

Graves Of Connecticut Sea Captains Discovered In South America

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The Republic of Suriname, a former Dutch sugar colony on the northern coast of South America, is not often a topic of conversation around here. But a team of researchers may make the tiny state of interest to Connecticut residents, thanks to their discovery of the graves of two 18th-century sea captains.

One headstone, bearing the date of 1758, is that of Capt. Michael Burnham of Middletown, a swashbuckling adventurer who made a fortune as a privateer and most likely trafficked in slaves. Another, made of Portland brownstone, marks the grave of New London Capt. William Barbut. Nearby are the graves of Rhode Island merchants Capt. Nathaniel Angel and Capt. William Gardner Wanton.

The graves of the New England seafarers were uncovered on Oct. 29 in the Dutch colonial cemetery of Nieuw Oranjetuin in Paramaribo, Suriname's capital city, by researchers who used machetes to hack away the vines covering the old headstones. One of those researchers, a former Connecticut resident, Tom Hart, immediately communicated the find to the Middlesex County Historical Society. The expedition was led by Paramaribo historian Bas Spek.

Hart said in an email that the location of old sea captains' tombs had been known to a few locals, but never officially documented. He said he hopes the discovery will spark interest in these seafarers and the close ties New England once had with this subtropical region. "I think any contributions we made were taking an interest in these Americans ... and bringing the information to the attention of potentially interested American institutions," Hart wrote.

Middlesex Historical Society Director Debbie Shapiro was excited to learn about Middletown's connection to Suriname in the days when the city was a major seaport, with ships sailing to exotic lands. "They say that the Internet has made the world smaller, but the more we learn, the more we discover that it was a small world back then, too," she said.

The historic inner city of Paramaribo, where the graves were found, lies on the left bank of the wide Paramaribo River, 15 miles up from the river's mouth. UNESCO recognizes the city as a world heritage site because of its intact 18th- and 19th-century wooden Dutch colonial buildings on spacious lots along tree-lined streets. Within the old city is the Nieuw Oranjetuin Cemetery, a sandy, five-acre plot once known for its lush

orange groves. Established in 1755, it was the main cemetery of the Dutch Reform Church.

Some of the tombs are quite elaborate, little shines built of red brick and marble. By contrast, the headstones of the Yankee sea captains, lying flat in the sandy ground, are plain. The four men were buried between 1758 and 1765. The inscriptions offer no clue as to how they died. What is known is that commerce – based on the ubiquitous slave-worked plantations of the sugar islands – drew these canny New Englanders to the area.

Capt. Burnham, as commander in chief in the Provincial Navy, was tasked with protecting this commerce during the French and Indian War – 1754 to 1763 – when American and British shipping in the Caribbean was being harassed by French corsairs. Burnham was sent to the West Indies in the winter of 1757 with orders "to distress his Majesties' enemies..." The 52-year-old commander was put in charge of the 24-gun brigantine *Tartar* with a crew of 100. Capt. Burnham carried Letters of Marque from the British crown, allowing him to seize French prizes.

Whether the Middletown captain was also running slaves – a common practice then – is not known, but Suriname at this time was a principal destination for Rhode Island slavers, who exchanged horses, lumber, rum and African slaves for sugar, coffee and cocoa – the infamous Triangular Trade.

Indeed, Capt. William Gardner Wanton, who is buried next to Burnham in Paramaribo, belonged to an illustrious clan of Newport merchants notorious for slaving, which included R.I. Gov. Joseph Wanton, one-time privateer and slaver who is pictured in a famous painting of the era by John Greenwood, entitled "Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam." Capt. Joseph Wanton, during and French and Indian War, was master of the privateer, *King of Prussia*, which was seized by the French in 1758 off the Bahamas with a cargo of gold dust, rum and 54 slaves.

That same year Capt. Burnham died at the age of 54 and was buried in Paramaribo amid the coconut palms and orange groves just up from the river. The inventory of his estate, compiled in five 15-inch columns of "closely written text," includes powdered wigs, crimson waistcoats, silk cravats, gold sleeve buttons and a silver-hilted sword, along with prodigious quantities of Madeira and Jamaican rum.

Also listed in his estate are three human beings – Africans – a woman named Sue, a young boy named Julius, and a young man called Cape Coast, whose value is given as 58 pounds.

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