

THE CEMETERY AT FORT ROSS: WHAT DOES IT TELL US ABOUT THOSE WHO LIVED THERE?

LYNNE GOLDSTEIN
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

From 1990 to 1992, I designed and directed the excavation of the historic Russian cemetery at Fort Ross in northern California (CA-SON-1876H). The questions the research posed included: 1) Where was the cemetery, and what was its extent? 2) Who was buried in the cemetery? 3) What does the structure and nature of the cemetery tell us about the inhabitants of the Colony and their relationships to this new location? This paper reviews the data collected, particularly information gained from the cemetery excavations. Unfortunately, bone preservation was extremely poor, and determination of individual biological details was almost impossible. We did find the cemetery, determined who was buried there in a general sense and in terms of grave details, and concluded that the Russians were conservative in their mortuary practices and tended toward a focus on the community rather than individual relationships.

About 20 years ago, I designed and directed the excavation of the Russian Orthodox cemetery at Fort Ross (SON-1876H) in northern California (Figure 1). At the time, one of my Ph.D. students, Sannie Osborn, wanted to focus her dissertation on mortuary practices in a frontier setting, and was specifically interested in Russian settlements and in Fort Ross. The key question for Osborn (1997) and for my own work at Fort Ross was: “What happens to prescribed customs of funeral behavior when certain members of a society are removed from the familiar surroundings of family, friends, and church, and relocated to a frontier outpost such as the Russian colony at Fort Ross?” Osborn’s dissertation (1997) primarily focused on archival materials from the colony and the Russian American Company, as well as information from the first season of fieldwork, but the location and complete excavation of the cemetery were critical to understand the articulation of the records with the material remains.

The Russian settlement at Ross was an isolated location with a multiethnic population (Farris 1989; Gibson 1976; Lightfoot et al. 1998). In such a context, how strictly would Russian Orthodox canon and rules be followed? When the project began, the precise character of the cemetery was unknown, in terms of its exact location, number of graves, or extent of the site. There was general agreement that the main cemetery was located across Fort Ross Creek from the fort, in view of the chapel, as directed by church canon. However, the cemetery in that location may not account for all burials, since we know that at least two individuals were recovered further north. The two outliers appear to be isolated burials, one perhaps interred early in the life of the colony (Schulz 1972), and the other later. It may be that the more recent burial was buried outside the cemetery because the individual was not Russian Orthodox or not associated with the community (Sandra Hollimon, personal communication 2010).

CEMETERY COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE

Initially, the informed estimate of the number of possible burials was in the neighborhood of 50-75. This estimate was based primarily on descriptions of the cemetery made by Ernest Rufus, who leased Ross with a partner in 1845 (Hasse 1952:25). Rufus’ description indicates that there were never more than 50 graves in the cemetery, but we excavated a total of 135 graves. What accounts for this large difference? The disconnect between the number expected and the number recovered may simply be an issue of preservation; the wooden markers used to mark graves were not stable, and they did disintegrate. In addition, Rufus and other early visitors may not have considered the possibility of a marker being gone, of a grave not having a marker, or of one marker indicating more than one grave. Rufus also may only have examined one portion of the cemetery, since the extent of the site is not clearly indicated in his description.



Figure 1. Location of Fort Ross along the northern California coast. (Map titles by Stamen Design, under CC BY 3.0. Data by OpenStreetMap, under CC BY SA.)

No matter what the reasons for the discrepancy, we recovered a total of 131 graves with evidence of burials, and an additional four “empty” graves. The empty graves may have been those in which preservation was exceptionally poor, or it is possible that these features represent graves from which individuals were later moved to other locations. Kashaya indicate that their ancestors moved a number of graves back to their homes after the Russians left (Warren Parrish, personal communication 1990).

One of the more surprising findings of our work at Fort Ross, in terms of both Osborn’s (1997) archival research and our cemetery excavations, is the number of children recovered from the cemetery. As Osborn (1997:214) noted, children at Ross have been omitted from most of the literature. For example, in 1838, children represented 47 percent of the population, with 60 percent of these children being male (Osborn 1997:214). By using grave size as a rough measure to identify children’s graves, we estimate that approximately half of the burials are children. There is a distinct group of smaller, narrower graves, and a conclusion that these are children’s graves is not unwarranted.

The spatial pattern of the cemetery was generally in rows following the topography (Figure 2), as one would expect in a Russian cemetery, with people apparently interred in order of death; that is, the structure of the site is not by status or rank or even by family, but rather more strongly organized by date of death. We expected some differentiation by rank, particularly given the social hierarchy of Russian over Creole over Alaska native over California native, yet such a pattern did not emerge. What appear to be the initial burials were tightly aligned, with the rows following the slope of the land. Although status differences were not spatially distinct, one cannot infer that they were absent. Indeed, as Osborn

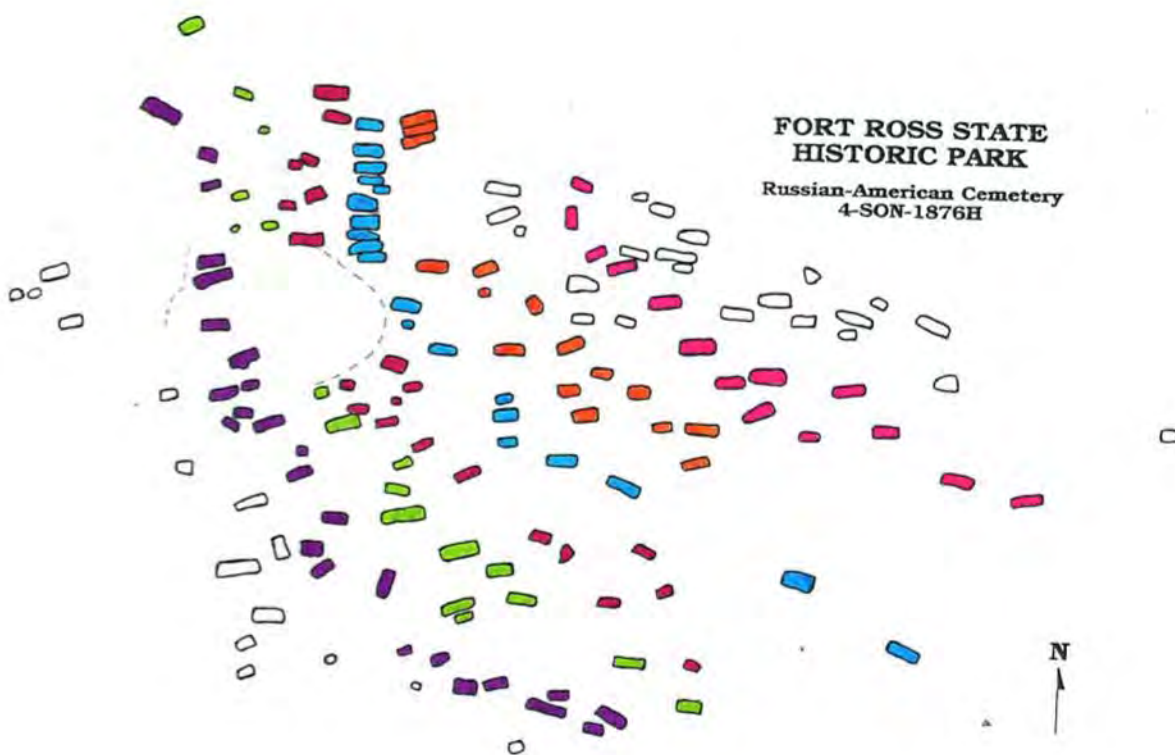


Figure 2. The Fort Ross cemetery with rows indicated.

(1997:139-140) noted, the earliest description of the cemetery is by Spanish priest Father Mariano Payeras, who visited Fort Ross in the fall of 1822. He noted several distinctions among the graves. First, there was a memorial for the Three Saints of the Russian Orthodox Church (Basil, Gregory, and John). This memorial had three rectangular levels ordered from large to small, and on these a pyramid of two *varas* (approximately 5.5 ft.). A sphere was on this pyramid, and finally a cross, painted in black and white. It seems likely that no burials were specifically associated with this memorial, but rather the memorial functioned as an overall Russian Orthodox cemetery marker. Payeras also observed that Europeans had a large box placed over their graves, while Alaska natives had a Russian Orthodox cross on their graves. We found no evidence to support or refute this observation, and there is no evidence in the literature of this type of distinction in such cemeteries elsewhere.

In Figure 2, the area designated by a dotted line highlights a portion of the cemetery that is distinctive in several important respects. First, the dotted area is the physiographically highest location in the cemetery. Second, it is a location with a number of large boulders (Figure 3), as well as some wooden planks lying on the surface. Third, during excavation, we found evidence of several features that likely represent monuments or memorials. One feature was an approximately 1.3 x 1.1 m rectangle with wood pieces in a lattice pattern, as well as a post pit. The location is in the same area as the pole that stood during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is likely that the lattice, with rocks on top of it, provided support for the pole.

Just east of the pole feature described above is another feature that may be a box or marker. It is approximately 0.7 x 0.5 m in size, and contains both nails and wood. The nail positions indicate some kind of joinery, and its small size suggests that it is a box, a marker, or even a base for a pole. We argue that these features, along with others that may have been destroyed over time, made up what would have been the memorial for the Three Saints and the overall cemetery marker. This location is most logical for



Figure 3. Large boulders in the physiographically highest portion of the Fort Ross cemetery, and possible location of memorial for the Three Saints.

such a monument because: 1) it is the highest point in the cemetery, 2) this appears to be the oldest part of the cemetery, and 3) the soils in this part of the cemetery are so hard and filled with large stones that it is impossible to dig a grave, making it an ideal location for a surface monument.

The orientation of the graves in the cemetery was generally east/west, with head at the west, so that at Resurrection the individual would sit up facing east, as dictated by Russian Orthodox canon. Interestingly, at this point on the California coast, the Pacific Ocean is actually to the south rather than the west, and although some early burials apparently were placed with the assumption that the ocean was west, the location and orientation of later burials seem to have been adjusted for the proper orientation. Since the later commander of the fort was a seaman, he may have used his skills to correct the earlier error, or at least insure that the placement was accurate from that point on.

GRAVE INCLUSIONS

Coffins were narrow and made of redwood, and most burials seem to have had a coffin. Of 131 graves (not including the four features that were empty), only 10 burials had no evidence of coffins. The coffins were constructed crudely, with butt-end joints, many nails, and no decoration or lining. Construction strongly suggests that the coffins were made on site and expediently. Of the 10 burials without coffins, only one individual had grave goods, and these suggested items of clothing. This particular individual did not have religious items, but had five metal buttons and 11 white ceramic Prosser buttons in a pattern suggesting a shirt buttoned on both sides of the chest. Some evidence of fabric was also recovered, and bone preservation was better than elsewhere in the cemetery. Two metal clasps that likely represented suspenders were recovered near the shoulders of this person. The burial was at the very

southern end of the cemetery, and the individual may have died very late in the colony's history, or may have been one of the settlers who was a European but was not Orthodox (cf. Osborn 1997:252).

We found a cross, or a religious medallion, in a total of 56 percent of graves. This suggests that whether or not individuals saw themselves as Russian Orthodox, the community likely viewed the people they placed in the cemetery as belonging to the community, whether Orthodox or not.

Other grave goods were present, but limited, and included such items as ceramic and metal buttons, glass beads, earrings, buckles, one very poorly preserved saber, bottles, some dishes, cloth, and a coin.

The graves at the cemetery can be divided into groups, according to what we found:

1. Empty graves, with no evidence of coffins or burials = 4
2. Graves with no evidence of coffins, but evidence of bone = 9
3. Graves with evidence of coffins but no grave goods = 35
4. Graves with religious pendants only (no other items) = 56
5. Graves with beads or bead clusters = 15 (12 of these also had religious pendants)
6. Graves with buttons/textiles = 13 (3 of which also had religious pendants)
7. Graves with additional items = 4 (these include a saber, shell, a coin, fur, pigments, beads, a spoon, and a group of other items)

The relatively small group of individuals buried without coffins may have been buried with shrouds only. It is also possible that their coffins were not preserved; most of these graves were in the same area of the cemetery, which had the worst preservation. However, it also seems likely that this portion is one of the oldest areas of the cemetery. For most purposes, Groups 2 and 3 can probably be combined. This means that 43 individuals, or approximately 34 percent of the cemetery, were buried with no grave goods or with items that easily deteriorated (such as wooden crosses, pieces of paper, etc.).

Group 4 is the largest group in the cemetery with 56 individuals (43 percent). This group includes only those graves that had religious pendants and no other grave goods. Other individuals had religious pendants (a grand total of 56 percent), but they also had other items in their graves.

Group 5 – those individuals with beads – is one of the most interesting groups in the cemetery, because we had hoped that the beads might allow us to distinguish between Alaska natives and California natives, since we know that different groups favored different kinds and colors of beads. We had hoped that these differences would assist in assigning ethnicity to the graves. Instead of the limited set of patterns anticipated, we found a large variety of colors and styles of beads. (Figure 4 shows a few examples.) According to Lester Ross (personal communications 1990, 1992), although a few styles of beads may have been made locally, the vast majority of beads found were imported from Europe and are within the range of those used by Alaskan natives. None are specifically California native in style, color choice, or pattern. We found two pairs of earrings laid out in a distinct pattern, as well as evidence of several other beaded garments or items in place. Twelve of the 15 burials with beads also had religious pendants, and we interpret these individuals to be Alaska natives. Note, however, that beads alone do not define a grave as Alaska native, and it is also certain that a number of other graves in the cemetery without beads are also those of Alaska natives.

Group 6 individuals had buttons, and the buttons often had textile adhering to them. Thirteen individuals fall into this category, and some of these may include non-Russian, non-Orthodox Europeans who died at Ross. In this group of 13, only three individuals also had religious pendants. This particular category includes both metal and ceramic buttons. Most buttons recovered are metal buttons; only a few graves have white ceramic buttons, and these sometimes occur together with metal buttons. The textiles with the buttons are wool in the case of metal buttons, and linen or muslin in the case of ceramic ones. The ceramic buttons likely represent shrouds or shirts, and the metal buttons coats or uniforms.



Figure 4. Examples of some of the glass beads recovered from graves at Fort Ross.

The final group of burials includes those that did not fit into the other categories because the combination of grave goods was unusual. Four graves fall into this category. The first is an individual who had both a religious pendant and a saber. Orthodox canon does not condone burial with weapons, so the combination of a religious pendant and a weapon is surprising. It is also the only weapon found in the cemetery. The second individual was in an extremely deep grave and had a religious pendant, a coin, and a shell. The coin is a Siberian copper from the reign of Catherine II (1762-96) (Harris 1971). It has a distinctive design, produced at the Kolyvan mint, and is a 5 *kopek* piece. This was the only coin and the only shell recovered, and the shell was too fragmented to identify. The third individual in this category had no grave goods, but the grave included evidence of hair, plus the remains of what was probably a type of headdress, clothing, or tassel decoration. A type of fur was found around the head area (next to the hair) and also at the foot. The final burial in this category was a grave that did not include any bones, but included the greatest number of artifacts in the cemetery. The wood in the grave did not resemble that found in other graves; it did not appear to be redwood. Artifacts include pink, poorly made glass beads, white glass beads, a spoon, orange pigment, red pigment, a glass bottle, a mirror, clear glass, yellow glass, a thimble, a wooden needle case, a ring, needles, and a thin metal strap. This feature could postdate the Russian settlement and may not be a grave. However, it is also possible that the feature may represent a situation in which the body was not recovered, so the individual's possessions were buried instead.

CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Although one can divide the graves into categories, the variability among and between the graves is surprisingly narrow. Most people were buried in the same way, with little deviation from the norm. The practices as reflected in the cemetery follow traditional Russian Orthodox canon and norms (Father Vladimir Derugin and Father Alexander Krassovsky, personal communication 1990). Even though the

soils at the cemetery were extremely hard and rocky, deep graves were excavated, generally from 4 to 6 ft. below ground surface.

In another paper, I examined the hazardousness of the cemetery location itself, which was almost lost because of the 1906 earthquake (Goldstein and Brinkmann 2006). The cemetery borders the San Andreas fault, and this event significantly changed the landscape of the region. During that earthquake, there was considerable damage to buildings at Fort Ross. At the same time, cemetery markers fell, and they rotted in succeeding decades.

Upon excavation, it was also clear that at least some of the graves were altered by mass wasting and chemical processes operating within the soils. In some areas of the cemetery, soil creep was so dramatic that grave pit excavations that started in one location would have to be shifted south as much as 0.5 m by the time one had excavated to the bottom of the grave pit. Preservation was poor due to high acidity in the soils, and in some areas, an anthropogenic pan formed within graves. The combination of physical and chemical processes made long-term preservation of the landscape unlikely; if we had not excavated the cemetery, it is unlikely that much would be left in another 100 years.

The cemetery must not be seen as any one particular snapshot of time. Weathering of any object may take place over long periods of time, or may happen rapidly as a punctuated event. There were a number of physical processes that had an impact on cemetery markers over the time the cemetery was used, and subsequently.

Cemeteries are important locations in any cultural landscape. Cemetery structure, surficial markers, and grave contents among populations vary spatially and temporally. The cemetery structure represented at Fort Ross suggests a community that organized their cemetery according to Russian Orthodox canon and buried their dead in rows according to date of death. There is no evidence of family groups, and there was relatively little differentiation within and between graves. Of course, lack of differentiation in death does not mean an absence of differentiation between individuals in life; there is ample evidence of a hierarchy of Russians, Alaska natives, and native Californians. At death, all were treated as part of the community, although it is possible that at least some native Californians were moved to their own lands after initial burial in the cemetery.

The purpose of Fort Ross was very different from that of the Spanish missions; people were not expecting to be living here permanently, and this is reflected in the cemetery organized by order of death and very traditional in structure.

Part of our agreement with the California Department of Parks and Recreation and with native groups and the Russian Orthodox Church was that all individuals would be reburied in the graves from which they were excavated. Prior to beginning work, we anticipated that this would be a simple matter of reburying bones in the appropriate grave. Unfortunately, preservation was so poor that few bones were preserved. Therefore, for each individual, all bones and bone fragments were kept together, and we also collected a sample of earth from the interior of the coffin or from the center of the presumed body area of each burial, so that even if no bone was present, we would have something representing the individual to rebury. Bone, bone fragments, the soil sample, coffin wood, nails, and all other artifacts were tagged and kept separate for all burials. The Russian Orthodox Church indicated that grave goods should be studied and exhibited and not reburied. All of these artifacts are now curated by the California Department of Parks and Recreation in its Sacramento facility. Members of both branches of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Kashaya Pomo tribe, and the Kodiak Area Native Association were kept apprised of all developments during excavation and analysis, were invited to visit and/or be present during all excavations, and scheduled and oversaw all reburial ceremonies. Figure 5 shows how the cemetery looks today; each individual has been reburied in his or her original location, and simple Russian Orthodox crosses mark the foot of each grave.



Figure 5. The Fort Ross cemetery today.

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