

“Vedado, donde no se entierran más que negros bozals”:

The burial grounds of 55 enslaved Africans whose skulls were acquired by S. G. Morton

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Abstract

In 1840, a physician from Havana named José Rodríguez y Cisneros, shipped 55 human crania to Samuel George Morton, a Philadelphia anatomist who collected and studied skulls from throughout the world. Rodríguez reported that he gathered these remains from a farm called “Vedado.” He asserted they were all enslaved persons who were born in African. Because no rigorous historical investigation has heretofore addressed Rodríguez’s claims, an analysis of archival maps, correspondences, and published literature was conducted. This analysis determined how the remains of the 55 people of the Vedado Group were interred, disinterred, and shipped to Philadelphia from Cuba. Archival maps were used to locate the Vedado Burial Grounds along the coastline west of Havana. Furthermore, the Vedado Burial Grounds probably originated as a sink hole that came to be utilized as a mass grave and refuse pit. It is likely that the remains sent to Morton consisted mostly of enslaved people born in Africa who died soon after arriving in Cuba. However, some of the 55 crania may have had other origins. There is also evidence that between 1835 and 1840 Morton coordinated with a network of Cuban naturalist-physicians to arrange the gathering and shipment of these 55 crania.

Introduction: Vedado Barrio, the Vedado Group, and the Vedado Burial Grounds

Between the early winter of 1839 and the late spring of 1840, José Rodríguez y Cisneros (1805–1864), a Cuban professor of medicine, traveled to *Vedado*, a sparsely populated coastal area located in the western outskirts of the city of Havana. He was on a mission. At that time, the place now known as the *Vedado Barrio* was where unbaptized enslaved persons born in Africa were interred. It was the skulls of these forsaken souls that drew Rodríguez to the Vedado Burial Grounds, which will be the focus of this paper.

Rodríguez collected 55 skulls scattered on the surface of the Vedado Burial Grounds. He sent them via ship to Samuel George Morton (1799–1851), a Philadelphia anatomist who studied human skulls, a field known as “craniology.” Morton achieved notoriety for amassing an

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extensive collection of human skulls from throughout the world. He housed these remains in his office at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP). Morton argued that Europeans of Germanic ancestry had the largest skulls and brains of any humans and, as a result had the highest inborn intelligence, maturity, and moral fiber. Conversely, Morton asserted that Aboriginal Australians and Africans had the world's smallest skulls and brains, leaving them with humanity's lowest innate mental capabilities. Others, like indigenous Americans, East Asians, and the Irish, were ranked between (Morton 1849, viii; Stanton 1960, 32–35; Erickson 1997, 690; Brace 2005, 91; Michael 2020, 281).

During the late 1830s, Morton sought to study the skulls of indigenous Africans, specifically those who were never enslaved in the Americas. Some of his fellow craniologists – most notably the German anatomist Friedrich Tiedemann (1781–1861) – had argued that the abuse suffered by enslaved Africans stunted their intellectual growth. By contrast, Morton asserted that Africans who were never enslaved were as mentally stunted as those raised in bondage (Mitchell 2018, 10). To that end, he sought to compare the skulls of native Africans to those raised while enslaved in the Americas. Thus, Morton inquired among an international network of colleagues, asking them to provide him with skulls of indigenous African people (Mitchell and Michael 2019, 81–88). Eventually, Morton's request made its way to the community of naturalist-physicians in Havana, Cuba, which included Rodríguez.

In July of 1840, the skulls Rodríguez had collected were unloaded off the brig *Elizabeth* at the port of Philadelphia. They were delivered to Morton, along with a letter written by Rodríguez, in which he stated these remains belonged to enslaved Africans who died soon after arriving in Cuba (Rodríguez to Morton 1840). I will call these 55 individuals the *Vedado Group*. Their remains are currently in the physical anthropology collection of the Penn Museum on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania (Diaz 2020; Kelleher 2021; McGreevy 2020).

The letter that Rodríguez wrote in 1840 provided only a vague description of where the skulls were found or how they were interred. It did not address what caused the death of these people, whom Rodríguez claimed were of “pure African race (*de la raza africana pura*)” (Rodríguez to Morton 1840). Cuban historian Marial Iglesias Utset recently located an obscure 1841 map of the Vedado Barrio which shows the location of the Vedado Burial Grounds (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841). This map was part of a plan for a multi-acre, military construction project entitled *Plano del terreno desde la bateria de Santa Clara, Cementario de los Yngleses y parte del Vedado, en que ha de establecerse la escuela practica de Artilleria* (Plan of the land from the battery of Santa Clara, Cemetery of the English, and part of Vedado, in which the practical artillery school is to be established). As the title indicates, the map shows an area of land in which a “practical artillery school” was proposed for construction.

In the following sections, I will use the 1841 map, Rodríguez's 1840 letter, and other resources to evaluate how remains of the Vedado Group were interred, disinterred, and shipped

to Philadelphia. I will present evidence that the Vedado Burial Grounds likely originated as a sink hole that came to be utilized as both a mass grave and refuse pit. I will argue that the Vedado Group consisted mostly of enslaved Africans who were born in Africa and died soon after arriving in Cuba. Most of them likely died of infectious diseases onboard the ships which transported them across the Atlantic in the early nineteenth century. However, it is also possible that some of the Vedado Group may have had other origins.

The 1840 letter from Rodríguez and the 1841 map of Vedado Barrio

To date, the few historical studies focusing on the Vedado Group have been cursory. Renschler (2007) briefly summarized their history in her PhD thesis, which examined their skeletal remains from a bio-anthropological perspective. Mitchell and Michael (2019) also discussed them in passing (Mitchell and Michael 2019). Iglesias (2023 in press) is currently preparing a manuscript addressing the enslaved populations in Vedado Barrio during the early nineteenth century. Recently, the Vedado Group remains have been mentioned in magazine articles on efforts to repatriate the crania that Morton collected (Alvarado 2020; Diaz 2020; Kelleher 2021; McGreevy 2020).

The geography and land use history of Vedado Barrio has been addressed by Cuban authors who were personally familiar Cuban society and the landscapes of Vedado Barrio (Riog 1963; Martín 2017; Oramas 2018; Couceiro 2020). These texts, which include government reports or magazine articles, provide observations of Vedado Barrio's land use and ecology. They also document narratives that local historians have derived from oral traditions which are often the only sources of information regarding Vedado Barrio.²

The only known primary source document describing the Vedado Group is the 1840 letter Morton received from Rodríguez, a medical professor from Havana about whom little has been written. He was born on April 7, 1820 and received his medical degree from the University of Havana in 1828 (Iglesias 2023, pers. comm; Anonymous 1871, 164). Cemetery records list Rodríguez's death as December 21, 1864 (Pujola 1868, i, 244).³ In his letter to Morton,

² The studies of some of the above noted authors lack the extensive citations that would be required by a peer reviewed journal. It is therefore essential that these texts be viewed skeptically and corroborated or refuted by more academically oriented publications.

³ In 1850, Rodríguez was mentioned in article in *La Gaceta de La Habana*, the official newspaper of the Spanish government in Cuba (Univ. of Miami, 2022). The article listed professors of the "medical facility who contributed to a festival" at the University of Havana (*Gaceta de La Habana* 1850, 3). Another doctor on that list was Ángel José Cowley y Alvirdes (1797–1859), a professor of toxicology at the University (Dollero 1916, 165). Cowley is listed in a general bibliography of 19th Century Cuban authors who published books in 1827. Above

Rodríguez reported that he had gathered the skulls of *bozales*, a Spanish word referencing enslaved Africans who had recently arrived in the Americas and spoke little if any Spanish (Faquinto 1887, 733). The letter reads:

“Habana, July 27, 1840

Sor [Señor] Dn. [Don] Dr. [Doctor] Samuel Jorge Morton.

Muy Señor mío: recibí su apreciable carta, en la que me encarga 50 cráneos de la raza africana pura, los que he yo mismo buscado y encontrado en los arenales de la finca del Vedado, donde no se entierran más que negros bozales.

My Dear Sir: I received your appreciated letter, in which you charge me to procure 50 pure African race (*raza africana pura*) skulls, which I myself searched for, and found (*encontrado en*) in the sandbanks (*en los arenales*) of Vedado Farm, where only negro *bozales* are buried.

Por la barca india se los enviaba a V. pero el capitán de dicho buque no quiso recibirlos a bordo pretestando (sic) que si los llevaba tendría que hacer cuarentena; más por el bergantín Elisabeth van en una caja con el sobre para el Dr. Morton y aunque de presente no he podido especificar las tribus a que pertenecen; sin embargo en lo sucesivo ofrezco a V. tomar todo el empeño que me sea posible por conseguir enviarle algunos marcados con el nombre de la nación a que corresponden; mas desde ahora manifiesto a V. que es de necesidad algún tiempo para cumplir esta oferta.

I was going to send them in the barge *India* but the captain did not want to take them on board, protesting that if he took them, he might be quarantined. But via the brigantine *Elizabeth*, they go in a box with the envelope for Dr. Morton and although at the moment I have not been able to specify the tribes (*tribus*) to which they belong; from now on, I shall make every effort to send you some marked with the name of the nation (*nación*) to which they correspond; however I am letting you know that some time is needed to fulfill this offer.

Cowley on this list is Juan Norberto “John Norbert” Casanova (1801–1871), who “established a health center in Santiago de Cuba in 1826” (Trelles 1912,15). Casanova was a Spaniard who received his MD in Havana in 1825. After living in Peru, he settled in Brighton, UK (Priault Library, 2015; Ryan and Pope, 1871, 187–188). In 1834, Casanova published a book on cholera in Philadelphia (Casanova, 1834). He also donated to Morton five skulls (ID Nos. 651, 652, 654, 655, and 656) of Mapuche (“Araucanian”) people from present-day Chile (Meigs 1857, 78–79).

He recibido su hermosa e interesante obra titulada Crania Americana la que estoy leyendo con el mayor placer y por la cual doy a V. las mas espresivas (sic) gracias. Cuando pueda especificar a usted la tribu a que corresponda la segunda remesa de cráneos, procuraré enviarlos con su mandíbula inferior, y desde ahora me repito su atento, afectísimo y servidor.

I have received your beautiful and interesting work, *Crania Americana*, which I am reading with the greatest pleasure and for which I send my expressions of gratitude. When I can specify to you, the tribe to which the second consignment of skulls correspond, I will endeavor to send them with their lower jaw; for now, I remain your attentive, affectionate, and faithful servant.

Q. B. S. M. [Que besa su mano (Literally: The one who kisses your hand)]

José Rodríguez Cisneros⁴

One of the most important, but heretofore overlooked statements within this letter is that Rodríguez personally “found (*encontrado en*),” the skulls “among the sandbanks (*en los arenales*) of Vedado farm, where none but negro *bozales* are interred.” At first glance it may seem that he found the skulls in a sand bank, one of the many that existed along the hundreds of miles of coastlines in and around Havana. However, when his letter is read along with the 1841 map presented in *Figure 1*, an important and previously unreported fact regarding the location of the Vedado Burial Grounds is revealed: the skulls were gathered from not just any “sand banks,” but from a specific geographic location, referenced as “*los arenales* (the Sandbanks).” On the 1841 map there is a specific triangle-shaped area of sand-covered land, which is labeled, in all capital letters, “ARENALES (SANDBANKS).” The Sandbanks is located just south of the area marked with a “E.”

⁴ Translation by Marial Iglesias Utset, Harvard University Afro-Latin American Research Institute.

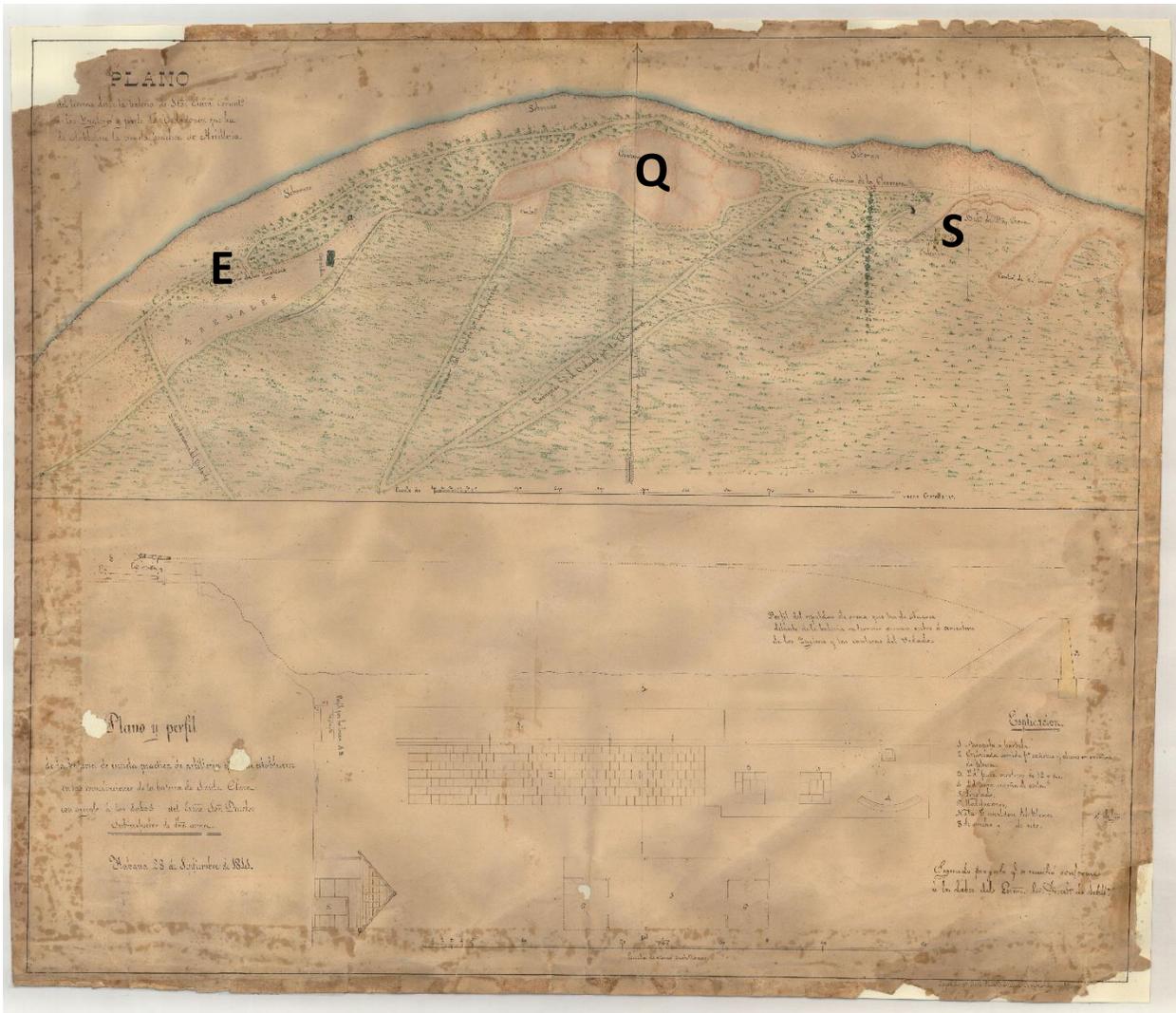


Figure 1: The 1841 Map of Vedado Barrio was part of a plan for the construction of a firing range to be used in training soldiers to operate cannons. “E” = the English Cemetery; “Q” = Vedado quarry; and “S” = the small battery. (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841, public domain)

The 1841 map was a “location map” included in a construction plan for a firing range where soldiers would be taught how to operate cannons. As *Figure 2* shows, this plan called for a small battery to be erected upon a ridge just southwest of the preexisting Santa Clara Battery. The cannons mounted at the small battery would launch missiles west along a firing line, which ended at a glacis, which is a high masonry wall with dirt piled up on one side. The glacis was the target that the artillerymen would aim for.

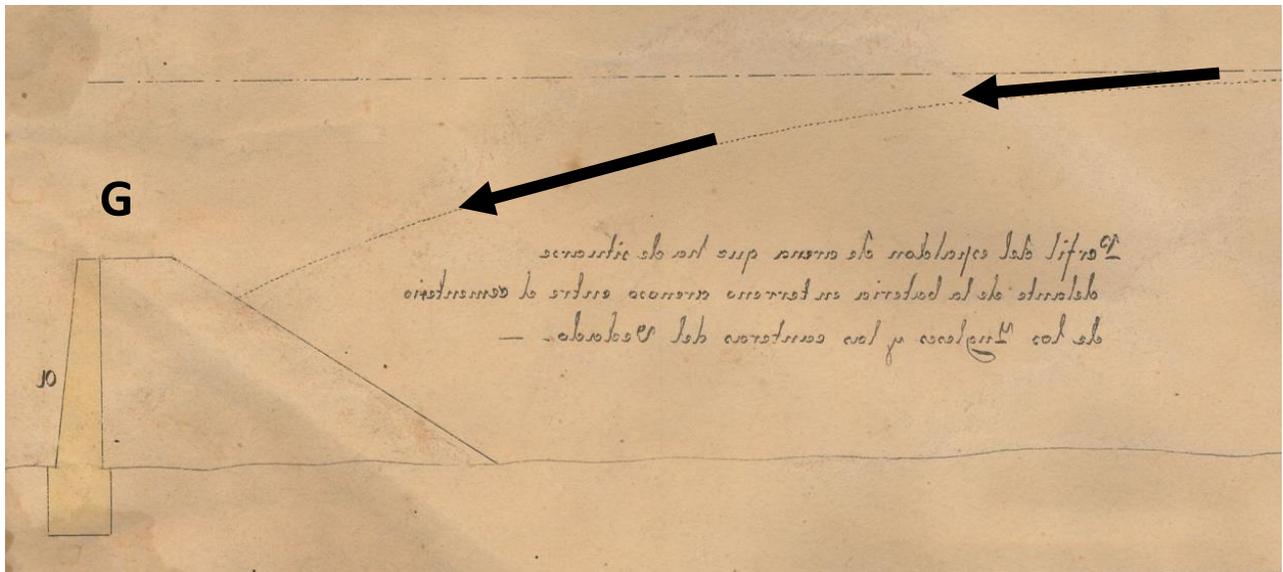
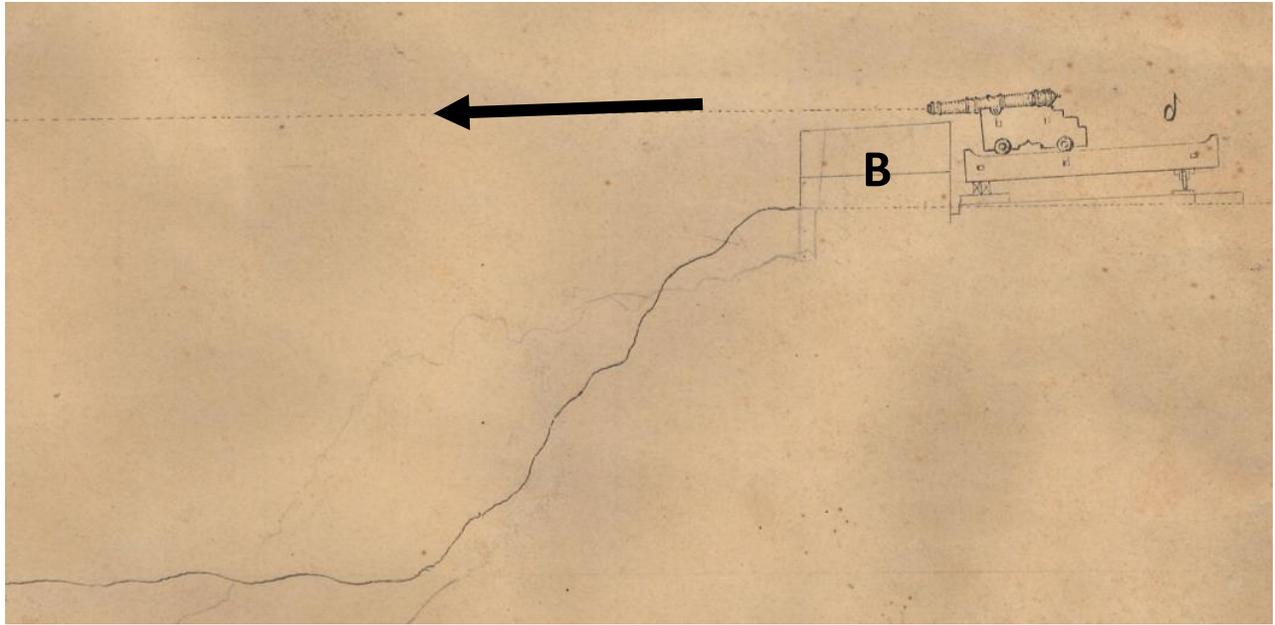


Figure 2: Two insets from lower half of the 1841 map. The top image presents the small battery (B) in profile. The arrows denote the westward direction of the line of fire. The lower drawing, which is a reverse image from the 1841 map, presents the small glacis in profile. The note written next to the drawing of the glacis reads, “*Perfil del espaldón de arena que ha situarse delante de la batería en terreno arenoso entre el cementerio de los Yngleses y las canteras del Vedado* (Profile of the sand glacis to be placed in front of the battery on sandy soil between the English cemetery and the Vedado quarries).” (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841, public domain)

Figure 3 shows a closeup of the Sandbanks, which is an oblong triangle-shaped landform consisting of sand dunes that lack vegetation. To the north and south of the Sandbanks, the land is vegetated, presumably with trees and woody shrubs. It is possible that this area is unvegetated because its underlying geological morphology is that of a layer sand so deep that no vegetation can grow on it. If that is that case, then the Sandbanks would have likely been unvegetated for centuries. Alternatively, it is possible that the Sandbanks were formerly a quarry which was abandoned and filled with sand through natural processes. This latter scenario is supported by *Figure 4*, a schematic map based on the 1841 map which clarifies that there are two quarries nearby. Another significant geographical feature shown on *Figure 4* is the Santa Clara Battery (*bateria de Santa Clara*). It is located just west of the area marked with an “S” in *Figure 1*. Built in 1799, the Santa Clara Battery consisted of several cannons mounted behind a protective stone wall erected near the coastline (Anonymous 1899, 27).

Figures 3 and *4* show that just north of the Sandbanks there is a rectangle-shaped cemetery called the *Cementario de los Yngleses* (The English Cemetery). The fact that a cemetery is located directly adjacent to the Sandbanks – the very place where Rodríguez reported that he gathered human remains – is of major significance. At first glance, it might appear that Rodríguez gathered the 55 skulls he sent to Morton from a cemetery called the English Cemetery. This would be curious since the skulls Rodríguez gathered were reportedly African, not English. However, there are additional documents which indicate that the English Cemetery was established in the early nineteenth century on the northern half of an even larger burial ground in which enslaved Africans had previously been interred.

In 1963, the Cuban historian Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring (1889–1964) reported that the English Cemetery – which is now located in northwestern Havana “between G and H,” and “5th and 7th streets”– originated as a burial site for:

“black *bozales* slaves who died without being baptized (*los negros esclavos bozales que morían sin bautizar*). As complaints arose over the poor state of the place, since the unfortunates were buried like animals, according to contemporary reports, the site was tidied up, a chaplain was appointed to baptize the *bozales* in articulo mortis.”

Riog further commented that:

“the best part of the cemetery (*la parte mejor del cementerio*) was dedicated to the burial of Protestant foreigners, for which it was initially called the English Cemetery, and then, the American Cemetery, after citizens of the United States overcame the subjects of Great Britain in [terms of] numbers and influence. This cemetery was closed in 1847, and later a site near the current Colon Cemetery was dedicated as a Protestant cemetery.” (Roig 1963, [58])



Figure 3: An inset from the 1841 Map showing the English Cemetery adjacent to the Sandbanks where the 55 Vedado Group skulls were gathered. (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841, public domain)

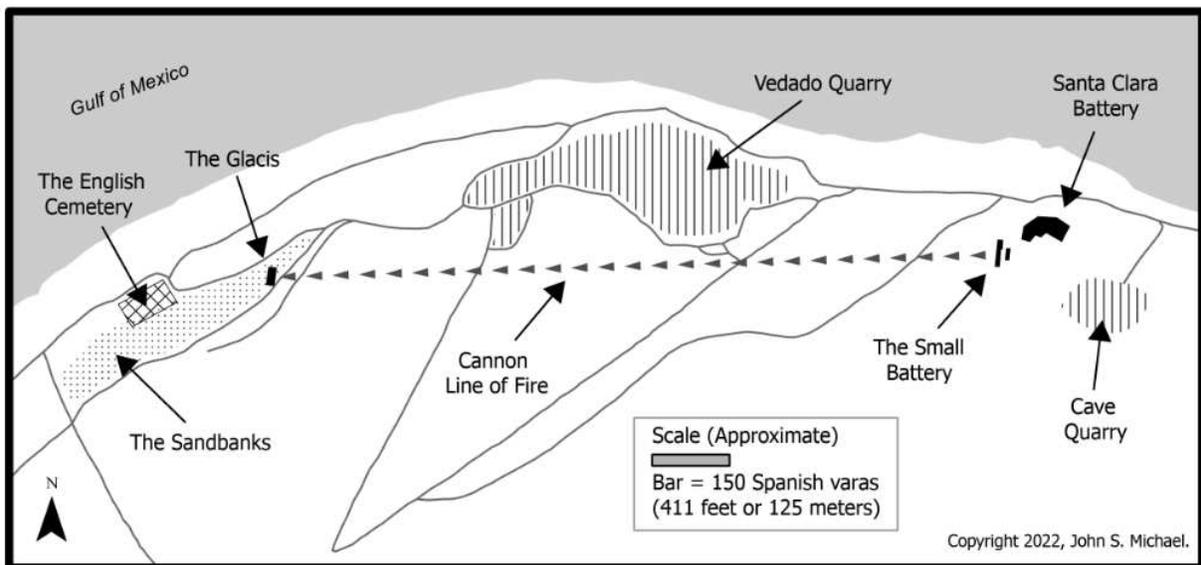


Figure 4: A schematic diagram of the 1841 map based on Sanchez-Casahonda, 1841.

Couceiro described the Vedado Burial Grounds as an “abandoned coast” used as a “popularly improvised cemetery” commonly known as “*el Pudridero* (the rotting place),” a word that can mean a swamp, compost pile, or a rubbish dump (Couceiro 2020, 288). Couceiro wrote that the corpses of non-Catholics were “abandoned on this coast as carrion for animals. The majority were black *bozales* slaves, especially those who died without being baptized.” It later came to be known as the cemetery “of the English” and then “of the Americans.” The property is located at “the current streets G, H, 5th and 7th.” The southern part of this property was developed into a mansion during the late 19th or early 20th centuries. As of 1952, the mansion housed the National Institute of Education Physics, and it is now the office of the *Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The northern part of the property is now part of José Martí sports park, which was established in 1961 (Couceiro, 2011, 288).

Figure 5 presents a map of the sidewalks in western Havana which was published by the US Government in 1899 (US House of Representatives 1899). This street grid is the same as modern day Havana. *Figure 6* presents an overlay of this 1899 street map atop the 1841 map. It confirms that the location of the English Cemetery portion of the Vedado Burial Grounds is between G and H, and 5th and 7th streets. This block is approximately 2,000 feet (610 meters) west, and 250 feet (75 meters) south of the site of the Cuban National Hotel, which was built in 1930 on the site of the then demolished Santa Clara Battery (Scott 2022, 66). In *Figure 6*, the Santa Clara Battery (*Bateria de Santa Clara*) is visible to the upper right near the coast.

The claims made by Roig and Couceiro indicate that the Vedado Burial Grounds, including the English cemetery, were so poorly maintained that bodies were commonly exposed on the surface. This neglect was confirmed by Martínez-Fernández who wrote that “Havana’s so-called American or English cemetery” was established in the early 1810s, “close to the shore, not far from the Espada Cemetery.” He described it as a “desolate potter’s field,” where Protestants, mostly English, were interred:

under the charge of a British hotel keeper named Francis Nichols in the mid-1820s. Reportedly, he charged between ten and fifty pesos for a burial. After Nichols’s death, James Tomson (or Thompson) took over the graveyard; but after his death it soon fell into disrepair, the keys to the gate being lost, and part of the walls collapsed. Scavenger animals roamed the ruined... graveyard, where they feasted on rotting human remains. During the early 1840s, a yearly average of forty corpses, foreign Protestants, suicides, and the unbaptized, were buried [there]. (Martínez-Fernández, 2002, 68)

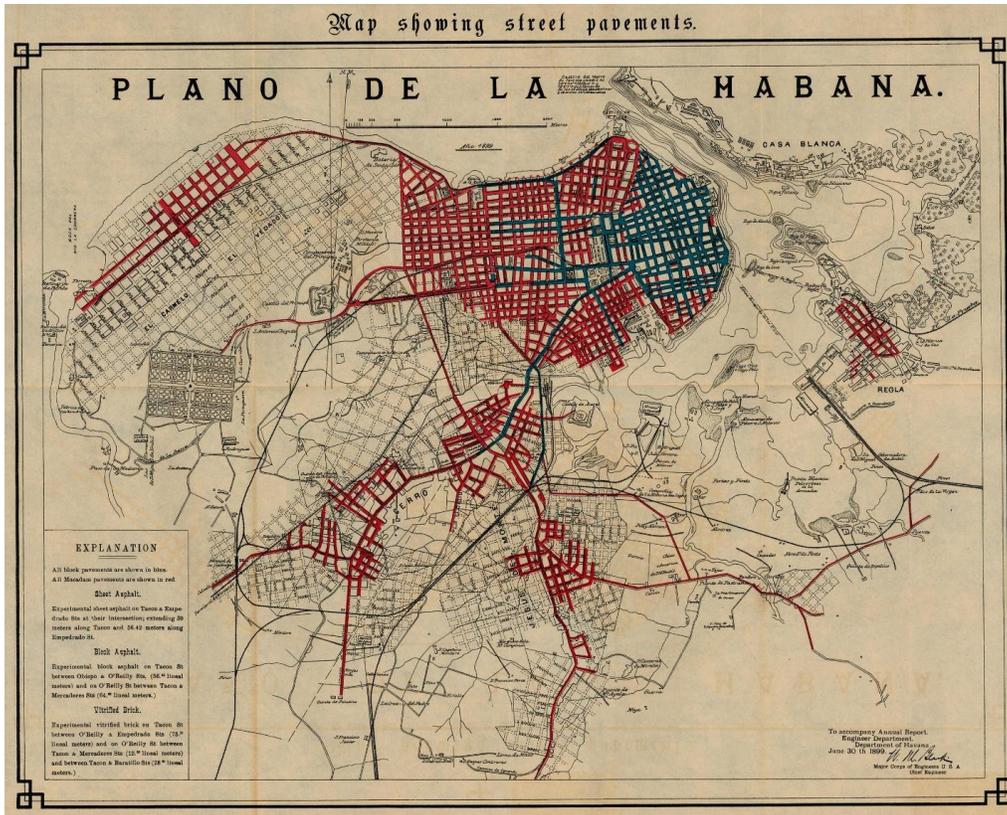


Figure 5: The 1899 Map Showing Street Pavements; *Plano de la Habana*. (US House of Representatives 1899, public domain)



Figure 6: An overlay of the 1841 Map and the 1899 Map. “E” = the English Cemetery; “Q” = Vedado quarry; and “S” = the small battery (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841; US House of Representatives 1899, public domain.)

Gordon, writing in 1901, similarly reported that American Protestants were interred in a “*vertedero de las basuras en los Uveros* (garbage dump among the sea grapes).” The coffins for these non-Catholics were constructed by an expatriate American named “Mr. Nickel,” presumably the above-mentioned Francis Nichol (Gordon 1901, 20–21). According to Barcia, the dump was officially designated as a burial ground for non-Catholics in 1818. At that time, a barrier was created to separate the graves of blacks from those of whites. However, this new, whites-only property was never well maintained, and bodies were either left like common refuse, or poorly buried, such that they were easily accessible to scavengers who scattered the remains around on the surface (Barcia 2001, 80).

In a later section, I will document that the Burial Grounds were sold or donated to the government in 1838 for use as a public cemetery for non-Catholics. Perhaps this real estate transfer also included a much larger area which was slated to become both a cemetery and the target zone for the proving grounds. In other words, it is plausible that the cemetery and the proving grounds were both established as part of one coordinated government initiative. This possibility might be clarified by addition research of historic records detailing the sale of lands in this area, along with mapping showing the boundaries of the parcels sold.

The Vedado Group consisted of the skulls of 55 individuals

The Vedado Group consisted of 55 individuals, although Morton’s own writings were sometimes unclear as to the number. In the following section, I will address the confusion over the number of skulls, much of which can be traced to the fact that the skulls were delivered to Morton in two shipments, one in early summer of 1840 and another in December 1840. In Rodríguez’s 1840 letter, he explained that he did not know the ethnic or “tribal” affiliation of the African skulls which he had gathered. Although he stated that he was not able to specify “the tribes to which they belong,” he offered to send a second set of skulls which were “marked with the name of the nation to which they correspond.” Rodríguez finished the letter by saying that when he sent the second shipment of skulls, he would “endeavor to send them” with their lower jaws (Rodríguez to Morton 1840).

With these statements, Rodríguez is unambiguously stating that the skulls will arrive in two shipments. The fact that he does not know the specific “tribe” or ethnicity of the skulls is consistent with the evidence that they were scattered on the surface. Thus, it was likely that there were no grave makers. Likewise, there were no graves, which perhaps, a local resident might be able to remember as the place where Africans from a given slave ship were buried. Lastly, the skulls had no jaws, which Rodríguez regarded as a shortcoming he would try to mitigate with the next shipment. Skulls without jaws would also be consistent with an open mass grave where loose bones would become separated.

The shipping chronology of the skulls is well documented. Based on Rodríguez's letter, the first shipment arrived some weeks after July 27, 1840, which was when the letter was written. The date Morton received the second shipment was December 3, 1840. In a letter that Morton wrote to phrenologist George Combe dated December 4, 1840, he stated that his collection included (with his emphasis) "fifty-five skulls of Negroes *born in Africa*," only thirty of which he had examined by that date. Morton explained that had not found the time to look at the remaining 25 because they had "reached me only yesterday" (Morton to Combe 1840).

The confusion about the number of skulls was initiated by Morton himself. In a catalog, dated 1840, Morton recorded a brief description of each skull, along with a "specimen number" which he assigned to each skull. This catalogue lists 29 skulls – not 30 – with the numbers 901 through 929 under the heading (with my emphasis): "*Thirty* Skulls of genuine, unmixed Negroes born in Africa. This interesting series was collected by Don Jose Rodriguez Cisneros, M. D. of Havana, in the island of Cuba, and by him presented to me for the purpose of ascertaining the internal capacity of the cranium in the pure African race." It is inexplicable why Morton described these 29 skulls, which are the first shipment, as "Thirty Skulls."

In December of 1841, Morton mentioned the Vedado Group when he published a half-page note in the *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*:

Dr. Morton communicated the results of the measurements of forty-five adult negro crania, in order to ascertain the internal capacity of the skull and consequent size of the brain in the African race. These skulls were those of negroes born in Africa of the Bassa, Grabbo, Makoua (*sic.*), Benguela, Mina, and other tribes. They consist of 25 males and 20 females varying from 18 to 50 years of age. (Morton 1841, 135)

This article states that Morton measured the skulls of 45 "negros born in Africa," but does not mention which ones they were. Records indicate that by 1841, Morton had collected the remains of 55 indigenous Africans from the Vedado Group. He also collected seven other indigenous Africans for whom he recorded an ethnic affinity, including a young Makua ("Macua") sent by "Dr. Lobé of Havana" (No. 580).⁵ Although his note suggests that he knew, based on information provided him by his skull "suppliers," the ethnic affinity for all of these skulls, his records suggest that he only knew the ethnic affiliation of perhaps seven of the sixty-two African skulls in his collection by that time.

Morton also addressed the Vedado skulls in handwritten notes he inscribed circa 1840. The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University possesses Morton's personal copy of his

⁵ In addition to No.580, these included the remains of people designated as Bassa of Liberia (Nos. 646, 647, and 648); Grabbo of Liberia (No. 645); Benguela (No. 421); and Mina (No 422).

1840 catalog into which he penciled notes listing skulls he had recently acquired.⁶ In these notes, he described each of the Vedado Group skulls from the first shipment as “Native Africans,” without listing any ethnic affiliation. A few pages after that, he penciled in a list of 24 skulls (Nos. 958 to 981) which he also labeled simply as “Native African.” He also added a note that read, “The Native Africans Nos. 958 to 981 inclusive are from D. Rodriguez of Havana.” Furthermore, he penciled in a listing for two skulls (Nos. 993 and 994) both of which he described as “Native African. D. Rodríguez” (Morton 1840, [59]).⁷ All together, these records indicate he acquired 55 Vedado Group skulls. There were 29 in the first shipment, and 26 (which is 24 plus 2) in the second shipment.

The sinkhole and the forbidden forest

Earlier in this paper, I documented that the Vedado Burial Grounds were located along the coastline west of Havana. In the following section I will detail why it was established there. Perhaps the most fundamental reason was because Vedado Barrio was sparsely populated and windy, which means that the putrid odors of decay would either be blown away or be noticed by only a few people. But to fully contextualize why the Vedado Burial Grounds were established along the coastline it is necessary to understand the geology, ecology, and early sixteenth century settlement of Vedado Barrio and nearby Havana.

There are no recorded descriptions of what Vedado’s coastline looked like prior to Spanish rule. However, there are descriptions of what it looked like prior to its twentieth century development. The Cuban journalist Renée Méndez Capote y Chaple (1901–1989) wrote that the “Vedado of my childhood was a sea rock over which the seagulls flew.” It was a coastal habitat full of songbirds and vultures (*tiñosas auras*), while below “iguanas, ferrets, and rats nested.” Feral “jíbaro” farm cats “came out at night.” In its undergrowth, “the Caleta grape [tree] grew wild and abundant” (Quoted in Oramas, 2018). The abundance of Caleta Grape tree (*Coccoloba uvifera*) – also the Caribbean Sea Grape – explains why even today Vedado Barrios is sometimes called “*Los Uveros* (the Grapes)” (Couceiro 2020, 287).

In 1920, Johnson reported that as recently as 1899, Vedado “was nothing but a goat pasture,” with a low-lying beachfront of “sharp coral rocks” (Johnson 1920, 308). It is likely that

⁶ This marked up copy can be viewed online at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/148888>.

⁷ In Morton’s 1840 catalog, he penciled in that skulls Nos. 993 and 994 came from Rodríguez. Yet in his 1849 catalog, he lists these two skulls but made no mention of Rodríguez (Morton 1849, [38]). This error is consistent with the overall sloppiness of his research for which he was faulted by leading scholars including Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Robert Jameson (1774–1854), who was Morton’s former professor at Edinburgh University (Michael 2020, 290–293.)

there may have also been bowl shaped depressions in the land. The limestone geology underlying Vedado Barrio is a formation known as karst topography. This landscape is characterized by sinkholes which are small caves, some of which undergo roof collapse and resemble a crater (Couceiro 2020, 284; Seale *et al.* 2004, 2–8). A 2004 geological survey of western Cuba noted that in some locations around Havana, sinkhole development is “very dense” (Seale *et al.* 2004, 4).

Although there are no available maps showing sinkholes at the Vedado Burial Grounds, several documents suggest that this internment site may have originated as a sinkhole. First, the 1841 map shows several quarry sites in Vedado Barrio, one of which is called the “*Cantera de los Cueva* (Quarry of the Cave)” (Sanchez-Casahonda 1841). The presence of a cave in this limestone-dominated landscape is suggestive of karst topography. Furthermore, Barcia noted that in 1818, when the Vedado Burial Grounds were officially designated as a burial ground for non-Catholics, a barrier was created to separate the graves of blacks from those of whites. This new, whites-only cemetery “formed a semi-circle” (Barcia 2001, 80). That would mean that the original cemetery had to have been a circle, like a round sinkhole. In 1901, Gordon y Acosta reported that he saw a map from 1863 in which the Vedado Burial Grounds were labeled as a “foreigners” cemetery. He noted that this site would be entered “via a curved road” (Gordon 1901, 20–21). A curved road on a map often indicates a change in topography consistent with descent into a bowl-like sinkhole.

Vedado Barrio is now an urbanized part of Havana, a city which was founded in 1519. It remained a modest settlement until 1551, when the king of Spain decreed that each winter, all the Spanish ships in the Americas that carried valuable resources – like gold from Mexico and silver from Peru – would gather in the Havana Bay. There, they would be joined by armed warships to form an armada which, come spring, would sail to Spain (Ferrer, 2021, 20–22, 29). Havana’s new prosperity attracted the attention of the French pirate, Jacques de Sores (fl. mid-16th cent.) who attacked it in July of 1555 (Ferrer 2021, 28–29). Sores’ pirates came ashore in Vedado Barrio. There they “landed two boatloads of well-armed men” who advanced on the settlement “by way of a narrow path through the otherwise impenetrable bush which surrounded it” (Wright 1916, 236). Sores razed the city’s fortifications, incinerating all but two of its buildings (Ferrer 2021, 28-29).

The ease with which Sores pulled off his raid led the Spanish Crown to erect the *Castillo de la Real Fuerza* (Castle of the Royal Force), a fortress which still stands aside the bay at the western end of Havana’s Old City. The defenders of Havana also established a five-mile-wide forest preserve with only one road leading through it. Any attackers would have to hack through dense tropical jungle, or else follow the one cleared roadway, which the Spanish regularly patrolled. In 1561, the government of Havana issued a proclamation that no person or cattle would be permitted to pass through this woodland. Because the decree set forth that travel in this landscape was forbidden, the Cubans began to call this place “El Vedado” which means “the

Forbidden” (María de la Torre 1857, 166–167). Despite the decree, valuable tree woods like mahogany, oak, and cedar were harvested illegally (Oramas 2018). By the 1630s Vedado had been logged so extensively that there was community pressure to simply convert it to agricultural uses (Benitez-Rojo 2005, 38).

The limited evidence regarding the demographics of the 55 Vedado Group individuals

Historical records clearly indicate that the Vedado Burial Grounds were established by the residents in and around Havana as a place where the bodies of *bozales* would be interred. In the following section, I will present evidence that suggests that the people interred at the Vedado Burial Grounds had a greater religious and ethnic diversity than some scholars have acknowledged. Some of those buried alongside the *bozales* may have been free paupers and other marginalized persons. To this end, I will also address the differing ways in which Catholics, non-Catholic Protestants, and non-Christian African *bozales* were buried in Cuba from the sixteenth century until 1840.

As noted above, the term *bozales* described enslaved Africans newly arrived in the Americas. The word *bozales* is derived from the old Spanish word *bosal* meaning *muzzled* or *bridled*, as in the case of a horse. According to the 1887 *Diccionario General Etimológico de la Lengua Española* the word *bozal* was defined as:

“*Adjetivo. El negro recién sacado de su país. Metafórico y familiar. El nuevo ó principiante en algún ejercicio. El simple, necio ó idiota. Se aplica a las caballerías cerriles. (Adjective. A Negro who was recently removed from his [native] county. Metaphorical and vernacular. One who is a novice or beginner in some activity. One who is foolish or idiotic. Can be applied to wild horses.)*”
(Faquinetto 1887, 733)

In 1840, the Scottish abolitionist and diplomat David Turnbull (c. 1794–1851) published *Travels in the West: Cuba*, in which he wrote:

As applied to negroes, the terms Creole and Bozal are pretty nearly antithetical. It is true that when a horse is spoken of, the phrase *un caballo Bozal* means merely that he has not been sufficiently broken in; but it is otherwise with the poor African who is spoken of as a *Bozal* long after he has lost all his natural spirit. The term *Criollo*, or *Creole*, is applied in Cuba, as in the other islands of the West

Indies, not to men and women merely, white, black, or brown, but to domestic animals in general, and even to plants. (Turnbull 1840, 63).⁸

Turnbull also reported that among slave drivers, there was a belief that *bozales* were harder workers than enslaved “creoles.” During his travels in the Caribbean, he was assured:

that the labour of eight emancipated Africans was considered equal to that of twelve of the apprenticed labourers born in the colony; and on the same principle a Bozal African, fresh from one of the marketplaces of the Havana, commands an average price of twenty-four ounces of gold when sold by retail; whereas a Creole of similar age is not worth more than twenty (Turnbull 1840, 62–63).

One feature common to *bozales* – including any enslaved Africans being transported across the Atlantic on a slave ship – was their exposure to diseases which could kill them while on board a ship, or soon after they landed. In describing his own passage in a slave ship, the Gambian-born former slave Gustavus “Olaudah Equiano” Vassa (c.1745–1797) wrote that the “closeness of the place and the heat of the climate... most suffocated us. This produced constant perspirations... and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died” (Vassa 1837, 47). During the early decades of the Transatlantic slave trade, up to 20 percent of enslaved persons died while in transit which lasted four to six weeks. After 1750 the mortality dropped to one in ten, or less (Morgan 2007, 74). Exhaustion, malnutrition, and seasickness weakened the immune system of persons enslaved on ships, making them more prone to infectious diseases (Smallwood 2009, 136). Barcia wrote that “slave vessels were themselves quintessential slave-trade contact zones, where death and disease were almost perennial residents” due to “the lack of ventilation, the heat, and the humidity” (Barcia 2020, 32).

The constant importation of enslaved Africans who died soon after their ships set anchor in Cuban ports helps explain why the residents of Havana needed ample suitable places to dispose of the bodies of *bozales*. Furthermore, because these Africans were not Catholic, they could not be buried in graves sanctified by the church. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Catholics in Cuba were commonly buried on the grounds of a church, or perhaps even

⁸ Trumbull noted that word *bozales* was the opposite of the word “creole,” which currently describes a person of mixed African, Indigenous American, and European ancestry. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it referred to any person born outside of their ancestral homeland, usually blacks born outside of Africa or whites born outside of Europe. The English word “creole” dates to 1604 and is derived from the Portuguese word *crioulo* meaning “native” or “brought up” (*OED* Vol. 10 1989, 68).

within it. Different parts of a church property were designated for the interment of persons from differing social ranks. As Gómez described it:

“The first section was immediately next to the steps of the main altar, and here those of high position were buried. The mulattoes and free blacks were buried near the door of the temple and behind the choir, and the free black, mulatto and Indian children, in the space between the choir and the chapel.”

Gómez noted that Havana’s “seriously poor” were “buried in the Los Uveros dump” (Gómez 2011, 16).

By the end of the 18th century, the population in and around Havana had increased so much that there simply was not enough room on church properties to hold all the deceased. In 1806, the Espada Cemetery was founded as Havana’s first public burial grounds. Although it was public, it was consecrated by the Catholic Church and Protestants could not be buried there. However, an 1849 report by the staff of Espada Cemetery noted that most of Havana’s Protestants were buried in Catholic cemeteries, but only by pretending to be Catholic. Those Protestants who could not pass for Catholic were buried in “desolate potter’s fields.” One of these internment sites was the Vedado Burial Grounds located “close to the shore” and maintained by a “British hotel keeper named Francis Nichols” (Martínez-Fernández 2002, 68).

Couceiro asserted that most— *but not all* — of the individuals interred at the Vedado Burial Grounds were unbaptized “black *bozales* slaves.” However, due to the “humanitarian protests” of the residents who lived nearby, a chaplain was appointed who could baptize non-Catholic *bozales* as they lay dying (Couceiro 2020, 288). It has also been reported that some Chinese immigrants were also buried among the *bozales*. Garcia and Eng wrote that in Cuba, “Some Chinese were buried in British cemeteries” including the ““English Cemetery” in La Chorrera, called the “foreigners’ Cemetery” on Felipe Loira’s map of Havana from May 1867.” This cemetery was located in “Los Uveros, between the beach road and the coast, near the Los Uveros rubbish dump and in the area of today’s Marti Park and the Ministry of External Affairs” in coffins made by “the American Mr. Nikel (*sic*) for non-Catholics” (Garcia and Eng 2009, 212). Gordon also noted that some unbaptized Chinese were buried there (Gordon 1901, 20–21).

Couceiro agreed that some Chinese might have been buried along with the *bozales*, but he suspected that some of the people described as “Chinese” were not from China. The Spanish word “*chino*” literally translates as “Chinese.” But it can refer to any East Asian, or more broadly any person deemed “exotic” (Couceiro 2020, 288). Couceiro wrote that when “burials in churches were stopped for hygienic reasons, and the Espada Cemetery was inaugurated in 1803” the corpses of non-Catholics were “abandoned” and dumped at the Vedado Burial Grounds. Couceiro noted that some historical documents reported that *chinos* were also buried there. However, it was not until 1847 that the first Chinese workers began to arrive in Cuba from Canton. He speculated that the “*chinos*” buried there prior to 1847 were, in fact, indigenous

people from the Philippines or the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. Couceiro noted, “This is how this kind of cemetery for ethnic and religious marginalized originated” (Couceiro 2020, 288).

Although Couceiro asserted that there was multi-ethnic diversity within the Vedado Burial Grounds, Renschler’s 2017 examination of the 55 Vedado Group crania concluded that each of them was of African ancestry (Renschler 2007:220–221). There are several scenarios which could explain the findings of both Couceiro and Renschler. Perhaps, Rodríguez possessed some information which allowed him to extract only the crania of *bozales* from the diverse remains scattered at the Vedado Burial Grounds. It is equally plausible that he genuinely believed he was only gathering *bozales*, but instead he also collected the remains of some free Cuban-born persons of full or mostly African Ancestry who died destitute and were interred with the *bozales*. Further studies may more definitively determine the ethnic identity and social position of each of the 55 members of the Vedado Group.

The family that owned Vedado Burial Grounds and sold it to the Cuban government

In the previous section I discussed the location of the Vedado Burial Grounds. I will now address the family who owned the Vedado Burial Grounds in the early nineteenth century, and so would have, at the time, been regarded as the owner of the Vedado Group remains. As Diana Ramey Berry has documented, during the nineteenth century the remains of persons enslaved in the United States were commonly sold by their enslavers as part of the cadaver trade (Berry 2017, 152). I will show that in 1840, when the Vedado Groups crania were shipped to Morton, the Vedado Burial Grounds were owned by the Cuban government. But prior to that, these lands were the property the of the Frías family. There is every reason to believe that the Frias family would have claimed ownership of the crania, just as they would have claimed ownership of the trees and limestone deposits located with their property boundaries.

Couceiro addressed the ownership of the Vedado Burial Grounds when he wrote:

On November 13, 1832, it [the mass grave] was officially inaugurated as the Cemetery of the English, many of whom were not papal Catholics either, and later it would be named the Cemetery of the Americans, which demonstrates the changes in the correlation of forces in the country and its respective influences in our culture. These were lands that, in 1832 had been ceded by the owner of the hacienda in the town, D. Antonio de Frías... The best part of the cemetery was dedicated to Protestant foreigners, hence its name “of the English” and then “of the Americans.” It was closed in 1847, to put an end to what was propitiating a Dantesque spectacle and the environmental and moral deterioration of the community. (Couceiro 2020, 288)

In 2017, Martín wrote that the English Cemetery was had “became famous as a cursed place (*adquirió fama de sitio maldito*), due to the sporadic appearance of corpses torn to pieces by scavengers.” She asserted that “Antonio de Frías” became “fed up with this situation” and decided to sell part of his land to be used as a cemetery. The burial grounds were established in 1809 and were overseen by “the Captain General of the Island” (Martín 2017). According to Martín, the English cemetery was probably established because of “the increase in foreigners due to the Haitian revolution and the provisions of Mayor Alejandro Ramírez, in 1817, to encourage the immigration” of white Catholic settlers. The decision to create the English cemetery was:

“also influenced by the numerous settlements of North American merchants in Havana and Matanzas, and the large number of blacks killed after their arrival from Africa. This last aspect was the reason for the creation, in 1817, of a new regulation to govern the cemetery, as there was a great disorder with the corpses. The neglect of the place constituted continuous complaints from the nearby residents.” (Martín 2017)

Barcia reported that the poor conditions at the cemetery were observed first-hand by Ángel J. Cowley, a leading member of Havana’s medical community. One day he went walking near the cemetery with his children and was shocked to see decaying bodies exposed on the surface. As a result, he lodged a written complaint which read, “We saw part of a corpse that was lying to the left of the entrance” that was “completely uncovered and in an advanced state corruption of the thigh and the leg on the left side, missing the foot, food for the carrion crows or vultures (*las auras o buitres*)” (Quoted in Barcia c. 2017). As noted above, Cowley and Rodríguez were fellow professors. Perhaps Rodríguez knew about the Vedado Burial grounds through Cowley, although many professors may have known about it.

Martín’s article was published in the online edition of *Granma*, which is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba. *Granma* espouses a specific political ideology. The articles of Couceiro and Barcia were government reports rather than peer reviewed manuscripts. Clearly, these three texts must be approached with appropriate skepticism. Yet their claims are largely corroborated by primary source records and the writings of other historians, which I shall detail in the following sections.

The founding father of the Frías family was Antonio Frías y Gutiérrez de Padilla (1770–1826), a wealthy Cuban coffee planter and slave merchant. Frías y Gutiérrez was reportedly born to a humble family from Valverde in the Canary Islands. It was only after he immigrated to Cuba that he made a fortune. In the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, he purchased a large estate east of Old City Havana which he called Vedado Farm. It would later be developed by his sons and become the Vedado Barrio of modern-day Havana. Frías y Gutiérrez’s Vedado Farm included the Sandbank where the Vedado Burial Grounds were located (Nieto 1995, 4–5).

In 1805, Frías y Gutiérrez married Bernarda Joséfa Jacott y Martinez Heto (1773–1845) whose family, the Jacotts, were Spanish nobles of Flemish ancestry. In 1834, at the age of 51, she became the 3rd Countess of Pozos-Dulces. She was born in Havana, where she and her husband Antonio lived in what Nieto described as a “big mansion called “El Carmelo” in Monte Vedado” (Nieto 1995, 4–5; Piqueras 2021, 116–119). Bernarda and her husband had six children. They included the famed Cuban intellectual, Francisco de Frías y Jacott (1809–1877) and his elder brother Antonio de Frías y Jacott (1808–1844), who owned the Vedado property in 1840 when the skulls were gathered by Rodríguez (Nieto 1995, 6–8).

Roig reported that the English cemetery was established in 1832 on land donated by “D. Antonio de Frías” who was “the owner of the hacienda” (Roig 1963, 49). This charitable landowner was Antonio de Frías y Jacott, who would have inherited the land in 1826 upon the death of his father, also named Antonio. Although little is known about Antonio de Frías y Jacott, Morales reported that in the 1810s he and his two brothers attended boarding school at Mount Saint Mary’s College in Emmitsburg, Maryland (Morales 1887, 6-10). A genealogy of the Frías family simply notes that Antonio de Frías y Jacott was a “distinguished farmer” who died unmarried in 1844, four years after Rodríguez gathered the 55 skulls (Nieto 1995, 7).

Although little is known about Antonio Frías y Jacott, there is ample information about his brother Francisco de Frías y Jacott. He was an agronomist, journalist, and abolitionist who, in 1868, introduced Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection to Cuba (Garcia 2012, 154). It appears that Francisco de Frías y Jacott was also an acquaintance of Auber. Frías wrote of him, “I will always remember with interest this good old man” who had “a notable influence on the enlightenment” of so many (Morales 1887, 6–9). Frías was also friends with the Cuban philosopher José Cipriano de la Luz y Caballero (1800–1862), who was an associate of Alexander von Humboldt (1767–1835). Luz was critical of Morton’s most well-known work, *Crania Americana*. Luz wrote that “The author [Morton] lacked insight (*Al autor le falta cacumen*)” (Quoted in Alonso 2001, 224).

Additionally, Frías was friends with the Cuban ichthyologist and polymath, Felipe Poey y Aloy (1799–1891) who was a corresponding member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP). The proceedings of the ANSP show that he donated a book on Cuban natural features to their library in 1866 (ANSP 1866, 437). He also sent fossilized bones of a crocodile, a turtle, and a sloth to, Joseph Leidy (1823–1891) a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical school who served as a curator at the ANSP (Leidy 1868, 178–179). Poey, who conducted some studies of human skulls, likely knew of Morton and his craniological research.⁹

⁹ Poey conducted studies of “the earliest known evidence of physical anthropology activity in Cuba.” He examined “prehistoric crania discovered by the Spanish Geographer Miguel

Circa 1844, Poey received a letter from Frías who was studying in Europe at the time. Frías wrote that he would soon have to return to Cuba to take over the family estate due to his brother's poor health. Frías wrote:

“You know the repugnance I have of returning to Cuba for reasons that I need not repeat. Up to now, my only endeavor has consisted in being able to stay away from that country until better times... In this state of affairs [I am] urged on the one hand by the idea of what my duty imposes on me, and on the other by the pleas and solicitations my whole family; what can I do but succumb to necessity that I have tried so hard to avoid?” (Quoted in Morales 1940, 16).

Not only was Poey an associate of Frías, but there is also evidence that Poey likely knew Rodríguez. The offices of both men were located at 96 San Nicolas Street in northwestern Havana. This building is two and a quarter miles from the site of the Vedado Burial Grounds. According to the *International Scientist's Directory* of 1882, “Poey, Dr. Phillip” was an ichthyologist who worked at “Rue San Nicolas, 96, Havana” (Cassino 1882, 281). In 1884, Poey was visited by the American ichthyologist, David Starr Jordan (1851–1931) who described the research being conducted in “Don Felipe's study in Calle San Nicolas” (Jordan 1884, 548; Wolff 2006, 999). An 1861 guide to businesses in Cuba lists Rodríguez as a “medical doctor” whose office was located at 96 San Nicolas Street (*Imprenta del Gobierrno* 1861, 252).

Whom did Morton contact in Cuba to request the skulls of indigenous Africans?

In the previous section I have discussed the ownership of Vedado Burial Grounds and the Vedado Group. I will now address how it was that the Vedado Group skulls came to be removed from their burial grounds and transported to Philadelphia. I will focus on the network of anatomists and natural scientists from Havana with whom Morton coordinated in his quest to acquire the 55 Vedado Group crania. In this section, I will give a cursory overview of who these Cubans scientists were, and document how they corresponded with – and in many cases visited – the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP). I will also discuss how the naturalist scholars from Philadelphia and Havana exchanged specimens of plants, animals, minerals, and newly published publications on an ongoing going basis. These exchanges were not one-to-one trades in which, say, a specific book would be traded for a specimen deemed equivalent. Rather, there was an ongoing cooperative relationship between the scholars of Philadelphia and Havana,

Rodríguez Ferrer” (Spencer 1997, 301). In 1861, Poey authored a book entitled *La Unidad de la Especie Humana (The Unity of the Human Race)*, in which he asserted that all human races belonged to one species. In Poey's view, Africans had yet to reach their full potential, but eventually would after being exposed to European culture and technology (Walker 2004, 107).

who shared the common goal of increasing the breadth of materials they curated in their respective museums and libraries.

I argue that these ongoing exchanges of natural historical specimens between Philadelphia and Havana explains the text from Rodríguez's 1840 letter in which he said he had received Morton's letter request for "50 pure African race skulls." Rodríguez then noted he had also received Morton's "interesting work entitled *Crania Americana* has been received, which I am reading with the greatest pleasure" (Rodríguez to Morton 1840). On first glance, it would appear that Rodríguez and Morton were engaged an exchange in which Morton mailed his book to Rodríguez, and afterwards Rodríguez delivered the skulls. However, documents suggest that Morton and his Cuban contacts – including but not limited to Rodríguez – had discussed the possibility of shipping African skulls to Philadelphia as far back as 1835.

Further research is needed to better clarify the Cuban scholars with whom Morton corresponded.¹⁰ What is clear is that in 1835, Morton discussed acquiring indigenous African skulls with Ramón Dionisio José de la Sagra y Peris (1798–1871), a Cuban scholar who was visiting Philadelphia. Sagra was a Spanish-born Cuban professor of natural history who served as the director of the Botanical Garden of Havana from 1822 to 1835 (Puig-Samper and Valero 1986, 286–287). In 1835, Morton and Sagra met at the ANSP, which Sagra was visiting while taking a tour of the eastern United States (Sagra 1836, 59–60).

During the 1820s, Sagra had struck up a relationship with William Maclure (1763–1840), the wealthy shipping merchant turned geologist who, in 1812, helped found the ANSP. In 1815 and 1816 Maclure traveled throughout the Caribbean studying islands of volcanic origins (Morton 1841, 15–17). In 1826, Sagra gave a speech in which he noted that he was indebted to Maclure for having provided him with many geological specimens (Sagra 1826, 12). In 1817 Maclure became the president of the ANSP and for years after was one of its primary financiers. In 1841, Morton composed Maclure's obituary, which is an indication of how well they knew each other (Morton 1841, 16). It is likely that it was Maclure was responsible for initially connecting Morton with Sagra.

In 1835, Sagra visited Philadelphia and while there met Morton. Sagra's notebook detailing this trip included an entry dated June 2, 1835, in which he briefly noted that Morton was one of the scholars responsible for amassing the ANSP's impressive collection of plant and animal specimens (Sagra 1836, 59). It is quite likely that while Sagra was in Philadelphia, Morton asked him to procure the skulls of indigenous Africans. The evidence that such a

¹⁰ Although Morton once toured Barbados and several Caribbean islands there is no evidence that he traveled to Cuba or ever met Rodríguez. There is also no evidence that Morton made connections with Cuban scholars through Humbolt, a member of the ANSP who visited Philadelphia and traveled extensively in Cuba (See Renschler 2007, 22–23).

conversation occurred comes from a letter Morton received from the Pierre Aléxandre Auber (1786–1843), a French-born professor of botany at the University of Havana and the director of its botanical garden (Puig-Samper and Valero 1986, 286–287). Auber’s letter, which was written in French and dated August 9, 1835, began:

At the receipt of your honor of July 1st, which gave me a recommendation from my invaluable friend, Doctor Sagra, I took action to fulfill your intentions, and give you the African crania (*crânes africains*) with all the data necessary to assure you of the nation to which these individuals belong.

This letter suggests that Morton spoke to Sagra about collecting African skulls in June 1835. As a result, Sagra recommended that Morton mail a letter to Auber, who was a colleague of Sagra. Morton took Sagra’s advice and on July 1st mailed to Auber a letter which has not been located. In this letter, Morton must have requested that Auber send him the skulls of Africans. However, Auber was concerned that he could not gather up the skull in a timely manner. And so, he wrote to Morton explaining the many difficulties presented by the task. Auber noted that there were “several obstacles” which kept him from sending the skulls. Auber did not detail the nature of these obstacles, but whatever they were, he was unable to overcome them. Auber never sent any skulls to Morton.

However, Morton did eventually receive one African skull from Guillermo “William” Lobé (1785–1883) a Cuban diplomat of Dutch ancestry. In 1845, Morton published a listing of the skulls in his collection, one of which was No. 580, a 16-year-old male “Native African of the Maua tribe,” acquired from “Dr. Lobé of Havana” (Morton 1841, [7]).¹¹ Morton assigned identification numbers to the skulls in his collection as he received them. Thus, those with lower numbers represent the skull he acquired first. Since the 55 skulls received from Rodríguez are all numbered in the 900s, and the Lobé skull is in the 500s. Lobé’s skull must have arrived first. Lobé likely sent Morton a skull at the urging of Sagra, who was one of Lobé’s colleagues.¹²

Lobé, Rodríguez, and Sagra all knew each other. In Sagra’s 1826 speech, he noted that his research into geology had been assisted by his “teachers and friends” who included the “distinguished” professor, “don José Rodríguez,” a man who was “cited with honor in the history of the natural sciences” (Sagra 1826, 13). In summary, Rodríguez, Auber, Lobé, and Sagra all knew each other, and all helped Morton acquire the skulls of indigenous Africans. Additional research is needed to fully understand the details regarding the relationships connecting these men with each other, as well as to Maclure and Morton.

¹¹ There remains a curious question of how Lobé knew the ethnic affiliation of the skull he gathered, while Rodríguez described the skulls he gathered simply as “Africans.”

¹² In 1842, Lobé wrote a book in which he referred to his “enlightened friend Don Ramon de la Sagra” (Lobé 1842, 111).

Conclusions: More research is needed for the Vedado Group and the Morton Collection

The above analysis of the Vedado Group demonstrates that researching the provenance of individuals whose remains comprise the Morton collection can provide important insights into the history of scientific racism, as well as both inform and pose productive questions for ongoing discussions about repatriation of human remains in the Morton collection.

The evidence presented herein suggests that the Vedado Burial Grounds likely originated as a sinkhole which, in the late 1700s, served as a refuse pit into which the bodies of enslaved Africans and other persons of low social status were deposited. Circa 1809, the Vedado Burial Grounds became a commonly used but unofficial open mass grave for *bozales* and the occasional pauper or non-Catholic. In 1832, the northern half of the Vedado Burial Grounds, known as the English Cemetery, was officially designated as a cemetery for Protestants. The southern half remained an interment site for African *bozales*, and it was from this location that Rodríguez gathered 55 skulls that were scattered on the surface.

Rodríguez assumed that all the skulls he gathered were of free-born indigenous Africans. However, the Vedado Burial Grounds were also used to inter paupers and other person of low social standing. Furthermore, some of the bodies in the nearby English cemetery were likewise allowed to decompose on the surface. Tropical storms and scavengers could also have transported such skulls into the adjacent sandbanks where Rodríguez gathered the skulls. Under this scenario, some of the Vedado Group individuals may not have been those of enslaved persons born in Africa.

The research conducted for this study was quite challenging due to a paucity of readily available historical documents in the United States. Further studies are needed to learn more about the Vedado Group. For example, Antonio Frías was an enslaver. Are there records indicating that any of the people he enslaved were interred at the Vedado Burial Grounds? Frías' father was a slave importer. Did he use his property, "Vedado Farm," to house newly arrived *bozales* on a temporary basis before selling them? If so, was the Vedado Burial Grounds a site for those who did not live long enough to be sold? Where was this housing in relation to the Vedado Burial Grounds? Did any slave ships disembark quarantined enslaved peoples at Vedado Barrio?

Additional background research into the nature of the slave trade in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century could also be valuable in determining the ethnicity of the native African people commonly enslaved at that time. Also, the network of relationships linking Morton, Rodríguez, and their associates is still not sufficiently clear. The extant letters between these scholars indicates that there may be other undiscovered letters still held in archival collections.

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