

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL

and what we found underneath the Cathedral floor part I

by Bernard Lauwyck



Previously unknown tomb under the Roseau Cathedral floor

Earlier in the year, I wrote an article in the Chronicle, on the catholic cemetery, which was located around the Roseau parish church.

As the church building expanded, after the emancipation of slaves in 1834 and again after it became the Our Lady of Fair Haven Cathedral of Roseau in 1850, we assumed that a lot of these graves were covered up by the cathedral floor. In February 2013, I wrote *“It remains to be seen if, during the present renovation works, evidence of this old grave yard will turn up.”*

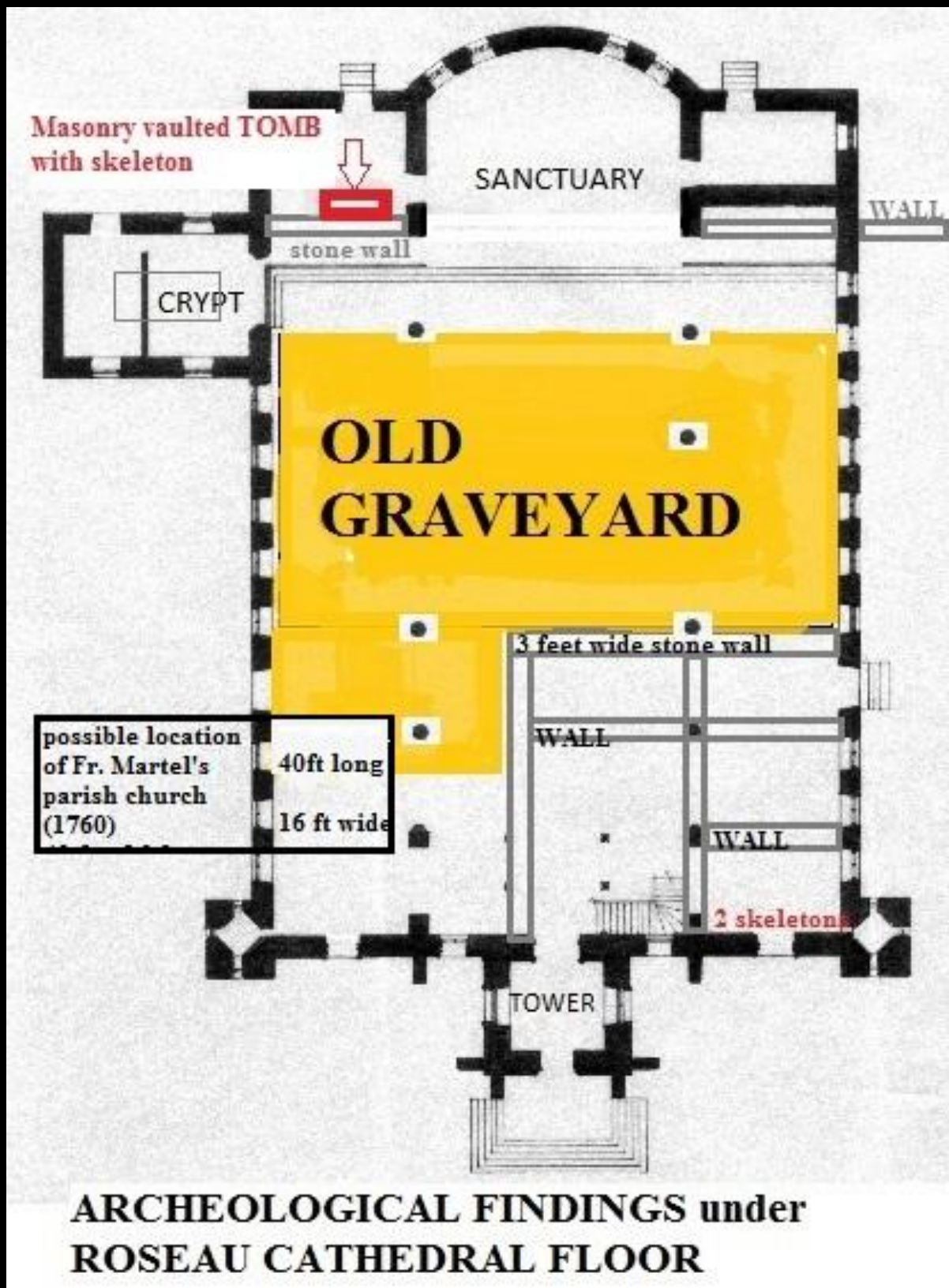
As the excavation works in the cathedral are completed , I can now report on our findings and discoveries.

First of all, I want to tell you that we did not find any gold or silver. But that was not surprising. We did find an area with empty mass wine bottles to the western side of the cathedral, but that is not much of a find. We also dug up a few pieces of pottery.

The theory that the Roseau Cathedral was on top of an old grave yard was confirmed. Small pieces of bones, but no skeletons nor skulls, were found right

across the nave or seating area as indicated in yellow on the attached floor plan. An area of 85 feet long East to West , and 45 feet wide South to North.

This puzzled me, as I expected the oldest part of the cathedral, the center aisle, to be free from burials. My theory was that as the eastern and western side aisles were added at a later date, existing graves around the oldest part of the church were covered up. Actually the whole cathedral building from its early inception sat firmly on a pre-existing grave yard.



Then I remembered what Bishop Moris wrote :

“In a manuscript of 1727 is found a statement to the effect that there was a chapel at Roseau, built by the French Inhabitants and serviced by Abbé Richard, previously missionary in Persia. He had arrived in March of that year and had taken up his abode on the western coast, where he found 60 French families and some English Catholics.”

This is the chapel that Rev. Father Guillaume (William) Martel of the Order of Preachers or Dominicans, found when he , on the 15th of September 1750, landed in the island and founded the parish of Roseau. He described it as *“a small hut of reeds, half covered with straw and open on all sides, so that animals could roam about at their will”*. Father Martel built subsequently a nicer and larger chapel, 40 feet long by 16 feet. I have written about Fr. Martel’s parish church of Roseau in a previous article.

It is interesting to know that this first parish church, was orientated towards the East. The sanctuary was located in what is now the Roseau presbytery yard. The entrance facing west was connected to the Old Market by Church Lane. Bishop Moris (+1956) stated that this western main entrance was located where the Baptismal font stood up to 1983.

“The first parochial church of Roseau, under the title of Notre Dame du Bon Port, stood not in the same direction [as the present Cathedral], nor was it of the same proportions. The main entrance was to the West, where now the Baptismal Font stands, whilst the sanctuary was in the present presbytery garden. The building was rectangular, 40ft by 16ft. in native timber, without much appearance; in fact, a good-sized hall, sufficient for the need of the time.” The HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE OF ROSEAU by Bishop James Moris (+1956).

I have indicated the possible location on the Cathedral floor plan. As it was a timber building it is very unlikely that this location will ever be confirmed by archaeology.



The most surprising discovery was the masonry vaulted tomb on the Eastern side.

As the excavator cut an opening in the corner of the bricked chamber , a skeleton was discovered. Out of respect nothing was touched and the vault was resealed.

This vault or grave was located before 1983 under the eastern marble side altar. The mural of the “Flight to Egypt” and this altar were moved in 1984 towards the southern back wall, suppressing the second sacristy to the East.

The location under the altar is very meaningful as only an important priest could have been buried there. The construction of a vault would support this.

Searching the Diocesan records, the first person that came up is Fr. Jean de la Hoz Ximeo.

Bishop Moris wrote that Fr. Jean, on his way to Grandbay, fell with his horse into a precipice above Pichelin and was killed on the spot.

“ This happened on the 7th May, 1828; he was 68 years old. He was buried on the 9th in the church of “Our Lady du Bon Port”, in Roseau...

An elderly Spanish secular priest, Father Jean de la hoz Ximeo arrived in the island in March 1819. “ l’abbé Jean ” as he was called, remained alone until Christmas 1822, when his nephew, Philip Ximeo arrived and became his assistant.

Father Jean was a hard worker and a successful reaper of souls. Whilst the walls of the Roseau church were slowly rising from the ground, the two Fathers Ximeo were busily engaged in attending to the spiritual needs of their numerous flock, scattered over the whole island. At times they were summoned for urgent sick calls in distant districts. It is on one of these errands of mercy that Father Jean, on his way to Grand Bay, fell with his horse into a precipice above Pichelin and was killed on the spot.

: THE HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE OF ROSEAU James Moris.

To be continued.