

“A Greenland Cemetery”

By James D. Dewell

In *The Monumental News*, Vol. 7, No. 8
August 1895, pp. 492-493

(This article is about a cemetery located at the harbor of Sukkertoppen (Sugar Loaf), Greenland, July 1894. “...a settlement of four hundred Esquimaux under the Danish flat, a race without a history of a nationality; a people of Asiatic cast, whose progenitors were probably from a warmer clime.”)

On the second page of this document, you will also find two article additional articles about the proposed monument to Bismark to be erected at Glankenseve, near hamburg, Germany & a photograph of the equestrian statue of General George B. Meade, modeled by Mr. H. K. Bush-Brown, SC, to be erected on the Gettysburgh battlefield.

This article, which begins on the next page,
is presented on the Stone Quarries and Beyond web site.

<http://quarriesandbeyond.org/>

Peggy B. Perazzo
Email: pbperazzo@comcast.net
May 2014

A Greenland Cemetery.

With Melville Bay as the objective point, I boarded the steamship "Miranda," July 7th, 1894. After many delays caused by fog, collision with an iceberg, and striking a hidden reef, we anchored in the little harbor of Sukkertoppen, (Sugar Loaf)



NO. 1.—LOOKING SOUTH.

Greenland, in early August; a settlement of four hundred Esquimaux under the Danish flag, a race without a history or a nationality; a people of Asiatic cast, whose progenitors were probably from a warmer clime.

How came this peculiar people to inhabit a frozen region can only be guessed at. The belief is that in ages past their ancestors were forced north by tribal wars, probably before the date of the English Channel, and hence through some emergency reached the north coast of Greenland, when that portion of the earth's surface was more temperate than now.

As the cycles of time rolled along and the ice fiend claimed possession of all that is now known as the great snow cap, this remnant of a once more important tribe worked its way down the coast to

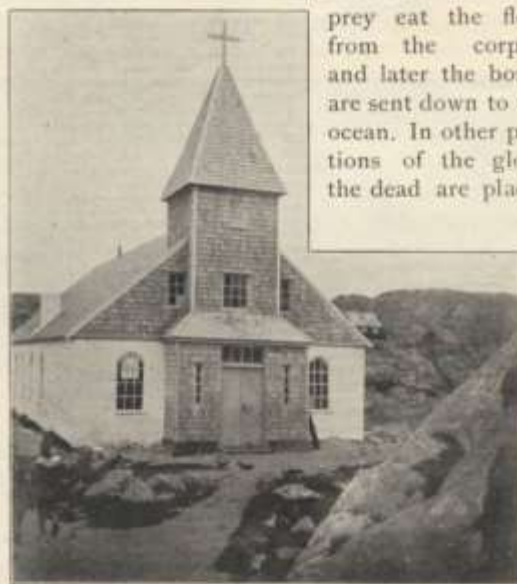


NO. 2.—OPENING GRAVES.

Davis' Straits where they now struggle in poverty for existence. While waiting for relief, a matter of two weeks, we took in the settlement and its surroundings. My first thought was, in case of death where might we be buried; but in any event I desired to see the place where the Sukkertoppers buried their dead. Their method of burial is not as they would have it if living in a more favored clime, but is forced by the conditions of climate and surroundings.

Disposition of the dead has been from remote times mostly a grave subject. The ancients had a way of embalming and depositing in tombs, hence the mummies; also cremation in a rude form was practiced. To-day in India some deposit their dead in the water, and the high caste leave their dead on the roof of a mausoleum or chapel, where the cor-

morants or birds of prey eat the flesh from the corpse, and later the bones are sent down to the ocean. In other portions of the globe the dead are placed



NO. 3.—LUTHERAN CHURCH.

in trees or on poles.

It remains for the poor Esquimaux of Greenland to show to the civilized world that the dead may be buried without digging a hole in the ground. In Greenland, cremation, or earth covering, or embalming, is utterly impossible, and owing to the climate quite unnecessary.

The views of the cemetery at Sukkertoppen, which accompany this article, were photographed by the writer in August, 1894. No. 1 represents the cemetery looking south towards Davis' Straits. It is a plot of about five acres in a canon, the rock projections exhibiting deep glacial marks. No. 2 shows the party opening graves to collect specimens for scientific purposes. No. 3 is the Lutheran Church. All of the Esquimaux, south of Melville

Bay are Lutherans, having been Christianized many decades ago by the Danish missionaries. I found the Esquimaux were poor in all things except good nature, and were especially poor as to a suitable ground where to deposit their dead, there being no soil or vegetation in all that section.

Our two weeks stay gave us ample opportunity to visit the natives in their homes, which are simply squalid huts, but no chance to see a funeral. However, I visited the cemetery and found as follows: that as there are no trees there can be no wood, hence no coffins. The only wood on Greenland coast is either brought from Copenhagen, or caught from the drift. The dead are simply laid on the surface of the rocks wrapped in sealskin.—Hair seal is the main stay of the natives: skin for clothes, flesh for food, fat for light and heat. The body is then covered to the depth of perhaps ten inches with moss scraped from the sides of a friendly rock, over which are mounded stones of various sizes to keep the body from wild animals, and as a monument. In the view showing a party exhuming for specimens, the reader will observe that the graves are simply stone mounds. We found in all of the old graves only skulls, securing five in good condition in one mound, and no other bones. A fine collection was gathered,

but alas, they all went down on the steamship "Miranda."

There are exceptions to the average mound. The Danes, who are in control of all the Greenland coast below Melville Bay, have a wooden enclosure surrounding their graves, the wood being brought from Denmark; and the wooden crosses are for the more favored or better portion of the Esquimaux. All else are filled with the poor, simple children of the frozen North, and their only monument a heap of stones, which in a later day is overturned by some explorer in search of human frames in the interest of science.

This brief article cannot give the reader my thoughts fully as I contemplated this God's Acre,

Here are the bones of human beings, some of them, perhaps, descendants of kings from Southern climes in centuries past, and beyond the memory or history of the living. It was noticeable that the mounds exhumed brought to light mostly skulls, furnishing evidence of antiquity, probably of those who died before the Lutheran missionaries spread the Gospel of Christ on the Greenland coast. Yet the method of burial remains as before, even though the present generation are blessed with religious rites. The people of Greenland on the western coast below Melville Bay are all nominally Christians, and dispose of their dead in the same manner as at Sukkertoppen. It has been frequently asked, "why do the Esquimaux remain in the frozen region?" The answer is plain and simple. They do not know of the outside world, and withal, have neither the desire nor facilities to leave their bleak and desolate habitation.

To bring such a race to a warmer climate and to civilization would insure their entire extinction. The future of this side tracked race can only be imagined. My thought is that ere many decades, they will become obliterated.

James D. Dewell.



GEN. GEORGE B. MEADE. H. K. BUSH-BROWN, SC.

the Elbe, is progressing. The monument itself will be about 100 feet high. Those having the work in hand comprise one hundred of the leading men throughout Germany, and some \$375,000 is the amount set to complete it. The funds necessary to erect the monument will be raised by popular subscription. The site has been presented to the committee by the owner of the land, a wealthy merchant of Hamburg.

The equestrian statue of General George B. Meade, illustrated above, and of which mention was made in our last issue, was modeled by Mr. H. K. Bush-Brown, and it is to be erected on the Gettysburgh battle-field.

More information about this area of Greenland is available at the two following online resources:

Encyclopedia Artica, 15 – volume unpublished reference work, Dartmouth College Library
<http://collections.dartmouth.edu/arctica-beta/html/EA14-12.html>

The Last Cruise of the Miranda. A Record of Arctic Adventure, by Henry C. Walsh, New York, London: The Transatlantic Publishing Company, 1895. (This book includes the following article, “A Greenland Cemetery.” The book is available on the Internet Archive.)
<https://archive.org/details/lastcruiseofmira00walsiala>