

# THE MAHOGANY TABLE MYSTERY

by Trevor W. Hearl

Myths surrounding Napoleon's death, burial and exhumation on St Helena are too durable to be punctured by my pen. But the 150th anniversary of Napoleon's elevation from Sane Valley, St Helena to the Hotel des Invalides, Paris, seems to appropriate occasion to recall an innocent, but puzzling Longwood legend. I refer to the mystery of Captain Bennett's mahogany table.

As every St Helena scholar knows, Captain James Bennett of the St Helena Regiment selflessly sacrificed his dining room table to make Napoleon's coffin.

"When the officers at Longwood asked for some mahogany to make the outer shell for the imperial coffin, they were told that this tree did not grow in the island and there was no means of supplying the wood required; (Captain)Bennett then remembered a large dining table in his possession and offered it to the carpenters".

Thus wrote M. Gilbert Martineau, French Consul at Longwood House, the leading authority, in 1966, in his prize-winning study *Napoleon's St Helena* (p. 161). And he added an intriguing reflection: "So that it is in mahogany from the dining table of an officer of the St Helena regiment that the Emperor now rests under the dome of the Invalides".

Ten years later, however, M. Martineau introduced some ambiguities into this account of the "outer shell" when, in *Napoleon's Last Journey*, (pp. 117-8), he described the raising of Napoleon's coffin from the tomb in 1840. "At half-past nine the mahogany coffin came into view [...] The screws had to be sawn through to open the first mahogany covering, which was warped on the outside [...]. The first mahogany coffin was sawn up and distributed among the French crews; every reliquary of St Helena contains a fragment".

So, if the "outer shell", made (according to the first account) from Captain Bennett's dining table, is the same as "the first mahogany covering" raised from the tomb in 1840 and "the first mahogany coffin" which (according to the later account) was sawn up for souvenirs, then clearly the Captain's furniture is not "under the dome of the Invalides". Indeed, Captain Bennett's generosity is not even mentioned in the later version. The mystery deepens.

Let us start solving it by sorting out the coffins. There were four of them. Norwood Young gives a clear account of them in *Napoleon in Exile at St Helena* (1815-1821) (London, 1915, Vol. II, pp. 248-9). Napoleon's body was placed in a tin coffin constructed by Sgt. Abraham Millington, an armourer in the East India Company's St Helena Artillery, and upholstered by Andrew Darling, who was employed in furnishing New Longwood House. This tin coffin was placed in shell of mahog-

any made by a cabinetmaker, Metcalfe, also working in New Longwood House. Sgt. Millington, with the other craftsmen and Pte. Levy of the 20th Regt., then enclosed these coffins in a lead covering which was finally encased in an outer shell of mahogany. These details came from Sgt. Millington, who said nothing about Captain Bennett's table, or a mahogany shortage. But what did Captain Bennett say about it?

On the day of Napoleon's funeral, May 9, 1821, Captain Bennett took all his family, even baby Eleanor, from their home at Chubb's Spring to watch the ceremony. For his four-and-a-half-year-old son George, proudly riding his pony, it was a memorable occasion which he later recalled clearly in his Reminiscences. But if his father exclaimed, "There goes my dining room table!" George did not hear him, nor apparently did the family remark that it was missing at home.

George next saw that piece of mahogany at the exhumation in 1840. Eluding the sentries in the early morning mists of October 15, he reached the railing around the tomb as men were hauling at the ropes. "In another minute, up came the coffin. It appeared to be shining with wet, but there it hung, like that of Mahomet, between heaven and earth".

He said nothing about it being his father's dining room table. Nor, it seems, did his mother or sisters. Yet they had a fine opportunity when George's old school friend, Lieut. John Lefroy, RA, was posted to the Island in 1840, for he had also watched the exhumation and was a frequent guest of the Bennetts. Had the story been family gossip - "We never expected to see our old dining table again! - it would certainly have found a place, not only in George Bennett's Reminiscences, but in Lefroy's long letters home, published in 1895.

But would Captain Bennett's sacrifice have been needed anyway? Surely not. For if mahogany was scarce anywhere on St Helena, it was not at Longwood. When Andrew Darling took the auction inventory of the three houses (Old Longwood House, New Longwood House and Bertrands' Cottage) he listed many mahogany tables, bookcases, wardrobes and other furniture. Today they would be priceless pieces of Napoleonica or valued as the work of cabinetmaker George Bullock but, except for such choice items as Napoleon's desk, such considerations would not have saved them from the carpenter in 1821 had he needed the wood.

Where then did the story of Captain Bennett's table originate, if not from the family in 1821 or 1840, or from the craftsmen who made the coffins? A clue might be seen, almost a century later, in Dr Arnold Chaplin's "discovery" of the Bennett family. For many years Dr Chaplin had found "delight" in studying Napoleon's exile on St Helena, publishing works on his illness, and on the Island's chief medical officer, Dr Shortt.

In 1914, his Directory of the Island during the Captivity of Napoleon, a "*St Helena Who's Who*", was published with a meticulously revised and enlarged edition which followed in 1919. Here, for the first time, we meet the Bennett family: Mrs James Bennett, "the first lady to whom Napoleon bowed on arriving in St Helena; Captain James Bennett, who "had a very large mahogany dining table, and he allowed it to be used to make the coffin"; and George Brooks Bennett, who "had

left a manuscript in which he records the events of his life in connection with Napoleon and St Helena” (pp. 57-8). Dr Chaplin did not add that it said nothing about a dining table.

Then where did Dr Chaplin find this story of the Captain’s table? Scouting through the relevant literature between 1914 and 1919 brought me to *Sir Lees Knowles Letters of Captain Engelbert Lutjens*, Orderly Officer at Longwood, Saint Helena, published in 1915. There, in a footnote, (p.32), he confides that Captain James Bennett’s “dining table, presented for the purpose, was used for making the outer mahogany-coffin for the Emperor”. Knowles listed his sources of information as “Broadley, Chaplin, Forsyth, Fremeaux, Gonnard, Masson, Rosebery, Seaton, Shorter, Watson and Young”, but none of these writers seem to have heard of Captain Bennett. But Knowles also revealed that he had spoken “recently” with Captain Bennett’s daughter, Eleanor, “now Mrs Owen, born in 1821 [...] she lives with a son and daughter at Balham”.

So, until someone comes up with a better suggestion - or a note reading: “5th May 1821. Received from Captain James Bennett, One Mahogany dining table”, I prefer to imagine a dear old lady of about 93, with a twinkle in her eye, sensing fertile soil, sowing the seeds of a nice new Longwood legend.

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Note: There have been several updates to this story since Trevor Hearl wrote this article.

Colin Fox, who is descended from the Bennett family, attempted to solve the mystery in the first chapter of his book [Fox, Colin. *The Bennett Letters: A 19th Century Family in St. Helena, England and the Cape: The Lives of Captain James Bennett ... and His Son George Brooks Bennett*, Gloucester: Choir Press, 2006]. He later published a revised version [Fox, Colin. ‘Napoleon’s Coffin’. *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* No 50 (2021): 5–24] that goes some way to provide a possible basis for the story. Some of the points made by Trevor Hearl can be explained and expanded upon by the further research that has been carried out.

- Sometime after Trevor wrote his article Colin Fox contributed to a BBC pilot programme to be entitled ‘The History Seekers’ – a forerunner of the more recent ‘Who do you think you are’. It was a 15-minute piece that was intended to delve into the truth of the Bennett’s table/coffin mystery. After this was filmed, it was decided to cancel the series and the pilot was never broadcast. During the research it was discovered that the earliest reference to the story appeared in a catalogue for the Colonial and India Exhibition

of 1886 and not from “a dear old lady of about 93, with a twinkle in her eye”.

- Newspaper articles by two more of James Bennett’s children also recount the story in papers published between 1886 and 1916. All the family stories state that the table was used to make the lid of the inner coffin. Other, non-family accounts, refer to the outer coffin. (There were four coffins – an inner tin coffin lined with velvet, a mahogany coffin, a lead coffin and an exterior mahogany coffin).
- There was no shortage of mahogany on the island to make a coffin. Research has shown that lengths of mahogany were drawn from the Commissariat Stores in sufficient quantity to make the coffins. This part of the story seemed to have originated from a misreading of a first -hand account written by Andrew Darling who organised the funeral arrangements. It was a shortage of crimson velvet to line the innermost tin coffin that was unavailable.
- The latest hypothesis is that the lid of the inner mahogany coffin was defaced sometime between its manufacture and its final use and that its replacement was hurriedly carried out using wood closer to hand that was, or later became, owned by James Bennett.