

Archaeology at Guana Island, BVI, in 2003

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A couple of aged and rusting cannon, some crumbling ruins of old building foundations, and broken bits of pottery and glass found scattered on the ground surface have long been left as curiosities for visitors to Guana Island, a small resort inconspicuously nestled within a privately owned 850-acre nature preserve and wildlife sanctuary in the British Virgin Islands. Yet, despite their allure, the significance of these relics, buildings, and artefacts had not been fully appraised until very recently. In 1998, the owners of Guana Island, Dr. Henry and Mrs. Gloria Jarecki, invited Dr. Edward Harris, Director of the Bermuda Maritime Museum, and Dr. Norman Barka, Professor of Anthropology at the College of William and Mary to review the island's ruins. Within a year, the Guana Island Archaeological Project was established under the direction of Drs. Harris and Barka to carry out thorough investigations of the island's standing ruins and to identify and assess other potential cultural resources on the island. To these ends, month-long field investigations of the island's various archaeological resources were carried out in the summers of 1999, 2003 and most recently again in 2004. This past summer's fieldwork also marked an important change in the Project's core staff. Dr. Barka retired this year after many years of fieldwork and productive scholarship. To fill the substantial void left by Dr. Barka's retirement, Dr. Harris recruited his colleague Dr. Marley Brown of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the College of William and Mary to continue the connection with the College and the Department of Anthropology there. Further rounding out the staff, I was enlisted to direct the day-to-day activities of the excavations, the results of which I hope to use as the basis of my doctoral dissertation at William and Mary.

Located across a narrow channel from the east end of the island of Tortola, Guana draws its name from a distinctive rock formation along the island's coastline shaped like the head of a giant iguana lizard. As a direct result of the Dr. and Mrs. Jarecki's environmental conservation efforts, the island today boasts more flora and fauna than any island of its size in the Caribbean. The island's fantastic array of plant and animal species has long been the subject of intensive study by a select group of environmental scientists, marine scientists and ecologists who come to Guana each year to do field research on the island's terrestrial and marine environments. The natural beauty of the island has also long been a favourite attraction for visitors to the islands resort. In the same way, our recent investigations of Guana's archaeological sites and ruins have brought to the forefront the island's unique and rich history, which has captured the fascination of Caribbean historical scholars and resort guests alike.

Since the Project's inception, over two dozen archaeological sites, historic structures, and landscape features have been identified and recorded on Guana, including finds relating to both the island's pre-Columbian and historic periods inhabitants. The majority of the sites inventoried pertain to the island's eighteenth century occupation, when according to local tradition Guana was divided between two Quaker families, the Parkes and the Lakes. Quaker missionaries founded a settlement at Fat Hog Bay on nearby Tortola as early as 1727, and based on artefacts collected from the various sites on Guana, the beginning of the island's historic period occupation likely coincided with the Quakers

arrival to Tortola. Both the Parke and Lake family names appear in the surviving records of the Tortola Meeting of the Society of Friends, attesting to their involvement within the local Quaker community. The community, however, was fairly short-lived, lasting for a period of no more than 45-years. The Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends on Tortola was officially ended in 1762, although many of its former members appear to have remained in the BVI. On Guana Island, both the Lake and Parke families appear to have continued on the island into the late eighteenth century, but for how long after that remains a question to be answered with additional historical and archaeological research.

Among the most intriguing and important archaeological sites dating to the Quaker phase of the island are the ruins of a large sugar-processing factory complex. In the eighteenth century, sugar plantations and their associated sugar-processing complexes dominated the physical landscape of the Caribbean. Sugar plantations included both agricultural and industrial operations, both of which required large and skilled labour forces carefully synchronized with one another in order for the plantation to operate successfully and profitably. Sugar cane has to be harvested very soon after reaching ripeness, or it will sour. Within hours of its harvesting, the cane must then be brought to the mill for crushing to extract the cane juice or it again risks spoiling. Once extracted, the cane juice must be processed by boiling in a series of "coppers", or boiling pans, within a few hours of crushing, in order to prevent its spoilage.

It is important to remember that at each stage of this process, enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were the ones working in the fields and factories, making possible the smooth operation of the process and often suffered significant personal injuries as a result. It was not uncommon for field hands to suffer deep cuts from errant machete swipes; for mill workers to have their hands crushed in milling machinery; or for workers in the boiling house to receive burns from stoking the boiling house furnaces or from working around the scalding-hot sugar cane juice.

On Guana, the sugar processing ruins are particularly well preserved, consisting of a crushing mill, boiling house, curing house, a pair of water wells, and a rum distillery. The complex was the focus of large scale archaeological excavations in 1999 and again in 2003 by teams led by Drs. Harris and Barka. Although no large deposits of artefacts were discovered, the scatter of artefacts recovered from across the site confirms its use during the eighteenth century. In 2004 the final landscaping of the site was completed, and plans for the consolidation and conservation of the standing walls of the various factory buildings are to be finalized. Cleared of invasive vegetation and potentially dangerous rubble and debris accumulated from previous wall collapses, the site is now poised to begin its new life as a venue for interpreting the history of sugar production and the working conditions of enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans in the Virgin Islands to the island's visitors.

With the work on the sugar factory complex nearing completion, attention shifted to other sites on the island. Several previously unknown sites were recorded for the first time, and preliminary collections of surface materials were made on several other sites. However, the focus of the lion's share of our efforts in the summer of 2004 was the archaeological testing in and around a small stone foundation located a few yards behind sand dunes near the main beach. After being cleared of the obscuring vegetation, the building's rectangular plan and orientation lengthwise to the beach were revealed. Overall interior dimensions of the structure were measured at 9.8 x 5.2-meters, with the walls averaging about 55cm in thickness. Intact foundation walls did not exceed 58cm in height above grade, and have sloped surfaces at their top designed to direct rainwater away from the building's wooden frame. Imprinted on the interior sides of the walls are regularly spaced vertical slots for wooden posts that would have formed the building's

framework. Three doorways were also present, one facing out onto the beach, and two facing inland.

The function of the building was completely unknown at the outset of our investigations, although we suspected that the building was probably either a dwelling or perhaps a storehouse. Excavations within the building's interior and along its exterior quickly revealed critical new information about the building's construction, use, and age. Our excavations began with a one-meter wide trench lengthwise through the centre of the building. Much to our surprise, the removal of a fairly thin layer of humus revealed the remnants of plaster floor that at one time extended across the whole interior of the building. Further investigation of the plaster floor suggested that this was not first floor laid in the building. Removal of a small square of the plaster floor revealed a dense layer of imported red clay flooring directly beneath it. To our amazement, we also found this same dense layer of red clay along the exterior of the building, outside the doorway leading to the beach. The purpose of the clay on the outside of the building is not clear yet. One possibility is that it was an effort to keep the building free of sand by "paving" over the sand directly in front of the building's doorway. In addition, the layering of one floor over one another suggests a renovation of the building. For what purpose, and by whom, and when this occurred in the history of the building, however, remains to be determined. The answers to these questions (and many others!) will hopefully be made clear with additional excavations in 2005.

Excavations along the exteriors of either gable end of the structure also revealed intriguing evidence with regard to the building's construction. On both ends of the building, substantial chunks of thick wall plaster with wooden lathe marks on their interior surfaces were recovered. Because no portions of the building above the foundation exist, we have little information about what the upper portions of the building looked like. The discovery of these plaster remnants is strong evidence that the buildings walls were covered in a coating of plaster.

Although the architectural discoveries were certainly exciting, perhaps the most interesting and revealing discoveries in the course of our excavations was the discovery of significant trash middens extending out from the doorways of the buildings. Artefacts recovered from the midden deposits included a variety of European manufactured ceramics, as well as, large fragments of a pottery called "Afro-Caribbean Ware" that is known to have been made by enslaved people of African descent throughout the West Indies. Also recovered from the midden features was substantial evidence of the diet of the individuals living in that house. In particular, the dietary evidence consisted overwhelmingly of small fish bones and West Indian Topshells (welks). The recovery of these domestic materials and food remains in association with the building foundations strongly indicates that this building served as a dwelling. The European-manufactured wares consistently date from the middle to the late eighteenth-century, indicating the buildings occupation at that time. Finally, the recovery of the Afro-Caribbean pottery further suggests that the building was probably the home or quarters of enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans brought to the island to work as house servants in the homes of the planter's families, or as labourers in the sugar cane fields and in the sugar-processing factory.

The identification of this building is a significant discovery in the archaeology of the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, and probably represents our most significant achievement of the 2004 season. The data generated from the limited number of small test units in and around the structure will provide the basis for another season of work at the site in 2005 when we hope to continue the excavation of the presumed slave quarter with a specific eye towards retrieving a larger sample of artefacts that will help to inform

us on the lifeways of Caribbean plantation slaves. We will also be careful to record where exactly the artefacts are coming from around the buildings. By noting the concentrations of related artefacts we hope to discern how the people living in this building were utilizing and ordering the space around their living quarters.

Enslaved Africans and their descendants made up the much of the Caribbean's population during the eighteenth century. The lives of these people, however, have only infrequently been examined until recently. Over the last quarter century, historical archaeology in particular has emerged as among the most fruitful methods of exploring the lives of the enslaved. Accordingly, the discovery of the slave quarters on Guana Island represents a major opportunity to study the lives and material culture of enslaved people in the context of their home life. Although slave quarters have been identified on nearly every island in the Caribbean, only a relative few have been rigorously excavated archaeologically. Thus the ongoing archaeological investigations of the small building found on Guana are indeed likely to yield significant insight into understanding the emerging history of enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans.

The tremendous success of the 2004 season of the Guana Island Archaeological Project came about as a result of the hard work of a dedicated team assembled by Dr. Harris. Dr. Marley Brown and Mark Kostro led the archaeological excavations in 2004. Linda Abind of the BMM proved to be a jack-of-all-trades working variously as field assistant, lab assistant, and mapping assistant for the project. Melissa Eaton of the College of William and Mary prepared the digital maps of the island. Kelly Ladd-Kostro of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation organized the artefact computer database and catalogued the artefacts from the current and past excavations. Charlotte Andrews of the BMM worked as an archaeological field assistant, as did Andrew Davidson of Bermuda. Dr. Clifford Smith of the BMM assisted with excavations in the field, and with the GPS plotting of the various sites on the island. Judy Smith of Bermuda assisted with laboratory work. The archaeological team was further assisted in all aspects of the fieldwork with students from the El Colegio Charter School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The team from El Colegio was organized and lead by George Sand and included students Dorothea Wease-Casci, Tiffany Tippett-Floyd, and Jeremy Quiroa.

First and foremost, the Guana Island Archaeological Project would not have been possible without the generosity of Guana's owners, Henry and Gloria Jarecki, and the help of Howard Watson, chief architect to the island: we thank them for their support of the project. Special thanks are also due to Guana's staff members who attended to our daily requests and predicaments. In particular, Resort Manager Roger Miller and Assistant Manager Dawn Laurencin were always willing and able to assist us in any way possible. We look forward to the continuation of the project in the near future.
