EXCAVATIONS AT THE BARRETT HOUSE, FALMOUTH, JAMAICA, 2006
FIELD REPORT
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On 19 July, 2006, the author began test excavations in the lot of the Edward Moulton Barrett house at 1 Market Street in Falmouth, Jamaica. The project had a number of sponsors, most notably Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Inc., (FHR) and Murray State University’s Committee on Institutional Studies and Research. The excavation was conducted as a field school arranged through the Center for Cooperative Study Abroad (CCSA), and proceeded under permit from the Jamaica National Heritage Trust.

Students from a number of universities participated in the field school. U.S. students included Lynsey Bates, Emily Breeding, David Field, Ashley Hackett, Ron Hopper, Kayce Humkey, Ryan Neely, Erin Ober, Adrianne Sams, Sarah Sharp, and Ashley Sorrell. Khadene Harris and Vanessa Clarke from the University of the West Indies, Mona, joined them under scholarships awarded by FHR. Dr. Janet Gross served as the CCSA Project Director. In addition, students from a concurrent University of Virginia field school in historic preservation joined the excavations for a day each: K.D. Klepper, Lauren Trice, and Maria Sanchez-Carlo, and also Ivor Connelly and Kristina Bookall from UTech.

The short-term goals of the project were as follows:
1. To recover a sample of artifacts from the early period of the Barrett lot occupation, towards assemblage patterning studies and spatial analysis of activities in the houselot;
2. To reveal details of the architectural history of the Barrett house and lot, towards aiding the historic preservation efforts of FHR.

In the long term, the project hopes to obtain a similar sample of lots representing households of varying social, economic, and ethnic character within Falmouth, to characterize archaeologically the range of the late 18th to early 19th century community.

Methods

We began the project by setting a grid datum at the northwest corner of the lot, with grid North oriented along the west (back) wall. The grid therefore aligns with the street plan of this section of Falmouth. We offset an effective datum at 1S1E (all units metric) so that we could set up a transit over the point. We measured a 3 x 3 m grid throughout the yard. We also chose the northwest corner of the top step of the back porch of the main house as our elevation datum, set at arbitrary 100.00 Assumed Elevation.

The crew then conducted a surface collection within each 3 x 3 m. unit, disregarding modern plastic and perishable trash. While parts of the crew began excavations, other crew members used a two-handled posthole digger to sample the deposits at each grid node. Each TPH (Test PostHole) was recorded on a standard record form, noting depth, stratigraphy, and
representative materials collected. As with the excavation, all soils were screened through ¼” hardware cloth. Three potential TPHs were not excavated because they were at the corners of active excavation units, and several grid nodes at large rubble piles were also skipped.

We excavated four 1 x 2 m test units as described below. The excavation proceeded by trowel and other small tools, and soils were removed in 10 cm levels except where practicality or visible stratigraphy suggested otherwise. The crew mapped and photographed the floor of each level, and measured all elevations by transit by reference to the elevation datum. Artifacts recovered were bagged by provenience unit and labeled accordingly. In the second and third weeks of the project, students were detailed to wash and catalogue the artifacts, and cataloguing is complete as of this writing.

Excavation

As detailed below, three of the units reached the depth of the water table, although the excavators were still recovering artifacts as water began to seep into the floor. This level was taken to be the effective limit of excavation. However, on the afternoon of Tuesday, August 1, a very heavy rainstorm (hereafter called The Storm) interrupted the excavation, raising the local water table by approximately 20 cm. The bases of all four units were thus under water and impossible to excavate. Water still stood in two units as of August 5, when time constraints forced us to clean and record the profiles and backfill the units.

7-8S26-28E

The first unit was placed next to the back porch of the Barrett house for two reasons: first, because the back door is often a rich discard area, and second, to discover whether the current porch is original to the house. Two flagstone-topped steps are visible at the porch, the lower at or barely below the modern sandy topsoil. By comparison with other houses in the area, notably the Baptist Manse at 9 Market Street, FHR personnel expected that there could be two more steps below the current ground surface, indicating that the original grade was deeper than the modern level.

The test unit proceeded through six excavation levels, until groundwater seepage made further excavation impractical. There is no lower step, nonetheless the original grade—as marked by a brick pavement section in the wet sands at the base of the unit—is well below the foundation of the porch. The inescapable conclusion is that the porch is a later addition.

The stratigraphy is complex, as will be illustrated in the forthcoming more comprehensive report (but can be seen in the photographs accompanying this report on CD-ROM). The lower step of the current porch rests on two layers of brick set in mortar, on top of a yellowish marl layer. Several zones of sand and marl underlie the yellow marl, ending in the saturated but brick-laden sands at the base of the excavation. The deepest layer of marl is a distinctive reddish color, also containing brick rubble. The water table/excavation floor is approximately 65 cm below the surface.

The ceramics in the lower three or four excavation levels are characterized by creamwares and pearlwares, without whitewares, indicating a ca. 1780-1820 deposition. This assemblage is consistent with the ca. 1798-1799 construction date of the Barrett house. Because
artifacts were found in the waterlogged Level 6, it is unlikely that we reached the deepest levels of historic deposit.

One notable artifact from this unit was a prehistoric potsherd. This specimen probably was imported with some of the marl, and should not be taken to indicate a Taino site in the location of the Barrett house.

4-5S17-19E

This unit was sited to investigate a solid blockage about 10-15 cm below the surface, found in TPH 4S19E. This turned out to be one of a line of square flagstones, well set in lime mortar, that led parallel to and just inside the north wall of the excavation unit. On removing the flagstones, the crew discovered that the pavers butted against a foundation of stone blocks that formed the effective north profile of the excavation. The sandy midden-like soil in the upper levels gave way to a zone of heavy brick and limestone rubble, which in turn rested on a reddish, brick-laden marl. The excavation floor, at about 50 cm below surface, was within the red marl zone when The Storm arrived and inundated the unit. On August 4, the groundwater had receded below the excavation floor, and the crew attempted to remove another excavation level from the east end of the unit. However, water seepage stopped this effort, and the unit was recorded and backfilled.

It is unfortunate that we were unable to discover whether the red marl in 4-5S17-19E rested on sands bearing creamwares and pearlwares. The reddish bricky marl at the base of this unit resembles closely the basal marl in 7-8S26-28E. If it is the same stratigraphic event, it is the only contextual tie between any two of our excavation units. The depth of the deposits suggests that it is likely that the two are the same, but the idea remains speculative. This unit did demonstrate the presence of a substantial foundation wall that suggests that a building of approximately 4 m depth stood in this section of the yard, between the unit and the north wall of the house lot. The line of flagstones may have served simultaneously as a walkway and a dripline for the building.

11-13S13-14E

We placed this unit to investigate whether there might be an architectural feature that aligned with the end of a stone wall segment that probably marked the west end of the original lot (Ivor Connelly, personal communication). The excavators removed a set of flagstones at the surface in the south end, and immediately found a brick pavement that barely intruded into the unit. By the time the excavation reached a depth of approximately 55 cm below surface, the crew had excavated through intercalated layers of sand and marl, evidence for two additional distinct brick pavements, a pit feature filled with yellow marl, a relatively modern pipe trench intruding from the upper stratum, and a stone foundation across the base of the south profile. The unit floor was in rapidly moistening but artifact-bearing sands when The Storm arrived. On August 5, the water table was still higher than the unit floor by about 5 cm, and we recorded the profiles and backfilled the unit.

Although the interleaving of marl and sand superficially resembled the stratigraphy in 7-8S26-28E, the sequence does not appear the same, nor does a reddish marl layer like those in 7-8S26-28E and 4-5S17-19E appear.
The flagstones from 11-13S13-14E resemble those from 4-5S17-19E and on the back porch in area (approx. 50 x 50 cm square), color and texture. However, the stones in 4-5S17-19E are thicker and were much more firmly set in place (in lime mortar) than the other two sets. It seems likely that the various groups of flagstones came from the same source and were cut to the same pattern, but it would be unwarranted to assume that they belong to the same construction episode.

4-5S11-13E

The site of the fourth unit was chosen arbitrarily to provide a sample of the northwestern area of the original lot, in a location that did not seem too heavily disturbed by sand crabs (as areas farther west appeared to be). Almost immediately the excavators uncovered a rubble-filled stone wall approximately 50 cm wide that bisected the unit from south to north. From Level 2, the crew separated the soils and artifacts on the east side from those of the west side. Both sides of the unit penetrated through a zone of brick rubble, identified as kiln wasters (Matt Webster personal communication). From the final profiles, the rubble appears to be denser on the west side than on the east side. A curious pavement only a brick-length (about 20-25 cm) wide lay on top of the brick rubble on the west side, leading from the west wall of the excavation to the stone wall, where a set of bricks appeared to make a step on top of the wall.

On the west side, the brick rubble lay atop artifact-bearing sand, which marked the base of excavation Level 3 approximately 40 cm below surface. On the east side, the brick rubble ended about 5 cm higher. A 5 cm-deep Level 4 in the east side matched the floor level of the west, and also revealed sand. At this point, The Storm intervened. The crew recorded the unit profiles with about 5 cm of water standing in the floor, and backfilled the unit on August 5.

The rougher stone first revealed by exposing the stone wall rested on a foundation of more regularly-faced stone. The base of the stone wall was not found. Thus, the stone wall appears to be the earliest archaeological feature in this location. At some point, a fill layer of brick rubble was piled and spread on either side (but especially the west side), and a narrow brick walkway was arranged over the rough surface west of the wall. If the wall had been higher originally, by now it was partly dismantled, as the brick path apparently stepped over the wall. Whether the original wall belonged to a structure or a lot barrier is unknown.

Comments

We not able to reach culturally sterile underlying soils in any of the four units. The question of whether there could have been occupation in this lot before the construction of the Barrett house in 1798-1799 cannot be answered definitively. However, the very small number of mid-eighteenth-century artifacts (so far noted) in any of the surface, TPH, or excavation assemblages argues against an earlier occupation.

The excavations revealed a number of architectural features, including stone walls and foundations, pavements, and numerous fill episodes. It is clear that the original grade is well below the modern surface, and that the back porch of the house is not original to the structure. Field inspection of the artifacts indicates that at least the base sands, and possibly several overlying marl and sand fill zones, belong to the period of initial occupation of the Barrett house.
The presence of the water table within artifact-bearing sands (and especially the dramatic rise of the water table after The Storm) suggest one reason why the yard underwent so many grade-raising fills. On the other hand, sea level has been rising slowly in the historic period, and at the occupation of the houselot, the land may have seemed slightly higher and drier (albeit still coastal and low-lying) when the house was built. Many of the fill and pavement episodes may be attributable more to renewal of working or aesthetic surfaces after wear and tear than to any conscious effort to rise above a swampy land level.

Pending analysis, it appears that the deepest levels of the units will provide a good artifact assemblage belonging to the turn of the nineteenth century, an early period in Falmouth’s occupation.

The artifacts have been catalogued and are boxed in order of catalogue number in the facilities of Falmouth Heritage Renewal. Three artifacts have been set aside for conservation treatment: a brass oval harness buckle stamped ARMED ASSOCIATION 1798, a brass flat-faced, loop-shanked button, and a carved bone implement handle. The rest of the collection appears fairly stable (the iron is mainly a sorry-looking lot of nails and scrap). The collection will remain in Falmouth. In the future, the author may request permission to remove the faunal materials temporarily for analysis by an expert in animal remains.

Final note

Members of the Archaeological Society of Jamaica toured the site on July 29. On July 31, we were visited by group of tourists about mid-morning, six adults and one child, visiting from England. Because of the rush of developments in this very brief field school, and the disruption of the excavation schedule caused by The Storm, we were unable to schedule a public forum for the Falmouth community. The author sincerely hopes that future public lectures and exhibits will be part of the long-term results of this project.