Excavations at the Barrett house, Falmouth, Jamaica, 2006

Kit W. Wesler

Murray State University

To be presented at the XXII Congress of the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology (IACA), Kingston, Jamaica, July 23-27, 2007

Abstract

Murray State University began an archaeological study of Falmouth, Jamaica in the summer of 2006, in conjunction with an ongoing restoration and development project conducted by Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Inc. Falmouth was founded about 1770 and soon became the major port of Trelawney Parish. By the mid-nineteenth century, the town began to stagnate economically. The first archaeological tests were placed in the yard of Edward Moulton Barrett’s house, home of the town’s leading citizen, built in 1798-1799. Preliminary analysis indicates that the lower soils zones contain relatively undisturbed occupation debris from the first decades of the house’s use. The ceramics, in particular, offer insight into the lifestyle of a wealthy member of the greater Atlantic mercantile community of the early nineteenth-century.

Introduction

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 short-term goals of the project were first 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, and second to reveal details of the architectural history of the Barrett house and lot, towards aiding the historic preservation efforts of Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Inc.
In the long term, the project aims 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 eighteenth to early nineteenth century community.

Although the Caribbean has a rich history and archaeological record, synthetic, comprehensive investigation of any particular aspect of that record—particularly in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and for urban settings—is still in its beginning stages. Urban sites in Jamaica have not been ignored, as exemplified by Mathewson’s (1972a, 1972b, 1973) papers. His work, however, was not thoroughly published, and is represented only by specialized studies. Allsworth-Jones, Gray and Walters (1998, 2000, 2003; cf. Wesler 2002) made a recent foray into the Neveh Shalom synagogue in Spanish Town; it was ably reported, but only hints at the potential for archaeology that Robertson’s (2005) history of Spanish Town evokes. Port Royal, early capital of the British in Jamaica, has received some attention especially for its underwater component, but has not been thoroughly published in an archaeological analysis (despite useful popular treatments such as that by Pawson and Buisseret [2000]). Despite these studies, Farnsworth’s (2001) collection of “Historical Archaeologies of the Caribbean” serves best to highlight the lack of systematic and integrative approaches to historical archaeology in general and the urban archaeology of the later historical record—the Georgian period and beyond—in particular.

Falmouth, Jamaica, offers itself as an excellent opportunity to remedy this gap in urban archaeology. Thomas Reid founded Falmouth in 1769, and named it in 1770, placing it on prime land along the harbor (Connolley and Parrent 2005). Adjacent land was owned by Edward Barrett, who began a subdivision called “Barrett Town.” In 1774, the first deeds were recorded in Barrett’s section, and by 1781 there were 8-10 houses connected by road to Martha Brae and
along the coast. By the mid-1790s, Falmouth contained as many as 150 houses, a remarkable growth (Besson 2002:73). It was a mixed community from very early, as in 1775 a lot was purchased by two mulatto carpenters (Binney et al. 1991).

Falmouth’s prosperity, however, was not to survive the mid-nineteenth century. Three factors worked against it: the shallowness of the harbor which prevented deeper-draft steamships from entering the port; the bypassing of Falmouth by the railroad, which went to Montego Bay; and the rise of Kingston as the shipping center of Jamaica (Binney et al. 1991; Jacobs and Concannon 1970). In 1861 the census still showed more than 3,000 inhabitants (Ogilvie 1954), but Falmouth’s days of rapid growth were over.

Falmouth’s collection of intact structures and its retention of its Georgian street plan implies strongly that the archaeological record is equally promising. The current efforts of the Falmouth Heritage Renewal program emphasizes the significance of the town, and both restoration and tourism development efforts will benefit from an active investigation of the town’s archaeology.

We started the project with the back lot of Edward Barrett’s town house, built in 1798-1799. There is a possibility that this property will be developed as a restaurant, and we chose to conduct archaeological testing here ahead of any disturbance to the lot.

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. We measured a 3 x 3 m grid throughout the yard. We 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 Post Hole) was recorded on a standard record form, noting depth, stratigraphy, and representative materials collected. As with the excavation, all soils were screened through $\frac{1}{4}''$ 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.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, August 1, a very heavy rainstorm 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.

Excavations

In the interests of space, details of each test unit will not be presented here. In each unit, the crew recorded a complex stratigraphy of marl or brick fills and brick or flagstone pavements. There were also several buried foundations, indicating the complexity of past changes in the arrangement of structures in this yard. One point of note to architectural reconstructions is that the current back porch clearly is not original, because its base lies well above the original grade.
The base soils were moist sand, and stood at the water table even before the August storm. Therefore we were not able to reach culturally sterile subsoils in any unit.

The deeper levels in all units are characterized by creamwares and pearlwares, without whitewares. Minority wares are consistent with a late eighteenth-initial nineteenth-century occupation. Curved glass assemblages show a distinct dominance of olive green bottle glass in the lower excavation levels.

It seems, then, that the lower stratigraphic zones are relatively intact occupation zones which represent the first few decades after the 1798-1799 construction of the house.

Two special artifacts are worth mentioning. One is a nice T.D. mark, surrounded by a wreath, on a pipe bowl, very comparable to specimens from Michilimackinac, Michigan (Stone 1974:149) and from Ferryland, Newfoundland (Gaulton 1999:52), in later 18th-century contexts. The mark is thought to belong to Thomas Dormer who made pipes between 1748 and 1770 in London (Bradley and Camp 1994:103; Camp 1982; Walker 1971:65).

Another is a brass military sash plate with the stamped words “ARMED ASSOCIATION” surrounding the numerals 1798. Unfortunately this was recovered in cutting profiles, and its vertical context can’t be established. Our first interpretation was that “Armed Association” is probably a term used by or for the Jamaican militia of the period. It is interesting that in June 1798, three new companies of militia were raised, made up of free blacks, Indians, and loyal maroons, to fight maroons in Trelawney parish, where Falmouth is (Chartrand 1996:40).

However, Ms. Natalia Wieczorek, Curator of the Department of Uniform, Badges and Medals, National Army Museum, London, wrote to me that “The shoulder belt plate you have, stamped ‘Armed Association’, is basically a unit, like the volunteers, that served locally. There
were many of them. It is not connected with Jamaica and is British, and was worn by members at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, in time of threat from invasion” (Wieczorek pers. comm.).

On first reading, it is difficult to understand what the difference between “a unit, like the volunteers, that served locally” and a militia is, but it appears that Ms. Wieczorek referred to units that served locally in England. How the belt plate might have ended up in the Barrett yard, then is a curious question, as is the coincidence of the stamped number with the date of construction of the Barrett house and the date of the raising of new companies to deal with Trelawney bandits.

Discussion

Because the analysis is still at a preliminary stage, only a few concluding remarks may be offered here. It is clear that the Barrett yard is architecturally complex. The presence of the water table within artifact-bearing sands suggests one reason why the yard underwent so many grade-raising fill episodes. On the other hand, global sea level has been rising slowly in the historic period, and at the first 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. In this, the Barrett yard resembles yards of Charleston, South Carolina, “a work area presenting either a brick-paved surface or aggregate crush of shell, dirt, bone, and debris” (Herman 2005:121).

Large quantities of ceramics attest to domestic activities. However, a close look at the ceramics shows that only about 10% of the wares belong to utilitarian stonewares and red earthenwares. Most of the ceramics are fine wares, generally representing the teawares and table settings that would grace an upper-class household of the Georgian period.
In one sense, this may be expected. Edward Barrett, a leading planter and merchant of Trelawney Parish, certainly was a member of what Bernard Herman (2005) calls “a larger Atlantic culture steeped in acquisition, display and exchange.” It’s possible that he used his town house primarily for entertaining and business, and not as a residence for more than short periods. So, a large quantity of creamwares and pearlwares would be predictable.

On the other hand, evidence for the support services for lavish entertaining is conspicuously lacking. Barrett’s house and yard complex probably served both at least part-time residential as well as commercial purposes. At least in the ceramics so far examined, the presence of the staff and support services is little in evidence. Only a single sherd of colono or yabba ware was recovered that might betray the presence of African-Americans. But free or enslaved servants almost certainly were involved in creating the archaeological record in the Barrett houselot.

Finding the living quarters of these less fortunate citizens of Falmouth may be difficult. Servants’ quarters are generally poorly documented in urban settings. Would the house and business servants of Barrett’s urban establishment have lived in the lot, or in districts with other Afro-Jamaicans elsewhere in town? We can hope that further analysis of the Barrett excavations, as well as continued investigations within Falmouth, will begin to answer such questions.

References cited

Allsworth-Jones, Philip, D. Gray, and S. Walters


Besson, Jean


Binney, Marcus, John Harris, and Kit Martin


Bradley, Robert L., and Helen B. Camp


Camp, Helen B.


Chartrand, Rene

1996  British Forces in the West Indies 1793-1815.  Osprey, London.

Connolley, Ivor and James Parrent


Farnsworth, Paul

Gaulton, Barry


Herman, Bernard L.


Jacobs, H. P. and T. A. L. Concannon


Mathewson, Duncan R.


Ogilvie, Daniel J.


Pawson, Michael and David Buisseret


Robertson, James
2005  *Gone is the Ancient Glory: Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1534-2000.* Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston.

Stone, Lyle M.


Walker, Iain C.


Wesler, Kit W.