FURTHER EXCAVATIONS AT THE BARRETT HOUSE, FALMOUTH, JAMAICA

Kit W. Wesler
Murray State University

Abstract

A small crew of excavators continued archaeological investigation of the Edward Moulton Barrett house in Falmouth, Jamaica, in July and August 2008. Expanding from two of the 2006 test units, the crew uncovered portions of two foundations, confirming the complexity of the cultural deposits in the yard. New data and reexamination of the previous collections showed that yabba ware, presumably made by Afro-Jamaicans, is better represented than previously thought. The project also serves as a pilot for the Murray State University Archaeology Laboratory’s to develop digital recording formats and to make research data publically accessible.

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1. Two years ago I reported the first season of excavations at Falmouth, in Trelawney Parish, Jamaica. We started the project with test excavations at the historic Edward Barrett house. I returned to the same site in 2008 with a very small crew. Today I would like to provide an update of the project, and a correction to my previous report.

2. Thomas Reid founded Falmouth in 1769, placing it on prime land along the harbor. 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 the mid-1790s, Falmouth contained as many as 150 houses, a remarkable growth. It was a mixed community from very early, as in 1775 a lot was purchased by two mulatto carpenters.

3. The town, however, did not do well after the mid-19th century. The harbor was too shallow to admit steamships, which required a deeper draft than earlier sailing vessels. The railroad bypassed Falmouth, and Kingston became the preeminent shipping center. Falmouth still had 3,000 inhabitants in 1861, but its days of economic growth were over.
4. Falmouth still has its late 18th-century street plan and many of its Georgian structures.

5. Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Inc., is engaged in a program of restoring many of the old buildings, training Jamaican craftsman, and hosting historic preservation field schools including my own field school in archaeology.

6. Edward Barrett’s house was built in 1798 and 1799, as commemorated in the keystone in front of the house. 7. It stood until Hurricane Gilbert damaged it badly in 1988. After that, it deteriorated rapidly. 8. Today just a shell of its ground floor remains.

9. In 2006, my students and I established a grid in the back yard. 10. We placed four test units, one at the rear porch, two within the yard, and one towards the back of what we think was the original lot.

11. The test next to the porch revealed a stratigraphy of marl pavements, and showed that the current porch was not original. 12. The unit at the back of the lot revealed a great deal of brick rubble, and what looked like a brick path laid across the broken brick foundation.

13. A third test, close to the north wall, revealed another set of marl pavements, and the north profile exposed a foundation of heavy limestone blocks. 14. The fourth unit, towards the south side of the yard, also revealed marl deposits interleaved with brick pavements. The deposits here were somewhat confused by a pipe trench, and the south profile exposed yet another limestone foundation. 15. A storm toward the end of the three-week project raised the water table and made it difficult to do final recording of the profiles. We could conclude, however, that the lower soil levels in the Barrett yard belonged to the early nineteenth-century, roughly to the pre-Emancipation period, and that the yard was architecturally complex.
16. When I returned in 2008, I had only four students, one of whom stayed only a week. With such a small labor force, I decided to extend two of the previous excavations, to see what I could find out about the foundations we had discovered.

17. The first unit we reopened was designated 4-5S17-19E, the one with the large limestone foundation blocks in the north profile. We actually had not reached the base of this deposit in 2006, due to the storm, so we began the new excavation by removing the final zone of reddish marl to reveal the underlying sand.

18. We then extended north. The foundation was made of massive blocks more than 30 cm wide, with a perpendicular wall of equally large blocks leading to the north. Presumably this signified at least a two-room plan for the building. 19. On the east side, the interior of the foundation was filled with marl and lime, well packed, to form the base of a floor made of 9” x 9” square brick-like pavers. Bricks covered the north-leading foundation, and may have continued westward to form a floor at one time.

20. The west side was not filled with the same materials but rather a yellowish sand, and the builders constructed a gap in the foundation apparently to drain the western room. Only a very small area of the western room was contained within the excavation unit. 21. Inside (north of) the limestone foundation, at the base of the excavation, there is yet another foundation of brick and mortar. It is not clear whether the brick foundation underlay the limestone, because the stone blocks were simply too massive to attempt to remove them. However, the red marl previously seen formed the deepest deposit, suggesting that the builders placed the marl first and the limestone structure was a later addition. This excavation unit yielded very few artifacts.

22. We also extended a meter south of the original unit. We excavated five levels, ending in the basal red marl. As with the original unit, the lowest levels produced mainly
pearlwares and creamwares, indicating an occupation in the first few decades after the Barrett house’s construction. 23. Following a recurrent theme in these excavations, the crew discovered an apparent wall at the south profile. Curiously, this wall was built of rough stone, looking more like a field wall than a foundation. Its purpose was unclear.

24. The 2006 unit on the south side of the yard was designated 11-13S13-14E. The stratigraphy here was more confusing than in the other test units, but we did reach the basal sands in 2006.

25. In 2008, we extended south in order to investigate the foundation at the south profile. We established a 1 x 2 m unit at 13-14S12-14E. A large tree root, attached to an even larger fallen tree, penetrated the eastern half of the unit, but we could excavate around it. Not unexpectedly, the tree fall disturbed the stratigraphy in the eastern half. Less expectedly, it also impacted a brick structure. 26. The western half of the unit contained a great deal of brick, some displaced, some probably dumped. The excavators removed the bricks in each level, revealing more brick underneath. It was not until Level 5 that we realized that we had been dismantling the north wall of a rectangular brick structure, of which the east wall pressed right up against (and was partly disrupted by) the tree stump, and the west wall lay against our west profile. 27. The crew left the base of the north wall intact in Level 6.

28. At this point rain inundated the excavation floor, and we expanded southward into a 1 x 1 meter unit in hopes of finding the south wall of the brick structure. 29. Instead, the structure’s west wall continued into the south profile. 30. In the southeast corner of the unit, large limestone blocks may have formed the corner of yet another foundation.

31. The deposits in these expansion units post-date the deposits found elsewhere on the site (surficial soils excepted, of course). In the deepest levels we recovered insulated copper
wire, which probably was associated with the disturbance created by the tree fall. Inside the
brick structure, bottle glass and whiteware suggested that the deposit was created after the mid-
19th century. It is likely that one or a succession of structures stood here until the 1850s or later,
when they were torn down, and the foundation voids became a trash repository.

32. The 2008 excavations, though fairly small in scale, confirmed our initial finding that
there were a number of outbuilding in the Barrett yard. This is to be expected. Bernard
Herman’s study of Georgian period Charleston, South Carolina provides comparison. Urban
yards included numerous work spaces and outbuildings, including any combination of kitchen,
pantry, privy, laundry, bath house, smokehouse, storehouses, well, garden, carriage house, stable,
sheds and, not least, servants’ and slaves’ quarters.

Barrett’s house and yard complex probably served at least part-time residential as well as
commercial purposes. Both surface indications and excavated exposures of walls, pavements,
and rubble fields suggest that the yard probably changed often in organization. Identifying the
function of any particular building will require much more thorough exposures, and even then,
frequent reorganizations and multiple uses of many spaces probably will make specific
interpretations difficult.

One of the concerns of a comparative archaeology of slavery is the difficulty of
identifying enslaved persons in urban settings. This problem can be seen in diverse settings,
such as Classical Rome and Greece. If you tour Pompeii or Herculaneum or Paestum, for
example, you get a sense that the situations of urban settings, the cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition of
upper and lower classes, free and unfree, would have been shared with our colonial-period cities.

33. In my previous report of this project, I noted only a single sherd of yabba ware in the
Barrett assemblage that might betray the presence of African-Americans who almost certainly
were involved in creating the archaeological record here. Fortunately the 2008 project allowed me to re-inspect the entire collection, and I found that several yabba sherds are, in fact, present. 

34. We recovered five examples in the northwestern unit, 4-5S11-13E; one sherd in each of the northern units, 4-5S17-19E and its expansion units; two sherds in the southernmost unit, 14-15S12-13E; and another in the surface collection from the same area. Only the unit closest to the house, 7-8S26-28E, did not yield any yabba sherds. It may be significant that the yabba wares cluster away from the house, although the lack of specimens at the back porch may be a matter of the small area sampled there. Expanding the spatial sample of the yard would provide valuable distributional data. Particularly we need testing in the area farthest to the rear, which we avoided previously because of sand crab disturbance.

In addition to the long-term goal of interpreting the archaeology of Falmouth, the Barrett project is also contributing to another project I’m working on, the digitization of our databases. 

35. Earlier this year, the Murray State University Archaeology Laboratory finally entered the 21st century and created a data-sharing web page. We are responding to a growing ethic in American archaeology, admittedly somewhat behind colleagues in other countries, that because archaeology is supported as a public trust, the public should have access to our results. We are beginning to experiment with digitization of data, and with more creative ways of presenting and disseminating the information. The Falmouth project is one of our first to be fully digitized and posted on the internet as it proceeds. This is still a work in progress, but if anyone has an interest in a more complete report or in the drawings, field notes, artifact inventory, and photos recorded in the field, please feel free to visit our web pages.

36. I would like to thank Jim Parrent and the staff of Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Inc., for their hospitality and support of the project, the Cooperative Center for Studies Abroad for
arranging the field school, and the Jamaica National Heritage Trust for granting permits for the work. Thank you.