Beginning An Archaeological Study Of Falmouth, Jamaica
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Falmouth, Jamaica, was founded about 1770 and soon became the major port of Trelawney Parish. By the mid-nineteenth century, the town began to stagnate economically. Falmouth retains its original plan and the best concentration of Georgian architecture in Jamaica. Joining an ongoing restoration and development project conducted by Falmouth Heritage Renewal, Murray State University began an archaeological study of Falmouth in the summer of 2006. The first tests were placed in the yard of Edward Moulton Barrett’s house, home of the town’s founder and leading citizen. As the project develops, we plan to study a socioeconomic and ethnic cross-section of Falmouth’s Georgian society.


Note: this is the script version, not referenced.
For three weeks last summer, several students and I conducted test excavations in the lot of the Edward Moulton Barrett house in Falmouth, Jamaica.

Thomas Reid founded Falmouth in 1769, placing it on prime land along the harbor. Edward Barrett owned adjacent land, and soon began a subdivision called “Barrett Town.” The first deeds were recorded in Barrett’s section in 1774, 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. It was a mixed community from very early, as in 1775 a lot was purchased by two mulatto carpenters. Through the first half of the 19th century, Falmouth ranked as the third busiest port in Jamaica.

Its prosperity, however, did not survive the mid-19th century. Three factors worked against it: the shallowness of the harbor, which prevented deeper-draft steamships from entering the port; bypassing by the railroad, which went to Montego Bay; and the rise of Kingston as the shipping center of Jamaica. In 1861 the census still showed more than 3,000 inhabitants, but Falmouth’s days of rapid growth were over.

A disappointment to Falmouth’s economy, however, is a boon for archaeologists. Falmouth retains its original street plan, and possibly the best concentration of Georgian period structures in the British Caribbean. Falmouth Heritage Renewal,
Inc., based in both Jamaica and Virginia, is engaged in an effort to restore the historic architecture, while training Jamaican artisans and planning for tourism and economic development. My project, I hope, will aid these efforts.

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 thought that we should get some testing done here ahead of any disturbance to the lot.

We began by setting a grid datum at the northwest corner of the lot, with grid North oriented along the west (back) wall. 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.

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.

We excavated four 1 x 2 m test units, generally in 10 cm arbitrary levels. In the second and third weeks of the project, students were detailed to wash and catalogue the artifacts.

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. This means, of course, that we did not reach sterile soils at the base of the deposits.

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.

The excavations revealed a number of architectural features, including stone walls and foundations, pavements, and numerous fill episodes. It’s 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. 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, many of the fill and pavement episodes may be due more to renewal of working or aesthetic surfaces after wear and tear than to any conscious effort to rise above a swampy land level.

I have time today only to mention a couple of the more interesting artifacts. One is a nice T.D. mark, surrounded by a wreath, on a pipe bowl, very comparable to specimens from
Michilimackinac, Michigan and from Ferryland, Newfoundland, in later 18th-century contexts.

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’s 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.

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.”

On first reading, it’s 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.

Because our Jamaica National Heritage Trust permit requires
us to submit an inventory of artifacts at the end of the field
season, I was able to begin some basic analysis. I concentrated
on the excavations, and was able to look at materials from three
of the units. In all three, the lowest several excavation
levels were dominated by creamwares and pearlwares, without
whitewares. I think, then, that the lowest soil zones represent
the first decades after construction of the house, with little
mixture from later occupation.

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 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.

Thank you.