

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 6
Issue 4 December 1999

Article 4

12-1-1999

Orange Vale Coffee Plantation, 1780-1850, Portland, Jamaica

Paula Saunders
University of Texas at Austin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Saunders, Paula (1999) "Orange Vale Coffee Plantation, 1780-1850, Portland, Jamaica," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol6/iss4/4>

This Articles, Essays, and Reports is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Orange Vale Coffee Plantation, 1780-1850, Portland, Jamaica

Paula Saunders, University of Texas at Austin

Situated two km west of the Buff Bay River, near the base of the Blue Mountains in the parish of St. George (now Portland), the ruins of Orange Vale plantation reminds us of the agony of Jamaica's legacy of slavery. To the immediate east of Orange Vale's boundary lies property belonging to the Moore Town Maroons. Orange Vale operated from the late 1700s until its abandonment in 1847, and was an example of the thriving mono-crop coffee industry that supplemented the slave economy of "king sugar," once common in the mountainous regions of Jamaica. The site was initially owned by John Elmslie, a "London proprietor," from 1782 until 1807. Orange Vale then passed into the ownership of Alexander Donaldson from 1807-1817, then to his "heirs" upon his death, who apparently maintained ownership until it was abruptly abandoned in 1847. At that time, the property was then split up and sold to the Bragg and Welsh families.

In conjunction with archaeologists from the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and interested parties from the Environmental Foundation, I conducted a preliminary on-site walking survey of Orange Vale plantation in the summer of 1999. I also conducted archival research of the plantation to establish a textual history of the site from documents and records at the National Archives and General Registrar's Office in Spanish Town. The purpose of the on-site survey was to locate potential archaeological remains and to assess the possibility of future excavation at the site.

After crossing the Buff Bay River by foot and walking about two miles uphill through a series of turns in thickly wooded environs, we arrived at the site's works-domestic complex. Although shaded under the cover of large tree branches and heavily covered in vines, the extensive and well-preserved ruins of the plantation were clearly visible. One could get a clear indication of the magnitude and success of this once thriving enterprise dependent upon forced labor of enslaved Africans.

The on-site survey was successful in locating many brick ruins. The entrance is marked by ruins of two massive stone gate posts, located on either side of a cobbled road running through the center of the plantation that appears to separate the works from the owner/overseer residence. At the highest elevation inside the "works-residence complex" and to the left side of the road (north), were the remains of two two-storied wall structures (believed to have been built with English ship ballast stones). Both structures had exterior stone steps leading up to the second stories, which no longer remain. These structures might have been the "great house" complex that possibly served as the residences and/or offices of the owners and/or overseers. One interesting artifact discovered in this area was a large copper basin, usually associated with sugar production. However, it is too early to speculate on how and when it was used at the site.

To the right of the road (south), were the extensive remains of a multi-level structure connected by steep steps that lead downhill. These ruins include large, dark, moss-covered stone walls that

represent the remains of an aqueduct, a waterwheel emplacement, large drying platforms or "barbecues," a peeling mill?, two washing cisterns, a mill house, a "coffee house," and a possible "dungeon" for the enslaved. The still intact aqueduct, whose water source seemed to have originated from the White Spring Falls, was used to power a giant waterwheel that was possibly used in the washing of the coffee beans in the cisterns.

Even further downhill near the river and at the lowest elevations of the property are the remains of slave housing. It was difficult to discern the actual nature of these structures since they were heavily covered in dense undergrowth and partly washed away by erosion. However, along with the surface debris of historic artifacts, the outlines of these structures were visible enough to identify these as dwellings for the enslaved population.

Historic artifacts in the form of ceramics, glass bottles, and metal objects were visible at the surface throughout the site. Also present relatively close to the main house were two intact stone/marble grave markers with some as yet uninterpreted inscriptions at their tops. Except for the occasional tourist adventurous enough to make the trek to the site, the plantation ruins have remained relatively intact and untouched. The isolation of the site has contributed to site integrity and the potential for future archaeological research appeared to be high.

Survey and evaluation testing at Orange Vale will be conducted during the summer of 2000. In addition, further archival research focusing on constructing a detailed history of the site's occupation will continue. Testing will focus on areas near domestic structures in the hopes of finding evidence of diet, expressed in the kinds of food eaten, and artifacts associated with other daily activities.

My goal is to shed some light on the lives of those involved in the economic and social ventures of coffee production. I hope to investigate the layout and land use patterns at Orange Vale to identify any discernible and meaningful differences in its physical and social structure in comparison to other coffee and sugar plantations in the region (Delle 1998, Higman 1988, Montieth 1991). In addition, I hope to learn about the ideology, social structure, and power relations among the people of different legal and social status who lived at Orange Vale.

Future archaeological excavations, combined with historical documentation, can potentially provide a wealth of insights into these and other questions with regard to the formations of identities, social interactions, and daily activities of those who lived at Orange Vale.

References Cited

Delle, J.

1998 *An Archaeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica's Blue Mountains*. Plenum Publishing Corporation, New York.

Higman, B.

1988 *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Institute of Jamaica, Kingston.

Laborie, J.P.

1798 The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo. T. Cadell and W. Davies, London.

Montieth, K.

1991 The Coffee Industry in Jamaica, 1790-1850. Master's Thesis, University of the West Indies at Mona, Kingston.