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Constructing Class and Community: Shifting Meanings in the Built Environment at Polly Hill Plantation, Bahamas

By Jane Eva Baxter and John D. Burton

The Historical Archaeology of the Built Environment

Historical archaeology is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor, which combines excavated materials with documents and often extant landscapes to interpret the more recent past (Yamin and Metheny 1996). Archaeological studies of the built environment are plentiful, and have been used to understand complex dimensions of social life in the past including class (e.g., McGuire 1991, Rotman and Nassaney 1997, Delle 1999), gender (e.g., Rotman and Nassaney 1997) and cultural interactions and influences (e.g., Groover 1994). Archaeological studies of enslaved and emancipated Africans and their descendants also have relied heavily on evidence from architectural design and landscape construction to understand the internal and external dynamics of plantation and post-plantation life ways (Orser 1988, Ferguson 1992, Delle 1999, Epperson 1999, Barka 2001, Farnsworth 2001, Armstrong 2003).

Archaeologists working in the Bahamas during the historic period are fortunate to have access to standing or partially-extant structural remains that date to different periods of the Bahamian past (Otterbein 1975, Farnsworth 2001, Baxter and Burton 2006b). These remains help us to reconstruct the landscapes that shaped people's everyday lives. These landscapes were in one sense a reflection of function, or how a space was developed to facilitate certain types of daily tasks and behaviors (Rapoport 1990). These landscapes also were symbolic, designed to shape and reflect certain elements of the social order (McGuire 1991).

The site of Polly Hill Plantation on the island of San Salvador has several extant structures that date to the original Loyalist settlement of the island in the late eighteenth century. There is also evidence that these buildings were augmented and reused by the enslaved

populations once the planter family relocated to Nassau, and by their descendants throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Evaluating these changing landscapes gives insights to the original intentions of the planter family who oversaw the construction of Polly Hill, and to the needs and sensibilities of those who later used and occupied these structures.



Plantation Period Architecture and Design at Polly Hill

Plantation period architecture is known from several sites on San Salvador including Sandy Point, Farquharson's, and Fortune Hill (Gerace 1982, 1987) and Polly Hill (Baxter and

Burton 2005, 2006a, 2006b). Although they share some traits, all these plantations have distinctive building techniques and designs. This diversity in plantation architecture is typical of the Bahamas and Caribbean generally (Farnsworth 1999, 2001). These distinctions probably stem from the geographic origins of the various planters, and different personal aesthetics and circumstances such as family size and structure. Such differences also may reflect each planter's personal expectations of and aspirations for their new life on San Salvador. All of these planter families also shared cultural knowledge of how plantations "should" look, as plantations had been operating throughout the British Empire for 150 years by the late eighteenth century (Baxter and Burton 2006c). Personal preferences and circumstances, then, undoubtedly were expressed within certain parameters of cultural convention for plantation function and aesthetics.

Another dimension that would have entered into the original construction of the plantations would have surrounded the nature of the domestic structures to house slaves from Africa and of African descent. Farnsworth (2001:235) has noted that slave housing would have been negotiated to varying degrees between enslaved peoples and their owners. Owners would have held ultimate control over the construction and design of slave houses and the level of control over overall plantation design by owners, including materials, size, and plan increased significantly throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Farnsworth 2001). However, Farnsworth notes that enslaved peoples would have been able to negotiate by drawing on "symbolic cultural capital" and that their influence would have varied significantly from plantation to plantation. It is imperative, then, to acknowledge that plantation period buildings designed to house slaves were influenced both by the ideals of the plantation owner and the values and symbolic systems of the enslaved residents. Farnsworth's review of documentary and archaeological evidence shows that slave housing in the Bahamas was extremely diverse over time and space, bearing witness to the types of interpersonal relationships that shaped the construction of the built environment (Farnsworth 2001).

Archaeological research at Polly Hill has identified the remains of nine structures that likely date to the original plantation. There are three distinct types of construction that were used in the building of Polly Hill: tabby, plastered stacked stone and dry-stacked stone construction.

Three tabby buildings date to the plantation period. Tabby is a form of concrete that uses crushed limestone, shell, sand, and water that is poured into a series of wooden molds that outline the form of a structure. The extensive use of tabby at Polly Hill is a distinguishing

feature of this site's architecture as only one other tabby building, the manor house at Fortune Hill, is known on the island (Gerace 1982, 1987).

The use of tabby construction is one of the important material links between the Bahamas and the Southern colonies. James Edward Oglethorpe, first governor of Georgia, popularized the domestic use of tabby construction in the settlement of Savannah. The first large tabby structure in the Carolinas was the Fort at Port Royal, constructed in 1732 in response to a possible Spanish invasion. Later, Fort Frederica in Georgia incorporated the use of tabby as well. However, the use of tabby in the latter eighteenth century was primarily limited to the building of chimney foundations on coastal plantations. Knowledge of tabby construction probably came with the Loyalists and their slaves from the mainland, and its widespread use in building construction in the Bahamas paralleled a similar renaissance in the technique on the mainland.

In 1805, Thomas Spalding revived the technique in Georgia, which he didn't perfect on the mainland until the mid-nineteenth century. Spaulding explained in an 1844 letter that, "Tabby. . .makes the best and cheapest buildings where the materials are at hand, I have ever seen; and when rough cast, equals in beauty stone." The materials for tabby construction were at hand in the Bahamas including shell, gravel limestone, and sand, and tabby would have been familiar to planters originating in the Southeastern US and Europe (Farnsworth 2001). Sources differ on whether tabby construction was more efficient or more labor intensive than cut limestone (Vlach 1995, Floyd 1937).

Techniques similar to the construction of tabby are also found in West African traditions along the Guinea Coast (Jones 1985:199). The mixing of burnt lime with seashells to make a hard lime plaster was a common technique in this region, suggesting the use of tabby-like construction had roots in African traditions as well.

The choice of which plantation buildings were made from tabby is significant in the interpretation of the plantation landscape. The three tabby structures at Polly Hill are those most closely associated with the planter and his family. The manor house was an imposing structure located on the highest point of land on the plantation. This position gave the home a commanding presence on the landscape, its occupants a panoramic view of the surrounding lands, and its rooms and porch a steady breeze from the prevailing eastern winds. The house had a veranda facing the sea, and an entry at ground level. Unlike other manor houses on the island, the main house at Polly Hill would have had two fully functional stories of rooms.

The second tabby building was the plantation kitchen where the meals would have been prepared by slaves for the residents of the manor house. This structure is located in close proximity to the manor house, and excavations revealed it was situated over a natural “pot hole” or “solution hole” that was considerably deep (.7 meters) and that could have acted as a root cellar for cool storage. The kitchen structure also had a cut limestone block chimney and fireplace that has since toppled over.

The final tabby building was what is thought to have been an industrial structure associated with the processing of plantation produce that also may have housed the plantation office. This structure was a single story with an enclosed outdoor workspace containing an elevated platform and an internal partition that created two rooms. One room had a wide doorway off of the enclosure suggesting it was used as a point of access for larger loads of goods, while the other room had doorways with widths more typical of the other domestic structures at the site and elsewhere on the island. Both rooms had windows suggesting the structure was not designed for long term storage of perishable crops. This building was located just down slope to the north of the manor house and would have been in easy view and earshot of the manor house and would have had clear view of much of the lower yard and northern fields.

There are two other forms of limestone construction present at the site that are clearly distinguished from the tabby structures. Dry stacked stone buildings are present at the site, but have largely collapsed to mere footprints on the ground. Other dry stacked stone buildings were plastered on the interior and exterior, which provided a bit more stability to these structures. A final use of dry stone construction was in the making of a platform that likely served as a foundation for a wattle and daub structure that has since decomposed.

The buildings made of stacked stone were those associated with plantation labor and production. These buildings were used both as domestic structures to house slaves, and also as storage and work buildings relating to the processing and storage of plantation crops. These buildings are significantly smaller than those made of tabby.

Stacked stone structures such as these are identified by Farnsworth as a type of construction that would have involved a good deal of cultural negotiation between owners and slaves (Farnsworth 2001:266). Unlike other documented forms of slave housing, such as wattle-and-daub and tabby, there is no significant African tradition of stone-built domestic structures. There also are no stacked stone structures known from pre-revolutionary slave sites in the

Southeastern United States, indicating that this construction technique had other origins, likely Britain. Therefore, enslaved peoples arriving on San Salvador would have had little experience with stacked stone structures, both in terms of construction proficiency or residential familiarity.

Several factors could account for the decision to house slaves in stacked stone structures, rather than earlier and more typical forms such as wattle and daub or tabby. (1) Bahamian plantations including Polly Hill would have had much smaller slave populations than those found in the sugar islands, with a typical Bahamian slaveholder owning fewer than thirty slaves (Craton and Saunders 1992:278). There would have been no need for a plantation owner to build extensive slave housing enabling greater investment in fewer buildings. (2) British attitudes towards slavery were changing as part of agricultural reform movements during the late 18th and early 19th century and there may have been social and economic pressures to house slaves in structures considered of better quality than earlier homes made of wattle-and-daub (Chapman 1991, Farnsworth 2001). (3) The resource poor environment of the Bahamas may have led planters to use the most abundant resources on the island (limestone), rather than those that may have held potential economic value.

Stacked stone structures, according to Farnsworth, represent a truly Creole house form of the Bahamas (Farnsworth 2001:268-69). The idea for stacked stone structures can be traced to Britain where reformists advocated for stone-built, multi-room cottages for agricultural workers and their families (Chapman 1991:116). The cultural exchanges between Bahamian planters and mainland Britain were plentiful both through visitors and popular literature, suggesting that these planters would have been aware of these new standards of worker housing. The housing, however, was built by the slaves, and while they may not have been able to negotiate a construction material (such as wattle-and-daub or tabby) with which they were proficient and comfortable, it appears they may have been able to negotiate the transformation of the multi-roomed stone cottages into single room homes that are highly reminiscent of West African homes as well as earlier slave housing in the Southern colonies (Farnsworth 2001). This combination of British stone construction and West African and Southern colonial house forms represents the beginning of a unique Bahamian vernacular form, and suggests negotiation and agency by all members of the plantation community in their construction.

The use of two distinctive forms of construction at Polly Hill during the initial construction of the plantation, however, speaks to the original intentions of the planter family.

When one compares tabby construction to dry stacked stone or stacked stone and plaster construction the differences are quite clear. Tabby construction, including the need to prepare molds and make and pour concrete, would have taken much more time and involved more specialized labor than the stacking of bedrock cobbles readily found on the surface. The appearance of the buildings, once completed, also would have been distinct. Tabby structures are molded to have perfect joints and junctures and result in smooth surfaces that can be painted and treated to heighten their appearance. Stacked stone structures, even those with rough plaster, would only approximate the precision of a well molded tabby building.

The original construction of the plantation was designed to underscore the social distinctions inherent in the British plantation systems. Economic investment in the comfort and apparent social standing of the planter family was more important than the appearance and durability of the structures used by slaves in the day to day operation of the plantation (Epperson 1999). Distinctions between slaves and their owners were emphasized with the relative size of, investment in, and appearance of their residences. Homes of slaves would have looked not like the residence of the planter family, but rather like the buildings used to store the crops and equipment also owned by the planter.

There has been some debate as to whether or not slaves were a part of the intended audience for these symbolic aspects of the plantation landscape (Epperson 1999). Rhys Issac (1982) has argued that the obvious distinctions between planter and slave embodied in plantation landscapes presented fundamental aspects of power relationships inherent in the plantation system that could not be ignored or misunderstood. It is unlikely that the slaves were unaware of these messages encoded in the landscape, but it is more likely that slaves and planters perceived these landscapes differently (Epperson 1999).

Upton (1990) noted that slaves often had direct access to intimate parts of planter family homes along access routes that were shared or were similar to those used by family members. Slaves, therefore, would not have encountered certain cultural and symbolic barriers when moving through the idealized landscape of the planter. The individuals who would not have shared these intimate domestic landscapes were the other planter families who would have been received as guests. These visiting planters would have had to encounter the plantation landscape in all its formality, and would have been in a position to internalize the messages of power and status encoded in the landscape. Upton argued that it was likely that slaves would have been

considered incapable of comprehending the complexities of white society by their owners, and would not have been the primary intended audience for these landscapes (Upton 1985).

As planter families would have engaged in the formal symbolic landscapes set forth by other planters, the slaves would have experienced these landscapes through the lens of daily use and activity. The resulting meanings may have had more to do with control and negotiation rather than class and status. Certain places on the landscape would have been directly under the control of the planter (such as areas in the manor house and visible areas of the yard), while others would have represented relative freedom (such as the interior of homes and wooded areas out of sight from the planter's home) (Upton 1985, 1990). It is this daily experience of landscape, rather than its intentional design, that may have held greater resonance for the enslaved occupants whether or not they engaged with the messages built into the structures and landscapes of the plantation.

The careful distinctions in housing that would have distinguished the planter family from the slaves and associated slaves with other forms of property, then, were likely understood by both the planters and the enslaved residents. The primary audience for these messages built into the landscape, however, would likely have been the other planter families on the island and guests received from Nassau. Slaves would have recognized these distinctions, but would have created their own understanding of the landscape based on a separate system of values and interests.

Use and Reuse of Architecture at Polly Hill

Although the planters deliberately created a home for themselves at Polly Hill, archaeological evidence suggests the manor house was occupied for only a few years at best (Baxter and Burton 2005a, 2005b, 2006b). Similarly, the kitchen, designed to prepare the meals for the manor house residents, seems to have been abandoned shortly after its construction (Baxter and Burton 2006a, 200b). This archaeological evidence for a short occupation supports a general historical trend for family island planters to abandon their plantations for a life in Nassau where they could pursue other mercantile activities while retaining the status of a planter with lands (Farnsworth 1999). Planters did not, however, take most of their slaves with them to Nassau, and these individuals were left to live on the plantation lands and largely fend for

themselves. It is likely that this departure of the planters for Nassau, rather than the formal emancipation of slaves in 1834, was the time of greatest change for the people left at Polly Hill.

There is no evidence that the manor house at Polly Hill was used as a domestic structure after the planter family left. Instead, the building is nearly devoid of artifacts, with the notable exception of an intact seabird skull that was found at the south end of the building. People who had lived at Sandy Point in the early twentieth century informed Kathy Gerace that they did not live in the manor house there, but instead used it for religious and community gatherings (Kathy Gerace personal communication). Perhaps the manor house at Polly Hill served a similar function for its residents after its abandonment as a planter residence.

Archaeological investigations of the kitchen also yielded a low artifact density, suggesting most cooking and serving vessels were either moved back to Nassau with the planters, moved elsewhere on the site by the remaining residents, or both. One interesting feature of the kitchen building was noted during investigations that points to reuse of the structure after the planter family left the island. The northwest exterior corner of the fireplace shows signs of intensive localized burning as if it was used for a windbreak for an outdoor cooking fire. This pattern of deliberate fire use outside the building may point to the reuse of the kitchen by the African and African-descendant populations who would have favored outdoor cooking techniques, rather than those facilitated by a Euro-American style kitchen (see Ferguson 1992 for a discussion of African-derived cookery at plantation sites). As this corner of the building was the closest to the manor house and in a direct sight-line from the structure, it is assumed that such outdoor cooking would not have transpired when the planter family was still in residence.

It appears that the dry stacked stone structures that would have been used for slave residences and storage purposes continued to be used later into the nineteenth century. Buildings that likely functioned as original slave residences demonstrated artifact concentrations indicative of a much longer occupation than the manor house or kitchen, but do not show much in the way of artifacts that suggest there was a replenishment of material goods from off the island. One of the structures shows the construction of an outdoor fire pit that likely used the exterior of the building as a wind break to facilitate outdoor cooking. This pattern suggests that enslaved laborers and perhaps recently emancipated peoples continued to live in these structures after the departure of the planter family, and continued to use the vessels left for them by the

planters. The absence of later artifacts at these locations suggests the residents eventually moved elsewhere on the island away from the central plantation yard: either to structures located in closer proximity to the fields where they were share cropping or to Cockburn Town (Burton 2006).

The building that shows evidence for a complex series of occupations is the tabby structure likely built to originally house the plantation office. It appears that this building was abandoned along with the manor house and kitchen with the exodus of the planter family. This abandonment is suggested by abundant graffiti in the original tabby and the relative absence of any 18th and early 19th century artifacts in or around the structure.

This period of abandonment seems to have ended in the late 19th through the first half of the 20th century when the building was turned into a two-room domestic structure. Walls were covered with pink painted plaster; an internal window was cut in the partitioning wall to allow for a breeze to flow through both rooms, and an abundance of period artifacts were identified in and around the structure. These artifacts included ceramic plates and bowls, a variety of beverage and medicinal bottles, and faunal remains representing both marine and terrestrial species. The only post-emancipation structure at Polly Hill, a kitchen made of plastered stacked stone construction was erected immediately behind the tabby building and a series of features, including two shallow privies and a series of trash pits were constructed around the building. These features are typical of yard features in use on the island throughout the 20th century.

Artifacts suggest a mid-20th century abandonment of this residence and it appears that the building subsequently was used to support more casual agricultural use of the area. Doors and windows were blocked using stacked stones suggesting the building was used for the storage of agricultural produce or housing of livestock. Several small trash piles consisting primarily of liquor bottles dating to the later 20th century were recovered around the structure. Later graffiti etched into the pink painted plaster may date from this last period of building use.

Landscape Change and the Bahamian Vernacular Landscape

Construction methods from the plantation period appear to have had a strong class bias suggesting a conscious construction of social roles and meanings into the plantation landscape. Tabby construction was used in the three buildings most closely connected the planter: the Manor House, Office and Kitchen. The planter's place of residence, business, and food

preparation were demarcated by the use of a particular building technique. Secondary buildings, including those connected to slave residences and labor (such as storage buildings) were constructed of rough plastered stacked limestone. These material differences in architecture would have served as a daily symbolic reminder of the social distinction between the planter family and their slaves, and reinforced the position of enslaved peoples as property, particularly for members of the planter family and their guests.

The arrangement of these structures focused on the highest point on the landscape crowned by the planter family's home and the immediately surrounding structures associated with the maintenance and provisioning of the planter family, both socially and economically. Away from this center were the residences of slaves, storage structures, and a network of walls, fields, and passageways. The result of this configuration was a hierarchical, centrally-focused landscape designed to reinforce the dynamics of class and race operating during the plantation period.

The reuse of buildings in the post-emancipation period suggests a pronounced shift in both landscape function and meaning. The buildings associated with the planter family, particularly the manor house and kitchen, appear to have been abandoned before emancipation and were not reused as originally intended by the later residents. Rather than selecting the manor house (the largest and most advantageously positioned building on the landscape) as a residence, it appears that the remaining people at Polly Hill consciously chose not to reside there. Instead, it seems they may have remained in their smaller dry-stacked stone homes that would have had internal dimensions much more consistent with houses in Africa, and which emphasized the use of outdoor living spaces. The use of the exterior of the kitchen as a wind break for an outdoor cooking fire is one such example of this emphasis on outdoor domestic space that also underscores a rejection of European traditions in favor of more traditional African life ways.

Eventually, the population at Polly Hill dissipated, with many people migrating to Cockburn Town (Burton and Baxter 2006a, Burton 2006) and others to the nearby Polly Hill settlement. Individual families, and later extended families, occupied portions of the plantation and farmed the adjacent lands, either as independent farmers or as sharecroppers. The former plantation office was a large single-story building located towards the more productive "blacklands" to the north. This building appears to have been reused over many generations as a family residence during the late 19th and early 20th century. While not identified yet in

archaeological survey, one local resident told us that her aunt lived in another structure on the former grounds of Polly Hill as a sharecropper in the early 20th century.

This shift in population away from the plantation center represents a reconfiguration of the landscape into a less-hierarchical, decentralized series of residences. The choice of building reuse at the margins of the former plantation core facilitated the reuse of the former plantation fields in a series of smaller-scale agricultural endeavors. It is likely that many families residing in separate houses worked cooperatively towards shared economic goals, thereby extending the definition of household beyond a single domestic structure and creating a decentralized or scattered village settlement (Anderson 2004). Abandoned features such as the manor house may have served as places for collective community activities, both civic and religious, but no longer served as a focal point in peoples' daily lives. This type of decentralized or scattered village settlement that emerged in the post-emancipation period at Polly Hill (and likely elsewhere in the Bahamas) represents the beginnings of a uniquely Bahamian vernacular landscape that has persisted over generations.

Throughout the 20th century, people living on San Salvador resided in similarly decentralized settlements on the eastern side of the island. Small house lots featured homes that share many architectural similarities to the stone-built slave residences at Polly Hill and these houses were surrounded by functional out buildings and small kitchen garden plots similar to the landscape surrounding the former plantation office. People used lands away from settlements for agricultural purposes with informal systems of "ownership" giving people the rights to farm a particular piece of land. The need for infrastructure to support these agricultural activities, such as existing walls and structures, were often met by the reuse of former plantations like Polly Hill.

The post-emancipation use of Polly Hill and the later settlements on the eastern side of San Salvador stood in contrast to the settlement of Cockburn Town, which saw significant influence from the British Colonial administration of the island. Grid-based town planning and several central religious and civic structures and features, such as cemeteries, were built in the central part of town and residences developed around this central core. The scattered village settlements on the other side of the island emerged out of a rejection of these British ideals for centralized hierarchical community, and a movement towards more practical and meaningful configurations of space as defined by emancipated slaves and their descendants.

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