Port Royal History

During the late 17th century, Boston, Massachusetts, and Port Royal, Jamaica, were the two largest English towns in the Americas. Most archaeologists who work with historic sites in the United States are familiar with the archaeological work carried out in New England, but relatively few are familiar with Port Royal and its role in the history of the 17th-century English colonies.

PORT ROYAL'S EARLY DAYS

In December 1654, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sent an invasion force under the commands of Admiral Penn and General Venables to capture Hispaniola. The Spanish were forewarned of the attack and soundly defeated the English forces attempting to capture the city of Santo Domingo. Failing miserably and fearing to return to England empty handed, Penn and Venables sailed south to Jamaica, and in May 1655, captured the poorly defended island with relatively little resistance. In short, Jamaica became a consolation prize to appease Cromwell.

Construction of Passage Fort, also known as Fort Cromwell, began in a matter of weeks following the conquest. Situated at the tip of the sand spit separating Kingston Harbor from the Caribbean, the fort could control all access to the harbor through the narrow entrance. A small community, known as The Point or Point Cagway, consisting of mariners, merchants, craftsmen, and prostitutes, built up around the fort (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:7). After the restoration of Charles II and the monarchy in England in 1660, The Point was renamed Port Royal, and the fort, was renamed Fort Charles (Taylor 1965:131; Pawson and Buisseret 1975:9).

Although Port Royal was designed to serve as a defensive fortification, guarding the entrance to the harbor, it assumed much greater importance. As a result of its location within a well-protected harbor, its flat topography, and deep water close to shore, large ships could easily be serviced, loaded, and unloaded. Ships' captains, merchants, and craftsmen established themselves in Port Royal to take advantage of of the trading and outfitting opportunities. As Jamaica's economy grew and changed between 1655 and 1692, Port Royal grew faster than any town founded by the English in the New World, and it became the most economically important English port in the Americas.

Coinciding with the city's early development between 1660 and 1671, officially sanctioned privateering was a common practice, and nearly half of the 4000 inhabitants were involved in this trade in 1689 (Zahedieh 1986a:220). The buccaneer era greatly enriched the port, but it was a short-lived and colorful period that England was supposed to end by the conditions of the 1670 Treaty of Madrid. Privateering and/or piracy, however, continued in one form or another into the 18th century. Indeed, it was the Spanish money flowing into the coffers of Port Royal, through trade and plunder, that made the port so economically visible.

After 1670, the importance of Port Royal and Jamaica to England was increasingly due to trade in slaves, sugar, and raw materials. It became the mercantile center of the Caribbean, with vast amounts of goods flowing in and out of its harbor as part of an expansive trade network, which

included trading and/or looting of coastal Spanish towns throughout Spanish America. It was a wealthy city of merchants, artisans, ships' captains, slaves, and, of course, notorious pirates, who gave it its 'wickedest city in the world' reputation.

Only Boston, Massachusetts, rivaled Port Royal in size and importance. In 1690, Boston had a population of approximately 6000 (Henretta 1965:73), while population estimates for Port Royal in 1692 range from 6500 to 10,000 (Taylor 1688:260; Buisseret 1966:26; Claypole 1972:242; Pawson and Buisseret 1975:99). An estimate of between 6500 and 7000 inhabitants is probably quite realistic. Many of the city's 2000 buildings, densely packed into 51 acres, were made of brick (a sign of wealth), and some were four stories tall. In 1688, 213 ships visited Port Royal, while 226 ships made port in all of New England (Zahedieh 1986b:570). In addition, the probate inventories of many of Port Royal inhabitants reveal much prosperity and the observation that, unlike the other English colonies, Jamaica used coins for currency instead of commodity exchange (Claypole 1972:144-145, 216-217; Zahedieh 1986b:585).

In short, Port Royal was the most successful entrepot in the 17th-century English New World. Its social milieu was quite different than either that of New England, with its religiously ordered towns, or of the tobacco-driven economy of Maryland and Virginia. This difference is clearly indicated in Taylor's (1688) and Ward's (1938 [1699, 1700]) contemporary descriptions of life in and around the port compared to other English American cities. Port Royal had a tolerant, laissez-faire attitude that allowed for a diversity of religious expression and lifestyles. There is early mention of merchants, who were Quakers, 'Papists,' Puritans, Presbyterians, Jews, or, of course, Anglicans, practicing their religion openly alongside the free-willing sailors and pirates who frequented the port.

PORT ROYAL'S FINAL DAYS

Until 1692, Port Royal was Jamaica's only legal port of entry, and its merchants controlled the economic affairs of the island. By this time, the merchants had been investing the profits derived from trading and looting to finance and develop emerging plantations (Claypole 1972:174-175; Zahedieh 1986a:221). This was the beginning of the transition of the domination of the economy by the merchants to the domination and control of the economy by the equally strong plantation owners of the 18th century (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:11). But the transition was never completed, and everything was about to come to a sudden and frightful end.

Shortly before noon on 7 June 1692, 33 acres (66 percent) of the "storehouse and treasury of the West Indies" sank into Kingston Harbor in a disastrous earthquake. An estimated 2000 persons were killed in an instant. An additional 3000 citizens died of injuries and disease in the following days (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:121). Salvage and outright looting began almost immediately and continued off and on for years. A pocket watch, made ca. 1686 by Paul Blondel, a Frenchman living in the Netherlands, was recovered during Link's (1960:173) underwater excavations near Fort James. Its hands, frozen at 11:43 a.m., serve as an eerie reminder of the catastrophe.

Following the earthquake, Port Royal underwent a dramatic revival only to fall again when it was ravaged by fire in 1703. A total of 16 hurricanes between 1712 and 1951 have consistently

smashed Jamaica, as have an additional six earthquakes between 1770 and 1956 (Cox 1984:Appendix B). Following a severe storm, a hurricane, and two earthquakes in 1722, Port Royal as it once was disappeared for the last time.

PORT ROYAL TODAY

As one walks along the narrow streets of the poor fishing village of Port Royal today, it is hard to imagine that it once was the largest and most economically important English settlement in the Americas. It is now an isolated place at the end of a long sand spit. It has a population of ca. 1800 people, who view themselves as 'Port Royalists,' rather than as simply Jamaican. Its unassuming presence belies the unique and unparalleled archaeological record that lies virtually untouched beneath.

Port Royal is different from most archaeological sites, belonging to a small group of sites that includes Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy, Ozette in the state of Washington, and shipwreck sites. Termed 'catastrophic sites,' they were created by some disaster that has preserved both the cultural features and material and the all-important archaeological context (Hamilton and Woodward 1984:38). In these undisturbed sites, the archaeologist is not dealing with a situation where – over time – houses, shops, warehouses, churches, and other buildings were constructed, expanded, neglected, abandoned, eventually collapsed, were razed, and then possibly were rebuilt. Rather, time has frozen, and life in the past is revealed as it was lived.

Considerable work has been conducted on the section of Port Royal that remains submerged below the water of Kingston Harbor (see Link 1960; Marx 1973; Hamilton 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988). For various reasons, these data have not been used by archaeologists working on contemporaneous 17th-century English colonial sites in North America. Much can be learned from Port Royal, for the underwater excavations have resulted in remarkable parallels and even more interesting contrasts with contemporaneous English colonists in North America.

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