

Report of Archaeological Reconnaissance at Fish Bay, St. John, U.S.V.I.

by

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From July 9-12, 2003, an archaeological field school team from the University of Southern Maine (USM) conducted a limited archaeological reconnaissance on property owned by the Island Resources Foundation at Fish Bay, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands. This brief investigation was directed by Dave Davis, who was at that time a Professor at USM and is currently Associate Dean of Tulane College of Tulane University, with the assistance of Kevin Oldfield, Sarah Haugh, and Samantha Roberg. The study had two goals: (1) To attempt to relocate the Fish Bay pre-Columbian site that was reported by Ripley Bullen in 1962¹; and (2) to locate, photograph, and map an historic ruin that had been reported to exist on the property. Toward these ends, the field school team was divided into two groups. Mr. Oldfield assisted in the supervision of the group investigating the pre-Columbian site, while Ms. Haugh and Ms. Roberg assisted with supervision of the work at the historic property. Dr. Davis monitored both efforts, moving frequently between the two areas, which are separated by a distance of some 200 meters. Locational data were collected with a portable Global Positioning System unit, while mapping data for the historic property were obtained with a surveying transit.

¹ Bullen, Ripley P. 1962 Ceramic periods of St. Thomas and St. Johns Islands, Virgin Islands. Wm. L. Bryant Foundation, American Studies, No. 4. Orlando.

Fish Bay is located on the south coast of St. John. The Island Resources Foundation property, consisting of some 45 acres, is situated at the head of the bay on relatively flat land that is, for the most part, densely overgrown with secondary growth broadleaf vegetation. The vegetation is particularly dense in the area of the historic site, and it was necessary for the Foundation to contract with a local resident to cut access paths to the structures.

Fish Bay Pre-Columbian Site

Bullen's 1962 report on his discovery of a pre-Columbian site at Fish Bay consisted of a single paragraph. The site distribution map in his monograph indicates that the site was situated somewhere near the northwestern shore of the bay. The report does not describe the lateral extent of the site, but simply indicates that Bullen collected a small number of pot sherds from the surface. Bullen's comments about the pottery indicate that he believed the site to date somewhere in the period from about 800 to about 1200 AD. It should be noted, however, that Bullen did not obtain radiocarbon dates for the site, and that the sherds in question exhibited little decoration or other attributes that could be considered highly diagnostic of their cultural period.

Using Bullen's published St. John site distribution map, which is the only evidence of the site's specific location, we initially decided to focus on an area near the western periphery of the IRF property, between the Fish Bay road and the shore. Within minutes, however, the reconnaissance group discovered several marijuana plants growing in plastic containers in the woods, and we decided to vacate the area to avoid a possible confrontation with the plants' owners. This turn of events was unfortunate because that

area appears to correspond most closely to the point identified as the site location on Bullen's map.

We repositioned our search to an area some 50 meters to the east and began systematically walking transects parallel to the bay on the south side of the road. The transects were spaced at intervals of 5 meters. Surveying flags were used to mark the locations of pre-Columbian artifacts, all of which were undecorated pot sherds. Few were large enough to discern the shapes of the vessels that they represented. A total of 83 potsherds were located, primarily in two concentrations. A total of five shovel tests were excavated near the two concentrations to depths ranging from 30 to 70 centimeters. In addition, 8 other shovel tests were excavated, to a similar range of depths, in other parts of the western half of the IRF property. None of the subsurface tests yielded any artifacts.

Although the pot sherds that we found on the surface were clearly of pre-Columbian age, they were not sufficiently diagnostic to clearly indicate their specific cultural affiliations. Their scattered nature and the lack of subsurface artifacts suggests that the sherds represent sporadic drops rather than a concentrated activity such as a household or hamlet. We therefore conclude that we did not relocate the site reported by Bullen, which we continue to believe is located near the western periphery of the IRF property in the area that we were unable to examine.

Historic Period Ruins

What was initially expected to be a single building foundation proved to be the remains of three separate, though presumably associated, structures. All three structures are constructed in a manner typical of the Danish colonial period prior to the twentieth

century. Indeed, a map in the Danish archives of the locations of eighteenth century plantations on St. John (Fig. 1) shows a plantation at this location, near the northeastern shore of Fish Bay.

The three ruins were designated Structure 1, Structure 2, and Structure 3, in order of their discovery. All three are situated within a total linear distance of less than 40 meters. Although the only portable artifact that was observed was a wine bottle pontil, we suspect that all three structures were associated with the Fish Bay plantation. Their walls are similar in composition to those at Annaberg, which are of eighteenth century origin. The structures are described individually below.

Structure 1. Structure 1, the largest of the three, consists of the lower walls of a rectangular building that encloses an area of 87.4 square meters (Figs. 2 and 3). The remaining height of the stone masonry structure is uniformly 75-80 centimeters. This uniformity suggests that the structure actually represents foundation walls, and that the remainder of the building, which rested atop the foundation walls, was made of impermanent materials. Openings that are approximately centered in the eastern and western walls probably represent doors. The eastern opening measured 1.33 m., while the western opening was 1.30 m. wide. The door doorways are nearly but not perfectly aligned: the western doorway (northern edge) is 189.5° east of north as measured from the center of the eastern doorway. A GPS reading on the center of the eastern door opening showed it to be located at W $64^{\circ}45.023'$ and N $18^{\circ}19.547'$. The interior of the structure consists of a compressed unpaved earth floor. Shallow trowel tests in the interior failed to yield any artifacts.

Structure 2. This structure (Fig. 4) consists of the largely collapsed remains of a mortared stone building. Its southwest corner is located at W 64°45.824' and N 18°19.562'. The building's components are so scattered that it was impossible to accurately measure its original dimensions; we estimated it to have been in the range of 5-7 meters square. The northern wall has two segments whose lower courses are partially intact; these are oriented 106° east of north, and measure 3.51 and 2.0 meters in length. The remaining portion of the southern wall has a length of 4.32 meters. There is no evidence of interior walls.

Structure 3. Structure 3 (Fig. 5) is a portion of a mortared stone wall that is 2.55 meters in length and 2.0 meters high. Its orientation is roughly east-west, and its southern end is located at W 64°45.828' and N 18°19.546'. The wall contains a window opening whose sill is located at a height of 1.83 meters. The opening is 30 centimeters high, 12 centimeters wide at the bottom and 7 centimeters wide at the top. A brick ledge, 11 centimeters in width, runs the length of the interior of the wall 18 centimeters below the window sill.

Fig. 1. Danish Plantations on St. John in the Eighteenth Century
 (Source: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~usvi/thomas1.jpg>)



Fig. 2. Fish Bay Structure 1, East Wall



Fig. 3. Fish Bay Structure 1, West Wall



Fig. 4. Fish Bay Structure 2



Fig. 5. Fish Bay Structure 3

