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Afro-European Archaeology in Barbados

Submitted by Thomas Loftfield, University of North Carolina at Wilmington

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington is currently conducting historical archaeological investigations of African-European acculturation in Barbados, West Indies. The project started as an outgrowth of excavations at the site of Charles Towne on the Cape Fear, a failed seventeenth-century colony in North Carolina which was supplied, funded and peopled from Barbados. The dearth of excavated seventeenth-century sites and materials in Barbados needed for comparative purposes led Dr. Thomas Loftfield of UNCW, Dr. Robert Keeler of the Oregon Committee for the Humanities, and Dr. Lindley Butler, Historian-in-Residence at Rockingham Community, Wentworth, North Carolina, to examine possible sites on the island for further excavation. Of all sites visited the most promising was Codrington College on the rugged and isolated east coast. The Codrington estates started as very successful sugar plantations in the 1640s. At the death of Christopher Codrington III in 1711, his Barbadian estates were willed to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the developing missionary arm of the Church of England. The S.P.G. set about the task of developing a college on the property which, according to the terms of the will, was to teach surgery and theology to attend to both the bodies and souls of men, especially the African slaves on the island. The building was designed in 1714 by Christian Lilly, a member of the Royal Engineers. Construction began in 1715 with the fabric completed by 1723, but fluctuations in the price of sugar delayed opening until 1745. Up until 1983, when the Codrington Trust was repatriated to Barbados, the S.P.G. kept meticulous records of not only the college, but the plantations which continued to support the college, as well. Because the grounds around the seventeenth-century mansion house and sugar factory had become a college yard, prehistoric, seventeenth-century, eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century materials all lie in the ground virtually undisturbed. Combined with S.P.G. records and Codrington papers, the rich archaeological deposits at Codrington constitute an excellent laboratory for investigating many problems dealing with early colonial settlement, the development of sugar, the development of the institution of slavery, and the process of creolization which melded elements of European and African heritage to create the modern Barbadian culture.

To date, excavations have been undertaken in seventeenth-century deposits of refuse from the great house, the kitchen for the great house, and a the sugar factory. Materials recovered have yielded information on European and African diets, on the development and use of locally made ceramics, and on the early development of the sugar industry. Most recently, testing has been undertaken at the seventeenth to nineteenth-century Codrington Pottery Manufactory, where the plantation made redwares for use in the sugar industry and for domestic use, as well. The ceramic data have shed interesting light on the role of industrial production in the survival of African traits in pottery.

The work at Codrington has progressed by means of field schools in archaeology held each summer since 1991. The field schools are jointly sponsored by UNCW and the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, in Barbados. In this setting students from the U.S. work and learn with students from UWI, producing an international, intercultural, interracial learning experience. The project benefits students in the U.S. while assisting local Caribbean students in

the exploration of their own particular heritage. Students interested in participating in this project can obtain information from Dr. Thomas Loftfield, Department of Anthropology, UNCW, Wilmington, North Carolina 28403-3297.