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Clifton Plantation New Providence, Bahamas

Submitted by Laurie A. Wilkie, UC Berkeley, and Paul Farnsworth, Louisiana State University

During the month of June, 1996, archaeologists from University of California, Berkeley, Louisiana State University, and the Bahamian Department of Archives, conducted archaeological excavations at Clifton Plantation, on the western end of New Providence Island. Clifton Plantation was owned by Loyalist William Wylly, who was the Attorney General of the Bahamas from 1793-1821, when he was transferred to St. Vincent. Fifteen structures, made of limestone block masonry and mortar, dating to the Loyalist period, are still standing at Clifton. The archaeological research team excavated a minimum of five 1 meter square test units around each of the structures to determine when they were built and what their function was. A total of 105 test units were excavated during the field season. At least eight of the structures are believed to be associated with the enslaved African population of the plantation. The excavations will serve to expand current knowledge regarding daily life on a Loyalist plantation.

William Wylly, Clifton's owner, was a controversial figure in his time. As Attorney General, he prosecuted several prominent planters on charges of cruelty and under provisioning of slaves. A convert to Methodism, Wylly advocated a strong paternalistic approach to the management of enslaved people, and imposed laws regarding morality, family life and religion on his slaves. In addition, he claimed that he encouraged his slaves to learn to read. Wylly's views and attitudes are well-known from newspapers, Colonial Records and letters from his time. What is not known is how closely Wylly followed his own public opinions in the context of his own plantation. The research hopes to reveal how the enslaved people on Clifton Plantation lived, and how their lives were or were not impacted by their owner's public views. The most commonly recovered artifacts from Clifton were animal bones, ceramics, glass, and kaolin tobacco pipes. The majority of the artifacts recovered from the site, including creamware and pearlware ceramics, and hand-blown glass, date to the early nineteenth century, coinciding with Wylly's ownership of the plantation. The preservation of animal bone from Clifton was much better than on many Bahamian plantations. Historical documents record the minimum amounts of rations that planters were required to provide their enslaved populations. However, many enslaved people supplemented their rations by growing their own produce, catching fish, collecting shell fish, or raising their own farm animals. Preliminary analysis suggests that conch, whelk and chilton were the most popular shell fish, while snapper, jack, and grouper were among the many fish species consumed.

In 1817, Wylly armed several of the slaves at Clifton to prevent a messenger of the court from the House of Assembly from arresting him. His action was perceived by many planters as a dangerous precedent, bordering on treason. Wylly answered that he had not allowed his slaves access to loaded weapons. A gun flint and an unfired musket ball were recovered from one of the slave cabins, and suggest that at some time, enslaved people did have access not only to muskets, but also to ammunition.

Another unusual find was a brass West Indian VI Regiment Military button. The West Indian regiments, composed of free African and Afro-Caribbean soldiers, defended much of the Caribbean, including the Bahamas. Wylly had at least one non-commissioned officer stationed at

Clifton Plantation to protect the harbor from piracy or invasion, and the button may be related to this individual.

The excavations were funded by the Government of the Bahamas, the University of California, the Stahl Endowment for Archaeological Research, and Louisiana State University.