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The Magens House: Archaeology of a Complex Urban House Compound in the Port Town of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas

By Douglas V. Armstrong, Christian Williamson, and Alan Armstrong*

The Magens House is a complex urban house compound located in the Kongens Quarter of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands (Figure 1). This walled compound rests within a grouping of historic properties in a part of Charlotte Amalie known as Blackbeard's Hill. In 2007, an archaeological investigation of buildings, ruins, and middens on the property was initiated by Syracuse University at the request of property owner Michael Ball. Over the past decade, Ball had restored several nineteenth century houses setting up a packaged heritage tour for the hill. The tour begins at the top of the hill at Skytsborg Tower, a seventeenth century Danish signal tower which is a National Historic Landmark that is more commonly known on St. Thomas as "Blackbeard's Castle" (NHL 1994). The historic tour proceeds down



Figure 1. Ruins of main house at Magens House (left), servant quarter (earlier enslaved laborer quarters) and cook house (right).

the hill through a series of restored and well furnished houses once owned by merchant and government officials and ending at Hotel 1829 at the bottom of the hill. Until recently, on the way down the hill visitors would pass by a relatively open lot with structures, ruins, and debris along the steeply sloped hill, but this site went without explanation from signage or the tour guides.

This “hole” on the side of the hill is the house compound of the former Magens House. The Magens House is now the site of intensive archaeological and historical research by Syracuse University that is exploring the complexity of life in the nineteenth century port town of Charlotte Amalie (Figure 2). This site is being used to tell the story of life of all of those who lived in the households associated with this compound. The property contains the ruins of the Magens House, which was destroyed by hurricane Marilyn in 1995, along with intact outbuildings including a cook house and slave/servant quarters and two houses that were once occupied by clerks and other mid-level clerks and managers. Unlike many properties in the



Figure 2. Excavation in progress at the Magens House compound.

area, this site retains its nineteenth century configuration with all structures intact, except the main house. The ruins of the main house are well demarcated on the landscape and will be the focus of future restoration. Because this property has been altered so little since the nineteenth century, and because the main house is now in ruins, it is an excellent site for archaeological investigation that brings together the diversity of components and material deposits representing not only the property owner but also the laborers on the property. Two additional factors have led to excellent detail in the recovery of the material record of life and its complexity on the site.

The first is the fact that the property is walled, and this encompassing wall has kept the materials of the site in and debris from other places out. The second is the fact that the property is on a steep hill and was partitioned into thirteen walled terraces. Each terrace has trapped the materials associated with its particular history of activities and kept them from eroding or sliding down the hill. This in turn has allowed us to excavate materials from discrete middens on each terrace and tie them to the features and structures that are or were present in that or adjacent contexts.

The project has several related themes or problem-oriented foci. The primary research theme is an exploration of life in an urban house compound (Figure 3). This is then further broken down into a comparative examination of the material record and history of the household associated with the main house and its outbuildings (including cookhouse, cisterns, and formal gardens) comparing the material record of the first and second halves of the nineteenth century (actually through the period of the transfer of the Danish West Indies to the United States in 1917). Houses on the property date to the second decade of the nineteenth century. The main house straddles three terraces towards the center of the lot. This part of the site is the focus of most formal historical records. The house was built and gradually added on to by the Magens



Figure 3. Stereoptical photographs of the Magens House and the town of Charlotte Amalie, Danish West Indies, published, circa 1900 as part of a Travel Series by the Montgomery Ward Company of Chicago. The caption to the original read “Beautiful Harbor of St. Thomas, West Indies (Class A. No. 20).”

family and is the scene of passionate social discourse related to issues of piracy, the slave trade, and the unfortunate falling out between Magens and the island's governor Peter von Scholten following Magens bringing light to the complicity of local merchants, outfitters, and colonial administrators in these illegal activities (Lawaetz 1999). The archaeological record of the main house provides an abundance of detail on changes over time in the layout and design of the structure. Initially the house served as a home for the family of J. M. Magens, a mid-level Danish colonial official. It was later bought and lived in by the family of Duncan McDougal or rented out by them to clergy and merchants working in Charlotte Amalie (Williamson and Armstrong 2009a).

Up-slope from the main house are the residential quarters of the servants and slaves. These people are lesser known to history but are an important representation of the island's majority population of people of color. This area includes a fully intact wood shingled laborer house and the ruins of several other structures. Also in this area are shelters that probably once served as sheds for livestock and storage, and terraces upon which provision gardens were once present. On the terrace above the primary surviving laborer house we recovered hundreds of bone fragments from which buttons had been carved (Figure 4). These button blanks represent a cottage industry on the site dating to the early nineteenth century and probably involving first enslaved laborers and later free servants or gardeners employed by the property owners. The Danish census records provide details that show that virtually none of the laborers on the property were born on St. Thomas, rather they came from islands throughout the Eastern Caribbean. By the 1830s, enslaved laborers had been replaced by free persons of color, a practice that was consistent with the shift towards free labor in this port town environment well before formal emancipation for the Danish West Indies in 1848. These people were employed as cooks, gardeners, and nurses. They came from St. Kitts, St. Eustatius, St. John, and other islands of the Eastern Caribbean, but the only their young children were individuals listed as having been born on St. Thomas.

Finally, at the bottom of the hill are two houses that date from at least the mid-nineteenth century. These houses were built to be rented out to clerks and others essential to the mercantile functioning of the port town. Some of the residents were employed in the warehouse trade of the businesses of property owner Duncan McDougal during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Magens House compound presents a unique opportunity to examine social complexity in a nineteenth century house compound in a port town of the Caribbean. It provides a site-based case study that provides details on local lifeways, but which at the same time sheds light on regional and global interactions expressed in a port-town setting. Those who came to Charlotte Amalie and lived at this site hailed from diverse places including Copenhagen, Glasgow, Paris, Boston, Philadelphia, the Canary Islands, and from an array of Caribbean islands spanning the region and its colonial polities, from Puerto Rico to Barbados. Many were descendents of people from many nations of Africa whose presence was initially coerced via the slave trade. All of these people arrived at this residence, on an island that was at once marginal, but at the same time a center of global trade and interaction. Such is the nature of a nineteenth century Caribbean port town and the multi-scalar social and economic infrastructures of which it is a part.



Figure 4. Bone button blanks from the cottage industry manufacture of bone buttons on the site, recovered from middens behind and upslope from the laborer quarters at the Magens House site.

This is a study that dissects complexity at the local level by presenting the array of characters through a reconstruction of their living context and material setting. It is a study of a house compound, within a neighborhood, within a port town in which many social, political, and economic spheres were intersecting. The interaction was continuous but not complete, and the cast of characters was constantly changing. Until this study was initiated, the public interpretation at the site focused on the house dining rooms and parlors of the upper middle class and elite. This study takes advantage of the open space on the hill to address topics that span across all sectors of society on the island. Our goal is to bring all of the people of this house

compound to light, and to explain the processes, complexity, impacts, and perhaps even meaning of their interactions.

This study will form the basis for Christian Williamson's dissertation and is the site of on-going local and regional comparative studies by Douglas Armstrong. In addition to its primary research focus the project is designed to provide direction and assistance to public interpretation. The owner is interested in gaining access to a richer history and a more compelling series of stories to tell visitors to the property, while the archaeologists are interested in gaining recognition for the role of archaeology in historical interpretation and the insights that the combined archaeological and historical analysis can provide relating to the full spectrum of the people who lived on the hill, rather than simply the house's owners. Alan Armstrong has examined aspects of the role of heritage tourism at the site and will present a paper on that topic at the 2009 International Association of Conference Archaeologists meetings in Antigua (A. Armstrong 2009). Armstrong and Williamson will present a paper on aspects of the initial archaeological findings at the same conference (Armstrong and Williamson 2009b; also see Williamson 2008, and Armstrong, Williamson, and Knight 2007).

During the summer of 2009, excavation and mapping of the site will continue. The objectives for the June field program include completing a detailed map of the property, creating a series of 3-D reconstructions of the main house using data from archaeology and early photographs, continued excavation of the yard of the laborer quarters, and the initiation of excavation in the yard of the two rental houses at the bottom (south end) of the property. In addition, signage relating to research to date will be put in place and evaluated in terms of visitor response and use by tour guides.

Note

* The authors are affiliated with Syracuse University.

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