

Life Among Ruins, Bermuda and Britain’s Colonial Heritage

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Published online: 25 July 2016

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Abstract Situated some 600 mi (965 km) east of North Carolina, the island of Bermuda is Britain’s oldest surviving colony. While much of the British Empire has been dismantled, Bermuda remains within the Imperial fold, and is today designated a “British overseas territory.” Within this framework, Bermuda’s heritage tourism landscape perpetuates an institutionally imposed colonialist narrative that neglects to explore the contributions of the island’s under-represented communities. This article explores these issues with respect to the island’s tourism plan. It concludes by highlighting new archaeological research centered on the material lives of enslaved Bermudians.

Keywords Colonialism · Empire · Bermuda · Heritage · Enslavement

Introduction

The English arrival on Bermuda in 1612 ushered in the first permanent human occupation of the 12 mi² (31 km²) Atlantic island (Fig. 1). It was England’s second successful colonial venture, and today Bermuda is Britain’s oldest surviving colony. Its enduring colonial status has resulted in a twenty-first-century heritage landscape that primarily champions its white, colonial, and British heritage packaged for white, middle class, North American air and cruise ship tourists. Such forefronting obstructs the creation of narratives that represent unique Bermudian identities; these realities are a consequence of the globalized world.

While individuals and groups are less consciously defined by the nation-state, much of contemporary life is still framed by the “ruins of empire” (after Stoler 2008). For Stoler (2008, p. 196): “to think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their

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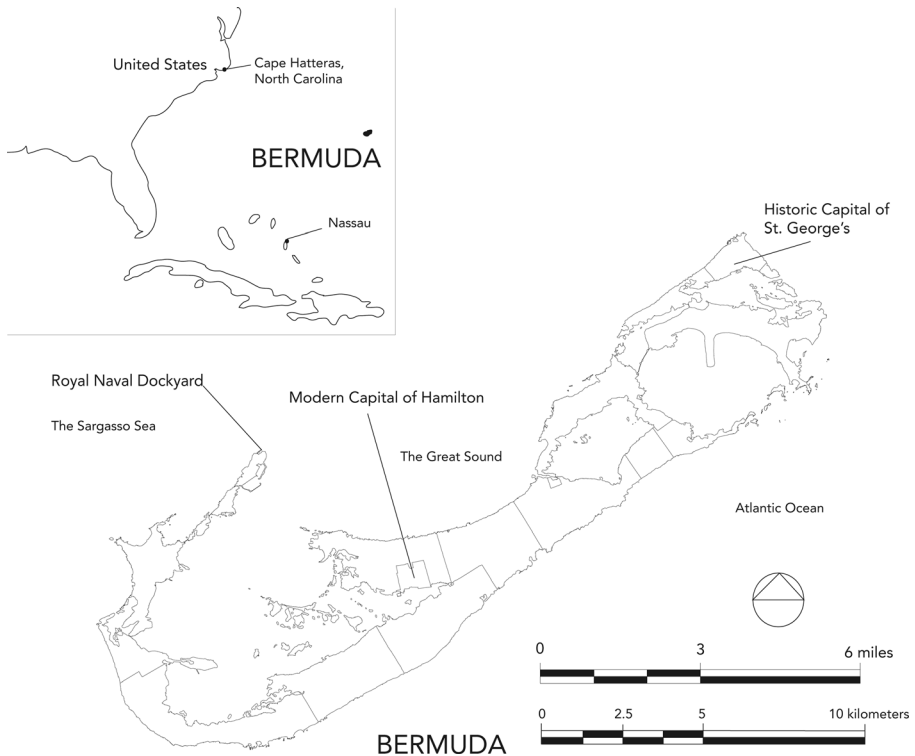


Fig. 1 Bermuda and location in the Atlantic World (Image: B. Fortenberry)

appropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present. To focus on the ruins is to broach the protracted quality of decimation in people's lives, to trade the production of new exposures and enduring damage."

Britain's imperial world is no exception. Within this dynamic geopolitical context, Bermuda occupies a liminal state: at one moment within the British Empire, and at the next an "independent colony"; it comprises a space of enduring Imperial formations (following Stoler 2008). These issues manifest not as the residues of decolonization, but rather the ruins of Britain's neglect, apathy, and the outgoing tide of the colonial authority, leaving material traces since the end of World War II. In a process of institutional erosion, colonies, now dubbed "Overseas Territories," are given more autonomy and relative independence. Bermuda is thus "betwixt and between," following Turner (1966) and Van Gennep (1960) ideas of liminality. While it remains a "British Overseas Territory," the island finds itself in an uncertain geo-social and political state, more closely aligned with North America, a connection that underpins much of its economy. This liminal state results in a contemporary heritage landscape composed primarily of the remnants of Britain's colonial institutions—military forts, elite gentry houses—as well as historic social connections to North America, that are in turn packaged for visitors by the Government via the island's tourism plan and further operationalized through UNESCO World Heritage Status (UNESCO 2015). At present, local and international heritage stakeholders are working to recast these heritage narratives to instead embrace the diverse and rich Bermudian identities of the past and present.

In this paper, I discuss some of the fissures present in the existing heritage landscape specifically the under-representation of Bermuda's African heritage, using the town of St. George's as a case study. I will then highlight the challenges of engaging with Afro-Bermudian heritage through an archaeological perspective before concluding by exploring recent efforts of the National Museum of Bermuda (NMB), Bermuda National Trust (BNT), and historical archaeologists to shed light on the material lives of enslaved Bermudians through new archaeological excavations and a re-engagement with existing archaeological assemblages. To frame this discussion, I will start with a brief history of the island's place within the Atlantic world and the role that enslaved Africans played on the island.

Placing Bermuda

Bermuda's permanent settlement was serendipitous. In 1610, the Virginia Company of London dispatched a fleet to resupply the failing Virginia Colony at James Fort. During the voyage, the flagship *Sea Venture* was separated from the fleet amidst a tempest and shipwrecked on the island's eastern shores. As the crew plotted their escape, they found the island to be plentiful and an ideal locale for a new settlement and eventual colony. Two years later, colonists were dispatched from England to establish a colony on the limestone Atlantic outpost.

Bermuda's distance from North America, some 600 mi (965 km), and the Caribbean, some 1200 mi (1931 km), prevented any previous indigenous occupation of the island. Like many of England's initial colonial ventures of this period, Bermuda was managed by a private group of investors, first the Virginia Company of London (1612–15), and then the Somers Island Company (1615–84). The company officials in London and their administrators on the island strictly controlled the lives of Bermudian settlers requiring them to grow tobacco only to be sold in London's markets through the Company magazine ship (Craven 1937; Wilkinson 1958).

Enslaved Africans arrived first on Bermuda in 1616, brought from the West Indies initially for pearl diving (Wilkinson 1958, p. 101). By the 1640s their subordinate status became entrenched in the island's emerging chattel labor system. Africans played a crucial role in the curing of tobacco and aided in the growing of new staples in the settlers' diets such as maize and cassava (Jarvis 2010, pp. 30–31). Despite their role in the futile attempts to make the tobacco monoculture sustainable, historians argue that bondsmen and women were not essential components of the island's seventeenth-century agricultural economy because of the settlers' heavy reliance on familial and indentured labor, a product of the island's modest size (Jarvis 2010, pp. 147–150).

The role of enslaved individuals on Bermuda radically change at the end of the seventeenth century. The Somers Island Company's charter was revoked in 1684 and the Board of Trade assumed control of the now Crown colony. At the end of the Company period, Bermuda's population consisted of 7626 individuals of whom 1,737 were of African origin (Bernhard 1999, p. 106). The end of the Company period ushered in a new era of prosperity for the island colony. Bermudians quickly capitalized on their strategic location between Europe, North America, and the Caribbean. Islanders turned to the sea as a part of Bermuda's "Maritime Revolution" (Jarvis 2010). They constructed a fleet of cedar sloops, the fastest vessels in the Atlantic, and shuttled legal (and illegal) goods across

the oceanic basin with ease and efficiency (Jarvis 1990). With the shift to a maritime economy, white Bermudians began to depend heavily on skilled enslaved African labor in both the construction of new ships as well as the manning and even captaining of vessels (Jarvis 2002). Within a generation, skilled enslaved Bermudian labor became the foundation of the island's maritime economic success (Jarvis 2010, p. 150); 1774 census data shows the island's population totaling 11,155 of which 5025 were of African descent (Bernhard 1999, p. 237).

The independence of the American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century again shifted Bermuda's place within the Atlantic world. With the loss of key ports on the eastern seaboard, Bermuda became a strategic waypoint in Britain's shrinking Atlantic Empire. The island was swiftly garrisoned and Bermuda's economy, which had been strained during the American War for Independence, began to boom with the new sustained military presence (Wilkinson 1973). The role of enslaved Bermudians in the island's social and economic landscape shifted once more. With the retraction of the maritime economy, enslaved labor was employed as a part of local, Crown improvement projects such as terrestrial and maritime military surveys of the island and its reef-system, as well as new construction projects, most notably the Royal Naval Dockyard on the island's western extreme. When emancipation was proclaimed in 1834, only thirteen percent of Bermuda's enslaved population was "at sea" as a part of the ever-windling maritime economy (Jarvis 2010, p. 199).

For over two centuries enslaved Bermudians made immeasurable contributions to Bermuda's social and economic landscapes and during that period racial relationships were indexes of Bermuda's geographic compactness—a "closer apart" according to architectural historian Edward Chappell (2010). The nature of enslavement on Bermuda, one of physical proximity and not distance, meant that day-to-day interactions between enslaved Bermudians and their masters were frequent and sustained. Using documentary evidence and surviving buildings, Chappell (2010, p. 70) argues that bondsmen and women lived and worked "everywhere in their owners' households and beyond." This meant that unlike the spatially distant quarters and villages of British North America and Caribbean, enslaved Bermudians dwelled close by in kitchens, cellars, and garrets. When physically distinct dwellings did emerge, as early as the turn of the eighteenth century, they were on average no more than 20-feet from the main house (Chappell 2010, p. 80). This closeness has resulted in an ephemeral signature on the island's built environment and archaeological record. As such, it would be easy to overlook the spaces and material culture of Afro-Bermudians as a part of the heritage landscape. Nonetheless, not ignorance but rather-neglect has resulted in the exclusion of these spaces and material culture from the heritage-tourism narrative, a product of Bermuda's liminal present.

Uncertain Present

British Overseas Territories are a group of colonies that remain a part of the "British Empire." The majority have some form of self-government but retain an appointed Royal Governor, who acts as the British Monarch's proxy. The relationship between the Crown and the territories is not fixed, but shifting, moving towards greater levels of autonomy for the overseas territories. The 2012 Partnership for Progress and Prosperity: Britain and the Overseas Territories report outlined a four-part philosophy

with respect to these colonial remnants: (1) self-determination, (2) responsibilities of Britain and the territories, (3) democratic autonomy, and (4) provision for help and assistance. Much of the political capital that is expended on Overseas Territories centers on building productive relationships that celebrate a shared past, as well as the ultimate defense and security of the territories by Britain (Royle 2010, p. 206).

The question of independence is regularly addressed on the island, with the recent Scottish Independence Referendum bringing the issue of Bermuda's autonomy once more into public discourse (Hardy 2014). Royle (2010, p. 207) maintains if Bermudians were to claim their independence they would by no means be the poorest or smallest nation in the world. On the contrary, the island would be the fourth richest country in the world as measured by per capita income of USD \$86,000 (CIA 2014). Its currency is backed by the Bank of England and tied to the US dollar one to one. With these factors in place, the island's independence might seem like a natural progression. As Aldrich and Connell (1998, p. 246) assert: "supporters of decolonization have emphasized both the psychological and cultural gains from independence and, where possible, the demeaning nature of colonialism. One supporter of independence has argued that 'to black Bermudians colonialism means chains, and puts them at a racial disadvantage.'" But critics argue that the dissolution of Bermuda's Overseas Territory status would come at the cost of both actual and perceived security and economy stability. Independence could result in their currency's relationship with the Bank of England ending, which would have a negative impact on the tax-exempt companies headquartered on the island, and although the Bermuda Regiment and police force keep the peace, a break with the United Kingdom might upset the perception of Bermuda's stable social and civil landscape (Royle 2010, p. 207).

There is still a strong sense of colonial presence on the island, much of which emanates from the acquisition of land by private developers aided by the Government in an effort to develop the hospitality and tourism industries. Of particular note is the ongoing dispute of "historic land grabs." During the summer of 2014, the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) (the opposition at the time) staged a march on Government House demanding that a formal enquiry be made into land acquisitions made by both the British (colonial) Government as well as the opposition One Bermuda Alliance (OBA) (and its predecessor the United Bermuda Party [UBP]) (McDonald 2014). Ultimately, no formal enquiry was made, but this dispute highlights the lingering racial and economic tensions that are a product of the island's colonial past and present (see Jones 2004 for a brief history of Bermuda's twentieth-century history).

The island is at a crossroad. Culturally, many Bermudians would be happy to seek independence to end over 400 years of colonial rule. Economically and politically, the end of a direct association with Britain might disrupt Bermuda's economic prosperity and social stability. While these issues pervade the social, political, and economic landscape, tourists continue to flood the island's shores by both air and sea.

Colonial Ruins Turned Tourist Features

Bermuda's economy is intimately linked to the broader patterns of Trans-Atlantic commerce. While much of the island's economic viability is now linked to "tax exempt" companies and related foreign financial institutions, tourism remains a major

component of Bermuda's economy. With the advent of affordable air and cruise ship travel, it has become a major (and easily accessible) tourist destination for the east coast of North America. The island's tourism plans leverage both its British colonial heritage as well as its historical connections to the United States (Bermuda Tourism Authority 2012). The latter might seem out of place for a British colony, however, consider the 2012 air and cruise ship arrivals data: American airline arrivals accounted for 168,178 (72 %) of 232,063 annual visitors, with the remainder including 30,656 (13 %) from Canada, 21,029 (9 %) from the UK, 4737 (2 %) from Europe, and 7554 (3 %) from the rest of the world. Even more striking are the 2012 statistics for cruise ship passengers. Americans accounted for 337,355 (89 %) of 378,262 cruise ship arrivals. Cruise ship tourism contributes roughly 90 million dollars to Bermuda's economy each year in docking fees alone.

In the Bermuda Government's 2012 Tourism Plan, "Cultural Tourism" is one of three core tourism products. Under this theme, they seek to leverage "Bermuda's Architecture," "British Colonial Heritage," "Linkages to US History," and "Ship Wreckages." As a part of this core product, the Government aims to further develop St. George's as a World Heritage Destination, an Underwater Heritage Interpretation Center (based in the Royal Naval Dockyard), and Cultural Heritage Trails (Bermuda Tourism Authority 2012). Five hubs were identified that would be used as cores of tourist activities. For cultural heritage, St. George's World Heritage Destination (Hub One) lies on the island's eastern end. The town is fashioned as a "World Heritage Destination" that "connects the past and present." The destination concept embraces the intertwining of colonial architecture, cultural heritage, and natural environment. Opportunities for development in Hub One included "heritage museums, walking tours, and 'waterfront experiences'"; St. George's is presented as "A World Heritage charming village with Bermudian Artistic expressions" (Bermuda Tourism Authority 2012). Hubs Two (the Capital City of Hamilton) and Three (South Shore Area) do not explicitly engage with Bermuda's cultural heritage. Hub Four, the Royal Naval Dockyard, merges a leisure tourist destination with a nineteenth-century military fortress. Hub Five engages with the island's Maritime Heritage, which will be further developed in future years as a part of the new Underwater Heritage center (see Andrews 2010 for a treatment of the island's underwater heritage, not discussed here). The tourism plan places a premium on the prominent British colonial features of the island's landscape, and their broader connections to North America. There is little opportunity for the fashioning of Bermudian heritage identity, especially one that engages with the island's history of enslavement and emancipation.

The inherent challenge for the Bermudian government (and heritage stakeholder more widely) is that in order to maintain an international (read North American) tourist product, those who craft this plan have felt it necessary to promote its colonial, British heritage. As a result, forts, civic sites, and churches all play a prominent role in the production of Bermuda's past for tourists. St. George's is an example of the projection of these colonial spaces and buildings into tourism products.

St. George's: World Heritage Site

St. George's served as Bermuda's colonial capital from 1612 to 1815, before the seat of Government moved to the more centrally located city of Hamilton. It retains over 200

pre-1900 buildings, including many colonial civic sites and urban town houses built during the economic boom of the island's Maritime Revolution (Figs. 2 and 3). In St. George's a host of heritage stakeholders and groups present different narratives to visitors. The cornerstones of the town's heritage landscape are St. Peter's church (ca. 1612), the oldest continually used house of worship in the English colonial world, the Globe Hotel (ca.1700) and President Henry Tucker House (c.1750), both house museums are owned and operated by the Bermuda National Trust, Mitchell House (a house museum run by the St. George's Historical Society), the State House (owned by the local Masonic Lodge), and the World Heritage Center at Penno's Wharf.

In 2000, St. George's historic urban core and the town's associated fortifications were awarded World Heritage status under Criteria (IV): an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history. The short description states (UNESCO):

Historic Town of St George and Related Fortifications, Bermuda

The Town of St George, founded in 1612, is an outstanding example of the earliest English urban settlement in the New World. Its associated fortifications graphically illustrate the development of English military engineering from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, being adapted to take account of the development of artillery over this period.

Included within the listing are the town of St. George's proper and 21 fortifications from the seventeenth through to the twentieth century. The total nomination area was over 496 ac (201 ha). This designation has codified the remnants of Britain's colonial fortresses and urban landscape in the contemporary heritage landscape. In the inscription, little is mentioned of the enslaved African contributions to the erection and



Fig. 2 President Henry Tucker House (Image: B. Fortenberry)



Fig. 3 Town of St. George (Image: B. Fortenberry)

maintenance of this landscape, relegated to the note “that Africans and Native Americans were brought to the island during the historic period, and they remained on the island and contribute to Bermuda’s multi-racial society” (UNESCO 2015).

World Heritage status for St. George’s and its fortifications maintains and re-entrenches the narrative of Bermuda’s dominant colonial heritage rather than recognize the contributions of Bermuda’s under-represented communities. In this vein, historian Burchall (2010) has argued that UNESCO World Heritage Status is not necessarily a positive aspect of St. George’s cultural heritage offerings, and more widely Bermudian heritage, due to the fact that the nomination process and designation failed to engage with local communities.

Unfortunately, due to the perceived interests of the international tourist market, early heritage narratives from the 1970s and 80s have channeled museum narratives towards American and British connections and away from Bermudian heritage. For example, at the Globe Hotel, formerly known as the Confederate Museum, the Bermuda National Trust has leveraged the building’s American connections in an exhibit titled “Rogues and Runners: Bermuda and the American Civil War,” which explores the connection between the island and Confederate agents (Fig. 4). Similarly, at the President Henry Tucker House, the tour engages with the Tucker family’s connections to Virginia and their role in the theft of British Gunpowder that was shipped to the rebelling American colonists. The archaeological exhibit, in the building’s cellar, highlights the Atlantic network of the Tucker family and their material wealth. These interpretative decisions made by Bermuda’s Heritage stakeholders follow contemporary economic realities; a vast majority of their potential customers is American, and will likely only be interested in paying for house museum tours if American connections are highlighted. This is not to say these narratives are inappropriate, rather these museum spaces perhaps miss an important opportunity to engage with Bermudian identity from a material perspective.

One exception to this landscape is the small, often overlooked, and privately owned Bermuda Heritage Museum, which explores and celebrates the island’s African heritage, and the struggles of Afro-Bermudians to craft their own shared and collective



Fig. 4 Globe Hotel House Museum (Image: B. Fortenberry)

identities within the Imperial regimes. The museum is off the tourist track in the eastern extreme of the town but has recently been added to the St. George's Foundation listing of museums in the old town, which has generated more publicity for the small independent museum. Private, personal, objects and stories are presented to the visitor in a contrast to the more global narratives of the larger museums.

The alternative to St. George's heritage landscape is to venture to the East End beaches, a voyage most tourists take, bypassing the historic town all together. The nature of leisure-tourism, essentially a heritage-free experience, dictates that the dominant, colonial narratives (naturalized as benign) have been selected for presentation in order to garner any interest from overseas visitors. The dangers of creating such narratives are that in many cases the racist inequalities of the colonial past are unreflexively reproduced, and celebrated in the present. As Catherine Palmer (1994, p. 800) writes with respect to similar issues in the Bahamas, "the influence of colonialism becomes even more problematical, for although the colonial era in its more obvious form no longer exists, the prejudices and racial discriminations that were part of its underlying ideology, may still have an impact on the tourists' and the locals' perceptions of each other." This reality creates a dangerous disconnect between presented and lived heritage. Tunbridge and others have argued that such a disconnect is unsustainable for the island's heritage industry and that at some point in the future, Bermuda's Afro-Bermudian majority might seek to recast these fissures as symbols of oppression rather than celebrate the island's "unique" colonial heritage (Tunbridge 2002, p. 50). In a similar vein to Palmer's work in the Bahamas, it is clear that Bermuda's dependence on tourism is a vehicle through which historical-situated narratives are reinforced and operationalized via its focus on the spaces and material remains of Britain's colonial regime. Such narratives de-emphasize the achievements of under-represented groups as well as Bermudian identity as something set apart from

Imperial narratives (following Palmer 1994, p. 809). The greatest challenge is accepting the idea that these museum narratives *can* be changed. They were created in the late 1970s and 80s and thus are products of their particular historical context. Acknowledging their antiquity permits stakeholders to craft new narratives of inclusiveness and representation for Bermudian identity.

Changing Narratives

Today heritage stakeholders and practitioners are aiming to change this landscape not just for St. George's but for Bermuda as a whole. At the institutional level, the founding of the National Museum of Bermuda provided a departure point to re-craft and re-envision under-represented narratives on an island-wide scale. Founded in 2011, the National Museum developed from the Bermuda Maritime Museum, which was founded in 1973. The museum plays a key role in heritage advocacy bringing Bermudians together to explore their shared material pasts (Harris 2012, p. 119). New exhibits in the Museum will celebrate the contributions of under-represented groups on the island. Of particular note are forthcoming installations that explore the island's connections to the West Indies and Azores as well as a permanent exhibit on enslaved Afro-Bermudians. Moving forward, the museum hopes to continue to craft new narratives of inclusion; Edward Harris, Executive Director of the Museum maintains that (Harris 2012, pp. 120–121): “in the future the Curatorial Department aims to focus on more projects to foster active community engagement and participation. Museums have a role in social cohesion, social development and enhancing civic life. The museum intends to develop into a place for visitors to share and connect with each other, provoke new means of understanding and become a place for communities to construct cultural identity, a sense of place and of belonging.”

The founding of the National Museum of Bermuda is a wider call to arms for the island's local and international stakeholders to more critically engage with Bermudian heritage. Archaeology has a vital role to play in this process, and scholars have begun to elucidate the material lives of enslaved Bermudians. But the challenge of such engagements lie in the archaeological record itself. As discussed above, enslavement on the island was marked by a lack of spatial apartheid. This “closer apart” resulted in a habitual overlapping of Black and White landscapes on the island. When areas were carved out for bondsmen and women they often took the form of cellars, garrets, and marginal domestic spaces. The result is an elusive archaeological signature for these individuals and families. Domestic archaeological assemblages have often been declared the products of slave owners and their bondsmen and women, and thus impossible to isolate and interpret with respect to enslaved lifeways. Nevertheless, some archaeologists have recently and successfully demonstrated that mixed contexts can provide fruitful insight into the lives of Afro-Bermudians by critically examining small finds within a wider contextual framework (Southern 2013).

Beyond the interpretation of “mixed contexts”, recent archaeological research has targeted spaces associated with habitual enslaved activities and habitation, namely two rock-cut cellars, work sponsored by the Bermuda National Trust and the National Museum of Bermuda. Excavations in the kitchen cellar at Verdmont (ca.1713) (Fortenberry 2013, 2014) and the rear-wing cellar at The Southampton Cottage (ca. 1690) (Fortenberry 2015) (Fig. 5), will provide the first archaeological assessment of



Fig. 5 Southampton Cottage (Image: B. Fortenberry)

the lives of enslaved Bermudians to date. Each of these projects were undertaken with substantial support of local heritage stakeholders and will be presented to the wider public in new museum exhibits at the National Museum (for the Southampton Cottage) and in Verdmont’s house museum (owned and operated by the Bermuda National Trust). Spurred by these excavations, researchers are now in the process of re-interpreting the cellar excavations at the President Henry Tucker House in St. George’s. These reinterpretations aim to examine the lives of the household’s enslaved Bermudians, and ultimately begin to diversify the heritage narratives of the World Heritage area. Together with spatial insights provided by architectural historians, new scholarship can begin provide a better understanding of material dimensions of enslavement on the island.

Conclusion

Bermuda’s location, history, and economic position all contribute to its liminal place within the twenty-first-century Atlantic world. It remains a product of enduring imperial formations of the early modern period; a British Overseas Territory, yet geopolitics and tourism market forces dictate that Bermuda orients its heritage narratives towards predominantly North American audiences. As a result, the island’s “authorized heritage discourse” (see Smith 2006) highlight colonial institutional sites and seek to leverage the economic forces of North American tourism in order to create a shared sense of a colonial heritage for ultimate monetary profit. In contrast, there are burgeoning efforts by local stakeholders such as the National Museum and the Bermuda National Trust, in cooperation with international stakeholders, to create more enriching narratives of the island’s material past and its under-represented groups.

Research outlined above marks a new phase in the ways in which archaeology can contribute to the crafting of historic Bermudian material identities in the twenty-first century. New research and interpretive priorities will shift the island’s heritage tourism

narratives from those dominated by colonial institutions, but more importantly will contribute to the re-focus of such narratives to better represent the diverse range of the historic and contemporary Bermudian population. Change will be slow but these efforts move towards a better and more comprehensive and balanced representation of Bermuda's past both for its people and its visitors.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Laura McAtackney and Russell Palmer for their invitation to the conference session and publication, and most importantly, their unwavering patience as these ideas developed. I have had the privilege of working in Bermuda since 2007. From that time an extraordinary group of people associated with the Bermuda National Trust and the National Museum of Bermuda have supported my research interests on the island. Of particular note are Andrew Baylay, Linda Abend, Stephen Copeland, Richard Lowry, Deborah Atwood, Charlotte Andrews and Jillian Smith from the Bermuda National Trust Archaeological Research Committee as well as Edward Harris, Elena Strong, and Jane Downing from the National Museum of Bermuda.

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