



Archeology Program

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Making Contact with the Archeological Record: Identifying Contact Period Sites on St. John USVI

In many places in the world, little is known about the actual interactions between indigenous populations, Europeans, and Africans during the early period of European expansion, despite its importance to global history. The U.S. Virgin Island of St. John is no exception. The 20 square mile island was colonized in 1718 by Denmark, who was a relative latecomer to the Caribbean, and who was motivated by economic competition with Sweden. The Danish government sent out settlers, in defiance of both British and Spanish imperial claims to the island as early as 1672. The settlers found "only a few Indians" (Dookhan 1994:20) on the island. By the time of formal colonization, 18th century St. John was completely deserted of all indigenous inhabitants. Who were the indigenous inhabitants that were encountered at the time of European contact, and what became of them? How did the Danish colonists adapt to new social, economic, and environmental conditions?

The Virgin Island NP Archeological Program has recently undertaken research to identify sites that date to European contact and colonization. Information from excavations at these sites will be used to explore relations between Taino and Island-Carib Indians, Europeans, and Africans during this time period. The goal is to better understand social relations during this tempestuous period of Caribbean proto-history.



Virgin Islands National Park, on St. John Island. [Click for larger view.](#) (NPS photo)

Taino and Island Carib Indians

Historical Background

Archeological research has confirmed the presence of Taino occupation throughout the Virgin Islands (Righter, Wild and Lundberg 2004). Excavations on St. John identified occupations dating to 880 BC to AD 1492 with a temporal development that mirrors Taino social progression in Puerto Rico over the last 500 years of occupation (Wild 1999). On nearby St. Croix, Taino influence from Puerto Rico was first identified by Hatt (1932, 1941), who excavated a Classic Taino ball court site at Salt River Bay (Hatt 1924; Morse 2004).

However, early historic records provide evidence that Island-Caribs were also in the Virgin Islands when Columbus arrived. Columbus documented that Island-Caribs raided Taino territory and described rescuing two women on Guadeloupe Island that were captured and taken from their Taino village on Puerto Rico, over 600 miles away. On his second voyage, in 1493, Columbus discovered the Virgin Islands and had his first hostile encounter in the New World on St. Croix.

Another Italian on the Columbus' expedition, Michele de Cuneo, called the natives of St. Croix "camballi;" the Spanish expedition members called them, "canabales" (Cissel 1992). All terms originate from the ship's Taino translator's word for man eaters or cannibals (Allaire 1997). Soon, the Spanish "canabales" transformed to "caribal" that was quickly shortened to Carib (Rouse 1992:22-23). Applying such a term to local populations, whether true or not, was beneficial to the Spanish crown, as it became a rationale for conquistadors to exterminate and enslave these indigenous people.

In addition to this documentary evidence for Island-Carib Indian habitation, the archeological record continues to produce evidence of Taino occupation in the Virgin Islands. Rouse argues that hostilities towards Columbus's ships can be interpreted as evidence of Taino presence as well. The Taino bordering the Island-Caribs would have naturally been more hostile than the Taino that Columbus encountered on Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. Thus, Taino in the Virgin Islands would have been predisposed to an aggressive attack on Columbus considering they were constantly contending with a hostile neighbor (Rouse 1992:19).

Native Americans were the first people to be displaced by the Spanish. Taino from Puerto Rico and the Island-Carib banded together in 1509 to assault the Spanish in Puerto Rico (Figueredo 1978). Consequently, in 1511, the crown issued a *Real Cedula* that Caribs everywhere could be exterminated (Cissel 1992). Almost immediately, St. Croix, to the south of St. John, was depopulated and survivors from the islands, along with escaping Taino from Puerto Rico, carried on a fight against the Spanish from the northern Virgin Islands. In 1514, the Native Americans were badly defeated and by 1518 European diseases had destroyed

their ability to resist Spanish domination. After 1519, the Virgin Islands may have remained depopulated for a short period.

Within Virgin Islands NP, several sites probably associated with Native Americans displaced by the Spanish in 1509 to 1519 have been located. These late period sites, that have a short occupation layer, have recently been located on the island's south shore, which would have been hidden from ships on the more commonly-used routes between the islands.

Archeological Research at Cinnamon Bay

From 1999 to 2001, the archeologists with Virgin Islands National Park conducted excavations at one of these sites on Cinnamon Bay. Excavations revealed undisturbed deposits dating to prehistoric and proto-historic times. An early 1600s sand road built over the site had reduced subsequent subsurface disturbance. Radiocarbon dates from the twelve 10 cm levels define a temporal timeline from AD 1060 to AD 1810 and correlate with the Pre-Columbian ceramic and historic material culture stylistic shifts observed in the cultural deposits. The dates, along with the ceramic styles in the last levels, indicate a rapid development of Taino culture. The deposits in the upper 30 cm date to the time when cultures collided. Level 3, 20-30 cm below the surface, was dated to AD 1270 to 1400. The second level, 10 to 20 cm below surface, was dated to AD 1390 to 1440. In these levels classic Taino effigies and offerings were prevalent.

Level 1, from surface to 10cm below, contains pre-Columbian pottery, but specific Taino designs, effigies, and offerings are absent. Radiocarbon dates from this uppermost level indicates that the site was re-occupied from AD 1650 to AD 1810. This suggests that the Taino culture on St. John may have disappeared prior to Columbus's arrival in the New World. Now that there is a better understanding of these stratified archeological deposits there will be a closer look at the data, and further refinement in our data recovery approach, especially between levels 1 and 2. This is needed to develop an appropriate analytical approach to the material remains that can address the present literary debate concerning the pre-Columbian culture(s) inhabiting the islands at the time of European contact.



AD 1650-1670 Bellarmine or Bartmann bottle sherds found in submerged context with bone tool. (NPS photo)

European Colonization of the Virgin Islands

Historical Background

The close proximity of St. Thomas and St. John to the heart of the Spanish realm soon created a hub of activity, as rival European powers attempted to establish footholds around the area. Initially, sanctioned invaders arrived, soon followed by official and unofficial occupancy by individuals displaced from societies from around the world.

By the 1500s the English, followed quickly by the Dutch and French, tried to make use of the island's strategic location. Buccaneers and pirates quickly saw the advantages offered by the unpopulated island and protected harbors, and often sought refuge on St. John and St. Thomas Islands. It was during this period that the water passage along the north coast of St. John earned the name *Drake's Channel*, after the famous privateer who launched his attacks on Spanish treasure ships from this area.

It is probable that in 1587, the ships carrying members of the "Lost Colony of Roanoke" came to St. John and from here, with men, women and children still on board, plundered the Spanish treasure fleet. The colony at Roanoke was established, in part, to re-supply raiding privateer ships from the Caribbean before their final crossing back to England. That they were on St. John is suggested by John White who later returned to America to find the colony he had left behind. After his return, he tried to keep the captains from leaving and begged them to stay and plunder the treasure fleets in the spring. He suggests that they can meet either on "Hispaniola, Saint John, or Trinidad," hinting that all three had been used in the recent past (Miller 2000:17). Within the park's boundaries a number of sites have produced material remains in definable deposits that are beginning to provide clues to this transitional period and cultural clash in Virgin Island's history.

Danish Settlement in the Virgin Islands

As the sixteenth century passed into the seventeenth, what is today the US Virgin Islands was claimed repeatedly by the French, English and Dutch only to have the settlements repeatedly destroyed by the Spanish, each other and disease. It was in this climate of constant turmoil and cultural collision that the first Danish settlement on St. Thomas failed in 1665. In 1672, the Danish tried again; this time, they survived. Their relative neutrality in European affairs provided a buffer zone between warring European nations and they opened their port to all nationalities.

It was, however, difficult to convince Danish citizens, even those who were destitute or criminals, to make the dangerous journey across the Atlantic. Those who did were mainly indentured servants. Although St. John was officially controlled by the *Danish West India and New Guinea Company*, many different nationalities were represented on the island as land

and slave holders, including French Huguenots; German European Jews; and Africans, both free and enslaved. Many of those had good reason not to record their affairs, were not allowed to, or did not have the means.

Like other European nations, the Danes sought their own power and wealth through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, establishing a trading post on Africa's Gold Coast at Accra. After official colonization of St. John it took only 15 years for the *Danish West India and New Guinea Company* to establish 109 sugar, cotton and provisioning plantations with the labor of over 1000 enslaved Africans; and a primarily absentee European planter population (Dookhan 1994; Fog Olwig 1985).

African Revolt - 1733

Historical Background

In 1733, a small group of African laborers, historically identified as "Alminas" (after the plantation where the revolt started), revolted against the European Creole society, instigating what is considered the first successful slave revolt in the New World. When the island erupted into violence, and was briefly ruled by enslaved Africans, it was French troops who came to the aid of the mercantilist Danes, hoping that military intervention in the Caribbean would mean Franco-Danish cooperation in Europe, cemented by the sale of St. Croix to the Danish crown that same year. Before the 1733 revolt, the French had exercised considerable freedoms in the Danish West Indies. Prior to formal colonization of St. John, the French governors on St. Croix complained extensively to the Danish officials of French deserters finding refuge on Danish soil (Caron 1978).

At this time, Africa was also undergoing turbulent cultural change brought into motion by contact with European slave traders. As a result of slaving activities, there were significant population movements and corresponding shifts in West African power structures (DeCorse 1993; Herneas 1995). This set in motion peculiar relationships between African and European groups, who had previously been slave trading partners in West Africa, but were now involved in relationships of enslavement on St. John. The amount of heterogeneity visible in the historic record will allow a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to the archeological record of the slave revolt. The ability to get beyond identifying cultures monolithically as "European" or "African" will allow us to investigate the status of enslaved Africans as both colonized and colonizer.

Douglas Armstrong and students from Syracuse University along with the park archeologist are researching the history of a small enclave of settlers that the Danish government sent to St. John in the 1680s in defiance of their English and Spanish neighbors, each of who had laid claim to the island. Armstrong's team found evidence of a small provisioning and cotton estate at Cinnamon Bay, run by people who were "betwixt and between" the standard definitions of history" (Armstrong 2003b:2), and therefore do not appear to conform to standard notions of power relationships between Europeans and Africans. It is in this context that the contact period continued to unfold.

Archeological Research at Turtle Point

In 2006, Virgin Island NP archeologist investigated an earth disturbance along the shoreline at the Caneel Bay Resort. Maintenance workers had removed vegetation and disturbed the surface at Turtle Point without the benefit of archeological reconnaissance, revealing a plethora of artifacts and leaving Turtle Point vulnerable to erosion.

Turtle Point is a known, if uninvestigated, multi-component site incorporating both prehistoric and historic events and, thus far, provides one of the best opportunities for investigating the proto-history of the island. Two 50 by 50 cm shovel test pits were excavated in ten centimeter levels, revealing a moderately disturbed, yet promising, stratigraphy. The first two 10 cm arbitrary levels, as well as the surface collection, revealed a mix of historic and prehistoric ceramics and lithics including stone belts, Chinese porcelains, ground stone implements, and shell buttons.

One of the most intriguing finds was a French honey-colored gun flint, showing heavy use-wear. Caneel Bay saw the largest battle between Africans and Europeans involved in the 1733 uprising. Historic documents claim that the island's planters made their last heroic stand against the mutinous slaves at Turtle Point before being driven into the sea and onto the cays that surround St. John. Was this single gunflint discarded or lost by French deserters who sought a new life in the late 17th century, by troops during the battle that raged on this point between African rebels and European and African militia reclaiming their land, or simply evidence of the extensive trade that existed between the European powers in the Caribbean during this era of European expansion?

This single artifact is only the tip of the archeological iceberg and represents the numerous anthropological questions that we have hardly begun to ask, much less answer, regarding contact period events within the boundaries of the Virgin Islands NP. The task that lies before us is the thorough research of these sites using rigorous methodological and analytical techniques, while incorporating the ethos of conservation and preservation that are dominant in the National Park Service today. Only then can we begin to fully understand the interactions of these various groups and begin to understand the legacy of the culture that was born from contact between Native Americans, Europeans, and free and enslaved Africans.

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Holly K. Norton, Syracuse University and Kenneth Wild, NPS

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