

Archeology Program

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Archeological Research at Salt River Bay NHP & EP, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands

The National Park Service and South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA), University of South Carolina (USC) conducted an archeological field school at the [Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve](#) (NHP & EP), St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, from May 5-June 4, 2011. Students from USC and the University of Virgin Islands (UVI), led by David Goldstein (SCIAA) and NPS archeologist Meredith Hardy, conducted excavations at a prehistoric village that dates to ca. A.D. 400-600. Greg Brooks and Bekka Larson conducted geomorphological research. Ethnography students, led by Elizabeth Rezende (UVI), collected oral histories from local residents of Salt River Bay and across the island.



Students and NPS archeologists excavating a unit.

Background

Salt River Bay encompasses a variety of high energy ecosystems: estuarine bay, coral reefs, sea grass beds, a deep near-shore undersea canyon, and the largest remaining mangrove forest in St. Croix. In addition to the diversity of natural resources, the island witnessed a unique colonial history encompassing at least two different indigenous Amerindian populations, six European colonial occupations, myriad African Diaspora communities, and forced slave migrations, making St. Croix one of the most culturally diverse communities in the Caribbean. In this relatively small area of the Salt River Bay, researchers as well as visitors to Salt River Bay (NHP & EP) can observe first-hand the challenges to sustain life in the islands, and solutions used by different human social groups, and plant and animal communities, to meet these challenges.

The crown jewel of these intersecting historical and biological communities in the Bay is the landing site of Christopher Columbus' second voyage, at the site of the St. Croix's major indigenous ceremonial center. The Old and New Worlds met for the second time at this 5-acre area owned and managed by the Government of the Virgin Islands, with lasting impacts on both human societies and biological communities worldwide. This is the location of the easternmost stone-lined ball court in the Caribbean, and the only place on U.S. owned soil where Christopher Columbus landed an exploration party, on November 14, 1493. This visit resulted in the first recorded skirmish between Europeans and Amerindians in the New World; because of this, the peninsula is known as *Cabos de las Flechas* (Cape of the Arrows).

Across Salt River Bay from the Columbus Landing archeological site is the Judith's Fancy site. Located on Hemer's Peninsula on the north side of St. Croix, nearly four miles from the town of Christiansted, Judith's Fancy, a National Historic Landmark, was a sugar plantation during the 18th and 19th centuries. The plantation was named for the wife of one of the property's 18th century landowners. The estate is also the likely location of the French colonial governor's estate dating from 1650-1696.

Anthropological Research

The students applied a two-fold approach for anthropological field skills. They learned both archeological (survey and excavation) and ethnographic field methods (oral history and archival study), to collect field data on a nearly 1,500-year old archeological site, and to develop oral history data regarding historic land use on the island.

Archeological Investigations

Eight students participated in the archeological fieldwork component of the field school, excavating a portion of a prehistoric site on the grounds of Judith's Fancy. Despite unseasonal and heavy rains, the eight students learned the basics of archeological field survey and excavation techniques, archeological theory, artifact analysis, and museum cataloging methods. Excavation efforts were focused on a portion of a possible structure and the central plaza of the village.

The excavations produced interesting information about the daily lives of St. Croix's earliest

inhabitants, such as cooking practices, housing construction technologies, and ceremonial practices. In the central plaza area a nearly complete ceramic griddle, or *burén*, was found, used to prepare and cook manioc into cassava bread. Pieces of a pottery vessel likely used to ferment beverages were also recovered. Fermented beverages were used typically consumed during ceremonies.

Fragments of stone and shells that were recovered indicate the manufacturing of tools. In addition to numerous stone and shell tools, students also found a nephrite or "jadeite" carved frog. These small frogs, measuring 15-30 by 12-20 millimeters (0.59-1.18 by 0.47-0.78 inches), are typically found at Caribbean sites attributed to the Saladoid cultural phase (400 B.C. to A.D. 500), and are indicators of social and cultural ties to South American homelands along the Orinoco River.



Stone ornaments, similar to jadeite frog found Salt River Bay, recovered from archeological sites across St. Croix. [Learn more about these objects >](#)

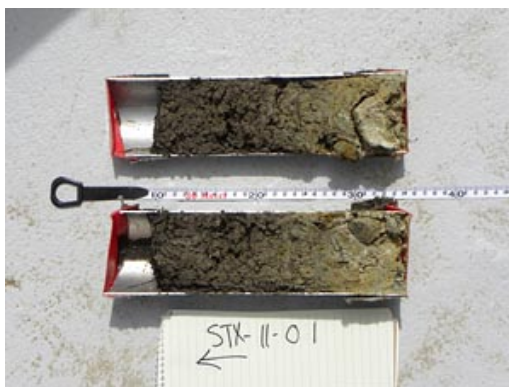
Students also expanded previous excavations at a possible structure located next to the plaza. Burned wooden posts that have been uncovered at this location have been dated to ca. A.D. 540-700 (Cal 2 sigma).

Ethnographic Investigations

Two ethnography students collected oral histories regarding catastrophic seismic and climate events, and farming and local agricultural practices that enhance resilience to hurricanes and tsunamis. Among other things, they developed a list of long-term and short-term survival practices that ranged from methods for storing and preparing root crops to selecting specific tree crops for planting and management. Additionally, they documented recollections of the older generation's ways of disaster and storm preparedness, comparing those activities with how more recent generations prepare for and rebuild after these events. This last point is of particular importance, as Hurricane Hugo (1989) remains one of the few natural disaster events in common between older and younger generations, and it was an extremely devastating event for the island.

Geomorphological Investigations

Gregg Brooks and Bekka Larson (Eckerd College) removed sediment cores from an inland pond south of the archeological site in order to begin to understand the long-term impact of environmental events on humans. These sediment cores will be correlated with the chronological data from local history and the knowledge revealed by the oral histories in order to interpret residents' reactions to and resilience from hurricanes and earthquakes over the past 100 years. Taken together, the social, archeological, and sediment core data will be used to contextualize the cultural changes associated with the events visible in the sediment cores that have occurred over two millennia. These cores will also be used to obtain pollen samples, to establish long term vegetation sequences that will be compared with archeological and historical data, and the modern landscape.



One of the soil cores taken from the pond at Salt River Bay.

All in all, it was a very satisfying season!

Acknowledgements

The field school was coordinated through the Joint Institutes for Caribbean Marine Studies (JICMS), of which the University of South Carolina is a partner. The Joint Institutes for Caribbean Marine Studies is a consortium of four universities that includes University of North Carolina-Wilmington; the University of the Virgin Islands; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; and the University of South Carolina. The JICMS intends to construct a marine laboratory and field station at Salt River Bay, the Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center (MREC). The NPS and the Government of the Virgin Islands are partners in this effort, to pair resource- and science-based management needs of the NPS with the research and educational mission of the universities, such as marine biology and ecology, archeology and museum studies, and Caribbean Studies.

Special thanks go to Molly Zuckerman (SCIAA) and Diane Wallman (USC-Anthropology), for

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To read more about the field school and see pictures from the field, visit the [Southeast Archeological Center's Facebook page](#).

Learn more about [Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve](#).

By Meredith D. Hardy, Archeologist, Southeast Archeological Center

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