

2008

Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions Newsletter

Five volunteers helped document and measure the ruins at the Hamilton Estate in Nevis. This former sugar plantation had a wind tower, factory building and impressive steam equipment which was used for grinding cane to make sugar. It is hoped that this will be a first step in the stabilization and interpretation of this site.

Hamilton Estate, Nevis. Documentation



WATTLE AND DAUB IN ST. EUSTATIUS

Wattle and Daub construction in Statia

Five volunteers helped the St. Eustatius Center for Archeological Research with the construction of a wattle and daub house. This type of construction uses thin straight branches which are woven together, and then a clay-like earth is applied.



HUNT'S BAY JEWISH CEMETERY INVENTORY

JANUARY 2008

CVE IN ST KITTS BY DAVID ROLLINSON



Sorting, recording and bagging archeological finds and masonry repair at Brimstone Hill Fortress and Museum, February 2008

With a decreasing population to care for the islands cemeteries and the ravages of time and weather, the grave markers found in the numerous parish church cemeteries are in danger of becoming lost and illegible. As no early burial records survive for these churches, we were asked by the St. Christopher Heritage Society to undertake a historic cemetery inventory as part of a genealogical archive. Historic cemetery surveys apparently hold a particular fascination for many people, and this has proved to be so for our St. Kitts programs. We have now completed surveys of all of the country churches, and for the past 4 years we have been working at the massive Springfield cemetery in Basseterre, the islands main town. Established in 1858, the cemetery covers an area of 60 acres and is home to an interesting collection of tombstones. Each winter we offer two historic cemetery surveys in St. Kitts, and each winter these two programs fill quickly.

With our early focus on the recording of historic buildings it was natural that CVE projects on the island would be involved with this work and an Elderhostel program was held at the 17th century Wingfield Estate, where we recorded the standing remains of a sugar works (including the site of a water wheel) and excavated various small foundations and features. Located at the side of the Wingfield River, and in the shade of centuries-old tropical trees Wingfield was, and remains, a wonderful place to spend a week. We returned to this site in January of 2008 and will continue to help in its development as a nature and heritage centre.

St. Kitts is also home to Brimstone Hill Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and for the winter of 2007/08 we were pleased to be able to offer a new Elderhostel program at this unique site. With its spectacular views over the mountains and to the Caribbean Sea far below, the fortress provides program participants with a host of new opportunities to explore the history and culture of the island and the wider Caribbean, whilst contributing to the preservation and development of this very impressive and important part of world history.

Summary of Recent Past Projects

2005

- Antigua Forts Archeology *
- BVI Historic Building Inventory*
- St John, USVI preservation projects*
- El Morro, Old San Juan preservation project*
- St Kitts Cemetery Inventory*
- St Croix Cemetery Inventory*

2006

- BVI Historic Site Inventory *
- St. Kitts Cemetery Inventory *
- St John Historic Preservation *
- San Salvador, Bahamas, Kerr Mount- mapping and archeology
- St. Kitts Museum Conservation

Antigua Fort Archeology Project

Grenada- La Sagesse Recommendations

2007

- Falmouth, Jamaica Jewish Cemetery Inventory
- BVI Historic Site Inventory *
- St. John Preservation *
- St. Croix Historic Preservation for Landmarks Society*
- St. Kitts Historic Cemetery Inventory *
- Lunenburg Preservation
- Brimstone Hill Restoration *

2008

- Wingfield Archeology*
- St. Kitts Cemetery Inventory *
- Brimstone Hill Restoration *
- Hunts Bay Jamaica, Jewish Cemetery Inventor
- St. John Preservation *
- St. Eustatius Wattle and Daub construction
- San Salvador Archeology *

* Projects with Elderhostel Volunteers

West Side to West Indies Across Three Centuries

By Susan Dessel and Lauren Stahl

An ancient cemetery, a New York coincidence and Jewish pirates? No, it isn't a Mel Brooks' movie. It's the real story of eight volunteers from Arizona, Connecticut and New York in Kingston, Jamaica earlier this year.

The leader of our group, architect Rachel Frankel, had gathered us there to inventory the overgrown, 17th century Hunt's Bay Jewish Cemetery with the prospect that our week-long efforts would add to the knowledge of Jewish history and genealogy while contributing to the diminishing, yet vital, Jewish community of Jamaica. The site is the oldest Jewish cemetery in Kingston and one of the oldest in the New World. Individual Jews arrived in the Caribbean in the 1620s and 30s with larger numbers joining them from the 1650s. Most were Spanish and Portuguese *Conversos*, Jews who had been forcibly baptized but continued to secretly practice their religion. Many arrived via Amsterdam where the Dutch had established the West India Trading Company and valued the business experience and geographically dispersed contacts in the Jewish community.

As we happily put aside our winter coats, two of us were delighted to meet for the first time though we live just a couple of blocks apart on W. 102nd St. Architectural conservator Lauren Stahl, from the Broadmoor, had participated with Frankel in a similar effort in Suriname (1998), and was interested in helping to restore and preserve the centuries-old gravestones. Susan Dessel, an artist from 299 Riverside Dr., was especially drawn to the imagery and symbols incised in many gravestones.

The project volunteers all shared an enthusiasm that was to get us through days of thorny bushes and blistering sun. Jamaica's famed beaches were at the other end of the island so, at the end

of each day, long, cool showers at the hotel were the destination of choice.

The cemetery was originally situated near the water of Hunt's Bay across from Port Royal. Many of the Jews of Jamaica in the 17th century lived in Port Royal and were brought in row boats to the cemetery for burial. The ships that brought the marble and slate gravestones carved in Europe docked in the harbor that has since been partially filled in. Now, the two miles from hotel to cemetery was a half hour van ride ending on a dirt track past corrugated metal shacks, some of whose residents were employed to clear the tangled brush from the site. By week's end we were all teammates, the locals' interest and enthusiasm matching our own.

Underneath the brush lay the graves, typically covered by horizontal gravestones on a brick base. Lauren laid out the grid that would enable us to map the site for our work and Susan numbered identifying markers. Eventually we located 359 graves and future efforts may uncover still more.

Many of the graves did not have gravestones (only the brick bases remain). Two of the dead were the Levy brothers, born in Austria probably of Ashkenazi (German Jewish) heritage. All the other names (e.g., Nunez, Henriques, Rodriques) appeared to identify Sephardic Jews (those of Spanish or Portuguese descent). Original records are assumed to have been destroyed in the 1692 earthquake and the 1703 fire.

Each stone was gently brushed clean so that information could be collected, including the measurements, materials and condition. The data included descriptions of illustrations and transcriptions of Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, and/or English language epitaphs containing biographical information, beautiful poems, and sad records of premature death. In addition, each grave was photographed.

The stones ranged from unadorned to those with lavishly sculpted elements and symbolic images including the unexpected skull and crossed bones. A debate arose as to their meaning but there was no doubt for our local on-site liaison, Ed Kritzer. His book, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean*, will be published this fall.

Throughout the week we enjoyed the help of local drop-in volunteers and a visiting Argentinean rabbi whose knowledge of Portuguese was invaluable. On our last day of work, we were joined at the cemetery by the 70 participants in the annual conference of Jewish Communities of the Caribbean and Latin America including many Jamaican families, a community that is racially integrated in a manner that we in New York rarely encounter. Witnessing some of the participants locate graves of their ancestors and gathering together to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, we ended a week marked by hard physical activity on a very spiritual note.



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ARCHEOLOGICAL DIG AT THE LIGHTHOUSE IN SAN SALVADOR,
BAHAMAS, MARCH 2008

CVE Mission Statement:

Throughout the Caribbean, historic structures representing each island's rich and unique heritage suffer due to natural and man made threats ranging from tropical storms to tourism-related development. Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions' mission is to support local efforts to preserve historic and architecturally valuable resources. We recruit volunteers from the US and Canada to work on preservation projects with local Caribbean agencies. We seek to contribute to the broader base of information about Caribbean styles, influences, history, and architecture, and to help preserve the region's architectural and cultural heritage.

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