



A Report from the Field:
Vernacular Architecture Conference
Falmouth, Jamaica

May 31 - June 4, 2011

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We are pleased to be able to provide the following report on the 31st annual conference of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, held this year in Falmouth, Jamaica from May 31 through June 4, 2011. The conference was attended by 230 scholars and graduate students from across the United States, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom. The conference opened on Tuesday, May 31, with a meeting of the Board of Directors. Marcia Miller is currently serving her second term as Vice President, and is responsible for conference planning for the next four annual meetings. Among her responsibilities at this conference were tasks related to planning and implementation for the 2012 conference, to be held in Madison, Wisconsin, and ongoing field documentation in preparation for the 2013 conference in Gaspé, Quebec, and the 2014 conference in southern New Jersey. The most significant development on the Board agenda was official announcement that the organization has received a gift for its endowment fund of \$300,000 by an anonymous donor. Also significant was the news that fellowships were provided this year to twenty graduate students, each of whom was selected to present a research paper to the membership.

The general meeting was launched on Wednesday, June 1, with a keynote presentation by Gustavo Araoz, current president of the US chapter of ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, on the role of heritage tourism in economic development. The speaker drew from his broad experience across the globe to outline both the benefits and pitfalls of heritage tourism, particularly the cultural issues raised when cruise ships are involved. This issue is particularly relevant for Falmouth, where the Jamaican government and Carnival Cruise Lines have collaborated on a new cruise ship terminal that has just been completed and will serve some of the largest cruise ships in the world. The introduction of cruise ships has not been without controversy, as up to 7000 passengers will disembark into a port town with a population of perhaps 2000.

Falmouth is located on the north coast of Jamaica, at the mouth of the Martha Brae River. The conference web site provides a succinct description of the early history and significance of Falmouth, as follows:

Founded in the 1770s as the major port for the remarkably fertile sugar plantations of Jamaica's north coast, Falmouth grew dramatically between the sugar boom years of the late eighteenth century and emancipation in 1838. In this period British merchants erected a significant set of houses and stores along the town's major commercial streets. There also survives a substantial fortification that now serves as the town's public elementary school, numerous nineteenth-century churches, an early courthouse, and a town square centered on a public cistern that provided fresh running water in town by the 1790s.

Emancipation in the 1830s expanded exponentially the number of Falmouth's free blacks, who had been living in town since its founding. Through the early nineteenth century, free blacks erected a notable set of small frame houses that evolved through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, diversifying the town's built environment in interesting ways. Falmouth is also the host to a handful of spectacular modernist buildings, especially a 1950s Catholic church and a number of reclaimed shipping containers that—once re-purposed—serve today as cheap roadside shops.



Post Office, Falmouth. Originally constructed in 1832 as a house and store for a British merchant, the building incorporates rendered masonry construction, a covered arcade, and hipped roof in an elegant but compact design.

Falmouth was selected as a conference site for multiple reasons. First, the town and surrounding countryside provide an opportunity to study a vernacular landscape that clearly expresses the complex cultural interplay of a European colonial power seeking economic expansion at the expense of a native population and fueled by slaves imported from Africa, and the eventual shift in power back to African-Caribbean control following British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and full emancipation for Jamaicans in 1838. This complex historical development is clearly seen in the evolving range and relationship of buildings, with a fascinating array of British governmental buildings and institutions, intermixed with European mercantile buildings, culturally mixed patterns of housing and religious practices, all shifting and adapting over time. A second area of interest was the development of a plantation economy and the buildings and landscapes that grew out of that system. Finally, the dramatic changes now underway in Falmouth as a result of the new cruise ship facility provide a case study for analyzing the impact of intense tourism development on a traditional, historic environment.

A key feature of Falmouth that made this conference possible was an innovative historic preservation initiative that has been underway since the 1990s. Local citizens, assisted by several donors in Great Britain and the United States, founded a local heritage foundation and began a process of mapping out a strategy for documenting the history of Falmouth and working to preserve the integrity of the historic core of the town. By 2002 this program included annual documentation sessions led by Edward Chappell of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and expanded in 2005 to include an annual field school offered through the architectural history program at the University of Virginia, led by Professor Louis Nelson, a veteran of architectural research in the Caribbean. Concurrently, the foundation created a restoration training program, which offers hands-on training in restoration carpentry, masonry and allied skills to members of the local community. This program has led to restoration work on buildings throughout the town, working from leased space in a historic building in the commercial core. Now in its second decade, the program has an impressive track record for success and is a model for communities elsewhere in both the developing world and in the United States and Great Britain.



The Baptist Manse, headquarters for the Falmouth restoration program.

On Thursday, June 2, the conference focused on the town of Falmouth, with numerous buildings across the town open for visitation, with detailed information available for dozens of key buildings, and local owners and experts available for guidance. Highlights of this day's session included the overall town plan, a British colonial courthouse, four churches, an impressive concentration of commercial buildings from late 18th century trader's houses to modern fruit stands operated out of cargo containers, and a wide array of residential housing. Many of the early buildings had much in common with British colonial structures from the Chesapeake and port cities such as Charleston and Savannah, while the residential buildings merited comparison with port towns around the Atlantic rim, from the American Gulf Coast to the British colonies of West Africa.



Store-house style residences on Market Street, Falmouth.

On Friday, June 3, conference participants boarded buses for a tour of plantation architecture along the north coast and up to 30 miles into the interior. This stretch of coast has a deep history that includes pre-Columbian elements, as well as sites associated with the earliest European exploration of the Western Hemisphere, and then layers of development associated with successive phases of Spanish and English colonization, following by emancipation and eventual self determination as a modern nation. The primary focus of the Friday tours, however, was the landscape of the sugar industry, with particular emphasis on its heyday from the 1700s to the mid-1800s. One plantation ("New Seville") was located on the site of an early Spanish settlement captured by the British in 1655, and another (in ruins) was designed as a fully fortified compound, reflecting the builder's fear of a slave insurrection, as happened in the 1790s on neighboring Haiti.

The final stop on Friday was at Good Hope Plantation in the high country of the interior, sited along the banks of the Martha Brae River. This plantation was a major producer of cane, both raw and as processed sugar and rum, and is in a remarkable state of preservation. Our bus climbed for miles on a rough 1½ lane road through lush tropical forest, interspersed with open

fields lined with rough stone boundary walls built with the limestone rocks cleared from the fields, and eventually arrived at the center of the plantation, off-loading us under a flowering tree harboring black humming birds with long, swallow-like tails. From here we toured on foot through an extensive complex of buildings related to the processing and storage of sugar cane, including a lime kiln, wheel house, distilling buildings, curing houses and warehouses, and a stone-arch bridge. All of these buildings were built of local limestone and dated from the 1740s to the 1790s. While much of the slave housing had deteriorated into archeological sites, the two-story slave hospital was still partially intact as a standing ruin, with cut limestone walls and a handsome molded stone cornice.



A mid-eighteenth century stone bridge at Good Hope Plantation spans the Martha Brae River. Iron brackets on the stone pillars once carried a trough that delivered raw cane juice from the wheel house to the processing complex. The smoke is from an early kiln reactivated to produce lime for restoration work.

On the highest point at the center of the plantation was the main residential complex, centered around a one-story, stuccoed masonry house that combined all the features we had come to expect from a planter's house—a floor plan favored for genteel rural Jamaican houses with verandas and interior louvered openings to assure air circulation, rooms left open to the roof (i.e. no ceilings) for the same purpose, stone paved floors, and a complete assemblage of early West Indian furniture crafted by local hands from native mahogany. A buffet dinner was provided in the garden, and the buses returned us to Falmouth around 9 PM.

Saturday, June 4 served as the venue for the paper sessions. Not surprisingly, given the conference location, the emphasis was on African American themes, and on heritage tourism.

Some highlights included papers on the colonization of Liberia by freed American slaves in the 1820s to 1850s, a study of a post Civil War African American community in Delaware, research on an antebellum community in Ontario, Canada built by escaped American slaves, studies of the role of the slave trade in Richmond, New Orleans, and the West Indies, and a session on plantation archaeology on the Island of Neves. The paper session wrapped up at 5:30 PM and the annual business meeting and awards banquet commenced at 6:30 PM.

The conference was extremely well organized, despite the many complexities entailed, and the highlight of the meeting was certainly to see a hands-on demonstration of what can be accomplished in a well-managed, locally directed preservation effort. The documentation and restoration projects in Falmouth are yielding clearly discernible results and are having an impact well beyond the local community. Of particular interest was the large cadre of the project's student alumni in attendance at the conference, and to see the impact of the VAF policy of funding student fellowships to attend the conference. At least one-quarter of the conference attendees were under the age of 30 and most had participated in this or other field schools co-sponsored by VAF; twenty of these students presented papers at this conference.

Overall, it was a remarkably smooth and highly beneficial meeting, and has set a standard for non-traditional conference venues. The conference team produced three guidebooks with nearly 400 pages of research, field drawings and analysis of Falmouth and the adjoining countryside. This material is available in electronic files ranging from 3 to 18 mb; for copies contact Marcia Miller at mmiller@mdp.state.md.us.



Ruins of Stewart Castle, a fortified plantation on the north coast near Falmouth. This former sugar cane plantation was developed in the late eighteenth century; the walled ramparts and gun embrasures are a testament to the violence and brutality of Jamaican slavery, and provide material evidence of the fear of a slave insurrection.