Social Space at the Royal Engineers Quarters
(BSH 3) Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park,
St. Kitts, West Indies

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the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park, St. Kitts, West
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By

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Community Dynamics and Social Status at the Brimstone Hill Fortress
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Archaeological investigations at the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park have focused primarily on recording the role enslaved Africans had in the fort’s construction and maintenance. Brimstone Hill was a multiethnic community occupied by British officers, enlisted men, and enslaved Africans. Recent excavations of a complex set of buildings and features where British Royal Engineers lived and worked have broadened our knowledge of the site’s occupants and reveal how the engineers used specific structures and their arrangement to demonstrate their social status within the Brimstone Hill community.

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The Caribbean offers an excellent opportunity for archaeological research at historic military complexes. These impressive military works often remain generally intact or at least in good states of repair since they have been a focus of historic preservation (Watters 2001). Historical archaeologists researching military sites can investigate rarely studied segments of colonial society, such as European soldiers and sailors, local militiamen, civilians who serviced the military, slaves of the British West India regiments, slaves either owned by the military or furnished by local plantations to construct the fortifications, and families of the soldiers stationed there. Archaeological investigations at the Brimstone Hill Fortress, one of the largest British military complexes in the Caribbean, have allowed archaeologists to evaluate social status and inequality within the context of a military organization.

This paper examines how the position of structures and the division of space on the landscape were used to communicate power and class relations. The concepts of panopticism and controlled access were used to understand social inequality and power relations between the British officers, enslaved Africans, and enlisted men at Brimstone Hill.

The Brimstone Hill Fortress is located on the island of St. Kitts, approximately 350 kilometers southeast of Puerto Rico in the Leeward Islands. The fort is situated on a 243-meter high volcanic extrusion located along the northwest coast of the island, St. Kitts was first settled by the British in 1623, and was jointly occupied by the British and French until 1713. Like many of the Leeward Islands, St. Kitts' greatest economic value lies in its fertile soils which have been used to grow sugarcane from the 1640s until 2005 (Ahlman and Schroedl 2004). By the early 18th century, St. Kitts became one of the most
dominant and prosperous of all the Leeward Islands because of the quality and quantity of sugar harvested there (Hubbard 2002). Enslaved Africans were the labor source used in the cane fields and by the late 18th century enslaved Africans outnumbered Europeans 20 to 1 (Cox 1984). The economic value and strategic location of St. Kitts caused numerous conflicts between the British and the French throughout its history.

The British first fortified Brimstone Hill with cannon in 1690 to provide military support for Charles Fort, a fort located along the coast captured by the French (Matheson 1987; Smith 1992). After realizing the strategic importance of Brimstone Hill, the British began to develop Brimstone Hill’s military potential by constructing numerous barracks, buildings, structures, and walls (Schooedl 2005a). In 1782 the French briefly occupied the fortress until the island was restored to the British by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. After the French siege, the British implemented a massive construction plan during the 1780s and 1790s. During this time, the Royal Engineers, a small corps of officers specializing in designing military works, designed the remodeled fortress and managed the construction (Smith 1992). Virtually all construction, renovation, and maintenance was accomplished by enslaved Africans before emancipation and black laborers after 1838 (Schooedl 2005a).

At various times throughout its history, British army officers and enlisted men, members of the St. Kitts militia, soldiers of the First, Third and Fourth West India Regiments, Africans from the “Corps of Black Military Artificers and Pioneers” and from the “Corps of Embodied Slaves,” as well as small numbers of civilians, military wives and children occupied the fort, forming a distinctive multiethnic community at Brimstone Hill (Schroedl and Ahlman 2002; Schroedl 2005a).
The way Brimstone Hill looks today is a result of the extensive construction that occurred during the late 18th century at the fort (Buckley 1998). The cut leveled terraces on the mountainside and the impressive buildings and fortifications that still remain on the landscape are a testimony to the labor of enslaved Africans who lived and worked there. Brimstone Hill was in operation until its abandonment in 1854. Since the 1960s, the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park Society has been dedicated to restoring and preserving the fort and interpreting it for the public.

In cooperation with the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park Society, excavations at Brimstone Hill were conducted from 1996 to 1999 and from 2004 to 2006 by the University of Tennessee. Archaeological excavations first focused on the role enslaved Africans had in the construction and maintenance of the fort; however, the project goals have recently been expanded to consider all occupants of Brimstone Hill, allowing researchers to examine social status and inequality among community members (Schroedl 2005a).

A 1791 British Royal Engineers map of the fort showing locations where enslaved Africans lived and worked at Brimstone Hill has helped direct the excavations and is the main guide in the archaeological investigations (Schroedl 2005a). Excavations have taken place in four areas of the fort, primarily focusing on a location between the Grillon and Magazine Bastions designated as BSH 2, where four structures attributed to slave activities are depicted, and the Royal Engineers building complex, which is designated as BSH 3.

This paper focuses specifically on BSH 3, the Royal Engineers building complex. Located above the curtain wall connecting the Grillon and Magazine Bastions, BSH 3
extends from the defensive wall upslope to the Prince of Wales Bastion and is between the modern access roads to the north and south (Schoedt 1999). The 1791 map indicates 13 buildings in this area, including: a slave hut, kitchen, Engineers quarters and offices, and eight additional buildings identified as huts or barracks for married enlisted men (Schoedt 1999). BSH 3 is located on a steep slope of the hill that was terraced to accommodate the various structures. The site is divided into three sections based on these terraces and are designated as Terrace 1, 2, and 3.

BSH 3 is significant since it represents an area occupied by British officers, enslaved Africans, and enlisted men, all of which constitute the primary social classes at Brimstone Hill. The spatial arrangement of structures and features at BSH 3 were analyzed to understand how the officers designed this area of the fort in order to express their power to the other members of the community and to control the enslaved community and the enlisted men at the fortress.

Researchers have shown that the position of structures and the division of space on the landscape are used by people to express power and class relations (Orser 1988; Leone 1995; Armstrong 1999; Delle 1998, 1999; Singleton 2001). Landscapes are consciously constructed by the people who inhabit them (Orser 2006). Research of landscapes has concluded that landscapes can be manipulated, contested, and imagined in numerous ways. Archaeological, architectural, and landscape studies have shown both direct and subtle ways in which slaveholders attempted to control plantation landscapes (Singleton 1995). In the southern United States and in the Caribbean it has been demonstrated that slaveholders manipulated the spatial organization of plantations in
order to maximize profits, exercise surveillance, control access, and reinforce the subordinate status of enslaved people.

The location and arrangement of slave quarters are seen as the result of a conscious decision made by the planters to reinforce their power and control over the enslaved community. Taking this into consideration, it was expected that the British officers occupying BSH 3 arranged their living space in ways that could control the daily lives of the enslaved Africans who served their needs. This expectation proved to be correct. The concepts of panopticism and controlled access were used to illustrate the ways in which the Royal Engineers sought to control the Brimstone Hill community.

Panopticism refers to how spaces are arranged in such a way that surveillance can be constant and take place in full visibility (Foucault 1979). This method reverses the principles of a dungeon which is intended to enclose, hide, or deprive light. Panopticism serves as a form of control over space itself, but also over movement through space (Delle 1998). By using the concept of panopticism, archaeologists have demonstrated that planters’ houses were physically elevated above other buildings to reinforce the planters’ authority through constant means of surveillance (Delle 1998; Singleton 2001).

The British Royal Engineers used a similar tactic of panopticism when designing the layout of the BSH 3 structures. The British military had control over the living spaces of the enslaved Africans. Since the military officers designed the fort, they could manipulate the landscape in ways that would most effectively help manage their control over the enslaved community. The buildings at BSH 3 were situated across three terraces and served as a way for the Engineers to demonstrate their authority to the rest of the Brimstone Hill community.
The Engineers’ quarters and offices, located on Terraces 1 and 2, were physically elevated above the slave and enlisted men’s quarters. The buildings served as a central point of surveillance, allowing the officers to not only monitor and control the activities taking place on the lower terraces but to also watch who entered the fortress and the ongoing activities around them.

Without leaving the confines of their offices or quarters, the Royal Engineers could have supervised and monitored the slave quarters. This type of panoptic surveillance mechanism has been described as a method of social control in Caribbean plantation contexts (Delle 1999). This technique of social control relied on both the direct surveillance of the officers and on creating the perception that the slaves were constantly being observed. The logic of this type of control helped dictate that the slaves would be more cooperative and productive if they thought they were being watched.

Restricting free movement of enslaved Africans through space is an additional technique used by slaveholders (Delle 1998; Singleton 2001). This method of control was also demonstrated at BSH 3. The Royal Engineers built a complex unlike other areas of the fort that included controlled access to their many amenities through a series of walkways and gated entrances. These walkways and gated entrances were used to control movements of all Brimstone Hill community members, not just enslaved Africans.

Excavations on Terrace 1 revealed an elaborate entrance way into the residence building, including a yellow brick walkway that ran from the doorway of the Engineer’s formal room to the entrance road. North of this walkway a gated entrance provided access to the barracks. A second brick walkway ran between the building and the wall.
behind it that leads to a paved patio in the rear of the residence between the kitchen, storage structure, and cistern. From this patio three separate sets of steps could be used to access a large bath tub, the Engineer’s office building, and the lower terraces. The west stairs leads to a gated, narrow walkway that runs between the cistern and the office building to the bath tub. The middle set of steps provides access to the Engineer’s office. The eastern stairs was gated and led to the lower terraces where the storehouse and slave quarters are located. Controlling access through walkways and gated entrances enabled the officers the ability to contain slave activities, restrict movement, and control entry.

Slaveholders at plantations and at military sites manipulated the spatial organization of structures on the landscape in order to control enslaved Africans. Spatial analysis at the Royal Engineers Complex has revealed how the British officers conceptualized and arranged their living space in order to monitor surveillance, control access, and reinforce their power and authority to the Brimstone Hill community.
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