

A Visit to Cotton Cay

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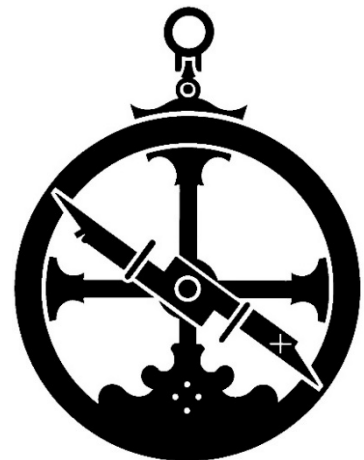
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The Survey

As part of the Turks & Caicos National Museum's continuing effort to explore and inventory sites of historical and archaeological importance in the Turks & Caicos Islands, Donald Keith and Randal Davis visited Cotton Cay over a two-day period Feb 1-2, 2002. The objectives of the visit were to re-visit the two known Lucayan sites on the island's Northwest and North coasts, to walk entirely around the coast of the island looking for other traces of past human habitation, and to measure and survey the ruins of the stone house on the island's Southwest coast (Figure 1). The weather conditions were very favorable. Although the temperature during the day was in the 25-30 degree C. range, the humidity was relatively low and a steady breeze made it feel much cooler. The several brief rain squalls we experienced were more of a blessing than nuisance, providing an opportunity to rinse and cool off. We were not bothered by mosquitoes, gnats, or other biting insects.

Geography and Topography

The island is low, with the greatest elevation occurring near the southwestern point where a large stone cairn has been erected. The high ground on the windward (East) side of the island is windswept and battered by the sea. A wide variety of drift objects, including entire small boats, may be found littering the island's South side, particularly the low beaches in the middle of the South side where rocky points form two shallow bays.

The lowest points are in the island's interior, where brackish water accumulates to form a number of shallow lagoons, none of which are connected to the sea. As no crystalized salt was seen around these lagoons, it is supposed that they supply drinking water for the animal population. Because availability of drinking water is one

of every animal's primary needs, we were particularly interested in locating 'wells' such as those seen on Grand Turk, but none were encountered.

History of Cotton Cay

In the earliest high-resolution maps of the T&C Islands, produced during the French survey of 1753, the island is labeled as "Isle à Coton." It also appears on Andrew Symmers map of 1769 bearing the name "Cotton Key." From this evidence alone one would assume that somewhere in its past, Cotton Cay was planted in cotton. If so, it is odd that no cotton is visible today growing wild as it does on other abandoned plantations in the Caicos Islands.

Plant and Animal Life Observed

The only mammals encountered were goats. Only three were sighted—a mother and two kids—but their signs abound all over the island. A few species of land and sea birds were sighted, but they were neither numerous nor varied. No rookeries were observed. Unfortunately, we did not have the expertise to identify the different bird species and plants encountered, other than the non-native economic plants such as agave (century plant) and aloe. Native plants include, but certainly are not limited to the Turks Head cactus, lignum vitae, sea grape, and acacia.

Historical and Archaeological Sites

Previous visits to the island by Brian Riggs, Grethe Seim, Donald Keith, and Bill Keegan established that there are at least two Lucayan Indian sites on Cotton Cay, one just inland of each of the beaches on the West and North sides. The West Beach site, "CC#1" is densely covered in bush and no artifacts or features (other than darkened soil) were encountered during the present survey. However, in the past when the bush was less dense the area produced shards of Palmetto ware, shell tools, and a skillfully carved and

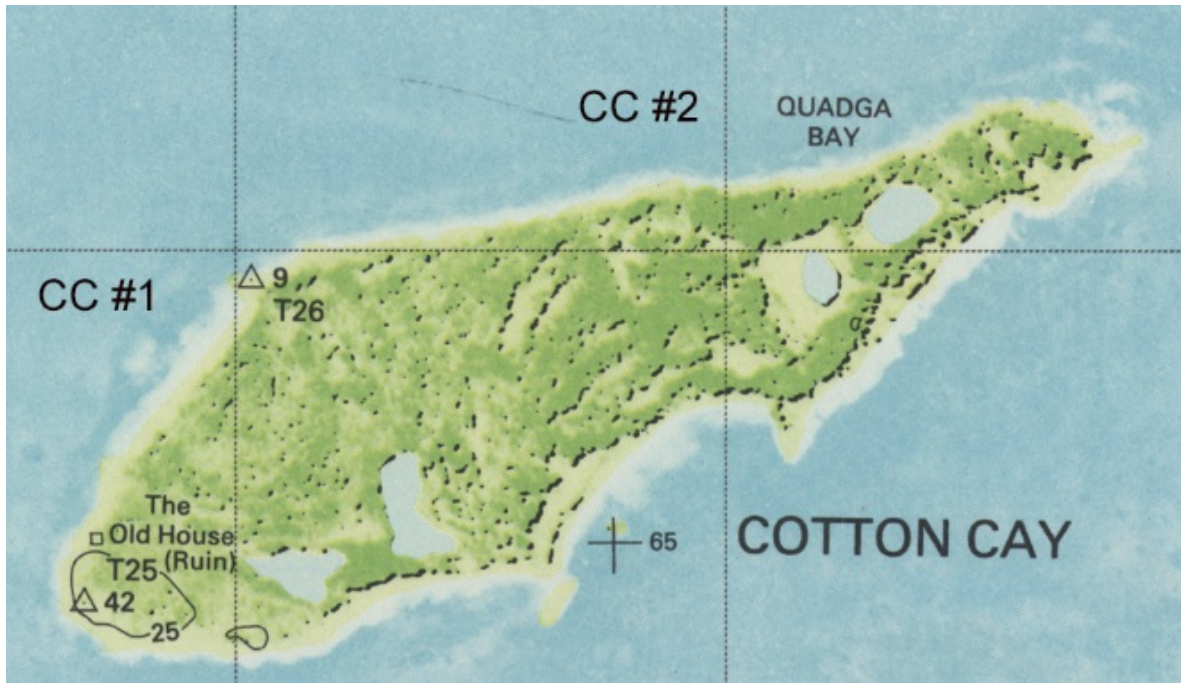


Figure 1. Map of Cotton Cay showing approximate locations of Lucayan Indian sites and house ruin. Scale = 1km.

drilled pendant which is now on display in the Museum's Lucayan Gallery.

The North Beach Lucayan site ("CC #2") is much more interesting and promising. It occupies a low ridge 5 or 6 m above sea level between the steep, sandy "Quadga Bay" beach and a shallow lagoon in the island's low interior. The site is distinguished by its dark sandy soil and a "pavement" of small pieces of fire-cracked rock and shell. Unfortunately, it is eroding into the sea and much of it may already have been lost. The depth of the cultural deposit is variable, from 0 to about 26 cm. The visible parts of the site are quite compact, extending about 45 m East to West and about 23 m North to South. It is likely that the site is larger and that parts of it are obscured by ground cover and windblown sand from the beach.

It is easy to understand why the site is located here. Compared to the ironshore that surrounds most of the island, the narrow, sandy beach below the site would have provided an inviting place to land small water craft. Evidently this can still be done in calm weather, because within the limits of the site we found the remains of a campfire and a mound of recently-discarded conch shells. The site enjoys a nearly constant East breeze, and for Lucayans there would have been easy access both to the food resources of the sea and plant and animal resources drawn to the water-filled basins only about 50 m farther into the island's interior.

After half an hour of observation we counted 8 shards of Palmetto Ware on the surface, most of which were clustered beneath the branches of a large sea grape tree (Figure 2). As the Museum already has a representative collection from the site we left the shards where they lay. Palmetto Ware is the signature ceramic of the Lucayan Indians, who occupied the Turks & Caicos Islands at least as early as AD 700 and were quite numerous when the first Spanish explorers arrived in 1492. It is distinct from the pottery

made by other culturally- and linguistically-related Indian groups from the Greater Antilles, who probably also visited the Turks & Caicos.



Figure 2. Palmetto Ware shards found on CC #2.

Numerous Lucayan sites have been found all over the Turks & Caicos and Bahama Islands, but there is another reason for taking a special interest in CC #2. A very brief test excavation of the site in 1993 produced a single, tiny shard of Spanish Melado Ware, a lead-glazed earthenware ceramic type found only on the earliest Spanish sites in the New World (before about 1550) (Figure 3). No Melado Ware has been found anywhere in the New World on sites created after the middle of the 16th century. Therefore, the presence of this shard strongly suggests that CC-2 is a "contact period" site—one that was occupied between 1492 when the first Spanish explorers entered the New World and about 1513, by which time the Lucayans had vanished from the Bahamas and Turks & Caicos Islands. Keith took the shard to the Florida State Museum Gainesville in October of 1993 where it was identified by Maurice Williams, a specialist in early Spanish ceramics, as "tending toward Melado Ware Type B" which is known from Isabella in the Dominican Republic from 1493 contexts and later. This makes it one of the oldest European artifacts ever found in the Americas.



Figure 3. Ceramic shards from CC#2, Lucayan Palmetto ware (right), Spanish Melado ware (center)

The House Ruin

The only detailed written reference to human activity on Cotton Cay that we have discovered so far occurs in the memoirs of Denis Murphy titled “My Years in the Sun.” In it he describes visiting Cotton Cay on day-sail outings from Grand Turk and tells us a little about the stone house, now a ruin:

“There was a two story house on this small island with two ground level rooms and a small upstairs room, There was also a stone annex to the main house, fitted with a hearth and used as a kitchen. A short distance away

from the dwelling was a wooden privy house, built on the edge of a low cliff near to the ocean.

The house was situated about 100 feet in from the rocky western shoreline. It was surrounded mostly by scrub bush on the north, the east and the south sides. Growing against the eastern wall there were a number of sisal, locally called pita, plants with their three feet long semi-rigid leaves, each tipped with a wicked looking spine.

On the western side, a short distance from the house were a couple of large sea

grape trees. These trees, when in season bore some of the largest sea grapes we ever picked in the Islands.

These excursions to Cotton Cay gave us a chance to let off steam. We did some fishing, had fish suppers, played cards, took a few drinks and had some good sing-alongs.

The island was near to, and just a short distance east of, Salt Cay. The Harriotts had leased it from the Government for many years, and Franklin Harriott was usually with us on these occasions.

I recall a time when, after supper and a couple of drinks later, we decided to build a bon fire. We scouted around and accumulated a pile of dried brush wood, and soon had a nice fire going.

During the evening we sat around and kept feeding the fire. Later we missed one of our group but soon discovered that he had climbed out of the upstairs window and was attempting to do a dance on the crest of the shingled saddle type roof.

We all knew this was extremely dangerous. If he lost his footing he might tumble down the eastern side and fall into the spiny leaves of the pita plants. We shuddered just to think of that. We finally talked him down and heaved a collective sigh of relief as he rejoined us around the fire.

Our brush pile finally gave out and we started to look around for more wood. We found an old hardwood mortar in the kitchen area and that kept the fire going for awhile. Finally someone, perhaps with tongue in cheek, suggested burning up the privy house. We all looked at Franklin and his reply was ‘Why not! We’ll burn it up, and I’ll come over here next week with a couple of carpenters and build a brand new two seater, to take its place’”[Murphy 1983].

Denis Murphy states that he was born in 1902 and left the Islands for good in 1929; therefore, it is safe to assume that these events occurred sometime between about 1918 and the hurricane of 1926, which so

destroyed the economy of the Islands that Murphy and many other Natives were forced to leave.

Murphy’s account is important because it allows us to partially reconstruct parts of the house that are no longer present. It also solves the mystery of why the house has no kitchen or obvious cooking area. We observed a large mound of debris at the Southwest corner of the house, now heavily overgrown (Figure 4). This is undoubtedly where the kitchen was located in a separate free-standing structure.

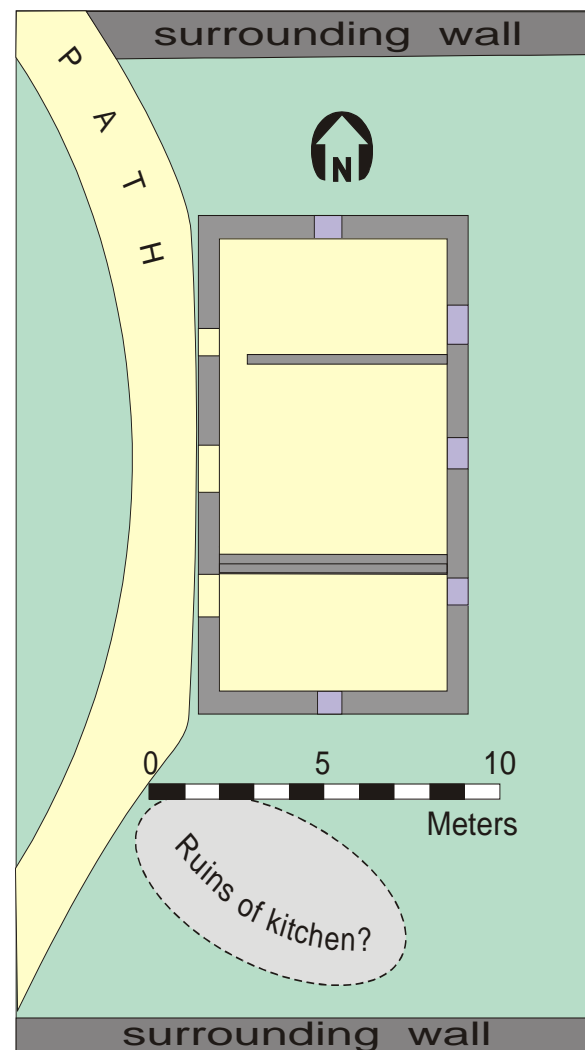


Figure 4. Plan view of the house ruin. Blue openings in walls are windows. Other openings are doorways.

The house is sited on the protected Western side of the Island, about 10-12 m above sea level and only about 15-20 m from the bare ironshore. There is no safe anchorage nearby. We did not locate any source of fresh water or catchments and cisterns for the storage of rainwater, but our survey was brief and confined to areas that were not completely overgrown. There was no readily-identifiable privy or trash pit, but judging from the quantity of broken glass and pottery lying near the kitchen area, it was customary for the inhabitants to fling whatever they no longer wanted over the wall that surrounded the house compound. There is also a maze of well-preserved stone walls extending into the island's interior to the North and East. Some of the walls are quite high, and may have been constructed to confine livestock.

It was readily apparent that the bush immediately around the house had recently been cleared. Debris from the house's interior had been shoveled out through the doors and windows and now lies in mounds around the building. Sifting through these mounds might lead to the discovery of artifacts that could tell us more about who built the house originally, who lived there and what their lives were like (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Stone house ruin seen from the Southeast.

We were particularly interested in

determining if the house showed evidence of different stages of construction or gave any indication of its original date of construction. Working backward in time from the present, we know that the house was unoccupied throughout most, if not all, of the 20th century. We know from Denis Murphy that it was a ruin in the 1920's, but that it still had at least part of the roof structure intact, which suggests that it had been occupied perhaps a decade or two earlier. From the Murphy account we know that the house dates at least to the period during which the island was leased by the Harriotts of Salt Cay, but may have been built much earlier.

The construction details of the house offer little information that could help to date it. The outer and inner walls are made from large cut stones with rubble in between, creating a total wall thickness of 60-65 cm (Figure 6). Sections of the inner wall show at least three layers of plaster, all distinctly different composition. The central room seems to have had a plaster floor. The exterior walls are collapsing where the protective plaster has disintegrated, particularly on the South side.



Figure 6. The central room looking to the West through the middle door. Full height of the wall remains. Interior has been shoveled out.

The chimney and hearth area have collapsed completely and are no longer identifiable. It is obvious that the interior wall to the North was added as an afterthought because it is free-standing, and not blended into either the East or West exterior walls. The window on the West side was once a doorway leading into what is now the North compartment.

The tops of all of the doors and windows have collapsed, indicating that inadequate wooden lintels were used. Litter, in the form of modern cans and bottles is evidence of recent, infrequent visitation. Artifacts, primarily shards of broken glass and ceramic containers abound around the house, in spite of decades of collecting. Some of these may be fairly precisely dated, giving us the earliest date that the house could have been built and occupied (Figure 7). No cistern or well or other source of fresh water was discovered, although there must be at least one near the house. Dense bush around the house and limited time on the island prevented a thorough survey.



Figure 7. A variety of 19th century ceramic types found within the house compound can help date occupation of the house.

Recommendations

Cotton Cay has the unusual distinction of being the only inhabitable island in the Turks Islands group that is uninhabited. This seems to have been the case throughout most of recorded history, which would suggest a marginal water supply and fragile ecosystem. The island is also hampered by difficult access, having only one or possibly two landing beaches and one or two places along the rocky western coast where the water is deep enough to allow a small boat to disembark passengers and cargo directly onto the ironshore. A Turks Islander originally from Salt Cay told us that this is how his family used to land their sailboat when they visited Cotton Cay years ago.

Although there were no obvious signs of habitat degradation resulting from goat overpopulation, their ability to thrive in harsh environments at the expense of the ecosystem is well-known. It is not known exactly how long goats have been present on the island, and no previous environmental “base line” data is available against which to compare the island’s current condition. One story we heard was that the goats were shipped from Grand Turk in an effort to get rid of its “goat problem.”

Cotton Cay does not seem to receive many visitors; however, now that there is a very clear trail leading from the main landing beach to the house ruin, it might be wise to post a sign along the trail advising visitors of the fact that the island is privately owned and that collection and removal of artifacts from historic or prehistoric sites is strictly prohibited. It is apparent that the sites on Cotton Cay that were attractive to human habitation centuries ago are the same ones that are attractive today: the two landing beaches, and the high elevation on the leeward side. Unfortunately, this means that they are also the places most likely to be impacted by increased human visitation.

Given the fact that CC #2 appears to

be a “contact period” site, further archaeological testing is warranted. The objectives of such an investigation would be to define the limits of the site, estimate the length of time during which it was occupied, gauge its rate of erosion into the sea, and look for the presence of “import wares” (pottery made by Taino Indians living in the islands to the south) and European trade goods such as glass beads, ceramic fragments, and metal artifacts that would reinforce the “contact period” dating.

The house ruin also deserves further archaeological investigation. If the island is slated for development, and if the development is to be centered on the house ruin, it is important to learn as much as possible about the site before mechanical land clearing and construction erases forever the faint traces of the site’s history.

The authors hope that this report will alert Cotton Cay’s owners to the presence of prehistoric and historic assets on the island, and provide “food for thought” when making decisions about how and where to initiate development.

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