

# Cheshire Hall: The Future and Potential of a Loyalist Plantation Complex on Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands

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## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this report is not to recount the history or evaluate the importance of the plantation complex on Providenciales known as Cheshire Hall –that importance is assumed – but rather to report the nature and condition of its architectural remains and illuminate its archaeological potential. It is hoped that this report will be of use in evaluating the site’s present physical condition, its importance for future archaeological exploration, its historical interpretation, and possibly even its reconstruction.

This report is based on observations made February 4-8, 2000 during a simple site survey conducted by a team of four archaeologists assembled by Ships of Discovery working under the sponsorship of the Turks and Caicos National Museum. The impetus for the survey was mounting concern over encroachment by burgeoning development. The same geographical and topographical features that caused the planters to build Cheshire Hall where they did – elevation and location – are equally attractive today, and the site is hard-pressed on every quarter by land hungry developers.

## ***The Survey***

The four-person Ships of Discovery team spent the better part of one day clearing and photographing the “lost ruin” (Figure 1), located on the next hilltop to the south of the main Cheshire Hall complex, and approximately three days on the main site. We cleared a minimal of undergrowth on both sites in order to gain access to interiors of structures and to run measuring tapes between structures. We measured heights, lengths, widths of walls, doors and windows of every structure, and took scores of

photographs to capture details and supplement our drawings (Figure 2). We measured the distances between structures and their orientations with respect to each other. We were not able to survey the site location into the national grid, but that can easily be done later using WGPS.

We did not specifically record the condition of the ruins. We did not excavate. We did not look for artifacts, and we do not pretend to have found all the structures. Our measurements, observations and photographs enabled us to produce a three dimensional plan of the main part of the site using AutoCAD. We learned that the site is bigger and more complex than expected, and that it has enormous potential to reveal the past. It is definitely not depleted.

## ***The Future of the Cheshire Hall Preserve***

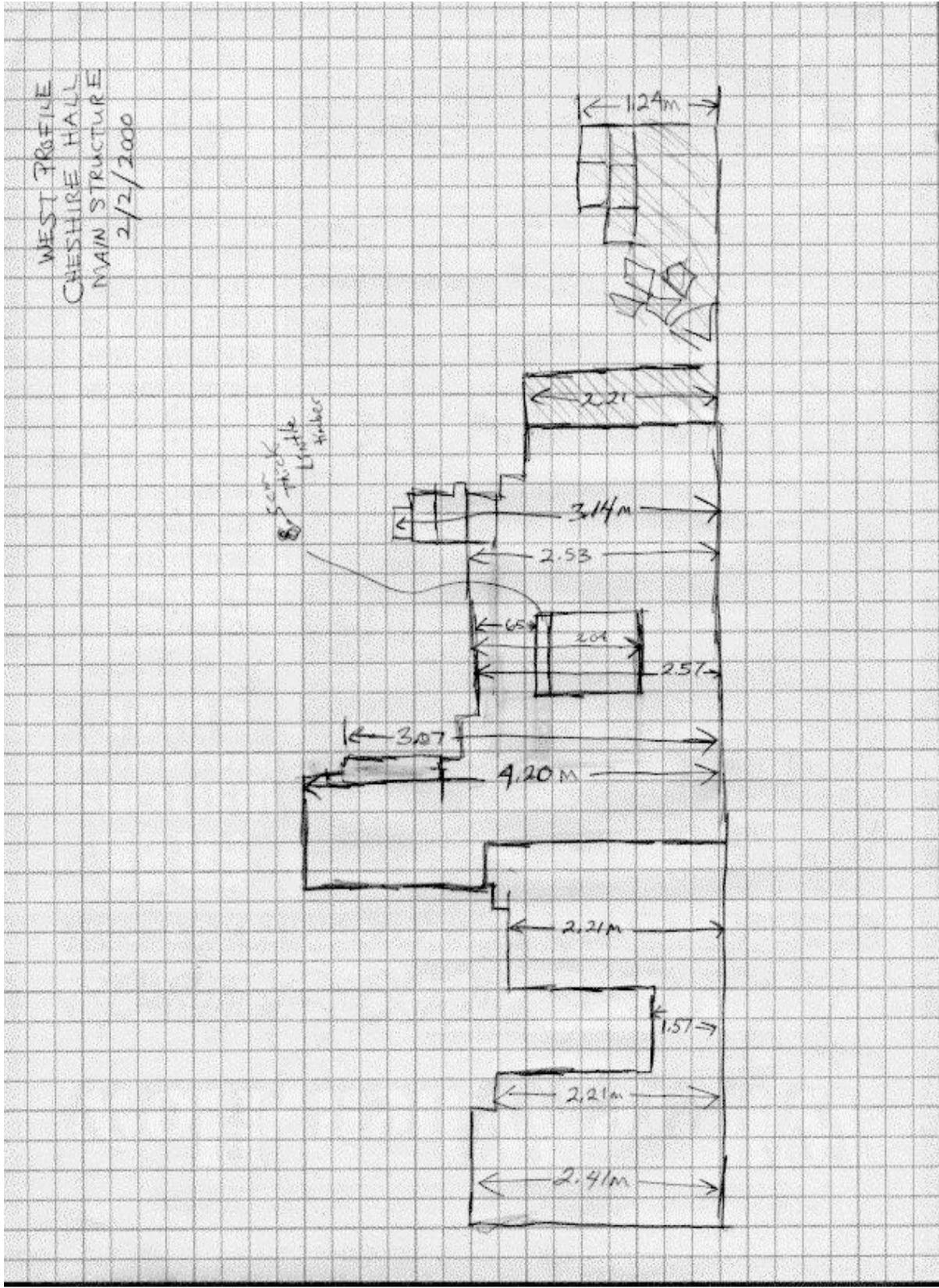
Although Cheshire Hall has long been recognized as a site of historical importance, little has been done to protect and preserve it, or to make its story more accessible to the public. Recognition of the site’s potential importance and attraction goes back at least as far as the late 1960’s when development first came to Provo (Figure 3). According to Provident Ltd. surveyor Bengt Soderqvist, it was always the intent of the first developers that the site be preserved. The Cheshire Hall parcel was surveyed, reserved, and specifically deeded to the TCI Government in recognition that the site should be the government’s responsibility. Mr. Soderqvist even re-routed Leeward Highway so that it would not run through the site, as originally planned. Since then, the Cheshire Hall preserve has shrunk dramatically as bit by bit has been trimmed away for roads and development without archaeological surveys or historical research to first determine what



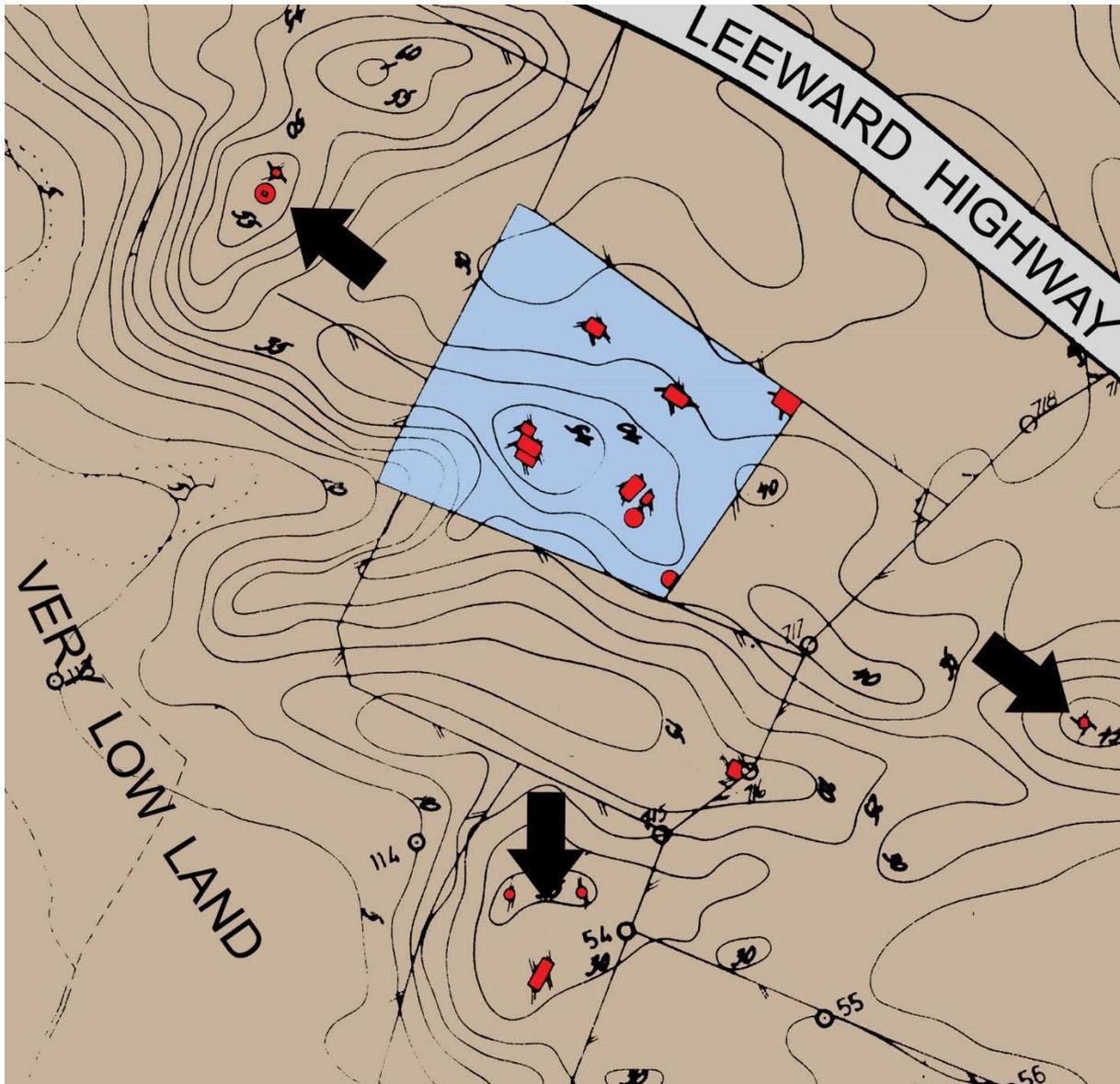
**Figure 1.** The “lost ruin”.

is being lost. The site is in very real danger of eradication. Cheshire Hall is, of course, only one of many plantation complexes in the TCI. However, by virtue of the fact that Provo is the most populous and heavily visited island in the TCI, any work done on Cheshire Hall would be more visible and have a greater potential to elevate historical awareness than similar work done on other islands. It follows that such work should be state-of-the-art and set the standard for all subsequent recording of other remains throughout the Islands. Other plantation complexes in the Caicos Islands such as Wade’s Green on North Caicos (Farnsworth 1993) and Haulover on Middle Caicos (Kozy 1990) have been the sites of historical and archaeological field schools, but the investigations have been brief and superficial. Lacking long-term support and

commitment, such efforts have not added greatly to our knowledge of the past. What would be the objectives of a comprehensive archaeological and historical investigation of Cheshire Hall? Regardless of the specific, scientific goals of an in-depth examination of the Cheshire Hall preserve, it is paramount that the quality of work be first class and reflect favorably on the National Trust and the TCI in general. Goals must be realistic and attainable on schedule. Cheshire Hall will be the most interesting to the public (and therefore the most “fundable”) while field work exploration and excavation is actually going on. The best plan of action is one that starts with relatively small-scale goals and budgets and escalates as public interest in the work increases.



**Figure 2.** Sketch drawing of the west profile of the main structure (each square equals 25cm).



**Figure 3.** Provident Ltd. survey map showing Cheshire Hall ruins in the mid-1960s. Arrows point to outlying structures (red) associated with the central complex (blue).

A list of specific scientific goals would, at minimum include the following: (1) Documentation of the present condition of the ruins, if for no other reason than to provide baseline data to determine the rate at which such sites are disintegrating. wells, privies, and trash pits. Such features typically produce a wealth of artifacts in (2) Stabilization of the architectural fabric of the ruins in some places very fragile—not only to preserve its appearance but also to protect

workers and visitors alike from injury due to sudden, catastrophic collapse. (3) Surveying and testing of the grounds around the visible structures to determine the locations of sub-surface features such as wells, privies, and trash pits. (4) Reconstruction of at least some of the architectural elements of the central complex, either on paper or physically. Provisions will have to be made for conservation and analysis of the artifacts that are found. While ceramics and glass artifacts

are relatively easy to clean and stabilize, wood and other organic materials require considerable effort and expertise to conserve them, and arrangements must be made for their safe keeping subsequently. Graves are also sub-surface features and their locations should be determined and included within the Preserve. The grounds also will require a landscaping plan and regular maintenance. Merely “bushing out” the ruins will no longer be sufficient. Plant species presently found on the site will have to be identified in case some of them may be descendants of economic plants brought in by the original colonists.

Within the ruins themselves it will be necessary to map the architectural elements that have collapsed into and around the standing elements before removing them. Removal is necessary to determine what lies beneath, as well as to determine what once existed above: where were the walls, doors, and windows in the upper stories of the Great House? What was the configuration of the roof? Was there a chimney? What were the functions of the various structures and the rooms within them? Excavation without historical research would be pointless; therefore, every effort must be made to locate historical information complementary to the field work. This will likely necessitate contacting and coordinating with archival researchers in Great Britain, the U.S., Jamaica, and the Bahamas.

Cheshire Hall is a perfect place to perform such a study because it is on the most developed island so transportation and logistics are simple to arrange. The best results will be obtained by using a combination of paid and volunteer local labor overseen by one or two experienced archaeologists working in close

communication with historians and archival researchers. Local people who work at the site will develop a sense of ownership and interest that would not otherwise come about. If sufficient local interest is raised, the project could become self-funding. Recognizing that the Cheshire Hall site would be much more interesting to the average visitor if it were teeming with activity and people who could explain the nature of the work in progress and display and interpret the most recent finds, the field work should continue as long as possible and be “visitor-friendly”. As the work progresses, and more is learned about the site, new signs can be installed and self-guided brochures made available to visitors.

Exploration, excavation, and interpretation of the site could take place in stages, the first of which would be inexpensive to launch, but very exciting and productive as new finds are made and relayed to the media. In this manner work could continue at a pace matched by escalating public interest and support.

### *Thumbnail History*

Conventional wisdom holds that the name Cheshire Hall was given to the plantation by one of its owners, Wade Stubbs, after the county of his birth in England. A cut stone bearing the inscription “W Stubbs 1810” (Figure 4) made in wet mortar, occupies a conspicuous place near the front steps of the Great House, but its original location is unknown. Previous owners may have included John Petty. The date of the beginning of construction is not known, but probably did not precede 1790. The ruins bear evidence of modification, repair, and re-use. It is not known when the plantation was abandoned by the Stubbs family, but it was probably close to the date of Wade Stubbs’



**Figure 4.** Inscription near the front steps of the Great House.

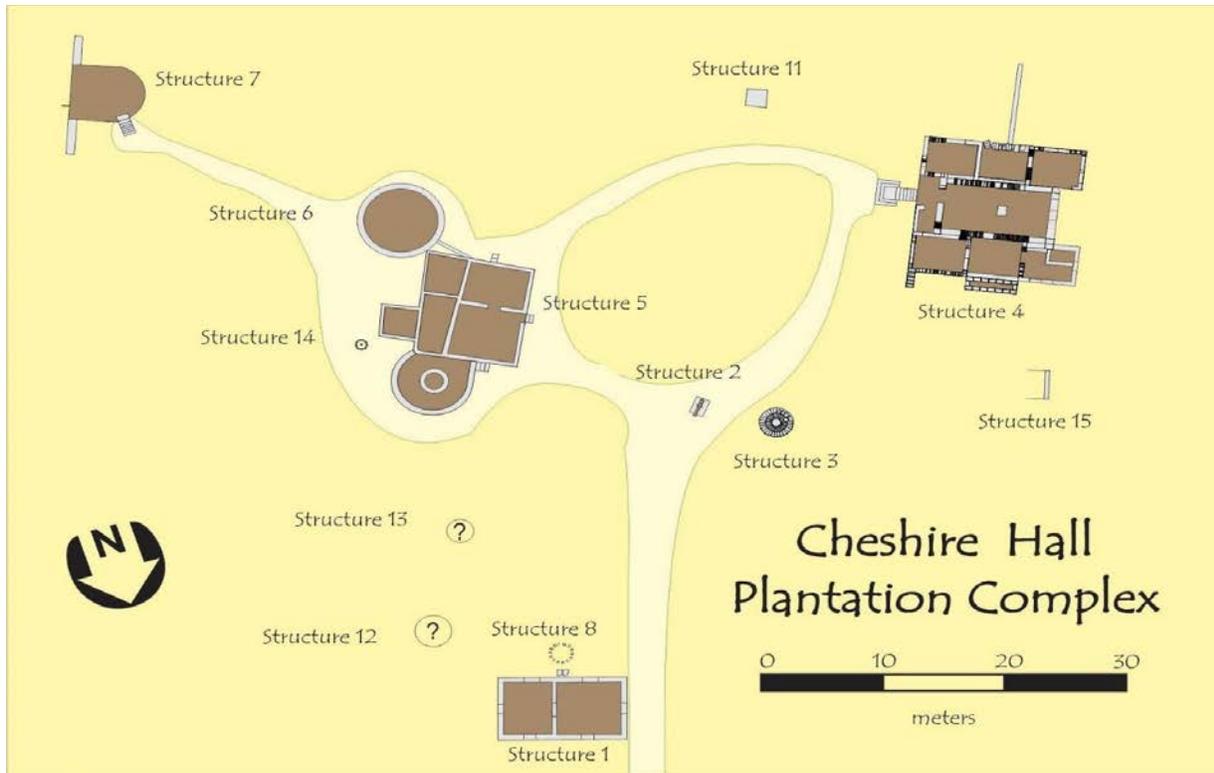
death in 1821. It is likely that the structures continued to be occupied and used in one capacity or another for decades. According to Mr. Soderqvist, parts of the ruins were reconstructed in the late 1960s, during a government-sponsored program, and dates written in modern cement repairs verify that. At its apogee, Cheshire Hall Plantation spread out across thousands of acres and may have included all the surrounding structures including those at “Richmond Hills”, located on the ridge overlooking Turtle Cove. The ruins are impressive and exude mystery: Who were the people? Where did they come from? Where did they go? Who were they connected to? Who did they do business with? Did any of them play a part in world affairs at the time? We are still groping for the answers to these questions, but the research that has been conducted so far gives every reason to believe that there is a great deal more to be gleaned from the ruins themselves and from historical research.

### *Descriptions of the Main Structures*

The Cheshire Hall structure complex crowns the top of a low hill and is completely

surrounded by a substantial wall. Visitors to the site enter through the North Gate (Figures 5 and 6). The hill to the west of the complex is topped by a circular stone structure similar to Structures 6 and 7. The hill to the south is topped by the “lost ruin”, a well-made rectangular stone dwelling similar to but larger than Structure 1. It is probably that other structures once existed to the east and north of the main complex, but these have been eradicated by development. Bengt Soderqvist maintains that two small iron cannons that were once positioned between the Cheshire Hall complex and the sea were removed in the 1970s and taken to South Caicos to adorn the swimming pool of the Admiral’s Arms Hotel (now the School for Field Studies). The markings are still visible on these cannons, and they tell us that they are English-made, 6-pounders manufactured according to the Armstrong-Frederick pattern introduced in 1760. The crown and letter “P” engraved in the top of one of the guns indicates that the gun was “proofed” or test-fired, but was intended for civilian, not military, service.

It is not known where the cannon that now adorns the Cheshire Hall site came from.



**Figure 5.** Measured scale plan of the Cheshire Hall main building complex.

No marks are visible on this cannon. According to Soderqvist, a fourth gun was found on a hillside overlooking Thompson’s Cove. It is now mounted on a pedestal in the Cove’s waterside park.

The reasons for locating the complex on this hilltop are not readily apparent. Early maps of Provo (Bellin 1768) appear to show it as two islands, with a waterway running from the north to the south in roughly the vicinity of Cheshire Hall (Figure 7). The maps are not sufficiently detailed to permit a definitive conclusion, but the land to the south and west of Cheshire Hall today is very low and subject to flooding. It is not inconceivable that the complex was sited to take advantage of a waterway providing access to both the Caicos Bank to the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the north. Dated inscriptions in stone on Sapodilla Hill, the

southernmost point on Provo, suggest that Sapodilla Bay, on the Bank (south) side of the island served as a primary anchorage for Provo throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Structure 1 was a one-story rectangular dwelling sub-divided internally into two rooms, one larger than the other. Its location near the North Gate through the compound’s surrounding wall and lower on the hillside than the other structures has led to the speculation that it was “the Overseer’s House”, but there is no corroborating evidence for this conjecture.

Structure 2 is a modern plinth built to display an iron cannon. It probably did not exist in the past (Figure 8).

Structure 3 is a small, low, two-tiered circular arrangement of keystone-shaped stoned. Its purpose is not known.

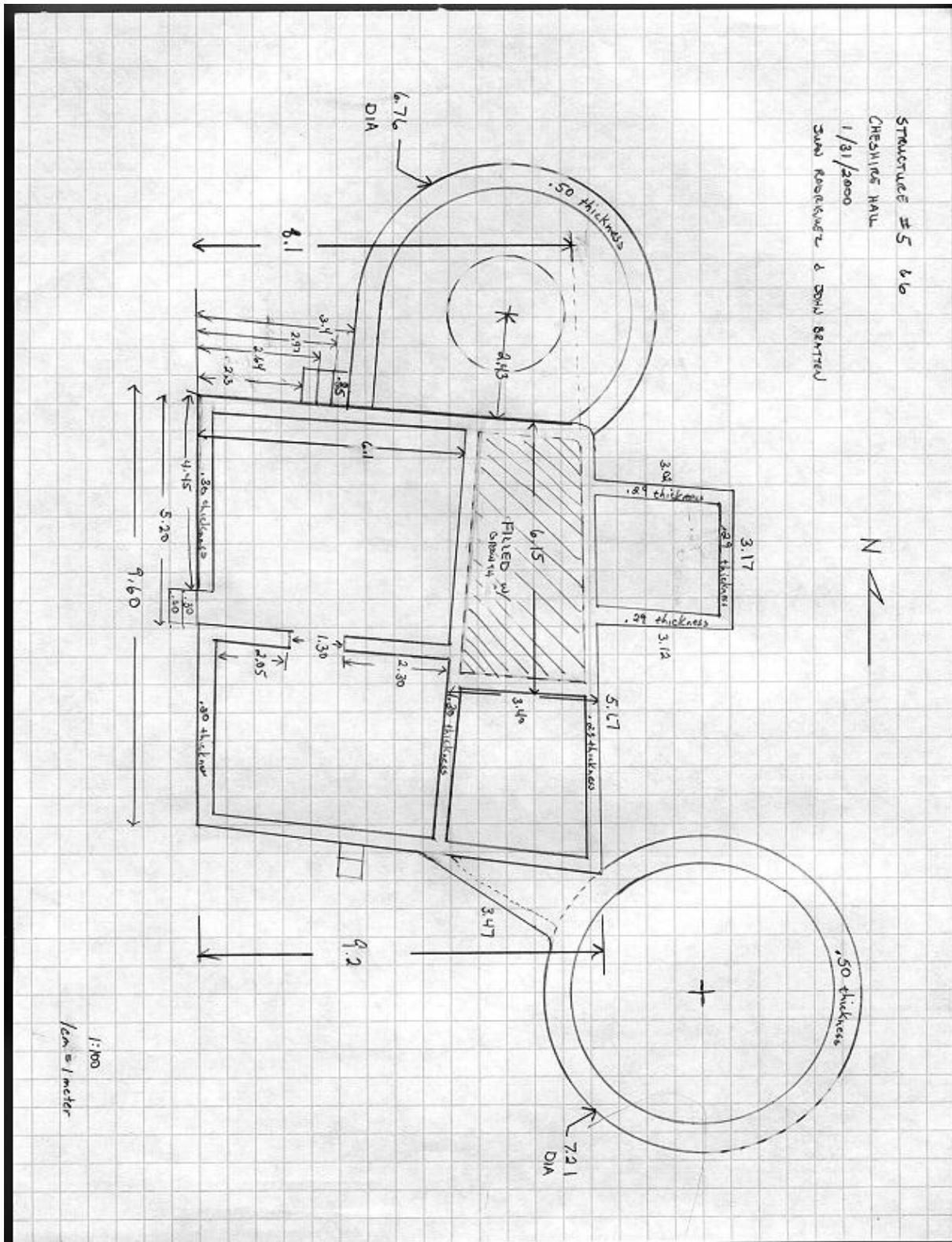
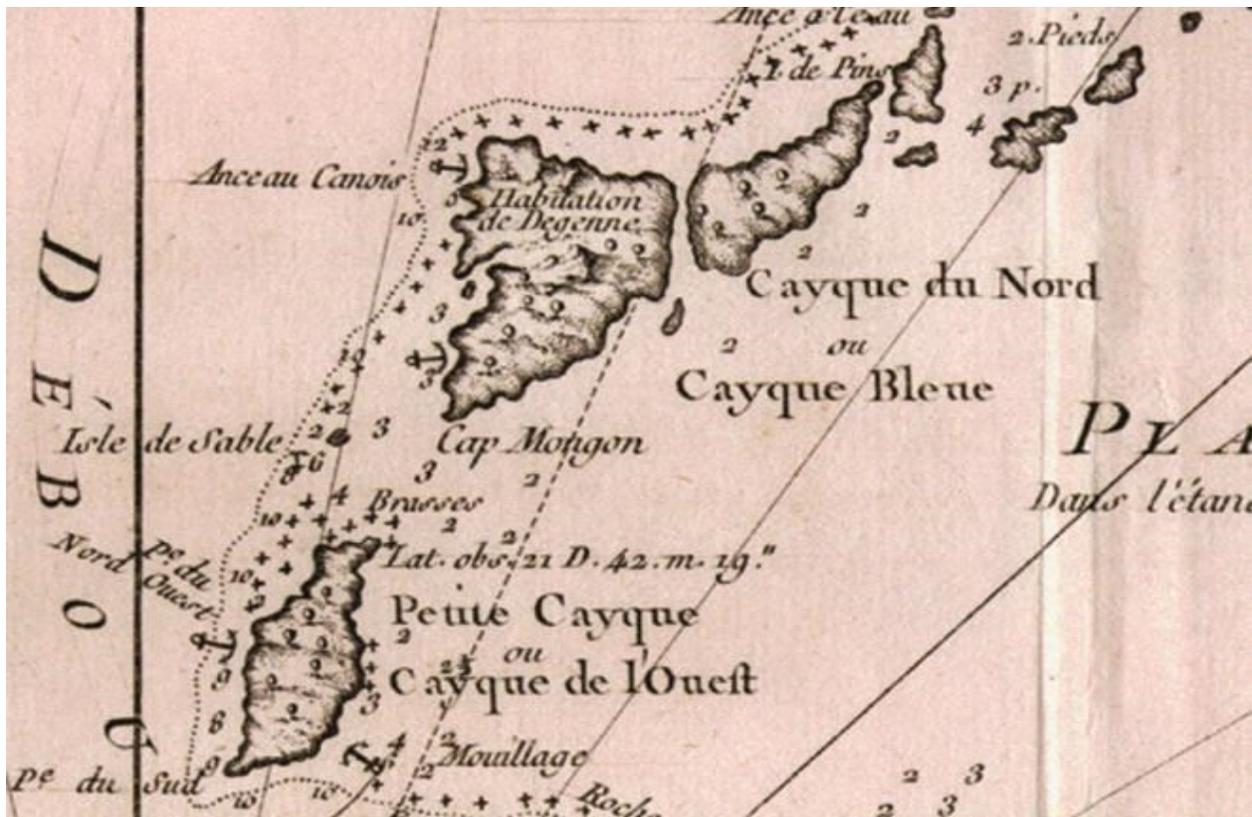


Figure 6. Measured plan of Structures 5 and 6.



**Figure 7.** A French map from 1768 shows Providenciales as two islands. The waterway between them is approximately, where Cheshire Hall stands.

Structure 4 is the Great House, which must be one of the largest masonry dwellings in the Turks & Caicos Islands dating from the Loyalist period (Figure 9). Judging from the double walls between the large central room and those on either side to the north and south, the building was constructed in episodes –almost as three separate but abutting buildings. The main central structure has high surviving exterior walls, and where they have collapsed there are enormous mounds of debris. The north and south do not seem to be surrounded by enough debris to make second stories. There were at least seven rooms on the ground floor. The north face of the building may have had an open central entryway. The east face seems to have been the “formal entrance.” The south face may have been more private, opening onto a garden or

terrace. This side of the hill falls away more precipitously. The west face seems to have had only one doorway and two windows, but perhaps there was a balcony on the second floor of the central structure between the protruding arms of the north and south wings.

Structures 5,6,7, and 14 appear to be elements of a processing facility for some sort of agricultural product, most likely cotton or sugar cane. The circular structures seem to have depressions in their centers which may have been occupied by a central beam or axle, or perhaps even a windmill. The fact that all the structures of this shape occur only on hilltops suggests that access to wind is important to their function.

Structures 8-15 are relatively small, indistinct, and as yet unidentified.

### ***Recommended Historical Research***

In addition to and conjunction with archaeological fieldwork it will be important to initiate investigations in such disciplines as geomorphology, early cartography, genealogy, archival research, oral history, and botany. Geomorphology and cartography can supply vital clues as to how the environment around Cheshire Hall has changed over the last two centuries. Genealogy and oral history may add to our knowledge of how the ruins have changed in more recent times. A knowledge of 18th century agricultural technology may help us determine the function of various mysterious structures.



**Figure 8.** Small cannon on Cheshire Hall site.

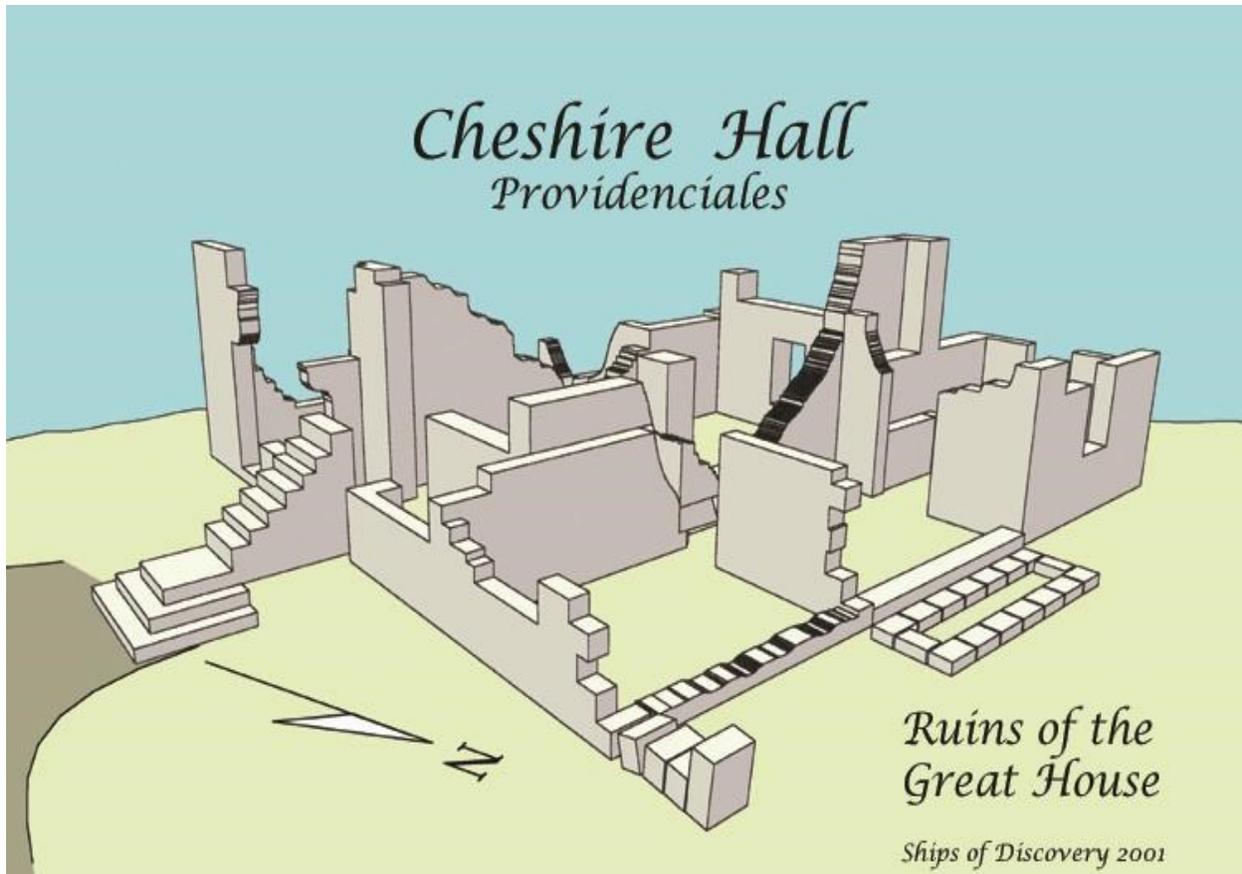
Because the Loyalists and their belongings were transplanted from various locations in the southern United States, it may be revealing to see how ruins in the Turks & Caicos compare to the contemporaneous plantation architecture in the United States. Some Loyalists ended up in different Caribbean countries. Perhaps at least some of the structures they left behind are in better condition than those in the TCI, in which case it would be instructive to examine and compare them. How did the Loyalists modify their architecture to adapt to conditions and available building materials in

the Caribbean? An effort must be made to locate paintings, sketches, and descriptions of contemporaneous plantations. Some of this work has undoubtedly already been done by archaeologists and historians in the U.S., West Indies, Great Britain, Bermuda, and other countries who specialize in this period of historical archaeology.

Archival researchers who specialize in this period and geographical area include Dr. Gail Saunders of the Bahamas Department of Archives and History; Grace Turner, Director of the Pompey Museum in Nassau; and Dr. Charlene Kozy (1983), whose Ph.D. dissertation is the best source for the Loyalist period in the Caicos Islands. A number of historical archaeologists have published fieldwork on plantation archaeology in the Caribbean including Dr. Tom Loftfield, Dr. Leland Ferguson, Dr. Douglas Armstrong, and Robin Woodward who is currently writing her dissertation on the Seville Great House plantation at St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica.

### ***Site Preparation***

The site must be prepared for long-term work. Walls prone to collapse will have to be shored up and supported during the early stages of site preparation. A careful study of the entire area must be made first to determine the locations of subsurface features in order to ensure that they are not covered up or disturbed by subsequent work. Space for worker support facilities (toilets, sun shelters, equipment storage, etc.) must be set aside. It may be necessary to make special arrangements for parking. Insignificant bush around the ruins themselves should be cleared to permit photography. Larger trees, economic plants, and trees supporting walls must be spared. There will have to be



**Figure 9.** The Great House at Cheshire Hall Plantation.

temporary holding areas for cut brush and debris as well as for laying out stones that have lost their original provenience over the years. The latter would include the hundreds of stones used in recent years to line the walkways. Determining their original positions will be very important. Each step of the site preparation should be systematically photographed.

Using our original survey as a starting place, interior and exterior drawings – accurate to the stone – of each wall in each room should be made. Wooden structural members such as window and door frames should be mapped, labeled, and collected. At least some of these can be used to reconstruct locations of doors and windows where the

walls have collapsed. The interiors of the structures will have to be cleared of stones fallen from the upper stories, then excavated. Sub-surface features such as wells, trash pits, and privies also require excavation. The entire site needs to be surveyed properly with instruments (the 2000 survey relied on tape measures and had no vertical control), including the precise locations of structures on nearby hills. Such a project will likely require several years of slow, methodical work to complete. Carried out properly, survey and excavation at the Cheshire Hall complex will enhance the interest the site holds for the general public and make visits more memorable and educational. The end products will be increased public awareness of the importance of history and archaeology, new respect for the past, better understanding

of what life was like on Provo 200 years ago,  
and a noteworthy attraction.

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