

■ Liberia

Back-to-Africa Archaeology and Heritage in Liberia

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Introduction

Liberia's unique Atlantic-era history, particularly its significance for the Back-to-Africa movement, has an archaeological signature yet to be thoroughly investigated. To remedy this gap, building on Banton's (2019) pioneering historical research on a group of Barbadians who sailed for Liberia in 1865, and Reilly's (2019) archaeological research in Barbados, a collaborative project was envisioned beginning in 2016 to explore the material dimensions of this chapter in the African Diaspora at settlement sites in Liberia, specifically Crozierville, established by the Barbadian migrants. Following a reconnaissance season by Banton (2012) and Reilly (2017), two successive field seasons (2018 and 2019) marked the first archaeological investigations of African Diaspora settlement sites in Liberia. Here we present a summation of our project to date, highlighting the project's local collaborations and partnerships that assisted in overcoming the challenges of slowly building an archaeological infrastructure in the country.

The focus of archaeological research has been the Barbadian-settled township of Crozierville, Montserrado County (Figure 1). Located upriver from Monrovia along the St. Paul River, this 1865 settlement was conveniently situated between what the settlers perceived to be the modern, civilized coastal settlements and the untamed and combative indigenous villages that remained. While the history of Liberia and nature of the conflict itself are far more complex than the binary of native vs. settler, these dynamics nonetheless weigh heavily on how settler sites are remembered and experienced on the Liberian landscape today (see Burrowes 2016).

Despite the growth of historical archaeology in much of West Africa in the last few decades, including studies that engage with the nineteenth century (e.g. Ogundiran and Falola 2010; DeCorse 2001; Stahl 2004; Thiaw 2011; Kelly and Fall 2015; Monroe 2014; Logan 2016; Gijanto 2017; Goldberg 2018; Richard 2018), as well as calls for Atlantic-period research in the country (Gabel *et al.* 1972-74:105; Posnansky 1999:35-36), Liberia remains largely devoid of archaeological research and heritage infrastructure. This dearth of research can partly be attributed to the violence and instability associated with the 1980 coup and the ensuing civil conflict (ca. 1989 to 2003), a time period that coincided with archaeological research focusing on the Atlantic World. Drawing on this regional corpus of work, our interdisciplinary collaboration in Liberia therefore highlights the potential and challenges associated with beginning historical archaeological work in this post-conflict context.

The research has thus far focused on sites primarily located along or in close proximity to the coast associated with the nineteenth-century Back-to-Africa movement. Such sites have tremendous potential to contribute to our understanding of this chapter of the African Diaspora as well as other Atlantic processes associated with colonialism, race, and freedom making before, during, and after the Emancipation era in the Americas and along the West African coast (i.e. Sierra Leone and Gambia). Locally, these sites occupy precarious and potentially contentious places on the landscape, underlying how an emerging historical archaeology in Liberia must necessarily confront the post-conflict challenges associated with memory and politics.

Summary of Research Undertaken

Fieldwork in Liberia in 2018 and 2019 focused on Crozierville to address specific questions about the settle-



Figure 1: 1870 map of coastal settlements in Liberia. The locations of Crozierville (top), Edina (bottom right), and Providence Island (left) are circled. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

ment process of Barbadians. We therefore outline our research questions, methods, and preliminary findings before offering brief updates about two other sites that have been briefly investigated for future archaeological work. Preliminary surveys and salvage excavations have been undertaken at the settlements of Edina, Grand Bassa County (established 1832), and Providence Island, Montserado County (established 1822). The latter, often referred to as the Plymouth Rock of Liberia, is of particular national and international significance because it is the first site where, following an unsuccessful venture in Sierra Leone, pioneering settlers from the United States arrived in 1822 to establish a free colony.

Crozierville

In Crozierville, we set out to explore the material world underlying the migration and settlement of approximately fifty Barbadian families (346 individuals) to Liberia in 1865. The Afro-Barbadians pursued transatlantic migration to Liberia as a response to landless emancipation,

the British Empire, and racial subjectivity. However, at the same time, they enveloped themselves in an imperial identity that would give them leverage in the republic’s social hierarchy as agents of African civilization and representatives of Liberia’s modernity. As they transitioned from British subjects into settled Liberian citizens alongside other groups of Blacks – African Americans, native ethnic Liberians, and Liberated Africans – the social, economic, and political changes in their lives and political ascendancy in Liberia at the turn of the twentieth century were manifested on the Crozierville landscape.

The exploration in Crozierville sought to trace, recover, and document remnants of the Crozierville settlers’ material world through a variety of objects, plants and food, pottery, and architecture. For the latter, architectural documentation and analyses build on previous work that focused on African-African influences at sites of settlement (Herman 2001; Holsoe and Herman 1988). Aiming to mark the differences between the civilized and uncivilized, Crozierville migrant architectural spaces



Figure 2: Remaining foundation columns and structural beams of the Padmore household (left). An aerial view of the Padmore property with the ruins of the former family house visible in the midst of a small plot of corn (right). This was likely the third house built by the Padmore family, and it underwent several refurbishments and upgrades before it was shelled and eventually destroyed in the twenty-first century. Photographs by Matthew Reilly.

were manifestations of settler identity. Through this study of the architectural and material remnants of colonization in Crozierville, we hope to redefine the transatlantic dimensions of the sedimented history of slavery as well as expand upon the existing geographic, temporal, and racial ideas of transatlantic post-emancipation.

Excavations

Two phases of archaeological research have been conducted at the Padmore house in Crozierville at the invitation of Mrs. Fannie Padmore. In June 2018, a shovel test survey (35 STPs) was completed in an area that, according to the oral history of Mrs. Padmore, had been the location of a timber house inhabited by the Padmore family prior to her arrival to Crozierville in the 1950s. Surface collection was also completed around the ruins of the family home that collapsed as a result of shelling during the war. In 2019, additional STPs (n=10), one 3 x 1 meter unit, and five 2 x 1 meter units were excavated in the rear of the house and underneath where the front porch was once located (Figure 2).

STPs in 2018 and 2019 sought to recover evidence of the first two homes that were built by the Padmore family. Mrs. Padmore, who learned the family history from her late husband, Jacob A. Padmore, relayed that the first two homes were timber-framed structures built on the family’s 25-acre plot adjacent to the ruins of the third and final construction. The third home, according to Mrs. Padmore, was construct-

ed in the 1920s. Thick beams from the previous homes were used in the construction of the new house, which received substantial upgrades including the addition of concrete support in the mid-twentieth century. The house collapsed around 2015, following extensive shelling by rebel forces during the war. Mrs. Padmore now resides in a small, two-room structure adjacent to the ruins of the third structure.

Surface collection and STPs in the immediate vicinity of the ruins of the third house, unsurprisingly, yielded the highest number of artifacts. This is likely due to the fact that many household belongings were moved from the old home to the new. While the majority of the ceramics and glass are of nineteenth-century manufacture, Mrs. Padmore informed us that these items could have been deposited by the rebels who raided the house in the early 2000s. It was during this 2018 season that surviving architectural features from the house, including hurricane shutters, wooden fretworking, and bed posts, were brought to the National Museum of Liberia (Figure 3).

Drawing on the above work, six units were excavated in 2019: five to the rear of the house and one in the front. All were excavated to subsoil using arbitrary 10-centimeter levels due to the highly disturbed nature of the soil. This disturbance is partly owing to Mrs. Padmore’s repurposing of the area as a garden as well as from the rebel activity at the site.

Units 1-5 were placed along the former rear wall of the structure and extending outward into the rear yard. Units contained highly disturbed soil with a mix of nine-



Figure 3: A sample of hurricane shutters salvaged from the wreckage of the Padmore household (right). Many of these features were collected and stored by Mrs. Padmore after the home was shelled by rebel forces. Aerial photograph of Excavation Unit 1 along the rear wall of the Padmore household (left). Level 1 of excavations exposed two large timber beams that once rested along the foundation columns. Photographs by Matthew Reilly.

teenth and twentieth century artifacts. Of particular note are the two intact architectural beams in Unit 1. While test results on the species of tree are still pending, it is possible that the timbers may have been used in previous versions of the house and may have even been brought to Liberia from Barbados (Figure 3). The artifacts were dominated by metal goods like nails, but also present were shells from AK-47 rifles and an ordinance cap from a mortar (Figure 4). Such finds were a stark reminder of the recent decades of civil war in the country and were intermingled with the household remains of the Padmore family. Additional finds included decorative household items like interior window glass (Figure 4), ceramics, bottle glass, and ornamental shells. The final excavation unit in the 2019 season was in the front of the house under the porch. The unit was excavated in the hopes of collecting artifacts associated with familial and communal life in a social gathering place on the property. Few materials, mostly twentieth-century plastics, were recovered. All excavated materials from the 2018 and 2019 seasons are now in the care of the National Museum of Liberia, making them the only provenienced archaeological collection at the museum.

Oral histories

Direct engagement with Crozierville residents, many of whom are the descendants of Barbadian migrants, in-

involved the collection of oral histories. Brief reconnaissance visits to Liberia in 2012 and 2017 outlined where some members of the Barbadian descendants had settled and initial contact was made with some of the descendants. Mrs. Padmore enthusiastically walked the grounds of the former residence describing activity areas, architectural features, family lore, and events of note. Like many structures in the community, the Padmore house is a skeleton of its former self following damage incurred during the war. Overall, more than a dozen other community members (those of Barbadian and Indigenous descent) were identified to interview.

One of the central questions driving the oral history inquiry was how the descendants of Crozierville migrants view their heritage through the stories, artifacts, and architecture that dot the Crozierville landscape. We also sought to explore the changes in the landscape and architecture including the ways its post-war state represents the aftermath of the divisions sown during settlement.

Edina

Officially settled in 1832 by Black Americans, Edina was envisioned as a site of temperance with missionary ambitions of ‘civilizing’ the people of present-day Grand Bassa, Liberia (Everill 2013). At the confluence of three bodies of water, including the Atlantic, Edina thrived as a central port



Figure 4: Sample of AK-47 bullet casings recovered from Unit 1 excavations (left). This cache of casings was recovered alongside the beams. Much of the deposit from the first two excavation levels is likely associated with civil war destruction. Decorative window glass recovered from Unit 5 in the rear of the Padmore household (right). Mrs. Padmore recalls this glass being ornamental window glass in a door separating rooms on the third floor of the family home. Many artifacts held sentimental value to Mrs. Padmore, who confirmed the heirloom status and familial significance of otherwise everyday items. Photographs by Matthew Reilly.

in domestic and international trade, making it a contender for Liberia’s capital city in the nineteenth century. The town’s past is reflected in the remnants of the settler architecture that occupy the gridded landscape, such as the estate (Figure 5) and business office of Joseph James Cheesman, Liberia’s twelfth president. Cheesman’s property sits along the bank of the St. John’s River, which allowed for the exchange of local products for imported goods at the doorstep of his commercial office. Following out-migration by some of the town’s more economically and politically successful residents in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of conflict, the site is now home to a small community of fishers and farmers and the skeletons of the homes built by the American migrants and their descendants.

A preliminary survey along the banks of the St. John’s River identified an abundance of imported nineteenth-century material culture, providing clues of the settlers’ consumption patterns. Further, spatial data of the settlement activity was gathered via drone photography. This, coupled with interviews with community lead-

ers, has placed us in a position to launch a thorough investigation into Edina’s multi-faceted history in the future.

Providence Island

Providence Island is one of the most important sites in the history of the African Diaspora and for the narrative of Liberia’s founding. Nestled between the Mesurado and Du Rivers, the tiny 11.22-acre island hosted the first 88 African American arrivals in 1822 as they negotiated with native Liberians to stake their claim to what would become their new colony (Figure 5). The island, once home to public concerts, festivals, and events, is now protected by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. While the remnants of a few stone foundations are visible along the eastern side of the island, there is little discernable indication of how settlers made use of the island upon their arrival or in subsequent decades before expanding their holdings to mainland Monrovia. In 2019, we began using a drone to photographically capture the landscape to construct a three-dimensional rendering of the space. This



Figure 5: The ruins of the Cheeseman household in Edina, Grand Bassa County (left). Joseph Cheeseman, born in Edina, was the 12th President of Liberia. His home and warehouse, located along the nearby river, were both targeted during the civil conflict. No excavations have taken place in Edina as of 2019. Aerial photograph of Providence Island, Monrovia (right). A view of the 11.22-acre island facing south illustrates the island’s centrality in the nation’s capital of Monrovia. This island, now protected by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, was the original point of arrival of the 88 African-American settlers in 1822. Drone photography by Matthew Reilly.

work was done in concert with the Minister’s office and the National Museum of Liberia to generate tourist interest in the site and provide visuals for the Museum and the planned Providence Island Visitor Center.

Unplanned at the start of our 2019 fieldwork, however, were brief salvage excavations occasioned by the falling of a large cotton tree on the island. The tree, which holds its own significance as being the supposed site where settlers negotiated with native leaders in 1821, came crashing down in the spring of 2019, revealing hundreds of artifacts and potentially a stone foundation in and below its massive upturned root system. The artifact collection, which is likely from a midden, includes nearly complete stoneware jugs, chamber pots, mugs, bowls, plates, clay tobacco smoking pipes, and large amounts of glass bottles (alcohol and non-alcohol alike). Of particular note is the presence of multiple coarse earthenware vessels, likely native Liberian, and a single gaming piece made from a creamware plate (Figure 6). The latter is particularly significant, as similar artifacts are commonly found across sites of the African Diaspora in the Americas. These artifacts, still in need of in-depth analysis, mark the beginning of archaeological efforts on Providence Island.

Collaborations and Conclusions

Arguably the first systematic archaeological research in Liberia in several decades, the project is also prioritizing capacity building and sustainability. Close partnerships

have been forged with the National Museum of Liberia and Cuttington University. Through our partnership with the National Museum, currently under the directorship of Albert Markeh, archaeological collections with provenance are being stored and cared for at an institution that suffered tremendous looting during the war years and has only recently reopened its doors. Through a partnership with Cuttington University’s Vice President of Academic Affairs and noted Liberian historian C. Patrick Burrowes, students are being trained in archaeological methods, including site documentation, excavation, and artifact processing. Our team has also worked closely with officials at the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, ensuring that our research also meets the needs of local government, especially as Liberia develops a tourism industry. Sites like Providence Island are particularly vulnerable but can also serve as major tourist attractions that would benefit from archaeological research and context.

Sites of settlement occupy a contentious place in Liberian society, politics, and memory. While the native-settler binary is not as rigid as it once was, and may have been far more complicated than once believed, there is no consensus as to whether these sites should be memorialized, celebrated, protected, ignored, or destroyed. Our project has therefore involved Liberians at all stages of the archaeological fieldwork process to ensure that multiple and diverse perspectives are heard and taken seriously. It is through these partnerships that Liberians will be



Figure 6: Sample of artifacts recovered during salvage excavations at Providence Island, 2019. Nineteenth-century imported stoneware jugs (top left). Locally-produced coarse earthenware hollowware ceramics (bottom left). Gaming piece made from a creamware vessel (top right). Sample of large creamware hollowwares. Vessels represented include chamber pots and large bowls (bottom right). Photographs by Matthew Reilly.

able to determine how best to engage with the materiality of nineteenth-century colonization that survives on the landscape. More broadly, though in its infancy, archaeological research at settlement sites in Liberia has much to contribute to global understandings of the Back-to-Africa movement of the African Diaspora. As a crucial space of freedom-making in the nineteenth century for those fleeing racial oppression and hardship in the Americas, Liberia offers a unique case study to archaeologically explore the complexities and tragic realities of colonialism, race, slavery, freedom, and nation-building in the Atlantic world.

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