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Barbuda: A Caribbean Island In Transition

by
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Photographs by the authors

Figure 1. One of the stockwells and its enclosing stonewall.

Therein lies the quandary faced not only by Barbuda but by islands throughout the Caribbean. Barbudans have only to look at Antigua to see an island whose resources are controlled in large measure by foreigners—an island held in virtual captivity by foreign banks. And Barbuda is pristine and undeveloped. But the economic needs of Barbuda make it vulnerable to

exploitation from all quarters (Robert Coram 1989: 86)

Before arriving on the island of Barbuda, we had read much about this place. There is an extensive literature set not only on Barbuda but also its sister-island Antigua, a southerly neighbor in the Leeward Lesser Antilles. These two islands were former British colonies that together would become the independent country of Antigua and Barbuda in 1981. None of the academic literature, *A Small Place* by the novelist and Antiguan-born writer Jamaica Kincaid, or *Caribbean Time Bomb* by the journalist Robert Coram had prepared us, however, for what we found during that field season.

After hiking a couple of kilometers from the island's single village through the

Figure 2. Map of Barbuda highlighting locations mentioned throughout the essay.

thorny shrubland on a torrid summer day in 2007, we entered a grassy clearing. A walled enclosure, built of limestone blocks and nearly two meters in height, occupied the center of the clearing. Inside was a well with a drinking trough built into one side, also made of limestone blocks. The size of the trough indicated that someone had once invested considerable labor to build an enclosure for large stock that included cattle, all of which now lay largely abandoned (Figure 1).

Part of that field season on Barbuda, supported through the American Geographical Society's program of Bowman Expeditions, was devoted to the intensive study of that enclosed stockwell and five others, all largely defunct but some better preserved than others (Figures 2, 3). Enslaved Barbudans, the ancestors of many of the island's 1,500 current residents had built those wells as part of a system of open-range cattle herding. That colonial economy established the system of communal land tenure, and we sought to under-

Editors' Note: All photographs for this article were taken by the authors between 2007 and 2012 except for Figures 4 and 5, which were used by permission and taken by David R. Harris, Professor Emeritus at University College London, during his fieldwork in the early 1960s for his dissertation, directed by James J. Parsons of the Department of Geography of the University of California at Berkeley.

Figure 3. The remnants of Spring Well.

Figure 4. Boats anchored and under repair at Codrington jetty in the 1960s. Courtesy David R. Harris.

stand further the relationship between those commons and transformations of land and life since others had conducted fieldwork on the island nearly a half-century before (Potter and Sluyter 2010).

Despite the island's general obscurity, a number of geographers and anthropologists have studied various aspects of Barbudan land and life. David R. Harris (1965) investigated vegetation history for his dissertation in the 1960s (Figures 4, 5). David Lowenthal and Colin Clarke (1977) debunked the myth that the island served as a slave-breeding colony. Riva Berleant-Schiller (1977) revealed much about its social and economic relations. And David R. Watters (1980) conducted archaeological research on both pre-historic and historic sites.

Our fieldwork updated and expanded on some aspects of that previous scholarship. One of us focused on cattle herding and land tenure (Sluyter 2009, 2012). The other used that initial field season to lay the groundwork for a doctoral dissertation on the relationships among: 1) the recent transformation of land tenure; 2) aspects of island society, and 3) the Barbudan transnational community, which has major nodes in New York City and Leicester, England (Potter 2011). Potter's dissertation and subsequent fieldwork incorporating participant observation, mental mapping, archival work, and semi-structured interviews spanned four summers (2007–2010), with her most recent visit being in the summer of 2012.

Figure 5. Beazer Well and its enclosing stonewall in the 1960s. Courtesy David R. Harris.

The origins of the communal land tenure, cattle herding, and the transnational community all date to colonial times, beginning in the late seventeenth century. The British Crown leased the island to the Codrington family for nearly 200 years, from the 1680s through 1870. The island's thin soils and lack of surface water precluded plantation agriculture, but its shrublands did provide adequate forage for livestock. The Codringtons used their lease to produce oxen for the sugar plantations of neighboring islands, principally Antigua, and beef for the Royal Navy. Since the Codringtons leased the entire island, they allowed the cattle to range freely through the unfenced shrubland. The enslaved Africans that the Codringtons kept on Barbuda built the walled wells to act as cattle traps. During the dry season, as surface ponds dried up, the cattle would come to the wells to drink, and the herders trapped them by closing the gates. The herders would then castrate and release the bull calves and ship the mature animals to Antigua, either as oxen to work on sugar plantations or as beef for the Admiralty victualling yard at Nelson's Dockyard in English Harbour. The enslaved population of Barbuda grew to some 500 by the time of emancipation in 1834 (Figures 6, 7).

Barbuda's distinctive social and environmental relations were mainly established during the period of the Codrington lease. Even before emancipation, Barbudans developed a sense of common possession of the island. The Codringtons were, after the early eighteenth century, absentee leaseholders who lived at their Dodrington Estate in England, located between Bristol and Gloucester. A single

Figure 6. Highland House, nicknamed Willy Bob, built in the 1700s at the island's highest point as a retreat for the Codrington family.

Figure 7. River Fort, a Martello tower that defended the main anchorage on the south coast.

Figure 8. Government House, home of the warden during late colonial rule, now boarded up and largely in disrepair.

Figure 9. Spiny lobster, now the island's principal export.

employee, sometimes married and sometimes with assistants, managed Barbuda. The letters between them and the Codringtons, preserved in the National Archive of Antigua and Barbuda, provide many insights into life on the island during colonial times. One such letter, from R. Jarritt to Christopher Bethell-Codrington in 1820, cautioned that Barbudans "acknowledge no master, and believe the Island belongs to themselves." The Codringtons nonetheless managed to derive great profit from the labor of those

Barbudans, not only from ox and beef sales but from the salvage of ships that wrecked on the island's reefs. With emancipation, the enslaved Barbudans became the landless employees of the leaseholder, the Codringtons, until 1870 and a series of others thereafter. Some left for other islands in the British Caribbean, early pioneers in what would eventually become a Barbudan transnational community.

The Crown stopped leasing out the island in 1895, and a warden appointed by

the Colonial Office exercised direct control over the colony from his residence in Government House (Figure 8). The entire island was crown land, and Barbudans became crown tenants in common rather than the emancipated employees of a leaseholder. They were supposed to pay an annual rent of twenty-four cents, but those payments never took place. They considered themselves the communal owners of the island, but the Crown considered them squatters. According to Desmond V. Nicholson (1991: 27), one of the principal historians of Antigua and Barbuda, "The whole issue should have been clarified by the Government, but Barbuda

Figure 10. Boats with outboard motors at Codrington jetty.

was considered too small and insignificant for administrators to worry about." De facto communal ownership thereby persisted despite the law. Barbudans continued to practice shifting agriculture and open-range livestock herding. That economy precluded fences and private property, encouraging the persistence of usufruct rights—legal rights to use and benefit from communal lands.

In 1967, as British colonies increasingly demanded independence, Antigua and Barbuda gained Associated Statehood Status. Barbudans were able to acquire their own governing body in 1976, the Bar-

buda Council, but just five years later were "forced," according to many Barbudans, to become part of the independent country of Antigua and Barbuda. By then, outmigration had established large Barbudan communities in the Bronx and Leicester, particularly after World War II.

After independence, the some 1,500 Barbudans living on the island and the larger transnational community continued to insist that they owned Barbuda in common. The national government, however, based in Antigua and elected mainly by the nearly 75,000 residents of that island, asserted that Barbuda was public land that could be sold

Figure 11. A morning's catch.

to develop tourist resorts along its beautiful beaches. The lack of resolution to that dispute largely precluded tourism development, other than a few small luxury resorts. The largely Antiguan-initiated K-Club on the south coast, for example, hosted guests such as Princess Diana.

In the meantime, the market for Barbudan beef had declined to the point that the island's cattle runners largely stopped catching cattle at the walled wells. Royalties from the mining of sand at Palmetto Point, barged to neighboring islands to build mass tourism resorts, allowed the Barbuda Council to employ nearly one-third of the residents. That revenue source has now all but ended because the negative environmental impacts of sand mining have forced a reduction in operations. Lobsters, exported to resorts on neighboring St. Barts and St. Martin, provide additional income (Figures 9, 10, 11). The K-Club has closed, but another small luxury resort opened in 2008: Lighthouse Bay Resort Hotel, across the lagoon from the village of Codrington (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Lighthouse Bay Resort, across the lagoon from Codrington.

Figure 13. Mangroves fringing the north end of the lagoon, home to a notably large Frigate Bird colony. Males possess a red pouch that inflates to attract the female frigate bird.

The pink sand beaches, Frigate Bird Sanctuary, and Amerindian petroglyphs in the caves near Two Foot Bay attract a small-but-steady flow of tourists on day-trips from the resorts of Antigua (Figures 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). The Barbudan carnival celebration, known as the Caribana Festival and held over the five days of the Whit Monday holiday weekend, attracts the single largest group of tourists each year, many of them Barbudans living in the US, UK, and other Caribbean islands (Figure 18).

Despite an economy that has largely moved away from shifting cultivation and open-range cattle herding—the very activities that provided a rationale to maintain communal land tenure—the government of Antigua and Barbuda recently

Figure 14. Prehistoric petroglyphs in Indian Cave, near Two Foot Bay.

enshrined communal ownership of the island in The Barbudan Land Act of 2007 (Figures 19, 20). Barbudans can now apply to lease plots of land but none of the island can ever be sold or otherwise alienated from the commons. The very definition of a Barbudan in this new act even recognizes and institutionalizes the transnational character of the community, granting the overseas population access to the commons. For migrants, Barbudan

Figure 15. Two Foot Bay on the rougher Atlantic coast.

land serves as an important source of identity and economic opportunity, and more than half of the applications to lease a plot of land to build a house or open a business come from those living abroad (Potter 2011). With the relatively recent formalization of the common property regime, Barbudans both on and off the island continue to negotiate creatively their tenure just as they have always done. They recognize usufruct rights based on long-standing activities, such as claims to ancestral fruit trees, and buy and sell homes on the communal lands (Potter 2011). Many of the applications relate to the tourism sector, however, and request land to establish businesses such as rental housing and restaurants. The Lighthouse Bay Resort, built by an American-born Barbudan, illustrates how the Barbuda Land Act has transformed the transnational community into a source of development capital in return for leases that provide more formal access to communal lands.

Despite the transformative impact of that recent legislation, the same struggles that have plagued Barbuda for the last 50 years, struggles that Robert Coram noted in *The New Yorker* in 1989 and ones we now highlight based on extensive fieldwork on the island, continue to persist. For instance in the fall of 2011, in the wake of diminishing sand mining revenues, Barbudans voted on a 987-acre, multimillion-dollar project at Gravenor Bay. The 99-year lease to Stanhope Shepherd International Limited would consist of two

Figure 16. Low Bay on the calmer Caribbean coast, taken from Lighthouse Bay Resort.

Figure 17. Pink sand beach at Palmetto Point, a mix of coquina shell and coral fragments.

Figure 18. Barbuda's Caribana Festival.

Figure 19. Herd of sheep on the main road through Codrington.

Figure 20. Aside from backyard gardens, Sir Eric Burton was one of the few produce growers on the island in 2008.

marinas, a five-star hotel and restaurant, 18-hole golf course, and residences. Some Barbudans voted to approve the project while others opposed it because of environmental concerns. While such current disputes over land use differ in scope and scale from those of the twentieth century and the colonial period, they nonetheless are rooted in the enduring dynamic relationship between Barbudans' identity, sense of place, communal land tenure, and transnational community.

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