

Port Royal, Jamaica: Archaeological Past and Development Potential

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Few people seeing modern day Port Royal, Jamaica, a small isolated fishing village situated at the tip of a 29 kilometer (18 mile) long sand spit called the Palisadoes, would ever think that it once played a major role in the politics of the Caribbean and in the economy of England. However, beneath the ground and the adjacent water of Kingston Harbor lies the only sunken city in the New World, a city that played a pivotal role in Caribbean politics and economics (Figure 1). Port Royal is one of the premier English archaeological sites of the Americas. Founded soon after the conquest of the island of Jamaica from the Spanish by an English invasion force in 1655, it went through a spectacular rise involving rich merchants, notorious pirates/privateers, and affluent planters. Its influence ended dramatically on 7 June 1692, when much of the town sank during a disastrous earthquake. In 1692 Port Royal was arguably the largest English town in the New World and was the most affluent with far reaching influence. Because of its significance as perhaps the best preserved 17th-century English site in the world, comes a great responsibility of all who undertake excavations of the site in terms of proper excavation, careful recording, conservation of the recovered material, and publishing the results. Equally demanding is the responsibility of the Government of Jamaica to protect the different areas of the town, properly house the recovered material, conserve the artifacts, display and interpret the recovered material, and properly develop the site for present and future generations.

Background History

Visitors to Port Royal prior to the 1692 earthquake would have been impressed with the multistoried brick buildings, the high population density, and general appearance of wealth when compared to the other English colonial towns in the New World. Port Royal, with an estimated population of 7,000-8000, was the largest and most affluent English town in the Americas at this time, rivaled in size and economic importance only by Boston with 6,000 or so citizens. All the amenities and vices of any 17th-century port town were present, and because of its loose living citizenry, it has been referred to as ‘the wickedest city in the world.’ During its heyday Port Royal covered some 21 hectares (52 acres) and was laid out with broad unpaved streets, named after familiar streets in London, each lined with buildings one to four stories in height with brick sidewalks along the front of many of the buildings. In 1692, the density of structures was comparable to that of London and the rent was as high as that paid in Cheapside, a high rent district of London. Following the earthquake in 1692, when 13 hectares (33 acres) of the town sank into the harbor, only 8 hectares (20 acres) survived as an island at the end of the sand spit.

Nothing remotely analogous to 17th-century Port Royal remains today. Visitors now see a small fishing town with just over 2,000 citizens along with an abandoned 19th-century British Naval Base and the headquarters of the Jamaican Coast Guard. Very little exists above the ground to indicate the past glory of Port Royal during its height in the 17th-century, or during its prosperous days in the 18th-century and when it served as a British Naval Base. When the Naval Base closed in 1905, it ended Port Royal’s prominent role in the economy of Jamaica.

Environmental Havoc

Port Royal belongs to one of a select group of archaeological sites which includes Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy and Ozette in the state of Washington. Sites such as these are unique “catastrophic” sites – sites created by some disaster that preserves the cultural features and material and the all-important archaeological context. In undisturbed catastrophic sites, the archaeologist is not dealing with a situation where – over a long span of time – houses, shops, warehouses, churches, and other buildings were constructed, added onto, fell into disrepair, were abandoned, eventually collapsed, were razed and then possibly built over. Port Royal is strikingly different: after only 37 years of existence this bustling city literally sank into the harbor in only a matter of minutes during a severe earthquake preserving the all important *in situ* provenance.

Port Royal is known for the unusually high number of catastrophes that have struck it. The most significant disasters causing extensive damage were the 1692 earthquake (which submerged two thirds of the town), the 1703 fire (the town was burned to the ground), the 1722 and 1744 hurricanes (they both obliterated the town), the 1770 earthquake (which destroyed the hospital), the 1815 fire (the town was extensively burned), the 1907 earthquake (which heavily damaged the Victoria Battery) and the 1951 hurricane (which left only four buildings standing). All of these played a major role in creating the different archaeological components

Figure 1: Aerial view of Port Royal situated at the tip of the Palisadoes





Figure 3: Underwater excavations conducted by the Institute of Nautical Archaeology and Robert Marx

lies in the old harbor, not within the boundaries of the town. Since the ship lies outside the town boundary it cannot be the *HMS Swan*, which is described as being careened at the time of the earthquake and was washed into town, landing on top of the house of Lord Pike. A better candidate for the *Swan* is the ship excavated by Hamilton lying across the front wall and floor of Building 4 located at the intersection of Lime and Queen streets (Figure 3). Just west of the ship identified by Marx to be the *Swan* is another wreck identified as the *French Prize*, and at the north end of his excavation area is a ship separated in two localities that Marx identified as the 1722 Wreck on the basis of a 1721 French coin. Historic accounts describe how Port Royal was overwhelmed by the sea and 26 merchant vessels along with 400 persons perished in the harbor during the disastrous August 28, 1722 hurricane. A contemporary observer mentions that only four man-of-wars and two merchant ships survived the storm out of 50 sails in the harbor. The 1722 ship was one of the vessels that sank in this 1722 hurricane that demolished much of the town and destroyed once and for all Port Royal's chance to revive its former prominence.

Tourism Development Plans

Over the past two decades there have been a number of development plans for Port Royal to develop it into a major tourism center. To date none have gone beyond the discussion and planning stage because of the grandiose nature of most of them and the lack of funding to carry them out. The latest

plan by the Port Royal Development Company Limited was initiated in 1998 and includes plans for major development in the land end of Lime Street, the Old Naval Yard, the area of Chocolate Hole, the harbor area, Fort Charles, the center of town, and pretty much every other area of the town. The development plan has the potential to significantly impact, and to some degree destroy parts of the archaeological record in the affected areas. The Government of Jamaica has the responsibility to see that the archaeological damage is mitigated as much as possible and to make sure that there is a knowledgeable archaeologist, well-versed in the history and archaeology of the Port Royal, included in the planning stages of the project.

More archaeological research needs to be conducted in conjunction with any large scale development of the town of Port Royal. There is great tourism development potential in Port Royal and the economy of the depressed town needs to be rejuvenated. The sunken remains of the sunken city are in an archaeological preserve and diving is not permitted without a permit. If supervised diving is to be allowed on the site, it must be monitored and safe guards established to protect the architectural remains and artifacts. Under the right conditions, regulated diving could be allowed thus making this dramatic archaeological site part of the present day economy as well as allowing development of the terrestrial components of the town. However, development must not compromise the incomparable archaeological record that still lies untouched beneath the ground and the water surrounding the town.