

**Brimstone, Sea and Sand: The Historical Military Archaeology of the Port of Sandy Point
and its anchorage**

by

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Introduction

It was undoubtedly the sugar plantations that gave tiny Anglophone Eastern Caribbean island colonies such as Barbados and St. Kitts their early claim to fame of disproportionately influencing the history of the Americas and the Atlantic World. However, it was the port towns of these imperial outposts that enabled and facilitated the plantation economy upon which England's power, prosperity and prestige would become so dependent.¹ While the sugar production of St. Kitts never equaled that of Barbados, it was on the former that England first sowed the seeds (literally and figuratively) of the prototypical Caribbean plantation economy.

The first English settlement in the West Indies was established on St. Kitts in 1624 under the leadership of Thomas Warner. The following year a French vessel which had barely survived an encounter with a Spanish warship limped into the waters of St. Kitts. The crew, led by Pierre D'Esnambuc, made an agreement with the English to share the island between the two nationalities.² The English occupied the middle of the island, with the French at the northern and southern regions named respectively Capisterre and Basseterre. The capital of English St. Kitts (St. Christopher) was Old Road, while the capital of French St. Kitts (St. Christophe) was Basseterre.³ However, our focus shall be on Sandy Point, another Anglophone town approximately 3.5 miles (5.6 km) north of Old Road. This paper shall use both terrestrial and

underwater archaeological evidence to make two arguments. The first is that the port town of Sandy Point and its anchorage became the centre of the struggle between the two emerging European powers for dominance in the Caribbean and by extension in the Atlantic World. Secondly, it shall be argued that this early Kittitian seaport came to influence fortification design and construction from the early years of colonization in the Caribbean to the period immediately preceding the declining importance of Britain's Caribbean empire.

Unlike the other towns on the island: Old Road (English), Basseterre, Cayon and Dieppe Bay (French), Sandy Point was located right next to the border between St. Christopher and St. Christophe. In fact, the boundary line ran through the Sandy Point Anchorage. Ever present tensions and constant hostilities between English and French were already a feature of life on the island, despite the treaty which committed them to neutrality when their respective European metropolises were at war. The location of the town of Sandy Point on a large, and therefore strategically important, natural anchorage divided between both rival colonies only added further fuel to a volatile relationship.

Charles Fort

The site that perhaps best represents the strategic importance assumed by Sandy Point from early in the town's history is Charles Fort, one of the largest coastal forts in the Eastern Caribbean.⁴ Construction of this coastal fortress commenced in 1670 and took twelve years to complete. Obviously, erection of Charles Fort was a monumental undertaking in every respect including financially. Most impressive; however, is the personal intervention by King Charles II, who dug his hands into the royal purse to finance the completion of the fortress.⁵ Royal funding of colonial defences in the Americas was almost unheard of not only for the English but other

European powers as well. In the British West Indies footing the bill for the cost of colonial defences was often a contentious issue between the metropole and colonial assemblies.⁶ In the Spanish American Empire it was usually the case that “responsibility for most defence initiatives lay with those whose lives and property would be directly threatened.”⁷

The source of Charles Fort’s funding wasn’t the only thing that made the fortress unusual. Most of the major fortifications in the Caribbean, including even the colossal Spanish fortresses of the Greater Antilles and the similarly proportioned Brimstone Hill Fortress, which would eventually supersede Charles Fort as the largest fortification guarding the Sandy Point Anchorage, began life as comparatively simple defences, often initially constructed of timber. These defences were improved and extended over time with additional gun positions added. Curtain walls were usually added at some point during the evolution of a fortress to connect the various gun positions and create a more enclosed comprehensive fortification that was less vulnerable to infiltration by hostile forces. Such evolution took years, decades or in some cases even centuries.

For example, Fort Shirley in Dominica (commonly known as the Cabrits) began life circa 1765 as a single building and a battery. Construction of the garrison did not commence until a century after and continued in a sporadic manner up to 1825. Guadeloupe’s Fort Delgres, today an imposing citadel fort standing above the capital Bass-e-terre, was initially constructed in 1650 as the Governor’s fortified residence. Major periods of expansion saw it transformed into a fortress in the eighteenth century.⁸

San Pedro de la Roca Castle in Santiago de Cuba, along with its associated defensive works, constitute what is today the largest example of renaissance military engineering in the Caribbean.

It took over two centuries of evolution, from the 1630s to the 1890s to elevate the fortress to its present form. The other major, and now world famous, fortresses of Cuba and Puerto Rico underwent a similarly lengthy evolutionary process before achieving the massive scale and dimensions for which they have become noted.⁹

Charles Fort contrasts with its contemporaries in being conceived and built from the very beginning as a comprehensive masonry fortress with curtain walls enclosing the site and linking its artillery bastions. Comparison of an early plan of the fort with modern day satellite imagery shows that; remarkably, its form (design and layout) has not changed significantly throughout the entire period of its existence.

One role that Charles Fort was expected to perform makes it obvious that the fortress assumed great strategic significance well before its construction was even completed. Two regular infantry companies were stationed at Charles Fort in 1671, a year after construction commenced (They were likely housed in timber or more temporary accommodation). The stated purpose of these troops was, in the event of hostilities between English and French, preventing the French marching north from Basseterre and seizing the limestone quarry at Brimstone Hill.¹⁰

Extensive archaeological surveys of Charles Fort conducted by Gerald Schroedl between 1999-2000 show that despite the erection of several additional structures within the walls of the fort during its occupation as a leper asylum from 1890-1996, the form and most of the original fabric (construction material) of the site remains intact.¹¹ The author's own fieldwork investigation of Charles Fort revealed that, despite the loss of a section of the seaward wall caused by coastal erosion, most of the fort's original masonry is still intact.¹² Thus Charles Fort is a rare example of a surviving, almost completely intact, seventeenth century fortification that retains its original

form. Charles Fort is one of the few examples left of tangible evidence of the former strategic importance of the port of Sandy Point and its anchorage. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the relevant heritage, government and community stakeholders urgently address the threat caused to Charles Fort's survival and the rest of the island's leeward coast by the receding coastline.

Brimstone Hill Fortress

Roughly a decade after major construction work on Charles Fort ended, the first gun positions were being placed atop an igneous peak named Brimstone Hill which loomed above the coastal fortress. The need for placing fortifications atop what had hitherto been a limestone quarry was necessitated because during Anglo-French conflict in 1690 the French had overrun and occupied Charles Fort. The French occupiers were only removed after guns were dragged atop Brimstone Hill, with the assistance of enslaved Africans and English sailors, and used to fire upon Charles Fort. The episode was one of many such occurrences in the Caribbean that highlighted the inherent vulnerability of coastal fortifications, regardless of their size and armament. Limitations in the effective range of artillery meant that up until well into the eighteenth century defenses of ports, anchorages and other strategically vital coastal sites had to be placed right on the coast themselves.¹³

Siting these fortifications on the coast made them vulnerable to naval gunfire and being encircled by enemy troops able to land on the coast out of range of their guns. The rationale behind placing fortifications atop the somewhat less accessible Brimstone Hill was to provide a backup to Charles Fort in defending the Sandy Point Anchorage and to defend the fort from being overrun. Charles Fort remained the chief defence of Sandy Point because for at least the first

half century of Brimstone Hill's existence, the already mentioned limitations in artillery technology meant that the citadel fortress could not cover the entire anchorage from its more inland position.

By the time the Great Siege of St. Kitts occurred in 1782, Brimstone Hill had evolved into a major fortress and taken over Charles Fort's role as the primary defence of Sandy Point. During the 1782 Siege, the French who already occupied the rest of the island including Charles Fort, besieged Brimstone Hill Fortress for a month before the defenders surrendered. In 1783, the island was returned to Britain under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Shortly thereafter, work commenced on rebuilding and redesigning Brimstone Hill Fortress incorporating the lessons learned from the 1782 Siege. The completion of major engineering work was completed circa 1790.¹⁴

Archaeologist and fortifications historian Victor Smith has extensively detailed the post (as well as the pre) Siege evolution of Brimstone Hill, so there is no need to cover that topic here.¹⁵ However, with regard to the author's research on the port of Sandy Point and its anchorage it is worth noting that in the redesign and extension of the fortress the strategic imperative to defend the Sandy Point Anchorage exerted a major influence. As late as 1829, barely three decades before the last British garrison was withdrawn from the fortress in response to the waning geopolitical importance of the Caribbean, official documents were stressing the coastal defence role of the fortress.¹⁶ The armament of the Prince of Wales Bastion and the Fort George Citadel, two new defensive works constructed atop Brimstone Hill after the 1782 Siege, was intended to cover the Sandy Point Anchorage and the Commissariat at New Guinea up to a maximum range of 3,000 yards (1.7 miles or 2.7 kilometres) out to sea.¹⁷

The Fort George Citadel was the crowning glory of the redesigned Brimstone Hill Fortress. The Citadel was a polygonal fortification. With this fortification type the long range gun positions were placed on a separate level from the close range firing positions, the latter being used to snipe on an enemy who managed to disable or in some other way counter the heavy artillery and get uncomfortably close to the fortification's walls. The polygonal design represented a quantum leap in fortification technology over the bastioned type fortifications of the Spanish Americas. It is well established that the Fort George Citadel was the first polygonal fortification in the Americas. The Citadel is in fact thought to be the prototype for all subsequent polygonal fortifications built in the Anglophone Americas.¹⁸

What is much less well known, even among historians and archaeologists specializing in the study of fortifications, is that the Citadel also predates even the earliest known polygonal fortifications in the British Isles. Up to the mid nineteenth century, France was seen as Britain's greatest potential adversary and the French Navy's lead in steam powered, iron clad warships was the cause of many sleepless nights at Whitehall. These vessels and their rifled armament, which was more accurate and had twice the range of smoothbore artillery, presented a considerable threat to Britain's coastal defences, including the defences of the Royal Navy's largest base at Portsmouth.¹⁹ In response to this naval threat work commenced in 1852 on two new fortifications to defend Portsmouth, Fort Elson and Fort Gomer. These forts are believed to be the first polygonal ones in Britain.²⁰ However, it is worth noting that they are preceded by the Fort George Citadel by at least half a century.

Sandy Point Fort (Fort Hamilton)

Earlier in this paper passing mention was made of another fort named Sandy Point Fort (also known as Fort Hamilton). Today, Sandy Point Fort is an almost completely submerged structure on Sandy Point's coast, positioned in the centre of the anchorage and lying below a landing at the foot of Downing Street, a thoroughfare running perpendicular to the coast. On the seventeenth century Norwood Map and eighteenth maps such as the 1752 Map of Bermuda and St. Kitts by Emmanuel Bowen, and the 1753 Map of St. Kitts by Baker, Sandy Point Fort is depicted as jutting out from the coast onto the water. No other fort on St. Kitts is depicted in this manner. Additionally, on some maps such as the Norwood Map, the fort is surrounded by a dotted line.

As noted in our discussion of Charles Fort, the leeward or western coast of St. Kitts has been subjected to a receding coastline. This may lead one to conclude that Sandy Point Fort was built on coastal land that became submerged over time. The manner of the fort's depiction in the Bowen and Baker Map also suggest another probability. Sandy Point Fort may have been erected on land built up in the sea or built on a submerged foundation.

Victor Smith has noted that "The idea of building on reclaimed land and onto the sea – *where compelled by the constraints of the site or tactical imperative to do so* – was universal.²¹ Along the banks of the Thames from the sixteenth century into the eighteenth century and later, some of the defences of this vital body of water were erected out from the land onto the water and secured by timber pilings back-filled from behind.²² There is also evidence to suggest that reclamation was undertaken at English Harbour in Antigua by the use of boulders.²³ Fort Augusta, in Kingston, Jamaica is one instance confirmed by the historical record of a Caribbean coastal fort being constructed on reclaimed or at best initially less than stable coastal land.²⁴

The cataclysmic earthquake which struck Port Royal in 1692 opened up an undersea passage below Port Henderson Hill which allowed deeper draught vessels access to Kingston. This enabled Kingston to come into its own as a major port but at the same time it created a new challenge, which was that large shipping calling at the burgeoning port of Kingston was out of the range of protection from Port Royal's guns. The only suitable area where a fortification could be placed to address the defence gap at Kingston harbour was at Mosquito Point which was afflicted with marshy soil unsuitable for construction. The solution found was to drive piles deep into the marsh to create the foundation upon which was erected a new coastal fort christened Fort Augusta.²⁵

There was clearly a "strategic or tactical imperative" for siting Fort Augusta in such a challenging location. The cartographic evidence cited above strongly suggests that a similar imperative drove the location of Sandy Point Fort. The intriguing question that remains is exactly how the construction of Sandy Point Fort at the location chosen was undertaken.

In the quest for answers to this question, site investigation of Sandy Point Fort presented some significant challenges. Persistent and heavy wave action, the rocky shoreline and drainage of household effluence from Downing Street made both water clarity and dive conditions hazardous in this area. Therefore, the author as principal investigator, ruled out any dive (including snorkel) survey in this area by the team of maritime archaeologists from STIMACUR (Foundation for Maritime Archaeology in Curacao) assisting him in this research on the port of Sandy Point and its anchorage. Another challenge was presented by the sea being only 10-15 feet in depth in this area, with boulders rising to just 6-7 feet below the surface. Such conditions made it too dangerous for the research boat to venture too close to the shore off Downing Street.

Two methods were utilized to overcome these challenges to site investigation of the remains of Sandy Point Fort, aerial photography and remote sensing using side scan sonar. Aerial photos of the site taken during a single drone flight show what appears to be additional rocky debris further from the current shoreline and to the north of the landing, which may have been part of the fort's foundation. From the information gathered in the current survey it is not possible to say conclusively whether the shoreline extended further into the bay than it does today, or whether the fort and landing were constructed on fill or man-made land.

Side scan sonar, the other method utilized, works by emitting conical or fan shaped pulses down towards the seafloor in a wide angle to create a sonar image of large areas of the seafloor. The remote sensing survey followed a pattern parallel to the shore at the base of Downing Street. Two passes were made 20 feet apart in water 10 feet and 15 feet deep. The area would have been unsafe for sailing ships to enter, since it was shallow and boulders of different sizes were present throughout the area as imaged in the scans. However, smaller vessels for transport to and from shore could have reached the landing. Imaged in this area were well-defined clusters of stones that may represent ballast stones from sailing ships re-used as pilings for a dock or pier structure.

It is not yet possible to state conclusively that Sandy Point Fort was constructed on infill. However, cartographic sources such as 1732 Moll Map,²⁶ and the already discussed 1752 Bowen Map and the 1753 Baker Map depict the fort clearly and without any unambiguity as a structure jutting out from the natural coastline. This cartographic evidence, taken in conjunction with the underwater features recorded during the side scan sonar and aerial drone surveys, strongly suggests that Sandy Point Fort was either constructed on built up land or the foundation was a

submerged one constructed on soil and/or boulders placed in the sea offshore of the Downing Street Landing.

The fortifications of Sandy Point in a Caribbean context

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Spain, Portugal, England, France and the Netherlands embarked on odysseys of exploration, conquest, settlement and trade in the Caribbean that were the genesis of what would become global empires. With the exception of Prussia, every major economic and military power in Europe from the fifteenth century onwards began its path to ascendancy in the Caribbean theatre. Therefore, as a result of their historical position of precedence in European empire building, Caribbean fortifications types display a rather extended evolution in architectural form and artillery technology.

For example, Buisseret ably uses Blanes Martin's four stages in Caribbean fortifications to show how all four stages are represented in Jamaica's fortifications.²⁷ The four stages are: Early town walls and fortified towers circa 1500-1680; the first phase of bastioned fortifications circa 1580-1780; the second stage of bastioned fortifications 1750-1815; nineteenth century developments in fortifications.

All or most of these four stages are visible throughout much of the Caribbean, including the territories discussed on pages 3-4 during the discussion above on Charles Fort. There are some exceptions; for instance Barbados, due to its geographic location east of the Caribbean archipelago and out in the Atlantic Ocean, was less vulnerable to attacks from hostile sailing vessels. As a result the fortified tower erected to function as a signal station typifies the common

form of fortification found on this island. There was never any perceived need to undertake the expense of building larger fortifications to repel an unlikely attack or invasion.

While Leeward Island Anglophone colonies such as St. Kitts and Antigua shared a similar trajectory to Barbados in their ascendancy as economically valuable and therefore militarily strategic imperial peripheries, geography dictated a different course in the development of their fortifications. Nestled firmly in the northern cluster of the Eastern Caribbean archipelago, the British Leewards were uncomfortably close to the French possessions of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Both physical and political geography played a role in shaping the form that military defences took in the Caribbean. The proximity of the French threat to the Leewards and the presence of a natural deep enclosed harbour at English Harbour in Antigua led to calls from as early as 1671 for the site to be developed as a base for large naval ships.²⁸ By the beginning of the eighteenth century fortifications were being erected in the environs of English Harbour for the primary purpose of defending a site which was seeing increasing use as a harbour facility for the Royal Navy.²⁹

In contrast, on St. Kitts, political and physical geography led to the development of stages two and three of Blanes Martin's four fortification types at Sandy Point. An Anglophone West Indian port town with a large natural open anchorage being situated on a terrestrial boundary with a French colony necessitated the early development of Charles Fort, which would become one of the largest coastal forts in the Eastern Caribbean. In order to overcome the limitations of seventeenth and early eighteenth century artillery and adequately cover an open roadstead that was more vulnerable than an enclosed site such as English Harbour, some form of coastal

engineering was apparently undertaken to site Sandy Point Fort at an optimal location in the centre of the anchorage.

The accepted inevitability of a major French assault on St. Kitts led to the continued development of fortifications at Brimstone Hill's more protected elevated and inland location. By the time of the 1782 Siege the Brimstone Hill Fortress was unrivalled by any other fortification in the British or French West Indies.

Even after the 1783 Treaty of Versailles, France remained a threat to British interests in the Caribbean. Incorporating lessons learned from the Great Siege of 1782, Brimstone Hill Fortress was radically expanded and redesigned. The Prince of Wales Bastion and Fort George Citadel, already discussed above, were the major defensive positions created in the Post-Siege reconstruction. As also noted previously, this era in the fortress' life saw it become not only an equal in size and scale to the fortresses of Havana and San Juan, but surpass them with respect to architectural technology. By the time the Prince of Wales Bastion and Fort George Citadel were completed circa 1790, Sandy Point was under the shadow of the most advanced defences of any port or anchorage in the Caribbean. The evolution of the third stage of Caribbean fortifications reached its zenith at Brimstone Hill.

However the technological zenith of Sandy Point's defences was a relatively short lived one. Within just around sixty years after the Prince of Wales Bastion and the Citadel were completed the last garrison had been withdrawn from Brimstone Hill, along with most of the garrisons in the West Indies. The end of the Napoleonic War left British military and naval supremacy in the Eastern Caribbean unchallenged. At the same time the British West Indies was being eclipsed in term of strategic value. Cheaper and more abundantly produced sugar from Cuba and newer

sources such as India were undermining the political influence of the West Indian planter lobby. The changing economic fortunes of the sugar interest combined with increasingly frequent slave rebellions not only helped to usher in the Emancipation of Enslaved Africans in the British Empire but also shifted the balance of geopolitical importance away from the British West Indies. At a time of shrinking profits the actions of British West Indian planters did nothing to help their cause. Their cruelty towards the enslaved Africans, and the Africans sometimes violent responses to such cruelty, enabled those lobbying first to end the Slave Trade and then later to bring about a complete end to the institutionalized enslavement of Africans to achieve their aims.³⁰

With the West Indies star in the imperial crown dimming, by the nineteenth century the fortifications on these islands and their armament were becoming obsolete. The latest advances in artillery technology were being introduced at some Caribbean fortifications, such as those of Puerto Rico and Bermuda. The looming threat of war with the United States compelled Spain in 1896 to begin replacing the outdated armament of the fortresses at San Juan, Puerto Rico with breech loading artillery.³¹

Bermuda while politically classified as part of the British Caribbean, geographically occupied a different sphere, being located off the Atlantic coast of North America. The island's strategic proximity to a burgeoning and rival power, the United States, demanded that its defences be kept up to date even after those in the British West Indies were falling into neglect or being abandoned completely. Therefore, by the 1860s the Bermuda Dockyard was being guarded by rifled muzzle loaders (RMLs).³² The rifled barrels forced the projectile to spin making it more stable in flight and therefore increasing accuracy. By 1899, a half century had passed since the

last garrison marched away down the winding road from Brimstone Hill but Bermuda was being rearmed with breech loading cannon because “The Americans were still thought to be a force to be reckoned with.”³³

While it seems that by circa 1880 rifled muzzle loaders and breech loaders were being introduced in Jamaica, the small number of such pieces being installed on the island paled in comparison to the number of new artillery pieces being emplaced at Bermuda. Clearly the strategic pendulum had swung away from the West Indies. By the beginning of the twentieth century the fortifications of Sandy Point had either been repurposed as health institutions for confinement (Charles Fort), completely abandoned (Brimstone Hill) or almost completely submerged and forgotten beneath the coastal tides (Sandy Point Fort).

Conclusion

The port of Sandy Point and its anchorage began exerting influence on altering the course of fortification design and construction in the Caribbean as a direct result of England's struggle to maintain a foothold against the French in the Leeward Islands during the early years of settlement. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the contest for European supremacy in the Caribbean, primarily waged between England and France, only intensified. With St. Kitts always being a prime target of the French, English concerns over protecting economic and strategic interests in the Caribbean saw their most dramatic tangible manifestation in the development of fortifications at and surrounding Sandy Point.

By the late eighteenth century the fortifications guarding the port of Sandy Point and the approaches to its anchorage had become the most extensive in the English speaking Caribbean.

Within the wider region only some of the Spanish ports developed fortifications of comparable size and scale to Sandy Point's defences. This research demonstrates the potential for a comprehensive study of Sandy Point's fortifications to yield a fuller picture of how this Kittitian seaport not only transformed the landscape of England's first West Indian colony but also the pace and course of developments in Caribbean fortifications from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century.

Endnotes

1. Higman, 117-148
2. Dyde, 19-22
3. ibid
4. Smith, pers. comm. 12 Apr. 2012
5. Dyde, 67-68
6. Pares, 241-242
7. Segovia, 36-37
8. Honychurch, 54-61; Roman et al; UNESCO
9. Roman et al; UNESCO
10. Cal. S.P. Amer. and W. Indies: 1669-1674, 282-296
11. Schroedl, 2-5

12. Gill et al
13. Smith, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 1994, 76
14. Smith, *Brimstone and Fire*, 26-36
15. Smith, *Brimstone and Fire*; Smith, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 1994, 73-109; Smith, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 1995, 77-107
16. Smith, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 1994, 104
17. *ibid.*
18. Cliver
19. Corney, Introduction
20. *ibid.*
21. Smith, pers. comm. 12 Dec. 2014
22. *ibid.*
23. *ibid.*
24. Buisseret, 10
25. *ibid.*
26. Buisseret, 1-3
27. Weaver, 3-4

28. *ibid.* 3

29. Parker, 333-357

30. Roman et al, 236

31. Harris, 199-240

32. *ibid.* 241

33. St. Kitts National Archives, Map titled the Island of St. Christopher's, alias St. Kitts by Herman Moll, 1732

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