

REPORT OF A TEST EXCAVATION ON BEACON ISLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Extremely little is known of the day to day existence of the stranded community on Batavia's Graveyard (Beacon Island). Where did they live? What did they subsist on? and, in general, how did they cope with their environment?

To adequately answer these questions would require a major archaeological excavation, but prior to such undertakings archaeologists generally conduct a test excavation to determine the range of data available for analysis and interpretation. The test results are then used to formulate a research strategy *for the main excavation.*

This brief paper presents the results of a test excavation on Beacon Island. It is hoped the results will enable future excavators to approach the island with a firmer understanding of the problems and potentials of the area and allow them to pursue the answers to the questions described above.

TEST TRENCH #1

On February 9, 11, 16 & 20 of 1974 a trench designated Test Trench #1 was excavated in the sandy interior of the Southeast portion of Beacon Island. This area had been selected for three reasons:

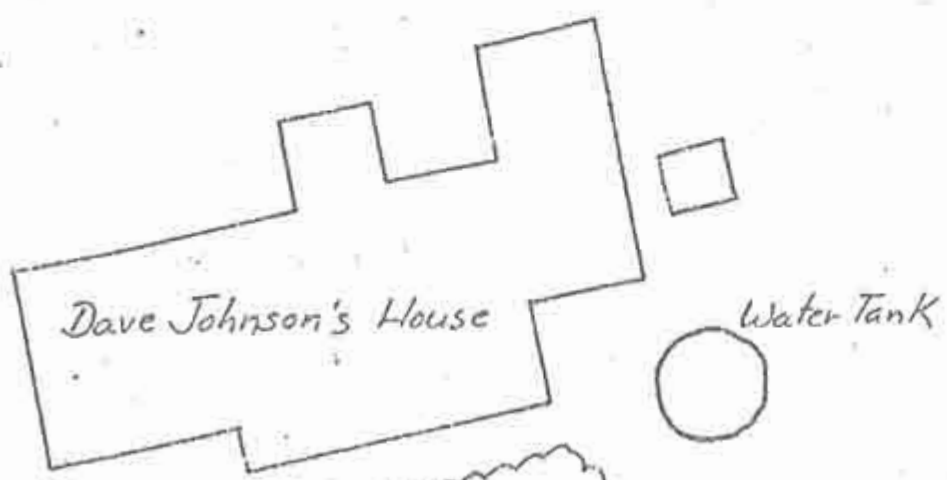
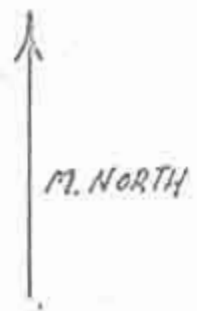
1. Occasional pot sherds and metal artifacts have reportedly been found there.
2. The flat, sandy surface may have been a preferred camping area for the survivors.
3. The area is presently protected by a dense growth of shrubs. It was hoped this would have protected the deposit from recent human and natural disturbance.

The excavated trench consisted of six meter squares (designated 1-6). The first exploratory squares, 1 & 2, were excavated in arbitrary levels, and the remaining four, 3-6, dug according to the natural stratigraphy. The stratigraphy consisted of:

1. a surface of loose white sand and humus.
2. a layer of brown, compact sand mixed with guano.
3. a sterile underlying strata of coral rubble with a sand fill.

RESULTS

Beacon Island is the breeding ground for several colonies of migrating sea birds, including the muttonbird or wedge tailed shearwater (Puffinus pacificus). The mutton bird, characteristically, burrows into the sand to make subterranean nests. Test Trench #1 revealed how the birds burrow down through layer 1, tunnel horizontally through layer 2, and then enlarge the end of the tunnel into a chamber for their nests. From an archaeological point of view, the effect of the 30cm deep burrows on an equally deep deposit like Beacon Island's is disastrous. For example, to line their nests the birds will bring foreign items into the burrows. Hence in the excavation, bits of modern English language newspapers were found in close proximity to musket balls.



Dave Johnson's House

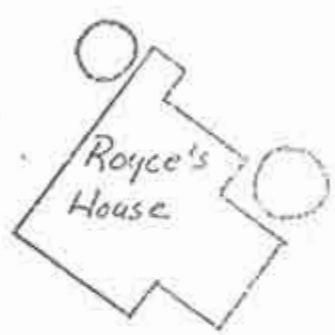
Water Tank



Dense Shrubs



Test Trench #1
← (squares 1-6)



Royce's House

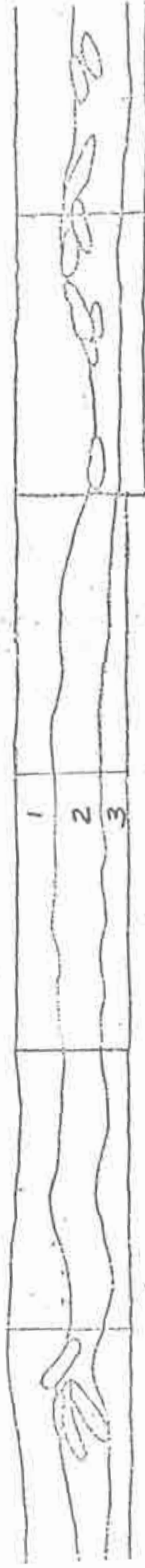


Location of Test Trench #1 on Beacon Island

Stratigraphic Profile of South Face of Test Trench #1

Beacon Island, February, 1974
scale 1:20
5cm = 1 metre

sq5 --- X --- sq4 --- X --- sq3 --- X --- sq2 --- X --- sq1



ice layer of loosely packed white sand with humus

or of yellow-brown (mottled) quartz + sand mix

lenticular strata of coral rubble with sand fill

20-40cm large coral slabs
irregular ground surface at base of section



MIDDEN

The greatest impact the muttonbird burrows have had is on the evaluation of midden materials. Few food remains, with any certainty, can be attributed to human subsistence and none can be directly linked to the Batavia incident.

Not only have the burrows confused the stratigraphic sequence, but the birds have also transported considerable fish remains in to the nests. These fish remains, the skeletons of muttonbirds that have died in their burrows, and egg shells are found at the same depths where midden dating from the Batavia would be expected to be found.

A noteworthy presence in the midden sample are the disarticulated skeletons of several seals. Their significance is not yet certain.

ARTIFACTS

Table I consists of a complete inventory of artifacts recovered in the excavation of test trench 1. Presented below is a discussion of the more interesting and noteworthy finds. Excluded from the discussion are the severely corroded and amorphous bits of metal from which little information could be gleaned.

GLASS

Glass materials consisted of 4 small fragments of bottle glass. 3 of these frags were flat and the fourth, a curved piece, was probably from the neck of a bottle. All are heavily patinated, but may have been originally a slightly frosted or translucent glass.

BONE

A fragment of a bone or ivory comb, one side of which has teeth for the regular grooming of hair, while the other side has tiny, narrowly gapped, teeth for the removal of parasites from the scalp.

A mammal rib that exhibits butchering marks. Identification of the species is pending.

LITHIC

One of the most interesting artifacts is a flake of black flint or chert. Along one edge of the flake minute percussion flaking was noted. The author was able to duplicate this edge damage by striking a flint against an iron point. This produced noticeable sparks. Hence the flint was possibly used in conjunction with iron and tinder in a fire-starting kit.

Another lithic find was a water worn pebble of a type that does not naturally occur on Beacon Island. It's function is not known.

BRASS

Two buckles, one of which is the shoe type, and the other is from what is modernly called a 'Sam Brown Belt'.

LEAD

A thin, flat, roughly square piece of lead, probably used as a weight in measuring small quantities on a balancing scale. Though this one is unadorned, often times the exact weight of the piece was etched into the surface of the lead.

CERAMICS

The twelve decorated potsherds represented the fragments of at least two similarly decorated pots. The decoration being a white background with blue bands below the lip and above the base. The mid-section being filled with a blue and burnt orange floral pattern. Similar pottery has been raised from the wreck and identified as 'majolica arberellos' or drug jars.

Also found were three sherds of plain, white, glazed ware (possibly porcelain).

MUSKET BALLS

The five musket balls were all made of lead and shared the same diameter of 1.45 cm. The size of the balls compares closely with ones found on the wreck site, though the ship contained balls of several different diameters and types.

BEADS

All of the beads discovered in the excavation were amber-coloured and made of either glass or resin. The technique used to make them probably to allow a teardrop of glass or resin to suspend until it hardens and then to break it off just above the bulbous part of the drop. This hypothesis is supported by the fracture marks on one side of each of the beads. The beads were then probably drilled with a hand-held bow drill. Such tools were used by the Dutch to drill pearls in the 1600's (Luiken 1694, p.81), and it can be assumed similar apparatus were used to bore beads.

<u>Artifact No.</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Provenience</u>
48	musket ball	sq 4 layer 2
49	"	" "
50	"	" "
51	glass frag	" "
52	majolica sherd	" "
53	bead	" "
54	"	" "
55	"	" "
56	"	" "
57	butchered bone	sq 5 layer 1
58	majolica sherd	" "
59	bead	" "
60	"	" "
61	majolica sherd	sq 5 layer 2
62	glass frag	" "
63	iron nail	" "
64	iron nail	" "
65	iron nail	" "
66	porcelain (?) sherd	sq 6 layer 1
67	"	" "
68	brass buckle	" "
69	bead	" "
70	iron nail	" "
71	bead	sq 6 layer 2
72	metal trimming (?)	" "
73	metal fragment (?)	" "
74	fragments of iron ring	" "

SUMMARY

This test excavation has revealed a range of artifacts that closely corresponds to material found associated with the Batavia wreck. The majolica pottery, the brass buckles, the musket balls, and the lead weight are identical to items raised from the wreck site. This evidence reinforces the belief that Beacon Island was the 'Batavia's Graveyard' described in Pelsaert's journal.

The greatest obstacle encountered in this study was evaluating the food remains. The fact the deposit had literally been riddled by shearwaters made it difficult to determine whether the remains were the result of human activity or natural deposition.

The results of this study -- including artifacts, midden, photographs, sketches, and written descriptions -- will be kept on permanent file in the Marine Archaeology Department of the W.A.Museum.

REFERENCES

Luiken, Johannes en Caspaares (1694) 100 Verbeeldingen van Ambachten,
Amsterdam.

(on File in Marine Archaeology Department
of W.A. Museum)