

Paper title: **Heritage Management and Museums in St. George's, Bermuda**

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Summary:

Bermuda is the oldest continually inhabited English settlement in the New World, and the town of St. George's served as the capital of Bermuda from its founding in 1612 to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, St. George's UNESCO World Heritage Site celebrates its 400 years of history, culture, and architecture through historic preservation, heritage tourism and public education in museums. This project aims to investigate the current heritage management situation in this historic town center through field observation, stakeholder interviews, and museum content analysis. Issues being discussed here include heritage narrative and navigating system, human connection to the built environment, diversity and inclusiveness of the narrative, as well as staffing situation at the local museums.

Paper:

### **Project background**

Bermuda is a North Atlantic archipelago with a total area of just twelve square miles. It is approximately 665 miles southeast of the North Carolina coast. Throughout its more than 400 years of history, Bermuda went through different phases of development. It was originally discovered by a Spanish explorer named Juan de Bermudez (hence, the name of the archipelago) in 1505, although neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese settled permanently on the island. In 1609, an English fleet en route to save the suffering colony of Virginia wrecked their ship, Sea Venture, off the coast of Bermuda. This marked the beginning of the archipelago's colonial history. In 1612, St. George's was founded as the first capital of Bermuda to the east end of the archipelago (fig. 1), thus becoming the oldest continually inhabited English settlement in the New World. St. George's remained Somers Island Company land until 1684, and was turned into a Crown Colony that last until 1815. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Atlantic fleet garrisoned in Bermuda, which made the archipelago an outpost to guard British trade and influence against the newly born United States. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bermuda gradually became a world famous tourist destination, known for its pink beaches, vacation leisure, and unique cultural and historic sites.



Figure 1: St. George's harbor, 2018. (© Mingqian Liu)

Because of Bermuda's geographical location and economic relations within the Atlantic world, it has close connections with three different continents: Europe, American, and Africa. Politically, it remains a British Oversea Territory. Culturally, it is a dynamic mix of Afro, American, and British traditions. The historic town center of St. George's was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Its unique architectural style and urban characteristics played an important role in this designation. Nowadays, the town offers a living heritage environment, with multiple layers of history and cultural identities shown through its British colonial vernacular architecture.

In order to study the architectural and cultural history of Bermuda, to trouble-shoot and improve the local historic preservation and heritage management situation, and to foster a strong partnership between local heritage stakeholders and outside academic institution, a series of student projects were carried out in January 2018 as the result of joint efforts by Texas A&M University (College Station, Texas) and Bermuda National Trust (Hamilton, Bermuda). The Department of Architecture at Texas A&M University offered a two-week study abroad program called Preservation Field Study, opened to graduate students in architecture, architectural history, and historic preservation. The course was led by a faculty member whose expertise is the built environment and heritage conservation in Bermuda and the greater Atlantic world. The local host institution is Bermuda National Trust, a non-governmental charity established in 1970 to preserve natural, architectural, and historic treasures and to encourage public appreciation of the Bermudian heritage. The Trust is also the largest property owner in the historic town center

of St. George's. Besides managing two historic house museums, the Trust rent out some of their properties as vacation homes in order to generation revenue for preservation work.

This project is one of the student projects being conducted on-site in Bermuda and during the following semester. It touches upon three local museums: Mitchell House (1731), a historic house museum managed by St. George's Historical Society; President Henry Tucker House (1750) and the Globe Hotel (1899), historic house museums managed by Bermuda National Trust. The project also covers the overall historic built environment and heritage tourism in St. George's, as issues at these museums can only be understood when looking at the historic town center as a whole. The researcher investigates the current heritage management situation in this historic town center through field observation, stakeholder interviews, and museum content analysis. Issues being discussed here include heritage narrative and navigating system, human connection to the built environment, diversity and inclusiveness of the narrative, as well as staffing situation at the local museums.

### **Key issues identified**

- **Lack of an overarching unified historical narrative**

The heritage assets in St. George's World Heritage Site are managed by seven different entities, including the Historical Society and the National Trust. Due to this administrative situation, most of the heritage sites in St. George's right now have their own heritage interpretation system. For example, the Globe Hotel tells the story of Bermudians' involvement in the American Civil War; and both Tucker House and Mitchell House tell stories of wealthy British families and their daily lives in Bermuda's early history. Other sites are devoted to the development of Anglican religion and British military presence in the Atlantic. There is no unified overarching historical narrative, to which each site contributes a unique perspective. This makes it hard for visitors to understand the importance of each site in the overall historical development of St. George's. It doesn't mean that all the museums and sites need to tell the same story, but their narratives need to be better connected to each other's, so visitors can appreciate the historic town itself as a living history museum.

- **Lack of clear navigating/signage system**

St. George's currently has no "you are here" heritage maps physically display in its streets. Locations of historical significance are not clearly marked, for example, the wharf, the warehouse, the marketplace, and the directions of early shipwrecks. This lack of clear navigating system often results in visitors not knowing where they are, and not sure about where to go next. It makes it difficult to choose points of interests among all the museums and heritage sites. Blue plates were put up on some of the National Trust sites, but the texts faded in a way that the visitors could not read them and get any useful information (fig. 2). Different entities put up their own version of signage with different font, size, and use of image. Some contents even come from academic books on local history, which are not comprehensible for a lay audience, therefore cannot effectively communicate their sites' heritage values (fig. 3).

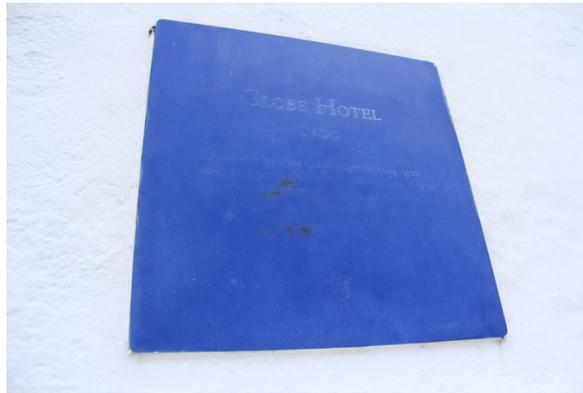


Figure 2: Blue plate of the Globe Hotel with faded texts. (© Mingqian Liu)

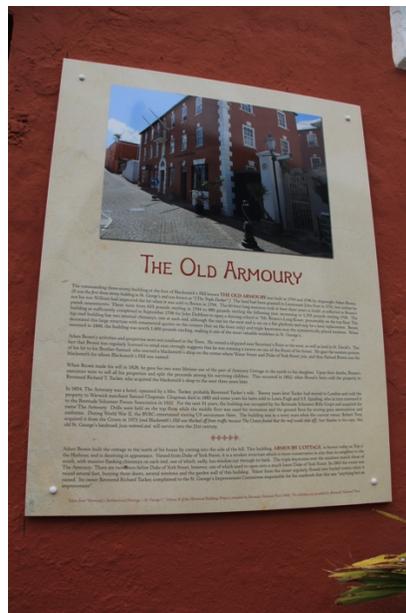


Figure 3: Sign of the Old Armoury that uses whole paragraphs from academic manuscripts. (© Mingqian Liu)

- **Lack of human connection to the historic environment/physical space**

Movements of people in the historic urban environment is not emphasized in the current heritage narratives at local museums and sites. Human interactions with the urban fabric throughout different phrases of history are essential for heritage tourism in a historic town center. Where did the ships dock? Via which road did people go to the marketplace? How did they gather for political and religious events? Why a certain building or space was important in history? Without a clear connection with their physical surroundings, visitors will not be able to understand the importance of engaging with heritage in situ. Never the less, museum panels can show up anywhere in the world, but Bermuda is the only place people can actually feel the interconnections of cultures in the Atlantic world.

- **Diversity and inclusiveness of the museum contents**

Nowadays, more than 70% of Bermudians working for the local government are of Afro-Bermudian descent. However, ancestors of this important group in the contemporary Bermudian society are largely left out in the current museum contents. The Globe Hotel, which hosts the most visited exhibition in the entire archipelago, mainly catered to the American tourists by telling the story of Union Blockade Runners during American Civil War (fig. 4). Other historic house museums like Mitchell House and Tucker House, which mainly talk about the early British colonial rule and European families' life in the Atlantic colonies, have similar problems with the Globe Hotel: their contents are largely disconnected from the local audience's identity and culture. Although Bermuda is a popular destination for oversea tourists, these museums are locally funded and should provide equal access to a diverse audience in Bermuda. Exhibition contents needed to be re-examined and re-organized, before the museums can do an effective outreach to local communities.



Figure 4: “Rogues and Runners: Bermuda and the American Civil War” exhibition at the Globe Hotel. (© Mingqian Liu)

- **Staffing situation**

The operation of museums and historic sites in Bermuda mainly rely on volunteers instead of full-time employees. On one hand, because of Bermuda's strict immigration laws and regulations on

foreign labor, people without a local passport find it hard to get a full-time job. On the other hand, there is no higher education institution in Bermuda that offers academic training in disciplines such as architecture, architectural history, historic preservation, or museum education. This leads to a significant lack of local expertise on the island. Most outside academic and cultural institution work in Bermuda when schools are not in session. Furthermore, living expense in Bermuda is higher than that of San Francisco and the Bay Area, which has the highest living cost in the United States. This means that few outside institutions could afford to work in Bermuda on a regular basis. Long-term partnership between local and oversea institutions is much needed, and work needs to be continued off-site or through online collaboration.

### **Solutions and suggestions**

Student projects from Texas A&M's Preservation Field Study course offered some practical solutions and suggestions to address and overcome the above mentioned problems and difficulties. In order to better represent the evolution of Bermudian vernacular architecture and human connection to physical space in the historic town center, new museum panels with educational contents were produced for Tucker House and the Globe Hotel. Based on hand-drawn floor and site plans, as well as photographs of architectural elements, these panels focus on architectural and urban history, which added a tangible heritage perspective to the existing narratives at these museums.

Students also worked on various digital humanities projects such as photogrammetry, documenting historic buildings' overall appearance and detailed elements using ArcGIS software, as well as recording daily preservation work through an online platform. Digital documentation of historic buildings and the urban environment will provide the first step for later decision-making regarding how to and what to include public accessible information and visual materials in museums and other cultural institutions in the town of St. George's. One thing particularly interesting is that the field documentation project has a public involvement component in there. Because the ArcGIS survey tool is built on an open-to-public platform and with a certain amount of training and experience, local students and volunteers can help record the buildings and changes through time, and inform the heritage managers and museum staff about early destructions. Through this kind of experience, the participants and the general public will have the opportunities to better appreciate their built heritage, the importance of protecting, and eventually get involved in preservation.

### **Significance**

This project from the field leaves many lessons about preservationist and museum professionals working in restricted circumstances. Bermuda's relatively isolated location and high living expense make it extremely hard to have outside institutions working on-site with local institutions. Therefore, effective online collaboration and projects that initiated by outside institutions that can be left for local operation afterwards are the key in such circumstances. The issues discussed here with heritage management situation in St. George's historic town center also provide the lessons to think about how to make outdoor living history museum and heritage

narratives available for different kinds of audience. While reassessing local stakeholders' roles in a historical environment, museums need to lead the work in research and information gathering, educational content and program design, as well as awareness raising and public involvement.