

***“...not even the remains of the dead were held sacred by this rapacious banditti!!!”
The 1814 Raid of the US Privateer Midas on Royal Island, The Bahamas***

Eric C. Poplin, Ph.D., RPA
Brockington and Associates, Inc.

Royal Island, The Bahamas, suffered an attack on private property on 12 September 1814 by crewmen of the American privateer *Midas*. This raid destroyed all but one building, with the remaining buildings and facilities associated with four plantation settlements all burned. The residents' personal goods and wealth were taken, with most residents fleeing to the bush to save themselves from injury. Even the tomb of the wife of Benjamin Barnett, principal planter on Royal Island, was broken open in search of plunder. Reputedly in retaliation for the burning of Washington, this act prompted a public apology from James Monroe, US Secretary of State, and the revocation of the *Midas* letter of marque. Recent archaeological investigations at EL 53 within the Barnett settlement revealed artifacts that appear to be directly related to this raid as well as evidence of the loss and reconstruction of the plantation settlement.

Society for Historical Archaeology, Toronto, Canada, January 2009

Introduction

At noon on Monday September 12, 1814, the American schooner *Midas* anchored off Royal Island, The Bahamas. Armed men boarded two of her small boats and made for shore. There, they raided the plantation settlements, destroying buildings and plundering personal property. The *Bahamas Gazette* of September 25, 1814, published the personal account of Mrs. C. Hudson who was on Royal Island at the time of the raid:

...on their approaching she with others, and about 20 children, made their escape from the buildings into the wild woods and there remained two days without any food ... that on their return to the settlement, they found the buildings all burnt to the ground, save only the stone Kitchen ... They carried off such trunks of dry goods with a considerable quantity of plate and jewelry, and in the height of their criminal barbarity declared that had Mr. Barnett, the proprietor [and Mrs. Hudson's father] been there, they would have cut off his head, and burnt his body with the house.

The last and most horrible part of their conduct we have yet to mention, at which humanity will shudder! Hearing ... that Mr. Barnett possessed much wealth, and seeing a Vault in which was deposited his deceased wife, it was broken open and dug up in search of money—not even the remains of the dead were held sacred by this rapacious banditti!!!

The *Midas* was one of many American privateers that operated in the Bahamas during 1814. Throughout the War of 1812, the United States issued over 1,300 letters of marque to private vessels to offset the size differential between the nascent US Navy and the British Royal Navy. US privateers harassed British shipping throughout the world's seas. Their appearance in the Bahamas followed closely a withdrawal of Royal Navy vessels stationed in the Caribbean (the ships were needed elsewhere due to the resumption of war with France) and an edict issued in March 1814 that all US citizens in the Bahamas were subject to confinement as prisoners-of-war if they did not leave immediately.

The *Midas* hailed from Baltimore, MD, and was sailing under the command of Captain Alexander Thompson. Thompson had presented his letter of marque to government officials in Nassau, and prior to the Royal Island raid, was considered to be a humane and decent man. According to the *Bahamas Gazette*, he seized several vessels in the Northeast Providence Channel prior to the Royal Island raid and treated their crews in a civil fashion.

British colonial authorities sent complaints of Thompson's conduct during the Royal Island raid to the US government. The US then revoked the *Midas*' and Thompson's letter of marque and

issued an apology for his actions on Royal Island. James Monroe, then US Secretary of State, replied (as published in the Washington [KY] *Union* of November 25, 1814):

It appears by the extract [from the Midas' Journal], that ... Capt. Thompson authorised a landing, with armed force, from the Midas, at the plantation of Mr. Barnett, on Royal Island ...; and that the officer to whom it was confided, acting under an order from Captain Thompson 'to set fire to the buildings,' did actually 'set fire to the whole, consisting of four handsome dwelling-houses and fourteen negro huts.'

The extract from the Journal has been laid before the President; and upon the unequivocal evidence which that affords of the wilful deviation of Capt. Thompson from the instructions for the private armed vessels of the United States, issued at the commencement of the war, which enjoin 'the strictest regard to the usages of civilized nations' he directs that the commission of the Midas be revoked; and you are requested, as that vessel is now within your district to revoke the same accordingly.

The Royal Island raid provides an opportunity to examine several aspects of military behavior during the War of 1812 and beyond and the colonial plantation economy of the Bahamas during the early nineteenth century. First, we will consider why Royal Island witnessed the raid. Then, we will consider the immediate and long range effects of the raid on its protagonists and the region. Finally, we will examine the archival and archaeological evidence that supports some of our interpretations.

Why Royal Island?

We assume that Captain Thompson chose to raid Royal Island, he claimed in revenge for the burning of Washington, due to his presence near the island and its relatively isolated location. Also, there was a small population on Royal Island which could be handled easily by the crew of the *Midas*. But why was the *Midas* cruising near Royal? We noted above that American privateers began intensive patrols in the Bahamas in mid-1814. Royal Island lies near the mouth of the Northeast Providence Channel, the primary “deep sea” route through the north central Bahamas. As one enters the Channel from the Atlantic, it is fairly narrow with shallow reefs to either side. Royal Island serves as a navigational aid to mariners approaching the channel. Two conical hills, called the “Paps,” rise 70+ feet above sea level near the center of the island and are the first visible land from the Atlantic approaches. In addition, Royal also boasts a small but well protected harbor on its south shore and accessible fresh water in a small pond near the center of the island and in shallow wells near its west end. These qualities of Royal Island were well known to mariners for over 100 years prior to the *Midas* raid..

The Effect of the Raid

The effect of the raid on Royal Island can be examined in light of the military actions and the sanctions it engendered and the changes in the nature of the use and settlement of Royal Island. We noted above that Captain Thompson and the *Midas* lost their letter of marque due to “*deviation ... from the instructions for the private armed vessels of the United States ... which enjoin ‘the strictest regard to the usages of civilized nations.’*” This likely resulted in the dishonor

of Thompson and prevented him from gaining any additional income from privateering on behalf of the US government. It also reflects efforts by the US government to conduct itself within the bounds of accepted “civil” behavior, particularly with respect to other “civilized” nations. Similar considerations continue to the present with the US recently signing the UNESCO convention on heritage resources in areas of armed conflict. Examples of efforts by US forces to avoid private property and injury to noncombatants can be extracted from every military action prosecuted by the US since the War of 1812. Unfortunately, examples to the contrary, some accidental and others wilfull, can also be noted. In essence, the aftermath of the raid reinforced the intentions of the fledgling US government to operate within the bounds of “civilized” warfare.

The effects of the raid on Royal Island itself are more dramatic. Historians of the Bahamas and Eleuthera offer what appear to be differing opinions on the impact of the raid and the War of 1812 on the Bahamas. Paul Albury (1975) notes that the War of 1812 was one of privateers in the Bahamas, with little effect on the Out-Islands like Eleuthera. In contrast, Lawlor and Lawlor (2008) contend that the loss of plantation assets on Royal Island during the *Midas* raid ended efforts to live/work there. Obviously, both can be right in this case since Royal Island is only a small part of the greater Eleuthera area. However, did the raid end plantation settlement on Royal Island?

What was the nature of the plantation settlements on Royal Island in 1814? How many settlements were there? How many people were in residence? To date, we have not been able to determine precisely the number of residents at the time of the raid although the account of the

raid in the *Bahamas Gazette* indicates that 20-30 people were present at the time of the raid (Mrs. Hudson “...and others plus 20 children” as well as the elderly Captain Richardson and his wife and daughter).

How many settlements and buildings were present on the Island? According to the *Bahamas Gazette*, 27 buildings were destroyed in the settlements of Benjamin Barnett and John Albury; another building was saved after the departure of the raiders. Thus, there were 28 buildings on Royal Island in at least two settlements at the time of the raid. In contrast, the journal of the *Midas* indicates that “four dwelling houses and 14 negro houses” were destroyed. Deeds and plats of Royal Island indicate that at least six people held land on Royal by 1803. From west to east, these were James Browne (20 acres), William Pinder (28 acres), Benjamin Barnett (28 acres), Thomas Hodgson (80+ acres), Robert Stirling (120 acres), and John Albury (51 acres). Interestingly, an Admiralty chart of Royal and Great Egg Islands published in 1816 may indicate the locations of four large buildings, presumably plantation “dwelling” houses scattered along the central crest of Royal Island. It is unclear if the information displayed in the chart was surveyed before or after the raid.

A recent archaeological survey of Royal Island (Poplin et al. 2008) examined the areas displayed in the 1816 chart where houses may have been present. Ruins were encountered in two areas, one coincides with the possible dwelling shown in the central portion of the island on the 1816 chart (now identified as archaeological site EL 53). The other ruins (now identified as archaeological site EL 50) stand on Whale Point at the west end of the island where nothing is shown on the 1816 chart. This may argue for a post-raid date of the information on the chart since the ceramic

artifacts recovered from EL 50 during the survey suggest an occupation ending about 1815. If so, the possible houses on the 1816 chart may be ruins rather than extant buildings.

Other archival information indicates that people were living on Royal Island after the raid. The *Bahamas Gazette* notes that Captain James Richardson died on Royal Island in 1815. The 1822 inventory of Benjamin Barnett lists 11 slaves living and working on Royal Island at the time of his death. Also, another Admiralty chart, prepared in 1832, shows a house near the center of the island and archaeological site EL 53. A panoramic view on that chart clearly shows a large two story house at this locale, the “Paps” rising behind to the southwest, and a flag on a staff to the east. The 1832 chart notes:

Royal Island may be recognized by the large stone house at the back of the harbour, and by two small round hills called “The Paps” about ¾ of a mile to the SW of the house.

Thus, the archival information argues strongly that at least a few of the landowners, Barnett in particular, returned to Royal Island soon after the raid and attempted to continue their plantation enterprises. Evidence of their efforts was visible into the 1830s. In fact, someone was living on Royal Island near the central settlement location into the early twentieth century. The 1927 *West Indies Pilot* notes that a large and conspicuous stone house stands near the center of the island with a well of good water located nearby.

Archaeological Findings

While professional archaeologists and paleontologists visited Royal Island on several occasions over the last 20 years, the two latest investigations, conducted through research permits issued by the Antiquities, Monuments, and Museums Corporation of the Bahamas, provide the best information concerning heritage resources on the island. In the fall of 2007, I directed an intensive survey of Royal Island by archaeologists with Brockington and Associates. We returned in the spring of 2008 and excavated portions of EL 53, one of the sites identified during the survey.

Our survey examined intensively portions of the island where the potential for archaeological or paleontological materials was greatest. These areas were identified using the 1816 and 1832 Admiralty charts, local terrain (e.g., sand beaches and dune fields), and Robert Carr's (1991) reconnaissance of Whale Point. The survey also included underwater remote sensing of the south harbor and its approaches. We identified four archaeological sites, one paleontological site (EL 54 in the caves near the west end), and five stone walls that segment the island (several reflect former property lines). Sites EL 51 and EL 52 are diffuse eighteenth-twentieth century artifact scatters in intertidal areas near the east end of the island. As noted above, Sites EL 50 and EL 53 contain ruins and artifacts associated with plantation-era occupations. EL 53 also contains the remnants of an extensive settlement built in the 1930s.

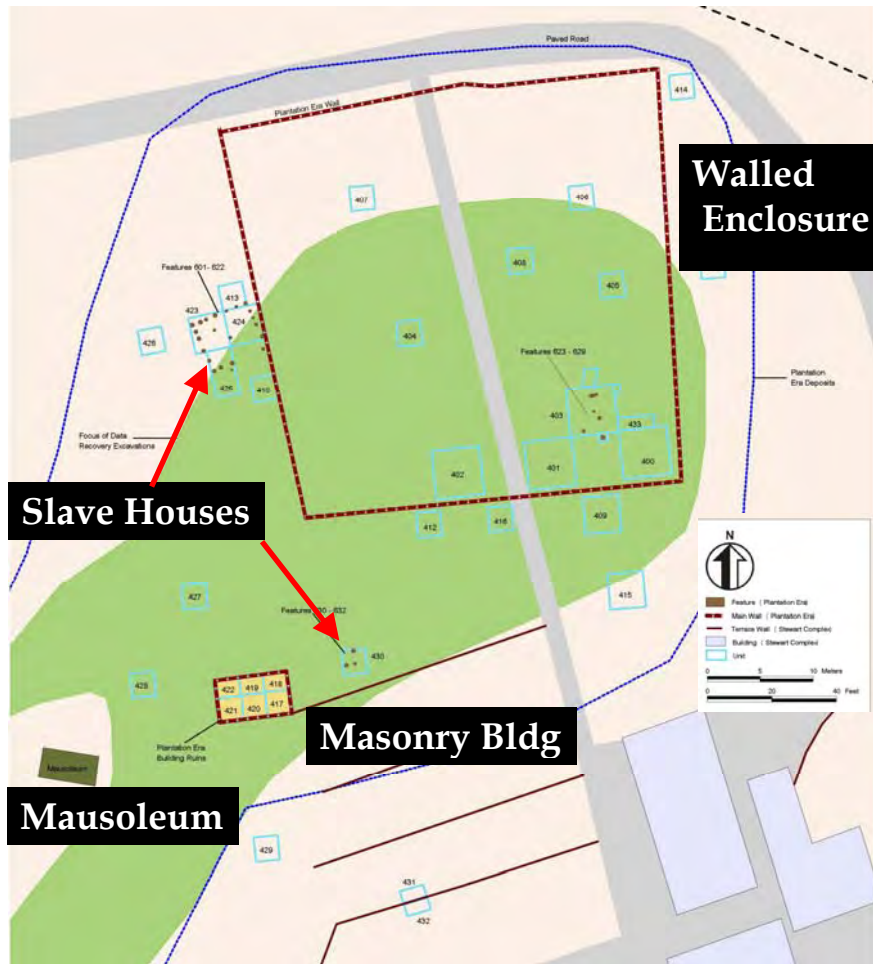
The Whale Point ruins at EL 50 (a large limestone masonry chimney) may be the remnants of the James Browne residence/settlement. Ceramics associated with this ruin suggest abandonment by

1815 albeit these artifacts were recovered from survey level investigation of the site. Perhaps, the *Midas* raiders burned Browne's house and it was never rebuilt. This is the strongest evidence that supports Lawlor and Lawlor's (2008) contention that the raid ended plantation-era occupation on Royal Island.



A plan of EL 53 – the Old Settlement Site. Blue line encloses area of plantation era deposits.

Above-ground ruins at EL 53 include the limestone masonry foundation of a small building, a dry stacked stone wall enclosure, and a limestone masonry mausoleum (presumably the tomb of Mrs. Barnett). Excavations revealed the remnants of two post-and-frame buildings (post holes carved into the limestone bedrock) thought to be former slave residences based on their size and configuration.



Detailed plan of excavations in plantation era deposits at EL 53.

The small building and the walled enclosure were built on the same horizontal alignment. One of the post-and-frame buildings also may have been constructed on this plane. The other post-and-frame building is not aligned to these three and must have been built before the stone wall given the proximity of one corner post to the wall. The mausoleum displays an entirely different orientation to any of the buildings. Plantation settlements in the Bahamas tend to display less formality than contemporary settlements in the southeastern US, primarily due to considerations of terrain and access to sea breezes. However, the multiple orientations of buildings in a small space at EL 53 suggests multiple building episodes that did not consider the alignment of former buildings, if such were extant at the time of subsequent constructions. Does one of these building

episodes reflect the destruction of these buildings by the *Midas* raiders? We encountered burned soils near the post-and-frame building adjacent to the small masonry ruin; whether this relates to the destruction of one of these buildings in 1814 could not be determined. Ceramics recovered from EL 53 around the former buildings indicate occupations from the 1780s into the 1850s and later. Thus, if one or more of the buildings were destroyed during the *Midas* raid, others were built to replace them and occupation of this portion of EL 53 continued well into the nineteenth century.

We recovered 17 large caliber musket balls near the entrance of the walled enclosure that may be directly related to the *Midas* raiders. All appear to be .69 caliber, the ball size of the common military weapon of the era- the Brown Bess or land pattern musket and its naval variants. It is likely that the *Midas* carried such weapons and that some of the raiders carried muskets onto Royal Island. Perhaps the greatest indication of this possibility is the recovery of 15 spent balls within one meter of each other. Either a single weapon was repeatedly fired into this locale or multiple weapons were discharged into this locale. While the possibility of target practice by some former occupant cannot be ruled out, it is possible that the raiders decided to empty their weapons prior to returning to the *Midas* to prevent accidental discharge and possible injury to themselves or their shipmates. In my opinion, the latter seems more likely. Since no resident of Royal Island offered more than vocal resistance, long arms during the raid rapidly were unnecessary. How does one render a loaded flintlock safe to travel? One can extract the wad and shot with a worm but it is faster and easier to discharge the weapon. Thus, we believe that these spent musket balls were fired by the *Midas* raiders during their visit to Royal Island.

In summary, we believe that there is evidence of the 1814 *Midas* raid on Royal Island at EL 53 and EL 50. The destruction of buildings at both sites and the reconstruction of buildings at EL 53 are documented in archival sources and in the archaeological information extracted from the sites to date. The frequency of large caliber musket balls in a very small portion of EL 53 may indicate the discharge of weapons by the raiders prior to their departure. While some of the former residences of Royal Island abandoned their landholdings after the raid, others returned and attempted to continue their former pursuits on the island. This suggests that the raid of the *Midas* severely wounded the plantation economy of the island, other factors (emancipation, the lack of a suitable cash crop, and small amounts arable land) were responsible for its final demise.

References Cited

Albury, Paul

1975 *The Story of the Bahamas*. MacMillan Caribbean, London.

Carr, Robert S.

1991 *Archaeological Survey of Spanish Wells and Northern Eleuthera, Bahamas*. Bahamas A.H.C. Technical Report #1.

Lawlor, Anne and Jim Lawlor

2008 *The Harbour Island Story*. MacMillan Education, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Poplin, Eric C., Colin H. Brooker, and David S. Baluha

2008 *Archaeological and Historical Survey of Royal Island, The Bahamas*. Prepared by Brockington and Associates, Inc., Brooker Architectural Design Consultants, and Diversified Wilbanks, Inc., Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. Submitted to the Antiquities, Monuments, and Museums Corporation, Nassau.