

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by  
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THE SUGAR CONNECTION: BARBADOS AND SHELTER ISLAND\*

## Introduction

### (1) PRESENT DAY SYLVESTER MANOR HOUSE

Early European trade interests in North America pushed the development of Shelter Island, on Long Island. Located in the Peconic Bay between the North and South Forks. This paper proposes that the early period of European settlement (1651-1685) that is currently being explored through archaeology and historical research would have been materially shaped by these trade considerations. It also submits that the armature of seventeenth-century spaces described by artifact and document and shaped by those considerations may also reveal new cultural identities forged in the contact period by the interaction of many different cultural traditions: Dutch, English, African, African-Caribbean, and Native American.

## Description

### (2) MAP AREA NEW ENGLAND SETTLEMENTS 1659

The 8000 acres of Shelter Island, known as Monchonock to its original Native inhabitants, the Manhansetts, were purchased in 1651 by four merchants as a provisioning plantation for their Barbadian sugar interests. (Records of the Town of East-Hampton 1887 [1]: 96-99). The seller was Stephen Goodyear, the deputy governor of the New Haven Colony, himself an active merchant and entrepreneur both in London and New England. (Calder 1934: 59, 157, 165) A purchase agreement with the Manhansetts for Shelter Island and its tiny neighbor, Robins Island, would follow three years later (Southold Town Records 1882 [1.]: 158).

The New England shipping picture of the 1640s makes it clear that the Shelter Island consortium got an early start both in sugar planting, and on the West Indies provisioning trade. The historian Darrett Rutman maintains that, though New Englanders had sporadically exchanged goods throughout the early 1640s, large-scale West Indian shipping only began in earnest in 1647, when planters had become "so intent upon planting sugar (introduced in 1641) that they had rather buy foode at very deare rates than produce it by labour." (Winthrop 1947 [V]: 161, 172; Rutman 1963:404.) Only four years later, the partners, Captain Thomas Middleton, Thomas Rous, Constant Sylvester, and his brother, Captain Nathaniel Sylvester, were setting up a provisioning plantation. Constant Sylvester was in Barbados at least by 1647, but had been active in trade with island since 1641 as a London merchant. (Smith 1999:1)

### (3) DETAIL MAP

Shelter Island's location was advantageous for trade, and not just because of its convenience as a stopping-off place between the West Indies and New England. The English Navigation Acts of 1650, 1651, and 1660 were attempts to restrict the mercantile hegemony of the Dutch and also to garner revenue for England, first under the Protectorate and then the restored Stuart monarchy (Morris 1953 [II]: 483-4). An island with forty miles of coastline and many harbors that was only very nominally a part of the New Haven Colony across the Sound and was far from any tariff port was indeed an advantage for those who wished to circumvent these acts (O'Callaghan 1849 [I ]: 166-7).

### (4) GARDINER'S INLET

Topographically speaking, Shelter Island was also ideal. A deep harbor backed by hills to the northeast for protection against the worst storms, and a shallower protected inner harbor from which pinks and snows, small lading vessels, could travel to and fro, are both characteristic of merchant harbors on the East End of Long Island. (Breen 1989: 223).

### (5) FERRY BOAT

The partnership was a fluid affair from the start, and by 1656 the consortium was down to three: the Sylvesters and Middleton. Nathaniel was the only one to settle on the island. Middleton was appointed navy commissioner at Portsmouth, England in 1664, and became the surveyor of the British navy in 1667 (Latham and Mathews 1983 [V]: 314; [VIII]: 62). Middleton's naval connections may eventually illuminate the mystery of how this merchant consortium transported their goods. There is no mention of trade vessels in the Sylvesters' papers examined so far. If, as seems likely in this early venture in global capitalism, each partner took on a separate area of responsibility, it seems likely that Constant oversaw the West Indies supply of manufactured and processed goods, Nathaniel the New England production of raw materials, while Middleton may have provided the transatlantic shipping.

### (6) FERRY LANDING

The Sylvesters' broad trade network followed a pattern typical of early transatlantic mercantile activity. Family links connected New England ports with Amsterdam, England, Madeira and the Azores, as well as with the West Indies. Members of the family moved around the Atlantic littorals as it suited their political and religious as well as mercantile purposes: Constant, for example, was fined for his Parliamentary sympathies when the Royalists took over Barbados in 1651 and may have left for sanctuary on the newly-purchased Shelter Island (Smith 1999: 5). Besides Nathaniel and Constant, there were three other brothers, Joshua, Peter and Giles. Joshua, who lived on Shelter Island until circa 1685, when he moved to Southold, had little to do with the family business. Peter took part in the transatlantic venture but died young in London in

1657. Brother Giles, whose will describes him as a merchant of London, acted as a go-between. Nathaniel's first cousin, Isaac Arnold, was not only the magistrate for the East Riding of Yorkshire--essentially Suffolk County-- but also served informally as a port collector in Southold until 1684 when he was officially appointed by Governor Dongan (O'Callaghan 1949: I, 166). Conveniently, Arnold also lived in Southold, at that time a port sending many ships to the Caribbean, and less than an hour by sail across the bay from Cousin Nathaniel's establishment on Shelter Island.

#### (7) BUTTON

Another asset that the Sylvester brothers undoubtedly contributed to the partnership was their knowledge of Dutch language and society, useful in the mixed Dutch-English environment of the Atlantic world. The Sylvesters of the charter generation were born in the Netherlands, the children of emigrant English Anabaptists, Giles and Mary Arnold Sylvester, who married in Amsterdam in 1613. (Hoff 1994 [1]: 14). Giles Senior is documented as dealing in tobacco in Leiden in 1624 (Sylvester and Coit 1624) Mary Arnold's brother, Nathaniel, father of Isaac Arnold of Southold, married a Dutch woman during the long Dutch exile, an indication that the Sylvesters and Arnolds may have been quite well-integrated into Dutch society. (Hoff 1994 [2]: 89)

#### (8.) DUTCH BRICK

A degree of cultural integration is also born out by the ongoing excavation of the site, now in its fourth year of summer field school. The predominance of Dutch material culture suggests a commercial network dominated by New Amsterdam merchants and the Dutch West India Company. This has raised questions concerning the nature of Dutch cultural influence during the period. It appears that the first manor house may have been constructed using a high proportion of Dutch building materials including yellow Dutch bricks and redware roof pantiles.

#### (9.) PANTILES

A house inventory of 1680 suggests a considerable main dwelling, as does Article 10 of the partners' agreement which specifies "nothing shall be done about building but what needs might be done for conveniency's sake, to wit, a house with six or seven convenient rooms." If built, this would have been a very large First Period residential structure. (Middleton et alia 1652: 4, Cummings 1979: 22-39).

#### (10.) PIPES

Excavations have also unearthed concentrations of Dutch utilitarian-wares, tin-enameled wares including both majolica and faience, and smoking pipes including two rare "Sir Walter Raleigh" pipes depicting him being eaten by an alligator. One of the questions this Dutch material culture has raised is whether the Sylvesters actively sought these material trappings of Dutch culture or whether their presence merely reflects the singular availability of Dutch goods. The latter interpretation is supported by several

students of Dutch material culture who have argued that Dutch commercial domination continued after the loss of the New Netherlands to the English in 1674 (e.g Wilcoxon 1987). But the amassing of Dutch goods may also be viewed as symbolic capital, and the material culture involved could include architecture, garden plants and design as well as foodways related items and cuisine. This interpretation would argue for a desire among an early planter class of English colonists in New York and the Caribbean to acquire the accouterments of Dutch culture reflecting the latter's position as the commercially and politically dominant power in the circum-Atlantic world.

#### (11.) MAGAZINE ILLUSTRATION, BRINLEY KNIFE & FORK

Beyond their Dutch frame of reference, the Sylvesters had other strategic mercantile connections through marriage and kinship, many of them with New England families of English origins such as Vassall and Symonds. Francis Brinley, the brother of Grissell Brinley Sylvester, Nathaniel's wife, was one of the largest Rhode Island landholders. He also served in several official capacities. Grissell's sister, Anne Brinley, was married to William Coddington, Governor of Rhode Island. Francis, Grissell and Anne were the children of a high-placed English civil servant, Thomas Brinley, who served as a royal auditor to both Charles I and Charles II, and was keeper of the dower accounts of Queen Henrietta Maria (Hoppin 1906, Aylmer 1961: 35, 37). Although Brinley's connections were a liability during the Commonwealth years, they regained importance with the Restoration. Finally, as Quaker sympathizers if not professed Quakers, the Sylvesters also had strong connections with Quaker merchants in the West Indies and elsewhere.

The two brothers received a patent from Charles II for the islands in 1666 (Nicolls 1666). (Sylvester Manor was one of four Suffolk County manors, most of which were engaged in similar Caribbean provisioning operations.) Manor status not only confirmed Nathaniel's dynastic ambition, but was also desirable for reasons which can be seen as part of the overall mercantile strategy: freedom from taxation and from military levies, court leet privileges and the right to appoint a magistrate. In his 1680 will Nathaniel claims full ownership of the island and its improvements on the basis of the fine (£500) he was obliged to pay to the Dutch during the Third Anglo-Dutch war of 1673-4 on behalf of his English partner, Middleton, and his brother, Constant (Nathaniel Sylvester 1680). Nathaniel's sole ownership was confirmed by Dutch law in 1673 and eventually upheld under English rule. (O'Callaghan 1858 [vol II]: 588-9). The mercantile activities initiated by the partners in the mid-seventeenth century took different guises in the next two generations as ties lessened with the West Indies and local trade increased.

#### Cultural landscapes

#### (12.) MAP OF SITE

Other influences and considerations that shaped Sylvester Manor are revealed within the mercantile framework. Research already reveals much about how the living and working landscapes of the plantation were set up, with many indications pointing to

the close proximity of the three groups that constituted the seventeenth-century Shelter Island population: Native American, European and African or African-Caribbean. Apparently they were living and working together in the same social spaces, an area believed to be the central core of the seventeenth-century plantation. Evidence suggests that besides the original manor house, this included subsidiary structures such as a separate kitchen, a waterfront area that contained a large warehouse and other out-buildings (Kvamme 2001). Archaeological evidence of a large Late Prehistoric/Historic Period Native American settlement on the Northern Peninsula suggests continuous occupation between AD 1200 and the time of European contact (circa 1640). A hard-packed occupation area where Native Americans worked for the Sylvesters and probably had daily contact with them and with the Africans, has been discovered within 100 yards of the midden site in front of the 1735 manor house.

Besides the two areas of Native American habitation, excavation has produced possible evidence of an African dwelling. The remains of building found directly south of the 1735 Manor may be of African construction. This area also contains a large trash deposit similar to those identified as root cellars on African sites in the Southeastern United States. Together these areas of European, Native American and African habitation suggest that interaction was probably quite fluid resulting in what might be best described as a patchwork cultural landscape.

Emphasis has customarily fallen on questions concerning the cultural divides that separated the three groups, the focus of this project is the interaction between all the plantation's inhabitants as a vehicle for examining the processes of cultural transformation that shaped the evolution of New World society.

Enslaved Africans

### (13.) SLAVE FAMILIES CHART

Evidence about the enslaved Africans and African-Caribbeans on site can be found in Nathaniel's will of 1680 which names 24 people--a very large number for the north--who would have served as skilled laborers, coopers, carpenters, blacksmiths, domestics and field hands. The names in roman type on the left are the names of enslaved Africans or African-Caribbeans who are listed as bequests to members of Nathaniel's immediate family. The names in italic to the right--Grissell, Elizabeth, Patience, etc.--are the names of the Sylvester family members to whom the slaves were being bequeathed. Quite unusually (Pulis, Klein: personal communications; Gutman 1976: 46, 114-118, 190, 337-338)), they are listed in the will as husbands and wives with their children. Though children are to be separated from their parents by the terms of the will, husbands and wives are not.

Historians of northern slavery have reached the conclusion that it was different both quantitatively and qualitatively from slavery practiced in the southern colonies and the Caribbean Islands. In the case of New York and Long Island, these differences were also influenced by the initial colonization of the area by the Dutch. Historians of the period,

most notably McManus (1966, 1973) and Berlin (1980, 1998) have suggested that Dutch treatment of Africans in New Amsterdam during the seventeenth century was markedly more humane than the practices of the English during their subsequent control of the colony. They note for example that freed Africans could own their own white indentured servants. Whether the Sylvesters, with both a Dutch cultural background and Quaker sympathies, accorded their enslaved Africans this kind of treatment is a question that may be only tentatively adduced from this list.

If there is an appropriate moment to avail oneself of Berlin's term "Atlantic creole," it is in discussing the names on this chart. Like many others in the north, the majority of these people would have come through the West Indies, probably from the partners' plantations. About half of them are listed in Nathaniel's will as having been owned in partnership. Jaquero with his Portuguese name might have come from Portuguese Africa or from Brazil. Tony the same. Hannah and Nannie are English names. Tammero and Oyou were probably Africans from Ghana; these seem to be Ghanaian day names. Semnie--there are two listed--is a name of uncertain origins, but it may be a corruption of an African one (Dr. John Pulis, personal communication). A linked speculation is that the Semnie who is married to Japhet--a biblical name--may be an older woman; no dependent children are listed with her and her husband. Nannie, married to Tony, may perhaps be this Semnie's daughter, and Nannie's child, Semnie, may be named after her grandmother. The freedom to have a namesake in an enslaved family would have been unusual in the period and the culture; it may be part of the same set of circumstances--political, religious?--we do not know--that allowed for the configuration of the slave list by families.

Significantly, many of the same names appear together in the Southold Township census of 1698 (O'Callaghan 1849 [I]: 669, 673)--eighteen years later--which may indicate a certain degree of geographic, social, and familial stability rather than the pattern of family breakup and separation that might be inferred from the directives of Nathaniel's will.

Native Americans

#### (14.) SITE MAP

The native populations of the New World were also culturally diverse. In New England and Long Island, much of this diversity was an outgrowth of economic and ecological adaptations that had evolved over centuries (see Stone 1993 [III]). Despite these long-standing cultural patterns, Native Americans adapted fairly quickly to new economic opportunities offered through trade with the Europeans. Over time, Native American/European interaction intensified and took on new dimensions. In some instances it involved working for the newly arrived Europeans, work that often brought them into direct contact with African slaves. Tools and shell remains indicate that the Native Americans working for the Sylvesters were probably producing wampum. Although this interaction is generally poorly documented, an accountbook that was used by Giles Sylvester, Nathaniel's son (Giles Sylvester 1680), offers a few of the names

listed in the will in conjunction with the names of nearly forty Native Americans who worked for wages--mostly rum-- at Sylvester Manor in 1680, and later in the same decade (Witek TK).

#### (15.) COLONOWARE SHERDS

It is expected that this interaction will also be displayed in the material culture recovered during excavations. Already, evidence has been discovered that suggests possible African American/Native American collaboration in the production of colonoware, a ceramic found throughout the American South and the Caribbean.

This smooth-bodied ware stands as a prime example of how material culture can be examined for clues to the processes of cultural transformation and creolization. It displays the characteristics in shaping and firing of both African and Native American ceramics.

European multi-culturalism

#### (16.) DIAPERED COBBLESTONE PAVEMENT

Although European emigrants were often equally diverse, perception of that diversity is often obscured by the broader definitions of the New World (African/European/Native American) and by the standard textbook description, especially as regards New England, that early settlement was patterned by national groups. However, Nathaniel and Grissell, unlike more homogeneous settlers ( for example, those in Plymouth: (Fischer 1989:13-54), were themselves the products of differing cultural, religious and political inheritances. To some degree, they too had been forced to emigrate and adapt. During the course of their lives, they incorporated Dutch, English, Anabaptist, Quaker, Parliamentary and Royalist traditions and affiliations. The degree of cultural flexibility they exhibited in dealing with these ambiguous situations is one of the prime factors to consider in how the Sylvesters dealt with both the enslaved Africans and their Native American workers. Although Nathaniel and Grissell chose to emigrate to Shelter Island, an option not accorded the Africans, they too faced new realities stemming from their involvement with both other groups.

Landscape and Dwelling as Multi-cultural Spaces

If this assumption of cultural flexibility can be tentatively accorded to the Sylvesters, then a variety of factors could be posited as influencing the design and siting of the plantation complex. In England and in Holland, a contemporary detailed practical literature on the subject existed that, along with local example and experience, may have set the context for the overall design (Lawson 1618, 1927; Roberts 1999: 89-108; de Jong 1990: 16-18; Oldenburger-Ebbers 1990: 167-168; Games 1999: 96-98) for a gentry-level household such as the Sylvesters' is presumed to have been. Such settings served many functions: they were commercial, leisure, religious, and symbolic landscapes (Roberts 1999: 95, de Jong 1990).

Climatic differences, the manor's early use as a trading post (Middleton et al. 1652) and large-scale provisioning needs for a warehouse, grain storage and livestock pens would have had an impact on layout as well. The inclusion of Africans in what would then have been termed the "household" would also have altered traditional European plans. Nathaniel Sylvester's previous experience in Virginia (Edwards Family 1906: 79), his and his partners' knowledge of Barbadian plantation layout especially in the accommodation and feeding of a slave work force, might also have determined spatially delimited changes to a traditional layout.

#### (17.) MAP, HAWTHORN POPULATION ON NORTHERN PENINSULA

One such significant variation from the traditional European design pattern may have been what was called "the Negro Garden," a place where the Africans grew their own food (Handler 1978: 30) which was tentatively assigned a location in 2000 by means of stumps and an isolated population of seedling hawthorns near the prehistoric site on the Northern Peninsula. The species has been identified as the traditional "English thorn," *Crateagus monogyna* (Cahilly and Forrest 2001), used for hedging throughout the British Isles. If the hawthorns on site today are indeed seedlings of a hedge mentioned as a dividing feature in an 1884 document, then they may help in locating both the Negro Garden and the Native American burial ground that the document suggests the hedge served to delimit (Horsford 1885). The discovery of a fragment of a redware colander--a gathering implement-- in the same area may be taken as further evidence of the garden's presence.

#### (18.) BURYING GROUND

Another such layout variation from the European norm would have been the African burial ground. The large "Burying Ground of the Colored Peoples" at Sylvester Manor is still fenced off and marked today. (19.) **STONE MARKER** According to oral tradition, several hundred people have been entombed here, a cemetery since 1651. (20.)

**ENGRAVING OF STONE** The inscription on the stone was probably carved just prior to 1884, when the then inhabitants of the manor house dedicated a monument (Horsford 1884); the engraving that portrays the stone was probably done soon thereafter (Lamb 1885). (21.) **MONUMENT** to the Sylvester family and its descendents and to the (22.) **GRAVE STONES** Quaker martyrs of Boston who fled to Shelter Island during the persecutions of the 1650s. Berlin (1998:62-63) has argued that these cemeteries may well stand among the first African American spaces in which cultural practices were allowed to persist unfettered.

#### (23.) "SLAVE STAIRCASE"

Timed access to shared areas for work or leisure must have played a part in accommodating the different groups, and some spaces were less negotiable than others, of course. Although African domestic servants probably moved freely through the interior of the manor house, less than subtle boundaries probably existed even for these



trusted domestics. This is the attic door on a staircase in the 1735 house that has long been described as "the slave staircase," (24.) STAIRCASE DETAIL This description supports the proposition that Africans did not have separate quarters on northern plantations as they did on southern or West Indian plantations, but instead inhabited the many buildings and areas where they, and Native Americans, would have lived and worked. (McManus 1966; Berlin 1998).

(25.) ENGRAVING, GEORGE FOX

There were occasions when all three groups gathered together in the same space, however. For example, when George Fox, the Quaker founder, preached three times on Shelter Island in 1672, he did so in "Madam Sylvester's dooryard," and described his mixed congregation which included over a hundred Native Americans (Fox 1694, 1998: 458-459).

(26.) WATER LANDING

Taken together, the archaeological and documentary evidence from Sylvester Manor suggests that spaces were being constructed in which a melding of cultural practices was the norm. (27.) FINAL VIEW OF HOUSE As social arenas in which cultural interaction was played out these areas at Sylvester Manor that at first seem to reflect only major mercantile considerations in fact had multiple meanings (Beaudry et al 1991; Mrozowski et al. 2000) and may represent the best place to begin examining the transformational processes that would shape early American culture.

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