

# REEF BAY GREAT HOUSE

By Frederik Gjessing

Reef Bay valley stretches from the main east-west ridge of St. John to a wide unprotected bay on the south coast. It is one of the more important valley systems of the island and has given the name to the south center quarter of St. John, one of the five administration divisions established by the Danish colonists of the Virgin Islands. At its head, the valley is little more than a ravine. Near the shoreline it opens on a small alluvial plain. For its entire length it is bounded by steep hills that towards the east rise to Bordeaux Mountain, the highest peak on St. John (approximate elevation 1280'). Although on the south and leeward side of the island with its relatively lesser rainfall, the valley as the drainage basin for the main ridge and the Bordeaux Mountain area is well watered by Virgin Islands standards and supports for most of its extent the same type of vegetation found on the damper north side of St. John. It was the last area of St. John to cultivate sugar cane and to support a sugar factory. In the early nineteen-hundreds, intensive cultivation was discontinued, and the valley has gradually reverted to a cover of woods and bush.

Reef Bay Great House is the name affixed to the structure that served as the residence of the former owner of Par Force and Reef Bay Estates. In addition to the main building, that housed the living quarters of the owner, there are four service buildings, the cook house, the servants quarter, a stable and an outbuilding.

The complex is located on a spur extending into Reef Bay valley from Bordeaux Mountain at an elevation of 280 feet. The site drops off steeply to the southwest and north from the very small plateau at the tip of the spur. (Illustration Number 1)

The Reef Bay Great House is considerably smaller than most Great Houses of plantations of equal size and value. Architecturally however, it is ambitious and the quality of its design and of its site planning is outstanding. Even in its present ruinous state its esthetic and architectural values are apparent.

The buildings, as if to underscore the potentials of the terrain, have been placed against the steeply rising hillside to the east leaving the small plot of relatively level land as garden and foreground for the impressive views from the Great House that commands the entire valley; to the north the narrow ravine at the head of the valley, to the south the small alluvial plain of the bay and the Caribbean beyond it. Immediately across the valley it faces the intermittent stream that drains the west center sector of St. John and enters Reef Bay valley over a series of cascades with a vertical drop of more than 150 feet.

A narrow road now nothing more than a footpath leads from the north and entrance side of the Great House around the tip of the spur and descends through a series of switch-backs on the south face of the hill to the Lameshure-Reef Bay Trail. 350 yards north and below this junction, the Lameshure Trail runs into the old Reef Bay Road connecting Reef Bay Estate Sugar Factory (3/4 miles south) and Centerline Road (1 1/2 miles north).

The steep hillsides, even by St. John standards, that flank Reef bay valley gives it an appearance of a ravine unsuited for any kind of cultivation. The appearance is deceptive, and the valley contains in addition to the small plain bordering the bay considerable acreage of near level land around the beds of the intermittent streams that wind through its floor. It has been valued as good farm land since St. John was first colonized by the Danish West Indies and Guinea Company in the early 18th century. "Old Works" at the head of the valley, one of the first sugar factories on St. John, testifies to the early settlers' appreciation of its agricultural properties.

In the 1700's the valley had six estates. Of these, the most important was Par Force that occupied the lower section of the valley including the site of the Reef Bay Great House. A smaller and less productive plantation called Reef Bay Estate adjoined it to the south and extended to the shoreline of the bay.

During the third and early years of the fourth quarter of the 18th century Par Force was owned by Anthony Zytzema. The estate had a factory as well as other buildings necessary for the production of sugar. Following Zytzema's death, Par Force was sold by the executors of his will (7th of February, 1792) to Jurco Vriehuis. Reef Bay Estate was then owned by C. Weyle, who raised cattle and cultivated cotton. Sometime prior to 1830, both estates came into the possession of John Vetter and the entire holding was devoted to the cultivation of sugar cane and went by the name of Par Force. It was inherited by A.K. Vetter in 1833. In 1844, it was acquired by A.M. Porth, who sold it the same year to L.D. Smith. Eleven years later it was taken over by O.J. Bergeest and Company and in 1864, this firm sold it by public auction to William H. Marsh, an Englishman from Tortola, who at the time was the estate manager for O.J. Bergeest and Company. He was able and acquisitive and succeeded subsequently in acquiring practically all the lands of Reef Bay valley as well as Lameshure and Carolina Estates. He made his home in the Great House of Par Force Estate but as this plantation gradually expanded to include the entire valley the name Par Force went out of use and was superseded by Reef Bay Estate.

After his death in 1909, Reef Bay Estate was inherited by his daughters. In 1951, it was sold to Frank Faulk and it was subsequently acquired by Jackson Hole Preserve and donated to the government of the United States as part of the Virgin Islands National Park.

The documentary information on the Reef Bay Great House is very sparse. The present buildings have the character and architectural details of early 19th century structures and the gate posts at the entrance bear the date of 1844. This most likely is the date of the completion of the standing structure. The cook house in front and west of the main building however predates the Great House and there are traces of an earlier structure within the basement of the main building.

From 1864 to 1951, the house was in continuous use by William Marsh and his descendants. In the latter years of occupancy by his daughters, the main building had been allowed to deteriorate and by 1951 only a section of it was habitable. The service buildings had been abandoned earlier. When the Danish architect Tyge Hvass visited Reef Bay in 1925, these buildings were already in a ruinous condition. In March 1951 the caretaker for Frank Faulk, Ridge Folk, moved in and lived there with his wife until April 1953. Although some work was done to rehabilitate the main house during their stay, it was not extensive enough to halt the effect of the near half-century of neglect.

Of the five buildings that comprise the Great House complex, two, the stable and the outbuilding, have deteriorated to a point where their original purpose is not readily discernible. Both ruins are behind and to the northeast of the main structure.

The outbuilding was a 10 foot by 10'-6", one story, masonry structure with a door on the northwest side and probably a small window in each one of the three other sides. The building was stuccoed and its cornice and the doorway had slightly projecting stucco bands, a treatment preserved in the other buildings of the site. The south corner stands to a height of 6'-9", but other walls have tumbled and only footings and wall fragments remain.

The stable is a one story masonry building measuring 14'-4" by 39'-1". It was built into the side of the hill and its near southeast wall also served as a retaining wall. Both end walls have a centered window opening 3'-0" by 3'-9" high. The front wall that has collapsed appears to have had either two or three large openings, base and top of walls were accentuated by slightly projecting stucco bands. The two remaining walls stand partially to their full height and the roof appears to have been hipped.

The cook house is located in front and to the west of the main house 10 feet below its first floor level. It was a one story masonry structure 24'-2" by 14'-2" with a dutch oven built onto the west side of the building 3'-10" from the southwest corner, 6'-2" wide and projecting 4'-3" from the outside face of the wall. The exterior walls vary in thickness from 2'-3" to 2'-6"; the interior was divided into two almost equal sized rooms without interior communication. The room to the north contained the kitchen proper with a range along the west wall and a 4' wall vent slit in the wall above it. Two doors in the east and north wall respectively provided light and additional ventilation to the interior. The south

room has one door in the east wall. There are traces of an opening in the opposite wall now blocked by the dutch oven. The south end wall of the cook house now stands only 2'-6" above the original floor level and any window opening that may have existed is lost without trace.

The cook house was plastered throughout and had the same banding of corners and openings as the other buildings of the complex.

The main interest of the cook house lies in its relative antiquity. It is indicated by the dimensions of its walls, the different texture of its masonry and the traces of remodeling in the masonry fabric as well as the signs of parging and earlier plastering under the 1844 stucco.

The servants' quarters are the best preserved of the four utility buildings. It measures 18'-5" x 14'-4" and is lined up with the cook house 8' north of it. It is a one story masonry building standing on an accentuated base, plastered throughout and with an exterior decorative banding of windows, corners and eaves. Wrought iron hitching rings at sill level are anchored in the north wall. All walls stand to full height although damaged and with only traces of the original finishes. Wood frames for the door and one of the windows are still in place. The roof was hipped and the interior floor finish was wood, both have disappeared completely but the anchorage of rafters and joists in the masonry have been preserved.

The principal building is one story with a partial basement under the north and west side of the structure. On the lower west side of the building the floor of the basement is on grade. On the south and east side the grade is at first floor level and slightly above. The building measures 35 feet by 56 feet, constructed in rubble masonry with brick lining of corners and around masonry openings. Except for pavements and steps all masonry surfaces are plastered or stuccoed. The roof is partially a flat brick roof of wood beams and partially a hipped wood roof with metal roofing. Floors are wood on wood beams. (Illustration Number 2). A large double masonry stairway leads to a small porch in front of the main entrance on the west face of the building. The brick roof of the porch is supported on four Tuscan columns. A smaller porch on two columns of similar design shields the rear entrance on the east side of the building.

Both the organization of the plan and the treatment of the elevation is unusual and without counterpart in the Virgin Islands. It is severely symmetrical around an east-west axis. Two arched galleries to the south and north flank a centercore that is accentuated by additional height and by its architectural details and the porches. The core is 4 by 5 bays with two windows on either side of the entrances and four doors leading from the interior to the south and north gallery respectively. The exterior bases and floor levels, as well as window and door openings, have stucco banding. A dentil course and a very simple *cyma recta* moulding form the cornice. The parapet wall above the cornice is divided into panels by stucco banding and the corners carry acroterions. The flanking galleries have stucco banding of corners and base, stucco panels above and below the arches, keystones, spring mouldings, parapet mouldings and on the parapet domed finials and acroterions. A similar detailing is given the porches. The plaster work is fairly well executed.

In the interior, a central hallway leads straight through the building. A long narrow room along the east wall connects the north and south galleries. In addition, there are two rooms on either side of the central hall. The trim around door and window openings of the interior, as well as cornice mouldings are in plaster. The design is sophisticated, extremely formal and carefully thought out in detail and would be somewhat formidable if it was not leavened by the equally carefully considered site planning.

A terrace in front of the main house separates it from the cook house and servants quarters built at the lower level. The terrace is bounded to the west by retaining walls from 1' to 12' high topped by circular masonry pillars that once were the posts for an iron fence. Access to the terrace is from the north by three steps and a gate between two 10'-3" ornamental masonry gateposts. Immediately inside the gate steps lead to a semicircular terrace centered on the north elevation. The front terrace continues 45 feet beyond the Great House and ends in a raised gazebo. A retaining wall and steps separated the yard south of the building from the front terrace.

The yard south of the building continues behind the building and was apparently intended to be approximately 7 feet above the front terrace. It is narrow and irregular in shape and bounded to the east by the steep hillside and exposed rock ledges. Immediately behind the house a 3' retaining wall parallel with the building and 16' from it gave definition to the rear yard. Steps in the northeast corner led down to the area north of the Great House and provided easy access to the stable and outbuilding to the east from the rear entrance of the building. The retaining walls and staircases, where they are still standing, have the same stucco band decoration as observed on the buildings.

The total effect, although very decorative, is saved from fuzziness by the restraint and rigidity of the architecture. These same qualities combine with the irregularity of the terrain to form an exceptionally successful design.

The main house is still under roof and with all walls standing. Although woodwork including rafters and beams have deteriorated beyond repair and exterior finishes and details are much coarsened by the general deterioration and in many cases are fragmentary only, it is still apparent that Reef Bay Great House is the most important architectural monument on St. John and a significant example of Virgin Islands architecture. Considered in connection with the remains of Reef Bay Sugar Factory and the various ruins within the confines of Reef Bay valley it ranks as the most complete exhibit of the plantation economy within the Virgin Islands.

Its isolation and general inaccessibility has both protected the structure and precluded its restoration. Over the years the National Park Service has strapped the exterior walls, shored interior archways and taken other steps to insure the protection of the structure, and the building has been included in both the Historic American Building Survey and on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Great House viewed from the southwest. The staircase leading up to the front porch and the basement story is hidden by the retaining wall of the front terrace. Note the tracing of the stucco banding and the retaining wall (foreground) and the architectural treatment of the galley and the porch.

Historic American Buildings Survey Photo

Photographer: Jack Boucher

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