



Public Community Gathering at the Heritage House, St. Eustatius, November 19th 2024

Transcribed by TurboScribe.ai, edited by Petra Ploeg

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St. Eustatius, June 2025

Introduction to the recording

The public community gathering at the Heritage House St. Eustatius took place on November 19, 2024. It was part of a series of community events *Reclaiming Our Stories, Restoring Our Ties* (Dutch working title: *Betrokkenheid erfgoedgemeenschap bij bedreigd erfgoed slavernijverleden Sint Eustatius*) funded by the Faro program and executed by the St. Eustatius Afrikan Burial Ground Alliance, in close cooperation with the Statia Cultural Heritage and Implementation Committee – SCHIC.

Goal

The main goal of this initiative was increasing the involvement of the inhabitants of St. Eustatius in the endangered heritage of the slavery past. We focused on knowledge exchange, awareness, community building, and better handling of this heritage in connection to its community.

GR2021 = the archaeological excavations of the Ancestral remains at the 18th century Afrikan burial ground Golden Rock.

Raimie Richardson: Heritage Inspector at the public entity St. Eustatius, historian.

marjolijn kok: independent archaeologist, member of St. Eustatius Afrikan Burial Ground Alliance

START TRANSCRIPT

Raimie Richardson:

So, I'm going to start from on this side, which is my left, going towards my right and that end. And, of course, I'm a historian, so I'll give context to the artifacts you see here. If you have any more in-depth questions, you can pose them to marjolijn kok who is the archaeologist.

So, here, of course, we have shackles. These were not used for the hands, but these would have been shackled at your feet. We have one of the sites that were found here in the field.

In the middle here, we have this little piece of clay, which is one of many. This is one of the 20 items that we have on Sint Eustatius.

[Oh, they're coming out one at a time. Is that everyone? Is everyone inside? Yeah, that's it.]

All right. Good evening, everyone.

Welcome. I'll just give a general welcome and I'll go through the artifacts, of course, from a historical perspective that will give context to what is exactly here. And the artifacts that we have as we go through the buildings.

For those of you that do not know, this is the Heritage Center. This is where we preserve and conserve anything that is stationed. It's not only pre-Columbian and colonial artifacts, but also furniture, clothing, etc.

Everything that is part of our history is stored, preserved, and restored here in this building. So over here, before I start, I'm going to start actually with this bell. Why is this bell actually very important for us here? Because this bell hung in the fort from 1764 until 1976.

On June 12th, everyone may have heard of the June 12th uprising in 1848. This was the bell that was rung that led to the death of about 25 Statians in front of the library were actually shot dead and left there for an entire week as a warning to not have another uprising on the islands. And a lot of people don't know this history.

This bell was actually removed by the Koninklijke Woudenberg during the bicentennial in 1976 for the 200th celebration of the first salute. It was sent to Curaçao, returned to the island a few years later. It was actually lost.

We brought it back here, cleaned it up, and have it here for safekeeping. So, a lot of our ancestors, when they heard this bell, it would have meant death at the time. It's part of the African heritage that we have here on the island.

Earlier, I explained about the shackles that you see here. These would have meant for the feet. This is one of the sites that were found in one of the fields of the plantations here on Sint Eustatius, also still in pretty good condition for the time.

One of the interesting artifacts that we have here on Sint Eustatius is we have about 20 of these where the word negro is printed onto plates. These plates would have been made in the 1700s. This, for example, is English pearlware.

This was made in the United Kingdom. And, of course, with all the shipment and the trade Statia was doing, it would have been brought here. This particular plate would have said, bring more cane to the male negro.

We actually have a lot of these plates in our collection that have these degrading texts to the enslaved ancestors. The colonial masters would have been eating out of these plates, so

this is not for decoration. So, you could imagine having to serve a plate after your master finished eating with the most degrading text about your race.

We also have here in the collection other plates that are printed in Dutch that were made in the Netherlands that said, negros don't have a soul (in Dutch: Negers hebben geen ziel). And that was also printed on plates here on Sint Eustatius.

And a lot of these artifacts is a contrast to the usual artifacts that you see. The reason we have this little plate here on display, if you look to the right, it's a stark contrast to the beautiful Chinese and Delfts Blauw porcelain that you normally see. But they were also printing these degrading texts, and we have quite a lot of those in the collection.

Oftentimes, people think the enslaved ancestors were stripped of all of their jewels and probably ended up with shrouds on the ship. But one of the things we also found a lot here on Sint Eustatius are these manilas. This one particular was also found at Fort Amsterdam.

That is the location behind of Smoke Alley. The enslaved ancestors would have had these around their wrists. This one is pretty small.

We have them even in much larger sizes as well. These were used in the Congo as currency as well for a period of time, which indicates by oral tradition a lot of us know that people are descended from the Congo here on Sint Eustatius. And a lot of the artifacts that were found on Sint Eustatius actually coincide with that history as well, bringing oral history even to fact.

This is one of the iron rods that would have been used for branding in the shape of an S. We also have some of them here in stores that have the West Indian Trading Company on top of it. But some of them even have just random letters of plantation owners and ownerships of different countries that would have been branded before they were discarded off to other places after they were sold. As we move on now on this side, we actually have personal items that were buried with the ancestors.

And the stark parallels to what you just saw with Saint Helena and Sint Eustatius is quite haunting because just like how Saint Helena had about three-fourths being young children, three-fourths of our excavations from the Golden Rock site are also kids between the ages of probably four up to eight or nine years old. And all of the excavations that we have here of the Golden Rock site are all most likely male. One of the interesting things that I spoke to marjolijn about as an archaeologist were some of the finds that we have here.

These white plates, for example, were on the chest of some of the enslaved ancestors. So, from the Golden Rock site that was excavated, as many of you know, at the GR 2021, the enslaved ancestors actually had these boards on their chests. There were no foods on top of it, but we do not know as yet what that custom entails.

And we are still trying to uncover what that custom would have meant because we haven't found this custom in any other burial site in the Caribbean, not even in Barbados or Jamaica or Haiti to date. So, we're still trying to uncover what that possibly would have meant because it's still a kind of new find in African Caribbean heritage in this part of the world. Another interesting artifact that was placed on the coffin is this artifact right here.

We haven't deciphered as yet what it might be, marjolijn.

marjolijn kok: I think it's plant leaves.

Raimie Richardson:

It looks like a plant leaf.

And another coin that was also there is this one that we know it's an almanac.

marjolijn kok:

[7:57] Yeah, it's from the Amsterdamsche Heeren. It's an almanac.

It's not a coin for money, but more of a memorial. Commemorative. And on the back side, if you look at it, it has the date 1667.

And there's like a picture of a book. I understand that you can't see it from the distance, but it's like a commemoration of an almanac.

Raimie Richardson:

And the date will also coincide with the burials that we see.

Just for extra information, many of the enslaved ancestors who were excavated from the GR2021 site were actually first-generation enslaved Africans. So, there's a huge possibility that everyone in this room has one descendant on that plantation. And over here is another very fragile, interesting find.

These are actually clothes fragments that were buried with the ancestors. You can see some of the clothes have the buttons attached, especially this one and some of the buttons that they would have had on their clothing. In our climate, these things should have degenerated very easily, but miraculously, clothing has survived.

We were discussing earlier; we don't know many enslaved burials that still had clothing. You saw that there weren't much clothing pieces or organic materials such as clothing in the Saint Helena burial. But we also have, to show you how close the parallels are with Saint Helena, there's also people buried here that were stored here in this building that also had lots of hair stuffed into perfume bottles that probably belonged to a loved one that they were buried with.

So, a lot of the things that happened on the island are very interesting, almost the same as what happened here on St. Eustatius, even though they are not connected in that way, geographically.

marjolijn kok:

Yes, so what's interesting to maybe show is that this is one of the excavated graves at GR2021, near the airport, Golden Rock. What it shows is the outline of a coffin.

So, you don't have the actual coffin existing anymore, because the wood deteriorates very quickly. So, you've more got little pieces and scraps of wood. Those are also kept, because you can do analysis on it, on what type of wood it is and those kinds of things.

But what it shows is that they were not just dumped in holes in the ground. They were really given a proper burial. And on this one, you may not see, but you can later look closer at it, there's a little object on it.

It's a coin shell that has been so altered that you can use it as a tool. So also, tools were given. And they were placed on the coffin just like the coins.

So, there was a habit of placing personal items on the coffins. That's very interesting. Most of the people got a coffin.

We don't have the full report [*archaeological report about the Golden Rock 2021 excavations*], so we just have to sort of do it with the scraps of information we have. But one of the enslaved people was buried without a coffin and on its side. While in the coffin, you're lying on your back, lying on the sleeping.

And they were placed in a position like this on their side. We call that a foetal position. And that's really like an African way of burying people.

And he didn't have a coffin and his teeth were found. That's also an African custom that was not allowed for the enslaved people to do. So, we're pretty sure that he came straight from Africa and was buried in this ancestral manner of burying.

And what we also find is a lot of these things. And it may look like blobs, but that's iron nails used to make coffins. And it shows that it was not just planes, but it was really a careful place together.

And it might be because the nails are very well preserved, that might be an indication also why the textile is well preserved. Because if there's a lot of iron in the ground, you sometimes have more chance of textile being recognized or kept. But these are really special finds anyway for any context that you find those still in the past.

And what we think is this is like a, these are the coffins. And also, the decoration on the coffin, I think that's very important because we know from other African American enslaved burial grounds in America that sometimes with little nails, they make patterns on the coffin that relate to their cultural background in Africa. And in the movie, you saw all these signs in a museum in New York.

And they had the Christian and the major, the Islamic symbols and the Jewish. But there were also more elaborate symbols and they were more related to African religious symbols. So just that they had this one makes me wonder if we can find more patterns on the coffins.

Well, another find. Here it looks just like a round shaped thing, but it's a coin. But this is an actual coin, so money.

It's of George II. It's from 1737. [I always have to think about English numbers.]

But what it shows is that the enslaved people did have some access to money at least. But also, that they valued their fellow enslaved people enough not to keep the money for themselves, but to give them something for the afterlife. And of course we haven't displayed them here, but there's also blue beads and a brown bead.

The blue beads are called trade beads, or the brown beads. And the blue beads we always have something special, but in effect they were also trade beads. And they were not made in Statia, also.

They were just made in the Netherlands and Africa. And they were used as a sort of barter money. So, besides the money economy with coins, there was also a whole economy where the enslaved people could barter with each other with the blue beads.

So, they're a different system. And it was also to make sure that they wouldn't get too much money. Because the Dutch wouldn't accept the beads as money, but they did allow the enslaved people to use them in that sense.

And one of the graves of an indeterminate skeleton. So, we don't know if it's female or male. That happens because the skeletons, to see if it's a male or a female, you have to have certain features still visible.

And of course, some of the ancestors have deteriorated so much that we can't do that anymore. But we have found the end of a clay pipe, an old-fashioned clay pipe, with the letters TN. And what is interesting about it, a pipe should have a stem like this long, because they had long pipes, they were smoking like this.

But this one is broken off and they still find marks of use on this part. So probably the enslaved people were able to smoke using disregarded pipes. So, these are all finds that they were given to the enslaved people when they were buried, that show a certain amount of care and an identity.

It was not anonymous graves. They were given an identity. And what is interesting is what Raimie was telling about a glass bottle with a little bit of hair in it.

Throughout the Caribbean and North America, we do find those kinds of things. And it's often also associated with healing. And there were also three bodies excavated years ago at Wittehoek, who are also here in the heritage house.

Raimie Richardson: at White Wall

Marjolijn kok:

And there was also a burial that we associate with a healer and that person also had little pieces of glass and other objects. So, there does seem to be a trend that there were also people who were healing. And of course, yeah, these are remarkable things, because we talked about the buttons.

And it might have, often in the pictures you see the enslaved people with just a loincloth or barely any clothes. But these look like all shirt or pants, because pants didn't have zippers in those days. So, if you had the non-decorative small buttons, they are often from pants.

And these, the more copper ones that have eroded a bit, they are more nice and visible. They would be on jackets or vests. So, all these little things tell us a lot about how these people were buried as individuals.

And the plates, that's indeed a mystery, but I have read somewhere in Gabon that they also place plates on the chest in burial in a certain period. So it could be that they were, of course, different plates in Africa, but that they just made do with what they had at their disposal. So, there are links to the way people in Africa were buried or their significance.

So, I think we can learn a lot from studying those artifacts.

Raimie Richardson:

And also, one of the things that me and marjolijn also spoke about, by testing artifacts or the material that is buried here over testing the human remains, we can actually find out a lot about the whereabouts based on that information. Because everything is so well documented within the Dutch kingdom on the whereabouts of plantation owners, etc., we also have to remember there are about 300 people that we can link to the Golden Rock Plantation based on name alone.

So, we shouldn't think about these ancestors as being anonymous. We do know who actually worked on this plantation. So, there's even a possibility, hypothetically speaking, that some of the names in the register are actually now lying within this building because everything is so properly documented.

We know exactly who inherited the plantation from father to son. And one of the last things that we're currently trying to find out is when the Golden Rock burial ground was stopped being used as a plantation burial ground. So, we do not know as yet when the last person was buried, but we can have indications of when the first person, seeing there's a first ancestor burial ground there with the file teeth that was buried on the side and the others already buried.

So, we do not know as yet when the last person was buried but we can't have indications of when the first person seeing there's a first ancestor burial ground there with the file teeth that was buried on the sign and the others are in coffins.

So that goes on to show you that people were actually being buried there over multiple generations as well.

So, we still have to find out and of course the big question for the community as well is what do with the ancestors that are still actually on the site seeing that it's been a plantation for about 300 years so that means there are potentially a lot more graves um than the 69 that were actually excavated in 2021.

marjolijn kok:

we can also guesstimate that from the data we call it guesstimate because we don't really know until we excavate but I prefer we don't excavate I mean let I mean a place for them where they can rest. But there are very few women.

And if you look at the amount of children, there should have been way more women graves. So that's an indication that we haven't found the complete burial ground. And at the time of the excavations, there were also indications that there were still other graves that were left undisturbed.

Ramie Richardson:

So, for those of you that want to see where the human remains are, we will go through the building, which is at the back side there, we will go through that door. And for respect, of course, no filming or photos is allowed where the human remains are currently stored.

So, let's maybe come in groups of five.