

SETTING, LANDSCAPE, HISTORY



“All the country looks like one continued village, and every house in it as white as snow”

Governor John Hope (1722)

White roofed stone houses are an integral part of Bermuda’s built landscape. There are houses in Bermuda that date from the 17th century, and there are houses being built today that look almost exactly the same. They each have a different story to tell.

One house, for example, recently demolished, sat on top of a hill and commanded ocean views on all sides. It was owned by a wealthy merchant. Perhaps he wanted to watch his ships come in,



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or perhaps he wanted his neighbours to see how well he had done for himself. You approached this house by a long driveway, passing walled gardens once filled with roses and kitchen produce. The house had a slightly formal air, with sash windows organised in neat bays, one above the other. It was decorated inside and out with Neoclassical details that reflected the fashion of the times and the status of its owner. At the corners there were flattened pilasters. Under the eaves, stone mouldings hid its utilitarian rafter feet. A lunette above the main door lit an ornate central stair hall. This house was built by craftsmen slaves, and we even know their names - Jacob, a house joiner, two carpenters, both called Jim, and Lewis, a mason. [1]

Another house perches rather precariously on quarried land beside the road. It is tiny but self-contained, with one room upstairs at road level, and one down. Perhaps the upstairs, street level room was once used as a shop. There is an oversized chimney, unusually placed on the long side of its shallow gabled roof, which also seems to buttress the house and stop it from sliding down the hill. The house, which was built by a free black family, has small details that are familiar from larger houses of earlier days, an eyebrow to keep rainwater from the window, some brick faced steps. It shares a water tank with its close neighbours, and they also share a small garden where bananas, cassava and grapes grow in chaotic profusion. [2]

Yet another house is hard to see from the road. The land has been planted to ensure privacy. It nestles on what was once rich farmland and is now a built-up suburb. Parts of it are very old, but it grew from its hall-and-chamber nucleus over the centuries, sprouting asymmetrical wings and additions, and later acquiring a regular main façade. In the 1930s it was completely remodelled by an American architect who was sympathetic to the variety of Bermuda's built past. Its rambling new additions, even the swimming pool, lie just as comfortably in the landscape as the old house does. [3]

Each of these houses occupies a very different place in Bermuda's social and cultural landscape. What do they have in common? Their building methods and materials.

Raw materials found only in Bermuda helped to create our unique vernacular architecture. When the first settlers arrived on the *Plough* in 1612, shelter was a priority. “First of all they shall build themselves howses,” instructed a Bermuda Company official. But what should these be made of? Possible resources included cedar wood, palmetto leaves and stone. These materials were unfamiliar, and each presented problems. Cedar was dense and strong, but it only grew to a limited height and thickness. Palmetto leaves dried out and sometimes caught fire in the hot weather. Bermuda stone was far softer than any the settlers had previously known. Would it weather the storms of the Western Atlantic? These raw materials had to be tried and tested, and somehow they had to be made to work. The results? Houses that still stand today to tell us, after hundreds of years, how our ancestors learned to live in an uninhabited country.

From the early days of settlement, specialised workmen came to Bermuda and adapted to the new environment. They included workers in wood: sawyers, carpenters and master carpenters, joiners, ships’ carpenters, shingle cutters, coopers; and workers in stone: masons, labourers, stone cutters and lime burners. In Bermuda’s first century of settlement, most building was in wood. Settlers were advised to bring: “. . . sawes, hammers, pearcers, pincers and nails of all sortes so many as will serve to build a house with”. Though there are a number of speculative theories, we are really not certain how wooden houses were constructed, as almost all of the evidence has vanished, and archaeological exploration, which is relatively new in Bermuda, has not yet turned up conclusive evidence.

As Bermuda is very small, its trees were a valuable resource. But wooden houses were neither stable nor durable enough, and people gradually began building in stone. Stone houses were rare in 17th century Bermuda, even though in 1620 Governor Butler had ordered a public building in stone, the State House in St. George’s, for Parliament to meet in. [4] A number of important stone forts were built around St. George’s at this time, one of which was a small stone house, the Captain’s House on Castle Island.





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The State House we see today was rebuilt from the top of the ground floor windows up in the 1960s, based on a drawing from John Smith's map of 1624. The Captain's House, though derelict, stands much as built. [5] A small two storey house, its lower walls are built of thicker blocks than its upper ones for strength. This early wisdom became the tradition.

In addition to materials, climate was a factor to be taken into account when building a house. Our climate is generally mild but there are frequent winter storms, occasional hurricanes, high humidity and dazzling sunlight. The steady, year-round rainfall of about 60 inches made it possible for each household to collect rainwater for domestic use. This meant the development of micro-systems for water – lime-washed roofs, rainwater glides and individual water tanks. Because Bermudians are not dependent on rivers for their water supply, houses were scattered all over the Island.

Bermuda's settlement was determined by the environment, and also by social and economic factors. Following the Norwood Survey of 1616, the Bermuda Company divided the Island into eight "tribes", each subdivided into 50 "shares". There was also land for the common use, mainly in St. George's and St. David's. Shares, which were narrow strips of 25 acres, were allotted according to investment in the Company. Most of these ran the width of the main island, so each had its quota of shoreline, shelter and arable land. People then built houses in locations where the soil was scant, saving the best land for planting tobacco and food crops. Houses were commonly sited in snug corners, out of respect for hurricanes and winter gales, but they were sometimes on the waterside of safe inlets and harbours.

St George's, our first town, developed slowly. Here merchants built along the harbour's edge and around a public square. For practical reasons they often put storage rooms under a house, so main rooms were at first floor level. The earliest houses were built of framed cedar wood, with the spaces between the frame filled in with twigs and clay, and the whole then plastered and lime washed. A document tells us that by 1687 the town consisted of "about 60 houses built of timber, of about three rooms a floor. Few are of two

storeys. Some are roofed with stone, some with wood and some are thatched with palmetto leaves.” Wooden roofs would have been of sawed or split cedar shingles or shakes.

From the end of the 17th century, Bermuda’s political history changed and seafaring became the basis of the economy. After 1693 lots of land were permanently granted to settlers in St. George’s on the condition that stone houses be built on them. These stone houses must surely have increased in popularity after the two great hurricanes of 1712 and 1715 proved their superiority over wooden construction. Much of the Island’s wooden building was destroyed in these hurricanes.

Cedar wood was now highly prized for shipbuilding, and stone houses with stone slate roofs were put up in greater numbers. Many of them still exist. Early stone houses were often small, of one or two rooms with lean-to additions. Houses usually had one room called the “hall” and many had a second room called the “parlour” or “chamber”, hence the expression “hall-and-chamber house”. Inventories, which were made at the death of householders, indicate the two rooms had slightly different functions. The larger room, the hall, was more public and was used for eating, cooking and to entertain visitors. The chamber was less public and accommodated the bed, storage chests and cupboards for valuables. There was little privacy, and people slept in both rooms. The kitchen was sometimes in a separate building to avoid the risk of fires and to avoid stifling heat in summertime. It was used for cheese making, butter churning, the salting and dressing of meat, for drying vegetables and for brewing. Slaves and servants, who were involved in both building and running the house, often slept there.

Before building a stone house it was necessary to build a tank to supply masons with water. Stone houses were often built on a low semi-basement cut into bedrock, which sometimes contained a kitchen with cooking fireplace. Such early houses seem to spring out of the rock from which they are built. They form the pattern for our traditional architecture today.

As the 18th century passed, Bermuda became prosperous from sea trade, and enjoyed many international connections.

Local builders adapted styles from abroad in ways that suited the environment and building materials. The late 18th century saw grand and visibly sited Georgian houses. Other houses were sited where there was easy access to transportation. Ferries and small tenders were used to get people around and, in the 19th century, places like Salt Kettle, Red Hole and the Warwick side of the harbour, already shipbuilding areas, became popular because they were near the new town, Hamilton, where the House of Assembly now met and trade was conducted. British naval and military settlements were built and these brought with them their own building designs, adding the concept of the view from a verandah. After emancipation, new black “villages” with many small, closely grouped houses grew up in Pembroke or on the outskirts of St. George’s. Later, 20th century American tourism meant the development of Tucker’s Town, and of a new concept, houses built on the ocean so people could enjoy the pleasures of the beach.

All of these different stages of our building history, layered one over the other, combine to shape Bermuda today. But it isn’t always easy to make out the logic of the footprint of past centuries. Over the last 25 years there has been so much new building and so much loss of open space that our historic landscapes are now almost hidden from sight.

Because of its isolated position, surrounded by reefs and sea, Bermuda has always had to either rely on locally available building materials or to import materials when nothing was locally available that would serve. The next chapters of this guide look at Bermuda’s indigenous building materials, and at the ways they were used to build our unique, traditional houses.