

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT
PART I
ARCHITECTURAL DATA SECTION

REEF BAY GREAT HOUSE
Reef Bay Estate

Virgin Island National Park

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I INTRODUCTION

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 1908, the factory was stopped and intensive cultivation discontinued, and the valley since then has gradually reverted to a natural cover of woods and bush.

II SITE

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 actual bed and living rooms 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).

III HISTORY

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 an able and acquisitive farmer and succeeded subsequently in acquiring practically all the lands of Reef Bay valley as well as Lameshure, Carolina and Maho Bay 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 superceded 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 until 1951, the house has been in continuous use by William Marsh and his descendents. In the latter years of his daughters occupancy 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 or basic enough to halt the effect of the near half century of neglect and since then it has deteriorated to an alarming degree.