

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.

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

January 1960



