



September 2009 Newsletter

Stabilization and Tourism at the Gambia River's Atlantic Trade Sites: the James Island Conservation and Survey Project

By Liza Gijanto¹

Abstract

In May 2009, a detailed survey of the remaining sections of James Island and James Fort in The Gambia were documented in conjunction with the National Center for Arts and Culture (NCAC), which was directing the construction of a sea wall defense to prevent further erosion of the island. The goals of the project were to document the architectural development of the structures, identify any archaeological features, and stabilize the fort. This article details the results of the current project and of previous work completed by the author. The information gathered through this project will be used to establish new site interpretation formats and tours at the site, and will preface future research that will expand to the entirety of James Island World Heritage Area, including the villages of Albreda and Juffure.

Introduction

Throughout its 200 years of occupation, the Gambia River post on James Island changed hands numerous times as well as suffered several destructive episodes due to conflicts between different European and local powers on the river. These events led to a continual rebuilding of the fort, later known as James Fort. The attempts to rebuild the fort were often hindered by deterioration of the island due to heavy erosion that continues today and represents a major threat to the historic structure that remains. James Island's designation as a World Heritage Site in 2003 highlighted the Gambia River's unique role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent strategic position for the British in blocking the slave trade. That designation marked it as a site to be protected. However, the initial efforts to stabilize the island that came with this designation have proved deficient. Unfortunately, following the initial effort for stabilization and interpretation, the site suffered significant decay due to natural processes of erosion and storms, as well as heavy, unmonitored foot traffic by tourists. In an effort to preserve and properly

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interpret the site, the National Center for Arts and Culture (NCAC) initiated a conservation project on the island, including an interpretive component with funding provided by the United States Embassy Ambassador's Fund. This 2009 survey of the historic and archaeological resources contributes data to a new interpretation of the island.

Historical Background

Beginning with Portuguese expansion in the 15th century, the Gambia River was incorporated into the emerging Atlantic World as a center of trade on the West African Coast. The Kingdom of Niumi, where James Island is located, was tied to the outside world via a series of trade diasporas with long-term historical ties to various commercial networks, markets, centers, and trade routes at local, regional, and global scales (Austen 1987; Barry 1998; Curtin 1975; Herbert 1974; Quinn 1972; Rodney 1970; Thornton 1998; Wright 2004). With the arrival of the Portuguese in 1455 (Crone 1937), the center of trade on the river shifted from the interior Saharan trade to the Senegambia and Atlantic maritime commerce (Barry 1998; Curtin 1975: 5; Fyfe 1965; Teixeira da Mota 1976). The French, English, Spanish, and Dutch soon followed the Portuguese in the exploration and participation in what was to become a major center of the trans-Atlantic trade in the Senegambia (Rodney 1965: 308). At the end of the 18th century the two major European powers in the Senegambia were the French and British (Fage 1969: 70). The British established their headquarters on James Island while the French held a post at Albreda on the north bank of the river directly opposite and within full view of the island (Figure 1).

The first known documented reference to James Island by European explorers or merchants was from the Portuguese merchant Cadamasto's account from the mid-15th century. Cadamasto was presumably the first European to set foot on James Island, which he named St. Andrew's after a crewman who had died on his second voyage to the Gambia. Before his ship proceeded upriver, the man was buried on the island and the name was given (Crone 1937: 67-69). Following this action in 1455, the island lay undeveloped until James, Duke of Courland, purchased it from the King of Barra (Niumi) in 1651 (Gailey 1965: 22).²

2. The former Niumi Kingdom was often referred to as Barra, the name of the port at the entrance of the Gambia River.

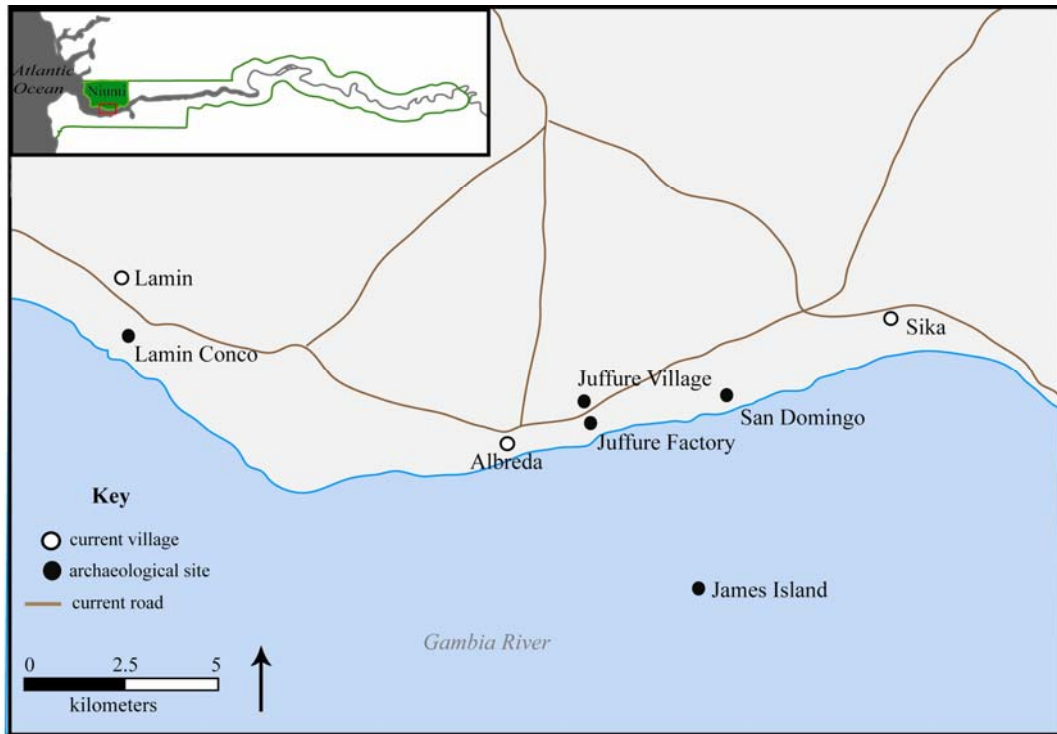


Figure 1. The former Niimi commercial center including Atlantic Period trade sites in relation to James Island.

The Courlander's (Latvians) occupation of the island was short lived, though this small Duchy had managed to construct the first fort on the island (Zook 1919: 164). At this time, the Portuguese monopoly in the Senegambia was quickly coming to an end under pressure from British, Dutch, and French traders (Rice 1967: 72-76; Zook 1969: 329-30; see Paris 2001). The Dutch managed to gain the advantage when the Duke of Courland was captured by Sweden in 1659, and his chief agent was persuaded to sign over the rights of trade on the river. However, fate was briefly on the side of the Courlanders, when the King of Barra interfered and forced the Dutch to retreat to Cape Verde after one month's time, allowing the Courlanders to regain possession of James Island (Zook 1919: 164-165).

The arrival of British merchants of the Company of Royal Adventurers, led by Captain Holmes under the auspices of King Charles the II, signaled a shift in power on the Gambia River. Shortly after entering the river, Holmes seized control of James Island and claimed exclusive rights to the river trade for the British. This incident set the stage for future hostilities between the British and French. The rights to James (then St. Andrew's) Island dragged on through November of 1664 between the English, Dutch, and Duke of Courland. Both the Dutch and

Courlanders claimed ownership, but the British were physically in possession of the island through the Company of Royal Adventurers (Gailey 1965: 22-23; Rice 1967: 74-75). In 1664 a partial resolution was reached when the Duke of Courland relinquished the island for limited trading rights on the river under the protection of the British crown, and was also given possession of the Caribbean island of Tobago (Rice 1967: 73; Zook 1969: 33-34).

The Royal Adventurers met with a long series of failures and obstacles, beginning with the destruction of James Fort by fire almost immediately following their occupation under Captain Holmes (Zook 1919: 166). They were quickly succeeded by the Gambia Adventurers, a new British company, which was granted sole trading rights in northern Africa for seven years beginning in 1669, even though they officially operated under the authority of the Royal Adventurers (Gailey 1965: 23; Zook 1969: 22; Davies 1957: 57). Again, this group was unable to sustain their position on the river or to maintain James Island, which quickly fell into disrepair.

In 1684 both the Gambia Adventurers and Company of Royal Adventurers admitted defeat, and relinquished their monopoly of the river trade to a third company, the Royal African Company (RAC) (Gailey 1965: 23). The RAC was officially formed in 1672 and was given a complete monopoly over the British trade between Africa and the West Indies (Carlos and Kruse 1996: 291; Davies 1957: 15). This company fared better than its predecessors and lasted until 1750 with varying periods of success and failure. Following the pattern established by previous occupants, James Fort was maintained as the Company's primary holding and from this point the company governor oversaw British interests on the river (Moore 1738: 16). As it operated during the height of trans-Atlantic trade on the Gambia in the mid-18th century, the RAC successfully established numerous trading factories along the river and creeks including the factory at Juffure (Gailey 1965: 23-24; BNA T70/550). It was during this period that James Fort was successively destroyed and rebuilt as a result of various conflicts with the French (Figure 2).

In the early 19th century, James Island was officially abandoned by the British as the base of commercial operations following the establishment of Bathurst as the official colonial capital on the south bank opposite the port of Barra. In spite of this official abandonment, the Island was still used, and in 1816 the fort was repaired by the colonial government (GNA CSO 1/1) and maintained as an outpost through the 1820s in order to monitor the French commercial

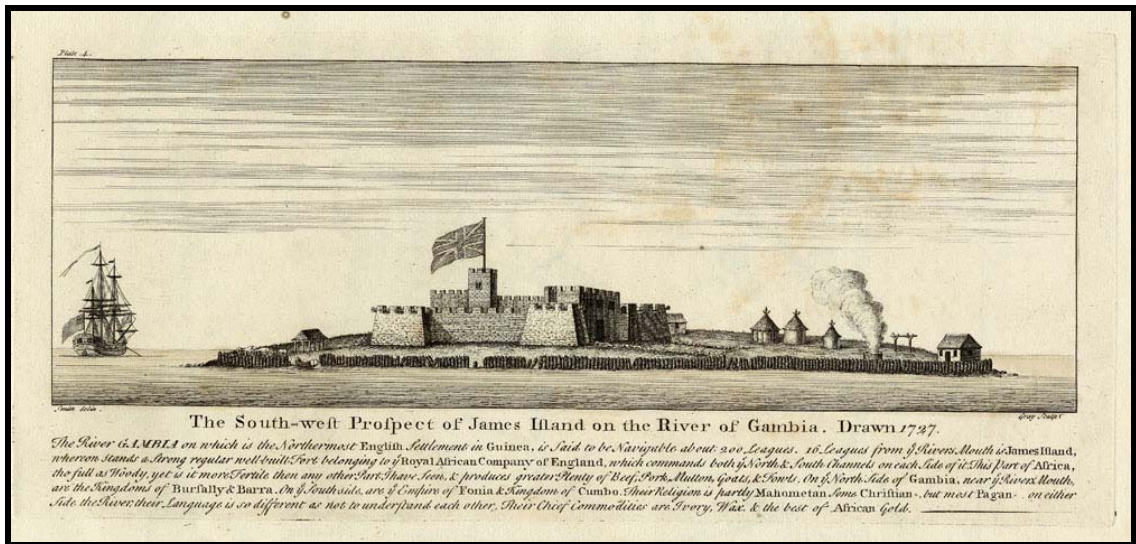


Figure 2. From William Smith, *Thirty different drafts of Guinea* (London, 1727), plate 4 (on file at The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia).

activities at Albreda. A letter from the British Admiral Grant, dated June 20, 1816, states that although James Island no longer possessed any advantage in the trade or prevention of the slave trade, it was still considered important as an observation post. Presumably, this importance was a result of its proximity to Albreda. Therefore he “directed the workmen to proceed in repairing the houses inside the ramparts” (GNA CSO1/1). The renovated fort did not last long. It was destroyed for the last time in 1830 by the King of Barra, who seized all the remaining supplies held at the fort during the Barra War (BNA CO 714/56). Following this event, the island was permanently abandoned by the British and left to deteriorate. It is believed that many of the fallen bastions and external walls observed on the island today are the remnants of the 19th century conflict.

James Island Conservation and Management Plan

The two main goals of the 2009 initiative to preserve James Island and the fort are: (1) to stabilize of the fort, including the construction of a sea wall to block further erosion on the north side of the island; and (2) to provide an interactive site interpretation as well as more historically informed site tours. At the request of the NCAC and Mr. Chris Honeycutt of the U.S. Peace Corps, I oversaw the recording of all visible archaeological and architectural remains on James Island in May 2009. This included a detailed documentation of the fort ruins comprised of

section drawings, plans, and photographs of significant architectural features, repairs, and collapsed walls. This information was used to determine which portions of the structure were in the greatest need of repair, but also to ensure the historic integrity of the fort as these repairs were conducted. Over 400 photographs of James Fort, numerous section plans of standing walls, and a detailed site map were compiled during the ten days of on-site work. In addition, the entire island was surveyed and mapped using a combination of hand-held GPS, transit, and Brunton compasses at low tide in an effort to document all visible foundations of the many outlying structures present on the island.³ Those remains identified as part of this project are primarily structures built after 1755 and include storerooms, soldier's barracks, and slave quarters as well as three former landing sites. The remaining fort structure recorded in May 2009 has sustained extensive deterioration over the last few years, including the collapse of most of the northwest bastion. While the entire island has suffered significant levels of erosion from the tidal flows of the river, it is the north side that has been affected the most.

The cistern, northwest bastion, and northeast bastion are subject to continuous destabilization at high tide. In order to combat this, the NCAC has erected a sea wall to block the tide from reaching the fort, and has undertaken to rebuild or stabilize the interior sections of the fort that have collapsed or are at risk for further damage during the rainy season.

Archaeological surface collections were conducted along the north side of the island where the sea wall was constructed.⁴ From this work, I determined that all artifacts in this area were deposited during high tide by the river, and were not eroding from existing ground surface. Neither archaeological nor construction excavations were conducted as part of this project due to the fact that the fort is highly unstable, and the sea wall was to be constructed on the current ground surface. The posts used in its construction were simply driven into the ground, because the extremely rocky nature of the coastal portions of the island prevented post holes from being dug (Figure 3). The entire area where the sea wall was built is covered with laterite and other stone, preventing any form of excavation, either archaeological or for current construction.

3. Mapping and surface collection were completed with the assistance of Mr. Chris Honeycutt of the US Peace Corps, as well as Amy Publicover and Seth Farber. Both are undergraduate anthropology majors at St. Mary's College of Maryland and served as interns at the NCAC under the direction of Mr. Baba Ceeseey.

4. Surface collection was carried out on the island in 2006 in order to hinder tourist theft of artifacts (see Figure 16, below).



Figure 3. The James Island sea wall (photograph by Mr. Baba Ceesey, NCAC).

Survey Results and Archaeological Assessment

For several reasons explained above, work on James Island in 2009 was limited to mapping and identification of potential archaeological features. Mapping concentrated on the extant interior fort complex, and outlying foundations only visible at low tide. The following is a brief assessment of the remaining structures and identification of the uses of historic buildings and rooms. These identifications were largely made using a 1755 survey map of the island, which included proposed renovations to James Fort that appear to have taken place (Figure 4). Identification of many of these rooms was difficult, because there are many recorded instances of renovations, and presumably unrecorded construction episodes during the colonial era, plus recent NCAC attempts at restoration and stabilization that have altered the island's appearance since 1755.

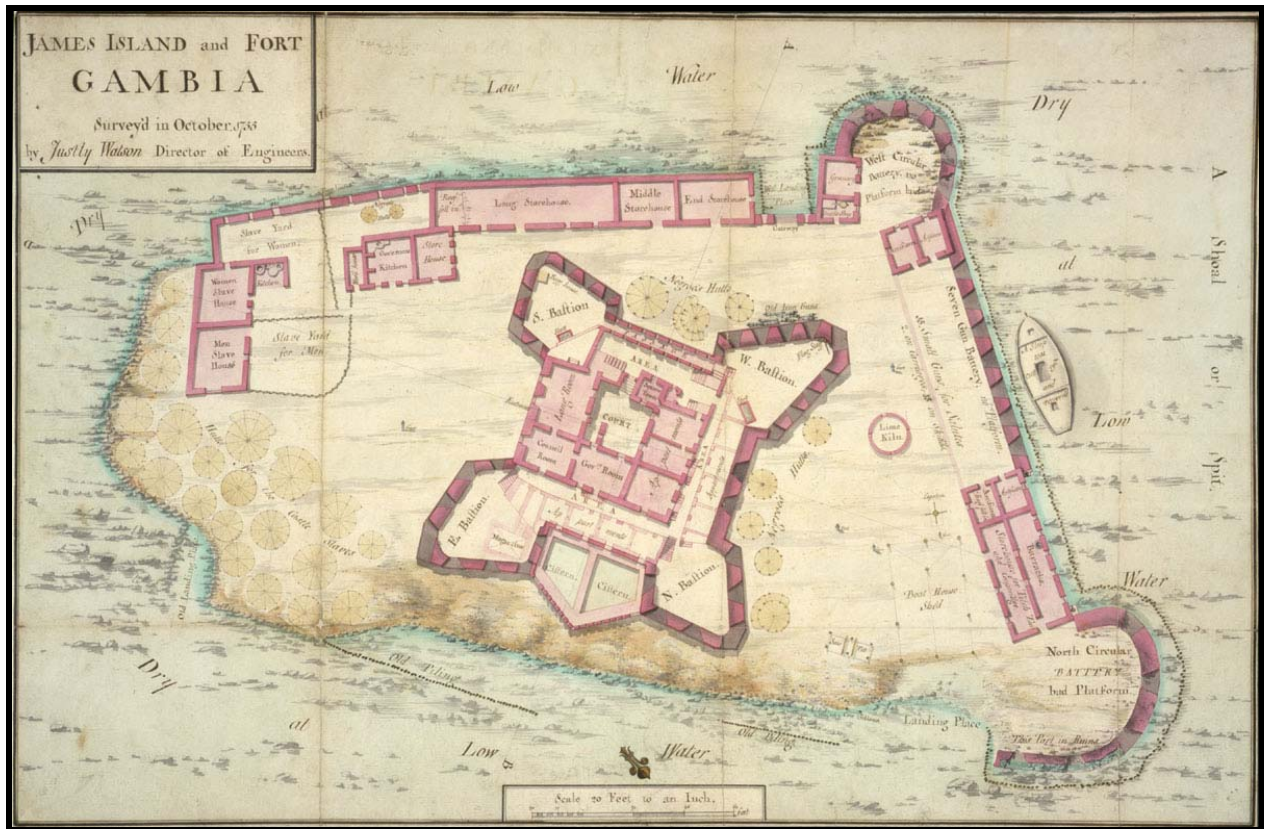


Figure 4. Survey of James Island by John Watson in October 1755 (BNA MPG1/224).

Several foundations outside of the main fort were identified, photographed, and mapped as part of this survey. Some of these structures were previously recorded during a 1948 survey of the island. However, foundations located as part of the 1948 survey on the southeast portion of the island do not match those present on the 1948 map and include foundations from the 1755 slave houses (see Figure 4). These foundations, as well as those from the storehouses along the south side of the island and landing spot in the northeast, are only visible during low tide. These structures, all cannons, landing sites, and a number of unidentified foundations that could not be matched with any available maps of the island or historic accounts were mapped and noted on the site plan created for this project (see Figures 16-18). Because the major focus of the project was to record the portions of the fort that were subject to conservation, these features will not be addressed in detail in this article. Rather, the findings from the assessment of the fort interior and exterior are presented below, as well as the potential for future site interpretation.

The Fort Interior

The interior of the fort has fared better than most of the exterior. A small portion of the upper level of the central fort area remains and includes the bastion floors with the exception of the southeast. The outline of former walls associated with the western apartments between the northwest and southwest bastion are also somewhat discernable. The complete extent of the surviving fort is blurred by a series of stabilization efforts by the NCAC, completed at various times beginning in 1997, coupled with heavy erosion and bastion collapse which has made it impossible to identify many of the internal separations in the upper level of the fort. On the south side of the fort, a small section of the 1755 passage remains as well as the remnants of the rooms to the west of the tower (Figure 5). On this side, as seen in Figure 5, there is an

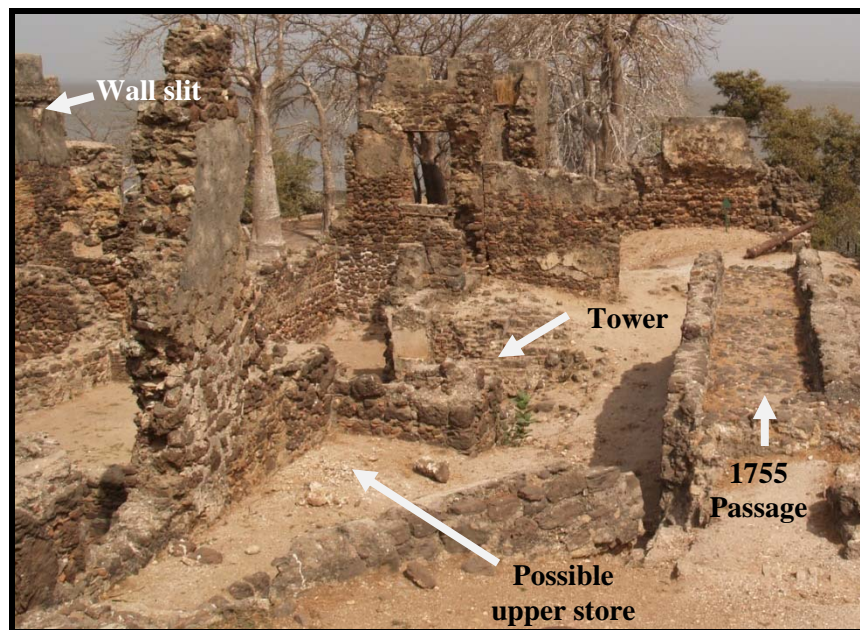


Figure 5. View of upper room foundation to the west of the former tower, taken from the southwest bastion (photograph by author).

unidentified room that was next to the former tower and southwest bastion that possibly served as a store. Finally, a section of the fort that contained the upper apartments between the northwest and northeast bastion abutting the cistern and the magazine, are present, and are in relatively good condition (Figure 6). While portions of the second floor wall above the governor's room in the northern section of the fort are complete, none of the floors associated

with any upper story rooms that were not constructed using stone remain. In these walls, opening for windows and doors, and slits for floor boards, are present as well (see Figure 5).



Figure 6. North upper apartments between northwest and northeast bastions, view from the east (photograph by author).

The lower level rooms, and in particular the internal separations, are more intact than those on the upper level. A single wall creating a passage area between the long room and council room was added sometime after 1755, though the exact date of construction is not known (see Figure 7 and 4). In addition to apartments, five other spaces have been identified, including the former governor's room, council room, long room, courtyard, and lower floor of the tower. The governor's room, council room, and long room were identified by the NCAC in 1997 and contain plywood signs identifying them as such to visitors (Figure 8). The courtyard and the tower area are not currently marked for tourists. As seen in many of these images, features of the fort construction are apparent in several walls which indicate shifts in material (i.e., stone and brick), wall repairs, and additions to the fort over time as seen in Figure 7. Unfortunately, repairs made to the ruins after its abandonment including the reconstruction or addition of stairs, are not always distinguishable from historic period construction phases.



Figure 7. Lower level western apartments showing the absence of internal wall taken from the south (photograph by author).

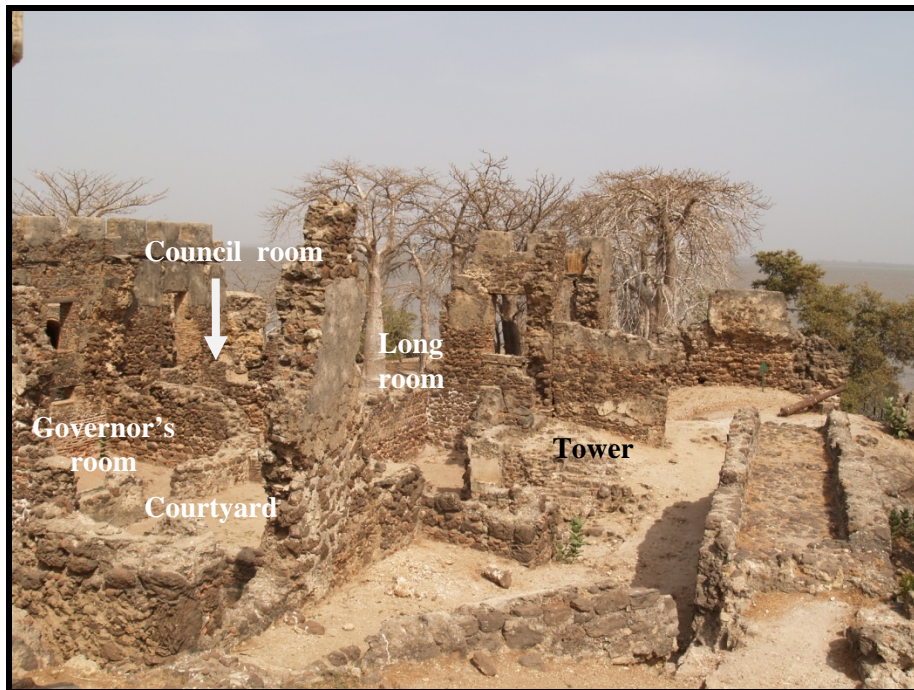


Figure 8. View of interior fort from the southwest bastion showing the governor's room, council room, long room, and courtyard (photograph by author).

Focus of External Stabilization

The area of the fort targeted for protection by the seawall includes the section between the northeast and northwest bastion in addition to the cistern constructed in 1755. A significant portion of this bastion has collapsed while the eastern section abutting the cistern was partially rebuilt by the NCAC in 1997. The remaining western wall has a large crack and the northern most section has become completely detached (Figure 9). Stabilization efforts here are limited to iron bars to prevent further collapse, strategically put in place between 1997 and 2003. The entire north side adjacent to the cistern has collapsed and is quickly eroding into the river (Figure 10). The height of the high tide -- particularly during the rainy season -- has compromised the base of the bastion while foot traffic from tourists has lead to further decay of the interior surfaces. One of three cannons within the fort walls is on this bastion and it is believed that the stairs leading on top of the bastion date to at least the 1755 renovations of the fort. The entire remaining portions of the walls and floor are constructed of local cut laterite stone and mortar consisting of crushed oyster shell. The interior wall has also been stabilized by the NCAC.

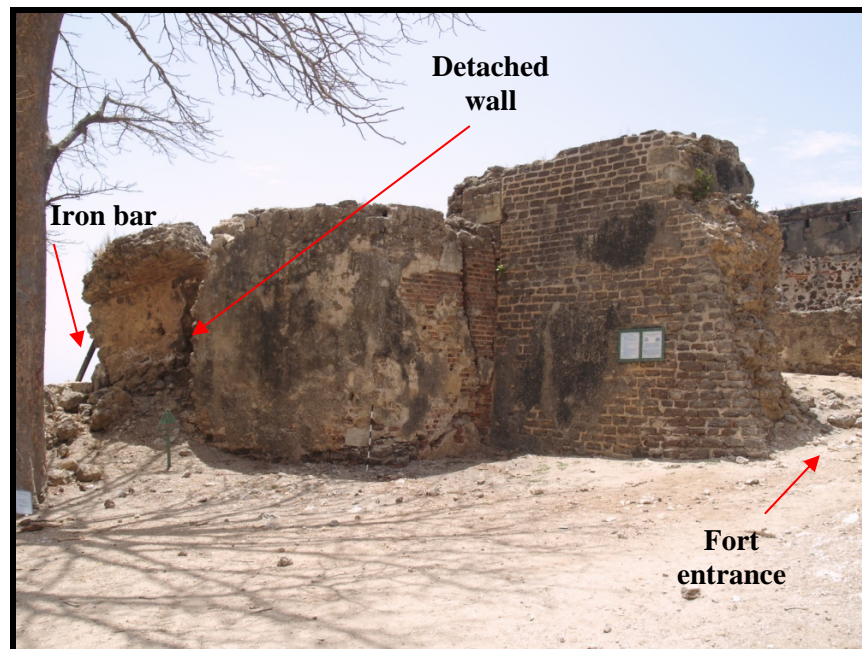


Figure 9. The northwest bastion from the west showing the detachment of the wall and past stabilization efforts (photograph by author).



Figure 10. Collapsed north wall of the northwest bastion (photograph by author).

The northeast bastion has the only interior room (the magazine) out of the four bastions (Figure 11-12). It has also suffered the most damage from erosion and vegetation. A baobab tree has destabilized the bastion's base along the river, and few exterior walls remain. As part of this project under the NCAC, the tree has been anchored, though not removed in order to prevent further collapse. As a result, the northeast bastion has received the greatest attention from the NCAC in terms of stabilization and restoration (see Figure 12). A large portion of the eastern wall has been rebuilt. Finally, although parts of the original stairs remain, in the collapsed portion of the south side of the bastion, a larger stair was added by the NCAC in the 1990s (see Figure 11).

The cistern was identified and signed during the 1997 conservation efforts by the NCAC on the fort and island.⁵ The extent of the island -- even at low tide -- on the north side was never large, and appears to have been consistently smaller throughout the last two centuries than the portion of land available on the south side. The current ground surface is extremely rocky

5. Archaeological monitoring and guidance were provided by Red Tobin in 1997.



Figure 11. East wall of southeast bastion showing NCAC rehabilitation efforts (photograph by author).



Figure 12. North wall of southeast bastion showing significant collapse and baobab tree growing at the base (photograph by author).

because the ground surface associated with the fort has been washed away over time. During high tide, the foundation of the cistern is almost inundated (Figure 13). The east and west walls

as well as the interior wall that abuts the north side of the fort are nearly complete (Figure 14). The floor has also been partially rebuilt by the NCAC including the central wall foundation. As with other walls of the fort interior, the use of various building materials, including the haphazard presence of Dutch yellow and red brick are mixed in the cistern walls. Historical accounts of constant leaking and repairs of the cistern partially explain this seemingly haphazard construction (Lawrence 1965: 257).



Figure 13. West side of cistern at high tide (photograph by author).

Prospects for Site Interpretation and Conclusions

Several maps of the island and historic structures have been produced in order to guide any future archaeological work on James Island. In terms of site interpretation, these will also be used to formulate both self-guided and guided tours of the island and will be incorporated into brochures detailing the island's history. At this time, the sea wall has been completed, and a series of new interpretative panels based on the findings of this project are being produced.

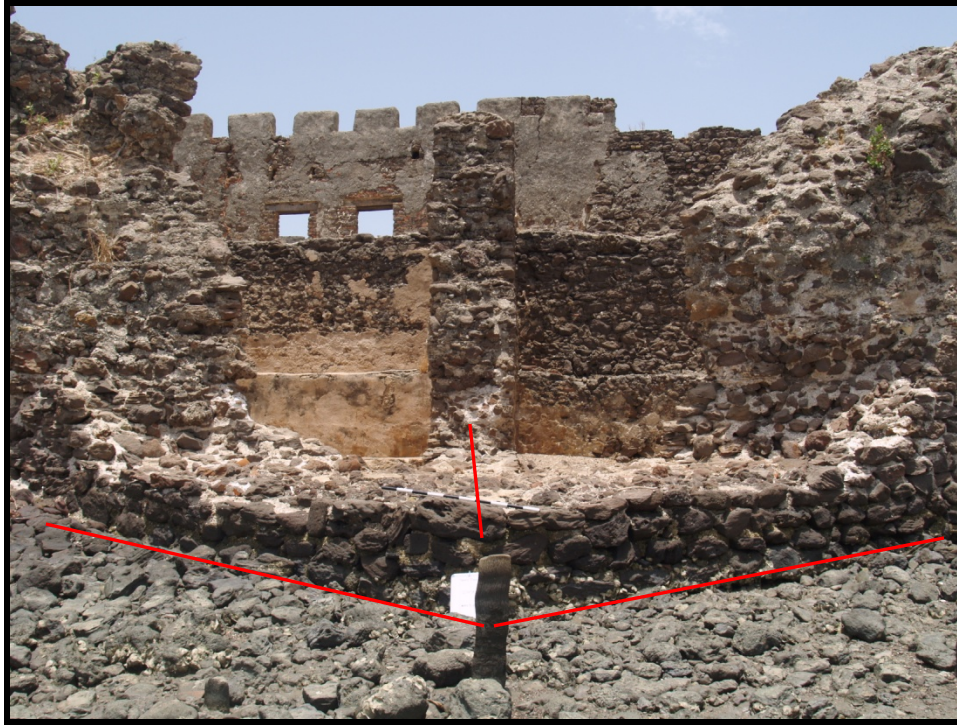


Figure 14. Cistern taken from the north at low tide showing interior south walls, dividing wall and reconstructed foundation marked with red (photograph by author).

These six panels, in addition to model of the fort based on the 1755 map, will serve as self-guided tour markers (Figure 15). A single introductory panel will provide a brief description of the island's history and a timeline for the fort's occupation, reconstruction, and abandonment based on historical information I gathered from the British and Gambian National Archives between 2004 and 2008. The remaining five panels will be scattered throughout the fort and the island providing in-depth descriptions of the different rooms and out structures, in addition to company employees, daily life on the island, and the location's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

While the north side is now somewhat protected from the elements and interior portions of the fort have been stabilized, the site is still threatened by unauthorized use of the island at night by fisherman, as well as by heavy foot traffic by tourists. Ultimately, it is hoped that the information compiled here and results from future projects will be incorporated into guided tours of the island. Currently, tourists are often taken to the island without a guide and allowed to walk over unstable features of the fort. For both safety and site preservation reasons, the NCAC is planning to provide detailed guided tours for future visitors.



Figure 15. Model of James Island based on the 1755 survey map (photograph by Mr. Baba Ceesey, NCAC).

Figure 16:
James Island Survey 2009

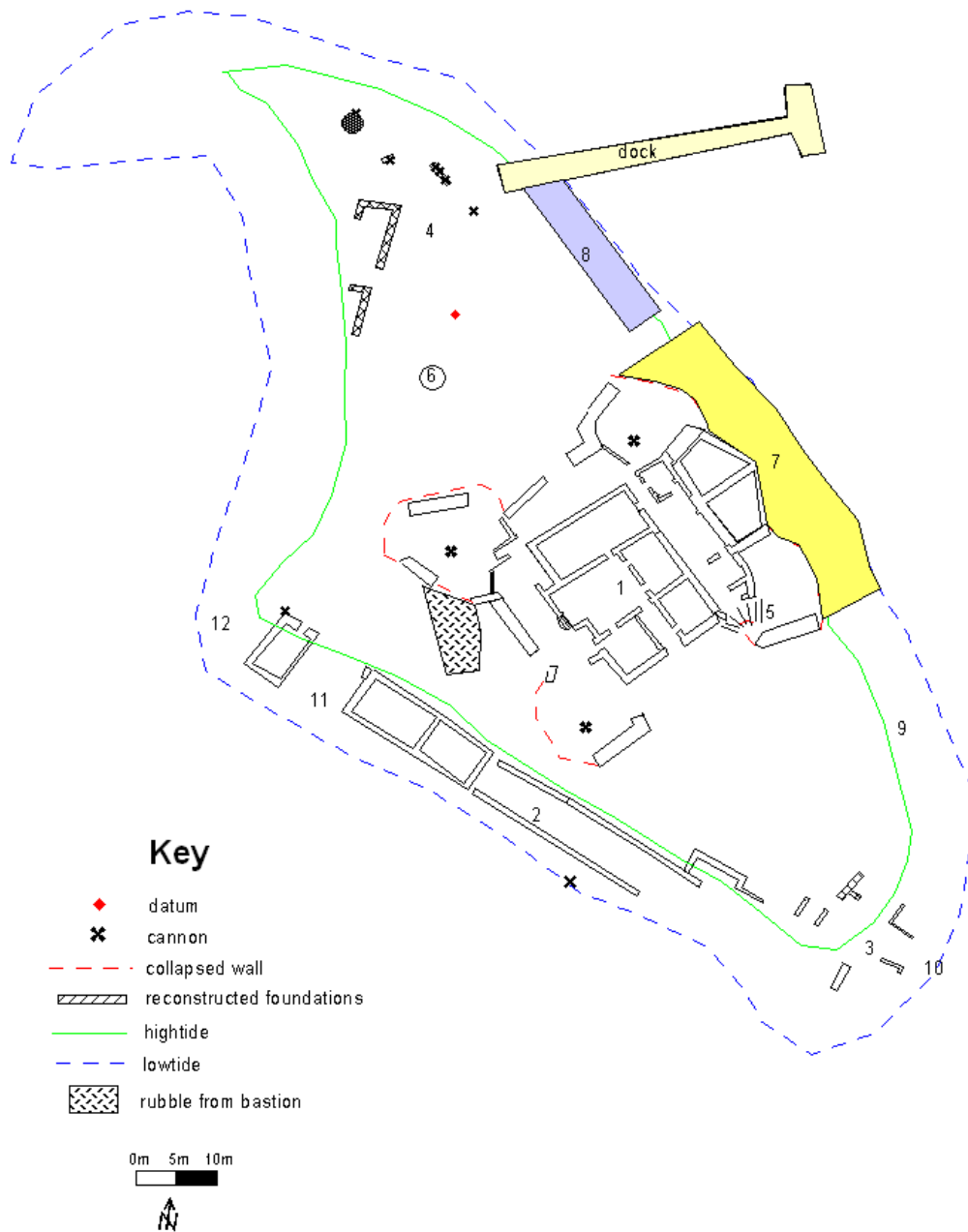


Figure 16 legend:

1. Main fort structure.
2. Storerooms corresponding to 1755 map only visible at low tide.
3. Unidentified foundations only visible at low tide.
4. Reconstructed foundations and cannon placements.
5. Recently constructed stairway and fort entrance.
6. Lime kiln foundation corresponding to 1755 map.
7. 2009 work area for sea wall defense and site of 2009 surface collection.
8. 2006 surface collection area.
9. Former landing site from 1727 map.
10. Possible site of eastern battery or former landing.
11. Landing site from 1755 map.
12. Possible remnants from southwest battery.

Figure 17:
James Island Historic Features

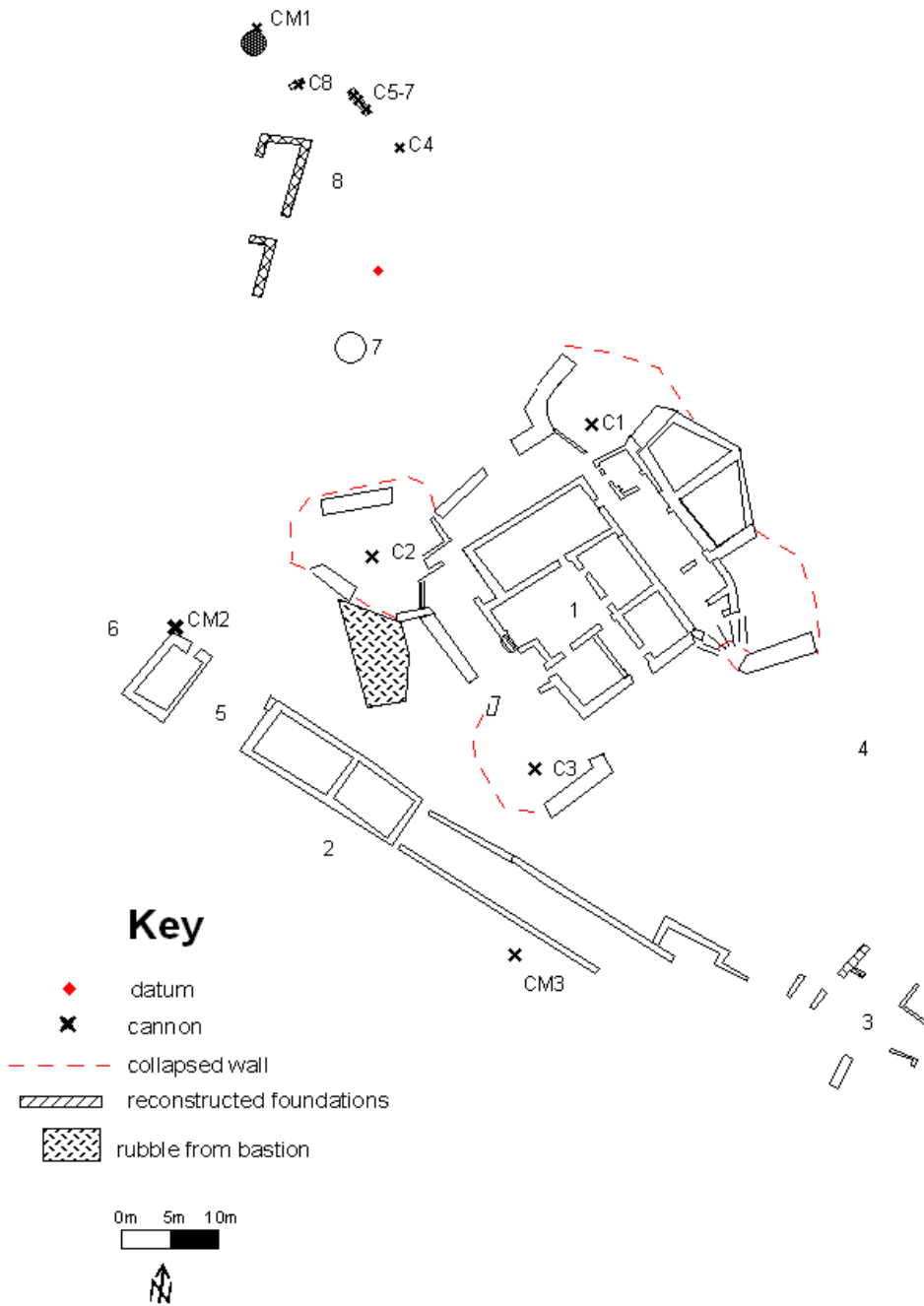


Figure 17 legend:

1. Interior fort complex.
2. Storehouse foundations corresponding with the 1755 map.
3. Slave quarter area and unidentified foundations.
4. Former landing site from the 1727 map.
5. Former landing site from the 1755 map.
6. Area associated with the northwest battery on the 1755 map.
7. Lime kiln foundation from the 1755 map.
8. Reconstructed foundations and remounted cannons. The foundations may be from former barracks and storehouses on the 1755 map.

Miscellaneous Cannons:

CM1. This cannon was located at the base of the baobab tree at the northwest tip of the island. The cannon is embedded on the north side and only partially visible. The area has been built up with laterite stone and local grasses. The cannon is extremely eroded and unidentifiable.

CM2. This cannon is again partially visible and is very eroded. The cannon abuts a partial wall of the southern storerooms located to the south of the southwest bastion.

CM3. This cannon is only visible at low tide and is completely covered in oyster shell. It is located on the south side of the island, directly south of the southeast bastion.

Cannons:

C1. Located on the northwest bastion, and is not mounted. It has been identified as a 24 pounder, manufactured in 1777.

C2. Located on the southwest bastion, this is the best preserved cannon on the island. Several markings are still visible on the top, and trunnions of the cannon. This is also the only mounted cannon on a wheeled base.

C3. This cannon is located on the southeast bastion and contains no visible markings. It is significantly smaller and more corroded than the previous two discussed above (C1 and C2).

C4. This cannon has been remounted and is one of two long cannons present on the island. Its original location is unknown, and there are no visible markings.

C5-C7. This is a grouping of three smaller cannons, remounted together near the current dock. Again, their original location is unknown and there are no visible markings.

C8. This is the second long cannon and has been remounted at the northeastern tip of the island. The stone mount constructed for the cannon once contained an inscription, but this is no longer present. There are no visible markings on the cannon and its original location is unknown.

Figure 18:
James Fort Feature Identification

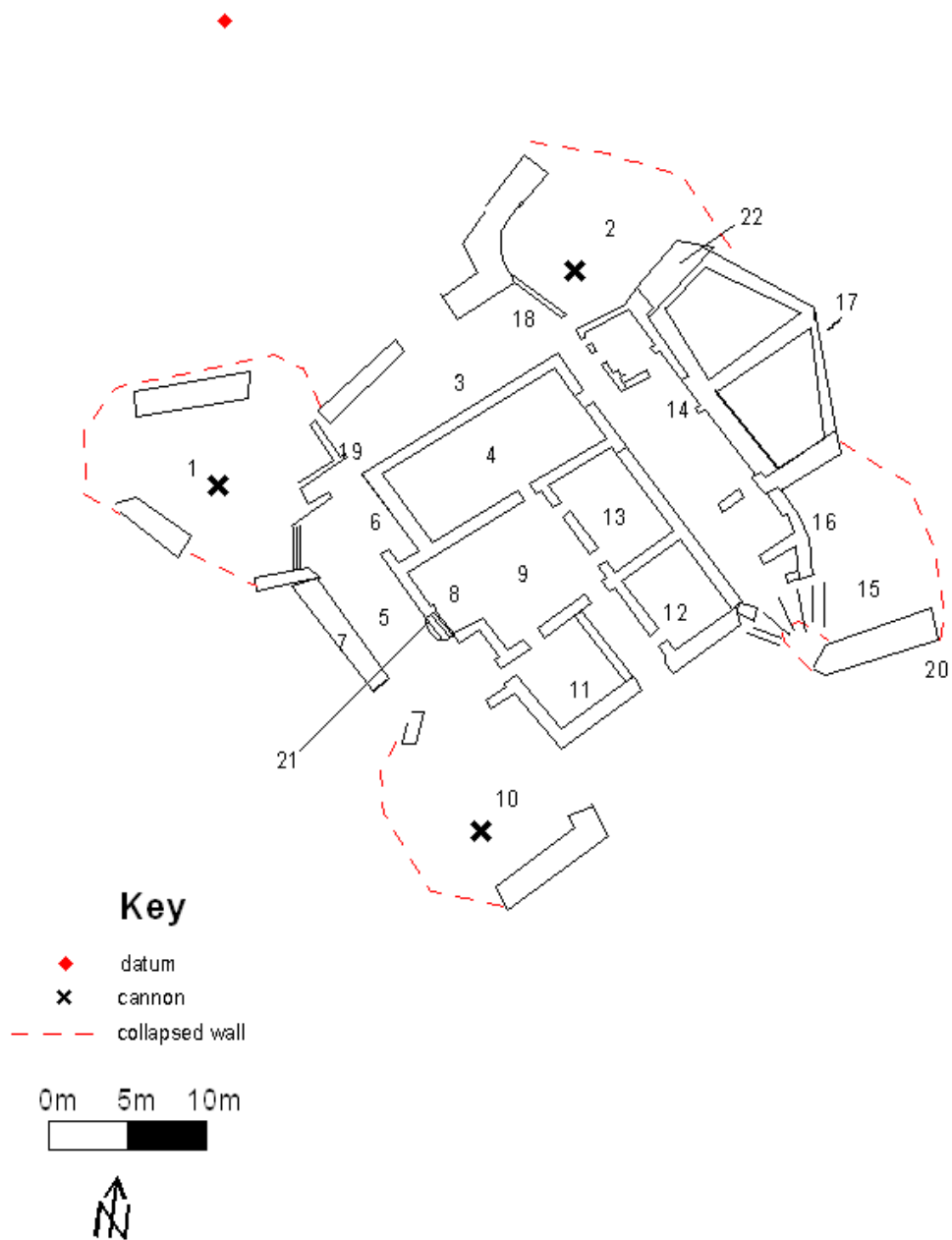


Figure 18 legend:

1. Southwest bastion
2. Northwest bastion
3. Current open area, former site of apartments (1755)
4. Apartments from 1727 and 1755 maps
5. Open passage area from 1755 map
6. Unidentified room next to tower 1755 map
7. Passage from 1755 map opposite tower
8. Site of former tower
9. Courtyard area (all historic maps)
10. Southeast bastion
11. Long room 1755 map, powder magazine 1695
12. Council room 1755 map. This as well as the area containing 13 and 4 is labeled apartments on the 1727 map. This is most likely in reference to the second floor rooms
13. Governor's room, 1755
14. Old barracks on the 1727 map and apartments and passage area in 1755
15. Northeast bastion including added stairs of unknown date
16. Powder magazine located under bastion
17. Cistern added by 1755 the area indicated was reconstructed by the NCAC in 1997
18. Stabilization area built by the NCAC
19. Area stabilized after fort abandonment
20. Partially reconstructed wall by the NCAC in 1997
21. Reconstructed staircase associated with the tower
22. Reconstructed wall by the NCAC in 1997

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