

Chattel Houses of Barbados

by Valerie Smith

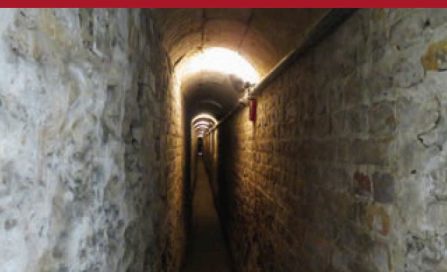


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Figure 1: UNESCO sites, Barbados. Courtesy of visitbarbados.org

Barbados - A Painful Past

Barbados is considered the "birthplace of the British slave society and the most ruthlessly colonized by Britain's ruling elites."¹ In November 2021, Barbados declared it would become a republic severing its ties with British rule. Officials stated, "the time has come to fully leave our colonial past behind."² This decision is a step that helps Barbados move forward and acknowledge the atrocities committed by the British with the slave trade in Barbados. The tourism industry in Barbados needs to do more to recognize the pain caused by colonizers. In researching this bulletin, it wasn't easy to find African heritage sites to visit in Barbados. There is little mention of slavery, and slave narratives are missing from current tourist sites. Barbados' tourism sites glorify colonial history and typically fail to mention the cruelty and lasting effect the brutality of the British has had on its people.

Mass Tourism

Mass tourism in Barbados is centered around the coast, which is true of tourism in other Caribbean locations. Mass tourism sites are perfectly packaged to give tourists a curated experience and do not accurately reflect that location's culture. In addition, most of the tourism does not benefit the local economy. These are known as "tourist bubbles," which are "constructed clean, safe and attractive self-contained environments in which to entertain."³ In Barbados, most tourist activities (even those located inland from the coast) fit that description of the tourist bubble. The top tourist activities in Barbados (listed on Tripadvisor) are catamaran cruises, snorkeling, private island tours, wildlife sanctuary, cave tours, walking food tours, turtle and shipwreck adventure, rum tasting, plantation/great house tours, and monkey feeding.⁴

Some tours give visitors the impression they are getting a taste of local Barbados. Still, in reality, they are "inauthentic" and erase African heritage. According to an old internet post, a tour group called "Chattel House Audio Tours Inc" told histories relating to African heritage. A similar tour was not found to be offered to tourists currently. The tours presently offered appeal to a

predominately white audience. The tour of Speightstown visits and glorifies colonist sites: "This tour takes you for a relaxing and informative stroll through the quaint town of Speightstown which is always awash with activity but somehow maintains its British colonial charm".⁵

Heritage Bias

It is essential to note bias in the preservation field, which contributes to missing African heritage sites. In recent years, UNESCO has focused on vernacular architecture and local building heritage. Yet, much of the UNESCO-designated sites in the Caribbean still center around their colonial past. Intangible heritage in the Caribbean has also begun to be incorporated in UNESCO designations, including Jamaican reggae music in 2018.⁶ Yet, this is only one location in the Caribbean, and Barbados' cultural traditions in music, dance, art, etc., have gone unnoticed.

UNESCO sites in Barbados presently include the George Washington House, The Garrison, the Israel Synagogue, the National Armory, the Old Fort and Light House, the Lord Nelson Statue, St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, etc. These primarily appeal to mass tourism and could be considered "tourist bubble sites."⁷ The official brochure listing UNESCO sites encourages tourists to visit Bridgetown, which is an "outstanding example of British colonial architecture...which testifies to the spread of Great Britain's Atlantic colonial empire."⁸

Roots Tourism

"Roots" tourism is "a symbolic return to an ancestral homeland often made visible by the idea or racial memory of Africa as a familial place of origin in the transatlantic slave trade."⁹ African Americans have traveled to Africa for many decades to honor their ancestors and learn about their heritage. The concept became popular during the Harlem Renaissance when writers and intellectuals such as Langston Hughes journeyed to Africa in the 1920s.¹⁰ This trend continues today and has been labeled "roots" tourism. One such example of a roots tourist site is Elmina Castle in Ghana. This castle contains a dungeon that kept Africans locked up until they were made to board slave ships at



Figure 2: One-room and One-room with lean-to Chattel Houses. Courtesy of UNESCO

the onset of the slave trade. There is growing support for roots tourism sites in places other than Africa. The sites are “where material evidence of the legacy of slavery still stands before their eyes and is available to be touched, walked through, and experienced with all of their senses and with the movement of their bodies through the space.”¹¹

While some may choose not to uncover these painful memories, others hope that learning about their ancestors will heal. At Elmina, man’s cruelty is at the forefront, and the suffering of the enslaved is brought to life as visitors walk through the dungeon. The chattel houses of Barbados also tell the narrative of slavery. This narrative shows resilience and ingenuity. Roots tourists should also be exposed to how the enslaved constructed chattel houses in Barbados. This architectural form is key to the history of Africans in Barbados and reveals a narrative that is currently underrepresented and overlooked.

What is a chattel house?

A chattel is defined as movable personal property.¹² The original use of the word relates to how African slaves in Barbados were considered “lifelong chattels.”¹³ Later this term came to refer to the homes of the slaves that were “moveable” due to the way they were constructed. After emancipation, slaves lived on rented land and were employed by plantation owners. If their employment was terminated, they needed to move off the land and would take their chattel house with them. Like prefabricated structures, the parts could easily be dismantled, stacked, and

assembled in another location.

The chattel house is a unique typology found in Barbados (but the term and style spread to other areas such as Trinidad). Authentic chattel houses have high gable roofs with corrugated metal or four-hip roofs. They are raised on blocks and contain a tightly-packed coral stone foundation. The street-facing facade is symmetrical, with a door in the middle and a window on each side. Chattel houses are made of wood and have mortise and tenon assembly (i.e., no nails used for construction). Ventilation and cooling were crucial components, achieved through jalousie flaps or fixed louvers.

As families gained more income over the years, the original one-room form of the chattel house expanded. Rooms were added in the back, along with lean-to kitchens. Pediment porches were sometimes added to show off a homeowner’s income, and bell-shaped hoods over windows. As rooms were added, so were other gable roofs. Chattel houses’ construction and additions required talented artisans and carpenters to design and build the structures. Some people enjoyed growing up in chattel houses even though they were associated with limited financial means as homes for emancipated slaves. Chattel houses were clustered together (as many still are today). They formed a village and provided a sense of community.

Chattel House Tropes

The official tourism Barbados site says that “today the chattel house has become an architectural icon of Barbados and is used in shopping malls, craft markets, and historic parks.”¹⁴ This greater appreciation for the chattel that has developed in recent years is often found in kitschy and fantasy-like adaptations. The chattel house is curated to appeal to tourists and for the “tourist gaze.” Commercial businesses have repurposed them as retail spaces to attract tourists, including the brightly colored “Chattel Village.” They are barely recognizable as an authentic chattel house, and their history of emancipated slaves is not represented. The Barbados National Trust preserved a group of chattel houses which can be seen as part of the Tyrol Cot site, which is the former estate of Sir Grantley Adams. While this presents a closer representation of chattel house history, it appeals primarily to mass tourism rather than to educate visitors about African heritage.

The St. Nicholas Abbey plantation tour has attempted to include a chattel house at their site. The chattel house was listed on their website, yet, no images were provided, and it couldn’t be located on the map. Browsing through their website shows the emphasis is on the great house (including its renovation, which is covered in great detail). Some tourists commented on the lack of inclusion of the slavery narrative during the plantation visit, which shows the continued unwillingness of mass tourism sites to include these histories. The commodification of the chattel house for mass tourism in boutiques, Tyrol Cot, and St. Nicholas Abbey failed to pay tribute to the emancipated slaves who built the houses.

The Modern Chattel House and Appropriation

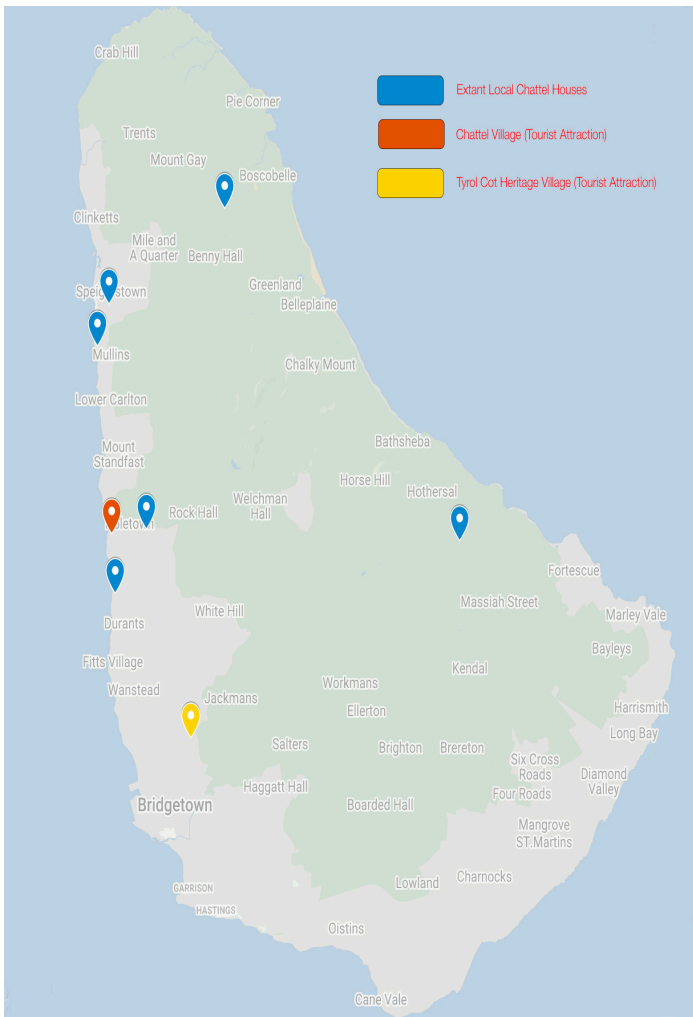


Figure 3: Map of Chattel House Locations. Courtesy of Google Maps.

Modern adaptations of chattel houses have become romanticized by newer generations of homeowners. They rent them out as vacation homes, and people who stay are likely unaware of their history (or that they only loosely resemble authentic chattel houses). Many of these “chattel houses” are just wooden bungalows that borrow features from the chattel, such as a steep gable roof.

Resorts in Barbados have also appropriated features of chattel houses. They borrow bell-shaped hoods, jalousies, and the corrugated roof style. They create small structures for their guests to stay in that are symmetrical with fantasy-like representations of a chattel house. These tropes are problematic since they give an impression of authenticity but contain no historical background on this architectural form and its ties to slavery.

Locating Extant, Authentic Chattel Houses

Authentic chattel houses are found all over Barbados. The research for this bulletin used google street view to identify some areas which contain extant chattel houses. Many of the homes on side streets could not be located since google street view provided no imagery of those areas. Yet, clustered chattel houses were identified, especially in Speightstown, Holetown and



Figure 4: Chattel Houses in Barbados. Courtesy of Google Street View.



Figure 5: Tyrol Cot Heritage Village. Courtesy of Mark Summerfield/Pixel.

Bridgetown. One of the roads in Speightstown is called Farm Road. This cluster was located using a map from the 1800s, which showed a plantation near Farm Road. Google street view also yielded results near plantations which are current tourist sites. An extensive survey by preservationists or city officials should document all the extant chattel houses. Chattel houses are an essential part of Barbados’ architectural and cultural history, and they should be identified and preserved.

Chattel House Heritage Tour

The third goal of this bulletin is to propose a heritage tour to appeal to roots tourists. This tour will explore extant chattel houses in Barbados. A heritage tour centered around the remaining chattel houses of Barbados could provide a sense of respect, memory, and honor for the generations of Africans. Resilience and ingenuity can be seen and appreciated in the extant chattel houses. The Akan word “Sankofa” means “one must return to the past in order to move forward.”¹⁵ This heritage tour could also attract locals with African heritage who may not know about their ancestors. Currently, there are very few African heritage narratives represented in Barbados, and this tour will lay the groundwork for more histories to be told.

Residents will be involved in planning the chattel house heritage tour. The tour will include various chattel houses (one-room, one-room with lean-to, etc.). Owners of chattel houses will be asked to participate by opening their homes for the tours. Some may wish to serve local cuisine, play local music, or display artwork. Local traditions and artisan crafts will be a focal point at various points along the tour and the local architecture. Local businesses should be highlighted along the tour as well. One example of this is the Rum Shack, which is operated out of a chattel house. It was visible on google street view, and other local businesses could also be identified.

This tour would be a significant event held four times a year. It could draw tourists from all over to participate in local culture with a focus on chattel house architecture. The tour will mimic the modernism tours done in Palm Springs. The home tours could evolve into a block party to bring the community together and help them get to know other chattel house owners in Barbados. While anyone can attend, the tours should not become a spectacle for mass tourism or promote the "tourist gaze."¹⁶

As part of the tour, there should be a demonstration of how chattel houses were built using prefabrication building techniques and showing the materials used. This demonstration will pay tribute to ancestral slaves and their ingenious building techniques and instill pride in homeowners of traditional chattel houses. The chattel houses tell a vital history, one of resilience, creativity, artisan skills, and community.

Homeowners who agree to be part of the tours will also receive a portion of the proceeds for continued maintenance on their homes or other expenses. Funds will be provided in advance of the tours to help homeowners repair the exterior and interior of their homes if they so desire. The preservationists and architects will perform exterior maintenance not to erase any historical elements.

A local demonstration and resources will also be provided to homeowners regarding ongoing maintenance techniques. The demonstration will also address authentic and sustainable additions to chattel houses. Current generations may not know the skills needed to add to a chattel house and could be tempted instead to tear them down and start from scratch. The Barbados National Trust should arrange for professionals to offer demonstrations and resources to homeowners.

Other African Heritage Sites

While there are not many African Heritage sites to visit in Barbados, one which may be of interest to roots tourists is the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. The Bussa Statue is also a site to see. This site marks the history of the slave revolt led by Bussa, an African slave. A local cultural event is a Crop Over festival, which takes place annually. It features some West African culture, including Calypso music. One of the quarterly chattel houses tours should overlap with the festival. The two sites identified (and any others) should be added as a resource for roots tourists visiting for the chattel house tours.

Hopefully, root tourism sites will become a priority in Barbados and other locations worldwide as the sites contains necessary healing for some: "at the destinations of roots tourists, the concept of memory is active and fluid as in the performative, human function of "re-membering", that is, putting back together, restoring the body, making whole the body politics. As a bodily practice, memory performed at these sites serves a temporal spatial function by incorporating the awareness of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste to fully experience the spatial arrangement of the memorial."¹⁷ A future chattel house heritage tour and other emerging root tourist locations will assist roots tourists in their quest for places of memory to honor their ancestors.



Figure 6: Bridgetown Chattel House. Courtesy of Wordpress.

Endnotes

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Figure 7: Chattel House with additions. Courtesy of Wikipedia.