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Smuggling on Lopez Farm

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Smuggling on Lopez Farm

Jonah Delasanta

Honors Project

Dr. Mather – Faculty Sponsor

11 May 2017

Abstract

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, the issue of illegal trade exacerbated tensions between the American colonies and the British government. Many Rhode Islanders, including wealthy merchants, smuggled goods like Madeira wine or French West Indian sugar into the colony in contravention of British trade laws. British warships patrolled Narragansett Bay in an attempt to interdict illegal trade, but many of the ships they intercepted were trading legally. Colonial resentment of British enforcement was exacerbated each time an innocent merchant captain suffered humiliation and financial loss at the hands of a British naval officer. While smuggling appears to have been commonplace, historical and archaeological evidence of the activity is scarce. Few, if any, smugglers kept written records of illegal trade and physical evidence of the activity was hidden. This project attempts to unravel the story of one reported smuggler, a Newport merchant named Aaron Lopez.

Lopez was born into a Jewish family in Portugal in 1721. In 1752 he fled religious persecution and moved to Newport, Rhode Island with his family. There, he established a profitable shipping company and eventually became the wealthiest person in town. Like many notable merchants, Lopez, who is sometimes referred to as “The Merchant Prince of Newport,” smuggled some goods in order to avoid paying British taxes. The locations where Lopez brought in smuggled goods ashore and the mechanics of smuggling are all but lost to history. There is scant archaeological evidence, and limited historical evidence within the state of Rhode Island that shows the physical locations where smuggling took place.

The aim of this project is to uncover one of Lopez’s smuggling locations. In Portsmouth, Aaron Lopez owned a farm on the Sakonnet River. This property shows evidence of potential smuggling infrastructure. The project aims to combine historical, cartographic, and

archaeological evidence to determine whether the modern-day property still shows evidence of historic smuggling. An extensive literature search combined, historic cartography and basic archaeological survey methods (on-site with owner's permission) offer an opportunity to determine whether Lopez smuggled through this property. If the findings prove affirmative, this honors project will have found, for the first time, conclusive evidence for smuggling at the Lopez farm, adding a definitive location to the historical landscape of smuggling in Rhode Island.

Learning Outcomes

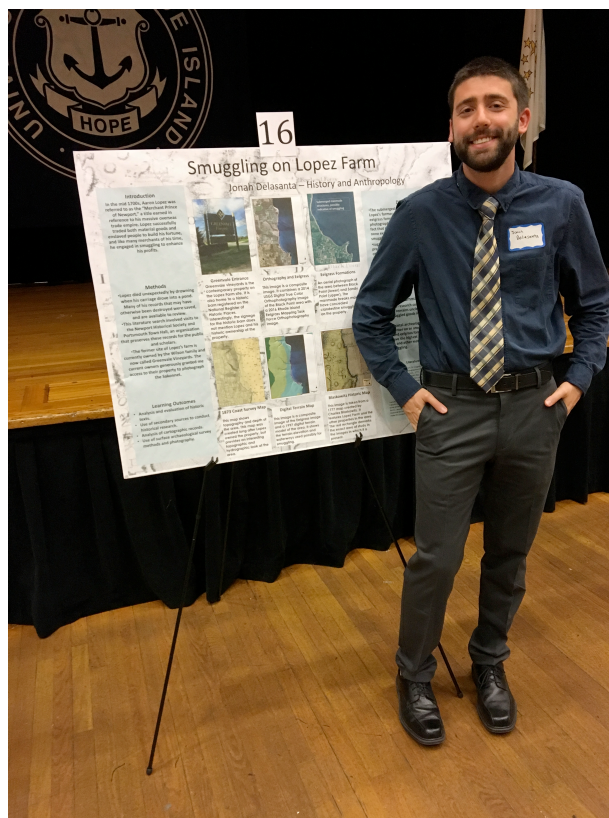
The primary goal of this project is make the argument that "Lopez Farm" may have been used for smuggling during the time of Lopez's ownership of the property. Through seeking ways to make this argument, I would like to sharpen my skills in both historical and archaeological research methods. This project sets the scene for future work in historical archaeology. The historic record will strongly strengthen the findings of future archaeological projects at the site. The historical section of this project will involve me using resources like databases, books, and primary sources from archives to help guide my research. The archaeological portion of this project will train me in using fieldwork methods such as pedestrian surveys, photography, GPS mapping, Google Earth, and other methods. Taken together, this project will prepare me for future work in either course of study.

Methodology

Several methods will be used for this project. The first, and most important, is a *literature search* to learn the history behind this practice. This will include visits to archives to see primary sources such as historic maps, arrest records, and other documents. This will yield useful

information about where to conduct the archaeological survey techniques. It is also the primary mechanism for determining where the smuggling took place, an absolutely necessary component for the project. Once these places are found, *photography* will be used to give viewers of the project an idea of what there is to see in the area. Photography will also be used during the archaeological surveys. Once a location is determined to be suitable to do survey work, *GPS software* including but not limited to *Google Earth* will be used to show an aerial view of the survey area. It can be used to show the survey area in relation to the rest of the state, and show multiple survey areas, in context, even if they are a significant distance apart. At the site, the *archaeological survey methods* will include pedestrian survey, tapes, and GPS marking.

Poster Session



Smuggling on Lopez Farm

Jonah Delasanta – History and Anthropology

Introduction

In the mid 1700s, Aaron Lopez was referred to as the "Merchant Prince of Newport," a title earned in reference to his massive overseas trade empire. Lopez successfully traded both material goods and enslaved people to build his fortune, and like many merchants of his time, he engaged in smuggling to enhance his profits.

Methods

- Lopez died unexpectedly by drowning when his carriage drove into a pond. Many of his records that may have otherwise been destroyed were saved, and are available to review.
- This literature search involved visits to the Newport Historical Society and Portsmouth Town Hall, an organization that preserves these records for the public and scholars.
- The former site of Lopez's farm is currently owned by the Wilson family and now called Greenvale Vineyards. The current owners generously granted me access to their property to photograph the Sakonnet.

Learning Outcomes

- Analysis and evaluation of historic texts.
- Use of secondary sources to conduct historical research.
- Analysis of cartographic records.
- Use of surface archaeological survey methods and photography.

Discussion

- Several sources referenced the fact that Lopez owned a Portsmouth farm, but none explicitly connected the farm to Lopez's smuggling practices.
- The submerged breaks off of the coast of Lopez's former property, coupled with the eelgrass formations visible in the aerial photography, suggests that there was infrastructure present in the past that supported activities other than farming.
- Though the property was visited on several occasions, no obvious surface evidence indicative of past smuggling remains. Aerial imaging provides an excellent resource for identifying potential smuggling sites that future archaeological research could then support or reject.

Summary


- Despite the research conducted for this project, it remains unclear whether or not Lopez smuggled goods into his Portsmouth farm.
- Future coastal archaeological research should center on or around the submerged breaks and eelgrass formations. These areas have the highest potential for artifacts and other materials associated with smuggling.

Literature Cited

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- Blaskowitz, Charles. A Topographical Chart of the Bay of Narragansett in the Province of New England, 1777.
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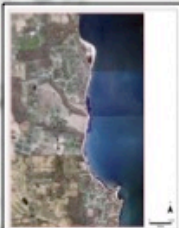
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend a special thank you to my project sponsor, Rod Mayer. I would also like to thank Chris McCabe for his help in the preparation of some of the main used for this project. For assisting me in many other ways, I would like to thank the Wilson family, Kirk Bunn, The Newport Historical Society, and the Rotors Program for their generous funding to make this project a reality.




Greenvale Entrance

Greenvale vineyards is the contemporary property on the Lopez Farm site. It is also home to a historic barn registered on the National Register of Historic Places. Interestingly, the sign for the historic barn does not mention Lopez and his historic ownership of the property.




Orthography and Eelgrass

This image is a composite image. It combines a 2004 USGS Digital True Color Orthophotography image of the Black Point area with a 2016 Rhode Island Eelgrass Mapping Task Force Orthophotography image.



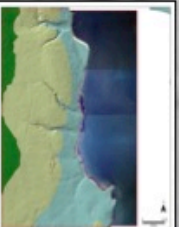
Eelgrass Formations

An aerial photograph of the area between Black Point (lower) and Sandy Point (upper). The manmade breaks may have concealed clandestine smuggling on the property.




1873 Coast Survey Map

This map shows topography and depth of the area. This map was created long after Lopez owned the property, but provides an interesting topographic and hydrographic look at the area.



Digital Terrain Map

This image is a composite image of the Eelgrass image and a 1997 digital terrain model of the area. It shows the terrain elevation and waterways used possibly for smuggling.



Blaskowitz Historic Map

This image is taken from a 1777 map created by Charles Blaskowitz. It features Lopez Farm and the other properties in the area. The red rectangle demarks the exact area of study in the images in which it is present.

Reflection

This project began with the goal of understanding the relationship between the historical and archaeological record on smuggling in RI. While conducting research, my advisor and I came upon an interesting conclusion — there does not seem to be an archaeological record of smuggling within the state. A call to the state office of historic preservation (RIHPHC) confirmed that there was so little information out there, that a project like this would be very difficult to do. Of course, work has been done that has links to smuggling. But there are no full-

fledged smuggling sites within the state, and very little information anywhere on the physical locations in which smugglers may have operated aside from document falsification and other methods similar.

This put us in an awkward position. The project had changed during the course of the research, and other avenues were pursued. Eventually, Dr. Mather came across information about a farm owned by Aaron Lopez, a prominent Newport merchant who very likely engaged in smuggling according to many different pieces of historical evidence. We found information about his property, his landholdings, and his business, and decided that his property in Portsmouth may have been used for smuggling purposes. Several different factors on the property point to this, and the geography of the area is extremely conducive to that kind of work.

I went to Newport on March 31st in order to view records at the Portsmouth Town Hall and at the Newport Historical Society. I initially was looking for as much information about Aaron Lopez as I could find, which turned out to be more than I needed. Lopez, the “Merchant Prince of Newport,” has a vast quantity of records concerning his life, his business, and his faith. The Portsmouth Town Hall had records of property holdings in a large room lined wall to wall with “land evidence” books dating back to the early 1600s. The people who worked nearby were also the ones most able to help me review these records, and without their help it would have been an extremely confusing process. From these records I gleaned information about land owned by Aaron Lopez, and Aaron P. Lopez. The record did not include a map or any other information that explicitly linked Lopez to the property I was curious about, but it was a start.

The Newport Historical Society was an extremely welcoming and informative place. I communicated with the staff via email for a week before my visit, and upon my arrival I was welcomed in and ushered to a reading area where the materials that they thought would be most

helpful were already laid out for me. Talk about a warm welcome! The materials I pored over on my first visit included a book about Lopez which I dedicated most of my time to reading, several historic maps, and an unpublished master's thesis about Lopez, which interestingly did not discuss his property holdings anywhere. The rules and regulations of the society meant that I could not use information from the thesis or photograph it out of respect for the author, so rather it just served as a springboard to guide me towards other sources that may be helpful. Naturally, many of the sources came from the Newport Historical Society itself. These different sources taught me a lot about Lopez, but little about this specific property.

The next time I went to Portsmouth, I visited Greenvale Vineyards. I went early in the morning, just around opening time and I was the first (and only) there for the duration of the stay. It was too rainy and too early for a vineyard tour, so I ended up having ample time to discuss the property with one of the people there, a man I'll call Jacob. Jacob had a lot to say about the property and its history, though little about Lopez himself other than that he believed Lopez might have been smuggling there. Jacob had a long-term connection with the property, and when I asked about archaeological potential he informed me that there almost certainly were areas of interest on the property. It does host a structure currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, though this structure dates to long past Lopez's death. I asked him a few questions about the property, and whether I could view the Sakonnet, but he told me that I was asking the wrong person. Permission would have to come from the owners of the property, because the area I was interested was not part of the general tour. I thanked Jacob for his assistance and conversation, and resolved to visit at a later date when the owners were around. I was convinced that a sunny day and a face-to-face explanation of my intent would be much more beneficial to me in the long run than an email would.

By mid April, I was relatively confident that this farm had at least some importance for Lopez's smuggling. It would not be hard for Lopez to have his captains dock on the Sakonnet, and take smaller boats down the rivers in the area to unload cargo on the farm. Alternatively, it was a place for larger boats to subtly dock, unload the illegal cargo into smaller, less obvious boats, and smuggle the goods into Newport in this way. Though very little historical information was found about this actual property – the land holding records told me little to nothing about Lopez or his father in law, the archaeological survey portion of the assignment would at least hint as to whether there was something potentially still there.

Contacting the owners of the property was difficult. Despite three unscheduled visits to the property, once just to get a lay of the land, once to meet with Jacob, and one to hopefully find the family when they said they might be available, I was unable to catch them at a good time. Through my email communications too I was unable to ever get a set date to visit the property, for one reason or another. This was obviously frustrating, but it was late into the semester by the time that I had enough information to actually warrant a visit to the property, and by the poster session on May 3rd I had been unable to visit the Sakonnet. Though it was certainly frustrating driving to the archive and the property so many times for no concrete results, it is a lesson in working with private property owners and planning far ahead.

In terms of doing a project like this in the future, I would have to have a much more defined research question. Though the aerial photography and composite images were absolutely fantastic, other forms of evidence must support them. Throughout my searches on the subject, I could find nothing more than cursory passages about this farm, and I searched many, many different sources about Lopez. In terms of primary sources, I was unable to find a single source other than the Blaskowitz map that conclusively linked Lopez to this property! Future research

can most definitely build off of what was completed by this project however. The aerial photography provides at least two compelling areas for future archaeologists to visit, primarily submerged. If these manmade breaks were where the unloading and docking of larger ships was taking place, or even if an area where ships may have entered and exited, there is a strong possibility for cultural material to still remain at the bottom of the Sakonnet in these locations. A much more exhaustive review of archival sources conducted by a researcher more familiar with that process could certainly yield more information about the property itself, if those records survived and are still in Rhode Island.

Though the project was far from what my initial expectations of it would be, and it was a difficult and at times frustrating endeavor, the poster session made it all worth it. It was very rewarding to discuss this important historical figure and his property with people at the session, and though I had doubted myself, people seemed impressed and interested in the work I had accomplished. This project would have benefited greatly if I had started it last semester to take much more time to plan its different parts, and could have gone differently if I was actually able to visit the waterline, but at the end it was a rewarding experience. It showcased the difficult work that goes with historical research, and what was found certainly has potential for future research to elaborate on.