

Interview with Agnes Meeker
November 2017



Dr = Dr. Carmen Gillespie

A = Agnes Meeker, local scholar and historian in Antigua, author of this project

C = Christine Cha, Presidential Fellow with the Griot

S = Sam Lauer, Graduate Student Assistant with the Griot

Amber / Am = Amber Quinlan, Undergraduate Student Assistant with the Griot

Dr. Gillespie: Hi Agnes, It's Carmen! How are you?

Agnes: Fine thanks. Hi Carmen! How are you doing?

Dr: I'm very well, I wish I were in Antigua. How are you guys doing post-hurricane, are you all alright?

A: We're pretty good. We were lucky with hurricanes. Poor Barbuda, not as good.

Dr: I know... Are the Barbudan people still in Antigua now?

A: Yeah, yeah. There are no houses. They've got to rebuild, and they're not making any steps to do so.

Dr: I had heard that, I'm so sorry.

A: Only sixty people have gone back. I had a family in my apartment, John Muffington, who's the headmaster and an environmentalist. I had him, his wife, and his youngest child here, and he went back two and a half weeks ago. His house could be made liveable, so he bought stuff, went over and fixed it.

Dr: Do they have electricity and water?

A: They have reverse osmosis, which is providing some. I'm not sure why they haven't cleaned out the systems and started to collect gutter, you know, rainwater off the roofs. Um... Who knows, who knows.

Dr: I'm sorry. I'm so glad you all are well. We were really worried for a while. I'm sure you were, too.

A: Guttering flew off, but they were able to come the next week and put stuff on, so I didn't lose any water.

Dr: I'm so glad. And we're very excited about the map project. Soon, we'll send you a link to it. It's almost functional. All of your work is paying off, it's beautiful, and these wonderful students have been working on it all semester.

Dr: Again, I'm so glad to hear your voice, and we're really excited to send you this project, but I'm gonna hand it over. They'll introduce themselves and then they have some questions.

C: When were you born and where?

A: I was born in 1940 here in Antigua at the Bendal Sugar Factory. My father was a junior engineer out from Scotland, and the Bendal Sugar Factory was being dismantled at that time. Whatever machinery could have been used at the main factory was sold off. And I was born during that process..

C: So, your family had immigrated to Antigua?

A: On my mother's side, I go back six generations. They all married Scots who came out to work for the sugar. And the farthest back we've been able to trace is 1803, and I think he was there earlier, was Daniel Burr Garling, and he bought Otto's estate. And so Otto's estate was in the family for a while until his son gambled it away. That's number 16.

C: I see. Wow, you have a really long history in Antigua.

A: Well, that's why I think I'm so interested in it.

C: So, what was your favorite mill to study? Was it Otto's?

A: I can't say that I really-- No, Otto's didn't have a mill. A lot of them were destroyed in the 1834 earthquakes. And I can't say I had a favorite one, but the one that kind of just tweaked me [sic] whenever I saw it was The Hope because it has a little red brick heart above the doorway. The Hope is number 119, it's very near Montpelier, and it has this little red brick heart, and that always fascinated me.

C: Do you have any other family connections or just connections in general with other mills or their estates?

A: Well, my grandmother's sister married one of the Goodwins, and they owned Duer's and Yeamon's estate. And her brother, Walter McSevney managed Diamond estate and Claremont estate. The Diamond is number-- And as a child, you know, we spent a lot of time there. The Diamond is number 87, and Duer's is number 89. My cousin, she's 85, she was born at Yeamon's, which is number 91, right next to Duer's. And then she moved. She grew up until she was 15 in Duer's, until her father died and her family sold it.

C: So what inspired you to start this project?

A: I came back [to Antigua] 22 years ago when my husband retired, even though he was American, so I lived in America for nearly 30 years. And when we came back, I've just always been fascinated with the mills. There's about 110 of them--there were; there are probably 100 now--dotting the island. And I used to think everytime about the stories that might have been associated with them. And then I found out working at the museum that Desmond Nicholson had done some research on them and there had been a CVE study (Caribbean...), [Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions] but they hadn't done anything with it! So I started off with what they had. And I thought, you know, it's kind of boring, we're not hearing anything about the people that lived on it or the stories *behind* the mills. So I started: anything I read, I jotted down whenever they mentioned an estate. It got where I thought, well instead of just doing the mills, I might as well do whatever 200 that were there because, you know, that's the patchwork story of it all. So that's how that started, and there's nowhere that they've all been put in one place. You can read about one estate, the Tudway papers. You can read about Betty's Hope and those papers. But there's nowhere that it spells out every single estate and the owners and a little bit about them.

C: So your goal was to consolidate all the information that you could find?

A: Right.

C: So how long have you been working on this project?

A: Well, it's been 22 years since I started collecting whenever I saw something and just jotted down. Finally, I started cataloguing it. And I'm still collecting! I just talked to an old guy the other day about Fisher's estate, which I knew nothing about, in the south. And very few people do because they didn't have sugar cane, they had cattle, but it was a hundred-and-something acres, you know, it was a fairly large estate. So you see there's stuff that's going to be surfacing all the time, and I have to stop somewhere.

C: I see. So what are the future directions of this project?

A: Well, once all the three volumes are out, [Ms. Meeker is publishing a three-volume compendium of her research] they will be there for sale, so the whole idea is to also to not only let Antiguan know their heritage, but every place name in Antigua stems from these estates. All of our villages, our place names, and the people, they're named from the estates. So it gives

people an idea of where they came from because they really don't know their history. Somebody told me not so long ago at the Defense Force, where there's a mill, and I was going up to look at it and take some information, and he said, "Yeah, you know, we have these all over the island, and there were a certain type of people used to live in them, like the eskimos in igloos." I said, "What?" No idea. So, that's my idea, is so it's written down and people can refer to it and find out why a certain place was named the name it was given.

C: That's so interesting. So do you have concerns about narrative accuracy? So like how accurate the accounts are in your research and findings?

A: I'm always concerned, but I'm taking everything from something, basically, that has been documented already. They come from papers, they come from maps, like the ownership, they come from the Horseford Almanac is fantastic as far as naming who owned what and how many acres. So I'm copying information that has already been put out there. And I am getting word-of-mouth stories from people, and it's shown that it's someone's story in how I've gotten it. So, you know, history is always documented by the person who's telling it, and you can always get two sides to a story. Right?

A: Right.

S: So do you think most of your information comes from word-of-mouth, or from these almanacs and...?

A: Oh, no, no. A lot comes from documented papers and from wills and indentures.

C: So is more information on enslaved peoples coming? Are you gathering more information on these people, or is that a project for a future researcher?

A: Once I am finished with Volume Three, that's going to be somebody else's problem. I will finish with number three, and I'm still getting information on that. Whatever I can find. And the thing is, five years ago, you could pull up genealogical sites on the Internet. They weren't there. But all of a sudden, people are interested in genealogy, and all these genealogical sites coming up on computers that you can pull up and *get* information. Plus, we get a lot of people--I would say five a year, that might not sound like a lot to you, but five a year is pretty good--who come to Antigua researching their roots. They know of an ancestor who was on a sugar plantation. They may not have owned it, they may have been a manager, an overseer, but they're finding letters. A lady came, and when her father died, there was this wooden trunk and it was full of letters of her great-great grandfather who was a manager for four estates, and in those letters there were two letters from my grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, which was amazing!

A: Yeah! So these things will always surface and continue to surface because they're not all in museums and archives. A lot of them are still privately owned.

C: What procedures should we use to go about further research of this type? What are the procedures that people should use after you're done with this project and other people want to look into it?

A: Okay, I have referenced a lot of areas where you can go to for further information with what I'm doing now, but a lot of the information are held in Kew Gardens, Kew Archives in the UK. They have an amazing amount of history in the Commonwealth Era, both US, Australian, and the West Indies, and they're all interconnected because it was part of the Commonwealth. They moved freely, they were sent as part of the army or navy, or, you know? So they were constantly moving, even all the way to Australia. It was an Antiguan planter who took his slave and pieces

of sugar cane and started planting cane in Australia in Fort Macquarie. So because it was the British Commonwealth, they were all connected, moved around, and a lot from like, if you look at Royal's estate. That whole thing, the Royal family, there's a book, *Pennyhill's Farm*, [sic] all written out in Massachusetts. The Red Hill Library is the architect for that is the same architect of the courthouse in 1725. It wasn't America, England, and Australia; it was the Commonwealth, so they're all related.

C: Which mills did you have the hardest time collecting information with?

A: Not necessarily mills, but plantations-- The ones down south. That's what I'm working on now. That's in St. Paul's, St. Mary's, and St. Peter's, mostly St. Paul's and St. Mary's because they were divided up with four and five owners, and they were smaller estates, and they changed hands regularly. They were the first ones to stop growing sugar cane because it was mountainous, harder to do anything with it, it was on the other side of the mountains, the hills. They went into either vegetable or cattle farming. Those are the hardest ones for me to find the information.

C: What was the most difficult aspect of this project?

A: Putting it all together and proofing it. It's because it's being done by a self-publisher and trying to keep the funds down. I'm just tired of going over it and over it and over it again. That has been the hardest part. The fun part was collecting everything. You know, discovering new stories and new people connected. The hardest part was putting it all together and making sure there are no errors. Spelling errors, typing errors.

C: So I think we've covered this a little bit, but how much needs to be found, in terms of information and stories?

A: I think probably unending! Because when you have over 200 mills and 300 years of ownership and each place maybe changed ownership 10, 12, 14, 18 times? Each of those people have a story to tell! You know?

A: When you think about it. So it all depends on how you can unlock some of those stories. A very interesting one is--it'll be in Volume Three--the Cranston family. It was a Canadian that came down here looking for his roots, never realized his background was colored. It turns out the same Duer's estate was owned by a man called Duer, and Lord Cranston, who was part of Lord Nelson's navy, used to come down and visit Mr. Duer on his estate and had a dalliance with a slave. And his son was brought up by Mr. Duer and sent to England for educating and given an estate. He came back and became a very respectable and well-known, he was known as Justice Cranston because he was an attorney for many estates, and his word was good! This gentleman found out that that's where he came from! So things like this are always breaking.

C: When did the gentleman come to Antigua to find this out?

A: When? He first found it about five years ago, six year ago. Recently! And then he delved into Lord Cranston in England during Lord Nelson's time and found out about that side of the family. Yeah. And he has photographs! Also, do you want the GPS that this other guy was going to be doing? If they do the GPS, do you want that information?

S: That would be great, yeah, thank you.

A: How much longer are you guys going to be working on this?

S: Until everything looks perfect! The engineering team that created the website, they hope to have that fully working and operational at the end of this semester. And it might take up until

the end of next semester for us to get the information input and edited appropriately, so I think at least by the end of the school year, we should have a lovely, public-facing website.

A: Wow, okay! By the end of the school year, which is

S: That would be May--May at the latest.

A: April? May at the latest? Okay, I can have the GPS by then, I just wanted to know how long I've got to get anything to you.

C: But we can continue to add information, so even if you have-- We'd continue to accept information you have-- We'd be glad to get any more information that you have, because the website's really-- we can add information, as much as we want.

A: Okay, good to know.

C: How did you teach yourself to do this research?

A: I am not an academic at all. It is mostly out of interest. Googling, calling the archives and communicating with different people in certain archives that would give me a map here or information there. I sent away for the Beinecke--they've got an enormous book cataloguing all the documentation--and went through it. I just did a lot of reading. I read *any* book at all connected with Antigua. The Vere Oliver volumes, *Antigua and the Antiguans*, there are three of them, have been the main source.

C: So how did you compile all your information? What kind of format, like on the computer? By notes?

A: Both. I have three-ringed binders on each parish, and once I numbered them, I started putting it in the computer and I would run copies and put it in my three-ringed binder. I had areas where I could tuck in photographs, anything, maps I had collected, that went with each one. And it just grew like Topsy. So I had both the three-ring manual to refer to as well as what was in the computer.

C: What's the importance of remembering these historical narratives and stories in this way?

A: I think it-- Someone can physically pick it up, have a look, and find out the history of the island. And that's why I'm looking forward to the App, [the website] too, for the museum, because they can then put it on their phones. Right? They'll be able to put it on phones? When you're finished with it. And visitors to the island or people on the island will have it, and when they're driving around, they can just click into where they are and get a directive as to what they're seeing.

C: So, how do you know how much of the information is enough when you're writing each mill?

A: Well, there was no such thing as enough! Some of them are six pages, and some of them are one page. It's what I could find... It's what I could find, and if it was of interest, I put it in. If it was something too long-winded, I referenced it.

C: I think that's all of our questions that we have written down. What's at least one story in particular, besides the one you told us, that you really enjoyed when you were compiling information?

A: Okay, I'll tell you a little interesting one. There's a guy called Mike Copperwaite, and he's an American, and he actually, I think, was in Obama's campaign. Anyhow, he came down to Antigua looking for his great-great grandfather, who he knew was at Dunbar's estate. Dunbar's is

number 8, and I can see Dunbar's from my house, and it has a mill. And he went to the archives, and he found out the parents were born in Antigua and that they were indentured servants from Ireland on Dunbar's estate. And their child was born and when he was born in Antigua and he got to be about 3 or 4, they immigrated to America, and he started making pies and selling pies on the road in a wagon, you know, a push wagon. His wife, they made the pies at home, and that's how they were able to make a living. It got so big, it is now--what the heck's the name of the pie company--and they provided pies to all of the Civil War people and the word "Doughboy" came from that because they ate so many of his pies. The troops, American troops, became "Doughboys," you've heard the term? "Doughboy"?

C: Uh, no! Actually...

A: No?! Well, it came from that, and the pie company is thriving today. This guy, he started his own farms to grow his own berries and produce for his pies: apples, fruits. And he also liked trotting horses, that was one his big thing, so he built a trotter...horse whatever you call it, you know, for racing horses, the trotting kind. That story always tickled me.

C: So when these people come to find more about their heritage, do they come to you? Or--who do they go to?

A: They either go to the museum or the archives, and our poor archives right now have a major problem: the roof leaks. And even though the government spent \$1 million trying to fix it, they didn't fix the leak, so none of the archival material can be replaced on the shelving for easy access. So when they can't find what they want or it's closed, they go down to the museum and the museum calls me because they're researching *estate*, plantation, people. So I usually meet them, give them what I have, and they give me what they have, so it works both ways. It works both ways.

C: The story you told us before about the gentleman who had a trisette with a slave and their son...

A: Yes, Lord Cranston!

C: Yeah-- Are there pictures of that child? Of the man who became an attorney?

A: Yeah! Yeah! We've got a picture of him and his whole family. That will appear in Volume Three under Thomas and Cochran's estate.

C: Was the man very light-skinned?

A: He was--I would say--half and half? Yeah. And the family got lighter, you know, in certain aspects. He married a light-skinned lady, his children were fairly light-skinned. There are a lot of intermarried-type families on the island. Before, we always referred to the whites, the coloreds, and the blacks. That is how people were categorized.

C: I see, so the coloreds were the lighter people?

A: Yeah. Yeah, Creole.

C: Guys, do you have any other questions? I think those are all the questions that we have for now.

A: Okay, well anytime! And feel free to email me if anything pops up!

C: It's been a pleasure talking to you! It was so interesting.

A: Well, it's a fun thing. You know, it's kept me going. I'll jump in the car and go check out something like I did just last week, on this Fisher's estate. It's a fun thing to do, like I said, the worst part is trying to make sure to take care of the all corrections before it becomes published. But the rest of it's fun, and I'm learning something all the time! All the time!

C: I'm learning so much from your work that I've been looking at the for the past semester.

A: I think fascinating are the connections. You know, Martin from here was a governor in, is it, North Carolina? You know? I mean, the connections between the colonial countries were amazing!

C: Wait-- Martin was-- When was this? When was he the governor?

A: Martin was the governor in North Carolina. He was--A,B,C,D,E,F,G--Green Castle estate. Green Castle estate is number...163. 163. So there are a lot of interconnections with the Caribbean and the US.

C: I'm learning so much. Thank you for all your work.

A: They were given land. It all started off with land grants, and usually when you fought for your country and you did good, the Crown, in England would give you land somewhere. That's kind of how they paid you. So that's how a lot of it all started. People were given land grants, and then they either sold it or gave it to someone else. It was the same thing in the US because it belonged to Britain. So they were given land grants there and then they found out that it was easier to grow cotton than sugar here, and so they turned it into tobacco and cotton states up in the eastern seaboard area. The slaves were just as heavy there as they were here, and they often transplanted them, or transported them. One of the first slaves here were American Indians! Because they were settling Massachusetts and they were grabbing the Indians' land, so they took them hostage and they couldn't control the men, so they put them on their ships and they shipped them down here. But they couldn't control them here either, so they eventually died out or lost them.

S: I was just reading that today with Winthorpe's.

A: Winthorpe's, there you go. Yeah. Yeah, that's all part of that one.

C: Royal's was really interesting for me because I didn't realize Harvard law school's seal-- past seal! They replaced the seal, though, recently in 2016.

A: Okay, okay!

C: So yeah. And they made a plaque in honor of the enslaved peoples!

A: Yeah! Okay. Yeah, no, It's all fascinating when you start to connect the dots. You know? Yeah.

S: Alright, thank you so much, Agnes! Have a lovely afternoon.

A: Okay! Like I said, anytime! Just drop me an email if that's easier.

C: Will do, thank you!

A: Take care everybody. Bye-bye.