

## Re-Visioning Fragments of a Life in Jamaica

Carol Campbell

[thewarecollective@gmail.com](mailto:thewarecollective@gmail.com)

[revolutionarygallery.jm@gmail.com](mailto:revolutionarygallery.jm@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Writing in conversational tones, this illustrated essay captures my memories of the deconstruction of a 120-year-old, Spanish wall house, in Western Jamaica. The essay highlights the individuals involved, their moods, as well as the nuanced heritage and hidden memories that resided in the Vassel's former home. As importantly, a link to the WARE film entitled "*Rockstone and Fire*" provides insights into the traditional processes of building a lime kiln, and producing the lime mortar, a significant component of the material used in the construction of many Jamaican houses built of Spanish wall by enslaved peoples long ago.

**Keywords:** Spanish wall, Jamaican Heritage, Architecture, Non-government organization

### Introduction

*"What is not memorialized will be lost...without our memory, we really are nothing"* said Amina Blackwood Meeks (storyteller, and college orator at The Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica) speaking in an interview for the film "*Rockstone and Fire*", a documentary produced by the Wattle and Red Earth (WARE) Collective in 2019 (*See link to the film*). In the interview, Blackwood Meeks reminds us of the importance of maintaining that sacred connection with our ancestors and our history, through proper documentation, and respect for our heritage.

Let me set the stage by first introducing you to the Wattle and Red Earth Collective (WARE). We are a young, dynamic charitable organization, a non-profit, non-government organization (NGO) based in Jamaica. Our passion, and our mandate, are to honour and celebrate the vernacular built environment in Jamaica, with a focus on offering education, through research into disappearing building and architectural practices, Indigenous craft forms, and historical lifestyle. We are a small, but determined band of culture warriors, intent on preserving our heritage for future generations. The importance of the recognition and preservation of the intangible heritage that resides in memory is invaluable, as our individual and collective memories generate a deep sense of purpose, and are a deeper connection to a fragile, nuanced history.

**January 21, 2021**

After a three hour drive from Kingston, winding our way through small villages and quiet, rural farming communities, with quaint names like Gutters, Gazeland, Cheapside, Lititz, Junction, Red Dirt, Congo Hole, Cow Head Gully, Lover's Leap (names which demand further investigation into their origins), we (Enith, Peter, Ajani, and myself, members of the Wattle and Red Earth Collective), finally arrive in Seaview, in the parish of St. Elizabeth, on the Southwestern coast of Jamaica. Time is of the essence. We are here to carry out a very special task which has to be completed this weekend. A group of 17 people (mostly volunteers), are here to secure an authentic example of Jamaica's vernacular architecture which is in danger of being lost forever.

Excitement and anticipation are palpable as the car turns from the paved main road onto the red dirt track that leads to the treasured experience that awaits. The unmistakably earthy scent of the St. Elizabeth red dirt embraces us and welcomes us as warmly as memories of baked bread at Grandma's home. As we approach, the rust coloured, aged zinc roof of the old house is barely visible in the distance, beyond the tall grass and bush. The land is quite wild now, with many trees which are probably as old as the house itself. We see towering thatch palms, mango trees of many varieties, almond trees with their shady branches spread wide, plum trees that perfume the air with fruit now being crushed underfoot, logwood trees buzzing with bees, the odd bougainvillea shrub in radiant purple splendour, and even a lonely scarlet hibiscus, obviously left over from a well-tended garden in years gone by. This is my first time visiting the site, although I've heard so much about the house from the architects and builders on the team.



*“What lies ahead?”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



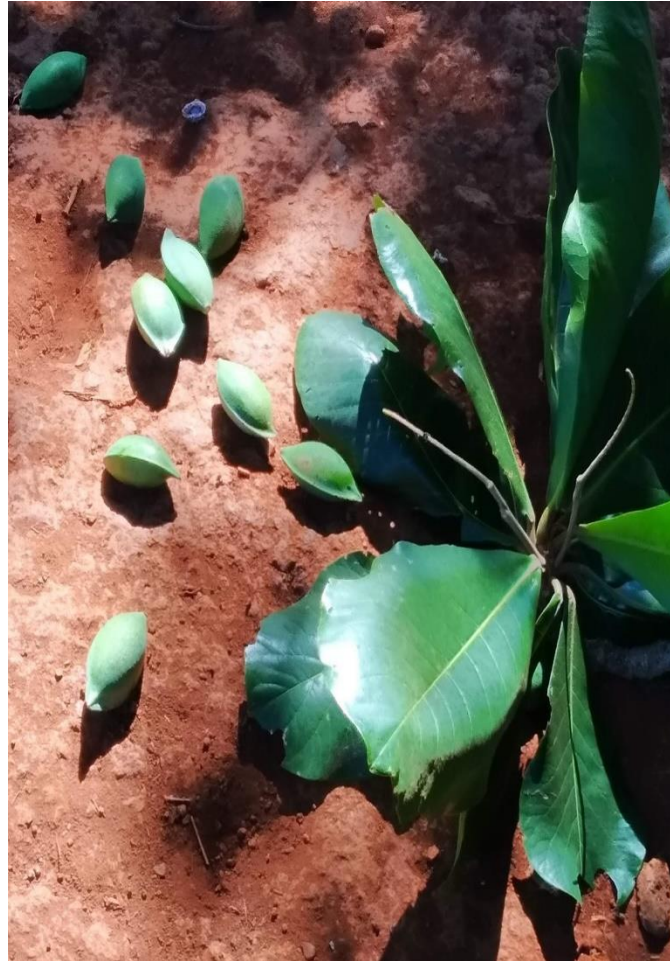
*The Vassel House - South wall* (© Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)

What memories will be unearthed? What secrets revealed? The rest of the crew are already on site, checking out the structure and its viability. The team consists of architects, engineers, a master builder, masons, carpenters, photographers, videographers, writers, a couple curious onlookers, under the ever-watchful eyes of the resident stray mongrel dogs.

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*“The Vassel House”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



*“Almonds and Red Earth”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)

This is a historic day (21/01/21), and a very important milestone for the WARE Collective. Who could have predicted that barely 3 years after our inaugural meeting in Munro, St. Elizabeth, at Courtney’s house, where we committed to an idea so large, it took six of us to hold the vision, that we would be at this place, physically and metaphorically, ready to stitch together memories of a quilted past, through this family home. This 120-year-old Spanish wall house, with which we have been generously gifted is the first installment towards our proposed Living Museum which will be located in St. Elizabeth. The property on which the house now sits has been sold, and the new owners have no interest in preserving this historically significant structure. Our task for the next three days is to carefully, and methodically deconstruct the house, so that it can be reconstructed on our new site, the site of our future museum. This is not a demolition, it’s a rescue mission.

At the new location, we envision history coming alive as an interactive process, heritage honoured and celebrated through documentation, research and community involvement; a welcoming space where people are free to roam and wander, and wonder, as they explore and learn; where evocative memories can inform our future, and where new memories are created for those who will come after.

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Dr. Courtney Coke, a founding member and director of the WARE Collective when asked, “Why is it important to remember my heritage and tell my story?” (in an interview for our weekly Instagram feature, *My Heritage, My Story*, had this to say: “*Because I **am** my heritage...laughter, music, community before self, love of the earth, respect for the past, and my survival instinct – all collectively pour out of Africa, through Jamaica, and run deep in my veins...my past is the lamp in the night...the lessons and gifts that my grandfather, uncles and cousins have given me, lift me up on my walk, as I try to make sense of everything.*” (@wattleredearth, March 5, 2021)

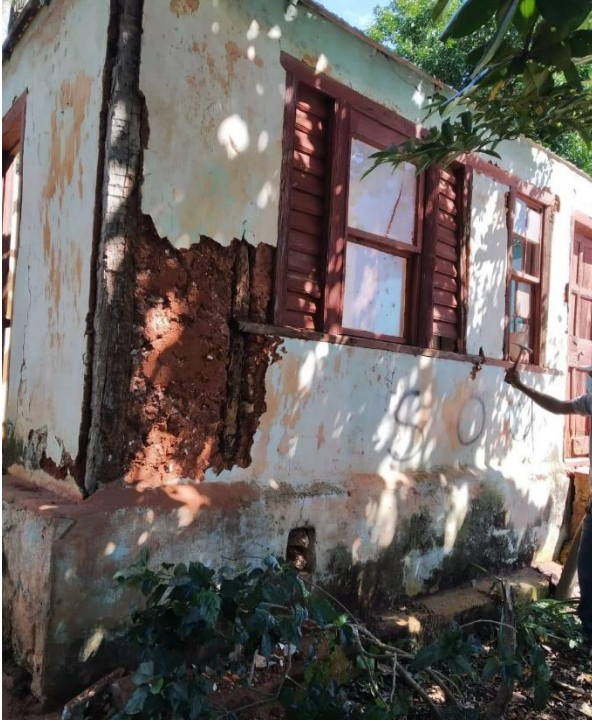
Historically, this house is an important marker, as one of only about 100 such remaining structures in St. Elizabeth, which is built of Spanish wall. The main feature of the Spanish wall technique is the lime mortar, a mixture of white lime (limestone ash), and red earth, mixed with water to create an environmentally sustainable material that holds stones in place in a timber frame (See link to “*Rockstone and Fire*”, for a detailed discussion).

This building technique has existed for thousands of years. A similar lime mortar (to Spanish walling in Jamaica), is reported to have been utilized in the construction of some of the pyramids dating as far back, as 2650 BCE in Egypt, when the first pyramid was created by the architect Imhotep. The Black pharaohs’ dynasties continued for 2500 years, and saw the construction of several awe-inspiring pyramids, which amazingly are still standing (except for instances of vandalism) 4500 years later.

The disappearance of such structures here in Jamaica, is mainly the result of abuse, neglect, and abandonment in favour of urban aspirations, and the use of “more modern” concrete. Low-cost, easily produced concrete was introduced to the world in 1824 as an alternative building material. It is still the preferred material, even though it is environmentally unfriendly, accounting for 8% of the world’s CO2 emissions.

The local Spanish wall structures that still remain in the country, have withstood countless hurricanes, earthquakes and other furies of nature, thus attesting to the strength and resilience of the construction method. A key characteristic of this mortar is its ability to absorb carbon dioxide, and over time revert to original limestone, thus considerably reducing the carbon footprint (See link to “*Rockstone and Fire*”). It has been used in the construction of the foundations, as well as the interior and exterior walls of buildings. It is called Spanish wall, because it is believed to have been introduced to Jamaica during the Spanish occupation of the island, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> to mid-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We park the car and continue the short walk to the house on foot. The dark stained, weathered wooden louvres are a stark contrast to the pale crumbling masonry which has taken on an interesting patina over the years. To the average eye, the house is a sorry sight ... sagging sash windows holding broken panes, gaping doorways with large wooden doors barely clinging to rusty hinges, water damaged peeling plaster that had been rendered over the Spanish walling.



**“Day 1”** (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



**“Testing the Structure”** (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



**“Here We Go!”** (WARE Directors Ann Hodges & Enith Williams)  
(© Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)



To the members of the WARE Collective however, the house represents pure potential, an opportunity to re-vision, reclaim, restore, and rebuild, using time-honoured traditional building methods, which are fast disappearing. It's a promise, a hope, a sacred relationship with the earth and the building, a recognition of the value of preserving our heritage, of memorializing our history.

The house is a modest structure by today's standards, but would have been quite a comfortable dwelling, with two bedrooms, sitting room, dining room, detached kitchen facilities, and outdoor bathroom. It is obvious that the house has not been lived in for a while. Although we know that it had been continuously occupied, by members of the Vassel family, from its original construction in 1900 ... Oh, if walls could talk! Obvious upgrades, such as electricity, were introduced in later years, and the original thatch palm roof had been replaced with zinc. An abandoned water catchment tank built from limestone sits to the right of the house. Brightly coloured ground lizards slither into the underbrush, as I approach.

**DAY 1** is primarily assessment day.

Mr. Parchment, affectionately known as Mas Guy, is the Master Builder and the unofficial historian. He seems to know everything about everything and everybody in the district; the raconteur who would keep us entertained with stories about village culture and the various characters in the area, with nicknames such as Brown Man, Pilarchie, Boy, Bling, Bird. The names spoke volumes about their stature, their misadventures, their abilities (or lack thereof), the characters who had now found their way into village lore and legend ... who was the town clown; who drank too much; who was the village Romeo; the butcher, the baker, the cartman, the shopkeeper, the wanton barmaid, and on and on...



*“Mas Guy, Peter Francis & Ann Hodges”* (© Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)

Mas Guy's incredible memory will be invaluable as we undertake the dismantling of the house and unearth relics and artifacts, antique household implements, and personal effects. We rely heavily on his expertise in identifying the proper sequence of deconstruction, in order to make sure that the integrity of the building is maintained during the process, and the safety of the workers is not compromised. This is high-risk work.

There is a studied reverence, as we walk around, and tiptoe through the house. I notice that in spite of the obvious excitement as we examine the structure, everyone on the crew is keenly aware of the enormity of the task ahead. This was someone's home after all, not just any old building; generations had lived here. Decades of memories are tucked into dusty cobwebbed corners, hidden beneath creaking floorboards, or strewn across dark, dank cellar spaces. Respect is due.

So how does one feel memory? Whose memory would we be *feeling*? We had not participated in the creation of these memories, so we would simply be imagining, based on our own individual and very personal experiences. How could we carry these memories forward into a new experience at the Living Museum? How do we deconstruct a physical structure that holds 120 years of living memory, to reconstruct it on another site in order to create new memories?

The chief architects on the team, WARE directors Ann Hodges and Peter Francis, outline the workflow with Mas Guy's guidance. Everyone is given their assignments, and outfitted with hardhats and appropriate tools. My job is to identify and number every stone, post, lintel, window, floorboard etc., making sure its original location is meticulously noted (or else we could end up with a miniscule version of the leaning tower of Pisa in the reconstruction).



*Untitled* (© John McBean, January 2021)



*"Carol at work"* (© John McBean, January 2021)

Before any work can begin however, there is an important ritual which must be carried out. We must bless the site in the tradition of our ancestors, with a libation, the sprinkling of white over proof rum at all four corners of the building, to appease the spirits, and ensure a safe and easy completion of the job. (This is a sacred offering that is also done at new construction sites, sometimes with the addition of a slaughtered white cock's blood. Thankfully, it was decided to forego that part of the ritual). After saying a brief prayer, I take a capful of the precious liquid in my mouth, and in the Myal tradition, forcefully spew it into the air as we traverse the four corners of the house ... this gets a big laugh from the men, as try as I might, I can't avoid swallowing some of the alcohol! And it's strong!!! Burning my throat, and making my eyes water.

Mas Guy reminds us that the original Mr. Vassel loved his rum, so better make sure to spew a little extra! And of course, everyone on the crew has to drink a toast to the ancestors, and bless the work they are about to do. (Rum was high on the list of essentials when packing for the weekend exercise). It seems the crew are intent on appeasing the spirits as often as possible, with several toasts raised often during the days ahead. And as the rum flowed, so did the stories as memories wiggled free from loosened tongues.

Mas Guy: *"Mek me tell you 'bout Mas Gerald and his mule during hurricane Charlie 1951! Now the mule was used to going to Kidney Pasture to feed on Friday evening after work, and stay there for the weekend. But this weekend, storm and flood was threatening... Mas Gerald try **everything** to get the mule to move to safer ground, but he wouldn't budge! So Mas G leave him with a prayer, and went home to seek shelter. Well you know, Monday morning, bright and early when storm finish, the mule was at Mas Gerald's gate, ready to go back to work as usual!"* This story was greeted with a good belly laugh as others started to recall their own escapades.

For the duration of the weekend, the mood on site was convivial though very focused on the task, which as times was quite dangerous, and required special skill sets. There was no grumbling, no slacking off, everybody was there to get the job done, and done well, with sincere appreciation and respect for the history of the place. Peter Francis took charge easily but not aggressively, and deferred to Mas Guy and other experienced tradesmen as necessary, so every person felt seen, heard, and appreciated. In all the years I've known him, this is the first time I've seen Peter so animated – eyes bright and sparkling, a wide open defenseless grin, absolutely enjoying the process, and the physicality of the work.



*Untitled* (© John McBean, January 2021)

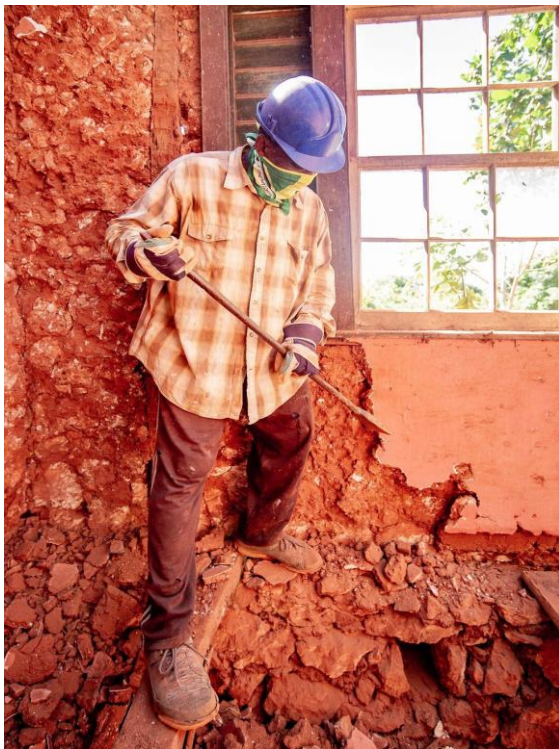


*“Ann at work”* (© John McBean, January 2021)

Ben, Dave and Walker, the tradesmen on the crew, started gingerly chipping away at the plaster rendering, to reveal the limestone underneath. It reminded me of peeling back layers of history, discovering, unearthing, revealing. It will be a painstaking exercise for the rest of the weekend, as care must be taken to save, not destroy.



*“Chipping Away”* (© John McBean, January 2021)



*Untitled* (© John McBean, January 2021)



*Untitled* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)

**DAY 2** begins in earnest, there is a lot of work to get done over the next two days.

As work begins, we are joined by Mr. Devon Vassel, a retired teacher and the son of the last living Vassel who occupied the house. Devon still lives nearby, as does his cousin, who joins him. They are both simply curious as to what we are doing, and the more we explain our mission, the more interested they become. Before too long, they've donned hard hats and work gloves and joined the crew. They are most impressed that we can see value in the old Vassel house and furthermore, are willing to respectfully preserve the memories. This is a new concept for them, because the family history has not been valued much, nor treated as something precious and worthy. Devon Vassel would later share that he discussed with his children how meticulous the process was, as he observed the way the deconstruction was being handled, and the obvious respect and care the job required. It was a tremendous learning for him personally, and I observed the sense of pride he felt at the recognition and appreciation of his family history. He and his cousin would become our friends and allies before the weekend was over, throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the work, even offering tools and equipment.

Peter emerges from the cellar holding a lady's shoe circa 1920's fashion, and an oblong shaped woven thatch contraption and a wooden paddle, "*Anybody know what this is?*" referring to the thatch artifact. Mas Guy replies: "*Yes man, that's a cassava press. They used to use it to make bammy. When they grate the cassava they would put it in the press to drain the juice, and beat it with the paddle before spreading it to dry to make the bammy.*" Bammy is a flatbread about 6 – 8 inches in diameter, made from the cassava root. This is a culinary staple in Jamaican cuisine, handed down from our Taino ancestors. Even today, St. Elizabeth is famous for its super thin bammies.



*"Thatch Cassava Press"* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)

Next someone drags out a large round grinding stone on a wooden stand; a rusty metal iron that would have been filled with hot coals to press clothes; a fragment of an envelope with a George V stamp still attached; a child's shoe made from silk with cutwork decoration. Even an antique china cabinet makes its appearance, still intact. Each new excavation draws an exclamation of surprise and wonder, like opening presents at Christmas! Every fragment is carefully put aside to be catalogued.



*Untitled* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



*“Coal Iron”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



*“Air Mail”* (© John McBean, January 2021)

As the deconstruction continues, more and more of the skeletal structure of the building is revealed, as well as construction methods that were used, at that time. I learn that no nails were used to hold the wooden posts together, instead they were tied and strapped with pieces of thatch palm fronds. Unbelievable as that sounds, I actually find a couple posts with the thatch binding still attached ... 120 years later!

*“Yes man...” Mas Guy starts. “In those days when they would build, they never have metal ladder, it was made from wooden posts, and as they need to lengthen the ladder, they just add another post and rung, and tie them on with thatch, and so it go. If the thatch wear out or get weak, they just reinforce it with more thatch, no nails! And that’s how they built the house structure too.”*

I’m truly in awe of Mr. Parchment’s encyclopedic knowledge of ancient building practices, and local history in general. His reservoir seems endless.

By the end of day two, everyone has a much better appreciation of why these types of structures need to be rescued and restored. The Spanish wall buildings represent not only feats of engineering and human formidableness, but also tell the story of a generation who used the resources they had, the earth, stones and timber to craft by hand a beautiful natural structure that could become a home, where treasured memories were crafted for the next generations.



*Untitled* (© Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)





*Untitled* (© John McBean, 2021)



*“Risky Business”* (@ C. Campbell, January 2021)



*Untitled* (@ Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)

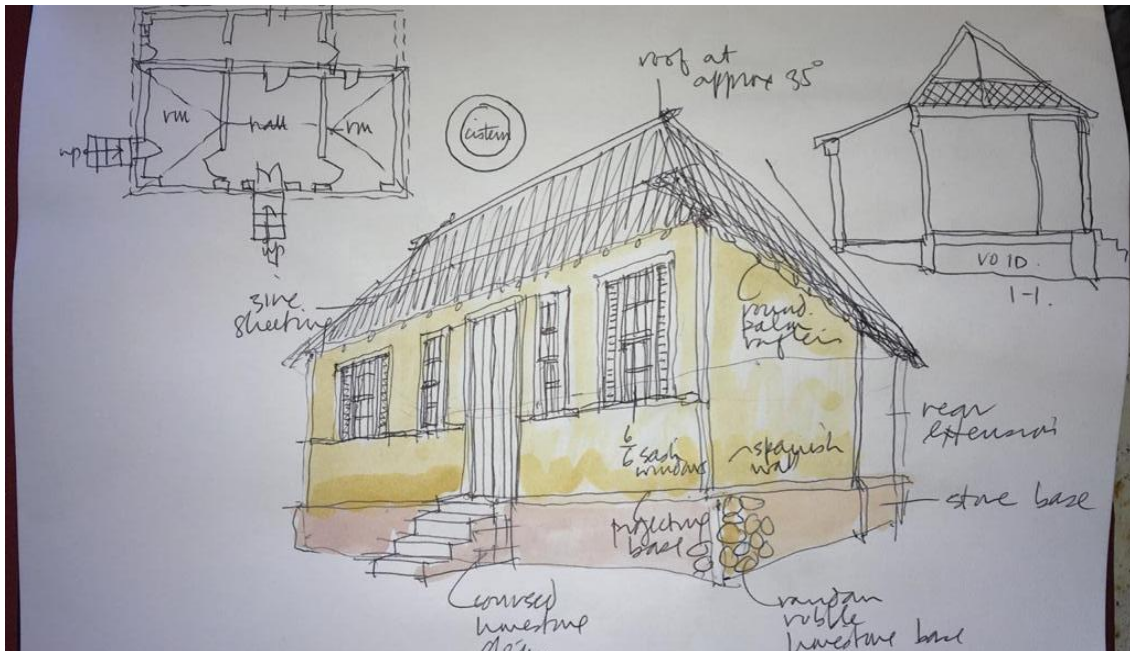
**DAY 3** - Deconstruction is complete. Now just to clear the site for the new owners, and transport the deconstructed house materials to the new location for storage. As the last truckload rumbles down the driveway out onto the main road, we all stand gazing in awe, an eerie emptiness, disbelief almost... 120 years reduced to a few truckloads of termite ridden wooden posts and boards, red rubble and limestone boulders.



*“The Last Truckload”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



*“Unloading”* (© Carol Campbell, January 2021)



*Artist rendering of restored Vassel House by Peter Francis (2020)*



*View from Malvern Chase (the new site)  
(© Courtney Coke, 2020)*



*Artist's rendering, Aerial View of proposed Museum site by Peter Francis (2020)*

In an article entitled “Come to your Senses” (@wattlereearth, March 26, 2021), WARE director Peter Francis had this to say, *“I want to remember the smell of charcoal that signaled the roasting of breadfruit or sweet potatoes, the scent of fresh country air mixed with earth, mist and blossoming trees and plants, to see, smell, and taste all the exuberances of mother nature at work filling all the senses ... if we come to our senses, we will find there are many such experiences to be had and renewed across our rural landscape.”*

Those of us from the WARE Collective are already envisioning the house rebuilt, as new life is breathed into the beams and stones. In our minds’ eyes, we see the new site buzzing with activities as visitors, including students at all levels, kindergarten to tertiary and graduate level, engage in a variety of study and research programs. They gather to learn from community experts, from skilled craftsmen, tradesmen, and professionals, to sit at the feet of masters, to enjoy a cup of tea and enjoy the spectacular view, or to partake of healthy meals lovingly prepared from food grown on our farm right there.

Later on, sitting in the cool fresh country air at a newly refurbished café, adjacent to the Vassel house, feet are set a-tapping to the rhythm of a mento band. New bonds are forged, new friendships seeded, new memories begin to take shape, and we’ll recount these past few days as a *“remember when...”*



*“The Crew”* (© Cookie Kinkead, January 2021)

WARE Collective 2019, film [ROCKSTONE and FIRE - MASTER 2019.mp4](#)

**Contributors:**

**The WARE Collective:** Dr. Courtney Coke, Ms. Carol Campbell, Mr. Peter Francis, Ms. Ann Hodges, Ms. Georgia Love, Ms. Dannet Parchment, Ms. Enith Williams.

Ms. Amina Blackwood Meeks - Storyteller, College Orator - Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts.

Mr. Guy Parchment - Master Builder.

**Photographs:**

Ms. Carol Campbell

Dr. Courtney Coke

Ms. Cookie Kinkead

Mr. John McBean

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