

"The Architectures of Black Identity: Buildings, Slavery, and Freedom in the Early American South and the Caribbean"

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Seven early nineteenth-century board houses still stand in Falmouth, Jamaica. Small, one story, timber-frame buildings usually of two rooms and often less than 150 square feet, these board houses are a rare survival of a once-common building type that served substantial free black populations in Jamaica's early nineteenth century towns. Yet as buildings that served to signal a certain desirable status, they are difficult to interpret. Subjected to anthropological readings of West African material survivalism or creolization, for example, these buildings might signal a near wholesale rejection of their builder's African roots. Offering an alternative approach, this paper foregrounds the role of circumstance in conveying meaning through architecture. In doing so, it shifts the locus of meaning from the static materiality of architectural features to an understanding of the building as a series of complex solutions to a variety of both stable and shifting physical, economic, and cultural factors. By aligning historic and contemporary circumstances, this paper argues for a series of thematic frames--interconnectivity, adaptation, reuse, and improvisation--through which more culturally sensitive architectural meaning might emerge. Once these themes are established, the paper ventures beyond the Caribbean to test their utility in the architectures of enslaved and free African Americans in the mainland South. In an attempt to reconstruct the possible meanings, motivations, and personal identities woven into the fabric of buildings, this paper ranges from archaeological excavations to contemporary shipping containers and from festivals to costume.