

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUGAR ESTATES TO
SENSE OF PLACE ON NEVIS, WEST INDIES

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Degree and Year: Master of Arts in Historic Preservation, 2007

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The Caribbean island of Nevis is small in size, but it was a mighty power in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the British became obsessed with sweetening their afternoon tea with sugar and the Caribbean was able to fill this need. For its size, Nevis was the most prolific of all of the sugar-producing islands with dozens of sugar estates producing volumes of sugar to send back to England. It also became the center of the distribution of slaves throughout the islands of the Lesser Antilles, bringing tens of thousands of black West Africans to the island's shores to build the sugar plantations, work the soil, and endure unthinkable hardships at the hands of their slave masters. As Nevis made sugar, sugar also made Nevis, and the sugar industry dictated the physical development of the island. The remnants of the sugar industry still populate the island with distinctive structures built from local volcanic stone. Today's population is comprised of

descendants of the original black West Africans. The number, density, and condition of sugar estates on Nevis as compared to other islands might, in fact, qualify the island for designation on the World Heritage List.

This thesis examines the sugar estates on Nevis, and considers how they are linked to the island's identity and character. The thesis considers whether the sugar estates should be preserved because they are central to the island's sense of place, which in turn is the basis for its tourism economy. The findings support the contention that the sugar estates provide the basis for the history, development, physical layout, and the demographics of the island. The research found that local citizens, expatriates, and visitors all believe that sugar estates are the most significant of its cultural heritage resources. Interviews with these stakeholders showed that they felt that sugar estates contribute to the island's special atmosphere and spirit. The thesis concluded that without sugar estates and the development connected to it, Nevis would be much the same as other tropical island.

This thesis reviews the history of the island, the sugar industry, the conditions of the estates, and the factors that threaten their well-being. It explores the role of the estates in defining the sense of place of the island and argues that the estates are crucial to maintaining the sense of place of the island. The appendix describes strategies to preserve deteriorating estates, recommends various methods to use in preservation, and encourages the development and implementation of a preservation plan for the sugar estates.