

Dear Honorable Senator Potter and Distinguished Members of the 36th Legislature,

Thank you for inviting me back to testify before you today. My name is Rachael Ackley. I am a born-and-raised Virgin Islander, and Water Island has been my home since I was a child. It is the place that shaped me, the place where I own my home, and the place where I have poured my heart into building three local businesses. Before I begin, I want to express my deepest gratitude to the senators who accepted my invitation from the last Committee of the Whole meeting to come across the water and truly see us. Senator Angel Bolques, Senator Marvin Blyden, Senator Ray Fonseca, Senator Carla Joseph, Senator Hubert Frederick, Senator Milton Potter, Senator Novelle Francis, and the representative from Senator Avery Lewis' office—thank you. Taking time out of your demanding schedules to walk our roads and meet our people meant the world to us. A special thank you to Senator Bolques, who came out twice and worked hand-in-hand with me to arrange those tours.

Those of you who visited saw firsthand that Water Island is not just a plot of land—it is a heartbeat. We are a tight-knit, fiercely resilient community. By necessity, we are problem solvers. When something breaks, we don't wait; we come together and fix it. We have mastered the art of doing a lot with very little.

There is an old, outdated stereotype that Water Island is just an enclave for wealthy, retired continentals. Perhaps decades ago, in the era of Walter Phillips, that held a grain of truth. But today, our reality is beautifully diverse. We are a community of children, working families, retirees and local entrepreneurs. We have twelve young children growing up here. My neighbors are boat captains, electricians, doctors, bartenders, housekeepers, lawyers, chefs, construction workers, plumbers, contractors, accountants and much more. Every day many commute to St. Thomas to work and contribute to our territory. Many work right here on Water Island for the many businesses here.

We also have a vibrant ecosystem of small businesses operating right on Water Island—restaurants, art studios, boat charters, a campground, a farm, a wellness retreat and more. Every single one is owned and operated by residents. We pay full gross receipts taxes and receive no special economic incentives. To put this in perspective: my golf cart rental shop alone pays more in gross

receipts tax every *month* than the proposed monthly rent for this entire 180-acre development during its construction period. Between our business taxes, income taxes, and land taxes, Water Island generates a significant amount of revenue for the government, despite receiving very few public services in return. I do not say this to complain; I say it to show our character. We understand the unique challenges of island life, and we take pride in taking care of our own, precisely so the government can focus its resources on other areas of the Virgin Islands that need them more. Water Island is not an empty, private canvas waiting to be painted on by an outside developer. It has a living soul, an existing community, and its own infrastructure. A project of this massive scale will tear apart the very fabric of who we are. It threatens to turn our home into an exclusive playground where local residents are pushed to the fringes of a resort. Furthermore, it will lock out everyday Virgin Islanders from other islands, making it harder for them to experience and enjoy a piece of their own territory. If this moves forward, our land taxes will inevitably skyrocket due to the sale of multi-million-dollar homes. I look around and honestly ask myself: *Will we even be able to afford to live here anymore?* That is a heartbreaking reality to face for those of us who grew up here, who love this island, and who have invested our entire lives into this community. And this crisis is not unique to us. Across the Caribbean, islands are facing severe pressures from land giveaways and sales to foreign investors. The result is always the same: community displacement, restricted beach access, and environmental destruction. Governments are making policy decisions that are an unsustainable exploitation of our dwindling natural resources. Once these islands are used up and stripped of their local culture, the magic is gone, and people won't want to come here anymore.

Water Island's historical sites and natural beauty belong to the public. Treasures like Fort Segarra and Tamarind Tree Cove (see Exhibit A) should be protected within our park systems for everyone to enjoy. They should never be handed over to a private entity for a century, and certainly not sold off to ultra-wealthy investors, forever violating the public-use purpose explicitly written into the transfer deed from the federal government.

We understand that economic development is important, and we do not want the Virgin Islands to miss out on meaningful investments.

But development must be scaled appropriately, and it must include ironclad protections for the land and the people who safeguard it. I conclude my testimony today with a heartfelt plea to the distinguished members of this legislature: do not set a dangerous precedent by giving away public-purpose lands for luxury development. I ask that you return this lease to its original footprint—restricted to a hotel and marina at Flamingo Bay—before granting any approval.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to protecting the people of the Virgin Islands.

Exhibit A: a comment by David G Anderson the lead author and archaeologist in charge for the National Park Service's investigations that resulted in the 2003 report ***The Archaeology and History of Water Island, U.S. Virgin Islands***. (David G. Anderson, David Knight, and Emily M. Yates). Southeast Archeological Center, National Park Service, Tallahassee, Florida.

I spoke personally with David and showed him the map presented by WIDC showing areas for development. Here is what he asked me to include in my testimony on his behalf.

The areas scheduled for development include one of the most significant historic and archaeological sites on the island, 12-VAM-3-209, the Carolina Point plantation. This property includes the well-preserved remains of a great house occupied in the 18th and 19th centuries, initially by prominent freedmen of color, while downslope to the south are the homes and work areas of an enslaved community that worked the plantation. Many of these enslaved people were buried in Tamarind Tree Bay (12-VAM-3-9), where a massive tree at the back of the cove may date from the time the burial area was in use. Limited archaeological excavations were undertaken at Carolina Point plantation in the 1990s, and at Tamarind Tree Bay, but only a tiny fraction of each site was examined. These areas were protected because of their historic significance, and should be preserved in perpetuity. Minimally, much more archaeological and historic investigation is needed if these areas are to be

developed, to complete the documentation of the great house complex and the associated enslaved community, and to respectfully treat any human remains present in Tamarind Tree Bay. A historic well is also present in Tamarind Tree Bay, and should be completely examined archaeologically. If the adjoining area at the base of Carolina Point is to be developed, in Ruyter's Bay, the historic well located there and designated 12-VAM-3-21, together with WWII era military architecture, two ammunition bunkers, on the cove margin, should also be completely investigated and preserved and protected. Finally, the Fort Segarra military complex on Flamingo Point, which is in a remarkable state of preservation, and that has been well maintained, should be left essentially as is. All of these properties have great historic value and, properly maintained, should be of interest to anyone visiting the island.

David G. Anderson, Ph.D., RPA

map overlay on next page.

Also see pictures of historical sites below and on following pages



Fort Segarra after extensive rehabilitation through a DPNR sub award grant

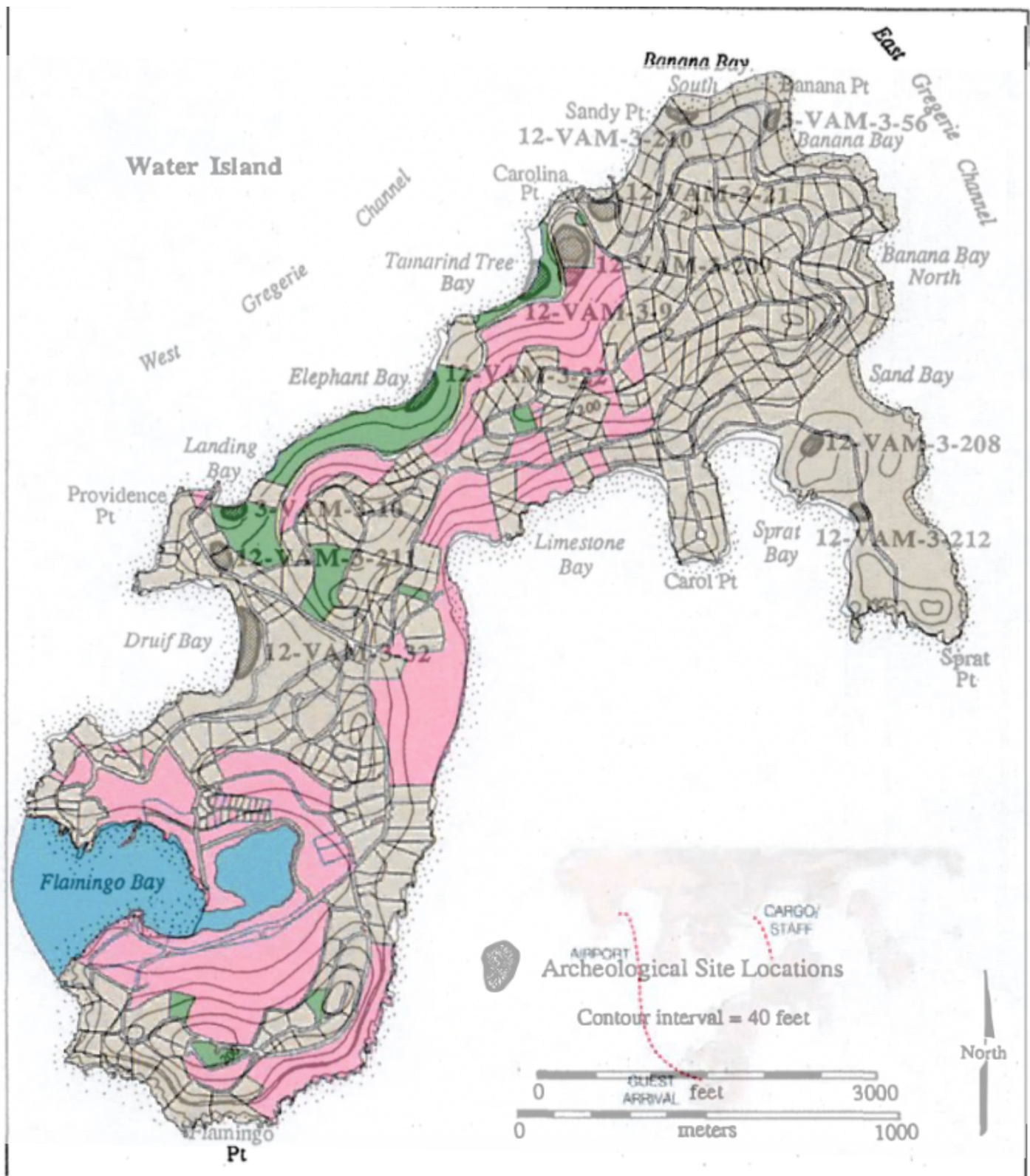


Figure 1.3 — Archeological site locations, 1992 Water Island Archeological Survey, U.S. Virgin Islands (from Wild and Anderson 1992:Figure 2).

Map overlay: Historical sites overlaid with WIDC map.



Figure 9.4 — Selected reconstructed vessels from the Southeast “Burned” Room.

FIGURE 1 (top left). View of Carolina Point and St Thomas from the central ridge on Water Island.

FIGURE 2 (top right). View of the arched cistern of the Great House at Carolina Point.

FIGURE 3 (above). Examples of reconstructed vessels from Carolina Point.

FIGURE 4 (above, right). Cane knife from Slave Structure 2, after conservation.

FIGURE 5 (right). Slave Structure 3, plaster floor and rock wall line.



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Figure 12.3 — The historic well at Tamarind Tree Bay prior to clearing (top) and during the 1998 excavations (bottom).

