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**"To be recovered out of the Sea":  
Engineering Urban Land in Port Royal, Jamaica and the Greater British Caribbean,  
1655-1722**

This paper considers the relationship between urban residents, island coastlines, and the Atlantic economy in Port Royal, Jamaica and the other port-cities of the early modern British Caribbean. By doing so, it demonstrates a regional culture of city-building and urban, environmental improvement that is otherwise obscured by the plantation bias of Caribbean historiography. It was along the Caribbean's shorelines that colonists first adapted to the region's environs and transformed its landscapes into habitable places. In Jamaica, Barbados, and elsewhere, that transformation was a ceaseless process that included creating artificial land, draining swamps, and taming the tides. With these alterations to the shoreline, colonists, engineered landscapes that not only attracted thousands of inhabitants and enabled dense settlement; they also created townscapes that balanced the agricultural, maritime, and commercial ventures of their colonies.

Man's power over the Caribbean environment had its limits. On June 7, 1692, an earthquake sent Port Royal hurtling into the Caribbean Sea. In the wake of the disaster, entire streets—including acres of artificial land—were submerged. Yet, many merchants desired to rebuild the town due to its geographic and environmental advantages. Though these men recognized that their engineering practices, especially land reclamation, made the location susceptible to future disasters, they nevertheless artificially enlarged Port Royal's terrain. In the coming decades a series of natural disasters plagued the once vibrant port-city. But those with land grants in Port Royal continued to promote resettlement and land reclamation until 1722 when a hurricane decimated the remaining buildings. Colonists' repeated attempts to resettle Port Royal were not indicative of maladaptation. Port Royal's proponents repeatedly measured the risk of resettling the ill-fated location. They ultimately decided that its environmental advantages outweighed those of other

locations. In reality, planting settlements anywhere in the Caribbean entailed risk. Colonists chanced their property by constructing houses on reclaimed land. They risked their lives by simply venturing into the Caribbean. Yet, the payoffs of a profitable settlement made colonizing the Caribbean—investing time, capital, and labor in the terrain and built environment—worth the risk.