

Life in Old Jamaica

By Thomas Foster

ONE of the advantages gained in compiling a collection of the postmarks used by a certain country, is the freedom given to include items that are not necessarily connected with philately or postal history, but which do have a bearing on the towns and villages concerned.

Some of the most interesting of these unrelated items concern place names and the derivation of many of the village names found in Jamaica is a fascinating subject, which can be most satisfactorily explained by going back in time to the old slave days.

Certain names have descended from the old land grants made by the Spaniards, but very few of these are to be found amongst existing post offices. Perhaps the best is YALLAHS which is a corrupted version of 'Hato de Ayala', a grant made to a *conquistadore* of that name. Another of these grants was the 'Hato de L'Iguana' which got its name because the place abounded with the land lizards known to the native Arawak as 'iguanas' and which has now been corrupted simply to LIGUANEA.



Other names derived from these old grants are MORANT BAY and PORT MORANT, both situated on land formerly known as the 'Hato de Morante' and GUANABOA VALE taken from the 'Hato de Guanaboa', the latter name itself being an Arawak name for the area.

Towns and villages having names derived from other Spanish sources include OCHO RIOS from the Spanish 'Chireras' ('waterfalls'), PORUS from the Spanish 'Los Poros' ('pitted ground'), LLUIDAS VALE from the Spanish 'Luzida Valle' ('gay, or fine, valley'), MONTEGO BAY from the Spanish 'Mantica Bahía' ('lard bay')—a district which abounded in wild hogs and consequently produced large quantities of lard for provisioning ships, MONEAGUE taken from the Spanish 'Monesca Savannah' ('plain of monkeys'), PEDRO—formerly land granted to the Spanish Governor of the island, DRY HARBOUR—an English translation of the Spanish 'Puerto Seco', RIO BUENO ('good river') which still retains its original name as the place where Columbus landed and found fresh water, RIO GRANDE ('majestic river'), and SAVANNAH LA MAR ('plain by the sea').

Some places in the island have been given more romantic names in modern times in order to further the tourist trade, such as DISCOVERY BAY which, until recent years, was called 'DRY HARBOUR' and was the first landfall of Columbus in Jamaica. Most of the remainder are connected with the plantation system established by the English settlers when they took over the island in 1655 and are often tied up with the kind of crop grown on that plantation.

Sugar had to be grown on roomy, flat, well-watered land which was called a plantation or 'field' and such

plantations were usually named after the owner, or after his residence or home town in the United Kingdom. Examples of these are VAUGHANSFIELD, originally owned by Lord Vaughan—a governor of the island; SEAFORTH, originally owned by Lord Seaforth; FONT HILL, in the ownership of the Beckford family; and BEVERLEY which was owned by the Hibbert family.

Coffee, on the other hand, had to be grown at a certain height above sea-level and because such land did not exist in large tracts, these small estates or 'pieces' became known as 'coffee pieces'. Many examples occur throughout the mountainous districts of the island and one is actually called COFFEE PIECE. Two other very important crops in those early days were cocoa and indigo, both of which were grown on land carrying established trees and bushes which had to be tended over a number of years and harvested gradually, thus becoming known as cocoa or indigo 'walks'.

Bananas were a modern crop and were not grown to any great extent before the 1890's. They were usually grown on ruinate sugar estates which were considered suitable for their cultivation and became known as 'banana ground'.



One post office in Manchester Parish is actually called Banana Ground.

Similarly, villages bearing names like LIME TREE GARDEN, PEAR TREE GROVE and LEMON HALL refer to the crop grown at that place, the word 'garden' being particularly common and usually applied to an orchard or market-garden.

The other most important agricultural concern was the raising of livestock for food and work. Horses, mules and donkeys were especially required for working on the



ANNATTO BAY

sugar plantations and driving the heavy cane crushers, before being replaced by steam engines which were initially designed for work on the Jamaican plantations.

Livestock was reared on vast estates called 'grazing pens', usually on flat stretches of land which were not well enough watered for sugar. The word 'pen' still abounds throughout the island, although nowadays, there is a tendency to rename such places and replace 'pen' with 'town'. Many examples exist, such as MAY PEN, WHITFIELD PEN (now WHITFIELD TOWN), and PEPPER PEN. The last named was a very famous 'pen' and had one of the largest studs in the world. Valuable racehorses were exported to the United Kingdom from there and one of them is reputed to have won the Derby at Epsom in the closing years of the 18th century soon after this classic race was inaugurated.

Yet another valuable crop was arrowroot which was often grown as a catch crop amongst sugar cane. We know this product today as tapioca, but its original Arawak name was 'cassava' and Jamaica issued a well-known stamp in 1921, showing an Arawak woman pounding cassava to extract the juice from the pith. It became known as 'arrow root' because the Arawak hunters dipped their arrows in the poisonous juice, which then produced a stunning or numbing effect on the small animals they hunted. In commercial use, the pithy starch is sun dried and used for making puddings and invalid foods.

Another profitable trade of that time was forestry, in this case the harvesting of the vast logwood and fustic forests from which were produced red and yellow dyes. In other parts of the island, mahogany was felled and exported to Europe for the making of good furniture. Village names resulting from these operations can be found, two of them being FUSTIC and MAHOGANY VALE. Good dyeing agents were constantly in demand and a small berry called annatto or annatto, produced a brilliant yellow dye. From this plant, the town and port of ANNOTTO BAY takes its name.

The centre of life on any estate was the Great House, which was the home of the owner or his manager. Around the house were situated various plantation buildings, stables, crushing and boiling sheds, the estate shop and residential quarters for the overseers, book-keepers and slaves. By the Deficiency Laws, all plantations had to maintain a certain proportion of white workers and many of these 'whites' had been bonded servants in the early days, who after working off their 'bondage', became overseers and book-keepers. Thus was created on each plantation, the nucleus of a small village.

After the abolition of slavery, most of these villages retained the names of the old plantations, even though the estates themselves had been broken up into individual small holdings or 'pieces'. Examples of these are SAWYERS (Sawyer's Plantation) and LUCKY VALLEY.

Apart from the small towns established at the outposts, the only places inhabited were the estates and, consequently, few shops or stores existed as we know them today, most traders in the towns dealing only in wholesale quantities and most owners importing plantation stores direct from the United Kingdom or America on a yearly basis. All commercial operations were run on credit and settlement was made when the various crops had been sold on the overseas markets.

The Brighter Side of Slavery

Much of what has been written about slavery in the past is sheer bunkum and the negro slave usually enjoyed far better conditions of employment than the farm labourer in this country, for a slave was a valuable property who could often cost up to £3,000 in local currency¹.

The most flourishing profession in Jamaica was that of the doctor of medicine. Many practitioners amassed great fortunes, as they were paid 6s per week for keeping each slave in good condition, which they did by a series of weekly check-ups. Many of the larger plantations had their own hospitals where slaves convalesced after illness until they were fit for work again. The legal profession also flourished in an island where law suits abounded.

In the towns, slaves were employed as craftsmen and artisans and were frequently allowed to seek their own employment. From the money earned, they could purchase their freedom and often set up in business on their own account.

On the plantations, slaves were divided into three gangs. The 'field gang' consisted of able-bodied men and women who worked the land and managed the harvesting, the 'second gang' was made up of boys, girls and convalescents performing light tasks including household work whilst the 'little gang' consisted largely of piccaninnies under the charge of an old woman and went around tending live-stock and kept the fires under the sugar boilers supplied with 'trash' during 'curing time'.

¹ All monetary values are quoted in local currency which was traded at a discount from sterling, 25 /— in currency equalling £1 sterling.

The slaves were awakened at daybreak by the blowing of a conch shell or 'abeng', the latter being an ancient instrument depicted on the stamp issued in 1964. They worked until 8 am when breakfast was taken in the fields and sluggards who had not answered the call were punished by giving them the dirtiest jobs. Whips were never used except as a punishment on slaves who tried to escape or who were convicted of criminal acts.



At noon, they had dinner and were not recalled until 2 p.m. when work continued until sunset. During harvest time, much longer hours were worked but that is usual in any agricultural system and the yearly average was only about 10 hours per working day.

Saturday and Sunday were rest days. Saturday was devoted to the cultivation of the ground or 'piece' given to each slave or his family and on this he grew vegetables and reared pigs, rabbits and poultry to augment the rations of salt, clothing, rum, cutlery, salt fish, meat, molasses and flour provided by the estate owner. The slaves lived on a family basis in their own huts made of wood and wattles and, apart from working times, were free to come and go as they pleased.

On Sunday, they could attend the local church or the chapel set up by the various missionary societies and then they went to the local market, where they sold or bartered their excess produce. The money raised was used to purchase luxuries from the estate shop or, as often happened, was accumulated to purchase the freedom of a member of the family. There are several instances of slaves purchasing the freedom of children whom they then sent to school in England and France!

Many of these old markets, often situated at strategic cross-roads or river fordings, are now flourishing towns such as CROSS ROADS, NEW MARKET, and LINSTED.



Any slave woman who gave birth to a child was given £3 by law (an early form of family allowance!) together with a gift of rations and clothing. Any slave woman who had six living children became a free woman and her owner was compensated by the government for her loss.

After the emancipation, there was great destitution amongst the ex-slaves and efforts by the missionary societies to help them, often assisted by local charity, resulted in the creation of small, 'free' villages such as BROWN'S TOWN, CLARK'S TOWN or STEWART TOWN. These villages usually took their names from the missionary concerned with their foundation, or the landowner who had donated the land on which they were built.

This resume of some aspects of life in old Jamaica will be of interest to the collector of these fascinating postmarks and may therefore assist in the 'writing up' of this kind of material.