

B/N Donald Sangster's

Ruins!

Donald Sangster's birthplace falling apart



The late Sir Donald Sangster.



Derrick Sangster points to the birthplace of his cousin, the late Jamaican prime minister Sir Donald Sangster. (Photo: Gregory Bennett)

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MOUNTAINSIDE, St Elizabeth – It looks like any old, abandoned building to be found in deep rural Jamaica. Its crumbling stone and wood-

frame structure is enmeshed in and choked by fast-growing trees and shrubbery in pasture lands just south of this South West St Elizabeth district.

In terms of solidity, the broken-down house runs a poor second to a long-unused stone oven to the rear.

Turn to **RUINS** on Page 3

RUINS from Page 1

Such is the birthplace of the late Sir Donald Sangster, Jamaica's second prime minister and the man after whom the airport in Montego Bay is named.

Hit hard by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004, the once-proud three-bedroom house, built by Sangster's father William, is now in rapid decline with sections of the walls as well as the verandah having already been flattened. The entire structure is at risk of collapse, with or without the intervention of natural disasters, if rehabilitative action isn't taken soon.

Talk of the old house being declared a heritage site took shape in the aftermath of the 2007 elections when then Member of Parliament for SW St Elizabeth Dr Christopher Tufton initiated discussions with the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT).

But the site remains undeclared. Executive director of the JNHT Laleta Davis-Mattis told **Jamaica Observer Central** by telephone that discussions about Sangster's

birthplace had been widened to include "birthplaces and homes of all Jamaican prime ministers and other significant spaces..."

She gave no timelines and avoided direct answers to questions regarding the availability of funding, but said "finding a mechanism" for the declaration of sites such as the Sangster birthplace and for their "development and sustainable maintenance" was an issue. She suggested that ownership of land could be a hurdle in some cases.

But in the specific case of the Sangster birthplace, the late prime minister's cousin Derrick Sangster, parish councillor (JLP) for the Mountainside Division, who owns the 200-acre property on which the old house is located, said land tenure wouldn't be a problem.

"In the discussions that I had with Dr Tufton, there was an understanding that I would donate about two to three acres of land to allow space around the house and an access road," said Sangster.

The poor state of the structure notwithstanding,

Derrick Sangster held out hope that if action is taken quickly the building can be restored.

"Hopefully, if Heritage Trust comes through quickly enough, it can be restored. The thing is that the basic outline is here still and I know there are architects and contractors who specialise in the restoration of old buildings. I don't think that's much of a problem, but they have to move quickly," he said.

Sangster said, too, that discussions with Tufton had centred on exploiting the site for its heritage tourism qualities.

Confirming those discussions, as well as his attempt to attract the interest of the Heritage Trust, Tufton said he had made progress in securing \$30 million from the CHASE Fund for the renovation and expansion of a basic school in Mountainside which Sir Donald's attended. A playfield donated by the late prime minister to the Mountainside community, and on which he also played cricket was also set for upgrading with the help of

CHASE funds, Tufton added.

Derrick Sangster confirmed that work was taking place on the pavilion at the playfield but he said the planned renovation of the basic school was yet to begin. Current MP for SW St Elizabeth Hugh Buchanan said, he had been informed of the development plans.

Born October 26, 1911 to land surveyor and cattleman William Sangster and Cassandra (nee Plummer), Donald Burns Sangster died on April 5, 1967 from a brain haemorrhage in a Montreal hospital, after just over six weeks as prime minister.

He was appointed prime minister on February 22, 1967, following the return to power

of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in the general election. Sangster, who was also finance minister, had just named his Cabinet and was preparing the budget, when he collapsed and was rushed off to Canada.

A graduate of Munro College and a trained solicitor, Sangster entered politics at age 21 at the Local Government level representing the Mountainside Division.

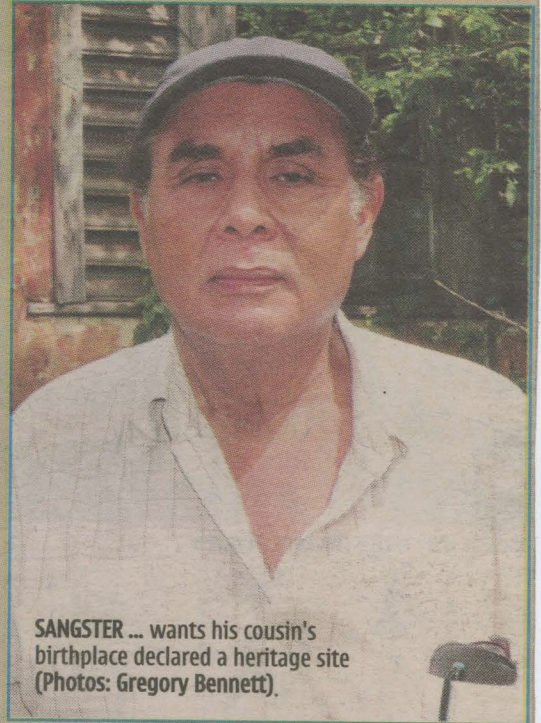
He ran as an independent for the South St Elizabeth constituency in the elections of 1944 and lost. He subsequently joined the JLP and won in 1949. But he would lose his seat in 1955. Sangster then moved his political base to Clarendon where he represented the North East and North Central constituencies before his death.

Sangster was an avid sportsman who was at one time captain of the St Elizabeth cricket team. A biography of Sir Donald Sangster, written by the late journalist and author, Hartley Neita was scheduled to be launched in Kingston yesterday.

Heritage tourism for Sangster's birthplace?



A section of the house where Sir Donald Sangster was born is still standing.



SANGSTER ... wants his cousin's birthplace declared a heritage site (Photos: Gregory Bennett).



The collapsed verandah.



The outside brick oven.