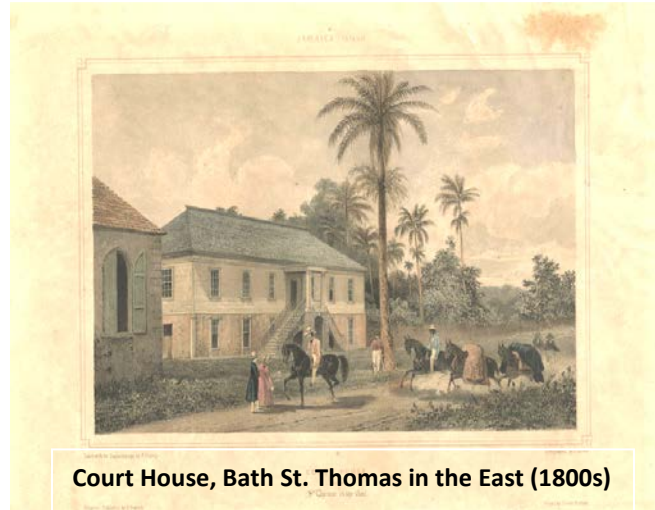


History of St. Thomas

The parish of St Thomas is located along the south eastern coast of Jamaica and is bordered by St. Andrew on the western end, Portland on the northern end, and the Caribbean Sea on the southern end.

Originally, the name of the parish was St. Thomas in the East, and it was so named primarily to distinguish it from St. Thomas in the Vale (amalgamated to form present



day St. Catherine). St. Thomas was combined with the old parish of St. David, and is considered to be one of the oldest parishes in Jamaica. Its historic legacy dates back to the 15th century as some historians have noted that when Columbus arrived he was met by a strong Taino presence in the parish; St. Thomas was therefore one of the earliest areas of settlement in Jamaica.

Origin of the Name

The name “St. Thomas” was derived from two possible governors of Jamaica - Sir Thomas Modyford or Thomas Hickman-Lord Windsor. Some historians argue that St. Thomas was so called before the arrival of Sir Thomas Modyford, so, Thomas Hickman Lord Windsor is who the parish may have been named after in 1662.

Morant Bay- Capital

Morant Bay is the capital of St. Thomas and was identified as the chief town and shipping port in the parish. Shortly after the English occupation in 1655, it was called “Freeman’s Bay”, named after Thomas Freeman, who owned a large tract of land there. Initially the town was

said to have been first laid out by Peter Ballette, and was called “Petersborough”. It is uncertain when exactly the capital finally became known as Morant Bay.

Settlement

The first set of people to settle in St. Thomas was the Tainos (Arawak) and they were already present in the island on Columbus’ arrival. The Spaniards after settling, established cattle ranches at “Morante”; this location would later be known as Morant Bay. ‘Ayala’ or Yealoth now known as Yallahs was another important town. A year after the island was captured by the English, the earliest English settlers included soldiers that were sent to colonize the Morant Bay area. Shortly after the conquest and after Cromwell had acquired Jamaica, he set about inducing settlers to come to the island. A group of approximately 1600 persons from Nevis, including Major Luke Stoke (Governor of Nevis), arrived in the parish. Some settlers found it difficult to adjust to their new home and they did not survive too long after living there. In a couple of months, up to two thirds of the colonists, including Major Stokes and his wife, died of fevers. Major Stokes was survived by his children who became quite wealthy and established two imposing houses which still stand today - Stokesfield and Stokes Hall.

Maroons

Out of all the groups of persons to have settled in the parish of St. Thomas, the chief settlers were the Maroons. These maroons were ex slaves who ran away to the mountains and joined other bands of maroons who had fled their captors because of ill treatment, and who did not want to be enslaved. In the latter years, bands of maroons settled in the mountainous areas of St. Thomas and eventually joined with those in Portland, thus forming the ‘*Windward Maroons*’. They set up independent communities, resiliently fought for many years against the English and even had some level of success, as the English had to sign a peace treaty between themselves and the Maroons. Maroons are still present in today’s society in their respective communities in other parishes.

Morant Bay Rebellion

The history of St. Thomas is most popularly associated with the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, which changed the way the island of Jamaica was governed; there was a shift from representative (House of Assembly) to Crown Colony government. At the forefront of the rebellion was Paul Bogle, a local Baptist deacon from Stony Gut, who led a group of his people to the then capital of Spanish Town, petitioning for an improvement in the people's condition. Their frustrations and concerns were in vain, as no official would see them and this action would contribute to the rebellion which took place on October 11, 1865. Many lives were lost in the suppression of the rebellion and under Martial Law, four hundred and thirty nine were put to death; a further one hundred and forty seven were put to death after martial law ceased. Under the governance of Edward Eyre, a commission was held to investigate the origins of the disturbances. The commission gave Governor Eyre full credit for his promptness in quelling the outbreak but held him responsible for the continuance of excessive severity and for the method of George William Gordon's trial and execution. Gordon was a prominent Kingston business man and large property owner, who was also the elected member of assembly for St. Thomas. Additionally, he was active both politically and religiously and was very critical of Governor Eyre and his handling of the people and their conditions. George William Gordon along with Paul Bogle were declared National Heroes in a ceremony in Morant Bay in 1965.

Notable places/buildings in St. Thomas

Bath Fountain

This mineral spring was discovered by a runaway slave in the late 17th century. It was acquired and developed by the Government in 1699. It is said to be effective in the treatment of skin diseases, gout and rheumatism.

Morant Bay Court House

This historic court house was the scene of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865.

Morant Bay Fort

Located behind the Morant Bay Court House, this fort dates back to 1773, but its three remaining cannons were installed early 18th century.

Morant Bay Lighthouse

This 100 foot high structure was built in 1841 by Krus, part of the contingent of 11,400 free Africans brought to Jamaica after emancipation. Many of these Africans landed and settled in Morant Bay as well as the interior areas of St. Thomas, particularly along the Plantain Garden River.

Bogle Memorial Garden

The Site where once stood the chapel and house of National Hero Paul Bogle which were destroyed by the soldiers in the vicious aftermath of the rebellion had been developed as a garden by the Jamaica National Trust Commission. A stone carving with a plaque which briefly tells the story has been erected on this site.

Stokes Hall Great House

Built by the sons of the former Governor of Nevis (Major Stokes). The ruins of this great house are possibly the oldest existing structural foundations in the island.

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