

# History of Westmoreland



The parish of Westmoreland was officially formed in 1703. It is speculated that it was so named because of its geographical location being at the Western part of the island. There is evidence that parts of Westmoreland were

inhabited by the Tainos. Evidence of their occupation in the parish can be found at Paradise Park, Bluefields and Negril; Chebuctoo House located in close proximity to Cave district is thought to be a former Taino site. Drummond and Indian Head in the parish are said to have caves with Taino remains.

Remnants of Spanish occupation can also be found in the parish. Led by Christopher Columbus, the Spanish first came to the island in 1492. Evidence of the Spanish occupation can be found in the place names, for example, Savannah-la-Mar- the capital and Negril Point formerly known as ( Punto Negrillo). Spanish influence was also evident in architecture in a building technique known as 'Spanish Walling' where quicklime was used as a cement substitute.

The English in 1655 ousted the Spanish and took over the country and it was under their occupation that Westmoreland was formed. Westmoreland was originally part of the parish of St. Elizabeth. The size of the parish was thought to warrant a division as the expanse was sufficient for two parishes. The passage of

an Act by the House of Assembly made it official. Westmoreland was again divided in 1723 and a part of the parish formed the new parish of Hanover.

## **Sugar**

Under English rule sugar and slavery accelerated; Westmoreland being one of the chief sugar producing parishes. An inventory in 1722 numbered the estates at seventy three. Two of the most prominent estates at the time were Fort William and Roaring River estates. The well known, planter family, the Beckfords featured prominently in the development of sugar in the Parish. Among the more know Beckfords are Richard, Peter and William. Current day Petersfield, is named in commemoration of Peter Beckford. In the post- emancipation era, sugar production fell sharply in Jamaica, and by 1854 the number active sugar estates in Westmoreland was thirty four.

The 1840s saw the introduction of different ethnic groups such as, Germans, East Indians and Chinese. They were brought into the country to supplement the labour shortage that resulted from the abolition of slavery. In 1839, Germans came to Westmoreland and settled in Seaford Town. The settlers were isolated and mainly engaged in agricultural pursuits. Descendants of these immigrants can still be found in Seaford Town.

East Indians also immigrated to Jamaica as indentured labourers after the abolition of slavery. Some names of persons currently residing in the parish are descendants of indentured workers such as: Malahoo, Ramjus, Sattahoo, Rampasad, Cheddesingh, Tingling, Potopsingh, Tulsie, etc. The indentured workers were instrumental in the rice industry at that time as many planted rice in the morasses.

## **The Capital**

Savanna-la-mar or Sav-la –mar as it is popularly called was founded about 1730 as the main town in Westmoreland. Prior to 1730 the chief town was Queen’s Town, now called Cross Path. It is said to mean “the plain by the sea.’ Savanna-la-mar was built on ‘a strip of land running down the sea between mangrove swamps which hem it in on both sides;’ it literally ends in the sea. The town has experienced a number of natural disasters, in 1748, 1780 and 1912. In 1748 the town was almost decimated from a hurricane. In 1790 the town also experienced a tidal wave of sorts which ‘swept up the beach for nearly a mile.’ In November 1912 after nine days of rain, a hurricane struck the island which almost wiped out the town of Savanna-la- Mar. The hurricane brought a tidal wave which saw a schooner, the ‘*Latonia*’ being swept ashore and sailed for some time on Great Gorges Street. Only Mannings School, the teacher’s residence, and the Bank of Nova Scotia Bank in the parish were spared. The town also encountered health challenges as in 1990 the town suffered a typhoid outbreak.

## **Religious History**

The religious history of the parish is very diverse. The Moravians were the first religious group that went to Westmoreland. In the middle part of the 1700’s they had immigrated to the country on the request of the Foster Brothers of Elim St. Elizabeth and subsequently went to Mesopotamia. They operated a station there 1760-1834. They established several missions in the parish and encouraged educational activities. The Presbyterians are historically linked to the parish. They established their first congregation in the parish in 1837 in Grange hill. They were

advocates for education and taught the newly freed blacks. The Catholics can be included in Westmoreland History.

### **Contemporary Westmoreland**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to be a transformational time in the parish. It saw the diversification of crops from mainly sugar cane to others such as pimento, ginger, logwood, honey, coffee. In addition to this persons from the newly established peasantry tried to be entrepreneurial and established small sugar plants where they produced a cheap variety of sugar known as 'wet sugar' or vinegar. Rice was later cultivated especially by the East Indian settlement in Paul Island. Fishing is also done in the ports of Negril, Little Bey, Bluefields and Whitehouse.

Westmoreland twentieth century history will forever be marked by the 1938 labour riots. The Frome sugar factory was the scene of labour riots in protest of the poor working conditions. During the unrest the estate was damaged by fire and many were killed. These events contributed to the formation of the Trade Union Movement in Jamaica. It also led to the prominence of Alexander Bustamante who went on to form his own trade Union and later a Political Party.

Today tourism has become a part of the economic activity of the parish. Negril is the tourism hub of the parish and one of the main tourist areas in Jamaica.

### **Notable things about Westmoreland**

- The cast iron fountain located at the Parish Council Building was gifted in 1887 by Mr. Earl Sadler a Westmoreland Planter. In 1874 Rev. Clarke founded the Westmoreland Building Society the first building society in Jamaica

- Rat Trap is named from the antics of a shop owner, it is said that he claimed that his shop could attract anyone in the district whether they liked him or not.
- Reis Mountain formerly Parson Reid district is the birthplace of Lady Bustamante.
- In 1723 a section of Westmoreland was partitioned to form Hanover
- The Westmoreland building Society was established in 1874 by Rev. Henry Clarke in order to allow persons from varying socio-economic background to access savings and loan services.
- Author of 'Roots' Alex Haley owned a beach house in Negril
- The marshlands otherwise known as the Great Morass is a crocodile habitat
- In 1920's Negril was a small underdeveloped fishing village.
- The courthouse was erected in 1925
- The Savanna-la-mar hospital was built on lands donated by a former Custos Hon. Eric Clark.

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