

THE PARISH OF ST THOMAS

GEOGRAPHY

The land mass of St. Thomas ranges from the peaks of the John Crow Mountains to as low as sea-level at certain sections of the coast. Subsidiary ridges of the Blue Mountain range, running from east to west across the island, come to their eastern end in St. Thomas. These include the Port Royal Mountain Range, which rises in some parts to 1, 219.2 m (4,000 feet) and stretches from above Newcastle, in St. Andrew, to a point near the sea in the Albion area of St. Thomas.

Between the valleys of the Yallahs and Negro Rivers lies the Queensbury Ridge, and to the extreme south of the Blue Mountain massif stands the Yallahs Hill, a 730m (2, 394 feet) isolated ridge.

The vegetation of St. Thomas is mostly dry limestone scrub forests at 0 – 381m (0 – 1250 feet), lower mountain rain forests over 381m (1250 feet) and some elfin woodlands.

The coastal area of the parish is located between the Yallahs River and Hector's River, and includes large wetland areas such as the Great Morass and the Cow Bay Swamps, as well as significant areas of deciduous forest. The shoreline is also made up of rocky cliffs and sandy or gravelly beaches and is indented by a number of bays which include Sugar Loaf, Yallahs, Salt pond, Lyssons, Holland point, Rocky Point, canoe and Morant Point.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The parish of St. Thomas is supposedly named after Thomas Hickman (Lord Windsor), Governor of Jamaica in 1662, although it may well have been dedicated to the Saint of this name in keeping with the desire of the early colonizers to establish church districts in their newly acquired territories.

Originally called St. Thomas-in-the-East, the modern-day parish of St. Thomas was enlarged in 1867, to include the former parish of St. David. St. Thomas was one of the earliest areas settled in the island, and at the time of Columbus' arrival, the parish was densely populated by Arawaks. The first Spanish settlers in St. Thomas established cattle ranches at "Morante" (later to be called Morant Bay) and Yallahs.

One year after the English conquest in 1655, residents of other colonies were invited to settle in Jamaica. Only the people of Nevis accepted this invitation. In December 1656, Major Luke Stokes (governor of Nevis), along with his family and some 1600

other colonists, settled in Morant Bay. Unfortunately, the settlers did not survive long in their new home. In a matter of months, two-thirds of the colonists (including Major Stokes and his wife) died of fever. Stokes' children survived, however, becoming quite wealthy and established two imposing houses which still stand today – Stokesfield and Stokes Hall.

St. Thomas had a major clash with foreigners when DuCasse – a French admiral from Santo Domingo – landed at Morant Bay in 1674. For over one month, DuCasse and his party destroyed plantations, burned sugar mills, murdered white colonists and kidnapped many black slaves. Although the bustling harbor of Port Morant was guarded by Fort Lindsay on Morant Point (now in ruins) and Fort William on the other side, these proved ineffective against the determined DuCasse. Having ravaged this parish, DuCasse moved on to Kingston where he encountered manned garrisons and fortifications.

In later years, bands of Maroons settled in the St. Thomas mountains and eventually joined with those in Portland thus forming the “Windward Maroons.”

The history of St. Thomas is most popularly associated, however, with the events of 1865; events which led to Jamaica's irascible assembly being dissolved and the island's status being changed to that of a Crown Colony.

Local leaders in the parish, Edward Jordan and George William Gordon had been attempting to improve the poor conditions of the newly emancipated slaves, but were repeatedly blocked by the white plantocracy, under the governorship of William Eyre.

Paul Bogle, a local Baptist deacon from Stony Gut, led a group to the then capital, Spanish Town, petitioning for an improvement in the people's conditions. They had to trudge over forty miles back to Stony Gut, however, as no official would see them. An infuriated Bogle began to train his followers in the use of arms, and several disturbances occurred, leading to the issuing of a warrant for his arrest.

A riot in front of the courthouse on June 11, 1865, which resulted in the killing of seven mob members as well as the Custos, has come to be called the Morant Bay Rebellion. Martial law was declared, and the warship the “Wolverine” dispatched to Morant Bay from Kingston.

George William Gordon (who had not participated in the uprisings) was illegally taken aboard the warship. After being tried and sentenced to death, he was hanged in front of the court house. Bogle was also hanged on this day, and both bodies thrown into a pit behind the building.

The Morant Bay Rebellion led to a week of killing under the guise of martial law. In time, the Legislature surrendered the Constitution of the island, allowing Jamaica to be brought under Crown Colony government.

As a result of his excessive brutality in the Morant Bay rebellion, Governor Eyre was relieved of his post and recalled to England. There he was tried, convicted and dismissed from the Service. A striking statue of Paul Bogle once stands before the Morant Bay Courthouse, a testimony to Bogle's fight for freedom.

AGRICULTURE AND INDUSTRY

Both Bowden and Port Morant were busy harbors during the heyday of sugar and bananas. Most of St. Thomas' large coconut plantations and sugar estates are no longer in operation however, the sole surviving sugar factory in the parish being Duckenfield and the sole surviving coconut farm being Michael Black's Farm.

The United Fruit Company once had many flourishing banana plantations in the parish, but these were forced to close due to the damaging effects of the Panama Disease. The Company pulled out, and the banana stations closed. Coconut and banana trees in St. Thomas were virtually wiped out by the hurricane of 1944 and many of those left standing was finally blown down in 1951 by Hurricane Charlie.

Today, a few large areas are used for the cultivation of coconuts, sugarcane and bananas, but small farming is now the main agricultural practice in the parish. Despite changing weather patterns and occasional periods of drought, most crops do very well. Oysters are farmed in the sea at Bowden, by the Ministry of Agriculture and private farmers.

Livestock farm

SERGE ISLAND DAIRIES

Serge Island Dairies limited, situated north of Seaforth in St Thomas, is the largest manufacturer of processed juices, milk and milk-based drinks in Jamaica, including lactose free milk, peanut punch, chocolate milk. Serge products are distributed locally and exported to the Caribbean, United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. This operation also produces beverages namely cool fruit and swizzle juice drink. Serge Islands Dairies was acquired by Seprod in 2005 and has since then upgraded to the the most advance tetra packaging technology in the island making Serge a world class facility.

Author: Winston Scott

GOODYEAR JAMAICA LTD

Goodyear Jamaica Ltd was the then manufacturing capital for Goodyear tyres locally and regionally, supplying every country in CARICOM with tyres manufactured at the Morant Bay plant. The company was incorporated under the laws of Jamaica and was declared an “approved enterprise” 1965. On February 1, 1967 Goodyear Jamaica’s factory built and cured its first “check tyre” and on February 13, the first production tyre was taken from the press by the then Minister of Trade and industry, the Honorable Robert Lightbourne. As the production at the plant gather momentum, the company had to carry out an expansion of its plant in 1975. In 1995, production of the radial passenger line was discontinued and in March 1997, the company made the transition from “full” organization to an organization dedicated exclusively to the sales and marketing for Goodyear’s Caribbean market (Factory was closed).

MAIN RIVERS

Yallahs River	36.9km (22.9 miles)
Plantain Garden River	34.9km (21.7 miles)
Morant River	25.9km (16.1 miles)

MAIN ELEVATIONS

Blue Mountain	(part of range)
Yallahs Hill	730m (2394 feet)

MINERALS

A small amount of marble was being mined from quarries in the Bath area of St. Thomas. Jamaica marble comes in various colours – pinkish-grey, grey-green and maroon. Some 100 tons are produced here annually primarily for use in the terrazzo-tile industry. In terms of capacity for polish, colour patterns and richness of colour, Jamaican marble compares favourably with those on the international market.

Author: Winston Scott

Talc and asbestos occur in the Hornblende schists of the area surrounding Bath.

FORESTS

Government Forest reserves 13, 158 hectares (32, 514 acres)

Private Woodland 74, 138.4 hectares (183, 200 acres)

WETLAND AREAS

Cow Bay Swamp

Albion Swamp

Great Morass

MONUMENTS AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Morant Bay Courthouse

Scene of the 1865 riot, this courthouse was burnt during the violence that occurred. It was rebuilt some time afterwards. Leader of the rioters National Hero, Paul Bogle, was buried behind the courthouse in a shallow grave.

Stokes Hall Great House

Stokes Hall and nearby Stokesfield mark the area where Major Luke Stokes – the then Governor of Nevis – brought his family and over 1, 600 colonists to Jamaica during the early days of colonization. Fevers and related illnesses killed many of the colonists, including Major Stokes and his wife, but his children survived and eventually established these two outstanding houses. The ruins of the Great House are possibly the oldest existing structural foundations in the island.

Morant Bay Fort

Located behind the Morant Bat courthouse, this fort dates back to 1773, but its three remaining cannons were installed early in the 18th century.

Morant Bay Lighthouse

Author: Winston Scott

This 100 feet 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 Valley.

LEGENDS

Jack Mansong (Three Finger Jack)

It is not known whether Three Finger Jack was born in Jamaica or in Africa. What is known, however, is that he led a one-man battle during 1780-81 against the English soldiers and planters. From his hideout in the Queensbury Hills of the Blue Mountain range, Three Finger Jack organized his attacks. He was a bandit, outlaw, rebel, murderer and hero, earning a reputation for his bold exploits and chivalry.

In 1781 a Maroon named Quashie along with two others ambushed and killed Jack. A price of three hundred pounds had been placed “on Jack’s head,” which his captors cut off, stuck on a pole and marched all the way to Spanish town in order to collect the reward.

At Eleven Miles on Kingston to St. Thomas highway, a roadside plaque pays tribute to the memory of “Three Finger Jack.”

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS AND POINTS OF INTEREST

Bath Botanical Gardens

Established in 1779 by the Government of Jamaica, these gardens are the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. Many of the plants first brought to Jamaica were introduced here, including the croton, the jacaranda, cinnamon, mango, jackfruit and breadfruit.

Bath Fountain (hot water mineral bath)

Discovered by a runaway slave in the late 17th century, the Bath Fountain (or Mineral Spring), was acquired and developed by the government in 1699. The water is drawn from both hot and cold springs, and its high mineral content (Sulphur and lime) is said to be effective in the treatment of skin diseases, gout and rheumatism.

BEACHES

- Mezzgar's Run
- South Haven
- Rozelle
- Lyssons
- Retreat
- Prospect
- Rocky Point

INTERESTING PLACE NAMES

Yallahs

The area probably got its name from Captain Yallahs, a 1671 privateer who loved the area and visited frequently. It is also interesting to note that Yallahs was chosen as the site of the first Baptist church in Jamaica in 1822. The Rev. Joshua Tinson's attempt to start the Baptist church was thwarted, however, but he returned in 1828 and succeeded in establishing both a church and a school.

White Horses

This was the area named Barreras Blancas by the Spaniards.

Sugar Loaf Hill

The Spanish settlers originally named this hill "Punta de los Ananones."

Potosi

Author: Winston Scott

A place named originating in Bolivia.

Lyssons

An extensive estate originally owned by Colonel Thomas Freeman, the first Speaker of the House of assembly in the 17th century.

References

St Thomas Parish Library

www.goodyearjamaicalimited.com

www.seprod.com