

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE
TOWN AND DISTRICT
OF
VIEUX FORT
(ST. LUCIA)

COMPILED BY

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*Published by the Saint Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society.
1971.*

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This short sketch of the story of Vieux Fort is offered by the authors, on behalf of the St. Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society, as a contribution towards the celebration of Development Day in St. Lucia on 1st May 1971.

INTRODUCTORY

In the days of the French ownership and occupation of St. Lucia, the island was divided into eleven districts. These were known as *quartiers*, later called parishes by the English. Vieux-Fort was the Southernmost of these. In most cases, the names of the *Quartier* and the chief town were identical. Thus Castries was both town and *Quartier*. Vieux-Fort was no exception; the name applied both to the town built on the edge of the sea and to the whole area bounded by the other *quartiers* of Micoud and Laborie (L'islet a Carret).

In most cases the names were derived from a French aristocrat, connected in some way with the island; e.g. Castries, Micoud, d'Ennery but there were exceptions and Vieux-Fort was one of these. Soufrière obviously took its name from the solfatara there and Anse-la-Raye from the fish of that name (English "skate").

Vieux-Fort derived its name from a redoubt or fort built by Dutch traders about 1654, but that belongs to history, and the place had been inhabited for many centuries before the Dutch or any other European or African had heard of it.

The district is one of the few areas of flat land to be found anywhere in the island. The town is built where the river of the same name used to enter the sea; but, jutting out into the St. Vincent channel, is an outcrop of land, rising to 729 feet, known as Moul-a-Chique. Geologically, the district would appear to combine the oldest and newest types of soil formation in St. Lucia; Moul a Chique belongs to the island's first physiological region whilst the Vieux Fort plain is the result of a volcanic glacia or mudflow that belongs to the third and latest physiological region.

As we shall see, Vieux Fort figured in events during historical times, culminating in its important position as an air base, cantonment and port during World War II. Its fertile lands invited settlement and produced a variety of crops which, over the years, contributed greatly to the economy of the island.

But, if we are to begin at the beginning, we must first record what is known about the earliest inhabitants of the area who lived, worked and died there during the many centuries before the New World was discovered by the explorers and adventurers of the Old.

THE EARLIEST INHABITANTS — THE AMERINDIANS

It is generally accepted that the earliest inhabitants of St. Lucia of whom traces have been found were a race of people whom we classify generally as Amerindians. They lived in South America and made their way Northward, at some very early date, up the islands, from Venezuela. Apart from a few petroglyphs (stone carvings) and rock basins no signs of their long occupation are to be seen above ground but numerous middens or refuse heaps have been located, mostly along the coast, throughout the island.

The first known for certain to arrive were the Arawaks who, in course of time, were distributed throughout the whole of the Antilles. At a later date came the Caribs, a more aggressive type, who largely wiped out the Arawaks—the males at any rate—and established themselves as far North as Puerto Rico. These were in possession at the time of the coming of the European and, as we shall see, did not readily yield to the new comers. Several of their middens have been found in the Vieux-Fort area and quite recently the Beanfield site has revealed a large quantity of artifacts, mostly in the form of pottery, stone or shell. Much more remains to be excavated but specimens of what has been found can be seen at the Archaeological and Historical Society's collection in the little Museum on Morne Fortuné (Castries).

THE COMING OF THE EUROPEAN

The isolation of these Amerindians was rudely disturbed when a wave of exploration and adventure brought Europeans across the Atlantic Ocean in search of new lands and a sea route to India in the last decade of the fifteenth century.

The invasion, spearheaded by the Spanish and Portuguese, eventually included most of the nations from the Western European countries bordering the Atlantic. They included the Dutch, French and English. Neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese attempted to settle in St. Lucia, and it was left to the French and English to dispute the possession of the island first with the Caribs and then with one another.

It is remarkable, however, that the "Vieux Fort"—the old Fort—to which the place owes its name belonged not to the French, as one might suppose, but to the Dutch.

It is also remarkable that, although St. Lucia was so largely French in the 17th and 18th centuries, the first Europeans to land in the island and to come into contact with the Caribs were Englishmen.

THE ENGLISH AT VIEUX-FORT

It was in the year 1605 (the year of the "Gunpowder Plot" to blow up the Houses of Parliament in England) that 67 passengers of the "Olive Branch" (or "Oliphe Blossome") which was making for the "Guyanas" but was running short of provisions, were "left on the shore of the aforesaid Island of Santa Luzia the three and twentieth day of August with (our) swords, muskets and Powder, and one Falcon and one barrill of biscuit onely for all (our) food".

The next day the ship departed, leaving the small band to cope with the unknown hazards of life with the Caribs, reputed to be Cannibals. Their landing place is believed to be near the town of Vieux-Fort. At first the Caribs acted in a friendly manner and traded with them for food. According to the account of one of the survivors (John Nicholls), they were able to obtain victuals by barter; namely "Cassavi, Potatos, Plantans, Pinas, Pepayes, Pompions, Calabassus, Tobacco, Pappies, Mammeyes, all very pleasant to eate."

They also found "tortoyses" on a certain stretch of sand every night. The Caribs even sold them some of their huts close to the Vieux Fort River.

But Carib friendliness soon changed to hostility and treachery. Within a few weeks, only 19 of the 67 Englishmen remained alive. These eventually escaped in a boat which they managed to buy from the Caribs.

The Vieux-Fort Caribs, like those of the rest of the West Indies, did not believe in co-existence!

THE DUTCH AT VIEUX-FORT

Around the middle of the 17th century, one finds the Vieux-Fort Caribs in conflict with some Dutchmen.

It would seem that certain Dutch ships used to call at this part of St. Lucia to take on wood and water. They may have been going to Tobago or returning from that island, around the year A.D. 1654 when the Dutch established a Colony there. So it happened that some Dutch men of the sea erected a redoubt in the Vieux Fort district at that time. Apparently it was on the Windward side, in the Pointe Sable area. The reason given for the erection of the redoubt was "to protect themselves (the Dutch) from the attacks of the Caribs, who were vexed at seeing foreigners act as if they were the masters in the midst of their very huts". The exact site of the fort is not known. It was probably made of earth and wooden staves and so disappeared in course of time.

These Dutchmen were followed by some Frenchmen, who also put up a redoubt. Finally "both the Dutch and the French abandoned the settlement and withdrew to the leeward side of the island". However, it was this early redoubt or fort of the Dutch which gave the district its name.

THE FRENCH AT VIEUX-FORT

It would seem that the French settlement was effected in the 1650's. In the year 1650, Governor Parquet of Martinique bought St. Lucia, together with Martinique, Grenada and the Grenadines from the French Company of which he was a member.

The following year, 1651, du Parquet sent over to St. Lucia a group of about 40 men, to establish a settlement there. This settlement is believed to have been situated in the neighbourhood of the present city of Castries. However, du Parquet must have come to the conclusion that the presence of the French had better be also felt at the Southern tip of the island. One thing is certain; Père du Tertre, the French missionary-historian, has left on record the existence of a fort at the South of the island in 1656. He says that du Parquet had it constructed on a bay that constituted a "very beautiful and very good harbour". Père du Tertre says that Du Parquet only left a small garrison there—20 men at the most. The reason for the fort was to keep out the English who also laid claim to the island.

Between the date of du Parquet's fort at Vieux-Fort and the cession of St. Lucia to France in 1763, French colonists must have seen some hard times. However, two years after the cession in question, viz. on the 15th April, 1763, the first sugar establishment in St. Lucia was commenced in the quartier of Vieux-Fort, under the auspices of Messrs. Levacher and Le Blond. From then down to World War 2, sugar would seem to have been the staple product of the district.

One may judge of the importance of the Vieux-Fort district in early French Colonial days by the fact that it had a resident priest from 1749 onwards. What is more, both the Laborie and Micoud districts appear to have been served for a time by the priest at Vieux-Fort, before becoming independent parishes.

The Parish Priest was Abbé Gerfroy, who remained in St. Lucia for 37 years, though he did not live in Vieux-Fort all the time. There was a church there and several people were buried in front of it, alongside it or even inside it. It was probably built on the same site as the present church. The Abbé Gerfroy was buried there on March 15th, 1786.

In fact, from 1750 onwards, Vieux-Fort was one of the three main districts of St. Lucia.



Vieuxfort Sugar Factory, St. Lucia.

A view of Vieux Fort from the old Hospital Road in 1920. On the left is the Central Sugar Factory, the first in St. Lucia and one of the first in the Caribbean. To the right St. Paul's Anglican Church. In the background the quarry hill. The wattle and daub houses used by the sugar workers can be seen in the foreground (description provided by social historian and author, Dr. Jolien Harmsen).



Town of Vieux Fort, St. Lucia. B. W. I.

In his booklet, "Birth of St. Lucia's Towns and Villages," Bishop Gachet cites the facts given above and goes on to quote from a Memoire by M. de Rochmore the following description of Vieux Fort in 1763 :—" All the plain of this district is fine and cultivated. There are many sugar-fields on the estate of M. Le Blond. It will be here that the first sugar-mill (" sucrerie ") will be able to work. There are many inhabitants who appear to be well-off and who desire the establishment of a trading centre (branche de commerce) here, which would easily become the most important of the whole island." Further on in the Memoire we read : " It is essential that these two towns (Soufriere and Vieux-Fort) should not develop too much and compete with Carénage (later Castries)".

" Registers prove," says Bishop Gachet, " that most of the British families were established in the Vieux-Fort district. In 1769, there were 100 colonists at Vieux-Fort against 126 at Carénage (Castries) and 151 at Soufriere."

It is perhaps permissible to wonder whether history will repeat itself. With the developments taking place in Vieux-Fort today, will it again become a rival to Castries ? Will it claim to be a City and excite the envy of the city of the North ?

NOTE :—The old-style Catholic Church at Vieux-Fort has a stone tower which was built by one of St. Lucia's " folk " Societies—the La Rose—which still survives.

THE AFRICANS, EAST INDIANS AND NORTH AMERICANS AT VIEUX-FORT

With the disappearance of the Caribs who, in course of time, were either killed off or who migrated else where, and the introduction of sugar cultivation, the need arose for imported labour. A supply was available from the West Coast of Africa which had been recently explored by the Portuguese. So, as the years went by, many thousands of Africans were brought over the ocean, often under deplorable conditions, to work on the plantations of the Caribbean and North America.

Time has worked in their favour. Occasionally freedom from servitude was either granted or bought and eventually the whole system was done away with. So, owing to the effects of climate and disease, the break up of estates at the time of the French Revolution, and a lower birth rate, the number of persons of European origin declined while that of African origin increased. Thus today the latter are vastly preponderant.

The whirligig of time has certainly brought its revenges !

After Emancipation in the 19th Century, many people came from India under a system of Indenture, though their presence is less evident here than in places like Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica.

So, if we include the influx of the Americans during World War II, Vieux-Fort can be said to have had a truly International mixture. Arawak, Carib, English, Dutch, French, African, Asian, North American—all have played a part in its long history.

VIEUX FORT ON THE EVE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

During the years 1784—1787, a detailed survey of the island of Ste. Lucie was carried out by M. Lefort de Latour by order of the Baron de Laborie, Governor of the island. The survey resulted in the making of a map, showing all the existing estates and the compilation of an accompanying report containing a general description of the island, district by district, and a detailed account of its production.

The map and Report were reprinted by the Colonial Office in London about a hundred years ago and we are fortunate to have copies of both.

If we turn to the chapter dealing with the "quartier" of Vieux Fort, we can glean some information about the situation in the area at the time. The general position was far from bright. There had been fierce fighting at the Northern end of the island around Castries and Vigie which had resulted in a victory for the British. The French had surrendered the island and General Grant had assumed the government on behalf of the British Crown. But, during his term of office, St. Lucia was struck by a devastating hurricane (October 10th and 11th, 1780). This proved a terrible setback for agriculture and trade; some of the colonists suffered so badly that they abandoned their estates and sought their fortunes elsewhere. However, after some fighting in which Lord Rodney, the English Admiral, defeated the French Admiral De Grasse, at the Battle of the Saints, a general peace was achieved and at the Treaty of Versailles in 1783, St. Lucia was restored to France. The Baron de Laborie became Governor and set about a much needed restoration of the island for which the survey made by Lefort de Latour was intended to be the basis. He gives a very favourable account of Vieux-Fort (the Report was intended *inter alia* to attract new settlers). He says in effect that there is no other "quartier" in the island which has so attractive an appearance as this one—it is nearly all level land; covered with canes and dwellings. Speaking of the "bourg" (town) of Vieux Fort he says that at that time it consisted of only a few fishermen's huts but was capable of considerable development as the harbour made it favourable for commerce.

The town, however, lacked good drinking water as the sea infiltrated the river water where it entered the sea and made it brackish. Inland, however, the water was good and abundant in the river and many streams; the situation could be remedied by the provision of cisterns.

Unlike Jamaica and Barbados, St. Lucia was a country of small estates and Vieux Fort was no exception to this rule. He lists 60 different estates in the "quartier" of which only six are above 100 carrés or about 360 acres. The crops grown include sugar, cotton, cocoa and coffee.

It is clear that in Vieux Fort as elsewhere in the island other crops were still competing with sugar at this time.

Speaking of the island as a whole, he says that of the 100 sugar factories which existed in 1780, only 40 are left. The destruction wrought by the hurricane, the shortage of labour, the low selling price and the difficulty of selling sugar at all because of the regulations had combined to bring about this result.

Latour believed that, if these conditions remained and cotton continued to sell well, more and more estates would shift from the cultivation of sugar to that of cotton.

One notes with interest that agriculturalists were faced with much the same problems as regards marketing and prices as exist today.

One can surmise that, had the French Revolution not broken out in 1789, and had the island not been involved in the wars between England and France which lasted—on and off—until 1815, the island (and Vieux Fort) might have got back on an even keel, new settlers might have come out, old settlers returned and, under a Governor such as the Baron de Laborie, there might have been a spell of unexampled prosperity. But it was not to be.

VIEUX FORT AT THE TIME OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. 1789 - 1796.

As St. Lucia was a French Colony at the time of the Great French Revolution of 1789 onwards, it was only to be expected that the island would feel the repercussions of that tremendous upheaval. It did, and the Vieux Fort district had its share of these repercussions. The agents of the Revolution gave it a new name as they did to so many other places in the island. They called it "La Loi" (the Law). They did more than that: they brought it into the zone of the war that they waged against the British, who captured the island in 1794. But in April 1795, a French force, sent by Victor Hughes from Guadaloupe, under the command of Goyrand, landed at Soufriere. There was some skirmishing at Rabot on the road from Soufriere which ended in the British forces retreating in the direction of Vieux Fort.

The French pursued but, after a long and arduous march, reached Vieux Fort just in time to see a fleet of pirogues, canoes and miscellaneous vessels, filled with "redcoats", making their way back by sea to Castries, thus leaving the revolutionaries in command of the South of the island. Perhaps it may be thought of as an earlier and miniature version of "Dunkirk".

Less than two months later, the British forces evacuated the whole island. They recaptured it, however, in 1796, but found themselves involved in a species of guerilla warfare which lasted for some time.

It is recorded that the guerillas were so active that, on one occasion, Sir John Moore, then British Governor and Commander of the Forces, had to go by row boat in the direction of St. Vincent in order to reach Vieux Fort from Castries.

Eventually the whole island was pacified, work was resumed on the estates and "La Loi" became Vieux Fort once more.

The upheaval of the Revolution dealt a severe blow to the island's prosperity.

A CENTURY OF PEACE BUT NOT PROSPERITY.

Although, apart from a brief interlude in 1802/3, when the island reverted to the French under the terms of the Treaty of Amiens, St. Lucia was governed by the British from 1796 onwards, its future was uncertain until it was finally ceded to Britain in 1815 after the downfall of Napoleon.

There followed a century of peace which Vieux Fort shared with the rest of the island.

Slavery, which had been a feature of the life of the island since the early days of occupation, came to an end in the 1830's but sugar remained the staple crop of Vieux Fort, though its price was often depressed.

By and large, although the nineteenth century was a century of peace, it could hardly be called a century of prosperity. Most of the notable events which form the stuff of history took place at the other end of the island—Castries—while Vieux Fort continued placidly to grow its sugar.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND PERIODS OF PROSPERITY

In the first half of the present century, Vieux Fort was once more caught up in world events, though in the first World War, of 1914–1918, only indirectly as a producer of sugar, a commodity for which there was an urgent and insatiable demand; Vieux Fort being one of the four largest producing areas in the island.

The price of sugar fluctuated wildly, reaching unprecedented heights and depths. Fortunes were made and lost overnight. Vieux Fort shared in the depression which followed the collapse of the market after the war.

It may be mentioned that Vieux Fort Central Sugar Factory was one of the earliest of its kind to be established in the West Indies.

The Second World War, however, brought Vieux Fort into prominence when a portion of the area was leased to the United States of America as part of a war-time deal between that Government and Great Britain under which the latter received some fifty naval vessels in exchange for the lease of a number of bases throughout the West Indies. But, before this happened, the Governments of Barbados and St. Lucia had come to an arrangement whereby lands belonging to the Sugar Company were bought by the Government of St. Lucia and sold to the Government of Barbados for the purpose of establishing a land settlement for some of its surplus population.

At the end of 1939, the first batch of Barbadians arrived to establish their "Colony". The scheme brought an infusion of new blood and a certain amount of money but it had not yet proved a success when it was overtaken by events of more pressing importance.

In September of the same year which saw the beginning of the settlement, Nazi Germany had begun the bid for power which came to be known as the second world war. By the end of 1940, France had been overrun and Britain was left as the only obstacle to Hitler's complete victory in Western Europe.

The United States, concerned about these developments, decided to establish a string of military bases to defend the American continent against possible Nazi aggression. After a survey of St. Lucia, the U.S. Government asked the British Government for a 99-year lease of approximately 1,200 acres of land on the southern half of the island. Under the terms of the agreement then drawn up, Vieux Fort became, in 1941, one of the larger U.S. military bases in the West Indies. The area thus taken over for the construction of any Army-Base and Airport included some 700 acres which had been allotted to the Barbados Land Settlement Scheme

From some time in 1941 to some time in 1949, Beaufield as the Americans named the Airport, remained activated. A part of this Base was reactivated in 1955, but, at the end of 1960, the major part of Beane Field was returned to the St. Lucia Government.

Although the agricultural economy of the district suffered through the construction of the base and the airport, it must be acknowledged that the Americans endowed Vieux Fort with good roads, water and a jetty capable of taking ocean-going vessels. Also, that the runway and airport which they established at Beaufield eventually enabled the construction there of an international airport. More recently, the Canadian Government, under the Canadian Commonwealth Caribbean programme, allocated two million dollars to the improvement of the base to enable

it to handle modern long-range jet aircraft. As a result, Beane Field now threatens to undermine the importance of Vigie, the island's original airport, as an important air-link with the rest of the Caribbean and the world.

Meanwhile, the basic economy of the island has changed from sugar to bananas and the facilities now available there have made Vieux Fort into one of the two ports in St. Lucia from which bananas can be exported.

IN THE SHADOW OF MOUL A CHIQUE

By a stretch of the imagination, the new international airport may be said to be in the shadow of Moul a Chique—the outstanding promontory which forms the Southern tip of St. Lucia.

Its name is intriguing. It is, of course, French but what does it mean? The French surveyor Lefort de Latour has the answer as far as the word Moul is concerned. In the "Description" that he wrote to accompany his map of St. Lucia (1784-1787), to which reference has already been made, he says that "le mole a Chiques" was a kind of natural breakwater—as in English. But what is the meaning of the expression *a Chiques*? Now, *chique* in French means chigger, chigoe or jigger—a flea or mite that penetrates under the skin of man and beast, to their great annoyance and pain. Even today the chigger is found in St. Lucia. One may suppose, then, that chiggers abounded on the promontory in question in the days of the early French colonists. Which made them call it *Mole a Chiques*.

From the beginning of this 20th Century, it would seem that a light-house at Moul a Chique has been shedding its beams afar through the night. Now that Beane Field becomes an international airport, its beams should guide planes as well as ships to safety.

To play on the words of St. Lucia's new Motto, its *Light* should guide *People* to the *Land*.