

Remembering the Morant Bay Uprising

The Morant Bay War of 1865 changed the course of Jamaica's history forever. The sacrifice of over 400 lives and the destruction of 1000 homes over a course of a few days, transformed Jamaica's political system, and reformed the island's land regulations. Most importantly, it provided Jamaica with two of our National Heroes, the Right Excellent Paul Bogle and the Right Excellent George William Gordon.



Monument to the Rt. Excellent Paul Bogle and the Rt. Excellent George William Gordon at the National Heroes Park

The first uprising took place on Saturday, October 7, 1865 during a court of Petty Sessions, which was held in Morant Bay. A publication by the Jamaica Information Service (JIS) states that Paul Bogle and his people had lost respect for the magisterial courts and their ability to hand down just decisions. In light of this, when word came in early October 1865 that two of their number - Alexander White and Lewis Miller – were to be tried on October 7 in the Morant Bay court house for assault and trespass respectively; Bogle and his people decided to go to Morant Bay on the day of the trial to see that justice was done. According to Senior, loud protests at the judgments handed down at the court house that day, resulted in scuffles with the police. As a result, on Monday, October 9, arrests warrants were issued against 28 persons, including Paul Bogle, for assaults on the police. When the police tried to arrest Bogle at Stony Gut the following day, a huge crowd gathered, causing them to retreat. The police returned to Morant Bay with the news that Bogle and his people planned to march on the town the next day (Wednesday, October 11) when the meeting of the Vestry was due to take place. This news prompted the Custos to send a message to the Governor asking for military assistance and to call out the volunteer militia.

The day of October 11 began quietly. The members of the Vestry assembled for their regular meeting in the court house around noon. Absent from the meeting was George William Gordon, a member of the house of Assembly for St. Thomas in the East. Gordon was ill at his Cherry Garden home in St. Andrew (JIS). Outside the court house were the armed members of the volunteers and a number of policemen. The Vestry met until about 3pm. They were about to retire for refreshment when drums were heard in the distance. According to Senior, Bogle and some 400 followers arrived in the town and in a violent confrontation with the militia, the court house was burnt to the ground and some leading citizens, including the Custos were killed. By October 13, martial law (or a state of emergency) was declared over the County of Surrey, with the exclusion of Kingston. The rebellion was ruthlessly and quickly suppressed. The government exacted a penalty which saw 439 killed and hundreds flogged or imprisoned and over 1000 peasant homes burnt. The Stony Gut Village, the chapel and other buildings in Bogle's yard were especially targeted.

In 1975, an acre plot, which was originally part of Bogle's property, was declared a Memorial Garden and a monument was erected in his honour. The Memorial Garden was declared as a national monument by the JNHT.



Marker at the Stony Gut Memorial Garden, St. Thomas



The burnt out remains of the Morant Bay Court House. This court house was a restoration of the original court house which was destroyed in the 1865 uprising; however the court house was destroyed by fire in 2007. Plans for its restoration are afoot.

Paul Bogle, the Man

The Right Excellent Paul Bogle was virtually unheard of prior to 1865. He was born between 1820 and 1822, as he was said to be about 45 years old when he died on October 24, 1865. It is believed that he was either a slave or the son of an enslaved African. Sources reveal that his mother had two children with his father, Paul and his older brother Moses, who resided at Cottage Penn.

Paul Bogle had very little formal education; however, historical sources reveal that he was literate. It is not certain whether he was a widower or married at the time of the Morant Bay insurrection. Bogle however had at least two children William and Elizabeth (also known as Cecelia). William Bogle was about 25 years old when he was executed along with his father, uncle and cousin over the course of the 1865 uprising. Bogle's daughter was about 16 when she was used as bait by the Maroons to identify her father. She remained in the Stony Gut/Spring Garden area until her death.

Bogle was a baker by trade. It seems to have been a family profession as both his brother Moses and nephew Henry were also bakers. He was also a small farmer who cultivated sugar cane, coconuts and other fruit trees and owned horses, mules and other livestock. Bogle had residences in both Stony Gut and Spring Garden. Stony Gut however was his primary residence. The family yard had a main house, with other cottages, and a well.

Paul Bogle personally owned a significant portion of land. This was probably facilitated through his friendship with George William George, who apparently purchased land on his behalf and was later reimbursed by Bogle. Paul Bogle was reported to have possessed 500 acres of land referred to as Dumobbin. From Bogle's perspective land ownership was a symbol of wealth and most importantly freedom.

Bogle was an influential man in not just in his community, but the surrounding areas. His "wealth" contributed to his social standing and facilitated his eligibility to vote. He was one of a few in the parish who could vote – a privilege that was rare for a black man in post-Emancipation Jamaica.

Bogle was also popularly known as a deacon in the Native Baptist Church. George William Gordon however was the major advocate of this independent Baptist Mission. On March 5, 1865 Paul Bogle was ordained as a deacon by Gordon. George William Gordon opened churches across St. Thomas in Bath, Spring, and Sunning Hill. Paul Bogle as Gordon's superintendent was a leader in the Native Baptist tradition before 1862.

George William Gordon, the Man

George William Gordon was born on the Cherry Garden Estate in St. Andrew in 1815. Gordon's mother was an enslaved mulatto woman who worked on the estate and his father, Joseph Gordon, was a Scotsman who acted as an agent for absentee proprietors. The St. Andrew Baptismal Register of December 27, 1815 records George, aged about three months, as a quadroon slave on the Estate. When he was ten years old, he was sent to live with his godfather, James Daly, a white merchant in Black River.

Gordon's public life began around 1850. As an elected member of the House of Assembly in the 1850s, George William Gordon became a leading promoter of the interest of the newly emancipated black peasants rather than the coloured middle class. The peasants formed the majority of the Jamaican population, but because of ethnic and historical barriers connected with enslavement, most of them were poverty-stricken and marginalized by the political system. Slavery ended in 1838, but the peasants as a group was still forced to live as social outcasts, and Gordon, himself a coloured, embraced their plight.

Gordon never gained acceptance as a legitimate member of his father's family. Hence, his concerns for the plight of the peasants came naturally, as there were little differences between his own experiences and theirs. Gordon taught himself to read, write and keep accounts, and when he became one of Kingston's most successful businessmen, it was due almost entirely to his personal initiative to overcome the misfortunes of his youth.

Gordon's alliance with the peasants did not reflect the policy of the 'Town Party' to which he belonged. Under the leadership of Edward Jordon, a coloured politician who became Mayor of

Kingston, the Town Party was primarily concerned with advancing the interests of the coloured middle class. Gordon broke away from this tradition when he made public his sympathy for the peasants, and some members of the coloured middle class and the white establishment resented him for it. His activities in support of the peasants would eventually bring him into conflict with Edward John Eyre, one of the most ruthless and callous governors Jamaica had ever known.

During the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865, Gordon was falsely accused of instigating Paul Bogle. Gordon's involvement in the Native Baptist Church was used as evidence to support the charge against him. He was arrested at Headquarters House on the orders of Governor Eyre, and brought to trial at the courthouse in Morant Bay. During the trial he was not allowed to properly defend himself, and he was quickly found guilty of sedition and hanged on October 23, 1865.

Gordon House was named after him because he supported freedom and justice for all classes in the society, and his concern for the peasants and his vigorous nationalism helped to paved the way for much of the advances in self-government and democracy that Jamaica experienced in the twentieth century.



George William Gordon House - home of the Houses of Parliament, Duke Street, Kingston

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