

ALEXANDER

William Alexander, the first member of his family in St Lucia, was born at Greenock in Scotland (one source says in 1730), and was the son of William Alexander and Mary Anne Hendry, who were both dead by 1777. The younger William became one of the British merchants who had interests in St Lucia in the years before the French Revolution. On 30 June 1777 he married at Laborie (then called Islet à Caret) Elisabeth Motet or Mottet, who was born in St Vincent when that island was still in French hands and whose family had moved to St Lucia where it acquired land at Vieux Fort and later also at Choiseul.

Between the time of his marriage and the outbreak of the Revolution William Alexander acquired several estates. Some were in the Choiseul district. These he combined to form a single extensive estate along the west bank of the Rivière Dorée, which became known as the River Dorée Estate. Another was just across that river, in the adjacent Laborie district; it is recorded that for this property, which he bought in 1785, he paid 350000 livres (about £10000). It was known as the Desgatières Estate, from the name of a previous owner. By 1788 William Alexander's lands had a total area of about 256 carrés. His main crop was sugar, but some cotton and coffee were also produced.

In spite of his foreign nationality, this important planter was given the *minor official* post of "voyer particulier", which meant that he was charged with ensuring that the local planters sent their slaves to work on the maintenance of the local roads.

William had a brother named Robert who was in St Lucia by 1779. He too appears to have been a merchant at Castries. In 1785 he bought an extensive but uncultivated estate of 88 carrés at Vieux Fort, for which he paid only 50000 livres (about £1400). He then ceded a half share to another British man who lived in Grenada, and the two formed a partnership for the exploitation of the estate. What happened to Robert after this is uncertain. He may have left St Lucia, perhaps after the disruption caused by the French Revolution.

Meanwhile William acquired yet another estate. This was one of the principal estates at Soufriere. It became known as the Diamond (or Diamant) Estate. It was his main residence. He was visited there by a French traveller who later wrote:

"From the volcano we went to have lunch with an Englishman named Alexander. The table was placed around the trunk of a tamarind tree, with dense foliage so that the branches were bowed to the ground. Openings had been cut all round this fine tree, like doors between the branches; they led to what was in effect a circular and spacious hall where over 100 guests were seated in the pleasant shade. The luxury with which the table was laid, the abundance of dishes of all kinds, everything was delightful, but these marvels were surpassed by the gracious amiability of the master of the house, and of Madame and Mademoiselle Alexander."

After the British conquest of St Lucia, William Alexander was appointed a Conseiller at the Conseil Supérieur (or Court of Appeals) on its creation in 1800, and was reappointed in 1803.

He died before 1807.

As a result of the events of 1791-1798 and their later repercussions, William Alexander had suffered, both as a planter who owed money to merchants in Britain, and as a merchant who was owed money by planters who could not pay. In a letter of August 1799 to correspondents in London, he said that he was one of the principal creditors of St Lucia, being owed "£47000, with interest thereon, for five, and some six, years". And in 1810, after his death, the same correspondents wrote to the British Minister responsible for the colonies to complain that the representatives of "the late William Alexander, a very considerable planter in the island of St Lucia", owed them £11000, including interest, out of a debt of fifteen years standing, and that they had been paid nothing since receiving £2000 in 1807.

In 1810 the seriously deteriorating state of the finances of the Alexander family would not have been apparent to someone who did not know the history of St Lucia since 1790. According to the census of 1810, William Alexander's widow had the River Dorée estate at Choiseul and an estate (Diamond) at Soufriere. At River Dorée were 5 whites (3 men, 1 woman, 1 child) and 250 slaves (140 working, 30 aged or infirm, 80 children). At Diamond were 3 whites (1 man, 2 women) and 126 slaves (76 working, 16 old or infirm, 34 children). These were, respectively, the most slaves on any estate in St Lucia, and the most slaves on any estate at Soufriere. (We do not know the numbers at Desgatières as the Laborie section of the census differs from the other sections in that it merely states the total numbers of the various classes of inhabitants in that district.)

Some information about Diamond appears in the record of an enquiry held in 1831 into the condition of the slaves in St Lucia. One of the witnesses described himself as "William Richard Wasbrough, manager of the Diamond estate, property of Madam Alexander, widow". He said there were about 94 slaves on that estate, and that the annual production of sugar was about 34 hogsheads.

One of the widow's last actions at Diamond was to prevent the Governor from restoring the old hot volcanic baths at Soufriere. She did this by proving in court in 1836 that the location was on her land.

The collapse came the following year. Creditors obtained court orders for the enforced sale of both the Diamond and Desgatières estates. Both were sold on 26 January 1837. Diamond (363 acres or 114 carrés) fetched £4540. Desgatières (430 acres or 135 carrés, which was more than twice the area it had when William Alexander bought it in 1785) fetched £2560. Also sold under a court order was part of the River Dorée estate (313 acres or 98 carrés); this sale took place on 9 February 1837 and made £2950. It turned out that the purchaser of Diamond could not pay, and so that estate was resold on 9 June 1840; this time it made only £2300.

By the time of the emancipation of the slaves, the Alexander family had already lost most of its slaves. In 1836 William's widow received compensation of £57 for 3 slaves, and her daughter-in-law, also a widow, received £1282 for 52 slaves. No other Alexander appears in the list.

After the loss of Diamond, William Alexander's widow Elisabeth withdrew to River Dorée, where she died ("old and respected" according to a St Lucian newspaper) on 29 November 1842.

Before the collapse members of the family continued to occupy important places in local society. One of William's sons, Marie Jean Pierre Alexander, was appointed to the Court of Appeal in October 1816. After the reorganization of the court he became a JP. By 1838 he was dead. He had evidently managed to keep a detached portion of the River Dorée estate: in 1840 20 carrés of land at Choiseul were advertised for sale as the property of the "late M. J. P. Alexander Esq". Another son, Henry, was described by the Governor as "a considerable planter" when he appointed him to the newly created Privy Council of St Lucia in December 1816. John Joseph James Alexander, who was described in 1838 as a proprietor at Castries and who described himself in 1840 as "former proprietor" of the River Dorée estate, may have been the same as "John J. L. (sic) Alexander, Esq, of the Island of St Lucia" who married at Bath in 1813 the widow of one of the Scottish Lords of Session; she died in St Lucia on 10 February 1818.

One of William Alexander's daughters (perhaps Mary who was born at Choiseul on 3 April 1779) married George MacCullom, another British merchant turned planter (he had a sugar estate at Anse la Raye), who by 1809 had become a Conseiller at the Conseil Supérieur (or Court of Appeals).

In the report of the year 1845 which he sent to the Minister in London, the officer who was then administering the government of St Lucia mentioned that the River Dorée estate was the home of three sisters of the Alexander family.

"These talented and religious ladies devote themselves entirely to the instruction of the inhabitants of the estate, who, formerly the slaves on the property, with few exceptions, since emancipation have never quitted the locality; and having been instructed by the family in the Protestant faith, form a small but increasing congregation of 182 souls."

It was the Alexander family who gave the land for the Anglican church and cemetery at River Dorée.

According to one source (Harmsen), "Dames Alexander" were still considered as proprietors of River Dorée and Desgatières in 1847, each of these estates then having a cultivated area of 50 or 52 acres (about 16 carrés each). According to the St Lucia Almanack for 1852, both estates were by then among the St Lucian estates in the hands of the London firm of merchants Joseph Marryat & Sons.

Sources:

1. For William Alexander:

Breen, *St Lucia* (1844), 110; E & R Bruneau-Latouche, *Sainte-Lucie* (1989), 186, 284; Bruneau-Latouche & Cordiez, *209 Anciennes Familles* (2002), 867; Bruneau-Latouche & Riffaud, *Essai sur les Huyghues* (1992), 57; Lefort de Latour, *Description Générale . . . de Sainte Lucie 1787* (1883), Choiseul and Soufriere; *Mémoires du Général Noguès* (1922), 159-160; *Notariats de Sainte-Lucie* (Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer); Public Record Office, CO 253/2, fo 105, 172, 208; CO 253/6; CO 253/10; Thounens, *Almanach pour les Colonies 1790*.

2. For other members of the Alexander family in St Lucia:

Accounts of Slave Compensation Claims, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 16 March 1838; Breen, 9, 388; Dobson, *Directory of Scottish Settlers IV* (1985), 126; Harmsen, *Sugar, Slavery and Settlement* (1999), 48; Lefort de Latour (1883), *Vieux Fort* [Robert Alexander]; *Notariats de Sainte-Lucie* [Robert Alexander]; Oliver, *Caribbeana II* (1912), 153; *Papers presented to Parliament . . . Condition of the Slave Population*, ordered . . . to be printed, 8 August 1832; *Papers presented to Parliament . . . Abolition of Slavery*, ordered . . . to be printed, 30 March 1836; Public Record Office, CO 253/7; CO 253/9; CO 253/10; Public Record Office, CO 258/1, III, Nos 27, 33; V, No 226; IX, No 428; Steiner, *Contribution . . . Sainte-Lucie* (CGHIA, dossier 15) (1999), 36.

Note: No attempt has been made to ascertain whether William Alexander of St Lucia was connected with any of the Alexanders in other West Indies or with the Edinburgh merchant firm of that name which had interests in the West Indies. Some of these people are mentioned for example in the following publications: Byers, *References to the Plan of St Vincent* (1777), 4; Oliver, *Caribbeana IV* (1916), *passim*; V (1919), 312; S. Walpole, *Some Unpublished Letters* (1902), 2-4.

