

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to describe and analyse the commercial activities of the Port Royal merchants between 1655 and 1700.

The Introduction and the first three chapters deal with the pre-1655 English commerce in the Caribbean and with the extension of that commerce to the town of Port Royal after Jamaica's occupation by the English in 1655. An attempt is made to trace the origins of the Port Royal merchants and to describe the various commercial opportunities which attracted them to settle at Port Royal. Although basically descriptive, this part of the thesis argues that the pre-1670 Port Royal merchant community developed along lines which reflected the diversity of its maritime trades and its role as supplier to the many small-scale farmers who immigrated to the island from the eastern Caribbean.

The thesis argues further that after the signing of the treaty of Madrid in 1670 and the suppression of the privateers, many of the Port Royal merchants increasingly began to direct their attention towards large estate agriculture. Their ready capital, overseas contacts and business skills placed them in a privileged position when it came to setting up a plantation. By the mid-1680s the Port Royal merchants were probably, as a group, the largest investors in Jamaican export agriculture.

The importance which the plantation owners placed on resident English factors to sell the estate's produce and ship supplies directly, resulted in a situation whereby resident Port Royal merchants, who were formerly able to act as independent entrepreneurs buying and selling on their own account, were bypassed. Also, the large plantations with their constant search for self-sufficiency coupled with a decline in

the number of small-scale European farmers, tended to lessen the varied local markets which Port Royal's merchant artisans and shopkeepers had formerly enjoyed. Finally, the thesis argues that many of the Port Royal merchants, when faced with declining markets, natural calamities, and the French wars of the 1690s, preferred either to quit the island or to become factors or agents for the plantations and their associated trades.