

ABSTRACT

The parish of Portland was established by an Act of the Jamaican Assembly in 1723 as part of its strategy to suppress and possibly enslave the Maroons who had since 1655, when their descendants escaped to the mountains, successfully defied the Assembly's orders to surrender to British government control. In 1739 with the signing of a peace treaty between Colonel Guthrie and the leader of the Portland Maroons - Captain Quoa - the Assembly formally recognized the Maroons as freemen in return for a promise by the Maroons to end all hostilities against the Assembly and white settlers in the island.

From the outset settlement of the area was therefore hampered by fear of the Maroons as well as by unfavourable climatic and topographic conditions which made people unwilling to settle and invest there.

For a brief period between 1791 and 1807 settlement expanded and sugar was profitably produced under the temporary stimulus of high sugar prices created by the destruction of St. Domingue's sugar industry in 1791. But when sugar prices fell during the post-Napoleonic war depression, credit was withdrawn from areas reputedly unattractive for sugar cultivation, and Portland's estates began to decline. This decline continued through the post-Emancipation period when

it was further accentuated by the adverse effects of emancipation and the 1846 Sugar Duties Act. By 1854 only four of the original 38 sugar estates remained.

The parish was saved from total economic collapse by the enterprise and industry of Negro peasants who initiated the extensive cultivation of ground provisions and bananas for the local and export market. The banana trade which was organized by two visiting American sea captains (George Busch and Lorenzo Dow Baker) in conjunction with peasant cultivators during the late 1860's and 1870's made Portland one of the most important and wealthy parishes in the island during the period 1880 to 1910.

After 1910 the parish experienced another period of decline from which it has not yet fully recovered. The terminal date of 1917 has been chosen because following the devastating hurricane of 1903, the earthquake of 1907 and the outbreak of Panama disease which almost completely destroyed banana cultivation, the United Fruit Company in 1917 removed its headquarters from Port Antonio to Kingston, thus severing any lingering claim to economic importance which the parish might have entertained.