

HISTORY OF INDEPENDENCE

In February 1962, a new constitution was approved by the Legislature and the Premier Norman Manley called General Elections.

Alexander Bustamante was elected in April and became the first Prime Minister of Jamaica. “On August 6, 1962, Jamaica became an independent nation and a member of the British Commonwealth”.

Jamaica becoming an independent nation now meant that Britain, no longer controlled the affairs of the country. It was now the responsibility of the newly elected Prime Minister and the locally elected Cabinet. Independence also meant that a constitution, symbols, emblems, an army, Jamaican currency and passports had to be developed for the country. The most significant event of the celebrations took place at the newly built National Stadium at midnight on 5 August when the Union Jack, symbol of British rule for 307 years, was lowered and replaced by the black, green and gold flag of Jamaica. As an Independent nation, Jamaica assigns Ambassadors overseas who represent the country. They sign treaties on behalf of Jamaica and become members of various international organisations. This is important as it gives Jamaica equal rights on various issues relating to international trade, policies and treaties. Although some had feared this day would bring unrest and violence, the events of Independence went smoothly and well, with celebrations held in the bars of Gold Street - a popular working class hangout - as well as in the reception rooms of King's House. Independence Day was at first celebrated on the first Monday in August each year, but with the re-introduction of Emancipation Day (1 August) the holiday has been fixed as 6 August.

In October, during National Heritage week (third Monday in October), we also honour our six national heroes and one heroine, in recognition of their contribution to the birth of our nation.

National Symbols Our National Symbols are representative of our rich history and culture. They define us as a people – Jamaicans who are proud of where we are coming from. The following National Symbols were adopted at the time of Jamaica’s Independence .6 August 1962.

The Jamaica National Flag

The Jamaica National Flag was first raised on Independence Day, August 6, 1962. It signifies the birth of our nation. The Flag brings to mind memories of past achievements and gives inspiration towards further success. It is flown on many triumphant occasions, showing the pride that Jamaicans have in their country and in the flag itself.

Design

A bipartisan committee of the Jamaica House of Representatives designed the Jamaican Flag which consists of a diagonal cross with four triangles placed side by side. The diagonal cross is gold; the top and bottom triangles are green; and the hoist and fly (side) triangles are black.

Symbolism

“The sun shineth, the land is green and the people are strong and creative” is the symbolism of the colours of the flag. Black depicts the strength and creativity of the people; Gold, the natural wealth and beauty of sunlight; and green, hope and agricultural resources.

Code for use of the Jamaican Flag

- The Jamaican flag should never be allowed to touch the ground or floor. It should not be flown or used only for decorative purposes on anything that is for temporary use and is likely to be discarded, except on state occasions.
- The flag should never be smaller than any other flag flown at the same time.
- When the flag becomes worn and must be replaced, burn it.
- Do not place any other flag above or to the right of the Jamaican flag, except at foreign embassies, consulates and missions.
- Do not raise any foreign flag publicly, unless the Jamaican flag is also flown, except at foreign embassies, consulates and missions.
- The flag shouldn’t be draped over vehicles, except on military, police and state occasions.

The Jamaican Coat of Arms

The Jamaican national motto is ‘Out of Many One People’, based on the population’s multi-racial roots. The motto is represented on the Coat of Arms, showing a male and female member of the Taino tribe standing on either side of a shield which bears a red cross with five golden pineapples. The crest shows a Jamaican crocodile mounted on the Royal Helmet of the British Monarchy and mantling.

National Fruit – The Ackee (*Blighia sapida*)

“Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market, not a quattie wud sell” is a line in the popular Jamaican folk song “Linstead Market”. Ackee is the national fruit of Jamaica as well as a component of the national dish – ackee and codfish. Although the ackee is not indigenous to Jamaica, it has remarkable historic associations. Originally, it was imported to the island from West Africa, probably on a slave ship. Now it grows here luxuriantly, producing large quantities of edible fruit each year.

National Flower – Lignum Vitae (*Guaiacum officinale*)

The Lignum Vitae was found here by Christopher Columbus. Its name, when translated from Latin, means “wood of life” – probably adopted because of its medicinal qualities. The short, compact tree is native to continental tropical American and the West Indies. In Jamaica it grows best in the dry woodland along the north and south coasts of the island. The plant is extremely ornamental, producing an attractive blue flower and orange-yellow fruit, while its crown has an attractive rounded shape. The tree is one of the most useful in the world. The body, gum, bark, fruit, leaves and blossom all serve some useful purpose. In fact, the tree has been regarded for its medicinal properties. A gum (gum guaiac) obtained from its resin was once regarded as a purgative. It was exported to Europe from the early sixteenth century as a remedy (combined with mercury) for syphilis and has also been used as a remedy for gout. The wood was once used as propeller shaft bearings in nearly all the ships sailing the “Seven Seas”. Because of this, Lignum Vitae and Jamaica are closely associated in shipyards worldwide. It is a very heavy wood which will sink in water. Because of its toughness it is used for items such as mortars, mallets, pulleys and batons carried by policemen. Sometimes it is used for furniture.

National Tree – The Blue Mahoe (*Hibiscus elatus*)

The Blue Mahoe is the national tree of Jamaica. It is indigenous to the island and grows quite rapidly, often attaining 20m (66ft) or more in height. In wetter districts it will grow in a wide range of elevations, up to 1200m (4000 ft.) and is often used in reforestation.

The tree is quite attractive with its straight trunk, broad green leaves and hibiscus-like flowers. The attractive flower changes colour as it matures, going from bright yellow to orange red and finally to crimson.

The name mahoe is derived from a Carib Indian word. The “blue” refers to blue-green streaks in the polished wood, giving it a distinctive appearance.

The Blue Mahoe is so beautiful and durable that it is widely used for cabinet making and also for making decorative objects such as picture frames, bowls and carving.

The inner bark of the tree is often referred to as Cuba bark because it was formerly used for tying bundles of Havana cigars. Cuba is the only other place where the Blue Mahoe grows naturally.

National Bird - The Doctor-Bird (*Trochilus polytmus*) or Swallow-Tail Hummingbird

The doctor bird or swallow tail humming bird, is one of the most outstanding of the 320 species of hummingbirds. It lives only in Jamaica. These birds’ beautiful feathers have no counterpart in the entire bird population and they produce iridescent colours characteristic only of that family. In addition to these beautiful feathers, the mature male has two long tails which stream behind him when he flies. For years the doctor bird has been immortalized in Jamaican folklore and song.

The origin of the name “Docor-bird” is somewhat unsettled. It has been said that the name was given because the erect black crest and tails resemble the top hat and long tail coats doctors used to wear in the old days. Other schools of thought believe that it refers to the way the birds lance the flowers with their bills to extract nectar.

According to Frederic Cassidy the bird is an object of superstition. The Arawaks spread the belief that the bird had magical powers. They called it the “God bird”, believing it was the reincarnation of dead souls. This is manifested in a folk song which says: “Doctor Bud a cunny bud, hard bud fe dead”. (It is a clever bird which cannot be easily killed).

