

Stony Gut St.Thomas And The Morant Bay Rebellion

The village of Stony Gut in St. Thomas is renowned as the home of one of Jamaica's national heroes, the Rt. Excellent Paul Bogle, and is a stone's throw away from Morant Bay, location of the famous 1865 rebellion and the place where national heroes George William Gordon and Paul Bogle were hanged.

The name Stony Gut describes an area that has been subject to massive erosions and landslides, which subsequently carved out huge gullies and gutters. During periods of flooding, the seasonal streams around the area deposit boulders that remain when the streams abate thus contributing to the area's stony and unlevelled appearance.

The land known as Stony Gut originally comprised 360 acres and was bounded by the Middleton, York and Spring Garden Plantations. This location facilitated the emergence of the Stony Gut settlement as a free village. When the neighbouring estates went into decline after emancipation, their peripheries provided land that could be bought by the ex-slaves for settlement and cultivation. As a free village, Stony Gut was an independent freehold.

It was distinguishable from the church founded free villages in that it was not a planned settlement, with a defined layout pattern, but developed haphazardly as freed men bought land and erected houses without much consideration for arrangement.

But what of the historical significance of Stony Gut? In 1865, there were grave social and economic problems in Jamaica. The reaction of the people of Stony Gut to these problems is of significance. Declining prices for sugar led to a reduction in estate wages. Peasants were also affected by two years of drought in the island in the early 1860s which led to low crop yields and caused the price of locally produced food to skyrocket. Crop failure led to an increasing demand for wage work on estates, but due to the falling market price for sugar, estates hired fewer people and this resulted in massive unemployment. In addition, civil war between the northern and southern states in the United States interrupted trade and resulted in imported foodstuff becoming scarcer and more expensive. St. Thomas was also the place where unfair trials in the courts seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. In the courts there were many injustices against the poor. The stipendiary magistrates who were employed by the Crown had been removed and other judges, who were themselves planters, were brought in. The people of Stony Gut found leadership in the person of Paul Bogle. He was a small farmer, a baker by trade, ordained by George William Gordon as a native Baptist deacon and one of the 106 inhabitants of the parish who had the right to vote.

Bogle was deeply concerned over the oppression and injustice to which the people were subjected. After several attempts at a peaceful resolution to their problems, he led them to active resistance. In August 1865 for instance, Bogle led a deputation to the capital at Spanish Town to present the grievances of the people to the Governor. After a forty-five mile walk to the capital, Governor Edward Eyre refused to see them.

Dejected they returned to Stony Gut and resolved to take their own action. Disturbances erupted on October 7, 1865 and the ensuing struggle became known as the Morant Bay Rebellion in which 439 persons were killed and over 1000 houses were destroyed. George William Gordon and Paul Bogle were among those who were hanged as a result of the uprising. The present Paul Bogle Memorial Park comprises approximately 1 acre.

The property is all that remains of Paul Bogle's land. In 2002, the archaeological team of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust conducted work on the Stony Gut site. Among the discoveries was what is believed to be the steps of the Stony Gut Chapel where Bogle was Baptist deacon. The Chapel was burnt to the ground during the Morant Bay Rebellion. In February 2004, the JNHT completed a new Visitor Information Centre and bridge at the heritage site. Stony Gut is a national heritage site. For more information : www.jnht.com