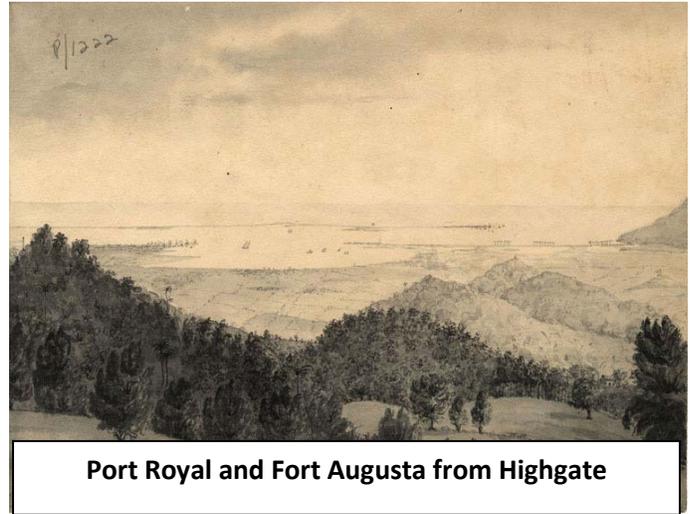


History of Portmore

Location & Geography

Located approximately twenty four (24) kilometres from Jamaica's capital city, is the urban settlement known as Portmore. It is situated on the south eastern coast of St. Catherine. Portmore is one of the largest urban areas in St. Catherine, second to the capital Spanish Town. Portmore can be divided into two regions, the plains to the north and the limestone hills of Hellshire to



Port Royal and Fort Augusta from Highgate

the south. Today, references to Portmore mean the area that makes up the Municipality of Portmore from Passage Fort Drive to the north to as far south as Port Henderson Road. The history of Portmore is one that encompasses a rich and compelling past that can be traced through different groups of people and localities that made significant impact on the area today..

Early History and Spanish Occupation

Portmore's history stretches as far back as 900 AD to the first inhabitants, the Tainos. Evidence of Taino presence was discovered at Port Henderson's Hill, Hellshire and Naggo Head. Jamaica was declared a Spanish colony in 1494. This Spanish colonisation resulted in the decimation of the Tainos. Portmore was brought into focus when the Spanish capital shifted from Seville in St. Ann to Spanish Town, St. Catherine. More precisely, Passage Fort or The Passage, as it was earlier called because it was the place of embarkation from Spanish Town, became one of the island's most important forts. Evidence of Spanish occupation in Portmore can also be found in Port Henderson and Hellshire where haciendas were built.

Passage Fort

Much like Spanish Town's importance, Passage Fort was equally significant to the Spaniards. Passage Fort was not viewed as the finest port of its kind, primarily because its shallow waters prevented large ships from docking. Nevertheless, it was the main port for the town since nearly all communications with the outside world was done through this port (Reid). Although Passage Fort had some form of defence system they would be subjected to frequent attacks by European rivals as Jamaica on a whole at that time was poorly defended by the Spanish.

Attacks on Passage Fort

In January 1597, an English adventurer named Sir Anthony Shirley made the first real attack on Jamaica. From Passage Fort, he and approximately two hundred and fifty men marched into Spanish Town where they set fire and plundered the city. Their stay would be short lived as they left the island afterwards. A few years later, there was another attack; English General, Christopher Newport with about a dozen ships under his command headed for Passage Fort. The English's attack was repelled and they were fired upon by the expectant Spanish (Cundall).

Portmore under the English

There was to be another attack by the English on Jamaica, but unlike previous attempts, this would be the last since the English had set out to capture Jamaica. On May 10, 1655 disembarking at Passage Fort, the English invaded Jamaica and it was captured from the Spanish thus ending over 150 years of Spanish occupation.

Development

Having captured Jamaica from the Spanish, the English set out to distribute land and establish agricultural properties. The Portmore area, being a part of Spanish Town's environs was one of the first places to be settled. By 1700, Portmore had a number of pens such as Reid's Pen, Salt Pond Pen and Cumberland Pen. Pens were small estates whose main purpose was to supply

goods to larger estates. It is said that the Portmore area was far too dry for sugar production so pen keeping was encouraged.

Port Henderson

The importance of Passage Fort to the English started to decline as the earthquake which destroyed Port Royal in 1692 also had a devastating impact on the port. It is also said that the Portmore area was in need of a better port as the harbour was being blocked with silt that was brought down by the Rio Cobre, so much so that the landing space could not be seen. For this reason, in the mid 1700s, a new town was established as a replacement, approximately three miles away from Passage Fort. It was first known as New Brighton but eventually came to be known as Port Henderson. This port was named after the owner Colonel John Henderson of the militia who was responsible for its development. It became an important town/port for the English as the depth of the water allowed vessels to come much nearer to the wharf. Henderson built warehouses and shops from which he was paid wharfage fees and port charges. Under his ownership a mineral spring was discovered. He cut a channel through the hillside so that the waters of the spring would be distributed to the rest of the town. For a short while this was considered as a form of tourism for Port Henderson. It became a fashionable spa and health resort with a small bath house erected over the springs. This venture did not continue very long as the underground source of the water shifted. Nevertheless, it is noted that in the mid 18th century, Port Henderson had become the principal port for Spanish Town.

By the 1770s, it had also become a vital part of the island's defense system as Portmore played a major role in the fortification of Jamaica/St. Catherine. Fort Augusta and Fort Clarence were pivotal in this role. Overtime, the importance of Port Henderson fluctuated and in the 1840s with the introduction of the railway, there was a slight decline but it picked up back in the 1890s with the work of Ralph Hotchkin and the advent of Port Henderson as a banana pier.

Agriculture (Banana)

During the 1880s, the banana export business from the port was booming. In the south eastern section of St. Catherine, major irrigation works had begun in an effort to make the plains more productive. During that period steamships were regular visitors to the ports and piers of the island, buying tropical fruit to take back to America to satisfy the demand. The profitability of the banana venture was so great that the grazing properties in close proximity to Port Henderson were put to use by those with the capital to outlay as banana estates and irrigation works. The United Fruit Company (the major banana company) also invested in banana production in the area. It bought lands all around the area including Portmore Pen which was north of Port Henderson (Reid). Overtime through the development of the banana industry at the turn of the 20th century Port Henderson was firmly a banana pier for southeast St. Catherine.

The Birth and Development of Modern Portmore

Majority of modern Portmore is built on that large coastal property called Portmore Pen. The first English owners of the property were the Dawkin's family. Initially the property was called Salt Pond Pen and was sometimes referred to as Dawkins Pen. In the second half of the 19th century however, it was renamed Portmore Pen and then Portmore in honour of ancestors of the Dawkins who had married into the family of the Earl of Portmore from Scotland. Portmore/Portmore Pen at that time did not include areas such as Braeton, Hellshire, Port Henderson and Newlands. In the early 20th century, Colonel Dawkins sold many of his Jamaican properties, Portmore included. The United Fruit Company (UFC) acquired the lands from Dawkins but they did not fully utilize all the lands; only the northern reaches were used and the majority remained a grassy, muddy wasteland. In the middle of the 20th century, the UFC sold the Portmore property to the Caymanas Estates. Unfortunately, much like previous owners, the lands were not fully exploited as a result much of Portmore remained unused.

Consequently, a company was formed called Portmore Land Development Company. They purchased the property from the Caymanas Estate with the intention of establishing housing development. In the 1950s and 60s, Kingston ran out of flat space for development, so housing development in Portmore was seen as a response to the great outcry for housing. Before

development began, a dyke had to be constructed to contain the Rio Cobre and a causeway was built to connect Kingston to Portmore. The lowlands were also filled by dredging the harbour and quarrying marl from the Port Henderson Hills (Reid). Once this was completed, the development of houses could begin.

Housing Development

In 1969, under the direction of the West Indies Home Contractors (WIHCON), the first housing scheme in Portmore was erected and called Independent City. The scheme consisted of approximately 1000-1200 two and three bedroom houses. The next community to be constructed was Edgewater Villas. Overtime, more community development took place as Bridgeport phase 1 and 2 were erected in 1972 and 1974 respectively. This was followed by Passage Fort in the same year and Waterford a year after in 1975. Bridgeport phase 3 would come next in 1976 with the construction of Portsmouth and Southborough in 1978 and 1979.

Population

With the development of Portmore came a growth in its population. When developers started working in the late 1960s, it is said that fewer than 2000 persons were living in the Portmore area. By 1970, there was a sharp increase to about 5000 persons. In the 1980s, more schemes were constructed as Cumberland, Westchester, and Westbay phase 1 and 2 were erected. During this period it is estimated that approximately 77,000 persons were residing in Portmore. The beginning of the 1990s saw the construction of Westbay phase 3 and Bridgeview, with an increase of units at Cumberland. This contributed to growth in the already booming population as it is noted that approximately 93,838 persons were residing there. The construction of Greater Portmore in the mid 1990s saw an escalation in population and the number of residents in Portmore almost doubled to roughly 160,000 persons. Along with the schemes, came schools, a town centre, churches and other facilities.

As a result of the rapid development, a bill was passed granting Portmore Municipal status in 2003. They were given the right to manage their own affairs including the election of their own

Mayor. By far, the most considerable aspect of the development of Portmore, is its status as the largest residential area in the Caribbean, with over 200,000 residents.

Notable places/ buildings in Portmore

Fort Augusta - situated between Port Henderson and Passage Fort on the seaward side is Fort Augusta. Construction of this fort began in 1740 and was completed in the 1750s. Fort Augusta was named in honour of the mother of King George III. The fort was part of the island's defense system and by 1770 up to 80 guns were housed. Fort Augusta has been converted into a prison for women and is the only of its kind in the island.

Fort Clarence - originally built in 1782, its main objective was to protect the bay between Port Henderson and Hellshire Hills. It was named in honour of Prince William, Duke of Clarence who had visited Jamaica years before.

Two Sisters Cave –is located in Hellshire Hills. Each cave has a large sink hole, which contains fresh water. It is possible that these reservoirs served as sources of fresh water for the Tainos. The cave contains a petroglyph carving of a face which is believed to be about seven hundred years old.

Rodney's Lookout – built by Admiral George Rodney on a summit of the Port Henderson Hills between 1780- 1782, it was an old signaling station west on Port Henderson.

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