



The History of Falmouth Boom Town Of The 19th Century



By Dr. Rebecca Tortello

Named for Falmouth, Cornwall, the birthplace of then British governor William Trelawny, it became the capital of the parish of St. James (of which Trelawny was once a part), in the 1790s, thus taking over from the town of Martha Brae in a move sanctioned by the Vestry (or Parish Council). Falmouth was created from seaside land owned by famed English Romantic poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's grandfather, Edward Moulton Barrett, in 1790. Barrett sold portions of land off to planter friends, kept the waterfront and donated what remained for the building of a courthouse, church and public gardens.

Edward Barrett

Elizabeth Barrett Browning thought often of Jamaica even though her lifelong battle with frail health rendered a visit impossible. She expressed her desire to see Jamaica, as she expressed many of her desires, in her poetry:

*My dream is of an island place
Which distant seas keep lonely
A little island on whose face
The stars are watchers only*

In the 1830s, Elizabeth was cut off from her family as a result of her relationship with fellow poet Robert Browning. Her favourite uncle Samuel, who resided in Jamaica managing the family property, bequeathed her the family's Falmouth holdings, giving her much needed financial independence. Not surprisingly, she asked that her wedding announcement read "...of Wimpole St. and Cinnamon Hill, Jamaica" (Kritzler, 2003, p. 117).

THE SHAPING OF THE TOWN

As Falmouth took shape, government offices were moved and churches such as St. Peter's Anglican Church, located in the town centre were built. Today St. Peter's, after an 1842 extension stands as one of the largest Anglican churches in Jamaica. Its supporting columns are of solid mahogany and its floor includes crosses inlaid with mahoe and mahogany. Graves spanning over 200 years grace its cemetery.

Falmouth was carefully laid out with narrow streets named after 18th and 19th century British sovereigns and heroes: King St., Queen St., George St., Rodney St., Charlotte St., Pitt St., Victoria St., as well as Wellington, Stanley and Albert Streets (Buisseret, 1996, p. 95). This was the heyday of King Sugar and Jamaica's fortunes were on the rise as the world's leading sugar producer. Planters flocked to Falmouth, their slaves in tow. In the late 1820s there were some 25,000 slaves in Trelawny alone. Merchants such as Delgado, DeSouza and Lindo were fast on the heels of the planters so that shops and homes, many in the form of two and three-storey townhouses, were built almost as if over night. Some merchants even built shops beneath their homes. Most houses were built in the Georgian style said to be the finest known outside of Britain. Some had stone built lower floors and wooden upper floors, with wrought iron balconies and verandahs supported on wooden columns, reaching out over the sidewalk (Gravette, 2000, p. 235). One of the most famous is the Tharp House, a one-storey building built by wealthy planter John Tharp. It is similar in style to Good Hope Great House, which Tharp also owned. Tharp owned three additional Falmouth townhouses and had his own ships and a wharf which today lies in ruins. Tharp House presently serves as the office for the Collector of Taxes.

BOOM TOWN



A stately old building along a Falmouth street, also a good example of Georgian Architecture.

In the late 18th to early 19th century Falmouth boomed, becoming one of the busiest towns in Jamaica. It is said to have been the "wealthiest New World port south of Charleston, South Carolina" (Kritzler, 2003, p. 115). Exports of sugar and rum came to Falmouth from over 88 properties worked by close to 30,000 slaves. Falmouth's busy harbour was guarded by Fort Balcarres (which in 1802 was moved from the centre of town and relocated by the sea. It is now the Falmouth All Age School). Falmouth boasted department stores, craftsmen such as goldsmiths, gunsmiths and tinsmiths, hotels, carriage-makers, taverns, brothels and newspapers. At one point, three newspapers were in production **The Cornwall Courier**, **The Falmouth Post** and **The Falmouth Gazette**. The newspapers, of course, advertised the goods on sale and the comings and goings of a town that had become an active commercial port. In the harbour, food, iron, furniture, household wares as well as slaves were unloaded at the Central Wharf, while logwood, sugar, rum and dyes were exported.

The conically-shaped Foundry, located in the town centre, built in the early 19th century, supplied bedsteads for British soldiers and repaired parts of British ships and sugar mills. On weekends the Town Square was transformed into a colourful food market organized by slaves. There they traded the ground provisions planters let them cultivate as a means of easing the financial burden of having to feed, clothe, house and provide medical care for the slaves. Soon enough, slaves increased the types of goods on sale and buyers began to include the planters themselves in addition to merchants, sailors and tradesmen. Market fare included fish, chicken, metal, tin and earthenwares as well as vegetable produce. An actual market was built in 1896 and still stands today, the Albert George Market.

Socially, Falmouth also blossomed. Travelling dramatic troupes passed through and the famed British painter Joseph Bartholomew Kidd painted panoramic views of the town from the sea, while visiting his brother Joseph, a successful Falmouth merchant. Kidd therefore left us records of Falmouth in its heyday. Many of the buildings captured on his canvas no longer exist. Another painter, well-known miniaturist Joseph Dunkerly, visited in the late 1700s and stayed on to paint Jamaica's prominent citizens, many of whom came (at great time and expense) and sat for him in Falmouth. In Falmouth's Town Hall/Courthouse built in 1817, high society entertained. With its four Tuscan columns, a portico and a double staircase, the Town Hall was a perfect match for the elegantly clad ladies who attended balls dramatically decked out in gowns within which peeniewallies were sometimes sewn to add sparkle and light while they danced. The Town Hall was eventually destroyed by fire and a replica built in 1926 which today houses the courts, Parish Council and town hall.

In terms of law and order, the police station, built in 1814 included a cell with a treadmill and a gallows (last used in 1896). Part of the prison became the police station of today. On the religious side, famed abolitionist William Knibb preached in the Baptist Church or Manse, known for its stonework and wooden staircase. Knibb became the spokesman for the Jamaica Baptist Church. His was a dramatic career. He was arrested in 1832 on grounds of subversive preaching and inciting rebellion in what was known as the Baptist War. The Rebellion resulted from a rumour that the slaves had been freed but were not so informed by their masters. Great houses and cane fields were burned and 15 whites were killed. Three hundred Africans were hung in reprisal. Knibb was sent to Montego Bay to await trial. It was Samuel and Richard Barrett who helped secure his release. As slave owners who had outlawed the use of the whip and allowed religious instruction and marriage among slaves, they were prepared to testify to his Christian character. Knibb was released and exiled to England where he spoke out on behalf of abolition in the 1830s. By the time abolition finally came in 1838, Knibb was back in Jamaica and at midnight on July 31, the dawning of full freedom, he announced to a packed congregation, "The hour is at hand, the monster is dying." He led the former slaves outside to bury their shackles and chains.

Knibb's legacy lives on in the Knibb Memorial Church he built in 1844 on the site of the first Baptist Chapel, which had been destroyed during the 1832 rebellion when those against him set his church on fire. Knibb and his wife are buried in the churchyard.

WANING FORTUNES

Post-emancipation Falmouth's fortunes as a commercial centre waned. The ex-slaves left the town in droves and settled in free villages. In Trelawny alone there were over 20, some of which near Falmouth, Martha Brae, Granville, Refuge, Kettering and Alps, were founded by Knibb. Sugar production fell by over 70 per cent and by the mid-1800s close to 150 sugar estates had been abandoned. Architecturally, however, a new dimension was added to the town of Falmouth, the houses of the newly-freed slaves wooden cottages known for their gingerbread fretwork and jalousie windows appeared.

Today, a visit to Falmouth is like a walk through history; every house, every corner, every road, every stone filled with stories.

NOTES

* Residents of Falmouth received piped water pumped by The Falmouth Water Company pumped (from the Martha Brae River) before New York City residents experienced the comfort of piped water.

* Falmouth Restoration Company arranges tours of the historic centre. Call: 954-3316

Sources: Buisseret, D. (1996). Historic Jamaica from the air. Kingston: Ian Randle, Gravette, A. (2000). Architectural heritage of the Caribbean: An A-Z of historic buildings. Kingston: Ian Randle, Kritzler, E. (2003). "The poet and the preacher Falmouth's curious heritage" in A Tapestry of Jamaica The best of Skywritings, Air Jamaica's inflight magazine. Kingston: Creative Communications Ltd. in association with Macmillan Publishers. pp. 115-117. "Falmouth," "Walkabout" and "Trelawny" in The Jamaican, 2001. Kingston: Deeks Designs. <http://www.silver-sands.com/falmouth-history.html>