



AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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Jamaican Sugar Plantation "Deed of Covenant"

Imagine working in the Jamaican sun on a sugar plantation every day of your life from sunup to sundown under the eyes of an overseer whose whip and other instruments of torture prompt you to accept your condition or revolt like hundreds of others and flee to the maroon encampments in the highlands. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, more than one million African captives embarked from ports along the continent's, Atlantic coast and disembarked in Jamaica. Nearly 12.5 million Africans were captives of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, of which 10.7 million or so survived the voyage—only to be enslaved in the Americas.¹ Jamaica was a British colony in the West Indies and part of the extensive American colonial system of the British Empire that included North America. Although sugar plantations did not exist in Pennsylvania, slavery did, and for much of the 19th century Pittsburgh was a battleground for abolition.

Sugar plantations required a large workforce not only to cultivate and harvest the crop but also to process the sugar into various products such as molasses, rum, and crystal sugar. Sugar cane is a member of the

grass family indigenous to New Guinea and was spread to the Middle East by Arab traders. It then made its way to the Mediterranean region including northern Africa and along the Nile River. It is thought that the plant was introduced to the Americas by Columbus.² Jamaican sugar plantations of the 17th to 19th centuries relied almost exclusively on enslaved African labor. It was dangerous labor as the life expectancy of sugar plantation workers was less than 10 years. If the conditions in the field did not kill you, the boiling house most certainly would. Sugar became the most profitable cash crop of the slave trade and was especially profitable for European owned plantations in the Caribbean. Historian Joseph Inikori estimates that between 1761 and 1807, the beginning of British abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a profit of more than £13.8 million was made by British investors in the slave and sugar trades.³

Some of the Jamaican sugar plantations were owned by absentee landlords and some were owned by British subjects who had made Jamaica their home for decades. One example of the latter was a plantation owned in the 1820s by Joseph Brissett in Hanover Parrish, Jamaica, located on the northwest end of the island. Brissett was born in Jamaica in 1789 where his family had owned a massive plantation since 1655. By the 1820s Brissett's Content Estate was 568 acres and held 147 enslaved Africans. Under Joseph Brissett the plantation grew to over 400 enslaved.

His tax filings, including inventories of male and female slaves, are recorded on a Deed of Covenant and included a duplicate register of slaves for the years 1817, 1820, and 1823. On display as a reprographic in the *From Slavery to Freedom* exhibit, the document extends and explains the complexities of slavery and the economic benefit to slave owners. This Deed of Covenant contains a detailed record of slaves on Brissett's sugar plantation with

names, skin color, race (African or Creole), age, remarks, mortality, and acquisition listed for each enslaved on the registry. The document was wax-sealed, notarized multiple times, and tied with ribbon. The first few pages are registers of enslaved; the final pages are legal documents governing the transaction of such. The document may have been used as a tax document, a petition for compensation (due to impending emancipation of slaves), a contract for the sale of the property, an agreement toward a pending marriage, or a will. Dates on the documents vary due to it being shipped to Great Britain and notarized by multiple officials in both Great Britain and Jamaica, but the last date affixed is March 31, 1827. The document was sent to England in order for the Brissett's to receive compensation for their estate under British law. Affixed with a wax seal and ribbon to the four large schedules of slaves on the plantation are papers, affidavits and assigns by the Mayor of Bristol, England, Thomas Camplin, esquire. Mayor Camplin's affidavit alludes to the British law passed during the reign of King George II, "an Act for the more easy recovery of Debts in His Majesty's Plantations and Colonies in America."⁴

The Deed of Covenant provides clear documentation of the nature of slavery in the Americas and its economic impact. It fosters a connection to Jamaican genealogy and history. Finally, the document provides a glimpse into the economic base of the British Empire that relied on its subjects in colonial territories to manifest its global enterprise. Not until the emancipation of slavery in Jamaica which began in 1833 and were finalized in 1838, did many of the enslaved in Hanover Parish see freedom. This record also helps us understand the accounting necessary as the British government doled out reparations to the tune of £20 million to slave holders who lost their "property" in emancipation.



This is a July 1823 accounting of the enslaved on a Jamaican sugar plantation owned by Englishman Joseph Brissett. The multi-page document lists 384 enslaved for that year by gender and age. By 1815, British plantation owners were required to register their slaves. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833 and slave owners received compensation for the loss of their slaves. Britain paid out £20 million pounds in compensation, or \$32,241,580.71 today. The enslaved received nothing.

Courtesy of Ernest Thomas.

In the final analysis this historic document sheds a lot of light on the specter of slavery in the United States. Issues such as reparations, emancipation, citizenship and most importantly, the economic growth and structure built on slavery in North America did not escape Western Pennsylvania. Sugar may have been instrumental in developing the Jamaican plantation economy, but cotton played the same role in the U.S. From the

1820s to the 1860s, slave-raised cotton from Mississippi and other Southern states made its way to the Port of Pittsburgh to the tune of nearly 5,000 tons per year. This raw material fed the numerous cotton mills along the three rivers, making textile mill owners such as abolitionist Charles Avery very wealthy.

¹ Eltis, David and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Also the online database, *Voyage: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*,

www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces, that offers numerous statistics and data gathered from a field of historical research on the subject.

² Bressey, Caroline and Tom Wareham *Reading the London Sugar & Slavery Gallery* London: Museum of London Docklands, 2011, page 17.

³ Ibid, page 21.

⁴ Affidavit attesting to the filing of the schedule of slaves and inventory of the Joseph Brissett plantation of Hanover Parish, Jamaica according to British law. This document is affixed to the said schedules and signed by the outgoing Mayor of Bristol, England, Thomas Camplin on April 4, 1827.