



# Emancipation Day



Emancipation day has been celebrated in Trinidad & Tobago since August 01, 1985 when it became the first country in the world to declare a national holiday to commemorate the abolition of slavery. Emancipation day replaced Columbus Discovery Day, which marked the arrival of Christopher Columbus on Trinidad on July 31st 1498.

Trinidad was a late starter in the Plantation system. Prior to 1776 the population of the island was small, and until the 1780s there were very few African slaves living on the island. In 1783, in an effort to increase the population, and by extension the prosperity of the island, the Spanish government, which ruled Trinidad, decided to invite French planters to settle in Trinidad. A law, called the Cedula of Population, was passed to encourage migration to the island. Under this law, incentives such as free land and exemption from paying most taxes were granted. Many French settlers were willing to migrate to Trinidad. The Haitian revolution and the unrest in other French territories acted as additional incentives. Planters in Martinique, Guadeloupe and other French territories feared that what happened in Haiti could happen in those islands, and so they became afraid. They saw the opportunity to migrate to Trinidad as a blessing. As a result large numbers of French immigrants came to Trinidad complete with all their possessions, slaves and way of life. In the beginning they planted cotton, cocoa and coffee.

However, by 1797 when the British conquered Trinidad, sugar had become the most important crop. With the increase in the price of sugar in Europe more and more sugar plantations were set up to meet the increasing demand. This in turn fueled the need for more slave labour. In the beginning labour needs were met by the slaves who were brought to Trinidad with their French masters. These slaves were creole. That is, they were born in the Caribbean. As the sugar economy expanded, other slaves were imported directly from Africa via the slave trade, until eventually, the majority of the slave population were African born - Yoruba, Hausa, Congo, Ibo, Rada, Mandingo, Kromanti (Koromantyn) and Temne. By 1797 when Britain conquered the island, the slave population had risen to over 10,000. By 1802 this population has risen to about 20,000.

Tobago's experience was slightly different. When the British conquered Tobago in 1793 plantations were set up, and soon sugar became the main crop. Like other British colonies, Tobago became a slave colony. The majority of slaves came from Africa and the Tobago economy prospered. After the slave trade was abolished, however, the island's economy suffered. The majority of Tobago's population was African - many of them from the African continent. The British white population was small, and many of the planters were absentee owners. Very few French people had ever settled on the island, and the Dutch and Courlanders had already left by the time the British took over.

Like slaves in other colonies, the slaves in Trinidad and Tobago lived in horrible conditions. Hard labour, poor food, disease and cruel masters were the order of the day. Through it all, the slaves still managed to create some sort of family life and maintain their culture. They also resisted their enslavement in several ways. There was open revolt. Slaves also ran away. They also broke plantation tools and equipment, they worked slowly, even though they were whipped for this, and they complained about their bad treatment whenever possible. The planter class retaliated predictably by flogging or torturing the slaves, or even putting them to death.

In 1833 Thomas Buxton presented The Emancipation Bill in Parliament. The Act was passed and came into effect on 1 August 1834. On that day, thousands of slaves in the British West Indies became free men and women. One hundred and fifty one years later, on 1 August 1985 the government of Trinidad and Tobago declared Emancipation Day a national holiday to commemorate the abolition of slavery.

In both Trinidad and Tobago, many of the ex-slaves moved off the plantations. They did not want any reminders of their former masters. They set up villages close to the sugar estates, but not on the planters' land. Villages such as Belmont, Arouca, and Laventille were formed. Land was available and many of the ex-slaves bought or rented land and made a living by growing their own crops. Other slaves gravitated towards Port of Spain and San Fernando where they became artisans, craftsmen, builders and domestics.



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