

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and Dominica's first Catholics. Part IV by Bernard Lauwyck



The old market in Roseau in 1770 by Agostino Brunias

Father Martel provided us with the background of the early French settlers of Dominica: “Some left Guadeloupe or Martinique, crippled by debt, running from their creditors, and looking for a second chance in life; others came to work out their dreams in a place of complete freedom without shackles imposed by governments and laws,..” (“Histoire Générale des Missions catholiques Vol. 3 page 625 by Baron Mathieu Henrion).

About one particular group of Catholic French settlers we know more as they emigrated to Dominica after a revolt in Martinique, known as La Gaoulé. (see Lennox Honychurch's Dominica Story). Members of this group have been pillars of the Catholic Church up till the present.

Let me give you some background on France of the “Ancien Régime” or France before the French revolution (which took place in 1789).

The policies of the Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin made the “glorious period” of the French “Sun King” Louis the fourteenth (1638-1715) possible. The Chateau de Versailles became the “golden cage” where this king gathered all the grand nobles of France.



Stupendous ceremonies and rituals were centred around this absolute monarch. Louis XIV also waged many wars and all this pomp and glory had to be paid for by the lower classes who were grovelling in misery. Besides the heavy government tax, the lower classes also had to pay a mandatory tithe, called the "dîme" or 10 % on their produce to the Second Estate which was the clergy or nobility of the robe. At the end of his reign king Louis XIV left France hugely in debt, its people taxed to the hilt, except the nobles and the clergy which were exempt of taxation.

The last of the wars of Louis XIV, known as the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), resulting in France's defeat by an alliance of countries led by Britain, concluded with the Peace of Utrecht. Presented with the possibility of losing the rich colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique, France ceded to Britain its claims to large portions of Canada which included Newfoundland, Acadia, with dire consequences for the French settlers there. The partitioned French-English island of St. Kitts (Saint Christopher) was also ceded to Britain. France preferred to give up their northern America possessions to keep their sugar-rich Caribbean islands!

Indeed, sugar was king and became enormously popular as it became a craving of the common people. Britain, for example, consumed five times as much sugar in 1770 as in 1710 (see Ponting, C. *World History: A New Perspective* 2000). It would take another war and a British naval blockade to force Napoleon Bonaparte to order in 1813 large scale cultivation of the sugar beet in Europe. Martinique and present day Haiti (then named Saint-Domingue) were the most prosperous islands in the Caribbean. In Saint-Domingue the number of sugar plantations increase with startling rapidity between 1700 and 1704 from 18 to 120. (See Laurent Dubois in "The story of the Haitian revolution" 2004).



To grow sugarcane a lot of flat land and an initial investment in expensive equipment and machinery were needed. This favoured the rich plantation owners



and traders families. Some of the French settlers in Martinique, who wanted to be part of the “Caribbean Dream” (= get rich fast), were left out. The process of sugarcane production was also very labour intensive, from the fields to the mill to the distillery to the storehouses. As indentured white labour proved too expensive, sugar was one of the main reasons for the importation of African slaves. Whites, who were imported earlier as indentured labour (= form of debt bondage) were without work. The richer got richer and the rest were left with an empty dream of fast riches.



In "Origines de la Martinique. Le colonel François de Collart et la Martinique de son temps; colonisation, sièges, révoltes et combats de 1625 à 1720" we read more about the revolt.

The French King wanted a greater variety of tropical agricultural produce grown in his royal domain Martinique such as cotton, indigo, cinnamon, ginger, cocoa and these imported directly to France. In October 1715 he imposed restrictions on the booming trade with the national enemies; the Dutch, Spanish and English, which greatly upset the local merchants and slave traders between the islands. More damaging to the white smallholders or petit-blanc settlers was the limitations which were imposed on the creation of

new sugar plantations and mills. At the time 60 sugar mills were being constructed in Martinique.

These new decrees were applied strictly by the new governor Varenne and the royal intendant Ricottart upon their arrival in Martinique in November 1716. They immediately put a stop to the 60 sugar mills in mid construction and seized a Spanish ship with 60,000 écus (gold coins) and a large cargo of copper owned by a local prominent family, descendants of a “flibustier” (freebooter or pirate).

Everybody in Martinique was negatively affected: nobles, large and small planters, shop keepers, country people and seafarers.

The widespread protests, which followed, against this “repression” were led by the local militias, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel sieur Jean Dubuc or Dubucq (his name might be at the origin of the name of the village Dubicque). (See “Les Antilles Françaises” by Baron Boyer de Peyreleau 1826) . These protests turned into a full scale general revolt of the white settlers when Dubuc and 300 men arrested the island’s governor and the king’s intendant and accused them of tyranny and oppression. This arrest took place in a house of the “quartier du



Diamant”, named after the island rock off Martinique known as “Le Diamant”.

This audacious revolt by the local “blancs”, which was called “La Gaoulé”, ended in May 1717 by the deportation of the French governor and king’s intendant.

DOMINICA : THE LAND OF THE FREE !

The French Regent, who succeeded King Louis XIV, eased up on the “oppression” and granted a general amnesty, which only excluded Colonel Dubuc and his five officers, named Labat, Bellair, Dorange, Cattier, who all fled. (See “Histoire de la Martinique depuis la colonisation” by Sidney Marcillac). However, due to lack of rapid communication, this General Amnesty announcement reached only on 15 March 1718 and by that time many white farmers and dependants had left for Dominica, a neutral island; with names such as Sorhaindo, Anselm, Darroux, Laurent, Laronde, Dehausays, Poiree and Bardouille according to Dr. Lennox Honychurch. First they settled in the Pointe Michel area but when the English annexed Dominica in 1763, some of these families moved to the East coast of Dominica. Dr. Honychurch mentioned that the Sorhaindos moved to the Boetica-Delices area where the Catholic records show them as godparents of Kalinago children to be baptised. St. Patrick Parish records show that in 1748 a child was baptised in Grandbay with as father Louis Dubicque.

In the dissertation (2004) of Stephan Lenik named “Frontier Landscapes, Missions and Power: A French Jesuit Plantation and Church at Grandbay, Dominica (1747-1763) we find a list of property owners in the Grand Bay parish register 1780-1782, the large majority of French origin, with names as Sorhaindo, Dubuc, Desabay, Dumas, Laronde, Roche, Tavernier.

Further reading on how Dominica became a place of refuge for French families can be found in the excellent book of Dr. Irving Andre named “*Sanctuary: How Dominica Saved Guadeloupe and Martinique in World War Two*” (2012).

bernardlauw@yahoo.com PO Box 317 Roseau Dominica