

CHAGUARAMAS: GATEWAY TO TRINIDAD

Understanding our Northwest Peninsula, by Angelo Bissessarsingh

From bombs to beauty queens, the verdant hills of Chaguaramas have loomed high over a turbulent and momentous history which has charted the course of an entire region

If one peers closely into the past of the Chaguaramas peninsula, it soon becomes apparent that it is perhaps one of the most historically important places in the whole of Trinidad and Tobago. Its lush green hills conceal the remnants of a long history which stretches back to the period before the island was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498. At the time, it was settled by Amerindian tribes, with an ersatz capital of sorts at the village of Cu-Mucurapo. Even after the island had been permanently settled by the Spanish in the 16th century, the peninsula remained pristine and unspoilt until 1783 when an enterprising Frenchman named Roume de St Laurent hit upon a scheme for opening up the rich lands and at the same time provide a refuge for his countrymen who were facing the turmoil of civil unrest in Grenada and St Domingue (now Haiti).

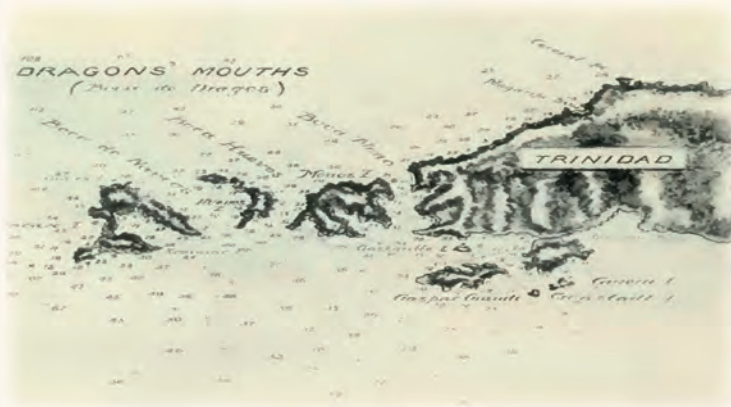
In 1783 the Cedula of Population was proclaimed by Governor José María Chacón, allowing Catholic slave-owners and their chattels to settle in Trinidad on grants of land, some of which were in Chaguaramas. Among the names of the grantees were some like

Rochard, Duvivier, Dumas, Noel and Dert whose descendants still live in the island. Cotton was the staple crop of Chaguaramas with coffee being cultivated on the slopes of its hills. In the well-watered La Cuesa valley, sugar cane was grown. In the 1780s, the conflicts between the superpowers of Europe saw a small battery being erected at Pointe Gourde of its hills. In 1796 Admiral Don Sebastián Ruiz de Apodaca anchored five armed ships under the shadow of its meagre protection, for it had been whispered that orders were afoot for a British invasion of Trinidad. Gossip became grim reality when on 16th February 1797, 19 British warships under the command of Admiral Sir Ralph Abercromby sailed through the Boca del Drago carrying seven thousand men. Hopelessly outnumbered, Apodaca chose the path of least resistance and decided to scuttle his fleet rather than even make a pretence of courage. The Spanish and French burgesses of Port-of-Spain kept a fitful watch to the west all night. One of Trinidad's early historians, L.M. Fraser wrote thus in 1891:

“At last, towards half-past one of the morning of the 17th February, the western sky was suddenly lighted up by the flames of a conflagration, which indicated a disaster of some kind in the Bay of Chaguaramas. At every moment the light became more and more intense, throwing out in bold relief the dark outline of Punta Gorda and illuminating the sea for miles to the southward. Explosion after explosion shook the still morning air, but the anxious listeners were ignorant of the exact nature and extent of the catastrophe. At nine o'clock in the morning all doubts were set at rest by the arrival of the Admiral in Port-of-Spain. He hastened to the Governor and reported to him that the enemy had taken up position before Gaspar Grande, and that as the forts were without water, and the heights commanding the Bay of Chaguaramas were totally undefended, he had found himself unable to attempt to escape

Hart's Cut: dug by convicts in 1855, it cut an hour's rowing time off the journey to Port of Spain





from his critical position without encountering the almost certain risk of capture by the enemy. In this emergency he had assembled a Council of War of the captains of the vessels under his command, and they had unanimously agreed that the ships should be burned at their anchorage rather than that they should fall into the hands of the invaders. He had accordingly put this plan into execution after having first removed all the troops from Gaspar Grande and spiked the guns in the forts.”

With Trinidad ceded to England, a new century had barely commenced when in 1806, a planned slave rebellion along the lines of the Haitian Revolution of 1804 was discovered on an estate in the La Cuesa Valley. The slaughter of planters and their families had been proposed when the plot was uncovered, with the ringleaders being severely punished and banished from the colony under the pain of death. British proprietors moved into Chaguaramas among the long-established French settlers and sugarcane cultivation spread. In 1831 a severe storm lashed the peninsula causing severe damage. In 1834, slaves in the British Empire were emancipated and this caused severe labour shortages on the estates in Trinidad. Small communities of farmer-fishermen had mushroomed

in the secluded coves at Staubles, Teteron and Scotland Bays. These were largely the ex-slaves of the struggling plantations of Monos, Chacachacare and Chaguaramas who found independence in their new way of life. In 1855, the dynamic Daniel Hart was Superintendent of Carrera

Island Prison, a few miles off Pointe Gourde, which was a strain to the fishermen who had to row around the narrow isthmus. Hart employed convict labour to dig a channel 2,000 feet long by 15 feet wide by 4 feet deep across the narrowest portion. At high tide it allowed the small pirogues of the fishermen to go through the isthmus rather than around it which knocked about an hour of hard rowing off their journeys to and from Port of Spain.

In the 1850s, William Sanger Tucker, an enterprising man, had propagated several cocoa estates, almost from scratch. A small village with its own shop and church grew out of Tucker Valley as the area was known in

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Above: 19th Century navigational map of the peninsula and bocas. Below: Boats moored at Staubles Bay, 1930s



The villagers of the peninsula were forcibly evicted and relocated to the already squalid and overcrowded villages of Carenage and Pt Cumana, the latter being immortalised when Lord Invader penned the famous 'Rum and Coca-Cola' song

Bauxite trans-shipment facility, Tembladora, 1950s

later years. Tucker's son-in-law was a visionary named Edgar Tripp. Tripp always believed the calm, deep waters of Chagville bay to be one of the finest deep-water harbours in the world. In 1900, Tripp formed a company and established an innovative floating dock at the entrance to Tucker Valley for the careening of vessels. It was constructed in England with backing from the wealthy Ellis Grell and hauled to Trinidad in 1907. The dock itself could move under its own power provided by a powerful steam engine. The drydock was a commercial failure, although during its existence, it was something of a sight for Trinidadians and excursions were frequently organised to take in this extraordinary piece of engineering. The floating dock was left derelict and became a rusty hulk, half sunk and listing to the side. Finally, in 1931, a decision was taken to tow it beyond the Bocas and sink it in deep water.

Sir George F. Huggins, a millionaire businessman, pioneered the development of the tourism sector when he erected a massive holiday resort and hotel at Macqueripe Bay in 1936. The hotel had 40 rooms, a billiards hall,

tennis courts and offered excellent swimming from purpose-built changing rooms and showers long before such facilities were even dreamed of, and Maracas Beach was an isolated little cove. Guests could go horseback riding on the 6,000 acre estate or fishing from a jetty from whence massive groupers weighing upwards of 300lbs could be caught. It was later confiscated by the Americans as an Officers' Mess during the second World War, and finally demolished in 1987.

When World War II erupted in 1939, Great Britain was dragged into the conflict, followed by the United States, and life would never be the same again for millions of people, including those in some isolated little villages in Trinidad's Chaguaramas peninsula. The crack of doom would soon be heard when the Bases Agreement was signed by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1941. It spelled an end to a way of life which had persisted for two generations. Thousands of American servicemen began pouring into Trinidad, upsetting the fabric of society and changing the landscape with hastily established prefabricated cities at selected points throughout the island. Despite the vehement protests of Sir Hubert Young, the island's Governor, the Americans confiscated the entire Chaguaramas peninsula, inclusive of the island of Gaspar Grande, and strategic locations on Monos and Chacachacare. The villagers of the peninsula were forcibly evicted by platoons of soldiers and relocated to the already squalid and overcrowded villages of Carenage and Point Cumana, the latter being immortalised when Lord Invader penned the famous 'Rum and Coca-Cola' song (later covered by the Andrews Sisters). He sang "Drink rum and Coca-Cola, go down Point Cumana, Both mother and daughter working for the Yankee dollar."

When the War ended in 1945 the Americans continued to occupy the base at Chaguaramas. The industry of the area took on a new dimension



Bauxite Depot, Trinidad.



with the construction in the 1950s of two massive trans-shipment facilities at Pointe Gourde and Tembladora, for the aluminium giants, ALCAN and ALCOA respectively. The latter was the largest of its kind in the world when constructed and was meant for the collection and forwarding of alumina powder manufactured in Guyana. Chaguaramas was catapulted into regional importance when it was proposed as the Federal Capital of the political union of the British West Indian colonies to form the West Indies Federation in 1958. Since the American military continued to occupy a significant portion of the peninsula, the capital was eventually based in Port-of-Spain until the Federation collapsed in 1962, the same year Trinidad and Tobago gained independence. Moves to oust the Americans had begun. On April 22 1960, Dr Eric Williams (then Chief Minister) marched at the head of a mighty contingent of citizens to Chaguaramas to demand the return of the lands to Trinidadians. This compelled the United States Government to renegotiate the Bases Agreement, first with the Colonial Government and then with Dr Williams as the Prime Minister of a newly-independent Trinidad and Tobago in 1962.

The Americans fell back and on their facilities in Chaguaramas were installed the battalions of the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment and the Coast Guard at Teteron Bay. Even so, the last vestiges of the US Army only left Chaguaramas in 1977. In 1970, the country was gripped by Black Power, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. There was a mutiny at the army

base in Teteron Bay when Raffique Shah and Rex Lasalle endeavoured to lead a rogue force into Port-of-Spain, being stopped when the Coast Guard shelled the Western Main Road, blocking their access. Although it never became the Federal Capital in the 1950s, Chaguaramas Convention Centre (a large building formerly

operated as the Marine Hotel) was the venue for the signing of the charter which formed the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) on 4th July 1973. This historic document was forever known as the Treaty of Chaguaramas. During the last two decades of the 20th century, Chaguaramas grew into a major hub with nightclubs and yachting facilities to rival the best in the region. In 1999, the area again received global attention as the venue for the 1999 Miss Universe pageant which was held in a reconditioned hangar, a relic of World War II. From bombs to beauty queens, the verdant hills of Chaguaramas have loomed high over a turbulent and momentous history which has charted the course of an entire region. ■

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Above: Edgar Tripp's famous floating dock at the entrance to Tucker Valley. Below: Sir George Huggins' Macqueripe Hotel, confiscated by the Americans in WWII

