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for Uncle Joe
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MORNE COURBARIL

Members of the Devaux family have owned various lands in St Lucia at one time or another, but that of Morne Courbaril, at Soufriere, is the only one which remained in the hands of the family for more than two centuries. It seems that no other St Lucian estate has remained so long in the same family.

In the 1740's the sugar planters of Martinique suffered a decline in prosperity. Some of them sought to improve their fortunes by selling their sugar estates and establishing coffee plantations, which required less capital expenditure on slaves and on equipment. Several planters moved from Martinique to St Lucia, which was still largely unoccupied, so that land could be obtained for little more than the cost of clearing the forest and bush.

Among these planters were Philippe de Vaux and his brothers Guillaume-André de Vaux des Rivières and Henry de Vaux de Bellefond. They obtained a concession of land in the Soufriere valley, which was thought to be the most fertile part of St Lucia. (According to an account written by the chief government surveyor of St Lucia about forty years later, the soil of the Soufriere district was perhaps the best in the islands, and certainly the best in St Lucia.)

It was in the 1740's that the French authorities established an administrative system in St Lucia. A map of the island, which seems to have been made at this time, shows the various plantations which were scattered about the island. One was the "Devaux" establishment at Soufriere.

The brothers supported the new administration, and helped by providing labour for the construction of forts and other public buildings, and boats for transport. Other prominent colonists were reluctant to help, perhaps because they knew that effective government would control trade and perhaps introduce taxation. In a letter to the Minister in France, the commander of the colony complained that he was not receiving much help from the colonists. Of those who did help, the brothers de Vaux surpassed all the rest. They had spared no effort for the advancement of the colony. They had continually provided slaves and boats for the King's service. Without them, progress would have been much slower. After receiving this letter, the Minister wrote to the three brothers in February 1746, acknowledging their assistance.

Philippe de Vaux, already a captain in the militia in Martinique, was given the command of the Soufriere district. In addition to commanding the colonists who formed the defence force, he was the local representative of government and local magistrate. His brothers both became captains. After Philippe's early death in 1752, Henry became the commander of the district, and later he was made a Chevalier of the military order of St Louis.

In the forty years after 1746, the colony became fairly prosperous, notwithstanding disruptions caused by hurricanes and invasions, and a chronic shortage of labour. In the latter part of this period, the produce of each hectare of canes was worth from £30 to £60 (depending on variations in yield and in sugar prices). While the net profit of the grower was rather less than this, it is apparent that it was not necessary to own a large estate in order to make a comfortable living.

The three brothers divided the land between them. The three resulting estates came to be called Soufriere, Soufreuse or Terre Blanche, and Morne Courbaril. They are clearly shown on a map of the Soufriere district made in 1770.

Henry, the youngest brother, had Soufriere Estate, which was situated along the Soufriere River. At first it was a coffee plantation, but it became a sugar estate before 1770. For this purpose, a portion of a stream flowing from the Soufriere Volcano down to the Soufriere River was diverted to drive a sugar mill. At that time the area of the estate was about 80 hectares, but before Henry's death in 1785 it was increased to 120 hectares by the incorporation of some land on the other side of the river. (In 1770 this land had belonged to a certain Widow Izaac.) Henry died childless. By his will he left his property mainly to some of his great-nephews and great-nieces. Some of these were the children of his niece Marie-Anne de Vaux, wife of the Comte de Micoud. It was arranged that she should take the estate, and should compensate the other legatees for their shares. That is why the estate appears under her husband's name in a list of owners annexed to a map of St Lucia made in 1786.

Guillaume-André had Soufreuse or Terre-Blanche, which surrounded and included the constantly active Soufriere Volcano. The estate took its names from the pale deposits of sulphur which encrusted the area of the volcano. In 1770 the area of the estate was 90 hectares, By 1786 the 20 hectares immediately

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surrounding the volcano had been acquired by Henri Loyo, a coloured man who had been manager of the Soufriere Estate for Henry de Vaux, who had spoken well of him in his will.

According to the list of owners annexed to the map of 1786, Guillaume-André owned other lands in the Soufriere district, but it has not been possible to locate them. Guillaume-André died childless in 1791. By his will of 1788 he left his property equally between his nephews Philippe-Henry and Jean-Baptiste (or rather, since the latter was dead, his children).

Soufriere and Terre Blanche soon passed wholly out of the family. The former stayed for a time with the descendants of Marie-Anne de Vaux (Madame de Micoud). It was being worked in 1810 by her son and her son-in-law, and in the 1830's by her granddaughter's husband. In 1843 the owner was said to be one G. H. Todd, a recent arrival in St Lucia, and by 1858 the estate had passed into the hands of Belisle Cornibert du Boulay; since then it has remained with his descendants. As for Terre Blanche, two of the sons of Jean-Baptiste de Vaux, who are known to have been planters at Soufriere in 1810, were perhaps working that estate; one, a second Henry Devaux de Bellefond, appears to have owned a small estate further inland which has retained the name Bellefond or Belfond to this day. In 1833 Terre-Blanche (which by then had almost certainly left the family) was sold by court order (it was only a portion of its former self, having been reduced to only 37 or 40 hectares); ten years later it was again sold by court order.

Philippe de Vaux, eldest of the three brothers who settled in St Lucia in the 1740's, had Morne Courbaril. This estate took its name from the courbaril, or West Indian locust tree (*Hymenaea courbaril*). When Philippe died in 1752 it was still a coffee plantation, but by 1785 it had become a sugar estate. Its 85 hectares extended from the shore of Soufriere Bay, which formed its north-western boundary, to a 1200 foot hill on the south-east. Its fertile but uneven surface was well suited to intensive cultivation by slave labour, although not to modern machinery. The principal house, built on a piece of flat land high up overlooking the bay, was accompanied by the usual buildings of a sugar estate, including a house for the manager, Jean Olivier, a number of slave huts, a hospital for sick slaves, various barns, workshops and other outhouses, and a sugar mill. The mill was driven by water from an artificial lake.

On the estate were two batteries whose cannon commanded the harbour. This was convenient for Philippe's son Philippe-Henry, who lived at Morne Courbaril and was a captain of artillery in the militia. In 1778 his biggest cannon were two 21-pounders, on garrison carriages. One battery was down by the shore. The other was high on Morne Crabier, a hill topped by a curious deposit of coral and other marine material; its name came from the land crabs which infested it and which were a locally famous delicacy.

Before tracing the devolution of Morne Courbaril, it will be useful to see what happened to property values in St Lucia in the period from 1780 to 1920,

because it affected the details of the devolution. The period before the French Revolution of 1789 seems to have been one of relative prosperity, in spite of some set-backs, one of which was the great hurricane of 1780 which killed many inhabitants and ravaged the estates, so that many owners without substantial reserves of capital simply abandoned their estates. This period of relative prosperity was succeeded by a period of chaos in the 1790's, during which St Lucia was given up to internal strife, to invasion and to counter-invasion. The republicans, who had taken over the government, were driven out by British forces in 1794, but in 1795 the republicans landed at Soufriere and, in a battle fought a mile or two on the other side of Morne Courbaril, they beat off the British and French royalist forces. The latter retired to Martinique; the royalists took with them as many members of their families as could travel. (Philippe de Vaux's widow, who was more than 80 years old, had to be left behind; no member of the family was present at her funeral in 1796.) The victorious republicans set up their guillotine at Soufriere, where a few of the remaining planters lost their heads. In 1796 the British again took St Lucia; among their forces were the newly raised companies of Royal Rangers (or First West India Regiment), among whose officers was at least one Devaux, the younger Henry de Bellefond. The republicans then retired to the forests, and for two years a fierce guerilla war was waged. Between 1794 and 1798 all cultivation ceased: no sugar canes, no cotton, no coffee were planted or harvested; no food crops were grown.

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In 1800 the state of the island was sufficiently peaceful for the British government to restore a civil administration in St Lucia. The former purely military commanders of the pacified districts became "civil officers", or mayors; this happened to Philippe-Henry Devaux, who was also appointed (with a dozen other French royalist planters and British merchants) to be a member of a new Court of Appeal or Conseil Supérieur of St Lucia.

This return to normality was not accompanied by a return to prosperity. The resources of the planters had been consumed. For years they had had no crops to sell. Their houses and all the towns (except the town of Soufriere) had been burnt. Many thousands of the working population had been killed, had starved or had fled to other countries.

Recovery might have been possible over a number of years, if there had been a good market for such sugars as the planters were able to produce with their depleted stocks of money, of equipment and of labour. But the prices of sugar fell to low figures on the British market. Yet the planters of St Lucia were forbidden to sell their sugar into other markets. This remained the position throughout the 19th century.

Whereas the annual value of crops exported from St Lucia in the 1780's was estimated to be about 9 million colonial livres or 6 million French livres tournois (equivalent to perhaps £250,000), in the last years of the 19th century it was well below £100,000. Most of this decline had taken place by 1815, and for most of the following century things got worse rather than better. Some specific figures will illustrate what happened.

First we have a couple of figures for the values of estates at Soufriere in the 1780's, and then a few figures from the first half of the 19th century. In 1785 a small sugar estate at Soufriere, belonging to the notary Clauzel, was sold for a sum equivalent to £6700. This estate was expected to yield an average net profit of more than £800 a year. After the death of Henry de Vaux de Bellefond in 1785, the gross value of his estate (Soufriere Estate, with four times as much land as Clauzel's) was fixed at the equivalent of about £25000. His nephew Philippe-Henry (who owned Morne Courbaril) also owned a coffee estate of nearly 60 hectares called Saint-Philippe. His widow and children sold it in 1815 to one Vittet for about £1500. This low price was partly accounted for by the fact that for years the estate had lain empty and abandoned, as Philippe-Henry had devoted his efforts to restoring, as far as he could, with little remaining capital and less than a hundred surviving slaves, the cultivation of the lands of Morne Courbaril. In 1833 Terre-Blanche was sold by court order; its remaining 37 or 40 hectares fetched £1000. Sold again ten years later, they made £500.

Things continued in this pass for a long time. Thus, in 1900 the Pearl Estate at Soufriere was sold for £1500. In 1916, the value of Morne Courbaril was estimated to be £1400. In monetary terms, this was certainly less than a tenth of its value in the 1780's. In real terms, it was still less.

It was only after the Second World War that St Lucian land values began to climb steeply.

We now come to the devolution of Morne Courbaril during the two centuries after 1750. We note, in passing, that this devolution illustrates a principle of the law of property of the French West Indies in the 18th century, which continued to apply after St Lucia had become a British colony. When a land-owner died leaving children, his real property passed to all his children jointly. However, this did not usually lead to the division of landed estates, because it was accepted that one of the heirs should take "le principal manoir ou habitation garni de negres et bestiaux" (the principal estate with its slaves and cattle) and should compensate the other heirs in money. The heir who took the estate need not be the eldest son.

The occupiers of Morne Courbaril included Philippe de Vaux, who died in 1752; his youngest son Philippe-Henry, who died in 1807; the latter's youngest son Henry, who died after 1880; and Henry's youngest son Emile, who died in 1923. The sequence of ownership was more complicated.

Philippe's other sons were planters elsewhere in St Lucia or, in the case of his eldest son, in Guadeloupe. His widow remained at Morne Courbaril, which was the home of their youngest son, who at some stage became sole owner. Something similar happened with the next generation. The third member of our list, Henry, was unable to pay off his brothers and sisters while also discharging the other debts of the estate. He turned to his relatively affluent brother-in-law from Barbados, John Goodman and, while Henry remained the occupier of the estate, it seems

that John Goodman eventually acquired a lien on Morne Courbaril or even became the legal owner of the estate. Emile Devaux, who followed his father Henry at Morne Courbaril, was for much of the time not even a part owner of the lands he was managing. The ownership was in the hands of John Goodman's granddaughter, Irma de Gaillard de Laubenque. She married one of Emile's brothers. The latter died without children. In 1904 Irma (by then remarried to F. E. Bundy) sold Morne Courbaril to the three daughters (not the sons) of Emile Devaux. (After the sale Morne Courbaril remained charged with a mortgage of £430, which was not paid off until 1922.) In 1914 one of the three sisters died unmarried, and in accordance with St Lucian law half her share went to her parents while the other half was divided equally between her brothers and sisters. Thus did Emile and his wife acquire a sixth share in Morne Courbaril.

After their deaths, their two surviving daughters continued to be the majority shareholders, the remainder of the shares being owned by Emile's sons or their heirs. For a time one son, Ferdinand, managed the estate. Later, local overseers were employed to do the job. The sugar cane was replaced, first by cocoa, then by coconuts, then by bananas.

Among those who eventually inherited a fraction of the shares in Morne Courbaril was Ferdinand's son Reginald Devaux. He bought up the other shares until he had made himself sole owner of the estate. Some years later, in about 1959, he sold it to Mr Monplaisir, for a sum said to be about £18000. The rise in values had only just begun.

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In the course of time, the area of the estate had been somewhat reduced. In 1841 a small piece of land near the town of Soufriere was set apart for use by the Catholic Church as a Calvary to which processions went. This gave its name to a nearby house, Calvaire, near the boundary of the estate, to which Henry Devaux retired in the 1880's with an unmarried daughter. In 1844 some land adjacent the town and fronting on the end of the Grand'Rue or High Street was donated, by Henry Devaux and his brother-in-law John Goodman, to the Anglican bishop of Barbados for the construction of a church. John Goodman was an Anglican, while Henry Devaux, in the words of a local newspaper, "although of the Romish Church, is desirous to have his Protestant labourers accomodated according to their conscience". Later some hectares in the south-western corner of the estate were detached to form a small estate for one of Henry Devaux's daughters and her husband; when the descendants of this marriage died out about the middle of the 20th century, this land was left to the children of one of Henry's grandsons, Gabriel Devaux, who sold it a few years later. (This little estate was called Stonefield, from the great number of volcanic boulders scattered over it.)

In 1916 Emile Devaux's eldest son, John, bought from the co-owners of Morne Courbaril, for £350, an area of about 16 hectares, being most of the estate south of the main road from Soufriere to Choiseul. He called it Jeanne d'Arc, and he had it run as a separate estate for more than thirty years. Then he sold it to his nephew, Reginald Devaux, who reunited it to Morne Courbaril before selling the whole as mentioned above.

In 1831 Morne Courbaril House was destroyed by a hurricane so fierce that a wardrobe from the house was later found on the other side of Soufriere Bay. It is not known whether this was the original house and had somehow survived until then, or whether it was a rebuilt, repaired or altered version of the original house.

After the hurricane, the old house was not rebuilt. The place it occupied was cleared. The family moved to a square two-storey building of stout masonry which stood a hundred yards from the old house. It was enlarged by the addition of wooden wings on three sides. The central block provided a drawing room on the ground floor, and a large bedroom above. The north wing had a couple of bedrooms upstairs, and a dining room, a pantry and another bedroom downstairs. The east and west wings were of one storey. The first contained a library and an office. The second was occupied by a long room, at one end of which was a large stone vessel for filtering rain water. From the dining room a porch projected, while the drawing room opened on to a paved terrace, beyond which was the garden. As was usual in St Lucia, the kitchen and servants' quarters were in a separate building; it was linked by a covered passage way to the house.

Saved from the wreck of the old buildings, and set up in the grounds, was a stone from the entrance to the old sugar mill. It bore a date. This date, according to the recollection of Edward Devaux, was 1777. This relic may well have been part of the very first sugar mill at Morne Courbaril, for it is known that the estate became a sugar estate between 1770 and 1785.

This was the house to which Henry Devaux brought his bride in 1834. Later it was occupied by their son Emile until his death in 1923. Later Emile's two surviving daughters lived in the house. After them it passed with the estate to Reginald Devaux. The house burnt down in the 1950's. Before selling the estate, Reginald erected a single-storey house on the site.

In addition to the various estate buildings and outhouses, there was a simple wooden building about a hundred yards north of the main house and overlooking the town of Soufriere. Known as the Pavilion, it was used to accomodate any children or young guests who could not be fitted into the main house.

Morne Courbaril was never the only home of the Devaux family. There have always been members of the family who owned or managed other estates. And since the latter part of the 19th century most members of the family have drawn their income wholly or mainly from commerce, banking or the practice of the law, and not from agriculture. However, as long as there was a Devaux living there, Morne Courbaril remained a symbol of family continuity.