

An Unusual Genealogical Resource

Legacies of British Slave Ownership

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Sometimes you can find information about your ancestors in the most unusual places. These are databases that were not set up with genealogy in mind, but often contain a wealth of information of great interest to those that are trying to piece together their family roots.

One such database is from the 'Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership' at UCL (University College London), which was launched on 28th September 2016. It can be accessed here: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

The focus of the Centre is on slave ownership and its impact on the formation of British Society. Their database contains, firstly, the identify of all slave-owners in the British colonies at the time slavery ended (1833) and, secondly, data on almost 10,000 estates in the British Caribbean colonies (almost half in Jamaica) for the period 1763 – 1833. The latter includes names of attorneys, overseers, mortgagees, legatees, etc. There is as yet no systematic data about the enslaved people however. Registers of the enslaved are held by the National Archives in Kew, London.

Apart from their identities, there is additional information to be found on slave owners. For most this is limited to their compensation claims: when slavery was ended, a compensation fund was set up to pay the slave owners for the loss of their "assets". A Slave Compensation Commission was set up to manage the distribution of £20 million. For quite a few slave owners the database also contains a lot of information about their activities, affiliations and legacies: personal, political, commercial, physical, cultural, historical, etc. We can for example see where they re-invested their compensation money, quite a lot of them in railway companies in the UK. The abolishment of slavery led to quite an investment boom in the home country!

To show what you could learn, below I have described a few of these slave owners, selected as examples of the different kind of people involved. All information was found in the database, which by the way also contains excellent source references.

John Irving the elder

John Irving was an absentee plantation owner. He is an example of the large investor, who would probably not get involved in the running of the plantations. For them, it was just (another) financial asset.

John Irving the elder was the son of another John Irving, who was the Laird (owner of a large Scottish estate) of "Cushathill & Burnfoot" in Middlebie, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. The younger John arrived in London aged 13 with just a Bible, sent there to work with an uncle. He would become a partner in this business and later became a wealthy West India merchant prince in his own right. He owned properties in Richmond Terrace, Whitehall, London and in Ashford, Kent and when he died was worth £300,000. He never married. The bulk of his estates in

London, Middlesex and Scotland were left to his nephew, another John Irving, who was a barrister and who died in London, 4 May 1891.

John Irving was a very busy man. His commercial undertakings included:

1. Made Partner in his uncle's firm around 1790: City of London Merchants, "John Rae, John Irving and Thomas Reid". In 1793, the uncle John Rea withdrew and the company continued as "Reid Irving." The company failed however in 1847
2. Partner in "Ancoats Cotton Twist Company" until 1824
3. Co-founder of the "Alliance Fire and Life Marine Assurance Companies", of which he was the first President.
4. Founder and Chairman of the "Colonial Bank"
5. Founder and Chairman of the "Royal Mail Steam Packet Company"
6. Founder of a bank in Mauritius
7. Director of the "West India Dock Company"

Apart from all this he was also a MP (Member of Parliament) from Bramber, Sussex (1806 – 1832) and Antrim (1837-1841) and supported the Conservatives. Although he was said to be supportive of the emancipation of slaves, he had investments in quite a lot of plantations: 3 in St. Kitts, 2 in Trinidad, 7 in Virgin Island and he was also involved in 5 plantations in Mauritius. The aforementioned Slave Compensation Commission awarded him £29,711

James Lewis, senior and junior

This family is an example of another type of investor. As it was their main asset, they would be very much involved with the plantation. In this example, we see that the plantation is even named after the family who owned it. They would still be absentees though – leaving the day-to-day running to managers.

The two generations of James Lewis had a few smaller investments, but the Lewisburg plantation in Jamaica was their main asset. The database has a lot of information on the plantation, starting with the location on a map of Jamaica which was produced by James Robertson from land surveys of Jamaica between 1796 and 1799 and was published in 1804.



The plantation was a sugar and rum plantation, going all the way back to 1785. As James Lewis senior was an absentee owner - he lived in Clifton, Bristol, Gloucestershire, England - there was an overseer. We have their names up to 1807:

- From 1785: Donald McBean.
- From 1787: David Robertson.
- From 1797: George Jeffret Johnson
- From 1803: James Ross
- From 1804: Alexander Keit

James senior made a will in 1818, which was proved in 1822:

Will of James Lewis [late of the island of Jamaica but now residing at] Clifton Gloucestershire [made in 1818] proved 06/07/1822. Under this will, James Lewis the father left an annuity of £1000 p.a. to his wife Ann, secured on the Lewisburgh estate, £4000 each to his five daughters (Susannah Blackall wife of Rev. Samuel Blackall of North Cadbury Somerset; Ann Redwood Lewis; Elizabeth Lewis; Sarah Lewis; and Jane Rennalls the wife of William Rodon Rennalls) and £100 to each of his grandchildren, with the remainder of his estate going to his son James Lewis 'of Spanish Town, Barrister at Law.'

James Lewis junior (1778 – 1847) inherited the property, although he must have been a partner already, as we learn from the compensation claims that Lewisburgh included two distinct groups of enslaved people: those owned by James Lewis junior since at least 1817 (between 30-40 people, claim awarded £590) and those owned as part of the estate by James Lewis senior and bequeathed to James Lewis junior c. 1822 (between 220 and 240 people, claim awarded £3,757)).

That these claims were uncontested should not surprise us. Firstly, most of the claims were uncontested. But moreover, the chair of the Slave Compensation Committee was none other than James Lewis junior. Although it must be noted that he stepped back from making a decision on his own claim, as one of the Commissioners of Slave Compensation and a former Speaker of the House of Assembly in Jamaica, awarded the compensation for the Lewisburgh estate.

James Lewis junior lived in 25 Park Street, Grosvenor Square, London, Middlesex, London, England. He died there on 4th September 1847. In his will, James Lewis left a “plate ewer”, which he was given by the West India Committee and was sold as Sothebys in December 2007, to his son Philip, an Anglican clergyman. He left his share of two vessels, the Stratheven and the Elizabeth and Henry to his son George, and £5000 to his second son William Frederick Lewis.

Joseph Gordon

Above we have seen owners and overseers. The overseer was the manager of the plantation. Another role was that of attorney, who really fulfilled the role of the owner at a local level, as the actual owner would be living thousands of miles away. The attorney would live in the colony, in this case Jamaica.

One of the most successful and powerful was Joseph Gordon. In 1832 he was one of only four attorneys who had control over more than 20 properties on the island.

Gordon was the father of George William Gordon. His mother was a slave, called Ann Rattray. This was not uncommon in Jamaica. Many of these "coloured" children would be "reputed", i.e. the father either admits it or it has been proven that then child is his. These reputed children would then be entitled to inheritance, and sometimes would end up owning plantations.

George William Gordon became a successful businessman and politician. In 1865 however, the governor of Jamaica had him executed following a rebellion. In 1969 he became a National Hero and Jamaica's parliament's building is called "Gordon House" after him.

Martin Morgan

Martin Morgan was a small plantation owner, who lived on his estate in Jamaica and managed it himself.

His plantation, Highgate, goes back to 1793. It was then owned by a Thomas Smith. It produced sugar, cotton, rum, coffee, some cattle. Thomas Smith employed overseers, so was probably an absentee owner. In 1801 his overseer was called Martin Morgan. We know that the latter was the owner since at least 1817. The plantation owned 18 slaves in that year, which has grown to 48 in 1832, when slavery was abolished. Martin Morgan was paid a compensation of £709.

Jane Bayne (née Hay)

And finally, to show that slave ownership was not an all-male business, we have Jane Bayne. She was the daughter of Charles Hay and his wife Jane née Brodie, who were living in Jamaica in the mid 1780s-1790. She left Jamaica before 1817 and married James Bayne, physician in Nairn, Scotland, where she died in 1865. The database describes in detail how they got this information.

We know she had left in 1817 because in that year she had an attorney, Robert Burnett, looking after the estate of St. Catherine in Jamaica. She owned 9 slaves that year. This had grown to 10 in 1823, when another attorney, Robert Ross, was looking after the estate in her absence. She received compensation of £82.

Jane had nine children between 1818 and 1832 in Inverness-shire, the first one in the parish of Kiltarlity and the rest in Dores. The database goes through her family's registration in the 1841 and 1851 censuses and what can be learned from this.

Jane Bayne, widow of James Bayne, Doctor of Medicine and daughter of Charles Hay, Landed Proprietor and Jane Hay MS Brodie, died 19/10/1865 at 10 Cumming Street, Nairn, age 75. The informant of death was her daughter Helen I. Bayne.

It also mentions that there is a portrait of Jane Bayne (1790-1865) at Nairn Museum.

From the above examples, it will be clear that the information on some slave owners is much more limited than on others. But for all of them, it provides a fantastic insight in their lives. This database might be a bit of a niche, but if your ancestors did own a plantation in the “West Indies”, it is a real treasure trove of information, and thanks to its many source quotations, can provide a real addition to your family history story.

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