

11. COTTON AND SALT

By Don Mitchell CBE QC

What sort of persons were the early settlers of Anguilla? What attractions made desperate men abandon the wealthier, if overcrowded, colonies of St Christopher, Barbados and Nevis and prefer this thirty five square mile outpost? Were there any advantages that encouraged some of them to opt for Anguilla as an alternative to the new and land-rich settlements in Virginia and Maryland? The answers must be as varied as the different types of persons that arrived to try to make a living here. There is no one clear-cut explanation. Due to the absence of written records by our ancestors in those early days, we are left to infer and to speculate. We ask ourselves, what were they doing in Anguilla? What, other than subsistence agriculture, the breeding of small stock for meat and milk, and fishing, were they occupying themselves with?

Besides privateering, trading, and smuggling in their sloops between the islands, the main commercial occupations on land were the growing of tobacco and cotton, the reaping of salt, and the raising of food crops and cattle, ie, sheep, goats and cows. Tobacco and cotton were small-planter cash crops that survived in Anguilla long after they had been replaced in the larger islands by sugar. It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that a very few Anguillian farmers had accumulated sufficient capital to invest in the mills and coppers and slaves necessary at that time to make sugar¹. Alternating cycles of drought and rain last in the Leeward Islands for upto forty years. Those islands with mountains have the opportunity to attract rain at least during the rainy seasons. In a flat island such as Anguilla is, the periods of drought, little would live but the goats. It is not for nothing that the children's geography text books say about Anguilla's climate, "Anguilla participates in passing Atlantic weather systems". The keeping of sheep and cows, and the cultivation of cash crops by the early settlers, were limited to the periods when there was sufficient rainfall to permit their survival.

Tobacco would originally have been grown in Anguilla by the Amerindians. The industry had merely been taken over by the newcomers. It seemed to be an ideal small-farmer cash crop. Apart from its small bulk and its ability when dried to survive the long voyage across the Atlantic, tobacco had other advantages to recommend it. Its cultivation could be undertaken on a small scale. It did not need the outlay of much capital. The settlers could grow their crop on a comparatively small area of land. They needed only a few helpers, perhaps the members of the family. Its disadvantages had caused it to be replaced by sugar in Barbados, even before it was planted by the settlers in Anguilla. It competed in England unfavourably with Virginia tobacco. It

¹ See Chapter 18: Sugar Arrives.

paid a higher duty and fetched a lower price. West Indian tobacco was less mild and less palatable than that of Virginia. Besides, Virginia had the advantage of being able to produce tobacco in great bulk from a large area of land. Merchants found it more convenient to deal with Virginia. Her supplies came near to meeting the demand of the English market. There was less risk than trading with the scattered islands of the West Indies. Already, by the year 1639, the price of tobacco on the London market had dropped alarmingly. Barbados and the other English islands looked for other crops. The first choice was cotton. In Barbados, this was soon replaced by sugar cane. In Anguilla, tobacco cultivation lasted longer, probably for want of any alternative. The last reference to tobacco being grown in Anguilla in the Colonial Office papers is an unattributed memorandum² probably prepared by Under-Secretary **Joseph Williamson** in 1667. In it, he noted that salt was made on Anguilla and tobacco grown there.

In Anguilla, cotton replaced tobacco as the planters' cash crop within a few years, certainly within the first generation of settlers.



1. *Gossypium* 'anguillense' growing wild at Corito in Anguilla.

² CO 1/21, No 175, folio 348: Unattributed memorandum.

It proved to be more successful than tobacco. It too had originally been grown on Anguilla by the Amerindians. Cotton was in some ways an ideal crop for the settlers. It required little capital outlay. It could be reaped by the settler and his family with a few helpers. It did not spoil once kept dry. Cotton continued as the main crop of the islanders until the middle of the eighteenth century, a run of nearly a hundred years. But, Europe had sufficient supplies from elsewhere. The demand for cotton at this time was comparatively small. Wool was more popular for the manufacture of clothing. The demand for cotton in Europe did not increase substantially until the late eighteenth century when the Industrial Revolution produced the automated ginning and spinning mills that made it more economic than wool.



2. Close-up of a cotton boll of *Gossypium* 'anguillense' at Corito in Anguilla.

The strain of cotton grown in Anguilla in the seventeenth century had an unusually long strand or staple. It was later to become famous as 'Sea Island' cotton. As Dr Jones remarked³, the botanical name of the species ought properly not to be '*Gossypium barbadense*', but '*Gossypium anguillense*.' It was from Anguilla that the seed had been exported in the eighteenth century to the Bahamas. There its superior quality was recognized. After the Declaration of Independence in 1776, loyalists and partisans of Great Britain were provided with homes in the

³ Dr SB Jones, *Annals of Anguilla* (1936).

Bahamas. They obtained cotton seed from the island of Anguilla and took up the growing of cotton. A hundred years later, the seed was taken from the Bahamas to Georgia and South Carolina. It was eventually found to flourish in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, from which islands that particular strain of cotton now takes its name⁴.

The Vick family, after whom the city of Vicksburg in Mississippi is named, took up planting the Anguilla cotton seed from South Carolina. They gave the farm the name, the Anguilla Plantation. The railroad was later given a right of way through the plantation on condition that they named the depot, which they planned to build at the nearby town of McKinneyville, 'Anguilla'. The town for a while carried both names, McKinneyville and Anguilla. To avoid the resulting confusion, the US Postal Department agreed to the change of the name of the town to Anguilla. The town of Anguilla, Mississippi, has now sprawled out into the area that used to be the Anguilla Plantation⁵.

The crops of the Anguillians were grown in the numerous 'bottoms'. The Dutch were to be found in numerous islands within sight of Anguilla, namely, St Maarten, Saba, and St Eustatius. They occupied those islands before the settlers moved to Anguilla from St Christopher. The Dutch named the relatively stone-free 'bottoms' in all these islands that they cultivated for food crops. This word 'bottom' is one of the few relics that remain of the early Dutch influence on Anguilla. They are so-called, according to the Dutch historian of the Netherlands Antilles, **Dr Hartog**⁶, from the old Zeeland word "botte", meaning 'bowl'. The English translated the Zeelander name for the sunken, relatively stone-free areas that they cultivated in the islands as 'bottoms'. The main town on the neighbouring island of Saba sits in the eroded crater at the top of the mountain, and is apparently incongruously named "The Bottom". There are few other signs of Dutch influence remaining on Anguilla. Statia Valley Estate may be named after the early Dutch settlers who moved there after the English had captured the islands of St Eustatius (Statia) and Saba in the English-Dutch wars of 1665-1667 and 1672-1674. The present familiar Anguillian surname **Hazell** is Dutch in origin. It appeared in Saba as early as 1677. In the same year, the name **Van der Poll** also appeared in Saba. This was later anglicised to **Vanterpool**. In Saba, the name **Zeegars** also appeared at an early date. This later became **Sagers**⁷ or **Zagers**. These were all well-known names in Anguilla in later years.

⁴ West India Committee circular for 5 February 1820, cited by Dr Jones.

⁵ Personal correspondence in 1996 with Billy C Fields, Tom Greer, and Henry Kline of Anguilla Mississippi.

⁶ Dr J Hartog, History of Saba (1975).

⁷ Ralph Hodge, then the Accountant General in the Government of Anguilla, told me many years ago that when he worked as a young man with the Cadastral Survey team in Anguilla in 1974, it was he who provided the unusual spelling to the surveyors who asked him how Sagers' land at South Valley was spelled. There was no written document available in Anguilla at that time that provided any clue to the spelling. He suggested that it must be 'Sachasses'. His spelling stuck.

It was the Dutch that were responsible for developing the salt industry⁸. Since the sixteenth century, the Dutch had been the major traders in salt in Europe. They used large quantities of it for curing their herring. Dutch salt herring was an important industry both for local use and for export from the Netherlands. They had originally procured their salt in Portugal. Spain was earnestly Catholic, while the Netherlands were adamantly Protestant. In 1580, Portugal came under Spanish rule. The Dutch were already at war with Spain. The Spanish barred their entry to the Portuguese salt flats. They had to look elsewhere for their salt. This was one reason the Dutch originally came to the Caribbean. They were far more interested in reaping salt and in trading with the English, French, and Spanish settlements, than in planting cash crops. Their ships would sail to the West Indies filled with trading goods, and return to the Netherlands filled with salt. That explains why they were content to occupy islands that were all unsuitable for agriculture. The islands of St Eustatius, Saba, St Maarten, Curacao, Aruba, and Bonaire were notable principally for their salt ponds. They were also strategically placed for trade with their neighbours. Neither the French nor the English settlers were interested in trade in dry goods. This was a niche the Dutch were happy to fill.

There are several salt ponds in Anguilla. These were formed when earlier coves became cut off from the sea by sand bars which formed across their mouths. As with similar sea-level salt ponds in other islands, they never completely dry out. Their bottoms are below the level of the nearby sea. As the brine becomes concentrated by evaporation, the salt precipitates out. It forms a thick crust on the bed some one or two feet below the surface. This underwater salt deposit was reaped by the workers bending over, breaking off, and lifting up bits of the slab of salt. These bits of salt slab were then thrown into the small salt barges or 'flats' floating alongside the pickers. It was back-breaking work. Several ponds in Anguilla were originally picked in this way. The more important salt works were at the Road, Long Path, Rendezvous Bay, Cove Bay, Maundays Bay and West End. Most were abandoned years ago. Until recently, when Hurricane Klaus in 1984 forced Anguilla's principal market in Trinidad to seek salt elsewhere, only the Road Salt Pond and the West End Salt Pond produced salt for export.

⁸ Dr J Hartog, A Short History of Bonaire (1975) p.14.



3. The Road Salt Pond, July 2009, with salt deposits around the bank.

The industry had been carried on in Anguilla from the earliest days of settlement. As we have seen earlier⁹, in 1624 Anguilla had been described by a Dutch sea captain as having “no fresh water, but a salt pan with enough salt for two to three ships a year.” This was probably a reference to the Road Salt Pond, the most productive in Anguilla. The early references we have give us an indication of how old the salt industry was in Anguilla. Originally, the ponds were communal property. Each man owned only the salt that he had reaped. He heaped it up under palm-frond shelters on the beach. There it was stored, awaiting ships that would visit the island for the sole purpose of purchasing it.

There are few other references in the Archives to this ancient salt industry. **Vere Langford Oliver**¹⁰ records a grant of the Road Salt Pond made by **Governor Daniel Parke** in 1708 to one **John Brady** (see illustration 1). Brady appears to have done nothing with his prize. He promptly transferred the pond to one **Martin French** of Antigua and Montserrat. What use Martin French made of it is not recorded. His name does not reappear in the Anguilla records.

John Brady, Esq., was granted salt ponds in Anguilla
24 Jan. 1708 by Governor Parke, which he assigned to
Martin French 21 April 1709.

4. Extract from VL Oliver, History of Antigua, p.275.

Another reference to the salt industry of Anguilla is met in 1769 when **Jehabed Clarke** swore a formal protest. A ‘protest’ is a notarized report of loss or damage to a ship or its cargo for insurance and other purposes. Clark’s protest relates to the sinking of his brigantine Elizabeth. From this document, it appears that the Elizabeth had been wrecked on Sandy Island. This is the name of a small sandy shoal enclosed by a little reef just outside of Road Bay in Anguilla. The protest¹¹ reads as follows.

Anguilla. I John Payne, Deputy Secretary and Notary Public for the Island aforesaid, do by this Public Instrument of Writing make known to all people to whom the same may or shall come that on this twenty ninth day of April one thousand seven hundred and sixty nine, Jehabed Clarke Master, David Cullam Mate and Benjamin Welch Mariner of and belonging to the late Brigantine Elizabeth owned at Piscataga [. . .] personally appeared before me and being duly examined and sworn on the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God deposeth and says that

⁹ See Chapter 3: The First Settlers and the Carib Raid.

¹⁰ Vere Langford Oliver, History of Antigua, (3 vols, 1894-1897) p.275.

¹¹ Anguilla Archives: Jehabed Clarke's 1769 Protest.

On Sunday the 23rd day of this instant sailed from the island of Grenada bound for this island aforesaid for a load of Salt; on the 28th day instant turning up that shore, there being a small sandy key off the harbour being enclosed with a parcel of shoals and shallow ground and not being acquainted, the Brigantine miss-stayed and sailed on the reef, who immediately bilged and found it was impossible to get her off, in a short time after some people from this island came to our assistance and saved all they could having on board four casks of coffee, one hogshead of rum and two bales of cotton.

Wherefore, I the said John Payne, Deputy Secretary and Notary Public, do at the special instance and request of the said Jehabed Clark, David Cullam and Benjamin Welsh Master Mate and mariner of the said Brigantine Elizabeth and to and for the benefit and advantage of all and every the person or persons that now are or shall or may be any ways interested in or entitled to either said Brigantine Elizabeth and her lading on board or any part thereof, protest against the vessel's mis-staying and all accidents herein mentioned and for and in respect of all costs, charges, losses, damages and expenses whatsoever that already have or at anytime hereafter shall or may happen to be sustained for touching and concerning the aforesaid Brigantine Elizabeth and her lading being run on shore or any ways however suffered.

In Faith and Testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal the day and date first above written.

(sd) Jehabed Clark

(sd) Benjamin Welch

(sd) David Cullam

(sd) John Payne

Notary Public and Deputy Secretary

Clark records that on 28 March 1769, he and his crew had been on their way from Grenada for a load of salt. The brig had rounded the little islet of Anguillita at the western tip of Anguilla. It had sailed eastwards up the northern coast of Anguilla. The crew had not been acquainted with Road Bay, the harbour the vessel was approaching. Clark had accidentally sailed his brig onto the reef at Sandy Island. There, it had immediately bilged and taken in water. Shortly after, people had arrived from Sandy Ground Village. They had saved all they could of his ship's simple cargo. This had amounted to four casks of coffee, one hogshead of rum and two bales of cotton. Of

interest is the additional fact that he seems to have had an Anguillian, **Benjamin Welch**, in his crew.

Not all of the ponds in Anguilla are salt ponds. There are also three brackish-water ponds situated away from the coast. These are Caults Pond, Bad Cox Pond and East End Pond. They each have a limestone outcrop at the water's edge on the northern shore. Springs feed into the ponds from fissures in the limestone outcrops. Besides the Fountain Cavern and the several Indian Wells, these were the only sources of fresh, if brackish, water on the island available to the settlers. There are no rivers flowing on the island, even in the wettest years¹².

The three ponds are not the only source of potable water. There are also fourteen springs in the island. Most of them are more or less saline. The degree of salinity depends to a large extent on the amount of rain falling in that particular period. The settlers found water, too, in the wells that had been dug by the Amerindians. They eventually dug some twenty five others scattered over the island.

When the island was first settled by the Europeans and Africans, there would have been considerably more soil and vegetation than there is today. Once the forest cover was removed for agriculture, the top soil began to erode down to the bottoms or out to the sea. Only low-lying scrub can now grow on the higher ridges. The lack of tall trees is unfortunate. Forests, besides conserving the soil cover, would have encouraged more rain to fall from passing clouds than falls today. The three inland ponds would have been fresher than they are today. No trace of alligator remains have ever been found around any of these ponds, as suggested by **de Rochefort**. If, as was likely, the island was wetter then than it is now, we can well understand that tobacco and corn were easily raised, and that the cattle multiplied very fast as he wrote.

The trees appear to have been cut down very early. Land had to be cleared for cultivation. There were also valuable dyewoods to be cut for export to England. Dye-wood is today a forgotten, almost unknown product. At one time, fortunes were made in the Caribbean by merchants who traded in it. Dye-wood used to be called by a variety of names. The old Portuguese word "brazil" is the source of the English word brazen. "Brazil wood" was one of the names for dye wood, a reference to its ruddy colour. Other names were "campeachy wood." This come from the Gulf of Campeche in Mexico, where it grew profusely. Nearby was the territory where wood-cutters would eventually establish the British colony of Belize. Dye-wood was also called "stockfish wood", either because its bark resembled stockfish or, perhaps, after the legendary island of Stocafixo. The dye was obtained from the wood by rasping or grinding it fine,

¹² Sir William Halcrow & Partners, Water Resources of St Kitts, Nevis & Anguilla (1964) p.18.

and then boiling it. Dye-wood trees would have grown on Anguilla in the seventeenth century, as they did on all the neighbouring islands.

There was also a ready market among the planters of the bigger, sugar cane-growing islands for building timber. When the Anguillian trees were exhausted, the sloops and schooners of the islanders sought out new supplies in the unoccupied islands to the west: St Croix, St Thomas, and Crab Island. Anguillian trees were also used to make charcoal, until the 1970s the staple fuel available to the islanders. All these trees were soon destroyed. The first cylinders of propane gas for cooking began to be imported during the early 1970's, and it was not possible to refill empty cylinders locally until the 1990's. Now, charcoal is a luxury fuel, and the trees have begun to recover.

The Anguillians in their sloops continued to trade in dye-wood and building timber from one end of the Caribbean to the other. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, there are several references in the Colonial Office records to this Anguilla trade. One such is a 1719 dispatch¹³ by one **George Lillington** of Barbados, shortly after the Anguillian settlement on Crab Island had been destroyed. He reported that the Spaniards had burned a large quantity of dyewood that the settlers had collected before the destruction of the settlement. The cochineal beetle of Mexico eventually replaced the dye-wood industry, and it fades from the scene.

Anguilla is described by geographers as a seasonal forest island. In this it resembles Antigua, Barbados, St Barths, Statia and St Martin. In all these islands, long-lasting changes have taken place in the natural vegetation and wild life. There is presently more rain falling in Anguilla than would fall in a true desert. Yet parched barrenness pervades the island¹⁴, except in exceptional years of heavy rainfall. It was the livestock that reduced Anguilla to the scrubby state that it has been in since the eighteenth century. Goats have played the most important role here. They have denuded the land. Where they roam, all is picked bare. Much of the soil has, as a result, been eroded away. Until the goat is recognized for the dangerous vermin it is and completely banned from the island, it will always be difficult to grow anything successfully in Anguilla.

All these ancient industries are now closed. The occasional tobacco plant may survive in someone's grandfather's hedge. Sea Island cotton shrubs are hardy plants and grow wild all over the island. The birds scatter their seeds and ensure their survival while using the lint to make their nests. A few surviving grandmothers can recount stories of the hardships involved in picking salt.

¹³ CO.28/15, No 56: George Lillington to the Committee on 31 October 1719.

¹⁴ C and A Carozzi, Conservation and Caribbean Regional Progress (1968) p.84.

Sugar cane grows in a few back gardens, for the enjoyment of the children, but will flourish only if it is watered from time to time. The best agricultural lands have been planted over now with houses, offices and hotels. There are new crops available to be picked by Anguillians in the twenty-first century.

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