

The Battle of Charles Fort, St. Christopher

By E. Challenger

[Extracted from the booklet entitled Charles Fort (1959)]

It was circa 1623 that (the Englishman) Thomas Warner, later Sir Thomas, arrived in St. Kitts, with the authority to found colonies in Charles I's name. In commemoration of which our earliest fort at Old Road is known as Charles Fort, as distinct from Fort Charles, which is Charles II's fort, now the Leper Asylum at Cleverley's Hill.

Surely, most everyone must be familiar with the tale of how Warner's ship returning from England and two French gentlemen aboard their distressed ship put here coincidentally on the same day in 1625.

The Frenchmen Desnambuc and DuRoissey anchored at 'Dieppe Bay' in distress, owing to an engagement with a Spanish galleon off the Cayman Islands in which they were worsted. We know today that they met a despised Huguenot settlement already in occupation on the site we know as Dieppe Bay; and that they swapped a few cannon with the Huguenots for assistance in repairing their distress. Although they were of Roman Catholic persuasion they were in sufficiently necessitous circumstances to swallow their pride and accept succor from their despised fellow Frenchmen though Protestants, and their uneasy Cathayan (Carib) hosts.

Lavasseur, the Huguenot leader, a qualified engineer, had had some uneasy moments with their protectors and hosts the Cathayans and the Huguenot were glad of the addition to their armory, so that next time they'd not have to kowtow to the audacity of these "Caribs" their erstwhile friends, whenever differences arose.

Desnambuc, the more aggressive of the two leaders, foreseeing the weakness and the strength of Lavasseur's position, pressed for an agreement between themselves as Frenchmen, for allowing him the colony, with a promise of additional help. DuRoissey fell into line, thought not quite happy over an alliance with non-conformists.

Now that Lavasseur had yielded to throwing in his lot, DuRoissey and Desnambuc returned to St. Kitts to set up their colony, with additions of men and supplies. This was to be the first official French colony in the Antilles, likewise for the English.

French and English nationals agreed to sink all differences in the face of the Spaniards and/or all comers; and to fortify and supply arms in common (e.g. Desnambuc supplying Lavasseur cannon), - nor to go to war with each other unless previous notification had been given "well beforehand". Curiously enough this part of the Treaty led eventually, in this writer's view, to the fortification of Brimstone Hill in 1660, when Huguenot Engineers joined with the English in fortifying this hill and driving the French into the sea. The 1st engineer in chief was a Kittitian Huguenot, M. Lewis de Marsal.

The treaty had just signed in May, when by Midsummer of 1627, civil war had broken out in France between the Huguenots and the Roman Catholic fellow citizens.

Huguenot and Roman Catholic hearts stirred in Capisterre especially, where at the Fig Tree international boundary, well settled with many small-holding Huguenot tradesmen; the boundary apparently

trespassed by moving the French boundary line. The French claim the English attacked first – the English that the French did so first.

Now let us hear what authoritative French history books tell us on this issue, that was to bring about the battle of Charles Fort. “(Warner’s Colony Believed)... on the news of the declaration of war, it was a timely opportunity for them to seize some French territory that they needed. The English thereupon crossed the boundary fixed by the treaty and finding themselves the stronger of the two, seized whatever they wanted, and in addition forbade DuRoissey and Desnambuc from fortifying Fig Tree, Sandy Point (fort). Desnambuc irritated by the violation of the early treaty, and by the humiliating position that the new treaty forced upon the French rulers, returned to France for help from Richelieu” (Peter Margry).

Richelieu supported Desnambuc by fitting out a squadron of ten ships under M.de Cahuzac, who was designated Admiral of this fleet on Feb.18, 1629.

Admiral de Cahuzac left Harvre, France on June 5th 1629 and arrived at Basseterre, St. Christopher on July 25, 1629;- on the morning of the 28th July he was down to business, he landed and was met by Governor DuRoissey, which later laid the case against the English before him.

On 30th July and on August 1st, Cahuzac sent word to Governor Edward Warner, at Old Road, to the effect that the treaty of SUZA signed between the French and English Kings specified that everything should be restored on the same footings before the war.

Governor Warner plied for time; by responding each time that he had received no orders from his King.

Calhuzac realizing he had to act more firmly next day (2nd Aug.) he sent back the English hostage, no less a person than Mr. Payne, the brother-in-law of Governor Warner, and asked to be returned the French hostage, Governor DuRoissey’s brother.

So on the 2nd August 1629, de Cahuzac’s fleet raised anchor from opposite Fort Louis, Basseterre (where the Royal and Barclays’ Bank are now situated) and bore down with full sail on Old Road, and its defenses and shipping. There they found five English ships at anchor, sheltering under the bristling guns of Charles Fort on the Charles or East River – and without further notice proceeded to pour broadsides into the English shipping as well as on the protecting battery on Charles Fort. The English Kittitians opened fire on the French in return as warmly as their smaller armour could command, in an endeavor to protect their shipping and themselves from surrender supported by the fire from their ships.

The French growing bold by reason of their evident superior metal, closed on the English enemy to within a distance of some two to three hundred feet from the shore, and there they continued to pepper at each other for some time, until the English fire slackening, they closed and boarded the five English ships although the shore battery had not been completely silenced. They were thus enabled to cut out four out of five English ships while under fire although the shore battery had not been completely silenced. They were thus enabled to cut out four out of the five English ships while under fire and then retreated with their prizes, back in the direction of Basseterre. Remarkable it is, that no mention is made of cross fire from any point at what is today the dismantled fort, called Fort Tyson, now used as a burial ground on the entrance to Old Road Bay. Had there been such a fort there and cross-fire at the French fleet; they should certainly not have closed in so near to the shore with such impunity, even though they had superior gun power.

On the following day August 3rd, Mr. Payne, Governor Warner's brother-in-law, came in frigate to Basseterre with a flag of truce, to complain of the surprise action committed by the French. Admiral de Cahuzac, brushed it aside and demanded the restoration of the lands encroached upon, as per the first treaty of May 13th, and the altered article re the non-fortification on Fig Tree (Fort).

The bluff of the English being thus called, on the morning of August 4th, Mr. Payne returned to Basseterre, where de Cahuzac was, and brought Governor Warner's consent to abide by the first Treaty terms. Thus the articles of the new Treaty were signed on the 7th August 1629 – when very much to the astonishment of the English the French Captains by common consent had at a Council of war, restored to the English the four prizes captured at Old Road. Upon which, Governor Warner was drawn out to visit the French fleet at Basseterre, to pay his respects, and drink the health of both monarchs, upon which Royal salutes shattered the quiet of the air waves – there being much rejoicing by the several sorts of inhabitants ashore, and embracing of erstwhile enemies. It was short lived however, for by the 16th September next, Cahuzac's fleet sailing off Statia, got the news of the Spanish capture of St.Kitts, which event occurred on the 7th instant.

Charles Fort, with little expense, can be made a fitting and enchanting approach to the countryside, in the approach from Basseterre to Old Road, in that little space on the seaside inside the gun-embrasures, the hut now there could be easily found another lot space, and the enclosure planted in grass well kept, a few old guns put back in the 'breeches', would certainly be enhancing. Now the gun embrasures look of their empty socks into the sunlit sea like a blind man looking into space. How long will we also remain sightless in the presence of most stirring historical background?

[Edgar Challenger, former trade unionist and member of the Legislative Council, is well known in some circles for his investigations into the history of St.Kitts]

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It should be noted that the site of the embrasures of Charles Fort has since been destroyed to make way for a Restaurant. On the other side of the river, large walls along the coast belonging to the Fort have also been dismantled to make way for a Fisheries Complex. The photos below show the area before it was altered.



The gun embrasures



The original walls of Charles Fort