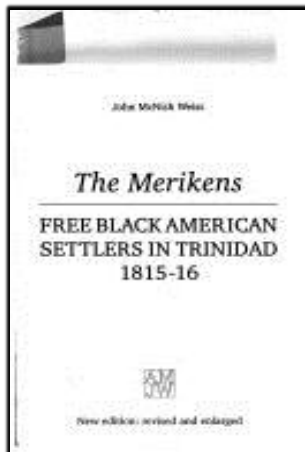


The Merikens: Free Black American Settlers in Trinidad 1815-16

John McNish Weiss

McNish & Weiss, London, UK 2002 (Reprinted 2008)



War causes the displacement of people, either by choice or by circumstance. British researcher John Weiss found that "Nearly four thousand American slaves took their freedom during the War of 1812, a full half-century before the United States emancipation." In *The Merikens: Free Black American Settlers in Trinidad 1815-16*, he describes the African-Americans who sought freedom by joining the British Corps of Colonial Marines, their migration to the Caribbean and settlement in Trinidad.

As part of the war effort, the British fleet sailed into Chesapeake Bay in 1813. African-American slaves in neighbouring states such as Virginia and Maryland took the opportunity to escape from their bondage. At first they were employed as guides, messengers or pilots. However, things changed in April 1814 when a British proclamation encouraged "persons resident in the United States" to join "His Majesty's Sea or Land Forces." The proclamation also gave the choice of "being sent as FREE settlers to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies." Thousands accepted the British offer.

John Weiss describes the history of the recruitment and involvement of these men of African descent in the British war effort. He notes that at the end of the conflict the British wanted the men to be transferred to the British Army. There was a general resistance to this with the preference being to receive land in the West Indies as had been originally offered. An unfortunate small group were sent back into American



A colonial British cannon overlooks the harbour of Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital city.

slavery by the British. However, a large number were transported to Trinidad, an island 11 kilometres off of the coast of Venezuela, South America. Weiss notes that it is unknown why Trinidad was chosen. Occupied by the British in 1797 and kept as a colony in 1802, it may have been targeted to increase development of the island.

The author has spent years tracing the identities of the seven or eight hundred people who migrated from the United States. Most settled in the south of Trinidad in what became known as the Company Villages, named after the Colonial Marine's First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Companies. He also notes that a number of African-American refugees migrated to Nova Scotia rather than the West Indies after the War of 1812. However, ninety-five left the Canadian colony in 1821 to join the other War of 1812 settlers in the more hospitable Trinidad. The uniqueness of Trinidad's American settlers is reflected in the term "Merikens", which is still used to describe their descendants today.

The painstaking research done by John Weiss adds new knowledge about little known War of 1812 events and the African-Americans involved in them. His scouring of old American and British documents has provided a wealth of family information. Since many of the people involved came from Virginia and Maryland there may be relevant information for genealogical researchers in this area. At least two familiar Grey County names are apparent, Handy and Bowie (Booey), and his research continues.

The Merikens: Free Black Settlers in Trinidad 1815-16 is a valuable resource for both War of 1812 enthusiasts and those interested in the African diaspora. Information about ordering the book is available by email at info@mcnishandweiss.co.uk.



Peter Meyler