

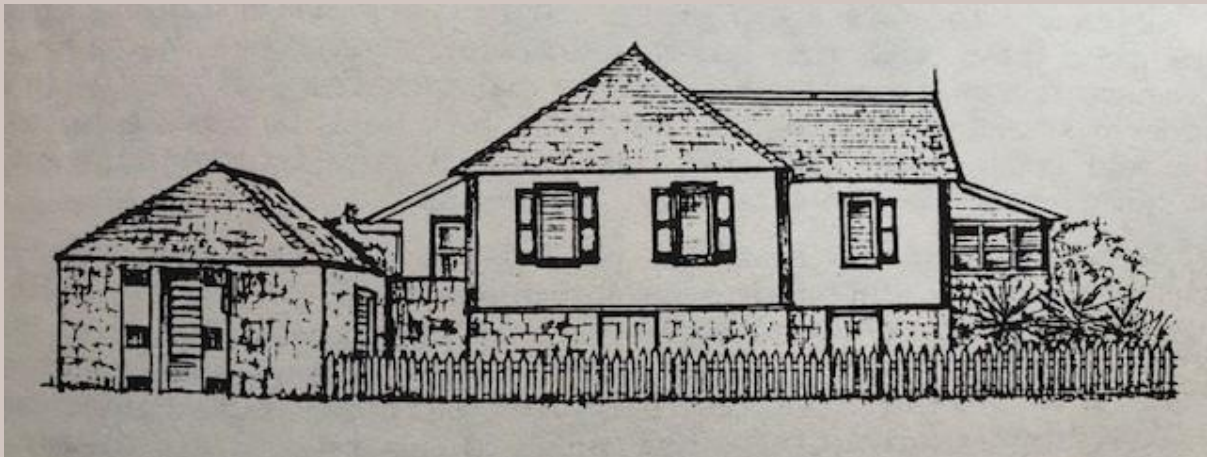
Wallblake House: A Historic Past

By David Carty

It is almost as if time has stood still for the old Wallblake Estate House standing serenely apart from third latter half of the 20th century amidst its stolid guardians of old stone walls and tall Spanish bayonet trees. Indeed the old mansion does have a mystic characteristic about it that exudes a quality of permanence and calm and an indestructible link with the past which only the sensitive who walk around and through it, can feel, and very few of us who are caught up in the hustle and bustle of making a living ever stop to ponder the historic symbol that is Wallblake House and the importance it played in the Anguilla of the 19th century and especially the early 20th century.

It is not altogether clear who exactly built Wallblake House or whether or not the present architecture is exactly the same as the original, but we can make some likely historical deductions which will give us a clue to its beginnings. Part of the difficulty in ascertaining the past of this old house lies simply in the fact that it changed ownership many times, due to the economic depressions of the 19th century, they would most likely have been removed with the various families who quit or sold the house for one reason or another.

Be that as it may, we know that the old house was built in 1787 because of a brick place in the northern side of the old kitchen and bakery on which that date was carved and is still faintly visible. We do not know however, how long it took to build and how much expertise it required or how much labour, but here again we do know that it must have taken at least eighteen months to build (possibly much longer) because of the cut stone involved, some of which may have come from East End or even Scrub Island and the lime used to hold the stone together which had to be made from burnt coral and shells, and then mixed with molasses and marl. The woodwork in the superstructure must have taken long and careful labour with the beading of each board used in the double panelling of each partition and especially in the intricate carving involved in decorating the edges of the trays suspended from the roof, and roping because they look like rope tacked onto the edges of the tray ceiling with 'roping' (tray ceilings are so called because they look like inverted trays suspended from the roof, and roping because they look like rope tacked onto the edges to hide irregularities). So at least we know that the construction of this old house must have taken a large number of skilled stone-masons (especially when one looks at the cistern) and skilled carpenters among which there may have been shipwrights as well as gangs of unskilled labour. Last but not least there had to be a great deal of money behind the project.



Wallblake House (1984)

Who built Wallblake House? Here again we do not know for sure but the name does suggest clues. If one looks at the Deed Poll of the late Governor William Richardson who died around 1829 and in which he disposes of his share of the Waterloo Money, you will see that one of the witnesses to that will was a William Blake J.P. William Blake, commonly known as Will or Bill Blake, was a sugar planter who lived at the turn of the 18th century, when sugar was still supreme in Anguilla. Although as far as we know he did not sit on the Council, we do know that he held a position of trust, being called upon to execute duties and of course being expected to fulfil the duties of a Justice of the Peace. It is significant to note that he was sometimes referred to as 'Will' and it is more than likely that it was this planter who built the old mansion in question and from whom the name 'Wallblake' is derived. In an oral society such as Anguilla, names usually undergo an idiomatic change which after many years becomes the universally accepted pronunciation and which in turn is consequently transmitted back into the literal tradition. For example, the original settlers called Blowing Point – 'Blown Point', and the Governor's residence at 'Old Ta's' is so called because on that site long ago lived an old man called Thomas. While he lived people commonly referred orally to the area as 'Old Ta's'. That brief example helps us to understand the origins of the name Wallblake. It is more than probable that during the decades after Will Blake's death, his Christian name underwent an oral change – from 'Will' to 'Wall' which as explained was, and still is, common in societies like Anguilla.

Nine years after this stately home was built, the Anguillian society came crashing down in death and destruction with the French invasion of 1796. Few realise how vicious and brutal that invasion was and how Victor Hughes, the instigator of that attack, ordered the French to burn and kill everything on Anguilla. Were it not for the sheer guts of the Anguillian defenders and the timely arrival of HMS Lapwing, the French may well have succeeded in their purpose, for they burnt, killed and raped all hapless victims they could find who were not fortunate enough to retreat

east of Sandy Hill, where the last defence was fought. Wallblake House featured prominently in that attack for a crippled man called Hodge, who was unable to run east from the French, sought refuge in the cellars of the old house. There, unfortunately the French found him and true to their orders, brutally murdered him and then set fire to the house. In the 'mop up' operations after the battle the discovery of Hodge's body apparently further incensed the already enraged Anguillians who proceeded to Crocus Hill jail where the French prisoners of war were being held and began to discharge their muskets through the bars at the defenceless French. Needless to say, more blood was shed.

William Blake must have been hard pressed to rebuild his stately home, but apparently the fire was not all that disastrous for the stone-work did not have to be levelled. For the rest of the century Wallblake House stood untouched, unblemished, undisturbed and beautiful as ever.

It is unclear whether or not William Blake's family inherited the old house or if it was sold, but around the end of the 19th century a man with the surname 'Hodge' possessed the building. During this time, the magistrate on the island was a man by the name of James Lewis Lake who became a great friend of the Hodges and held a position of great trust with the family. Unfortunately, however, Hodge's trust in Lake was much misplaced, for Lake used his position as magistrate to deal his friend a most unpleasant 'stab in the back'. What had happened, was that drought had once again laid its ugly but familiar fingers across the island and once again the cotton crops had failed disastrously. Hodge was so hard pressed as a farmer that he was forced to abandon his estates and seek temporary refuge in emigrating in search of employment. Before leaving, however, Hodge left Wallblake House in the care of his friend, the magistrate, in the hope that conditions at home would improve quickly enough so that his absence from the island would be brief.

Unfortunately, his absence from the island was not brief and in the interim his property taxes had fallen into arrears. Since Hodge was abroad and in no position financially to pay the arrears, his bosom friend the magistrate seized the house on behalf of the state, set up an auction to sell it and reclaim the few pounds of tax arrears, and then promptly bought it for himself. So for a fraction of its real value Wallblake House changed owners once again, demonstrating in no uncertain terms how man is always true to his brother.

In the meantime, the early years of this 20th century saw the beginnings of the powerful Rey family who, through the person of Carter Rey, practically ruled the island economically and socially, although he held no public office. Carter Rey's father, Wager Rey, was a native of French St. Martin who owned large estates in that island, the most important being that of Mount Vernon. He married Susan Carter of

Anguilla around 1861 who was very wealthy in her own right, having inherited estates in the Spring Division and in The Valley. Together they lived at Landsome, that lovely old mansion that was the seat of political power until 1967 when it was unfortunately destroyed by fire. It was there at Landsome that Carter Rey was born in 1865.

As a young man Carter Rey worked in Guyana, seeking for gold in the interior and after a few years there he returned to Anguilla to manage the estates both here and in St. Martin. Being a confirmed bachelor and a man who apparently preferred his own company, Carter Rey left his family at Landsome House and rented Wallblake House and the estate as well from Miss Marie Lake, daughter of the infamous magistrate. Carter Rey reigned supreme in Anguilla for nearly half a century, providing employment in the cotton fields of the Wallblake and Landsome estates, and in the salt pond at Sandy Ground. C. Rey and Company also ran the only 'general store' on the island which provided everything that the population needed, from flour and molasses to pocket knives and pins. This store was housed under the same roof as the cotton ginnery and that building was and still is known as 'the factory'.

Although Carter Rey lived at Wallblake, the social centre for the elite of that era remained at Landsome. Indeed Wallblake House was more like a Spartan business headquarters of this stern tycoon who ate his meals under a huge mosquito net in by far the largest room of the house, much bigger in fact than the drawing room. Rey was not a very active Anglican although he gave a lot to the church and helped the poor and destitute in times of hardship. During the year of 1937 when many poor families were on the verge of starvation, the report sent by Dr Thompson to the Governor of St. Kitts was full of praises and blessings for Carter Rey heaped on him by the very poor who in desperation flocked to him for help. Rey died in Wallblake of heart disease on the 25th October 1943 at the age of 78. The whole island went into mourning, although more out of respect than love, and true to his last wishes his was not 'churched' but borne straight from the old house to Blowing Point where it was put on board the Warspite and carried to St. Martin for burial at the Mount Vernon Estate. The Warspite's crew, like old seamen, were not too pleased over their task, being properly educated in the superstitions of the sea, where transport of the dead was taboo. They may have had reason to fear, for on the return trip a freak gale struck the vessel in mid channel breaking her boom. Exit Carter Rey.

His younger brother Charles Frank Rey promptly moved into Wallblake House with his young wife who he married in Chicago. A few months prior to Carter Rey's death, Frank had preceded his wife to Anguilla and was living in Wallblake with his brother. Apparently, however, he had not informed his brother Carter on arrival, of his American marriage, and when he eventually did so, his stern bachelor brother promptly banished him from the house and sent him to live in the 'Anguillian', where he stayed until Carter's death.

Frank Rey did not receive much from Carter Rey's last Will and Testament, which is an indicator to the type of relationship that existed between the two brothers. He did

not get any [art of the Landsome or St. Martin estates or of the factory in Anguilla. In fact, all he got was two hundred pounds sterling. But for the rest of his life he managed the Road Salt Company for his three sisters and apparently did very well for himself, by pocketing a substantial share of the profits. This reputation was further impaired through amorous escapades which resulted at time in violent reactions from his wife, and a vehement adherence to the principles of atheism. This was the way Charles Frank Rey lived until his death on the 8th August 1959.

Strangely enough the Rey to die Wallblake House was also 78 years old, like his brother, and because of his atheism he refused to be churched or buried in hallowed ground. Instead, he insisted on being buried at sea, and so the reluctant Warspite again had to perform the task of carrying a corpse. The body was sewn in canvas and weighed, carried on boarded at Sandy Ground from where the Warspite sailed to Arthur's Deep and then slipped overboard. Exit Frank Rey. Anguillians would not eat fish for months after the funeral.

Miss Marie Lake, the owner of the Wallblake House, had in the meantime settled in where she underwent a religious change of heart, left the house and surrounding [property were willed to the Catholic Church.

Since 1959, apart from very brief visits by Catholic priests, and temporary usage as a place of worship, Wallblake House has remained largely idle and empty. In 1978 it was leased by the Government of Anguilla to house the Department of Tourism, which was largely responsible for extensive renovations of the old house and an almost complete renovation of the kitchen with its unique chimney.

Since the lease was terminated Wallblake House has reverted to being the rectory of the Roman Catholic Church. In an island where hurricanes and economic change have removed so much of Anguilla's structural historical heritage Wallblake remains an intact symbol of what once was. It is therefore the duty of all Anguillians and especially the members of the Anguilla Archaeological and Historical Society to ensure that this beautiful mansion continues to grace the present with memories of the past.



LANDSOME HOUSE

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