

# Tobacco, Cotton, Salt and Dye-Trees

By Don Mitchell, as derived from the Archives, 1650-1700

The questions most asked about the early colonists in Anguilla are: what sort of persons were they? What forces made men leave the wealthier islands of the Caribbean to live on a thirty five square mile outpost at the tip corner of the Caribbean islands, exposed to the sea swells of the Atlantic? Were there perhaps advantages that encouraged some settlers to opt for Anguilla as an alternative to the new settlements in Virginia and Maryland when they left the wealthy if overcrowded colonies of Barbados and Nevis?

In answering these questions, there is some information available on what the first settlers were doing here. Besides privateering, trading and smuggling in their sloops between the islands, the main occupations were the growing of tobacco and cotton, the reaping of salt and the raising of food crops and cattle, 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 near the middle of the eighteenth century that some Anguillian planters had accumulated sufficient capital to invest in the mills and coppers and slaves necessary at the time to make sugar.

Tobacco, like cotton which replaced it, was originally grown by the Indians on the island and this industry was merely taken over by the newcomers in the seventeenth century. It was an ideal small planter cash crop. Apart from its small bulk and its ability to survive the long voyage across the Atlantic, tobacco had other advantages to recommend it. Its cultivation could be undertaken on a small scale and it did not need the outlay of much capital. The settlers could grow their crop on a comparatively small area of land and with only a few laborers, perhaps the members of the family. By the time the settlers came to Anguilla, however, the benefits of tobacco had mainly disappeared.

For example, Anguillian tobacco in England compared unfavorably with Virginia tobacco because it paid a higher duty and fetched a lower price. It was also alleged that West Indian tobacco was less mild and less palatable than that of Virginia. Moreover, Virginia had the advantage of being able to produce it in great bulk from a large area of land. Merchants found





Cotton

it more convenient to deal with Virginia, whose supplies came near to meeting demand in the English market, than to trade with the scattered island of the West Indies. Already by 1639 the price of tobacco had dropped alarmingly. As these disadvantages mounted, Barbados and the other British Islands turned to other crops. The first choice was cotton, which was subsequently replaced by sugar cane.

Cotton also appears to have replaced tobacco as the planter's cash crop in Anguilla within a few years, certainly within the first generation of settlers. Cotton was in some ways an ideal crop for those who settled on the island, but unfortunately, Europe has sufficient supplies of cotton from elsewhere and the demand for cotton was, therefore comparatively small. Wool was more popular for the manufacture of clothing and the demand for cotton did not increase substantially until the late eighteenth century.

The particular strain of cotton grown in Anguilla in the seventeenth century had an unusually long stand and was later to become famous as "Sea Island Cotton". As Dr. S. B. Jones noted in "Annals of Anguilla" (page 20), the botanical name of the species ought not to be "Gossypium barbadense" or "Barbadian Cotton" but rather "Gossypiu, anguillense". It was from Anguilla that the crop was exported in the eighteenth century to the Bahamas where its superior quality was recognized. A hundred years later the same seed, originally from Anguilla, was taken to Georgia and South Carolina where it eventually flourished as crops on islands off the coast of those American states.

Dr Jones quotes a leading article from the West India Committee Circular for 5th February 1920:

".....An interesting account of the origin of Sea Island in the United States is given in a letter to the Charlestown Courier on February 20th 1839. It appears that after the Declaration of Independence, partisans of Great Britain were Provided with homes in the Bahamas and there Took up the growing of Sea Island variety of Cotton. It is said that they obtained the seed from The Island of Anguilla in the B.W.I....."





Cotton in Anguilla did prove to be more successful than tobacco. The last reference to tobacco being grown in Anguilla is which he notes that salt is made on Anguilla and tobacco grown here. Tobacco was phased out and replaced by cotton some time after this. Cotton continued as the main crop of the islander's century, a run of some fifty years at least.

Cotton crops were grown in the numerous so-called "bottoms" scattered around the island, still very visible today. These bottoms contained a suitable depth of stone-free soil in the otherwise rock-strewn island. According to Dr Hartog, the name "bottoms" was derived from the Zeeland (Dutch) word "bott" meaning "bowl" named by the early Dutch settlers for the bowl-shaped valleys that they cultivated in St. Maarten, Saba, St. Eustatius and of course, Anguilla.

**Salt**  
The Dutch were also responsible for developing the salt industry, which Anguilla ultimately developed, when Cotton became less profitable. Since the sixteenth century, the Dutch had been the major traders in salt in Europe. They themselves used large quantities of it for curing their herring. This salt they had originally procured in Portugal, but after 1580 when that country came under Spanish rule, with which the Dutch were already at war, they had to look elsewhere for salt. This is one reason why the Dutch originally came to the Caribbean.

There are several ponds in Anguilla formed from former coves which have been cut off from the sea by sandbars. These represented a good source of salt. As with similar salt pond in other islands, they never completely dry out, their bottoms being below the level of the nearby sea. The salt is picked by slipping the hands underneath the layer of deposited salt and lifting slabs of it into shallow salt barges floating alongside in the pond.

The salt industry, in varying degrees, had been carried on from the earliest years of settlement. Originally, the ponds were communal property and each man owned only the salt that he had boated up under palm-frond shelters on the beach, awaiting ships that would visit for the purpose of purchasing salt. In early years, several ponds were reaped by the settlers in this fashion. For a more detailed description of Anguilla's salt industry on page.....

Ponds also were a source of water on the island. Three of the ponds on the island are situated away from the coast: Caul's Pond, Badcox's Pond and School Pond. They each have a limestone outcrop at the waters edge on the northern shore and springs feed into the ponds





from fissure in the limestone. There are also 14 springs in the island but most of them are more of less saline, the degree of salinity depending to a large extent on the amount of rain falling in that particular period.

Cattle  
The settlers found water, too, in the wells that had been dug by the aboriginal Indians and they dug eventually some twenty-five others scattered over the island. It is quite likely that when the island was first settled there was considerably more soil and vegetation than there is today. One would also expect that the cooling effect of that more extensive vegetation which existed in those times would have encouraged more rain to fall from passing clouds than falls today. Southey's reference to alligators found on the island, therefore, may not have been a mistake. Alligators are found in Jamaica and Trinidad to this day and probably existed on the other islands in the Caribbean as well. The three inland ponds noted above would have provided an ideal habitat for them. If, as was likely then, the island was wetter than it is now, it would have been easier to raise crops and maintain cattle.

