



A Division of the Institute of Jamaica

# **ACIJ/JMB FACT SHEET – THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF DEVON HOUSE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (ACIJ) was established in 1972 as a division of the Institute of Jamaica to deepen public awareness of African cultural retention and its relationship to the other ethnic groups in Jamaica. In 1990, the Jamaica Memory Bank (JMB) was integrated into the ACIJ, forming the ACIJ/JMB. The JMB documents Jamaica's social history via audiovisual recordings of the memories of senior citizens throughout the country. The ACIJ/JMB has a wealth of resources relating to Afro-Jamaican and other ethnic cultural heritage and a vast area of Jamaica's social history.

In fulfilling its mandate, the ACIJ/JMB has developed a systematic research and documentation programme, thereby establishing its importance as a centre for the study of African presence in Jamaican and Caribbean culture. This programme includes research conducted on traditional dance forms, various aspects of language, traditional and popular music, religions, food, social movement, herbal medicine, festivals, and community histories.

The ACIJ/JMB also maintains a vibrant Publications Unit. Through this medium, the division informs the public of aspects of our culture by producing Fact Sheets. These Fact Sheets are posted on the division's website, and stored in the division's library, and are used by researchers, teachers, students, and the general public. They are also widely distributed to schools and colleges islandwide, as well as to various divisions and affiliate bodies of the Institute of Jamaica.

## THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF DEVON HOUSE

### Historical Background

Devon House, located at the corner of Hope Road and Waterloo Road in St. Andrew, is a historic building and is regarded as one of the finest examples of nineteenth century domestic architecture in Jamaica. It is situated a far distance from these roads and is surrounded by gardens, with scattered boulders and majestic trees, including a huge cotton tree. The entrance is graced with black iron gates and the pathways leading to the house are dotted with royal palms. It has the ambience of a great house.

Devon House was built in 1881 by George Stibel, a coloured Jamaican of modest origins, who was a carpenter and shipwright in his native land before migrating to Venezuela and other parts of South America. It is believed that Stibel made his fortune in gold, either that he discovered or invested in a gold mine. He returned to Jamaica a wealthy man after spending some time abroad. He decided to build a mansion, (now, Devon House), on a large property called Devon Pen in what was then the outskirts of town. As a millionaire, Stibel became a notable figure in Jamaican society and was the Custos of St. Andrew at the time of his death in 1896.

Since Stibel's death, Devon House had a succession of owners. The property was inherited by his only daughter, Theresa, who married Richard Hill Jackson. Theresa, whose husband predeceased her father, lived with her children at Devon House until the 1920s. In 1922, the property was sold to the Melhado family and later passed into the hands of the Lindos. It remained a family residence until it was bought by the Government of Jamaica.



Devon House

## **Development**

The government of Jamaica had placed a preservation order on the property, (which was threatened with demolition to make room for a housing development), and acquired Devon House for the nation in 1967. Devon House was saved from destruction at the last minute by then Minister of Development and Welfare, the late Most Hon. Edward Seaga. Seaga decided to use Devon House as a showcase of crafts and furniture to demonstrate the excellence of Jamaica's craftsmen and cabinet-makers. A decision was made to create room settings from different periods of Jamaica's history. Things Jamaican, a government agency established to stimulate the development of craftsmanship, provided the interior designers and craftsmen. The historical room settings dramatised and popularised antique reproductions.

The property has been carefully restored and in 1974, the government decided to transform Devon House into the National Gallery of Art, and most of the original furniture pieces were transferred to the Institute of Jamaica. Then, in 1980, the government decided to restore Devon House to its former status. For some years, it was the home of the National Gallery, until 1983 when the National Gallery, was relocated to the Roy West Building in downtown Kingston.

Still compelling after over a century, Devon House is now the centre of a complex that includes craft shops, restaurants, and other attractions, designed to create a Jamaican ambience in a gracious setting. The grounds are a popular site for wedding parties, eager to take their photographs in front of the steps of the mansion. But more than anything else, Devon House remains a lasting monument to the skill of Jamaican craftsmanship in building great houses out of wood. The house itself is open to visitors, and is furnished with antiques of Jamaican and Caribbean origin as well as reproductions by Jamaican craftsmen.

## **Structural Restorations**

Structural restorations and work on Devon House began in 1969, paying respect to its original structure and character. For the inside of the house, Things Jamaican produced copies of English and Jamaican furniture. The house began to reflect a series of Jamaican and Caribbean furniture styles, and some rooms displayed Jamaican antiques donated by generous citizens.

The impressive work on Devon House was completed in record time in 1969 and enabled the craftsmen to demonstrate what they could accomplish. This included spice cabinets, gate-legged tables, Chippendale chairs, dining room sets, high-boys, corner chairs, etc. The settings were enhanced with Persian carpets and accurate reproductions of brocade and upholstery of the period. Chandeliers and original works of art from the Institute of Jamaica were hung and added the final touch to crystallise stunning period settings.



Staircase leading to Devon House

## Second Restoration

After the removal of the National Gallery, a second restoration began. Devon House was designed to be more attuned to the original house and emphasised antiques of Jamaican and Caribbean origin. The house was been refurbished in the style of a 1860 – 70 Jamaican great house, with riding chairs, massive four-poster beds and carefully constructed jalousies that provide the wind currents needed on the hottest days.

The Caribbean antiques and objects are some of the most interesting features of the house. One interesting piece is the tea caddy – a beautiful table with a lifting counterweight top that was used to lock up the containers of then very valuable tea. There is also a revolving high stool with a miniature bucket chair made for a young child; this was manufactured in England in 1881. There is also a bagatelle table, which is believed to date back to the late eighteenth century and a very low-slung baby's nursing chair in the master bedroom.

The paintings and prints are typical of those hung in Jamaican great houses and are from the collection of the Institute of Jamaica. The crystal chandelier in the Great Ballroom has survived and was revived from the original chandelier of the Stiebel mansion.

One of the best furniture pieces is in the Dining Room – a very beautiful example of a cellaret (a sideboard for wines and liqueurs of fine Georgian-Caribbean design. This is a rare piece.

In the bedrooms, the large four-poster beds are typical of the Jamaican great houses. The Meissen porcelain chandelier hung in the Young Lady's Bedroom is in perfect condition. It is a valuable find and special as it was discovered in a Jamaican antiquarian's collection on the north coast.

The Gaming Room features a ladies' playing table which folds out as an envelope with four triangles, making a large square. Another highlight of craftsmanship in this room is a beautiful upholstered leather wing chair in Jamaican calf skin which was made to order in Jamaica. The Living Room features a superb carved couch with rattan webbing in a very classic Caribbean design, and the Palm Room has an elegant panelling of palms painted on cotton.

The carpets throughout the house are antiques and their vegetable dyes are a proof of their age. The brocades imported from Europe are some of the finest examples of drapery and upholstery reproductions made today, and are a correct interpretation of what would have been in a Victorian house in Jamaica.

### **Variety of Settings**

However, the most attractive aspect of the Devon House complex is the variety of settings. The front garden is formal in nature, and between the house and the Grog Shoppe restaurant lies the majestic mahogany tree. The grounds have been planted in the style which was prevalent at the time of the original construction, and pay respect to the architectural layout of the house. The area at the back of the shops has been largely untouched. This is where Stiebel used to pasture his horses. Perhaps, someday, work might be done to develop this area commercially.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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