

## The Earliest Placenames in Jamaica

Frederic G. Cassidy

Jamaica, West Indies, should be of onomastic interest because early conferral of the names exemplifies naming-patterns that are fairly typical of the Caribbean area as a whole. The American Indian names came first, of course, Arawak and Carib. European explorers and colonists adopted and adapted some of these, added many of their own, and then, as a result of struggles among themselves, altered some names when the territories changed hands among the Europeans. One can see a common practice for name-giving in three main phases, or as three chronological layers: the Indian names, the Spanish or other European names, and the later-come European names – in the case of Jamaica, English.

The island was discovered by Columbus on his second voyage, May 4th, 1494, in the full growth of spring. He described it as “darkly green Xamayca...the fairest island that eyes have beheld.” Though there was always *talk* of gold and copper mines the Spaniard, failing to find precious metals and seeing the unusual fertility of the island, began to settle and develop it as a source of food stuffs for their other colonies. They easily subdued the Arawak Indians and sought to Christianize them. They also sought to make them agricultural laborers, but the Arawak resisted this; their numbers dwindled and many took their own lives by drinking bitter cassava. Negroes were first imported as domestic slaves after 1513, and later as agricultural slaves.

They had been in the island for more than a century before the English took it in 1655. Those blacks who escaped to the hills and lived as “Maroons,” and their descendants, formed a fourth source of a few Jamaican names – West African languages and creole English.

In the King of Spain’s correspondence of the years 1519 to 1526 there are repeated references to “the Island of St. Iago, called Jamaica,” which phrase seems to express a royal preference for *St. Iago*. Despite this, the name had little use and never appears on a map in this use. *Jamaica* followed Columbus’ form of the name, and perhaps for that very reason ul-

timately won out. But it had to go through many variant spellings before becoming established in its present form.

Columbus' initial *X* must have represented an Arawak front spirant sound very much like [ʃ] or [ç], which was its Spanish value at the time — much the same as that of the letter *J*, which was in any case simply a scribal variant of *I*. Reading any of these in Spanish one would say [ça'maika]; on the other hand, if the map was done in Latin, it would be [ja'meika]. Later, Englishmen would read the *I* or *J* as [dʒ]: [dʒʰ meikə], suiting their value of the letter; and Frenchmen would make it [ʒ], as it still is in *La Jamaïque*. The same sound-values are illustrated today by the two spellings of *Mexico* and *Mejico*, one English, the other Spanish.

As to the latter consonant, it was always [k], though spelled with *ch*, *qu*, or *c*. The mapmakers very early settled on *c*: the full modern form first appeared in 1512 on Peter Martyr's map and thereafter rapidly superseded others. Immediately after the English conquest, in the correspondence of English officials who had evidently *heard* the name but not seen it written, we find curious phonetic spellings, and as late as 1690, Coronelli's Italian spelling *Giamaca*.

What did the name *Jamaica* mean? There can be little doubt that it was Arawak, since Columbus got it from these Indians at the time of his discovery. But the actual etymology remains in doubt. James Knight, in 1742, wrote, "In the original it was *Jamajaco*. *Jamo* in the Indian language is a country and *Jaco* is water." On this basis, and with some poetic bur-nishing, it is now usually rendered as "Island of Springs." If the last syll-able is a form of *cay*, which survives today in many Jamaican place-names and is the same word as Floridian *key*, it comes from Arawak (Taino) by way of Spanish *cayo*. This would account for the *island* part, but the first element is still uncertain.

Two other explanations may be quickly dismissed: Moll's map of 1708 states that the island was first called *St. Jago* by Columbus but later changed by the English to honor James, Duke of York, later King James II. This is remarkably unhistorical. The other was put forward by the historian Edward Long in 1774: "It is not improbable that Jamaica is a name of Indian extraction, perhaps derived from *Jamacaru*, the Brazilian name of the prickly-pear, which over-spreads the maritime parts of the south-side, where the aboriginal Indian discoverers of this island might have first landed." This seems to be no more than a guess; a Tupi word is unlikely to have been current in Jamaica in 1494.

**Cassidy**

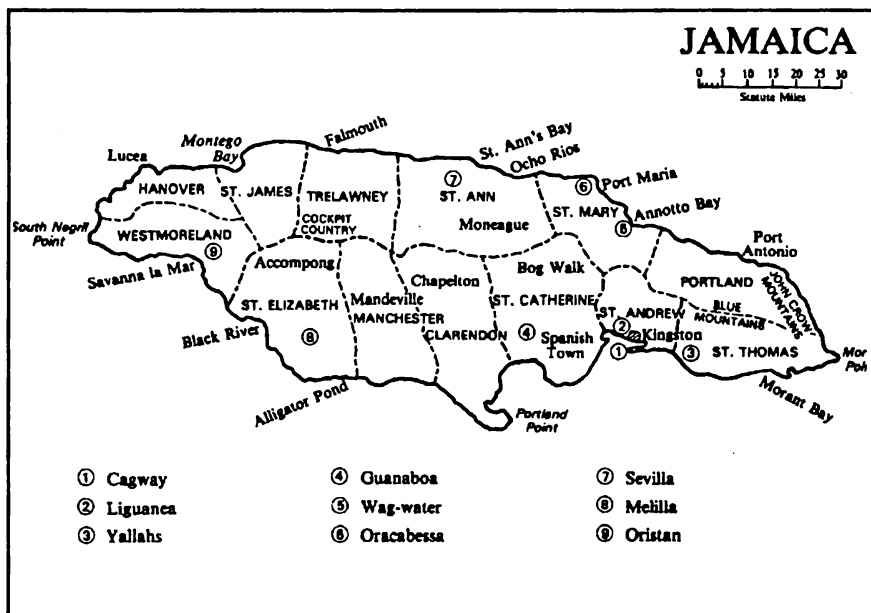


Fig. 1. Map of Jamaica. Courtesy of Cartographic Laboratory, University of Wisconsin.

The other names probable or certainly Arawakan are few, but even those few do not all appear on the early maps, and most were pretty thoroughly disguised, first by the Spanish and then by the English. The namers were not students of Indian languages. In the absence of careful observation, monolinguals are tempted to hear things in terms of the only language they know, rationalizing without adequate data and producing "popular etymologies." Jamaican names furnish some remarkable examples of this.

*Navassa* having been placed on one of the earliest maps, is continued, with minor differences of spelling, for a large key off the north-east end of the island, now a U.S. possession, but formerly associated with Jamaica. Though probably Arawak, the meaning is unknown. The spelling, with double *s*, would seem English rather than Spanish.

*Cagway* is the English rendering of Spanish *Caguay* or *Caguaya*. The Spanish forms suffered when, on some maps, an *I* was substituted for *C*, and one map further changed the *C* to *L*, *Laguia*, perhaps taking *la* as the article for a noun *guia*. The English spelling further rationalizes the end

of the name *-way*, and perhaps *cag-* was understood, in the contemporary pronunciation, as what we call a *keg* today—thus, a place or road for transporting kegs. But when the point was fortified as *Passage Fort*, about 1660 (it first appears on Hickingrill's map of 1661) *Cagway* was soon superseded. *Caguay* or *Caguaya* is very probably Arawak, but the meaning is uncertain.

*Wag-Water* furnishes one of the most surprising developments. *Guaiguata* is on 16th century maps for a port and then the river flowing into it. But attempts to rationalize it produce the Spanish-like *Agua Alta* (deep water), and later the English took the second part of the word, *-guata*, very simply, as water, and *Guaig-* could easily produce *Wag-*. This could then be taken, by folk-etymology, to explain the remaining *Wag* as referring to the erratic course of the river or its twisting currents. Again, we do not know what the Arawaks meant by the name, and the Spanish may have accepted it simply as a name, without explanation. *Guai-* is a common first element in many Indian tribal names of the Caribbean and South America.

*Guanaboa* is more certain—at least the name is also found in the neighboring island of Hispaniola. Cundall (*Place-Names*) suggests with some hesitation a possible connection with *guanabana*, the soursop, an anonaceous fruit common in the island; but he seems to prefer the Haitian Arawak possibility, which might be translated “house of gold.” The place itself was not a town but a district, and it is possible the Spaniards hoped to find gold there. If so, they were disappointed.

*Oracabessa* shows the apparently irresistible effect of coincidence. The Arawak form was written by the Spanish as *Juracabes*, with an ending very similar to Spanish *cabeza*, ‘head’ or ‘headland’. If this was accepted, what did *Jura-* mean? The historian Edward Long made it *Aura*, air or breeze, hence “windy headland. Others have seen Spanish *oro*, ‘gold’ as the first element. Hickingrill (1661) at least records the initial spirant (*Hora-* for *Jura-*) though if he thought of Spanish *hora*, ‘hour’ ‘time,’ it makes little sense with *cabeza*. *Juracabes* is very probably Arawak, but of unknown meaning.

*Liguanea*, the plain in which Kingston stands, has traditionally been taken to be connected with the iguana—a green lizard of the kind quite common in the Island, and now called by the Jamaican folk *guana*. A picture of the lizard has been the symbol of *Liguanea* for over a century. As originally the name of a ranch (*hato*), *Liguanea* may well represent a place

where lizards were plentiful. Arawak *iwana*, in Spanish *la iguana*, is therefore a possible source, but the date of first map record is relatively late, and there were no Arawaks left in Jamaica by 1655. This name may have been only in oral use until it was given to the ranch and so recorded. Thus, though the word was Arawak, the *name* and the *naming* were probably Spanish. The final *-ea* appears to be a Latinized naming element meaning something like “place,” hence translatable as “Iguana-land.” The Spanish pronunciation, [ligwa'nea], has been Englished as [e'ligð'eni] or [eligðni].

The earliest Spanish names were *Sevilla*, *Melilla*, *Oristan*, *Negrillo*, and *Morante*. Of these only the latter two survive in English forms as *Morant Point*, *Morant Bay*, *Port Morant*, and *Negril* – at opposite ends of the Island, both points being of essential importance for navigation, and both now having lighthouses.

*Sevilla*, the first capital, proved to be unhealthily located, and was moved. *Melilla* was also supposed to be a town, but did not flourish and was even mislocated on at least one map. *Oristan* was also misplaced – it was in any case not a town but a district name for the Southwestern area now including *Savanna la Mar* and *Bluefields*. The Spanish, again for reasons of health, moved the capital to *Villa de la Vega* (sometimes misnamed St. Iago de la Vega) but after the conquest the English found this too much of a mouthful and simply called it Spanish Town – and so it has remained, though the English moved the capital to Kingston, a new town, after the Port Royal earthquake of 1692.

*Sevilla* and *Morante* were transported Spanish placenames; *Oristan* was named after a town in Sardinia, then subject to the crown of Spain, and *Melilla* similarly for a town on the Barbary coast, then subject to Spain. *Negrillo*, which means black silver ore, probably reflects a hope that precious metal might be found there.

*Port Antonio* seems to be an English version, perhaps a conscious attempt to hispanize. In its Spanish forms it did not have the final *-o*, but the English frequently ended Spanish loan-words with *-o* (for example in *ambuscado*, *palisado*, etc.). The pronunciation without *-o*, “Port Antóni” is still current locally.

*Ocho Rios* is another English remaking of a Spanish name by drastic alteration. *Las Chorreras*, spouts or waterfalls, which perfectly describes the spot, was made first into *Ocho Rio*, and then “corrected” to *Ocho Rios*. Several streams do indeed come down to the sea here, and people will say that eight is just the right number, but that is an *ex-post-*

*facto* count, made to justify the name. At least, the English knew the name was Spanish, even if they got it quite wrong.

*Yallahs* has gone through two distinct changes, first in Spanish from *Aguaia*, perhaps Arawak, to *Ayala*, then in English to *Yallahs*, which was for a time understood, following a common pronunciation, as *Yellow River* and district. Again, there is nothing especially yellow about the area, but the foreign form seemed to call for some rationalization.

*Montego Bay*—despite the Spanish *Monterias*, of uncertain meaning and perhaps an error, is agreed to be from Spanish *manteca*, ‘lard’, which was much in demand by ships, and was obtained by the buccaneers (literally, “meat-curers”) from numerous wild pigs and pigs kept in “crawls” in the interior of the Island, especially in the western part. Passing ships stopped at “Lard Bay” knowing that they could obtain lard and boucanned meat.

The English conquest of Jamaica was a series of mistakes. A fleet sent by Cromwell was intended to take Santa Domingo, but it was driven off. Not to return empty-handed, it turned to Jamaica, with its small population poorly defended. The English, under Admirals Penn and Venables, landed at the west end of present Kingston Harbor, not far from the capital, Villa de la Vega. Under the Governor Ysassi, the Spanish resisted vigorously; the English also, having chosen an unhealthy spot, lost a great many men to fever and other diseases. Had Ysassi been properly supported from Hispaniola, he might well have succeeded against the English, but, denied any kind of support, the best he could do after about two years, was to evacuate most of the Spanish settlers. *Runaway Bay*, on the north coast, rather ungallantly names the point of his departure. It might be mentioned that the Spanish set their loyal Negro slaves free, who, taking to the hills, made guerilla warfare on the English. This was the beginning of the Maroons, who later continued their hill settlements, resisted the English till late in the Eighteenth century, and are responsible for a number of African and Creole names in Jamaica.

The English took over the present Kingston Harbor and fortified it. As we have seen, *Cagway* became *Passage Fort*. The settlement on what had been *Careening Cay* was renamed *Port Royal* and this, too, was fortified. They they moved inland, taking over Liguanea plain, renaming the *Rio Zautaco* the *Hope River*, after a local plantation. The Spanish names that survived best were those already well known to navigation—thus the names of rivers—*Rio Viejo*, *Rio Nuevo*, *Rio Bueno* and so on. But the

English maps soon begin to show their own new names — *Plantain Garden River*, *Black River*, *White River*, *Cane River* and many more. We have also seen some of their transformations such as *Wag Water* and *Ocho Rios*. For obvious reasons, since sailing long preceded the construction of roads, coastal names appear first on the maps, and most of them are simply descriptive — *Long Reef*, *Northeast Point*, *Cow Bay*, *Alligator River*, *Old Harbour*, *Bluefields Bay*, *Starvegut Bay*. Sir Thomas Modiford's survey of 1670 leads to maps with many names not recorded before, with places better located, and with names in actual use.

Soon after the conquest, the English took over the whole island, divided it into parishes, and thereafter their names begin to appear on maps: ten of them saints' names, others named for members of royalty and similar eminences — sometimes both combined. *St. Catherine*, originally with initial *K*, is thought to reflect not only the saint's name, but that of Catherine of Portugal, the wife of Charles II, who was reigning at the time the parish was formed. Clarendon was named for the first Earl of *Clarendon*, the chancellor Edward Hyde. *Portland*, *Trelawny*, *Manchester*, and *Metcalf* (now merged into *St. Mary's*) were all governors' names, and honorifics. A whole chapter might be written on the names of plantations, usually expressions of hope or satisfaction.

By 1700, when the English had possessed the island for 45 years, it had become a flourishing sugar colony, on the pattern of Barbados. A few older Spanish and Arawak names were kept but on the whole the English went ahead straightforwardly with their own names. The early stages of placename evolution are well illustrated here. Names of Arawak or Carib origin, heard but not always understood by the Spanish but fitted more or less to Spanish pronunciation and orthography, include *Jamaica*, *Navassa*, *Cagway*, *Wag-Water*, *Guanaboa*, *Oracabessa*, *Liguanea*, and the word *cay* (in U.S. use *key*) a common name element.

The Arawak names had come indirectly to the English, whose knowledge of Spanish was evidently poor and certainly casual. They came up with various adaptations, phonetic, folk-etymological, erroneous, but more pronounceable by Englishmen. One well-meant attempt to keep a Spanish form mistakenly converted *Chorreras* to *Ocho Rios*. But for the most part, there was no disposition to keep the Spanish forms, as we see in *Cagway*, *Wag-Water*, *Yallahs*; some were abandoned, as *Sevilla*, *Mellitla*, *Oristan*, others half-Englished — *Negril*, *Morant*, *Port Antonio*. The following series of map spellings illustrates not only those tendencies, but

shows how often mapmakers adapted inaccurately and produced spurious forms as they moved back and forth between Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, and English with their orthographic differences. Further differences in pronunciation there certainly must have been which the spellings were inadequate to indicate, but sometimes this very contest of polyglot spellings can take the scholar back with some firmness to a probably original form, and possible etymology.

The panoply of Jamaican names and the way they were given reflects typically the process of name-giving in the multilingual Caribbean or Antillean archipelago of the New World.

### Placename Forms as Represented on Selected Maps The Name *JAMAICA*

Xamayca: c1500 Columbus; 1601 Herrera *Xamaica*; 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz 3; 1704 Charlevoix *Xamayca*.  
(Iamaica, Iamayca)

Jamaicha: 1502 Colombo; 1527 Maggiolo.

Jamaiqua: 1502 Canerio; 1502 Cantino; 1513 Ruysch (Unnamed on his 1508 map); 1516 Waldseemüller; 1528 Bordone.

Jamaique: 1555 Le Testu.

Jamaiana: 1507 Waldseemüller – an error, corrected on 1516 map.

Jamaqua: 1507 “Admiral’s” map.

Jamaica: 1512 Peter Martyr; 1519 Maggiolo; 1529 Ribero (or Ribeiro); 1541 Mercator; 1545 Alonso; 1561 Ptolemy; 1576 Porcacchi; 1594 Benzoni; 1597 Wytfliet; 1598 Langenes.

Jamica: 1540 Muster Map – an error?

Yamyca: 1621 Iacobsz.

**Cassidy**



- Yamaica:** 1681 Van Keulen.  
**Jamaica:** 1661 Hickingrill (English maps); 1671 Ogilby; 1671  
 (Iamaica) Seller; 1671 Blome; 1674 Modiford; 1675 Roggeveen;  
 1678 Slaney; 1680 Visser; 1680 Morden; c1680 Hack;  
 1689 Thornton; 1696 Lea.
- Giamaca:** 1690 Coronelli; 1655 Butler: Gemecoe (English cor-  
 respondence, "phonetic" spellings); 1655 Daniell:  
 Jamico; 1657 Gwakin: Jammaca; 1658 Fleetwood:  
 Jamecah.

### Arawak Names (Certain and Probable)

- Navassa:** Nabaca—1545 Alonso de Sta. Cruze—cays at the East  
 end; Nauaca—1561 Ptolemy; Nauaca—1576 Porcacchi;  
 1597 Wytfliet; Nauaza—1598 Langenes; Mauaxa—n.d.  
 Cundall-Pietersz I.
- † **Cagway:** Caquoy — 1555 Le Testu — site of later Passage Fort;  
 Iaguabo porto — 1576 Procacchi; Caguay — 1596 Ben-  
 zoni; Iauabo P<sup>o</sup> — 1597 Wytfliet (Other records: la  
 Guaya); Caguey — 1621 Iacobsz; Laguia — n.d. Cundall-  
 Pietersz I; Caguaya — 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz III & IV;  
 Iaguabo — 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz II; Cagnay — 1681  
 Van Keulen; Poynt Caggeway — 1661 Hickingrill; Pt.  
 Caggway — 1671 Ogilby; Cageway — 1671 Seller; Cag-  
 way — 1680 Visser.
- Wag-Water:** Guaigata P — 1576 Porcacchi — bay and river; (Also  
 Guayguata 1601 C-P 24); Guiagata P. — 1597 Wytfliet;  
 Wag Water — 1674 Modiford; Aqua Alta B[ay] — 1696  
 Lea.
- Guanaboa:** Goneboa — 1661 Hickingrill — inland, No. of Portland  
 (1659 in Pt.; Guanache — 1680 Morden; Guanache —  
 1685 Seller. C-P, 84)
- Oracabessa:** (Juracabes — 1660 Cundall-Pietersz — document);  
 Hora-Cabesia — 1661 Hickingrill; Ora Cabess — 1671  
 Seller, Ogilby; Ora Cabessa — 1674 Modiford; Cabesa R

– 1678 Slaney; Ora Cabesia – 1680 Visser; Cabeça R – 1680 Morden; Cabeça R. – 1685 Seller.

*Liguanea*: Hato de Leguani – 1655-6 Cundal-Pietersz II (Spanish correspondence Cundall-Pietersz p. 84); Legonae – 1661 Hickeringill; Lygoney – 1678 Slaney; Liguanea – 1689 Thornton.

### Spanish Names

†*Sevilla*: seuilla – 1545 Alba plate 20; Sevilla – 1545 Alba plate 11; Siviglia – 1576 Porcacchi; Seuilla – 1594 Benzoni; Seuilla – 1597 Wytfliet; Sevilla – 1598 Langenes; Sevilla – 1621 Iacobsz; Sevilla – n.d. Cundall-Pietersz I (wrongly placed).

† *Melilla*: Melilla – 1545 Alba plate 20; Melilla 1576 Porcacchi; Melilla – 1597 Wytfliet (makes it an island); Melille – 1621 Iacobsz; Melilla – n.d. Cundall-Pietersz I; Melilla – 1675 Roggeveen.

† *Oristan*: Oristan – 1545 Alba plate 20 ( area of present Bluefields); oristan – 1545 Alba plate 11; Oristan – 1576 Porcacchi; Oristan – 1594 Benzoni; Oristan – 1597 Wytfliet; Oristan – 1598 Langenes; Orestan – n.d. Cundall-Pietersz I.

*Negril*: P del negrillo – 1545 alba plate 20; poincte de negrille – 1555 Le Testu; P del Negrillo – 1576 Porcacchi; P del Negrillo – 1597 Wytfliet; Pta. Negrío – 1621 iacobsz' Pto. del Negrillo – 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz 3; Puerto Negrill – 1661 Hickeringill.

*Morant*: P de morante – 1545 Alba plate 20; P de morante – 1545 (Point Bay)Alba plate 20; Capo Morante – 1576 Procacchi; (Point Bay)C. Morante -- 1597 Wytfliet; Cabo Morante – n.d. etc.) Cundall-Pietersz I, p. 104; Porto Morante k 1655-6 Cundall Pietersz 3, p. 104; Porto Moran – 1671 Ogilby, Seller, Blome; Morant Pt. 1661 Hickeringill; Pt. Morant – 1689 Thornton.

**Cassidy**

*Port Antonio*: Anton P — 1576 Porcacchi; Anton P — 1597 Wytfliet; P de Antilo — 1621 Iacobsz; P de Anton — 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz 3, II; P S Antoni — 1661 Hickingill; P Antonio — 1671 Ogilby.

### Spanish Names

*Ocho Rios*: (Las Chorreras — 1657-60 Cundall-Pietersz — documents); Ocho Rio — 1671 Ogilby, Seller; Otne Rio — 1674 Modiford; Ocho R — 1678 Slaney; Ocho R — 1680 Morden; Ocho R — 1685 Seller; Ocho Rio Port — 1689 Thornton; Ocho Rio B — 1696 Lea.

*Yallahs*: Aguaia pro. — 1576 Porcacchi; Aguaia prouincia — 1597 Wytfliet; Rio de Ayala — 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz II; Yallowes — 1661 Hickingill; Yallowe — 1671 Blome; Yallah r — 1678 Slaney; Yallah R — 1680 Morden; Yallowe — 1680 Visser; Yallah R — 1685 Seller; Yallah — 1689 Thornton.

*Montego Bay*: Monerias — 1655-6 Cundall-Pietersz 3; Montego Bay — 1661 Hickingill; Montego Bay — 1671 Ogilby; Mantega B. — 1675 Roggeveen; Mantica B — 1696 Lea.

† Denotes the name is dead.

### University of Wisconsin, Madison

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