

Headquarters House, the home of Jamaica's democratic heritage

On October 26, 1960, Jamaica's legislature was transferred from Headquarters House to the newly built Gordon House. Beyond a doubt Jamaica's democracy has grown tremendously within Gordon House over the last 60 years with many important milestones and much to celebrate.

Headquarter House is steeped in history as it is one of the oldest continuously used buildings in the country. It was built in 1755 and was initially a residence and then the headquarters of the British military in Jamaica (Hence the name). From 1872 to 1960 it housed Jamaica's legislature.



Headquarters House today is heritage site and the office of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust

The building itself had to be retrofitted in order for it to be suitable for its new use. Among the changes which were made was the expansion of the main lobby areas as well as inner construction of visitor's gallery and press box for journalists and reporters. In the course of time,

the building was deemed too small and unable to shield the proceedings from noise and other distractions. Even so, the building has withstood many natural and other disasters and remains a masterpiece of architecture and endurance.

At the main entrance stands the old legislative chamber which has many treasures indicating the rich history of the building. Some of these include portraits of the National Heroes, the old desks which were used by the legislators, the press box, the visitors' gallery, an old Jamaican coat of arms, a standing clock, a bequest from Philip Stern, a member of the legislature in the early 1900s.



A view of the legislative chamber at Headquarters House

The principal materials which constitute Headquarters House are, brick, stone and timber. It has huge windows and high ceiling specifically to facilitate ventilation.

While much can be said about Jamaica's politics over the last 60 years, much is not known of the politics of the years before 1960 when Headquarters House, the cradle of Jamaica's democracy,

was the epicenter of politics, since 1872. All the important features and components of our politics have their origins at Headquarters House. Some of these include-

Holding of elections. Following the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) elections were suspended until 1884. Since then elections (and bi elections) have been held with regularity, except for short periods during World Wars I and II. Initially, the right to vote was restricted to males who owned property or paid a certain amount of taxes. Some women were given the vote in 1919, and in 1944, the advent of Universal Adult Suffrage all adults over 21 were allowed the right to vote, the first in the British Empire.

Blacks in Politics. The first elected Black politician in Jamaica was Edward Vickers for St Catherine in 1847; however the first Black man to be elected to the legislature at Headquarters House was Alexander Dixon for St Elizabeth in 1899. Since then, many others have followed and by 1925 Blacks became the majority for the first time in the legislature. It is now commonplace for Black Jamaicans to be in the majority.

Women in Politics. In 1919, elite women were given the right to vote. Women, however, had a higher qualification to vote than men and women were not allowed to enter representational politics. The first woman to be elected to Headquarters House was Iris Collins for North West St James for the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1944 followed by Rose Leon for Western St Andrew (JLP) in 1949 and 1955 and Iris King People's National Party for Western Central Kingston (PNP) in 1959. Other women appointed to the upper chamber of the legislature include Edith Clarke, Edith Dalton James, Uno Jacobs and Isobel Seaton. The first woman to be elected to a public office in Jamaica was Mary Morris Knibb in the Kingston and St. Andrew Parish

Council election in 1925. Since 1944, there has been a steady increase in the number of female legislators

Two party system. Prior to the formation of the Peoples National Party in 1938 and the Jamaica Labour Party in 1943, there were no effective political parties. The spirit of the times dictated that politicians should be independents, without biases and only form alliances within the legislature in order to get the business of government done. However, the formation of the political parties led to the demise of the independent legislators. Only a handful survived the 1944 elections while some of them joined the JLP and the PNP and remained politically relevant. Since then the two-party system, though imperfect, has aided orderly, predictable and stable government.

Constitutionalism. From 1872-1960 Jamaica had four different constitutions. Constitutional changes were made in 1872, 1884, 1944 and 1953. Except for the changes in 1872, the other constitutions were geared towards the expansion of political powers to a wider cross section of the population as well as to grant more powers to the legislature thus preparing it for eventual self-government and political independence. These many constitutional changes served to provide guidelines for the scope of government and to tutor the population and lawmakers of the workings of government in maintaining democratic traditions and stability.

Other important developments before 1960 include representative government, responsible government and self-government by 1953.

Two points of interest of Jamaican politics prior to 1960 are the seating arrangement and salaries. Before 1944 legislators were unpaid. Their roles and functions were viewed as public service and duty. Despite this, electoral campaigns were vigorous, and many persons sought to be elected.

Elected and nominated members functioned gave dedicated service. In addition, prior to 1944, legislators sat and were ranked and listed in order of seniority of membership in the house, rather than on party lines



A view of the Legislative chamber today

Since the 1660s, Jamaica's legislature operated from several places including Port Royal, various locations in Spanish Town, Headquarters House on Duke Street in Kingston and then just next door to Gordon House. As Jamaica's legislature goes boldly to the future, history will recall that between 1872 and 1960 were the most crucial years in the development of Jamaica's democratic politics.

Norman Manley, Premier of Jamaica, during the last ceremony at Headquarters House on October 26, 1960 declared

'... here in this Chamber was shaped the whole course of our modern history.... we have... built up a sound parliamentary system of which we can truly be proud. It has not always been easy, nor did it come about without our having many lessons to learn...

So, we move into our new House across the way carrying with us the traditions which already firmly established and united in our devotion to those traditions and in our determination to preserve and enrich them as the years roll by.

Here in this old House we have been richly blessed with progress, by right decisions wisely made.'

Submitted by Duane Harris

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