

The American Revolution

When: 1776-1782

Combatants: Great Britain vs The American revolutionaries, France, Spain and the Dutch Republic

Reasons: Tensions in the North American Colonies and Britain's rivals wishing to exploit the crisis.

Other names: The American Revolutionary War, the War of Independence

Key battles and places: The Bahamas, Dominica, St. Lucia, The Nicaragua expedition

A popularly forgotten theatre of one of the most famous wars in history is that of the Caribbean during the American Revolution. The revolution had a direct impact on the region, as the British West Indies were largely reliant on the thirteen North American colonies for foodstuffs, their own agricultural economy being geared to the production of cash crops, most notably sugar. It was the impending threat of war and the economic effect that it would have on the Caribbean that made the members of the West India Committee resolve to become a permanent body, as opposed to just banding together on occasion when their economic interests were threatened. Food shortages did indeed occur, with famine and malnutrition taking a heavy toll on the slave population in the region; it was estimated that 15,000 slaves may have died on Barbados over the course of the war.

The food situation was not, however, the only threat to the Caribbean as the conflict spread. An American force raided Nassau in the Bahamas on 3rd March 1776, capturing stores of ammunition and gunpowder to support the revolution. Whilst such raids were an annoyance, the major threat did not come until Britain's European rivals joined the war on the side of the revolutionaries, seeking to undermine Britain's power. France allied itself with the Americans in 1778 and began a military campaign in the region, successfully invading Dominica in September that year with 2,000 men under the Marquis de Bouillé. The British made a counterattack, raising a large force under Major General James Grant. 5,800 men from ten different regiments, and 200 artillery men, including some 5,000 stationed in North America, were gathered. The withdrawal of large numbers of very experienced troops from North America at this time demonstrates the importance that Britain placed on its Caribbean colonies; they were viewed as far more economically valuable, to the extent that the government abandoned Philadelphia to protect them.

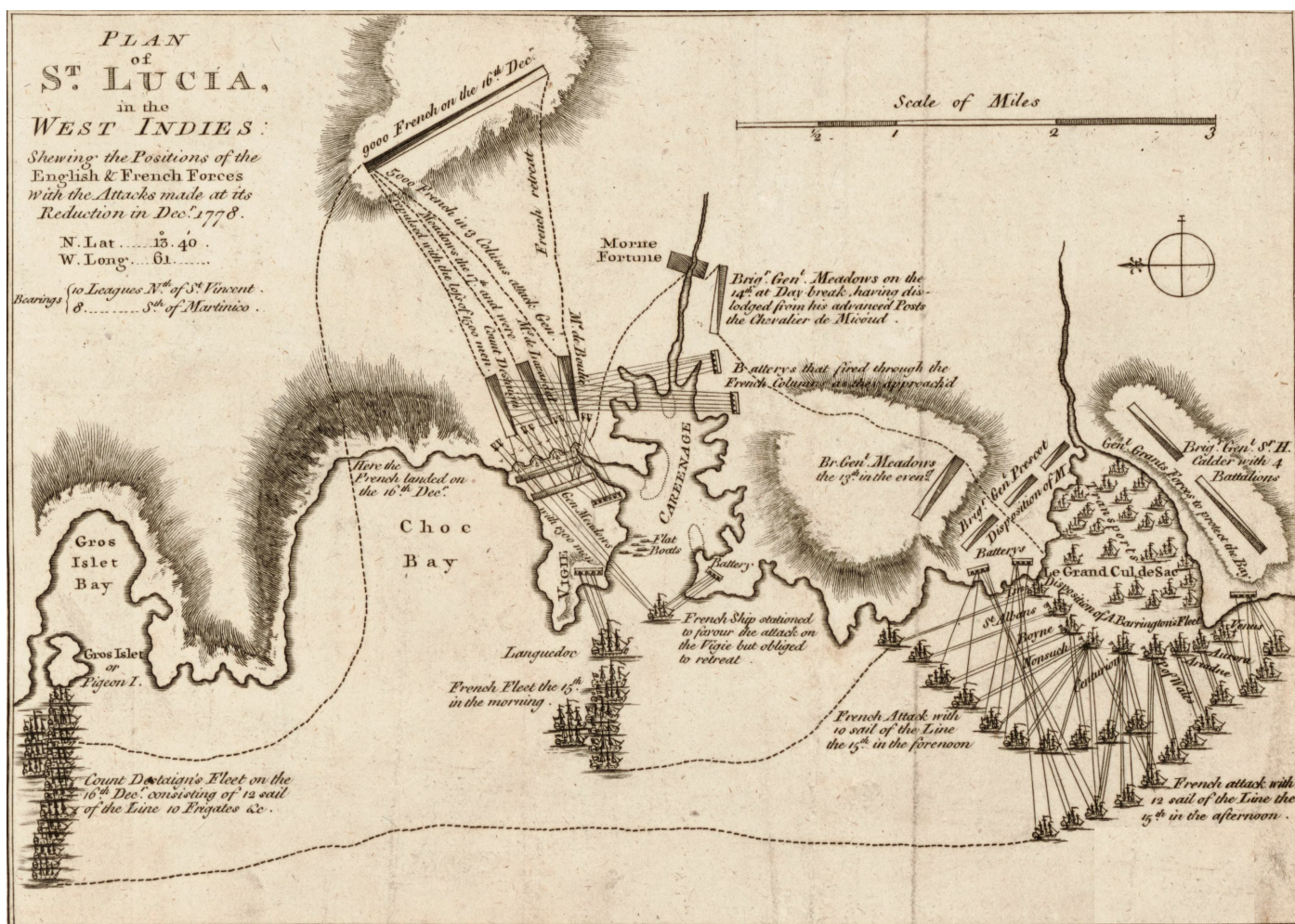


James Grant



William Medows

Instead of trying to recapture Dominica, the British force was sent to St. Lucia, due to its strategic location, landing on 12th December at Cul de Sac Bay and securing the island over the next few days. However, following the island's surrender, a French fleet with 9,000 soldiers arrived from Martinique. The fleet was unable to force its way into the well-defended Castries Bay, and so troops were landed to the north, in the hope that the Vigie peninsula to the north of the Bay could be captured, and thus allow the French fleet to enter. A British force of 1,300 men, experienced veterans, under the command of Brigadier General William Medows successfully repelled a much larger French force on 18th December after three hours of combat, making good use of the thin neck of the peninsula to limit the effectiveness of the superior French numbers. After over a week of inaction, the French withdrew from St. Lucia, leaving it in British hands.



However, it proved difficult for Britain to launch more offensive actions in the Caribbean for the remaining duration of the war. Relations at the time between the local governments and Britain were poor and the former were reluctant to provide money to support the war effort, even neglecting the maintenance of fortifications on their own islands or even being reluctant to supply their own militias. Many in the Caribbean also shared some of the same grievances raised in the North American colonies, such as the Stamp Tax, which also perhaps contributed to their disinclination to cooperate with the British government on this occasion. In January 1779, a successful operation saw the British capture St. Martin and St. Barts, but the French were able to recover both islands the following month. When the British Navy was required to escort a convoy in June, a small French expedition of 500 was sent to St. Vincent and allied with the local Black Carib population, giving them a total of 1,300 men.

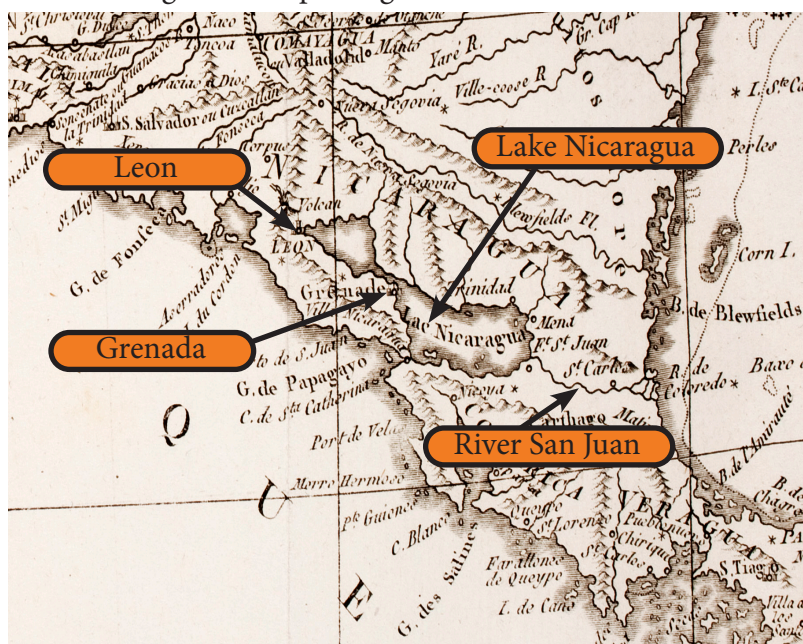
With minimal defences, the British Governor surrendered on 18th June, two days after the French had landed. On 2nd July, the French landed 1,500 men on Grenada and, in the space of two days, again forced the island's surrender, although the 101 men of the 48th Regiment and over 300 men of the militia attempted to put up a fight, but this was futile in the face of such overwhelming numbers. At the same time, a British force was sent to recapture St. Vincent, but were diverted to Grenada when news of the French entrenching themselves on their initial target reached them. However, the French fleet prevented their arrival and seventy-four soldiers died aboard ship in the exchange on 6th July. Another attempt to recapture St. Vincent was made that December, but the fortifications were found to be in good order and the British withdrew.

Major General Grant, still commanding forces in the Caribbean, despite orders from Britain, had been reluctant to disperse his troops in detachments around the region, arguing that it would totally destroy their effectiveness and pointing out that the French Commander, d'Estaing, had not dispersed his forces but kept them together at Martinique. However, he was overruled and recalled, with the Army being duly dispersed. Much as Grant had feared, this proved ineffective, and the French harassed outposts at Tobago and St. Kitts. Matters became worse when the Spanish entered the war against the British and, in September 1779, a Spanish force sent from Honduras attacked British woodcutters at Honduras Bay, ejecting them from the St. George's Key settlement.

A force sent from Jamaica was able to recapture the settlement, before besieging the Spanish town of Omoa. Despite the small size of this force, it was able to capture Omoa, as well as a large amount of goods and ships, but had to abandon its prize in December as disease took its toll on the garrison.

Major-General Vaughan was sent as Grant's replacement and, although he had been given nonspecific orders, it was nevertheless suggested that he should attempt to recapture Grenada and St. Vincent and, if possible, attack Puerto Rico. However, the dispersion of the Army had sapped the men of both health and morale. Although he was able to assemble a great number at St. Lucia, which also scared off a potential French invasion on 23rd March 1780, Vaughan realised that an offensive action was impossible in such circumstances and used the reinforcements that he had brought to the region to strengthen the garrisons of Antigua and St. Kitts. Soldiers also saw service as Marines during naval engagements between the Royal Navy and the enemy fleets.

1780 saw an unsuccessful expedition up the River San Juan in Central America, with the aim of reaching Lake Nicaragua and capturing the towns of Grenada and Leon on its shore. This action would have helped to



divide the Spanish Empire in the New World in two. The expedition stalled on its passage and disease took its toll, killing approximately two thirds of the men involved and leaving less than half of the survivors fit for service. The expedition, having first departed Jamaica in the February, was finally abandoned in November and is chiefly remembered today, if at all, for the participation of the Captain of *HMS Hinchinbrook*, Horatio Nelson, later Britain's most famous naval hero. The soldiers' lot in the Caribbean was exacerbated by the calamitous effects of a hurricane that swept through the Windward Islands in October 1780, which killed many and caused devastation in its wake, leaving many civilians and soldiers without shelter.

Early 1781 brought reinforcements and news that Britain had declared war on the Dutch. This was because Britain believed that the Dutch had been secretly trading and negotiating with the revolutionaries. Vaughan and his naval counterpart, Admiral Rodney, lost little time in capturing the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, which surrendered when the British arrived on 3rd February. Long known as a centre of commerce and illicit trade, St. Eustatius was found to hold French, Dutch and American goods in large quantities, as well as prohibited merchandise from the British West Indies and even Great Britain itself. Many British merchants, despite the illegality of their actions, later complained that the military seized their property. The value of the goods seized on St. Eustatius totalled over £690,000,000 in today's money. It was also arguably the first territory to recognise the American colonies as a separate political entity, when it offered a salute to a revolutionary ship. Admiral Rodney later commented that despite St. Eustatius's small size, it had, "*done England more harm than all the arms of her most potent enemies, and alone supported the infamous American rebellion.*" The nearby Dutch islands of St. Martin and Saba were also captured at this time, as were the colonies of Demerara and Essequibo in South America.

The French launched further invasion attempts, trying to recapture St. Lucia in May, but departing when they saw the strength of the defences. Shortly afterwards, they launched a successful invasion of Tobago, forcing the Governor's surrender. Admiral Rodney arrived on 4th June, two days too late. On 19th October, Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in North America, allowing the French fleet to return to the Caribbean as it was no longer required to support the revolutionaries. This allowed the French to recapture St. Eustatius and St. Martin in late November, and take the 800 men of their garrisons hostage. Barbados was saved from invasion by the trade winds that prevented the French reaching the island easily.

Although Barbados was safe, St. Kitts was not and a veteran force of 8,000 men under the command of the Marquis de Bouillé landed on 11th January 1782. Capturing Basseterre, they proceeded to lay siege to the fortifications at Brimstone Hill, one of the most impressive military structures in the Caribbean. The fortress was garrisoned by 600 men from the 1st (Royal Scots) Regiment and 15th (East Yorkshire) Regiment under General Fraser and 350 men of the Kittfonian militia commanded by Governor Shirley. There were issues with the defence from the beginning, as war materials, both stores and weaponry, had been left at the base of the hill; the Kittfonian government, still on poor terms with the British authorities, had refused to provide slave labourers to carry the materials up to the fortress. Thus, they were seized by the French and used against the defences. The French proceeded to open trenches and had completely cut the citadel off by 28th January. The evening of the



The siege of Brimstone Hill

same day, British reinforcements landed on the island, having manoeuvred past the French fleet. The reinforcements were, however, unable to contact the now completely isolated defenders, despite the efforts of several men. Unable to make contact, and unable to face the superior French numbers, the reinforcements were re-embarked.

By 8th February, the fortress had been severely damaged by cannon and mortar fire, with many casualties amongst the defenders. A number of the militia had already deserted and another attempt by the reinforcements offshore to contact the garrison failed and the men making the attempt captured. With four breaches in the fortress walls, the militia convinced Governor Shirley to

surrender. Terms were discussed on 12th February and the serving garrison of 500 men marched out under the full honours of war. Following this defeat, the neighbouring island of Nevis came under French control and, in the same month, the French were also able to recapture Demerara and Essequibo. The British island of Montserrat surrendered on 20th February after a brief period of resistance.



There was now a severe threat to Jamaica but an invasion was prevented by Admiral Rodney, who on 12th April 1782 defeated a combined Franco-Spanish fleet in the Battle of the Saintes. This largely broke the power of both the French and Spanish in the region but, before the end of the war, a joint Spanish and American force travelled from Havana, Cuba, to the Bahamas. Having only some 600 men under his command, as opposed to well over 2,000 enemy troops, Vice Admiral John Maxwell, the Captain General of the colony, opted to surrender.

The Treaty of Paris, in 1783, secured American independence and Britain came to agreements with both France and Spain. Most of Britain's colonies were returned, but France was able to retain Tobago and regain St. Lucia. However, 1783 also saw one final military operation, one that took place after the signing of the treaty and the accompanying agreements. Instead of being carried out by the regular Army, it was the result of an initiative by a commander of the militia.

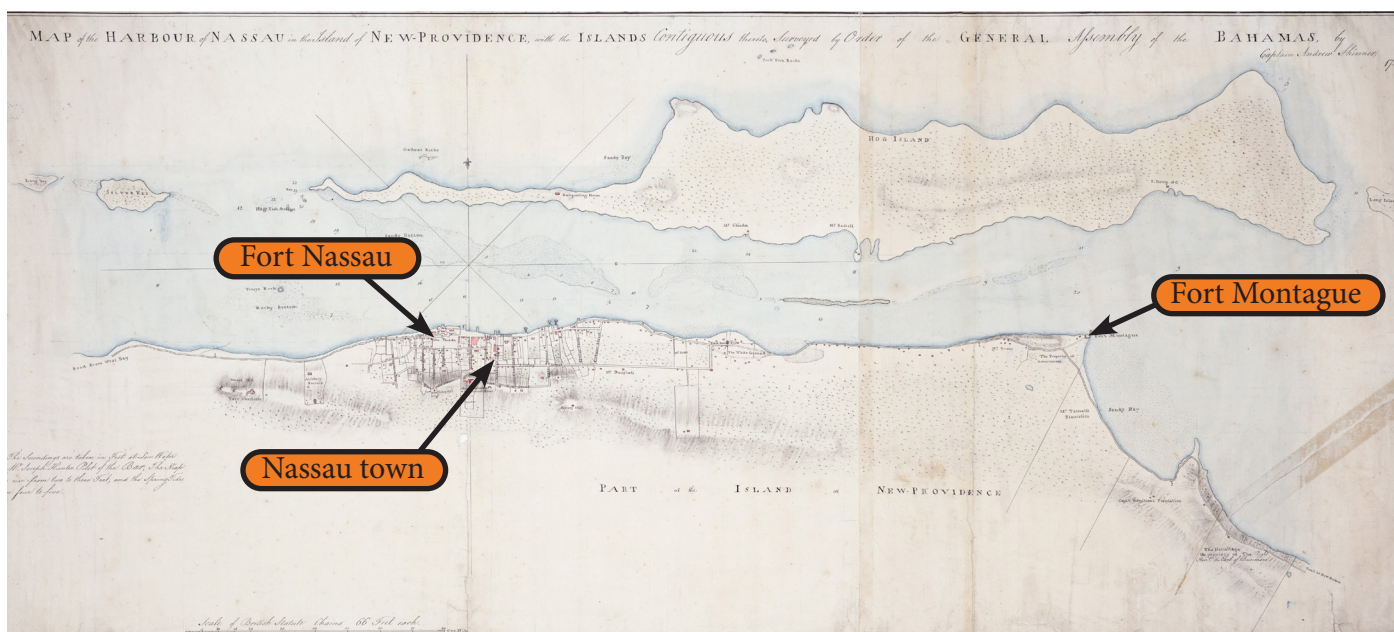
Admiral Rodney at the Battle of the Saintes



Fort Montague
Photo by Oscar Flowers (CC BY-SA 3.0)

American Loyalist Colonel Andrew Deveau of South Carolina funded an expedition to recapture the Bahamas in March 1783. A force of some 160 to 200 men landed on the island of New Providence before dawn on 14th April and quickly captured Fort Montague. The Spanish Governor, who had already heard that the Bahamas would be returned to Britain and communicated this information to Deveau under a flag of truce, but the Colonel refused to believe him and continued hostilities. Deveau prepared to attack Fort Nassau but, being severely outnumbered by the Spanish, opted to use subterfuge. He convinced the Spanish that he had far more men than he actually did. He had figures made out of straw and even had his boats ferry men to shore repeatedly,

making the boats look empty on returning to the ship by having his men duck down out of sight and then sit up again for the journey to shore. This ultimately convinced the Spanish to surrender on 18th April. In the years following the American Revolution, many American Loyalists, now in exile, would settle in the Bahamas, Deveau amongst them.



Despite the widespread failures of the British war effort, having to fight multiple enemies on multiple fronts, the British were ultimately able to prevent a total collapse in the Caribbean theatre. The efforts they made in order to defend the region demonstrated the high value they placed on the West Indies and later historians have commented that the resources deflected to defend the Caribbean may be the reason why ultimately Britain lost the war in North America.