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**THE FRENCH  
INVASIONS OF  
DOMINICA**

INSTITUTE OF  
COMMONWEALTH  
STUDIES

By

SIR REGINALD ST.-JOHNSTON, K.C.M.G.

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## THE FRENCH INVASIONS OF DOMINICA

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SIR REGINALD ST.-JOHNSTON, K.C.M.G.

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The Island of Dominica, being situated midway between the French islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, has always had close associations with the French people, both in peace and in war; and, indeed, more than once completely changed hands during the latter half of the 18th century. Neither nation was able to hold it very strongly, partly because there was, in the earlier period, the always uncertain factor of the war-like Caribs among the hills and forests, ready to harass the settlers on all sides, and partly because the very nature of this large island of 305 square miles, with its wild and inaccessible mountains preventing any hope of good military roads, made the safe growth of population, and therefore of peace and prosperity for either nation, almost impossible.

**English and French settle.** About the middle of the 17th century Sir Thomas Warner of St. Kitts, the first colonizer of these West Indian islands, sent one of his sons (by a Carib woman) with a party to settle down in Dominica and grow tobacco and other produce for his ships to take to Europe. He thought that this son would be able to make friends with the Caribs, which he did. Not long afterwards some Frenchmen from the adjacent islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique came over also and settled down there, probably at the other end of the island. Both parties before very long were evidently harassed by the Caribs, who were at the time so powerful in Dominica that they were able continually to send out expeditions to attack the European settlers in all the surrounding islands. The result was that it was considered expedient to give over certain islands completely to the

Caribs, in the hopes that they would thereby be induced to remain on them and leave the other islands alone. And so a treaty was made that the islands of Dominica and St. Vincent should be set aside for the Caribs. The effect of this, however, did not last long, as by 1666 the English, and possibly the French too, appear to have gone back to Dominica, as it is recorded that in that year the French captured Warner's son and held him prisoner for some time in Guadeloupe. At the end of the next year Lord Francis Willoughby procured his release, and re-instated him at Dominica. In 1674 he was killed by an expedition from Antigua headed by his own half-brother, Colonel Philip Thomas Warner, the Lieut.-Governor. Colonel Warner was charged with murdering his half-brother, and sent home to England for trial, but was acquitted. Colonel Warner died the following year.

The English and French continued to settle in Dominica, but not in very large numbers, and for the next fifty years nothing of an outstanding nature occurred in the island, and no real progress was made. Peaceful occupation was rendered almost impossible by the Caribs, and at last, in 1731, a definite treaty was made between the English and French that both parties should simultaneously evacuate the island. In the constant wars of those days, however, Dominica was far too important a strategical post to be left alone, and the magnificent harbour at Portsmouth was invaluable, as Nelson often found later on in H.M.S. *Boreas*, as a resort for shelter, or watering and victualling. It was there that Lord Cathcart, the General commanding troops in Sir Charles Ogle's fleet, and who had died, some say at sea, of dysentery, was alleged to have been buried ashore, though the important-looking vault near the beach, known as Cathcart's tomb,\* when opened in recent years was found to be empty. The probable explanation of the mystery is that his family had subsequently had the lead coffin taken home, or else that he had been buried at sea and this was

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\* It has also been called "Prince Rupert's tomb," but this is probably only due to a careless way of speaking of "the tomb at Prince Rupert's,"

merely a monument. Portsmouth was known at one time as Prince Rupert's, from its association with Prince Rupert's fleet when he was cruising in these waters.

**Neutral Territory.** In 1748 the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle again declared that Dominica should be regarded as neutral territory between the English and the French, although a considerable sum of money had been spent by both parties from time to time in erecting fortifications at various strong points around the coast. About ten years later, however, there was a large influx of French from Martinique, whence they had been expelled by the conquering English.

**The Douglas-Rollo expedition.** By 1761 they had become so strong in Dominica that a special expedition had to be sent to eradicate this danger point to the British arms in these waters, and on June 8th, Commodore Sir James Douglas, Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands Naval Station, in H.M.S. *Dublin*, (Capt. E. Gascoigne) with the following ships, "Stirling Castle" (Capt. M. Everitt), "Sutherland" (Capt. J. Legge), "Norwich" (Capt. W. M'Cleverty), "Falkland" (Capt. F. S. Drake), "Penzance" (Capt. J. Boyd), "Repulse" (Capt. J. C. Allen) and "Lizard" (Capt. J. Doake), on board of which were troops from "North America" under Lord Andrew Rollo, attacked and captured the island. Douglas Bay, to the North of Portsmouth, and Rollo Head (often called Pointe Ronde) to the South, were named after them. In 1763 the Treaty of Paris formally rendered Dominica to the English, and Brigadier-General Robert Melville was appointed as Governor of Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago. It is probable that Melville Hall on the Windward side of the island was his estate, since most of the Governors in the old days owned and worked estates in the islands which they governed. He had originally come out to the West Indies with the 30th Foot to Antigua. He was a keen planter, and had founded the Botanic Gardens at St. Vincent. In later days he became a famous Antiquarian.

**Crown Lands sold.** Hoping that the island would now be peaceably settled, and realising the need for a bigger population to stave off the constant menace of both the French and the Caribs, the English Government arranged in 1764 to sell off the Crown Lands, which constituted the bulk of the island. They were sold by Commissioners from London. The money obtained, however, amounting to £312,000, which might have remained in the island to develop it, was retained in England to replenish an impoverished exchequer, and was mostly used to form a dowry for Queen Charlotte.

The French residents were allowed to keep their own lands on condition that they took an oath of allegiance to England, which most of them did.

In 1768 Major Young was appointed Lieut.-Governor, in succession to George Scott, (after whom Scott's Head was named) who had died in that year. Two or three years later Major Young moved on to Tobago, and William Stewart was appointed to succeed him.

**A separate Colony.** But in 1771 it was felt that the growing importance of the island called for a separate governorship, and Sir William Young, now a Baronet, was made the first Governor of the new Colony. (William Stewart continued as Lieut.-Governor). It remained a separate colony until 1832, when it was finally incorporated in the Leeward Islands Colony. During Governor Young's regime much was done to strengthen the defences. "The Cabrits," two adjacent hills respectively 500 and 600 feet high, on a promontory to the north of Prince Rupert's Bay, were fortified, barracks erected, and a residence built for the General commanding troops. Also Fort Young, at Roseau, (now the Police Station) was commenced. In 1774 Thomas Shirley was appointed to succeed Sir Wm. Young, and he continued the fortification of Dominica, paying special attention to the vulnerable point of Scotts Head, or Kashacrou in the native dialect, to the south of Roseau. But his efforts were in vain, for on September 7th, 1778, the Marquis de Bouillé, Governor

of "The French Windward Islands of America," with headquarters at Martinique, made a sudden dash with an expedition against Dominica while Governor Shirley was on leave in England and before Lieut.-Governor Stewart was aware that war had again broken out between France and England.

**de Bouille's Invasion.** He arrived with 3000 regulars and 1500

volunteers in a fleet of four large Frigates and a number of Sloops, with 164 cannon and 24 brass mortars, against 94 regulars and two or three hundred militia! The enemy first of all captured, partly by surprise and partly by treachery, Fort Kashacrou. They were then able to effect a disputed landing at Point Michel, where they lost 40 men, and marched upon Roseau. On the way they were held up at Fort Loubiere, which they captured and lost again three times. Having then easily taken the higher ground commanding the town de Bouillé demanded the capitulation of the island. Stewart in the circumstances had no option but to surrender, and so Dominica changed hands once more. The French troops made a triumphal progress through the streets of Roseau, marching in slow time, a sort of early "goose-step," to the rolling of their drums, and with their hats decorated with flowers as a sign of victory. It is said that, like schoolboys, they continually pulled ugly faces at the inhabitants as they passed, in order to intimidate them! The Articles of Capitulation were generous and allowed the troops to leave "with all the honours of war," and to be sent to England under promise not to fight again against France during the war. The Militia also might retire to their houses, dispersing with all the honours of war, with two brass field pieces, arms and baggage, colours flying, drums beating, *and lighted match.*

de Bouille left the Marquis Duchilleau, a particularly cruel and ferocious type of Frenchman, in charge as Governor, and for over four years the inhabitants suffered under his harsh regime. He was suspicious, and a coward at heart, always fearing imaginary risings. He forbade more than two Englishmen to assemble in any place, he

forbade lights in the town after 9 p.m., and he even forbade anyone to walk out in the evening unless he had a lighted lantern in his hand or else a *lighted pipe in his mouth!* Two more French Governors followed him during the French occupation, namely Count de Bourgoinne and M. du Beaupé.

**Dominica restored to England.** Sir W. M. Burt, Governor of the Leeward Islands, died in 1781, and Shirley, still out of employment, was appointed to succeed him. Dominica remained in the possession of the French till 1783, when it was restored to the English by the Treaty of Versailles. It is remarkable that for all the bloodshed among these islands during the constant wars the hard won victories on either side were so often nullified shortly afterwards by a Treaty which restored the territory to the loser.

**Rodney's Victory.** In 1782 there took place, off the coasts of Dominica and within sight of some of the inhabitants, one of the most famous sea-fights in the history of the British Empire, when, on April 12th, Rodney brought the French fleet under de Grasse to action, between Dominica and the islets known as "The Saints," and achieved a glorious victory. He captured or destroyed six large ships, while Hood followed up and secured four more of them subsequently. One of the largest of the French ships, shattered almost to pieces, drifted ashore at a place still known as Rodney's rock. It was for this great victory that Rodney was given his Peerage.

On Dominica being ceded to England by the Treaty of Versailles, Capt. John Orde, R.N., brother of the first Lord Bolton, was appointed, at the age of 33, Governor; but the English did not formally enter into possession until January, 1784, when the troops marched into Roseau amid the greatest rejoicings. There were then about 1200 white settlers in the island. Almost at once there was considerable activity in putting the defences in order, and the Ordnance Stores building, now used as the Roseau Boys' School, was erected to contain munitions of war.

**Barracks and Forts.** The barracks on Morne Bruce were enlarged about this time, and these were in occupation of troops until the time of the Crimea. They were then turned into Alms Houses, and finally into an Agricultural School, but have now been disused for some decades, except for an occasional camping barracks for the Defence Force. There is an old military cemetery connected with them, but very few of the tombstones are nowadays decipherable.

Other military buildings in the neighbourhood of Roseau were Fort Demoulin, the Melville Battery, at Newtown, and another battery near Loubiere. Captain Orde was created a Baronet in 1790, and retired in order to rejoin the Navy and take part in the wars. He challenged Lord St. Vincent to a duel, and was a pall-bearer to Nelson.

**“Blanche” v. “Pique.”** On January 4th, 1795, another famous naval action, (though in miniature, being but a duel between two ships) occurred in much the same place as Rodney's battle. This was the memorable action between H.M.S., “Blanche” (Capt. R. Faulkner), guarding the Dominica waters, and the French frigate “Pique”. After bombarding each other at close quarters for an hour the two ships drew together and fouled, whereupon the British sailors lashed their ship to the “Pique”, which was still valiantly resisting, and towed her before the wind. But in this position most of the guns of the “Blanche” were useless, and the only thing to do was to take the risk of deliberately blowing away her own stern so as to get a clear line of fire on the enemy. This was done, and though almost a suicidal policy it had its effect, because the French ship was now raked by all the guns possible. Nevertheless the enemy bravely fought on, and it was not until seven hours hard fighting had passed, during which Captain Faulkner had been killed, that the Frenchman surrendered. It was indeed an epic of the sea. The nation placed a monument to Faulkner and his men in St. Paul's Cathedral.



**Hugue's invasion.** Later in the same year, when General Hamilton was Governor, the infamous Victor Hugues, the Commissioner to the West Indies from the French Revolution, who knew that there was now but one small company of regular soldiers in Dominica,\* and who also knew that there were many Frenchmen settled there who were disloyal to their adopted country, sent over a surprise expedition of some three hundred troops from Guadeloupe. They devastated various parts of the island with much cruelty. The British, however, made a determined attack on them near Pagoua Bay, on the windward coast, and defeated them. But Hugues at once despatched a further three hundred men, while simultaneously one hundred and sixty of the French planters in the neighbourhood of Colihaut rose up. Both these parties were defeated, and once again Dominica was saved. It was even possible a little later on to send over troops to help the British, who were then in possession of Martinique, to repel an attack by Hugues against that island.

Two years later, when the Hon. A. Cochrane Johnstone was Governor, Hugues made another attempt against Dominica, but this time by treachery, sending an agent named La Course to try and stir up a rising in the island. A loyal inhabitant gave the plot away and La Course was captured, tried, and condemned.

Governor Cochrane Johnstone was an extraordinary character, briefly but properly described in the Dictionary of National Biography as "an Adventurer". He was indeed a "soldier of fortune", of a type not uncommon in those days, and apparently of little or no morals. Born of the Cochrane stock, he assumed the name Johnstone on marrying into the latter family, and through influence

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\*The mortality among the troops, from wrong diet, wrong clothing, rum, yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery was enormous in those days. In the year in question it is recorded that forty out of every hundred soldiers in the West Indies had died from these "natural causes".

obtained the post of Governor and Captain-General of the forces in Dominica in 1797. The following year he was appointed in addition as Colonel of the 3th West India Regiment, and in 1879 became Brigadier of the Leeward Islands. He was suspended for gross oppression and financial irregularities,—probably in connection with military stores—in 1803, and was subsequently found guilty of the same by Court Martial. Four years later he came back to the West Indies, and, settling at Tortola, got himself made Customs Officer there, hoping at the same time to get some better appointment through his brother, Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who was Naval Commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands station, and who became Governor of Guadeloupe in 1810. But he could not live an honest life at Tortola, and became implicated in frauds on a large scale in connection with shipping matters and customs duties. Returning to England he became a Member of Parliament, and as such escaped arrest, until he was eventually expelled from the House of Commons.

**La Grange.** There were no other fights with the French for nearly ten years, and all was peaceful in the island except, during the Governorship of General Prevost, for a brief and quickly quelled mutiny at Prince Ruperts' in 1802. Dominica was beginning to prosper once more, even though the shadow of Napoleon was looming across the British Empire, and there was now 1594 white settlers and soldiers in the island. Suddenly, on February 21st, 1805, there appeared from the south, round Scotts Head, a large fleet sailing under British colours. They anchored near Roseau, but before they could complete their surprise and land troops something strange about their appearance and manoeuverings was discovered through the telescopes of the onlookers, and in reply to a gun from the shore the English flag came down with a run, the French one was hoisted, and Dominica realised that once more the enemy was at her gates. The forces on land at that time were only 200 regular soldiers consisting of the 46th Foot (Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry), a few Artillery, and

some of the 1st West India Regiment, together with the Dominica Militia, of which the St. Georges company were the strongest and the best.\*

The French Admiral Missiessy had come from Martinique with a fleet of five Sail-of-the-line, three Frigates, two Brigs, and one Schooner, while with him were 3500 soldiers under the great General LaGrange.

The French troops now being unable to land by surprise at Roseau were landed at Pointe Michel. Thence they advanced to Loubiere, where they were met and held up for some time in a defile by Major Nunn, but he was soon wounded and had to hand over the command to a Captain O'Connel. He in his turn was also wounded, but managed to fall back with his men to a point under Melville's battery near Newtown, or Charlotte Town as it was then called.

All this time a steady bombardment of Roseau had been going on from the fleet, replied to as far as possible by the shore batteries. The opposing sides being so close to each other the din and confusion must have been terrific.

The landing party not being immediately successful to the south of Roseau, LaGrange despatched another large party to land in Woodbridge Bay (Goodwill). Here for a time a hundred men of the St. George's Militia under Captain Serrant bravely resisted them, but had to fall back before superior numbers. The French in the meantime had carried the Redoubt by Morne Daniel, and about this time Roseau town, mostly consisting of wooden houses, caught fire, probably from some stray cannon-wads borne on the wind. The position was then hopeless, so General Prevost, the Governor, gave the President of the Council permission to surrender Roseau, and decided to make an attempt by a forced march to get his small remaining

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\*All the whites and the free coloured people between the ages of 18 and 50 were compelled to enroll in the militia under a penalty of "Two Joes" (£6. 12. 0.) Their uniforms were for the Company of the Line, or foot soldiers, a scarlet coat with black velvet facings, and for the artillery company, a blue coat with scarlet facings.

regular force to Prince Ruperts, to hold this at all costs as a last stronghold in Dominica. He arranged with Capt. O'Connel and his contingent of troops to meet him there, and he himself proceeded with his small party up the Roseau valley, for a time fighting a rearguard action, across the island to Rosalie, and thence along the windward coast round to Prince Ruperts and the Cabrits. O'Connel, in a wonderful march across country, aided by Carib guides, was also successful in making Prince Ruperts within two days. These were extraordinary achievements when one remembers the heavy, tight uniforms and high stocks that the unfortunate troops were clothed with in those days.

LaGrange, who had behaved with considerable humanity to the inhabitants, among them to General Prevost's family, levied a ransom on Roseau of £12,000 currency (having asked for nearly twice that amount), but he did not venture to stay indefinitely in the island. He sent the following letter to General Prevost demanding surrender.

HEADQUARTERS AT ROSEAU,  
THE 5TH VENTOSE,  
YEAR 13.

FROM,

The general of division, LaGrange, grand officer of the legion of honour, inspector-general of the gendarmerie, commander-in-chief of the troops of the expedition of the Leeward Islands.

General,

Before I commence any military operations against the fort into which it appears that you have retired I shall fulfil a preliminary duty, authorised and practised by civilised nations . . . . You witnessed with grief the melancholy fate of the town of Roseau . . . . The want of necessaries is ever attended with the most cruel consequences . . . . This consideration is more than sufficient, without reference to the particular circumstances in which you are placed, to induce you to accept the honourable

conditions which I am ready to grant you, and thus to preserve the interesting inhabitants of this colony from fresh calamities which are inseparable from the occurrences of war. In the meantime receive the assurances of the high consideration I have for you.

I have the honour to salute you,

LAGRANGE.

To which Prevost replied . . . . .

HEADQUARTERS, PRINCE RUPERT,  
Feb. 25th.

Sir,

I have had the honour to receive your letter. My duty to my King and country is so superior to every other consideration that I have only to thank you for the observations you have been pleased to make on the inevitable consequences of war.

Give me leave individually to express the greatest gratitude for your humanity to my wife and children, at the same time to request a continuance thereof, not only to her and them, but towards every object you may meet with.

I have the honour to be, etc.,

GEO. PREVOST.

Thus after perhaps the scene of greatest fighting in her history the island of Dominica did not surrender or change hands, and so was able to remain a danger spot to any French activities in these waters. The damage at Roseau was quickly repaired, while the country estates were practically uninjured. In appreciation of Prevost's stubborn defence against overwhelming numbers the House of Assembly voted him a thousand guineas to buy a sword of Honour and a service of plate, while three

thousand guineas were likewise presented to him by the West India Committee in London. A baronetcy was also bestowed upon him.\*

The "46th" were granted the privilege of having "Dominica" emblazoned on their colours, and also of wearing a special badge in memory of the occasion. In 1905 a centenary dinner was held by the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry in celebration, and old regimental plate presented by Dominica a hundred years before was brought out and used.

The tattered silk fragments of the ancient flags of the St. George's Militia still hang in the Court House of Roseau, together with two kettle drums which probably marched into action the brave heroes of Dominica's most famous fighting. After this action the prefix "Royal" was bestowed by the King on the Dominica Militia, and Queen Charlotte presented new colours to the regiment. The year 1805 was known among the inhabitants for many decades after as "LaGrange year," and nurses would frighten their little charges with threats of "LaGrange" much more successfully than with threats of "Bony."

**A cutting-out expedition.** This was the last occasion when the English and French clashed at Dominica, except for a small incident in 1806 under the Governorship of Brigadier General Dalrymple, when the crew of a small sloop-of-war, which was kept at Roseau to guard the port, decided to mutiny, and fled with her to Guadeloupe. General Ernouf, commanding the forces of that island, promptly re-manned her with 73 soldiers and sent her back again in company with another vessel to try and cut out any British merchantmen that might happen to be at Roseau. The expedition was, however, a complete failure, as both the French vessels were captured by a British man-of-war that had happened to come up in

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\*He subsequently became Governor-General of Canada, but while there was held to be responsible for two defeats in the United States war of 1812. He received some censure for this and demanded a Court of Enquiry, but died before this was granted.

the meantime. Since then the Union Jack has waved untroubled over Dominica, and the days of the French wars have receded into the dim past.

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## APPENDIX A.

### SOME OF THE GOVERNORS AND LIEUTENANT-GOVERNORS OF DOMINICA DURING THE FRENCH WARS.

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Sir Thomas Warner of St. Kitts (who held the islands under the Earl of Carlisle, the grantee of the King) sent one of his sons as first "Governor" of Dominica. Subsequently Lord Francis Willoughby of Parham (who had leased the grant from the Earl of Carlisle) appointed his Governors, Deputy Governors, or Lieutenant Governors to administer these islands. In later years their administration came directly under the Crown, through the Council of Foreign Plantations. From about 1761 to 1770 Dominica was included in "The Southern Charibby Islands," consisting of Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago, under one "Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief." It had, subordinate to him, its own Lieutenant-Governor. From 1771 to 1832 it was a separate colony having its own "Captain General and Governor-in-Chief." From 1832 it was included in the loosely joined "Leeward Islands Colony," and was under a Lieutenant-Governor, subordinate to the Governor of the Colony. Since 1871 it has formed one of the Presidencies of the Federated Leeward Islands Colony, and has been administered by Administrators, Commissioners, and Presidents from time to time.

— Warner's son, Lt.-Governor.

c. 1673. Col. Thomas Warner, Lt.-Governor.

1673-1763. Period during which no settled government by English or French.

1763. George Scott, Lt.-Governor (Brigadier-General Robert Meville being Captain-General of the Southern Charibby Islands.)

1768. Major Young, Lt.-Governor.

### A SEPARATE COLONY.

1771. Sir Wm. Young, Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief. (Wm. Stewart, Lt.-Governor).

1774. Gen. Thos. Shirley, Capt.-General and Governor-in-Chief. (1778-1783. French occupation. Marquis Duchilleau, Governor).

1783. Sir John Orde, Bart. . . . (—Bruce, Lieut.-Govr., 1790).

1793. —  
 1795. General Hamilton.  
 1797. Hon. A. C. Johnstone.  
 1803. Brig. General Prevost.  
 1805. Brig. General Dalrymple.  
 1810. General Barnes (Lieut.-Governor).  
 1812. Col. Ainslie.  
 1813. Lt.-General Fr. Maitland.  
 1814. —  
 1820. —.Whittingham.  
 1822. —.Huntingdon.  
 1826. Major General Nicholay.

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## APPENDIX B.

### FORTS, BATTERIES, ETC, AT THE TIME OF THE CAPTURE OF DOMINICA IN 1778.

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- At Prince Rupert's.* (a) Batteries on the north and south sides of the Cabrits peninsular, and an Ordnance store on the south side.  
 (b) A battery just north of Portsmouth town.  
 (c) A battery near the north side of the mouth of Picart river.

*At Petit Marigot Bay.* A battery.

*At Grand Bay (formerly Colebrook Bay).* A battery.

*At Kashacrou (or Scotts Head).* A fort and signal station.

*At Roseau.* Redoubts on the shore, north and south of the town.  
 Fort Young.  
 Melville Battery, at Newtown.  
 Bruces Hill Battery.  
 Fort de Moulin.

*At Grande Savanne.* A block-house and signal station.

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## APPENDIX C.

### SOME PRESIDENTS OF COUNCIL IN DOMINICA.

1795. —.Matson.  
 1805. —.Metcalf.  
 1813. —.Corlet.  
 1815. —.Lucas.

