
CHAPTER TWO: COLONIAL FORTIFICATIONS (THEME TWO)

JAMESTOWN, MORTON'S BAY AND JAMES FORT: MYTH, PORT AND FORT

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'In Nevis...ffive places for trade, there are but two considerable. First Charles Town where there are good dwellings and store houses...Morton's Bay, the other place of trade where there are the like houses, but few in number because the shippes doe ride at Charles Town and doe send their long boats to Morton's Bay to fetch their lading [loading] from thence'

William Stapleton in a letter to the Board of Trade and Plantations, 22nd November 1676.

In many books, tourist pamphlets, advertising materials and on maps (Hubbard 1996, Gordon 1998, NHCS 1999), a myth regarding the origins and fate of the settlement at Jamestown has been and, indeed continues, to be told. Indeed, in recent years the story has been awarded academic analysis, with archaeologists examining the legend in detail (Taylor 1999, Leech, *et al.* 2002).

This persisting story states that Jamestown was founded in 1607, by settlers, en route to Virginia. They apparently named the town after King James I. The legend further states that following a catastrophic earthquake and subsequent tidal wave, in either 1680 or 1690, the town was entirely destroyed. A few versions even suggest that church bells can sometimes be heard ringing beneath the sea. The author can find no basis for any of these statements. However, as the fort associated with Jamestown shares its name and alleged mythical fate, the author has included below her reasoning for treating the myth with great suspicion.

Foundation of Jamestown

The origins of the Jamestown foundation story are difficult to ascribe. No mention of a settlement by Virginia planters has been located in the documentary evidence for Nevis, although it is known from John Smith's account that a brief stop was made at Nevis in 1607. However, in this account, no mention is made of founding a town and it is not until the 1670s that the first accounts of a town on this site appear. From 1672, a series of documentary references attest to the presence of a settlement at this site. But, it was not called Jamestown; it was in fact called Morton's Bay.

In 1672, the first mention of Morton's Bay was made in a fort inventory of that year (Sir Charles Wheler, PRO CO1/29/161: 14/12/1672). This account stated that there was a cannon 'platform' at this site. Two further acts mentioning Morton's Bay also date from this year. The first stated that Morton's Bay, Bath Bay [Charlestown], Old Road, New Windward and Indian Castle were lawful ports of the island (PRO CO154/1/114: 1672). The second legislated that only stone or brick chimneys should be built in Charlestown and Morton's Bay (Nevis Acts, PRO CO154/2/60: 10/2/1672).

By 1675, a further Act, 'for the suppression of thatcht houses' in Morton's Bay and Charlestown was passed (Nevis Acts, PRO CO154/2: 43: 26/5/1675). This act would have been designed to stop thatched houses, which were a fire risk, being built. This would suggest that the settlement had now reached a reasonable size. By 1676, Morton's Bay was referred to as the second biggest town on the island after Charlestown, but even at this stage was described as having 'but few houses' (William Stapleton, PRO CO1/38/162: 22/11/1676).

In 1680 an act was passed 'against making dangerous fires in Charles town and Morton's Bay' (Nevis Acts, PRO CO154/2/23: 8/5/1680) and in 1682 the act for stone and brick chimneys in Charlestown and Morton's Bay was again passed (Nevis Acts, PRO CO154/2: 16/3/1682). In 1683, an act to raise a levy in Charlestown, Morton's Bay and World's End was read and passed (Nevis Acts, CSP 1681-5, No. 937: 12/2/1683). Clearly, in the 1670s and 1680s, the town was now large enough to merit regular legislation and levies. However, it was still not known as Jamestown, but as Morton's Bay.

The first mention of Jamestown appeared in late 1684, in an act which referred to the 'lawful places receiving goods' to be Jamestown and Charlestown (Nevis Act, CSP 1685, No. 1874: 27/9/1684). From this point onwards Morton's Bay vanished from the acts to be replaced by Jamestown. Previously such acts had discussed Charlestown, Morton's Bay and World's End only. Now they discussed Charlestown, Jamestown and World's End. Clearly the name had changed. The suggestion that Jamestown and Morton's Bay were one and the same is further supported by a map of 1687, drawn by William Hack, which showed a fort named Morton's Bay in the position of Jamestown.

In 1685, Jamestown, Charlestown and World's End were mentioned in a further 'levy' act (Nevis Acts, CSP 1685-8, No. 79: 19/3/1685), with the same town names being included in a 'levy' act from 1699 and in a 'chimneys' act from 1700 (Nevis Acts, CSP 1699, No. 46: 20/1/1699; PRO CO154/5: 30/1/1700; PRO CO185/1: 22/10/1700). John Johnson's description of James Fort at Jamestown stated that the location 'is commonly known as Morton's Bay' (John Johnson, PRO CO152/6: 15/9/1705), providing further proof of the identity of Morton's Bay and Jamestown as one and the same.

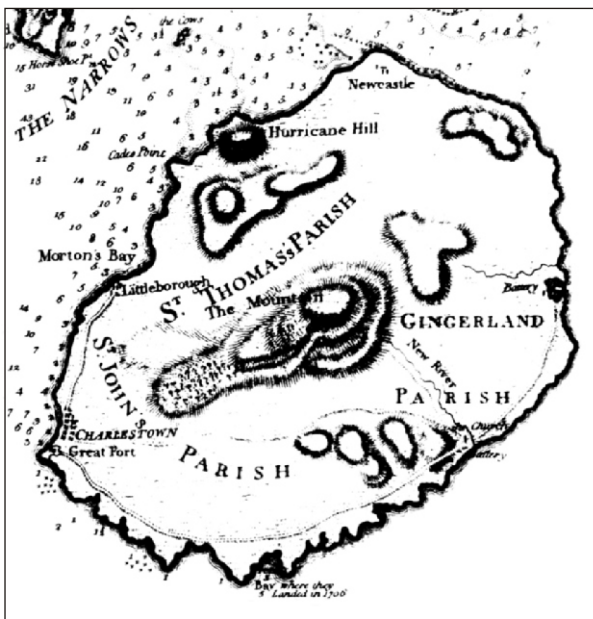


Fig. 2.1: 1810 map of Nevis showing 'Littleborough' in the position of Jamestown/Morton's Bay (PRO CO700/ST. CHRISTOPHER AND NEVIS/6).

The fort (although largely abandoned after the French attack of 1706) and the town continued to appear in records (PRO CO152/6: 12/3/1706; CO152/7: 15/12/1707; CO152/11: 1/9/1715; CO152/16/159: 3/10/1727; CO152/20/148: 31/8/1734; CO152/31/11: 23/2/1769; CO152/32: 1/2/1773; CO152/ 64: 4/1787; CO152/83: 30/6/1801) until the early nineteenth century with a map of 1810 (Figure 2.1) showing a town called Littleborough, almost certainly a corruption from the term 'Petit Bourg' shown on French maps of c.1703 and 1758 (Figures 2.2 & 2.3). However, on a further map of 1818 (Figure 2.4) no town is shown, with only a 'Pleasure House' being marked.

As has been shown above, from documentary evidence a consistent pattern for the presence of

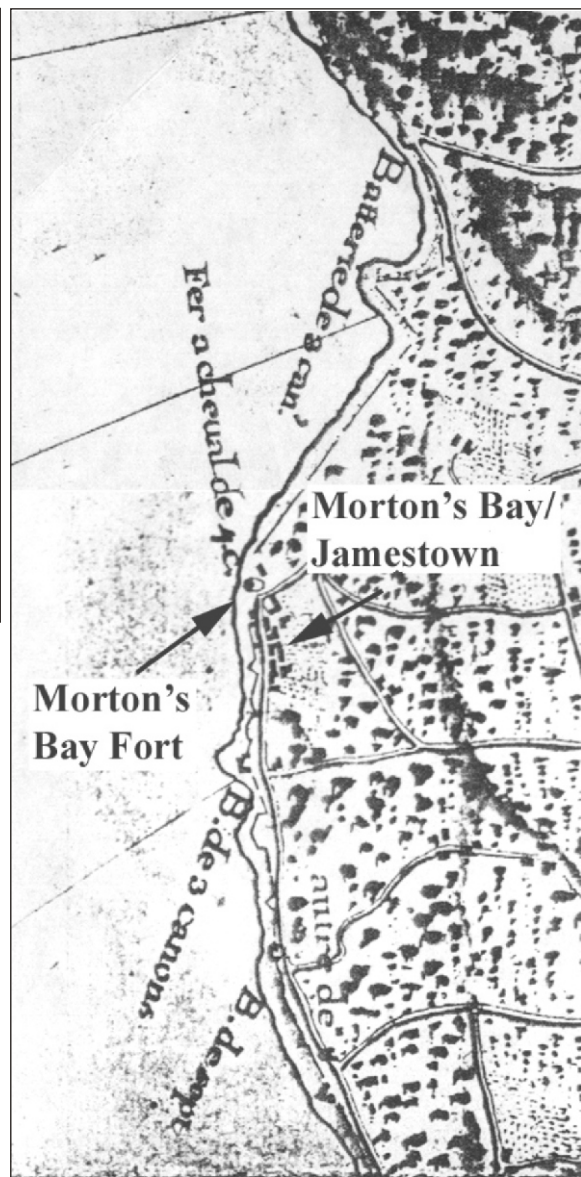


Fig. 2.2: Detail from c.1703 French map of Nevis showing Jamestown/Morton's Bay (Nevis Archive).

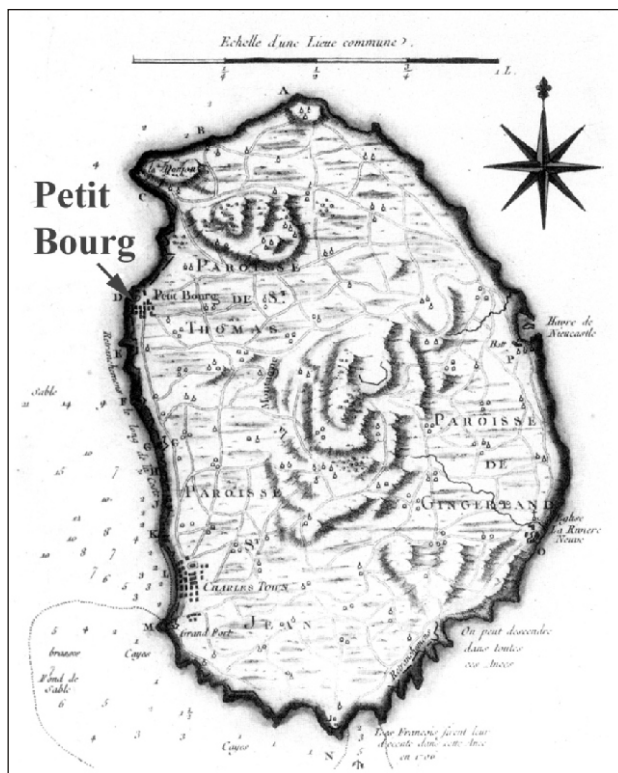


Fig. 2.3: 1758 French map of Nevis showing 'Petit Bourg' at the location of Jamestown/Morton's Bay (Nevis Archive).

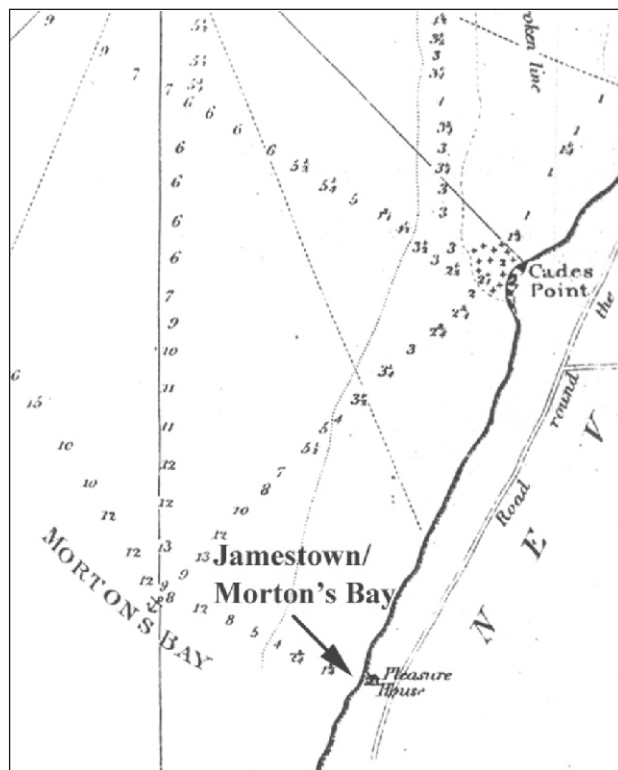


Fig. 2.4: Detail from 1818 map of northern Nevis with a 'Pleasure House' shown at Jamestown/Morton's Bay (Nevis Archive)

Morton's Bay/ Jamestown from the mid-late seventeenth to nineteenth centuries can be seen. Had Jamestown been founded and named by the Virginian voyage, it would surely have merited mention at some point prior to 1684. Indeed, its mention only after James II's accession, and the almost entire removal of the name of Morton's Bay after this date, would suggest that the town name was changed from Morton's Bay to Jamestown. Indeed, it is probable that the town only grew to a size appropriate to be graced with a royal name from the later seventeenth century. However, by late 1684, only a few months before Charles II's death, the all too apparent choice of successor to Charles II appears to have led the island to apply the name as an advance gesture of loyalty.

Artefactual Evidence

The above details the historical evidence for the founding and development of this settlement. However, without archaeological evidence, the historical framework, although consistent, cannot be confirmed or denied. It may be that the historical resource is incomplete or that the reports are biased or untrue. Archaeology offers a potentially less biased dataset and as such can be used to further examine the validity of the legend.

Pottery, clay pipes and glass bottle pieces recovered during the Time Team excavations in 1999 (Taylor 1999, Barker, *et al.* 2002: 81) show two distinct date ranges: the first from around c.1660-1720 and the second throughout the nineteenth century. Allowing for manufacture in Britain and transport to the Caribbean, the earliest date possible is likely to be around 1670 or later. In the absence of earlier material, this would fit the documentary evidence for the first founding of the town in the late seventeenth century. However, it is difficult to establish with certainty whether the settlement evidence discovered by the excavations represents seventeenth-century Morton's Bay/Jamestown proper or general activity close to the town. As such, a definite conclusion is difficult to draw although the evidence is compelling.

Of interest is the apparent absence of true eighteenth-century material, suggesting a hiatus in activity during this period. It is possible that this absence evidences a decline

in activity on the site after the French attack of 1706. This decline is evidenced in the data available for the fort on the site, which was described as having only three small cannons in 1707 (James Milliken, PRO CO152/7: 15/12/1707) and as having only one cannon in 1715, 1727 and 1734.

However, by the nineteenth century, with the forts now abandoned, slave emancipation led to an expansion of settlement activity on the island (Fog Olwig 1995). It is possible that the nineteenth-century finds from the excavations represent evidence of this expansion into the vicinity of Morton's Bay/Jamestown: the poor quality of the pottery discovered would not disprove such a theory (Barker, *et al.* 2002: 84).

The Fort

The first mention of a fort at Morton's Bay occurs in a fort inventory of 1672 (Sir Charles Wheler, PRO CO1/29/161: 14/12/1672). By 1676, Morton's Bay is described as having four cannon and in the William Hack map of 1687 is shown with seven cannon. By 1701 the fort was known as James Fort, and in Council Minutes of that year, is given three more cannon for its defence (Council of Nevis Minutes, PRO CO152/4: 7/1701). By 1701, Codrington describes the 'battlements' of the fort as being in need of

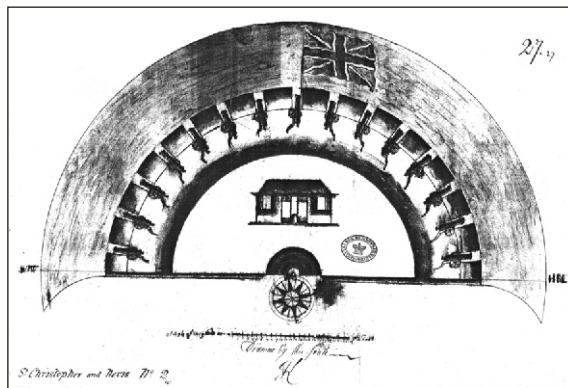


Fig. 2.5: John Johnson's Plan of St. James Fort, 1705 (PRO CO700 ST.CHRISTOPHER AND NEVIS/2: 15/9/1705).

repair. It could be seen that these repairs were necessary as the result of earthquake damage, but the more likely explanation is that the fort had received little maintenance since its construction in the late 1660s, thus making repair work urgent in the unsettled times of the 1700s.

In 1705, when John Johnson repaired the Nevis forts, St. James Fort (Figure 2.5) as it was now known, was rebuilt at a predicted cost of £1200 (Council and Assembly of Nevis Minutes, PRO CO152/6: 12/3/1706). This amount was similar to that spent at other forts, suggesting that there was no particular destruction at James Fort which needed attention. The repairs suggested by Codrington four years earlier had now been carried out.

However, following the French attack of 1706, it would appear that, although not suffering as badly as the more southern beach forts of Mathew's, Old Road and Cotton Tree, the loss of cannon from the James Fort (possibly evidenced by the sabotaged, late seventeenth-century cannon present on the fort today) would attest to at least some form of French intervention at the site. Indeed, the probable guard house wall still standing today would appear to show evidence of a possible cannon attack against this building, with a hole typical of such an assault visible on the Eastern wall (Victor Smith, pers. comm.).

By 1773, the fort still had two cannon, and although dilapidated, the walls and platforms were 'in better order than any other on the island' (Return of the Forts and Batteries of Nevis, PRO CO152/32: 1/2/1773). However, by the standards of the other forts of Nevis, which were by now almost all ruined and abandoned, this does not necessarily mean that the fort was in any sort of military preparedness. From this time the fort disappears from the records and it is likely that, following the further French attack in 1782, was abandoned.

Some two hundred years later, in the 1980s the fort was repaired and a café had been built on the site (Figure 2.6). The guard-house/magazine had fallen into ruin, with only the eastern wall surviving. The cannon of the fort were placed in new made embrasures and notice boards were erected which named the battery Fort Ashby. However, the author has been unable to locate the source for this fort name. There were Ashbys on Nevis throughout the colonial period, but there would appear to be no connection of this name with any of the historical accounts of Morton's Bay/James Fort. As such it remains an anomaly, although the presence of a Frances Ashby, who owned land on the western coast,

on the island's Council in 1875, at the same time as Alexander Burke Isles (see below) may offer a possible answer to the problem. Is this name another product of Isles' erroneous conclusions on the island's history? This suggestion seems likely, although we will probably never know for certain.



Fig. 2.6: View of Morton's Bay/James Fort from the South West

Destruction

As with the foundation of the settlement and fort, when one considers the mythical destruction of the town, no basis in fact can be established. No record of an earthquake in 1680 can be located. Indeed, the passing of acts in 1680, 1682 and 1683, prove that the town was flourishing during this period. Therefore the 1680 date can be categorically ruled out. Indeed, the absence of underwater remains and the presence of buildings and the fort some 100 metres inland would suggest that whatever happened to Morton's Bay/ Jamestown, this did not result in the sinking of the town into the sea. As such, this element of the myth can also be ruled out.

However, for 1690 the picture is less certain: an earthquake did occur in April of this year (Robson 1964). An eyewitness account of the event (Anonymous 1690) describes the sea retreating from the land before returning again with great force. It also mentions that many houses in Charlestown were destroyed. However, the account makes no mention of Jamestown or its destruction. It also does not mention the destruction of any fort. In fact Charles Fort is described as having 'escap'd' damage. In fact, none of the other low-lying forts on Pinney's Beach report any destruction. In a further account by Governor Christopher Codrington, although much of the island's stonework is described as damaged (Christopher Codrington, PRO CO152/37:4/6/1690), no record is made of a lost town or fort.

In the years immediately following the earthquake no mention is made of such huge destruction on Nevis, although numerous letters continue to be sent by the Governor home to England (For example, CSP 1689-92, No. 977: 4/7/1690; No. 1212: 26/11/1690). Had the town and fort been lost it would surely have merited some comment, particularly in the dangerous years of the late seventeenth century when the easiest landing place on Nevis (John McArthur, PRO CSP 1702, No.132) would have been left undefended. Indeed, following later disasters, such as the French attack of 1706, numerous petitions, accounts of damages, etc. were sent to England. In Jamaica, where an earthquake in 1692 caused the destruction of the town of Port Royal, many accounts of the disaster survive (Pawson and Buisseret 1975). No such documents could be located for the 1690 Nevis event.

In addition to the overwhelming documentary evidence, recent geological work carried out in the area, although preliminary, has not been able to locate any tsunami related deposits (Andrews 2001: 68). Again, when considering the artefactual assemblage from the Time Team site, the consistent range of material dating from the period between 1660 and 1700 and the apparently undisturbed contexts uncovered would suggest that the site has not been subject to an utterly destructive tsunami. In light of all the above evidence such a catastrophic event appears extremely unlikely. In fact it would appear odd that the theory continues to be explored.

Although mention of a tidal wave is made in the 1690 account, great store should not necessarily be set upon this. In the Caribbean, where hurricanes and earthquakes are relatively common, at least fifty tsunami/tidal waves were recorded between 1530 and 1860 (Lander 2001, Lander and Whiteside 2001). However, only fifteen of the reported events are associated with significant damage (Lander 2001: 1). Indeed, inundation by the sea is not uncommon in Nevis with the hurricanes of recent years (e.g. Lenny and Georges) having caused water of several feet in depth to cover Main Street in Charlestown for days. Although damaging and inconvenient, generally these inundations both historically, and in the present, cause few long-term inconveniences.

Indeed, the attitudes of those brought up in the temperate British climate as opposed to those possessed by the hurricane weary Nevisians often show a great difference. For instance the seventy miles per hour winds in the British 'hurricane' of October 1987 caused widespread destruction and panic amongst the inhabitants of Southern England. However, the Caribbean Hurricane Bertha, witnessed by the author in July 1996, which had slightly higher winds than the 1987 British version, excited little attention from the inhabitants of Nevis. Windows were boarded and provisions were bought, but apart from that life carried on as normal.

Of course, larger hurricanes, such as Lenny in 1999 and George in 1998, pose a much greater threat to life and can cause immense damage to Nevisian property. However, with around one major hurricane per year in recent years, the ability of the islanders to swiftly repair and get back to normal is evidenced by the continuing prosperity of the island. It is likely that this survival mentality was also present historically. Therefore, we should not necessarily judge the effects of such events through sensitive European eyes; rather we should look at the adaptations and attitudes, which allowed, and continue to allow, the Caribbean islanders to survive and flourish in spite of these events.

The making of the myth

In the absence of secure evidence for the Virginia Jamestown foundation and for the earthquake destruction, the origins of such a wonderful myth must be sought elsewhere. During the course of the author's research into the forts of Nevis, a possible source for this story has become apparent.

The origins of the earthquake story appear to be found in a history of Nevis made by a Nevisian planter, John Alexander Burke Isles. Burke Isles was a Justice of the Peace and had been Colonial Secretary in the 1870s. In 1871, he wrote his 'An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis, West Indies' (Burke Isles 1871). Typically Victorian, the account makes mention of great disasters, heathen savages and great wars, all written in a flamboyant and extravagant prose. For example, the Newcastle Redoubt is described as a mausoleum through which the Caribs 'shot their last arrows and died in the hope of that bright reversion of which heaven itself had never bereft the savage beast' (Burke Isles 1871).

Within the history, Burke Isles describes how, on 20 April 1680, 'the capital Jamestown situate on the north west margin of the sea coast was submerged by an earthquake, carrying with it, its population and wealth' (Burke Isles 1871). He also describes 'relics of this terrible visitation' in the form of fissures. However, it is probable that the fissures referred to are in fact the ghuts (gullies), caused by run off water from Mount Nevis rather than by earthquakes. However, Burke Isles neglects to mention his sources for such a theory and if his deductions concerning the Newcastle Redoubt are anything to go by, a healthy scepticism is advisable. Indeed, having been incorrect in his interpretation of the Newcastle Redoubt as a Carib structure, and having got the date of the earthquake event provably wrong, it would seem

foolhardy to regard his story concerning the loss of Jamestown as anything other than an unsupported romantic account.

Included in the account is a map, which pinpoints the location of the disaster in the vicinity of Morton's Bay. This marking persists to the present day and is shown on the modern Ordnance Survey map of Nevis printed in 1984. The author discovered a possible reason for this continuation in the Ordnance Survey offices in Southampton, U.K. Within the St. Kitts and Nevis collection of maps, a War Office map from 1920, entitled 'The Presidency of St. Kitts and Nevis' by Major J. A. Burdon is marked with 'site of Jamestown, destroyed 1680'.

A further note on the map states that 'Nevis is based on Isle's map of 1870: the coastline and hill features being taken from the admiralty chart of 1848'. Clearly, Isle's map influenced the first 'official' map of the island and, once established in 1920 by the War Office, the myth of Jamestown's destruction, despite information to the contrary, was crystallized for the 20th century and beyond. One can only hope that future archaeological and historical work at Jamestown will help to lay this myth to rest once and for all.

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