

The Brereton surname in Trinidad



The beachfront at Moruga, South Trinidad, looking West, March 2013

By

*Ashton Samuel Brereton
of
Cachipe, Sangre Grande and Champs Fleurs*

July 2013

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Preface

For many years now, but particularly in the last decade or so, many persons who either carry the surname **Brereton** or are related to individuals who do, have been attempting to research the movements of their forefathers to and within some countries in the English-speaking world. This short paper is my contribution to this on-going research. The focus is on the story of how and when the surname Brereton came to **Trinidad and Tobago**.

My findings – and unanswered questions – are directed to all who have or believe that they may have connections to the Brereton families and their descendants in Trinidad. Those who will be interested now live in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia and in the Caribbean – in Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent, Antigua, Barbados and Guyana. In Trinidad, the descendants of the families originating in the south of Trinidad, i.e. from Princes Town to Moruga on the southern coast of the island, will find this work particularly relevant.

In pursuit of certainty for the results of this research, I joined the **National Geographic's Genographic Project – Geno 2.0** –“a real-time scientific research effort ... to help to answer the fundamental questions of where we originated and how we came to populate the earth”. The results of my DNA test, conducted over a period of eight weeks, as part of the **Geno 2.0** project, have given me a comprehensive and scientific perspective on migration out of Africa and Europe and provided me with specific information that reinforces old family narratives about the Brereton lineage in Trinidad. I am pleased to have been able to contribute to the continuing documentation of the world-wide migration map being produced through the Genographic Project.

I trust that my findings and questions will contribute to the continuing search for information about our past particularly as it relates to the lives of our forefathers in the Caribbean.

Ashton Samuel Brereton
Champs Fleurs
Trinidad and Tobago
July 2013

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I - Introduction

Some months ago, one of my nieces, in the course of a work-related interaction in the south of Trinidad, happened to mention that she was related to a Brereton family. She was promptly asked: "Which one, the white or the black ones?" This brief episode highlights the development of the races – particularly Africans and Europeans, in Trinidad and Tobago. More directly to the point, for my research, it focused on the single unchallenged reality about the Brereton families in Trinidad - going back five to six generations. That reality is that from the beginning of the lineage in Trinidad, there have always been white, coloured and phenotypically black Brereton families. The key question, currently being asked by Brereton descendants of all hues, is whether all the Brereton families in Trinidad came from related forefathers.

There are old and new family narratives, of course, but I decided that I would start my research by locating whatever documentation existed about the arrival of the first Brereton in Trinidad, and then cross-checking that information against oral history accounts.

Sources

I knew of course that I needed to secure documentation such as birth or death certificates, immigration records, wills, marriage certificates, baptismal records - in order to ensure that my conclusions would be correct. Much to my consternation, I soon discovered that there are no documents, from the 19th Century, recording the names of free persons migrating to or from Trinidad or anywhere else in the Caribbean for that matter. Planters/slave-owners, indentured servants and slaves were meticulously recorded for obvious reasons – but not free persons – whether white, coloured or black. This situation continued until well into the 20th Century. As a consequence, unless the first Brereton coming to Trinidad was a planter, a slave or an indentured servant, there was little chance of my locating any travel documentation that would definitively locate the year and place of his arrival in Trinidad.

Additionally, birth records in 19th century Trinidad were problematic. When I sought, from the Registrar General's Department, documentation on the date of birth of my paternal grandfather, I found that the birth record, supposedly his, simply recorded him as "man-child" – no first name or surname. However, his mother's full name was recorded. I subsequently discovered that this practice persisted well into the 20th century, with names of new-borns mainly recorded from the date of baptism. (The consequence of this practice, even to today, is that for many seeking the new computerised birth certificates in Trinidad, they have to get affidavits from persons older than they - relatives included - swearing to the veracity of their names.) For my research, this meant that it was even more difficult than I had anticipated, to get confirmation of names of ancestors and associated life events. It has also meant that oral history, particularly as it relates to how old a relative was recorded or reported to be when he or she died, was very important for locating the approximate year of birth – which as I discovered is often more important than first-names in the tracing of lineage. The situation with respect to death certificates is no better. I paid for several searches for death certificates and turned up only wills and applications for probate and letters of administration.

So I realised that in the absence of birth and/or death certificates – in Trinidad - I had to find other documented sources of information to validate/cross-check the oral family history. Fortunately there are other sources. These sources include: selected genealogical studies that have been done

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on families and villages in Trinidad¹; original historical records of life events in the British West Indies - including *All Slave Registers of former British Colonial Dependencies, 1812-1834* - available at online databases such as *Ancestry.com* and *Grow Your Own Family Tree*; documents such as wills, I Crown Land grants; and where available birth and death certificates from the Registrar General's Department, Ministry of Legal Affairs, in Trinidad. Armed with these resources I was able to check the various narratives about the arrival of the Brereton name in Trinidad.

¹ **John Milton Hackshaw** – Two among many - The Genealogy of Bashana Evins and Amphy Jackson;
John McNish Weiss – Free Black American Settlers in Trinidad 1815-1816;
Alfred B. Huggins – The Saga of the Companies

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II - The context

The first occurrence of the Brereton name in connection with the Caribbean was in **1659**. In that year, the "*Bristol Registers of Servants*" showed one **John Brereton** – "Cloth-worker of Mitcheldean, Glos" – leaving Bristol on December 4th 1659, as an indentured servant, to Thomas Liston, planter, in Barbados, for five years. Not surprisingly since John was an indentured servant, there is no further record of him. However, in the period between December 1659 and August 1st, 1834, when all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated, there are scores of references in Barbados to the name Brereton in parish records of births, baptisms, marriages, deaths, wills and from 1812, in Slave Registers. And at Emancipation, there were two Brereton slave owners in Barbados, and one in Antigua.² So, the Brereton name has been in the Caribbean since 1659 – but not in Trinidad.

Trinidad was a Spanish colony until captured by the British in 1797. While it is true that British colonists and investors flocked into Trinidad after its capture, and some had in fact settled here even before 1797, "anxious to develop sugar plantations at a time when sugar prices were artificially high"³, there is no record of any Brereton,- whether planter, overseer, soldier, other free white, white indentured, free coloured, free black or enslaved in Trinidad in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. So when did the first Brereton arrive in Trinidad? Oral family history provides clues.

The Brereton arrival narratives

There are two strands of narratives about the arrival of the Brereton name in Trinidad. One strand is from Brereton descendants who were either born, grew up and lived in the north of Trinidad – Maracas Valley, St. Joseph, and Port of Spain-- or were born outside of Trinidad, in North America, UK and Australia, and have since become interested in tracing a known Brereton family connection to Trinidad. The narratives from this group I call the "the northern narratives". The other narrative strand is from Brereton families who were generally born and raised mainly in the south of Trinidad from Princes Town to Moruga on the southern coast. These narratives I call "the southern narratives". There are many descendants of Brereton families from this area who have migrated to North America or the UK and, like those in the northern narratives, many of them have also developed a keen interest in tracing the Brereton lineage in Trinidad.



Trinidad – showing original centres of the Brereton name – North and South.

² George Cholmeley Brereton [54 Enslaved], Richard Cholmley Brereton [85 Enslaved] and Robert Brereton Antigua, [2 Enslaved]: from University College London website : *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*.

³ **Bridget Brereton**, *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783-1962*

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The Northern Narratives

The northern narratives come from Brereton descendants currently living in Trinidad, Australia, Ireland, England and various cities in the US and Canada, who are descendants of individuals with the Brereton surname and who came to Trinidad at different times from around the 1840s to around the 1870s. These narratives are all short and uncomplicated but they provide the names of Brereton migrants to or transients in Trinidad. The possible years of their arrival and even the names of their spouses and children are also provided. I refer here to settlers/migrants to Trinidad such as:

- **William Thomas Brereton** from *England* described as possibly a soldier/planter – reported to have come to Trinidad circa **1840** with one son and had another – **Thomas Andrew Brereton**- born in Trinidad in **1847**;
- **Hugh Brereton** from *Ireland* reported as coming to Trinidad with three brothers in the **mid 1800s**; and
- **Edward Brereton** around the 1870s or **early 1880s** – who lived with his family first in North Trinidad and then elsewhere in the country.

The most notable characteristic about these narratives is that they are all relatively new, as narratives go, having surfaced mainly during the mid-20th into the 21st Century. They are significantly different in content from the much more dramatic and colourful southern narratives.

The Southern Narratives

There are two old, similar southern narratives about the Brereton name in Trinidad.

The first southern narrative

This narrative says that the Brereton name in Trinidad came from “three white slaves”, brothers,- who escaped from Barbados and landed in Moruga on the South coast of Trinidad. They are reported to have split up and started families in different parts of south and possibly north Trinidad. No details are available about dates and names for this narrative.

The second southern narrative

This narrative - a variation on a theme - also has three brothers coming from Barbados. Their names are reported to be **Prince William Brereton, John Edward Brereton and Solomon Brereton**. One telling of this narrative has them arriving in Trinidad sometime around 1797-98. They are reported to have been the sons of one John Brereton and they are described as former white planters in the sugar industry in Barbados. The narrative goes on to record that on their arrival in Trinidad they acquired properties in the southern part of the country. One or more is reported to have subsequently cohabited with descendants of the Merikins⁴.

⁴ **Bridget Brereton, Daily Express (Trinidad), June 6, 2013, p.12:**. “During the war of 1812 between America and Britain, many enslaved African-Americans in the southern states joined the British forces, responding to the promise of freedom if they did. Most were enlisted in the Corps of Colonial Marines. After the war, recognizing that their fate when the British left would have been grim indeed, the British military and naval authorities shipped them out of the United States. Some were settled in Trinidad with their families, starting in 1815. This is the origin of the Company Villages in southern Trinidad.” The new arrivals were simply called the “Americans”. This was later shortened to “Merikins”.

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The third southern narrative

The third southern narrative was relayed to me in April 2013, from a male Brereton, aged 94 and still coherent, the only surviving grandchild of one of four Brereton sons. He reports that his grandfather came from Barbados, his name was John and he had four sons, all born in St. Mary's Village, south Trinidad, in the area of the Company Villages. The four took up residence in different parts of the country. Edward, known as "Saiee", settled in Cachipe Village on the Moruga Road; Prince William went to the Princes Town area, a third son called "Dandy" lived in St Mary's Village also on the Moruga Road and the fourth son, Lloyd, known as "Yallah", lived in the 6th Company Village.

Now what can be made of these narratives? How much of them can be validated? What are the differences? What are the common elements?

Fundamental difference between the "northern narratives" and" southern narratives"

Unlike the "northern narratives", which are essentially seeking to get information on known individuals who reportedly arrived here in the mid1800s and later, the "southern narratives" all seek to do two things. First these narratives seek to establish the race and physical appearance of the first Brereton to arrive in Trinidad. And second the "southern narratives" seek to explain how and why the Brereton name spread to North and South Trinidad and why, today, there are black, coloured (mixed-race) and phenotypically white Brereton families in Trinidad.

While there are those differences between the two sets of narratives, there is one common thread through four of them.

Three or four brothers

Three southern narratives and one northern narrative report the appearance of three or four brothers together at the same time in Trinidad. (Of course the narratives which come from the south probably came from the same original source and simply got modified over time.)

Where from

The fourth of these narratives about the arrival of brothers introduces a twist to the history by identifying Ireland as their point of departure. The earlier southern narratives all talk about arrival in Trinidad of the Brereton brothers from Barbados.

As for the other elements of these narratives, we have examined them all and arrived at certain conclusions.

White slaves or ex-planters or soldiers/planters or brothers from Ireland

There were no "white slaves" in the strict legal meaning of the word "slave", in Barbados or anywhere else in the British Empire for that matter. There were however whites whose living and working conditions were, in the eyes of many, equivalent to slavery or worse. They were brought to Barbados as indentured servants for five years and then cut loose to survive as they might. So they were called, among other pejorative terms, "white slaves". And after the end of African slavery in 1834, for a number of reasons, their conditions worsened and those who could, left a crowded Barbados in search of a better life.

So it is possible that three white brothers from Barbados – with the surname Brereton - arrived in Trinidad in search of a better life sometime after August 1st 1834.

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The second southern narrative identifying the first Brereton brothers arriving in Trinidad as three ex-plantation owners, the sons of one John Brereton of Barbados, appears plausible- but only on the surface. For historical reasons explained earlier, the reported date of their arrival in Trinidad 1797-98 is probably wrong. If it occurred at all, it would have been more than likely after the end of slavery in 1834. The reported subsequent dispersal of the name Brereton to Cachipe Village, Moruga, St Mary's Village, one or more of the Company Villages in the Princes Town area, and to North Trinidad, supports the assertion that the brothers settled in different locations. The fundamental problem with this narrative however is that there is no record of a John Brereton, land owner/slave owner with three sons **in Barbados**, at this time, from the late 18th Century to around 1834. So, they were not ex-planters, nor the sons of ex-planters. None of the relevant records in Barbados or Trinidad shows three planter brothers, or the sons of planters with the surname Brereton.

As for arrival from Ireland, while the surname exists in Ireland, as it does in England, we have unearthed no information on the arrival of four Irish brothers named Brereton in Trinidad in the 1850s. It is however possible that they did arrive here but we are unlikely to ever unearth those records of arrival in Trinidad, since they were not slaves, indentured servants or planters.

Similarly, we have not located any record of a soldier/planter coming to and working in Trinidad in the mid-1850s. But it is possible that he did come to Trinidad at that time.

And, finally from the detailed historical records available, we can say with certainty that there were no planters in Trinidad with the surname Brereton, before or shortly after emancipation.

Conclusions from the narratives about the first Brereton in Trinidad

We examined all the narratives against information we have located - or failed to locate - in available historical records of life events such as births, deaths, and marriages in the Caribbean for the 19th Century. We took account of the socio-economic conditions of the Caribbean, particularly Barbados and Trinidad in the same period, and we reached the following preliminary conclusions:

1. Although there is no available travel/passenger documentation, it is probable that the Brereton surname in the south of Trinidad first came to Trinidad via Barbados.
2. The Brereton name came to Trinidad EITHER through the arrival of three coloured/mixed race, perhaps phenotypically white brothers born in Barbados, shortly thereafter being joined in Trinidad by their father OR through one coloured and perhaps phenotypically white male, who came to Trinidad from Barbados and who subsequently cohabited with either a descendant of a Merikin or a coloured woman in Trinidad, and fathered four sons.
3. The arrival of the name in Trinidad would have been some time after August 1st, 1834.
4. All Brereton families in the area between Princes Town and Moruga on the south coast were established as a consequence of the dispersal of "the Brereton brothers" to different locations: Princes Town, New Grant/Torrib Trace, 6th Company Village, St. Mary's Village and Cachipe Village. Consequently, the families from these areas and their descendants are, in all likelihood, related.
5. Other Brereton families were established in the north of Trinidad from probably the mid-19th Century, by migrants from Ireland and possibly elsewhere – Barbados included. Connections between the north and south families cannot be ruled out.

These conclusions will now be tested against known and documented family history.

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One Brereton generation back from today

I start with my father.

My father was Fitzroy Brereton and he was born in 1914, in Cachipe Village, on the Moruga Road, Trinidad. He died on March 26th, 1987 in Sangre Grande, Trinidad, where he had put down roots for this branch of the family some 69 years ago from today.

Fitzroy had eight siblings, five sisters and three brothers, all of whom I knew from childhood. Their names are as follows:-

Siblings ▾	
	Albertina Brereton
	Alfred Brereton
	Estella Brereton
	Leolf Brereton
	Margie Brereton
	Meta Brereton
	Stanley Brereton
	Toya Brereton

As at the time of writing this paper, July, 2013, Albertina is the only surviving sibling. She is 92 years old and lives in Moruga, Trinidad, a few miles away from the village where she was born.

Two Brereton generations back from today

Next in line going back in time is my father's father, called "Poppa" by his grandchildren, and universally known by adults as "Johnny" Brereton. His correct first name is reported to be Edward and his full name was probably John Edward Brereton.

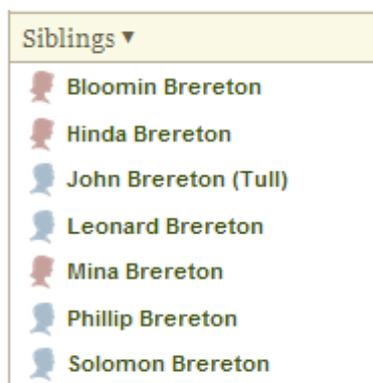
"Johnny" Brereton, Trinidad, 1873-1968

Johnny Brereton, my paternal grandfather, is recorded in oral history, reconfirmed today, as being 95 years old when he died in 1968. This puts his date of birth as sometime in 1873. He was born in Cachipe Village, and was buried there in 1968. (I tried and failed to get from the Registrar General's Department in Trinidad, copies of birth and death certificates for him. All I succeeded in getting was a hand-written note acknowledging the birth of a "Manchild" in 1873 to one Hannah Silverthorne⁵. This information confirmed what I had been told orally that Johnny's father, my paternal great grandfather, had married a Merikin descendant. Historical records show that Hannah Silverthorne and two siblings had accompanied her father to Trinidad from the USA. It is likely that the Hannah giving birth in 1873 to Johnny Brereton was her daughter or possibly granddaughter.)

⁵ She was a direct descendant of a Free Black American Settler Joseph Silverthorne, who enlisted in the Colonial Company 2nd Company in the Chesapeake, USA, May to October 1814, and upon arrival in Trinidad was allocated plot No. 11 in Division B, 2nd Company, just west of Savana Grande, now Princes Town. **John McNish Weiss**, Free Black American Settlers in Trinidad 1815-1816.

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Johnny had seven siblings, four brothers and three sisters. Like Johnny, they were all born in Trinidad, and probably all in Cachipe Village. Their names were:-



Johnny's wife, with whom he had nine children, Fitzroy and his siblings, was Rose "Kitty" Williams, 1883-1964, a direct descendant⁶ of one of the Merikins who lived in 3rd Company Village, outside Princes Town. (Johnny had one other son, Irving Brereton, before he married Kitty.)

Three Brereton generations back from today – Johnny's Father

It is from this point back that there is some uncertainty.

Three or four brothers

Oral family history records **Johnny Brereton's father**, my paternal great grandfather, as universally known as "Saiee" or "Syee". His proper first-name was Edward. There is unanimity also that Johnny's father was one of **three OR four brothers**. The first and second southern narratives – three "white slaves" and "three ex-planters" – describe three brothers while the third has four brothers. Of the two narratives with three brothers, one lists their names as:

1. Prince William Brereton
2. John Edward Brereton and
3. Solomon Brereton

The third narrative, which reports four brothers born at St Mary's Village, South Trinidad, also names Prince William as one of them, but has other names that are different from John Edward and Solomon. The names given in this narrative, in addition to Prince William, are:-

1. Edward
2. "Dandy"
3. "Yallah"/"Yaller"

In the absence of documentation, the certainties that I take from this discussion are that Johnny Brereton's father's first-name was Edward Brereton and that he was universally known by his nickname "Saiee" or "Syee"; and that he was one of three or four brothers with the surname Brereton who lived in the area between Princes Town and Moruga.

Now the question is: who was "Saiee's" father and from whence did he come?

⁶ Rose "Kitty" Williams was a grand-daughter of James Downing, Colonial Marines 3rd Company, Chesapeake, USA, 1814, and given plot No. 33 in Division A. *ibid*

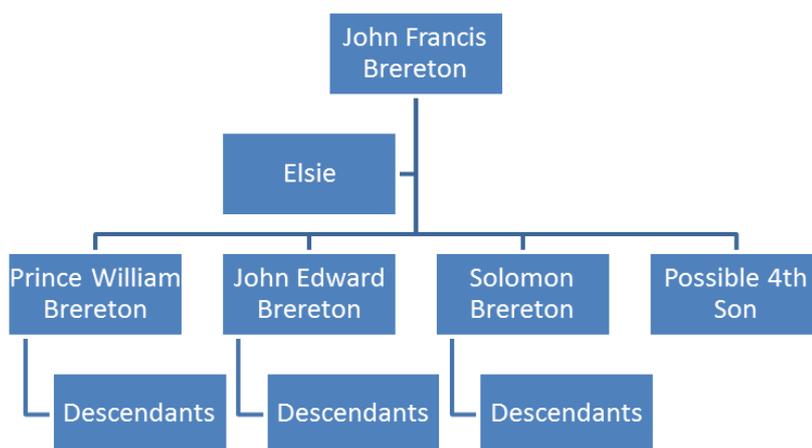
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Four Brereton generations from today – the father of the Brereton brothers

Three ⁷ living relatives state, categorically, that one **John Brereton** was the father of Prince William Brereton, one of the three brothers who started the family line in south Trinidad. One of these relatives, Robin Brereton, also advised that John Brereton's middle name was **Francis**. And Merle supplied the name of his wife, Elsie.

I have found no information that in any way contradicts this information about John Francis Brereton. Consequently I have concluded that the father of the Brereton brothers in south Trinidad was **John Francis Brereton**.

The first line of the Brereton family tree in the south of Trinidad therefore would look like this. (A more detailed chart is shown as an attachment – using the writer as the starting point.)



Is there any documentation supporting any of this? Yes there is some.

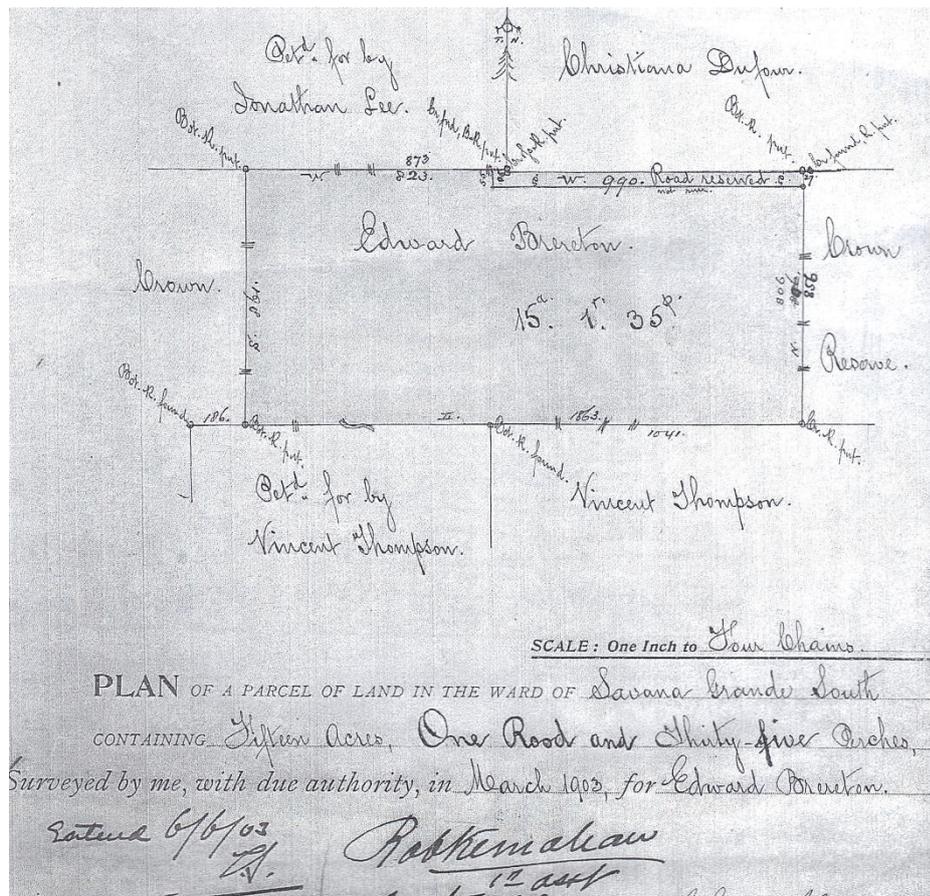
John Francis Brereton in Trinidad

The most recent southern narrative records that four sons were born to a Brereton male in St. Mary's Village. We have already established that the Brereton referred to was **John Francis Brereton**. So the quest was to find documentation that located him in that area. This we have now done.

The official state land records show **John Francis Brereton** owning two parcels of land in the area then known as Savana Grande, on Samuel Cooper Road, in the general area of the 3rd and 6th Company Villages and Indian Walk, off the Moruga Road in South Trinidad. The surveyor's reports and cadastral map for the area show that in **December 1875**, John Francis Brereton bought 15 acres from the Crown, and in **1895**, a plot of land comprised of 7 acres

⁷ Merle Ling, grand-daughter of Prince William Brereton; Elton Brereton, son of Prince William; and Robin Brereton, grandson of Philip Hezekiah Brereton, brother of "Johnny" Brereton

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Original documents from the Lands and Surveys Division of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and from the Registrar General's Department, show that one Edward Brereton paid to the Crown, on 15th June 1903, the princely sum of \$74.25 for a "Royal Grant for Crown Lands Sold" to him. The size of the holding was fifteen acres, one rood and thirty-five perches. The cadastral map for this land shows it to be in the location in Cachipe Village where my siblings, cousins and I often, during our "August vacation", accompanied my paternal grandfather – "Johnny" Brereton – who lived in Cachipe. The entrance to this land was via Brereton Trace in Cachipe Village.

So it is confirmed through documentation and family history that John Francis Brereton and one of his sons acquired land and lived in the areas then known as Savana Grande and Cachipe Village. However there are still some questions to be answered.

More questions

First, how and why did John Francis Brereton appear in Trinidad?

After exhaustive searches in the databases available to us and searches at the Registrar General's Office in Port of Spain, Trinidad, we have failed to locate any documentation to show whether John Francis was born here, or came here as a child with his family, or migrated here as an adult. So we do not know for certain from whence he and/or his father came. We have established that he was not a slave-owning planter, a white indentured servant or a slave. We have checked all of the available life event records as well as the meticulously

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kept Trinidad Slave Registers from 1812 to 1834, and can find no trace of him or his family. We are still no closer establishing how he came here.

So the fact that John Francis first purchased land in 1875 is all that we have by way of documentation that can point us in the direction of the date of his arrival in Trinidad. We have no documentation to show when/if he arrived before 1875. However we have the confirmed year of birth of one of his grandsons – “Johnny Brereton” – as 1873 in Trinidad. And we have information that Johnny’s father Edward was also born in Trinidad. So we have used these two bits of data and calculated that John Francis was probably born in the 1820s and had sons around the 1850s and after – in Trinidad. We know from Merle Ling that one of his sons, Prince William, was born in 1865. But we have no definitive information on this.

Notwithstanding this, however, we are confident in our final conclusion.

The first Brereton in Trinidad: Conclusion

From all of the historical and sociological circumstances of Trinidad and Barbados in the 19th Century, before and after emancipation, we are confirming our preliminary conclusion reached earlier, that John Francis Brereton was a free man of colour, perhaps phenotypically white, with Northern European ancestry from his father, and African or coloured/mixed race ancestry from his mother. If he was born in Trinidad his mother would in all probability have been a descendant of one of the Merikins from one of the Company Villages in Trinidad close to where he had settled. If he was born in Barbados, on the other hand, his mother could have been a freed or enslaved African woman or a free woman of colour. (This conclusion of mixed-race ancestry is confirmed by DNA test results of the writer, a great, great grandson of John Francis Brereton, showing Northern European ancestry from his, the writer’s father, who was a great grandson of John Francis.)

His father was not a slave owner either in Barbados or in Trinidad, as his name would have appeared in the list of slave owners seeking compensation after emancipation. Whatever the final truth about this we are certain that he was the first Brereton in the south of Trinidad, in the area from Princes Town to the coast at Moruga.

While we are certain that John Francis was the first Brereton to arrive in the south of Trinidad, he may not have been the first Brereton to arrive here. The “northern narratives” raise the possibility that other Breretons from Ireland may have been the first here; and that subsequent arrivals of males with the Brereton surname were either relatives or from different branches of the Brereton family from Barbados, Ireland and England. Research into the Brereton arrivals in Trinidad from around the middle of the 19th Century is now indicated.

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A Brereton top level family tree

