

Peter Rose Street

Once in a while – although very infrequently nowadays – someone raises questions about Georgetown's nomenclature, and by implication that of coastal Guyana as a whole. This time it has come through the vehicle of a Diaspora column. The particular concern of the writer is Peter Rose Street in Queenstown in addition to Croal Street. The last mentioned was named after John Croal, a planter in the slavery era and Georgetown's first mayor, while the first named had also been a planter in the same period as well as an attorney for various plantations. In addition, he had played a major role in colony affairs, including in the Court of Policy and College of Keizers.

Peter Rose is not an obscure figure as far as historians locally are concerned, and Ms Cecelia McAlmont wrote her MA thesis on him, as well as articles which appeared in the History Gazette and this newspaper, work which was founded on research in the Guyana National Archives and other places. The question is whether the status of the two men constitutes sufficient grounds to erase them from the name-plates on our streets, as is now being proposed.

The first thing to be said is that if the names of Peter Rose and Croal Streets are to go, one would end up having to rename much of Georgetown in the first instance, and by extension the vast majority of settlements on the coastland. Most of our villages carry plantation names or the names of their owners, and in one or two instances, of their relatives. In fact the capital supplies two examples of the latter – Kitty and Eve Leary. The last name derives from a woman who

was married to an English planter from Antigua called Cornelius Leary, and who inherited the estate when he died. Although she remarried, taking on the surname of her new husband, the plantation name did not change.

For Guyanese 'Eve Leary' has a special resonance about it, since it is the police headquarters, and it is difficult to imagine any of our political parties lining up to provide a designation which could be substituted for it.

As for some of the other candidates with connections to the period of enslavement, Joseph Bourda cannot be omitted, since his name is recorded in a ward, a street, a market and a cemetery. He was at one time owner of Vlissen-gen, which name is preserved in Vlissengen Road. Then there is the ubiquitous Thomas Cuming, the son of Lachlan Cuming, a Jacobite, it is thought, who at some point after the suppression of the 1745 rising in Scotland took refuge in Dutch controlled Demerara, where he became a plantation owner. His son Thomas laid out what is now the ward of Cummingsburg, in addition to which we have Cummings Street, the Cummings Canal, and on the East Coast, Cummings Lodge. (Later Gazeteers added an 'm' to the original name.) His Bel Air plantation is also reflected in a ward name.

There are others too such as J H Albouy who has bequeathed his name to the ward of Albouystown as well as Albouys Street, in addition to George Lacy, a leaseholder for a part of the Vlissengen estate, after whom Lacytown is named. But the planter who was familiar to the Georgetown schoolchildren of an earlier generation, at least, was Pierre Louis de Saffon, whose name is remembered in Saffon

Street. Tradition has it that de Saffon killed his brother in a duel over a woman, and he fled France taking up residence in Demerara where he came to own three plantations. They all carried names which reflected his remorse – Le Regret, La Penitence and Le Repentir. The name of the first of these has not survived into modern times, but the other two are well known to Georgetowners, the last of them representing as it happens a rather apt appellation for the city's main cemetery.

The second thing to be said is that Georgetown was carved out of the plantations of the lower Demerara River; the frontlands initially, and later the backlands of Thomas and Vlissengen in particular. In fact Queenstown, the ward where Peter Rose Street is located, had been part of Thomas Plantation which was sold by Quintin Hogg to the City Council in 1887.

In short, the history of Georgetown for the most part is inscribed in the names of its wards and its streets, while its layout furnishes evidence of its plantation structure. Its grid-like pattern was necessitated by the fact that it had to take account of the dams, trenches and canals which bounded the fields it was built on. It was a Dutch consultant who had worked on a project to have Paramaribo in Suriname listed as a World Heritage Site, who pointed out to the authorities and citizenry that Georgetown was the only plantation city in the world. It could not make a claim to special status on the basis of buildings alone, too many of which had been destroyed or allowed to fall into ruin, but its plantation associations could be emphasized, and it is these which make it quite unique. And if the argument were to be preferred that instead of plantation owners we should have

the names of people who laboured on their lands, the unfortunate truth is that for the most part we simply do not know who these were.

As it is, the names Bourda and Albouystown and Cummingsburg, etc, are ingrained as part of the mental map of the residents of Georgetown. Anyone who tried to change the name of Bourda, for example, would find that it would simply be ignored by the citizens of this city, who would continue to insist they were going to Bourda Market and not some place whose name they regarded as alien. At a minimum place-name changes have to be considered carefully and have to have the concurrence of those who live there.

Guyanese have been very mature in their attitude to the symbols of the past, and there have been very few name changes in the capital, although the renaming of a portion of High Street as Avenue of the Republic after Independence comes to mind, along with the integrating of Kelly's (or Kelly) Dam into Carifesta Avenue for the first Carifesta. Later there came Mandela Avenue, which no one objected to, and then Shiv Chanderpaul Drive, after the cricketer. This last was contentious, because the government imposed it on a portion of New Garden Street, which was quite unnecessary, since after the expansion of the East Bank Highway it could easily have been applied there, in addition to which it would have been associated with the new cricket stadium.

The Parade Ground was renamed Independence Park, although it is often still referred to as the Parade Ground. The land for it as well as what became the Promenade Gardens had been donated by Thomas Cuming.

The change of Murray Street to Quamina Street is a special case, and the only example of the effacing of the name of an unpalatable character from the street complement. The story of how Forbes Burnham came to do this has been related more than once; suffice it to say the grounds were that Lieutenant-Governor Murray oversaw the savage reprisals against those who had taken part in the 1823 uprising. And this was a rising which had more the characteristics of a modern strike than a violent revolt. Burnham himself did not rename the street; that task was passed to the historical committee of the 150th commemoration activities which took place between 1984 and 1988.

Energised by disposing of one governor, the following year (1985) Burnham focused on another street called after a governor – Carmichael Street. He thought it took its name from Governor Carmichael-Smyth, who was associated with the execution of Damon. This notwithstanding, not only was Carmichael-Smyth not one of our more odious governors, but the street in question is not named after him; it is Smyth Street which is. The first-named roadway recalls Lieutenant-Governor Hugh Carmichael, a curmudgeonly character who in earlier days was remembered for his campaign against corruption and his distaste for Dutch lawyers. As it was Burnham died shortly after making his announcement, and Car-michael Street has retained its name, as has Smyth Street.

The last point to be made is that Guyana is not the UK and the considerations which apply there are not necessarily relevant here. In this country every schoolchild knows that our recorded past is one of bondage – either enslavement, or later, indentureship.

No one along the coastland needs to be told that the village in which they live and which carries a Dutch, English or French name, was where their forebears laboured in the fields and where their bones were laid to rest in its soils. The name is their connection to the past and those who went before them. (The case of villages like Victoria and Buxton is special, because there the ancestors bought abandoned estates after 1838, and renamed them.)

In the UK there are ongoing discussions about street names in cities like Bristol and Liverpool, and probably also in towns like Greenock and Port Glasgow. But that is because Britain has never come to terms with its slave trade and slavery past. That is not applicable here. Everyone knows we have an unfortunate history, but that history is what it is. We all know what the planters who came here did, but they were the ones who created the framework in which those who came before us lived, and which determined the contours of some of the political and social structures we inherited. Eliminating their names from our streets and villages will not change our history. Their names are part of our act of remembering.