



History of Nisbet Plantation

Nevis personifies just about everyone's fantasy of a palm-fringed tropical isle, still as yet unspoiled by overdevelopment. And its romantic history speaks to lovers across the ages.....

The history of Nisbet Plantation is the story of two very different women in two centuries with 150 years separating them.

It was here that the young British Navy Captain Horatio Nelson met Frances "Fanny" Nisbet, niece of the President of Nevis and widow of Dr. Nisbet, owner of Nisbet Plantation. He was taken by her refinement, as well as by her resourcefulness in operating a large house alone. She was, in addition, an accomplished musician and a fluent speaker of French. Nelson and Fanny quickly fell in love and were married on March 11, 1787 at Fig Tree Church on Nevis. Prince William Henry, Duke of Clarence, later to be King William IV of England and a close friend of Nelson's, gave the bride away.

A key stone, found in the ruined windmill, bears the family initials and the date 1778 is still clearly visible. At that time Nisbet Estate covered numerous acres – from the existing hotel property all the way to Newcastle village – and was run first as a sugar plantation and later, as a coconut plantation.

The history of Nisbet Plantation jumps more than a century and a half ahead, but continues with yet another strong and resourceful woman at its helm. That woman was Mary Pomeroy. Her father was Sir Hannibal Secluna, the head of one of the Orders of the Knights of Malta and a colorful gentleman who remarried at age 90 to a woman 20 years his junior. When she died, he decided not to marry again, and instead took off on a world cruise with his lady friend of 102.

Mary's love life was not quite so romantic, having had an arranged marriage. Her husband was always saying things which upset her. At one of their regular dinner parties, he called down to her from his end of the table, and she picked up a plate of pudding and threw it at him. She then walked out, never to return. After the Second World War (during which she is said to have been a spy), Mary went to England to take up interior decorating.

In the late 1940s she was in a serious car accident. She was riding as a passenger and as the car was passing a huge truck, a steel girder fell off slicing through the car and Mary. She was so badly hurt that she was taken to the morgue where she regained consciousness and demanded that she be taken to the hospital where her friend Dr. Mackindon, the famous surgeon practiced. He operated on her over a two-year period (she had three different noses) and was virtually reconstructed. During that time she cursed Mackindon for saving her life since she looked so ugly. When he saw how sorry she felt for herself, he took her to the "Guinea Pig Club." This was the ward where the pilots who had been shot down were so mangled that they volunteered to undergo different surgical techniques and experiments. When she saw their condition, Mary was ashamed and got on with her own recovery.

Upon leaving the hospital, Mary looked for a retreat, and with her compensation (which was the highest awarded any person in England at that time) she bought Nisbet Plantation from Lady Lees in 1950. After the War she met a Mr. Pomeroy. He was a Commander in the Royal Navy, and the two came out to Nevis as husband and wife, although they were never married. They tried to make a go of Nisbet as a coconut plantation, but learned that coconuts have a habit of "walking in the night." Purchasing a shotgun, Mary would round up the culprits and march them to the nearby Newcastle Police Station in the wee hours of the morning. Mr. Pomeroy had his own ideas on how the estate should be run and one day when Mary had had enough of watching her money being spent on all sorts of fancy schemes, she gave him two hours to get out!

Having been unsuccessful in making a living by running the plantation solely as a livestock and copra farm, she decided to lure the newly anointed "jet-set" to come and stay at Nisbet Plantation. Barclay's Bank refused her a loan, as did Mr. Wade who owned Pinney's Estate, so she approached Douglas Yearwood who agreed to lend her

the money, provided that she ran it as an intimate “pension.” Nisbet and Golden Rock (started by Frank and Inga Galey) were the first hotels on the island of Nevis. In the Great House dating from 1778, Mary turned two rooms downstairs and a few upstairs into guest rooms. Once she started to make some money, she built “Gingerbread Cottage” over the “Dungeon” which was part of the original sugar processing plant, using the old well as a bathroom. She also added on to the cottage, what we now call “Cox Heath,” which was the old plantation’s kitchen. Towards the late 1950’s she began building other cottages further out from the Great House towards the beach.

A yacht on its way from Europe to Australia stopped in Nevis and when the captain ran out of money, Mary hired the Spanish couple who had worked on board. She built “the Spanish house” for them, part of the existing Manager’s house.

Mary’s first employees were from Anguilla. She had a right to hire Anguillans since at that time the island was part of St. Kitts and Nevis. She was wise in doing so since she reasoned they would be far from home and therefore more dependent on her. After watching her Anguillans start to become sick, she guessed that the locals had convinced the Obeah to put a hex on them. One night exactly at midnight, Mary banged on this fellow’s door with a revolver in one hand, assuring him that should anything more happen to her staff, he’d be found dead and no one would be the wiser! Needless to say, her employees soon regained their health.

In 1967 the World’s Fair was held in Montreal and Margot Fontaine, who had studied ballet with Mary Pomeroy, invited her to attend her opening night. So Mary, now called by some the “Witch of Beachlands” flew off on her “broomstick.” (As a result of some earlier dispute, she refused to set foot on the ferry and had bought her own plane.) Flying on her own, Mary crashed in a farmer’s field but managed to walk out and still attend the performance.

At about the same time, the Anguillan Rebellion took place and Anguilla split from St. Kitts and Nevis. Many of Mary’s friends were thrown in jail. She called Douglas Yearwood to ask whether or not she should return to Nevis, and he advised against it. (Later her name appeared on a list of “Prohibited Emigrants.”)

While Mary was stranded in Canada, many people took turns running Nisbet Plantation, but this did not enable her to make a living. She made an agreement with Geoff Boon who was the head of J. W. Thurston, whereby he would take possession of what we now know as Nisbet Plantation, in addition to a property by the airport in St. Martin. Mary would retain the property called Blue Crescent which was adjacent to Nisbet and visually considered to be part of the hotel grounds. The materials for the property were supplied by Boon’s company, and it was christened “Mary’s Boon.”

In 1978 Geoff Boon was killed in a flying accident, and in 1980, the hotel was purchased by George Barnum and his associates: Bob Hitchins (the chief pilot of the charter company Carib Aviation who died in a flying accident in December 1987) and Fred Kelsick (the company lawyer who died in July 1988.)

George Barnum, the remaining owner of Nisbet Plantation, sold the hotel to David Dodwell on May 2, 1989.

And the stories continue...

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