MORRIS, VALENTINE (1727 - 1789), colonial administrator and landowner

Name: Valentine Morris
Date of birth: 1727
Date of death: 1789
Spouse: Mary Morris (née Mordaunt)
Parent: Elizabeth Morris (née Wilmont)
Parent: Valentine Morris
Gender: Male
Occupation: colonial administrator and landowner
Area of activity: Land Ownership; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: Adam N. Coward

Valentine Morris was born on 27 October 1727 on Antigua, the eldest son of Lt. Col. Valentine Morris (c.1678-1743), an influential plantation owner on that island, and his second wife, Elizabeth (née Wilmont). In 1736, Valentine Morris the elder moved to Britain and purchased Piercefield, near Chepstow in Monmouthshire, formerly the seat of the Walter family, which he expanded. At the age of seventeen, Valentine Morris the younger went to Leyden, in accordance with his father's wish that he study there. However, he did not register there and instead entered Peterhouse College, Cambridge, the following year. In 1752, he married Mary Mordaunt, a niece of Charles Mordaunt, 3rd Earl of Peterborough (1658-1735), who was reputedly of great beauty, intelligence and taste, but little fortune.

On his father's death in 1743, Morris inherited the Piercefield estate, along with substantial plantations in Antigua including a great number of enslaved people. These included Looby's, Crabb's, and Martin's in St Paul Parish in southern Antigua and Jolly's in St Mary Parish in western Antigua. In 1776, Morris was rated as owning 1,004 acres on the island, which was worked by 284 enslaved people. As Ivor Waters strikingly puts it, 'The elegant Valentine Morris owned Piercefield in Monmouthshire, worth £50,000 and Piercefield, a slave in Antigua, worth £10.' He was largely an absentee plantation owner while in Britain, apart from a visit to Antigua in 1754 following a period of drought there.

From around 1752, Morris took up residence at Piercefield and commenced the work of laying out the picturesque landscape and walks for which it would become nationally famous. In his *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), William Gilpin deemed the grounds at Piercefield to be 'as much worth of the traveller's notice as any thing on the banks of the Wye', and while he did not regard it as 'picturesque' by his criteria, 'they are extremely romantic, and give a loose to the most pleasing riot of imagination.' The views of and from these grounds drew numerous travellers and visitors, whom Morris treated with ostentatious generosity. The *Gentleman's Magazine* noted that at Piercefield 'the rich were entertained, the poor fed, and the naked cloathed'. Indeed, William Coxe also remarks strongly on Morris's liberal generosity and the regard with which he was held within the local community. Even the hot houses, cellar, and larder at Piercefield were open to Chepstow innkeepers for the refreshment of tourists.

To facilitate travel, Morris was a strong proponent of turnpiking, contributing his money, land, and labour as both advocate and surveyor to the roads' success. He was a proponent of the Monmouth Turnpike Act in 1754 and was instrumental in the establishment of the Chepstow Turnpike Trust in 1758. These activities were part of a wider movement for turnpiking and road improvement in Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire which saw the introduction of such trusts in Wales. Coxe records an interesting anecdote related to Morris's advocacy for such trusts. On being questioned in the House on Commons about roads in Monmouthshire he replied that there were none. On being further asked how, then, they travelled, his blunt answer was 'in ditches'.

As a result of his extravagant lifestyle and generosity, his predilection for gambling, and environmental factors in Antigua which adversely affected sugar production, Morris's fortunes became depleted and indebted. His economic downfall was further precipitated by an expensive electoral contest in which he challenged the might of the Morgan family of Tredegar for the Monmouthshire seat in the Commons in 1771. Morris lost the contest, in which he allegedly expended around £6,000 and was characterised as an outsider, an enslaver, and a 'Creole', by a vote of 743 to 535. In October 1772, Piercefield and his other estates were entrusted to trustees and Morris left Britain for the Caribbean.

In December 1772, Morris was appointed lieutenant governor of the island of St Vincent, then in the midst of the First Carib War, which had come under British control following the cessation of the Seven Years' War in 1763. In 1776, he was appointed governor, in which office he served until he surrendered the island to the French in June 1779. His tenure there was largely occupied by managing conflict with and between various groups of the island's inhabitants, including French and English settlers, the Caribs of St Vincent, and fugitives from slavery. It was also characterised by a lack of support, especially financial support, from the British government. In particular, his conflicts with the English settlers and the island's Council and Assembly (which he twice dissolved) prevented him from collecting the taxes which would have paid his salary and ensuring the defence of the island through the establishment of an effective militia. He also drew heavily on his own finances in ensuring the security of the island, including the construction of military outposts. These were needed not only due to fears of uprising and violence from the islands' inhabitants, but also threats of piracy and invasion, which grew as the North American colonies revolted against British rule.

Following the surrender of St Vincent, Morris returned briefly to Antigua, where he was detained by creditors. He was himself owed substantial sums of money from the Treasury, both for his salary and for his expenses incurred in the defence of St Vincent. He returned to London and was imprisoned in the King's Bench Prison on 22 April 1782 for a debt of £4,594 13s. 8d. Meanwhile, his wife had suffered from mental health issues from 1771 onward and, on their return to Britain, was institutionalised in Wimpole Street. In 1783, Morris moved to Jersey for a period before returning to London where he died on 26 August 1789.

Morris has been characterised as 'unfortunate' by his biographer, Ivor Waters, and certainly his riches to rags life and the circumstances which complicated his tenure as a colonial administrator and led, ultimately, to his imprisonment for debt, give weight to this descriptor. However, his financial misfortunes were also due to his extravagant lifestyle and gambling. On the one hand, he was not popular as a governor of St Vincent - neither among the white settlers, nor, certainly, among the fugitives from slavery which he personally led expeditions to recapture. On the other, he was regarded by his neighbours in the Chepstow area as a generous benefactor to their community. Ultimately, Morris is best remembered today for two major contributions to late eighteenth-century Wales. His work on the gardens at Piercefield put it on the map as a destination for tourists at a time when many came to Wales in search of the Romantic and the Picturesque, while his advocacy for turnpiking helped begin a revolution in Wales's transportation network.

Author

Adam N. Coward

Sources

Antigua Sugar Mills, Griot Institute

Cadw, Registered Parks and Gardens Description for 'Piercefield Park and Wyncliff' (PGW (Gt) 40)

W. Coxe, *An historical tour in Monmouthshire* (1801)

William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c* (London 1782)

T. Griffin, 'The Unmaking of St. Vincent: Colonial Insecurity and Black Indigeneity, 1780-1797', PhD Thesis, UCLA, 2021

J. C. Kim, 'The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance during the Age of Revolutions', *Early American Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013): 117-32

Valentine Morris, *A Narrative of the Official Conduct of Valentine Morris, Esq* (London 1787)

RCAHMW, 'Piercefied (Ruins)' (NPRN 20654)

Ivor Waters, *The Unfortunate Valentine Morris* (Chepstow 1964)

Sources

Wikipedia Article: Valentine Morris

Additional Links

VIAF: 31870235

Wikidata: Q7910985

Published date: 2024-10-28