



Eva Crane Trust

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Early Honey Production in St. Kitts and Nevis

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Nevis Historical and Conservation Society
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The expansion of beekeeping in Nevis since 1986 has created an interest in the early history of beekeeping on the island, and in the origin of the honeybees now found there.

The bee used for most of the world's beekeeping is the European honeybee *Apis mellifera* which is native to Europe and the Mediterranean region. No honeybees are native in the New World, and the earliest known to have been sent were in hives reported (on 5 December 1621) to have been despatched from England to Virginia - together with pigeons, peacock, and connies (4). Colonies of honeybees spread rapidly by swarming, and also by man's actions, from Florida, in 1764, the first were taken to Cuba (1).

After my visit to Nevis in January, 1988, I searched for records of the introduction of honeybees to St. Kitts and Nevis. Pinchon (2) quotes letters (C 8A 5) in the Archives Nationales in Paris as referring to introductions to St. Christophe in 1688 and Guadeloupe in 1689. Christiane Courant kindly searched C8A5 and other archives for me; she found several of Pinchon's folio references to be incorrect, but there were three relating to bees, written by Comte de Blenac in 1688/89 to the French King, Louis XIV; the first two :

In folios 27-28, after a reference to stingless bees [mouches] - which were said to produce rather liquid honey, and black wax - it was reported that [le?] Sieur Duclerc, Major of Guadeloupe, wanted to bring honeybees [mouches a miel] from the Landes of Bordeaux to the island, but that success was considered unlikely M. de Blaynac had already brought some from his home [de chez luy]; and those that did not die on the journey perished in Fort Royal. (This must be Fort-de-France, Martinique which was then responsible for the administration of Guadeloupe.) The writer said that it was almost impossible to protect hives from ants and the many other insects.

From folio 304 we learn that Duclerc had been charged with bringing hives of honeybees to Guadeloupe, but had not done so. Folio 328 (a letter from Duclerc) stated that since he had returned to Guadeloupe, he had got honeybees; he had had two swarms from them, and had sent to France samples of the wax they produced. Duclerc had also written to a merchant in Nantes in France to send him honeybees, and he said that he would use every resource to ensure their success.

Pinchon quotes C8A5 as reporting the importation of honeybees to St. Christophe in 1688, but the passage is not in the folios quoted, or in any other so far found. If (as with Guadeloupe) the report is correct although some references are not, St. Kitts may well have been the first Caribbean island to receive honeybees - from France. Further efforts will be made to locate the relevant archive.

The next reference I know to honeybees in St. Kitts is on page 191 of *A Natural History of Nevis* . . . by Rev. William Smith (5), which is in the library at Alexander Hamilton House, Charlestown, Nevis. Letter VIII (written between 1716 and 1720) says :

We have no bees that are hived, and still we meet with excellent Honey, made by the wild Bees in the Woods, about the Salt-Ponds in St. Christopher's, etc. But it will not make tolerable Mead, on account of the Climate's being so warm, as I was assured by Lady Stapleton, who tried it. You will not wonder at the term Wild-Bees, for I suppose they are mostly, if not always, wild in hot Climates.

So it seems that between 1688 and 1720 beekeeping died out in St.Kitts, but swarms had established plenty of wild colonies. St.Kitts and Nevis are well within flying distance for a swarm. The channel between them is only 3.5 km wide at one point. We shall probably never know exactly when the first honeybees reached Nevis; they may well have arrived before 1700. I would guess that they prospered as well in Nevis as in St.Kitts.

In 1988, I learned that honeybee queens had been imported to both St.Kitts, and Nevis during the present century. Some were "Italians", which have a yellow coloration, whereas bees from northern Europe look black; in a productive area, Italians tend to produce more honey, and are favoured by beekeepers for this reason. In Caribbean islands I have visited, bees in the mountainous interior "jungle" are often referred to as black, and more inclined to sting, and I think that they may well be the remnants of honeybees imported in the early colonial times from northern Europe. These "wild bees" nest in rocks, and also in trees as referred to by the Rev. Mr. Smith(5) in the early 1700s. Their honey is similar to honey from hives, except that more of it comes from wild plants. "Honey-cutters" harvest it, some being well equipped, and also careful to leave combs of brood from which the colony can regenerate; others, unfortunately, burn the bees and destroy the whole nest.

The stingless bees referred to in Guadeloupe in 1689 are tropical social bees in the family Meliponinae. Some species can yield a small amount of honey, and a few species are kept in hives. In the Caribbean region, Schwarz(3) records them in Trinidad and Tobago, with a "thinning representation" in such islands as Dominica, Guadeloupe and Montserrat, and single species in Cuba and Jamaica. (In 1492 Columbus was given honey in Cuba, which must have been from stingless bees, and wax in Hispaniola, possibly also from them.) In 1948 Schwarz (3) reported that there were no stingless bees in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the northern Leeward Islands, or the Bahamas. St.Kitts and Nevis have thus been on the borderline of their distribution, and any data would be of special interest.

Tropical African honeybees *Apis mellifera* are native south of the Sahara, and in 1935, some were taken from Southern Africa to Brazil. There they hybridized with descendents of European *Apis mellifera* introduced in the last century. (Honeybees mate in the air, and it is impossible to prevent hybridization between different colonies that are located within 10 to 20 km of each other.) The hybrids which became known as "Africanized bees", and these spread through South and Central America as far as Mexico, from which they may enter the USA(6). In 1977 they reached Venezuela, and in 1979 they arrived in Trinidad, swarms having moved from island to island across the 30 km strait between the mainland and Trinidad.

Other Caribbean islands are much farther from the mainland, and as far as I know, all are still free from these bees, which are much more inclined to sting than the European bees now present, and produce less honey. It is essential that they are not allowed to enter St.Kitts or Nevis, and it is most important that no bees whatever should be imported into the islands at present.

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