From 1815 to the 1820s, Trinidad became the home to over seven hundred formerly enslaved African-Americans and ex-soldiers of the British Colonial Marines. The ex-soldiers had fought in the War of 1812 in the United States and was granted their freedom and land on which to settle in Trinidad.

Known as the Merikins, an abbreviated version of the word “Americans,” they settled mainly in six Company Villages in remote areas of virgin forest in southern Trinidad at a time when slavery was still practised.

Their journey from being enslaved in the USA to becoming soldiers and then landowners in Trinidad tells a compelling story of resistance, independence, resilience and communal survival.

We invite you to discover the rich history and heritage of the Merikin community, whose identity has been kept alive through oral history and discovery in various archives.
NORTH AMERICA AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was responsible for the forced migration of over twelve million people from the African continent to the Western Hemisphere. This trade which involved all major European powers began in the mid fifteenth century and ended in the nineteenth. An estimated 472,000 enslaved Africans were shipped to the British North American colonies which later became the United States. Of that number only an estimated 388,000 enslaved Africans arrived as more than 83,000 died on the barbarous Middle Passage. The year 1619 marks the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to the British North American colonies.

The enslaved Africans who came to the United States came from different regions of West Africa. Upon arrival, they were sent to three main regions where they would work mainly as agricultural labourers on plantations which grew indigo, rice, tobacco and later on cotton. Some also worked as artisans, house servants, and labourers in cities and ports. The States which received the majority of enslaved Africans were the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland and Virginia.

In 1808, the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves was enacted by the United States but slavery continued until the end of the Civil War in 1865 when the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted.

Sources:
Images Courtesy:
Library of Congress
Celebrating The Merkins
Our heritage. Our faith. Our future.

FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO FREEDOM FIGHTERS

There was a perpetual quest for freedom by enslaved Africans throughout the Western Hemisphere. During the American Revolutionary War (1775 – 1783), Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia issued a proclamation on November 7th, 1775, promising freedom for enslaved Africans who left their masters and joined the British troops. This proclamation set the precedence of using freedom to entice enslaved Africans to fight in wars.

The War of 1812 was another instance where, with the promise of freedom, enslaved Africans were to join the British naval forces. During the course of this war, Britain sought to enhance the size of its forces and drew attention away from the northern battlefields. On April 2nd, 1814, Sir Alexander Cochrane issued a Proclamation to encourage the recruitment of enslaved Africans. Formerly enslaved Africans who joined the British forces constituted a section within the British Royal Navy called the Corps of Colonial Marines which was established on May 15th, 1814. Their participation in the war included service on ships and as spies, labourers and messengers, as well as their involvement in various battles.

On February 13th, 1815, the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. At the end of the war, the men of the Colonial Marine Corps were sent to Bermuda where they were involved in manning the garrison and continued construction of the Royal Naval Dockyard. Whilst in Bermuda, these men were offered a choice of either serving in the British West India Regiment or being settled as free men in a British colony. They unanimously refused to join the British West India Regiment and as such the Corps of Colonial Marines was formally disbanded on August 20th, 1816. These men and their families were subsequently settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and on the island of Trinidad.

Sources:
FROM FREEDOM FIGHTERS TO LANDOWNERS

The largest group of Merikin settlers, the ex-Colonial Marines, were each granted 16-acre lots and settled in six Company Villages in the Naparima district of south Trinidad. They settled in areas according to the "companies" they had served in the Colonial Marines, and were placed under the unpaid supervision of their respective sergeants and corporals. The Merikin community was placed under the general supervision of the Commandant, Robert Mitchell, who became their link with the authorities.

Each settler initially occupied land without any evidence of ownership but this was later petitioned by the settlers under Lord Harris. From 1847 to 1848, they were given deeds to their land with proper titles and were required to pay an annual quit rent.

The Merikins were initially engaged in subsistence agriculture and later sold their excess produce in the markets. Among the principal crops grown were corn, pumpkin, plantain and rice. As the Naparima settlements were located close to sugar estates, many undertook casual employment on the estates during crop time. As the need for housing and roads grew, some became carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths and the like. With the discovery and exploration of oil from the late nineteenth century, many settlers went to work on the oilfields or entered into land lease agreements with the oil companies.

FIRST COMPANY
Originally called Grant, it was the first land granted to the first settlers. Later, after applications were made for more lands it became known as New Grant. The area also covers Hinduustan and famous cane districts of La Cabee, La Retreat and La Resource. Dunmore Hill, Nagoe Road, Jackson Block and Lewis Trace were named after the settlers.

SECOND COMPANY
This village was not named as such and was known as Petit Café and Matilda.

THIRD COMPANY
Usually referred to as "Indian Walk," as it was the road travelled on by the Guaraoin Indians, indigenous people from Venezuela, who on landing at Moruga, journeyed to Princes Town, then called the Mission. Streets named after settlers include Loney Road, Lumpsden Ridge and Lewis Road. The area includes an old fort, Fort George.

FOURTH COMPANY
This area includes Sherrington Place, Hardbargain or Williamsville. Areas named after settlers include Jackson Hill and Dyer Village.

FIFTH COMPANY
The name was retained and was well-known for its rich agricultural land and oil bearing areas. Areas or streets named after settlers include Mitchell Block, Weston Road, Teesdale Road and Samuel Cooper Road.

SIXTH COMPANY
The name was also kept and was famous for its mixed farming and large virgin forest areas called Cara Hill.

Sources:
ARRIVAL IN TRINIDAD

The formerly enslaved African-Americans and disbanded soldiers of the British Colonial Marines settled in Trinidad where they were promised their freedom and land. They came following instructions given by Lord Bathurst, Secretary for War and the Colonies to Trinidad’s Governor Woodford in October 1814.

The first settlers arrived in Trinidad in May and July in 1815 and settled in Laventille and Caroni as preparations were not yet in place for their arrival.

By the time the third group arrived in November 1815, arrangements were in place for their accommodation. Land was cleared for distribution to them in the Naparima district in south Trinidad. The fourth and largest group of settlers, the disbanded soldiers of the Colonial Marines, arrived on 20th August 1816 and also settled in the Naparima district.

The settlers were provided with temporary accommodation for the first few weeks and with an outfit of clothes and blanket, tools to build their own houses and agricultural implements and seedlings for cultivating their lands. In some cases, the First Peoples were used to clear the land. For the first six to eight months the settlers received a daily ration of food from the Government until they were able to subsist on their own food crops. Medical care was also provided for the sick.

In 1817, in response to the Governor’s concern for the disproportion of the sexes in the area, 42 African women captured from a French slaver that had landed in Barbados, joined the Merikin settlements.

In 1821, another group of Merikin settlers arrived from Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE OF ARRIVAL</th>
<th>SHIP</th>
<th>NUMBER ARRIVED ACCORDING TO COLONIAL DESPATCH 1815-1816</th>
<th>LOCATION WHERE SETTLED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 May 1815</td>
<td>HMS Levant</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Laventille and Caroni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 July 1815</td>
<td>H.M.S. Carron</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Laventille and Caroni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 November 1815</td>
<td>H.M.S. Carron</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Naparima District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 August 1816</td>
<td></td>
<td>574</td>
<td>Naparima District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Schooner William</td>
<td>95 (based on ship muster)</td>
<td>Naparima District</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Governor Woodford’s account of the arrival of the American settlers in May and July 1815, and November 1815.

Sources:
CO 295/377: Woodford to Bathurst, 5 June 1815. No. 103, No. 113, No. 134
CO 295/46: Woodford to Bathurst, 28 Aug. 1816. No. 189
Influence of the Baptist faith

The majority of the Merkins who settled in Trinidad were originally Baptists in the United States while others were Methodists and Muslims. Among the Baptists were preachers who kept the faith alive by gathering their following on ‘camp-grounds’ for worship, as was the practice in southern USA. William Hamilton and David Richardson are credited to be among the first village evangelists who struggled to establish their churches.

In 1843, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) of London, England, was encouraged to come to the assistance of the local evangelists and thus began the association with the London Baptists. Rev. George Cowen was their first missionary.

Major disagreements regarding worship style, governance and education led eventually to a split from the London Baptists and the departing group adopted the name “Independent Baptists.” The Independent Baptists themselves split into several other groups such as the Independent Baptist Missionary Union and the Independent International Baptist Church.

In the 1960s, the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the USA came to work with the London Baptists to establish churches in north and south of Trinidad and Tobago.

With its arrival into Trinidad, the Baptist religion came to dominate the spiritual and social life of the Merkins, and became one of their distinct ethnic markers. The various manifestations of the Baptist faith and their influences are still very much alive today and reflected in the presence of numerous churches and schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Our Heritage

Among the aspects of cultural heritage attributed to the Merkins include:

- Macadam - Brought from the USA, it was the process of burning clay to produce a hard red substance for use as a road surface.

- Gayap “or “each one help one” - the practice of helping each other as a necessity for survival, brought from the USA and observed in house building, cultivation and reaping of crops, and the burial of the dead.

- Oral tradition / storytelling - many stories were passed from generation to generation, and through this medium, they were able to keep alive their history and folk traditions.

- Food - their indigenous cuisine include “tum tum” or pound plantain, coo-coo, hill rice which was commonly grown, and benne.

- Herbal remedies or “bush medicine” for various ailments.

Sources:
Gospel Baptist Association of Trinidad and Tobago, A Rich Heritage of Baptist Witness in Trinidad and Tobago (Brochure).2016
Huggins, A.B. The Saga of the Companies, Trinidad and Tobago National Centre for Persons with Disabilities, 2013, Print.