

## HISTORY

The island had for a long time remained unknown and uninhabited. It was probably visited by Arab sailors during the Middle Ages, and on maps of about 1500, it is shown by an Arabic name 'Dina Arobi'. The Portuguese sailor Domingo Fernandez Pereira was probably the first European to land on the island at around 1511. The island appears with a Portuguese name 'Cirne' on early Portuguese maps, probably because of the presence of the Dodo, a flightless bird which was found in great numbers at that time.



It was another Portuguese sailor, Don Pedro Mascarenhas, who gave the name Mascarenes to the group of islands now known as Mauritius, Rodrigues and Reunion. The Portuguese did not stay long as they were not interested in these islands.

### The Dutch period (1598-1710)

In 1598, a Dutch squadron, under the orders of Admiral Wybrand Van Warwyck, landed at Grand Port and named the island "Mauritius", in honour of Prince Maurice Van Nassau, "Stathouder" of Holland.



However, it was not until 1638 that there was a first attempt of Dutch settlement. It was from here that the famous Dutch navigator Tasman set out to discover the western part of Australia. The first Dutch settlement lasted only twenty years. Several attempts were subsequently made, but the settlements never developed enough to produce dividends and the Dutch finally left Mauritius in 1710. They are remembered for the introduction of sugar-cane, domestic animals and deer.

### The French period (1715-1810)

Abandoned by the Dutch, the island became a French colony when, in September 1715, Guillaume Dufresne D'Arzel landed and took possession of this precious port of call on the route to India. He named the island "Isle de France", but it was only in 1721 that the French started their occupation. However, it was only as from 1735, with the arrival of the most illustrious of French governor, Mahé de La Bourdonnais, that the "Isle de France" started developing effectively.



Mahé de La Bourdonnais established Port Louis as a naval base and a ship-building centre. Under his governorship, numerous buildings were built, a number of which are still standing today - part of Government House, the Chateau de Mon Plaisir at Pamplemousses, the Line Barracks. The island was under the administration of the French East India Company which maintained its presence until 1767.

From that year until 1810, the island was in charge of officials appointed by the French Government, except for a brief period during the French Revolution, when the inhabitants set up a government virtually independent of France.

During the Napoleonic wars, the "Isle de France" had become a base from which French corsairs organised successful raids on British commercial ships. The raids continued until 1810 when a strong British expedition was sent to capture the island. A preliminary attack was foiled at Grand Port in August 1810, but the main attack launched in December of the same year from Rodrigues, which had been captured a year earlier, was successful. The British landed in large numbers in the north of the island and rapidly overpowered the French, who capitulated. By the Treaty of Paris in 1814, the "Isle de France" which regained its former name 'Mauritius' was ceded definitely to Great Britain, together with its dependencies which included Rodrigues and the Seychelles. In the act of capitulation, the British guaranteed that they would respect the language, the customs, the laws and the traditions of the inhabitants.

## **The British period (1810-1968)**

The British administration, which began with Robert Farquhar as governor, was followed by rapid social and economic changes. One of the most important events was the abolition of slavery in 1835. The planters received a compensation of two million pounds sterling for the loss of their slaves which had been imported from Africa and Madagascar during the French occupation.



The abolition of slavery had important repercussions on the socio-economic and demographic fields. The planters turned to India, from where they brought a large number of indentured labourers to work in the sugar cane fields.

The Indian immigrants, who were of both Hindu and Muslim faith, were to change rapidly the fabric of the society. They were later joined by a small number of Chinese traders.

Cultivation of sugar cane was given a boost and the island flourished, especially with the export of sugar to England. Economic progress necessitated the extension and improvement of means of communication and gradually an adequate infrastructure was created.

### **Constitutional development**

On the constitutional plane, the Council of Government which was first established in 1825, was enlarged in 1886 to make room for elected representatives. The new council included 10 members elected on a restricted franchise. It was not until 1933 that the Constitution was again amended in a significant respect. The proportion of nominated members of the Council not holding public office was raised to two-thirds. However, franchise was still restricted to persons within a certain income bracket and to proprietors. A major breakthrough occurred in 1948, when after years of protracted negotiations for a more liberal constitution, franchise was extended to all adults who could pass a simple literacy test.

The Council of Government was replaced by a Legislative Council composed of 19 elected members, 12 members nominated by the Governor and three ex-officio members. General elections were held in August 1948 and the first Legislative Council met on 1st September 1948.

Following constitutional conferences held in London in 1955 and 1957, the ministerial system was introduced and general elections were held on 9th March 1959. Voting took place for the first time on the basis of universal adult suffrage and the number of electors rose to 208,684. In 1961, a Constitutional Review Conference was held in London and a programme of further constitutional advance was established. It was followed in 1965 by the last constitutional conference which paved the way for Mauritius to achieve independence. After general elections in 1967, Mauritius adopted a new constitution and independence was proclaimed on 12 March 1968. Mauritius achieved the status of Republic 24 years later on 12 March 1992.