

Address by
Senator the Hon. Sandra Falconer at Plaque Unveiling Ceremony
for UNESCO Memory of the World Register

THURSDAY, JUNE 27, 2013 at 10.00AM
THE JAMAICA ARCHIVES, SPANISH TOWN

SALUTATION

- Spanish Town Mayor, His Worship Councillor Norman Scott
- Mr Sidney Bartley, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Youth and Culture
- Distinguished Representatives of the Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO
- Officials of the Jamaica Archives and Records Department, and other Government Agencies and Departments
- Our Young Citizens
- Ladies & Gentlemen
- Members of the Media

I am pleased to participate in this ceremony to celebrate the inclusion of three of Jamaica's outstanding historical collections in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

The unveiling of these Plaques of Inscription is a proud moment for Jamaica and the Jamaican people.

That our records could have been selected to be part of such a prestigious project by a United Nations organization is an honour for our country and a fine tribute to the hard working staff of the Jamaica Archives and Records Department (JARD).

I want to thank UNESCO, the Regional Office for the Caribbean, the Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO, Jamaica Archives and all of those who over the years have helped us to preserve and make accessible such records of world significance.

Today we face various economic and social challenges caused by a volatile global environment.

I am sure that there are those who could well argue that what we are here to celebrate is little more than curiosity in things quaint and historical.

Many may even believe that there are more important things to deal with other than official colonial documents, slave records, immigration data of ethnic groups, or information about our people's role in the building of the Panama Canal.

Unquestionably, there is a connection between what we are here about and the concrete day-to-day challenges we face.

In his just published book entitled **Agency of the Enslaved**, Dr. Daive Dunkley of the History and Archaeology Department of the University of the West Indies presents a fascinating and gripping account of how our foreparents courageously and valiantly fought against slavery and devised creative ways of coping with the most inhumane and degrading conditions our people have ever faced.

It is a book that would inspire you.

It is a book which shows how our people have been ingenious and strategic in demonstrating their creativity, their will, their innate sense of freedom and how they used such traits to deal with their external circumstances.

Historical knowledge is not simply for curiosity.

It is not simply about what took place in the past.

Historical knowledge and memory are about drawing on the past to provide strength and coping skills for today and hope for the future.

Historical knowledge helps when you are tempted to think that you cannot go on or make it; when you feel all hope is lost or you don't have it within you to face the challenges of another day.

Historical memory helps when you see what our foreparents went through -- the indignities and indecencies they not only endured but mastered and overcame.

Historical memory provides the tools to give us strength, courage and hope.

I believe that part of our problem in Jamaica today is that we are not sufficiently grounded with a strong sense of history and historical memory.

We lose hope and tend to get pessimistic too easily. And, yet, this pessimism and sense that we cannot overcome is not part of our culture and heritage, as Jamaicans.

By taking the time to go back into the archives and our historical memory, we will discover that Jamaica has a heritage to preserve – a heritage of fortitude, resilience and perseverance; a heritage of a people struggling against monumental obstacles and overcoming adversities.

History can embolden and inspire a people.

We need to draw more on our rich historical memory and build our faith and our destiny.

When we do that, then we will not be tempted to think that history and culture are just for curiosity lovers.

National Hero, Marcus Mosiah Garvey knew the importance of history.

It was that fascination with history that lit the fire in his stomach and mind and which blazed the path of liberation which he set for black people all over the world.

My challenge to you this morning is to encourage more Jamaicans to visit any of the three offices of the Jamaica Archives and Records Department.

The stories our archives tell will empower us with a different perspective that embraces a sense of who we are.

These stories will build our optimism and give us that indomitable will to fight against the odds, rather than choosing to give up.

It is with such a perspective that we can truly appreciate our “Out of Many One People” motto.

Go through the Immigrants Collection, examine the period of indentured immigration, and be fascinated with the Jamaica /Panama Canal historical link.

It is interesting that with all the talk and excitement today of opportunities from the expanded Panama Canal, many are not aware of the pivotal role Jamaicans played in its development back in 1904.

Over 100,000 persons from our region, many of them Jamaicans went to Panama to contribute their labour to the building of the canal.

Even from as far back as 1881, French Recruiter Charles Gadpaille (Charl Jadpie) ran advertisements throughout Jamaica offering higher wages than were paid here.

The campaign showed “The Colon Man”, a Jamaican who had gone to work in Panama returning home as a rich and prosperous man.

These promises which turned out to be empty drove a huge migration of Jamaicans to Panama in the latter half of the 19th Century.

We all remember the song “one, two, three, four colon man afour” which tells the story of Jamaicans migrating to Panama.

It is from such a perspective that we will best be able to build on our tradition and be empowered to deal with our present circumstances.

As a government, not only are fully committed to strengthening the important work of recording and preserving our history but making this powerful information more accessible to our people anywhere in the world.

To this end, some 36 million dollars has been committed to JARD to enable the office to digitize its operations and modernize its processes.

Much of our archives are already on microfilm and I must, on behalf of the government, thank UNESCO for its assistance to JARD in the thrust to digitize our archives.

This will assist us in making this important repository of knowledge more widely accessible *by just the click of a mouse*.

And so ladies and gentlemen, our inclusion in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register is a significant testimony to the quality and importance of our archival information.

I have no doubt that in time, other aspects of our historical memory will also similarly recognized.

Today's ceremony is a strong signal of our commitment and intention to continue the excellent work of preserving and making these records of history, both matters of world and personal significance.

It is therefore with a sense of pride that I thank all who have contributed to taking us to this stage and to officially unveil these Plaques of Inscription honouring a truly remarkable part of our journey to nationhood.

Thank you all, ladies and gentlemen.