

FOUNDATION

At two o'clock in the afternoon of the 16th of November 1853, about three hundred representatives of the agricultural community of Mauritius assembled at the Masonic Lodge de la Triple Espérance in Port Louis, for the purpose of founding an agricultural society. The meeting had been convened by means of notices published in the press and its object was stated in the following words:

« That a Chamber of Agriculture should be formed, much upon the same system of the Chamber of Commerce which now exists and which is found of great utility to the commercial body, the main object of the Chamber of Agriculture being to give information to the Government on matters relating to agriculture and to be an organ of communication between the Government and the Planter.»

The importance attached to the meeting is shown by the fact that it received the support of the Governor, Sir James Macaulay Higginson, C. B., and that it was attended by the most influential personalities of the day.

Mr. J.E. Arbuthnot, landowner and bank director, took the chair and move the following resolutions:

1. *“That in the general interest of agriculture, it is the opinion of the assembly that the Planters should form an agricultural society.*
2. *That to establish the Society on the broadest possible basis, every person interested in agriculture may become a member on payment of an entrance fee of £1 and a subscription of six dollars per annum.*
3. *That a committee be named by the subscribers to conduct the business of the Society, under the title of “Chamber of Agriculture”.*
4. *That a committee for the current year be named immediately by the persons present at the meeting who are disposed to subscribe, and that they be considered as subscribers by the deposit of their vote.*
5. *That the committee be composed of 30 members, including the President, vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer.*
6. *That at the expiration of each year ten members of the committee thus elected shall retire by lot, and shall be replaced by ten others voted by ballot at the Annual General Meeting.”*

These resolutions were adopted unanimously, and the following persons were elected by ballot to be members of the first Chamber of Agriculture:

G. Fropier	H. Lemière
J. Chaline	V. Lanougarède
J. E. Arbuthnot	E. Pison
A. Hardy	J. A. Guthrie
C. Wiehe	H. Bertin
C. Bourgault	J. Currie
E. Baudot	P. A Molière
E. Harel	A. de Rochecouste
C. J. Ulcoq	J. B Chéron
A. Trébuchet	C. A. Louys
E. Chapman	F. Koenig
A. Genève	C. Antelme
E. de Chazal	J. Staub
E. Hart	E. Rouillard
M. Fontenay	A. Koenig

The name “*Chamber of Agriculture*” at first applied only to the administrative committee appointed in terms of the third paragraph of the resolutions.

This Chamber held its first meeting on the 30th of November 1853 at the Hotel d'Europe, in Port Louis, and it elected the first executive committee ("Bureau") of the Society. The following were nominated as office-bearers:

President

The Honourable G. Fropier

Vice-President

J. E. Arbuthnot

Treasurer

The Honourable C. Wiehe

Secretary

The Honourable E. Baudot

Previous Societies

The need for an agricultural society had long been felt; several attempts had been made but had proved unsuccessful.

As early as 1773 Joseph François Charpentier de Cossigny, better known as Cossigny de Palma, had tried to set up an agricultural society. However, Cossigny was viewed with some distrust in high quarters for various political reasons, and the French Ministry for Naval and Colonial Affairs refused to authorize the establishment of a representative body which, under the leadership of Cossigny, might have prejudiced its authority in Mauritius.

Fifty years later, in pursuance of a policy intended to develop the agricultural resources of the island, the first British Governor, Sir Robert Farquhar, founded an Agricultural Society. The Society met for the first time on the 28th of April 1814. Its objects as outlined by Charles Telfair in his address to this inaugural meeting, were to develop the production of foodcrops and to improve agricultural practices by the more extensive use of farm implements and of draught animals. The efforts of the society did not prove very far-reaching and its activities ceased altogether in 1826.

A masonic society which styles itself Les Amis Cultivateurs (The Planters' Friendly Society) was also in existence at that time. This agricultural association had its headquarters at Rivière Noire and its activities appear to have been restricted to regional matters of no great importance. There is no record of it after 1825.

Another movement, of far greater scope, was started by Adrien d'Epinay in 1827. D'Epinay then founded the Comité Colonial (Colonial Committee) which had a definite political bias: its express object was to "conciliate the views of His Majesty's Government with the interests of the colony". The Comité Colonial created what were in effect agricultural societies in the five rural districts of the island: Pamplemousses, Rivière du Rempart, Flacq, Grand Port and Savane. These societies set to work resolutely; that of Rivière du Rempart, for instance, was particularly active in urging the adoption of a steam-power in sugar factories – a move which, in those remote days, must have seemed foolhardy and perhaps utopian. The Comité Colonial was, however, short-lived: the grave incidents which attended the assumption of office in Mauritius of John Jeremie, Procureur General, resulted in Lord Goderich, Secretary of State for the Colonies, proclaiming in 1832 by Order of the Council the dissolution of all associations whose activities went beyond the terms of the Order. The Comité Colonial fell within this category, and its dissolution led to that of the five regional societies.

Finally, in 1829, the Société d'Histoire Naturelle de l'Île Maurice was founded. This society still exists under the name of Société Royale des Arts et des Sciences which it was allowed to assume by Royal Charter in 1845. The Society set up a permanent Agricultural Committee whose terms of reference were to promote "*research on the colony's produce and on the means of improving agriculture and horticulture*". This committee was dissolved in 1863. It has made valuable contributions to the progress of agriculture in Mauritius.

Offices of the Society

The newly-formed Agricultural Society first had its offices on the premises of the Magasin Coutanceau, La Chaussée, Port-Louis. This building was destroyed by fire on the 24th of October 1877. Most of the archives of the Society were thus lost, except for a few documents which were thrown out of the windows by two servants. The portrait of Sir James Higginson was also lost in the fire; this portrait had been painted in Paris by French artist Lefébure at the request of the executive committee of the Society, as a token of its gratitude for the interest which Sir James had shown in the welfare of the Society.

Until new premises could be found, the Society held its meetings in the offices of the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce for several years. On the 28th of February 1885 the meeting-place was transferred to the Public Institute in Port Louis, where a room had been placed at the Society's disposal by the Government. This

arrangement continued until 1929. Amongst the important meetings that were held at the Institute one at least deserves special mention : that of the 7th of June 1920, when the Imperial Government's offer to buy the sugar crop of that year at 90 shillings per hundredweight was accepted after a lively debate.

In 1929, the chamber moved to No. 5, Place d'Armes, and in 1937, to its present offices at No. 2, Queen Street, Port Louis.

CONSTITUTION AND REGULATIONS

The administrative committee of the Agricultural Society met on the 3rd of December 1853 to define its functions and to adopt its rules and regulations. These original rules and regulations were amended from time to time and brought into line with the changes that have occurred in the structure of the Society during the past hundred years.

Title

The association first assumed the title of Société d'Agriculture de l'Ile Maurice under which name it was incorporated by Proclamation No. 25 of the 22nd of September 1886. The task of applying for incorporation and of obtaining the Charter was entrusted to William Newton, later Sir William Newton, K.C. The title "The Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture", which the association now bears, appears for the first time in a deed drawn up by Mr. Robert Kœnig, Notary Public, dated 30th March to 30th June 1893.

Objects

The original regulations of the 3rd of December 1853 contain the following definition of the objects of the Society :

"The object of the Chamber of Agriculture is to seek by all legitimate means to promote the welfare and progress of the Agriculture of this colony, to entertain communications and to centralize information from the different districts, to gather and to spread, as much as possible, the knowledge of all sorts of improvement in cultivation and the methods of perfection in manufacture, to make known to Government the state and wants of the Agricultural body and thus to secure for the Planters the complete development of their resources and the full and entire enjoyment of the advantages to which they can pretend."

This wording remained unchanged when the regulations were revised in 1886 and in 1893. A new definition of the objects was adopted on the 10th of April 1947, when the regulations which now govern the Chamber came into force. The new text reads as follows:

"Art.3 -The objects of the Chamber shall be to safeguard and promote the interests of Agriculture, of agriculture industries and of all other industries depending on agriculture or connected therewith. With this end in view, the Chamber shall, by means of organisations set up and appointed by itself, establish statistics concerning agriculture, agricultural industries and other allied industries, give encouragement and practical support towards the advancement of field and factory methods, and towards improvement in every sphere connected with agriculture, agricultural industries and other allied industries mentioned above; maintain official contact with the Government Authorities in the Colony and in Great Britain, and shall, generally, do all things, which, in its opinion, may be conducive to the fulfilment of the above objects."

Membership

The regulations of 1853 provided that "any person interested in agriculture" was eligible for membership of the Society. This provision was maintained in its original form up to 1882. In actual practice, however, it must have lent itself to various interpretations which cannot be retraced owing to the destruction of the archives by the fire of 1877. Thus, at the general meeting of the 26th of January 1865 it was decided that all co-owners of a sugar estate paying a subscription would be members of the Society by right.

This text was amended on the 18th of September 1882, by which time two new factors had intervened : firstly, the development of the aloe fibre industry and its contribution to the colony's economy ; secondly, the extension of the system of ownership of sugar estates by shareholders. As a consequence, the new text provided for the admission, by right, of all owners or co-owners of sugar or aloe fibre estates, as well as of all directors of companies owning sugar estates.

When the Society was incorporated in 1886 these provisions were further extended so as to allow the admission of proxies or agents of absent or incapacitated persons. In addition, any person interested in an agricultural industry became eligible for membership if, in the opinion of the Chamber, that industry was of sufficient importance.

A new and important change was adopted in 1893. It was then provided that any person wishing to be admitted as a member should henceforth be proposed, seconded and elected. Furthermore, membership was divided into two classes, namely: full Members, comprising owners of sugar or aloe fibre concerns and their proxies; and Associates, comprising representatives of other agricultural industries and members of the senior staff of sugar estates. Associates were not entitled to vote and were not eligible for appointment to the administrative committee of the Society. This provision remained in force for more than fifty years.

The distinction between members and associates was dropped in 1947. All persons joining the Chamber of Agriculture are now members with the same rights.

There are, however, two categories of members :

1. Those who by right may become members, provided they belong to one or other of the following groups :
 - (a) owners or representatives of a sugar estate with or without factory, or delegates of a group of planters, whose total production in a normal year amounts to 5,000 metric tons of cane ;
 - (b) owners or representatives of a tea plantation with or without factory, or delegates of a group of planters, whose total production in a normal year amounts to 125,000 half-kilos of green leaves ;
 - (c) owners or representatives of an aloe fibre plantation with or without factory, or delegates of a group of planters, whose total production in a normal year amounts to 50 metric tons of fibre.
2. Those who may be elected members at a general meeting, on being proposed and seconded, provided they have a bona fide interest in any agricultural industry.

Administration

The business of the Society, when it was first formed, was managed by an administrative committee of thirty members, known as the "Chamber of Agriculture" ; that committee nominated the president, the vice-president, the honorary treasurer and the honorary secretary of the Society, who constituted the "Bureau" or executive committee. It also appointed a permanent secretary.

In 1861, the membership of the administrative committee was increased to forty-two. In his annual report for that year, the Honourable Christian Wiehe explained that the object of increasing the number of members was -

"to extend the activities of the Chamber and to bring back to its fold influential planters who, being members of the Agricultural Society only, refrained from attending meetings at which they were not entitled to vote, thus depriving the Chamber of their active and enlightened co-operation."

(Translated from the French)

The regulations were revised when the Society was incorporated in 1886. The administrative committee remained unchanged, but the "Bureau" henceforward included two vice-presidents instead of one. The new regulations also authorized the committee to increase the permanent staff, and an assistant secretary was appointed.

In 1893, when the association adopted its present title of The Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture, the committee became known as the Administrative Council. The new regulations provided that the Council would be composed of twenty members only, and managed by an executive committee or Bureau of four : the president, the two vice-president and the honorary treasurer. The office of honorary secretary was abolished.

The regulations of 1947 gave the Chamber its present constitution. The administrative council is now known as the Council of the Chamber, and comprises twenty-four members, in addition to the president and the two vice-presidents if they are not already members of the Council. The office of honorary treasurer has been abolished, these duties being discharged by a member of the permanent staff. The Bureau comprises the president, two vice-presidents, and two additional members selected from those forming part of the Council of the Chamber. These officials are elected by ballot at the Annual General Meeting. The meeting also renews one-third of the Council, outgoing members being re-eligible. No member can form part of the Bureau for more than three consecutive years.

The Bureau deals finally with all matters within the province of the Chamber : it appoints the secretary and other members of the staff. Its decisions are subject to revision by the General Assembly of the Chamber, a special procedure being provided for that purpose; this procedure has however never been resorted to. The Bureau may, in its discretion, refer any matter to the Council or to the General Assembly whenever it deems it desirable so to do.

Although no provision exists to that effect, it is now a tradition to invite all past presidents to attend meetings of the Bureau, so as to ensure the greatest possible continuity in the administration of the Chamber.