

Thomas Noell was a London merchant who, along with his brothers, Martin, Stephen, and James—the four were known locally as the “four brethren”—was among the leading investors in the Barbadian sugar boom.⁸ In 1654 Mt. Clapham had a workforce of fifteen servants and twenty-nine slaves. At the optimum ratio of one worker for every two acres, this was barely enough for a small, 100-acre plantation, let alone one of Mt. Clapham’s size.⁹ Noell addressed the labor shortage by recruiting tenants. By June 1654 he had leased out 179 acres to twenty-four tenants for an annual rent of £362 Barbados currency. Ranging in size from 3.5 to 18 acres, often operated by two or three men in partnership, these leases ran from six to nine years at annual rents of £1.5 to £3 Barbados currency per acre.¹⁰

The history of Mt. Clapham plantation provides a window into the changing organization of the Barbadian sugar industry.⁷ Thomas Noell acquired Mt. Clapham plantation, a 510-acre tract in St. Michael’s and Christ Church parishes in 1650. Although we should not assume that all tenants grew cane, it seems likely that those at Mt. Clapham did so. Their rents seem too high to have been covered by the minor crops, and we do know that the landlord owned a sugar works.

English merchants who bought land in Barbados in 1647

Merchants ^a	Acreage	Price (£)	Date
Martin Noell, James Noell, William Seeman	67.5	800	8 March
Colleton, John	80	250	14 March
Henry Quintyne	77		10 April
Martin, James, Stephen, and Thomas Noell	5	30	14 April
Thomas Walker, John Webster, Nathan Grafty, Philip Holman	10		17 April
Walker, Webster, Grafty, Holman	80		18 May
M., J., and T. Noell	21	160	29 May
Laurence Chambers	300	20,000	2 June
Walker, Webster, Grafty, Holman	30	300 ^b	9 June
Richard Ellis	25	40	11 June
Thomas Mathew	184	5,000	13 June
Richard Batson	40		1 July
Walker, Webster, Grafty, Holman	18		1 July
M., J., S., and T. Noell	20	200	July
Nathaniel Starkey	23.5		7 August
M., J., S., and T. Noell	6.5	32.6	20 August
Beatrice Odiarne	60		9 September

Source: Recopied Deed Books, Barbados National Archives.

Note: All prices are in Barbados currency.

The biggest plungers were the four Noell brothers, James and Martin, who remained in London, and Stephen and Thomas, who came to Barbados in 1646 to develop and manage the firm’s island investments. Their first recorded purchases were modest enough, four acres in June 1646 and again in December, although it could be that Thomas and Stephen were adding small parcels to fill out a plantation that the “four brethren” had acquired earlier.¹⁸ The first big investment I found record of came in March 1647, when James and Martin joined William Seaman, another London merchant, to buy a quarter-share of the Spring Plantation, a 270-acre tract in St. Joseph’s Parish already planted with 50 acres of cane, from Thomas Pead and James Worsum, also London merchants. Apparently, Worsum and Pead needed the £800 sterling the Noells and Seaman brought to the enterprise to build a sugar mill and supply the plantation with sixty servants and seven oxen or bulls to drive the mill by the following August.¹⁹

That partnership was only the beginning: Between April and August the brothers purchased four tracts, one of them a small plantation of 21 acres, the other three undeveloped parcels of 5, 6.5, and 25 acres, all of them in St. James’s Parish and adjacent to land they had acquired in 1646. These several parcels formed the nucleus of their Black Rock Plantation.²⁰ In July they purchased a small plantation of 20 acres in St. Peter’s Parish, soon adding to it an adjoining tract of 44 acres. They also bought a lot near the session’s house in Bridgetown, where they perhaps planned to open a store and a warehouse. Again in July, Martin, this time in partnership with another London merchant, Mark Mortemore, bought another fully stocked plantation in Christ Church Parish for £2,400, to be paid within twenty-one years. Finally, in November the brothers bought yet another developed plantation, a 60-acre tract at the border of St. Peter’s and St. James’s, for £1,200.²¹ By the end of the year the Noell brothers and their various partners were operating at least five plantations in Barbados on some 600 acres, representing an investment of from £9,000 to £10,000 sterling.²²



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