

***The Vagrant Depot of  
Grand River North West, 1816-1886***

By SatyendraPeerthum

- **Introduction**

The Vagrant Depot of Grand River North West is located on the Pointe aux Sables Road and extends over an area of almost two acres. It is one of the most important historical and heritage sites which is closely linked with the history of the Indians in Mauritius during the nineteenth century. For most of the 1800s, it has served as a place of incarceration for individuals who were brought from the Indian subcontinent to British Mauritius such as the convicts and indentured and non-indentured labourers. Between 1816 and 1853, hundreds of Indian convicts were kept at the Convict Barracks or Convict Headquarters of Grand River. In 1853, the Convict Barracks was closed down and during the mid-1850s, occasionally, vagrants from the Port Louis Prison were imprisoned there. In 1864, the Convict Barracks was converted into the Vagrant Depot of Grand River or the colony's Central Depot. Between 1864 and 1886, tens of thousands of Indian and non-Indian vagrants were imprisoned at the Grand River Depot. It was closed in early 1886.

- **The Vagrant Depot Before the Indenture Era:  
The Indian Convicts (1816-1853)**

Between 1815 and 1837, around 1500 Indian convicts were transported by the British colonial government of India to Mauritius. They came from the Presidencies of Bengal and Bombay and some from the island of Ceylon. Between the 1810s and 1840s, the majority of the Indian convicts, especially those who resided at the Grand River Convict Barracks, laboured on the public works such as in constructing and repairing the roads, bridges, canals, and public buildings in Port Louis and those in its suburbs. In 1816, the Convict Headquarters was established at Grand River North West where many of the convicts had their living quarters in what became known as Convict Barracks. Six years later, the Convict Department was also officially established at Grand River. In 1848, there were 315 convicts in Mauritius and many of them still resided at the Grand River Convict Barracks. Five years later, the Convict Barracks was closed and the overwhelming majority of the remaining convicts were liberated, with only a handful returning to British India. During the mid-1850s, on some rare occasions vagrants from the Port Louis Prison were transferred and imprisoned at the Convict Barracks.



*A Detailed Illustration of the Convict Barracks  
at Grand River North West, c.1831*



*A Map of the Convict Barracks and  
old Grand River North West Bridge, c.1834*

- The Vagrant Depot During the Indenture Era:  
 The Vagrants of British Mauritius (1864-1886)**

During the nineteenth century, a vagrant, in the eyes of British colonial officials and according to colonial laws, was someone who did not possess a 'valid pass' (or ticket) as well as someone who did not have a permanent place of residence and not working under a labour contract. At the same time, a vagrant was also considered to be a deserter or a labourer who had escaped from his master's employment, usually on a sugar estate. Between the late 1830s and early 1900s, the term "vagrant" was applied in particular to newly introduced indentured labourers or New Immigrants as well as to ex-indentured Indian labourers or Old Immigrants.

In February 1864, in order to deal with the worsening problem of vagrancy in the colony, Governor Barkly and the Council of Government ordered the conversion of the Convict Barracks at Grand River North West into a depot for 300 vagrants. During the following month, Ordinance No.4 of 1864 was enacted and it provided the legal framework for the erection of the Vagrant Depot at Grand River (or also known as the colony's Central Depot). Between January 1865 and December 1867, the Surveyor General's Office, through the use of vagrant labour and at a total cost of more than 6,700 pounds sterling, a dormitory or two large associated wards for the prisoners, quarters for the prison staff, six new prison cells, a boundary wall, and a small hospital, with a surgery, were built.

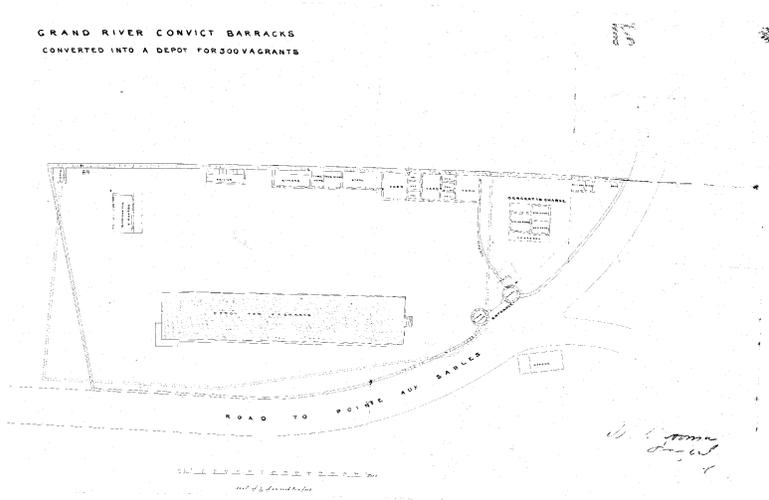
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**WORKS AND BUILDINGS (ITEM ) C. A. F. 1866.**

DETAILS of an Estimate for *enlarging the Vagrant Depot* in accordance with  
 Ordinance No. 4 of 1864 dated the *10th March* 1866.

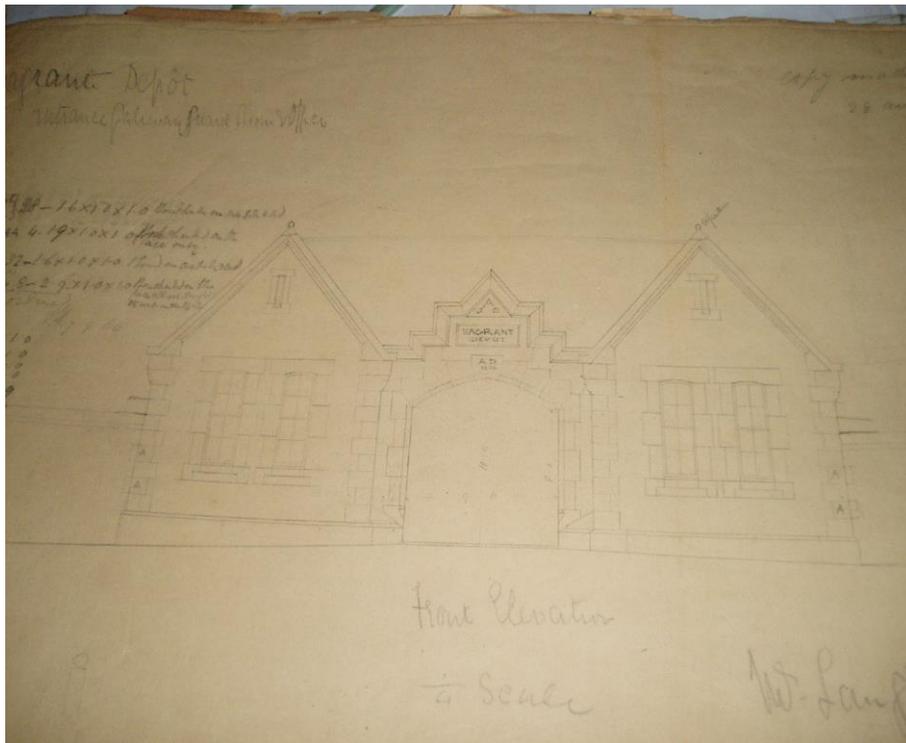
No. of Work or Building.	Description of Work or Materials.	No.	Length.	Breadth.	Depth or Thickness.	Content.	Unit of Estimate.	Price.	Amount.	REMARKS.
	<i>Labour in taking down present doorway and end wall &amp; clearing away rubbish</i>								4	s. 0.
	<i>Cube digging and removing</i>							100	0	

*Details of an Estimate for the Enlarging of the Vagrant Depot, c. 1866*



*Plan of the Vagrant Depot of Grand River, c. 1868*

Between September 1866 and February 1867, a new guard room and office were constructed at a cost of more than 1000 pounds sterling.



*A Three Dimensional Drawing of the Guard Room & Office, c.1866*



*The Guard Room/Office of the Vagrant Depot  
was constructed between September 1866 and February 1867*

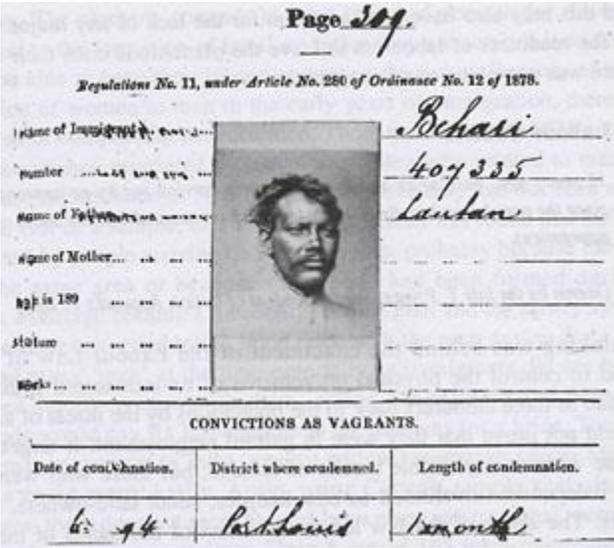
According to the annual returns for the Vagrant Depot of Grand River from the Mauritius Archives, it is estimated that between 1864 and 1886, more than 60,000 vagrants were imprisoned there. Furthermore, during that period, there was a common practice of transferring vagrants from the Port Louis Prison and other district depots and prisons to the Grand River Central Depot.

**Table**

**THE VAGRANT DEPOT  
PRISON POPULATION (1865-1884)**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>NO. OF PRISONERS</b>
1865-1866	4933
1864-1871	40967
1872	842
1877	358
1881	906
1884	2252
1864-	60000

The overwhelming majority of the vagrants of the Depot of Grand River North West were adult males between the ages of eighteen and fifty and were first time offenders who served a three-month sentence. In addition, the Depot had a heterogeneous population which consisted of Indians from India, Indo-Mauritians or Mauritians of Indian origin, Creoles, and a few Europeans. The Depot vagrants also followed the Hindu, Christian, Moslem, and Buddhist faiths and some of them could also read and write. The majority of the Depot prisoners were used for outdoor labour such as breaking stones, constructing roads, cleaning streets, and repairing the public buildings mostly in the Port Louis area and its suburbs. In early 1886, the Vagrant Depot was closed and its prisoners transferred to the Port Louis Prison and the newly built Beau Bassin Prison.

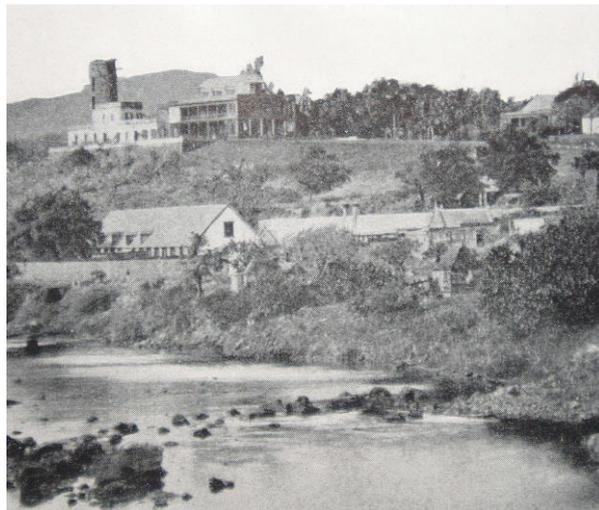


*Picture of Lautan, a Bihari Indian indentured labourer, was condemned to one month imprisonment for vagrancy in Port Louis, c.1884*

- **The Case-Study of a Vagrant of the Grand River Depot: The Story of Dookee in British Mauritius**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1871, Dookee, an indentured Indian labourer, was sent under escort from the Savanne district prison to the Grand River Vagrant Depot to undergo a sentence of 112 days imprisonment. He was condemned as an “incorrigible vagrant” by the Stipendiary Magistrate of Savanne. Shortly after his arrival at the Depot, it was discovered that in January 1870, Dookee, had been imprisoned at the Grand River Depot in January 1871 as an “incorrigible vagrant” and had been transferred from the Vagrant Depot to the Immigration Depot for deportation to India. It is interesting to note that during his first stay in Mauritius, Dookee went by the name of Dawarg and was sent back to Calcutta at the expense of the local colonial government. He stayed in Calcutta for only six months and re-enlisted as an indentured labourer for a 5-year labour contract and passed through the local depot to come to Mauritius. In January 1871, he arrived in the colony and was indentured to Mr. Tourette of Savanne, from whose service he deserted within a matter of days, and was arrested as a vagrant in Souillac. Dookee was imprisoned for several days at the Savanne district prison before being transferred to the Vagrant Depot where he was incarcerated for 112 days and then was transferred to the Immigration Depot. Eventually, the Protector of Immigrants had him deported once again to Calcutta as an “incorrigible vagrant”.

- **The Heritage Value of the Vagrant Depot**



*A Picture of the old Vagrant Depot of Grand River, c.1921*

In 1958, the Vagrant Depot was decreed national monument by Governor Sir Robert Scott through Government Notice No.614. As a national monument, the Vagrant Depot is a heritage site which is worthy of being preserved. Today, it is a matter of public interest because between 1864 and 1886, it formed one of the pillars of the colony’s repressive state apparatus to control the movement, labour,

and lives of the Indian and non-Indian labourers. Thus, this heritage site is tangibly linked with the lives of the Indian and non-Indian labourers who struggled to carve a place for themselves in a highly controlled and stratified Mauritian colonial society. The Vagrant Depot is an important *lieu de mémoire* which bears testimony to the trials, tribulations, and the struggles of more than 60,000 indentured and non-indentured labourers between 1864 and 1886. In the near future, the completion of the *Vagrant Depot Conservation Project* will surely form part of a local as well as an international *Indenture Route Project* which will link Mauritius with other countries where the Indian diaspora took place.