

S. B. Thomas Agricultural Academy (a.k.a. Mabang College)  
– Preserving a Sierra Leone Historic Monument

By Melbourne Garber

The Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission currently has a list of 16 national monuments, down from the original list of 32, including buildings, ruins, tombstones, a deserted village site, remnant of stockades, steps, stones and bastions. A few of the more well known sites are the Bunce Island Slave Castle; the Maroon Church located not too far from the historic cotton tree in the heart of Freetown, St. Charles Church in the village of Regent and the Old Fourah Bay College in Cline Town in the east end of the city.

On the banks of the Ribbi River in the Kholifa chiefdom, there is an edifice of significant architectural and historic significance called Mabang College that has regrettably remained hidden in plain sight for exactly a century. It is not even listed in the original or current list of historic monuments compiled by the Monuments and Relics Commission.

Mabang College was first brought to my attention in 2009, by my brother who casually asked me if I had ever heard of it after I had been talking about the dilapidated state of the Old Fourah Bay College and about the preservation of the Bunce Island Slave Castle. Intrigued, I immediately went online to find out more about this place and found very few references to it but no pictures. I needed to know more but could only find out a little bit more additional information.

A pioneer of formal training in agriculture in the country was a shrewd and frugal Sierra Leonean businessman, Samuel Benjamin Abuke Thomas who hailed from the peninsular town of Wellington on the outskirts of Freetown. He is said to have been one of the richest Africans of his time and a recluse. He died in 1901 and left over £50,000 (other accounts put it between £54,000 and £60,000) as an endowment to build an agricultural school. The late Doyle Sumner, teacher, educationist and cabinet Minister quotes two relevant clauses of the Will. Clause 10 stated *inter alia* that “the said investment...to be called ‘Samuel Benjamin Thomas Charity Trust’...shall be forever a permanent endowment for the agricultural development of the Colony... and the income accruing therefrom shall subject to the payment therefrom .....and be appropriated for the education and maintenance independently of their religious opinions of male natives of the Colony aforesaid of ability good character and sound constitution for such periods as my trustees shall think fit in the theories and practice of a liberal education and a sound Christian training, such education and maintenance to be furnished either within the Colony aforesaid or provided for and obtained in agricultural institutions in England or America or both.

Clause 13 of the Will contains elements such as the offering of land preferably a thousand acres “on the banks of the Ribbi River not far from the village of Songo in the Colony...” and the building “on the land given as aforesaid an agricultural Academy or college with the necessary appurtenances and outhouses inclusive of a chapel..... for the

education of male natives of the Colony aforesaid in the theory and practice of profitable farming and agriculture and to equip such college with all the necessary appliances and appoint thereto when completed professors and teachers at adequate salaries so as to secure in due course locally an institution as useful and efficient as any of the kind in England or America.”

As Sumner further puts it; the patriotism of Mr. Thomas, unique in the history of Sierra Leone was appreciated by his compatriots: “It was distinctive in that it set up a definitive goal of education different from the reigning bourgeois concept. While critics had vigorously condemned the pedantic tone of education in Sierra Leone, the result of their criticism was poor, because there was little practical example of their faith in industrial education. The idea around the provisions of the bequest [Samuel Benjamin Thomas Charity Trust] gathered into itself past desultory utterances in favour of industrial education, and became the fulcrum of educational thought and subsequent change in educational policy.” [D.L. Sumner] As is well known the curriculum of higher or college education in Sierra Leone was dominated by theology and the humanities. The social and pure sciences as well as agriculture are, comparatively speaking, new. The history of institutions concerned with the development of agricultural education, relative to Fourah Bay College, according to Dr. Edward R. Rhodes, is a short one, presumably because it took a long time indeed for anyone to realize the need for formal teaching of the methods of modern farming in Sierra Leone. As Agronomy Professor Russell T. Odell points out, while it was widely acknowledged that Sierra Leone is primarily an agricultural country, the emphasis of improving agriculture had not been commensurate with the importance in the economy. Prior to independence there was no agriculture degree programme in Sierra Leone. The Ministry of Education had trained a few Sierra Leoneans in a non-degree programme at the Njala Agriculture Experimental Station, but less than a dozen Sierra Leoneans had earned university degrees in agriculture, mostly in the United Kingdom. This is the rationale for recognizing the contribution of S.B. Thomas and the institution he bequeathed to his country in the field of agriculture, and the case for including the building and its site in the list of national monuments.

The foundation stone for the S. B. Thomas Agricultural Academy was laid by Governor Leslie Probyn on 28 January 1909 and was opened in 1912. Governor Probyn was very supportive of this college and according to the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science used his influence to obtain 1000 acres of land in Mabang for the college and approved the grant of 12 scholarships worth £50 annually for a 4-year course in agriculture. Three were given out each year. This was in all likelihood one of the first, if not the first Agricultural Institution in West Africa.

There is very scant information about whether the building was ever used for its intended purpose or how long it functioned as an Agricultural College. With the departure of Governor Probyn, the government interest in the college waned. It was claimed that the land around Mabang was not very fertile; the surroundings unsanitary and potable water was not readily available. Thus it appears that it soon became a “white elephant” and this was compounded by the fact that the Agriculture Department of the government then focused its attention on starting an Experimental Agricultural Station at Njala along the

banks of the Taia River [Sumner]. Thus Mabang College became the forerunner of Njala Experimental Agricultural Station in 1912, Njala College founded in 1919, Njala University College, and now Njala University, founded in 1964. The original aim of Njala College was to train teachers for government schools, agriculture being a subject of special study. However, for the first five years after its establishment there was no agricultural instructor on staff. [Rhodes]

The next significantly recorded historical occurrence of Mabang College is during the Second World War, when for six years, 1939 – 1945, it was home to the students from Fourah Bay College as the British army had commandeered Mount Aureol. What happened to it in the intervening years? After the end of the Second World War, it appears that it again faded from the consciousness of Sierra Leoneans. In fact this hidden identity has prevailed to the extent that a magnificent photograph of the Academy -- perhaps the only surviving pictorial record of the grandeur of the building is captioned "Fourah Bay College Exile Quarters, Mabang" Of course this is because Fourah Bay College, the first institution of higher learning in Africa south of the Sahara, was using what the historian Christopher Fyfe described as the "ill-fated Academy" as a temporary home during the second world war as stated above.

The next online mention of Mabang College is a picture showing a Canadian military officer with members of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces cooking a meal near the college during the rebel war. The caption goes on to state that the college was burnt down during the rebel war.

Fast-forward to the present and there is still a paucity of information on Mabang College and so for me a visit to Mabang College was the only way to find out more about it.

A day prior to visiting the college, I found out from Professor Eldred Jones that when he went to Fourah Bay College in 1945, the first year was spent at Mabang College. That coincidentally, was the last year Mabang College was used as a substitute for Fourah Bay College. At the end of that school year, they "packed up" the college and moved back to Mount Aureol.

Early the next morning, I set off to see Mabang College. After passing through my hometown of Waterloo, we take the unpaved road leading to Songo and then on to Moyamba. The driver is informed that once we get across the Ribbi River Bridge, we would arrive in the village of Mabang. We eventually arrive at the bridge and have to come to a halt. While the bridge structure itself looked old but sturdy, the driving surface left a lot to be desired and was almost enough to make one consider not going any further with the trip. However a guide was on hand to precede us across the bridge, arranging the timber planks to ensure they were directly below the wheels. This did not necessarily ease the fears of traversing it and once we were safely across, I informed the guide that I wanted to go to Mabang College. He offered to accompany us and show us where the college was. He stated that some of the villagers had recently cleared the brush around the college and that they tried to do it regularly. It was apparent that they had an affinity for the college.

Prior to going on to the college, I asked the guide to take us to the local chief so I could go pay our respects, as is customary. Fortunately his home was on the way and when I met with him, I informed him that I was on the way to Mabang College and was hoping to subsequently raise people's awareness about it at home and abroad. He informed me also that the villagers were proud that this building was in their village and that they regularly cut the vegetation growing around it, but obviously there were costs involved whenever they had to do this.

The drive from the Ribbi River to the college took about 15 – 20 minutes, during which time we actually saw some of the villagers growing rice in some swampy land. Soon after we passed the original train station at Mabang, the guide suddenly told us to stop as we had arrived at the college which was set back from the road. We would have missed it if that was not where we were going. We got out of the vehicle and walked a few meters into the clearing – AND THERE IT WAS IN ITS MAJESTY!! As the guide had said, they had cleaned the brush around the building and to say I was awed by the size and grandness of the building would be an understatement.

It was more magnificent than I could have ever imagined. The main entrance was up a pair of stairs that then led into a 3-story reception area with an octagonal atrium. As glorious as it looked, it was readily apparent that the building had been burnt to the ground as there were no floors within it (when my brother visited the college in the 1980's, they had walked up to the top floors). The building's exterior and interior walls are intact and the workmanship is spectacular. The foundation stone plaque is unblemished and walking around and within the building one is just amazed that this treasure is within our midst and just sitting there. The guide informed me that the building originally had 99 rooms though that is not recorded anywhere.

Amazed by the splendor and still in awe, we left the college and headed back to Freetown. At the bridge over the Ribbi River, the guide again preceded the vehicle over the bridge and I eventually returned to Freetown more determined than ever to do something about Mabang College.

In order for Sierra Leone and Sierra Leoneans to derive any benefit from the location of Mabang College, the road from Songo to Mabang needs to be upgraded and tarred. This is part of the infrastructural development that is necessary around the country and will benefit the people of this chiefdom. The bridge over the Ribbi River must also be overhauled and upgraded and the driving surface made safer.

### What Next?

#### Short-term

1. First and foremost, given the fortuitous coincidence that this year is the centennial of the completion of this building, it should immediately be included in the Monuments and Relics Commission list of national monuments.

2. An application should be made to the World Monuments Fund to include it as a historically significant site. It can also be submitted to UNESCO's World Heritage Sites List for consideration.

### Long-term

1. Given the size of the building, Sierra Leone should look into the feasibility of a limited renovation of the building to convert it to an Agricultural Museum, historic site or a tourist center. Its proximity to Freetown and the neighboring towns could make it an educational site visit for school children.

As indicated in this article, this year marks the centenary of the opening of this Agricultural Academy and it is incumbent on us as Sierra Leoneans to ensure that it receives the national and international recognition that it deserves.

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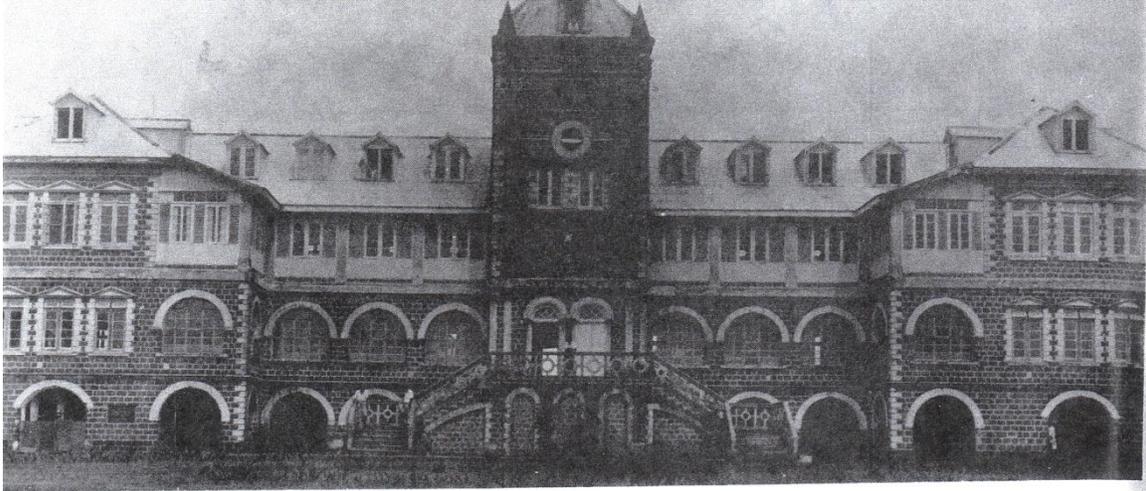
Figure 3 - Photograph of S. B. Thomas Agricultural Academy or Mabang College. Reproduced by the Celebrations Committee, Centenary of University Education (1876-1976) and Sesquicentennial of Fourah Bay College (1827-1977), Freetown



Figure 1 - Crossing the Ribbi River



Figure 2 - Foundation Stone laid by Governor Probyn



Fourah Bay College Exile Quarters Mabang

Figure 3 - Lone Picture of Original Mabang College



Figure 4 - Mabang College January 2012