

# The Wonderful Demerara River

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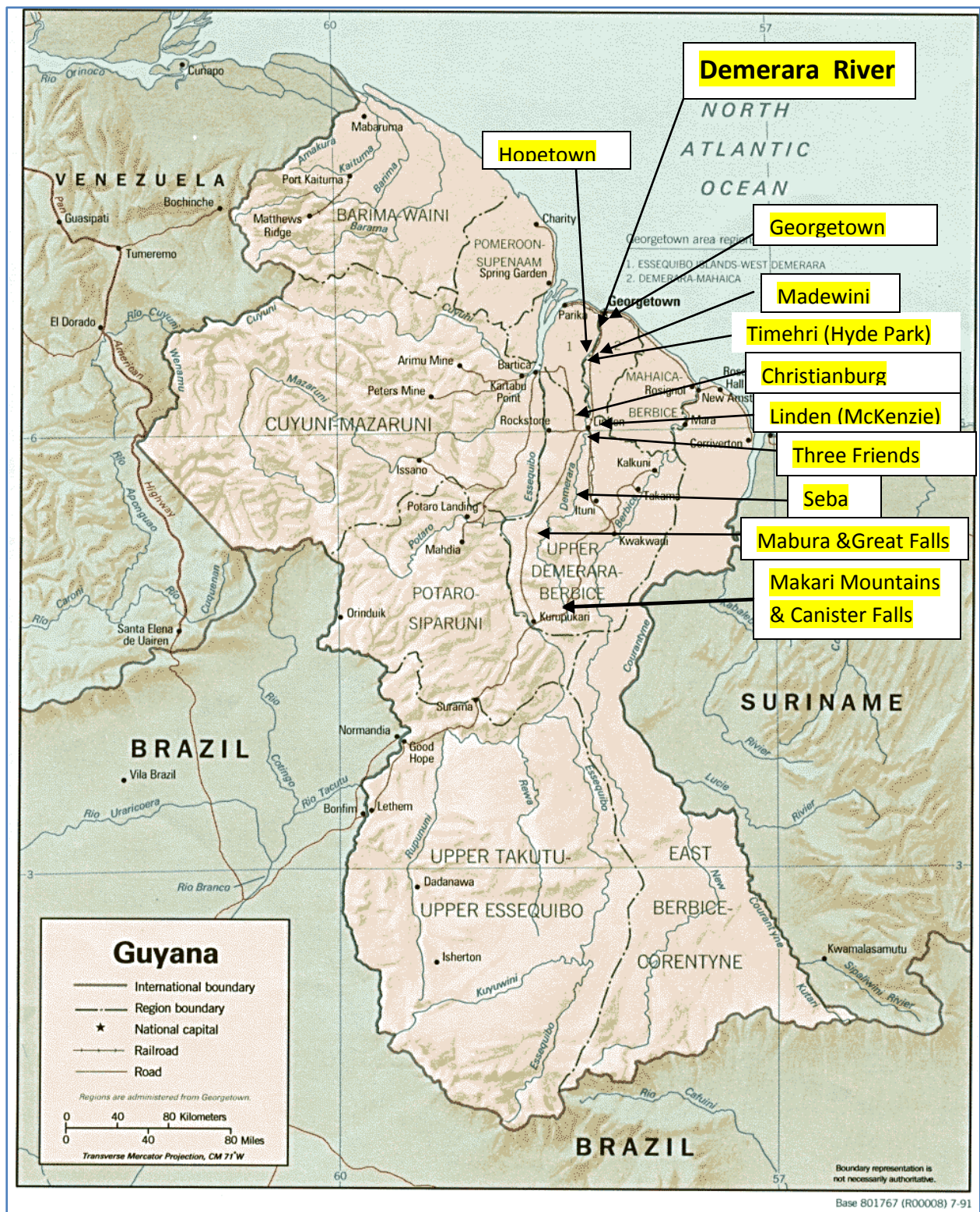


*“When your ship has passed the Islands  
and the blue sea turns to brown,  
And the leadsman calls ‘Five Fathoms’ when  
he casts the lead-line down,  
And you see a long flat coastland and a  
smokeless wooden town,  
You can reckon you are nearing Demerara,  
Demerara, Demerara, you can reckon you  
are nearing Demerara”.*

Extract from the National Song:

**“Way Down Demerara”**

By R C G Potter



**Demerara River**

**Hopetown**

**Georgetown**

**Madewini**

**Timehri (Hyde Park)**

**Christianburg**

**Linden (McKenzie)**

**Three Friends**

**Seba**

**Mabura & Great Falls**

**Makari Mountains & Canister Falls**

### **The Demerara River – origin of its name, its profile and its significance**

The early Spanish explorers referred to this river as ‘*Rio de Mirar*’, the wonderful river, but it was the Dutch who christened the river, the **Demerara**, from the word ‘*Demirar*’, the **wonderful**.<sup>1</sup>

The wonderful Demerara River originates from the rugged, rain-fed, forested northern slopes of the Makari Mountains, located slightly right of centre of the narrow waist of Guyana.

In 1956, while prospecting for diamonds at Lindo Creek, **Matthew Young**, man of many parts – sugar estate overseer, gold panner, diamond prospector and hinterland construction engineer during the 1920s to 1980, received an invitation to visit Mr Bleakey, a Government Geologist who was working in the area towards the source of the Demerara River. Young wrote:

*“I dropped downriver to his riverside camp from where Edwards, his boat man carried me to the walking line on which Bleakey and his other geologists were working. The next day, I followed the geologists over laterite rock which was oozing water, in some places a foot deep. We continued walking through this water to climb a sandstone mountain about 1,000 feet high from which two black water tributaries emerged. At the top I found myself on a flat tableland of rock with dwarfed trees and shrubs. There was a grand view all around. From the southern tip I could clearly see the Makari Mountain peak rising above us. This then was the source of the Demerara River”<sup>2</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. L. Crookhall, **British Guiana or Work and Wanderings among the Creoles, the Africans and Indians of the wild country**. (London: T. Lester Union Ltd.)

<sup>2</sup> M F Young (1998), **Guyana: The Lost El Dorado**. Peepal Tree Press, UK

### Tributary of the Demerara River above Canister Falls



The black water source tributaries –the Kuruduni and the Charabaru, conjoin just above the Mauri tributary to form the Demerara River and its volume increases from the numerous tributaries flowing into the valley from the two ridge lines on the left and right banks as the river journeys 346 kilometres to its estuary at the Atlantic Ocean. The ridge line on the left (western) bank of the river provides the alignment of the Kurupukari –Mabura - Linden – Sand Hills trail and the one on the right (eastern) bank, the alignment of the Kwakwani – Linden- Timehri – Georgetown road and trail. There are significant hill features on these ridge lines: the Akaiwanna Mountains, Wamara Hill, Mabura Hill, Arisaru Mountain, Tiger Hill, Wismar and Sand Hills are located along the western ridge line while on the eastern ridge line are Red Hill, and the Ituni, Seba, Linden, Dora and Timehri Hills. Along its journey also, the river descends from a height of approximately 300 metres through a series of falls and rapids of which the more well known are the Canister Falls, Great Falls, and Malali Falls.

### Canister Falls in the upper Demerara River



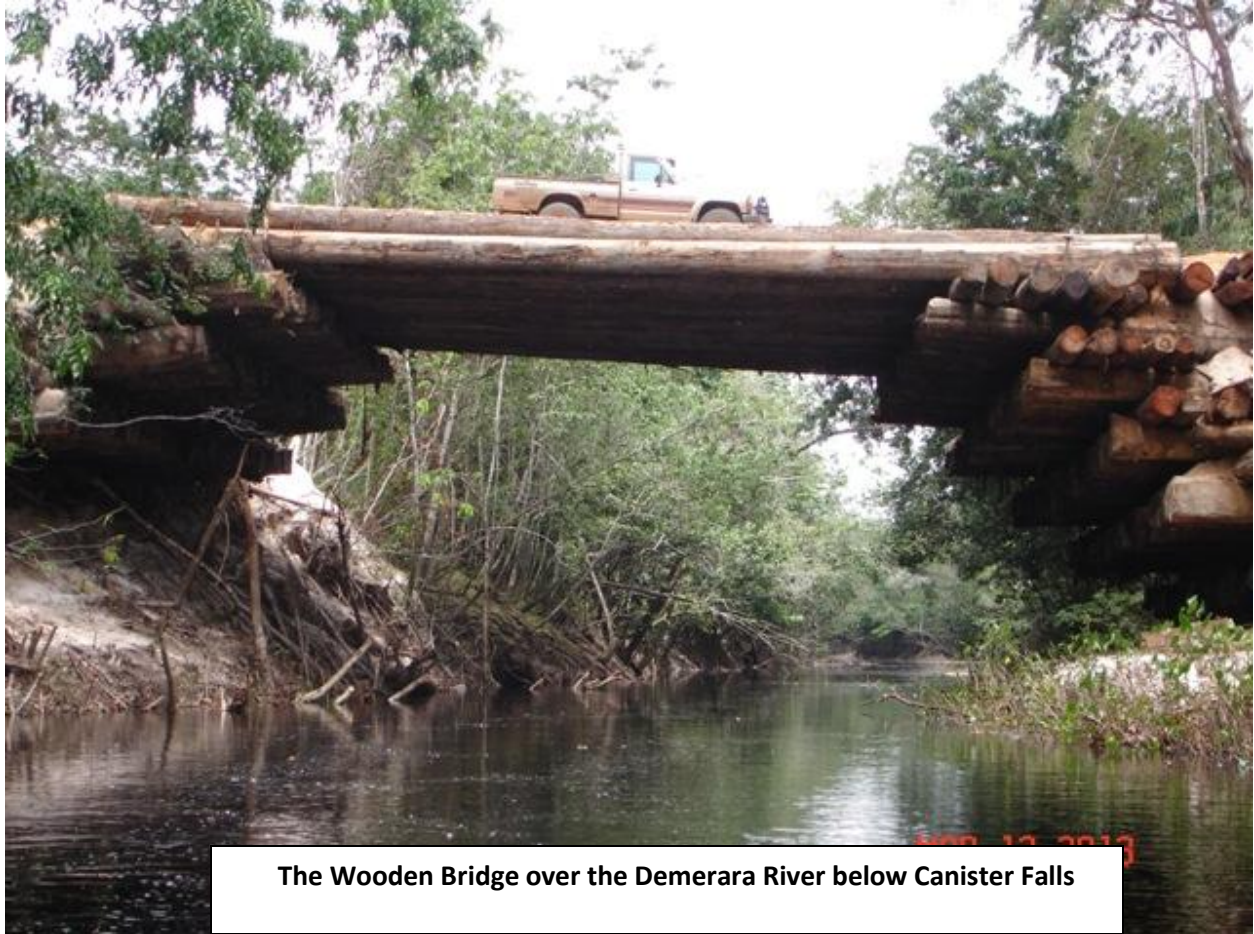
This article on the wonderful Demerara River is intended to provide the reader with relevant aspects of Dutch, French and British occupation of the Colony of Demerara as they pertain to the pivotal role of the river in facilitating the development of early settlements, plantations and enterprises. It illustrates how the river was integral to this development and helped shape the foundations of trade and commerce based on sugar, minerals and timber that have been the magnets for colonial exploitation and post-emancipation settlement.

The employment opportunities associated with production and processing of sugar, extraction of minerals, and logistic movement, attracted the flow of foreign contractors and also migrant workers from coastal communities and this led to the establishment of settlements on both banks of the river. The presence of the Demerara River as a natural feature as well as a logistic artery was advantageous to the colonial administrators and the foreign-owned companies, who, up to the late 1960s, propagated a stratified society, based on class, religion and ethnicity. The Demerara River has its unique folk-lore and it has provided travelers and settled communities with euphoric as well as the painful memories. And, it continues to stimulate the modern-day shared optimism and promise of a brighter future.

It is worthy of note that some of Guyana's best known signature products carry the brand name Demerara – **Demerara Rum**, **Demerara Sugar**, and the **Demerara Shutters**.

It is the river that provided the artery, conduit and lifeblood for the multiplicity of activities. Commencing in the 1750s under Dutch colonial occupation, the early settlements existed alongside plantations on both banks of the Demerara River, where European Planters, utilizing their slave labour, produced sugar, coffee and cotton for the Dutch West India Company. During French and then British occupation there was the establishment of the Capital City and Port of Georgetown on the right bank of the estuary of the Demerara River. Later, the discovery of bauxite at McKenzie and the quest for gold, diamonds, timber and balata in the hinterland, catalysed the development of lines of communication – a sand trail of approximately 60 kilometres running south through the forested ridge line from Hyde Park (later Atkinson Field and Timehri) to McKenzie, and the steamer service in the Demerara River from Georgetown to McKenzie. A 27 kilometres single track railway ran from Wismar on the left bank of the Demerara River to Rockstone on the right bank of the Essequibo River and from there, boats plied to the Potaro and the gold and diamond fields, the logging and balata concessions. Later, a cattle trail was opened up from the Rupununi to Kurupukari on the Essequibo River and from there to the Canister Falls on the Demerara River and through to the Berbice savannahs. Cattle were driven through this trail to the Berbice River, and then transported by steam-driven paddle boats to the coast.

The lines of communications are in constant evolution. Trails, roads, airstrips, river landings and bridges provide the threads of connectivity for economic enterprises, market access, tourism, socialisation and culture. A fixed metal bridge was constructed over the Demerara River to service the Wismar-Rockstone railway, as well as the bauxite industry and the mining operations in the hinterland. In July 1978, the floating pontoon-supported Demerara Harbour Bridge was commissioned - 1,851 metres in length, with a retractable span for passage of ocean going vessels, and it provides the connection for the communities on the eastern and western banks of the lower Demerara River. More recently, wooden bridges have been constructed over the upper Demerara River by Demerara Timbers Limited in the vicinity of Mabura, and by Variety Woods Limited just below Canister Falls, in order to manage their operations in timber concessions granted in accordance with Timber Sales Agreements with the Guyana Forestry Commission.



**The Wooden Bridge over the Demerara River below Canister Falls**

### **The Demerara River and its significance to the Dutch**

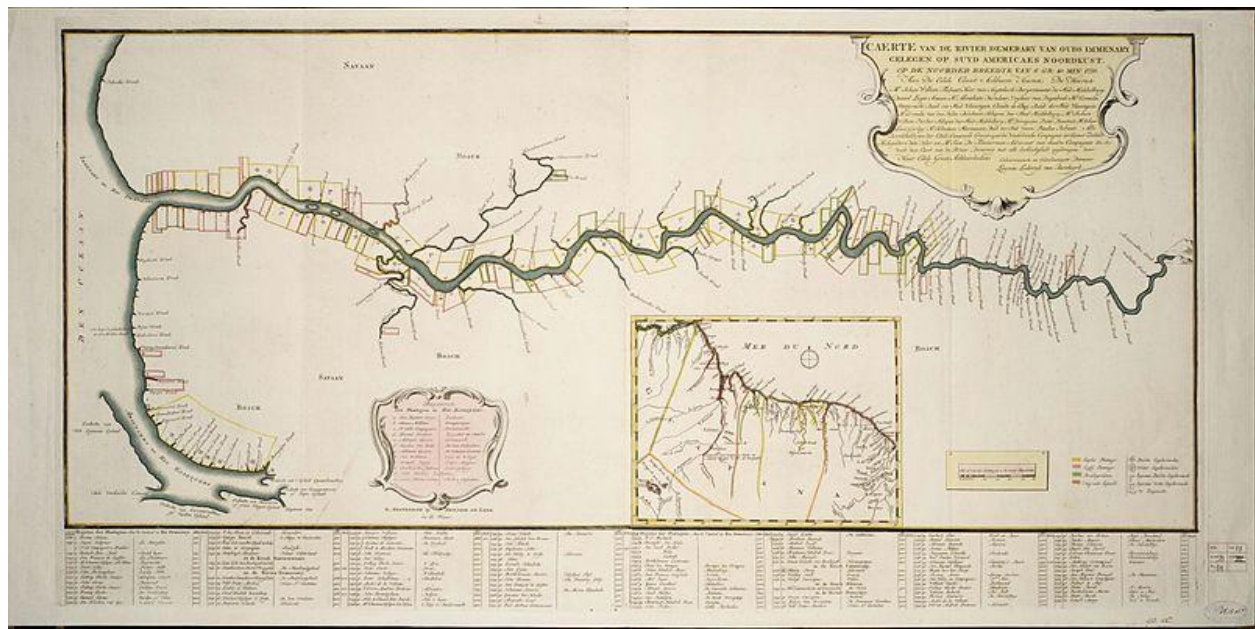
In 1744 during the Dutch occupation, there was an overflow of new settlers in the Essequibo colony and the Directors of the Zeeland Chamber of the Dutch West India Company allowed the Commander of the Essequibo Colony, Laurens Storm Van Gravesande to throw open Demerara to settlement. The first grant of land in Demerara was to Andries Pietersen on the Kuliserabo River, a left bank tributary of the Demerara River and approximately 66 kilometres upriver. Concessionaires were to commence cultivation within a year and six weeks or risk forfeiture of the land. Between each concession a strip of land 10 roods (1 hectare) wide was to be left in reserve as a company path to secure access to the lands beyond. Ignatius Courthial, a Frenchman who was a miner, established a coffee estate on the West Bank Demerara. During Gravesande's visit to Holland in 1750 to brief the managing body of the Dutch West India Company, referred to as the TEN - who represented the Amsterdam and Zeeland Chambers of the West India Council, his report so impressed them that he was appointed the Director General of the two rivers – the Essequibo and Demerara and his son Jonathan Samuel Gravesande was appointed the Commander of Demerara. On his return to the colonies in 1752, Gravesande brought with him his wife's nephew, a qualified surveyor - Laurens Lodewijck Van Berch-Eyck and the latter commenced the laying out of the boundaries in Demerara. Jonathan had received a 1,600 hectares concession on the

Madewini Creek on the right bank of the Demerara River and his father Laurens received 800 hectares concession on the Madewini and 800 hectares on the Haimaruni Creek - approximately 10 kilometres upriver from Madewini. The Dutch settlements in Demerara that developed from the cluster of plantations located along the eastern or right bank of the Demerara River required that a Brandwagt or Guard-House be established at the mouth of the Demerara River close to what is now the Stabroek Market.

In 1752, it was decided that no concession of 800 hectares should be granted except on condition that a sugar mill be erected within 3 years. The Director General was therefore undertaking to erect 2 new sugar mills within 3 years and the foundation of the sugar industry of the colony of Demerara was laid at this instance. Later, an Administrative Centre was established on the second island, located 32 kilometres up the Demerara River, which lay abreast of Jonathan Gravesande’s plantation at Madewini. The island was called Borssele in honour of one of the TEN – P.J. Van Borssele Van Der Hooge. The island was laid out into 24 lots - 3 for government purposes and 21 were sold and among the first grantees were Laurens and two of his nephews – the Van Berch-Eycks.

The site on which Georgetown is situated was first laid out in plantations in 1759. Jacques Solinoe was the first to receive a grant of 2000 hectares below the Brandwagt and this included Plantations Vlissengen and Eve Leary. Joran Heyligar also owned properties in Werk-en-Rust, La Penitence and Ruimveldt. In 1759 also, Laurens Lodewijck Van Berch-Eyck published his famous chart of the Demerara River and for his efforts as a draughtsman, the Directors presented him with a slave and a cask of red wine.

**Map of Demerara River showing Dutch Plantations in the 1760s**







### **The Lower Demerara River and the Capital**

The Demerara Trade grew as a result of the increase in production of sugar, coffee and cotton and in 1762, ten ships entered the Demerara River and shipped a total cargo of 1200 tons of sugar, 281 bags of coffee and 10 bales of cotton. On 24 February 1781, the English captured the colony of Essequibo and Demerara and established Fort St. George on the site of the Guard-House or Brandwagt which had been built by the Dutch to monitor activities along the river. Thus were the plans laid for the Capital – Georgetown. On 3 February 1782, the French captured the colony from the British and the new town was named **Longchamps**. When the Dutch regained possession of the colony on 16 February 1784 under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, **Longchamps** was renamed **Stabroek** and when on 22 April 1796 the colony again came under British rule the administrative centre continued to expand and on 5 May 1812, **Stabroek** was renamed **Georgetown**.

On Robert Schomburgk's second journey to BG, accompanied by his brother Richard in 1840, they arrived on the ship '**Cleopatra**' and Richard recorded this view of Demerara from the deck:

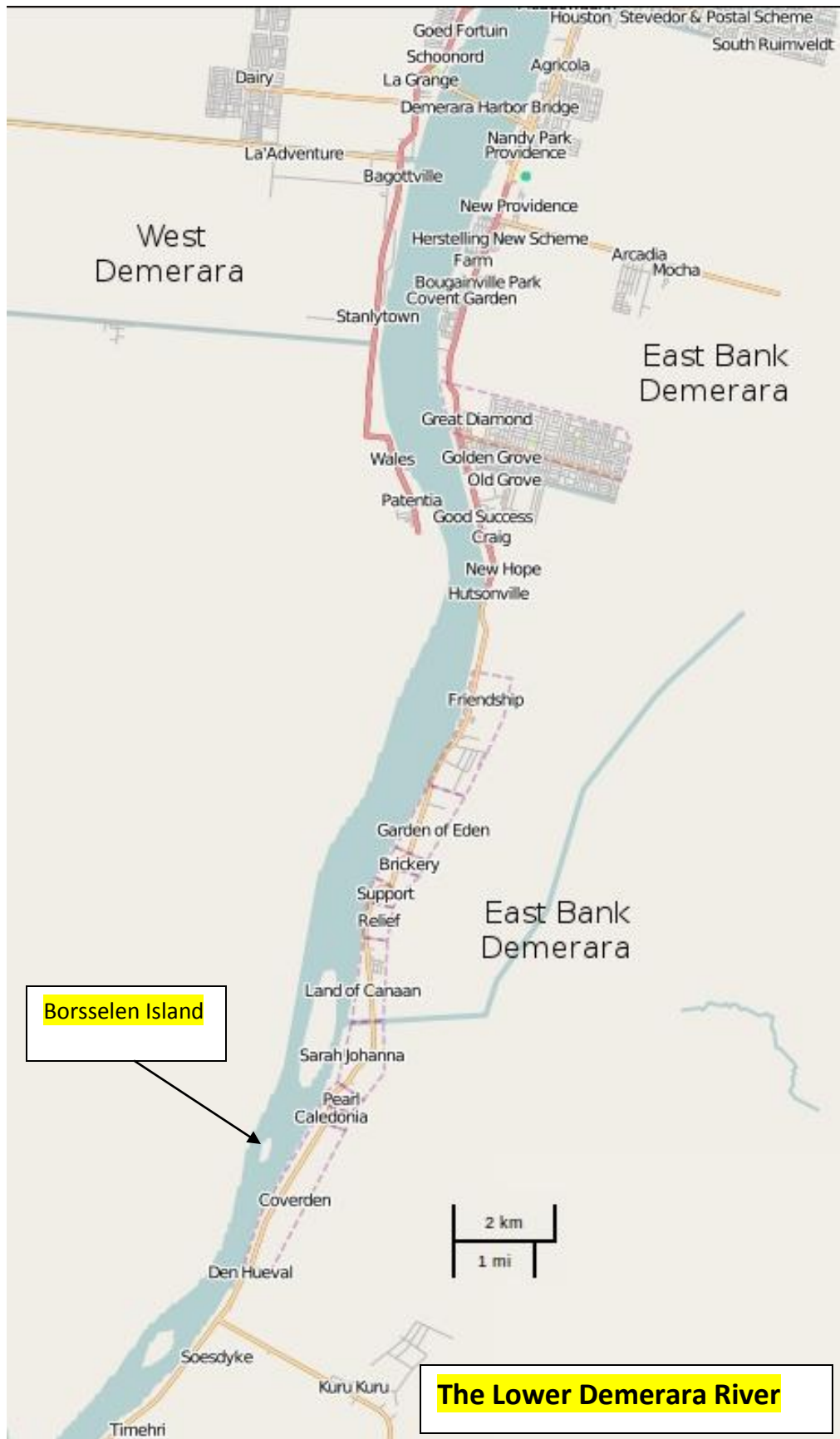
**“The dense tropical vegetation, with which Georgetown or Demerara was regularly veiled, prevented us from satisfying our inquisitive gaze. We could only see a majestic Lighthouse with its proud summit and the huge locking chimneys of the sugar plantations”<sup>3</sup>**

After the efforts of the French resulted in the empoldering of lands along the coast and the Canals Polder, there was a shift from the plantations in the upper Demerara such as Kulisiabo, Haimaruni and Madewini which were experiencing declining yields to the more productive and logistically more accessible, lower Demerara River. Significant economic activities influenced the demographic shift to the coast and the Capital Georgetown, and many of upper plantations were abandoned.

The modern day profile of the lower Demerara River is that of a bustling Port with a variety of vessels and crews plying their trade – ocean- going and coastal vessels, fishing trawlers, artisanal fishing boats, fuel boats, pontoons laden with timber and quarry products, and water-taxis ferrying passengers across the river as an alternative to using the Demerara Harbour Bridge. Vessels transporting bauxite from Linden and ships laden with petroleum products, cement, containerized cargo and agricultural produce, are also a regular feature. Plans to desilt the river channel will facilitate transportation of increased tonnage of cargo, with consequential benefits to the private sector and the country’s revenue stream. The health of the river’s ecosystem is an issue which requires monitoring and enforcement because of the impacts of mining operations upriver, leaching from agricultural activities, and indiscriminate disposal of solid waste.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Schomburgk: **Travels in British Guiana during the years 1840-1844. Vol 1.** (Leipzig: J.J. Weber, 1848), p.14.



## **The Upper Demerara River and its linkages to the exploitation of mineral and other resources**

The discovery and exploitation of bauxite, gold and diamonds, the tapping and processing of balata, and the demand for beef and tobacco from the sprawling savannahs in the south west, influenced the migration of coastlanders to the upper riverine settlements and the hinterland. The Demerara River along with the Essequibo River provided the means through which logistic movement was made possible to the bauxite locations of McKenzie, Ituni and Kwakwani, the gold and diamond districts of the Cuyuni, Mazaruni and Potaro and the cattle ranches, tobacco fields and balata concessions of the Rupununi. Settlement along the upper Demerara River can be traced back to 1759 when a land survey was carried out for the establishment of a township which later became known as Three Friends. This was named for three friends - Messrs Spencer, Blount and John Dalgeish Patterson, who had settled there in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. They were former British naval officers who had fought against the French in the Caribbean during the Napoleonic War. Patterson, a contractor for the Dutch colony of Essequibo-Demerara at the time, owned Plantation Christiansburg which was a choice place for retirement of British naval officers after 1803. Patterson built a great house there which became a Guest House for visitors of the early settlement and when he died in 1842, the British Guiana Government took over his plantation and used the great house as a Magistrate's Court. A portion of the plantation was then sold to Sprostons which then established the Wismar-Rockstone railway to move stone and timber from the Essequibo to Demerara. Wismar was formed by influx of immigrants from various European countries, mainly Germany, and after emancipation, many of the former African slaves who refused to work on the sugar plantations, migrated to live there. The German settlers named the settlement Wismar after a German town of that name.

Bauxite, as an economic term, is defined as an aggregate of hydrated aluminum oxides of sufficient concentration to be commercially exploitable as an ore of aluminum metal. It was described, but not identified as such, by JG Sawlins and C Barrington Brown in 1875 in the vicinity of Christianburg. The material was investigated by J.B.Harrison in 1897-1916 and field work over an extensive area was carried out in 1917 to 1921 under the direction of Harrison. Many of the deposits exploited currently, were located. Areas such as Fairs Rust, Watooka, and Noitegedacht were mined out. Dorabisi Creek deposit and Montgomery - Arrowcane deposits are some of the better known ore bodies mined. These ore bodies are overlain by blue clay beds of overburden, white kaolin, and white and brown sands varying in thickness from 5 to 60 metres or more. In 1913, Scottish geologist, George Bain McKenzie bought lands for mining on the eastern bank of the Demerara River. He bought the lands at cheap prices by claiming he would plant oranges because few people knew about bauxite and its potential. In 1915 after Mackenzie died, his lands passed to Winthrop C Nelson. In 1916, great interest was generated in the USA on the occurrence of bauxite and the Aluminum Company of America, ALCOA, in the same year incorporated the Demerara Bauxite Company DEMBA and secured leases on large areas of bauxite-bearing land in the vicinity of the area purchased by McKenzie. In 1916, mining of Bauxite commenced and hundreds of people from the coast migrated there in search of employment. A settlement known as Cockatara, which grew up in the bauxite mining area, joined up with Christianburg Plantation and became known as McKenzie. The settlement's fortunes depended on the overseas demand for bauxite and aluminum. The slump of the early 1930s was followed by a rapid increase in demand during World

War II and with infrastructure such as for production of refractory grade and abrasive grade bauxite as well as an aluminum refinery, British Guiana became the most diversified bauxite producer. On the socio-economic side, even though facilities were established for worker's accommodation, education, health and recreation, McKenzie was a racially stratified society.



**View from the McKenzie Bridge of the bauxite loading facilities - right bank of the Demerara River**

In the 1960/61 period a potential hydropower project at Malali Falls was the subject of discussion between then Premier of British Guiana, Dr Cheddi Jagan and Cuba's Dr Ernesto (Ché) Guevara<sup>4</sup>. It is hoped that this project would be revisited.

Forestry operations on both banks of the Demerara River provide logs and processed wood products for the export and domestic markets. In 1980, the Government of Guyana established a national logging and sawmilling company known as Demerara Woods Limited based on Mabura Hill. This was subsequently divested to a foreign company and renamed Demerara Timbers Limited.

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<sup>4</sup> Cheddi Jagan (1966): **The West on Trial**, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin.

Forest concessions have been awarded to the Demerara Timbers Limited, private individuals such as Messrs Nagasar Sawh, Klautky, Herzog and Charter and to syndicates comprising small chain saw loggers.

The wonderful Demerara River has been a silent witness to the events of over 250 years as summarized in this article. It has been relatively unchanged as a river except that modern day extractive industries and agricultural run-off as well as indiscriminate disposal of solid waste, especially in the middle and lower reaches of the river, pose health challenges to downstream communities and environmental stress to biodiversity, especially aquatic life. There are anecdotal reports of increasing rates of siltation. The Shipping Association is concerned at the reduced tonnage of cargo carrying vessels. Siltation has reduced the volume of fresh water discharge from the estuary into the Atlantic Ocean. Increasing salinity in the lower reaches of the river can threaten agricultural production, fish stock and the integrity of aquifers. Climate related impacts on rainfall patterns, tidal differentials, and the health of coastal and estuarine mangrove forests, micro-climate and biodiversity, are all aspects that need to be monitored and appropriate regulatory and corrective action taken.

As with the human body, the health and functional integrity of this national artery will need to receive the attention of policy makers, regulators and citizens, since the future economic, social and developmental activities that depend on this important national waterway, will only be realised through committed and sustained stewardship of this Wonderful Demerara River.



**The Wonderful Demerara River**