

Silver Men and Women in the construction of the Panama Canal

A presentation by Sir Ronald Sanders, Ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the United States and Permanent Representative to the OAS

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"Past, present and future of the Panama Canal"

The historical tapestry of the Panama Canal embodies many of the factors that continue to drive the world today.

Among these are migration by persons seeking economic opportunities that are denied them in their homelands; the difficult conditions, including racism, that migrants face even while they take on jobs that locals will not do for wages locals would not accept; and treatment that is inhumane, even in death.

These elements are as important as the engineering prowess of the United States that the construction of the Canal represents.

Despite the considerable sums of money spent – and recouped - by the United States on this monumental project,¹ it would not have been achieved without the sweat, blood, perseverance and lives of West Indians, whose pivotal role no one should forget.

It also involved, between 1913 and 1916, the dismantling of Panamanian towns and the expulsion of 40,000 people – mostly black – by the US company that ran the Canal Zone, practically as a sovereign state, imposing the existing segregationist policies in the US.

As the title of Marixa Lasso's powerful book states, those people were... erased.

Migrant Labour as a transformative force

The late 19th and early 20th century were difficult economic times in the Caribbean, pushing many to seek employment overseas.

The employment opportunities presented by the construction of the canal, became a beacon of hope for thousands of West Indians.

Many were enticed with hollow promises, and some even sold their meagre belongings, banking on the hope that the canal offered.

¹ The total direct cost was around \$425 million by 1914. This doesn't include subsequent costs for improvements, maintenance, or other considerations over the next several decades. However, the U.S. controlled the canal from its opening in 1914 until the end of 1999, when control was handed over to Panama. During this period, the canal generated significant revenue from tolls charged to ships. The exact revenue the U.S. received varied year by year, based on global shipping demands, toll rates, and other factors. To provide some perspective: in the mid-20th century, annual toll revenues were in the tens of millions of dollars. By the late 20th century, this figure had risen significantly. For instance, by the 1990s, **the annual toll revenue** approached, and **in some years exceeded, \$500 million.**

An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 West Indians arrived at the Canal Zone between 1904 and 1914 – the period with which this presentation is concerned.²

While many of them - especially from Barbados and Jamaica - were recruited by agents of the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), which was established by the U.S. government to oversee the construction of the Canal, many paid their own way.

For instance, persons from Antigua and Dominica “paid their own passages, or went to the French island of Martinique, to be contracted by the agent who operated there”.³

However, upon arrival, in the Canal Zone, many found not a dream, but a terrible reality.

Dire Working Conditions:

Imagine the tropical heat, laden with humidity, as workers dug deep into the earth, facing the peril of landslides.

Malaria and yellow fever were rampant, and medical facilities for them were often inadequate, leading to countless untimely deaths.

Yet, West Indian men laboured at every hazardous task.

These included being lowered each day into a concrete cylinder sunk seventy-five feet below the murky waters of the harbour; being suspended seventy feet into the air, riveting lock gates from which many fell to their death; carrying fifty-pound boxes of dynamite on their heads to shift three tons of coal each night; and setting fire to dynamite charges and running for their lives before the chains of explosions started.

However, in official records, their contributions were often unmentioned.

As one authoritative researcher described it:

“Official visitors could not help but be amazed, even astounded, at the degree to which the entire system, not simply the construction depended on black labour. There were not only thousands of West Indians down amid the turmoil of the Culebra Cut or at the lock sites but black waiters in every hotel, black stevedores, teamsters, porters, hospital orderlies, cooks, laundresses, nursemaids, janitors, delivery boys, coachmen, icemen, garbage men, yardmen, mail clerks, police, plumbers, house painters and gravediggers”.

“Yet no official notice would ever be paid to such contributions. In the official journal of Zone life, the Canal record, the black employee went unrecognized except in death, and then only in a line with his name and country of origin, along with a tag number as if he were not quite human.”⁴

Gold and Silver classifications

² *Sex at a Crossroads: The Gender Politics of Racial Uplift and Afro-Caribbean Activism In Panama, 1918-32*, Jeffrey W Parker, *Women, Gender and Families of Colour*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (Fall 2016), pp. 196-221, University of Illinois Press, p. 200

³ *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914*, Velma Newton, Ian Randle Publishers, Jamaica, 2004, p. 66

⁴ *The Path between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*, David McCullough, A Touchstone Book, published by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1977, p. 575

The construction of the Canal and the establishment of the Canal zone by the U.S, controlling company, was guided by an ideology of racism, directed first at native Panamanians who were expelled from land they occupied and developed for 400 years⁵, and then toward West Indian workers on the Canal's construction,

In the canal zone, "silver" became the new "black".

The terms "gold" and "silver" were used in the Canal Zone as classifications for white workers and black workers.

The classifications determined wages and every aspect of a worker's life, from housing to recreational facilities.

The system was deeply entrenched in racial discrimination.

Workers on the gold payroll received higher wages. Payment was made in gold coins. These were the white workers.

Black workers were paid less, using silver coins.

In housing, for gold workers, residences were often spacious, well-constructed houses or apartments with modern amenities.

They were located in areas with better sanitation, infrastructure, and proximity to work and leisure areas.

By comparison silver workers lived in overcrowded barracks or labour camps.

The housing lacked basic amenities, and sanitation facilities were limited.

As for health facilities, gold workers had access to the best medical facilities and doctors.

And while silver workers received medical care, it was often limited, leading to disparities in health outcomes between the two groups.

Racism and Discrimination:

The gold and silver rolls were not just economic classifications; they were racial barriers.

West Indian workers on the silver roll faced daily discrimination, from verbal abuse to physical violence.

They were treated as inferior and often subjected to dehumanizing treatment.

The gold and silver system is a stark representation of the deeply ingrained racial prejudices of the early 20th century, in the United States.

It serves as a reminder of the broader societal structures of racism and colonialism that affected every aspect of life,⁶ and, regrettably, linger in some countries today,

⁵ For a full account of this, see: [Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal](#), Marixa Lasso, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2019

⁶ Sources for this section on Gold and Silver classifications are: Velma Newton, Op. Cit., Note 3: [Dying to better themselves: West Indians and Building of the Panama Canal](#), Olive Senior, The University of the West Indies Press, Jamaica, 2014; [Silver and Gold: Untold Stories of Immigrant Life in the Panama Canal Zone](#), Dr, Guillermo

The Plight of West Indian Women

Black women faced the worst of neglect and stigmatization.

A U.S. led anti-prostitution campaign falsely branded Afro-Caribbean women residing in the Republic of Panama as prostitutes.⁷ This stereotype stripped all black women of their dignity and disregarded their invaluable contributions to the canal's construction.

Indeed, West Indian women were pillars of strength and resilience, providing essential support by cooking, laundering, and nursing, and also by their labour in the construction process.

Injury and deaths

The records do not accurately reflect how many West Indians were severely injured or died while working on the Canal, but research reveals that, in relation to Barbados alone, 5,893 died mainly from disease, landslides, explosions, and machinery accidents.⁸ The actual number for all West Indians would have been significantly higher.

One person who was injured in a work-related incident, losing a leg, was an Antiguan, named Zephaniah Richards.

He was numbered: 1096.

He arrived in the Canal on March 27th, 1907, aboard the SS Solent.⁹

He left around 1915 after his serious leg injury and returned to Antigua.

From his Panama money, he invested in a small business and educated his two sons.

His great grandson is today the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Gaston Browne, proving the point that race and poverty are not determinants for accomplishment and capability.

Recognition and Commemoration:

The Panama Canal stands tall as an engineering marvel.

Many monuments and plaques commemorate the engineering feats and political achievements embodied in the Canal.

But the tales of its construction are intertwined with the story of hope, despair, dreams, sacrifices, and above all, the undying spirit of the West Indian laborers.

Evers Airall, RoseDog Books, Pittsburgh, PA, 2014; Op. Cit. Note 3; and *Black Caribbean Labour Radicalism in Panama: 1914-1921*, J A Zumoff, *Journal of Social History*, Winter 2013, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Winter 2013), pp. 429-457, Oxford University Press, 2013

⁷ Op. Cit., Note 2, p. 196

⁸ *The impact of Panama Money in Barbados in the early Twentieth Century*, Bonham C Richardson, *New West Indian Guide*, 1985, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 1-26, p. 11

⁹ I am indebted to Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda for information concerning Zephaniah Richards and to Maria Rocquebert Leon, Ambassador of Panama to the Organization of American States and non-resident Ambassador of Panama to Antigua and Barbuda for researching this information from the records of the Panama Canal Authority

Still, the stories of West Indian laborers are conspicuously absent.

Today, as we commemorate the marvel of the Panama Canal, it's crucial to remember that it wasn't built solely on the back of engineering brilliance but also on the sweat, blood, and tears of West Indian men and women.

They are not mere footnotes in history; they are the backbone of its narrative.

It is time that the Panama Canal Authority establish an appropriate permanent tribute to their contribution, and I call for this to be done without delay.

As we celebrate the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which transferred control of the Canal from the United States to Panama, let us also remember and celebrate the "Silver Men and Women," without whom this marvel would have remained a distant dream.

That 'silver' relationship between West Indians and the American-run Panama Canal is a strong foundation for building, a 'gold' cultural and economic relationship now and in the future between the sovereign nation of Panama and the sovereign nations of CARICOM, if, for nothing else, but to honour those West Indians who toiled and died so that the Panama Canal could exist for the benefit of the World.

Author's Note:

This presentation was on the Panama Canal – the past. It had to be delivered within a stipulation of 15 minutes. Therefore, much pertinent detail had to be omitted, such as laws passed in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands to deter migration to the Panama Canal Zone, and the encouragement of such migration by the authorities in Barbados whose population was very dense and unemployment high. The ways in which returning West Indians spent their savings – some productively, others on a 'high life' as characterised by 'The Panama Man', the swaggering returned Panama Canal worker who squandered his savings – all of which has a beneficial economic effect on their homelands – were not discussed here but are areas worthy of recall in the annals of West Indian history and already being documented (see Bibliography below).

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