

# They Left a Legacy



By: Dario Solis and  
Sofia Castro

## Working on the Rails

The Afro-Antillean, also known as West Indians, arrived to Panama in the 1850's along with other groups of immigrants to work on the construction of the Panama Canal Railroad. 44.1 % of Afro-Antilleans came from Barbados, 12.3% from Martinique, 4.6% from Guadalupe and 3.7% from Trinidad and Tobago. Back in their home countries, they were offered a better quality of life if they came to Panama and worked on the railroad. They were told that the Panama Canal Railroad would be located in Panama City, and that it would be an easier route from the Atlantic to the Pacific.



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## Rugged Terrain

Not soon after they arrived to work on the railroad, the Afro-Antillean started having trouble with their working conditions. They became ill with Fever, Cholera, Malaria and

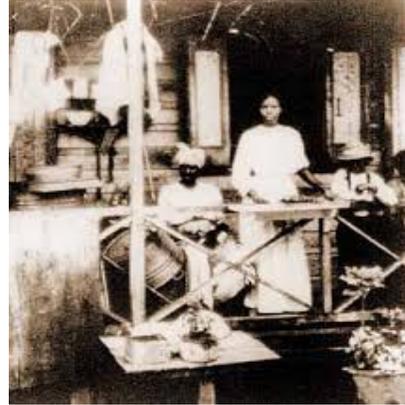
Dysentery. Their working condition was also exposed to many dangerous animals near the railroad like mosquitoes, snakes and alligators. The muddy grounds would also make it harder for the workers to take the equipment to the construction locations. Unknown poisonous trees and plants were chopped down, and affected the workers as well. In addition, they had the most dangerous jobs. They were in charge of the dynamiting; the material was extremely dangerous as it could blow up at any moment. They were also in jeopardy since there were a lot of railroad accidents occurring as they worked. 44 workers died of train wrecks and landslides.

Not only was their working conditions affected, but their living conditions as well. Their living quarters were located in rugged terrains and in segregated communities; they lived in barracks with several workers per room. Diseases sometimes spread through their community. The Afro-Antillean were segregated by their ethnic group. It was similar to their payment. The payment method at the time was the Gold and Silver roll. The gold roll involved more money and was usually given to Zionians and skilled labors. The silver roll was the way in which the Afro-Antillean's were paid. It meant less money, and it was usually given to unskilled labors and foreign ethnic groups. The workers in the gold roll were paid in gold coins, whereas the workers in the silver roll were paid in Balboas, which are of less value.

## It All Comes with Consequences

Before the Panama Canal Railroad was built, a conflict ensued between the U.S and Colombia. It all started when Colombia's Government suddenly rejected the Hay-Herran treaty in the late summer of 1903. The Hay-Herran treaty consisted on allowing the U.S to build the Panama Canal; but also the U.S having to pay Colombia 10 million plus an annual payment of \$250,000. This treaty was signed on January 21, 1903 between the Secretary of State (Hay), and the Foreign Minister of Colombia (Herran). The treaty was approved by the U.S congress on March 17th, 1903, but the Colombian Government had to approve it. The Colombian government demanded more money, but the U.S denied and held firm. Eventually, the Colombian Government decided to deny the treaty.

President Roosevelt was really angry, since he wanted to start building fast and move on with the project. President Roosevelt decided to make a deal with Panama. If they agreed to sign the Hay-Herran treaty, he would help Panama get their independence. After all of this conflict was solved, they started hiring workers. The first workers they hired were the Afro-Antillean. That's when it all started.



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## Their Actual Legacy

The Afro-Antilleans loved, bonded and helped each other as they were working on the Panama Canal Railroad. They came to Panama because they were offered a better life than they had in their home countries. The collective identity of the Afro-Antilleans was very different from other immigrants and Panamanians. Their religion was Protestant, they were of a different race, they were black, and they spoke English. Panama was a Catholic country and they spoke Spanish; it was a culture clash. This started to affect the Afro-Antilleans behavior.

“They were constantly debating. Should I talk English or Spanish? Should I give my child an English name or a Spanish name?” Said Mr. Wallace, Coach at the MET. “The Afro- Antilleans had so many things in common that they were “forced” to stay together and support each other”, Coach Wallace added. He

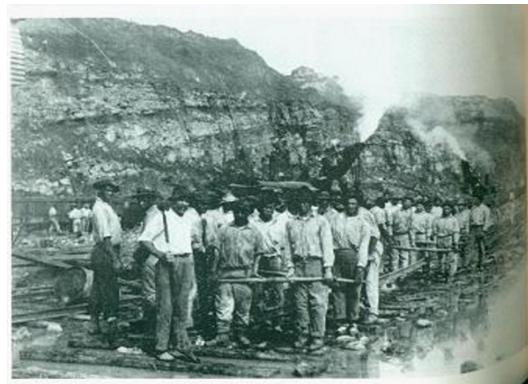
also talks about the silver roll affecting the Afro-Antilleans collective identity. They decided to stick together since they were paid very little; they worked as a team since all they had was each other. But they weren't always at peace with each other. There were small disputes between the Afro-Antillean groups about food, traditions and accents. However, it never turned into a big conflict.

The Afro-Antilleans lived in a segregated community where the housing consisted of barracks. It was calculated that there were around 70,000 Afro-Antillean at the time. Their jobs and working conditions in the construction sites made it so that they had to work with each other all day, every day. Once their contract was over and they had finished working, Afro-Antilleans decided to move forward.

The ones who felt successful, decided to go home. Others started looking for new job opportunities and education for their children; they moved to the U.S and looked for jobs. The U.S military had their arms open for most Afro-Antilleans. It was an amazing opportunity as they had the chance to travel more and get promoted. A large amount of Afro-Antilleans also moved to New York, Brooklyn. Lastly, most Afro-Antilleans decided to stay on Panama.

By the 1960's, the Afro-Antilleans who stayed began to organize themselves and created the National Center of Panamanian Workers (CNTP). Even a few Afro-Antilleans

broke into the upper class. In 1980, Manuel Noriega, who had an African/Antillean background, was elected as authoritarian. Nowadays, we can see how the University of Panama is teaching African-American/Antillean subjects as a discipline. Their achievements show that they are no longer treated like less because of their race and are appreciated in Panama and the society; their skin color doesn't define them anymore.



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