


## TAKE THREE

# A Black Woman's History of the Panama Canal

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What does the history of the Panama Canal look like, not from the view of Theodore Roosevelt or the marble rotunda of the central administration building, but instead from the view of a Black West Indian woman like Emily Amelia Griffith—a person who migrated to Panama without an official job contract, who lived in both the Canal Zone and Panamanian territory, who worked in informal market or domestic labor, who faced stark racial segregation? It looks much less like the glorious success of American ingenuity. It is messier and more violent, but also simultaneously more intimate and more transnational. It is a story that helps us center the everyday work of Black migrant survival, community, and kinship within U.S. empire.

Emily Amelia Lewis, known by her loved ones as Sugar, faced a daunting decision in 1910. Five years earlier, her lover William Edward Griffith had been recruited in Barbados to work in Panama on the famous canal as a blacksmith, leaving Emily Amelia behind with a child. He had traveled on a Royal Mail steamship along with hundreds of other Barbadians seeking their fortune to become part of the official workforce of more than 40,000 (and another estimated unofficial hundred thousand) West Indian migrants who built the Panama Canal.<sup>1</sup> In 1910, she finally decided to leave her lifelong home and follow William into the unknown opportunities of Panama. They married at a Protestant church soon after her arrival, confirming their already long partnership, but perhaps also in response to the local laws—as of 1905, U.S. authorities had made cohabitation without legal marriage a crime in an effort to target West Indian intimate practices that they deemed immoral.<sup>2</sup> Emily and William lived in the town of La Boca, a racially segregated town for Black workers within the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after her arrival, Emily Amelia's only daughter got sick with what was most likely malaria. Containment protocols against malaria and yellow fever had taken up most of the

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<sup>1</sup>On West Indian labor in the Panama Canal, see Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, 1985); Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York, 2010); and Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1985; Kingston, Jamaica, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>For more on this law and its repercussions, see Joan Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal* (Philadelphia, 2023), ch 3.

<sup>3</sup>The story of Emily Amelia Griffith is narrativized from an oral history of Griffith's daughter, Adica Moore. Mrs. Moore remembers her mother's name as Emily Amelia Griffith (née Lewis), though the U.S. Canal Zone census records her as either Emily (1920 Census) or Amelia (1930 Census). The facts of her life—her husband's employment on the canal, her arrival in 1910, her daughter's death, her life in La Boca—are documented in Mrs. Moore's oral history and in U.S. Census documents. Adica Moore, interview by Frances William Yearwood, July 17, 2020, transcript, George A. Smathers Libraries Digital Collections, University of Florida, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00081353/00001>; United States Census, 1930, FamilySearch, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XCVB-N7D>. The University of Florida's George A. Smathers Library offers invaluable resources to scholars working on the Panama Canal, such as the oral history I use here, collected in 2020 by West Indian-Panamanian advocacy group Pan-Caribbean Sankofa, and the Isthmian Historical Society competition written testimonies utilized by many canal historians, including Julie Greene in this feature.

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U.S. administration's attention in the early years of construction, led by Chief Sanitary Officer William Gorgas, who instituted the use of screens for new buildings, kerosene to disinfect breeding sites, and fines for residents who kept standing water.<sup>4</sup> These attempts were hugely successful, but could never fully eradicate disease, nor temper its disparate impact upon West Indian migrants who did not receive screened-in homes and were often targeted as violators of sanitary policy.<sup>5</sup> Emily Amelia took her child to Ancon Hospital, where she would have been treated in a segregated ward by an all-white American staff. There, the child was given the usual ice bath treatment for malaria patients. As another Jamaican worker, James Williams, described it, this treatment consisted of placing "a heavy waterproof blanket in the bed and two buckets full of heavy crushed ice and several buckets of water and not even the courtesy as to consult me but stripped me naked and threw me in that cold deadly water."<sup>6</sup> James Williams survived, but Emily Amelia's child would not. She would be buried in the only place the family could go, the segregated cemetery for Black workers in Corozal.

The segregated town, hospital, and cemeteries were part of the broader system of racialized labor organization on the canal project. The Isthmian Canal Commission, the U.S.-run governing body of the construction, divided workers into two payrolls—gold for white American skilled workers and silver for unskilled Black West Indian workers. Though inconsistently applied according to nationality and skill level, the "roll system" for the most part marked a racial line, where Black workers were paid substantially less than white ones. The system extended beyond pay to divide most institutions, spaces, and benefits in the Canal Zone between gold and silver workers, Jim Crow-style.

Black women were also subject to the racial segregation of the roll system, along with facing targeted surveillance and policing, such as a law that criminalized interracial relationships between Black women and white men. American residents and administrators repeatedly associated West Indian women with vice, sex work, and racial degeneration, and these women faced unequal punishment for perceived criminal activity. For example, in response to a resident's complaint in 1913, the Canal Zone police investigated five West Indian women for consorting with white employees. The investigation concluded that there was not enough evidence of wrongdoing, but that the facts were nevertheless sufficient to recommend deportation for the women and ordered them to leave the Canal Zone in the next thirty days. The men, who all pled guilty, were merely verbally ordered to cease relations with the women.<sup>7</sup>

But while they had to contend with the roll system, West Indian women also worked across these racial boundaries as servants and laundresses in white American gold roll homes or market women selling food across the Canal Zone. These women provided the essential, though uncontracted, domestic and care labor that made the construction possible. In the early years, the Commission relied on West Indian women's informal services as it disavowed its role in providing for silver workers.<sup>8</sup> West Indian women also fostered crucial links to the islands and Afro-Caribbean traditions, cooking the food that West Indian migrants preferred, given the substandard food served at segregated cafeterias, and leading community events such as funeral processions for deceased kin. Even West Indian women who did not leave the islands had a role during the canal construction, taking care of children and homes left behind by male workers. Given that far more men than women left the islands—especially in places like

<sup>4</sup>William Crawford Gorgas, *Sanitation in Panama* (New York, 1915).

<sup>5</sup>See the example of Augusta Dunlop in Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women*, 49–51.

<sup>6</sup>Statement of James A. Williams, "Isthmian Historical Society Competition for the Best True Stories of Life and Work on the Isthmus of Panama During the Construction of the Panama Canal" (1963), Digital Library of the Caribbean, <https://dloc.com/AA00016037/00113>.

<sup>7</sup>H. G. Belknap, "Memorandum to Division of Police and Prisons," June 10, 1913, Folder 62-B-248, "Part 1: Cohabitation and Immoral Conduct of White Employees with Native and Colored Women," Record Group 185, Entry 30, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>8</sup>Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women*.

Barbados, where the sex ratio of men to women dropped almost 20 percent in the Panama years—the prevalence of female heads of household in the Caribbean is not surprising.<sup>9</sup> It was these same women in the islands who often received and managed remittance payments sent by their family members working in Panama, using the money for everyday survival, for housing upgrades, and to fund further migrations to places like New York.<sup>10</sup> Emily Amelia and her husband, like many other migrants, likely sent money back to their own families in Barbados.

Emily Amelia would go on to have nine other children, including Adica, born on Panamanian territory in Santa Ana Hospital on March 8, 1924. Her previous kids had all been born at home with a midwife, and Emily Amelia spoke almost no Spanish, so Panamanian doctors might have seemed unfamiliar. On the other hand, considering her previous experience, giving birth at the racially segregated U.S. hospital might have seemed an even bigger risk. By the time of Adica's birth, the great majority of West Indians who worked on the canal had left Panama, but some who retained well-paying jobs with the canal or had settled in Panamanian territory yet remained and had to contend with the continued racial policies of the Americans. Adica's youth was defined by the racially segregated institutions of the Canal Zone. She grew up in silver family housing, where four families had to share an outside washroom, and attended segregated silver schools taught by West Indian teachers such as Leonor Jump. She bought groceries with a commissary book at the segregated commissary, though many in the town of La Boca relied instead on Manuel's shop, the Chinese-owned grocery, to buy fresh vegetables and fish on credit. Towns like La Boca were multicultural and multiethnic spaces, where Chinese and Caribbean migrants from different islands mingled with Americans and Panamanians. West Indians remained the bulk of the canal workforce throughout the twentieth century; Adica herself worked for many years as a grocery saleswoman and cashier on the Canal, including twenty years as the manager of the snack bar at Gorgas (formerly Ancon) Hospital, where her sister had died years before (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>11</sup>

Panama from the 1920s through the 1950s was not an entirely welcoming place for West Indians, who faced the increasingly xenophobic wave of nationalism that sprouted after the canal's completion. The idea of *panameñismo*, or Panama as an Iberian Hispanic nation, left little room to incorporate Black West Indians perceived as foreign to the body politic. Since the 1920s, Panama had passed restrictive immigration laws that directly targeted West Indians as prohibited immigrants, culminating in the infamous 1941 constitution that stripped second-generation West Indians of citizenship. Historian Kaysha Corinealdi shows how West Indians responded to these exclusions through practices of “diasporic world-making,” forging ties across places like Panama, New York, Jamaica, and Costa Rica to understand and protest their conditions. They founded independent newspapers like the *Workman* and the *Panama Tribune*, established credit unions and lodges, planned activities at their local Protestant churches, and created unions and civic organizations to fight against labor, social, and political discrimination.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the 1955 Remon-Eisenhower treaty, which renegotiated the relationship between the Canal Zone and the Panamanian state, many West Indian residents lost their housing.<sup>13</sup> Adica explains that “they made La Boca then for white people,

<sup>9</sup>A phenomenon noted by multiple scholars of the Caribbean, among them Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1996); and Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900–1920* (Knoxville, TN, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>Joan Flores-Villalobos, “Thrift, Morality, and Migration at the Barbados Savings Bank,” *History Workshop* 95 (Spring 2023): 154–74; Richardson, *Panama Money*.

<sup>11</sup>“S & CS Holds Final Employee of the Year Awards,” *Panama Canal Spillway*, vol. XVII, no. 50 (Aug. 10, 1979), 2, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00094771/01229/images/2>.

<sup>12</sup>For more on these organizing efforts and West Indian Panamanian life in the period after construction, see Kaysha Corinealdi, *Panama in Black: Afro-Caribbean World Making in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2022).

<sup>13</sup>For more on the treaty, see Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, ch 4.



Figure 1. Adica Moore at work, “Gente en la Noticia,” *The Panama Canal Spillway*, Vol. III, No. 31, January 22, 1965, 2.

and then they moved us out” to Panamanian territory, where the family eventually settled in the neighborhood of Rio Abajo.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the ongoing exclusion, many West Indians and their descendants had by then built their lives, homes, and communities in Panama. They participated in the major changes of this nation, including the Torrijos-Carter treaties that finally returned the canal to Panamanian sovereignty and the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama under Operation Just Cause, which destroyed the primarily West Indian neighborhood of El Chorrillo in the center of Panama City.<sup>15</sup> Despite their long residence and labor there, West Indians remained marginal to Panamanian history and society throughout the late twentieth century, still considered outsiders.<sup>16</sup> Most of the historical work of recovering their contributions has been done by West Indian Panamanians themselves through community and advocacy organizations, such as the volunteer group Society of the Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama (SAMAAP). Since 1989, on August 15, Adica joined more than 100 descendants of Afro-Caribbean canal workers on a commemorative ride across the canal organized regularly by SAMAAP, stopping at the deepest and most dangerous site of digging, the Culebra Cut. On the ride, descendants sang religious songs and prayed, throwing flowers into the canal waters where their ancestors were buried by the construction effort.<sup>17</sup> Another West Indian advocacy organization, Pan-Caribbean Sankofa, was responsible for gathering the oral history of ninety-six-year-old Adica Moore and her family in 2020, along with that of many other

<sup>14</sup>Adica Moore interview transcript.

<sup>15</sup>For more on modern Panamanian history, including these two events, see Michael Conniff and Gene E. Bigler, *Modern Panama: From Occupation to Crossroads of the America* (Cambridge, UK, 2019); and Michael Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone* (Durham, NC, 2014).

<sup>16</sup>George Priestley and Alberto Barrow, “The Black Movement in Panama: A Historical and Political Interpretation, 1994–2004,” in *New Social Movements in the African Diaspora*, ed. Leith Mullings (New York, 2010). See this struggle captured in Melva Lowe de Goodin’s play *De/From Barbados A/To Panamá* (Panamá, 2007).

<sup>17</sup>Society of the Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama (SAMAAP), “Pilgrimage to the Panama Canal,” <https://samaap.com/artwork/pilgrimage-to-the-panama-canal>.

descendants. It is thus the community of West Indian descendants in Panama and the diaspora whose work preserves the legacy of their ancestors who made the canal construction possible.

The infrastructural behemoth that is the canal, its mark on global economies, and the massive documentary record the American administration created during its construction (now held in the National Archives) can easily obscure the lives of those who were not beholden to U.S. interests and narrow down the experiences of those who did work directly on the construction. From Emily Amelia's perspective and that of many other Afro-Caribbean people, the Panama Canal marked a key node in the increasing migration of West Indians throughout the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the wake of imperial investments. Railroads and canals, pineapples and bananas, sugar and cacao—all depended on the migrant labor of West Indians who built U.S. empire from the ground up.<sup>18</sup> Black women like Emily Amelia performed domestic and care labor across these enclaves, cleaning the homes of U.S. managers and engineers, washing the laundry in the nearby rivers, cooking in their tenement kitchens, keeping boarding houses for new arrivals, selling food from their baskets, and caring for their children. This era of migration provided an economic opportunity for many Afro-Caribbean people struggling to break free of the still-dominant plantation system on their islands, but it also unmoored them from their homes and traditions, thrusting them into new locales that rarely welcomed them. The diaspora of Afro-Caribbean people across the Americas precipitated a new consciousness about the conditions that bound them together across national and colonial borders. Jamaicans, Barbadians, Martinicans, and other islanders began to see themselves as connected by their parallel experiences of anti-Black exploitation. Thus, the stories of migrant women like Emily Amelia Griffith not only help decenter triumphal U.S. stories of the construction, but they also help us reconceive of projects of U.S. empire like the Panama Canal as ones that extended far beyond the official labor effort into the intimate spheres of homes, relationships, families, and bodies. Moreover, they remind us of the permeability of borders, making the story of the canal construction not one defined by the United States, nor by Panama, but rooted in the mobility and transnational connections of the Black diaspora.

Despite the importance of these changes to the people that experienced them, the lives of most working-class Black West Indians were rarely recorded in U.S. archives about the construction beyond their role as official laborers on the canal effort. Black women especially evaded documentation, given that they worked outside the umbrella of the canal authorities and often migrated beyond its oversight. As a methodological matter, then, centering Black women in a history of the Panama Canal requires both a transnational outlook and an attunement to their unique position during the construction—essential but uncontracted workers, key nodes of care and community beyond the oversight of the Canal Commission. It further requires special attention and collaboration with the sites of memory that West Indian Panamanians have created to honor their ancestors—the testimonies, museums, gravesites, and oral histories they have carefully gathered and preserved. This helps us place the river laundries of Taboga, the kitchens of gold roll homes, and the *casas de inquilinato* (tenements) of Panama City right alongside the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal. To do so is not merely an additive matter, but one that expands our previous understandings of the construction effort, grounding the materiality of infrastructure in the everyday of Black labor and survival and decentering U.S. imperial interests by casting an eye toward Panama and the Caribbean through the experiences of Black West Indian women who navigated across these diasporic spaces.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Lara Putnam, "Borderlands and Border-Crossers: Migrants and Boundaries in the Greater Caribbean, 1840–1940," *Small Axe* 18, no. 1 (Mar. 2014): 7–21.

<sup>19</sup>Mary Bridges, "The Infrastructural Turn in Historical Scholarship," *Modern American History* 6, no. 1 (Mar. 2023): 103–20.