Jamaican Influence on Greater Hartford's Cultural and Political History

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Abstract:

This study examined the lived experiences of Jamaicans in the Greater Hartford area, particularly their experience with racism and how they were able to unite West Indians and African Americans, who shared similar beliefs. Data was collected from qualitative interviews with influential Jamaican-Americans as well various archival collections. Results from each interview and the archival findings were analyzed for similarities and differences between participants' experiences. This thesis argues that racism, while challenging, proved less of a barrier to integration for Jamaican immigrants in Connecticut than previously argued by historians. With a mission to unite West Indians and African Americans who shared similar spiritual beliefs to create a greater community, Jamaican immigrants successfully integrated into Connecticut and became a part of the Greater Hartford community by actively engaging in politics and creating new cultural communities through powerful and effective support networks that included social organizations and communities of faith.

Introduction

Tobacco farming in New England began when settlers identified Windsor's soil as perfect for growing tobacco, and imported seeds from Virginia.[1] In Connecticut, tobacco was raised in Windsor as early as 1640.[2] Ultimately, the Tobacco Valley stretched from Springfield, Massachusetts to Hartford, Connecticut. In the colonial period, tobacco was smoked in pipes, but by the late 18th century, workers hand-rolled tobacco into cigars in local workshops. Once a thinner and finer cigar wrapper emerged from Indonesia after the Civil War, the challenge to make the best domestic tobacco cigar created economic competition among tobacco companies, including those in Connecticut. By 1910, tobacco became the leading agricultural crop in the valley. West Indian workers became a significant asset to working tobacco in Connecticut, since it was the growers of shade tobacco that invited West Indian workers to the State of Connecticut.

Once the U.S. entered WWI, New England tobacco growers needed to replace the labor force that had gone off to fight. African American students at Morehouse College traveled north from Atlanta to work starting in 1916. Twenty-six years later, workers from Jamaica arrived to fill a vacuum in agricultural labor in Connecticut due to World War II. In 1943, the United States federal government arranged with the Jamaican government to ship 1,300 men to work in American agriculture and a significant number came to work in Connecticut**.** The Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association (SGTAA) hired Jamaicans since they preferred workers who had agricultural experience, were able-bodied, and were prepared to work in tough conditions on the farms.

Some of the reasons Jamaicans came to Connecticut included earning money to pay for education in Jamaica, to send money back to their families, and to take advantage of the

opportunity to work in New England. Connecticut tobacco owners grew to depend on Jamaican labor and invited many to return in the next season. Seasonal Jamaican workers were transported by the U. S. government until the end of the war.[3] Tobacco growers by then depended on Jamaican workers; they continued their own seasonal-worker program for another decade until new immigration laws slowed the annual flow. Eventually, another seasonal-worker program emerged that hindered the annual return of Jamaican workers. Jamaican workers, like the African American Morehouse College students before them, moved to other, better-paying jobs, including work in the growing military-industrial complex.[4]

Once Jamaicans' work contracts ended, many of them decided to either go back to Jamaica and return at a later date or remain in the state and build a better life for themselves. Today, Greater Hartford has the third largest West Indian population of all U.S. cities. Connecticut is home to the fifth largest population of Jamaican ancestry in the United States: more than 38,000 Jamaican-born people live in Connecticut and 56,000 have Jamaican ancestry.[5] Between the end of WWll and 2017, approximately 487,000 immigrants came to Connecticut from the West Indies (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and the Bahamas). Many came as guest workers and lived in camps at Bradley Field and other locations. Bounded by similar interests, Jamaicans often played cricket together, attended church, and soon began to develop a deep sense of community with fellow Jamaicans, West Indians, and African Americans.[6]

Among the wave of workers who came seasonally from Jamaica in 1943 was a young Euylad Clarke who worked with, and befriended, fellow tobacco worker, Martin Luther King Jr. Clarke eventually became a leader within the Jamaican diaspora of Connecticut. He was joined by other future leaders of the Jamaican diaspora, including Alfred Chambers, Veronica Airey-Wilson, and her political mentor, Collin Bennett, in their effort to provide political and social leadership for the Jamaican-American community in Hartford. These Jamaican immigrants and community leaders founded the West Indian Social Club, served as leaders of St. Martin's Episcopal Church and St. Monica's Episcopal Church, and organized the Caribbean American Society. All of these institutions had a lasting impact on the West Indian community in the Greater Hartford area.

While historians have claimed that racism prevented Jamaicans from being successful, this paper argues that Jamaicans strategically used their experiences as motivation to achieve integration and social mobility through the adoption of a formula for success: unity. Instead of Jamaicans working against native blacks, they were the first black ethnic group to unite African Americans in the Greater Hartford area in order to achieve success in Connecticut by resisting discrimination. They achieved success by developing powerful and effective political, cultural, and social organizations.

Shade Tobacco and the Role of Ethnicity

During the 1950s, most Connecticut residents refused to work on tobacco farms due to the strenuousness of the work. Jamaicans, on the other hand, were eager to come to America to work in the fields, as long as it meant progressing in society. It is for this reason that it is impossible to understand the significance and the formation of the Connecticut Tobacco Industry without understanding the significant role Jamaicans played in the industry's success. They did this by using their cultural values to implement hard work in their occupation.

Euylad Clarke of Hartford recounted his experiences working tobacco as one of the first Jamaican migrants. He travelled to the United States when he was 21 years old to assist in filling the labor void during World War ll. While working in the fields, Clarke befriended Martin Luther

King Jr, who also traveled to Connecticut during the summer to work tobacco with other Morehouse College students. Martin Luther King Jr came to Connecticut and found the experience of the lack of legal segregation formative.[7] King spent two summers working in the fields around Simsbury, Connecticut, and wrote about his experiences in Connecticut which helped to shape his response to the injustice of segregation.[8]

When asked about his relationship with Martin Luther King Jr, Clarke stated that he was able to befriend Martin Luther King Jr and other "boys" who were members of Morehouse College, and that everyone was friendly. Clarke described King as a "very good man of God." He said that the two ethnic groups (Jamaicans and African-Americans) worked together and worked hand-in-hand without tension. According to Clarke, some of the Morehouse "boys" worked on one side of the farm and the Jamaicans worked on the other side of the farm in the same field. He stated that the two groups were not able to congregate and socialize as much while the work was being done, but they often talked during, and in-between, lunches. This is significant because it shows early stages of racial unity between African Americans and Jamaicans in the tobacco fields, and the early role that Clarke and King both played in uniting these two ethnic groups in Connecticut, at least in the tobacco fields. Even though King returned to the South, Clarke's early experience with the men of Morehouse would shape him as a future leader.

For many Jamaican immigrants, signing a contract in order to come to Connecticut to work tobacco provided a way for them to become natural citizens and have a better life for themselves and their families. Jamaicans were used to difficult work in Jamaica, so most of them did not see a problem with coming to America to do similar, difficult labor. In fact, they were proud of their work ethic. One Jamaican noted that, "we do in one day what an American worker, or a Puerto Rican worker does in two or three."[9] Clarke remembered the challenges of working shade tobacco: he "did all sorts of work and dealt with all sorts of people. Not nice people, good people, and inspector workers." But the labor itself did not intimidate him: "No work was hard work. People complained but we [Jamaicans] never really were afraid of the hard work, it wasn't hard, we liked it. It didn't trouble us. The pay was cheap of course, but I for one, loved working in Connecticut, nothing really troubled me here." Clarke recognized that living here during this time offered the potential for a better life, despite its challenges.

The role of ethnicity in the work of tobacco was significant. Jamaicans came to the United States and immediately encountered the problems of segregation and Jim Crow laws.[10] This wasn't common in Jamaica. In Jamaica, one could be successful if they had wealth or had a good education-ethnicity was irrelevant.[11] In Jamaica, diversity is common: there are lots of integrated families made up of whites, blacks, and Indians.[12] As soon as Jamaicans arrived in the U.S., however, they were seen as "different" due to their accent and their cultural values.[13] They experienced racism in a different way than their African American counterparts due to their different worldview and life experiences. After migration, Jamaicans often quickly came to the realization that in the United States, even if a black person had wealth and a proper education, they would be looked down upon by white people. Jamaicans knew they needed to continue to work hard and remain resilient in order succeed. They were eager to work lower paying jobs in order to gain economic status. They believed that because of their willingness to work lowly jobs in order to eventually advance economically, racism proved to be less of a barrier.[14]

Clarke agreed. For him, racism was not a barrier to success: I "got along with everyone. I sang, I danced, I did everything. Everyone liked it. My experience was good, it was a happy time. My experience was happy . . . Personally, I didn't really experience racism when I was in Connecticut." Despite not having experienced racism himself, Clarke knew of the challenges that

African-American had faced here and was grateful that he did not have to face the same challenges. He acknowledged, however, that racism did exist: “when we first got to Connecticut, there was one white American boy that came from the South and was working on the farm and called the Jamaicans niggers when we first got here but he ended up getting kicked out and it wasn’t received well. The white American girls were upset with him because you did not call the Jamaicans niggers. When the boss came, they fired him, they didn’t really stand for that.” Clarke firmly believed that he and white Americans had a mostly positive rapport.

After the war concluded, many young Jamaicans wanted to remain in the United States to further their opportunities to build a better life for themselves. During the 1950s, there was an additional uptick of Jamaicans entering the United States, as Jamaica was experiencing a continued Great Depression as export demand and export production contracted sharply. Even the war did not lessen the depression. But in the U.S., Jamaican tobacco workers had begun to lose their jobs in 1950 when Europeans started to immigrate to the United States following the end of World War ll, searching for jobs.[15] Nonetheless, 500,000 West Indians came to the United States between 1951 and 1970, in part for political reasons as Britain granted Jamaica independence and a left-wing President came to power.[16]

Political Networks

When asked about the relationship that existed between African Americans in the Hartford area in the late 1950's and the West Indians who were coming in, Molly-Tate Bennett stated, "I would say we had a good relationship as far as I've seen it. Same for the kids, they came into this new territory and married into the families here."[1] Today, Jamaicans come to the United States with "advanced education, professional skills, and financial capital that facilitates transnational connections.” Now, much more so than in the past, Jamaicans are able to travel back and forth between Jamaica and the United States to stay connected to their families and culture.[2]

Jamaicans knew that if they wanted to succeed in a new area that already made way for another black ethnic group (African-Americans) they had to work in solidarity with them. African Americans had struggled for equality with white Americans for centuries and resented that West Indians came into the city and, although they had the same skin color, seemed to be achieving more, faster. In their migration experience, West Indians’ encounter with whites was often not as hostile as it was for African Americans as Clarke noted, because West Indians had not endured centuries of discrimination by white Americans. Their experience was profoundly different because they came from a society which was solely based on social class rather than race.[17]

Reverend Collin Bennett was a Jamaican immigrant who came to Connecticut to work on the tobacco farms in the 1950s and later moved to Hartford with his family.[18] Bennett actively encouraged blacks to participate in politics and practice economic self-sufficiency. In 1965, he became “first West Indian and black Republican to be elected” election on the Hartford City Council.”[19] Bennett owned businesses and encouraged blacks to do the same because he believed in economic advancement as one of the pathways to achieve unity between two groups of people.[20]

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[1] Molly Tate-Bennett, interview by Fiona Vernal, Connecticut Museum of Culture and History Archives, Hartford, Connecticut, November 28, 2000.

[2] Nancy Foner, *In A New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration.* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 23.

During his eight years as a councilman, Bennett fought to help poor families become homeowners. Through his work as a councilman, Bennett helped build a bridge between African Americans and West Indians in Hartford by advocating for greater support in Hartford for mutual respect, decent housing, and good educational facilities.[21] He believed that if people were working hard and making a difference in their community, the community would thrive.[22]

Reverend Bennett served as a political mentor to many Jamaicans in the Greater Hartford area who aspired to achieve socio-economic mobility including Veronica Airey-Wilson—the first Jamaican elected to serve as the city's deputy mayor. Airey-Wilson's political efforts included the creation of a loan program for homeownership called House Hartford, and the improvement of the city's relationship with the business community, including enhanced job training for residents. This agenda is similar to those that her mentor, Reverend Bennett, adopted as a politician. Many other Jamaicans in the Greater Hartford area decided to run for political office following these successful examples of Wilson and Bennett.

Due to the lack of resources for both ethnic groups, African Americans and Jamaicans found uniting together could accomplish more than separate advocacy. For example, for West Indians and African-Americans, Hartford's housing supply in the North End was very limited and the quality was poor. Both groups wanted spaces that they could engage in social and cultural activities and feel a part of a community leaving behind discrimination. Both groups engaged actively in politics running as both Democrats and Republicans, attending community meetings, and working to address the problems in Hartford's housing supply.

Fiona Vernal interviewed Collin Bennet's wife, Molly Tate-Bennett, to discuss the life of Collin Bennett, and his political experience as a Republican politician who served for four consecutive two-year terms on the City Council of Hartford. When asked about her husband's experience as a politician, Molly Tate-Bennett explained, "we came here and got involved with people and people gravitated to my husband (Collin) because in the early days when we came to America, you could never say you were a Republican while black, you would have to say it down in your throat because it was three and a half Democrats to one Republican was how they equated it in those days. We never let our accent get us down because we were from another area in the world."[23] Furthermore, she stated that, "We loved our skin, and we appreciated our skin and would not want it any other way and did not use it as a crutch to come up the ladder as an excuse to excel."[3] Bennett was the first Republican candidate to run for office in the 1960's. Regarding her husband's political platform, she revealed that, "First of all, it was education and housing. My husband felt that instead of us black people being concentrated, my husband thought to build scattered site housing so that when you put the people there, with more middle or affluent people, you would bring them along instead of leaving them in an isolated situation."[4] When asked about housing discrimination in the early 1950's Molly Tate-Bennett stated that because of "lascivious carriage," (also called an uncivil union) her and her husband could not live together at first, until they were married. She explained, "If you ever lived with a man, the police would be right there on your door to lock you up. They would send the police for you at night, and it would be in the papers. You could not sleep with a woman and vice versa. This happened a lot to all black people, including Jamaicans."[5] Collin Bennett was also an active member of Eastern Connecticut State University and the advancement of black students and

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

pushed Eastern president, Dr. David Carter, to consider the idea of implementing a nursing program to help address the nursing shortage. Bennett also donated a significant amount of money to the J. Eugene Smith Library and in turn, the institution dedicated the Caribbean Collection in his honor.[6]

Formation of Community: Church & Social Programs

Jamaicans also simultaneously worked to unite all people of color in Hartford through shared spirituality. The catalyst for this change was the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. The assassination of King, who had spent two summers in Connecticut's tobacco fields as a college student, brought a major shock to the black community. Following King's death, West Indians began attending African American churches. Tensions began to lessen between these two groups, and they began to accept one another. Through the lens of faith, African-Americans and Jamaicans worked together in terms of their churches to address social issues, including not being able to attend certain churches and discrimination in housing. These communities of faith have a very long history of standing in solidarity with one another and supporting each other regarding social issues and supporting fellow people of color in times of need. These churches set the precedent of being united and being a place where people find comfort and acceptance, free of discrimination and prejudice. Uniting over common faith and common goals helped to alleviate those tensions.

In the 1980s, Veronica Airey-Wilson joined an extension of the Club called the West Indian Social Club Lady's Auxiliary. The Auxiliary's mission was to increase political representation for Caribbeans and African Americans and celebrate Jamaican culture. Historically, membership of the West Indian Social Club was only open to men. After years of debate about womens'participation, a compromise was reached on May 30th, 1953, with the creation of the Auxiliary. The Auxiliary was composed of West Indian women and the wives of members. Women worked hard and arranged many social functions such as teas, talent shows, trips, dances, game days, dinners, and beauty pageants, all of which brought revenue into the club while continuing to celebrate West Indian culture. The women continued to voice their concerns about their second-class status in light of their hard work at numerous fundraising events. While many members opposed the full integration of women, those who favored the measure finally prevailed in 1980. The auxiliary was dissolved, and women became full members of the West Indian Social Club. In 1989 Veronica Airey-Wilson became its first female president at only 40 years old.[7] Her father, Narsico-Airey Wilson, was also an active member of the West Indian Social Club, so in

[6] "Named Rooms and Collections," Eastern Connecticut State University Special Collections and Archives, accessed October 9, 2023, https://www.easternct.edu/library/about-the-library/rooms.html.

[7] Fiona Vernal, "The West Indian Social Club, a Home Away from Home," *Connecticut Explor*ed, May 23, 2022, https://www.ctexplored.org/the-west-indian-social-club-a-home-away-from-home/.

some ways, Veronica Airey-Wilson continued her father's mission to participate in a community that is a "home away from home."[8]

As they got to know each other better and establish social networks, West Indians recognized that solidarity with African-Americans did not require rejection of their own Jamaican culture. Jamaicans helped to familiarize African Americans with Jamaican culture by introducing them to reggae and Jamaican foods.[24] Many of the Jamaicans who got involved in the Greater Hartford area were also involved with cultural communities. These organizations and communities were formed to help support new Jamaican immigrants that had immigrated to Hartford. As we have seen, some black workers decided to work with Jamaicans on tobacco farms, others did not. The same experience applied to socialization. According to a Connecticut Chronicle newspaper article from 1948, "The Jamaicans and Their Rule in Connecticut," Jamaicans were not initially welcomed warmly by some of the people of color in Connecticut at first due to ethnic tensions.[25] This exclusion led Jamaican immigrants to create the West Indian Social Club, founded in 1949 to form a "home away from home" for West Indians living in Hartford. The Social Club provided West Indians with the opportunity celebrate their culture with one another. Today it also is an educational center that provides information, and self-help for new immigrants and members of the diaspora to help them acclimate to Hartford. For seven decades the WISC has been the pulse of Hartford's Caribbean community. The West Indian Social Club also founded other institutions to help the West Indians living in the Hartford area and continues it's original mission to foster and strengthen a sense of unity among all West Indian social, fraternal, business groups and associations.[26]

Family is important for the people from Jamaica, so these foundations strive to keep the family connected with one another and with those members who are still in their homeland. Jamaicans are proud to be Jamaicans and they do not want to lose this identity even as they have successfully integrated into American society.[9] A West Indian New Arrival Program was also set up in the 1990s for children coming to the United States to ensure that they would be able to successfully integrate into the American society.[10] Collectively, these cultural communities and organizations of support were formed to ensure that West Indians did not feel that they were alone in their new country and that the positive efforts of other members of their diaspora could emulated, thereby helping Jamaicans advance socio-economically in Hartford through support services.[27]

Community unity is often centered around sports. To this end, Jamaicans incorporated their love of cricket into their new homeland. This started when Jamaicans working tobacco found themselves in a rather strange and unusual environment and it was not long before they longed for homeland traditions like dominos and cricket. Jason Kaufman and Orlando Patterson's journal article, "Cross-National Cultural Diffusion: The Global Spread of Cricket," argues that the

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[8] Christopher Service, "Narciso Fernandez Airey Lived a Full Life," West Indian News, December 3, 2018, https://wianews.com/2018/12/03/narciso-fernandez-airey-lived-a-full-life/.

[9] "Summer Enrichment Camp," The West Indian Foundation, accessed September 15, 2023, https://www.westindianfoundation.org/summer-enrichment-camp.

[10] Nancy Foner, "Gender and Migration: West Indians in Comparative Perspective," *International Migration Review* (November 2008): 3–29, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2008.00480.x.

influence and reemergence of cricket came from Jamaicans through their educational system, which strongly promoted the sport in secondary schools. [28] By bringing cricket to Connecticut, Jamaicans engaged in a culturally favored sport. In the early 1940's, the game of cricket was introduced in Connecticut by Jamaicans.[29] The workers soon discovered that laborers at nearby tobacco farm work camps also played cricket. Eventually, they formed teams and began playing against each other on the farms. When African Americans approached fellow Jamaicans to learn more about the game, cricket soon became a sport that united African-Americans and Jamaicans as they were able to "break-bread" with one another by regularly engaging in friendly competition. The Connecticut Cricket League was founded in 1979, with five teams. Today, there are ten teams in Hartford, Bloomfield, Windsor, New Britain, and New London.

Conclusion

In Hartford, historically, Jamaicans and African Americans had a difficult relationship with one another. In the beginning, Jamaicans and African Americans struggled to find common ground, but they were eventually able to stand in solidarity with one another and understand that by presenting a united front, there was more to achieve. African-Americans and Jamaicans knew that they needed to unite if they were going to have a voice in American society. Connecticut's tobacco fields were the original crucial spaces for African Americans and West Indians. By finding common ground, both ethnic groups figured out they had three things in common: community, faith, and politics. This thesis argues that racism, while challenging, proved less of a barrier to integration for Jamaican immigrants in Connecticut than previously argued by historians. Despite their challenges, Jamaicans were able to successfully integrate into the Greater Hartford area by uniting African Americans who shared similar spiritual and political beliefs to create a greater community. In doing so, they successfully engaged in politics while creating new cultural connections through powerful and effective support networks.

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[18] Ibid., 68-69.
[19] Dennis C. Canterbury, "The Reverend Collin Bennett: Hartford's Caribbean Pioneer in Politics, Civil Rights, and Business," *The Griot: The Journal of African American Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 69.
[20] Ibid., 69.
[21] Ibid., 71-72.
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