

Emancipated Life and Problems Affecting the Sugar Industry

Introduction:

The period of Apprenticeship ended prematurely on August 1, 1838. The planters had a lot of adjustments to make.

1. They now had to enter in a new relationship or arrangement with the emancipated people.
2. They would have to pay full time if they wanted labor on their estates. According to Ashdown and Humphreys, (Caribbean Revision History for CXC) after emancipation wages accounted for two thirds of the total cost of the production of sugar.
3. They would have to finally face the fact that the laborer was free to choose who he or she wanted to work for.
4. Because of the negative and spiteful attitude towards the apprentices many of them did not want to return to the estates to work. The planters therefore faced a labor problem. In some cases it was shortage of labor. In other instances it was a case of the labor being unreliable or too expensive
5. Emancipation also highlighted the need to use machinery on the estates. But there were other challenges as well. By 1838, competition from beet sugar and cane sugar from Cuba and Brazil increased. In 1846, Britain equalized the duties on foreign grown sugar so that all sugar entering her ports paid the same amount of duties.



A sugar plantation in Brazil

The little 'cushion' that the British West Indian planters depended on was removed. That compounded the credit crisis that they were already facing. A number of them were staring bankruptcy in the face. By 1854, a number of them were overburdened with debt and forced out of production. Jamaica and Grenada had the highest number of abandoned estates.

In the older colonies such as Jamaica, Barbados and Antigua the planters were battling with infertile and tired soils. Soil exhaustion leads to poor quality yields in a market where better quality sugar was readily available.

Some of the planters tried items of machinery such as the centrifugal systems the plough, harrow and vacuum pans. Others introduced the railways. Trinidad, British Guiana and St. Kitts introduced steam mills.



The Steam mill at St. Croix Sugar Mill

The planters in the Windward Islands of St. Lucia and Grenada in particular tried the system of sharecropping. The majority though still believed in the old way of production using manual labor. They managed to convince England to allow them to import immigrant labor.

A number of them clung to the 'gripping method.' They complained to England hoping to get some help: Select Committee of 1842 and 1848. Others opposed the establishment of Free Villages and the Peasantry. As usual they ranted and raved against the Non-Conformist missionaries and tried to block their effectiveness.