

The Work of the Slaves in the Forestry Industry

Introduction:

Logwood and mahogany were produced in British Guiana, Jamaica and British Honduras (Belize) but the latter was the chief supplier before Emancipation. Only the strong males were selected for work in the logwood and mahogany industries.

Logwood

Logwood is a dyewood that grows plentiful in Belize. It was used to dye woolen goods, black, grey, purple and dark red. The slaves along with a white overseer, goes to the forest for a number of days or even weeks. They too are armed with a machete for cutting way through the forest and an axe to chop down the trees. The whites have guns to shoot games. At the end of each day, the men cook, smoke tobacco and even drink rum together. It may sound like fun but there was a lot of hard work to be done before this and it was basically a lonely life for these male slaves.

Arrangements were then made to get the lumber to the ports.



Logwood trees growing along the river in Belize

Mahogany

By the 1770 there was more logwood on the market than was needed. This is known as a glut. This resulted in a dramatic fall in the price being offered on the market. In addition, the development of cheaper man-made dyes in Europe led to a decrease in the demand for logwood so the settlers shifted to mahogany.

By 1779, mahogany replaced logwood and dominated the social, economic and political life of British Honduras until the mid 20th century. Mahogany was required for shipbuilding and to a lesser extent cabinet making.

Wood cutting was seasonal and required the slaves to spend long periods away from their family. The mahogany trees had to be found, cut and trimmed. The logs were then taken through temporary paths to the nearest riverside. They were then formed into rafts and floated down river. There were basically three (3) groups of slaves that were involved in this strenuous exercise and the numbers ranged from a minimum of ten (10) to a maximum of fifty (50). A foreman or captain was responsible to co-ordinate the gangs' activities.



A big mahogany tree being cut down

The Huntsman

He was very important to the process. He was regarded as a skilled slave. His job was to search for the mahogany trees. Unlike logwood which grows along river banks in groups, mahogany was scattered throughout the forests and must be searched out among the other trees and dense undergrowth.

The axe men were the ones to cut the trees down. They are usually the ones also to clear a path through which the logs were dragged. The gang that was responsible for trimming the trees after they had fallen.

What were the similarities and differences in the forestry industry?

Similarities

- Only strong males were used
- The males stayed away from families and friends for long periods
- The tools and tasks were similar
- The presence of white supervisors and overseers

Differences

- Mahogany slaves spent a longer time in the fields
- The huntsman or skilled slave was needed.
- Different organization of labour
- Logwood slaves enjoyed certain 'recreational activities' at the end of their labours.