

John Soluri*

➤ Bananas Before Plantations. Smallholders, Shippers, and Colonial Policy in Jamaica, 1870-1910

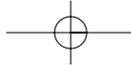
Recent trade disputes between the European Union and the United States over bananas have served to emphasize the differences between the “dollar zone” commodity system based on Latin American banana exports to the United States and Europe, and the “ACP system,” based on European imports of bananas produced in former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. The key difference often identified by analysts is the dominant role played by vertically integrated U.S. banana corporations in Latin America in contrast to the ACP production system in which state-sponsored associations of small-scale growers receive preferential access to European markets (Raynolds 2003: 23-47). There can be little doubt that the reorientation of Caribbean producers toward Europe following the Second World War marked a moment when the banana commodity system in that region diverged from that of Latin America. However, the tendency of researchers to focus on twentieth-century banana trades has had the unintended effect of obscuring the trades’ origins in the late nineteenth century, a period when a sharp divide between Caribbean and Latin American commodity systems did not exist. Indeed, it is easy to forget that the roots of the United Fruit Company (today known as Chiquita Brands International) lie in both the Caribbean and Central America.

This article re-examines the emergence of export banana production in Jamaica by focusing on the relationships between Jamaican “small settlers,” North American shippers, and colonial policymakers.¹ Most published accounts of nineteenth-century export banana trades rely on a handful of secondary sources which, often written from the perspective of the North Atlantic shipping companies, tend to characterize the period as “chaotic” and “disorganized.”² However, from the vantage point of small-scale cultivators, the period between 1870 and 1900 represented a rare opportunity to gain access to both land and expanding North Atlantic markets for tropical foods and beverages. When the banana industry began in Jamaica, the institution of slavery was a memory, but eco-

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¹ I employ “small settler,” “small holder,” and “small-scale cultivator” interchangeably. According to Olivier, “small settler” was the term with which small-scale Jamaican farmers referred to themselves (Olivier 1936). Precise estimates of how much land small settlers cultivated are difficult to determine, but most plots probably did not exceed five acres (Satchell 1990: 7-8).

² Lyle (1906: 7296-97); Thompson (1915: 16-17); Sealy/Hart (1984: 12); Davies (1990: 29).



conomic exploitation and political exclusion continued to be a part of the lived experiences of Afro-Jamaicans. In this context, the participation of black Jamaican small settlers during the early years of the fruit trade can be seen as an attempt to avoid coercive labor practices and unstable tenancies. In their desire to forge dignified livelihoods after slavery, Anglophone blacks would also help to initiate late-nineteenth-century banana production in Caribbean Costa Rica and the Bay Islands of Honduras.³

The early banana trade was not without risks. Hurricanes struck export-banana growing parishes of Jamaica in 1874, 1880, 1886, 1889, 1899, and 1903. In addition, “blow downs,” or localized windstorms, caused the greatest pre-harvest fruit losses for late-nineteenth-century farmers. Export banana growers faced less dramatic but equally important perils when trying to sell their highly perishable commodity to brokers and shippers determined to maximize profits and minimize financial risks. One of the ways that shipping companies tried to reduce losses was through the development of standards for fruit quality and pricing. Another strategy pursued by some shipping companies was vertical integration. In the late 1880s, a handful of island-based and foreign investors began buying abandoned sugar estates and converting them to banana plantations. As prices increased for arable land in close proximity to seaports, small settlers were forced to lease land or move into the island’s highland interior.

Thomas Holt has argued that colonial policy during this period of economic transition in Jamaica was highly contradictory: “During an era in which racist ideology was becoming more virulent and practically unchallenged, official policy was grounded paradoxically on the entrepreneurship of black Jamaicans” (Holt 1992: 317). Small-scale Afro-Jamaican cultivators produced the vast majority of food for both local and export markets including yams, coffee, ginger, fruit, and pimento.⁴ In spite of this reality, government officials continued to praise and support large-scale production by providing subsidies including the importation of indentured labor from South Asia (Look Lai 2004). The deep ambivalence with which government bureaucrats viewed the centrality of Afro-Jamaican smallholders to island agriculture is reflected in the pages of the *Journal of the Jamaica Agricultural Society (JAS)* whose “technical” advice on agriculture was often couched in paternalistic language based on implicit adherence to racial ideologies that perpetuated, albeit in new forms, ideas of white Anglo-supremacy. The journal’s contributors both acknowledged the potential of small settlers and criticized their agricultural practices as backward and ecologically destructive.

Because they carried out the vast majority of the agricultural work on the island, there can be little doubt that small settlers were leading agents of environmental change. Nevertheless, I argue that colonial officials “misread” the island’s changing agro-landscapes by decoupling the actions of small settlers’ from the re-emergence of a plantation economy and ascribing environmental decline to the static “customs” of Afro-Jamaicans. Drawing on frameworks from political ecology, I analyze discourses of environmental degradation to reveal the contradictions in colonial bureaucrats’ efforts to promote export banana cultivation as an “all-Jamaica” project; increasing the island’s output of high

³ Chomsky (1996); Putnam (2002); Davidson (1979); Soluri (2005).

⁴ Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies, 1886. General Records of the Department of State. Microfilm edition T31. Washington DC. (Further quoted as *Despatches*).



quality bananas became a central policy objective that sought to redefine the question of how to improve the lives of small settlers into one of technical capacity.⁵ Although some colonial officials acknowledged the historical responsibility of the white planter class for the economic and political marginalization of Afro-Jamaican smallholders, the suggestion that modern plantations contributed to social and ecological problems remained outside the realm of official discourses.

Smallholders, Shippers, and the Struggle to Control Production

Scholars have often commented on the tightly entwined histories of slavery and sugar in the Caribbean, but the connection between slavery and banana production in the region has yet to be thoroughly examined. In major cane-growing regions of the Caribbean and Latin America, slaves cultivated bananas and plantains for a variety of reasons including as a shade plant for other crops, as a source of food, and as a commodity for exchange on local markets.⁶ Limited evidence from the post-emancipation period suggests that small settlers continued to use bananas and plantains as nurse crops to shade coffee, cacao, and other cultivars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Jamaican women played a crucial role as middle brokers (higglers) in a cash economy, a historical antecedent that helps to explain the prominence of women in the production and transport of bananas. In sum, most smallholders in the Caribbean were already experienced with producing, marketing, and consuming bananas when the first North American traders began purchasing fruit.⁸

The banana variety that would dominate the export trade, the Gros Michel, reportedly reached Jamaica in 1835, when botanist Jean Francois Pouyat planted a single specimen that he acquired during a trip to Martinique. The variety became extremely popular in Jamaica where locals called it the “banana Pouyat” or “Martinique banana” (Rodríguez 1955: 11-12). The pre-export history of Gros Michel remains murky but if it is true that the variety was widely cultivated on the island in the mid-nineteenth century, then it is likely that Afro-Jamaican cultivation practices and foodways conditioned the international banana trade by making Gros Michel fruit readily available to North American traders. That said, the widespread cultivation of Gros Michel bananas in Jamaica could not have been more than one or two generations old before the export trade began. Moreover, growing bananas in home gardens was similar to, but not the same as, growing bananas for export markets for reasons that I outline below. Consequently, the idea that Afro-Jamaicans possessed unique knowledge of Gros Michel cultivation may have reflected an “invented tradition” not unlike what Michel-Rolph Trouillot found in twentieth-century Dominica (Trouillot 1988: 120-137).

The association of bananas with blackness in nineteenth-century Jamaica was sufficiently strong to discourage most white planters from cultivating them for export, even

⁵ Fairfield/Leach (1996); Peet/Watts (1996: 1-45).

⁶ McDonald (1981: 65); Marshall (1993: 203-220).

⁷ *Despatches* (1886); *Report* (1884: 223); Beckwith (1929: 16); Rodríguez (1955).

⁸ Mintz (1974: 180-224); Trouillot (1988: 120-137).

when it was clear that the sugar industry was in decline.⁹ Consequently, as planters took cane land out of production, property values dropped sharply, contributing to a rise in the number of “small-settlers” who purchased plots of estate lands. Veront Satchell’s study of land transfers in Jamaica found that the number of small holders rose significantly through 1890 (Satchell 1990: 83-109; 111-150). In 1883-4, more than 90 percent of the land holdings in Portland Parish—the largest producer of export bananas in Jamaica—were less than ten acres (Bartlett 1977: 50). Three years later, testimonies submitted before the Jamaican Legislative Council indicated that bananas had largely replaced ground provisions in Portland (*Minutes* 1887: 13, 17). One source indicates that the Boston Fruit Company purchased nearly four-fifths of the bananas that it exported in 1890 (Bacon 1890: 152-3). One indication that smallholders made economic gains during the 1880s was a major increase in both the value of deposits and the number of accounts in the government savings bank in Port Antonio, the principal banana port in Portland (Holt 1992: 349). Although precise data on the size of banana farms is hard to come by for the late nineteenth century, virtually all observers acknowledged that small settlers were “the backbone of the country” (*Despatches* 1886).

North American shippers began purchasing fruits, including bananas, coconuts, and citrus, from Jamaican growers in the late 1860s (Rodriquez 1955: 25; *Despatches* 1884). Among the early traders was George Busch, a schooner captain who had experience trading Cuban red bananas. In 1869 Busch associated with two Port Antonio merchants to purchase fruit for U.S. importers. One year later, John Edward Kerr began buying and selling fruit in Montego Bay. Within ten years he had financed the construction of two steamships designed to transport bananas. Around the same time, Lorenzo Dow Baker, a fishing captain from Cape Cod, entered into the fruit trade. Throughout the 1870s many wholesale fruit dealers established themselves in towns situated along Jamaica’s northeast coastline suggesting that there were other schooner captains who experimented with fruit exports (Hall 1964: 62-65). During this period, wind-powered vessels dominated the trade, accounting for two-thirds of exports from Jamaica as late as 1878. However, sometime around 1880, the colonial government began subsidizing the Atlas Steamship Company to carry relatively small cargoes of fruit on its lines servicing Jamaica and New York. This policy had limited success, but by 1882 unsubsidized steamers accounted for two-thirds of the fruit leaving Jamaican ports; schooners accounted for less than one-sixth of the trade (*Despatches* 1884).

In order to be profitable, early shippers had to secure a steady supply of bananas that would not ripen prior to reaching consumer markets. Shipping agents alerted growers about when and where they could sell their fruit. This system generally afforded farmers no more than two or three days to harvest and transport their bananas to traders. Shipping agents, merchants, and other buyers based in Jamaican ports played a key role in the early banana trade because they made decisions about fruit quality and pricing. Bananas judged to be harvested prematurely or damaged were usually discounted or rejected. In contrast to other kinds of fruit exported in the late nineteenth century, bananas did not travel in crates during their journey from farm to retail market. In fact, one of the reasons why shippers preferred Gros Michel over other bananas was on account of its relatively

⁹ Olivier (1936: 379); *New York Times* (07.10.1888: 11).



thick peel and compact bunches that reduced bruising and facilitated tight packing in the holds of ships.

Gros Michel plants also tended to yield larger bunches than many other varieties, an important characteristic because shippers set prices based on the number of “hands” of bananas on a given bunch. In other words, exporters did not pay a price based on weight. For example, in 1880, John Kerr, hoping to secure a steady supply of fruit in the face of growing competition from other shippers, offered farmers three-year purchase agreements. He based his purchase price of two shillings on a seven-hand bunch. Kerr agreed to purchase bunches with fewer hands at significantly reduced prices. The standard bunch count appears to have steadily increased between 1880 and the 1890s. In 1883, Kerr renewed his three-year offer, but he agreed to purchase only bunches of seven or more hands (Hall 1964: 68). One year later, a U.S. consular official reported that an eight-hand bunch was the “standard size” shipped from Jamaica (*Despatches* 1884). An 1885 contract between Lorenzo Dow Baker and Boston-based shipper Jesse Freeman stipulated that “bunches less than eight hands to be invoiced as seconds at half price of firsts [...] All bunches less than seven hands to be rejected” (Bartlett 1977: 247). As late as 1887, some shippers accepted seven- and eight-hand bunches when the trade was “brisk.”¹⁰ However, at some point in the 1890s, Baker’s Boston Fruit Company raised the standard bunch count to nine hands; anything smaller was discounted or rejected. The “bunch count” would become the standard unit of sale for export bananas throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.¹¹

Size was not the only thing that mattered in late-nineteenth-century banana markets. Buying agents for shipping companies frequently rejected fruit brought to the wharves on account of poor quality. Quality was defined by the “fullness” of the fruit (a characteristic linked to when the fruit was harvested) and the appearance of the fruit peels. Bruised, sunburned, waterlogged, or chafed bananas developed blemishes as their peels ripened, a quality generally deemed unacceptable for the export market. In correspondence from 1884, Lorenzo Dow Baker advised his son “[i]n buying bananas this winter buy only full fruit, no thin fruit at all, not one for they are of no value whatever in a winter market but spring and summer thin fruit will pass very well, and let the fruit be free of bruises as possible. Nothing like full clean fruit for the winter market” (Bartlett 1977: 61). In stressing the need to purchase only high quality fruit, Baker added, “[n]ever mind what people say, throw it back on their barrels, let them suffer for it if they will not mind you” (Bartlett 1977: 61). On another occasion, he told his son to instruct a company purchasing agent that “if they don’t give him clean fruit he must reject the fruit. It is of no use” (Bartlett 1977: 62). Baker’s blunt instructions reveal how market structures influenced quality standards: the same banana that found a buyer when U.S. consumption peaked in spring and early summer was likely to be rejected during seasonal lulls.¹²

The state of transportation infrastructure in Jamaica created challenges for farmers trying to deliver “clean” fruit. Shipping agents obligated farmers to bring harvested fruit

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Legislative Council of Jamaica* (1887: 20). (Further quoted as *Minutes*).

¹¹ Curiously, bunch counts were not used in retail markets in either the United States or the Caribbean where consumers purchased bananas either by weight or by the dozen.

¹² The decline in sales during the winter months was due primarily to the limited number of fruit dealers who had insulated storage facilities in the late nineteenth century.



to designated points, shifting both the costs and risks of ground transportation onto growers. Cultivators usually wrapped harvested fruit bunches in dry banana leaves before placing them in carts or drays drawn by mule teams. Perched atop loads ranging from 30 to 40 bunches, drivers traveled from as far as thirty miles to sell their cargo (*JAS* 1906: 165; and *Despatches* 1884). Roads were often in poor shape. For example, Thomas Pickersgill, commenting on an 1887 proposal to construct a railroad between Kingston and Annotta Bay on the north coast, complained that the roads leading from the farm on which he cultivated bananas were impassable (*Minutes* 1887: 19). In a letter submitted before the 1882 Royal Commission, a group of unidentified “laborers” from Portland wrote “we do think it hard for us to pay taxes and be without good roads to take our produce to market” (*Report* 1884: 134).

Tiresome to describe though they may be, the nuances of transactions between farmers and shippers are important for understanding the tensions that gave rise to disputes over bunch counts, rejections, prices, and point of sale. In addition, the emphasis on maximizing bunch size and minimizing blemishes on the peel tended to favor growers who had access to level lands in close proximity to points of sale (often ports) and who could mobilize labor to weed and prune their bananas. Over time, this led shipping companies to prefer fruit from large estates over bananas from small settler plots (*Minutes* 1887: 16). Indeed, a desire to control the quality of production convinced Andrew W. Preston, the U.S.-based director of the Boston Fruit Company and key architect in the creation of the United Fruit Company, that “the successful company of the future is the one that controls the growing of its own fruit.”¹³

From Plots to Plantations

Writing in the *New York Times*, a North American traveler who visited Port Antonio in 1888 noted the “regular and sometimes extensive banana plantations,” but added, “thousands of bunches of bananas are raised in Jamaica by the colored people a few here and few there. Nearly every colored man living in the rural parts has his few banana trees scattered here and there about his ‘patch,’ and gathers in a few half dollars annually by carrying his bunches to market. Often he carries a bunch for miles on his head, but oftener yet he sends his wife with it” (*New York Times* 02.09.1888: 12). The writer’s assumption that men were “sending” their banana-bearing “wives” to market reveals his ignorance about the central role played by women in Jamaican banana production but his description of plantations mingled with small plots accurately conveyed the transformations taking place in the organization of production in Jamaica’s primary banana-growing parishes.

In 1879, only one estate near Port Antonio was identified as a “banana plantation.” By the early 1890s there were more than one hundred banana plantations owned by shippers, merchants, professionals, and some former sugar planters (Hall 1964: 68). Under the leadership of Lorenzo D. Baker, the Boston Fruit Company became one of the most important property owners in Jamaica’s banana-growing parishes. By 1887 the company

¹³ Lorenzo Dow Baker Papers, Cape Cod Community College (West Barnstable, Massachusetts), Wilkens Library, Nickerson Room Manuscript Collections.



had acquired some 13,000 acres (Rodriquez 1955: 26).¹⁴ Boston Fruit directly cultivated a portion of this land in addition to leasing plots to tenant farmers. In fact, in 1888 the company's Boundbrook Estate generated considerably more income from rents than from banana production (Bartlett 1977: 80). John Edward Kerr, one of Boston Fruit's principal competitors, also acquired several properties during the 1890s, as did John Pringle, a retired physician who possessed 2,722 acres in St. Mary in 1897.¹⁵ By 1902, just two entities, the United Fruit Company (formed in 1899 following the merger of the Boston Fruit Company with twelve other firms) and John Pringle, cultivated nearly 8,000 acres of bananas—more than one fourth of the banana acreage in the four major exporting parishes. Smallholders cultivated approximately 3,500 acres. A large and poorly defined "middle sector" (farms ranging from twenty acres to several hundred acres) occupied some 16,700 acres.¹⁶

The labor force on these newly established banana plantations consisted of indentured South Asians and black Jamaicans. In 1897, John Pringle employed 327 indentured workers, slightly more than the 297 who labored for the Boston Fruit Company (*Minutes* 1897: Appendix XVIII). Approximately 2,700 South Asian men and women arrived in Jamaica between 1899 and 1906 to work on banana farms (Holt 1992: 353). Indentured laborers formed the core of year-around labor forces on estates. They represented a form of subsidy to large-scale banana growers because the government provided health care for the indentured workers, something that reportedly upset Afro-Jamaican day workers whose tax dollars paid for a benefit that they did not enjoy. The perceived need for imported workers partly reflected the persistence of small settlers in export banana-growing parishes throughout the 1890s. For example, in 1897, E. E. C. Hosack, a banana planter who employed one-hundred indentured laborers, reported "at certain times of the year they [blacks] cultivate their own banana fields, and especially on Mondays you do not get any Creole labor to turn out at all, because they go to cut their own fruit" (*West India Royal Commission* 1898: 295).

Nevertheless, between 1897 and 1903, small settler acreage declined in both absolute terms and as a percentage of total land in banana production.¹⁷ The drop was steepest in St. Mary's parish where farms smaller than twenty acres fell from 51 percent (4,912 of 9,575 acres) to 12 percent (1,670 of 14,143 acres) of total area in bananas. Significant declines also took place in Portland and St. Thomas.¹⁸ In St. Catherine, banana acreage more than tripled from 1,703 to 6,048 acres between 1897 and 1903, but smallholders were almost non-existent, an anomaly that may be attributable to the fact that limited

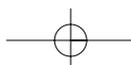
¹⁴ The Aliens Law Amendment of 1871 permitted foreign entities to purchase land in Jamaica (Satchell 1990: 79, 133).

¹⁵ Hall (1964: 68-69); *Handbook of Jamaica* (1897: 406-09).

¹⁶ Prominent island planters held a significant portion of these cultivations, but more research is needed on the large number of individuals who owned neither plots nor plantations.

¹⁷ My analysis of land holdings is derived from a comparison of statistical tables printed in the *Handbook of Jamaica* for the years 1897 and 1903. The recorded number of small settlers was probably less than the actual number because tax evasion was commonplace (Holt 1992: 403-404).

¹⁸ In Portland, farms under twenty acres decreased from 39 percent (1,335 of 3,454 acres) to 30 percent (1,427 of 4758 acres). In St. Thomas the same category fell from 18 percent (533 of 2,897 to less than 14 percent (457 of 3,362 acres).





rainfall in the parish obligated export banana growers to irrigate, an input that few small settlers were able to afford.¹⁹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of smallholders in important banana-growing parishes was either stagnating (Portland) or in sharp decline (St. Mary). The rising prominence of large-scale producers created new problems for small settlers who faced both falling fruit prices and rising land values. Limited evidence indicates that the United Fruit Company stymied early attempts to form producer associations (*JAS* 1902: 156). After a generation in which the number of property holders increased in Jamaica, the expansion of banana plantations compelled many Afro-Jamaicans to either lease land or seek out plots in higher elevations that were less than ideal for banana cultivation (*West India Royal Commission* 1897: 314). Government statistics provide indirect evidence that many small holders in banana-growing parishes switched to other crops including cacao, coffee and ground provisions.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, this tremendous expansion of banana plantations made it harder for smallholders to sell their fruit. Upon being questioned by the British Royal Commission of 1897 if bananas were profitable, Thomas Smickle, a former schoolteacher residing in St. Thomas parish replied, “they [bananas] are if you can sell them, but I see people with bananas all around them who cannot get sale for them.” He added that at certain times of the year, the region’s only buyer, the Boston Fruit Company, rejected all fruit that was not grown on their farms:

There are times when they reject the small settlers’ fruits because they [Boston Fruit] have enough of their own. Their policy seems to be to extend their own cultivations as much as they can. On the whole, the small settlers can get no profit by the cultivation of bananas at all. Of course they do get sale for them sometimes. But at other times they must get weary of them [bananas]. I have seen them return from market with these bananas after they have gone miles with them and have found no one able to buy them, and they have had to return home with them (*West India Royal Commission* 1897:325-6).

Eight years later, Reverend E. Arnett cited three reasons for fruit rejections that he observed in St. Ann parish: immature fruit, damaged fruit and excess supply, the last of which “would seem to account for the largest number of rejections:”

I have been informed that at times when the amount required has been secured that whole cart loads are rejected with the exception of one or two of the best bunches, and unfortunately this generally happens to those who have come long distances who having had to come so far, and not being allowed to cut the fruit before Monday morning, cannot get to the wharf before Monday night. It is especially hard on these persons. Their mules now being tired, they cannot drag the load 15 or 20 miles back to the mountains, and in so many cases have to leave the fruit on the beach. It is a very serious loss to the people in terms of time, money and food (*JAS* 1905: 248-9).

¹⁹ In 1902, the four parishes of St. Mary, St. Catherine, St. Thomas, and Portland combined to account for 86 percent (28,311/32,842 acres) of the island’s total banana lands.

²⁰ In St. Mary, the number of units under twenty acres producing cacao more than doubled from 500 acres in 1897 to 1,233 acres in 1902 (*Handbook of Jamaica* 1897: 408; and 1903: 379). In St. Catherine small-scale coffee acreage increased from 3,974 acres to 6,132 acres (*Handbook of Jamaica* 1897: 405; and 1903: 376).





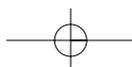
After receiving multiple complaints about fruit rejections, Arnett decided to observe the banana purchasing process. Commenting on the plight of one cultivator who had 17 of 20 bunches rejected, he wrote, “This man had gone over twenty miles, and of course it was impossible for him to cart the fruit home, which meant leaving it on the beach for practically nothing, a most serious loss to the owner, in food if nothing else—and yet one cannot expect even a fruit company to buy what they do not need” (*JAS* 1905: 338). A number of factors may have contributed to the extremely high rate of rejection described by Arnett including seasonal dips in U.S. demand and/or premature harvesting on the part of the grower. What is more significant is that rejections were commonplace in the early twentieth century when demand in the United States was skyrocketing and production in Jamaica and Central America was expanding rapidly. For small settlers hauling fruit over rough roads to distant points of sale, the late-nineteenth-century banana market can hardly be described as “open.”

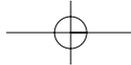
As the century came to a close, friction between shippers and growers increased in response to an expansion in the number of large-scale farms, many of which were owned by shipping companies. The backward integration and consolidation orchestrated by United Fruit’s executives enabled the company to control multiple sources of both supply and distribution in the largest U.S. markets. In addition, a 1902 deal with Elder Dempster and Company effectively gave United Fruit control over exports from Jamaica to Britain (*New York Times* 03.07.1902: 5). Jamaican smallholders experienced these changes in the form of stagnant prices and increasing rates of fruit rejections. They also often found themselves pushed to the geographical peripheries of production areas by plantations that increasingly occupied prime soils in close proximity to transportation infrastructure. At times, Jamaican cultivators responded forcefully to their growing marginalization. In 1899, violent riots broke out in St. Mary parish over the eviction of tenants from a banana plantation (*New York Times* 15.06.1899: 3). Two years later, banana growers macheted thousands of harvested bunches rather than sell them to United Fruit at “reduced prices.” The discord prompted the company to dispatch a representative from the United States (*New York Times* 29.08.1901: 2). These last two incidents were serious enough to be reported in a major U.S. newspaper; I suspect that similar incidents took place without making headlines.

The colonial government’s responses to the economic transformations of the late nineteenth century were contradictory: they endorsed “progressive” planters like Lorenzo Dow Baker at the same time that they rhetorically embraced small proprietorships as official policy (Holt 1992: 339). Government bureaucrats and agricultural extension agents simultaneously praised the rapid expansion of the banana industry and raised concerns about environmental degradation in the form of deforestation, soil erosion, and dessication. Colonial policy makers responded by creating programs that targeted smallholders whose cultivation practices were generally viewed as inefficient if not ecologically destructive.

Colonial Discourses on Changing Landscapes

In 1895, the island government under the leadership of Governor Henry Blake approved legislation to sell small parcels of Crown lands as part of an effort to promote





stable small-scale cultivation. That same year, the Jamaica Agricultural Society was founded to provide technical support to smallholders. The Society's board of directors included prominent planters and professionals with scientific training. By the early twentieth century the organization had nearly 3,000 members. In addition to publishing a journal, the society sponsored traveling instructors who lectured on "scientific agriculture" and organized regional agricultural fairs. The essays, reports, and correspondence published in the journal reveal the deep ambivalence felt by the authors toward small settlers. They acknowledged that the island's agricultural production was largely in the hands of small settlers, yet the journal frequently criticized their farming practices and work ethic.

For example, an essay published in 1905 seemed to lament Jamaica's post-emancipation trajectory:

It may be true that 'la petit culture' is not the only salvation of a country with a people like ours who have too little faith in themselves and less in their neighbors, and that numerous large estates, giving labour for all, where the people receiving monthly wages are always provided for, with few heads taking all the responsibility and care, as in old times, would be better. But this cannot return even to an appreciable degree, and as the small settler is always with us, owning his land, but with too often neither money, nor any high degree of perception, ability, nor industry, we have to make the best of him (*JAS* 1905: 108-09).

The essay avoids using racial categories to identify the "people" to whom it refers yet its invocation of large estates bears a strong resemblance to slavery modified by monthly wages. One suspects that the "few heads" described as "taking all the responsibility and care as in old times" were visualized as white planters, not black small settlers. But the essay concludes by acknowledging that the small settler—"owning his land"—was not likely to go away. The implicit goal then of the Jamaica Agricultural Society was to help with the "uplift" of small settlers by promoting modern agricultural practices.

In a paper read at the West Indian Agricultural Conference in Trinidad, the Inspector of Schools in Jamaica advocated an institution of "scientific agriculture [...] for the benefit of those who in the future are to be the employers of labor, and the owners or managers of estates. Education does not usually rise up, it filters down, and the most successful means of improving popular agricultural education is undoubtedly the object-lesson of properly organized and profitable work under efficient management" (*JAS* 1905: 403). A 1904 report by the Board of Agriculture and Department of Public Gardens and Plantations echoed the Inspector's top-down approach: "As the small settlers see the larger planter improve his field by drainage and deep cultivation, giving plants sufficient space to get light and air, they will follow."²¹ The journal also repeatedly endorsed the practices of J. E. Kerr and Company and the Boston Fruit Company. As one writer put it, concluding his essay on the potential for agricultural enterprises in Jamaica, "I cannot but pay a tribute to that huge concern, the Boston Fruit Company; it has shown what can be done" (*JAS* 1900: 20; and 1899: 713-19). Jamaica's planter elite held Lorenzo Dow Baker in particularly high esteem.²²

²¹ *Annual Report on the Public Gardens and Plantations* (1904: 19).

²² Baker was among those invited to speak, along with Governor Henry Blake and other island dignitaries, at an 1898 meeting convened to discuss the findings of the West Indian Royal Commission (*JAS* 1898: 20-31).

Alongside the articles praising plantation agriculture was a steady stream of essays, lectures, and reports bemoaning the woeful state of small settler agriculture. The journal's criticisms often conflated agricultural practices and moral standing: "In spite of much advice given as to the necessity of keeping bananas clean and cultivating them with judgment, so that we may get as good fruit as possible to export, there are to be seen from the roadsides in the country thousands of stems choked with creepers, while their owners do not seem to be so very busy doing anything in particular. This sort of gross carelessness and laziness is a disgrace and the people who own such bananas are enemies to the Island" (*JAS* 1905: 141).

In another column, the editors implicitly attributed fruit rejections to small settlers' inferior cultivation and transportation practices: "The cultivation of bananas is now a science, and no rule of thumb way of letting the plants grow as they please with many suckers will bring success. The science consists in getting a maximum of bunches to sell between March and June when the best prices are offered" (*JAS* 1905: 58). In other words, the journal's editors urged growers to prune their banana plants—which did not require annual replanting—in such a way as to produce large fruit bunches when U.S. market demand peaked. By pruning all but one sucker, farmers increased the odds that the solitary stem would "shoot" a nine-handed bunch of bananas. Alternatively, a farmer could leave two suckers with the hope that they would "shoot a pair of eights," that is, produce two eight-handed bunches. In the 1890s, an eight-handed bunch during peak season was worth two-thirds the value of a nine-handed bunch, meaning that two eights potentially garnered more money for a grower than a single nine (*JAS* 1905: 58). However, there was no guarantee the two stalks would bear eights, and lower bunch counts had little market value. The Jamaica Agricultural Society discouraged cultivators from managing for eights, citing the need to preserve the reputation of "our" fruit: "The stiff competition that we have with Central America and the fine fruit which is produced there should be constantly kept in mind, and it should be our object to produce as fine fruit as possible—large bunches and big fingers" (*JAS* 1905: 58). On another occasion the journal reminded readers "a good nine-hand bunch in May or June is better value than three moderate eight-hand bunches in September" (*JAS* 1905: 141).

In the eyes of the society's traveling instructors, sound farming practices were predicated on the exigencies of the export market. The language and medium through which they conveyed their message served to translate a subjective market standard into an objective, technical practice. There was little that was natural about a nine-handed bunch of bananas; it represented one of several possible yields, the relative value of which was determined largely by the shippers who linked sites of production with places of consumption. How growers responded to the Society's pleas is unclear, but what appeared to be highly rational to colonial extension agents concerned about "our bananas" may have been less so to an individual grower trying to balance a finite quantity of labor and capital with a desire for income. Small settlers often used Gros Michel plants for multiple purposes including as a shade crop and for self-consumption, uses that likely influenced their decisions about pruning. Also, heavy pruning tended to make Gros Michel plants more susceptible to blow downs by removing followers that served to anchor the plants. Finally, Jamaican men and women frequently migrated to Central America for work, meaning that there may not have been anyone available to carry out the tasks of pruning and weeding. By paying close attention to production processes, scholars can better understand the dynamics of agroexport economies.



Small-scale fruit growers were not the only ones targeted for criticism. Assessing the effects of the 1899 hurricane while presiding over the Agricultural Society's annual meeting, acting Governor (and ex-officio chair of the society) Sidney Olivier criticized small settler provision grounds:

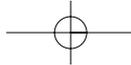
The provision grounds were carried [out] on the hillsides and were in consequence exposed to the severe weather. If the cultivation had not been in such remote, exposed situations, the results of the bad weather would not have been so serious. And if the cultivations had been carried on properly and not on two year shifts they would have been in a much better position to withstand such severe blows. It was the object of the society to promote cultivation in the true sense, as contrasted with cultivation by catch crops. Cultivation at present was little better than a process of denudation. No more important work lay before the Society and its branches than in persuading the people to give up the system of catch crops and to go in for permanent agriculture (*JAS* 1900: 526).

Olivier, who on other occasions praised small settlers for their vital contributions to the island's economy, here condemned the shifting agricultural practices of provision growers and called for the promotion of "permanent" agriculture. Significantly, the banana sector, which had also been devastated by the hurricane, did not elicit any remarks from Olivier beyond an acknowledgment that the industry was both "very remunerative" and "precarious." There is no discussion of the industry's susceptibility to hurricanes or the hardships faced by plantation workers dismissed in the hurricane's aftermath (*JAS* 1899: 701; and *The Daily Gleaner* 08.12.1899). Olivier also ignored the tendency of continuously cropped banana plantations to deplete soil nutrients in as few as five years, compelling many planters to shift their cultivations or invest in fertilizers, the material and labor costs of which may have been beyond the reach of small settlers (*Minutes* 1887: Appendix 31).

Indeed, the banana industry could do little wrong in the eyes of the journal editors for whom increased fruit production was linked to an abstract idea of progress. Consequently, the same journal that published Olivier's condemnation of smallholders' use of hillsides for provision crops assigned entirely different values to similar land transformations wrought by banana cultivation: "bananas [...] have been brought from the remotest parts of the island [...] until now, there is hardly a corner from the hilltops and mountain valleys in the heart of the country but where bananas are profitably being marketed and increased quantities hopefully being planted. It is wonderful!" (*JAS* 1900: 402-03). For at least some of the journal's contributors, the road to the island's prosperity was literally lined with bananas.

The extent to which the island government's thinking was constrained by its export-oriented development model is revealed in the following exchange published in the Society's journal in 1902. In a lengthy letter, one of the Society's traveling instructors expressed concern that the government's tax collecting activities were causing small settlers to abandon their homesteads and migrate to Crown lands in order "to be left in undisturbed possession for a term of years" and to avoid tax collectors (*JAS* 1902: 279-80). The letter drew responses both from the journal's editors and the Colonial Secretary. The editors argued that many people preferred to rent lands on an annual basis in order to ensure suitable soils for the crops they wished to grow and to avoid taxes. They emphatically denied the existence of a land shortage: "We say deliberately that all the cry of no





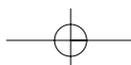
lands to be had has no foundation at all [...] Good land may always be bought by settlers and cheaply too; but of course they may not get it in St. Mary or St. Andrew. That is why people in congested countries emigrate to the backwoods of Canada or Queensland, to get land of their own cheaply” (*JAS* 1902: 280). Acknowledging that crown lands in St. Mary might be unavailable due to “congestion,” the editors’ analogy seemed to encourage small settlers to venture into the “backwoods” of the island in order to obtain inexpensive lands—concerns over resource conservation momentarily forgotten. Thus, while condemning the transitory habits of the small settlers as wasteful of natural resources, the colonial government’s own ideas about development provided few alternatives to the expansion of small settler agriculture on sloping lands in the island’s interior.

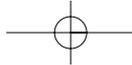
To judge by this review in the *Journal of the Jamaica Agricultural Society*, government officials and bureaucrats in Jamaica viewed the late nineteenth-century transformation of the landscape with a peculiar mixture of alarm and satisfaction. They hoped that export banana production would be the salvation of the island’s plantation economy and promoted it with vigor. The Agricultural Society’s traveling instructors monitored and criticized small settlers who grew provision crops or bananas using techniques judged to be inefficient and wasteful of natural resources. But colonial officials’ discussions of land use seldom considered how the political ecology of Jamaica’s export-banana zones severely limited the set of options available to small settlers for whom fertile, level lands were seldom available and who were compelled by the market standards for bananas to adopt practices such as “clean weeding” and monocultures that hastened erosion rates and soil nutrient depletion. In short, by failing to consider the constraints imposed on small settlers by state policies and commodity market structures, colonial officials misread both the causes and meanings of economic and environmental transformations in Jamaica.

Colonial officials’ faith in the progressive character of the export banana industry would not be shaken until the 1920s when concerns over both United Fruit’s monopoly power and the spread of Panama disease prompted the government of Jamaica to subsidize the creation of a small-scale growers’ cooperative, and to establish banana research stations in Jamaica and Trinidad. In 1932, the British government placed a tariff on banana imports from non-empire sources. These initiatives met with partial success; Jamaica’s banana exports captured a large portion of the British market before World War II abruptly interrupted trade. At the same time, the spread of Panama disease accelerated, and a second plant disease epidemic, Sigatoka, struck Gros Michel farms throughout the Caribbean and Central America. Following the end of the war, the British Ministry of Food became the exclusive importer of bananas. The government subsequently approved the importation of a Panama disease-resistant banana variety (Lacatan) thereby creating new opportunities for smallholders in both Jamaica and the Windward Islands (Grossman 1998: 34-43).

Conclusions: Bananas Before the Split

I began this article by suggesting that the historical connections between the Caribbean and Central American export banana trades have been unintentionally obscured by an outpouring of scholarship focused on the twentieth century. I will con-





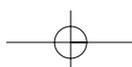
clude by calling attention to some compelling similarities between Jamaica, a colony of the British Empire, and Honduras, a Central American republic often depicted as the quintessential “banana republic.” Export banana production in Honduras started at virtually the same time as it did in Jamaica. In fact, Anglophone blacks on the Bay Islands (a British possession until 1861) dominated production during the 1870s and 1880s. The center of production started to shift to the Honduran mainland in the 1880s, a move facilitated in part by government policies that subsidized steam traffic to mainland ports. As was the case in Jamaica, smallholders, or *poquiteros*, constituted the vast majority of mainland growers: in 1899 seventy percent of the producers farmed fewer than fifteen acres. Nevertheless, a significant degree of stratification among growers already existed; less than three percent of the farms accounted for twenty-eight percent of the land in bananas (Soluri 2005: 22-24). Evidence of conflicts in Honduras between growers and shippers over prices, fruit rejections, and shipping schedules can be found from the early 1880s—long before shipping companies began to integrate vertically. As was the case in Jamaica, a relatively competitive market enabled, but did not guarantee, prosperity for late-nineteenth-century producers in Honduras.

The Honduran state simultaneously supported small- and large-scale agriculture, generating contradictions not unlike those described for Jamaica. For example, in Honduras both municipal and national government policies promoted smallholder agriculture via grants of usufruct rights and zoning regulations that favored farmers over ranchers. At the same time, the national government granted North American investors a series of broad-based concessions that laid the legal foundation for shipping companies, including both Standard Fruit and United Fruit, to establish plantations in Honduras and begin to undermine the market position of non-company growers.²³ In sum, both government land policies and expanding commodity markets helped to create livelihoods for smallholders in Jamaica and Honduras, but state and market institutions simultaneously functioned to control small-scale cultivators in the name of agricultural efficiency and market standards.

The vertical integration that took place in early twentieth-century Honduras did not bring about an elimination of smallholders—who often established themselves near railroad lines built and operated by shipping companies—but it did drastically reduce their share of total banana exports from Honduras (Soluri 2005: 41-127). The economic position of non-company growers worsened in the late 1930s due to a combination of falling prices for bananas and plant disease epidemics. During World War II some observers described non-company growers in Honduras as doing little more than collecting rent on their farms at rates set by United Fruit (Soluri 2005: 111). By the mid-twentieth century then, smallholders in Honduras and Jamaica occupied similarly marginal positions in the banana trade.

The similar historical trajectories of Jamaican small settlers and Honduran *poquiteros* between 1870 and 1950 suggest that scholarship on the export banana trade would benefit from analytical concepts and explanatory frameworks that are not bounded by geopolitical borders. This is hardly a radical suggestion given that shipping companies in general and the United Fruit Company in particular operated on transnational

²³ Kepner/Soothill (1967); Posas (1993); Soluri (2005).





scales. The ability of a handful of companies to integrate vertically was crucial, less so because the companies' expansive land acquisitions turned smallholders into wage laborers than because it enabled shippers to gain considerable control over the quantity and quality of a highly perishable agricultural commodity. United Fruit's domination of the U.S. market—far larger than any single European market during the first half of the twentieth century—meant that grower cooperatives faced enormous obstacles finding viable market outlets.

Historians also need to probe the archives for further insights into the export banana trade's nineteenth century beginnings, an era when many key elements, including the banana variety, shipping techniques, and quality standards, were established. In both Honduras and Jamaica, tensions between shippers and growers over prices, fruit grading, and transportation monopolies pre-dated vertical integration. In fact, there can be little doubt that sorting out the “chaos” of late nineteenth century banana trades will help to explain how and why integration and consolidation took place. Consequently, in order both to explain the power of United Fruit in a wide range of political contexts, and to imagine alternatives to contemporary banana commodity systems, researchers should focus more attention on the brief yet dynamic period of bananas before plantations.

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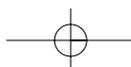
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