

“THEY COULDN’T MASH ANTS”
THE DECLINE OF THE WHITE AND NON-WHITE ELITES IN ANTIGUA, 1834-1900

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THE CINDERELLA OF THE WEST INDIES

The mid-1890s were years of gloom and loss throughout the British West Indies and of great despondency in Antigua, where the cane fields were reported to be in a pitiable state (Beachey 1957; Watts 1906). Sugar production had dropped precipitously owing to an exceptionally long drought (beginning in 1892 and lasting through 1894), which overlapped with a sudden infestation of cane disease (1894-97). Only 7,219 tons of sugar was shipped from Antigua in 1895, compared to 16,120 tons in 1890, and any chance of recovery after the good crops in 1896 and 1898 was destroyed by bad crops in each of the next three years.

Such poor production would have been problem enough, but to make matters worse, sugar prices declined to a new low of £7/7 a ton in 1895, in part the result of increased exports of bounty-supported European beet sugar to England. Worse still, Antiguan sugar producers, who had turned to the United States market when they found it difficult to compete in the British (by 1894, 76 percent of Antigua's export earnings came from the United States), suddenly lost that market when the United States moved to protect domestic and Cuban production. The value of exports in 1895 was half that in 1892. The value of imports declined as well, but not enough. The government suffered a drastic drop in revenues and a huge deficit; such deficits continued, although on a lesser scale, for the next ten years. The financial situation was made more dire by the British decision in 1899 to abandon Nelson's Dockyard, a naval station since 1743. Overnight the island was stripped of another source of income (Lewis 1968:119).

The mass of the population of about 35,000 suffered severely from the rapid decline in its living standards. The drought affected food crops as well as sugar, while inflation abroad, due in part to the Boer War, led to an increase in the price of imported foodstuffs. Estates laid off workers and lowered wages. A census of the estates for the period from July to September 1897 indicated that only 2,995 people out of a former total of almost 5,000 remained employed, 1,971, or 40 percent, having been dismissed in the preceding six months.¹ By 1898 deaths from starvation were reported to be on the increase, as was the number of paupers and beggars. Men began to migrate in large numbers, leaving women and children dependent on their own much lower earnings (women earned half what men received on the estates). Between 1897 and 1898, the number on poor relief increased threefold,² and an Anglican clergyman was provoked to write the governor (who passed the letter on to the Colonial

Office) that the situation had become so bad that the workers were willing to risk the hazards of gaol where they knew they would be fed.³ Antigua was truly on its way to becoming, as it was described some years later, the “Cinderella of the West Indies.”⁴

I open with this grim description of the economic situation in the 1890s not only to emphasize the depth of the crisis - certainly the deepest since Emancipation and probably deeper even than the Great Depression of the 1930s - but also in order to highlight that this was a watershed decade in Antigua's history. The very severity of the economic problems made this a critical moment, when a series of forces, germinating since Emancipation, came together to transform the island's economic, political, and social landscape. The entire population was affected by this transformation, but I shall focus here on the white and non-white elites - the white planter class and the non-white middle class - as each struggled to achieve the promises of Emancipation in the context of forces that originated far beyond the confines of Antigua itself.⁵

BROWN SUGAR

Antigua's sorry economic situation in the 1890s had been some time in coming, but for most of the nineteenth century the Antiguan planters had believed they would be able to survive - as they had throughout the eighteenth century - the multiple problems of growing sugar in a small colony with a dry climate poorly suited to that crop. In the 1760s, at the height of the slave-based sugar regime, Antigua's 32,000 slaves, 2,500 whites, and 1,200 free coloured had produced enough sugar to make Antigua the fourth largest producer in the West Indies (after Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Kitts). Production declined thereafter, but even Emancipation, whose results were much feared, did not cause the expected disruption, and production continued high through the 1850s, despite the natural disasters that Antiguan producers had learned to expect: an earthquake in 1843, a hurricane in 1848, a drought in 1849 (Candler 1965:54). One visitor reported that in 1849 Antigua was still the “most populous, productive, and wealthy” of the Leeward Islands (Davy 1854:379).

The real crisis began in 1846, when the British parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act, which gradually removed the tariff protections that had been given to sugar coming into Britain from its colonies. The resulting influx of cheap foreign sugar spelled the beginning of the end for the West Indian sugar industry. As Sidney Mintz has written, “It might not be too much to say that the fate of the British West Indies was sealed, once it became cheaper for the British masses to have their sugar from elsewhere, and more profitable for the British bourgeoisie to sell more sugar at lower prices” (Mintz 1985:185). If this was true for planters throughout the West Indies, it was particularly true for the less competitive among them, which included those in Antigua.

For many years the Antiguan planters were able to stave off total disaster, primarily because of their ability to control their labor force. In striking contrast to those islands with abundant uncultivated land far from plantations, where former slaves could (and did) retreat in large numbers, Antigua (like

Barbados and St. Kitts) had little land available for peasant cultivation or even for the creation of independent villages. This, coupled with such repressive measures as a severely restrictive Contract Act, harsh vagrancy laws, licensing laws that kept the former slaves out of urban trades, and regressive taxation policies, all reinforced by a virulent local and metropolitan literature that re-installed the image of the "idle Negro," obliged the workforce to remain on the estates. There was thus no question of competition from a peasant crop - coffee or bananas, for instance - or even from peasant-based production of sugar. In fact, dependence on sugar was almost total: sugar crystals made up between 80 and 95 percent of the total value of exports throughout the nineteenth century, and most of the remainder - rum and molasses - was sugar-related. In 1891, sugar production provided direct employment, in field and factory, for well over 50 percent of the population over the age of 15: there were more than 12,000 agricultural workers out of a total population over 15 of 23,690. This total does not include those in ancillary artisan activities, technicians in the sugar factories, and dockworkers, none of whom would have been employed without the sugar industry,¹⁶ or those who worked for the import-export merchants and were therefore involved in the distribution (packing, loading, shipping) of sugar.

The planters were also able to maintain profitability by shifting the bulk of the tax burden onto the laboring population: both taxes on individuals (donkey and hut taxes, for instance) and import taxes on consumer goods fell disproportionately on the poor. Import duties, which had been eliminated on most goods in 1848, were reinstated in 1850 (Hall 1971:157); by 1894 they provided 50 percent of revenues. This, along with the lack of land and the almost non-existent transfer of government funds back to the poor (through education or social welfare programs), meant that the labor force was squeezed and re-squeezed in order to give the Antiguan planters a small advantage over their competitors. The British Colonial Office, supposedly the guardian of the welfare of the former slaves, was opposed in principle to most of these taxes but was loathe to protest too much, since the need to keep the colonial financially solvent was the central consideration. The introduction of imported labor, which in other islands became crucial to the continued profitable production of sugar, was viewed with some reserve by the Antigua planters, primarily because of their lack of capital. After much discussion, it was agreed to import a few Portuguese from Madeira and the Cape Verde Islands, and the first arrived in 1847 or 1848. The total was only 2,235. Virtually no East Indians or Chinese migrated to Antigua in these years.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the planters had been able to hold their own by keeping labor costs down and improving production as much as possible without making any major investment. Lack of capital meant, however, that they continued to produce unrefined muscovado, or brown sugar, when refineries in other islands were turning to the higher quality grey crystals. Then in 1862 the worst drought in fifty years drastically and precipitously reduced production: 1862, 12,920 tons; 1863, 10,124 tons; 1864, 2,613 tons; 1865, 7,906 tons. Prices were low at the time, and the combination created a severe crisis.

To make matters worse, at this point bounty-fed European beet sugar began to compete in the British market. Imports to Britain began in the 1860s and increased rapidly: 80,027 tons of beet sugar were imported in 1865, 305,000 tons in 1878, 559,000 tons in 1884, and 1,362,000 tons in 1900 (Dookhan 1975: 18).

Not only does this point to an astonishing English sweet tooth, but it presented the most serious threat to West Indian cane sugar production since Emancipation. The United States, which had become an important market, was also affected by beet-sugar competition and was unable to take up the slack. One further result was that the price of cane sugar continued to fall: to 13s per cwt in 1884 and on down through the 1890s.

Production declined steadily, if erratically, after 1862. Visitors for the first time saw signs of depression. Daniel Hart (1866:219) reported large tracts of abandoned land and noted a huge imbalance between exports (£79,533) and imports (£178,786), a fiscally dangerous situation that the sagging economy had little chance of rectifying. Many planters began to feel that the future looked grim and started to sell off their estates and head home to England, or became absentees, leaving their plantations in the hands of local attorneys. Antigua, which had had a large number of resident proprietors in the 1830s and 1840s (Bum 1937: 66), had by the 1890s become an island where absentees were the largest owners.⁷

The move to absentee ownership was aided by the passage of the West Indies Encumbered Estates Act in 1854. Antigua did not vote to come under the act until 1864, but once the act was in place sales were frequent: 73 estates were sold through the court between 1866 and 1892, more than in any island other than Jamaica.⁸ Since several estates passed through the court twice, it was not actually 73 estates, but 73 transactions, but these nevertheless encompassed a total of 23,569 acres, or more than 37 percent of the 63,147 acres in estate land at the time.

The gathering speed of the turnover can be measured through an examination of changes in estate ownership over time.⁹ By 1878 only seven estates still belonged to the families that had owned them in 1843, and all but one of these was an absentee, the plantations having been handed over to resident managers when the owners left the island. One merchant stated that all but eight estates changed hands between 1860 and 1897.¹⁰ By 1901 it was reported that the oldest resident proprietor had only been on the island forty years.¹¹ This is in striking contrast with Barbados, where a resident planter class had been in place since emancipation.¹²

The result of all this turnover was a major change in the structure of land ownership and a large reduction in the number of whites: where there had been 156 owners with more than fifty acres in cane in 1843, there were only 80 in 1895. Compare this again with Barbados, where 440 of the 500 estates in

existence at emancipation were still producing in 1890 (Augier et al. 1960:238). In 1891 the white population of Antigua was 1,830 (out of a total of 36,119), down from 2,556 in 1861, and the census counted only 224 planters, compared with 326 in 1861.

The colonial government, which was responsible for a wide range of activities, from administering the government and courts to medical care, the port, the police, the post office, roads and water, raised its revenue primarily from import duties. By 1894 import duties alone (not including port, harbor, and wharfage fees) provided 50 percent of revenues; the next largest components came from the equally regressive court fees and stamp taxes. The planters had always refused to impose any form of direct taxation on sugar exports (this did not come until 1916), and even when prodded to enact a small tax on land in crop, they repeatedly petitioned that the tax be waived because of one unfortunate circumstance or another - hurricanes and poor crops being the most frequently cited mitigating circumstances.

The economic crisis of the 1890s precipitated a political crisis, to which I will return. But first it is necessary to understand the role played by the upper level of the non-white population - what I call the non-white middle class - and its relationship to the white elite.

THE CLASS CALLED COLOURED

In 1836 Governor Henry Light wrote a dispatch to the Colonial Office in which he discussed at some length the upper level (in wealth and status) of the newly freed population.¹³ The highest group - what he called the "first class" among the non-white population - was distinguishable both economically and socially by its well-established prosperity, education, and respectability. In this group Light included merchants, estate managers and overseers, clerks in public and private office, and shopkeepers. The same group was described by Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, who visited in 1837, as being "persons of intelligence, education, and true respectability" (Sturge and Harvey I 838:90). Mrs. Lanaghan, in her book *Antigua and the Antiguans* (1844), wrote extensively about what she called the "higher class of coloured persons." Not one to lavish praise on the majority of the non-white population, she nevertheless waxed enthusiastic about this group:

These are men who, if not educated in England, have received the best instruction the West Indies could afford, aided by their own strenuous endeavours for information. Hospitable in the highest degree, with a hand ever open to grasp in friendship that of the strangers whom fate or the winds may lead to their pretty little island; living in an easy elegance of style . . . the doers of high and noble actions ... of agreeable conversation and polished manners ... (Lanaghan I 844: II, 170).

"Among them," she wrote, "are some of the most respectable merchants and planters; and the whites themselves, with but few exceptions, follow no higher occupations" (ibid.: 182).

The free-coloured population in Antigua developed gradually at first, but it increased dramatically in the decades before emancipation and by 1821 outnumbered the white population by two to one (Table 1).

TABLE 1

The Population of Antigua Before Emancipation

Year	White	Free Coloured	Slave
1707	2,892	18	12,892
1787	2,590	1,230	37,088
1805	3,000	1,300	36,000
1821	1,980	4,066	31,064

Sources: The figures for 1707 come from Gaspar 1985a:162; for 1787 and 1805 from Davy 1854:386; for 1821 from Sewell 1861:154.

Although the commonly held pyramidal view of West Indian social structure places the free coloured in the middle in terms of wealth as well as phenotypic skin color, by the 1820s the free coloured in Antigua as elsewhere exhibited a wide range of wealth, color, education, and social status. At the upper levels were those with white or wealthy free-coloured fathers who had been educated abroad and/or set up in business, established in a trade, or left with a substantial inheritance, mostly the land and merchant or artisanal establishments they already worked in.¹⁴ There were a few wealthy free-coloured merchants and more somewhat less wealthy shopkeepers; others were writing clerks in private and public office, and in 1814 two free-coloured men, William Hill and Henry Loving, established the *Antigua Weekly Register* (Coleridge 1826:241), which became the principal paper for the next twenty-five years. A number of free coloured owned slaves who either worked directly for them, as clerks in shops, seamstresses, washers, ironers, or were hired out to others, as porters on the docks, for instance, or as skilled tradesmen.

Visitors to Antigua in the immediate pre-emancipation period all reported that the upper-level free coloured owned considerable property and were doing better than in most of the other islands - the key exception being Grenada (Coleridge 1826:203; Bayley 1833:311). Most free coloured were urban dwellers, since deficiency laws, which required that a certain number of whites be employed on each plantation, effectively reserved the jobs of estate manager and overseer to white men. By the early 1800s only a few free coloured owned property outside of town, and only one owned a large working estate, although after the repeal of the White Servants Act in 1833 increasing numbers of non-whites began to take the post of overseer, at a much reduced salary (Sturge and Harvey 1838:48). Legal restrictions on the amount of land the free coloured could own and a lack of access to credit and labor prevented all but a few from practicing small-scale agriculture on their own account (Goveia 1965:225).¹⁵ The wealthiest were merchants, and by emancipation most of the larger retail establishments - those

selling dry goods, housewares, women's clothing, haberdashery, cosmetics, and so on - were owned by free-coloured families. The large and extremely profitable import-export houses, however, more closely tied to the plantation economy, remained in the hands of the white population.

For reasons that are unclear, the free coloured in Antigua had more political rights than in most other islands. They had the right to vote in Assembly and vestry elections (Goveia 1965:82, 85, 216; Bayley 1833:311), although in practice this was severely restricted by property qualifications.¹⁶ By 1832 the free coloured made up two-thirds of the militia, although they could not hold a commissioned rank; none, however, had ever been elected to the Assembly.¹⁷ Nor had they made many inroads into the upper levels of the civil establishment: an 1832 dispatch from the governor to the Colonial Office included a list of the official appointments held by "gentlemen of colour": five of the seven held honorary military posts.

The free coloured were active in the social-welfare arena, particularly in the years immediately preceding emancipation - perhaps, indeed, in preparation for it. They established the first friendly society in 1828 in St. John's and the next in 1832 in the countryside, and by 1854 these institutions had 12,588 members (Davy 1854: 394). They also established beneficial societies and were active in charity fund-raising events. They were concerned about the education of former slaves, and in the late 1820s established the Society for Aiding the Education of Poor Children: its officers were from the upper level of the free-coloured community and included those most active in the struggle for free-coloured civil rights.¹⁸ A free-coloured woman had established a Distressed Females' Friendly Society in 1817, which became the Female Refuge Society and then the Female Orphan Asylum, with establishments in English Harbour and St. John's (Horsford 1856).

Of all the non-whites in Antigua at Emancipation, it was this stratum of the free-coloured population that was best situated to take advantage of the opportunities offered - once legal disabilities had been removed - to become a non-white middle class, and according to those who visited at the time, this was their expectation.¹⁹ Although the white population remained firmly in control of sugar production, many of the free coloured were well placed to take over the merchant sector (and thus the towns), and from there move into the political arena.

In the relatively prosperous years immediately after Emancipation this did indeed begin to happen. Governor Evan McGregor was sympathetic to non-white demands for government posts, and even before Emancipation had made two of his key free-coloured supporters justices of the peace; by 1837 there were three, and by 1844, six. In 1843 a former free coloured was inspector of prisons, and others were police magistrates and visiting justices at the gaol. Former free coloured served on the honorary city boards and commissions (health, water, market, but not roads, which remained a white

planter affair).²⁰ John Candler, visiting in early 1850, reported that “Many highly respectable men, who were also [i.e., once] slaves now fill the office of Legislators, or are otherwise employed in civil office, owing to their talents and qualifications for public business” (Candler 1965: 52).

The political arena was more difficult, for the planter-dominated Assembly was less welcoming than the governor, and at first those non-whites who were elected were immediately disqualified. The Assembly had only one non-white member in 1844. By 1848-49, however, it had three (Davy 1854), and in 1851 six (out of twenty-seven).²¹ McGregor's supporters John Athill and Tyrrell Shervington held a number of titular posts, including Puisne Baron of the Exchequer. Tyrrell's brother Joseph was appointed Deputy Treasurer in 1840, a post he still held in 1851, by which time his son John was a senior clerk in the Treasury Department. Henry Loving, as Superintendent of Police, played a large role in drafting the first (and harshest) Contract Act and was subsequently appointed temporary private secretary to the governor; he went on to be acting Colonial Secretary in Montserrat, Stipendiary Magistrate in Barbados, and finally Colonial Secretary and Registrar in Montserrat; he died in 1850. Daniel Hill, another prominent former free coloured, was appointed private secretary to the governor in 1837 (Sturge and Harvey 1838:20; Horsford 1856:81).

In the twenty years after Emancipation it also appeared that some of the social barriers of the slave era were beginning to fall. For the first time, according to his own account, the governor invited members of both militias to dine together, hoping to “banish forever the objections to the seating of mixed and pure blood on similar occasions.”²² By 1842 Mrs. Lanaghan was noting that “white and coloured gentlemen walk, and talk, and dine together - drink sangaree at one another's houses, sit in the same juror's box, and are invited, *sans distinction*, at Government House”; they also served together as pallbearers at funerals (Lanaghan 1844:II, 181, 189). St. John's Masonic Lodge, established in 1843, included at least one prominent former free coloured among its seven founders and took in a number of others in its first few years; several served as Masters.²³

But as the economic situation deteriorated in the late 1840s, the white population made a concerted effort to preserve its hegemony, and barriers that had seemed to be falling began to be re-erected. Even those staunch allies of the government - Loving, Shervington, and Athill - found that they were being disdained by the governor. In 1848, when Loving was pleading with the Colonial Office for a new position, he was told stiffly that his request would be “considered in common with those of other candidates for employment,” a far cry from the lavish praise he had received only ten years earlier. John Athill and Tyrrell Shervington met a similar fate: despite repeated requests, neither could get a paid post, and when the latter asked somewhat desperately to be promoted to Provost Marshall “or any other vacancy, in Antigua or any other colony,” he was told that there was little hope; in the end the governor appointed him temporary police magistrate, but only as a “mark of favour.” At the same time, the local whites

mounted a campaign to discredit McGregor for his efforts to reform the elections (Brown, personal communication). By 1860, according to Sewell, the non-white middle class was being excluded from the polls, and the Legislative Council was once again composed entirely of planters (Sewell 1861:151).

The number of non-whites who acceded to high position was not only small but from a narrow circle: all the Assembly members, for instance, originated in the same upper level of formerly free-coloured families. In addition, the free-coloured institutions that continued into the post-emancipation era also remained in the hands of these same families, and the same people created new institutions as well. The St. John's branch of the Female Orphan Asylum, the St. John's City Friendly Society, the Antigua Library Society, the Philharmonic Society, and the Polytechnic Association all still existed in 1851, and, in so far as one can tell from the names of the officers, remained firmly in the hands of this elite. As if to emphasize the difference, several of these organizations had parallel white (and Anglican) institutions with a similar purpose: throughout the 1840s and 1850s there was an Antigua Asylum for Destitute Female Children and a Daily Meal Society, both led by white women and with the rector of the Cathedral as their head.

In two other areas non-whites apparently felt a need to create institutions of their own, again parallel to white institutions: the St. John's Savings Bank was a clear response to the Colonial Bank (established in 1836) and the Bank of Antigua (successor to the West India Bank); its officers in 1851 were Joseph Shervington, Treasurer, and James B. Thibou, Actuary.²⁴ Similarly, the former free coloured created their own education system, which remained almost entirely separate from those schools attended by the mass of the population or by the children of white planters and merchants.

Not only was the non-white middle class being excluded economically and politically, but it was increasingly being excluded socially as well. Prejudice had never disappeared: the first visitors after emancipation heard bitter complaints from non-whites about the extent of prejudice against them (i.e., Candler 1965:55). Even those, such as Thome and Kimball (1838), who reported a general diminution of prejudice, acknowledged that it continued behind the scenes. Mrs. Lanaghan, who also felt that great advances had been made, noted that "the assertion ... that prejudice is entirely done away with, is incorrect. It still exists, and that, perhaps, very strongly; but policy forbids, in great measure, its outward show" (Lanaghan 1844: II, 180).

But public displays of such prejudice did diminish, as the descriptions of post-emancipation life cited earlier demonstrated. The difference is that those who wrote of a lessening of prejudice were describing gatherings that were limited in two ways: they were public - in the street, at Government House - and they were all-male, like the Masonic Lodge. Privately - at home - and socially, both in the sense of domestic social life and of those institutions that served the family, the barrier between whites and non-whites remained. Thus the social-service organizations, which were led by women, were

confined to either whites or non-whites, while a more public organization like the Antigua Mutual Life Assurance Company, established in 1844, had both white and non-white (male) directors. When Candler “took tea” at the home of Thomas Thibou in 1850, only non-whites were present. None of the visitors, including the indefatigably sociable Mrs. Lanaghan, reported any mixing between whites and non-whites when women were present. Social clubs, which were family affairs, also remained separate, whereas the Masons, a male organization, did not.

Furthermore, the practice of white men having open liaisons with non-white women - and therefore two families - diminished. After Emancipation, Mrs. Lanaghan wrote, the “unhallowed custom of concubinage” greatly decreased, such alliances having become generally reprobated (Lanaghan 1844:II, 181). The governor reported that “no white man of respectability dare now openly violate the laws of morality ...”²⁵ This change was possible in part because the sex ratio of white men to women had improved and may also have been linked to the retraction of the economy: maintaining two families is an expensive business (Lazarus-Black 1994:162). In addition, the number of marriageable partners increased as the white population became increasingly homogeneous and social differences among them disappeared. By mid-century their roles had become entirely proprietary, managerial, and professional; practically no white artisans remained.

But while these factors facilitated ending the practice of open concubinage, the need to protect the social hierarchy - and particularly the division between whites and all non-whites - provides the key to understanding the reinforcement of the social divide. Because of pressures from the Colonial Office, a comfortable translation of pre-emancipation legal distinctions into distinctions based on skin color was not possible. The Colonial Office felt that economic factors should be dominant: as Under Secretary of State for the Colonies James Stephen wrote, “now that a white skin is no longer a badge of aristocracy, there is no other principle than that of comparative wealth and poverty by which rank is assigned to any one man over his neighbours.”²⁶ But his point of view was unacceptable to the white population, who knew that as the economy worsened it would not be sufficient to distinguish whites from non-whites: some of the latter might have more wealth than many of the former. The white population had to find what Ann Stoler has called “cultural criteria of privilege” (Stoler 1989:639). This they achieved by reshaping the content of the cultural component of high status, respectability.²⁷

In Antigua neither skin color nor wealth had ever been sufficient for entry into the elite: both criteria had to be accompanied by respectability. But after Emancipation respectability began to have legitimacy, and therefore marriage, as a core component. A careful reading of Governor Light's 1836 dispatch shows this shift at work: he disdainfully described a man who wanted to be his aide-de-camp as the “illegitimate offspring” of a white man and a non-white woman, although this distinction had not been important for his predecessor, McGregor, who had appointed a number of illegitimate non-whites to government

posts. In the same year, Thome and Kimball were told by the local planters that illegitimacy and occupation, not color prejudice, were the reasons for the lack of greater socialization among whites and non-whites.

It is in this context that concubinage between white men and non-white women, readily accepted before Emancipation, was reported to have declined precipitously. The number of illegitimate children did not necessarily decrease, but they were a less acknowledged part of respectable white family life. Thus by mid-century illegitimate children are seldom mentioned in their father's wills, in striking contrast to both the pre- emancipation and immediate post-emancipation periods. For there to be a racial divide, there had to be a sex divide.²⁸

The Anglican Church, which had always disapproved of illegitimacy on moral grounds, played a major role in institutionalizing marriage as the norm and making illegitimacy a barrier to social advancement. As early as 1832, when the bishop embarked on discussions about establishing a grammar school - the first in Antigua - he argued that it should not be open to illegitimate children. Despite strenuous objections from his free-coloured parishioners, he got his way, establishing a rule that would last for more than one hundred years. It hardly seems coincidental that this happened in the same year that the free coloured gained full civil rights. After Emancipation, a church wedding became the necessary counterpart to legitimacy, and all ranks of society aspired to it. Only the white upper class and the non-white middle class, however, were able to cement the connection between the two; for the mass of the population, neither was the norm.

Women were central to the enforcement of the revamped definition of respectability. Mrs. Lanaghan, ever the astute observer, was quick to catch on to the new discourse: "It is said, that the white ladies are the strongest upholders of prejudice; but that their refusal to mix with this [i.e., the upper level non-white] group of persons is not occasioned from any shade of colour, but on account of their general illegitimacy." White women were, to use Stoler's phrase, the custodians of the community:

Whether or not white women exacerbated racial tensions, they certainly did not create them, as is sometimes implied. On the other hand, we should not dismiss the fact that colonial women were committed to racial segregation for their own reasons and in their own right. ... it is perhaps not surprising that these women championed a moral order that both restricted their husband's sexual activities and reconstituted the domestic domain as a site demanding their vigilance and control. (Stoler 1992:333)

The post-emancipation histories of a number of upper-level free-coloured families show the result of these processes as the nineteenth century progressed.²⁹ Well situated to take advantage of the new circumstances, members of these families expanded their economic and political presence in the 1830s

and early 1840s. But progress did not continue, and in each case the next generation was less prosperous and less prominent than its predecessor. By the 1860s, entire branches of each family had disappeared; those members who remained were from the less prominent branches, were less wealthy, and held far fewer appointed and elected positions. Thus if family members had stayed on the island and had children, and if those children in turn had stayed and had children, their numbers would have increased geometrically. Yet the opposite was the case. While the generation after emancipation was as large as expected, the next generation was dramatically smaller, and the one after was smaller still.

Part of the reason for the decline was obviously economic. The period of post-emancipation prosperity was short-lived, and, as we saw above, in the mid-1850s planter fortunes took a turn for the worse and the number of estates in cultivation declined precipitously. This contraction meant that the former free coloured had almost no chance of moving into planting, and the few non-whites who owned sugar estates had lost them by the 1850s; marginal estates such as the free coloured were able to acquire were undoubtedly the first to be hit by any difficulties, financial and otherwise. In addition, the former free coloured who were retail merchants, lacking capital and entirely dependent on the buying power of the population, were also severely affected. To make matters worse, this niche, which had been the center of free-coloured economic life, was steadily eroded as a new set of white retail merchants, mainly Scotsmen, began to arrive in the 1850s and 1860s.

The former free coloured responded by either leaving themselves or sending their children away. The occupations of the children who remained were considerably less prestigious than those of their parents and grandparents. A few became civil servants but not of the rank of the first generation of Athills or Shervingtons. A few were merchants, though not so many, and without the same wealth, as their free-coloured forebears, while many more were reduced to clerking for white merchants. None owned producing estates, and few even managed them. Non-whites no longer served on the honorary policing bodies, as magistrates or prison justices. By 1890 only two non-whites were on the Legislative Council, and only one was in the administrative branches of the Colonial Service; all three were from old free-coloured families.

The economic and political marginalization of the non-white middle class was made easier because its members had failed to increase in number. The men in particular left the island, while the women stayed behind. Many of those who remained never married, did not have children, or both. Thus in one generation after another, the majority of the sisters in a family never married: these women are often mentioned in their fathers' wills, both because they remained in Antigua and because special care was taken to ensure them a home and an income, however meager, to live on. Because respectability, marriage, and legitimacy were so inextricably linked, the women were unwilling to marry those who were not socially suitable. These families never recruited husbands from the class below, no matter how

wealthy they might be, since this class - because of its own origins - was mostly illegitimate. They preferred to maintain their social distance, even if the price was the erosion of their numbers.

An indication of the extent to which the former free coloured failed to reproduce - or, more specifically, to produce a next generation - can be found in the rolls of the Antigua Grammar School. In the ten years from 1890 to 1900, only two of the six Antiguan non-whites admitted to the school were from these families; there were none among the twenty-nine admitted between 1900 and 1910.

By the time of the economic crisis of the 1890s, then, it was clear that the expectations of the 1830s had been dashed. The wealthier free coloured and their offspring, who had seemed so well placed to continue to accumulate wealth, property, political power, and social acceptance once the restraints of their status had been removed, had failed to achieve any of these. The white population - both those who remained and those who came as new arrivals - were themselves hard-pressed economically and beleaguered socially and had (with the help of various governors and the Colonial Office) embarked on a path of exclusion: the small opening for non-whites had gradually been plugged. The middle class now followed much the same path as the whites: they too sold off their properties, sent their children abroad, and left themselves. And in a situation where there were not enough suitable men to marry, the women who stayed remained unmarried - whether through choice or social or familial pressure - rather than marry "beneath" them. What was left at the end of the century was a number of elderly men and a host of elderly never-married women of modest means without political or economic power, and socially isolated from both those below and those above.

THE POLITICKING OF SUGAR³⁰

As the economic situation deteriorated in the 1890s, the Antiguan planters used every weapon in their arsenal, from petitions to pleas to threats, to get the British government to come to their aid. They joined with other West Indians in peppering the Colonial Office with petitions demanding that the bounties given by the French and German governments to producers of beet sugar be abolished or that countervailing duties be placed on bounty-supported imports to make prices more equal. They pleaded poverty and warned of the dire social consequences of their demise: if they were to abandon their estates, throwing large numbers of people out of work, disturbances might well follow. They begged for grants to tide them over what they maintained was only a temporarily bad period. They asked for a remission of the already small land tax and threatened that without such relief they would have to curtail, or even refrain from, cultivation; they argued that every shilling exacted in taxes would "mean so much less to be circulated among the labouring classes in wages."³¹ On the other hand, they rejected Colonial Office proposals to increase import duties, warning that this would lead to lawlessness and pauperism, as well as to an increased burden on the British taxpayer, who would be forced to foot the bill for any relief.

By this point the Colonial Office was displaying a withering contempt for the Antiguan planter class and the Legislative Council it dominated.³² The planters were seen as impoverished, inept and self-indulgent, perpetual complainers with little commercial sense and therefore unworthy of further investment. Their requests for loans were turned down because their only security was their estates, which the British considered worthless.³³ The Colonial Office heartily agreed with Archibald Spooner, manager of the factory at Belvedere and the representative of a group of overseas investors, when he told them that capitalists “could never be advised to invest their money in this Island as long as such a body as constitutes the elective side of the Legislative Council have any voice in the administration of the Colony's affairs.”³⁴ To make matters worse, the decline in the white population made it difficult for the governor to find competent men for the nominated side of the Legislative Council, which was expected to back his initiatives. He reported that many office holders were so aged and yet so determined to hold on to their offices that he was having to devise ways to force them out, using whatever face-saving tactics - letting them keep the titles that accompanied their offices, for instance - that came to mind and did not cost money. The Colonial Office noted that with fewer white men and so many offices, any white man who was not a complete disgrace held office in Antigua.³⁵

From the Colonial Office and governor's point of view, the solution was to abolish the elected side of the Council completely. In pressing his case for abolition, the governor argued publicly that the problem was a legislature that refused to act except in its own narrow interests, but he was equally worried about the demands of the non-white population for a larger voice in island affairs. In 1891 he wrote to the Colonial Office that he feared that in the near future an increasing number of non-whites would be elected, and that if this happened the island would be given over to the “Blacks and coloured population” because whites would not stay to be governed by other races.³⁶ He believed the elected side should be abolished “unless there is some better prospect than at present of increasing the white population in these Islands.”³⁷ The public argument - that the laboring classes had to be protected “through the restraining influence of the Crown” - was almost entirely disingenuous: that the real issue was racial comes through in the confidential reports to the Colonial Office.³⁸

The governor's concern was fully endorsed by the white members of the Legislative Council, who saw their numbers declining and were also alarmed at the prospect of the non-white elected element stirring up the rest of the population. While in 1891 only two non-whites sat on the Council, by 1897 there were four. These men were using their position to exert pressure on the government to extend the franchise and to increase the size of the elected element, two reforms that would have enhanced the leverage of the non-white population.³⁹ Public meetings were held around the island and were reported in great detail in the non-white newspapers. The specter of rule by their former slaves certainly helped make the white planters more amenable to the governor's efforts.

Although such fears may have been the stick that pushed the Legislative Council members forward, the carrot was provided by the Colonial Office: unless the elected side of the Council was dismantled the island would neither receive aid nor be able to attract much-needed outside investment. In March 1898 a resolution proposing a council of eight officials and eight unofficials was introduced by John Maginley, an ageing resident planter and loyal member of the Council for more than twenty years. The vote, which took place in secrecy to forestall any public protest, was carried by an eleven-to-eight majority.⁴⁰

The non-whites who lost their seats included the last of the upper-level free-coloured families to take part in Antigua's political life. They, along with a few others from their class, had fought hard to retain elected members on the Legislative Council, but by then they had no economic base from which to mount a challenge to a united force of governor and planters, not least because they had failed during the preceding decades to forge alliances with those below them economically and socially. By 1898 they were few in number, marginal to the economy, and unable to marshal support from other sectors of society. For the next forty years, the place of non-whites on the Council was strictly controlled; there was one "slot" for a non-white unofficial (increased to two in 1925), which was usually given to a merchant. Not until an elected majority was introduced in 1937 did non-whites regain the role in political life that they had held throughout most of the nineteenth century.

In the late 1890s, then, the Colonial Office achieved its aim: in the context of a severe economic crisis, the white planters agreed to give up representative government because they feared the consequences of keeping it, and because they believed that this was the only way to save the sugar industry on which their livelihood depended. Faced with an increasingly restive non-white population in Antigua and an increasingly critical and meddlesome Colonial Office in the metropole, they placed their faith in a "home" government that they hoped would be able to do for them what they were finding too difficult to do for themselves: preserve their economic and social power. The non-white middle class, isolated from the whites on the one side and the rest of the non-white population on the other, was unable to protect its own interests. The distance between the white and non-white elites made any alliance against the colonial authorities impossible, yet neither group alone proved able to "mash ants," to use a graphic Antiguan phrase: neither was able to stand up for its interests even when its very existence was at stake.

Antigua therefore entered the twentieth century with a class structure severely weakened at the top. Yet the expected aid was not forthcoming: although it was decided, following the recommendations of the Norman Commission of 1897, to invest in Antiguan sugar production by building a central refinery to produce grey crystals, in the negotiations that followed the Antiguan were rebuffed in their attempts to maintain control over the process. Despite their vociferous objections and to their utter dismay, the grant to build the refinery was given to a British company with both capital and the ear of the Colonial Office. Within a few years, Henckell DuBuisson & Co. of London owned most of the producing estates,

controlled the Legislative Council, and was setting the tone for social relations.

The 1890s were thus a crucial moment in Antigua's history, a decade in which the economic, political, and social landscape was transformed. Furthermore, the profound restructuring of the organization of production and of political and social life set the terms in which the issues of the twentieth century were framed.

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NOTES

1. Public Record Office, Kew, Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 1521222/582, 29 Sept. 1897.
2. CO 152/244/151, 6 March 1899.
3. CO 152/233/312, 8 June 1898.
4. CO 152/351/155, 3 May 1916.
5. I have chosen the term non-white in order to avoid such imprecise and inaccurate terms as *brown* and *mulatto*, and such value-laden ones as *black* and *Afro-Caribbean*. I also did not want to use Afro-Caribbean because it obscures the European background of many members of this class. I have used *middle class* because this is what the group was, and is, called locally and because of its structural middle position.
6. Census of the Leeward Islands for 1891. Early nineteenth-century censuses are not readily accessible: The 1821 census appears in summary form in Lanaghan (1844: II, 284), and is also cited in Sewell (1861:154). The 1844 census, also in summary only, is in Great Britain, Sessional Papers, 1845 (426), XXXI: 426-427. Unfortunately, no census was taken between 1821 and 1844. The 1861 and 1891 censuses can be found in various places, including on microfilm. A summary of the 1891 census is included in CO 152/263/291, 4 June 1901. After 1891, the next census was in 1911, followed by another in 1921.
7. Absentee ownership has been criticized repeatedly in the West Indies for its negative effects on production, as well as on the manners and morals of local society, but in Antigua it was not considered a problem until well after emancipation. Burn noted that in 1838 Antigua was remarkable for the comparatively large number of resident proprietors: according to his figures, 63 percent of the cultivated acreage (and 55 of 112 estates) were owned by absentees (Burn 1937: 66).
8. For lists see CO 318/282.
9. Tracing ownership of estates may be the ultimate exercise in frustration, in part because properties not only changed hands but also changed size, whether through expansion, amalgamation, or by going out of production. Complete lists of estates are only available for scattered years: 1843 Antigua Almanac and Register; 1851 Antigua Almanac; Almanac for 1872; Almanac for 1878. Douglas Hall (1971) put together lists for 1829 and 1891; incomplete lists can also be found for 1902 (CO 152/273), 1907 (CO 152/297/295) and 1924 (Watkins 1924).
10. Great Britain, Royal Commission, West India Sugar Commission [Norman Commission], "Report", Appendix C, Pt. 1 (1899).
11. CO 152/266, Confidential, 31 Dec. 1901.
12. Indeed, in contrast with Barbados and Nevis (Hall 1971: 167), where families arrived in the 1600s and stayed for generations, a key characteristic of the white population of Antigua since its first members arrived in 1632 was the rate at which they came and went. Richard Sheridan (1960--61) and Richard Dunn (1972) are the only scholars who have done any work on the composition of the early Ant1guan plantocracy. While their studies, like that of Pares on Nevis (Pares 1950), focus on continuities, a re-

analysis of their material demonstrates that the discontinuities are at least as striking. Dunn's data show that by the late 1600s most of the original "paltry men" had left, and that only six of the top 29 families of 1678 had direct descendants in the plantocracy of the mid-1700s (Dunn 1972: 131). Even this established plantocracy moved on: by 1829, only thirteen of the 65 leading Antiguan families of the 1730-75 period remained as estate owners, and at least three of these were absentees.

13. CO 7/44, 18 Nov. 1836. Light was actually Lieutenant-Governor of Antigua and Dominica but was referred to as Governor.

14. Little archival research has been done on the free coloured in Antigua. The lone exceptions are David Barry Gaspar's article on freedmen before 1760 (Gaspar 1985b, as well as his discussions in 1985a), and Michael Brown's unpublished paper, "Henry Loving (1790?-1850): Freeman, Journalist, 'Coloured' Civil Rights and Emancipation Campaigner, Police Chief and Civil Servant" (paper presented to the Postgraduate Seminar, Institute for Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 21 January 1965), from which some of the material on Loving comes. What follows is pieced together from Brown's paper, almanacs, visitors' accounts, and wills. In addition, Brown has kindly supplied me with some material from the Public Record Office in London. The discussion in this section is condensed from Lowes 1994.

15. See also C07/44, 18 Nov. 1836.

16. According to Mindie Lazarus-Black (1990:50), the right to vote was matter of custom before 1822, when it became law.

17. The situation was quite different in St. Kitts, where the free coloured held three seats in the Assembly by 1833 (Cox 1984:108). For a comparison of Dominica, St. Kitts, Antigua, and Grenada, see Lowes 1994, Chapter 4.

18. CO 7/34/58, 1 Nov. 1832, enclosing a copy of the Society's 1829 report.

19. Because the white population drew such a strict line between itself and all non-whites, the former free-coloured population, including those whose wealth and education were *greater* than that of many whites, by definition became the "middle" class. Not all visitors saw it this way, however. Sturge and Harvey (1838:90) reported that the middle classes included whites as well as non-whites. But locally to whites, all non-whites *had* to be of a different class.

20. Antigua Almanac and Register, 1843.

21. Antigua Almanac, 1851. Six of the names are known to me as former free coloured; there may have been others. Horsford (1856) reported five in 1856.

22. CO 7/44, 18 Nov. 1836.

23. A brochure prepared for the Lodge's centenary celebrations in 1944 lists members for the years 1843 to 1854 (with date of joining and occupation), and Masters from 1834 to 1944, and gives a short history of the lodge (St. John's Lodge 1944). In addition, the Master at the time I was in Antigua kindly read me the names of new members, with date of joining, age, and occupation, from 1890 to 1950. He would not let me see the roll book because it includes the final disposition of members - for instance, if they have been removed - which he felt was privileged information; unfortunately he did not have time to read the

list from 1850 to 1890, although the names are there. I have found references to non-white lodge members who are not on the printed reconstruction of the roll (for instance, Horsford 1856), so it seems possible that the printed list missed some non-whites.

24. The Colonial Bank would not lend money on security of land or property and would only provide personal loans to well-known people (Lobdell 1972); this alone would have made a parallel bank with different standards necessary.

25. CO 7/44, 18 Nov. 1836.

26. CO 152/7/68/60, 7 Aug. 1841.

27. For more on the important issue of respectability, see Lowes 1994, Olwig 1993, and Olwig's chapter on Nevis in Olwig 1995.

28. Before emancipation, marriage had been a means of exclusion for non-whites because it had been so difficult for them to marry. In terms of the free coloured, marriages between whites and non-whites and between whites and free coloured or slaves were discouraged, and the unbalanced sex ratio made marriage an unrealistic possibility for many free-coloured women (Lazarus-Black 1994:82-3). As Barbara Bush has written, "No matter how respectable coloured women were, they could never transcend the fact that they were, according to the official norms of white society, concubines, never wives" (Bush 1981:258).

29. The material that follows comes from an analysis of a sample of 24 surnames, twelve chosen at random from a free-coloured petition and twelve held by middle-class families of the 1930s. Genealogical research was carried forward from the 1830s and backward from the 1930s, using a combination of informants and archival material: birth and death registers, wills, jury and voter lists, school rolls, newspapers, and Colonial Office correspondence. For more on this, see Lowes 1994.

30. From Sidney Mintz's comment in *Sweetness and Power* that "no single food commodity on the world market has been subjected to so much politicking as sugar" (Mintz 1985:185).

31. CO 152/230/199, 30 March 1898.

32. Antigua was a quasi-Crown Colony with a Legislative Council made up of twelve elected and twelve nominated members. The crisis that led to the imposition of Crown Colony government in Jamaica in 1865 had both fuelled Colonial Office doubts about the ability of other islands to govern themselves and given it the leverage to pursue the institution of Crown Colony government elsewhere (Rogers 1970:228). In Antigua, the production crisis of the mid-1860s made the planter class amenable to Colonial Office proposals to reduce the elected role in the Assembly in return for financial relief (Hall 1971: 175-77). In 1866, the fully elected Assembly voted to replace itself with a Legislative Council. In doing this, Antigua followed quickly in the footsteps of St. Kitts and Nevis, which had voted for the same arrangement earlier in the year. St. Vincent followed in 1867, Tobago in 1874, and Grenada in 1875. Similar status had been instituted in Dominica in 1863, in the smaller and more impoverished Virgin Islands in 1858, and in Montserrat, in stages, in 1861 and 1866. Howard Aston Rogers's unpublished doctoral dissertation provides a wealth of fascinating detail on this period (Rogers 1970). In some islands, the move to full

Crown Colony status followed quickly, and by 1878 only the legislatures in Antigua, Dominica, British Guiana, and Barbados had any elected members.

33. See CO 152/221, June 1895.

34. CO 152/222/549, 14 Sept. 1897.

35. CO 152/207/356, Aug. 1896.

36. CO 152/181/Confidential, 14 Dec. 1891.

37. CO 152/181/Confidential, 3 Nov. 1891.

38. The issue of race was never discussed publicly but nevertheless runs like a rumbling underground stream throughout Colonial Office correspondence. Virtually any dispatch dealing with race was marked Confidential.

39. It is easy to see why the non-whites wanted the franchise extended: the number of voters had declined from 442 in 1872 (Almanac for 1872) to 349 in 1897 (CO 152/223/608, 12 October 1897). An average of thirteen voters elected each representative, although several members from the rural areas were elected by only two or three voters each. The qualifications for voting were high and entirely property-based. These had been steadfastly maintained after emancipation, so that the number of voters as a percentage of the population actually decreased.

40. CO 152/276/J. Maginley, 2 April 1902. A columnist in the *Antigua Sun* newspaper noted some years later that the public at large had been prevented from objecting because the vote had been “sprung” on them, with only the council members and three others knowing about it (*Sun*, 27 June 1914). The negotiations in 1868 had also been carried out in secrecy until the newspapers got wind of them.

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