

ABSTRACT

High unemployment and underemployment caused primarily by the decline of the sugar industry and the limited number of other jobs available, induced many British West Indians to emigrate between 1850 and 1914. Until the 1890's, no attempts were made to restrict emigration. However, after thousands of the islanders were stranded on the Isthmus of Panama in 1889 when the first company to attempt construction of the isthmian canal failed, the British Government urged British West Indian administrations to regulate emigration and the activities of agents who hired workers for companies in foreign countries.

After 1890 legislation adopted by the government of Jamaica sought to restrict emigration to the Isthmus by requiring prospective emigrants to purchase departure permits if they were not hired by recruiting agents, and by making it difficult for agents to operate. However, the movement from this island proceeded as steadily as from the other British colonies where more lenient legislation was adopted. Between 1850 and 1914 over 100,000 British West Indians emigrated to the Isthmus where they supplied most of the labour needed to construct the Panama Railroad during the 1850's, and the Panama Canal between 1880 and 1914. The majority of these workers returned home with savings after a few years, but, thousands chose to seek work in other countries, or to stay on the

Isthmus .

Emigration to Panama affected population growth and structure and caused temporary labour shortages in some of the British West Indian islands. However, most islands were relieved of unemployed, and benefitted considerably from the remittances emigrants made to their families, or the savings with which they returned.