Unit 3: Caribbean Labor in Connecticut

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Introduction

Connecticut is no stranger to farm labor or agricultural work. In ways, it shares similarities with states on the west coast and how they implemented the Bracero Program. In other ways, Connecticut's labor history completely differs from that of the Bracero Program because of whom it employed, how they treated them, and what they were growing. Historically, the Connecticut River Valley has specialized in growing tobacco while simultaneously never being able to rely on the local supply of labor. As a result, many–if not all–Connecticut tobacco growers had to hire foreign labor, a majority of which came from the Caribbean. While this stayed relatively consistent, the treatment Caribbean laborers endured has changed over time from initially not as oppressive to a dehumanizing experience. Nevertheless, the introduction of Caribbean labor to Connecticut has led to a large population of Caribbeans within the state, particularly in Hartford.

Tobacco has grown in the Connecticut River Valley since its colonial beginnings. By the 1880s, however, the Valley developed a new way of cultivating tobacco called shade tobacco. This was the process of growing tobacco under a shade tent although today nylon mesh knitting is used. Despite tobacco having been historically cultivated in Connecticut, its demand fluctuated over time. By the 1940s, however, the demand for tobacco surged with the start of World War II. This was not only due to a disruption in the tobacco market but also because "the federal government considered tobacco essential to morale, at home and certainly to the men and women abroad. Tobacco was categorized as essential as bullets in the effort to win the war," (Dunlap and Hellerman 40). With an increasing demand for tobacco and a shortage of workers due to WWII, tobacco growers found their much-needed labor force in the West Indies. They also found a domestic labor supply among high school students from the south, however, they were only available during school breaks.

Caribbean communities, which barely recovered from the Depression-era economy, "suffered from a halt in tourism and disruption of agricultural trade. These conditions ushered in new opportunities for West Indian men to work in agriculture in the mainland U.S. via the British West Indies Temporary Alien Labor Program, an emergency measure in effect from 1943 to 1947," (Vernal). As a result, the Connecticut Valley Shade Tobacco Growers Association's farm labor coordinator, Ralph Lasbury, was able to secure a deal with the U.S. government to recruit thousands of laborers from the West Indies to work on the Connecticut tobacco farms. The migrant laborers thus entered short-term contracts in which they would come to the U.S. in April and return back to their home country at the end of the growing season, usually by December.

With the ability to recruit people from the West Indies, the first wave of West Indian laborers, about 1,000-1,200 of them, arrived in Connecticut in 1943. The method by which they arrived in Connecticut was by taking a ship from Jamaica to Florida and then another ship to Connecticut. Those who journeyed to Connecticut on the "Hell Ship" or the "Starvation Ship" suffered the worst experiences since many got seasick or went unfed. One passenger said this

about the experience: “If anyone ever told you that we had three meals a day on that ship, they were the biggest liars that God ever made.” (Dunlap and Hellerman 42). Once in Connecticut, the experience the West Indians faced was much more pleasant compared to what they endured on their passage. They stayed in newly constructed wartime-inspired barracks which were specifically made for them. They also arrived to their kitchens stocked with food and never had to worry about restocking it. Additionally, they had recreation areas and office spaces, however, they couldn’t fully enjoy these benefits since their shifts were “12 hours long and often lasted 6 days a week,” (Dunlap and Hellerman 42).

By the 1950s, a new labor force joined the West Indian laborers on the tobacco farms. “In a 1952 article, the Hartford Courant announced plans to officially ‘order’ three hundred Puerto Rican farm workers on a trial basis to make up for the lack of available local labor. Another Courant article at the time stated that those from the island were ‘not compelled to return to Puerto Rico when they finish their jobs, nor are they subject to deportation if they break their contracts,’” (Dunlap and Hellerman 65). These laborers were not subjected to the same immigration laws as the Jamaicans because they were U.S. citizens and thus were not regulated by the same short-term labor contracts. Instead, Puerto Rican laborers could choose to return to the island or stay in Connecticut. This created racial tensions with the primarily white Connecticut community who saw Puerto Ricans as foreigners despite them being U.S. citizens. Not only did Puerto Ricans find themselves racialized by other U.S. citizens, but they also suffered worse treatment compared to the West Indian laborers. Puerto Ricans who were hired after 1952 endured poor housing conditions, poor working conditions, and “‘predatory farmers’ who paid low wages and work[ed] them too many hours in violation [of] the law,” (Dunlap and Hellerman 73).

By the 1960s, Puerto Rican laborers on tobacco farms suffered even more hardship. Work contracts were being abused by corporations which led them to work over 8 hours a day for 7 days a week with no overtime pay. Housing and food were also docked from their pay and they had to sleep in overcrowded barracks, with no access to heat, clean water, and functioning restrooms. As a result, many Puerto Ricans either left the tobacco farms or began to protest their working conditions. This led to tobacco growers making efforts to better house and care for their staff. By 1970, Congress established the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) which has helped hold tobacco growers liable to regulations.

Tobacco farms in the 1960s were not only plagued with human rights abuses but also with a small labor force to exploit. In 1964, the 88th Congress decided to terminate Public Law 78 which had authorized the use of foreign labor on U.S. farms. Congress repealed it primarily to end the hiring of Mexicans in the southwest region in response to the complaints of abuse towards Mexicans and to the complaints that they were taking jobs from Americans. The belief was that Americans remained poor because they were never given the opportunity to work in agricultural fields since immigrants were taking their jobs. Although the repeal was not aimed at foreign laborers in Connecticut, it had a great impact on blocking the controlled labor force made up primarily of West Indians. This repeal had two effects: highlighting a domestic labor shortage

and changing who tobacco growers looked to supplement the labor shortage. Now that farmers were forced to seek domestic labor, they found that Americans were unwilling to take on the role that foreign laborers did. Many teens during that time preferred working in the malls or at big chains such as Mcdonald's rather than doing laborious work under the sun. Consequently, farmers looked to Puerto Ricans as a major source of labor since they were legally considered U.S. citizens and not deemed as "foreign labor." Tobacco growers were unhappy with this because they liked the British West Indian labor supply since "it offered the local growers a 'controlled' workforce. By 'controlled,' Lasbury said, he meant the workers could be supervised and bound by immigration regulation so that any person causing trouble to the community or creating a problem could be immediately sent out of the country and barred from re-entry," (Dunlap and Hellerman 71). Although the termination of Public Law 78 was not targeted toward the West Indian labor supply of the Connecticut River Valley, it drastically changed who was to be employed and whether or not Americans were part of that labor force.

While Public Law 78 had a great impact on the Connecticut tobacco-growing industry, it did not dismantle it. The cultivation of tobacco is still going strong in the Connecticut River Valley, primarily in Windsor, East Windsor, Suffield, and Enfield. The demographics of who is being employed on these farms have not changed over the course of 70 years either. In fact, tobacco growers still employ primarily male workers, a majority of whom come from the West Indies (Jamaica in particular). Even the process through which these laborers are employed has stayed relatively the same. In the past, laborers were hired via the British West Indies Temporary Alien Labor Program whereas now they are hired under the H-2A program which allows certain U.S. employers to bring foreign nationals to the United States to fill temporary agricultural jobs. As a result, "Connecticut's largest immigrant population…is from the island nations of the West Indies in the Caribbean – a region that includes Cuba, Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, and Jamaica," (Best). West Indians have created a home in Connecticut, specifically Hartford. Many of them have congregated there and established institutions such as the West Indian Social Club which continues to serve as a hub for West Indians to preserve their culture.

Bibliography

- Best, Kenneth. "The History of the Largest Foreign-Born Population in the State - UConn Today." UConn Today, 14 November 2018, https://today.uconn.edu/2018/11/west-indian-population-approved/. Accessed 24 October 2022.
- Dunlap, Brianna E., and Leonard Hellerman. Connecticut Valley Tobacco. The History Press, 2016.
- Vernal, Fiona. "The West Indian Social Club, A Home Away From Home." Connecticut Explored, 23 May 2022, https://www.ctexplored.org/the-west-indian-social-club-a-home-away-from-home/. Accessed 24 October 2022.

Objectives

- Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place, as well as broader historical contexts.
- Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- Be able to support an argument, claim, or position using strong textual evidence.

Essential Questions

- Compare and contrast the treatment of Braceros to West Indian laborers.
- How did the treatment of 1940s West Indian laborers differ from that of Puerto Rican laborers of the 1950s?
- What occurred in the 1960s that led to a demographic change in the makeup of tobacco laborers in the Connecticut River Valley?
- What causes immigration?
- How has immigration affected Connecticut's demographics?

Activities

Activity #1: Shade Tobacco Promotional Film
Activity #2: Home Away From Home
Activity #3: Analyzing Primary Sources

UbD Template and Lesson Plan

- Caribbean Labor in CT Lesson Plan.docx

Other Lesson Plans/Activities

- Existing Lesson Plan by Elena Marie Rosario, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate in History, University of Michigan discussing Post-World War II Puerto Rican Farm Labor Migration to Connecticut

Complementary Sources

- Primary sources
    - Pamphlet titled "How to hire agricultural workers from Puerto Rico"
        - Read the entire pamphlet but pay extra attention to the highlights of the work agreement section (page 8) and article VI
    - Newspaper Articles
        - "Valley Cigars Going to War If Army Tests Are Passed." (1952)
        - "Foreign Competition, Labor Costs Push Connecticut Shade Tobacco Farmers To The Edge" by the Hartford Courant (2017)

- Relevant Scholarship
    - Best, Kenneth. "The History of the Largest Foreign-Born Population in the State - UConn Today." UConn Today, 14 November 2018, https://today.uconn.edu/2018/11/west-indian-population-approved/.
    - Dunlap, Brianna E., and Leonard Hellerman. Connecticut Valley Tobacco. The History Press, 2016.
    - Glasser, Ruth. "Tobacco Valley: Puerto Rican Farm Workers in Connecticut -." Connecticut Explored, 26 February 2016, https://www.ctexplored.org/tobacco-valley-puerto-rican-farm-workers-in-connecticut/.
    - Glasser, Ruth. "Tobacco Valley." *Aquí Me Quedo: Puerto Ricans in Connecticut.* Connecticut Humanities Council, 1997, pp. 41-79.

    - Sunshine, Catherine A., and Deborah Menkart, editors. Jamaica. Teaching for Change, 1991.
    - Sunshine, Cathy, and Keith Q. Warner, editors. Caribbean Connections: Moving North. Network of Educators on the Americas, 1998.
    - Vernal, Fiona. "The West Indian Social Club, A Home Away From Home." Connecticut Explored, 23 May 2022, https://www.ctexplored.org/the-west-indian-social-club-a-home-away-from-home/.

- Lecture Series
    - Shade Tobacco Stories: Land, Labor, and Immigration in the CT Tobacco Valley by Fiona Vernal, PhD

- The Connecticut Valley Tobacco Museum
    - Home of the Gordon S. Taylor Tobacco Shed
    - 135 Lang Road Windsor, CT 06095
    - Hours: Wednesday through Friday 12:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.; Saturday 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
    - (860) 285-1888
    - www.tobaccohistsoc.org

- The Shade Collective Website
    - Group of scholars and cultural workers researching the significance of the Connecticut River Valley's tobacco plantations.

- Film
    - " TOBACCO VALLEY " SHADE GROWN TOBACCO & CIGARETTES PROMO FILM CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY
        - Connecticut shade tobacco promotional video made around the 1950s
    - Introduction to Connecticut's Tobacco Valley

- Images
    - Photographs of H-2A workers on Jarmoc Tobacco Farm (Enfield, CT)
        - Hook, Douglas. "Jamaican workers start the harvest of tobacco at the Jarmoc Farm." Hartford Courant, 1 August 2022, https://www.courant.com/community/hc-news-somers-tobacco-20220802-doliz5v43rcenogj2i4plhiumy-photogallery.html.
    - Exploited Citizens: The Puerto Ricans Who Migrated to Grow Our Food
        - Puerto Rican farm workers in the U.S.
    - Tobacco/Smoking Tobacco Images
        - https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-8a69-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99/book?parent=a945bb70-c600-012f-7ed6-58d385a7bc34#page/47/mode/2up
    - Tobacco Farming Postcards provided by the Windsor Historical Society Digital Library

- https://windsorhistoricalsociety.org/home/collections/digital-collections/postcard-collection/