



Graduate Student Essay

Hailing Jamaican Independence: Jamaica's Independence Movement and the American Press

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Abstract

Jamaica's independence was a watershed moment, with Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Bahamas, and Grenada all following suit over the next decade. Blacks in the Caribbean broke free from racist colonial rule during a time when African Americans were fighting for their civil rights in the United States; African Caribbean geopolitics no doubt influenced American Black freedom movement leaders and activists. The border-breaking transnational influence of Jamaica's independence can be interrogated through a close, comparative study, of American newspapers around the time of independence. This article illustrates the importance and influence of the events occurring in the Caribbean on American politics, and social movements, through the analysis of press coverage, showing the geographic, regional, and racial differences in how the events were reported. In so doing, I show that African Americans were greatly inspired and intrigued by the events occurring in Jamaica, and

that the Jamaican independence movement, and Jamaican Black nationalist movement, impacted activists in the United States.

Keywords

Caribbean decolonization, Jamaica, Civil Rights Movement, Transnational Black history

Introduction

On August 6, 1962, Jamaica became an independent nation. In a jubilant ceremony, soldiers lowered the Union Jack and raised Jamaica's new flag, which was green for the land, gold for the sun, and Black for the people. Jamaica's independence was rooted in the interaction of three distinct variables: a labor rebellion in 1938; the presence of white refugees during World War II and Marcus Garvey's brand of Black Nationalism.¹ Jamaica's independence was a watershed moment, with Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Bahamas, and Grenada all following suit over the next decade. Blacks in the Caribbean broke free of racist colonial rule, during a time when African Americans were fighting for their civil rights in the United States. African Caribbean geopolitics and race no doubt influenced American Black Freedom Movement leaders and activists. This article seeks to investigate American reactions to decolonization struggles in Jamaica.

African Caribbean politics and decolonization should be situated within the African American Long Freedom Movement framework due to the transnational nature of Black Nationalism and Black Power in the United States. Newspaper reactions across the country stand as evidence that decolonization in the Caribbean was both influential and anxiety inducing in the United States. This essay provides new insight into the thoughts and feelings of Americans of all races by utilizing newspaper sources and other documents that have been otherwise ignored. By making these connections, exploring the existing scholarship, and highlighting previously muted voices, this article makes an important contribution to the historiography of both the Black Freedom Movement and African Caribbean history.

Historiography and Research Methods

Few historians have attempted to study the reactions of African Americans to decolonization in the Caribbean.² Most scholarship looks at Britain's relationship to the colonies rather than any influence African Caribbean Black Nationalist decolonization struggles may have had on African American aspirations for freedom.³ The most relatable scholarship to this project, however, comes from Kevin Gaines and Rhonda Williams. Gaines' "The Civil Rights Movement in World Perspective," focuses on how the Civil Rights Movement in America affected *other* countries, such as those in the Caribbean, rather than how other nations, especially Black countries gaining independence, influenced African Americans. However, his argument in 2007 helped open the field of Civil Rights scholarship to look beyond America's borders. Gaines wrote, "Until quite recently, U.S. historians were accustomed to thinking of the civil rights movement within a domestic U.S.-based framework. But in its time, the movement had global dimensions that were abundantly clear to many contemporaries."⁴ Gaines explained that viewing the Civil Rights Movement from a global perspective would help enrich the field and further our understanding of it, arguing that by doing so, "scholars and teachers may gain an enhanced appreciation of the motivations of those who challenged the racial status quo. Such a recontextualization also enables us to comprehend the limits, as well as the achievements, of civil rights strategies and reforms."⁵ This argument has influenced the present study, which aims to expand the global perspective even further by changing the direction of influence.

Likewise, Williams' *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* offers significant and important scholarship to African diasporic studies, especially the study of Black Power. Williams analyzes the significant contributions of Marcus Garvey at great length, rightfully acknowledging his primary role in the development of Black Nationalism and Black Power. While "Black Power" was not a battle-cry of the Long Freedom Movement until uttered by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) in 1966, the notions and ideologies behind it existed for decades, both inside the United States and beyond its borders, in no small part due to the works and influences of Marcus Garvey and his followers. Williams' work is also significant to the present study because of its focus on grassroots activism – I suggest that, even when

Civil Rights leaders and well-known activists were not outwardly discussing the significance of Jamaican independence, grassroots activists and even non-activists were internalizing the message and being inspired by the political successes of a predominantly Black nation breaking free from colonialism.

While secondary literature is scarce, material from which to build new scholarship is abundant. Newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor provide insight into the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of Americans. Using newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Wall Street Journal*, as well as lesser-known or more-local American publications like *The Baltimore Afro-American*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Southern Illinoisian*, as well as international newspapers like the Jamaican *Daily Gleaner*, among a multitude of others, this article tracks and explores the influence of the decolonization movement in the British West Indies as it affected the African American Long Freedom Movement.

Roots of Independence

Many historians find the root of Jamaica's independence movement in the 1938 labor rebellion. Others point to Marcus Garvey and his brand of Black Nationalism as the driving force behind the independence movement, suggesting that Garveyism lifted the spirits and the minds of Blacks in Jamaica, and sowed the seething unrest in Jamaica, to reap the fruits of independence. The exact reasons behind Jamaica's independence movement, however, are unimportant in the context of the present study. What matters is that Jamaica, a land where African descendants comprised 95% of the population in 1962, gained independence from Britain and embarked on a path of self-government with Black and mixed-race leaders at the helm. However, to fully contextualize the international and racial moment in which American newspapers reacted to Jamaica's independence, it is crucial to fully understand the economic, social, and political climate of Jamaica in the mid-twentieth century.

In exploring how a colony is liberated, Albert Memmi wrote, "A day necessarily comes when the colonized lifts his head and topples the always unstable equilibrium of colonization."⁶ That instability was profound in Britain's Caribbean colonies. The British were so aware of the instability of the colony that they did everything in their power to keep white and free Black Jamaicans separate. The economic instability in

Jamaica was rooted in the plantation, agrarian economy it tried in vain to maintain, even though industrialization was clearly the way of the future.⁷ Moreover, Jamaica suffered an unstable economy because it was tilted so drastically in favor of one small group: the elite whites. With 1% of the population controlling nearly all of the economy, and reaping nearly all of its benefits, it is no mystery why the island encountered such instability. Moreover, the instability of white supremacy in the twentieth century, throughout the world, necessitated change to the very roots of Jamaican society.

Between 1944 and 1962, Jamaica endured many changes. It saw the development of Rastafarian culture; it endured the last years of the Second World War; it was home to, for a brief period, thousands of white refugees from Europe; and it saw a bitter rivalry unfold between two cousins who both wanted to help Jamaica. Over the years, sometimes the People's National Party (PNP) held the most seats in Jamaica's parliament, and other times the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP); the swing back and forth between the parties was not unlike the pendulum that swings in any other democracy. Norman Manley became the first Premier of Jamaica in 1959 until his cousin Alexander Bustamante unseated him in April 1962,⁸ a direct repudiation of Manley's hesitant proposal for independence and an acceptance of Bustamante's more radical idea.⁹ This final moment in colonial Jamaican history is the epitome of the masses coming together and demanding a singularly Jamaican government *of the people*.

Jamaica's political history was long and complex, but the two major players, Manley and Bustamante, affectionately called "Busta" in Jamaica, held the reigns for over three decades. To fully understand Jamaica's independence movement, it is crucial to first explore the histories of Manley and Busta. Both their stories begin with the 1938 labor rebellion, which erupted in reaction to the racism and extreme poverty in Jamaica.

Race was inextricably connected to the conditions of poverty in colonial Jamaica. As years passed after the end of enslavement, the margin of difference continued to grow, with the Black and mixed-race population expanding, and the white population shrinking (see Table 1). The white elite class dominated political and economic leadership, and held essentially all power on the island; they did not experience the suffering and poverty of the Black majority.

Table 1. Census and race information in Jamaica, 1881-1943

Census Year	All Races	Racial Origin						
		Black	Colored	White	Chinese	East Indian	Other Races	Not Specified
1881	100.0	76.5	18.9	2.5	.0	1.9	—	.2
1891	100.0	76.4	19.1	2.3	.1	1.6	—	.5
1911	100.0	75.8	19.6	1.9	.3	2.1	—	.3
1921	100.0	77.0	18.3	1.7	.4	2.2	—	.4
1943	100.0	78.1	17.5	1.1	1.0	2.1	.2	—

Source: Eighth Census of Jamaica and Its Dependencies, 1943, as cited in Colin A. Palmer's Freedom's Children: The 1938 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica, 15.

Jamaicans used the term “colored” for mixed-race people who were of African descent and who had either white, Chinese, autochthonous, or other ancestry; mulatto was another racial designation for mixed-race Jamaicans. The total Black and “mulatto” population combined in 1943 was therefore 95.6%. In 1881, that percentage was 95.4%; in 1891, it was 95.5%; in 1911, it was 95.4%; and in 1921, it was 95.3%. At any given time, then, over a 62-year period, Black and “colored” citizens made up at least 95% of the country’s entire population. Significantly, the white population shrank during this time, it seems, by approximately .2% each decade, and in 1943, it was barely greater than the miniscule Chinese population. This information is hugely significant; 1.1% of the racial population in Jamaica controlled nearly 100% of the government, with only a small handful of Black and “colored” legislators at the local level. Similarly, 1.1% of the population owned the plantations on which the vast majority of Jamaicans labored. Put into this perspective, then, it is clear that race, intrinsically connected to the conditions of poverty, was the dominant factor in Jamaica’s economic situation.

The reality of poverty and the living conditions for Blacks in Jamaica was appalling. There were many without work who were destitute, but even for those employed as laborers, life was incredibly difficult, and living conditions had hardly changed since the period of enslavement. In 1938, 381 plantations in Jamaica grew various crops, including 117 sugar and 94 banana plantations. On those 381

properties, 2,513 barracks housed 22,620 workers in 8,596 rooms, of which less than half were in acceptable condition. Two hundred thirty-eight barracks had no latrines and 567 were unsanitary. Only one in eight barracks had a water supply, either piped or from wells. Moreover, 38% of the barracks made no provisions to supply water at all, and about half received water from rivers or ponds.¹⁰ That reliance on rivers and ponds for drinking water led to other issues, because the poor water quality led to outbreaks of disease and illness; farming supplies and human waste ran into those waterways.

In *Freedom's Children*, Colin Palmer wrote that the 1938 rebellion represented the first fundamental change in African Jamaicans' lives since emancipation, a century prior.¹¹ He argued that, while Black laborers "were no strangers to abuse, exploitation, and economic deprivation," the Great Depression exacerbated those conditions, causing some workers "to realize their collective power and their ability to force the barons of capital to change ... the texture of their relationship with labor."¹² According to Palmer, this realization of collective power, tied intrinsically with race and cultural identity, fostered class-consciousness in Jamaica. As such, in May and June 1938, after a century of racist economic policies and an exceptionally hard decade of economic hardship, Black laborers banded together to demand better wages. This became a landslide of political movements from which Jamaica's first major political players, Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley, emerged.¹³

Based on these grievances, Jamaicans went on strike en masse in May and June 1938. On May 2, a multi-day strike devolved into violence at the Frome Estate Sugar Plantation in Westmoreland parish, where sugar cutters rebelled against low wages armed with sticks, rocks, and their slogan, "a dollar a day."¹⁴ From there, echoes of unrest rippled across the island, and the rebellion spread to dockworkers and general laborers, leading eventually to an almost island-wide strike and rebellion in the subsequent days and weeks. Like in Morant Bay in 1865, colonial authorities reacted swiftly and violently. The riots that ensued resulted in the deaths of some 46 African Jamaican workers, injuries to more than 400, and the arrests of thousands, including Bustamante.

After the violence in the first week of May, dockworkers and laborers at the wharves sought union leadership. After a strike at the docks in Trench Pen, Alexander Bustamante made an appearance to help soothe the crowd and prevent violence, though rioters largely ignored his pleas. Disregarding Busta's pleas for peace and

order, workers stated they were prepared to “suffer hunger and deprivation” and refused to return to work unless their employers raised their pay to at least one shilling an hour.¹⁵ However, in response to the unrest in Trench Pen, a group of dockworkers seeking to organize the group reached out to Bustamante and asked him to lead the workers. While most workers first rejected Bustamante due to his fair complexion, his race eventually became “a positive attribute,” something that many followers held up as something that made him “superior and fit to lead.” After the authorities arrested Busta on May 22, 1938, Norman Manley stepped in to help ease the tensions and negotiate with the owners. Manley served as a mediator to the conflict, which Palmer stated, “helped to calm the unsettled nerves of the elite groups.”¹⁶

This watershed moment in Jamaican history catapulted Busta and Manley to the national stage, and they oversaw massive changes within the small island country. In 1958, Jamaica and ten other Caribbean countries formed the Federation of the West Indies, with Manley at the fore and with the hesitant blessing of Great Britain. The idea was to gain independence by forming one sovereign nation made up of the eleven islands of the British West Indies. Manley was an ardent supporter of the Federation. He had believed that the Federation would earn independence quickly, but after three years, the Jamaican people had lost faith in the idea. After Bustamante announced his non-support for the Federation, Manley moved to let the people decide. It would be more than a year before that would happen.

In March 1961, Bustamante and the JLP anti-Federation campaign were in full swing, and rapidly gaining momentum. The JLP harped on the continued issue of economic insecurity and poverty in Jamaica, arguing that joining the Federation would just amplify and aggravate those issues; they suggested that staying in the Federation and becoming independent from the Crown through it would add “the economic burdens of the other islands to Jamaica’s already heavy burden.”¹⁷ Bustamante and the JLP kept up their assault on Manley, the PNP, and the existing government, using his well-known bombastic rhetoric to stir up the masses and reach the lowest, often forgotten, classes of people and mobilizing Jamaica’s rural voters. The PNP, on the other hand, did not begin their pro-Federation campaign until June. On September 19, 1962, Jamaicans went to vote on the Referendum: should they stay in the Federation, or should they go it alone? That day, Jamaica saw a 60.87% voter turnout of 453,580 persons. Of them, 54% voted to leave the Federation. In this way, “too much cannot be made out of the argument ... that West Indian nationalism lost out to

Jamaican nationalism.”¹⁸ While the win was not a landslide, it illustrated that the majority of Jamaicans identified as *Jamaican*, and not as *West Indian*. Manley conceded defeat; he quickly pulled Jamaica out of the Federation and announced that it would negotiate independence on its own.

In the wake of his crushing loss in September, Manley also conceded that Bustamante now spoke for the Jamaican people. JLP representatives were present at all meetings and negotiations with the colonial government, and Manley declared that a general election would be held as soon as possible. The existing lame-duck government, but with the help of Bustamante and the JLP, drafted a new constitution. They sent it to the Colonial Office in London, who returned it with “significant alterations”; Jamaica’s government ratified it anyway on February 27, 1962.¹⁹ On April 10, Jamaica held a general election and Bustamante won by a margin of less than 10,000 votes. The day after the election, *The Gleaner* suggested that Manley’s loss was due in a large part to rural voters, who were won over by Busta and the JLP, and had lost faith in the PNP. The article made it clear that rural voters had lost faith in the PNP and considered them more representative of an urban middle class.²⁰ Regardless of the reasons, Manley was unseated, and Bustamante would lead Jamaica into independence in August 1962.

Jamaica’s independence movement was complex, and proved itself a watershed moment, with other British Caribbean islands falling like dominos into their own independence movements over the next decade. What matters in the context of the American movement for Black equality, is that the Black masses, the average Jamaicans who made up nearly all of the island’s population, came to embrace an idea that just thirty years before had seemed unfathomable. No movement could have been successful without the support of Jamaicans, across class, just as with the Civil Rights Movement in America. Because Jamaica’s fight for independence came during the height of the fight for racial equality and civil rights in the United States, the impact of the movement must not be ignored.

White Mainstream American Newspapers React

Responses to African Caribbean independence varied by region in the United States. On September 26, 1961, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on Jamaican and British negotiations on the front page below a headline about President Kennedy. While the

brief article simply touches on the planned meeting between Norman Manley and political leaders in London, its inclusion on the front page is telling. “The delegation,” reported Reuters in the *Chicago Tribune*, “headed by premier Norman Manley, requested the meeting [with the Colonial Office in London] following a referendum last week in which Jamaica voted to withdraw from the 10 island West Indies Federation, which is itself scheduled for independence next May.”²¹ The general tone, however, of the coverage in Chicago was neutral, simply reporting on the goings-on without injecting opinions on the matter.

Such was not the case in Alabama. On September 12, 1961, a week ahead of Jamaica’s historic vote to leave the West Indies Federation, *The Anniston Star*, a small, local newspaper based in Anniston, Alabama, took a hardline on the idea of Jamaica attempting independence on its own. The newspaper reported hopefully that it appears Jamaica would vote to remain in the West Indies Federation, suggesting, “From the United States viewpoint, an independent, stable federation could help offset the pressure of Castroism in the Caribbean.”²² *The Anniston Star* did not report again on Jamaica in the aftermath of the September 19th vote. This mention of Castro and Cuba was one of the only examples that expressed that concern so explicitly. While the interests of the American government were to keep Jamaica a democracy, there appeared to be little concern over its close proximity to Cuba, even though tensions between the United States and Cuba were tense and strained during this time.²³ The reaction to Jamaica’s September 19, 1961 vote to leave the Federation therefore shaped both American anxieties and hopes.

In an editorial published in Cullman, Alabama, about a week after Jamaica’s vote, anxieties over Jamaica’s independence and self-government seemed ripe. “It seems the Jamaicans acted the way they did for two reasons.” The editorial reads:

One was fear that the island, which contains half the land area and population of the federation, would have to support the poorer and smaller islands. The other was that Bustamante ... had made rejection of the federation a part of his program ... The population of the British West Indies is mainly composed of Negroes who have been hankering for independence because that status has been acquired by many former British colonies in Africa.”²⁴

The language used by the senior editor of *The Daily Times-Democrat* at the end of his editorial is clearly infused with racism, and anxieties about the future of Black populations under white rule, although for the time, the tone was likely considered neutral.

Mississippi, too, responded with articles and editorials injected with racial anxieties and distrust in the Black populations around the world. On September 20, 1961, Laurel, MS *Leader Call* ran a short article expressing shock about Jamaica's vote to leave the federation, titled "Jamaica Shuns Federation." The *Hattiesburg American* in Hattiesburg, Mississippi simply stated that "Jamaican Negroes rejected alliance" with other West Indian islands.²⁵ In general, however, coverage of the September 1961 vote was scarcely covered in Southern newspapers. Northern papers, however, seemed to take a much greater interest in the events happening in the Caribbean. In the South, most states only had one or two articles covering the vote, while others, such as Georgia, had none. In Michigan, on September 20, 1961, the day after the vote, fourteen separate newspapers reported on it.

The Daily Globe stated that Jamaica voted against the federation because it would lower the standard of living.²⁶ *Traverse City Record Eagle* reported that Jamaica boldly voted to leave the federation and attempt their own independence even though the West Indies Federation was scheduled to become free in May 1962.²⁷ Other newspapers simply reported a sentence or two stating the outcome of the vote. In Wisconsin, ten newspapers reported on the vote on September 20th. In New York, thirty-three covered the event. Clearly, there was far more interest in reporting the news related to Jamaica's independence in the North than there was in the South. This suggests that editors in the South were hesitant to call attention to the issue. In the North, perhaps where more newspapers had more Black subscribers, or at least more readers sympathetic to the Black Freedom Movement, newspapers did not shy away from the topic.

While interest levels in the initial vote to leave the federation varied regionally, once Jamaica became independent in August 1962, newspapers across the country began to take notice, although the South continued to lag behind in coverage compared to Northern States. In Illinois, for example, on August 6, 1962 in a section discussing rising standards of living, *The Southern Illinoisan* boldly ran the headline, "Jamaica Achieves Slow, Bloodless Revolution." The article began, "Jamaica has been undergoing a revolution for more than two decades. Independence will not complete

the revolution but will give it impetus.”²⁸ The tone of this article was clearly defined by the first two sentences. It continued:

Jamaica has achieved national independence, has shaken off the yoke of the British Colonial Office, has improved the living standards of its people, and has established self-government under a system of parliamentary democracy based upon universal adult suffrage. All this has been accomplished without bloodshed. The Jamaican can be allowed his boast that his revolution “has been the only revolution in the last three decades that has in fact extended freedom in the Western sense of the term, rather than exchanged one form of dictatorship for another form.”²⁹

This bold statement from a senior editor of a Northern newspaper, which reads almost like a tourist brochure with its expressive boosterism, speaks volumes to the significance of Jamaica’s remarkable revolution, and other Northern newspapers expressed similar reactions.

In Maryland, *The Cumberland Evening Times* took a celebratory tone. “Jamaica, once a center for piracy and slavery,” an article began, “became an independent nation today after over three centuries of British rule.”³⁰ *Frederick News Post* reported that Vice President Lyndon Johnson attended Jamaica’s independence ceremony. *Annapolis Evening Capital* ran on page one in giant, bold letters, “Jamaica Gains its Independence.” It was the biggest news story of the day in Annapolis on August 6, 1962. Likewise, the reaction was jubilant in New Hampshire. *The Portsmouth Herald* reported with the headline, “Jamaica Begins New Existence as Free Nation!” In Massachusetts, the *Berkshire Eagle* questioned the longevity of the new island government, but offered sincere congratulations and hopes for success. “A couple of cheers are in order for Jamaica,” the editorial began. “Not only is Jamaica free of British rule, its people also have their freedoms guaranteed by a parliamentary democracy based on universal adult suffrage ... A further case for congratulations is Jamaica’s evidently successful policy of racial integration.”³¹ This celebration of Jamaica’s racial attitudes, universal suffrage, freedom, and integration was a purely Northern reaction to Jamaica’s independence.

In Southern states, newspaper responses were far less jubilant and positive. In Mississippi, the only mention in the immediate aftermath of Jamaica’s independence

day was a shortened reprint of an Associated Press article found in newspapers all over the country. In New Hampshire, the AP story came after the headline listed above in *Portsmouth Herald*, but in Biloxi, MS, the *The Biloxi Daily Herald* shared excerpts of the article under a far less exuberant headline: “Jamaica Observes Independence Day.” The choice of tone and words used in the headlines illustrates the varying public sentiments towards Jamaica’s independence across regions in the United States.

The Anniston Star in Alabama took a far more negative stance on Jamaica’s new freedom. Running the headline “Independent Jamaica” on page four, *The Star* reported: “Jamaica has been promised U.S. economic aid ... [and] help will be needed ... It might be pointed out, also, that most Jamaicans are either of mixed blood or Negroes, and the British Government saw fit to raise barriers as of July 1 against their taking up residence in the United Kingdom.”³² This focus on race, and ways the United Kingdom seemed to be protecting itself from Black and mixed-race Jamaicans, was found in most Southern newspapers that discussed the events of August 6, 1962. This is quite telling of Southern white anxiety about the independent nation controlled by a Black or mixed-race majority population, only 500 miles from the United States.

It is clear from a survey of newspapers around the country, therefore, that coverage varied by region. Northern states took greater interest in the events, and also welcomed Jamaica’s independence with jubilation, celebrating the historic movement for self-government by a predominantly Black and mixed-race population. In the South, the response was far more subdued. Coverage was comparatively scarce, and the mood far from positive. Anxiety and racial tensions peppered the coverage of Jamaica’s independence, and newspapers reported somberly or at least disinterestedly. These regional differences represent the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, and the resistance to it, across the country. States generally opposed to desegregation, and that actively fought against Black activism, had drastically different reactions. However, this is only half the story. In the United States during the Long Civil Rights Movement, there existed many African American publications, which provide much greater insight into how African Caribbean decolonization influenced activism in America.

Significance of Print Media: African American Responses

The significance of Black publications in the Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements is immense. Timothy Vercellotti and Paul R. Brewer discussed the importance of Black newspapers and magazines in “‘To Plead Our Own Cause’: Public Opinion Toward Black and Mainstream News Media among African Americans.” Vercellotti and Brewer explain that Black publications help advocate for the Black community in America, writing, “The Black press has served in this role since the founding of the first African American newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, in New York City in 1827.”³³ The nineteenth century was the beginning of African American publications, but the tradition would continue until the present, often inspired by the original intent and purpose of *Freedom’s Journal*. “In vowing ‘to plead our own cause,’ as the newspaper pledged in its inaugural edition,” they continue, “the Black press embarked on a mission that distinguished it from its White counterparts ... The Black press played a role in spurring the Great Migration from the South during Jim Crow ... and eventually pushing for civil rights after initially counselling caution.”³⁴ It therefore makes sense that African American newspapers would have a different perspective than white mainstream publications regarding Jamaican independence.

Interest in Jamaica’s independence extended much farther back in African American newspapers, than it did in white mainstream newspapers. *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported on the events in Jamaica with great hope and positivity. On July 28, 1962, more than a week before Jamaica would officially become independent, it reported, “468 years of colonial rule end August 6.”³⁵ On August 4, 1962, it ran three articles on one page: “Jamaica Selects UN, Other Aides,” “Jamaica’s Historic Moment Precedes Trinidad, Tobago,” and “Johnson Heads US Delegation to Jamaica.”³⁶

In Pennsylvania, the *Pittsburgh Courier* covered the decolonization process for over a year. On August 12, 1961 – a full year before Jamaica would become independent – the paper published an article about the involvement of the United States and Canadian governments sending assistance to the British West Indies, going so far as to include details about Jamaica’s battle between Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante over the West Indian Federation.³⁷ The publication expressed great interest in the events surrounding Jamaica’s independence, and in 1962 alone, published 112 articles covering Jamaican politics and events.

In Durham, North Carolina, the African American newspaper *The Carolina Times* reported on August 11, 1962, that Jamaica would get its independence on August 7. Why the article ran the incorrect independence date was wrong is unclear, but the tone of the article was more positive than any of the mainstream publications.³⁸ With the headline “Jamaica Boasting Well-Developed Economy and Stable Government, Gets Independence August 7,” the *Times* wrote hopefully of the stable government of the new nation composed of 95% Black and mixed-race people. “Jamaica possesses a well-established two-party system,” the article boasted, pointing out Jamaica established universal adult suffrage in 1944.³⁹ On August 25, the *Times* reported that American and foreign students in Greensboro, North Carolina celebrated Jamaica’s independence at a ceremony.⁴⁰

On August 11, 1962, *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported on excitement in the African American community about Jamaica’s independence:

A host of prominent Americans were on hand here Monday as Jamaica, an island with 1,700,000 people, celebrated its independence. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP extended to Sir Alexander Bustamante, the premier of that country, and to the people of that country “the warm greetings and sincere felicitations of all members of the NAACP.” The NAACP leader noted that “for many years the NAACP an colored American generally have received support, encouragement and inspiration from Jamaicans who have come to the United States.”⁴¹

The tone of Baltimore’s African American newspaper illustrates the significance of Jamaica’s independence on the African American community and the influence it had on the leaders of the NAACP. Similarly, *The Carolina Times* also took a celebratory stance on Jamaican independence, running an article on the front page of the August 11, 1962 edition, reporting on Wilkins’s comments, as well.

Likewise, the NAACP official magazine, *Crisis*, printed Wilkins’s comments in full. Of note in his statement, Wilkins impressed upon the importance of freedom and equality in Jamaica. He said, “We have a common interest in the objective of eliminated discrimination between men which is based on the irrelevancies of skin color ... We like to believe that the progress of Negro American citizens which has progressed steadily against great odds ... also vindicates the cherished ideal of

individual freedom.”⁴² Wilkins connected Black freedom in Jamaica with African American struggles for equality and civil rights, showing that the connection between Jamaica’s independence and the movement in America was well-known to activists and leaders.

Other Black magazines also reported on the events unfolding in Jamaica. *Jet* reported, “State Sen. James L. Watson of New York City will be a member of the US party, headed by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, that will represent the United States at the independence celebration beginning this week in Kingston, Jamaica. Sen. Watson is of Jamaican descent.”⁴³ While it is possible that some mainstream newspapers reported on Senator Watson’s inclusion in the US Delegation to Jamaica, no mention of him can be found in any newspaper archives available, suggesting that interest in this aspect of Jamaica’s independence was not of interest outside of the Black community. Moreover, on August 25, *Jet* ran an article illustrating the importance of an independent Jamaica to African Americans. “There is ... much speculation,” the article read, “as to whether a Negro will be appointed as ambassador to the newly independent Jamaica.”⁴⁴

In Washington, DC, *The Evening Star* detailed the events of Jamaica’s independence with a celebratory headline: “Jamaica Welcomed as Free Nation at Party.”⁴⁵ While many southern states and predominantly white publications shied away from the details of American involvement in the independence celebrations, Black publications such as *The Evening Star* offered detailed accounts, including information about who was in attendance – such as John Kennedy’s special assistant Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

In May of 1962, the *St. Paul Recorder* ran an article titled, ““In the Back” Still with Us,” which laments, “Although we have made considerable progress in race relations in the last quarter century, the custom of “eat and sit at the back” has not passed entirely from the scene ... the new Negro is tired of sitting and eating in the back.”⁴⁶ From there, the article immediately deviates to the story of Jamaica’s rejection of the West Indies Federation and its imminent independence. “Jamaica voted itself out of the group,” the author explains, “because its people could not see what they had to gain.”⁴⁷ This, of course, is an understatement of the events that led to Jamaican voters overwhelmingly rejecting the Federation, but the coverage of the event in *St. Paul Recorder* in the same article that talks about African Americans rejecting their status of second class citizens – and with reference to Marcus Garvey’s New Negro

concept- is a significant indicator of the influence and importance of Jamaica's independence and Jamaican Black Nationalism in Black communities in America. Importantly, it also represents an example of the interest African Americans took in Jamaica's decision about the West Indies Federation, which was echoed in the years between 1959 and 1962 in Black newspapers all over the United States. The *Jackson Advocate*, for example, wrote in 1959, on the front page, "Perhaps the greatest single threat to federal unity since the outset has been the dissatisfaction of Jamaica to the method of representation in the federal Parliament."⁴⁸ Nine months earlier, *Advocate* ran another front-page article on Jamaica's struggle against the Federation titled, "Jamaica Debates Islands Future in Federation."⁴⁹

Other Black publications pointed out the significance of the West Indies Federation itself, even before Jamaica demanded it be its own nation. In an article summing up the previous year, *Minneapolis Spokesman* ran the January 9, 1959 headline, "Integration Battle was Biggest News in 1958," where the first subsection, titled, "Important Period in US History," shifted focus almost immediately to the West Indies. "A new semi-independent nation, governed by Negroes," the author writes, "came into being with the West Indian Federation."⁵⁰

Conclusion

Decolonization in the African Caribbean influenced the Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements in America, in numerous ways. While the narrow scope of this study, which only analyzed publications meant for civilian consumption, leaves many questions remaining, it opens a new path of understanding to better contextualize and study the struggle for Black equality and civil rights in America and beyond. White anxieties were impossible to hide in newspapers across the country, and the effects of Jamaica's independence movement sent ripples through the United States. Conversely, Black publications across the country illustrate significant interest in the events in the Black Caribbean, celebrating the entire process of independence, all not shying away from the role race was playing in the process. In sum, African Caribbean independence further destabilized the colonized aspects of white supremacy in the United States and must therefore be situated within the Black Freedom Movement and Civil Rights framework.

Notes

¹ Charlotte Richard, ““Emancipate Ourselves from Mental Slavery”: Gibraltar Camp, Black Nationalism, Economics, and Jamaica's Independence Movement,” (Master’s thesis, University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2017),

<https://search.proquest.com/openview/8c06a01a04078a171fae0803234c2ad5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

² Michael Collins’ “Decolonisation and the ‘Federal Moment’” stands out as especially important to the present study. Collins argues that the significance of British decolonization has been understated in academic scholarship, and that it has had an impact reaching far beyond the scope of the British Empire. Likewise, Sharon Sewell’s “Decolonization and the Other: The Case of the British West Indies” places British decolonization in a more transnational context. Jason Parker’s “‘Capital of the Caribbean’: The African American-West Indian ‘Harlem Nexus’ and the Transnational Drive for Black Freedom, 1940-1948” helps drive the arguments in the present study. While Parker’s focus is on the time prior to independence, focusing mostly on the era leading to universal adult suffrage and the political activism prior to calls for decolonization, the connections he makes between Jamaica and the United States make his article historiographically important. Likewise, Parker’s *Brother’s Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937-1962* discusses the history of Anglo-American-Caribbean relations, and the insights gleaned from Parker influenced the narrative and direction of the current project. In addition, Fitzroy Baptiste’s “US Policy towards Decolonization in the Caribbean and Africa in the post-World War II Period” also plays a role in the historiography of this topic.

³ Marc Matera’s *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis in the Twentieth Century*, for example, looks at the experiences of Black individuals in London and the role empire and decolonization on their experiences. While an important contribution to diasporic studies, especially regarding the development and evolution of transnational and international Black progressivism, its focus is on London and therefore does not expand the historiography in the same way as scholarship on colonies themselves. Similarly, Harvey Neptune’s *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* looks not at African Caribbean influence on Americans, but on the significance of American influence on Trinidadians. The present study does the opposite.

⁴ Kevin Gaines, “The Civil Rights Movement in World Perspective,” *OAH Magazine of History* 21, no. 1 (2007): 57, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.unh.edu/stable/25162103>.

⁵ Kevin Gaines, “The Civil Rights Movement, 57.

⁶ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 150.

⁷ See, e.g., Michaeline Crichlow, *Negotiating Caribbean Freedom*.

⁸ Bustamante became Jamaica’s first Prime Minister.

¹⁰ Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 375.

¹¹ Colin Palmer, *Freedom's Children: The 1938 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹² Palmer, *Freedom's Children*, 1.

¹³ Bustamante and Manley were first cousins, and both were “colored,” or mulatto, and not members of the larger Black population. In addition, they both came from somewhat-prominent families and never experienced the economic hardships endured by darker-skinned Jamaicans.

¹⁴ Sugar plantations were the largest employers in Jamaica at this time; see Chapter 2.

¹⁵ “Unrest on the Waterfront,” *Daily Gleaner*, May 20, 1938; “Rates of Pay on Wharves of Metropolis,” *Daily Gleaner*, May 20, 1938.

¹⁶ Palmer, *Freedom's Children*, 54.

¹⁷ George Eaton, *Alexander Bustamante and Modern Jamaica* (Kingston: Kingston Publishers Ltd., 1975), 188.

¹⁸ Eaton, *Alexander Bustamante*, 192.

¹⁹ Eaton, *Alexander Bustamante*, 192.

²⁰ Ulric D. Simmonds, “JLP victory—the reasons,” *Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, Jamaica, April 11, 1962.

²¹ “Ask Freedom not Partners, for Jamaica,” *The Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1961.

²² “Indies Federation?” *The Anniston Star*, Anniston, Alabama, September 12, 1961.

²³ Jamaica is 90 miles south of Cuba.

²⁴ “Jamaicans Vote No,” *Daily Times-Democrat*, Cullman, Alabama, September 29, 1961.

²⁵ “Jamaica Rejects Federation,” *Hattiesburg American*, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, September 21, 1961.

²⁶ “Jamaica Quits Federation,” *The Daily Globe*, Ironwood, Michigan, September 20, 1961.

²⁷ “Jamaica Quits West Indies Federation,” *Traverse City Record Eagle*, Traverse City, Michigan, September 20, 1961.

²⁸ Richard Spong, "Jamaica Achieves Slow, Bloodless Revolution," *The Southern Illinoisan*, Carbondale, Illinois, August 6, 1962.

²⁹ Spong, "Jamaica Achieves Slow, Bloodless Revolution."

³⁰ "After 207 Years Jamaica Becomes Independent Nation," *The Cumberland Evening Times*, Cumberland, Maryland, August 6, 1962.

³¹ "Can Jamaica be a Real 'Nation'?" *The Berkshire Eagle*, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 7, 1962.

³² "Independent Jamaica," *The Anniston Star*, Anniston, Alabama, August 6, 1962.

³³ Timothy Vercellotti and Paul R. Brewer, "'To Plead Our Own Cause': Public Opinion Toward Black and Mainstream News Media among African Americans," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 232, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.unh.edu/stable/40034412>.

³⁴ Timothy Vercellotti and Paul R. Brewer, "'To Plead Our Own Cause': Public Opinion Toward Black and Mainstream News Media among African Americans," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 232, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.unh.edu/stable/40034412>.

³⁵ "Jamaica's Independence," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Baltimore, Maryland, July 28, 1962.

³⁶ *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Baltimore, Maryland, August 4, 1962.

³⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, "U.S. and Canada Experts to Aid West Indian Islands," August 12, 1961, Pittsburgh, PA.

³⁸ Jamaica's Independence Day was August 6, 1962.

³⁹ "Jamaica Boasting Well-Developed Economy and Stable Government, Gets Independence August 7," *The Carolina Times*, Durham, North Carolina, August 11, 1962.

⁴⁰ "Foreign Students Hail Jamaican Independence," *The Carolina Times*, August 25, 1962.

⁴¹ "Americans Hail Jamaica Freedom," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, August 11, 1962.

⁴² "Wilkins Attends Jamaica Celebration," *Crisis*, August 1962, p. 414.

⁴³ "Watson with US Delegation to Jamaica Celebration," *Jet*, August 9, 1962, p. 4.

⁴⁴ "Ticker," *Jet*, August 25, 1962, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *The Evening Star*, August 7, 1962.

⁴⁶ ““In the Back” Still with Us,” *St. Paul Recorder*, May 18, 1962.

⁴⁷ ““In the Back” Still with Us,” *St. Paul Recorder*, May 18, 1962.

⁴⁸ “West Indian Debate Stirred by Conflict Between 2 Major Powers,” *Jackson Advocate*, December 5, 1959.

⁴⁹ “Jamaica Debates Islands Future in Federation,” *Jackson Advocate*, March 7, 1959.

⁵⁰ “Integration Battle was Biggest News in 1958,” *Minneapolis Spokesman*, January 9, 1959.