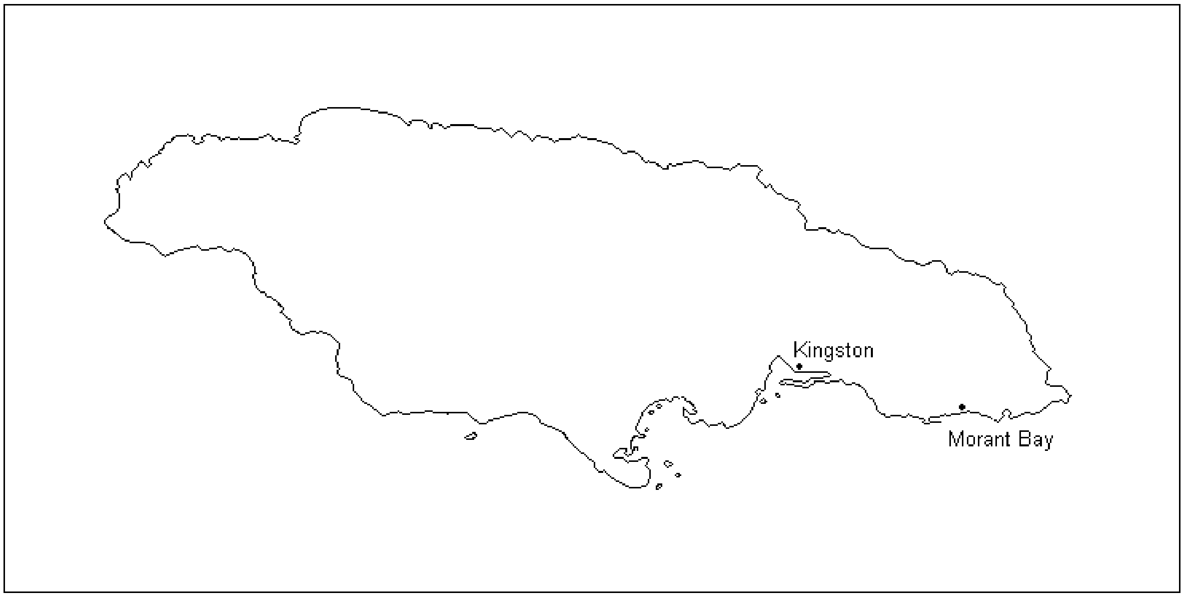
Chapter Three

To and from the Warm Caribbean Sea

Jamaicans

Jamaican man's voice heard from within the Jared Coffin House: "Nantucket is not America. Noooo, Nantucket is NOT America!"



During Jamaica's long history as an English colony, free black and colored (mixed race) Jamaicans lived in the cities of the south coast, while most of the island's population labored as slaves on sugar plantations in the north and west of the island and on coffee plantations in the east. Nantucketer Jared Coffin carried on business in Kingston and Morant Bay in 1796.

Nantucket is not at all like Jamaica either. At first glance it seems that the two islands have little in common and, prior to the 1990s, few points of contact.

As Herman Melville so aptly described it, Nantucket is "an elbow of sand" in the ocean, and a chilly ocean at that. Jamaica's mountains and rich, fertile valleys, on the other hand, bask in Caribbean warmth ninety miles south of Cuba. Wampanoags continued to live on Nantucket for a century after the arrival of English settlers, while Jamaica's Arawaks had perished before the English came. Since the mid 1600s Nantucket has had many more Euro-Americans than African Americans, while the reverse has been overwhelmingly true for Jamaica. There, Africa-born slaves and their Jamaica-born descendants labored in the sugar-cane fields of the north and west and the coffee plantations of the east, while a small population of free blacks and people of mixed race (known in Jamaica as "colored") lived in towns, mainly in Kingston on the south coast. The number of enslaved persons in Nantucket in the 1700s was small both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total island population. Boston and Maria with their eight children in William Swain's household appear to set a record. A slave sent whaling, as Prince Boston was, might be the only man on board who was not free, and it appears—at least in that case—that the master of the vessel made no distinction between enslaved and free crewmembers. In Jamaica, on the other hand, white estate owners—fewer than ten percent of the population—held almost all the rest of the inhabitants of the island in servitude. There were domestic slaves in the great houses, and slaves were overseers and skilled laborers on the estates, but most of Jamaica's slaves labored in the fields in work gangs of from 50 to as many as 600 men and women. They lived in slave villages, raised food to augment the salted fish provided by the estate owners, and were generally denied the benefits of marriage and established family life.

On guard against rebellion, plantation managers made every effort to prevent the arrival of news from outside. The planters were for the most part hostile to Christian missionary work among their slaves, whether by European representatives of the Moravian, Baptist, or Wesleyan Methodist churches or by African-American preachers who began traveling to Jamaica after the American Revolution.[1]

Throughout the 1700s, as Nantucket's maritime economy expanded, Quaker principles dictated sober living and avoidance of ostentation. By contrast, during that century, as Jamaica became England's most important asset in the Caribbean, that island's planters engaged in building what today's Nantucketers would recognize as trophy houses on their estates, and the extravagance of their lifestyle was the talk of London. In 1763, the year of Nantucket's "Indian sickness," Jamaica produced more sugar than all the other British West Indian islands together. That sugar was the product of a system of forced labor like nothing ever known on Nantucket.

In the extreme circumstances of Jamaica's plantations, enslaved Africans and their Jamaica-born descendants created from sources at hand a distinctive way of life and a language—Jamaican Creole English. Survivals of various West African ways of doing things and talking about them melded with observed European lifeways and English words for talking about them. Dancing continued to pervade life as it had in Africa. At Christmas celebrations, slaves danced to drums and also danced formal quadrilles and gavottes to violin accompaniment. Jamaican Creole English put English vocabulary together with profoundly un-English sentence rhythm and sentence structure.

Although similar developments took place on the islands of the Cape Verde archipelago, nothing like this particular creative process was initiated on Nantucket. Only in recent years has Jamaican Creole English been brought to Nantucket—by Jamaican workers on seasonal work visas. Unlike Cape Verdean Creole Portuguese, which most Nantucketers have rarely if ever heard, Jamaican Creole English is now ubiquitous, to be encountered on the island even in the dead of a Nantucket winter.

Given all these contrasts, how are Nantucket and Jamaica alike, and what have been their connections through history?

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[1] Two comprehensive sources for the history of Jamaica are Turner 1982 and the introduction to Ingram 1997. Prince 1990 offers a view of Jamaica in the 1840s through the eyes of the daughter of an African Nantucketer.

Despite their geographical and social differences, Nantucket and Jamaica share long parallel histories. The English established themselves in Jamaica in 1655, and the first English settlers arrived on Nantucket in 1659.[2] Contact with Europeans led to the demise of the islands' indigenous populations—the Wampanoags on Nantucket and the Arawaks of Jamaica. English settlers on Nantucket were threatened by the proximity of King Phillip's War, while the English in Jamaica were at risk from the Maroons—former African slaves of the Spanish who had established themselves in the mountainous interior of the island.

African slaves were imported to both islands, and until the vast expansion of sugar-cane cultivation in Jamaica their situations were comparable. Before then, the early English settlers in Jamaica had small numbers of African slaves and some indentured whites working for them, just as in Nantucket a number of English families had obtained a few African slaves and put some of them to work on whaling vessels together with indentured Wampanoags. In time, by different routes and in vastly different numbers to be sure, the island-born descendants of Africans achieved freedom on both islands and set about demanding equality as landowners, farmers, and entrepreneurs.

Throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s religion played a central role in the social history of both Nantucket and Jamaica, and education for African children arrived on both islands at about the same time. In 1826, within a year of the opening of Nantucket's African School under the aegis of the African Baptist Society, the Baptist school in Kingston, Jamaica, built a new schoolhouse and took on the education of sixty-five slaves. In both African schools the subjects taught were basic literacy followed by history and grammar.[3]

These parallel developments went on independently of direct contact between the islands. During the 1700s they had little contact. Fenced off from the Atlantic Ocean by the islands of Cuba, the Bahamas, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, Jamaica was not a convenient provisioning place for ships working the Atlantic whaling grounds. Nor did Jamaica—unlike the ocean islands where Nantucket whalers regularly made port—offer the opportunity to pick up crew replacements. Prior to 1838 the vast majority of the Jamaican work force was not free to ship out.[4]

Nonetheless, in 1796 a Nantucket merchant named Jared Coffin was operating out of Jamaica. In a series of letters written that year from Kingston and nearby Morant Bay, Coffin documented his trade in candles, lumber, and rum and contemplated expanding his business into iron and cowhides.[5]

At the time when Coffin was operating in Jamaica, Nantucket's black Gardner family was a generation away from producing another remarkable and little-known connection between the islands. In the 1770s and 1780s, there was a flowering of marriages among African-Nantucketers as people were at last able to set up their own households in New Guinea. That is where Daniel and Anstris Gardner made their home, and by 1810 they were parents of eight children with ages ranging from four to twenty.

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[2] Although Jamaica had been discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1494, the Spanish ultimately lost the island to the English.

[3] Turner 1982, p. 87.

[4] For four years after emancipation in 1834, freedmen were required to serve "apprenticeships" before being fully able to work where and how they pleased.

[5] Account Book of Jared Coffin (1754–1831), Nantucket Historical Association Collection 131. This merchant is not the Jared Coffin (1784–1860) who built two mansions in Nantucket—one now known as Moor's End and the other the Jared Coffin House. Nor were the two Jareds father and son.

The 1790 census also shows Thomas Gardner—possibly Daniel's brother—living alone. Shortly after the census was taken, Thomas left the island, married the daughter of an Africa-born former slave in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and had a daughter.[6]

Nancy Gardner, granddaughter of an African and daughter of an African-Nantucketer, was born free in 1799, when the total number of free Africans in all of Massachusetts numbered about 500, many of them living on Nantucket.[7] Just months after his daughter's birth, Thomas Gardner died, and there is no evidence that Nancy ever visited Nantucket.

From a difficult childhood in Salem, she was sent out to work without schooling, but through her church in Boston and through her marriage to a cosmopolitan black man, Nero Prince, she became a woman of the world. Her life played out on a global scale—in Salem and Boston; then in St. Petersburg, Russia; and then in Jamaica, with stops in New Orleans, Philadelphia, and New York along the way.

During the 1820s, while Nancy Gardner Prince was living in the czarist court, speaking French and doing needlework, Jamaican society was undergoing a profound change, a change that can be traced back in part to the 1733 publication of Nantucket Quaker Elihu Coleman's antislavery tract.[8] It was not until 1761 that the London Yearly Meeting followed Coleman's declaration against slavery, but once the London meeting stated that any Friend engaged in the slave trade should be disowned, their abolitionist persuasion spread beyond the Religious Society of Friends, and "within a decade it was the received wisdom of the educated, including the political nation, that slavery was morally and philosophically condemned."[9]

Facing a myriad of obstacles as they labored to bring Jamaica's slaves into the fold of orthodox Protestantism, missionaries in Jamaica—Baptist and Methodist in particular—brought with them the European enlightenment notions of the equality of all humankind and the moral repugnance of slavery. Although they sought to convince their congregations of the rewards of being faithful and obedient servants, they could not help but convey the welcome message that slavery must end and all people be free.

Not only were the European missionaries obstructed in their work by the planters, they were also in competition with indigenous Jamaican sects—the Native Methodists, the Native Baptists, and the Spirit Baptists—that integrated West African customs and beliefs into Christian observances. Only on the eve of the Christmas Rebellion of 1831 did the missionaries realize the extent to which their Jamaican lay helpers were also involved as full preachers in the native movements.

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[6] Prince 1990, p. 1. The primary source for the life and career of Nancy Gardner Prince is the annotated 1990 edition of the 1853 second edition of her autobiography, edited by Ronald G. Walters.

[7] Introduction to Prince 1990, p. x.

[8] Coleman's arguments against slavery are summarized in Appendix 1f.

[9] Turner 1982, p. 5.

The 1831 rebellion was rightly perceived by the estate owners to be of a different nature from previous uprisings in which slaves sought to escape from the English plantation system. This time the aim was to fundamentally change Jamaican society in such a way that all people formerly enslaved would be free. In fact, they considered themselves already free.

The rebellion was put down by force in a matter of weeks, and retaliation against both slaves and missionaries was severe. Black Jamaicans were executed by the hundreds, unbalancing the gender ratio among the slaves to just ninety-two men to every hundred women within a year of the uprising.[10] Only military intervention saved missionaries from lynch mobs. Conveyed for safety's sake to ships offshore, some missionaries were prevented from landing again on Jamaica and instead sailed to England with firsthand reports of what had happened. A reactionary organization of Jamaican estate owners and their supporters calling itself the Colonial Church Union set itself up in opposition to the British Parliament and the Colonial Council, but it could not prevail. The words of the expelled missionaries carried the day in England, and on August 1, 1834, the slaves throughout the British West Indies were emancipated.

The joy of emancipation was soon tempered by practical realities as the Jamaican sugar-based economy declined, and the struggle for self-governance began. Into these unsettled times stepped Nancy Gardner Prince.

Childless and widowed after a decade of life in Russia, she turned her attention to Jamaica in 1840. Responding to a recruitment lecture she attended in Boston, she felt a calling to go and work there. She wrote, "I was sensible that I was very limited in education," but added, "I hoped that I might aid in some small degree to raise up and encourage the emancipated inhabitants and teach the young children to read and work, to fear God, and put their faith in the Savior."[11] Her first visit convinced her that Jamaican women needed literacy skills and financial independence and that a women's vocational training school would be an effective starting place. For support in her efforts to establish such a school, she turned to Nantucket-born Lucretia Coffin Mott and her associates in Philadelphia.[12] Due to inadequate capital and difficulties with Jamaican officials, the project was not successful. Nancy Prince's life, already replete with loss, was made the harder by frustration of her best intentions, but as she tells it in her autobiography, she had made a grand attempt.

Self-published in Boston in 1850, the *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* was a success as abolitionism heated up in the northern states in the years prior to the Civil War, and her book went through two more editions in 1853 and 1856. A copy of the first edition made its way to the Nantucket Atheneum and is still there.

In the 1850s another link was forged between Nantucket and Jamaica. South Carolina-born Ann Williams Crawford, wife of the Reverend James Crawford, had two sisters, one of whom married abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet. Like James Crawford,

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[10] Turner 1982, p. 157.

[11] Prince 1990, pp. 48, 50.

[12] Prince 1990, pp. 58–59.

H. H. Garnet had been born into slavery, escaped to the North, and become a clergyman. In the 1850s he experienced a call to missionary work and took his family to Jamaica.

On March 13, 1858, the *Weekly Mirror* of Nantucket reported the safe arrival in Nantucket of Ann's other sister, Diana, and her daughter—heroically redeemed from slavery by James Crawford. In relating how this had come about, Crawford began with his brother-in-law and sister-in-law, the Garnets, deciding to offer themselves in service to the newly emancipated Jamaicans. Soon after arriving there, they received terrible news:

> *On hearing that they were Americans, a gentleman stepped up and inquired their pedigree, and on learning that Mrs. Garnet was of Charleston, S.C., and a member of the Williams family, he informed her of the sad condition of her youngest sister, Diana, and her daughter Cornelia, who had fallen into the hands of one John N. Maffit. of schooner Galveston, in the American Coast Survey, and he had offered them for sale.*

H. H. Garnet immediately sent word from Jamaica to James Crawford in Nantucket, and a group of island residents, described by Crawford as "distinguished gentlemen of Nantucket," set about negotiating for Diana's release. John Maffit replied that Diana's and Cornelia's freedom could be bought for $1,900. A short time later Maffit sent a second letter reporting that he had concluded the sale of Cornelia, and that he anticipated selling Diana within a month. From their two islands the brothers-in-law both appealed to Quakers in England to help raise the sum to ransom Diana and then to purchase Cornelia. With funds in hand, James Crawford—passing as white—traveled into the slave states, "managed to assume the character of a master, and having procured his niece, started for home. But he was in constant fear of being taken, and more than once his suspicions were aroused, supposing that plans were being devised to place him for violation of the laws of the state."

Crawford and Garnet lived on into the 1880s. With his missionary days in Jamaica behind him, Garnet was posted as United States minister to Liberia but died shortly after arrival in Monrovia. Crawford outlived Ann and Diana, served the African Baptist Church on Nantucket for forty years, and died on the island.

Both men had served island congregations in the midst of economic breakdown. By 1848, when James Crawford was asked to be pastor of the African Baptist Church, Nantucket's whaling industry had pitched into a decline from which it never recovered. Simultaneously, the sugar industry declined in Jamaica, partly because of tariff revisions, but also because Jamaica's freedmen refused to return to working for low wages in the service of their former masters. To fill the labor shortage, the planters recruited indentured laborers from India and China.[13] In the meantime, formerly enslaved Jamaicans, experienced in raising their own food and marketing their surplus, sought to acquire their own land for small, independent farms.

Searching for new ways out of profound economic depression, Nantucketers looked to commercial cranberry cultivation as one promising new revenue source. Jamaica, dealing with declining income from sugar, was receptive to investment in large-scale banana growing by the Boston Fruit Company. In the long run, neither cranberries nor bananas could sustain the two islands' economies, but they played a part in diversification of those economies. Nantucket's cranberry industry was ultimately stopped in its tracks by off-island overplanting. Lethal enemies to Jamaican banana plantations were European trade policies and a blight known as Panama disease.

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[13] Ingram 1997, pp. xx–xxi; Shepherd 1993 *passim*.

Just as Nantucket's inhabitants responded to unemployment in the 1850s by leaving the island in great numbers, so eventually did Jamaicans respond to poverty, population pressures, and lack of opportunity at home by emigration to Cuba, mainland Central America, the United States, Canada, and England. Eventually political events in some of those destinations and immigration restrictions to others turned the flow from outright relocation to seasonal migration on short-term work visas reissued from year to year.

In the second half of the 1800s as their neighbors left for the mainland, for California and beyond, the Nantucketers who stayed behind found their most lucrative asset to be their open spaces, cool sea breezes, and beaches lapped by clean ocean water. Nantucket women began renting rooms in their houses and serving meals to summer visitors. No longer employed in whaling, Nantucket men worked on the steamboats and operated large catboats for parties of holidaymakers. Massive wooden hotels sprang up around the island with horse-car and train service to transport guests from Steamboat Wharf to their lodgings and back again. Money was to be made by selling lightship baskets and ice cream to tourists, transporting visitors around the island, taking them out on the water, and generally entertaining them.

Charles Grant, whose father was born in Jamaica, was Nantucket's fish warden from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. *Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association, P1924*

To Nantucket in the 1880s came Charles and Rachel Grant. How and where they had met and married is a mystery. Charles had been born in Kingston, Jamaica, and Rachel Saco's birthplace was Winslow, Maine. Her mother was also from Maine, and her father had been born in Vermont. At the time of Rachel's birth in the mid-1850s, the African-American population of those states was small, and Winslow is located well inland from Portland, where a young woman might have met a seafaring man from far away. [14]

However their union came about, they were in their early thirties when they arrived in Nantucket with sufficient capital to open a saloon. Life on the island was not easy for them. In 1885 their eight-month-old son Frederick died and was buried in the cemetery behind Mill Hill. They had another son, Charles Jr., in 1888, and a third, Willie, the next year, but Willie didn't survive to see his fifth birthday. He died of "membranous croup" (probably diphtheria) and was laid to rest beside Frederick in 1894. Three years later, Charles Grant Sr. was buried in the Grant family plot. He was only forty-three years old when he died of "organic brain disease" in Taunton Hospital on the mainland.

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[14] The 1830 federal census lists under 650 African-Americans in the state of Vermont and fewer than a thousand in Maine. See Abrams, ed., 2001, pp. 39-40, 162-63. Rachel Grant's maiden name appears in various sources spelled sometimes as "Saco" and other times as "Seco."

Rachel and Charles Jr. were on their own, living in the house on Coon Street that Rachel Grant owned free and clear of any mortgage. Rachel took in a Connecticut-born foster child, Josephine Lawrence, who was four years younger than Charles, and sent both children to school. Josephine was one of the witnesses when the Reverend P. B. Covell married young Charles and Blanche Hawkins of Boston in 1912, but by 1920 Charles had been widowed and was living alone with his mother and fishing for a living.

Georgia-born Ruth Jones worked as a maid, dividing her years between Nantucket in the summers and Greenwich, Connecticut, in the winters. In the summer of 1933, she married Charles Grant, who was by then middle-aged. Shortly thereafter Charles was appointed Nantucket's fish warden, in which capacity he served until six months before his death in 1948. He only outlived his mother Rachel by three years, but Ruth lived on until 1985. With her burial—one of the most recent in the two-century-old cemetery—the family group was complete. All the Grant family graves are marked with handsome headstones. Their house on Coon Street, said to have been the repository for furnishings of the African Meeting House after its closure in 1912, was sold, and Nantucket memories of this Jamaican-American family began to slip away.[1]

Just as Nantucket had turned to tourism to restore its battered economy, so did Jamaica. While Nantucket has welcomed refugees from the heat and discomfort of northern cities in summer, cruises to Jamaica and the island's resorts offer respite from the cold and discomfort of northern cities in winter. Urban Jamaican women have a long tradition of lodging travelers, catering banquets, and marketing food and other goods. They have been professionals in accommodating transient visitors since the days of Jared Coffin's stay on their island.[2]

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Dutch elm disease took out the leafy canopy over Nantucket's Main Street, and a disease known as "lethal yellowing" carried off Jamaica's coconut palms, depriving both places of trademark symbols. Nonetheless, tourism continues as the backbone of both islands' economies. Jamaicans, moreover, have found dual employment in their own island's winter tourism and Nantucket's summer tourism.

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[1] Personal communication from Angeleen Campra: "I received this bit of information from Ruth Grant when I came to Nantucket in mid-late 70s for a brief visit. This is what I wrote then: 'One of the last Trustees and Deacons of the Church was Edgar Wilkes [who] died around 1956. Emma Wilkes gave Ruth Grant the pulpit and bible. Ma Grant (Ruth's mother-in-law [Rachel]) came to the Island around 1847, twenty years old, an Indian from China, Maine. She remembers it (the Meeting House) as an Indian Mission or Church—no minister that she could remember—more like lay services.'" This recollection is accurate on some accounts (Edgar Wilkes's wife's name was Emma, and Rachel Saco was born in Maine) but inaccurate on others. There is no record of Rachel Saco or Rachel Grant on Nantucket before 1880, and if census reporting is at all accurate, she was born after 1850. It is tantalizing to think that she may have been an Abenaki from Maine and that items from the African Meeting House passed into her keeping, but no evidence to support these assertions has yet come to light.

[2] For how free black and colored Jamaican women earned livelihoods through taking in boarders, cooking, and merchandizing prior to emancipation in 1834, with the texts of newspaper advertisements, see Boa 1993, *passim*.

The Jamaican flag flies at St. Paul's rectory on August 26, 2002. *Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association,* (photo by Frances Karttunen).

At the opening of the twenty-first century Jamaican seasonal workers have become a visible presence and an especially audible presence on Nantucket. Jamaican Creole English flows between check-out aisles in the grocery stores, rollicks about restaurant kitchens, echoes in hotel corridors as rooms are made up for the day, and ricochets through shuttle buses. For local naturalists, the arrival of Jamaican voices in April foretells the imminent passage of migratory birds following the same route from the Caribbean to New England. (Jamaica's lovely national bird, the streamertail hummingbird, stays home, however, and does not migrate.) When Nantucket's tourist season ends, the seasonal workers hurry home. Shortly after Thanksgiving, Nantucket's streets ring with departure calls: "When are you going?" "Tomorrow." "Sunday." "Today." But every year—despite the dark, damp, and chilly weather and despite visa restrictions—some Jamaicans winter over on Nantucket, and babies are born on Nantucket with all their grandparents in Kingston.

The Jamaican presence on Nantucket began in 1989 and gathered force in the 1990s after Hurricane Gilbert wrought havoc in the Caribbean and just as the tide of Irish workers in the United States began to run out. For Nantucket businesses Jamaican seasonal workers have been a godsend like no other. Experienced from work at home in what has come to be called the "hospitality industry," they can arrive early and stay late, as college students cannot. From about a hundred people contracted to work on the island at the beginning of the 1990s, the number rose to between five and six hundred a year in the course of the decade. Although Jamaican women are more visible in their employment than men, the numbers of men and women coming to work on the island are about equal. [3]

Jamaicans make heroic sacrifices to fill Nantucket's spring-through-autumn jobs. They are away from home for months at a time. They often leave young children behind with aging parents. They give up privacy and family life in order to earn for their families' needs and for their future, Despite their vulnerability as contract workers on short-term visas, they put a good face on what they do. One rarely hears anything but cheerful Jamaican voices.

There is reason for this positive, uncomplaining demeanor beyond any innate propensity for good cheer. Holders of work visas have their residence in the United States at the pleasure of their employers. Termination of employment, whether initiated by employer or employee, terminates the visa as well. The Immigration and Naturalization Service may be slow to act, but for a visa holder who has left a job or lost it, the threat of deportation always looms. Some Nantucket businesses are and have been exemplary in employee relations. Others have been less so, but from Jamaicans one is much more likely to hear about job-satisfaction than dissatisfaction.

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[3] Telephone interview with Jane Zimmerman of Antioch Associates, a contracting agency, on May 15, 2002.

A century and a half after Nancy Gardner Prince went to Jamaica on behalf of Jamaican women, Jamaican women and men began using Daniel Gardner’s home island as a resource. His daughter would have been surprised and gratified by this unexpected turn of history.