

MOUNT HOPE

UNCOVERING BURIED HISTORY



Saturnin Gilbert Mauge
President of Local 900 Union

Stones and Stories

Adaptation of an interview with Mrs. Gladys Mauge by Anita Cumberbatch. Published in Afropanavisions, 2014.

Saturnin Gilbert Mauge was born in the city of Colón, Republic of Panamá, on November 29, 1929. At the age of three, he lost his mother, and his father returned with the family to his homeland of Martinique. The family soon returned to Panamá and settled in Gatún, at the Atlantic entrance to the Panamá Canal.

Mr. Mauge studied at Gatún Elementary School and La Boca Normal School and attended the University of Panamá. He later earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C. He was an educator, a union activist, the President of Local 900, and the Vice President of the international AFSCME for two consecutive terms. During negotiations of the Panamá Canal Treaties, Mr. Mauge served as a consultant.

During U.S. control of the Panamá Canal and the Canal Zone, Panamanian workers, descendants of the "Silvermen" who built the Canal, faced an arduous struggle for unionization and equality.

Continued, next page.



The History of Mount Hope Cemetery

Mount Hope Cemetery was initially called Monkey Hill Cemetery by the French, who buried their workers there because of the monkey colonies in the area. West Indian laborers, who worked on the Panamá Railroad (1850-1855) during the Gold Rush, were among the first to be buried there. Bankrolled by American financiers during the California Gold Rush, the Panamá Railroad made it easier for Americans on the East Coast of the U.S. to traverse from the Atlantic side of the isthmus of Panamá to the Pacific coast on their way to California.

The Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal Interoceanique de Panamá, which spearheaded the canal project, was the first to employ West Indian laborers. When the French abandoned the project and the U.S. took over, the U.S. Isthmian Commission hired West Indian laborers to work on the final stages of the canal's construction.

During the American construction period, Mount Hope Cemetery was established in 1914 by the United States as the burial ground for West Indian Silver Roll workers and their families who labored on the Panamá Canal. From 1904 to 1914, approximately 45,000 to 50,000 West Indian laborers worked on the project, though not all at the same time. During peak construction periods, approximately 31,000-35,000 workers were employed simultaneously, with West Indians comprising roughly 75-80% of the total workforce. *Continued, next page.*

Stones and Stories, Contd.

Their attempt to create a union that truly represented them was viewed as a threat by U.S. Panamá Canal workers, who believed they were solely responsible for operating and maintaining the Panamá Canal and the Canal Zone. This caused tensions between U.S. and Panamanian Canal Zone workers.

In 1957, he was elected President of the Local 900 Panamanian Government Workers Union and was reelected for eight consecutive terms. Local 900 was established in 1959, after 34 years of opposition from U.S. workers' dominance over the Canal Zone Central Union and the Metal Trade Council (CLUMTC).

Despite being labeled a “vende patria” by some and a “communist” by others, Mr. Mauge never lost sight of the struggles of Panamanian workers under the Canal Zone regime. He regularly addressed the U.S. Congress, exposing the disparate and unfair treatment of Panamanian Canal Zone workers and advocating for the extension of benefits to all Federal workers without distinction of nationality. For example, he exposed how salary increases for U.S. Federal workers were never extended to Panamanian Federal workers. Mr. Mauge carried out this mission with humility, dignity, integrity, and acumen.

In 1979, Mr. Mauge declined to run for office again, opting to return to full-time teaching. Nevertheless, he never abandoned the fight for equality. He later became Vice President of the International AFSCME, always at the forefront of workers' rights.

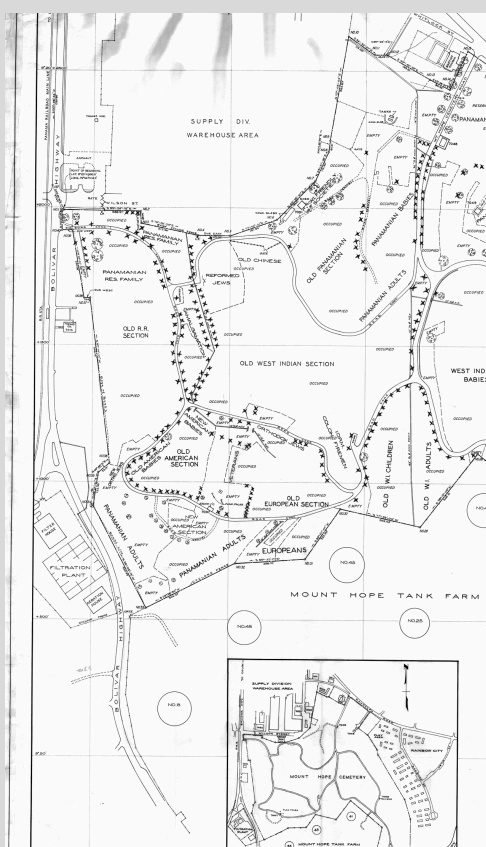
“Sat”, as he was affectionately called, was a pleasant and kind person, always with a smile and a disposition to assist anyone with their concerns. Saturnin Gilbert Mauge married Gladys Wright Bonito, also an educator, and they had three children: Antonio Richelieu, Velasquez Saturnino, and Carmen Estrellita.

Mr. Mauge died on January 2, 1993, at the age of 63 and is buried at Mount Hope Cemetery. A premature death, it was felt profoundly by his family, union members, and friends. Mr. Mauge will eternally be remembered as a champion of the Panamánian Canal Zone workers.

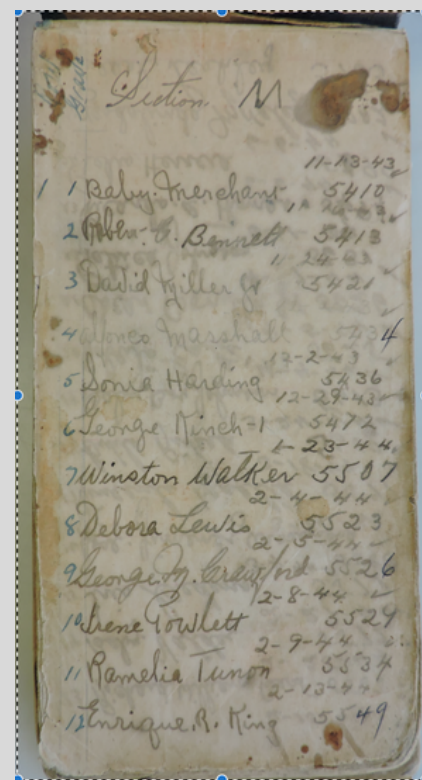
The majority came from Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique, and other Caribbean islands. These workers faced harsh conditions, performing the most dangerous manual labor—excavation, dynamite work, and railroad construction—often for significantly lower wages than white American workers doing similar jobs.

The West Indian contribution was crucial to the canal's completion, but came at a tremendous human cost. Estimates suggest around 5,600 workers died during the American construction period alone (with thousands more during the earlier French attempt), and a disproportionate number were West Indian laborers who faced greater exposure to disease, accidents, and hazardous working conditions.

The cemetery is organized into sections: West Indian/Black, Panamanian, Chinese, American, French, and Jewish. Sections are identified by letters.



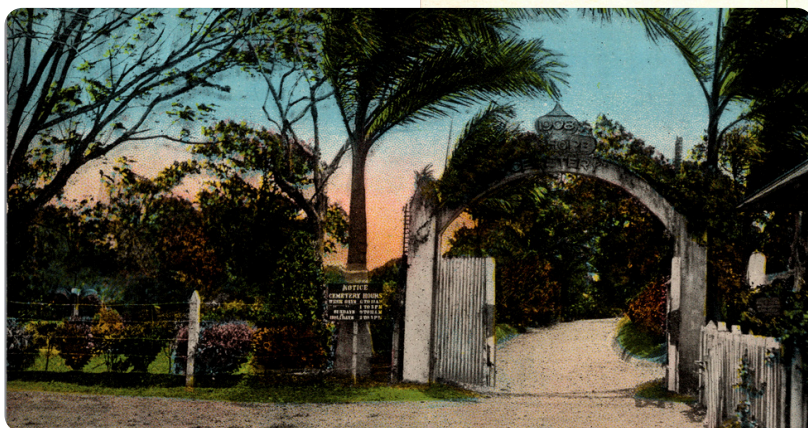
Mt. Hope Vicinity Map, 1978
Partial view of West Indian Sections



Mt. Hope, Section M, Burial Record

One of CGM's missions has been to collect and digitize the burial records of our ancestors at Mt. Hope. If you would like to help us type the information into the database, please reach out.

Archives and Records



Original Post Card of MT. Hope Cemetery - (front and back)



Courtesy of the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries. John R. Nemmers, Curator and Betsy H. Bemis, Associate Curator.



Click on the image to view the extensive collection of artifacts from the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone. Many descendants of the "Silver People" have donated artifacts.

Click here.

The Work Continues

Although we have been pressing for a face-to-face meeting with the Minister of Culture since August (the request was made via a formal letter), we have not yet had success.

Nevertheless, our constant pressure on the Administrator of the Corozal Cemetery allowed us to meet with the Director of Cultural Patrimony. This meeting resulted in the grass in Corozal Cemetery being cut for the **first time since December 2024**, just in time for the November 2, 2025 national day of remembering the dead.

The effort to hold a face-to-face meeting with the Minister will continue, as we deem this essential to establishing a healthy relationship with the Ministry of Culture and ensuring the most appropriate long-term care of the Corozal Cemetery.



Mt. Hope Cemetery

Grounds Keeping

Mt. Hope is presenting new challenges. In a meeting with the mayor, he informed CGM representatives that budget constraints would end grass cutting in that cemetery in December of 2025.

There is a dire need for the resurgence of a substantial number of CGM participants to come together and push for long-term government commitment to the care of Mt. Hope Cemetery

Community Engagement and Fundraising



Fiestas Patrias BINGO! Fundraiser 11.04.2025



30th Annual Panamian Parade Brooklyn 10.11.2025

I thought it was so important to take this day, All Souls Day, to highlight that people might be looking at it and saying, "Ah! The cemetery! I don't care about the cemetery, it's dead people."



Live with Genetta All Souls Day 11.02.2025

They are looking at it that way, but if you look at the Jewish Cemetery, the Chinese Cemetery, the Military Cemetery, they are there maintained for a purpose, and it hurts me in my heart to know that we not giving ourselves credit. Knowing what I know . . . and my grandfather had been part of completing the Panama Canal, it's only right to have a monument and to don't let it fall apart and say, "Once upon a time there was this . . ."

- Genetta Staple

Learn with Us

Are you a first-, second, or third-generation Panamanian American, or did you immigrate to the U.S. as a child? Did your ancestors immigrate from the West Indies to work on the Canal? Are you interested in connecting with your ancestors' history while honoring your family's legacy? Are you a Panamanian or West Indian parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle who would love the opportunity to share in your younger relatives' learning? Scan the QR code and complete the brief survey to indicate your interest in joining our virtual intergenerational book club (projected start, spring 2026).



*Scan here or
email us.*

Visit Us

CGM: <https://www.cgmceemeteryfoundation.org/>

Visit us here to learn about the work we are doing and how you can help.

Pan Caribbean Sankofa: <https://www.cgmceemeteryfoundation.org/pan-caribbean-sankofa> - Visit us here to learn about the collection of oral histories of West Indian Canal workers and their families held at the University of Florida's George A. Smathers Libraries archives.



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Help Keep the Legacy Alive

- Become our Youth Legacy Ambassador
- Join the Newsletter Committee
- Contribute Newsletter features and share information about ancestors buried at CGM to spotlight
- Join our Town Hall meetings (contact us to be added to email and WhatsApp group)
- Share this Newsletter within and outside the Panamanian community

Make an End-of-Year Donation

To fulfill our mission, CGM relies on the financial donations from our supporters like you. Please donate whatever you can to our efforts. Donations can be made directly to the following:

Banco General (Panama)

Cuenta Corriente: #03-38-01-125719-1

Nombre: Fundacion para la Preservacion de los

Cementerios de Corozal-Gatun y Monte Esperanza

C-G-M Cemetery Preservation Foundation (U.S.A.)

P.O. Box 120663

Clermont, Florida 34712

Zelle: cgmcemeteries@gmail.com

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