

# The History of *Railroads/ways in Jamaica*

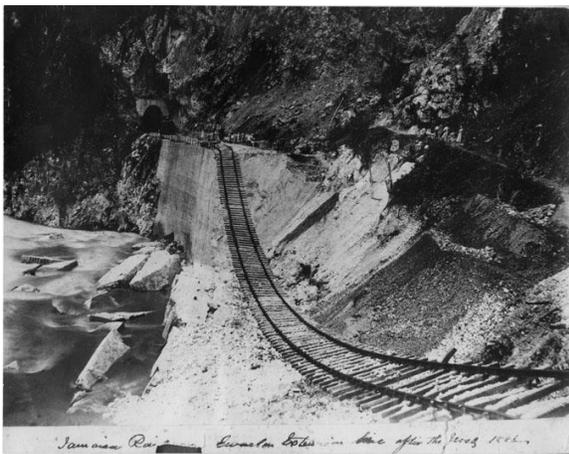
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*Engine 54 on its last run.*



*Diesel electronic locomotive*



*The flood of 1886*



*Gregory Park Railway Station*

**Up to the early 1840's** there were no railways in Jamaica as the many mountains made the laying of the rails a difficult job. The Jamaican Government also did not have sufficient funds for this venture.

**Two English brothers**, William and David Smith, asked the Government to allow them to build the railway and this was to become the first railway in the British West Indies. They began building the railway in 1844 on a standard gauge line (i.e. 4'8 1/2" between the inner rails), across the Liguanea Plains, from Kingston to Spanish Town. The survey plans and estimates for the line were prepared by James Anderson, a civil engineer of Edinburgh. The cost of the original undertaking, including buildings and rolling stock, was £222, 250.

**By late 1845 the railway was completed** and was subsequently opened on November 21, 1845 by the Governor, Lord Elgin. Invited were, His Excellency the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, several heads of departments, civil and military personnel, the honourable members of the Council and Assembly, and a large number of wealthy and influential members of the community. The railway was 14 miles long and ran from Kingston to Spanish Town. The first engine was called “Projector” and it was run on steam. The band of the first West Indies Regiment took its stand in the last third class carriages and added to the festivity of the scene. People lined the route and cheered and waved as the train went by at a slow pace.

**From its opening until 1879**, the line was operated by the Jamaica Railway Company, owned by the Smith brothers. David Smith was the manager of the line and his brother William, the first civil engineer. The Government bought the railway company in 1879 after which they laid 24 ½” mile extensions from Old Harbour via May Pen to Porus and this was opened on February 26, 1885. An additional 14 ½” mile extension from Spanish Town to Angels to Bog Walk, to Linstead and then on to Ewarton, was opened on August 13<sup>th</sup> of the same year. In order to lay the line to Bog Walk, the Rio Cobre River had to be crossed. Four tunnels were built, the longest of which was the Gibraltar tunnel near Bog Walk, which is 730 yards long.

Despite the many lines which had been laid, the north coast of the island had still not been reached. The Government saw that they would not be able to pay for the laying of the lines across the mountains. Therefore, in 1890, they sold the company to the West Indian Improvement Company.

**In 1894, the line to Montego Bay was opened.** This line was 66 miles long and ran from Porus to Montego Bay. The line from Kingston to Montego Bay was now about 113 miles long and its tunnels were cut through rocks. The Port Antonio 54 mile extension from Bog Walk was reached in 1896. It included the 468 ft. bridge over the Rio Grande River. Until the opening of the new 780 ft. bridge at Sandy Gully, it was Jamaica’s longest railway bridge. The mountain lines were now all laid.

**The construction of these lines created a vast drain** on the resources of the West India Improvement Company and like the Smith Brothers they did not make the success of operating the railway as they had hoped. In 1896 and 1898 they defaulted on the first mortgage bonds. In 1898 the shareholders assumed control of the line, finally defaulting to the Government in April 1900. The end result was good for the government, it had sold the line at a handsome profit, had the two most difficult sections constructed for it, and now had control of the line again. It is interesting to note that the mountain sections of Jamaican railways are among the most difficult standard gauge mountain railways in the world.

**In 1900, Mr. James Richmond took over as General Manager** of the railway for the Government, and set about improving the operations of the system. More locomotives were ordered including three unusual Kitson-Mayer articulated locomotives. In 1907 the first of various classes of tender engines were ordered from the famous American firm of Baldwins. The total route mileage – i.e., place to place mileage, not counting sidings, was at this stage almost 185 miles. Many new lines were laid after the Government took over. In April 1913 a short spur line from Linstead to New Works was opened and was followed later in the year by a 13 mile line from May Pen, along the banks of the Rio Minho to Chapleton. The ten mile extension to Frankfield from Chapleton was authorized at the same time and the contract was awarded to the Canadian firm of Bedford Construction. It was to include a 400 yard tunnel and a 100 ft. high viaduct. The line was not to be opened, however, until 1925. In 1914, the 133 miles journey from Kingston to Montego Bay, took 7 ¾ hours.

**1938 saw the introduction of diesel traction to the system**, in the form of three diesel rail cars. During the World War, various engines were brought in by the U.S. Transportation Corps. Five large tender engines, the biggest work in Jamaica, were among these, along with a few small shunting engines. The War also saw the construction of two new lines- a two and a half mile line from Bodles to the U.S naval base at Port Esquivel and a six and a half mile line from Logans Junction, near May Pen to the U.S. Air Base at Fort Simmonds, now called Vernam Fields.

**1958 saw the opening of a line from Linstead** along the site of the original Ewarton line, to Pleasant Farm Alcan Bauxite Works some two miles away from Ewarton. Special hopper trains ran from there to Port Esquivel via Spanish Town. At Kirkvine, between Williamsfield and Kendal, a spur line was constructed to the Alcan Kirkvine Alumina Works. Trains also ran from there to Port Esquivel. From 1<sup>st</sup> May 1960, the Fort Simmonds line was closed and uprooted as the upper three miles of the line had been taken over by Alcan Jamaica Ltd., which set about constructing a line from Woodside to the Mocho area of Clarendon to carry Bauxite to Rocky Point. At Jacobs Hut, where the Montego Bay line crossed the Mandeville main road, the new lines met both. This crossing had already been the scene of many road/rail crashes, and as a result, flashing lights and boom barriers were installed to protect the crossing. This was also the only place on Jamaican Railways where semaphore signals had been installed to control train movements.

The Woodside to Rocky Point line owned by Alcan, but maintained and operated by the Jamaica Railway Corporation was brought into use in July 1963. Apart from the Jamaica Railway Corporation lines, there were also a number of other railway lines in the island. Leading among these was the Kaiser Bauxite Company's railroad, a Standard Gauge line running from the bauxite mines at fellowship, near Mandeville, to Kaiser's loading place at Port Kaiser near Alligator Pond.

**In early 1966 the Jamaica Railway Society was formed.** This was a society whose membership was open to anyone interested in railways, either professionally or as a hobby.

**By 1973 JRC's operational deficit had risen** to J\$3.4 million, and in 1975 it was nearing J\$4 million and carrying a J\$11 million loan. The government was paying over J\$1.4 million in subsidy to keep the island's trains running. However, the financial crisis had led to a backlog of deferred maintenance, with stock and buildings also neglected. In 1974 the May Pen to Frankfield line closed, whilst the Bog Walk to Port Antonio line closed in 1975.

**Public pressure forced the government to reopen** the Port Antonio line at a cost of J\$1.4 million in 1977. The condition of the track resulted in the line closing once more in 1978. Hurricane Allen in 1980 damaged much of the JRC railway system, and totally destroyed a section of the Port Antonio line running along the coast between Buff Bay and Orange Bay.

In October 1992 public rail transport services finally ceased operating in Jamaica, although private industrial lines continue to operate in part today.

**Public passenger service resumed in the island,** for the first time since February 1992, when an inaugural train operated from May Pen to Linstead on April 16, 2011. Regular service was planned to begin in July, with three round-trips per day between Spanish Town and Linstead, with extensions to Williamsfield and Gregory Park opening in September and December, respectively. The railway service has again proven to be inefficient and is therefore again on hold.

## References

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