

store: clothing, basic provisions and machetes for hand-to-hand combat with the jungle. He had some banana cuttings that he had picked up on his way to Costa Rica while passing through Panama. He planted them. The fruit would grow quite quickly and he could sell it to the men.

Some Jamaicans had already been hired to clear the jungle and swamp but Minor wanted hardened US labour. He took the project's steamboat to New Orleans to recruit from its waterfront bars and flophouses. At a dollar a day and food, many occupants of the city's jail were also keen to offer their services. As they lined up on the dockside ready to embark, the police chief couldn't believe his luck in getting rid of them.

Keith's recruits included a good number of US Civil War veterans. Some even had tropical experience of a kind. The latter had been William Walker's men. Walker was another Scots emigré and had come to the US in the 1840s. He had also set off to chance his luck in Central America. His methods of extending the US frontier were more Old World than New and in the 1850s he had declared himself King of Nicaragua. The US government in Washington, enamoured of this regal idea, gave him its support.

His mistake was to make an enemy of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the US railway and shipping magnate who had established a presence in the area with the intention of building the trans-isthmian canal. When Walker fired on Vanderbilt's boats on the San Juan River between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, Vanderbilt hired Central American mercenaries to retaliate. Walker fled for the US aboard an American gunboat. He later returned to pronounce himself king again, though he only made it as far as Nicaragua's northern neighbour, Honduras. Here in 1860 he was put against a wall and shot.

Many of Keith's new employees jumped ship in Havana, the first port of call made to take on sugar. When the boat ran aground on the Chinchorro Bank in a night storm off Yucatán, Keith and a few loyalists had to hold off the rest at gunpoint from rushing the lifeboats. Only when the storm eased next day were the malcontents persuaded to help jettison cargo and re-float the boat.

All but a few of this shipment and others that followed died working in Limón. No proper records were kept but the first twenty-five miles of the Costa Rican railway were estimated to have cost four thousand lives. Malaria and yellow fever were the main causes, though no one at the time knew of the part played by the Atlantic coast's especially virulent mosquitoes. Word went around among New Orleans' dwindling supply of labour that Keith was an employer to avoid. He was obliged to turn almost exclusively to recruiting Jamaicans.

The railway advanced only four miles in the first year. No proper survey had been done. The money ran out thanks to mishandled bond issues in London. With the Civil War only just behind it, the US was no good for credit. The Franco-Prussian war had put Europe's continental bankers out of commission and the bankers in London saw the Keiths and the Costa Ricans coming. Most of the loans raised went in interest payments.

In 1873 the markets crashed. Henry Keith went home claiming Costa Rica owed him money and calling for US intervention. Still engaged in its period of post-Civil War reconstruction, Washington confined its action to a letter of polite enquiry. Henry returned to Costa Rica only to join the multitude struck down by disease. He died leaving both the railway and his younger brother Minor stranded.

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