Sugar cane or Saccharum officinarum was introduced to the New World by Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. His choice of sugar cane among other goods at his stopover at Canary Islands was to become as valuable as the precious gold which Columbus so ardently sought. It became the wellspring of economic wealth for many New World colonies.

Sugar cane is revered for its high sucrose or sugar content, which is stored in the stem or stalk. The basic principles of sugar-making from the cane are the extraction of the juice and its concentration to a dense syrup in which sugar separates by crystallization. By-products of sugar include molasses which can be used in the production of rum, and bagasse which can be used as fuel. Sugar is a key ingredient for several industries – candy and other food industries, the manufacture of some chemicals as well as soft drinks.

In Tobago, sugar cane was introduced by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and in Trinidad, a century later while under Spanish rule. The crop was initially used for domestic consumption until commercial production was introduced with the first mills.

The introduction of ‘sweet gold’ into Trinidad and Tobago did not only bring economic wealth but was also the catalyst for our ethnic and cultural diversity, as many people from all corners of the world came to work and manage labour in the industry. The sugar industry was instrumental in shaping our nation socially, politically and culturally.
Although sugar was produced in Trinidad under Spanish rule, its commercial production did not commence until the 1780s, after the Spanish Crown issued the Cédula (Decree) of Population. Proclaimed in 1783, the Cédula attracted wealthy French planters, including free Africans and colonists, by offering a grant of limitless virgin soils along with tax concessions and other benefits. The French planters were accompanied by their slaves and land was allotted proportionate to the number of slaves. The influx by the French settlers significantly transformed the economy and society.

In 1782, the Otaheite variety of cane was introduced by St. Hilaire Begorrat, a planter from Martinique, and the first sugar mill was established in 1787 by Picot de La Peyrouse at his Tragarete Estate. The Lapeyrouse Cemetery today stands on the site of that estate. Within the next decade over 150 sugar estates entered commercial production of ‘muscovado’ sugar with about 130 mills, mostly mule-driven. By the time the British captured Trinidad in 1797, sugar had become the most important export crop. The sugar industry subsequently became the backbone of the economy until the early twentieth century.
After British capture of Trinidad in 1797, British colonists and investors flocked to its shores to partake in its prosperity from sugar. Stephen Lushington, a British capitalist, erected the first steam-engine at his plantation in Corozal, Corina in 1804 and by 1810 eight were in operation, along with nine water mills.

The sugar plantation was distinguished by large estates, labour of enslaved Africans, alienation by the largest landowners, rigid social divisions based on race, colour and legal status, and labour-intensive methods of cultivation and manufacture. The plantation required an injection of large sums of money and a large, skilled and disciplined labour force.

Exports in sugar continued to climb until the industry was crippled by the labour shortage after Emancipation and the effects of the Sugar Duties Act in 1846. The Act provided for the equalization of duties on foreign and British West Indian exports of sugar to Britain. The loss of preferential treatment was worsened by a financial crisis in Britain from 1847-8. The result was a drastic fall in sugar prices, a loss of confidence in the sugar estates by British firms, and business failure especially on small estates.

Signs of recovery from the crisis became apparent by 1849 following the sanctioning of Indian immigration, reductions in import duties, and revival of confidence by British capitalists. Thereafter major transformations in the sugar industry occurred, including the amalgamation of estates, injection of British capital, the modernization of the manufacturing process through the introduction of vacuum pans and centrifugal technologies, the construction of central factories, and the birth of the cane farming sector. By 1880 sugar production was 53,436 tons compared to 12,228 tons in 1840.
“As rich as a Tobago planter”
– Tobago’s Sugar Industry

Tobago’s sugar industry had a much earlier start to that of Trinidad’s industry. The earliest indications of sugar in Tobago were from the Dutch who introduced it in 1655, along with other crops. It was not until under British occupation from 1783, that sugar was first reported by Gobers, Claude of Bushy Park in St. Mary’s parish. By 1774, over 10,000 hogshead large cask holding about 34 gallons of sugar was exported. By 1790 sugar cane assumed importance as the primary crop and exports peaked in 1798. The high profits enjoyed in the 1790s prompted the coining of the phrase in London, “as rich as a Tobago planter” to describe a person of considerable wealth.

By 1843, after the enslaved were emancipated, a system of profit sharing known as metayage was introduced to improve sugar production. Hit by a disastrous hurricane in 1847, and by the closure of the West Indian Bank in that year, many planters were forced to abandon their estates and the industry began to decline. The situation was aggravated by the Sugar Depression of the 1880s and 1890s when sugar prices fell sharply due to competition from European beet sugar. In 1884 the London firm of A.M. Gillespie and Company, which monopolized agriculture and shipping and owned four-fifths of Tobago’s sugar estates, went into bankruptcy. It led to the collapse of Tobago’s sugar economy and the island becoming a ward of the colony of Trinidad and Tobago in 1899.
Labour and Sugar

A large skilled, disciplined and reliable labour force was required for the labour-intensive work on sugar plantations. In Trinidad and Tobago, numerous sources of labour were used, including enslaved and free Africans, Chinese, Portuguese and Indians.

The enslaved African workers, most of whom were brought in under the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, had the physically demanding task of preparing fields for cultivation under extreme climatic conditions. Enslaved persons also worked in the mills as skilled workers.

Faced with an acute labour shortage following emancipation of the enslaved in 1838, the Colonial Government turned to immigrant labour. Various experimental immigration schemes were used which included West Indians, liberated Africans from West Africa, Portuguese from Madeira, and Chinese from China’s southern Guangdong province. These schemes however were unsuccessful in providing a sustained and manageable labour force.

India was eventually settled on as the main source of cheap labour and from 1845 to 1917, Indian immigrants arrived under the indentureship system, with the guarantee of a free passage back home or a free grant of land at the end of their tenure. Those who accepted land either continued to work on the sugar plantations or became cane farmers. Cane farmers formed their own organization, the “Trinidad Island Wide Cane Farmers’ Association” in the 1930s, while sugar workers established their own union, the “All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers’ Trade Union”, led by Adrian Coka Rienzi, in 1937.
In the last forty years of the nineteenth century, British concerns were consolidating their hold on the most productive estates in Trinidad. The French Creoles who had established the estates from the 1780s were no longer the owners of the sugar estates. The Colonial Company led in the amalgamation of estates and modernization of production at its factory at Usine St Madeleine, using railways to transport cane to the factory. Other British concerns followed in the same vein. Central factories were also established at Breton Castle, Orange Grove, Reform and Woodford Lodge, eventually giving rise to the development of cane farming in 1882, to a steady supply of cane had to be assured for optimum sugar production at the factories. Cane farming accelerated in the 1880s and 1890s when the sugar prices were at an all-time low due to competition from beet sugar produced in Europe, the exports of which were subsidized. The price of sugar was further depressed from 1895-97, when the USA imposed heavy duties on British West Indian sugar. Relief however came in 1898 when the USA imposed duties on beet sugar imports and paved the way for entry of British West Indian sugar. In 1892 the Brussels Convention ended the payment of subsidies on beet sugar exports and Canada offered a general preference to British West Indian sugar. Following these developments, Trinidad and Tobago was able to enjoy modest prosperity in the early years of the twentieth century, particularly with the coming of the multinational British conglomerate of Tate and Lyle.

In later years, the country’s fortunes from sugar were influenced by the price of sugar negotiated under trade agreements such as the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement and the European Economic Community’s Lome Convention, as well as by other developments, including the oil boom and American occupation during World War II, which increased pressure on the industry’s labour supply.
The twentieth century saw the dawn of a new era in Trinidad and Tobago’s sugar industry. Through mechanization, the sugar industry was revitalized. A large part of this was due to Tate and Lyle, a multinational British conglomerate. Prior to the introduction of Tate and Lyle, there were eight sugar companies of which three were locally owned. The history of Tate and Lyle in Trinidad begins in 1937 when its subsidiary, Caroni Ltd, was established.

From 1937 to 1962 the company actively pursued its policy to acquire and amalgamate sugar estates into Caroni Ltd. Caroni Ltd was established in 1937 due to the amalgamation of the Waterhouse and Caroni Estates which were acquired in that same year. In 1955, they acquired the Esperanza and Bronte Estates, the Woodford Lodge Estate in 1961 and the Ste Madeline Estate in 1962. With its acquisitions, the company dominated the sugar industry.

Caroni Ltd was instrumental in pioneering the further development of the sugar industry by initiating:
- Bulk transport and handling (1950)
- Industrial use of bagasse
- Mechanization of field labour
- The development of new varieties of sugar cane (1964)
- Profit Sharing Scheme for personnel (1956)
- Retirement Scheme for personnel (1960)

The 1970s saw Tate and Lyle’s reluctance to invest in the sugar industry due to the decline in profitability. Integral to this was also a shift in the policies of the Trinidad and Tobago Government which moved from an economic policy of Arabization by invitation to State Sponsored Capitalism with foreign investors. This led to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, acquiring 51% of ordinary shares in 1970. By 1975 the government had acquired the remaining shares thus liquidating Caroni Ltd and registering a new company Caroni (1975) Ltd.

QUOTATION: Jean Claude Giacottino described Caroni Ltd in 1962 when he states:

“It is responsible for 90% of the grinding of sugar cane in its four sugar factories: Brechin Castle, Ste Madeline, Reform and Woodford Lodge. Its production capacity exceeds 200,000 tonnes of sugar per year. At harvest time it employs as much labour as all the oil companies together (about 15,000 persons of which 4000 are employed in the central factories); it buys cane from 80% of small planters. Some 150,000 persons are dependent on it. It constitutes an agro-industrial entity whose power could exert an influence on the newly independent state.”

(Quoted from Claude Giacottino, 1962.)

THE EMERGENCE OF CARONI LTD
In 1977, cane was grown on some 50,000 acres of land in Trinidad, using a ratooning plant, one which sprouted new plants from the roots after being harvested. Manual, mechanical and aerial methods of weed and pest control were employed, with the froghopper and other pests making the most demands.

**Harvesting**

Harvest time was from January to late June when the cane would usually be burnt before harvest. The cane was transported using animal-drawn or other forms of transport to locations where they were weighed and recorded. An efficient means of transportation from the field to the factory was organized by Caroni Ltd, using locomotives with 10-ton rail cars to accompany them, as well as 10-ton cane haulage trucks. At the factory, the loads of cane were tipped into a pit and a conveyor would take the cane to the crushing mill.

**Manufacturing**

At the mill, the cane passed through shredding knives and crushing rollers to expose the sweet cane underneath, after which the cane was crushed with squeezing rollers under a pressure of some 500 tons, and sprayed at intervals with water. The next process was heating the extracted juice and adding lime, which caused much of the impurities to come together, after which they were either skimmed off or allowed to settle as sediment. A clear cane juice was produced which had to be concentrated in evaporators to allow for large quantities of water to come out. Next, the concentrated juice was boiled in steam-heated vacuum pans until a certain percentage of sugar crystals and syrup were produced. This mixture then went into centrifugal machines – tubs with perforated walls – to allow for the separation of the sugar crystals – "raw cane sugar" from the dark syrup or cane molasses. Granulated or refined sugar was manufactured at a refinery at Ste. Madeleine, which was the only refinery in operation in the eastern Caribbean.
THE RISE AND FALL OF KING SUGAR

Caroni Ltd was more than just about sugar. In 1918, the Caroni Distillery was established and produced well-established brand names such as Golden Glow, Caroni Super Light White, Mountain Dew and Puncheon. In 1975, the Distillery became part of the Government Holdings of Caroni (1975) Ltd's rum division called Rum Distillers Limited. In 2001, the Government's 49% holding was sold to Angostura and a year later the Distillery closed with the impending closure of the sugar industry, which had guaranteed its sustained supply of molasses. Faced with declining profitability, and an unfavourable global sugar market marked by a loss in preferential treatment to ACP countries in its exports of raw sugar to Britain under the Sugar Protocols of the Lome Convention, and competition from the US artificial sweeteners market, Caroni (1975) Ltd embarked on a programme of diversification in the 1980s. This diversification consisted of ventures into large and small ruminant farming, shrimp farming and fruit cultivation on Caroni lands.
THE RISE AND FALL OF KING SUGAR

End Of An Era

Despite the best efforts to revitalize the sugar industry in the twentieth century, Caroni (1975) Ltd. remained unprofitable and became overshadowed by the oil industry. In 2003, Caroni (1975) Ltd. was closed.

Its legacy however remains in the countless archival records left by Caroni (1975) Ltd and others involved in the industry. Through the Sugar Archives Centre, which now houses these records, the evidence of our 'bitter-sweet' past is preserved – in particular the voices of those who have toiled tirelessly in the cane fields, factories, clinics, laboratories and offices.

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End of an era for Caroni

Preserving sugar’s history

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

End of an era

More recently, the All Sugars and General Workers Trust, often involved in the National Industrial Co-operative, has done its own share of preserving the memory of Caroni. The former workers no longer want to stop the Caroni DNA from being preserved as a national heritage. They have done their share in the past, and be it through clear communication, they would like to do their share in the future, and we are sure that they would receive the support of the people to ensure that the package this workers will receive will be to the benefit of all involved. The result will mean to be in a trading company as we know it, people will live to work, to trade, and enjoy the benefits of the trade. In the words of Caroni CEO Church, “the sugar company is not one.”

In 2001, a report on the then privatized National Sugar Company was written. The report was presented to the then Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Patrick Manning.

The closure of Caroni is the end of an era.