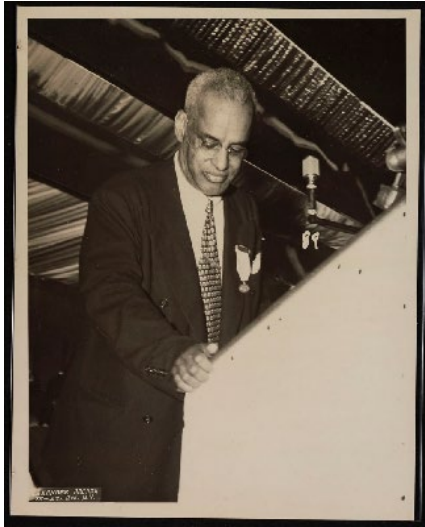


ASHLEY TOTTEN (1884 – 1963)



EARLY LIFE

Ashley Totten was born in Frederiksted, St. Croix, in the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) in 1884. As a young man, he migrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities, joining many other Caribbean immigrants who settled in northern cities during the early twentieth century.

During 1905, he had migrated to the United States, where, after serving in the U.S. Navy, he became a Pullman porter, a job both prestigious and grueling for African American men at the time. Pullman porters were responsible for assisting passengers on railroad sleeping cars, but they often worked long hours for low wages and faced racial discrimination and

unfair working conditions.

Experiencing these challenges firsthand inspired Totten to become involved in the labor movement.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Played a key role in organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American labor union recognized by the American Federation of Labor.
- Worked closely with labor leader A. Philip Randolph to recruit and organize Pullman porters.
- Served as the first vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.
- Advocated for fair wages, reasonable working hours, improved working conditions, and respect for Black workers.
- Helped strengthen the labor movement by encouraging workers to unite and advocate for their rights.

CHALLENGES FACED

Totten faced significant opposition from the Pullman Company, which discouraged employees from joining labor unions and often retaliated against workers who organized. He also encountered racism and discrimination in both the workplace and society.

Many workers feared losing their jobs if they supported the union. Despite these risks, Totten continued organizing and advocating for better treatment of Pullman porters.

LASTING IMPACT ON THE VIRGIN ISLANDS AND BEYOND

Ashley Totten's work helped improve wages, working conditions, and labor protections for thousands of African American railroad workers across the United States.

The success of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters demonstrated the power of collective action and inspired future labor and civil rights movements. The union's achievements helped pave the way for greater economic opportunities and workplace protections for Black workers.

As a Virgin Islander, Totten's contributions extend beyond the territory and highlight the important role Caribbean immigrants played in shaping American labor history.