

Bartica

A Missed Opportunity of History

By Dmitri Allicock



Bartica grove 1910

Some of the greatest cities of old and modern times owe their rise and grandeur to their positions in the fork between great rivers, which gave them unrivaled advantages for defense and commerce. Lyons of France, St Louis in the U.S and Belgrade of Serbia are three striking examples. Bartica occupies such a unique natural location in north-central Guyana where the mighty Essequibo, Mazaruni, and Cuyuni rivers meet.

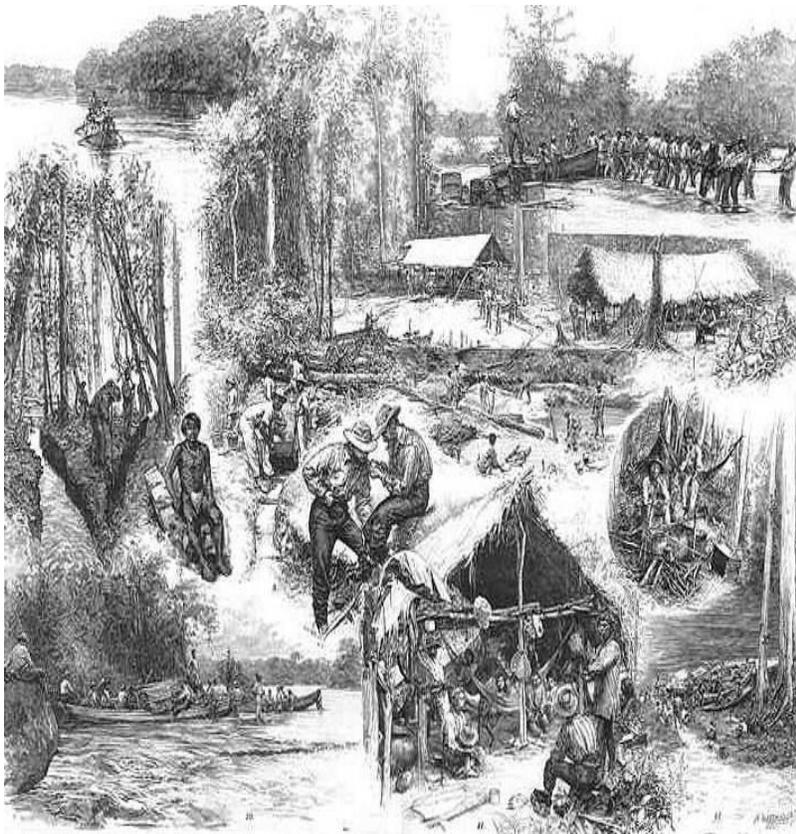


Bartica is situated at a junction of the [Essequibo River](#), 50 miles (80 km) inland from the Atlantic Ocean, and is considered the "Gateway to the Interior", the town has a population of about 15,000 and is still the launching point for Guyana's gold and diamond miners.

British Guiana Gold prospectors 1896

There is no doubt that the bulk of Guyana's precious gold and diamond reserves are embraced by that wide stretch of highland which is drained by the Essequibo, Cuyuni, the Mazaruni rivers and their tributaries. The three rivers converge at the area called Bartica and the vast flood of their united waters is carried by the mighty Essequibo, past her hundred isles, 21 miles wide at her mouth, into the basin of the Atlantic. Washed on two sides by the waters of the two great rivers, Bartica faces the Atlantic breeze, tempered by a passage of 50 miles of tropical verdure forest.

Bartica was originally granted for religious uses and was one of the earliest Anglican missionary settlements in the colony under British rule. The name 'Bartica' comes from an [Amerindian](#) word



meaning '*red earth*', abundant in the area and probably spawn from the belief, accordingly to the ancient [Babylonian Talmud](#) text, which man originated from.

The original site was about a mile to the west of Grove, where a grant of land was obtained from Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban. The mission was removed to its present position in 1837, where a grant of five hundred and sixty acres was obtained from the Crown.

Under the fostering care of the Rev. Thomas Youd, the mission obtained a certain amount of success. It was visited by Bishop Coleridge of Barbados in 1838 and a church was built dedicated to St John the Baptist, the evangelist of the desert, and consecrated by the Lord Bishop of Guiana on 5th of January, 1843, in the presence of Governor Light and distinguished company.

The major discovery of gold in the 1850s, described as very Pactolus, brought many from all over Guyana, including the Caribbean and led to the formation of the British Guiana Mining Company, whose fortunes were sought in the rich Gold and Diamond fields of Guyana's Highlands. It was found necessary to establish a town at the little settlement of Bartica on the Essequibo and an ordinance for that purpose was passed in 1887.

Bartica was chosen and founded as a central depot from whence the gold industry could be regulated, a place where laborers registered, where boats inspected and licensed, where magistrates adjudicate upon gold disputes, where hospitals for the sick could be established, a lock-up for the disorderly, where the dead could be buried and the living entertained.

Bartica unparalleled natural location is one of the most intriguing site for a city. To the north stretches a mass of fresh brown water fed by the three river and their tributaries dotted in all directions with islands, varying in sizes from the huge Hogg Island called *Varken Eiland* by the early Dutch, to the lovely Sail Rock, the smallest of the islets. North of Bartica is the ruins of the



Dutch fort [Kyk-Over-Al](#), former government seat for the County of Essequibo. Bartica is also close to Marshall Falls. To the south stretches over two thousand miles of pristine rainforest and savannah, intersected by hills, mountains, deep rivers and scores of massive and thundering falls and rapids, forest rich in invaluable hardwood and lands with bountiful gold. An esteemed land associated with the lost city of Eldorado in 1595 by Sir Walter Raleigh, Captain of her Majesty's Guard, Lord Warden of the Stannaries, and her Highness' Lieutenant general of the County of Cornwall.

The great difficulty with gold mining lay with the tortuous and deadly journey from Bartica to the goldfields of Guyana highlands. The rivers are sown with countless rapids and dangerous passes where many lives were lost to the lust for gold. It seems that the ancient Amerindian legends were true where these rushing waters dragged down into their dark depths all those who attempt passage without appeasement.

Many ideas were suggested to avoid loss of life and possessions including a light, narrow-gauge railway from Bartica, up the left bank of the Essequibo, bypassing the rapids to the smoother water up the Potaro and other gold bearing rivers and creeks. This railway would open the vast areas of valuable timber and a branch could be constructed up the right bank of the Mazaruni, past Calacoon, skirting the Marshall {Marechial} Falls, up to the Puruni gold fields and even connecting with a line from the Yuruari Valley, a branch of the Cuyuni River, bringing the wealth of that great district through the channels of Essequibo to the port of Georgetown.



Perhaps it was the Venezuelan's border issue or more practicable reasons which may have led to an alternative plan and a railway was indeed constructed in 1897, but from Wismar, Demerara River westward to Rockstone, Essequibo, forming a more direct route to Upper Essequibo and Potaro River, diminishing the prospects and importance of Bartica.

Read more:

<http://guyanathenandnow.wordpress.com/2011/11/06/the-demerara-essequibo-railway-der/>

Today, Bartica remains a small town and is still associated with gold and diamond mining of Guyana Highlands and Timber extraction. Bartica is linked to Georgetown by air and can be reached from [Parika](#), Essequibo and [Linden](#), the [Denham Suspension Bridge](#), also known as the Garraway Stream Bridge, links Bartica to [Mahdia](#).

Its small population consists of a harmonious mix of Guyanese. The central town is about one square mile and consists of seven avenues and nine streets. The avenues run north to south and the streets east to west.

During the Easter weekend every year, Bartica hosts the famous Bartica Regatta with a growing variety of entertaining holiday activities including water sports, cricket boxing, soccer, talent shows, a street parade, and a Miss Bartica Regatta Pageant. The Regatta attracts people from all parts of Guyana, and even from other countries. There is also a summer Regatta, which is held annually in August.

As fate and gold would determine the birth and destiny of Bartica, dreams of it becoming a more vibrant gateway to the interior and a larger city were not attained. Perhaps the natural wonder and fork in the river that is uniquely Bartica may yet still bear upon its full potentials and future.