

The History of Nairobi and
the Origins of Slums.
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The History of Nairobi and the Origins of Slums: The Colonial Phase and the Construction of the Railway

The urban model of Nairobi was established by the British colonial administration. In 1896 the British began working on the construction of the railway line that was meant to connect the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa to Kampala in Uganda, so that the rich mineral resources could be exploited. Once it had crossed the coastal plain, the railroad began to advance up into the Highlands region, characterized by massive rainfall and volcanic soils which made agricultural development of the area a possibility. The territories where the railway line was planned to be built were not uninhabited. Therefore, the British had to deal with the local leaders to get the permission to build (since the railroad was supposed to cross the people's rangelands). Once the Kenya Uganda Railway was completed, in 1901 – exploiting cheap labour from British India, as well as the Africans themselves – the headquarters of the railroad were moved from Mombasa to Nairobi. That is how the city of Nairobi was born, and its development was very rapid owing to the railroad. The city was founded in 1899 as a depot for railway supplies, due to its central location between the coast and the British properties in Uganda. This area was set apart not only for its strategic position; it was also characterized by an extremely hospitable atmosphere determined by its proximity to a thick hydrological network, which provided an abundant presence of water, and by its high altitude position, between 1600 and 1800 meters above sea level, which generates cool temperatures and eliminates the risk of tropical diseases like malaria. Subsequently, Nairobi began to develop as the economic and commercial centre of the British protectorate and was proclaimed as its capital in 1901.

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