Emigration of the Garifuna

At the same time that the settlement was grappling with the ramifications of the end of slavery, a new ethnic group, the Garifuna appeared. In the early 1800s, the Garifuna, descendants of Carib peoples of the Lesser Antilles and of Africans who had escaped from slavery, arrived in the settlement. The Garifuna had resisted British and French colonialism in the Lesser Antilles until they were defeated by the British in 1796. After putting down a violent Garifuna rebellion on Saint Vincent, the British moved between 1,700 and 5,000 of the Garifuna across the Caribbean to the Bay Islands (present-day Islas de la Bahía) off the north coast of Honduras. From there they migrated to the Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and the southern part of present-day Belize. By 1802 about 150 Garifuna had settled in the Stann Creek (present-day Dangriga) area and were engaged in fishing and farming.

Other Garifuna later came to the British settlement of Belize after finding themselves on the wrong side in a civil war in Honduras in 1832. Many Garifuna men soon found wage work alongside slaves as mahogany cutters. In 1841 Dangriga, the Garifuna's largest settlement, was a flourishing village. The American traveler John Stephens described the Garifuna village of Punta Gorda as having 500 inhabitants and producing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

The British treated Garifuna as squatters. In 1857 the British told the Garifuna that they must obtain leases from the crown or risk losing their lands, dwellings, and other buildings. The 1872 Crown Lands Ordinance established reservations for the Garifuna as well as the Maya. The British prevented both groups from owning land and treated them as a source of valuable labor.