

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BRITISH SETTLEMENT

Colonial Rivalry Between Spain and Britain

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spain tried to maintain a monopoly on trade and colonization in its New World colonies, but northern European powers were increasingly attracted to the region by the potential for trade and settlement. These powers resorted to smuggling, piracy, and war in their efforts to challenge and then destroy Spain's monopoly. Early in the seventeenth century, the Dutch, English, and French encroached in areas where Spain was weak: the small islands of the Lesser Antilles, the no-man's-land of the Guianas between the Spanish and Portuguese dominions, and the uncharted coasts of Yucatn and Central America. Later in the seventeenth century, England effectively challenged Spain in the western Caribbean, capturing Jamaica in 1655 and subsequently using this base to support settlements all the along the Caribbean coast from the Yucatn to Nicaragua.

Early in the seventeenth century, on the shores of the Bay of Campeche in southeastern Mexico and on the Yucatn Peninsula, English buccaneers began cutting logwood, which was used in the production of a dye needed by the woolen industry. According to legend, one of these buccaneers, Peter Wallace, called "Ballis" by the Spanish, settled near and gave his name to the Belize River as early as 1638. English buccaneers began using the tortuous coastline of the area as a base from which to attack Spanish ships. Some of the buccaneers may have been refugees expelled by the Spanish in 1641-42 from settlements on islands off the coasts of Nicaragua and Honduras. Buccaneers stopped plundering Spanish logwood ships and started cutting their own wood in the 1650s and 1660s. Logwood extraction then became the main reason for the English settlement for more than a century.

A 1667 treaty, in which the European powers agreed to suppress piracy, encouraged the shift from buccaneering to cutting logwood and led to more permanent settlement. The 1670 Godolphin Treaty between Spain and England confirmed English possession of countries and islands in the Western Hemisphere that England already occupied. Unfortunately, those colonies were not named and ownership of the coastal area between Yucatn and Nicaragua remained unclear. Conflict continued between Britain and Spain, over the right of the British to cut logwood and to settle in the region. In 1717 Spain expelled British logwood cutters from the Bay of Campeche west of the Yucatn. This action had the unintended effect of enhancing the significance of the growing British settlement near the Belize River.

The first British settlers lived a rough and disorderly life. According to Captain Nathaniel Uring, who was shipwrecked and forced to live with the logwood cutters for several months in 1720, the British were "generally a rude drunken Crew, some of which have been Pirates." He said he had "but little Comfort living among these Crew of ungovernable

Wretches, where was little else to be heard but Blasphemy, Cursing and Swearing."

During the eighteenth century, the Spanish attacked the British settlers repeatedly. In 1717, 1730, 1754, and 1779 the Spanish forced the British to leave the area. The Spanish never settled in the region, however, and the British always returned to expand their trade and settlement. At the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, the Treaty of Paris conceded to Britain the right to cut and export logwood but asserted Spanish sovereignty over the territory. Still, there was never an agreement on the precise area in which logwood cutters could operate. The Spanish frontier town of Bacalar in the Yucatán, refounded in 1730 after having been deserted for almost a century, became a base for operations against the British. When war broke out again in 1779, the commandant of Bacalar led a successful expedition against the British settlement, which was abandoned until the Treaty of Versailles in 1783 allowed the British to cut logwood in the area between the Hondo and Belize rivers. By that time, however, the logwood trade had declined and mahogany had become the chief export, so the settlers petitioned for a new agreement.