

History of Jamaica

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Jamaica , one of the largest Caribbean islands, was inhabited by arawak natives. When Christopher Columbus arrived at the island, he claimed the land for Spain. Still, it was not truly colonized until after his death. But only a few decades after Columbus' death almost all Arawaks were exterminated. Spain held the island against many pirate raids at the main city, which is now called Spanish Town. Eventually England claimed the island in a raid, but the Spanish did not relinquish their claim to the island until 1670. The British never lost this island in a war.

Jamaica became a base of operations for [buccaneers](#) [:pirates], including Captain Henry Morgan. In return these buccaneers kept the other colonial powers from attacking the island. Africans were captured, kidnapped, and forced into slavery to work on plantations when sugarcane became the most important export on the island.

Many slaves arrived in Jamaica via the Atlantic slave trade during the same time enslaved Americans arrived in North America. During this time there were many racial tensions, and Jamaica had one of the highest instances of slave uprisings of any Caribbean island. After the British crown abolished slavery, the Jamaicans began working toward independence. Since independence there have been political and economic disturbances, as well as a number of strong political leaders.

Prehistory and discovery

Tainos from South America had settled in Jamaica at around 1,000 BC and called the land *Xamayca*, meaning "a land of springs". After Christopher Columbus' arrival in 1494, Spain claimed the island and began occupation in 1509, naming the island *Santiago* (St. James). The Arawaks were exterminated by The Spanish. Some also committed suicide, presumably to escape. Spain brought the first slaves to Jamaica in 1517.

On Jamaica one outspoken man, Bartolomé de Las Casas, worked for the protection of the Taino population. It was also he who suggested, and later came to regret, the importation of slaves from Africa. De Las Casas was a Spanish priest, and wrote several books about the poor treatment of the natives by Spanish conquistadors. He believed that the Spanish should work to convert the Tainos to Christianity. The flag of Jamaica was adopted on August 6th.

Spanish rule

The settlers later moved to Villa de la Vega, now called Spanish Town. This settlement became the capital of Jamaica. By the 1640s many people were attracted to Jamaica, which had a reputation for stunning beauty, not only when referring to the island but also to the natives. In fact, pirates were known to desert their raiding parties and stay on the island. For 100 years between 1555 and 1655 Spanish Jamaica was subject to many pirate attacks, the final attack left the island in the hands of the English. The English were also subject to pirate raids after they began their occupation of the island.

The 1907 *Catholic Encyclopedia* states, "A review of the period of Spanish occupation is one which reflects very little credit on Spanish colonial administration in those days. Their

treatment of the aboriginal inhabitants, whom they are accused of having practically exterminated, is a grave charge, and if true, cannot be condoned on the plea that such conduct was characteristic of the age, and that as bad or worse was perpetrated by other nations even in later years." This is borne out by the much more detailed history of Spanish Jamaica by Francisco Morales Padrón.

English rule

In May 1655, British forces in the form of a joint expedition by Admiral Sir William Penn (father of the founder of Pennsylvania), and General Robert Venables seized the island. In 1657 the Governor invited buccaneers to base themselves at Port Royal to deter Spanish aggression. In 1657 and 1658 the Spanish, sailing from Cuba, failed at the battles of Ocho Rios and Rio Nuevo in their attempts to retake the island, and in 1657 Admiral Robert Blake defeated the Spanish West Indian Fleet.

The British extended colonisation in 1661 and gained formal recognition of possession from other European powers through the Treaty of Madrid in 1670. However part of the Island remained in the hands of the Maroons with whom they signed a treaty on 1 March 1738. Although much of the Spanish capital, Villa de la Vega, was burned during the conquest, the English renamed it Spanish Town and kept it as the island's capital. For some time, however, Port Royal functioned as the capital while Spanish Town was being rebuilt.

The island was a major base for pirates, especially at Port Royal before it was destroyed in an earthquake in 1692. After the disaster, Kingston was founded across the harbour, one of the largest natural havens in the world, and rapidly became the major commercial centre of the island.

The cultivation of sugar cane and coffee by African slave labour made Jamaica one of the most valuable possessions in the world for more than 150 years. The colony's slaves, who vastly outnumbered their white masters by a ratio of 20:1 in 1800, mounted over a dozen major slave conspiracies and uprisings throughout much of the 18th century, including Tackey's Revolt in 1760. Escaped slaves known as Maroons established independent communities in the mountainous interior that the British were unable to inhabit, despite major attempts in the 1730s and 1790s; one Maroon community was expelled from the island after the Second Maroon War in the 1790s and those Maroons eventually became part of the core of the Creole community of Sierra Leone. The colonial government enlisted the Maroons in capturing escaped plantation slaves. The British also used Jamaica's free people of color, 10,000 strong by 1800, to keep the enslaved population in check. During the Christmas holiday of 1831, a large scale slave revolt known as the Baptist War broke. It was organised originally as a peaceful strike by Samuel Sharp. The rebellion was suppressed by the militia of the Jamaican plantocracy and the British garrison ten days later in early 1832.

Because the loss of property and life in the 1831 rebellion, the British Parliament held two inquiries. The results of these inquiries contributed greatly to the abolition of slavery as of August 1, 1834 throughout the British Empire. However the Jamaican slaves remained bound to their former owners' service, albeit with a guarantee of rights, until 1838 under what was called the Apprenticeship System. The freed population still faced significant hardships, marked by the October 1865 Morant Bay rebellion led by George William Gordon and Paul Bogle. It was brutally repressed. The sugar crop was declining in importance in the late 19th century and the colony diversified into bananas.

In 1872 the capital was moved to Kingston, as the port city had far outstripped the inland Spanish Town in size and sophistication.

In 1866 the Jamaican legislature renounced its powers, and the country became a crown colony. Some measure of self-government was restored in the 1880s, when islanders gained the right to elect nine members of a legislative council.

The establishment of Crown Colony rule resulted over the next few decades in the growth of a middle class of low-level public officials and police officers drawn from the mass of the population whose social and political advancement was blocked by the colonial authorities.

The Great Depression had a serious impact both on the emergent middle class and the working class of the 1930s. In the spring of 1938 sugar and dock workers around the island rose in revolt. Although the revolt was suppressed it led to significant changes including the emergence of an organized labour movement and a competitive party system.

Independent Jamaica

Jamaica gained a degree of local political control in the mid-1940s. The People's National Party (PNP) was founded in 1938. Its main rival, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) was established five years later. The first elections under universal adult suffrage was held in 1944. Jamaica joined nine other UK territories in the Federation of the West Indies in 1958 but withdrew after Jamaican voters rejected membership in 1961. Jamaica gained independence on August 6, 1962, remaining a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. The first prime minister was Alexander Bustamante of the Jamaica Labour Party.

Initially, power swapped between the People's National Party and the Jamaican Labour Party regularly. Michael Manley was the first PNP prime minister in 1972 and he introduced socialist policies and relations with Cuba. His second term elections marked the start of repeated political violence. When the PNP lost power in 1980 Edward Seaga immediately began to reverse the policies of his predecessor, bringing in privatization and seeking closer ties with the USA. When the PNP and Manley returned to power in 1989 they continued the more moderate policies and were returned in the elections of 1993 and 1998. Manley resigned for health reasons in 1992 and was succeeded as leader of the PNP by Percival Patterson.

Historically, Jamaican emigration has been heavy. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Jamaicans migrated to Central America, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic to work in the banana and canefields. In the 1950s the primary destination was to the United Kingdom; but since the United Kingdom restricted emigration in 1962, major flow has been directly to the United States. The heaviest flow of emigration particularly to New York, and Miami occurred during the 1990s and continues to the present day due to dangerous levels of violence, drugs, and gang warfare which is hampering Jamaica. About 20,000 Jamaicans emigrate to the United States each year; another 200,000 visit annually. New York, Miami, and Fort Lauderdale are among the U.S. cities with the largest Jamaican population. In New York, over half of Jamaican expatriates reside in Brooklyn. Remittances from the expatriate communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada make increasingly significant contributions to Jamaica's economy.

