

Historical Geography of the Bay Islands, Honduras: Anglo-Hispanic Conflict in the Western Caribbean

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Relict English-speaking communities on the islands and shorelands of the Caribbean have long interested geographers, anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists. The important role played by these groups in colonial times, the influence they had on official Spanish economic and land settlement policies since the beginning of the Republican period, more recently their attraction as tourist centers, and almost non-existent research on these areas, all point to a need for more information about them. Groups of this kind are common on the mainland coast from British Honduras to Panamá, and on Providencia, San Andrés, Corn, and the Bay Islands.

Since early colonial times non-Spanish Europeans have especially prized these coasts and islands, which, because of their scanty human and natural resources and isolation, were substantially neglected by the Spaniards. The British, even before their defeat of the Armada, saw these places as ideal for harassing the traditional enemy. Indeed, English Puritans of the Providence Company and pirates fortified the protected, deepwater harbors of the Bay Islands and forced the Spanish Crown to mount a number of expensive campaigns to retain their control over the Bay of Honduras. Although these offshore outposts were occupied periodically by the British for a century and a half, they were abandoned by 1782. Reconstruction of the past locations of island settlements has been made by use of maps, archival records, and field observations that relied on house foundations, the distribution of wine bottle glass, and ruins of the military fortifications.

In 1797, the British-organized deportation of Black Caribs from Saint Vincent introduced another culture to the islands. This marked the beginning of a permanent settlement landscape that persists today. These Afro-Caribs did not select the same sites for settlement as the British before them. Different perception of the landscape and different land use needs brought them to a site near fishing shallows protected by offshore reefs. English-speaking settlement became firmly established after the arrival of emigrants from the Cayman Islands following the abolition of slavery in 1834. For a decade during the mid-nineteenth century, when the English claimed the islands as a Crown Colony, the traditions and social inclinations of the British Caribbean became well imbedded. The interweaving of physical environmental factors with the cultural background of the new settlers resulted in different landscapes that even yet include linear coastal settlements, stilt houses, and a town built on an artificial island.

Although the Republic of Honduras has had political power in the islands for over a century, only within the last decade have there been effective attempts to incorporate them more fully into the mainland system. Due primarily to the recent economic upswing stemming from North American investments and growing

international tourism, Spanish-speaking Hondurans from the mainland have been attracted to the islands. The 400-year-old contest between the Spanish and English cultures for dominance in the islands is once more evident as the landscape reflects increasingly the Hispanization of the English-speaking Bay Islanders.