

## ***BELIZE The 19<sup>th</sup> Century:***

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a continuation of the importation of African slaves from Jamaica and the West Indies. A number of Africans involved in a slave rebellion on the island of Barbados were brought to Belize at this time. At the same time a gradual slow down in logwood and mahogany exports was taking place eventually resulting in a lack of work for many slaves during these years. Between 1816 and 1825 the population of the settlement increased from 3,825 to 4,100 persons but during the same years the slave population declined from 2,740 to 2,470. Part of this decrease was due to an increase in the number of free blacks in the colony.

All free men in Belize could vote regardless of property or color. Most whites and “free coloreds” lived nine miles off the coast on St. George’s Caye where cooler breezes made it a more desirable place to live. The slave population lived on the mainland in “Belize Town”. In the poorer south side area of Belize Town African religious practices such as *obeah* were common. The all night playing of *gombay* drums was outlawed by the British authorities here. Anglican, Methodist and Baptist missionaries also worked in these areas converting many and slowly African religious practices became less pronounced, but not all together abandoned, by the *Creole* population.

There was not only a geographical division between those living on St. George’s Caye and those living in “Belize Town” there was also a social division between lighter skinned *Creoles* and their darker skinned cousins living on the “mainland”. The white minority purposely sought to divide the black community by giving free *Creoles* certain limited privileges that slaves did not have. Many of these “free coloureds” were of mixed African and European parentage and this mixed race community was a sort of “racial buffer” between the small white ruling class and the much larger black slave population. On July 5, 1831, seven years before the end of slavery in Belize, all “coloured subjects of free condition” were granted full civil rights. This ethno-social division within the black community of Belize exists to this day, a legacy of British colonialism. The lighter-skinned landowning and merchant families of mixed African and British ancestry made up the “social elite” of the country along with a small community of whites from Europe.

A dozen or so of the older English and Scottish families were referred to as “Old Baymen”. With names like Hyde, Haylock, Usher and Fairweather, these families intermarried with the local *Creole* population during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to form a social and economic class that continues to play an important role in the political and economic life of the country. Many are doctors, lawyers and influential business people. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the racial amalgamation between black and white in Belize was well on its way. The American archaeologist John L. Stephens visited Belize Town in 1839 and noted in his journal (to his surprise) that British army officers dined with “mulatto” women. In Belize Town he said “color was considered mere matter of taste” and that among the judges of Belize’s “Grand Court” there sat a doctor of “mulatto” heritage.

When slavery was abolished in 1838 most blacks in the colony had already gained their freedom. The British had passed an act to end slavery in their colonies in 1833 and a five year transitional period took place in which an “apprenticeship” system was introduced. This essentially gave the slave owners an additional five years of free labor. The freedom of Belize’s slaves left most in a dependency relationship with their former “masters”. A small white elite of around 300 persons continued to rule the country for the rest of the century and into the next.

In 1862, with the United States deeply involved in its own civil conflict, the British government officially recognized Belize as a “colony” giving it the name of British Honduras (British Honduras was declared a “Crown Colony” in 1871). Peoples from various parts of the British Empire came to settle in small numbers adding to the Belizean “melting pot”. Although Belizeans now had the official recognition of London, their economy continued to decline. After 1860 the supply of wood was starting to thin out and many blacks in the colony were left unemployed and in poverty. Immigration from abroad was promoted by the British in an effort to develop the colony’s agriculture. The story of the “lost Confederates” and their efforts to colonize Belize after the American *Civil War* is a fascinating one that also includes the only example of settlement in Central America by African-Americans from the United States.

At the end of the American *Civil War* (1865) a number of Confederate soldiers and their families decided to escape life under “yankee” rule through immigration to Latin America. Some 7,000 American southerners left the former “Confederate States” between 1866 and 1870. They settled mainly in Brazil, Mexico and Belize. Steamship service was started between New Orleans and Belize Town in 1866 and between 1867 and 1869 two steamships were bringing 100 settlers per trip to the British colony. Most were ex-Confederate soldiers and their families, as well as a number of recently freed African-Americans who arrived with these families.

Around 300 Confederates followed the Reverend B. R. Duval of Virginia and founded the town of New Richmond (near San Pedro). Another group of settlers from Louisiana established sugar plantations on the New River south of Orange Walk Town. Here indentured East Indians were brought in to cut sugarcane. Around the town of Punta Gorda Confederate veterans received land grants from the British government and established more sugarcane plantations. There are still two white families in this area today descended from these North American colonists. In all around 1,500 white and black southerners immigrated to Belize during the late 1860’s. African-Americans lived in these communities with the idea that job opportunities would be better in Belize than in the post Civil War south.

Living conditions in Belize were harsh and many southerners or their children returned to the United States after only a few years. Others however stayed on in Belize and within a few generations this transplanted Confederate community had all but lost its “social cohesiveness”. White families that stayed on in Belize eventually intermarried with local *Creole* and *mestizo* families. The rigid racial segregation of the American south was not found in Belize, and today a number of

**Belizean families can trace some of their lineage to these Confederate soldiers who's descendants have blended into the Belizean melting-pot.**

**During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Belize continued to be opened up for settlement. In 1879 the Englishman Henry Fowler explored the inland areas of the country resulting in increased settlement by both blacks and whites during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**