

Confederates Rescue the Queen's West India Regiment from Indians

(from "The Yucatan Times")

Jamaicans and Confederate veterans fighting off an Indian massacre — it really happened.

In the mid-1800s, British woodcutters and other settlers had become well established in the southeastern Yucatán Peninsula, along the Belize and New Rivers and in the surrounding flat country of mangrove swamps and tropical forests. In 1862, the Bay Settlements became the Crown Colony of British Honduras.

As they moved inland and their numbers increased, the British had encountered conflict with the resident Maya people. When the Caste War burst into devastating violence to their north, the problems became a crisis. Thousands of Maya and mestizo refugees fled south. Fighting between Maya groups, pressure from Mexican military forces, and conflicting claims to the area all acted to bring the war into the territory claimed by the British. Far from innocent, the British had been engaging in illegal arms trade with the Maya rebels for years, and they now found the guns turned against themselves.

Against the threat of attacks, the British deployed troops of the 1st West India Regiment. These men were the descendants of slaves in the British Caribbean colonies. West Indian troops had distinguished themselves in combat, beginning in the War of American Independence, and their ability was well respected by their officers, who were, of course, all white. Members of the 1st Regiment were nearly all Jamaicans. They wore zouave-style uniforms — short open-fronted jackets, red with gold braid, over white shirts and sashes, loose-fitting black trousers, and tasseled red and white turbans — and were paid one-fourth less than regular British troops.

Into this remarkable mixture, let us introduce the Confederates. At the end of the Civil War, some ten to twenty thousand defeated Southerners left the United States, fleeing economic ruin and the ignominy of being governed by the victors. The number would have been higher if Robert E. Lee and other respected leaders had not urged their compatriots to

remain and build new lives as good citizens. Among the many who left, a group that included five Confederate generals and three former southern governors crossed the Rio Grande to establish a colony in Mexico, where Emperor Maximilian actively invited their immigration. John Breckenridge, former United States Vice President and candidate for President, later Confederate General and Secretary of War, led a settlement in Ontario. Some moved to England, among them Confederate Secretary of State Judah Benjamin, who established a successful new law career and died in Paris. General Jubal Early promoted the idea of a colony in New Zealand, a land with “no negroes.” Many Southerners favored Brazil, because slavery was still legal there (it was abolished in 1888), and thousands of former Confederates established several colonies in that country.



Soldiers of the West India Regiment (Print by R Sinkin Barbados Museum Bridgetown)

British Honduras proved to be an attractive choice for would-be expatriates. *The New York Times*, scarcely an unbiased observer, warned migrants they would find there “a worse climate, worse Governments, great lack of energy, no mechanical devices, untrustworthy field hands and labor, constant wars and overthrows of ruling powers, and loss of property, of health, of friends, and of the spirit of enterprise.” But proximity and common language made it appealing, and they arrived in numbers estimated upward from seven thousand,

predominately from Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi, establishing eleven settlements throughout the colony. The colonial government welcomed and aided them, hoping they would revitalize an economy in serious decline following the abolition of slavery and a drop in mahogany prices. Belize City became a boom town, and regular steamship service to New Orleans began. Mr. W. J. S. Scobell, from New Orleans, started a newspaper, *The Commercial Advertiser*, to serve the growing community of transplanted southerners.

The most successful Confederate settlement in northern British Honduras was near Orange Walk, a village of some 1,200 creole woodcutters and mestizo farmers on the left bank of the New River. A contemporary report described the citizens as “indifferent to British rule.” The new settlement, called Tower Hill, was four miles from the town. Its leader was John Wallace Price, war veteran and sugarcane farmer from Louisiana. Many emigrants had hoped to replicate the cotton agriculture of the South, but cotton was never grown successfully, and Price quickly demonstrated the profitability of sugarcane.

The territory of a particularly aggressive Maya group, the Icaiché, lay only ten miles from Orange Walk, across the Río Hondo, the disputed boundary with Mexico. Led by their chief, Marcos Canul, the Icaiché attacked a mahogany camp on the Bravo River in 1866 and defeated a detachment of British troops sent against them. An augmented British force mounted a retaliatory raid and terrorized the Icaiché by using incendiary rockets to set their villages ablaze. The attacks ceased, relative peace returned, the settlers disbanded the local militia, and the army reduced its garrison force at Corozal Town.

But the situation must not have seemed secure to John Wallace Price. He joined other Confederate veterans around Orange Walk Town in a self-defense force they called the Flying Cavalry. Membership in the force is not well documented, but it included veterans named E. Boudreau and H. J. Archer. And Canul did return.

In 1870, Icaiché forces attacked and occupied defenseless Corozal, about thirty miles north of Orange Walk. Confederate settlers near Corozal, led by the younger brother of General P. G. T. Beauregard, surrendered and departed the colony. The British brought their troops back.

Then on September 1, 1872, Canul launched a determined surprise attack on the men of the 1st West India Regiment stationed in Orange Walk Town. At 8:00 on that Sunday morning, his force of about 180 fighting men entered the town at three points, setting fires and pillaging. The British commander, Lt. Joseph Graham Smith, and the Regiment's surgeon, Dr. Edge, were having their morning baths and barely managed to dress and reach the barracks. The thirty-eight men of the Regiment found themselves surrounded in the insecure one-room building constructed in the fashion of Maya houses, with walls of vertical poles and a palm-thatch roof.

The attackers "were pouring in unceasing discharges of ball" while the defenders returned fire from behind their iron cots, the best protection available to them. The battle continued for some hours, the West Indians taking casualties but holding out stubbornly against far superior numbers. Lt. Smith received a severe bullet wound in the chest and was eventually forced to relinquish command to Sargent Edward Belizario. A catastrophic defeat seemed imminent as Canul's forces attempted to set fire to the flimsy barracks structure.

John Wallace Price, on receiving news of the attack, rallied the Flying Cavalry and rode to the scene of conflict. Approaching under the cover of thick woods, the Confederates suddenly charged into the rear of one of the Indian parties, throwing them into confusion. The Indians broke cover, exposing themselves to fire from both Confederates and Jamaicans. Price and his cohort entered the barracks. Firing continued, but gradually diminished, and at about 2:30 that afternoon sorties by the defenders drove the attackers away.

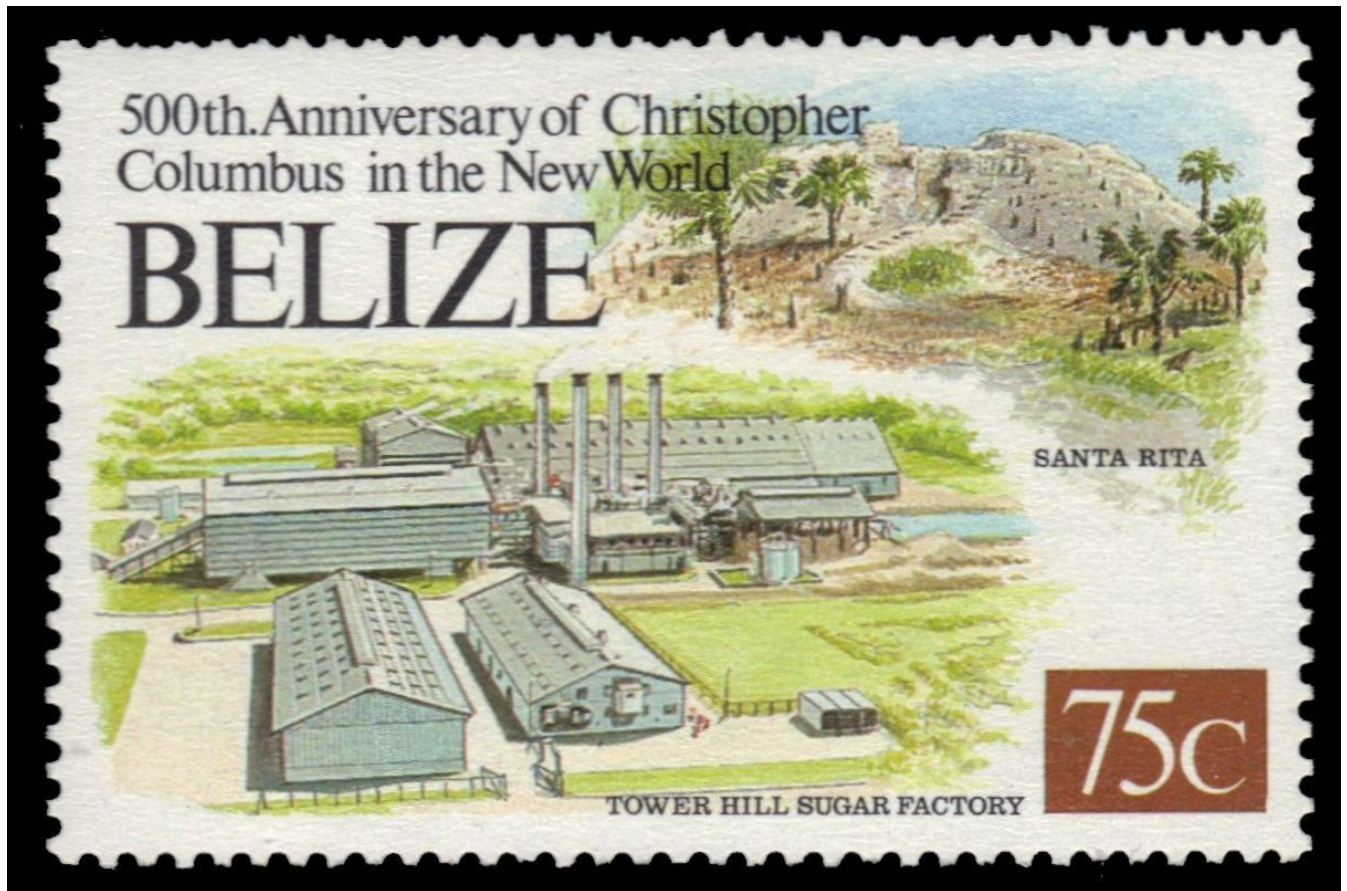
As the smoke cleared, the British troops counted two of their number killed and fourteen wounded. In the village, one civilian died and seventeen were wounded. About fifty Indians were dead on the battlefield, plus an unknown number of additional casualties. Marcos Canul himself was mortally wounded. The barrack walls had hundreds of bullet holes.

If anyone remarked on the irony of unreconstructed Confederates coming to the rescue of black men, it went unrecorded.

On September 4 and 5, significant reinforcements arrived from Corozal and Belize City, including the commander of troops in British Honduras, Major W. W. W. Johnston. The Icaiché had withdrawn beyond the Río Hondo and never seriously threatened the colony again. Lt. Smith and Dr. Edge were immediately promoted, Sargent Belizario received the Distinguished Conduct Medal and an annuity, and several other troops received medals, promotions, and commendations. The British subsequently constructed two substantial forts in the town, which proved unneeded.

However, the attack left the inhabitants of Orange Walk severely demoralized. The population collapsed to about fifty people and only slowly recovered.

As for the Confederate settlements, most failed quickly, and the homesick emigrants returned to the United States. The relative racial equality in British Honduras offended many of the newcomers, who refused any association with blacks. By the early 1870s, after the initial waves of immigration, only about a hundred Confederates remained. Remnant settlements at Orange Walk and at Toledo, in the south of the colony near Punta Gorda, survived into the early 20th century.



Postage stamp showing the Tower Hill Sugar Factory Belize 1992

In Brazil, a large Confederate community still exists in the town of Americana, north of São Paulo. Descendants of the founders continued to speak English for generations. Today around three hundred of the *Confederados* are members of the *Fraternidade Descendência Americana*, and displays of the Rebel battle flag abound.

As for British Honduras, the Confederates, and John Wallace Price in particular, must receive recognition for helping end Indian raids and for introducing the sugarcane industry. All of the country's sugar production, around a million tons per year, now comes from the Tower Hill Sugar Factory near Orange Walk. And descendants of John Wallace Price still live in now-independent Belize.

By Robert D. Temple

Travelers from Mexico today can easily reach Orange Walk, about an hour's drive south of Chetumal. The town's nickname is "Sugar City," and the Tower Hill Sugar Factory is an impressive sight. Trucks loaded to overflowing with sugarcane can form lines stretching for miles during harvest season. The factory produces molasses and rum as well as sugar for export.

The sites of the two colonial-era forts, Mundy and Cairns, are near the center of Orange Walk Town, although there are few remains and little interpretation. The Banquitas House of Culture has displays on local history.

Orange Walk makes a good base for explorations of the Maya archeological sites in northern Belize, including Lamanai, Cuello, and Santa Rita. Nearby Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, as well as several other natural areas, offers excellent birding.