

A Brief History

The most easterly of the Caribbean islands, Barbados has a relatively calm history when compared to her socially volatile sister islands.

The first recorded settlers were Amerindian peoples from South America. They came in their dugout canoes through the outflow of the Orinoco, a waterway called "The Dragon's Mouth".

They followed a path that even today challenges larger vessels and made their way toward Barbados. They came, hundreds of them – villages, families, individuals, a tribe who were to form the first layer of the complex Barbadian family tree.

These First Peoples were called Arawaks and they left their mark for us to discern their presence in small archaeological digs on the West Coast of Barbados. Archaeologists estimate their arrival at 1623 BC and they had the island all to themselves until the arrival of the Caribs in 1200 AD.

The Caribs conquered the Arawaks and took over dominance of Barbados until the Europeans came, bringing with them smallpox and tuberculosis which wiped out the native population, as it did to many native peoples in other lands.

The Portuguese also settled here briefly and gave the island the name "Los Barbados", a name that scholars are still arguing about. Some say it refers to the bearded fig trees that were prolific on the island; others say it refers to the bearded African people they found occupying the island. No one can disprove the other and the argument is still alive.

Even though they have left our shores eons ago, there are still traces of the Amerindian peoples in Barbadians: in the cant of an eye, or the width of a brow bone, the bridge of a nose or the height of a cheekbone.

On May 14, 1625, Captain John Powell landed at Holetown, claiming the island for the British Crown. Two years later, on February 17, 1627, Captain Henry Powell landed, also at Holetown, with a party of 80 white settlers and ten African slaves. This was to set the tone for Barbados's history for more than 200 years.

The English engaged in the slave trade for many years and Barbados was one point of the Trans-Atlantic triangle. It was a major depot for slave trading and in Bridgetown today the place called Temple Yard was once the block on which human lives were bought and sold.

Slavery was abolished in Barbados in 1834.

Unlike most of the other Caribbean territories, Barbados was always under British rule until it gained independence on November 30, 1966. It was never conquered or taken over by any other colonists.

Over the centuries, other cultures made their way to Barbados including Jews, Indians, Syrians and Lebanese.

Today, the population of Barbados is made up primarily of the descendants of African slaves, the white plantocracy and white indentured servants sent here to serve their terms of indenture, along with a smattering of other groups.