

0. THE SPANISH MAIN - Story Preface

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This image depicts an area which was once known as "The Spanish Main." It was a base of operations where Spanish ships traded with the "New World" (and Pirates did their best to relieve those treasure-laden vessels of their Old-World-bound goods). Click on the image for a much-better view.

How was it that the Caribbean became a base of pirate operations in the first place? The story begins with "The Spanish Main."

After Columbus "discovered" some of the Caribbean islands, Spain claimed them as her own possessions. Throughout the 16th century, Spain continued to build a significant presence in the Caribbean area. The northern edge of the South American mainland became known as the "Spanish Main."

By the 17th century, other territories in the region - some with lucrative resources like gold and silver - were also under Spanish control. In 1650, when British colonies in America were barely in their infancy, Spain had divided the entire Caribbean basin into several principalities:

- New Spain: Mexico and parts of Central America with Mexico City as its capital
- Panama and Honduras: Governors in each reported to the viceroy in Mexico
- New Granada: Today's Venezuela and Colombia with Cartagena as its capital
- Peru: Included what had once been the entire Incan Empire
- Greater Antilles: Included Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico

Of all these territories, Peru (with its valuable silver mines) was Spain's most lucrative possession. But silver was also mined in Mexico while Colombia contributed gold and emeralds. Every year these treasures (including "pieces of eight" which were minted in the Spanish Main) were shipped to Spain through a series of secured ports:

- Panama received the silver from Peru
- Mules (centuries before the Panama Canal) transported the silver across the Isthmus of Panama to Porto Bello
- Cartagena (which was besieged and sacked in the late 17th century) received the gold and emeralds from "New Granada"
- Vera Cruz received the treasures from Mexico

When it was time to return to Spain, all the treasure-laden ships gathered in the Cuban port of Havana. They would sail together, well-protected, in a convoy. Spain "ruled the waves" of the Caribbean for much of the 17th century - until other European powers (and their buccaneers) found the weak link in Spain's treasure-delivery system.

Some of Spain's crucial port towns were about to change hands.

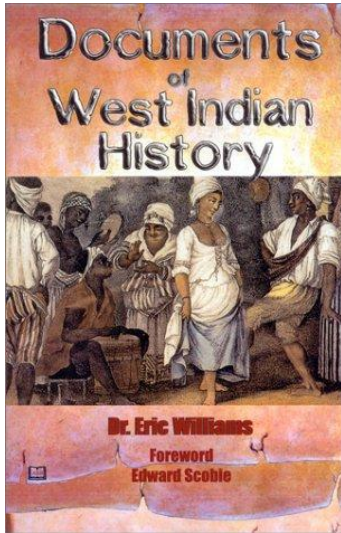
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-SPANISH-MAIN-Pirates-of-the-Caribbean>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Documents of West Indian History - by Dr. Eric Williams

Image online, courtesy [Amazon](#) website.

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Spanish Main - Map

Image by Tim Rickard / News & Record. Online, courtesy Sail Dive BVI.

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Mexico City - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy [mon-photo.com](#) website.

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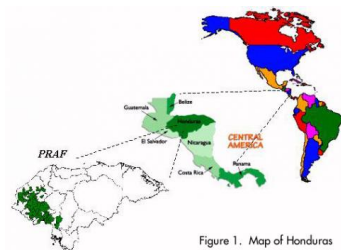


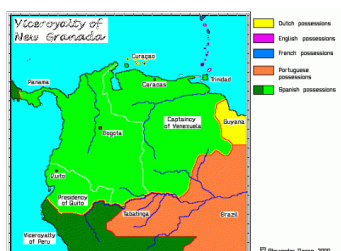
Figure 1. Map of Honduras

Honduras - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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Viceroyalty of New Granada

Image online, via the [World History at KMLA](#) website.

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Emeralds - Gemstones from Colombia

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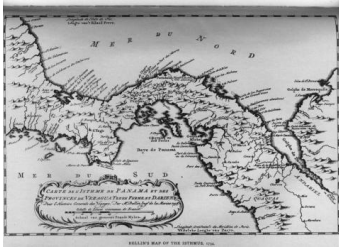


Panama - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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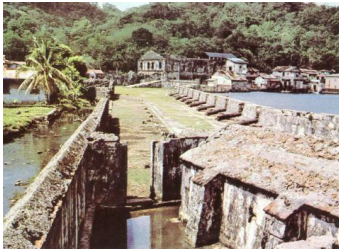


Isthmus of Panama

Image depicting Bellin's Map of Panama, 1754. Online, courtesy Panama Railroad.

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Porto Bello

Image online, courtesy czbrats.com website.

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Cartagena Sacked in 1697

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Buccaneers - Early Years, c. 1630

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Vera Cruz - Map Locator

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View of Modern Cartagena

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THE SPANISH MAIN

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Pirates of the Caribbean - Golden Age of Piracy

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