

**THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF THE STATE IN
SOUTHERN BELIZE**
**LOS ORÍGENES COLONIALES DEL ESTADO EN EL
SUR DE BELICE**

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Recibido: 01-04-2020 / Aceptado: 26-06-2020

Abstract

Recent research in Belizean historiography has improved our understanding of twentieth-century colonial state relations and the transition to the post-colonial authoritarian democratic state. Following a concise review of these works, I draw on archival documents to examine the origins of the British state in southern Belize. This analysis provides two principal findings. First, the earliest state institutions were founded at the behest of colonists from the defeated Confederate States to facilitate labor discipline over their workers. Once established, local state officials sought to learn about and gain influence over Indigenous communities. Second, the nascent colonial state was relatively authoritarian and inattentive to local accumulation and social needs. Thus from its inception, the state was organized around race and class relations.

Keywords: State, colonialism, political economy, history, indigenous peoples.

Resumen

Investigaciones recientes en historiografía beliceña han mejorado nuestra comprensión de las relaciones estatales coloniales del siglo XX y la transición al estado democrático autoritario poscolonial. Después de una revisión concisa de estos trabajos, me baso en documentos de archivo para examinar los orígenes del estado británico en el sur de Belice. Este análisis proporciona dos hallazgos principales. Primero, las primeras instituciones estatales se fundaron a instancias de los colonos de los Estados Confederados derrotados para facilitar la disciplina laboral sobre sus trabajadores. Una vez establecidos, los funcionarios estatales locales buscaron aprender y obtener influencia sobre las comunidades indígenas. Segundo, el naciente estado colonial era relativamente autoritario y desatento a la acumulación local y las necesidades sociales. Así, desde su inicio, el estado se organizó en torno a las relaciones de raza y clase.

Palabras claves: Estado, colonialismo, economía política, historia, pueblos indígenas.

Introduction

As with most former British colonies, Belize's state is a democratic constitutional monarchy.¹ Yet to describe this state in such terms obscures as much as it reveals. The democratic character of a state is questionable in a country where an oligarchy holds a *de facto* monopoly on political-economic power and the masses are largely passive.² There is also a conceptual issue. To describe any state as a constitutional democracy is to emphasize its formal, legal character and thereby deemphasize its inherently social and relational character. Like other small societies –Belize has only four hundred thousand citizens– there is a fine line between personal and political relations. Thus any coherent explanation of the Belizean state requires historical-geographical analyses of social and political life. As a contribution to this end, this paper discusses the origins of state institutions in southern Belize. I treat the Belizean state as the crystallization of the prevailing ensemble of social relations. I argue that these social relations (*ergo* the state) are fundamentally rooted in the colonial era and the type of capitalist society it engendered. To grasp the contemporary state in southern Belize and its ongoing conflicts with Indigenous communities over oil, timber, and other resources, therefore, requires taking account of these colonial origins.

To generalize, the historical literature on Belize's state prior to the mid-1970s is distorted by an Anglophilic tone and pro-colonial presuppositions. Consider, for instance, the preface to the three volumes of archival documents edited by one of the colony's governors, John Burdon. Burdon writes that the history of the colony "reflects the utmost credit on the race of adventurers to whom Great Britain owes her Colonial Empire. It brings out their daring, their tenacity, their fundamental desire for and achievement of British law and order" (Burdon 1) This narrative marginalizes non-European perspectives. It is also geographically deterministic: in this view, what distinguishes the history of Belize from that of other former British colonies is its *geography*, particularly its resources and location in the western Caribbean and Central America.³ Such colonial historiography could only produce a self-justification for colonization, an alibi that is teleological and Eurocentric.⁴ Belizean history is naturalized as a story of a territorial nation-state called forth from the land.

Fortunately, over the past thirty years a critical literature has called into question the earlier historiography. I will only briefly mention five scholars who have recast the making of modern Belize by emphasizing the dialectic of colonial rule and popular struggles. O. Nigel Bolland inaugurated the critical study of colonial British Honduras (as Belize was then known) through a series of monographs on the history of colonialism.⁵ Cedric Grant wrote the foundational history of the nationalist movement and formation of modern politics (Grant).⁶ Grant's study was significantly corrected by Anne Macpherson's analysis of the leadership of women in the struggle against colonialism, which had important consequences for the shape of the colonial hegemony between the

1930s and the 1960s (Macpherson). Odile Hoffman's historical studies of the mapping and territorialization have filled in a major gap in our understanding of the spatial formation of colonial British Honduras (Hoffman). And with two historical monographs and a widely used history textbook, Assad Shoman –politician of the left and expert on the Guatemalan claim– is arguably Belize's most important living historian.⁷

Shoman also wrote an important (but rarely cited) analysis of the Belizean state (Shoman, *Belize*, 189-219).⁸ Applying Clive Thomas' framework (Thomas) to Belize, Shoman argues that the distinctive features of its "authoritarian democracy" are rooted in the colonial political economy of the nineteenth century (Shoman, *Belize*). During this century, Belize had an "extreme monopolization of land ownership," with the vast majority of lands in the hands of a tiny oligarchy that ruled an economy "based almost exclusively on the export of mahogany"¹ (Shoman, *Belize: An Authoritarian Democratic State*, 195-197). Underneath this ruling class were the masses, comprised of a small urban proletariat and a much broader "working class and peasantry made up of the non-white population" (198). Within this colonial society, the role of the state was principally to maintain order and facilitate the outward flow of unprocessed timber. The creation of institutions, which might have counteracted the extractive character of British colonial capitalism, was retarded by the persistent Spanish claim to the territory:

Because of the ambiguous state of sovereignty –with the British acknowledging Spanish sovereignty but still fighting to maintain exclusive possession– the usual state institutions were underdeveloped, with the powers held respectively by the settlers and the colonial representatives in continuous conflict (193).

I will return to these points (with which I agree) but pause here to note a geographical limitation of the critical historiography. With few exceptions these studies focus on people and events in Belize City, the largest city and headquarters of colonial government. This has left those of us who seek to understand historical processes in the outlying districts (particularly rural areas) with little material to work. Granted, Belize City was the locus of power and population, but throughout the nineteenth century the majority lived elsewhere.⁹ None of the aforementioned studies discuss the history of southern Belize (i. e. south of Dangriga). This paper complements the critical historical literature empirically by providing the first account of the origins of the colonial state in the Toledo District, the southernmost part of Belize. I also address one of this literature's theoretical lacunae by framing my study with Marxist state theory –work hitherto absent, but which has a great deal to contribute.

As is well known, Marx never elaborated a coherent theory of the state, so Marxist accounts of the state build upon Marx's concepts, historical analyses, and method (Jessop, *State Theory*). These accounts are distinguished from conventional schools of political theory (including those prevalent in most studies of the Belizean state) by the general argument that the capitalist state is never a neutral arbiter of economic or social conflict, but rather a cause and effect of the underlying structure of capitalist social relations—

which are inherently unequal. Within this rubric, multiple schools can be discerned. Let us briefly consider two and their implications for Belize.

First, instrumentalists see the state as an instrument wielded by elite social classes in their struggle to maintain power. This view could be drawn from Marx's statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the Executive of the modern state is merely the organizing committee for the collective interests of the bourgeoisie": the "merely" is a problematic adverb since capitalist states do things which are positive for the proletariat (build schools, e.g.) (Marx and Engels 98-137). Consider too Sweezy's claim that the state is "an instrument in the hands of the ruling class for enforcing and guaranteeing the stability of the class structure itself" (Sweezy 243). This position is untenable. To begin, social class structures are not perfectly stable. Moreover, this approach cannot account for the conflicts internal to the state that cut across class boundaries, e.g., when the bourgeoisie is divided into distinct groups that fight one another for state control. Thus, adherents of this approach tend to explain state practices reductively, by reference to the corrupt motivations of individual leaders (a common tendency in the analysis of Belizean state). Finally, powerful social groups in capitalist society often seek to *inhibit* state action. If the state is indeed an instrument, it is not only employed by capital: it is often blunted.

Another approach focuses on the ways that particular accumulation processes shape the capitalist state's form and structure. Capitalism is by its nature uneven, crisis-prone, and wrought by conflict, and that the state acts as one of the central means of assuaging capital's often contradictory and destructive tendencies. The state, in this view, reflects the concentration of the balance of forces in capitalist society. Elites pursue their interests through the state—thereby helping to sustain their elite positions as well as the accumulation processes that abet them—under competitive conditions that evolve historically with no guarantees nor predetermined path. As a class, capitalists in Belize compete with those of other countries and are commonly divided into competing factions, each seeking to address the challenges facing the class in a fashion that best suits its particular interest. Indeed since its inception as a class, the Belizean elite has been both closely allied to and competitors with capitalists from other countries—particularly England, and more recently, the USA—who sought to shape the state in ways that contributed to the extraction of profit from Belize. The alliances between competing groups of elites and their overseas backers around specific class projects have often shaped specific intra-state and party rivalries. This approach, often associated with the work of Nicos Poulantzas, is analytically rich but often difficult to apply.¹⁰ For instance, it may be difficult to pinpoint the contours of Belize's capitalist class and its specific political and economic interests. Insofar as the state is a product of class conflict and intra-elite competition, it rarely operates as a clear-cut instrument of bourgeois rule. This is by no means to deny the essentially class character of Belizean society, nor the existence of capitalist elites. Rather it is to emphasize the complexity of class processes,

which are always articulated through other forms of identity, including religion, gender, and race—social phenomena which bear their own historical complexities.¹¹

Two conclusions follow. First, rather than treat the state simply as a pre-given thing, we should see it as a *stage of social conflict* on which strategies for capital accumulation are forged through inter- and intra-class competition. Second, we must *historicize* the various processes that shape the state and society. By framing my inquiry in this way, I am drawing upon Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach, an elaboration of Poulantzas' theory. In Jessop's approach, a given capitalist state is studied as "a strategic terrain, as the crystallization of political strategies, and as a specific form which offers structural privileges to some but not all kinds of political strategies" (Jessop, *State Theory*, 270). This approach allows us to interpret the role of the Belizean state by examining the state as a terrain of struggle for the formation of particular accumulation projects and the effect of the essential political-economic relations of that society. Analytically, this approach points us toward historical-geographical research into three intertwining phenomena: first, the political-economic relations of production, exchange, and consumption;¹² second, the social relations that constitute the state and its institutions; third, the mediation of the state and society through the contested process of winning the active consent, or hegemony, of subaltern social groups.¹³ My focus here is solely on the second aspect, particularly on the social relations of class and race.

Within this purview, a preliminary description of the Belizean state today would emphasize that, although formally democratic, the state is substantively authoritarian. There is a marked dominance of the state over civil society (insofar as they can be separated) and social movements (e.g. for labor and environmentalism). Social power is tightly concentrated among an elite historically unified as much by race and geography as by class (though the three intersect). Political power is centralized around the Prime Minister and his closest allies. Elections are monopolized by two parties that mobilize through networks with strong social and familial ties. Since the 1980s, when neoliberal economic policy became entrenched, these parties have only rarely displayed any meaningful ideological differences. Clientelism and corruption are rife. The form and nature of the state have not been seriously challenged since political independence in 1981.¹⁴

While this may provide an accurate and useful preliminary description, any attempt to *explain* this political condition and its historical persistence would need to account for the distinct social classes, institutions, and geographical variations that shape state-society relations in all their particularity. For this, we will need a theoretically informed account of Belize's political economy, derived through geographically sensitive studies of state-society relations as they have evolved through time. As yet, no such account exists for southern Belize for any period. Considerable spadework must still be done.

This paper contributes to this broader project by offering an account of the origins of the colonial state in southern Belize. I do so in three steps. First, I situate 19th century Toledo in colonial British Honduras. Second, I consider the origins of the first state institutions by examining the conditions that led to the appointment of the first District Magistrate. Third, I examine the social and material form of the early colonial state. I conclude by drawing out two critical points from this analysis.

The Toledo District in colonial British Honduras

One of Belize's leading historians, J.O. Palacio, has discerned 1872-1945 as "the climax of colonialism in the history of Belize" (Palacio, *New Creole*, 6). Speaking more roughly, capitalist relations—commodity production, labor markets, and abutting state institutions—were quite weak in southern Belize in the middle of the nineteenth century, but firmly in place by the end of the 1940s. The colonial state in Belize during this period was comprised of an odd combination of social relations.¹⁵ State culture—as gauged by language, style, and administrative form—was thoroughly British-imperial. The state's structure was narrow and hierarchical, with no pretension of democracy. At the top of the hierarchy was the governor, officially the local representative of the Crown: hence the titular head of the government for most of this period was Queen Victoria (who ruled 1837-1901). The governor was appointed by the secretary of state for the colonies in London. In British Honduras, most governors arrived with prior colonial and/or military experience in British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. While the governor was responsible for managing the colony, most business was conducted by the colonial secretary, who responded to most of the Minute Papers that passed through the Government House.¹⁶ Like commerce, political power was spatially concentrated in the British zone of Belize City. Beyond the city, each district was governed by the district commissioner (or "DC") who served as magistrate, tax collector, customs agent, and so on: the *de facto* local sovereign.

In remote Punta Gorda, the colonial headquarters in southern Belize after 1884, the DC effectively served as the sole representative of the Crown. In 1882, the boundaries of the Toledo District were defined and its first magistrate, Francis Orgill, appointed. The first district commissioner, B. Travers, was appointed two years later. In four subsequent decades, all DCs were British; an uneven transition to use of "local" staff—meaning Caribbean-born, relatively elite Creole men—started in the late 1920s.¹⁷ The first Belizean to serve as DC to Toledo was S.B. Vernon, a Creole man elected chair of the Toledo Legislative Council in 1943. There were never any Maya or Garifuna DCs.¹⁸ With brief exceptions, political leadership in Toledo has remained with the Creole minority (including the Vernon family) down to the present day.¹⁹

Other key colonial institutions in the South were maintained by Europeans, though not typically British. The churches and schools were administered by Jesuits,

mainly from Ireland and the US.²⁰ The large forestry companies were financed and managed by a blend of German, British, and American capitalists. Agricultural colonists included Confederates from the US South, Germans, and the Indigenous subaltern groups of southern Belize: the Maya and Garifuna.²¹ The Garifuna, however, were not regarded *as* Indigenous by the colonial state, and the presence of the Maya was either denied or ignored. Indeed the prevailing narrative in the colonial historiography is that southern Belize was empty at the time of the British arrival. Consider Burdon, writing as late as 1931:

*There is no record of any indigenous Indian population and no reason to believe that any such existed except far in the interior. There are traces of extensive Maya Indian occupation — temples, wells, foundations, cultivation terraces—all over the Colony, wherever the land is suitable for agriculture. But this occupation was long before British Settlement. The almost complete disappearance of the once teeming Maya population from these regions is one of the problems of Maya Archaeology (Burdon 41).*²²

Apart from indicating the denial by the colonial state of the existence of the Indigenous peoples, statements like this suggest how the marginalization of the Maya in Belizean historiography works through a discourse in which the Maya are troped as failed civilizers. The Maya were not regarded as a proper “indigenous Indian population” because the British did not at this time recognize their historical-geographical continuity. The British saw only the “traces” of “once teeming Maya”: a residue of a lost civilization, a problem for science to explain (Wainwright, *Decolonizing Development*).

From the vantage of the present, this is hard to grasp. How could the British colonial government have no way to see the Maya people in their colony and recognize their indigeneity? One answer is that the British had practically no knowledge of the Maya and their lands—particularly the interior of the southern portion of the colony—before the 1900s. (Data on the Maya communities accumulated after church leaders, state officials, and anthropologists wrote about them, roughly in that order.) Apropos the state, consider two lines of evidence. First, there are abundant statements in the archival records to the effect that the interior is largely unknown and unvisited. In 1859, one colonial official wrote, e.g.: “*The Southern portions of our territory have never been explored, and according to the Crown Surveyor they contain inhabitants who... have never yet been seen by European or creole*” (Seymour 221-222).

The Maya of Toledo were largely hidden from the state’s gaze until the end of the century. The colonial state operated with a skeletal structure, and state officials practically never left Belize City for the interior (Anon, *Trip to Western Districts*). Moreover, the Maya of Toledo lived in the most remote part of the colony and although Maya people had lived there long before the 1890s, the British state had few engagements

with them.²³ Reports by DCs from the Toledo District between the 1880s and 1930s suggest that trips outside of the main settlements along the coast of southern Belize (Monkey River Town, the Toledo Settlement, Punta Gorda, and Barranco) were rare and brief. Typically, one or two of the largest Maya villages were visited annually by the DC (e.g. in 1895, for the first time, a governor visited San Antonio—then as now, the largest village) (Anon., Report on Indian Settlement).²⁴ State officials would return every few years, occasionally with a small team, producing a report on community life and resources for London (Anon., Despatch 125).

The second line of evidence is cartographic.²⁵ Maps drawn prior to 1900 typically describe Toledo as “unexplored,” and topographic features are substantially misplaced (one common feature is to show an unbroken line of mountains running from SW to NE). Consider the maps from 1885 and 1891, i.e. the period when the first state institutions were founded (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Both feature major topographical errors and label the district interior as “unexplored.”

Figure 1

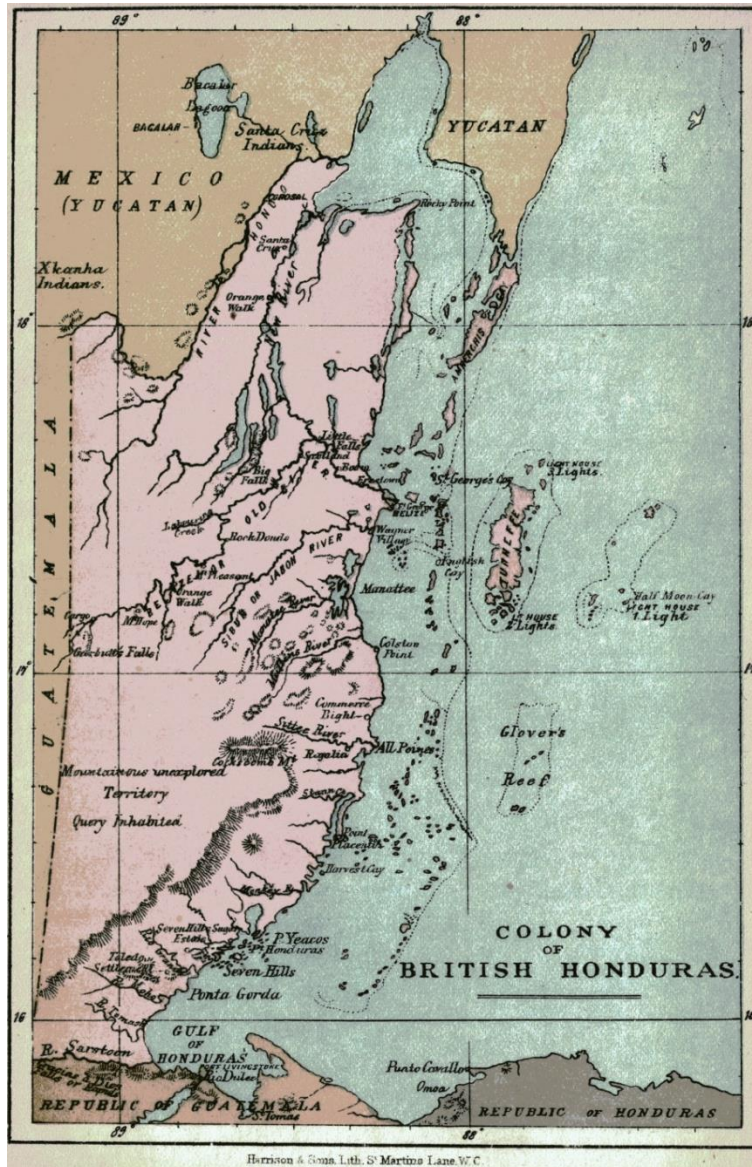
USHER'S MAP (1891) SHOWING PRIVATE PROPERTIES IN SOUTHERN BELIZE



Note: Note that the interior of the Toledo District is marked ‘unexplored’. As in the 1885 map, representation of the mountains of the mountains – drawn “As seen from Cayes” (the coast) – is inconsistent with local topography.

Source: US National Archives, Washington D. C.

Figure 2
MAP OF THE COLONY OF BRITISH HONDURAS (1885, HARRISON & SONS)



Note: Note that the interior of the Toledo District is labelled “Mountainous Unexplored Territory Query Inhabited.” The representation of the mountains is inconsistent with local topography.

Source: author’s collection.

But there were plenty of Indigenous people in southern Belize. Many Garifuna people had settled in southern Belize by 1802, and another group arrived in 1832 (the event celebrated by “settlement day”) (Palacio, *The Garifuna*; Enriquez). And although their population declined due to Spanish *reducciones* and slave raids, Maya people have

lived in the area known today as southern Belize for thousands of years.²⁶ There is now an abundant literature documenting the presence of Maya people in the interior of southern Belize prior to the 1880s; drawing from diverse sources, a group of scholars has documented linguistic, archival, oral-historical, geographical, and other lines of evidence indicating an unbroken history of Maya occupation of southern Belize.²⁷ Yet this literature has been imprecise about the historical geography of the earliest local British state institutions. Hoffman's study of the historical production of colonial territory is a landmark contribution in this respect, but here too the treatment of southern Belize is relatively weak (Hoffman; Wainwright, Review).

"Masters and servants": State and society in colonial Toledo

The ostensible reason for staffing a District Commissioner in the south was the "considerable amount of smuggling" in the region, a practice that threatened the state's territorial order: hence the fixing of the district's boundaries coincided with the appointment of a magistrate in 1882. But archival evidence suggests that other dynamics were more fundamental.

At the end of the US Civil War, some Confederates sought to colonize parts of Latin America, from Mexico to Brazil, in the hope of maintaining their independence and their peculiar institution.²⁸ In 1868 a group of Confederates settled just north of Punta Gorda, at that time a modest Garifuna village that produced a livelihood by fishing and farming (Dwight, map).²⁹ The Confederate settlers purchased land from the colonial government and an investor named Phillip Toledo (for whom their estate, and then the district, took its name).³⁰ The Confederates hoped to build a tropical agricultural colony, but after a cholera epidemic, most returned to Mississippi and Louisiana (Simmons).³¹ The few who remained planted sugar estates, looking towards Punta Gorda as a source of labor power. Yet they encountered difficulties attracting laborers from the Garifuna community, which after hundreds of years of struggle against slavery and colonialism had secured a measure of autonomy in their coastal settlement.³² Nor were Maya people living in rural villages drawn to work for the Confederates. But without access to labor, the sugar estates would fail and with them their colony.

The Confederates made a series of urgent appeals to the colonial state for help with what they called their "labor problem." The British state officials clearly regarded the Confederate settlers at Toledo as natural allies, due to their race, language, and desire to build agricultural estates. In 1872, the state facilitated the importation of laborers from India (Anon. Application for Coolie Labour). Today the descendants of these laborers are defined for the census as "East Indian"; the colloquial term used, without strong prejudicial association, is "Coolie." Yet even after importing low-wage laborers, the Confederate estate owners were unsatisfied. They repeatedly turned to

the colonial state, asking the governor to deputize one of them as the local magistrate so that they could discipline their laborers with the force of law.

The governor sympathized. British policy in the late 19th century encouraged agricultural diversification. In some parts of the Caribbean, this was driven by declining sugar prices, but in Belize it was to encourage a shift away from forestry, given the long-term decline in the availability of and price received for mahogany (Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas 2012). In April 1882, the governor forwarded to London a letter written by the settlers at Toledo, appending a letter summarizing the situation and expressing his support for their cause:

[The settlers] are praying for the appointment of a paid District magistrate... At present, [Toledo] is only visited once in three months by the Magistrate of the Southern District [based in Stann Creek town] who remains there for a day or two. Such visits are productive of good will but the presence of a resident Magistrate is necessary if only for cases between masters and servants which can only be dealt with by a paid magistrate... In the vicinity of this part of the Colony, new settlements are being made, considerable acreage has been taken up. The people from the Bay Islands [i.e. the Garifuna] are turning their attention thither and it is almost a certainty that the population will more than double itself within this year.

The memorial was presented to me by a deputation specially sent, who represented that labor is in such demand and wages so high, that the men employed are so independent as to be almost beyond control—that if a dispute arises and cannot be amicably settled, it has to wait for the visit of the District Magistrate, perhaps, for a period of nearly three months or the master has to proceed to the headquarters of the District, procure a summons, return for the hearing of the case, and probably expend a considerable sum in addition to the loss of time.... And when this is done, the servant, if dissatisfied with the result, will probably not return to his work and will evade arrest by proceeding into the boundaries of Spanish Honduras or Guatemala, which can be reached in a few hours (Governor, 1882 my emphasis).³³

Thus the Confederate colonists who wanted to create sugar plantations spurred the state to create a district magistrate (subsequently commissioner) at Toledo. The first post was even offered to one of the Confederates, James Hutchison, with the understanding that a British DC would be appointed two years later. The Colonial Office was reassured that the revenue collected by the DC “will more than repay the expense entailed.”³⁴

Thanks to the surplus value produced by their agricultural laborers, by 1890 some of the settlers had sufficient capital to expand into exporting mahogany—the mainstay of colonial Belize—which generated sufficient wealth to allow a few to return to the US South with abundant savings. The account of a geographer, Desmond Holdridge (1940), explains the transition:

The rancor of the settlers toward their homeland [i.e. the USA] had disappeared by the third generation... [A] kind of get-rich-quick psychology grew up, it is said, and men concentrated by making as much money as they possibly could in order to return wealthy to the United States. This... accounts for the extension of acreage beyond the point where it could be worked by the white settlers and forced the employment of colored labor... and the unfortunate social result already described... By 1910 the settlement was well on the way to extinction (Holdridge 390-391).³⁵

So far as I can tell, the “unfortunate social result” to which Holdridge refers is that the Confederate settlers were compelled to live in close proximity to Garifuna, Maya, and ‘Coolie’ people.

Notwithstanding support from the colonial government, the Toledo settlement was short-lived. Although their so-called “Coolie” laborers enriched their estates, the Confederates complained about the lack of disciplined labor. The true limitations of the Confederate colony lay in turbulent markets for unprocessed agricultural goods, the challenge of maintaining soil fertility, and —if Holdridge’s account is correct— the settlers’ racism.³⁶ Prospering through the 1880s, it peaked in size and wealth around 1890 before falling into a permanent decline. The settlement effectively collapsed around the turn of the century when cane yields declined during an international slump in the price of sugar (Camille 36). A few Confederate families stayed on for several more decades, and as late as 1916, the DC of Toledo reported that “the Sugar Industry at the Toledo Settlement... provided work for a considerable number” (Anon., Report for the Year 1916). But by 1918 only a few descendants of six Confederate families remained: together they managed twelve consolidated estates, averaging 530 acres; presumably the relatively successful farmers purchased estates from emigrating, failed colonists. That year the remaining families begged the state for money to build a sugar mill and a new road (as well as an import tax on sugar). The state rejected these requests, ending the rich legacy of subsidies, thus sealing the fate of the Toledo settlement (Anon, Forwarding Petition; Anon. Deputation from Planters Regarding Factory; Anon. Deputation from Planters Regarding Import Duty).

Though short-lived, the Toledo settlement transformed the landscape of southern Belize in several ways. The estates, drawn up during a period of speculation on timberlands, were subdivided into agricultural estates. The Confederate settlers’ failure to secure labor from the Indigenous communities led to the importing of East Indian laborers whose descendants still make a livelihood on the lands purchased by the Confederates. Although the crops have changed, the region remains marked by certain landscape features laid down in the 1870s: unusually long, straight property lines, extending due North and South, perpendicular to the road from the sea at Cattle Landing. The East Indian families who inhabited parts of the formerly Confederate estates could not afford to purchase the land outright were locked into leasing relationships that maintained an outward flow of capital. Today this region, known as “Rancho,” is among the poorest in Belize.

Administering colonial Toledo

It is often imagined that the various relations that constitute the state are so tightly integrated that they must come into existence together or not at all. In fact, in Belize as elsewhere, the social and political qualities we associate with states – law, border, state institutions, and so on – need not coincide in time and space. In southern Belize, they emerge differentially and unevenly. The rule of law was asserted by the Court in Belize for the first time in 1821, through the trial of Prince, a slave, who murdered a Maya woman. The territorial boundary-line between Belize and Guatemala was fixed in 1859 by Article I of the Wyke–Aycinena Treaty (Shoman, *Belize's Independence*), yet remains porous—and contested by Guatemala—in 2020. State institutions were slow to crystallize, even in rudimentary form. The process begins in the late 19th century.

In 1895 Punta Gorda—at the time one of several Garifuna villages located along the southern coastline—was declared a town and made district capital: henceforth the DC and the Toledo District Board (also founded 1895) kept offices there. Elementary state institutions followed slowly, each DC requesting resources to expand his capacities. A rudimentary hospital was established in 1896, followed by telephone contact with Belize City in 1905.³⁷ State agents always remained few: as late as 1903, only 94 civil servants administered the entire government, with about two in the South.³⁸ Belize was considered to be among the most unhealthy and remote of the British colonies, and the South had an especially poor reputation. The first magistrate of Toledo fell ill and died shortly after his appointment; upon receiving the news, London replied that his replacement could not expect to have “a very good life” (Anon., *Death of Mr. H. Orgill*). Hence the DC-of-Toledo position attracted inexperienced candidates. The district was not so much forgotten as avoided. The state institutions that emerged were weak.

The political economy of the South in this era exhibited a blend of capitalist and precapitalist social relations. Maya, Garifuna, and East Indian households built their own homes and produced most of their own food through agriculture, fishing, and hunting; to generate money needed to pay land taxes and purchase imported commodities (clothing, soap, and foodstuffs) they sold surpluses, particularly in the modest quantities of surplus crops and pigs exported to Puerto Barrios or Belize City. The sale of labor power was informal and occasional, purchased by firms exporting forest products, particularly timber and chicle. The colonial state collected little revenue from the export of these products; what little investment and accumulation occurred in the colony was concentrated in Belize City. As Bolland memorably noted, “until the middle of the nineteenth century the British settlement at Belize resembled little more than a trading post attached to a massive timber reserve” (Bolland, *Formation of a Colonial Society*, 6). Even during periods of economic growth, Belizean colonial state

never effectively taxed land and consistently ran deficits. The local state in southern Belize made no pretense of offering democratic representation or providing services for social welfare. Medical care was largely traditional; education, such as it existed, was organized by the church.

An 1883 letter to London written by Lt. Governor Harley reveals something of the state's capacity in the South. His report is worth citing at length because it provides the fullest description of southern Belize and its early state institutions from a colonial official in this era. It also gives a sense of the attention given to racial depiction of the (relatively little known) subjects Harley encountered and employed:

I paid a visit to the Southern part of the Colony... with the express purpose of visiting the Settlement of Punta Gorda, to which a Magistrate has recently been appointed. This settlement has hitherto not received much attention at the hands of the Government, but it occupies an important position on our boundary...

Punta Gorda is a settlement of Caribs, numbering about six hundred, and I am sorry to say without much industry, however, little has been done for them and they continue to live in a state of primitive simplicity, satisfied with cultivating the small patches of Crown Land which they rent from the Government in yams &c, and corn, which with the fish they can supply themselves with daily is all they require. When they want money they will work on some of the adjacent Estates [i.e. the Toledo settlement] until they have earned sufficient to pay their rent and taxes, and buy a few yards of cloth...

I had received reports that the Magistrate was living in a hut which consisted of one room, which had to serve the purposes of living, sleeping, and administering justice. I decided to enquire for myself into the facts of the case. I found all that had been imparted to me but too true. I took the Colonial Engineer with me, as I had in view not only reporting on the accommodation provided for the Magistrate, but that for the Police and Prisoners. Nothing could be worse... I have made arrangement also for the suitable lodgment of the Magistrate and his Court close to the Police Station, in premises for sale in a short time, which the Colonial Engineer reports as being very suitable, and which will cost considerably less than having to build a house (Anon., Visit to Southern District).

The colonial engineer suggested that the government purchase the buildings that subsequently became the courthouse and DC's headquarters.³⁹ The Colonial Office replied by approving "the action you have taken with respect to quarters for the District magistrate," but construction of state buildings was slow. Almost two years later, Governor Goldsworthy visited the same area and found that "except the Magistrate's House at Punta Gorda and the Police Stations at [Dangriga and Monkey River] there are no public buildings [South of Dangriga] and as to public roads except in the villages themselves they do not exist." He then describes Punta Gorda and the Toledo settlement:

Punta Gorda, the next village of any size, lies at almost the Southern limit of the Colony—it has a population of about 500 nearly all of whom are Caribs. The village is picturesquely situated on the sea coast... There is a Magistrate's House and Police Station—the former recently built and the latter in a terrible... condition, a sum has however been placed on the estimate for a Court House and a Police Station combined. During my visit, by heading a subscription, sufficient funds were obtained for building a school house, & it is now in course of construction—Hitherto there existed no means of educating the children (Anon., Cultivation of Northern District).

Goldsworthy's report was written in 1884. Remarkably, the state buildings called for were not completed until 1916:

The Court House, Offices, and other official buildings connected there-with at Punta Gorda were completed [in 1916], with the exception of fencing the land upon which they stand, this will I understand be erected at an early date. A new Flag and Light Staff was erected at Punta Gorda, and various repairs done to the Public Hospital and Assistant Medical Officers Quarters (Anon. Annual Report for the Year 1916).⁴⁰

Essentially no further investment was made by the colonial government in public buildings before the beginning of "Self-Government" in 1964. At Independence in 1981, there were still no public buildings south of Dangriga worth mention. The former DC headquarters in Punta Gorda was razed in 2006 after decades of decay and disrepair; the old post office and courthouse were badly damaged by fire in 2013 (later partially repaired). There were no campaigns to resurrect these colonial buildings as historical monuments and their degradation produced no discernable expressions of nostalgia. They comprise, after all, the ruins of an unmemorable state.

Conclusions

To conclude I will summarize two key arguments that follow from this analysis.

The first is that the state was organized from the outset around class and race relations. One anthropologist writes that Toledo appears as if:

God had shaken the earth and everything that did not fit into some space had spilled into this small pocket... Down the front of God's lacy apron they slid.... They shook themselves, these creatures who had no other residence...and decided to make the best of things (Staimana-Ross 7).

The metaphor is too clever. For if anything played the part of God in this story, it was the British Empire. The Garifuna came to southern Belize as war refugees, hounded by fear of enslavement; the Maya were in southern Belize long before European contact, but faced waves of dispossession until the Q'eqchi' and Mopan resettled ancestral homelands; the East Indians were brought as indentured laborers to work for Confederates. The British claimed the territory principally for commercial advantage in

timber exports. Their earliest state institutions were founded at the behest of the Confederates to discipline their would-be “servants.” The Indigenous Maya and Garifuna always far outnumbered the Confederates, but the latter alone received the state’s attention and assistance. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Confederate colony was in permanent decline, and the state’s attention shifted to securing hegemony and finding opportunities to generate exports from the South. An implicit racial hierarchy – Europeans on top (with the British in charge), Creoles in the middle, the East Indians, Garifuna, and Maya on bottom – was inscribed into and reproduced by the state.

The second conclusion is that the fundamental, problematic characteristics of the post-colonial state in southern Belize were present from the late-nineteenth century. The palpable weakness of state institutions of contemporary southern Belize was in evidence more than a century ago. The paucity of public institutions, the emphasis on labor discipline and law-and-order, the brevity of terms by officials (and their limited spatial movement) are symptomatic of the state’s basic incapacity to promote social welfare or to discipline capital. And yet this small state, backed by the authority of the British Empire, organized through authoritarian institutions, was sufficient to secure a new social order and facilitate the extraction and export of primary commodities. In sum, the history of early state formation in southern Belize is a story of the consolidation of a marginal colony with a capitalist economy under British hegemony. The general pattern reveals what Bob Jessop describes as “the relative subordination of an entire social order to the logic and reproduction requirements of capital accumulation (Jessop, *Future of the Capitalist State*, 23).” The social order in southern Belize remains so subordinated today. Hence it was not necessary to save the old colonial buildings. Their legacy is embedded in the social relations living out around them.

Notes

- 1 Popular elections determine the composition of the House, where the standard-bearer of the leading party becomes the prime minister and appoints a cabinet of ministers.
- 2 On these limitations of Belize’s democracy, see Assad Shoman, *Backtalking Belize* (1995); Mark Nowotny, “No Tyrants Here Linger: Understandings of Democracy in Modern Belize” (2007); Dylan Vernon, *Big Game, Small Town: Clientelism and Democracy in the Modern Politics of Belize (1954-2011)*, (2013); also the numerous, regular editorials by Evan X. Hyde in *Amandala*, Belize’s leading newspaper. On the economic history of Belize, see N.S. Carey Jones, *The Pattern of a Dependent Economy: A Study of the National Income of British Honduras* (1953); Norman Ashcraft, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment: Processes of Political Economic Change in British Honduras* (1973); Barbara Bulmer-Thomas and Victor

Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Belize: From the 17th Century to Post-Independence* (2012); Frantz Smith, *A History of Enterprise in Belize* (2013).

- 3 Texts written in the first decades after British Honduras became an official colony served to produce “the colony” and “British Honduras” as a space of extractable resources. The history of this object thereby becomes told as an unfolding of knowledge about these resources. See, e.g., Charles Swett, *A Trip to British Honduras, and to San Pedro, Republic of Honduras* (2012 [1868]); Samuel Cockburn, *Rough Notes and Official Reports on the River Belize, the Physical Features of British Honduras, Taken in 1867 & 1869* (1875); Daniel Morris, *The Colony of British Honduras, Its Resources and Prospects, with particular Reference to its Indigenous Plants and Economic Productions* (1883); and Wilfred Collet, *British Honduras and Its Resources* (1909). These texts are rarely cited after the publication of Charles Wright et al., *Land in British Honduras* (1959), the apex of this genre.
- 4 See, e.g., Archibald Gibbs, *British Honduras: A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Colony from its Settlement, 1670* (1883); and Great Britain Foreign Office Historical Section, *British Honduras* (1920).
- 5 See especially O. Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, from Conquest to Crown Colony* (1977); and O. Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (1988).
- 6 This book was initially a PhD dissertation written at the University of Edinburgh of 1969.
- 7 O. Nigel Bolland and Assad Shoman, *Land in Belize 1765-1871* (1977); Assad Shoman, *Thirteen Chapters of a History of Belize* (1994); Assad Shoman, *Backtalking Belize* (1995); Assad Shoman, *Belize’s Independence and Decolonization in Latin America: Guatemala, Britain, and the UN* (2010). The latter provides a rich historical analysis of Guatemala’s claim to the territory of southern Belize, a conflict rooted in different interpretations of the Anglo-Guatemalan Treaty of 1859 (Shoman 2010, 29-35), as well as an explanation of Belize’s successful campaign to internationalize its appeal for independence.
- 8 This essay, written in 1988, is practically the only theoretically informed critique of the modern Belizean state. See also those texts cited in note 2.
- 9 E.g., in 1895 Belize District was home to 12,227 people and southern Belize 8,156 (Stann Creek District 4,388; Toledo District 3,768): PRO CO 123/218 (Despatch 125). Yet this population count for Toledo was almost certainly an undercount, since, as explained below, the colonial state did not collect data regularly on the Maya communities.
- 10 Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1978); Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (1979). To be sure, these papers do not realize the full potential of the Poulantzian approach to the study of Belize. Apart from limitations of space, Belize’s archival record is spotty—hurricanes and fires have taken a

- toll—and the texts that do survive, generally written by British colonial officers, do not offer material that can be easily used to these ends. I hope this study effectively signals the need for further theoretically informed historical research.
- 11 For an excellent study of gender-nation-class intersections and their contribution to making the modern Belizean state, see Anne Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation: Women Activists and the Gendering of Politics in Belize, 1912-1982* (2007). On identity and social class in Belize, see Rick Wilk, *Household Ecology: Economic Change and Domestic Life Among the Kekchi Maya in Belize* (1997); Laurie Kroshus Medina, *Negotiating Economic Development: Identity Formation and Collective Action in Belize* (2004); J.O. Palacio, ed., *The Garifuna, A Nation Across Borders: Essays in Social Anthropology* (2005); Assad Shoman (2009, 2010).
- 12 On the political economy of colonial Belize, see O. Nigel Bolland, *Formation of a Colonial Society* (1977); Rick Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (2006), Chapters 3-5; Joel Wainwright, *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya* (2008), Chapter 1.
- 13 On practices to win colonial hegemony in southern Belize, see O. Nigel Bolland, "Alcaldes and Reservations: British Policy Towards the Maya in Late Nineteenth Century Belize," *América Indígena*, (1987); Rick Wilk, *Household Ecology: Economic Change and Domestic Life Among the Kekchi Maya in Belize* (1997); Wainwright, *Decolonizing Development*, 2008; Joel Wainwright, "'The First Duties of Persons Living in a Civilized Community': The Maya, the Church, and the Colonial State in Southern Belize." *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009): 428-450; on the colonial history of forestry, see Joel Wainwright and Chris Zempel, "The colonial roots of forest extraction: Rosewood exploitation in southern Belize." *Development and Change*, 49 (2018), 37-62.
- 14 See note 2. Consider also the 2013 data from the World Bank's World Governance Indicators (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>). Belize scored below average for the region (Latin America and the Caribbean) in government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and rule of law.
- 15 Elements of a British colonial state date to 1765, when the European settlers agreed to "location laws" to formalize their land rights. In 1786 these rules were codified into Burnaby's Code, the first civil law. The first superintendent of British Honduras, Colonel Despard, was appointed in 1786. The first constitution and Legislative Assembly were established in 1854. Belize was declared a colony in 1862 and became a Crown colony in 1871. On the establishment of British Honduras as a Crown Colony, see O.N. Bolland, *Formation of a Colonial Society*, 1977.
- 16 Government House was built in Belize City in 1814, almost thirty years after Despard became the first superintendent of British Honduras.
- 17 In Belize, "Creole" may refer to a broad and diverse social group comprised of the descendants of African people, often mixed with European ancestors, and/or

the distinctive language spoken by this group. See Palacio, "May the New Belize Creole Please Rise" (1988); Karen Judd, *Elite reproduction and ethnic identity in Belize* (1992); O. Nigel Bolland, "Creolisation and creole societies: a cultural nationalist view of Caribbean social history. *Caribbean Quarterly* 44 (1997), 1-32; Melissa Johnson, "The Making of Race and Place in Nineteenth-Century British Honduras," *Environmental History* 8 (2003): 598-617; Ken Decker, *The Song of Kriol: A Grammar of the Kriol Language of Belize* (2013); Shoman (2009, 2010). A Creole minority dominated politics in Punta Gorda Town, and thereby the Toledo District generally, from at least the 1910s until the 1980s. Their hegemony diminished for two reasons. First, the size of their community declined. In the 1980s Creoles made up 26 percent of the population of Punta Gorda; in 2000 they comprised only 15 percent of PG and 5 percent of the Toledo District (data from Census 2000). This demographic decline is largely attributed to the greater international mobility of Creoles, especially with respect to migration to the US, relative to other social groups: many chose to escape poor economic conditions in Punta Gorda through education and employment abroad. Second, the Creole community has lost much of its economic base to other groups (especially Chinese migrants) who have won most of the "Creole share" of the wholesale dry-goods market.

- 18 Some Garifuna people, particularly men, were employed in other, subaltern roles (particularly as police and teachers), across the South. See Enriquez (2017).
- 19 The current representative of Toledo East, Mike Espot, is serving his fifth term. While some of his family are of Arab descent, in the terms of southern Belize's racial profile he would be considered a member of the Creole minority.
- 20 The Catholic mission was established in Punta Gorda in 1862 (Woods, Bennett, and Udz, 2015, 352). On the church in colonial Toledo, see Wainwright, "'The First Duties of Persons Living in a Civilized Community'" (2009).
- 21 On Garifuna history, see J.O. Palacio, ed., *The Garifuna, A Nation Across Borders: Essays in Social Anthropology* (2005); apropos Maya history, the multiple lines of evidence are elegantly summarized in the affidavits prepared by Richard Wilk and Grant Jones for the Supreme Court case on Maya land rights: see Richard Wilk, "First Affidavit of Richard Wilk,"; Grant Jones, "First Affidavit of Grant D. Jones" (2007).
- 22 Burdon brackets the question of the existence of the Maya as a problem for archaeology. Archaeology has been both the inspiration and hegemonic form of knowledge for debating "the Maya question" since it was first posed in the early twentieth century. The first Minute Papers in the Archives of Belize that refer specifically to "Mayas" in southern Belize concern the discovery of "Indian ruins." See, e.g., AB MP 3267-1894: "Indian Ruins on the Rio Grande, Toledo District" (1894).

- 23 In 1859 the superintendent of British Honduras said of the Mayas: “We know but little of these people” (cited in John Burdon, *Archives of British Honduras: Volume III* (1935), 221-2).
- 24 This report states, “This visit is paid annually by the District commissioner during the dry season when the road is cleared and the bridges are repaired....”.
- 25 On the role of cartography in the colonization—and, potentially, decolonization—of Indigenous lands in Mesoamerica, see, e.g., Raymond Craib, “Cartography and Power in the Conquest and Creation of New Spain,” *Latin American Research Review* 35 (2000): 7-36; Joel Wainwright and Joe Bryan, “Cartography, Territory, Property: Postcolonial Reflections on Indigenous Counter-mapping in Nicaragua and Belize,” *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 153-178.
- 26 This claim presumes, of course, a continuity in the meaning of “Maya” which should be historicized. See Wolfgang Gabbert, *Becoming Maya* (2004). The Spanish *reducciones* were created by Catholic (mainly Jesuit) missionaries in Guatemala to concentrate Maya people in places where they could be more easily governed.
- 27 See sources in note 13.
- 28 I refer to Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1967). On the attempted Confederate colonization of Mexico, see Andrew Rolle, *The Lost Cause: The Confederate Exodus to Mexico* (1992).
- 29 An 1868 map of the proposed Garifuna land reserve in Punta Gorda shows that the settlement had twenty-two buildings (C. Dwight, 1868).
- 30 The Toledo, Young, and Co. acquired much of the private land for sale in Belize in the 1860s by buying the estates from smaller companies that went bankrupt. By 1871 they held more than a million acres of land, but the company went bankrupt itself in 1881. Most of their lands passed to the state in lieu of unpaid land taxes.
- 31 Donald Simmons, *Confederate Settlements in British Honduras* (2001), Chapters 6, 8.
- 32 On the Garifuna struggle, see Christopher Taylor, *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival and the Making of the Garifuna* (2012).
- 33 PRO CO 123/167/45: “A District Magistrate at Toledo: Recommends the Appointment of, and Encloses a Memorial from Certain Planters and Others Praying for Such an Appointment” (1882), my emphasis. The enclosed letter, written in Punta Gorda in April 1882, was signed by twenty-two men, including the names of most of the estate owners in Toledo: Watrous, Payne, Copeland, Ezell, Gamble, Wilson, Lester, and Pearce. Most give their occupation as “Sugar Planter, Toledo Settlement.”
- 34 London agreed to approve “the temporary appointment of Mr. Hutchinson but so that before coming to any decision as to the permanent appointment of a District Magistrate.” In the context of local poverty, the expenses were not inconsiderable. Across the whole colony the greatest expenditures in this era were for the

police and administration. In 1884, for instance, the largest single item among state expenditures (comprising 7 percent of the total budget) was the police.

35 Desmond Holdridge, "Toledo: A Tropical Refugee Settlement in British Honduras," *Geographical Review* 30 (1940): 376-393.

36 The Confederate colonists' anxiety about maintaining their racial "purity" features prominently in Holdridge's (1940) account of the community. Holdridge notes that "the settlers' fear of absorption" into the local community led them to send their children abroad for education, thus depriving the community of "white labor" (385). Hence while the "growth of the colored settlement at Punta Gorda was ensured... stagnation of the white settlement at Toledo became inevitable" (Ibid.). By the 1930s the remaining colonists felt "isolated," filled with an abiding "resentment of the social conditions that, in view of their racial convictions, force them to leave as their children grow older" to preserve racial white purity (391).

37 Through the 1950s communications between state officials in the south and the city were predominantly conducted via written despatches exchanged via boat traffic.

38 I write "about two" because it is difficult to specify the exact location of officials from the records. Between 1903 and 1914 there was a rapid growth in the civil service; in eleven years the number of colonial officials increased to 160. State employment continued to grow at a consistent rate until 1926, when there were 215 state officials, an average addition of more than five officials per year. Layoffs in 1932-1937 reduced the number of officials, but then rapid growth picked up again in 1938-1940. But even this larger staff represented a small fraction of the population. In 1921, when the population of British Honduras was forty-five thousand, the state was run with only 162 civil officials (data from AB: Blue Books for specific years). According to the 1921 census, only 1.2 percent of the population came from the UK or US.

39 Gustav Von Ohlafen, the Colonial Engineer, writes: "There is now for sale at Punta Gorda a suitable frame house twenty four feet by thirty five, elevated from the ground and roofed with corrugated iron, which with a few trifling alterations and the addition of a water cistern will make a convenient residence for the Magistrate, the present but being converted into a Court house" (9 April 1883).

40 In 1921 the colonial secretary asked Taylor, a former DC, to explain the origins of the building arrangement in Punta Gorda. He replied: "When I visited Punta Gorda in 1899... there was no Hospital at Punta Gorda, and Sir Bickham suggested the purchase of Mr. Cramer's house there, for the Commissioners Quarters, and the present one (now occupied by Dr. Hetherington)—be converted into a Hospital;—the idea was considered a good one" (AB MP 3566-21, 1921).

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