

A short history of Jamaica

From the Taíno to independence, told in short chapters.



Before you start

This is a short history of Jamaica, put together from our carousels. Disputed dates are given as approximate.

In this guide

Overview — Jamaica in 10 dates

Taíno and Spanish — The Taíno · The Taíno, in depth · Spanish Jamaica · Spanish Jamaica, in depth

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OVERVIEW

Jamaica in 10 dates

From the Taíno to independence.

From Xaymaca to Port Royal

c. 800	The Taíno arrive.
1494	Columbus arrives (5 May).
1509	First Spanish colony: Sevilla la Nueva.
1655	England takes Jamaica.
1692	An earthquake sinks Port Royal.

From rebellion to freedom

1739	Peace treaty with the Maroons.
1831	Sam Sharpe's rebellion.
1834	Slavery is abolished. Full freedom in 1838.
1865	Morant Bay Rebellion.
1962	Independence (6 August).



The Taíno

The first Jamaicans.

They came by canoe.

Arawak peoples, among them the Taíno, settled across the island.

They called it Xaymaca: "land of wood and water".

Cassava, casabe, barbecue.

They grew cassava and made casabe, the bread that is now bammy.

Their way of cooking over a wood fire is at the origin of jerk.

They almost disappeared.

Spanish slavery, European diseases and forced labour wiped out almost the entire population by the early 1600s.

Some fled to the mountains and mixed with Africans who were escaping.

You say them every day

Ají	Yes: the word is Taíno.
Maíz	From the Taíno mahís.
Hamaca	A Taíno word.
Huracán	From Jurakán.
Cacique	Chief of a people.

The Taíno, in depth

The sources disagree.

Britannica places the Taíno around the year 800. Other studies say their culture formed on the island around 1200.



Before them there were already pottery-making peoples: around 600 or 650, depending on the source.

Up to 60,000, it is estimated.

Britannica and the Gleaner estimate some 60,000 people when the Spanish arrived.

It is an estimate, not a census: the Taíno had no writing.

A large village by the Rio Cobre.

Between Kingston and Spanish Town was one of the largest Taíno villages. It was still inhabited in Spanish times.

Pots, stone axes and net weights were found. Its museum opened in 1965 and closed in 2007.

148 paintings in a cave.

At Cudjoe Hill, St Catherine, there are Taíno paintings of birds, fish, turtles and human figures.

They became known in 1897. Since 2003 the cave has been a national monument.

Three figures in London.

In June 1792 a surveyor found three wooden figures in a cave in Vere, in the Carpenters Mountains.

Today they are in the British Museum, which dates one of them to between 1028 and 1156.

Spanish Jamaica

1494–1655: 161 years in which the island was a colony of Spain.

Columbus arrives.

On his second voyage, Christopher Columbus reaches Jamaica.

He is the first European on record on the island.



Sevilla la Nueva.

Juan de Esquivel founds the first Spanish settlement, near St Ann's Bay.

The island is called Santiago.

JAMAICA

**1534 • Villa de la
Vega**

&

PERU

1535 • Lima

Two Spanish capitals, one year apart

Villa de la Vega, now Spanish Town, was the capital of Jamaica until 1872.

Enslaved Africans arrive.

With the Taíno population almost gone, Spain brought enslaved Africans.

In the 1611 census, they were 558 of 1,510 inhabitants.

The English arrive.

Some 7,000 English soldiers land near Villa de la Vega.

Many Spanish settlers flee and free the people they had enslaved, who escape to the mountains and join the Maroons.

Spanish Jamaica, in depth

Spanish Jamaica: from Sevilla la Nueva to its last battle.

Sevilla la Nueva, next to Maima.

Juan de Esquivel arrived with 80 settlers and their families. They founded the first capital next to Maima, a Taíno village.

Ruins remain of the governor's castle, a sugar mill and a church.

Stones that changed use.

The church of Pedro Mártir was begun in 1525 and never finished. Its stones were later used for another church nearby.



An island for supplies.

With no gold or silver, Jamaica served mainly as a base for food and hides for expeditions to the mainland.

Cattle ranches replaced Taíno villages, with forced labour under the encomienda and repartimiento systems.

Five years of resistance.

After the English invasion, Governor Cristóbal Ysassi kept fighting from the hills, with settlers and Africans.

Spain lost the battles of Ocho Rios (1657) and Rio Nuevo (1658).

Changing sides.

Juan de Bolas, Maroon leader from Lluidas Vale, went over to the English in 1660. He was given land and the rank of colonel.

Without that support, Ysassi left the island for Cuba that same year, according to the historian Irene Wright.



English Jamaica

1655–1962: sugar, slavery, rebellion and independence.

From Spain to England.

England takes the island in 1655.

In 1670, the Treaty of Madrid recognises it as English.

Port Royal sinks.

Port Royal, a port of pirates and merchants, was one of the richest cities in the Caribbean.

An earthquake sank two-thirds of the city into the sea.

Sugar and slavery.

The island filled with sugar plantations worked by enslaved Africans.

There were rebellions: Tacky's in 1760 and Sam Sharpe's in 1831, the largest in Jamaica.

JAMAICA

1838

&

PERU

1854

End of slavery

In Jamaica slavery was abolished in 1834 and full freedom came on 1 August 1838. In Peru it was abolished in 1854.

Morant Bay.

Paul Bogle led a march against injustice. The repression killed 439 people and executed 354 more.

Bogle and George William Gordon were hanged.



20th century

1938	Workers' strikes. The PNP and the BITU union are founded.
1943	Bustamante founds the JLP.
1944	Universal suffrage for all adults.
1962	Independence: 6 August.

The Maroons of Jamaica

Africans who freed themselves and forced the British to make peace.

Free in the mountains.

Africans who escaped slavery founded free communities in the interior of the island.

In the west, in the Cockpit Country. In the east, in the Blue Mountains.

The peace treaty.

After years of war, the British made peace with Cudjoe and recognised his land and autonomy.

It came at a cost: the Maroons had to return other runaways.

Nanny.

She led the eastern Maroons in the war against the British.

Today she is a National Heroine of Jamaica and her face is on the 500-dollar note.

Still there.

Accompong and Moore Town still exist today.

Every 6 January, Accompong celebrates the 1739 treaty.

JAMAICA

Nanny Town

&

PERU

Huachipa



In 1713, cimarrones led by Francisco Congo formed a palenque (fortified settlement) in Huachipa, Lima.

Cimarrones: the same word

The same word, the same fight for freedom.

JAMAICA

Maroon

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PERU

Cimarrón

Someone who escaped slavery

According to the National Library of Jamaica, "maroon" probably comes from the Spanish "cimarrón".

The palenque of Huachipa.

Near Lima, cimarrones led by Francisco Congo, "Chavelilla", built a palenque with a wall and a single gate.

The militias took it after a day of fighting. On 17 April 1713 its leaders were sentenced to death.

The treaties.

The Jamaican Maroons held out until they signed treaties with the English: Cudjoe on 1 March 1739 and Quao on 23 December.

Accompong, Moore Town and Charles Town still exist.

The only heroine.

Nanny, a Maroon leader, is the only woman among Jamaica's National Heroes.

Her face is on the Jamaican 500-dollar note.



The Maroon Wars

Two wars, the 1739 treaties and a forced journey to Africa.

Ten years or 84?

Colonial archives speak of about ten years of war. Maroon oral history speaks of about 84.

The sources disagree, and the National Library of Jamaica records both versions.

Nanny Town falls.

The English took the town of the eastern Maroons, led by Nanny.

It was a hard blow, but not a defeat: the war went on until the 1739 treaties.

Land, peace and conditions.

Cudjoe's treaty gave 1500 acres between Trelawny Town and the Cockpit Country. Two white men would live with them; in the eastern treaty, four.

The second war.

It began in Trelawny Town: two Maroons accused of stealing pigs were flogged by a runaway they themselves had returned.

They were hunted with dogs brought from Cuba. They surrendered on 6 March 1796.

From Jamaica to Africa

1796	More than 500 are deported to Canada.
21-22 Jul. 1796	They reach Halifax, Nova Scotia.
In Halifax	They work on the Citadel Hill fortress.
7 Aug. 1800	They sail for Sierra Leone.
30 Sep. 1800	They reach Freetown.



Tacky's Rebellion

1760–1761: the Coromantee war, told in depth.

Takyi, from the Gold Coast.

According to the Gleaner, he was a Fante chief captured in wars between Akan peoples, in present-day Ghana.

In Jamaica he was enslaved on the Frontier estate, in St Mary, where he became a foreman.

The attack on Fort Haldane.

Before dawn, the rebels took gunpowder and muskets from the fort at Port Maria. They killed the storekeeper.

Workers from the Trinity, Esher and Heywood Hall estates joined them.

From St Mary to Westmoreland.

The historian Vincent Brown counts uprisings from 7 April 1760 to October 1761.

In Westmoreland they were led by Wager, also called Apongo. More than a thousand people joined.

Hundreds of lives.

Brown counts 60 white people dead and more than 500 Black people dead in combat, executed or by suicide.

Some 500 were deported for life. Other sources give different figures.

There are two versions.

One says he was killed by Davy, a Maroon marksman, and that his head was displayed in Spanish Town.

Another, that he disappeared behind the waterfall now called Tacky Falls. Some people are calling for him to be made a National Hero.



JAMAICA

Tacky

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PERU

Túpac Amaru II

Two rebellions, twenty years apart

Tacky rose up in April 1760. Túpac Amaru II, on 4 November 1780, near Yanaoca, in Cusco.



Morant Bay and after

1865: what happened before, during and after the rebellion.

Very few could vote.

Jamaica had more than 436,000 inhabitants, but fewer than 2000 could vote, almost all of them white.

The Baptist missionary Edward Underhill wrote to London about the extreme poverty of the people.

The march on the courthouse.

Up to 500 people entered Morant Bay. After the militia opened fire, they burned the courthouse.

Martial law.

As well as the dead, more than 600 people were flogged and more than a thousand homes were burned.

Gordon was taken from Kingston, where martial law did not apply, to a military trial in Morant Bay.

Farewell to the Assembly.

The Jamaica Assembly gave up its charter and ended two centuries of elected representation.

The island came under direct rule by the British Crown. Eyre was replaced.

Intellectuals divided.

The Jamaica Committee, with John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, wanted Eyre put on trial.

Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Alfred Tennyson defended him. A grand jury did not indict him, and in 1873 he was granted a pension.



The 1907 Kingston earthquake

The earthquake that forced the capital to be rebuilt.

Seconds that changed everything.

At 3:32 p.m., according to the Gleaner, in 10 to 20 seconds a city of 46,000 people was brought to a standstill.

Estimated magnitude: 6.2. Every building in Kingston was damaged.

Fire and sea.

Within twenty minutes fire was sweeping the streets and finished what the quake had started.

On the north coast there was a tsunami: at Annotto Bay the sea dropped more than three metres and then came back.

The sources disagree.

The Gleaner speaks of more than 800 dead; other sources, of about 1000.

Hundreds were buried in mass graves at May Pen cemetery.

The marines and the governor.

A US admiral landed armed marines without the permission of Governor Swettenham, who asked for them to be withdrawn.

Swettenham had to apologise and resigned shortly afterwards.

A new Kingston.

Under Governor Olivier, the public buildings of King Street, gardens and new grid-pattern streets were built.

More than a quarter of a million pounds in aid came from England.

1938: the year that changed Jamaica

The strikes that changed work and politics in Jamaica.



Strike at the sugar factory.

At the new Tate & Lyle sugar factory, wages had fallen behind the cost of living.

On 2 May, the governor reported to London that some 3000 strikers had demolished the company office.

Four dead.

Four workers died, one from a police bayonet, and more than 100 were arrested, according to the British National Archives.

The following week the dockworkers stopped work.

The city stopped.

Workers halted traffic and the trams. The Riot Act was read and troops moved in.

On the Kingston waterfront there is now a monument to the workers of 1938.

New rules

1938	The Labour Department is created.
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Dec. 1938	New trade union law.
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1945	The Moyne report is published.
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1961	23 May becomes Labour Day.
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JAMAICA

Kingston · 1938

&

PERU

Lima · 1919

Strikes that changed the rules

In Lima, a 48-hour general strike ended with the decree of the 8-hour working day for the State, in January 1919.



Universal suffrage in 1944

Universal suffrage and Jamaica's new constitution.

Voting cost money.

To vote you had to pay at least ten shillings in tax a year or own property.

The 1944 constitution gave the vote to everyone over 21.

Constitution Day.

The new constitution came into force, and it was also nomination day for candidates.

Until 1961, every 20 November was celebrated as Constitution Day.

The first election.

All 32 seats in the House of Representatives were elected. There were 663,069 registered voters.

The exact date varies by source: 12, 13 or 14 December.

Iris Collins.

She was the first woman elected to Jamaica's House of Representatives, in 1944.

She was born in St James in 1915 and died in 2001.

Towards self-government

1944	Universal suffrage and new constitution.
1953	The post of chief minister is created.
1957	Full internal self-government.
1959	The post is renamed premier.



The West Indies Federation

1958–1962: when ten British Caribbean territories wanted to be one country.

Ten territories, one government.

Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and seven other territories formed the West Indies Federation.

Its prime minister was Grantley Adams, of Barbados. The capital was Port of Spain.

Half the population, fewer seats.

Jamaica had about half of the Federation's population, but 17 of the 45 elected seats.

It was also far from the other islands.

Jamaica votes.

The question: should Jamaica stay in the Federation? 54.11% voted no. Turnout was 61.6% of registered voters.

The JLP campaigned to leave; the PNP, to stay.

“One from ten leaves nought”

Trinidad and Tobago also withdrew. Its leader, Eric Williams, summed it up like this: “one from ten leaves nought”.

The Federation was dissolved in 1962. The exact date varies by source.

JAMAICA

Federation

&

PERU

Confederación

Two short-lived unions

The Peru-Bolivian Confederation lasted from 1836 to 1839 and was dissolved after the Battle of Yungay, in Áncash.



6 August

A date that Peru and Jamaica share.

JAMAICA

6 Aug 1962

&

PERU

6 Aug 1824

One date, two stories

Jamaica became independent from the United Kingdom. In Peru, the Battle of Junín was won.

The battle without smoke.

On the plain of Junín, the cavalry won in about 45 minutes, with only lances and sabres: that is why it is called “the battle without smoke”.

6 August is the Day of the Cavalry of Peru.

Independence.

On 6 August 1962 Jamaica became independent from the United Kingdom and its flag was raised for the first time.

It is the national holiday.

Two independences

28 July and 6 August: national holidays a week apart.

JAMAICA

6 Aug 1962

&

PERU

28 Jul 1821

Independence

141 years apart, and only nine days apart on the calendar.



“From this moment Peru is free...”

On 28 July 1821, San Martín proclaimed independence in the Plaza de Armas of Lima.

The proclamation was repeated at La Merced, Los Descalzos and today's Plaza Bolívar.

Black, green and gold.

“The sun shineth, the land is green and the people are strong and creative.”

Black: strength and creativity. Gold: natural wealth and sunlight. Green: hope and agriculture.

Side by side

Peru · anthem

Lyrics by José de la Torre Ugarte, music by José Bernardo Alcedo (1821).

Jamaica · anthem

“Jamaica, Land We Love”, by Hugh Sherlock and Robert Lightbourne.

Peru · motto

“Firme y feliz por la unión” (by custom).

Jamaica · motto

“Out of Many, One People”.

Jamaica after 1962

Some milestones of independent Jamaica.

Member of the UN.

Six weeks after independence, Jamaica joined the United Nations.

As early as 1957, still a colony, it was the first country to declare a trade embargo on South Africa.

The red earth.

The first bauxite export left in 1952. By 1957 Jamaica was already the world's largest producer.



Australia overtook it in 1971. In 1976 the Jamaica Bauxite Institute began operating.

Caricom is born.

Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago signed the Treaty of Chaguaramas, in force from 1 August.

Today Caricom has 15 full members and its headquarters is in Georgetown, Guyana.

JAMAICA

Caricom • 1973

&

PERU

CAN • 1969

Two integration blocs

On 26 May 1969 the Cartagena Agreement was signed, the origin of the Andean Community. Its secretariat is in Lima.

Jamaica at the UN

1979–1980	Member of the Security Council.
1983	Lucille Mair, 1st woman Under-Secretary-General.
1994	1st session of the Seabed Authority.
2002	Patricia Durrant, 1st UN Ombudsman.

The 7 National Heroes

Who they are and why Jamaica honours them.

Nanny of the Maroons.

She led the eastern Maroons in a guerrilla war against the British.

She is the only woman among the National Heroes. She is on the 500-dollar note.



Sam Sharpe.

A Baptist preacher. In 1831 he organised a peaceful strike that became the largest slave rebellion in Jamaica.

He was hanged in 1832. He said: "I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery."

Paul Bogle.

A Baptist deacon. In 1865 he led the Morant Bay march against colonial injustice.

He was hanged that same month.

George William Gordon.

He was born enslaved and became a politician. He criticised Governor Eyre and defended the poor.

He was executed after a two-day military trial in 1865.

Marcus Garvey.

Born in St Ann's Bay. In 1914 he founded the UNIA and took Pan-Africanism around the world.

His ideas inspired the Rastafari movement. He was the first National Hero to be recognised.

Alexander Bustamante.

A union leader. He founded the BITU union in 1938 and the JLP party in 1943.

He was Jamaica's first prime minister, in 1962.

Norman Manley.

A lawyer. He founded the PNP in 1938, championed universal suffrage and negotiated independence.

Fact: he was a first cousin of Bustamante, his great political rival.



Marcus Garvey

Jamaica's first National Hero and a voice heard around the world.

In dates

1887	Born in St Ann's Bay, on 17 August.
1914	Founds the UNIA in Jamaica.
1916	Moves to the US.
1918	Founds the newspaper Negro World.
1919	Creates the Black Star Line.

Madison Square Garden.

In August 1920 the UNIA held its first international convention in New York.

Garvey championed Black pride and the unity of African peoples around the world.

Deported.

Convicted in the US, he was deported to Jamaica in 1927. In 1929 he founded the People's Political Party.

He died in London on 10 June 1940.

The first hero.

His remains returned to Jamaica in 1964 and rest in National Heroes Park.

He was Jamaica's first National Hero. Today he is on the 100-dollar note and the 20-dollar coin.



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