At the dawn of the 17th century Spain still dominated the Central American region. It did not remain unchallenged for long: British pirates and privateers roamed the coast from Yucatán to Costa Rica, raiding Spanish ships for whatever cargo they carried. One lucrative item was logwood, which was valued for its use as a dye in Europe.

After the British had been cutting logwood in Belize for around a century, Britain finally won from Spain, in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the right to cut logwood in “the Bay of Honduras” (without defining any boundaries). Spanish sovereignty over the area was acknowledged. The British agreed to demolish all fortifications they had built, and Spain would ensure that they were not “disturbed or molested under any pretence whatsoever in the said places, in their occupation of cutting, loading, and carrying away logwood.”

Peace treaties between Britain and Spain in 1667 and 1670 committed both states to suppress piracy, and within a few years many of the former British pirates had settled down to cut logwood all along the coast, from southern Mexico to the Caribbean coast of Central America.

Britain negotiated a further agreement, known as the Convention of London, 1786, by which Spain agreed to return for the British evacuation of the Mosquito Shore in Honduras, to extend the limits of the Belize settlement southeast to the Sibun River.

In 1821 the Central American colonies of Spain declared independence and formed a Federation that broke up in 1839, after which the members formed independent States. The Federation had stated its claim to Belize as inheritors of Spanish sovereignty, and then Guatemala pursued this claim. Britain did not recognize any such rights, however, and claimed that it had consolidated its sovereignty over the land after Spain had abandoned it and before Central American independence. In any case, Britain was in undisputed possession of the land for decades and Guatemala had never settled nor exercised jurisdiction over any part of the territory.

From Papal Bull 1493 to Cutting Logwood 1763

EMPIRES CLASH: Britain vs Spain

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