

Logwood ≈ Mid 1600s

Although the story of enterprise in Belize starts with the Maya, our treatment of this topic begins with the Europeans who founded the settlement that evolved into our nation. Their first major business enterprise was the logwood trade.

The first Europeans to trade dyewood sourced from our area were the Spaniards who had learnt about the plant from the Maya. When British buccaneers realized that they could make money by taking the wood from Spanish ships or pilfering unguarded stacks of the wood on the coast, they quickly became experts in commercializing this new product. The most prominent of the dyewoods was logwood (*Haematoxylon campechianum*) but Belize also exported considerable quantities of fustic (*Maclura tinctoria*). In addition, rare dyewoods such as the Brasileto (*Haematoxylon brasiletto*) and Dragons Blood were being sought from Belize's forests (Henderson, 1811). This trade was started just before the 1667 Treaty of Madrid which outlawed piracy and forced the buccaneers to settle at coastal locations like Belize to cut their own dyewood.

Logwood grew in lowlands near rivers, lagoons and on the coast. These trees were readily found and cut down using axes and the bark was removed on-site. The logs were then chopped into small blocks which were piled along the rivers then transported in wagons or long yemeri or cedar pitpans to a central storehouse at the settlement at the mouth of the Belize River. Ships from England, the Dutch colonies and the North American cities like Boston visited these storehouses and negotiated a price for the material. At the onset, logwood fetched around 250 *reales* for a ton but, when the British entered the market, this declined to 140 *reales*. Although the British were underselling the Spaniards, they were getting close to £100 per ton at times; Logwood was almost as valuable as some precious metals. This profitable trade prompted Sir Thomas Lynch, Governor of Jamaica, to comment in 1671 that British Honduras had "increased his Majesty's customs and the national commerce more than any of his Majesty's Colonies" in a report to King Charles II (Archibald Robertson Gibbs Esq., 1883).

Quinine was the first drug that was found to be an effective treatment for malaria. Quinine was extracted from the Cinchona plant by the Quechua people of Peru and Bolivia who used it to treat fever. The Jesuits brother Agostino Salumbrino introduced quinine to Europe. Quinine is now used in tonic water.

The extraction of logwood underwent two cycles of boom and bust (Camille, 1994). The first lucrative period lasted from the time of the buccaneer Settlement in early 1600s until the 1750s when London merchants were able to bulk up reserves and drive down the price. It was during this low price period that the British began to bring increasing numbers of African slaves to do their work in Belize.

The low logwood prices which were caused by oversupply of logwood in Europe lasted until the mid 1800s when prices began to trend upwards a second time. The second boom which occurred in the late 1800s would only last for a brief period because of a technological shift which occurred in the pigment industry in Europe. This shift was a result of the synthesis of aniline dye (mauvine) in 1856 by W. H. Perkin who was trying to synthesize quinine (Bunch and Hellemans, 2004). This accidental discovery was followed by the synthesis of alizarin (red) in 1869 and indigo (blue) in 1878. These discoveries heralded the birth of the European chemical industry and the beginning-of-the-end of logwood extraction in places like Belize, southern Mexico and Brazil.

In Belize, the increase in the trade of logwood caused two main changes to occur. Firstly, logwood transformed the settlers from seafarers to river men. While the buccaneers worked on sloops, the logwood traders worked using pitpans (Figure XX).



Figure 1: An example of a pitpan which was used to transport logwood from inland Belize to the coast.

The other major effect of the logwood industry was that the settlers became accustomed to attacks, harassment and imprisonment by the Spaniards. In 1779, the Spanish took the Settlement and marched the inhabitants to Merida and then to dungeons in Havana. Many of the settlers died during the march. The ones who survived the ordeal were released in 1782 to the British government and many went to Jamaica. Some settlers went to the Mosquito Coast and lived with the native Indians for a period but the Convention of London forced the Mosquito Coast Settlers to return to Belize in 1786.