

Trujillo, Honduras has a rich history, despite it's out-of-way location. Here are a few highlights to perk your interest.

Arrival of the Spanish



In 1502, Christopher Columbus made his 4th landing in the New World, at what is now called Puerto Castilla, a few miles outside Trujillo. He named the region Honduras, meaning “Deep Waters”.

Although Columbus’ stay was brief, Conquistadors led by Cortez returned in 1524 to consolidate their hold. He named the town Trujillo and built a villa, a church and housing for his men on the bluffs above the Bay.

Over the following years many others travelled there, looking for gold and silver to ship to Spain.

There was constant friction between the Spanish and many battles. Then Lempira, a young Lencan warrior, organized a large army of native warriors to rid the area of them, but was murdered before he could succeed by Spanish “peace emissaries”. The Honduran currency - the Lempira - is named after him.

By the end of 1540, Trujillo was occupied by an administration staff of 15 Spaniards and 50 soldiers, with 600 natives to work for them. It was the capital of Honduras until 1544, when gold was discovered in the interior at Gracias, which became the new capital.

Pirate Attacks



The first recorded attack on Trujillo occurred in 1558, when French privateer vessels arrived, commanded by a pirate nicknamed “Pegleg”. They overpowered the small garrison, took the gold and burned the town.

In 1570 & 1573, Francis Drake and his cousin John Hawkins attacked shipping off Trujillo. Lurking outside the range of the town’s cannons to capture shipping, it prompted the Spanish to build two watch towers – one on the bluff in town and another at Punta Castilla.

Trujillo enjoyed a relative period of calm until a new war in Europe in the 1630’s, when it again became the target for pirate attacks, many of whom called themselves buccaneers after the smoker they used to jerk their meat, called a Boucan. An attack by the Dutchman Cornelius Jol resulted in the ransacking of the town and destruction of the church and the fort.

The next notable pirate attack on Trujillo was by probably the most infamous of them all - Henry Morgan - who led a surprise night attack by canoe on a large Spanish galleon moored in the bay.

However, the total and complete destruction of Trujillo by another Dutchman - Van Hoorn - was the last straw for the Spanish. It decided not to rebuild the fort and church but to pull out.

Trujillo languished undefended and in ruin. A massive earthquake in July, 1764 destroyed 108 houses, or nearly all of the town, and the English dismantled the fort to build one of their own at Port Royal on Roatan. However, as a result of American War of Independence and Spain’s renewed interest in the area, work began in 1760 on rebuilding the fort in Trujillo. The new fort opened in 1780, with thirty nine cannons and manned by 200 black soldiers (refugees from Haiti known as the French blacks).



The Garifuna

The Spanish were keen to recolonize the north coast around Trujillo. Realizing there were many Garifuna (African slaves originally from St Vincent) on Roatan who were Catholics with a bitter hatred of their mutual enemy the British, they were invited to settle on either side of Trujillo. Arriving In 1797 they were granted Spanish citizenship and property in the area of Rio Negro and Rio Cristales.

However, when Honduras finally gained independence in 1821, many were jailed and disenfranchised. Feeling no longer welcome in Trujillo, some settled along the coast near La Ceiba and Tela.

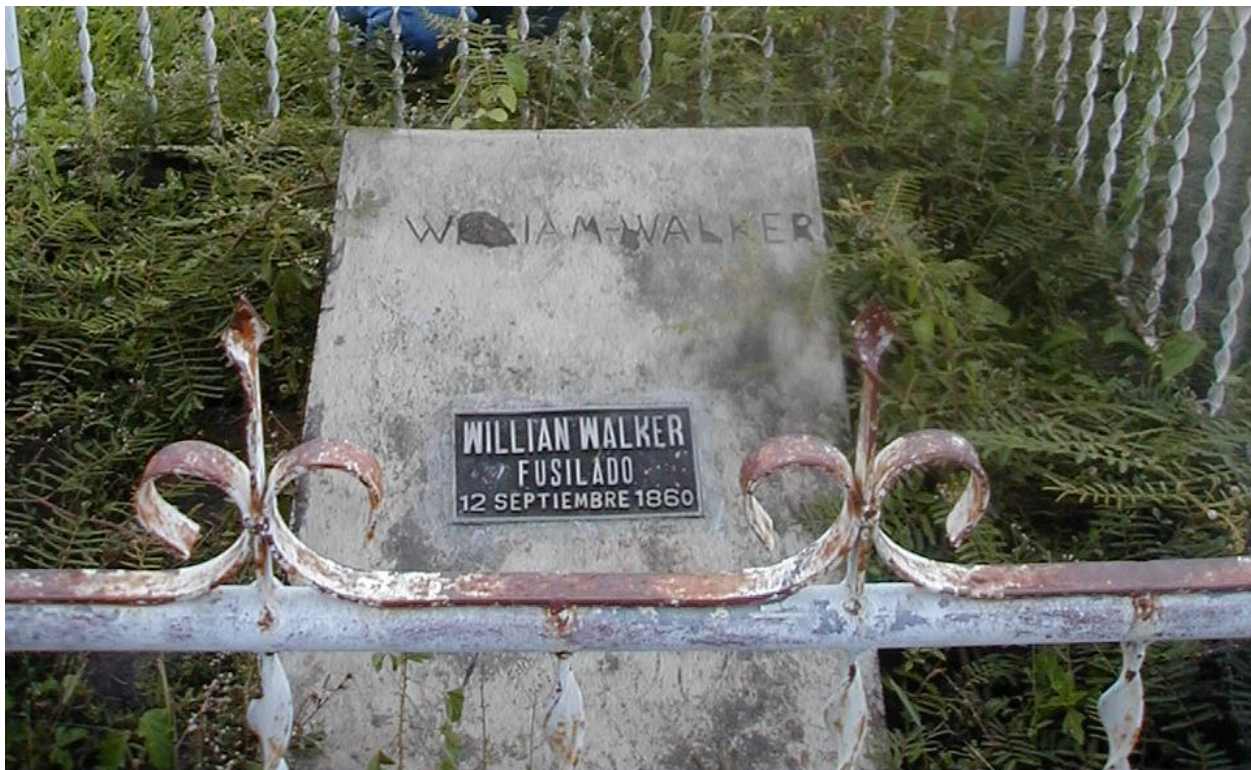
William Walker

By the mid 1840's the United States "Manifest Destiny" policy was in full swing, with many believing that it was their divine right to colonize the entire region of the Americas.

In 1856, after 3 unsuccessful expeditions to capture parts of Mexico, Walker won a battle in Nicaragua and declared himself President. He then devised a plan to conquer the other four Central American countries - Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador - and turn them into his empire, where slavery would be legal, governed by southerners fleeing the impending American Civil War.

But the Honduran militia attacked him in Trujillo, backed by the British Navy who cut off any escape by sea. Forced to abandon his ship and flee Trujillo, he lived in the jungle for 13 days until surrounded by Honduran land forces and the British navy. He surrendered and was executed.

His grave can be seen in the old cemetery in Trujillo, surrounded by a white wrought iron fence.



The Banana Republic



With a growing interest in bananas in Europe and North America, fruit companies began looking for deep water ports surrounded by land for growing bananas. Trujillo was one of only 5 ports in Central America to fit the bill and soon became a hub of action.

It was the setting for O'Henry's book "Of Cabbages and Kings" a wry, amusing account of shenanigans and boondoggles in a sleepy banana port. He coined the term "Banana Republic", which was later used to describe any small, politically unstable Latin American country.

Trujillo at the time had a census of 1,540 people - a mix of Meztiso and Garifuna - with a foreign community consisting of 22 Cubans, 16 British, 12 French, 9 Americans, 4 Germans and 1 each from Canada, Ethiopia, Italy, Spain and Switzerland.

The later years

In the 1980's Oliver North build a landing strip (located on the doorstep of the now Christopher Columbus hotel) to supply Contras in Nicaragua.

The U.S. military still provides training support to Honduras in the area of Trujillo. We met a Navy Seal team there in 1996 and spent many fun evenings with them.

Today we see the occasional U.S. helicopter on the landing strip and there have been military hospital ships and aid teams in the area, providing medical assistance to the locals.

More information

For more information about this safe and lovely area, come visit us! Talk to our local historian - Jon Tompson - owner of Vino Tinto on the bluff above the Bay; he will entertain you with his many stories. He's writing a history of Trujillo (from which much of this has been sourced), an advance copy of which can be read here

<http://holahonduras.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Trujillo-History-by-Jon.pdf>