

# History

A speck in the remote mid-Atlantic, Bermuda was well outside early migration routes and remained unsettled before its discovery by European explorers.

Bermuda takes its name from Spanish sea captain Juan de Bermúdez, who sighted the islands around 1503. The Spanish, in search of gold in the Americas, took no interest in colonizing the sparse island chain. In fact, there is no indication that the Spanish ever deliberately landed on Bermuda in the 16th century, although misadventures at sea cast them ashore at least a few times.

Spanish galleons sailing between Cuba and Spain commonly set a course north past Florida and then east out to sea. Although the extensive reefs surrounding Bermuda posed a potential hazard to their ships, there were no other islands in the mid-Atlantic that sea captains could use to take bearings, so Bermuda became a vital navigational landmark. Once Bermuda was spotted, the ship's course could be reset east-northeast to follow a straight line to the Azores and Spain.

In fair weather, sailing past Bermuda was usually uneventful. However, powerful storms occasionally swept ships off their intended course and onto Bermuda's shallow reefs. Scores of Spanish ships, their hulls loaded with bullion, never completed their journey home from the New World. Today you can see some of the gold booty recovered from the wrecks at the Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute (p63).

The treacherous reefs gained such a reputation among mariners that by the mid-16th century Bermuda was appearing on Spanish charts with the nickname 'Islas Demonios,' or 'Isles of Devils.'

## EARLY SETTLERS

On June 2, 1609, Admiral Sir George Somers of the Virginia Company set sail from England with nine ships carrying supplies and colonists to the recently established British settlement at Jamestown, Virginia.

Somers, who was in command of the flagship *Sea Venture*, got caught in a fierce storm and lost contact with the rest of his fleet. The *Sea Venture*, badly damaged by the storm, shipwrecked on a reef three-quarters of a mile off Bermuda's eastern shore. Using skiffs, all 150 people on board managed to safely come ashore.

The castaways salvaged wreckage from the *Sea Venture* and began construction of two new ships. Aware of the gloomy Spanish accounts of the island, the shipwrecked Brits expected the worst, but instead found Bermuda surprisingly agreeable. Native cedar trees provided timber for the new ships, palmetto palms supplied thatch for shelters and the abundant nearshore fish proved easy to catch.

In 1610, the two new ships, the *Deliverance* and the *Patience*, set sail to continue the journey to Jamestown, leaving a couple of men behind on Bermuda to establish an English claim.

Back in England, the officers of the Virginia Company took a keen interest in reports on the island's suitability for colonization. The fact

Bermuda is the oldest continually inhabited English settlement in the New World.

Although the name failed to stick, the British christened the islands the Somers Islands in honor of the English admiral who shipwrecked here.

## TIMELINE 1503

Bermuda is first sighted by Spanish explorer Juan de Bermúdez

## 1609

Admiral George Somers shipwrecks on Bermuda's shoals with 150 passengers and spends the rest of the year on the island

that Bermuda was uninhabited weighed heavily in its favor, especially in light of the Indian sieges that decimated the Jamestown settlement. The Virginia Company amended its charter to include Bermuda in its New World holdings, and organized a party of 60 settlers to establish a permanent colony there.

The settlers landed on Bermuda in 1612, led by Governor Richard Moore, an able carpenter who went about building the village of St George. In 1620, the parliamentary State House (p75), which can still be seen today, began to hold meetings of the colonial legislature.

Bermuda was divided into parishes, each named for a stockholder of the Virginia Company, and plots of land were leased to settlers. Crops were planted, but agriculture was limited by the shallowness of the topsoil and the reliance upon rainwater as the sole water source. In the end, Bermuda became reliant upon food imports from the American colonies to augment its meager harvests.

The Virginia Company ruled Bermuda like a fiefdom, telling people what crops to grow, monopolizing trade and forcing those who violated their rules into indentured servitude. Over time, the settlers grew weary of the restrictions and took their case to London, where they successfully sued to have the charter rescinded in 1684. Bermuda was then ruled as a British crown colony in much the same vein as the American colonies.

Slavery, the norm on British colonies, was introduced to Bermuda in 1616. Although the vast majority of slaves came from Africa, there were also Mahican Indians taken from the American colonies. The Atlantic crossings were so brutally inhumane that many of the slaves, chained in the ships' suffocating hulls, died en route.

The dehumanizing conditions continued after arrival, permeating every aspect of life and even following into death. Slaves were buried in their own part of the cemetery, away from whites, and you can still see walls separating the two as you stroll around old churchyards such as St Peter's (p73) in the Town of St George.

Degrading as the conditions were, they were not as horrendous as in other New World colonies. Most of the slaves in Bermuda did not end up toiling in sweltering fields, but were put to work as servants, construction workers and sailors. Some became skilled tradespeople and were able to pass their skills on to their children, assuring them opportunities in the trades long after the end of slavery.

By the early 1800s, the antislavery movement was gaining widespread support. The British Parliament passed legislation in 1807 that outlawed

In the 17th century, Bermudians ran a sea-salt business in the Turks Islands, with nearly 1000 Bermudian colonists and slaves working 900 miles from home.

Slavery was abolished in Bermuda 31 years earlier than in the United States of America.

### SINK OR HANG

The witchcraft hysteria that swept Europe and America in the 17th century hit Bermuda as well. The first death sentence imposed upon a 'witch' in Bermuda was in 1651, when a woman accused of evildoing was given a 'trial' in which her feet and hands were tied and she was thrown into the ocean.

The fact that the woman managed to float 'confirmed' she was indeed a witch, and she was subsequently hanged. Bermudians continued searching for witches in their midst until the hysteria ended in the 1690s.

### THE ONION PATCH

Onions were first planted in Bermuda in 1616, though large-scale cultivation did not start until the 1830s. By the late 19th century, exported Bermuda onions had become so well known, particularly in New York markets, that Bermuda was nicknamed the 'Onion Patch' and Bermudians themselves were sometimes lightheartedly referred to as 'Onions.'

The onion biz ground to a halt as competition from 'Bermuda onions' grown in Texas swamped North American markets in the early 1900s. And a loss of Bermuda farmland to growing numbers of homes and hotels sealed the demise of onion exports. Indeed, there are indications that as early as 1908, Bermuda was importing the famed 'Bermuda onions' from Texas!

the sale of slaves, and phased out slavery itself over a broader period. By 1834 all slaves in Bermuda were emancipated.

### BRITISH-US INFLUENCES

Historically, Bermuda was often put in a tight spot as it struggled to balance its close trade relationship with America against its political bonds with Britain.

During the War of 1812, the British Navy used Bermuda as a base to launch the Chesapeake Bay Campaign that torched the US White House and much of Washington DC. The Americans took revenge where they could. Under the rules of war practiced during the period, American ships were free to confiscate the cargo of any ship flying the British flag. Bermuda provided lucrative booty for American privateers, who made an easy catch of Bermuda's merchant fleet, devastating the island's trade-dependent economy.

The US Civil War (1861-65), on the other hand, provided a boon for Bermuda, which was thrust into the lucrative role as a center for blockade-runners. The Confederacy depended upon the sale of cotton to England's clothing mills to finance its rebellion, but had become forced to employ small, fast vessels to outrun the gunboats of the northern navy. These vessels could not handle transatlantic shipping, so Bermuda became an intermediate port. The Town of St George enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, its waterside warehouses overflowing with goods, its shops and taverns catering to mariners carrying fat wads of cash. Traders made fortunes until the northern forces became victorious in 1865 and Bermuda, which had sided with the south, saw its shipping industry all but collapse.

During WWII, Bermuda's strategic mid-Atlantic location made it a center for Allied military and intelligence operations. It was a port for Britain's Royal Navy, which patrolled the Atlantic for German submarines that threatened vital US-UK shipping lanes. The USA also established a substantial presence in Bermuda, most notably with the construction of an air base on St David's Island. The base, some 1040 acres in all, was so large it added 1.25 sq miles to the island in the form of reclaimed land, boosting Bermuda's total landmass by more than 5%.

### POSTWAR CHANGES

In the wake of WWII, many of the old colonial assumptions that prevailed in the British Empire were called into question. In Bermuda, long-held

*Rogues & Runners: Bermuda and the American Civil War* by the Bermuda National Trust provides a colorful account of St George's heyday, complete with period photos.

Fascinating historical documents, photographs and period maps can be found at [www.rootsweb.com/~bmuwgv/bermuda.htm](http://www.rootsweb.com/~bmuwgv/bermuda.htm).

1612

The first permanent English settlers arrive on Bermuda and begin building the Town of St George

1616

The first slaves are brought to Bermuda

1812

Bermuda serves as a base for the British attack on Washington DC in the War of 1812

1834

Slavery is abolished and blacks on Bermuda are emancipated