

British Hills Knowledge Base: Trinidad and Tobago

Humans first came to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago around 7000 years ago. These peoples are called **Amerindians** in English, though this is a collective name for the indigenous peoples of the American continents. They were many different groups of people who lived here, with a variety of cultures and languages. By the 1400s, the two main groups on the islands were Arawak-speakers and Carib-speakers.



Unfortunately, little is known of the culture and history of these indigenous peoples. Most were **wiped out** by war, enslavement, and disease after the arrival of Europeans. The modern inhabitants of Trinidad and Tobago are mainly the descendants of immigration from other regions of the world.

The first European to see Trinidad was Christopher Columbus, in 1498. Trinidad was claimed by the Spanish in 1509, and Spanish slavers enslaved many Amerindians and brought them to other areas of the Caribbean. Over the next few decades, small Spanish groups of soldiers **fought intermittently** with the indigenous people until the establishment of the first permanent settlement in 1492.

From 1492 until the late 17th century, Trinidad and Tobago remained quite undeveloped compared to other colonies in the region. Tobacco and cacao were grown using Amerindian and African slaves, but not as successfully as on other islands. European powers frequently fought over the islands. Notably, Tobago changed control between Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Britain 31 times before 1814, the most of any Caribbean island.

1776 was a **major turning point** in Trinidad and Tobago's history. The Spanish **instituted a policy** encouraging Catholics to move to the islands with their slaves. Cheap land and 10-year **tax breaks** were offered to anyone who settled there, and a large number of Europeans arrived with their slaves. This included a large number of French people, bringing French culture to the islands. Large cotton and sugar **slave plantations** were established, and the island's population increased rapidly.

In 1783, Trinidad's population was 2,763. 2032 were Amerindians, 310 were African slaves, and 421 Europeans. In 1803, however, a British census showed the population as 28,000 people. These were recorded as 20,464 slaves, 5,275 free nonwhites, and 2,261 whites (the racist distinction of people as "whites" and "nonwhites" was common at this time).



British Hills



From 1802, Trinidad was taken from Spain by Britain. In 1814, Tobago was also taken from France by Britain. After this time, slave plantations continued to grow and African slaves continued to be imported. However, in the UK anti-slavery sentiment was growing, and would eventually become law. In Trinidad, **slavery was abolished** in 1833, all slaves freed in 1838.

After the abolition of slavery in 1838, large numbers of Indians were brought to the country to work on the plantations as indentured servants. These were different from slaves as they were paid, were protected by law from **corporal punishment** like whipping, and were not considered property. They worked according to contracts. This does not mean things were easy, however. Conditions were hard, and wages were low. Nevertheless, by 1911 over 100,000 Indians had come.

During the 19th century, oil was discovered around the islands, and by 1910 Trinidad and Tobago was becoming a **major oil producer**. At the same time, however, the agricultural industry collapsed, and soon the great depression caused further social problems. Opposition to British rule also grew. Before 1925, Trinidad and Tobago was a "Crown Colony," which meant they did not hold elections or have representation in the British government. After this, however, Trinidad and Tobago was given only 7 elected officials.

British control was strengthened in the build-up and during World War II, but soon after the end of the war in 1945 Trinidad and Tobago gained **universal suffrage**. New political parties were created, and Trinidad and Tobago became independent from Great Britain in 1962. It became a republic, and joined the Commonwealth, in 1972.

During the 1970s, Trinidad and Tobago's economy rapidly grew due to an **oil boom**. The nation quickly became one of the most developed in the Americas, building up industries of oil, natural gas, agriculture, and tourism. The majority of the population today is of either African or Indian descent, but Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and the influence of many other cultures can be found, making Trinidad and Tobago one of the most diverse nations in the Caribbean.





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What do these words mean? Match the term **in bold** in the text above to the meaning:

Amerindians

wiped out

fought intermittently

major turning point

instituted a policy

tax breaks

slave plantations

slavery was abolished

corporal punishment

major oil producer

universal suffrage

oil boom

slavery was made illegal

physical punishment e.g. whipping, beating, torture

a nation that controls and sells a lot of oil

a time of high oil prices & demand for oil, creating wealth for oil producers

Name for the groups of indigenous peoples of the American continents.

destroyed, eradicated

discounts on or freedom from tax for a limited time

a large farm or agricultural site where slaves were forced to work

stopped and started fighting at many different times

the right for almost all people to vote regardless of race, sex, beliefs etc.

an important event that changed history

created a policy, made a policy