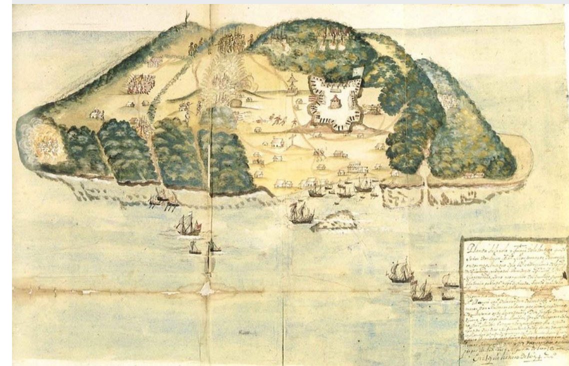
17th-century Imperial Competition in the Atlantic and Piracy on Land and at Sea



Introduction

In this lesson, we will focus on warfare in the Atlantic world and how it shaped piracy and responses to piracy in the seventeenth century. We will then focus on the growing power and presence in the Atlantic of the Protestant English and Dutch, thinking about what the consequences were for Caribbean piracy of the increased numbers of warring European powers in the region. We will consider the case study of Jamaica and how it went from pirate lair to sugar colony and how public opinion about pirates—and communities' willingness to do business with pirates—in the British American colonies was slow to change. Through a close analysis of Jamaica's transformation from a welcoming pirate den to an enormously profitable sugar colony with a total reliance on enslaved African labor, we will consider whether there was a place for state-sponsored pirates in an increasingly consolidated plantation regime. The lesson will close by chronicling the rise of the buccaneers in the late seventeenth century and the increasingly anti-pirate stance of the English government towards pirates in the Atlantic, with consequences for global trade in other oceans.

17TH-CENTURY IMPERIAL COMPETITION

INTRODUCTION

EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN WARFARE AND THE CARIBBEAN CONSEQUENCES

DUTCH "PIRACY"? IMPERIAL AMBITIONS AND PIRACY IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND IN CRISIS AND SHIFTING AIMS IN THE CARIBBEAN

CASE STUDY: JAMAICA, FROM PIRATE LAIR TO SUGAR COLONY

AFRICAN SLAVERY TRANSFORMS JAMAICA IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

GLOBAL PIRACY: FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE INDIAN OCEAN

European and African Warfare and the Caribbean Consequences

In both Africa and Europe, constant warfare complicated global commerce and politics, with repercussions for piracy in the Atlantic and other forms of resistance throughout the Atlantic Americas. The Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618–1648) ultimately destroyed Spain's power in Europe and Portugal's commercial empire in the East. Meanwhile, the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns, which had been joined under Spanish rule in 1580, began crumbling in 1640, leading to over two decades of warfare in Europe as well as within each kingdom's respective global territories.

The collapse of the Spanish and Portuguese alliance had immense consequences for the inhabitants—both free and enslaved—of their American territories as well as for Atlantic shipping. The Portuguese had long been the major carriers of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic and the 1640 start of Portugal's war for independence from Spain brought immense complexity and difficulty to these existing trade routes. So, too, did the changing political context in West Africa, where Portugal became involved in warfare between the rival kingdoms of Kongo (in modern day Angola, where the Portuguese established a small foothold in the sixteenth century in the port city of Luanda) and the neighboring Kingdom of Ndongo. The growing presence of the Protestant Dutch in the region further complicated Portuguese aims in West Africa.

Map of the Kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo

Key Terms:

30 Years War

Kongo and Ndongo

West India Company

Piet Heyn

Navigation Acts

The Western Design

Jamaica and Barbados

Buccaneers

Indentured Servants

Tortuga

Henry Morgan

King William's War

Tensions between Kongo and Ndongo continued to build and came to a head in the early seventeenth century, just as the Portuguese-Spanish union was crumbling. Heavy enslaving during this period of warfare between Kongo and Ndongo dramatically shaped the trade in enslaved Africans, sending to the Americas tens of thousands of people captured in this conflict: from 1615 to 1640, enslaved peoples from this region composed 85–90 percent of the people transported to Brazil and the Spanish Caribbean. These captives brought their political ideologies and experiences of warfare to the Americas: we must consider how the identities and previous experiences of enslaved peoples shaped colonial communities, in ways small and large. Enslaved people brought their cultures with them and shaped everything from foodways and religious practices to the political beliefs of communities of runways. If pirate crews represented one kind of renegade community, so too did communities of self-emancipated people of African descent (i.e.: formerly enslaved individuals who ran away from bondage), such as the enormous community of Palmares in Brazil, which remained independent of Portuguese colonial authority for nearly the entire seventeenth century. Whether at sea or on land, whether composed largely of Europeans or largely of people of African descent, these communities of outsiders reflected the values, injustices, and opportunities of the world around them. Piracy was one dramatic expression of unhappiness with the status quo of the emerging Atlantic World, but not the only one—and neither pirates nor communities of formerly enslaved people were unusual in their willingness to use violence or in their desire for prosperity.

Explore More..

The Palmares were settled by people who fled sugar plantations in the region of modern-day Brazil. Under the leadership of Ganga-Zumba, they resisted Portuguese control, establishing a large and thriving community.

Learn more about the history of the Palmares:

- Zumbi: The Last King of Palmares

Map of Spanish claims in the Caribbean Islands, c. 1600

During these war-torn years at the start of the seventeenth century, European Protestant rivals of the Catholic Spanish and Portuguese empires took aim at the Caribbean with the goal of establishing colonies, not just raiding shipping (although they continued to do that, too.) During the seventeenth century, the English established several agricultural colonies in the Caribbean: St. Christopher/St. Kitts in 1624; Barbados in 1627; Nevis in 1628, Montserrat in 1632; and Antigua 1632. The French and Dutch arrived in the region slightly later; the Dutch were focused on trade and on their brief occupation of northeastern Brazil and their footholds in Africa and Asia. In 1635 the French seized Martinique and Guadeloupe and in the 1650s they occupied the western end of Hispaniola, which they called St. Domingue (present-day Haiti).

Dutch "Piracy"? Imperial Ambitions and Piracy in the Eye of the Beholder

Map of the Dutch Antilles (above); Dutch Brazil in the 17th Century (right)

In 1621 the Dutch founded the West India Company (WIC) based on the model of English East India Company (EIC). The mission of the WIC was to wage maritime war and commercial war on Spain's American holdings. The Dutch met with remarkable successes: in the early decades of the century (when Spain and Portuguese were still united politically), they occupied some small Caribbean islands (Curaçao plus Saba and St. Eustatius). From 1630 to 1654 the Dutch also captured and held Recife in the north of Portuguese-controlled Brazil. In 1638 the Dutch inflicted another blow to the Portuguese, capturing their trading fort of Elmina on the West African coast. Then, from 1641 to 1648, the Dutch captured and held the Portuguese port town of Luanda, disrupting the supply of enslaved Africans upon which the entire Atlantic economy depended.

Portrait of Piet Heyn, 1629

Piet Heyn's 1628 Heist

This period also saw one of the most spectacular—and controversial—pirate heists of the Golden Age of Piracy, one that enraged Spaniards and delighted the Dutch. Of the era's many successful Dutch attacks on Iberian maritime wealth, none was more spectacular than Piet Heyn's seizure of the entire Spanish treasure fleet in 1628. A pirate to the Spaniards and a lawful maritime hero to the Dutch, the story of Heyn's success shows how pirate politics were imperial politics. Heyn had sailed from Europe to the Caribbean with 32 ships, 700 cannon, and 3500 men. He and his ships encountered the Spanish fleet on September 8, during hurricane season, as the convoy sailed for Havana. The Spanish fleet was unusually small that year—just 15 ships—and tried to avoid the encounter with the Dutch by heading into a bay (Matanzas Bay) just east of the city of Havana. Unfortunately for the Spanish, the fleet's Captain, Juan de Benavides, didn't know the bay well. In a disastrous (or perhaps miraculous, for the Dutch) turn of events, several of the large ships foundered in shallow waters, stranding the boats and their valuable cargo far from shore and leaving most of the ships' guns pointing away from their attackers.

Piet Heyn's arrival in the Netherlands, 1629

Heyn and his men seized the opportunity, capturing all 15 vessels of the 1628 treasure fleet. The Dutch predators took half the ships for prizes and set fire to the rest. Heyn and his men returned to the Netherlands with gold, silver, silks, dyes, and other valuables worth about 4.8 million pesos. Back at home, the underpaid sailors and soldiers who had participated in the raid rioted in the streets of Amsterdam while Dutch West India shareholders enjoyed dividends of over 75 percent (the highest ever paid by the West India Company).

The Dutch victory helped to continue to fund the Protestant struggle against Catholic Spain (an extraordinary example of how piracy funded early modern politics in the Atlantic). Meanwhile, in Spain, the unfortunate fleet commander, Benavides, was imprisoned and tried for negligence and abandonment of duty and executed in 1634.

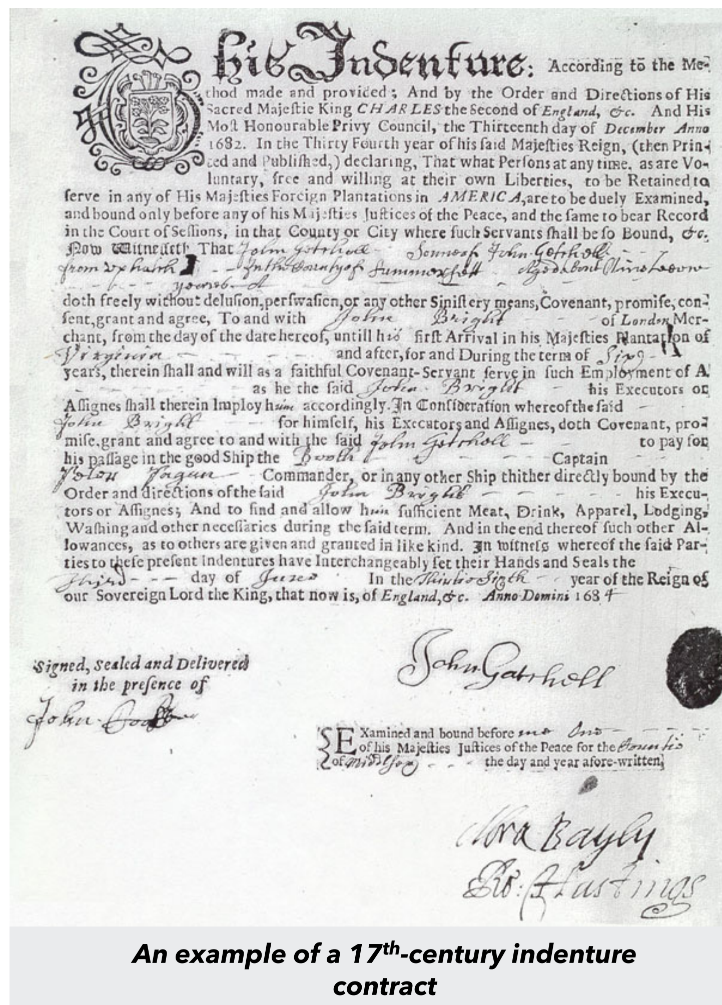
The repercussions of Heyn's astonishing success were felt globally. As the increasing commercial ties of the era linked global markets more than ever before, the disruption of trade routes (whether because of piracy or for some other reason, such as shipwrecks or catastrophic storms) produced dramatic, often unintended consequences around the world. Because American silver enabled European access to Asian markets, attacks (such as Heyn's) on ships in the Caribbean disrupted the flow of silver into Asia.

Seventeenth-century England in Crisis and Shifting Aims in the Caribbean

As the Dutch moved into Atlantic and global waters in a serious way, their actions were often linked to, or labeled, piracy by their rivals. Meanwhile, for much of the seventeenth century, the English tried to play a similar game as far as piracy was concerned: officials denounced piracy while also depending upon it. Pirates were often tolerated because officials in England and residents in the colonies depended upon them for everything from highly desired goods to defense in times of war. Keep in mind that Parliament began issuing the Navigation Acts in 1651 (and renewed and expanded throughout the rest of the seventeenth century), forcing the North American colonies to remain economically underdeveloped. All items delivered to the colonies were required to be carried on English ships, and any European goods being brought to the Americas had to pass through an English port first. Certain valuable colonial products like sugar, tobacco, and dyes could only be shipped to England and nowhere else. The laws keep the colonies from developing a colonial mint and regulated the value of foreign money, keeping the colonies forever short of cash. Among many other similar policies designed to keep the colonies beholden to the mother country, the laws had the effect of making North American colonists desperate for access to foreign trade and goods. So-called 'pirates' often were the providers and colonial ports—from Boston to New York and Newport to Charlestown—welcomed these maritime renegades even as crown policies called for their heads. Given that piracy was often very depended on precise local circumstances and relationships with the people identified by officials as "pirates", it is no surprise pirates continued to find a warm welcome in much of the Americas even as crown policy turned sharply against them in the late seventeenth century.

Another critical context for understanding piracy in the English Atlantic in this period is the general upheaval that characterized the era. Warfare, poverty, and migration all had a dramatic impact on the changing population profile of the American colonies and on the political and economic character of England's new settlements, whether in the Caribbean or on the North American mainland.

Over half a million people left England during the 17th century, approximately 377,000 of whom went to America. The peak period of emigration was 1630–1660 (a period of warfare and tremendous political upheaval in Britain). About 120,000 of these migrants settled in the Chesapeake, and almost twice that amount—200,000—settled in the Caribbean. The remainder went to New England. In the Chesapeake, 70-80 percent of settlers arrived as indentured servants (bound laborers) who contracted to work in tobacco fields (where extensive cultivation began in the 1620s) for between 4 and 7 years. In the English Caribbean settlements, the ticket to wealth for white English settlers was sugar, which was beginning to make its leading planters wealthy by the 1650s. But sugar was a cash- and land-intensive crop, meaning that English men of modest means had an increasingly difficult time affording or even finding available land on which to grow sugar or the money with which to buy skilled enslaved Africans to grow it.



This Indenture: According to the Method made and provided; And by the Order and Directions of His Sacred Majeſtie King CHARLES the Second of England, &c. And His Moſt Honourable Privy Council, the Thirteenth day of December Anno 1682. In the Thirty Fourth year of his ſaid Majeſties Reign, (then Printed and Publiſhed,) declaring, That what Perſons at any time, as are Voluntary, free and willing at their own Liberties, to be Retained to ſerve in any of His Majeſties Foreign Plantations in AMERICA, are to be duely Examined, and bound only before any of his Majeſties Juſtices of the Peace, and the ſame to bear Record in the Court of Seſſions, in that County or City where ſuch Servants ſhall be ſo Bound, &c. Now Witneſſeth That John Gatrhell Sonne of John Gatrhell [illegible] doth freely without deluſion, perſwaſion, or any other Siniſtery means, Covenant, promiſe, conſent, grant and agree, To and with John Bright of London Merchant, from the day of the date hereof, untill his firſt Arrival in his Majeſties Plantation of Virginia and after, for and During the term of Six years, therein ſhall and will as a faithful Covenant-Servant ſerve in ſuch Employment of A[illegible] as he the ſaid John Bright his Executors or Aſſignes ſhall therein Imploy him accordingly. In Conſideration whereof the ſaid John Bright for himſelf, his Executors and Aſſignes, doth Covenant, promiſe, grant and agree to and with the ſaid John Gatrhell to pay for his paſſage in the good Ship the [illegible] Captain [illegible] Commander, or in any other Ship thither directly bound by the Order and directions of the ſaid John Bright his Executors or Aſſignes; And to find and allow him ſufficient Meat, Drink, Apparel, Lodging, Waſhing and other neceſſaries during the ſaid term. And in the end thereof ſuch other Allowances, as to others are given and granted in like kind. In witneſs whereof the ſaid Parties to theſe preſent Indentures have Interchangeably ſet their Hands and Seals the Third day of June In the Thirtie Sixth year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord the King, that now is, of England, &c. Anno Domini 1684

Signed, Sealed and Delivered in the preſence of [illegible]

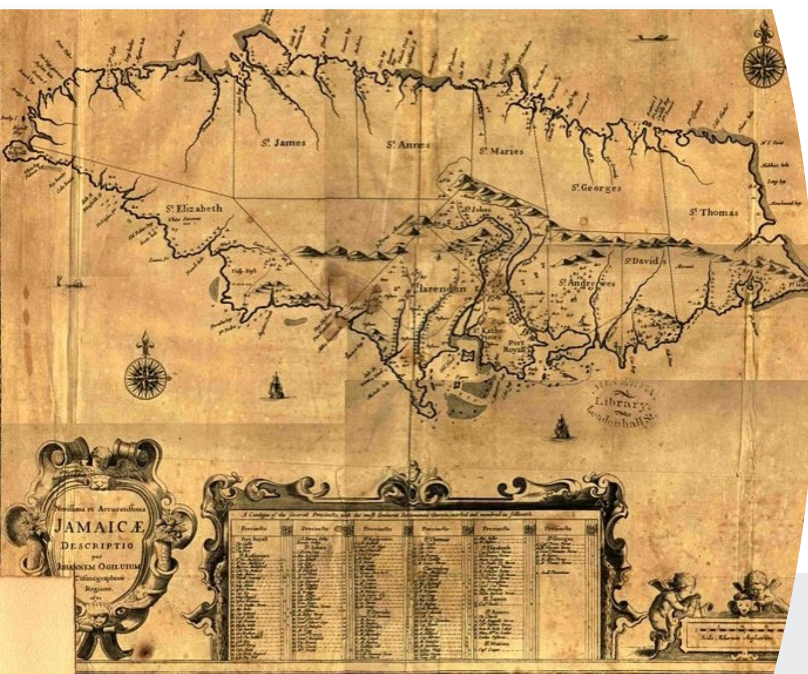
John Gatrhell

Examined and bound before me One of his Majeſties Juſtices of the Peace for the [illegible] of [illegible] the day and year afore-written.

[illegible]

An example of a 17th-century indenture contract

As the century progressed, the relatively small English-controlled islands of Jamaica and Barbados offered fewer and few possibilities to newcomers, who saw increasingly limited chances of getting rich in the Caribbean. As rich white landowners consolidated control over a sugar and slavery driven economy, there were many reasons for people (particularly men) to choose a life outside the bounds of colonial society. Few white men could afford major plantations and white servants or laborers who survived the period of their indentures or saved up enough money found their prospects for acquiring land and property severely limited.



English map of Jamaica, 1670s

Portrait of Oliver Cromwell, c. 1649

Many were promised riches, but only those who arrived with money or connections usually prospered. In addition, the circulation of reports of terrible treatment for servants in Jamaica and Barbados made them especially unappealing destinations for poor white men. Combined with slowing population growth in England in the late seventeenth century (meaning less incentive to leave), white servant labor in the Caribbean begins to dry up and African slavery took root. It is not surprising, then, that it was in the late seventeenth century that renegades in the backwoods of Caribbean islands formed a community that came to be known as the buccaneers.

Meanwhile, seeking to expand England's American claims in the mid-seventeenth century, England's ruler, the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, pursued a bold new Atlantic policy, called *The Western Design*. In 1655, with the goal of claiming more territory in the Caribbean—Cromwell authorized an English attempt to seize the island of Hispaniola. The attack was a disaster but the English forces regrouped and successful attacked Spanish Jamaica, claiming it for the English. The victory came during a difficult time for England, which was still recovering from a brutal civil war and characterized by tremendous political division. Seeking to celebrate the victory in Jamaica victory and to build public support for Atlantic endeavors, English publishers turned to maritime figures from a previous generation, reprinting the exploits of Francis Drake and his fellow seaborne adventurers and branding them as courageous patriotic heroes. These men (who had been pirates and slave traders) were publicized as brave and virtuous imperial servants and officially incorporated into a grand story of English Atlantic colonization.

It was also during this period that the most famous pirate account of the seventeenth century first appeared, *The Buccaneers of America*. First published in Dutch in 1678 by the French surgeon Alexander Oliver Exquemelin (also known as John Esquemeling), *The Buccaneers of America* introduced an eager public (the book was quickly translated into multiple languages) to tales of the Tortuga-based Caribbean renegades, with whom he had spent time. Given the popularity of the myth of the pirate hero, it is unsurprising that it would prove difficult for the English to change public opinion about piracy when the politics and economics of Atlantic trade began to change in the late seventeenth century.

DE
AMERICAENSCHE
ZEE-ROOVERS
Behelsende een Pertinent
Verhael van alle de Roverye
En Onmenschlijcke Wreetheden die de Engelsche
en Franse Roovers
Tegens de Spanjaerden
in America
Gepleeght
Hebben.

t'Amsterdam by JAN ten HOORN, Boeckverkoper
Over het Oude Heerelogement. 1678

Alexander Exquemelin's The Buccaneers of America (in Dutch), 1678

Map of the Caribbean

As romanticized accounts of sixteenth century pirate slave traders like Drake and Hawkins grew in popularity, perhaps the most famous Caribbean pirates of the so-called Golden Age of Atlantic piracy came into being—the buccaneers. The emergence of the buccaneers reflected the demographic realities of the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, which had been transformed by catastrophic death tolls among the islands' indigenous communities and the arrival of increasing numbers of enslaved Africans and Europeans. Some of the European arrivals came with significant fortunes but many did not. Poor white inhabitants of the West Indies often had a hard life, frequently starting as indentured servants. They watched rich white men get richer and land get ever more expensive and hard to come by. Many unhappy servants rebelled or ran away if they could.

These non-elite Europeans, along with unhappy sailors and other marginalized individuals, become the core of the group that would later be called buccaneers. The buccaneers lived on a kind of beef jerky grilled on a Taíno-style wooden grate called a *boucan* (an indication of the survival of Taíno indigenous lifeways in spite of the death and devastation of the era). The French term for these renegades was "jerky-makers", or *boucaniers*. Compared to the servant's life on any of the Caribbean islands, the life of the "buccaneers" as they came to be called in English, was very good. Buccaneers established a base off Hispaniola's northwest shore on the tiny rocky island of Tortuga by the late 1620s. Soon they had regular trade ties, mostly in hides and cured meat, but also in tobacco and crude sugar, with passing French, Dutch, and English traders of all types. The increasing arrival of Europeans of all backgrounds into the region made the buccaneers' survival possible, as there were many people willing to trade with these wild men.

The buccaneers got their start in the backwoods of Caribbean islands due to two factors which they themselves probably failed to realize and which reflected the transformation of the landscape in the wake of European voyages. Sparsely populated lands (due to the devastating effects on native populations of European diseases, violence, and forced migrations) meant that there were unoccupied interior lands to which people could run away if they decided to flee the European-controlled settlements (which were primarily on the coasts). In the forests and backlands of Caribbean islands, the rapid reproduction of European-introduced animals (cattle, particularly, but also horses, pigs, and dogs) meant that there was animal companionship for runaways, as well as meat to hunt and hides to sell. In fact, it was as hunters of wild cattle that the buccaneers got their start on the northwest coast of Hispaniola, after fleeing their harsh labor contracts and before becoming known as pirates.

The Island of Tortuga from the air

Case Study: Jamaica, From Pirate Lair to Sugar Colony

The very same forces that contributed to the rise of the buccaneers on Tortuga led to a remarkable transformation on the island of Jamaica—one that led to a serious shift in the role of piracy on the island. Caribbean. Once a pirate den—famous for its lawless society—Jamaica experienced several transformations that led to a complete shift in attitudes toward piracy by the early eighteenth century.

Henry Morgan's attack on Panama, 1671

In the decades that followed the English conquest of Jamaica from the Spanish, the island colony became famous for being a place where bad behavior was not just tolerated but celebrated. Tales of wild behavior emerged from people who visited. A visitor to the Jamaican port town of Port Royal blamed the presence of maritime predators ("privateers and debauched wild blades") for the town's problems: "the town is very loose in itself, and by reason of privateers and debauched wild blades which come hither (for all the strict restraint of the law), 'tis now more rude and antic than 'ere were Sodom." Along with privateers and men on the make, many other colorful characters passed through Port Royal (which became known as a "bawdy town", famous for bars and brothels.) One story that circulated in the 1680s told of a pirate named Bare who escaped to Spanish territory accompanied by a "strumpet" (or prostitute) who used to dress in men's clothing in Port Royal. Once in Havana, Cuba, the couple asked for permission to marry; they were both Catholics and she claimed a noble background. Stories like this increased people's fascination with the Caribbean, and Jamaica in particular, as place where anything was possible. In 1670 one visitor estimated that there was 1 tavern for every 10 men and that the town boasted "a bull and bear, for sport at the bear garden, and billiards, cockfighting, shooting at the target, etc." The town had a night watchman but apparently his presence didn't matter much: "the vile strumpets" and prostitutes were "almost impossible to civilize…a walking plague, against which neither the cage, nor the whip, nor ducking stool could prevail." In 1687, Port Royal was known as having several "ordinaries" (a term that referred to inns) where "young merchants" could stay, as well as "many taverns, and abundance of punchy houses, or rather may be fitly called brothel houses." When an earthquake and tsunami destroyed the town in 1692, many contemporaries viewed it as divine judgement.

So, how could this famously lawless colony ever change its ways? The story of Jamaican pirate-turned-official Henry Morgan illustrates the island's remarkable late seventeenth-century transformation. As a pirate, Morgan led many violent raids—including starving prisoners and raping female captives— on Spanish towns in Cuba, Panama, and Venezuela. Many of the men who sailed with him brought their ill-gotten gains back to Port Royal and spent their money on women and alcohol. For a long time, the English government turned a blind eye to these kinds of activities because pirate raids were seen as another way to extend English influence in the Caribbean, with the added advantage of transferring Spanish wealth to English colonists. Pirates like Morgan also sometimes provided much-needed defense of colonial outposts in times of trouble. The English crown even rewarded Morgan for his raid on Panama with a knighthood, and further appointed him deputy governor of the island in 1674. But by the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the official English attitude towards pirates and their misdeeds was beginning to change, owing in part to the island's shifting economic profile and in part to the changing politics of the Atlantic world.

Trelawney Town, Jamaica, a maroon residence, 1790s

African Slavery Transforms Jamaica in the Late Seventeenth Century

As the sugar economy began to take hold in Jamaica in the 1680s, English officials and rich planters living on the island realized that their wealth depended upon their enslaved African laborers and the agricultural bounty they produced. It was at this point that English officials and influential island elites began to realize that Jamaica's reputation as a pirate haven did more harm than good. The remarkable and profitable growth of the island's sugar economy would not have happened without the simultaneous expansion of the trade in enslaved Africans, who began arriving in Jamaica at the rate of about 3,000 per year in the 1680s. In 1684, one planter on the island, Thomas Tryon, acknowledged the importance of enslaved Africans to Jamaica's economic success, writing simply: "How would we live as we do without slaves?" A few years later, in 1692, the council of Jamaica offered an even more explicit acknowledgment of the degree to which the island's economic well-being depended on enslaved African labor: "All our estate here, or the increase or preservation, depends wholly upon the frail thread of the life of our Negroes".

A few statistics underscore the dramatic transition that Jamaica made from a lawless pirate town to a plantation economy driven by the work of enslaved Africans: in the 1670s, Jamaica's total population of 17,000 was split between black and white inhabitants. By 1703, the island's population consists of 8,000 white residents and 45,000 enslaved Africans. Life for the enslaved residents of Jamaica was hell. White officials and planters didn't care much about what they fed Africans in bondage: on 1690 the Council of Jamaica decided that the rotten food taken off naval ships should be sold as slave provisions. Working under the horrific conditions of enslavement, violence, privation, and despair, the enslaved inhabitants of Jamaica transformed it into a lucrative sugar-producing colony. And the profits to be made from sugar and slavery, it turned out, were worth more in the eye of the English crown and the most powerful lobbyists than whatever booty pirates might capture. Anti-pirate legislation began to gain English support in official circles in the late 1670s: in 1677, it became illegal for an English subject to sail under a foreign commission (meaning, in legal service to a non-English government), as English buccaneers based on the French-controlled island of Tortuga had long done. Increasingly harsh anti-pirate punishments began to send a strong message to maritime renegades and their supporters: in 1677, a pirate captain was executed in Jamaica for carrying a cargo of pirated enslaved people under a non-English commission. In 1683, the Jamaican legislature actually outlawed piracy! This represented a remarkable shift in policy and one that put the former pirate (now colonial official) Henry Morgan himself in a very awkward position, as he now had to prosecute the activities of his former crewmates. That same year, the Jamaica Assembly ruled that piracy trials would be held in common-law courts and that anyone who helped pirates or privateers could also be prosecuted. This policy shift to holding pirate trials locally (rather than sending the accused back to England) and making anyone who collaborated with pirates vulnerable to prosecution was a major change in official English attitudes towards piracy—one intended to turn colonists against these maritime renegades who had long been an accepted part of colonial society.

Pirate attack on a galleon

Global Piracy: From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean

Although the English were enacting anti-piracy laws and sending naval expeditions out to hunt pirates in the Atlantic by the late seventeenth century, it proved difficult to change either the behavior of pirates or local colonial attitudes about them. Colonial courts with juries made up of local residents were often reluctant to convict pirates who they knew personally and with whom they had done business and even intermarried. Thus, English, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and French privateers and pirates continued to do a regular business around the Caribbean and far beyond.

As English policies made it more dangerous to be a pirate operating in the Atlantic, some Caribbean buccaneers, like Bartholomew Sharp, sailed to the Pacific to raid Spanish settlements in South America. Others left for even more distant waters, heading to the Indian Ocean and to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, numerous buccaneers found that Atlantic warfare worked in their favor as the English government, in need of skilled and fearless sailors, offered former pirates legal commissions when they needed extra colonial defense. Throughout the Caribbean and in mainland North America, privateering and piracy continued to play a critical role in supplying much-need goods and defense in times of war.

In the 1690s, many North American governors depended on pirates for defense against the French during King William's War (1689–1697) when the English government was slow to send supplies and troops to protect their threatened North American colonies. During this period, the governor of the Bahamas, Nicholas Trott, explicitly connected the importance of pirates in colonial America with imperial failings when he defended himself in the face of accusations of harboring pirate Henry Every and the crew of the Fancy in the 1690. Every and his crew arrived at Nassau Island in 1695 as the island was under siege by 3 French vessels. Every's 46-gun ship successfully scattered the French fleet. Trott noted: "Otherwise they had certainly attacked the island…and had taken it, and therefore certainly it was better to invite a known pirate to save a place than by denying them and suffer the enemy to be master of such an island fortified."

Pirates also proved critical to the defense of colonies on the mainland. In 1690 Jacob Leisler (who briefly controlled New York) gave commissions to various privateers/pirates. William Mason, Samuel Burgess, Robert Culliford, and William Kidd all were licensed to attack the French at the start of King William's War. These men helped to defend the colony during the war and captured French prizes in the Atlantic. Governor Fletcher of New York also commissioned pirates as privateers: Captains Coats, Tew, and Hoar each took many French ships before turning to piracy in the Indian Ocean when official English attitudes toward piracy in the Atlantic soured.

Henry Every, depicted with his ship, the Fancy

Similarly, the governors of Carolina, the Jerseys, Connecticut, New York and Rhode Island were all suspected of harboring and welcoming pirates into their communities—for commerce, through marriage, and in times of war. Governor William Markham of Pennsylvania married his daughter to a pirate named Brown, from Henry Every's crew. Markham eventually lost his office but the colony's proprietor, William Penn, defended his policies. Many of these governors granted privateer commissions to individuals and ships who later "turned pirate". Commissioning privateers was often their only recourse in the war against the French: these renegade maritime men helped to plug the gaps in defense as well as provisioning undersupplied drafty colonial economies with much sought-after goods.

Thus, if you were someone living in the Caribbean or colonial North America in the late seventeenth century, your perspective on who was a pirate likely depended a great deal on what, exactly, they did for you. If they brought much-wanted supplies to your town, or fought off your attackers in times of war, you likely were sympathetic to them. If they seized your ship or attacked your town, stealing your goods and committing terrible acts of violence in your community, you likely feared and hated them. Remarkably, however, most North American settlers on the American mainland didn't associate the term "piracy" with the types of maritime conflict that existed in the Atlantic—they associated the term with a different ocean. Piracy was believed to be something that happened in the Mediterranean as a result of Christian-Muslim rivalries in that region. This was not entirely incorrect: between 1500 and 1800, Barbary Corsairs ("Barbary" was a term that referred to the North Coast of Africa) seized approximately 1 million Christians in the Mediterranean. Stories of the exploits of Barbary corsairs and the captivity narratives of sailors who were taken and later released by them circulated increasingly widely in North America and contributed to an association of the term "piracy' with Muslim Mediterranean corsairs. Sometimes, when there was a lull between wars in the Atlantic, out of work seamen would "turn pirate"— some headed to the Mediterranean and joined forces with Barbary corsairs (this was called *"turning Turk")*. In the late seventeenth century, as the English crackdown on piracy in the Atlantic began, tales of privateers going rogue in Islamic-dominated waters and attacking foreign ships landed on sympathetic ears in North America. If men were heroes in the Atlantic, many people didn't care so much if they were pirates in the Indian Ocean…

Woodcut depicting captain Henry Every receiving treasure onboard his ship, 1837

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