



Guatemala, in Gage, *The English-American*, French ed., 1694



Peter Schenk, *Tabula Mexicae et Floridae*, 1710 (?), detail of Central America, with "Guatemala" and, at bottom right, "Golfo Dolce"

MAROONS & FREE BLACKS IN SPANISH AMERICA IN THE 1600s: Three Documents

MAROONS IN GUATEMALA, 1630S

Thomas Gage was a Catholic priest from England who lived and traveled in Central America from 1625 to 1637. In 1648 he published an account of his experiences, *The English-American his Travel by Sea and Land: or, A New Survey of the West-Indies*. In this excerpt, he describes a community of maroons (escaped slaves) in Guatemala.

The way from this gulf [Golfo Dolce on the Pacific coast] to Guatemala is not so bad as some report . . . for in the worst of the year mules laden with four hundred-weight at least go easily through the steepest, deepest, and most dangerous passages of the mountains that lie about this gulf. . . .

What the Spaniards most fear until they come out of these mountains are some two or three hundred Blackamoors, *cimarrones*,¹ who for too much hard usage have fled away from Guatemala and other parts from their masters unto these woods, and there live and bring up their children and increase daily, so that all the power of Guatemala, nay, all the country about (having often attempted it), is not able to bring them under subjection. These often come out to the roadway and set upon the

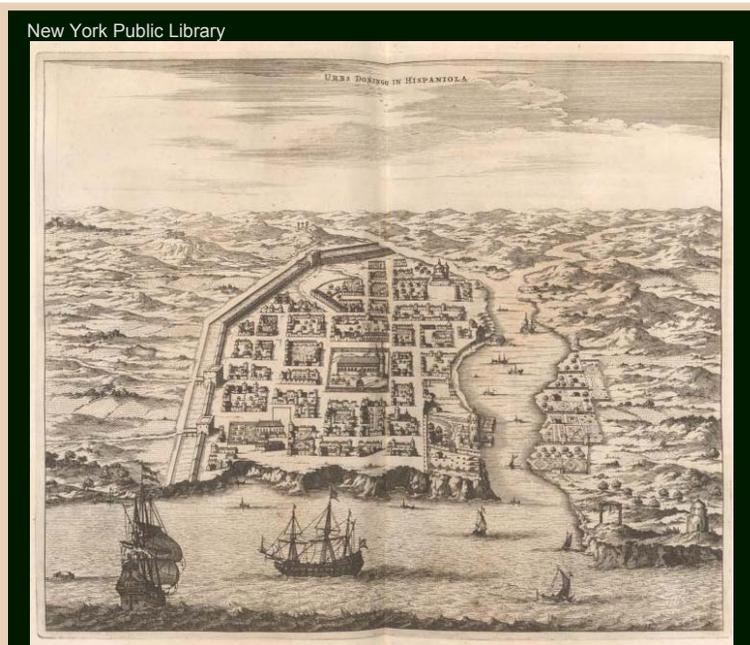
recuas of mules [mule trains] and take of wine, iron, clothing, and weapons from them as much as they need, without doing any harm unto the people or slaves that go with the mules. Rather, these rejoice with them, being of one color, and subject to slavery and misery which the others have shaken off. By their example and encouragement many of these also shake off their misery and join with them to enjoy liberty, though it be but in the woods and mountains. Their weapons are bows and arrows which they use and carry about them, only to defend themselves if the Spaniards set upon them; else they use them not against the Spaniards, who travel quietly and give them part of what provision they carry. These have often said that the chief cause of their flying to those mountains is to be in a readiness to join with the

Excerpted, images added, and punctuation modernized by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. (1) Thomas Gage in J. Eric S. Thompson, ed., *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 195-196. (2) Archbishop-elect of Santo Domingo in Ernesto Sagás and Orlando Inoa, eds., *The Dominican People: A Documentary History* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2003), pp. 44-46. (3) Council of Cartago in Steven Palmer and Iván Molina, eds., *The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) pp. 29-30. Permission pending. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Blackamoor: A dark-skinned person, especially a person from northern Africa. [American Heritage]

Cimarron: Spanish word for "maroon" (fugitive or wild one), referring to the Africans (and others) who escaped slavery from the plantations and mines of the European colonizers between the 16th and 19th centuries and developed independent communities in the wilderness. [Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage]

English or Hollanders if ever they land in that gulf, for they know from them they may enjoy that liberty which the Spaniards will never grant unto them.



Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, in John Ogilby, *America: being the latest, and most accurate description of the New World*, 1671



Peter Schenk, *Tabula Mexicae et Floridae*, 1710 (?), detail of the island [Hispaniola] and city of Santo Domingo

MAROONS IN HISPANIOLA, 1662

As Africans came to outnumber Spaniards on the island of Hispaniola, and the island's weakening economy drove white planters to other settlements, many slaves escaped to the interior and formed independent communities (manieles). In 1662 a Catholic priest reported to King Philip IV of Spain on the maroon threat to the Spaniards.

Sir.—

In the uninhabited regions of this island, some fifty leagues from this city [Santo Domingo], there are some sierras (a place called Maniel) which are very tall and fertile. After all the native Indians of this island disappeared, and the Spanish had to resort to black slaves to work the land, all the fugitive slaves escape to these sierras where they live without any doctrine [Catholic faith] nor priests to teach them. It is a robbers' cove of barbarians, because every year slaves escape from their owners' rural farms, and that is one of the main causes for the miserable state of this island.

There are four towns in this sierra, which "it is said" have six hundred families, and with children and wives should be more than two thousand persons. They have no churches nor do they worship images; some who were baptized before escaping put crosses in their homes, yet they do not get baptized nor do they have laws. They are governed by ladino Negroes²; their weapons are arrows,

which they use with skill; they use short, broad swords they fashion from the iron and steel that they purchase from other Negroes in this city. They cultivate just enough land for their subsistence, because they have an abundance of meats and native fruits. They collect tomines³ of gold and of silver in the rivers, and with this they buy clothes, wine, liquor, and whatever they need, from other Negroes. The militias have launched some attacks against them, in which women and children have been captured, because the rest escape to the heights of the sierras, and so far this robbers' cove has not been destroyed.

² Ladino Negroes: slaves born in the colony. [Sagás & Inoa, p. 44]

³ Tominas: Spanish measure of weight. [Ibid., p. 45]

Some of them pray the Holy Father [Lord's Prayer] and the Ave Maria, and mistakenly worship idols. They guard and watch their sierras with care. If someone commits a grave crime, they throw him down a cliff; and if he escapes, they search for him so that he may not give their location away. And they remain restless until they kill him. And if they cannot achieve that, they move their villages elsewhere so that

escapees cannot serve as spies to entrap them.

Slave owners live in uneasiness, because they cannot safeguard their slaves, and if their [the maroons'] barbaric government were not so rigorous, all the slaves would be in the Maniel to obtain their freedom.

A few days after I arrived in this city, concerned about so many lost souls, and with the colonists — who are the interested party — inclined to offer them [the maroons] liberty at the time, and knowing that God's and Your Majesty's service was to pacify this people, after communicating the matter to President Don Pedro de Carvajal



and others, I resorted to writing them a letter, in which I promised to beg Your Majesty their pardon, and that they all would be free if they left the Maniel and moved their towns to places to be indicated. There, Your Majesty would place them under the rule of justice, and my ministers of the church would teach them, so that thereafter they would live like Christians. And they shall not admit any more fugitive slaves, and if any are missing, they would be in charge of locating and delivering him. To deliver this letter I used a slave belonging to treasurer Don Diego Soria Pardo, who is brother of the captain of the largest [maroon] village. And though we know that he delivered it and talked to them, he has been detained and I have received no response from them, although a group of them went to a farm and said that I should be told that they do not trust whites, who in the past have betrayed their word.

And they have told me that if I travel alone with a servant, they would come to talk to me, as long as there are no other people present. If they decide to talk to me, certainly, God will subdue them. I have decided to seek them by early November, and to try to talk to them. This is important, Sir, to Your Majesty's service, because it is a robbers' cove (as I have said) of fugitive slaves, and from other Negroes they have news of whatever happens in town. And we have these barbarians on our backs, and if the enemy again tries to invade this island, we must guard ourselves from them [the maroons] as well as from the enemy, though during the [16]55 events⁴ they were quiet. They cause damages like stealing female slaves and admitting those slaves who flee. I will inform Your Majesty of whatever happens, since up to now nothing has been achieved, and the President believes that it is impossible to subdue them, so nothing will be informed until this matter develops, though nothing would be lost by trying.

Santo Domingo, island of Hispaniola, the fifteenth of September 1662
Francisco, Archbishop-elect of Santo Domingo (signed)

⁴ Reference to the 1655 English attack on Santo Domingo. The English were defeated and from Santo Domingo they proceeded to attack Jamaica, which they were able to take. [Sagás & Inoa, p. 45]



BLACKS AND MIXED-RACE GROUPS, COSTA RICA, 1676

By 1676 a community of “mulattoes, free coloreds, and lower-class mestizos” had grown near the town of Cartago in Costa Rica. After supporting Spanish officials in their battles against pirates, the community petitioned the governor and town council of Cartago for official recognition.

Having considered the various points of the petition, we see that it is in the interests of the Crown that the mulattoes, free coloreds, and lower-class mestizos⁵ come together and settle so that their lives might be overseen by regular justice and they might live in Christian discipline. Until today, they have lived freely in the valleys and mountains without the justices being able to control them. So we determine

it to be useful and convenient to concede that a settlement be established in this city with the name of Arrabal, and its residents shall join the residents of this city. It is the desire of the governor and captain general in the service of God our Lord that they avoid the serious sins that are committed in the *châcaras* [farms] and mountains where these people have been living and continue to live. And it is also the desire of the king our lord (may God protect him), and in the interests of the security of these provinces, to have them together and ready with arms in hand, as they are today, for the defense of this province against the hostilities that our enemies intend to inflict upon us and for whose great benefit this city in its mercy thanks them. We therefore concede them the right to settle in the place called La Puebla de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, which was the site of their first settlement . . . and the right to name and develop a town council consisting of three councilors, a mayor and a bailiff. . . .



⁵ Mulatto: a person having one black and one white parent. [American Heritage]

Mestizo: a person of mixed racial ancestry, especially of mixed European and Native American ancestry. [American Heritage]