**Central America Early History**

***How did early civilizations affect cultures in Central America today?***

Central America was first inhabited by Native American groups. Then during the 1500s, the Spanish began conquering the region. Cultural influences from Native Americans and the Spanish can be found in the region today.

**Native Americans**

The Maya civilization was one of the most important early civilizations of Central America and Mexico. The Maya excelled at pottery, agriculture, calendar-making, and mathematics. They also developed skills in building pyramid-temples, constructing cities, and creating stone monuments. A large and well-organized group, the Maya were unlike other early peoples of the area. They populated a large area that included present-day Guatemala and Belize, as well as southern Mexico. Politically, the Maya were divided into fiercely independent city-states, which were independent political units that included a city and its surrounding area. The concentration of the Maya in one geographic area provided them with security from invasion by other cultures.

The earliest Maya settlements date to about 1800 B.C. By 1000 B.C., many groups lived in organized farming communities and regularly traded with each other. They grew beans, squash, fruits, and other vegetables, as well as corn, or maize, which was a main staple.

Many other Native American civilizations had also developed in Central America and Mexico during the time of the Maya. One of them was the Olmec. The Maya derived their religious and cultural traits from the Olmec. Influences also came from the Nahuatl (Nä·wä·tel), who moved from Mexico into Central America along the Pacific coast. The Chibcha, based in South America, brought their culture to the area that is present-day Panama and Costa Rica. The closeness of the Caribbean Islands resulted in influences from that region reaching the Central American coastal plain from Panama to Honduras.

The height of the Maya civilization was from about A.D. 300 to A.D. 900, when their civilization suddenly collapsed. Ruins of their ancient cities still stand today, and people of Maya descent still live in Guatemala and Belize.

**Spanish Rule**

By the time of the Spanish conquest, Maya civilization had declined, and its great cities had been abandoned. Spanish conquistadors arrived in present-day Central America after conquering Mexico.

The first Spaniard to establish Spain’s claim to Central America was Rodrigo de Bastidas in 1501, but he did not establish a settlement. Likewise, Christopher Columbus arrived in 1502 but did not stay. Other explorers followed, eventually establishing colonies. The first colony was begun by [Vasco Núñez de Balboa](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/49909/Vasco-Nunez-de-Balboa), who actually hid aboard a ship in hope of free passage. Although Balboa had a good relationship with the Native Americans in the area, diseases brought by the Spanish eventually wiped out many of the Native populations.

Other Spanish colonies followed, as well as many years of conquest and fighting amongst Spanish conquistadors. It was common at that time for governors of colonies to send conquistadors to conquer more land. Often, after these conquests, conquistadors would take control in the new territories, declaring them separate colonies. These practices led to years of unrest in Central America. By the 1560s, Spain had seized control of most of the region. In the 1630s, the British settled the area that is now Belize. Over the next 150 years, this area was attacked numerous times by the Spanish. Not until 1798 did the British win a decisive victory over the Spanish. It was not until 1871 that Belize officially became a British colony known as British Honduras.

**Independence**

***How did the nations of Central America develop?***

During the 1800s, the Central American colonies struggled for freedom from Spanish rule. In 1821, they became independent from Spain. A year later, however, they were joined to Mexico.

**Unity and Separation**

In 1823, the provinces of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—separated from Mexico. They united to form an independent republic called the United Provinces of Central America. The leaders of the new country wrote a constitution and named Guatemala City as the capital. Each of the five provinces had a president. At that time, they gave the right to vote only to the upper classes, ended slavery, and supported the influence of the Catholic Church.

However, political disagreements soon erupted into civil war. By 1840, the provinces had separated into five independent countries—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The area that is now Belize remained British Honduras. Panama was still part of Colombia.

Several attempts were made in the next 50 years to re-create the union, often by force. The last attempt was in 1885 when Guatemala’s president declared himself ruler of Central America and marched an army into El Salvador, where he was defeated.

**Social Divisions**

The people of Central America were divided into two main social classes—the upper class and the poor. Further, the upper class was divided by political beliefs into two groups—the conservatives and the liberals. The conservatives favored unlimited government, rule by wealthy landowners or the military, and the interests of the Catholic Church. The liberals supported limited government, more opportunities for business, and the separation of religion and government. Civil wars were fought between conservatives and liberals in a quest for power.

Central America also experienced economic colonialism. Under this type of system, the economy of a country or a region is controlled by foreign companies. In Central America, European and American companies set up plantations, or large farms, where poorly paid workers produced cash crops. The most important cash crops were bananas, coffee, and sugarcane. The crops were then shipped to Europe and North America, where people gladly paid for these highly valued foods.

Heading the governments for much of this time were military strongmen called caudillos. The caudillos helped ensure the foreigners’ economic success. In turn, the foreigners made sure that the caudillos remained in power.Central American countries were run largely as military dictatorships. Landowners held the wealth, while peasants who worked for them were very poor.

**Panama**

For centuries, Europeans and Americans dreamed of building a canal across Central America. In the 1880s, the French tried—and failed—to build a canal. At this time, Panama was part of the South American country of Colombia. The people of Panama, however, wanted their freedom. In 1903, Panama finally gained its independence from Colombia. It was helped by the United States, which wanted to build a canal there. The new Republic of Panama soon signed a canal treaty with the United States. In exchange for a $250,000 payment to Panama each year, the United States was given the rights to build the canal.

On August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal officially opened. The United States controlled the canal until 1999. Then, by agreement, Panama took control of the canal.

**Conflict and Cooperation**

***What challenges did young Central American countries face?***

The late 1900s was a time of conflict in Central America. New wealth came to the upper classes, but most people remained poor. Various groups demanded reforms. Several countries were ravaged by civil wars. Only Costa Rica and Belize remained peaceful.

**Twentieth-Century Civil Wars**

Central America’s social divisions continued into the twentieth century. The upper class faced strong challenges from middle class and working class groups, which demanded more political power and economic benefits. Some of these movements were for peaceful change through political parties. Others favored violent revolution to end the rule of the upper class. During the 1970s and 1980s, guerrilla groups in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua battled landowners and military governments for control of land. Guerrillas are small groups of fighters that use their knowledge of local landscapes to carry out surprise attacks on larger military forces. The civil war in Guatemala was the longest and most deadly of the civil wars in Central America. About 150,000 died, and the civil war severely weakened the country’s economy.

**Strengthening Democracies**

The civil war in Guatemala ended in 1996, and today the country has a democratically elected president. By the end of the twentieth century, all of the countries in Central America had democratic governments. However, social problems including poverty are still widespread in the region. Various efforts have been made in the last half of the twentieth century to unify the Central American countries. The goal of unification is to provide greater economic and political unity in the region.