

## ***History of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines***

Prior to European domination that began in the 18th century, St. Vincent and the Grenadines was home to various tribes that had migrated from South and Central America. One early group was the peaceful Arawak, a tribe of skilled potters who also engaged in farming and fishing. By AD 1000, the more warlike Caribs overtook the Arawak on islands throughout the Caribbean. The Caribs' name for St. Vincent was Hairouna ("Home of the Blessed").

The traditional belief that Christopher Columbus landed on St. Vincent in 1498 has been refuted, but the island certainly was known to sailors and traders during his day. The Caribs fought the Europeans who landed there, so sailing vessels avoided St. Vincent for more than two hundred years. The Caribs did welcome other Caribs who had been defeated by Europeans on other islands, as well as escaped and freed African slaves. The Africans mixed with the Caribs and became known as Black Caribs, while the original Caribs were called Yellow Caribs because of their fair skin. Together, they proved nearly invincible to European conquerors. However, when the Black Caribs began to dominate the Yellow Caribs, the latter agreed to let the French build a settlement on St. Vincent in 1719.

The Black Caribs continued to resist the Europeans, and St. Vincent was declared a neutral island in 1748. For the next several years, the French, British, and Black Caribs all struggled to control the island. In 1795, the great Carib chief Chatoyer (the island's first national hero) was killed in battle by the British. His death allowed the British to eventually (in 1797) defeat the remaining five thousand Black Caribs and banish them to the Honduran peninsula. The remnant of the Yellow Caribs retreated to the island's northern tip, where their descendants live today.

For most of the colonial period, sugarcane production was the source of economic wealth. British landowners imported African slaves to work on their plantations. When slavery was phased out between 1834 and 1838, the population with African origins exceeded that of the Europeans. However, most freed slaves could do little more than engage in subsistence agriculture, although some became skilled artisans. Gradually, plantation owners brought in indentured laborers from Portugal and East India. Descendants of these laborers still live on the island today.

Until 1969, St. Vincent and the Grenadines was part of the Windward Islands colony. It then became an associated state with Britain, meaning it had internal

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autonomy but not full independence. The nation became an independent state within the Commonwealth in 1979. The center-right New Democratic Party (NDP), headed by James Mitchell, held power from 1984 until 2000, when anti-government protests spurred an early election to be called in 2001. Ralph Gonsalves from the opposition Unity Labor Party, won the election and was reelected in 2005.

### ***References:***

“Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.” *CultureGrams World Edition*. 2008.

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