

## Realejo: A Forgotten Colonial Port and Shipbuilding Center in Nicaragua

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COLONIAL NICARAGUA was an important source of Indian slaves, timber, dyewood, naval stores, and foodstuffs for the Viceroyalty of Peru. The great bulk of this traffic moved through the port and *villa* of Realejo, at the head of a mangrove-lined estuary some 8 kilometers up river from the modern Pacific coast port of Corinto. Today Realejo is an almost forgotten village of thatch-roofed cane houses, shrouded by giant mango trees and reached not by ship, but by a rutted dirt turnoff from the modern paved Corinto-Chinandega highway. The road lies deep in mud during the rainy season, is choked with dust during the dry season, and can hardly be distinguished from private access paths through surrounding fields of cotton.

Once called, perhaps with only modest hyperbole, "the best natural harbor within the Spanish monarchy"<sup>1</sup> this large estuary consists of the drowned confluence of the mouths of several rivers which cross the León-Chinandega Plain of Nicaragua to reach the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1). It could safely have accommodated a fleet of several hundred Spanish men-of-war within its spacious confines. The entrance is well protected from strong winds and swells, both of which are common along this stretch of Central American coastline.<sup>2</sup> Paso Caballos estuary, a mangrove-lined creek that presently separates the mainland

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1. Domingo Juarros, *A Statistical and Commercial History of the Kingdom of Guatemala*, transl. by J. Baily (London, 1823), p. 337.

2. The coastal shelf is shallow off this section of the Nicaraguan coast and at several points between the Gulf of Fonseca and Corinto offshore reefs or islands are aligned parallel to the coast. Mentioned in the 1904 U.S. Hydrographic Office Bulletin 84 (*West Coasts of Mexico and Central America*, 3rd edition) are Speck Rock and Shoal and Limón Island. The entire coast was considered a graveyard for ships. Such long-shore bars may readily build to the surface to become new beaches where there is a sufficient rate of sediment supply and favorable wave action. This may have been the origin of the original Isla Corinto (Isla Aserradores), since anchored to the mainland at various points by the vagaries of beach erosion and deposition.

from the beach ridge on which Corinto stands, had an outlet to the sea 12 kilometers northwest of the harbor according to the Juan Bautista de Jáuregui plan of 1819.<sup>3</sup> Early used by small vessels for entry into the harbor, it has long been sealed off by sand accretion. In colonial times this broad beach, known as Isla Aserradores, was a source of fine timber as well as a favored nesting beach for sea turtles. Ocelots and jaguars from the interior came here during the nesting period to hunt female turtles as they came ashore to deposit their eggs.<sup>4</sup>

Protecting the mouth of the harbor is the small Isla del Cardón (on early maps Isla Maese Antonio), a barren rocky islet named for the abundance of *Cereus aragoni* which grew there.<sup>5</sup> It was early the site of a battery of guns and a lighthouse. Navigable channels enter the harbor from both the east and west of Isla del Cardón so that the harbor could be entered by sailing vessels in almost all weather and at all times of year regardless of wind direction.<sup>6</sup>

The western entrance, El Cardón Channel (also called Barra del Cardón), has long been the principal entrance to the harbor. It is about half a kilometer wide and can accommodate merchant ships of deep draught. The bottom is sandy, and there are few hazards. On the island of Cardón a large rock overlooks this passage. The freebooter Reveneau de Lussan, on his way to sack the town of Realejo in 1685, noted that although Cardón Channel lay unprotected, the Spaniards had once considered building an outer fortification on this rock to protect the passage.<sup>7</sup> This site was later fortified,

3. Reproduced in E. Pérez-Valle, "El puerto de el Realejo dos años antes de la Independencia," *La Prensa* (Managua), 27 Nov., 1960.

4. "Descripción de Realejo," c. 1791 (Museo Naval, Madrid 570 (Virreinato de Méjico, IV), Expediente #6.17 ff.) in Sauer Collection, vol. 51, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley.

5. Antonio Morel de Santa Cruz, "Carta al Rey" 1752, in Sofonías Salvatierra, *Contribución a la historia de Centroamérica* (Managua, 1939), I, 381-383. Isla Limón, 12 kilometers northwest of Corinto harbor, is referred to on Hydrographic Office charts as False Cardón, apparently because it has been confused in the past with the island at the entrance to the port. Recent maps suggest that Isla Limón may have been incorporated into the mainland by sand accretion. Similar shifts in the configuration of the coastline are seen south of the Realejo bar, especially on the peninsula of Castañón, where a high cliffed headland now attached to the mainland is shown on earlier maps to have been an island ("Mapas de las costas de la Nueva España en el mar del Sur," c. 1650 (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, MS 2959, folio 75) in Sauer Collection, Vol. 61, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley.)

6. R. G. Dunlop, *Travels in Central America* (London, 1847), p. 26.

7. Raveneau de Lussan, *A Journal of a Voyage made into the South Sea, by the Bucaniers or Freebooters of America from the year 1684 to 1689* (London, 1704), p. 48.

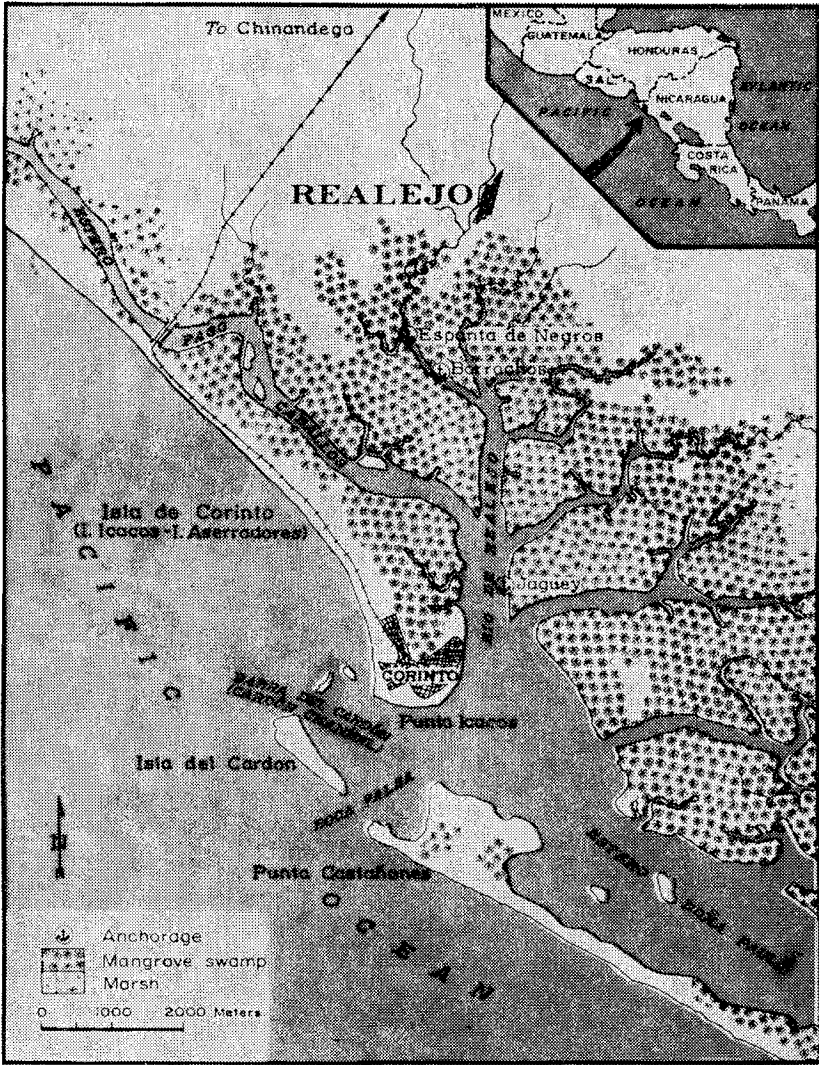


FIGURE 1

as is mentioned by Morel de Santa Cruz in his 1752 description of Nicaragua.<sup>8</sup> The narrower eastern channel, Boca Falsa (also called False Bar Channel), was used extensively during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, as early as 1740 it was already known as La Barra Vieja, presumably because it had not been important for

8. Morel de Santa Cruz., "Carta al Rey," I, 381-383.

many years. Only on the occasion of winds from the south did eighteenth century vessels venture into this channel, which had long since become dangerously narrow and shoal.

Entering the harbor and doubling Punta Icacos, which lay on the left, vessels found fully protected anchorage in seven fathoms. Across the channel, to the north, at Jaguey, an opening in the mangrove-lined beach, large ships from Peru were careened. Barracks had been established there for guarding port provisions and equipment. Smaller vessels were careened further up the estuary at Borrachos (five fathoms), Cadavera, or the parish of Espanta de Negros, where sentinels for the defense of the *villa* of Realejo were stationed.<sup>9</sup>

The narrow, meandering tidal creek known as Río del Realejo was bordered by stilt-rooted mangrove almost to the edge of town. Towards the end of the colonial period silting of the channel appears to have become a problem, with larger vessels no longer being able to reach the port. Encroaching mangrove along with the deposition of sand and silt by tidal currents seem to have contributed to the shoaling.<sup>10</sup> The waters of the harbor, furthermore, were infested with *teredo*, the shipworm which feasted on wooden sailing ships and which often caused their hulls to be riddled with holes.<sup>11</sup>

Settlers and travelers alike found the natural environment of the port and *villa* quite unpleasant. It was hot, humid, and unhealthy although the adjacent area was well endowed with fine alluvial soils and fruit trees of every description.

Realejo, for three centuries one of the most active shipbuilding and commercial ports on the South Sea coast, first assumed its commercial role in 1533, some 10 years after the initial settlement of Nicaragua. Prior to that time all Spanish commerce entered and left Nicaragua by way of the Gulf of Nicoya in modern Costa Rica. To accommodate this trade the port city of Brusélas had been founded on the east shore of the Gulf of Nicoya by Hernández de Córdoba in 1524.<sup>12</sup> Brusélas was forcibly depopulated twice for political reasons, initially during the time of Hernández de Córdoba and again only a

9. Felipe Gómez y Messia, Corregidor "Auttos y Relación. . . de la Villa y Puerto de Realejo y Pueblos de su jurisdicción," 1740, Archivo de Guatemala (Hereinafter cited as AG), (MS) Al.17(14) 5014-210.

10. "Descripción de Realejo," c. 1791.

11. Antonio Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales* [1628], Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections (Washington, D.C., 1948), pp. 108, 232-233.

12. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Central America* (San Francisco, 1883), I, 512.



FIGURE 2

few years later, in 1527, when it was dismantled completely by Diego López de Salcedo.<sup>13</sup> It was never again rebuilt.

Following the abandonment of Brusélas, ships arriving from Castillo de Oro (Panama) anchored off the island of Chira and from there longboats and native canoes carried commodities and passengers up the Río Tempisque to the province of Nicoya. The friendly cacique, Nicoya, supplied food, water, and Indian porters for the 35 league overland journey through almost uninhabited territory to the Indian city of Nicaragua (Rivas).<sup>14</sup> From there the journey to Granada and then León, through a well-populated country, was adequately supplied with food, water, and resting places.

An excellent Pacific harbor, situated scarcely fifteen leagues northwest of the city of León, had been discovered by sea during the initial voyage of Gil González and Andrés Niño to Nicaragua in 1523. They traveled into the harbor and up a large tidal river and at the head of navigation took possession of Nicaragua in the name of the King of

13. "Carta con documentos de Licenciado Francisco Castañeda a S.M.," León, March 30, 1529, Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla (Hereinafter cited as AGI), Patronato 180, Ramo 27 in *Colección Somoza*, I, 479-508.

14. *Ibid.*

Spain, calling the port "Puerto de la Posesión" and the river "Río de la Posesión."<sup>15</sup> The settlement that grew up at the head of navigation was later to gain fame as the port and *villa* of Realejo.

Although discovered and explored before any Spanish cities were founded in Nicaragua, this harbor was not frequented until Spanish navigators had learned to sail safely past the Gulf of Papagayos, northwest of the Nicoya Peninsula. Here very strong offshore winds called *papagayos* prevail, accompanied by turbulent ocean currents. This treacherous area seriously impeded coastal navigation in the 1520s because skilled pilots had not yet become completely familiar with these anomalous sailing conditions. Even after this navigation had been mastered and Realejo had been opened to trade, the Gulf of Nicoya remained an important alternate route for Nicaraguan commerce.<sup>16</sup>

The first Spanish ships constructed on the Pacific shores of the New World had been built on the Gulf of San Miguel in Panama in the first years after Balboa's crossing of the isthmus to explore the newly found South Sea.<sup>17</sup> The initial stimulus for the development of a Central American shipbuilding industry came in part from the demand for ships to carry Indian slaves from Nicaragua to Panama and the new mines of Peru. The settlers of León and Granada early had turned to slaving among the densely settled and sedentary aboriginal population. As early as 1526 at least one shipload of Nicaragua Indians had arrived at Panama. After Pedrarias Dávila moved to Nicaragua two years later the trade expanded rapidly, with slaving expeditions ranging far into the interior to supply the insatiable demands of the traders. Following the death of Pedrarias in 1531 the colonists were allowed to build ships and engage in slaving virtually without restraint so that by 1533 or early 1534 between 15 and 20 caravels were reported exclusively engaged in the Nicaraguan slave trade. Between them, Nicaragua and Panama supplied the overwhelm-

15. Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias* (1554) in Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1946, XXII, 280-281.

16. "Carta con documentos de Licenciado Francisco Castañeda a S.M.," *Colectión Somoza*, I, 479-508.

17. Woodrow Borah, "Early Colonial Trade and Navigation Between Mexico and Peru," *Ibero-Americana*, 38 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954). Borah's reconstruction of early Pacific shipbuilding and trade is followed in this and the following paragraph. On the Nicaragua Indian slave trade see also David R. Radell, *Historical Geography of Western Nicaragua: the Spheres of Influence of León, Granada, and Managua, 1519-1965*, Nonr-3656 (03), Project NR 388 067, Department of Geography, University of California (Berkeley, 1969), especially Chapter 4.

ing majority of vessels, trained seamen, and pilots then operating in the Pacific.

Within the next decades modest shipbuilding enterprises were to spring up at Alanje in Veragua, Iztapa in Guatemala, Acajutla in El Salvador, and in New Spain at Acapulco, Huatulco, Tehuantepec, and La Navidad, as well as on the Gulf of Guayaquil in the Audiencia of Quito (Fig. 2). But it was Nicaragua that dominated the industry, producing ships not only for the coastwise trade southward, but the bulk of those in the Mexico-Peru traffic and significant numbers of Manila galleons.

The port of Realejo first attracted attention in connection with Pedro de Alvarado's plan to invade Peru.<sup>18</sup> In 1533 Alvarado was in the process of assembling a small fleet in the Gulf of Fonseca for an exploratory expedition to Peru. He heard that three ships were being constructed on the Río del Realejo under the supervision of Governor Francisco de Castañeda for the purpose of sending reinforcements to Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru. Immediately Alvarado dispatched a band of well-armed men, along with a few ships outfitted for battle, to attack the shipbuilding yard. This party successfully seized two completed ships and from the remaining vessel which had not yet been completed and still lay on the slip, took the anchors, cables, and sails. According to complaints filed by Nicaragua officials, Alvarado not only seized the ships but also inveigled a substantial number of Spanish settlers from the province of Nicaragua to man his expeditionary force.

In the years following the departure of the Alvarado expedition shipbuilding activity increased; Nicaragua emerged as a leading supplier of Spanish soldiers, Indian slaves, and agricultural supplies for the Peruvian conquest, and Realejo developed into the principal port for this inter-colonial trade.

The port's hinterland provided abundant raw materials suited to ship construction. Indeed, it was claimed that few places in the New World were so well endowed with the resources required for the development of a shipbuilding industry. From the upland pine forests of the Central Highlands of Nicaragua, the southernmost natural stand of the genus *Pinus* in the New World, lumber, pitch, and resins were carried to the port of Realejo by Indian porters. The amount of pine lumber transported overland for shipbuilding was so great that Las Casas ranked the rigors of hauling timbers as one of the chief causes

18. "Información Legalizada en la Ciudad de Panamá, ante el Gobernador de Castilla del Oro," San Miguel, Peru, October 24, 1533 AGI, Justicia, Leg. 1,051 in *Colección Somoza*, III, 283-305.

of death and misery among the Indians of Nicaragua.<sup>19</sup> The supply of masts in the pine forests of the adjacent highlands were said to be "inexhaustible."<sup>20</sup> Hardwood species useful in ship fabrication also were numerous. Among the most important local timbers available for maritime use were *cedro* (*Cedrela*), *caoba* (*Swietenia*), *guácimo* (*Guazumo*), *madero negro* (*Gliricidia sepium*), which was a durable "underwater" timber, *palo cuadrado* (*Macrocnemum glabresceus*), a very hard wood for levers and rudders, and *sapodilla* (*Achras sapota*), famed for its resistance to teredo.

Cotton, grown by the Indians throughout the Pacific coastal area of Nicaragua, was plentiful and from the beginning had been one of the most important commodities collected as tribute. In addition, the weaving of cotton was one of the chief handicrafts in the province,<sup>21</sup> so that native talents were easily turned to the weaving of much needed sail cloth as well as other fabrics considered useful by the Spaniards. Rope-making, based on local raw materials, was another important handicraft industry. Maguey (*Agave*) and *cabuya* (*Furcraea cabuya*) were the principal sources of fiber for cordage manufacture in Nicaragua.<sup>22</sup>

Of all major necessities for ship construction only iron, used primarily for anchors on colonial ships, was not produced within the province of Nicaragua. Anchors usually were brought directly from Spain by ship over the Río San Juan route from the North Sea to Granada and from there were carried overland to Realejo.

Notwithstanding the abundant availability of raw materials, early ship construction at Realejo appears to have suffered from serious mismanagement. Unscrupulous practices by contractors sapped gold from the royal treasury as well as sweat and blood from Indian workers. In 1578 a report was made informing the Crown of developments at the shipyards of Realejo.<sup>23</sup> One galleon had recently been completed and another was under construction. Although these two ships were reputed to be the best vessels in the South Seas, their cost to the Crown and to the Indian workers was excessive. The 1578

19. Bartolomé Las Casas, *Destrucción de las Indias* (1552), (Puebla, 1821), p. 37.

20. Juarros, *Statistical and Commercial History*, p. 337.

21. "Diligencias de la Distribución de los Tributos de los Pueblos de Nicaragua, practicadas por los Oidores de la Real Audiencia de los Confines," San Salvador, November-December, 1548. AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, Leg. 128, in *Colección Somoza*, XIV, 357-385.

22. Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción*, p. 236.

23. "Fray Pedro Ortiz a S.M. el Rey," February 6, 1583, in Manuel María de Peralta, *Costa Rica, Nicaragua y Panamá en el siglo XVI*, pp. 623-625.



report estimated that the ships could have been built for one-fourth the price actually charged the royal treasury.<sup>24</sup> Shipyard owners, dissatisfied with handsome profits wrung from the Crown, apparently also short-changed the Indians for their labor. Shipbuilding contractors were paid in gold for their finished product, but Indian workers usually were promised only cacao beans. It was said that the quantity of cacao beans promised the Indians for 20 *reales* worth of work could be purchased on the open market by their employers for not more than 15 *reales*. If payment were to be made in silver, the workers were paid one peso for 10 *reales* worth of work instead of the standard rate of exchange, one for eight. These practices were said to have netted contractors an additional twenty to twenty-five percent profit at the expense of the Indians. Of 300,000 *tostones* paid by the Crown for ship construction under one contract, only 5,000 *tostones* were allocated to be paid to the Indian workers.<sup>25</sup> Even this meager amount was not necessarily received by the Indians, for they often received worthless promises of future payment instead of hard cash. Rather than work in the shipyards without pay, natives fled the country, abandoning their wives and children, thus contributing to the province's serious depopulation.

In partial solution to the problem of labor in the shipyards, the Crown was implored by the clergy to import Negro slaves.<sup>26</sup> Although not much is known about their importation to Western Nicaragua, the recommendation appears to have been implemented; for, when Vásquez de Espinoza visited Nicaragua in the early years of the 17th century, he could report that many laborers in Realejo's shipyard were Negro slaves, Negro freemen, or mulattoes.<sup>27</sup> *Mestizos* also must have worked in the yards, for there was evidence of an incipient organized labor movement. In 1674, for example, a Calker's Union felt strong enough to demand the dismissal of a *calafate mayor* or supervisor on the ways.<sup>28</sup>

Most of the ships built at Realejo after the first years were for Peruvian merchants and the Peru trade. Until 1585 Manila galleons also were constructed at Realejo.<sup>29</sup> Two such vessels of 350 tons each

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. Vásquez de Espinoza, *Compendio y descripción*, p. 236.

28. "Los calafates del puerto y villa de Realejo pretenden la supresión del oficio de Calafate Mayor de la provincia de Nicaragua," AG, (MS) A 3.10, 3140-164, folio 76.

29. Peter Gerhard, *Pirates on the West Coast of New Spain* (Glendale, California, 1960), p. 29.

were completed there in 1579, for example, for trans-Pacific use.<sup>30</sup> Another Realejo-built vessel of 700 tons, seized by Cavendish in 1587, was also on the Philippine run.<sup>31</sup> The original link of the Nicaragua port with the Manila trade was through Acapulco, the northern terminus of the Mexico-Peru trade, for which Realejo served as a frequent port-of-call. In later years a cabotage trade with other Central American ports such as Iztapa, Acajutla, and Panama became increasingly important.

During the last half of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century pine pitch (*brea*) was the most important product shipped from Realejo to Peru. As the viceroyalty to the south solidified its territorial control and became less dependent on agricultural imports, naval stores from the Nueva Segovia region of the northern Nicaraguan highlands became progressively more important in the trade. First used in ship construction at Realejo, pine tar and resins had become the primary export of this port to Callao as early as the 1540s.<sup>32</sup> With illicit Oriental trade goods, smuggled overland from Mexico for transshipment to Peru, and illegal wine shipments bound from Peru to New Spain, they dominated the commerce of the port.

The intercolonial naval stores trade was especially profitable to the Nicaraguan merchants. By the early seventeenth century it was reported that a kindle (100 pounds) of Nueva Segovia pine tar could be delivered at Realejo for two pesos. From Realejo transportation by ship to Callao cost three pesos more, including duty. Yet at Callao merchants received no less than twelve pesos and as much as thirty pesos per kindle.<sup>33</sup> The pitch was used not only for calking ships but also for treating wine containers in the wine producing districts of the Peruvian coast. But by the end of the seventeenth century the supply seems to have been largely depleted.

By 1540 activity generated by the shipbuilding and the prospering Peru trade had enabled Realejo's population to grow to more than 50 Spanish *vecinos*, exclusive of sailors, persons in transit, and merchants.<sup>34</sup> Although most merchants controlling trade at Realejo were residents

30. Sofonías Salvatierra, *Contribución a la historia de Centroamerica*, I, 299.

31. Borah, "Early Colonial Trade," p. 66.

32. See William Denevan, "The Upland Pine Forests of Nicaragua: A Study in Cultural Plant Geography," *University of California Publications in Geography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961), 12 (4), 251-320, esp. 298-300, for references on the *brea* trade.

33. Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción*, p. 233. Also pp. 484, 499.

34. "Capítulos de cargas formulados por Francisco Sánchez contra Rodrigo de Contreras," Panamá, July 1, 1540, AGI, Indiferente General, Leg. 1206 in *Colección Somoza*, VI, 103.

of León (León Viejo), that town was too distant to handle all of Realejo's affairs conveniently. Many grave crimes and illicit activities are said to have gone unpunished for lack of local peace officers and adequate law enforcement from León, situated 12 leagues to the southeast across the volcanic Pacific outwash plain on the shores of Lake Managua. About the only law enforced during the 1540s was a governor's restriction on Realejo's trade which declared that all Peruvian imports unloaded at Realejo could be traded only at León.<sup>35</sup> Residents of Realejo complained bitterly, and as a result this restriction was subsequently revoked.<sup>36</sup> The official status of "*villa*" was granted to Realejo during the late 1540's and with it an increase in local authority. In 1560, with the Peru trade very active, the resident European population of Realejo was listed as thirty. Interestingly, almost all of these were said to have been Genoese, although there were also a few Spaniards in residence.<sup>37</sup>

Realejo's port and shipyards were unmolested by pirates until 1578 when Sir Francis Drake passed through the Straits of Magellan and entered the Pacific Ocean. He quickly moved northward, attacking shipping and coastal settlements and taking the Spaniards by surprise. Word of his approach often preceded him. Yet, so rapid was his progress that the colonists had little time to prepare adequate defenses.

On April 6, 1579, Realejo received news of Drake's approach. The port was fortified as quickly as possible. A breastwork was laid near the Río del Realejo's mouth, and a log chain was stretched across the stream to prevent a river assault on the *villa*. However, fate intervened; Drake, unable to induce his captured pilot to guide him past the Isla Cardón into the harbor, simply bypassed the port and proceeded northward along the coast.<sup>38</sup> Drake had traveled up the coast so quickly that Cardón had been bypassed before the Spaniards had even begun to fortify the river. Nevertheless, these fortifications were maintained for a few years in fear of his return. The presence of pirates who infested the South Sea after Drake's initial voyage seriously depressed business at Realejo for the remainder of the sixteenth century. Although the port was not attacked, the mere presence of pirates had an adverse effect on Pacific Coast commerce, and Realejo's trade diminished along with that of other Pacific ports.

By the late sixteenth century the increasing advantages of building ships in the Philippines to meet Pacific commercial needs were having

35. *Ibid.*, 108.

36. *Colección Somoza*, VI, 108.

37. Salvatierra, *Contribución a la historia*, I, 301-302.

38. Gerhard, *Pirates on the West Coast*, pp. 67-68.

their effect on Realejo's shipyards. In 1585 Padre Alonso Sánchez of the Compañía de Jesús reported on the situation.<sup>39</sup> He observed that construction of ships at Realejo and other ports of New Spain was inefficient and expensive when compared to similar work done in the Philippines. Sánchez estimated that four ships could be built in the Philippines in the time required to build one in New Spain, and a 500-600 ton ship costing 50,000 to 60,000 pesos in New Spain could be built for only 6,000 to 8,000 pesos at Manila. The low cost was attributable to three factors: (1) excellent wood; (2) low priced iron, costing only 8 to 10 *reales* per kindle; and (3) artisans skilled in carpentry and iron work. In addition, a concentrate of coconut oil could be used for calking, lead was available for weights, and local rope was of the highest quality.

Above all, however, Realejo's commercial function was most seriously undermined by the relocation of León in 1610 to its present site at the foot of Volcán Cerro Negro and only three leagues from the port. As a consequence, by 1620 most of Realejo's official functions had been assumed by the nearby capital. León's more convenient new site induced many of Realejo's successful merchants to abandon the hot, humid, unhealthy coast for the comparative comfort of the interior city. Realejo, as a consequence, not only lost administrative power, but also her most influential citizens. Recurrent attempts thereafter to breathe new life into its economy were largely ineffective.

In the early seventeenth century, sometime after the height of its affluence, Realejo claimed nearly 100 Spanish *vecinos*, not to mention mulattoes, free Negroes, slaves, and a few Indians.<sup>40</sup> One of the four corregidores appointed by the President of the Audiencia of Guatemala to administer justice in Nicaragua had his headquarters in Realejo; his jurisdiction extended to the province of El Viejo, which included among its twelve villages Chinandega, Chichigalpa, and Posoltega.<sup>41</sup> A few decades later, with León firmly established in its new site, there remained in Realejo only a few Spaniards. When Thomas Gage visited the *villa* in 1637, he described its vulnerability to attack:

But neither this creek or arm of the sea is fortified (which might be done with one or two pieces of ordnance at most placed at the mouth of the sea's entrance) neither is the Realejo strong with ammunition, nor with people, for it consists not of above

39. Ricardo Cappa, *Estudios críticos acerca de la dominación española en América* (Madrid, 1894), III, 47-49.

40. Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción*, p. 252.

41. *Ibid.*

two hundred families, the most of them are Indians and mestizos, a people of no courage, and unfit to defend such an open passage to Guatemala and Nicaragua.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps inspired by Gage's description of both Nicaragua's commercial wealth and the weakness of its defenses, the pirate John Davis traveled from the Caribbean Sea up the Río San Juan to Lake Nicaragua in 1665 and proceeded successfully to sack Granada, León, and Realejo. After another pirate attack followed the same back-door route, the Río San Juan was fortified. Pirates then turned to direct attacks on Nicaragua from the Pacific Coast. Although the Spaniards were well aware of the threat posed by the filibusters, defense measures taken against them appear to have been of a very limited nature.

In 1684, apparently hoping to find Realejo in a state of unpreparedness as described by Gage, a group of English freebooters made an abortive attempt to take the port by surprise. After Captain Edmund Cook's death off Nicoya Peninsula earlier that year, Edward Davis had taken command of Cook's three ships and set sail for Realejo. When, on August second, the little armada arrived at Isla del Cardón and entered the harbor, they found the river approaches to Realejo fortified by breastworks. Rather than fight the well-entrenched Spaniards, Davis decided to pirate elsewhere and put to sea bound for Amapala in the Gulf of Fonseca.<sup>43</sup>

The next year Davis returned in the company of the freebooters Townby, Swan and Knite with eight ships and a combined force of 640 men. The ships anchored in the harbor and a raiding force of 470 marched inland, by-passing Realejo to attack León, a day's march inland.<sup>44</sup> After looting and burning the city, they returned to sack Realejo. They were too late, however; the residents of the villa had heard of their approach and had abandoned their homes. Finding the place vacant, the freebooters gathered whatever naval stores, rigging, and supplies had been left at the port, put the town to torch, and sailed away on September 7, 1685. It probably would have pleased the Nicaraguans somewhat had they known that the freebooters suffered for this attack by contracting a "spotted fever" which, while at sea, considerably thinned their numbers.<sup>45</sup>

Nicaragua's troubles for the year were not over. On November

42. Thomas Gage, *The English-American: A New Survey of the West Indies*, 1648. Edited by A. P. Newton (London, 1928).

43. William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World* (London, 1927), pp. 85-90.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-157.

45. *Ibid.*

first, a French buccaneer, François Grognet, entered the harbor of Realejo, where his men found the breastworks along the river unmanned and the partially burned *villa* of Realejo deserted.<sup>46</sup> After raiding a large sugar estate and local cattle ranches, Grognet's force of 120 men attempted to attack León but found the city too heavily defended. Before leaving Nicaragua the buccaneers did raid the pueblo of El Viejo, on a navigable tributary of the Gulf of Fonseca near Chinandega, there securing much-needed supplies.

After this visit to Nicaragua, Grognet's force sailed back and forth along the West Coast of Central America, raiding Spanish settlements. Granada also suffered at his hands. Grognet returned to Realejo, found it still vacant, captured El Viejo again, and also burned Chinandega before putting to sea on May 19th, 1686. Once again, eight months later, Grognet returned to sack El Viejo for a third time before making a hasty retreat.<sup>47</sup> According to Lussan, people did not begin to resettle Realejo again until December, 1687, when the Spanish warship "San Lorenzo," mounted with 30 cannon and manned by 400 hands, provided protection by anchoring at the entrance to the port.<sup>48</sup>

With the departure of Grognet's buccaneers, shipbuilding resumed at Realejo. Gerhard provides a description of two small galleys being built there at this time to protect Mexican shipping and coastal settlements from pirate attack.

The flagship had the breath-taking name of "Jesús Nazareno Santo Domingo y San Gaspar." The smaller "Nuestra Señora de la Soledad y San Francisco de Paula" had a keel of  $33\frac{1}{2}$  *codos* (46 feet), twenty-eight oars, and a normal complement of fifty soldiers in addition to the rowers. The armament of these vessels must have been quite small, probably a few light swivel guns, but their maneuverability would make them useful in a hit-and-run engagement. The first of the galiots reached Acapulco in December, 1690, and the second in March, 1691. For the next few years they patrolled the coast from Huatulco to Lower California, investigating rumors of pirates and serving as convoys to the Manila galleon.<sup>49</sup>

Although pirate attacks declined on the Pacific Coast of Central America after the beginning of the eighteenth century, incidents were still common. In 1704, John Clipperton sailed into the harbor of

46. Lussan, *Voyage into the South Sea*, pp. 47-49.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-71.

48. *Ibid.*, 151-152.

49. Gerhard, *Pirates on the West Coast*, pp. 198-199.

Realejo and captured two ships.<sup>50</sup> In the same year William Dampier captured an 80-ton ship bound for Realejo from Zihuatanejo. Fear of raids from the Atlantic persisted. Documents in the Guatemala archives show that more than half of the port taxes levied on ships arriving at Realejo from Panama in the 1720s were for the "Castillo de San Juan" fund for building defenses on that river.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout most of the eighteenth century Realejo's contact with the French, Dutch, and British involved the exchange of contraband. Shipbuilding for colonial commerce also continued. As late as 1742, the shipbuilding facility at Realejo was still capable of launching one 300-ton ship each year for the Callao trade.<sup>52</sup>

There were 15 Spanish *vecinos* living in the *villa* in 1740, together with 108 other families, mostly mulattoes.<sup>53</sup> At least two of the latter were of sufficient substance to occupy tile-roof houses, as did all the Spaniards, but most of the structures were of cane and straw. Several of the *vecinos*, as well as the *cura* and the *corregidor*, owned small sugar mills and livestock *hatillos*. The town garden plots (*chacararas*) were dominated by plantains, as they are today, while the adjacent fields were planted to maize, cotton, and, in good years, indigo. Port activity was said to be in decline "because of the prohibition of *suertos* from both Guatemala and Peru," but ships still came from Peru to load lumber, naval stores, cacao, indigo, hides, dried beef, and brazilwood, as well as occasional cargoes of maize and sugar. Panamá, Guayaquil, Acajutla, and Acapulco also sent vessels, and ships in the Acapulco-Callao trade frequently stopped off for supplies and to fill out their manifests. To stem the declining trade a royal order in 1796 exempted from all taxes ships in the Acapulco-Realejo trade, but it was without effect.

By 1752, it was reported that Realejo's fortifications had been considerably improved.<sup>54</sup> El Cardón channel was guarded by an outpost. The town, three leagues up the estuary, was protected on three sides by strong palisades and a moat. In the center of the settlement a building, 20 paces long and 14 paces wide, held the town's arms.

50. William Funnell, *A Voyage Round the World Containing an Account of Captain Dampier's Expedition into the South Seas in the Ship St. George, in the years 1703 and 1704* (London, 1707), pp. 47-68.

51. "Registro de entradas y salidas de embarcaciones, Villa de Realejo, año 1721," AG, (MS) A 3,6 2200-120.

52. Fernando de Echeverz, *Ensayos mercantiles para adelantar por medio del establecimiento de una compañía del comercio de los frutos de el reyno de Guatemala* (Guatemala, 1742).

53. Gómez y Messia, "Auttos y Relación," (see Note 9).

54. Morel de Santa Cruz, "Carta al Rey," I, 381-383.

These consisted of four cannons and six mortars of bronze, along with gun carriages, munitions, gunners' ladles, and other defensive equipment. In case of sudden attack, a company of local militia was armed with 40 muskets. Within the palisades were 87 houses of straw and 13 of masonry, serving a population of 320 persons "of confession and communion."<sup>55</sup> There was also one parochial church and two convents, one Franciscan and the other of the order of La Merced. The ruins of the town's hospital, destroyed in 1685, were still evident. Since the attack all patients had been sent to the hospital at León.

In the mid-eighteenth century ship construction at Realejo was compared with that at Guayaquil:<sup>56</sup>

The woods at Realejo suck in nails without splitting whereas those of Guayaquil split easily. The woods of Realejo are much superior to those of Guayaquil. They do not discharge splinters, and they are lighter and more flexible, the result being that fewer planks are needed and the ships are therefore stronger.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas a ship's frame at Guayaquil might be fitted with nine planks, one of comparable size at Realejo required only five, and it was easier to get the lumber of Realejo to port than it was at Guayaquil.<sup>58</sup> Whereas ships built at Guayaquil were said to have lasted forty or fifty years, those of Realejo were reputed to have lasted much longer. The ship "Santa Cruz de León," built in 1682, was still in sound condition in 1746, and other ships which were only thirty years old showed almost no signs of wear.<sup>59</sup> But despite the natural advantages of Realejo for ship construction, by 1752 the shipyard had begun to deteriorate, apparently owing in good measure to incompetence and mismanagement.<sup>60</sup>

Realejo never again regained its earlier prominence as a shipbuilding center although the port continued to export Nicaraguan products until 1859 (Table 1). The deeper draught sailing vessels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not easily ride the tides up the Río del Realejo and increasingly they were forced to anchor in the harbor behind Punta Icacos while lighters served the upstream port. A careenage on the opposite shore at Jaguey attracted ships in need of minor repairs to the lower harbor.

As its fortunes declined Realejo apparently became increasingly

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Cappa, *Estudios críticos*, pp. 100-101.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 110.

60. Morel de Santa Cruz, "Carta al Rey," I, 381-383.



a mulatto town. The 272 adults censused in 1791 were said to be nearly all "gente de color, zambos y motallos."<sup>61</sup> The women were appreciatively described as slender, erect and fine-featured with "los pechos muy bien conformados, recojidos, semiglobosos, con los pezones horizontales y crecidos."<sup>62</sup> By this time only the church was of *mampostería* (plaster), many ruins in the town being described as "reminiscent of the cruelty of the filibusterers." In neighboring pueblos, however, Indians were in the majority. Chinandega had become the principal settlement of the region with some 400 houses hidden among trees, their yards fenced with *pita*, which yielded *cabuya* fiber. Agricultural activity continued to be centered on maize, cotton, and indigo, along with the ubiquitous plantains. In the wet season locusts frequently ravaged the cotton crop; in the dry season "fevers" laid men low.

TABLE I  
*Export from Realejo—1852*

Item	Amount	Item	Amount
Boards	71,764	Sugar	1,664 Quintales
Brazilwood	22,845 Cwt.	Beans	100 Quintales
Cedar	20,000 Sq. yds.	Eggs	600 Dozen
Mahogany	21,000 Sq. yds.	Cotton	1,000 Cwt.
Honey	11,000 Gallons	Hides	12,870
Limes	50,000	Cigars	120,000
Maize	16,155 Bags	Coyol Oil	615 Gallons
Rice	7,627 Cwt.		

Source: A. Boucard, *Travels of a Naturalist* (London, 1894), p. 109. Other exports included mules, cattle, horses, pigs, indigo, fruits, hammocks, shoes and miscellaneous manufactured goods.

Towards the end of the century Acajutla (Sonsonate) in modern El Salvador replaced Realejo as the major Pacific port of Central America. More and more Nicaraguan commerce, especially with Guatemala, moved in small boats north from El Viejo through Puerto Real and the Estero Real to the Gulf of Fonseca. After independence El Viejo replaced Realejo as the district capital, under the Intendencia of León. Realejo continued to handle the largest share of Nicaragua's export trade (see Table I) but the shipbuilding industry had disappeared. In 1831 an English entrepreneur proposed installation of new sawmill equipment at Realejo to revive shipbuilding if the

61. "Descripción de Realejo," c. 1791 (see Note 4).

62. *Ibid.*

government of the Central American states would permit the machinery duty-free entry, but apparently nothing came of it.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, in 1859, the port of Corinto was established at Punta Icacos near the deepest part of the harbor, and the *villa* of Realejo was relegated to the role of an insignificant backwater village. In contrast, Corinto continued to gain importance, diverting trade especially from the Río San Juan Caribbean gateway. By 1878 three-fourths of Nicaragua's foreign trade, including the growing coffee and cacao exports, were moving through Corinto. In that year construction was begun on the railroad from Corinto to the interior. Eight years later it had reached Lake Managua at the port of Momotombo, 93 kilometers distant. After another 17 years, in 1903, Managua was finally linked directly to Corinto by rail.<sup>64</sup>

The early rise of Realejo as a major port and shipyard on the Pacific Coast of Central America was facilitated by its superior resources, its dense and relatively docile Indian population, and the superior shelter afforded by the mangrove-lined estuary of the Río del Realejo. From the beginning it proved an attractive target for the pirates of the several European nations bent on embarrassing the Spanish presence. Their persistent threats, coupled with the relative shallowness of the river, a gradual depletion of nearby timber and naval stores, and apparent mismanagement of the shipyards, led to the decline of shipbuilding in the eighteenth century and the port's eventual abandonment. In its place the modern, mechanized port of Corinto, linked by rail and highway with the interior of the republic, serves today as Nicaragua's principal Pacific gateway through which most of its imports and exports flow. All that is left of the former port and *villa* of Realejo is a forlorn and forgotten cluster of thatched-roofed houses huddled at the head of a minor tidal estuary on the margin of the vast new fields of cotton and planted pasture grass that cover the fertile Chinandega volcanic outwash plain—mute evidence of the effect of time and of changing technology on the evaluation of site and situation.

63. Robert S. Smith, "Financing the Central American Federation, 1821-1838," HAHR, XLIII (November, 1963), 509.

64. Radell, *Historical Geography of Western Nicaragua*, p. 195; Mariano Barreto, *Recuerdos históricos de Chichigalpa, Corinto, Chinandega, y León* (León, Nicaragua, 1921), pp. 131-132.