

HISTORY OF VANUATU TIMELINE

Date Event

- c. 3000–1300 BC The islands are first settled by peoples arriving from Melanesian islands to the west on which Melanesians had mixed with Austronesian seafarers to form a new Lapita culture.
- c. 1200–1300 AD A highly stratified society develops in central Vanuatu under the great chief Roi Mata. His death is marked by an elaborate burial ritual, including live sacrificial burials of retainers. The site is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site preserved in oral histories.

European 'Discovery' and Colonization

- 1605–06 Portuguese explorer Pedro de Queirós, sailing for Spain, departs Peru and becomes the first European to reach the islands, landing on Espiritu Santo. He names the island group 'La Australia del Espiritu Santo' believing it to be part of the great mythical southern continent of *Terra Australis Nondum Cognita* (Southern Land Not Yet Known) - the quest for which drove Pacific exploration for 2 centuries. De Queiros establishes a short-lived settlement at Big Bay.
- 1768 French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville visits and names the islands Les Cyclades after the paradisiacal Greek island group.
- 1774 British explorer Captain James Cook charts the islands and renames them the New Hebrides. The French-British dyad begins to evolve.
- 1825–1830 Irish trader Peter Dillon discovers sandalwood on Erromango, sparking a trade rush that leads to violent clashes between imported Polynesian workers (primarily Hawaiian and Tongan) and indigenous Melanesians.
- 1840s–1860s European missionaries and sandalwood traders settle on the islands. Presbyterian missionary John Geddie arrives in 1848, converting locals on Aneityum. "Blackbirding" (forced labor recruitment) begins, with thousands of indigenous Melanesians kidnapped for plantations in Fiji, Australia, and elsewhere. Over half the adult male population of some islands is affected. A surge in European settlement in the 1860s fuels anti-colonialism among the native Vanuatuans, but lessens British-French tensions as the colonial powers band together.
- 1878 Britain and France declare the New Hebrides 'neutral territory'.
- 1887 Britain and France establish a Joint Naval Commission to protect their citizens and interests. Franceville is renamed Port Vila and declares independence as a short-lived municipality with universal suffrage (though only whites hold office). It is one of the first colonial outposts to enfranchise indigenous people.
- 1889
- 1906 Britain and France agree to joint administration as the 'Anglo-French Condominium ' (often wryly referred to as the 'Pandemonium' due to the complexities and challenges of dual administrative structures). Separate legal systems apply to British and French citizens, while indigenous Vanuatuans are governed by a joint British-French colonial administration.
- 1914–22 The 'Anglo-French Protocols' consolidate and extend condominium authority, ratified in 1922. French plantation owners import Vietnamese workers from French Indochina with numbers peaking at over 5,000 in 1930. Land disputes and conflict over the indigenous labor pool occur.
- 1920s–1930s The John Frum 'cargo cult 'emerges in 1938 on Tanna (see **Note** below) initially leading to a crackdown and arrests by British authorities due to political aspects which were thought to threatened the colonial structure.

continued

World War II and The Path to Independence

- 1940s The islands become a major Allied base during WWII, with around 10,000 Vanuatuan in the Labor Corps supporting U.S. forces at Espiritu Santo. James Michener was stationed on Espiritu Santo as a war historian (though he traveled throughout the South Pacific). Cargo cults like John Frum continue to evolve into a political movement challenging the Condominium.
- 1956 The John Frum Cargo cult is recognized as a religion (in hopes of de-politicization).
- 1963 The NaGriamel movement emerges on Espiritu Santo, advocating for land return to indigenous Vanuatuan and reviving traditional customs.
- 1971 NaGriamel petitions the UN to halt land sales to foreigners (36% of land is foreign-owned).
- Early 1970s The New Hebrides National Party forms under Anglican priest Walter Lini, pushing for independence.
- 1975–77 A Representative Assembly is created but dissolved after demands for immediate independence. Independence on a timetable is agreed upon in Paris in 1977.
- 1978 Partial self-government is introduced.
- 1979 Elections held and a constitution drafted. Foreign land owners are dispossessed, with compensation.
- June 1980 NaGriamel leader Jimmy Stevens, an indigenous Vanuatuan, declares Espiritu Santo independent as the land of Vemerana. French interests ally with and support Stevens as a way of forestalling a British-dominated government. British interests led by Walter Lini favor a very rapid path to independence.
- July 30, 1980** **Independence as the Republic of Vanuatu** ('Our Land') within the Commonwealth, despite the ongoing rebel protests. Walter Lini becomes the new sovereign nation's first Prime Minister. Land ownership is restricted to indigenous Vanuatuan and the government.
- "The Coconut War": Rebel protests increase, resulting in new PM Walter Lini inviting in Papua New Guinea troops to quash the rebellion in what the foreign press labeled 'The Coconut War' (as land disputes over lucrative coconut plantations were a key driver) aka 'The Bow & Arrow War' as much rebel warfare was native-style. The 'war' was short and one-sided as PNG troops were equipped with modern weapons. Stevens' son was killed and he surrendered soon after. Stevens was tried for sedition and sentenced to 14 years in prison.
- Aug 1980
- 1981 Vanuatu joins the United Nations.
- 1982 Vanuatu claims the uninhabited Matthew and Hunter Islands (disputed by France).

Post-Independence Era

- 1980s–1990s Political instability with frequent government changes. Lini's Vanua'aku Pati dominates until 1991. Coalitions form, corruption allegations arise, and a coup attempt by disgruntled members of the para-military police unit Vanuatu Mobile Force is quashed (in 1996).
- 2004 PM Serge Vohor attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan, after a long period of Vanuatu following a 'One China' policy and only recognizing the People's Republic of China. This leads to protests and his eventual ouster. Ham Lini (brother of Walter Lini) becomes PM.
- 2007–14 State of emergency over unrest and clashes over sorcery and witchcraft-related deaths. Despite political unrest and multiple changes of PM, the economy grows steadily.
- 2015 Cyclone Pam devastates the islands, causing widespread destruction and killing at least 11. Corruption scandal leads to Parliament dissolution and snap elections.
- 2018 First drone delivery of vaccines to Erromango by UNICEF.
- 2020 Cyclone Harold strikes, destroying thousands of homes and killing 2.
- 2022 Nikenike Vurobaravu elected president.

- 2023 Investigation into investment fund; 7.0 earthquake offshore; East Epi volcano erupts. Cyclone Lola causes damage. Multiple PMs amidst ongoing political turmoil.
- 2024 Air Vanuatu enters bankruptcy/liquidation. Vanuatu emerges as a leader in climate change initiatives, driven partially by natural disasters being widely attributed to global warming. Another 7.3 earthquake near Port Vila kills at least 12 and displaces thousands.
- 2025 Pacific Partnership 2025 enhances U.S.-Vanuatu cooperation through training, medical services, and infrastructure projects. A no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Jotham Napat is defeated in Parliament.

A Note on Cargo Cults in Vanuatu

Cargo cults are millenarian movements that emerged in Melanesia, particularly during and after WW II when indigenous peoples encountered vast quantities of manufactured goods brought by American and Japanese forces. [Millenarian movements are defined as "a religious or social group expecting an imminent, radical, and total transformation of society into a new utopian millennium, often involving a divine savior, the end of the current world order, and the establishment of a new and perfect earthly kingdom."] These goods—canned food, jeeps, radios, medicine—appeared miraculous to isolated communities accustomed to bare subsistence and colonial deprivation under British and French rule. *Locals interpreted the cargo as divine gifts intended for them but intercepted by foreigners.* Cargo cult rituals often involved imitating Western behaviors (*e.g.*, marching, building airstrips) to summon more cargo from ancestors or messianic figures. In Vanuatu, cargo cults blended traditional *kastom* (customs) with anti-colonial resistance and neo-Christian influences. Missionaries had suppressed kava drinking and dancing, fueling resentment. The most prominent and enduring cargo cult is the John Frum Movement centered on Tanna Island. The John Frum Movement originated in the 1930s and increased greatly in the 1940s WWII era. "John Frum" is possibly derived from a shortening of "John from America" and first appeared in visions after kava sessions. He urged rejection of conventional missionary teachings and resumption of traditional practices (kava, dancing), and promised wealth if Europeans were expelled. Colonial authorities suppressed it, arresting leaders and exiling them on the grounds that it was a de-stabilizing political and social force. During WW II, U.S. troops (over 50,000 in Vanuatu, most based on Espiritu Santo) brought in massive cargo, unlike anything native Vanuatuans (known as Ni-Vanuatu) had ever seen. Over 10,000 Ni-Vanuatu in the Vanuatu Labor Corps assisting U.S. operations saw this cargo as well as the equal treatment of all U.S. soldiers irrespective of skin color - something they had never seen in colonial Vanuatu - as a divine sign. This was thought to fulfill prophecies of a Utopia to come, greatly boosting followers. In the Post-War era, the Ni-Vanuatu saw the Americans leave, dumping equipment into the sea. John Frum Followers built symbolic airstrips, made symbolic 'radios' from bamboo, and performed ritualistic drills to attract planes to bring in massive cargo once again. In 1957, leader Nakomaha formed the Tanna 'Army', a non-violent group which sponsored parades with American flags and "USA" painted on chests, symbolic bamboo rifles. In the 1970s and 80s the movement evolved into a significant political force, with strong anti-colonial elements. The group opposed the UK-driven independence movement, fearing Christian dominance and lack of support for indigenous land rights. The group was actually outlawed in the 1930s but was largely tolerated, and was finally formally recognized as a religion in the 1950s.

Current Status: The John Frum movement persists, mainly in Lamakara and Sulphur Bay villages on Tanna (population ~29,000). Annual John Frum Day (February 15) features parades, flag-raising (U.S. and also John Frum red flags), dances, and kava. Followers view John as a spirit manifesting God's message, akin to Jesus or Buddha. Today the movement emphasizes cultural preservation over literal cargo expectation. Tourism brings the movement income via its ritualistic performances. Some leaders do still engage in

politics. Overall, numbers are declining, but besides its interest as a cultural and sociological and psychological phenomenon, the movement retains some symbolic importance as a force of anti-colonial resistance. There have been other Cargo Cults in Vanuatu, including the Prince Philip Movement on Tanna which worships Britain's Prince Philip (d. 2021) as a divine figure, son of a mountain god. He is linked to John Frum lore as well, and his return as a messiah is awaited. There is also a Tom Navy Cargo Cult variant on Tanna, focused on a U.S. Navy figure. Most of these Pacific cargo cults have faded post-independence, but John Frum endures as the archetypal example, blending spirituality, politics, and cultural identity. Cargo cults were not exclusive to Vanuatu. They emerged across Melanesia, including Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and New Caledonia - but Vanuatu's John Frum Cargo Cult remains the most famous and long-lasting.

