

The Most Brazen Hoax in History!

- Chaim Rivkin

The Country That Never Was

If it takes guile to dupe someone into buying the Brooklyn Bridge, imagine what kind of guts it takes to sell an entire country... that isn't even on the map... and not just to one person... and not just once...



They waited hopefully for the howling winds and driving rain to show some signs of letting up. This was supposed to be their long-dreamed-of voyage across the ocean, the journey of a lifetime. But the harsh weather had put a real damper on their plans.

It was the winter of 1823, and the rain, hail and snowstorms had descended on England and Scotland with unprecedented ferocity, sending people scurrying into their homes for shelter and effectively keeping wagons off the streets. Certainly, a journey by sea was out of the question.

In the city of Edinburgh, Henry Crouch paced up and down near the harbor, squinting at the horizon and wiping his forehead nervously. As captain of the *Kinnersley Castle*, a well-armed merchant ship which was due to set sail on January 14, just a week away, the weather concerned him more than it would most people. The ship would be heading out to a new colony in South America with about 200 passengers and was equipped with food and supplies to last several months. But with this weather it was doubtful they would manage to load up all the cargo before setting sail.

The passengers registered to sail on the *Kinnersley Castle* had rented lodgings close to port, and were eager to begin the long-awaited journey that held so much promise. Much thought and consideration had preceded the final decision to make the journey. Now, they were saddened by the prospect of possibly postponing the actualization of their dreams.

The group of passengers included doctors, lawyers and a banker – all of whom had been persuaded to assume positions of prominence in the fledgling colony. Others were farmers who had sold their properties or abandoned long-held contracts in favor of acquiring about 100 acres of land in a place where the soil was unusually fertile, and perhaps even contained gold and other treasures.

Administrative employees were willing to join after receiving assurances that there were suitable white collar jobs to be had. Store owners realized the opportunity for a new market, and laborers were eager to join because of the significantly higher salaries they could earn there.

Understandably, the would-be emigrants were frustrated by the unrelenting snowstorms which were preventing them from setting out for their new home where the sun always shone and the climate was warm and sunny all year round. It was said that this country was one of the most beautiful places in the world, where the air was incredibly clear and brisk. How they yearned to see in real life the stunning scenery and breathtaking vistas pictured in the brochures and leaflets! Most compelling of all was a 350-page guidebook written especially for the new settlers of this idyllic country called Poyais – a virtual paradise on earth.

It was described as a democratic and independent country situated in the mountainous terrain of Honduras; a three to four day boat ride from Jamaica; thirty hours from the British settlement in Belize; about eight days from New Orleans, in America. It was surrounded by a chain of nearly impenetrable mountains which shielded the land from invasion by Spain.

In fact, ever since the 1700s when pirates first discovered the land, British colonists had been settling there. It was only due to political considerations that Poyais never officially became a British colony, despite several attempts by Poyais monarchs to persuade the British government to annex the country to the British Empire. Consequently, the country's natural springs, rich soil, blooming forests and hidden gold mines remained nearly untouched. In the widely circulated guidebook it was estimated that aside from the harvest grown for local consumption, produce valued at more than fifty thousand pounds was exported annually to the Spanish-American provinces, bringing in huge profits—profits that would increase many times over with a large new influx of labor.

The would-be colonists were also reassured that there was no danger of hostility from the local Indian residents of Poyais because, aside from the Poyais residents' profound respect for the British, the country was ruled by a powerful and wise monarch of Scottish origin who governed his subjects judicially and kindly. That monarch, General Sir Gregor MacGregor, was a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars and a decorated hero in South America's struggle to win independence from Spain. He was later awarded the title "His Majesty Gregor, Prince of Poyais."

His Majesty had come to England with the specific purpose of recruiting administrative officials for his government and encouraging the immigration of those people with the necessary talent to bring out the country's vast potential. His goal was to bring Poyais on a par with any other cosmopolitan European country, which was what the local residents dreamed of. As the group huddled anxiously in Edinburgh waiting for the weather to calm down, MacGregor told them that theirs would not be the first group. A group of 70 new colonists had recently arrived in Poyais and had thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the task of developing the country.

Wednesday came, then Thursday went by, and the storm showed no signs of abating. Finally, on Monday, the captain announced that the ship was fully stocked with enough meat, flour, rice and other food to feed the passengers for 12 months. There were also quality horsehair mattresses and quilts and pillows for the cabins, as well as a substantial supply of building material to build new homes and develop agriculture.

Another deluge of snow followed and it was only on Wednesday, January 22, when the passengers were finally instructed to bid farewell to family and friends gathered at the port. They then boarded the small vessels that would take them to the large ship waiting further out at sea.

His Majesty MacGregor boarded the ship to wish the travelers success and personally ensure that everything was in order for the lengthy voyage. Much to the passengers'

excitement and appreciation, he announced that to celebrate the very first trip from Scotland to Poyais, the women and children would be traveling for free. The crowd applauded wildly, Captain Crouch raised the Poyais flag, and off they sailed into the horizon.

The Golden Land

The heavens ceased their merciless pounding, the winds abated and a gentle breeze blew over the waters. The little island gradually disappeared from view, and four days later, the big ship slipped into the Atlantic Ocean.

Though this would be their last view of the dry land for more than a month, they were in good spirits. The well-to-do passengers had their own private cabins and all the accompanying amenities. But even the others had nothing to complain about. Good, nourishing food was in abundant supply and they kept themselves happily busy dreaming of the beautiful and blissful land awaiting them at the end of their voyage.

Time and again, they spread out the maps provided by officials in the Poyais office in Edinburgh and tried to imagine what the land would look like in real life. The map depicted little more than the port on the Black River where they were supposed to dock. The drawing showed a small river, luscious date trees and verdant vegetation dotting the landscape. Further up, there was a magnificent mountain called Sugarloaf with forests and hills stretching toward the horizon.

More details of the picturesque and splendid



The "flag" of Poyais.