

# HOW MARIJUANA STARTED IN THE UNITED STATES

America is a weed nation. Love it or hate it, you or someone you know inevitably has a deep tie to the ubiquitous herb. With states now declaring recreational pot legal and more supporting medical marijuana, weed's set to become not just an unavoidable illicit experience, but an integral and nonchalant part of our culture.

It's important, first of all, to differentiate between the different types of cannabis. There are four species within the genus. One is cannabis sativa L, and that's what we call hemp. That's what was grown in both the British colonies on the East Coast and by the French in Quebec. But hemp is less than one percent THC, so you really can't get stoned off of hemp. It was used for bales and ropes and sometimes paper and clothing and things like that [and that's all].

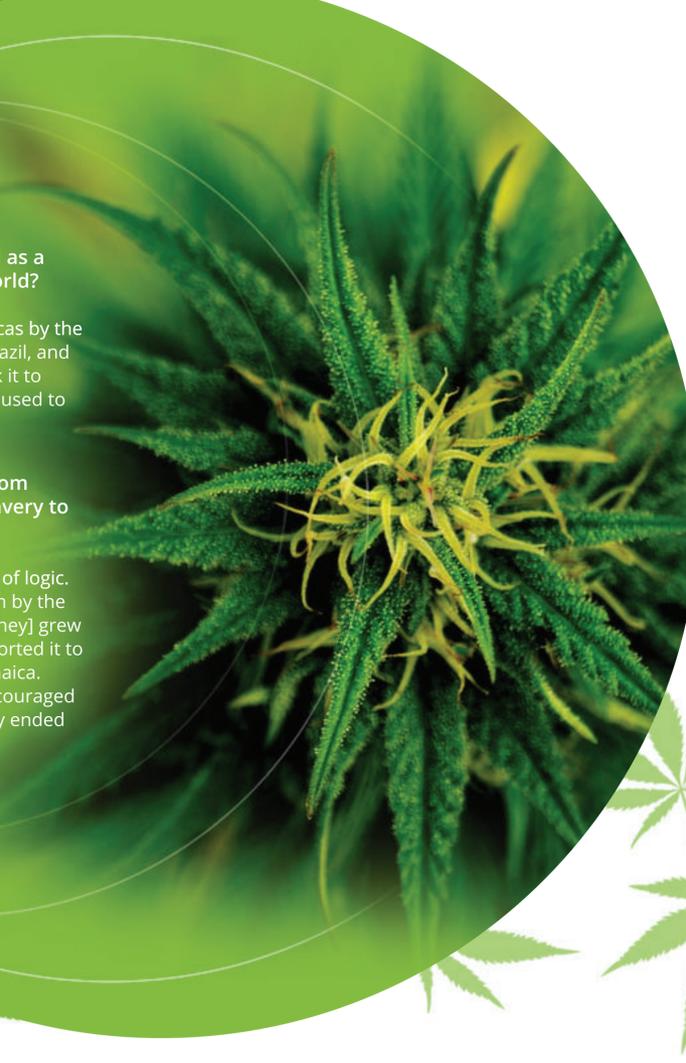
The other species of cannabis are cannabis sativa (without the L), which is much higher in THC and has become much more potent over the years. [Then there's] cannabis indica and... cannabis ruderalis, the last of which was discovered by a Russian scientist in 1923. But that one's almost invisible.

## When and where did weed as a narcotic enter the New World?

It [was] brought to the Americas by the Portuguese, who took it to Brazil, and again by the British, who took it to Jamaica. In both cases, it was used to pacify slaves.

## How did people there go from seeing weed as a tool of slavery to seeing it as a fun drug?

Well, it doesn't take a big leap of logic. You had cannabis being grown by the British East India company. [They] grew it in Bengal and India and exported it to Guyana, South Africa, and Jamaica. [They] taxed it heavily and encouraged its plantation well after slavery ended there.



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Getting back to the United States proper, how did weed-the-narcotic make its jump from South America and the Caribbean into America, and when?

The introduction of smokeable cannabis to the US largely begins after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1911. There were a number of refugees crossing the border from the violence of the revolution at the time, and they brought smokeable cannabis with them. There had been a long tradition of smokeable cannabis in Latin America [after its introduction to the region via plantations] and networks of marihuaneros [pot growers] in Spanish-speaking countries.

## What impact did that have on the way we look at pot today?

These Mexican roots of American smokeable cannabis are important because it was known as a colored-people's drug well into the 1960s when the baby boom discovered it and white college kids began to smoke it and it lost its racial connotations.

## How did that happen?

When Harry Anslinger, who was leading a federal agency that would later become the Drug Enforcement Agency, was confronted with the end of prohibition in 1933, he panicked because he and his man were charged with enforcing prohibition... He was worried that he didn't have a mission in life, that he and his men would be out of a job. That's when he began to lead the crusade against marijuana. They very deliberately, systematically chose marijuana as their new whipping boy.

When Anslinger was participating in federal hearings that would eventually culminate in the passage of the Marijuana Stamp Act in 1937, which essentially made marijuana illegal, the arguments against marijuana use were not at all grounded in scientific evidence. They were grounded in hearsay and stereotypes: That this was a drug black men used to seduce white women. That it was a drug that led Mexicans to murder their white neighbors.

## But it never proliferated... it was more like a luxury import or something you did abroad?

So it'd be like well-heeled Americans going on vacation now and trying ayahuasca vines and maybe bringing back a bit at great expense?

That's an interesting analogy. It does kind of make some sense.

Hash was also much more expensive than cannabis because it's purified resin. Not many people could afford it.



## But there were accounts of cannabis use of some kind in America before the Mexican Revolution.

In the 19th century, there was that book, The Hasheesh Eater, about hash use in the Northeast, for instance. Where does that fit into this story of weed's American roots?

Hash had been used in Europe widely going back to the 16th and 17th centuries.

[In the 19th century] French soldiers who'd returned from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt brought hash with them. In Paris, there was a group called the club des hashischins that included many of France's most famous writers like [Charles] Baudelaire, [Gustave] Flaubert, [and Honoré de] Balzac.

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So we have these Caribbean and Mexican communities smoking weed in the 1910s in America. How does weed become so widespread and popular?

[At first] it may have been largely confined to the Mexican and Mexican-American communities in Texas and confined largely to the black community in New Orleans... but it had to have grown in popularity or Anslinger wouldn't have chosen it as his demon of choice.

## Does that mean it just spread through gradual contact with immigrant communities?

Right—as far as I can tell. I wish we had a much more detailed account of this.

In Texas, the boundaries between the immigrant community and American Latinos was a very porous one. There was a great deal of intercourse between them, so it's not a surprise that [marijuana] became widespread among the Hispanic community of the southwest.

## Was there anything else that helped marijuana to get so popular within two decades?

It was especially popular as an alternative to alcohol, which was illegal [in the 1920s]. In some respects, the [widespread] use of marijuana may have been an ironic and unintentional outcome of Prohibition. I don't have firm evidence to justify that claim. But it does make sense.