

The Peoples & Cultures of The Bahamas

by Gail Saunders

THE LAND & THE SEA

The Bahamian archipelago comprises about 700 limestone islands and cays and over 2,000 rocks stretching more than 500 miles southeasterly from just off Florida to Cap Haitien in Haiti. The climate is temperate, the terrain is mainly flat, and the soil is sparse. Primarily owing to the poverty of the soil, the population of The Bahamas, now numbering 255,000 people, has never been large. Yet the sea is “more fertile and far more spectacular than the land” (Cration and Saunders 1992:5), yielding fish, mollusks, and turtles and encouraging the growth of coral. The color of the water varies from place to place according to the water’s depth but is generally turquoise and an almost undescrivable green. The name “Bahamas” may be derived from the Spanish phrase *baja mar* (land of shallow seas), or, as Julian Granberry has argued, it may be of Arawak origin.

EARLY PEOPLING OF THE ISLANDS

It is believed that the first inhabitants of the Bahama Islands were the Lucayans, Arawak-speaking Amerindians, whom Columbus met on his epic voyage and landfall in 1492. By 1509 or so, they had been killed off by diseases and enforced labor both in the gold mines of Cuba and Hispaniola and in the pearl fisheries of Cubagua and Margarita.

The Bahamas remained depopulated for the next hundred years. Spain claimed the islands but neglected them for much more profitable enterprises on the Spanish Main. The British formally annexed The Bahamas in 1629, but no permanent settlement took place there at that time.

In 1648, a small group of about 70 “Independents” from Bermuda and England, with a small number of slaves, arrived at Eleuthera, seeking religious freedom. Their life was extremely harsh, but, as time passed, they learned to live from the resources of the land and sea. They collected sal-

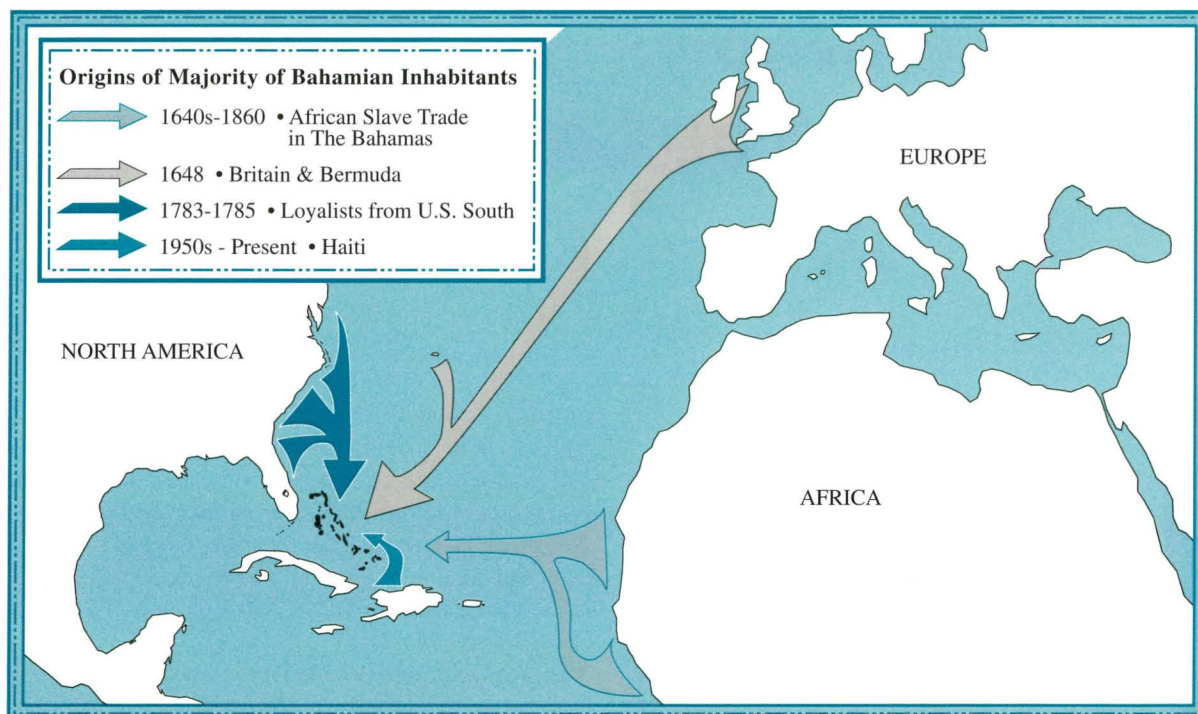
vage from wrecks and exported hardwoods, ambergris, and salt. Although many of the early Puritan “Adventurers” (as they were called) left, some pioneers, including the Adderley, Albury, Bethell, Davis, Sands, and Saunders families, stayed in The Bahamas, and were joined by poor whites, rebellious slaves, and free Blacks and Coloreds, all put out of Bermuda.

Before 1670, settlements were founded on Harbour Island and St. George’s Cay (Spanish Wells), and by the end of the century there were believed to be settlers on Current Island and Cupid’s Cay (Governor’s Harbour) as well. Sometime around 1666, Sayles Island or New Providence, a sizeable island fairly near to the American mainland with an excellent sheltered harbor, was settled and soon had several hundred inhabitants. Charlestown, later renamed Nassau, became the Bahamian capital, and its main street, Bay Street, the center of commercial and political activity.

In 1670, the Bahama Islands were granted to six of the eight Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas. These Proprietors never visited The Bahamas and ruled by sending governors from England as their representatives. The Crown bought the islands from the Lords Proprietors, a sale that was not completed until 1785, however.

The Proprietary period (1670-1717) was a time of much lawlessness, due to the ineffectiveness of the governors, constant invasions by the Spanish and French, and the instability inspired by such notorious Bahamian residents as the pirates Edward Teach (“Blackbeard”), Captain Henry Avery, and Anne Bonny. Conditions changed slowly for the better when the first Royal Governor of The Bahamas, Woodes Rogers, arrived in 1718.

In 1721, The Bahamas had approximately 1,031 inhabitants, living mainly at New Providence (480 Whites and 233 Blacks), Harbour Island (124 Whites and 5 Blacks), and Eleuthera (150 Whites and 34 Blacks). Not much is known about the sub-



stantial number of Blacks in New Providence. Most were slaves, but some were free. However, what is clear from slave regulations passed in 1723 is that the White settlers felt threatened by the Black presence (Saunders 1990b:11).

Some efforts were made in the early 18th century to diversify the economy. The most lucrative sources of trade remained woodcutting, salt raking, the gathering of turtle shells and ambergris, and the collection of monk seal oil for export. Because the inhabitants were not inclined to farm, no staple crop was developed; they seemed to prefer seafaring activities, and the essentially maritime nature of the Bahamian economy would continue into the 20th century.

THE LOYALISTS & THEIR SLAVES

By 1773 the population of The Bahamas had grown to 4,000, with an almost equal ratio of Whites and Blacks living mainly on New Providence. However, in the space of two years, between 1783 and 1785, the population of The Bahamas doubled with arrivals from the recently independent United States of America. Known as Loyalists because they wished to remain British subjects, the majority of these American colonists came from the South, and they settled in New Providence and the Out Islands, many of which had had no permanent population before. The Blacks they brought with them, mostly Creole slaves born in the Americas, West Indies, or Bahamas, tipped the population balance

in The Bahamas, putting Blacks in the majority, where they have remained and now comprise 85 percent of the population. The creole society which evolved during the Loyalist era reflected strong influences from Europe, America, and Africa.

Many of the Loyalists tried their luck as merchants. They also developed the boatbuilding industry, which, although not prevalent today, is still practiced especially in Abaco, Andros, and Long Island. Farmers with large families and 10 to 100 slaves were induced by land grants to establish cotton plantations on the Out Islands. These thrived for several years, but by 1800 cotton as a commercial crop had failed, and most farmers were facing ruin. Many Whites left The Bahamas as a result.

Among the Blacks accompanying the Loyalists to The Bahamas, many claimed to be free, by virtue of having been born free, having purchased their freedom, or having been granted it by official decree. Among them were Joseph Paul, the first Methodist in The Bahamas, and Prince William and Samuel Scrivens, who set up the Society of Anabaptists in 1801 and established Bethel Baptist Church, out of which St. John's Native Baptist Church grew. The Baptist Church quickly gained converts among the Black population. While the Established (Anglican) Church took little interest in the slaves, the Baptists, with their stress on freedom, rousing music, emotional sermons, lively singing, hand clapping, and spirit possession,



Three women go to market in Grant's Town in the early 20th century. Grant's Town was founded in the early 19th century by the governor of The Bahamas to settle newly arrived Africans, thus keeping them separate from Nassau's White citizens. This photograph was published in 1936. Photo courtesy Nassau Magazine and the Department of Archives, The Bahamas

appealed to the Bahamian slaves as well as to the freed Blacks.

The slaves brought by the Loyalists comprised a youthful and healthy population that was increasing naturally at Emancipation in 1834 (Saunders 1985a:50). They were used to build the plantation system; when it failed, they worked as field laborers on farms and were utilized as salt-rakers, seamen, domestics, and artisans.

This migration of Loyalists and Blacks exerted a significant and long-lasting influence on countless areas of Bahamian culture. For example, the color and class barriers characterizing the social structure during slavery were intensified after the coming of the Loyalists and would continue well into the 20th century. On the positive side, the Loyalists improved record keeping and started a lending library. John Wells from Charleston, South Carolina, founded the first Bahamian newspaper, the *Bahama Gazette*, in 1784. Vernacular architecture reflects the introduction by slaves of thatching techniques and outside rock ovens. In Nassau, a number of public buildings and private residences

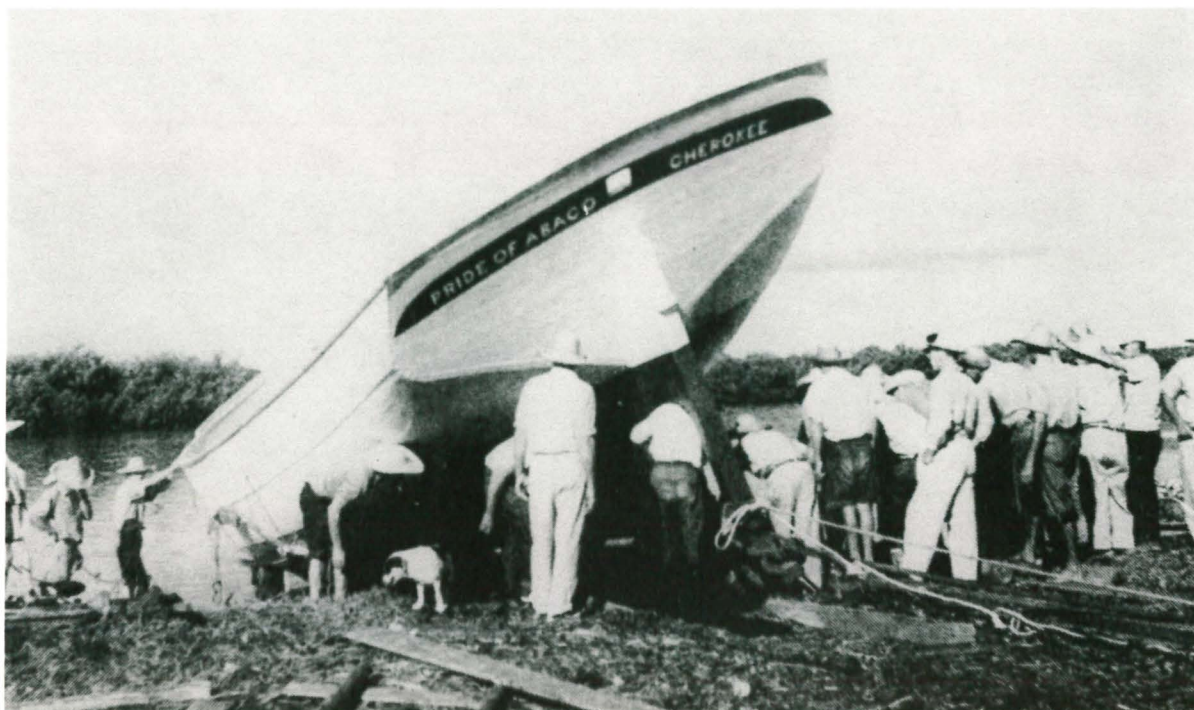
that are highly regarded today display stylistic elements brought by the Loyalists from their homes in the American South.

The slaves had kept alive many of their African customs, even though these were diluted by their new environment, and brought these as well as beliefs and folklore from America to The Bahamas. There they were reinforced by the coming of the liberated Africans, and still affect Bahamian culture today.

LIBERATED AFRICANS

After the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807, many African slaves were liberated from foreign ships by British naval patrols, and between 1808 and 1860, about 6,000 were settled in The Bahamas, mainly at New Providence. They were first "apprenticed" to "masters" or "mistresses" and performed many of the same tasks the slaves had, under similar conditions: "fishing, wrecking, cutting wood, raking salt and agricultural and domestic tasks" (Johnson 1991:20). As Howard Johnson argued, a proto-peasantry emerged in The Bahamas in the late 18th century. Liberated Africans formed the nucleus of the peasantry that developed during slavery. They also were a part of the free Black community, enjoying some independence and "a measure of prosperity" (Johnson 1991:24).

Although many lived in the town of Nassau, there were in the 1830s at least eight free Black villages or settlements elsewhere. For at least a hun-



While the construction of shipping vessels has declined in The Bahamas, the popularity of regattas sustains the demand for racing boats. Abaco is well known for its boatbuilding industry. Photo courtesy Department of Archives, The Bahamas

dred years after Emancipation these villages retained strong African characteristics and an identity of their own.

African Bahamians learned to fend for themselves after Emancipation. They were able to survive in a depressed economy which offered few opportunities for wage labor (Johnson 1991:185) by thrifty habits and through the custom of the *asue*. A system of financing with roots in West Africa (Eneas 1976:17), the *asue* is still popular in the contemporary Bahamas. Ex-slaves and liberated Africans also formed Friendly Societies to provide "by mutual assistance, for periods of sickness, old age and burial expenses" (Johnson 1991:183). "While the early friendly societies in the Bahamas were based on English antecedents," the organizations "reflect African cultural values" and resembled associations and secret societies of the Efik and Igbo peoples of West Africa (Johnson 1991:184). Until the latter part of the 19th century, these Friendly Societies operated as pressure groups on the White power structure as well. Other affiliated societies providing for the physical welfare of their members and mobilizing the Black community on political issues became more popular in the 20th century; these

were linked to organizations in Britain and the United States. Both the Friendly Societies and affiliated lodges are still important in the lives of many Bahamians.

Liberated Africans also gave added vigor to other cultural forms and practices with African roots. These included John Canoe (Junkanoo) (see Keith Wisdom's article) and dances such as the Jumping Dance, Ring Play, and (to a lesser extent) the Fire Dance. Goombay or rake and scrape music, although Bahamian, contains strong African influences (see Kayla Edwards's article). Clement Bethel believes that much of the music found in The Bahamas today, especially in Cat Island and Andros, contained a spiritual quality derived from the songs of the ante-bellum slaves from the American mainland (Bethel 1978:91). Death rites, which originated in Africa, evolved into the custom of holding a wake. African influence on the foods eaten and the methods and types of cooking is manifest.

"Bush" medicine, the use of local medicinal plants (see Tracey Thompson's article), is utilized in the practice of *obeah*, a Caribbean phenomenon that almost certainly originated in Africa and that persists today, even if more privately. *Obeah* is based on the belief that all good and evil, illnesses and cures, result from spirits, sorcery, or magic.

Marketing, as it had in Africa, played a significant part in the lives of Black Bahamians. Inheriting traditions from their slave and African forbears,

African Bahamian populations traditionally grew much produce in their own garden plots and sold it either from door to door or at small homemade stalls in the streets, often in front of the houses. Most of the vendors were women and, according to Cleveland Eneas, nearly all were of Yoruba descent. The Nassau Market, in existence since the early 1800s, was the central node of local commerce.

For some years, even until the early 20th century, many African Bahamians kept their native languages alive. Most Blacks, however, spoke Bahamian Creole, a syncretic dialect which resembled the Black English spoken on the U.S. mainland in the 18th century. Shilling and Holm argue that the slaves of the American Loyalists preserved American Plantation Creole of the 18th century. Standard English is the country's official language, but many Bahamians of all colors and classes still speak varieties of English (Holm and Shilling 1980: iii-vii).

LATER MIGRATIONS

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, demands for labor encouraged the immigration of significant groups of "trading minorities" (Johnson 1991:125-48) including Chinese, Greek, Lebanese, and skilled laborers from the West Indies. The first Greeks who arrived in the late 19th century engaged in the sponge trade, and by 1925 the Greek community "was firmly established in the Bahamas" (Johnson 1991:130). The Lebanese, who also arrived in the late 19th century, were peddlers and later successful shopkeepers. A small number of Jews also began retail businesses. Chinese immigrants established restaurants, although many worked in other capacities. The descendants of the original immigrants have branched out into professional areas such as law, medicine, and architecture, and some are still engaged in lucrative businesses.

In the 1920s, the "immigrant groups occupied an intermediate position in Bahamian society" (Johnson 1991:136). At least until the 1950s they were seen as a threat to the local mercantile elite and remained on the margins of society. Although there are distinct Greek, Lebanese, and Chinese communities in The Bahamas today, some members of these groups have intermarried with other Bahamians.

West Indian laborers migrated to The Bahamas, many via Cuba, during the prosperous Prohibition years. Better educated than local Creoles, these immigrants and their descendants later played a large role in sensitizing Bahamians to political movements in the Caribbean.

By far the largest minority in The Bahamas are the Haitians. They began migrating in the 1950s because of sociopolitical unrest and economic hardships in Haiti; as conditions in Haiti have deteriorated in recent years, the number of Haitians landing in The Bahamas, many of them illegally, has increased. Most Haitian men work in gardening and farming, and many Haitian women work as housekeepers and cooks, although quite a few have set up small retail businesses, following the African custom. Numerous Haitians also are employed in the Royal Bahamas Police Force and the Defence Force; others are lawyers and teachers.

There is friction between the Creole Bahamian and Haitian populations, arising from Bahamians' resentment of the competition by Haitian women in retail trade, and the demands that Haitians put on health services and the educational system.

Many children born of Haitian parents have become Bahamianized to a large extent. More research is needed, but, although they usually live in all-Haitian communities, it seems that some Haitians desire to distance themselves from their Haitian roots and culture. Some have converted from Roman Catholicism to Baptist and other non-conformist denominations.

CONCLUSION

The society of The Bahamas has been mostly influenced by Africa and Britain and more recently by America and the Caribbean. As Winston Saunders wrote in 1989:

Culture in The Bahamas today is an amalgam of our British heritage, our African heritage and the effects of our closeness to North America. Our language is English, our Parliament follows the judicial procedure set down in England.... Our courts follow the English system.... Marry the above with the practice of obeah, the girating movements of the ring-play, the pulsating rhythm of Junkanoo and the goat-skin drum, the hand-clapping jumpers, the use of bush medicine, the songs and the drinking of a wake and the consequent outpouring of public grief at the death of a loved one, our African-inspired neighbourhood banking system called asue, and you almost have a Bahamian. The final touches comes in the form of the American Jerri curl, the American Afro, American television, American and Japanese technology, the American system of higher education and its graduate degrees, hamburgers and hot dogs,

coca cola, the Chevrolet . . . the satellite dish. Frivolous though some of these things may seem, they fuse to form a representative catalogue of our cultural heritage and the patterns that dictate our reaction to any given situation (W. Saunders 1989:243).

Indeed, despite the powerful influence of North America, The Bahamas continues to forge a cultural identity of its own.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Bethel, Edward Clement. 1978. *Music in The Bahamas, Its Roots, Development and Personality*. M.A. Thesis, UCLA.
- Cash, Philip, Shirley Gordon, and Gail Saunders. 1991. *Sources of Bahamian History*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd.
- Craton, Michael. 1962. *A History of the Bahamas*. London: Collins. (Revised and reprinted 1986).
- Craton, Michael, and Gail Saunders. 1992. *Islanders in the Stream. A History of the Bahamian People, Vol. I*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Eneas, Cleveland. 1976. *Bain Town*. Nassau: *Nassau Guardian*.
- Granberry, Julian. 1991. Lucayan Toponyms. *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Oct.): 3-12.
- D. Gail Saunders heads the Department of Archives in The Bahamas and is Bahamian curator for the Smithsonian-Bahamas program. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.
- Holm, John, and Allison Shilling. 1982. *A Dictionary of Bahamian English*. New York: David K. Barnhart Lexik.
- Johnson, Howard. 1991. *The Bahamas in Slavery and Freedom*. Kingston and London: Ian Randle Publishers.
- Johnson, Howard. 1989. The Emergence of Peasantry in the Bahamas During Slavery. *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Comparative Studies* 10(2).
- Marshall, Dawn I. 1979. *The Haitian Problem. Illegal Migration to the Bahamas*. Mona: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies.
- Outten, Kim. 1989. A Brief Historical Review of Straw Work in the Bahamas. In *Aspects of Bahamian History*. Department of Archives, *Nassau Guardian*, 23 March.
- Saunders, Gail. 1983. *Bahamian Loyalists and Their Slaves*. London: Macmillan Caribbean.
- _____. 1985a. *Slavery in the Bahamas*. Nassau: *Nassau Guardian*.
- _____. 1985b. The Social History of the Bahamas 1890-1953. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Waterloo.
- _____. 1990a. *Bahamian Society After Emancipation. Essays in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Nassau (privately published). Now revised and reprinted as *Bahamian Society After Emancipation*. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994.
- _____. 1990b. Life in New Providence in the Early Eighteenth Century. *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* (October).
- _____. 1992. The Early Settlers in the Bahamas. *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* (October).
- Saunders, Winston. 1989. The Cultural Arts in the Bahamas. In *Modern Bahamian Society*, edited by Dean W. Collinwood and Steve Dodge. Parkerburg, Iowa: Caribbean Books, USA.