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For:  
Kelly's Freeport Ltd.  
April 7th, 2000





## One Thousand Years of Grand Bahama

The earliest aboriginal inhabitants of the Bahamian archipelago, the Lucayan Taino, not only settled in Grand Bahama so long ago, they left something very important behind for the modern residents of the archipelago: **THE NAME OF OUR NATION.**

In spite of being taught for generations that the name for our country came from the Spanish words "baha mar" meaning "shallow sea," in truth the word "Bahama" was the Lucayan Taino name given to Grand Bahama. According to extensive research in the Taino language by noted American archaeologist and anthropologist, Dr. Julian Granberry, the word "Bahama" meant "large upper midland."

Dr. Granberry has also been involved in archaeological research on Grand Bahama that has revealed a rich prehistoric past. The finding of three Lucayan skeletons in an underground cave in the Lucayan Caverns in Lucayan National Park led to the discovery of what Dr. Granberry calls "one of the archipelago's largest and most important ceremonial sites." According to other investigations, Granberry tells us that much of the southern coast of Grand Bahama was "populated by a series of extremely large, linear villages spread along the coast behind the dunes."

In **June 1996** it was the chance find of large sections of Lucayan pots and bowls by the owners of the Buccaneer Club, Heinz and Kitty Fischbacher, while they were taking a walk along the beach that led to the discovery of another Lucayan site, described by Dr. Granberry as "one of the most important in the Lucayan archipelago." At this Deadman's Reef site, by the end of 1997, over 17,000 artifacts had been unearthed, contributing greatly to the knowledge of not only Bahamian prehistory, but also to the documentation of the rich past of Grand Bahama.

Grand Bahama is probably one of the few Bahamian islands that is not mentioned in one of the many theories of where Columbus made first landfall in the New World. However, a poignant footnote to the early history of the discovery of the New World is believed to have occurred in Grand Bahama. It was on **July 18th, 1513**, twenty-one years after Columbus had stepped ashore on the island he named San Salvador

when, according to the ship's log of Ponce de Leon who was on a voyage in search of the legendary Fountain of Youth, his three ships anchored at a small island at 28° latitude where they took on water. It was there that they met the only living soul that they had encountered in their entire trip throughout the northern Bahamas: one old Indian woman. Ponce de Leon named the small island La Vieja in honour of the old woman. This degree of latitude clearly placed them in the shoals of the Little Bahama Bank, north of today's West End. Taking into consideration that their calculations might have been a bit off, it is generally believed today that Indian Cay, a small islet just off West End, is the very island where the old woman was sited. On August 6th, his log records that, after exploring the northern coast of Grand Bahama, Ponce de Leon returned to La Vieja to take on more water and to further interview the old woman, but does not document whether they ever found her again.

These early adventures opened the way for vast numbers of treasure ships, laden with gold and silver from the mines of South and Central America, as well as the fabulous New World gemstones. Over the years, these ships braved the treacherously shallow waters and dangerous coral reefs, as well as the wild winds and waves of the seasonal hurricanes, as they sailed through Bahamian waters on their way back to the Old World. Not surprisingly, the seabed became a graveyard for many of these ships and, subsequently, the focus for many a treasure hunter.

**In 1682 or 1683**, Thomas Paine was commissioned by the Governor of Jamaica to sail "to the island of Bahama which is desert and uninhabited" to seize the pirates who lived there. Arriving at what is today's West End, Paine met several other ships' captains who were mounting an operation to dive for silver from a Spanish wreck lying just offshore. Captain Paine immediately forgot his original mission and joined in the salvage operation.

**In 1684 - 85**, records show that a map was made for Captain William Phipps that showed Membre Rock as a landmark for the location of three treasure wrecks. It is believed that this three-century-old treasure landmark is today's Memory Rock, located thirty miles northwest of West End.

Apart from treasure hunters and pirates, Grand Bahama slumbered on



for centuries, uninhabited, probably partly because of a lack of natural harbours. Governor Phenny's report of 1721, however, records that the island grew "fine timber" and the soil along the southern coast was "white land," known to yield "fair crops of corn." In 1792, a sale of 240 acres was recorded near the western end of the island. In 1816, a Mr. Bootle was granted 960 acres near West End.

Apart from the economic boom enjoyed in Nassau during the Blockade Running years from 1861 to 1865, West End in Grand Bahama also became a centre of activity for this risky business. When the Civil War ended in 1865, West End returned to a sleepy little fishing village - until the early part of the twentieth century when its geography plunged it, once again, into the spotlight.

In 1886, Louis Diston Powles, an Englishman, was appointed Stipendiary and Circuit Justice in the Bahamas and took up his duties there on November 2nd. Powles' first circuit started November 16th, 1886 aboard the schooner, "Eastern Queen," that he described as "a wretched cargo boat, with a cabin void of furniture, comforts, and even decencies." He comments further about the voyage: "...any one condemned to travel regularly in these waters goes in constant danger of his life. This is partly owing to the natural risks....partly to the habitual recklessness of the Bahamian sailor." The second place he held court was the Island of Grand Bahama of which he said: "This is almost the only island where the people now own cattle in any quantity.... The soil of this island is good, and might, with judicious manuring, be made very productive... It [the island of Grand Bahama] is about ninety miles long...yet, with all its advantages, it has but a population of 700 persons, who can barely exist." While on Grand Bahama, Powles paid a visit to the school "where ninety-nine young [people], of all ages, are educated" and enjoyed the products of the farms. "This is one of the very few places in the out-islands, where I tasted fresh milk, and the only one in the Bahamas where I tasted butter which is unknown even in Nassau itself." He describes coming to the end of his stay with Mr. Joseph Adderley who was both magistrate and schoolmaster on the island: "After a night comfortably spent on a bed stuffed with what is called bed-grass, our crew came to fetch us, and we started to walk a mile into the head of a large lagoon called Hawksbill Creek, where our schooner's boat was awaiting us... A row of several hours brought us to where the "Eastern Queen" was lying, about four

miles out at sea." "Stark's History of and Guide to the Bahamas," which was published in 1891, says that Grand Bahama, comprising 275,000 acres, was first settled in 1806, but was often visited by lumbermen from other islands because of the "fine timber with which it abounds." Stark tells his readers that "the interior is well adapted to grazing, fresh water being abundant. Large quantities of fish and turtle are to be found in the creek and shoal waters. The inhabitants," Stark says, "are principally employed in agriculture, sponging and fishing. There is no good harbour along the shore for large vessels, but with the wind off the land the anchorage is good, particularly at the west end."

In "The Bahamas Handbook" compiled by Mary Moseley in 1926, she recounts that "Eight Mile Rock, from which Hawk's Bill Creek, a most picturesque inlet, runs three miles north and south, is the chief settlement, but in the last few years considerable business has been done at West End which has been made a port of entry. A large scheme for the development of the island, she reveals, "has been recently launched by the Grand Bahama Mercantile and Development Company." She also notes that the population of Grand Bahama in 1926 was 1,695, which represented a decrease of 129 individuals since 1911.

In 1944, after having virtually exhausted the pine lumber supply in Abaco, the Abaco Lumber Company moved its operations to Grand Bahama. Its first base of operations was a sawmill and camp five miles to the east of Hawksbill Creek, a settlement called Pine Ridge. In 1946, Wallace Groves, an American who owned Little Whale Cay in the Berry Islands, was looking for investment opportunities in the Colony. With an eye towards the value of its extensive lumbering rights, Groves took a risk, bought the ailing Abaco Lumber Company, and proceeded to replace the antiquated machinery and put the Company on its feet again. By 1953, the Abaco Lumber Company had 1800 workers and was the largest single employer in The Bahamas. However, by 1955, the demand on the part of coalmines of Britain for pit props had ended and the supply of timber had been exhausted. Groves sold the company and its rights to cut timber for four million dollars to the National Container Corporation, which was soon absorbed in the Owens-Illinois conglomerate. He immediately invested the money into his seemingly incredible dream of turning the central third of Grand Bahama into a free port, with an industrial complex, luxury hotels and a modern residential area.



On **August 4th, 1955** the honourable A. G. H. Gardner-Brown, Acting Governor of the Bahamas, and the President of the newly created Grand Bahama Port Authority Limited, the man with the dream, Wallace Groves, met at Government House in Nassau to sign the Hawksbill Creek Agreement. Essentially, the agreement allowed the Port Authority to have certain rights and privileges within an area of Grand Bahama referred to as the "Port Area." On its part, the Port Authority agreed to create a deep-water harbour and develop an industrial area on Grand Bahama. The Government also agreed to make Wallace Groves' longstanding dream of a true free port come true by guaranteeing that the Port Authority and its licensees could import non-consumable goods into the port area free of Bahamas customs duty. The Bahamas Government also contributed to making this area an investor's dream by eliminating excise, export and stamp taxes. It has been observed that this agreement bears a likeness to the historic agreement that established the Hudson's Bay Company, which was a major factor in the development of British Canada.

As **Freeport became a city in the 1960's**, Wallace Groves and his new partner, Sir Charles Hayward, were dedicated to creating the infrastructure that all cities require. Aside from the obvious like power and communication, they were concerned with making sure that the residents of Freeport had the ordinary conveniences that most inhabitants take for granted: like a lumber and hardware business. Knowing he could depend on their quality and service, Groves turned to the Kelly family to establish a lumber and hardware business that would meet all the needs of the growing Freeport community.

When Captain Charles Jordan Kelly, the master of a three masted schooner, of Harbour Island had a shipwreck in the early part of the twentieth century, his wife served him with an ultimatum: get out of the ship business and find something to do on dry land. They soon moved to Nassau where he first established an ill-fated grocery business. Soon after that went bankrupt, Captain Kelly started a lumber and shipping business in the **1920's**. His first ship was the "Isle of June" that sailed between Nassau and Miami, offering freight and passenger services. His son, Trevor, joined him in the Kelly's Lumber/Shipping Company. In **1927**, when his son, Kenneth, was compelled by his fiancée's high moral principles to abandon the liquor business, he opened a hardware business, eventually bringing his sons, Basil and David, into the



business. It was only natural that when Wallace Groves wanted a dependable hardware and building materials business in Freeport, he approached Trevor Kelly who brought his two nephews along to establish the hardware side of the business in Freeport. In 1965, Kelly's Lumber Yard (Freeport) was founded by C. Trevor and Charles G. E. Kelly and Kelly's Hardware Limited by Basil and David Kelly.

In 1979, when Basil and his cousin, John P. Kelly, took over the business, they proceeded to renovate and modernize the business, changing its name in 1985 to Kelly's Freeport Limited. Upon the death of the President of the Company, John Kelly, in 1990, the total ownership of Kelly's still remained in Bahamian hands, those of his niece and nephew, as well as his cousin, Basil, with Lynn M. Lowe (nee Kelly) becoming President and Managing Director in September 1999.

The current renovations, started five years ago, have culminated in a new 2000 square foot contractor's showroom, the addition of a new 30,000 square foot drive-in building materials warehouse and 8,000 square feet of retail space, doubling the size of their store and taking them to the next level. Sharing the feelings of Sir Jack Hayward and Edward St. George, principals of The Grand Bahama Port Authority, In the words of Albert Miller, Co-Chairman of The G. B. Port Authority, Kelly's Freeport firmly believes that "now, more than ever, Freeport is the place to do business." Poised to serve the needs of the exploding Freeport construction market, Kelly's Freeport has positioned themselves to be ready to compete in the ever-changing Grand Bahamian market and to deal with not only the local contractors, but also with demanding multi-national corporations that are now doing business in Freeport like Southern Electric International, Martin Marietta, Bradford Marine and one of the largest in the world, Hutchinson Whampoa.

Kelly's and Freeport, two Bahamian success stories whose paths are forever linked as we enter the exciting years of the 21st century.

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