



BAHAMIAN FRAGMENTS

BITS AND PIECES FROM THE HISTORY OF

THE BAHAMAS

Benedict Thielen "The Bahamas-Golden Archipelago"

Holiday December 1964, pp. 62- 73, 135-140

- [Grand Bahama in 1887](#) from L. D. Powle *The Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas.*
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- [Grand Bahama in 1967](#) *Moral Panic, Gambling, and the Good Life*
- [Historical Sources Page](#)

The coat of arms of the self-governing British colony of the Bahamas bears on its motto: "*Expulsis piratas, restituta commercia.*" Whether the pirates have been completely expelled is perhaps open to question, but there can be no possible doubt that commerce has been restored.

Of all the commercial activities in the Bahamas, none approaches tourism in importance. Each year more than half a million set foot on New Providence Island, the home of Nassau, the colony's capital. Many descend from planes or disembark from yachts, but mostly they stream down the gangplanks of the cruise ships. For these a stop at Nassau is as routine as the Captain's Dinner, the eleven-o'clock bouillon or the free Bossa Nova lessons included in the price of the ticket. Pausing briefly at the native straw-market to purchase a hat—functional or facetious, depending on the spirit of the buyer—the cruise passengers charge upon the shops of Bay Street, their chests festooned with cameras, their pockets filled stuffed with traveler's checks. Like a hydra-headed vacuum cleaner they suck up china and crystal, tweeds and woolens, liquors, pipes and perfumes. The calypso singers and the steel-drum beaters often find it hard to make themselves heard above the exultant chiming of the cash registers.

During the rare lulls when no cruise ships are tied up at the Prince George wharf or anchored in the roadstead, Nassau reverts to its unhurried tropical indolence and charm. The hot sun bakes and fades the brightly colored facades of the old buildings. The breeze blows through the open doors of a courtroom presided over by a judge in white wig and scarlet gown. The straw-hatted horses that draw the surreys doze in their shafts. From the giant ceiba tree in front of the hundred-year-old Royal Victoria Hotel the white puffs of kapok down drift and settle in the garden's deep shade. A short block from Bay Street the water front looks much as it did when Winslow Homer painted it many years ago.

All water fronts are interesting but it would be hard to find one so charged with vitality, with fury and laughter and action. The little native sloops toss and strain at their moorings. Their furled sails are patched and faded; their decks are piled with crimson-lipped conch shells, baskets of fish, crates of mangoes, oranges, tomatoes and limes. Seagoing goats and sheep are tethered to their masts. children crawl among the frayed lines. The smoke of cooking fires billows up from the sandboxes jammed in corners of the decks.

Among the sloops are the mail boats, high-sided, clumsy and fancifully colored as a child's drawing. They carry cargoes of rum and beer, oil drums and tractors, crayfish pots, cows and sometimes grand pianos. The *Air Swift* has come from Eleuthera, the *Lady Dundas* from Cat Island. The *Church Bay* is bound north for Grand Bahama, the *Drake* far south to Rum Cay and San Salvador. Coming and going, they and others like them call at little settlements like Palmetto Point and Eight Mile Rock, Savannah Sound and Castle Island, Pleasant By and Pure Gold.

Sooner or later someone is bound to tell you that Nassau is not the Bahamas. When you look out at the boats in the harbor or look up at the Viscounts and the venerable DC-3's of Bahamas Airways flying overhead, you know it is true. Nassau is the heart, the hub from which the sea- and air-roads fan outward. Beyond it, scattered over 90,000 square miles of ocean, are the 700 islands and the 2,400 cays (pronounced keys) and rocks that make up the Out Islands.

Where to go? it is not easy to make a choice from what the Ministry for Tourism in its informative booklet calls 700 Pieces of Paradise. Nassau is filled with displaced Out Islanders and if you ask the advice of one he is sure to tell you that the island where he was born is the loveliest of all. Filtered through time and distance, its hills are greener and its waters clearer than those of any other. When the goombay bands fall into the gently sentimental strains of *My Little Island* he will remember the pines of Abaco or the bays of Eleuthera or some windswept rock in the Exumas. His advice will be colored by nostalgia and possibly the fact that he still owns a parcel of land which, like most Bahamians, he is willing to let you buy. Exacting a promise from a Nassau friend of mine that he would show me no real estate, I went with him to Eleuthera—a half hour's flight eastwards from Nassau.

In London in 1647, an investment of £100 would buy a membership in the Company of Eleutherian Adventurers, entitling a man to 300 / acres in the main settlement, thirty-five acres for each member of his household and 2,000 acres outside the settlement. Aside from these practical considerations the Adventurers, like the Pilgrims, were seeking religious freedom. The Greek word *eleutheros* means free, but for a time, after they were wrecked on the island of Eleuthera, it meant largely a freedom to starve. It also apparently meant ample leisure to insure the Company's continuance in full strength. According to local tradition, when the Adventurers finally settled in what is now Governour's Harbour, all the women were pregnant, The island where they built their first houses is still appropriately known as Cupid's Cay.

It so happened that my arrival on Eleuthera coincided with the annual Eleuthera Fair, held each April to raise funds for the upkeep of the Governour's Harbour hospital. I suppose you could say that an occasion like this was not typical;. On the other hand it offered a concentration of the entire island population, both black and white, such as you wouldn't find on an ordinary day. Awestruck or graciously smiling, according to their positions on the social scale, they wandered about the fair booths or stood listening to speeches by the governor, the premier, the commissioner of education and half a dozen other dignitaries. A band played, the wheels-

of-fortune spun, flags and bunting and banners lettered *Welcome to Our Governor* and *God Save The Queen* flapped in the hot wind above the dust, the smoke of barbecues and the drifting pink wisps of cotton candy.

They were all here. There was the lady from Upper Bogue whose woven purse won a prize in the exhibition of native crafts. There were the four Thompson brothers, pineapple growers from Gregory Town, splendidly dressed in identical ruffled silk shirts and scarlet blazers embroidered with a gold pineapple for a pocket patch. There was Mrs. Austin Levy from Hatchet Bay, who gave the hospital in the first place and who today endeared herself even more by taking off her shoes and resting her feet in the shade of the causaurinas by the side of the fair grounds. Miss Enid Bethel, a direct descendant of the Eleutherian Adventurers, a business-woman of wide interests and treasurer of the fair, dashed tirelessly about making change and scooping up shillings and pence. Anglican clergymen in round collars, priests in black soutanes, an army officer looking imperturbably British and cool in the thickest of blue-serge uniforms, gave off a benevolent air of approval.

< [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) >





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- [Historical Sources Page](#)

In contrast to Nassau, which is mercantile, sophisticated and closely tied to the United States, it was all very Bahamian and colonial. Underlining this impression was the presence, here and there among the crowd, of a troubled or weakly amiable face that bore the unmistakable stamp of the remittance man. When the fair was over and the people who had come in from the outlying settlements had gone home, the feeling of being in a tight little outpost of Empire persisted in Governour's Harbour.

Unidentified figures move in and out of the local scene. There are sudden silences, followed by a murmur of explanatory gossip: of a divorce, a remarriage, a small drinking problem, a sexual peculiarity, a reason why someone has left England or why someone cannot return to the States. Of those people who lead ordered and conventional lives there is, as in all colonies, always one of each kind. You meet *the* doctor, *the* lawyer, *the* bank manager or airlines agent.

When I drove away from Governour's Harbour at night, to the house where I was staying, the feeling of remoteness grew with each mile of dark, deserted bush, with each land crab that scuttled across the road. In the morning the silver thatch palms glittered in the sun and the pale pink beach had been swept clean by the tide. But as I looked out at the sea breaking on the barrier reef I felt a little like Heyst in Conrad's *Victory* looking out to the waters of Samburan. I would not have been too surprised if a boat containing the sinister figures of Ricardo, Pedro and Plain Mr. Jones had suddenly appeared from around the nearest headland.

Such uneasy thoughts, I am sure, never trouble the people who come for a winter vacation at French Leave or the Potlatch Club or any of the other elegant resorts of the Out Islands. They face a magnificent beach, they are self-contained and their guests seldom venture beyond their spacious grounds. The buildings are done in a studiedly rustic good taste and any shocks received from nature-in-the-raw must be as nicely cushioned as they were for Marie Antoinette and her ladies-in-waiting when they played at being milkmaids in the little barn at Versailles.

Few pictures of Bahamian beaches—whether issued by the Ministry for Tourism or by a real-estate developer—fail to show them other than lined by bending cocoanut palms. The palms exist, but I am obliged to say that they are few and far between. In fact, the landscape of the

Bahamas is, on the whole, dull. Except where the casuarinas form a hazy green background or the century plants thrust up their tall columns capped with golden blossoms, the growth is scrubby and if a uniform uninteresting green. But it doesn't matter. It is the sweeping sands and the waters beyond them that matter.

As you fly above them your sight is sucked down, dizzied and drowned in shifting patterns of indigo and bottle-green, violet, turquoise-matrix and jade. Where the corals rise close to the surface, their branches spread out in tangled forests of gold. In shallow waters, the sand-bores swirl like a finger painting made by the strokes of a cosmic thumb. They are rhythmic as music, high-keyed, pale tan, pearl-gray, milky blue. With the approach of a squall the water darkens to the angry black-purple of the ink jet shot out by a squid. When the sun returns, the colors spring up from the depths like a flooding of light through cathedral windows.

It is good to fly above such splendor but the time comes when distant views are not enough. These waters are meant to be sailed on and swum in. At Governour's Harbour I sat by the old Pineapple Steps, where then sailing ships used to take on their loads of fruit, and waited for the schooner *Caribe* to take me away from the land. Friends of mine from Key West sail the *Caribe* on charter, and as I waited for them I remembered the quotation from Swinburne's *Swimmer's Dream* which appears on their advertising brochure: "A purer passion, a lordlier leisure, a peace more happy than lives on land..."

I was trying to remember the rest of it when an old Negro carrying a string of fish stopped and asked me if I was waiting for a boat, and where I was going. When I told him, he looked up at the sky and with the soft-spoken precision of the black Bahamian said, "You will have a fair wind to the Exumas." It seemed as good a line as any unremembered Swinburne.

Beginning thirty-odd miles southeast of Nassau, the Exuma Cays stretch southeasterly in an almost straight chain for more little and hundred miles to Great and Little Exuma, where we were bound. According to the *Yachtsman's Guide to the Bahamas*, "They form what is probably the most exquisite cruising ground to be found in the northern hemisphere." It is a statement which, for once, it would be hard to take exception to.

Exuma, the deep water we sailed across from Eleuthera to the top of the Exumas, was dark blue, alive with wind and the flight of flying fish. After it was the stillness of the anchorage of Highborne Cay. In such a shelter the boat is held in a sheet of glass. The shells on the sea bottom that look as though I could reach over and pick them up are lying three fathoms down. The water has the clarity of gin and its effect, whether you are looking at it or immersed in it, is much the same.

There are few aids to navigation in the Bahamas, and the Exuma Cays are no exception. Of those that exist, many are unreliable or of use only to someone who is familiar with them. A kerosene lantern hung from a post may be all that marks the passage through a dangerous reef. On a stormy night when no one should be foolish enough to be out on the water, the people on shore may not even bother to light the lantern. Native sloop men, sailing by instinct and experience, using a few stars such as the North

Star and Big Dipper—which they call Big Shiny and Conch Tail—can travel at night. No one else does.

Daytime pilotage is done almost entirely by eye, with the color of the water telling its depth. The colors range from the almost purple-blue of the deep sea through half a dozen shadings of blue and green to the "white water" of less than a fathom. Grass and rocks, sand and marl and the coral heads that can rip out a ship's bottom all have their distinctive hues and these can be deceptively altered by cloud shadows and changes of light. It is no place for the weekend sailor or the carefree amateur.

Because sailing into the low sun of early morning or late afternoon makes it impossible to judge the water's true color you usually have no choice except to make a late start and an early anchorage for the night. In time a routine of this sort brings on a state of happily bemused torpor. The sun is hot. The shade is cool. The next anchorage, if it is really necessary to move on from this one, is only a few miles distant, and you can always come to by crawling across the deck and falling over the side. You are released from /

[≤ 1 2 3 4 5 6 >](#)





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- [Historical Sources Page](#)

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the tyranny of time and the need to keep track of the sequence of events.

At Big Major's Spot, a day's sail south from Highbourne in the Pipe Creek area, we were alone with the moonlight and the shining white crescent of the beach.

A few miles farther on, the little thatched-roof houses of Staniel Cay were scattered across stony ground. Staniel is famous for its seamen and one of them, Capt. Rolly Gray, once took the Duke of Edinburgh for a sail. We stopped for a beer in his bar. Its name is The Royal Entertainer's Lounge and on the wall above the bar is the tiller which the duke handled. We decided to follow the advice painted outside the door: *Rest a While—Live Longer.*

The shore at Great Guana was wild, hot and volcanic-looking. It was pre-historic and cruel, a place where the big lizards it was named for belong.

Some men rowed out from Black Point which the Yachtsman's Guide describes as one of the poorest settlements in the Bahamas.

"We just came out to spoke you," one of them said. "We're not as bad off as they say in that book." Their pride made them refuse Cokes but finally a man asked if we had anything that was a good for a misery in the back.

At Little Farmer's Cay a young girls ran barefoot over the rocks and broken glass to announce our coming. Her face was the simplified and polished dark mahogany of an African mask. Children stared out at us from Maycock's School, a wooden shack painted pink and chartreuse. The wind had freshened and beyond the sheltered harbor the waves were breaking high on the rocks. Soon, if it grew rougher, the people would say that the sea was "raging" and if a harbor entrance became impassable they would say that there was "a rage on the bar."

Near Cave Cay we dove for crawfish or simply hung motionless over the sulphur-yellow coral heads, watching the black-and-gold angel fish, the parrot fish and the tangs that are the color of the morning glories they call Heavenly Blues.

Ever since Highbourne Cay, we had been in the calm lee of the Exumas, but

now the waters were too shallow, and we sailed through Galliot Cut back to the deep water of Exuma Sound. At the end of the day we reached our last port, George Town on Great Exuma.

Even if you did not know that George Town sits almost astride the Tropic of Cancer you would feel the tropics around you. The growth of plants is thicker and richer. The flowers are bigger, The air is damper and softer. For three hundred and sixty-two days of the year, the tempo of George Town is throttled down to a single speed: Dead Slow. For three days at the end of April, during the annual Out Island Regatta, George Town bursts into frantic activity. We arrived on the first of these days and for a short time the contrast with the peace that had been ours for the past week made us wonder if this was really a good idea. Apparently no one of consequence in Nassau had any such doubts.

A bomb dropped at random in the courtyard of the Club Peace and Plenty would have temporarily paralyzed the entire economy of the Bahamas. In one disastrous flash it would have eliminated not only Sir Roland Symonette (the Premier), but also his son Bobby (the Speaker of the House of Assembly), Sir Harold Christie (probably the largest single landholder in the islands), and a few dozen other key figures of the ruling caste generally known as the Bay Street Boys.

Fortunately no such incident occurred. The Bahamas Police Band, its drums beaten by giants wearing leopard skins over their red-white-and-black uniforms, marched and played in the dusty square which is still stubbornly called The Green. School children ran races. The freight boat Lady Baillou made a special trip from Nassau, loaded to the Plimsoll mark with ice and beer. The Ministry for Tourism gave a small cocktail party for the press. In Government Yard the Commissioner for Great Exuma gave an enormous cocktail party for apparently anyone, black or white, who wanted to come. Across the harbor on Stocking Island there was an Out Island Squadron party, followed the next day by a Squadron luncheon down the road at Great Cay. At the Silver Dollar, the Pieces of Eight and the Two Turtles Inn there were spontaneous outbursts of singing and dancing, There were, finally, speeches and a presentation of trophies and cash prizes on The Green.

The Out Island Regatta is a contest between native work boats. They are the same boats that you see tied up at the Prince George Wharf in Nassau and the races are marked by the same jovial fury that vibrates over the wharves and bulges the walls of the waterfront saloons. As far as I could discover there are only two rules: if you collide or if you cross the finish line with fewer hands aboard than you started out with you are disqualified. This last rule, I understand, was made to discourage the practice of lightening ship when the breeze died down by heaving crew members overboard. Since sailors are often poor swimmers this sometimes resulted in narrow escapes from drowning and detracted from the gaiety of the proceedings. Aside from these restrictions, no holds are barred. The competition is fierce and highly vocal. The skill with which the boats are handled so that their big, loose-footed sails catch every breath of wind is the skill of the true professional.

The life of the Out Islands depends on sail. It is one of the few regions in

the world where this is still so, and one of few where boatbuilding survives as a fine art. By current standards of glass fiber and chrome there are details in the native boats which may seem /

[<1 2 3 4 5 6>](#)





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- [Historical Sources Page](#)

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rough and unfinished. But it is this that gives them their beauty and strength. there is a quality of naturalness about them, whose existence we have forgotten. The wood they are made of seems still to hold some of the life of the tree from which it was cut.

A few days after returning to Nassau from Great Exuma, I sailed north in the big charter ketch *Traveler II* and at Man of War Cay, off Great Abaco, saw how the native boats are built. The little landlocked harbor is a wonderfully peaceful spot and I can't imagine a more agreeable way of spending an afternoon than watching Uncle Will Albury, the master builder of them all, as he putters about his boatyard.

Lying around on the warm ground or curing in the water at the harbor's edge are gnarled shapes, flaked with peeling bark, of the wood he will choose for knees and ribs, frames and planking. The boats sheer and flare will grow from these muddy or sunbaked roots, branches and crotches of pine and cedar, madeira and the hard dark red wood they call horseflesh. In the open-sided sheds there the whine of power tools but below it there is the delicate shaving of the hand-held plane and the quick chip of the adze. When a boat is ready to be launched, the ways, instead of being greased, are smeared with the cool green jelly-flesh of the aloes which grow wild a few feet away.

"Slickest thing there *is*," Uncle Will said, and his voice rose sharply on the last word, as all Bahamian voices do.

Although the accent of no two islands is exactly the same, the speech of the Bahamas is the speech of Sam Weller's London, of East End sailors impressed into service who skipped ship in some sunny Bahamian harbor. V's and W's become transposed, H's are dropped and added. You are 'appy in Habaco and at Spanish Vells it's werry himportant to put hoile in your hengine.

Like the Elizabethan turns of phrase of the Southern U. S. mountaineer the speech of the Bahamian reflects a profound conservatism, the result of an isolation imposed in the one case by mountains, in the other by the fact of living on an island. This is true insularity and the smaller and more self-contained the island the greater is its resistance to outside influence and change.

On the way back from Man of War Cay *Traveler II* puts in at Spanish Wells, on St. George's Cay, at the northern tip of Eleuthera.

It would be hard to find a prettier village. There is a square, precise quality about the neat red-roofed houses that line its waterfront and stand symmetrical as toy houses made of building blocks along its back streets. They are painted pink and white, green and blue, and their trim may be lavender or yellow or cerise. Breadfruit, sapodillas, and green-gold Malay coconuts hang from the trees in their yards. Among the flamboyant bougainvilleas and hibiscus are flower beds of asters, petunias and the pale Bahamian roses. The people of Spanish Wells are noted for being sober and industrious and their modest prosperity shows in their homes. Yet something, you feel, is lacking. Presently you realize that what is lacking in them all is the color they have dared to put on their houses but which has become leached out of themselves.

As I sat on the deck of *Traveler II* and watched them going by on bicycles, on scooters or on foot, I began to have the curious feeling of seeing the same person over and over. It was as though actors in a troupe which was too small for the number of parts in the play were doubling in various roles and each time one of them came on stage you had a vague sense of having seen him before. Under their distinct round-crowned broad-brimmed straw hats the faces of the people of Spanish Wells are a sallow white, their eyes an oddly staring blue. When bareheaded their hair is a lank and lusterless blond. Here, as with the American mountaineers, is the ultimate triumph of the WASP—the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant—the end product of centuries of inbred and unbending racial pride. Hidden away somewhere are its aberrations: the dwarfs, the idiots and the deaf mutes.

Towards dusk, as I walked down the street with *Travelers II's* skipper, Art Crimmins, we passed a Negro.

"A few years ago you wouldn't have seen that," Art said. "There used to be a sign that said, 'Colored man, don't be here after the sun goes down.' They could work here but they'd have to leave the island every night and row back to The Bluff, three miles across the water on Eleuthera.

That evening we sat for a while in the little parlor of a woman Art knew. "Captain," she said, "I hear you've been up to Abaco. I hear there are some good men up there. I'd be glad to take a man, like a widower with four or five kids, and work hard for him. Next time you go up there you see if you can find me someone like that."

We sailed to Harbour Island, another small island off the tip of Eleuthera. Although its settlement, Dunmore Town, was bigger than Spanish Wells, its streets and houses were not very different. But among them was a soft sound of black voices and along the waterfront, when someone tripped and almost fell from the pier, there was the whoops of black laughter.

Dunmore Town is one of the oldest settlements in the Bahamas and one of the most charming. Freeport, on Grand Bahama, to which I flew after returning to Nassau, is the newest. Like an adolescent's, its charm is potential rather than actual. But if you mention Freeport to any businessman on Bay Street his face will be suffused with the special

radiance which only the thought of money in the millions can generate. A large part of the *Bahamas Handbook and Businessman's Annual* is devoted to Grand Bahama and its glowing industrial and touristic future. No one stands more in awe that I do before bunkering stations, newly dredged harbors, cement plants, housing developments and luxury hotels which are complete with /

[< 1 2 3 4 5 6 >](#)





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championship golf courses and marinas. For this reason I prefer to leave the description of these wonders to such an authoritative publication as the Bahamas Handbook.

Physically Grand Bahama, with its flat dusty miles of pine woods, is like chunk of inland Florida chopped off and set afloat sixty miles offshore. Except for the closer presence of the sea you might as well be in the outskirts of Orlando or Ocala. Since much of the land development taking place on Grand Bahama is being done by the same American interests as are transforming the state of Florida into a single super-Levittown, the resemblance between the two grows daily more disquieting.

In addition to industrial development and home sites, Grand Bahama offers gambling. For twenty-four hours a day there is a busy shuttling back and forth between the mainland and the Miami-Beach-baroque corridors of the Lucayan Beach Hotel. Its gambling casino is a handsome thing of yellow damask walls and crystal chandeliers. To spend your winnings you have a choice of La Mer Lounge, the Club La Perruche, the Monaco Bar and several restaurants whose prices are scaled according to their gastronomic heights. When they first reported for duty on Grand Bahama the Bunnies of the Lucayan Beach Hotel were understandably bewildered by the frontier-town atmosphere of the town. They have since become adjusted, reconciled to such events as the expected arrival, on the day I was there, of a five-hundred-man convention of insurance salesmen from Missouri and Kansas.

When you fly between Nassau and Grand Bahama, you pass directly over the Berry Islands. The sea to the westward of them is shallow and its colors, instead of the clear blues and greens of the exumas, are pale pastel shades of pink, olive and cloudy mauve. The sand banks roll like waves, rise and dip like ranges of bare hills, flowing and changing shape as the high-piled cloud masses sail across them with their shadows and shafts of light. There is something unreal, too, about the islands rooted in their hazy depths.

"Lotta money around here," said the man with the attaché case who sat next to me on the Grand Bahama plane. "See down there? Wallace Groves' place. Fellow who started the whole project, Freeport. Owns the whole island. Little Whale Cay, they call it."

I looked down at what appeared to be a resort hotel with an Olympic-sized pool set up in the middle of elaborately landscaped grounds.

"Nice setup," the man said, drumming on his attaché case. "Place we just passed belongs to a fellow named Francis Francis. Got his own police force, Designed their uniforms himself. Dresses for dinner every night, Drives a Bentley. Place up ahead, Whale Cay, belongs to his sister, half-sister or something. Miss Carstairs. Quite a character, I understand."

A few days alter and a few minutes after meeting Miss Carstairs I decided that of all the understatements I had ever heard this was perhaps the most memorable.

Short, erect as a drill sergeant in khaki shirt and trousers, Miss Marion B. Carstairs rules her island domain with the cool authority of the absolute monarch. Signs placed along the roads built under her supervision conclude with the reminder, clipped as her own speech: By Order, M.B.C.

At various stages of her sixty-four-year career Miss Carstairs has been a front-line ambulance driver in World War I, a speedboat champion, a racing-car driver, an aviator, and the commander of her own three-hundred-man / island army. She has been sued for piracy and has smoked—mostly cigars—since the age of eight. Her tattooed arms—the souvenir of a a hazily recollected evening with some Spanish sailors in Honduras at the age of twenty-four—handle a billiard cue with the deadly accuracy of a Willie Hoppe. To judge from the skins of wild animals, the hides of boa constrictors and the heads of record-breaking tunas and marlins that decorate the walls of her house or of her museum next door, they do the same with a rifle or a fishing rod. For two months of the year she turns over a part of her island to the poor children of Nassau for a summer camp. By the lighthouse at the island's tip are the flagpole and plaque which she put up as a memorial to President Kennedy.

"Islands are dangerous places," she said as she slammed the stick-shaft of her MG down for a racing turn. "You have to keep busy."

During the two or three days I spent in Nassau, recovering from my visit to Whale Cay, I remembered this advice. Instead of / lying on the beach drinking rum punches and reading light novels I read a history of the Bahamas. Since the particular volume I had chosen was admirably detailed and consequently rather dull, I feel I can render a public service by summarizing the history of the Bahamas in a single word.

The word is violence. Until tourism set its soft Midas touch upon the islands, all the most succulent fruits of the Bahamamian prosperity have grown from the seeds of violence. Privateering, piracy, wrecking, seizing American vessels in the War of 1812, supplying Confederate blockade runners in the Civil War, rum-running during Prohibition gave the islands their finest financial hours. One one occasion pirates removed the governor and roasted him on a spit. In later, more restrained days, three hundred guests at a blockade-runners' ball held in the Royal Victoria Hotel consumed three hundred and fifty magnums of champagne and set off fireworks which blew up a number of servants. Before the party was over, according to an eyewitness account, "Three gentlemen were injured, two

by be raking each other's nose in an unfortunate quarrel and a third by having his hand hurt during an impromptu gun-firing contest in the garden."

Violence and rugged individualism go hand in hand. Ten years ago there was not a single auditor in all the Bahamas/ Even today a businessman can say, "Keep books? Why should I? I don't want everyone to know what I'm doing." /

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Some Serious Reading

BAHAMIAN FRAGMENTS

BITS AND PIECES FROM THE HISTORY OF

◆ THE BAHAMAS ◆

- [Grand Bahama in 1887](#) from L. D. Powle *The Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1891](#) from *Stark's History and Guide to the Bahama Islands.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1917](#) from Amelia Defries *In a Forgotten Colony*
- [Grand Bahama in 1924](#) from *The Tribune Handbook*
- [Grand Bahama in 1926](#) from Mary Mosley *The Bahamas Handbook.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1931](#) from *Nassau and the Treasure Islands of the Bahamas*
- [Grand Bahama in 1934](#) from Maj. H. M. Bell *Bahamas: Isles of June*
- [The Bahamas in 1964](#) from Benedict Thielen *The Bahamas-Golden Archipelago*
- [Grand Bahama in 1967](#) *Moral Panic, Gambling, and the Good Life*
- [Historical Sources Page](#)

Benedict Thielen "The Bahamas-Golden Archipelago"

Holiday December 1964, pp. 62- 73, 135-140

The Bay Street merchant is a one-man band, beating the drum of commerce with one hand, working the stops on the sweet horn of politics with the other. Since, if he is elected, he may sit in the House of Assembly as a representative of one of the Out Islands, his influence extends far beyond the shores of New Providence. Altogether he is in an enviable position, in spite of the fact that things are not quite as they were in the best of the good old days.

"My first election," a politician confided to a friend of mine, "cost me four cases of gin, salvaged off a wreck. My last one cost me almost four thousand pounds."

Like the £3,000,000 which the Ministry of Tourism annually pours into publicity and advertising the politician's £4000 was money undoubtedly well spent. The return on the government's investments—less than \$7 per tourist—comes to around \$100 million. Figures on the politician's return are naturally less precise but the general feeling appears to be that it is at least commensurate with the dignity of the office.

Except for a few places like Spanish Wells there are no color barriers to speak of in the Bahamas and until recently membership in the House of Assembly was about evenly divided between white and black. Since the election of 1962, however, when women voted for the first time, the House has been predominantly white. In view of the fact that Negroes far outnumber whites it is obviously the Negro woman who has put the white man in power. At first sight this seemed rather puzzling but the cook of a Nassau family that I know explained it with simple feminine realism.

"I haven't any use for the white man." she said, "But I'm not going to have any colored man telling me what to do."

It is not without reason that New Providence has been called The Gold-Plated Island. The bland climate created by the absence of inheritance, income and real-estate taxes is one / peculiarly suited to the contentment of the excessively well-heeled. greatly improved properties do call for small tax payments, but they are scarcely more than token.

Safe from the dangers of apoplexy caused by thoughts of creeping socialism in Washington, the tycoon can, as far as his temperament allows,

relax. In addition, his name when mentioned in Nassau will usually include a respectful built-in parenthesis to indicate the extent of his wealth and power. If you are Mr. X (President of Glorious Motors) or Mr. Y (Chairman of the Board of Dynamic Plastics) the environment must be a pleasant one. If not, the time comes when you feel the need of being in a place where the diet is less rich.

I flew to Cat Island, southeast of Eleuthera's southern tip. I had been to some all-white islands, many racially mixed ones and in the Exumas had gone ashore at small all-black ones. I wanted to stay longer on a large island that was all-black and free of anything done with the tourist in mind. There are other islands to the south of Nassau that would have done as well except they offer no places to stay. Neither, for that matter, does Cat Island unless you happen to know its single white resident. I did which was another reason for going there.

With his hearty appetite for land, the ubiquitous Sir Harold Christie has annexed some sizeable chunks of Cat Island, and Col. Peter Wilson, formerly of the Royal Dragoons and the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force, is in charge of them. Eventually, I suppose, civilization will come to Cat Island and deface it. At present it is scarcely touched by the outside world. More than any other that I saw, it has the feel of true isolation that the words "out Island" suggest.

There are historians who believe that Cat Island, instead of nearby San Salvador, was the place where Christopher Columbus first stepped ashore in the New World. Except for this possible claim to fame, the story of Cat Island is a story of failure: the failure of the white man. Like so many of the Bahamas it was settled in the late 18th Century by Loyalists from the American mainland. Those who came to Cat Island were mostly from the Carolinas and they brought their slaves and their plantation way of life with them. They planted the land in sisal and logwood and pineapples. For a time they prospered but it was a prosperity based on slave labor and, in 1838, when the slaves were freed, it came to an end.

Here and there among the bush-grown fields and hills you can see the ruins of their manor houses, a crumbling wall or a chimney half hidden under vines. At Port Howe the old Colonel Deveraux house is still standing. Its doors and windows are gone but its roof is intact and parts of the graceful wooden balconies still hang from its second story. There is a strangely haunted quality about it. Among the traces of delicate moldings that show on its cracked walls you can feel the dim presence of the planters and their gently bred women languishing on this alien shore.

Now and then among the island people there are also echoes of this past. There are the aquiline Semitic features of Hausa tribesmen, The dogs still look like dogs that you find only in certain parts of West Africa. One of the great landowners, Lord Rolle, at one time imported members of a particularly savage tribe who terrorized the other slaves. Today a Cat Island will say of someone who causes trouble, "What can you do with him? He's a Rolle's man."

The eastern side of the island is reef-rimmed and forbidding. The few safe anchorages lie along the western and / southern shores. It is here, strung

out close by the water, that you will find the island's settlements. Their houses are well kept and freshly painted. Their sandy yards are swept clean with homemade brooms. The paths that lead to their front doors are lined with conch shells and planted with castor beans and flowering shrubs. Bananas, papaws and tomatoes grow in the pot-holes that hold a handful of earth cupped in the rock. These are the houses of poor people but also of people with decency and pride. They made me remember, by contrast, places I had seen in the Deep South and inland Maine.

"It's a hard land," Peter Wilson said as we bumped along in his dusty Land-Rover. "But I've never known anyone to go hungry. They share, and the best thing they have is always for guests." The hills of Cat Island are the highest in the Bahamas and on the highest of these, more than two hundred feet above the sea, is the curious collection of buildings called The Hermitage. With its mixture of Gothic, Byzantine and Tuscan, it is an unexpected thing to come on in this out-of-the-way spot. Its little domes and turrets are like a piece of Italy or the fragment of a Greek island lifted out of context and set down for no reason on the other side of the world. Yet they don't seem out of place.

"What is my theory of building?" wrote their creator, the architect, missionary and Franciscan monk Fra Jerome Hawes. "Well! Just to follow nature and the nature of a thing, and not to coerce it. The hermit's eyrie lair where I dwell just grows naturally out of the rock."

So do the four other churches which Fra Jerome, between 1939 and 1952, kept the natives busy building. There is a rugged grace about them like the grace of the native sailing craft. There is a gentle Franciscan simplicity in the murals which Fra Jerome painted on the walls. The Saints and the Virgin are dark-skinned. St. Peter is dressed in blue jeans, and the fish he stands among are all the fish that swim in the waters of the Bahamas.

The people of Cat Island, like the rest of the Bahamians, are natural wanderers. They go to Nassau and they go to Florida as seasonal workers in the winter vegetable fields around Homestead and Lake Okeechobee. The actor Sidney Poitier happened to be born in Florida but his parents were Cat Islanders. Many of the older people once worked in the road gangs of Flagler's railroad when it was put through from Miami across the Keys to Key West. They leave but they return.

Among the men I met on Cat Island was one known as The General, a title widely used in the Bahamas for the local politician who acts as a vote-getter, adviser and liaison man between the island's representative in Nassau and the people. He too had spent many years on the mainland.

"The States are very fine," he said. "I was happy there. But in the States they run all day and never reach."

In a different way you could run all your life through the Out Islands and never arrive—which is what a Bahamian means when he says "reach." It is a long sail from True Blue to Memory Rock, from the Devil's Backbone to Delectable Bay, from Bitter Guana to the Ambergris Cays. Off the edge of Andros the undersea canyon of the Tongue of the Ocean drops down a thousand fathoms deep and there are places in the island's water-veined

interior where no man has ever been. There are wild horses on Great Abaco and flamingos by the lakes of Great Iguana. The islands, their waters and their skies lie flung out like a vast preserve of space, of free-breathing openness in a daily more choked and crowded world.

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