

An Overview of Bahamian History in Context

The first British settlers came to the Bahamas in 1648. This colony, established by the Company of Eleutherian Adventurers like other English colonies, was intended to earn profits for investors and provide a living for participants. It is uncertain whether any of the seventy original settlers were people of African heritage. The colony was never as successful as its organizers had hoped. By the 1650s, some settlers had returned to Bermuda or relocated to other British colonies. Bermudian colonists evidently regarded the small Bahamian colony as a convenient location for banishing their social rejects. These included several whites, such as an unfaithful wife and a Quaker woman who wanted to preach (Lefroy 1981, 133, 227–228; Craton and Saunders 1992, 78). A number of free blacks and enslaved persons were also sent to the Bahamas. In 1656, after the disclosure of a plot by slaves and free blacks to free themselves from white domination, all free blacks in Bermuda were banished to Eleuthera (Wilkinson 1958, 280; Packwood 1975, 142; Lefroy 1981, 94–96; Maxwell 1999, 5).

Documentary evidence of the lives of early Bahamian settlers is rare. It is uncertain how many white inhabitants came to the Bahamas as indentured servants or as tenants to wealthy investor-landlords. This was not a prosperous colony, so it is unlikely that there ever were significant numbers of indentured servants in the Bahamas. As was usual with colonial settlements, there was much speculative optimism about the colony's potential (Sainsbury [1889] 1964, 9, 971; Oldmixon [1741] 1969, 430–431).

Yet even this small struggling colony warranted the importation of un-free African labor. With the evolution of a colonial society also came the changing positions of social groups. The deportation of an entire community of free blacks brought as much change to Bermuda as it did to the

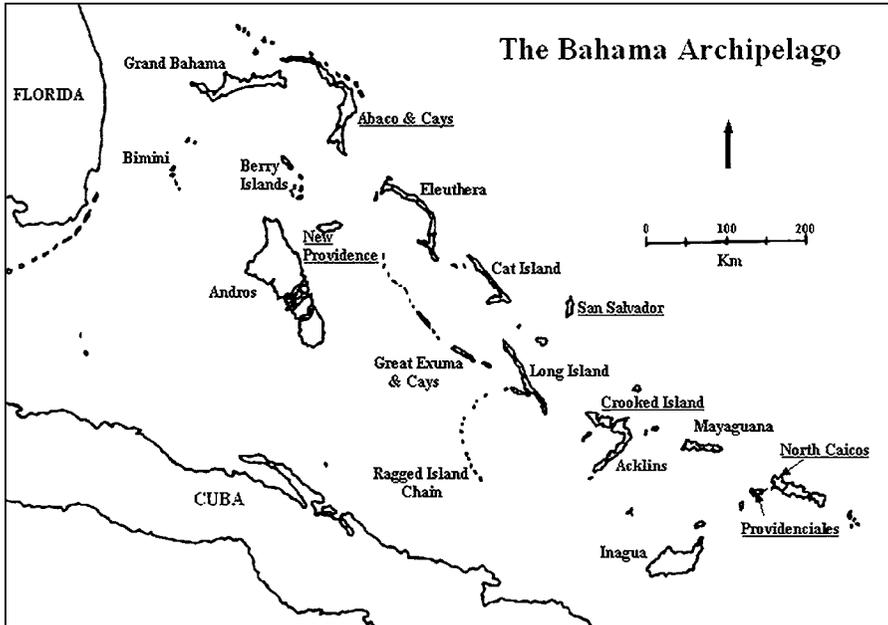


Figure 1.1. The Bahama Archipelago.

Bahamas. In the Bahamas, the many small islands had already proven more suitable to small-scale, independent holdings than the large-scale ventures colonial investors expected would bring them huge profits. This type of setting allowed for an atmosphere that was less restrictive for lower-ranked social groups such as people of color. In this chapter, I examine the basis of economic wealth in the Bahamas and determine whether any avenues existed for African-Bahamians to access this wealth. This review looks at the conditions of life for Bahamians of African heritage in combination with other factors that affected their life conditions over time.

In her book *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, biological anthropologist, Audrey Smedley (1999) argued that the cultural history of English settlers in North America contributed to the rigid racial categorization of enslavement for people of African descent and that in contrast, in Spanish and Portuguese South American colonies, racial categorization was more fluid, depending on economic and social circumstances. However, this argument is most true for the British colonies that became the United States. The character of the race-based slave labor system in British

West Indian colonies such as the Bahamas was more similar to the flexible racial characterization of Latin American colonies (Eastwood 2006, 68–73; Helg 2004, 162–167; LaCerte 1993, 42; Lasso 2007, 16–67; Levine 1997, 7–25; Marshall 1993, 16; Beckles 2011, 212; Scarano 2011, 179–183; Wade 1993, 3–14). I make the case that since English colonists also settled the Bahamas, the difference in racial characterization was affected by the paths to wealth and power that were available to all social groups in the Bahamas.

While access to economic and social opportunity may have been restricted for people of color, there was no definitive prohibition against people of African descent participating at different social and economic levels. Nevertheless, access to the most powerful roles and property were heavily protected by social conventions that determined suitable social relationships. These social mores also impacted access to economic opportunities. In the eighteenth century, several acts “for governing Negroes, Mulattoes or Indians” sought to define which persons were categorized in each group. These laws were also reactions to such customary practices as extensive racial and social mixing and the habit of enslaved individuals of working unclaimed land for themselves (Craton and Saunders 1992, 148–156). As blacks constituted at least half the population of the Bahamas from the early eighteenth century forward, it was more feasible for people of color to participate in all but the most power-laden aspects of social, economic, and political life.

For at least the next century after the Bermuda blacks were deported to the Bahamas, people of African descent played significant roles in most levels of Bahamian life. In 1696, an incident occurred that cost proprietary governor Nicholas Trott his career. He was charged with accepting fees and “gifts” to allow Henry Every, alias Bridgeman, to land in Nassau. Every was considered a notorious pirate because he had plundered a ship belonging to the Great Mogul of India (Defoe 1999, 53; Oldmixon [1741] 1969, 429). The decision to land in Nassau was not a random one, as at least four of the white crewmen were “married and are settled upon the Island; and also there came severall boys and foure free negros.”¹ This case demonstrates that both white and black Bahamians were tied into at least one global network of profit, albeit not one of the most desirable ones.

The royal charter for the earliest English settlers in the Bahamas detailed an economy based on collecting economically valuable resources from the land and the sea. Because the Bahamas were located along several major sailing routes, the list of legitimate maritime activities included salvaging

wrecked and stranded vessels. Until the early eighteenth century, Spanish authorities in Cuba considered much of this activity to be piracy. In the late eighteenth century, newspaper notices indicated that some wrecking activity was done illegally.²

There is very little documentary information until the mid-eighteenth century on the general populace and their daily lives. In the leadup to the war in the American colonies, the British had considerable interest in assessing the demographic, economic, and military state of the Bahama Islands. The general conclusion was that they did not have very much soil, that these soils were not very fertile, and that agriculture was not a priority for white settlers. The predominantly transitory nature of the Bahamian economy had fostered a strong sense of independence among settlers (Craton and Saunders 1992, 75–79; Sainsbury [1889] 1964, 7, 712).

Although the Bahamas remained a small and poor colony, because the archipelago was strategically located on major oceanic shipping routes, it was in the interest of the British colonial government to maintain control of these islands. In the eighteenth century, competition for access and control of territory in the Americas was vital for European states that wanted to engage in the struggle for political and economic dominance. The great value of the Bahamas to the British was that its location enabled them to maintain access to the Florida Straits, a major shipping channel for returning to Europe that also connected routes to other parts of the Americas. Gov. Montfort Browne summarized it well in a 1775 report: “They [the Bahamas] command the Gulph of Florida, through which all Spanish vessels with their Treasure return to Europe, As too do the Windward passage; where all ships bound to the West Indies must pass. Their Consequence in this respect has been clearly manifested by the astonishing number of Captures made in those Seas by our privateers War, and the galling Effect it has had on the trade of our Enemys.”³

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, a critical issue for the Bahamas’ colonial government was how to enable settlers (these would generally be white settlers) to obtain title for private land. In a 1768 report to the Earl of Hillsborough, the secretary of state for the colonies, Gov. Thomas Shirley, noted that “Some of the Inhabitants of New Providence especially in the Town of Nassau hold their Land by Grants from the Lords Proprietors and the Company or Copartners for settling the Bahama Islands, and the rest by Grants from the different Governors, that have been in these Islands

since their being erected into a Royal Government; but the Inhabitants of the other Islands have no other title to the Lands they hold other than possession.”⁴ The governor’s report was to be sent on to the Board of Trade. Gov. Shirley wanted to stress the urgent need to upgrade the legal basis for private property ownership in the colony. In a letter to the Earl of Hillsborough, the governor explained that “It is needless for me to observe to your Lordship the necessity there is that Government should immediately take some Steps towards securing to the Inhabitants their Property; as I find from their Alarms upon that head, and from the very languid State of the Trade of these Islands, upon which their very Existence depends, many Families have, and still continue to remove from hence to the Continent, and Neighbouring Islands.”⁵ In 1670, administration of the Bahama Islands was transferred from the Company of Eleutherian Adventurers to the six lord proprietors of the Carolinas. However, in the transition from a proprietary colony to a Crown colony in 1718, the Crown did not include a buyout of the lord proprietors’ title to lands of the colony. About fifty years later, Gov. Browne’s exasperation was evident in his assessment of the consequences of this situation:

There are many cogent reasons, my Lord, why the Bahama Islands can never arrive to any state of real advantage to the Crown, until the property of the Islands can be secured to the Planter; For until that happy period arrives, no Inhabitant, wood cutter, or planter can ever be confined to his own plantation. These people now range from Island to Island, and so soon as the Land in one place refuses to yield its increase agreeable to their Expectations, Or the Timber by its distance from the place of cutting becomes troublesome, they immediately change to a situation more convenient, and more profitable, which they first strip of all its valuable Timbers for Exportation to the French and Dutch Islands. . . . It is therefore for these Reasons humbly submitted to your Lordship’s Consideration, whether the renewing the negotiations . . . on the part of the Crown, for the purchase of the proprietorship of the Islands, would not be of the highest advantages, as thereby the rambling Inhabitants must be tied down to their own plantations, which would be secured to them and their Heirs by legal Grants, and would not only help to discourage that abominable Custom of wrecking, and the carrying on an illicit trade, which last is practiced in a high degree with the Dutch, French, and Danish Islands in the West Indies.⁶