

## *The Cayman Islands Project*

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As the summer of 1980 drew to a close, most of the offshore waters and coastal lagoons of Grand Cayman had been surveyed. Work had progressed smoothly, and the weather had been excellent. But, as is usual in the West Indies, the month of August brought increased awareness that the hurricane season was under way. Throughout the expedition, the British Broadcasting Corporation had been a daily source of radio news about the outside world. One morning the broadcast included mention of a depression forming in the mid-Atlantic. In the days that followed we learned that the first hurricane of the season, named Allen, slowly was gaining force and heading into the Caribbean Sea. We began tracking Allen's progress on a dog-eared National Geographic map of the West Indies. The previous season had given us plenty of practice packing up project equipment in a hurry, with not one but two hurricanes on the way. Both, however, had moved to the north of Cuba rather than remaining on a course toward the Cayman Islands. Now we waited and prepared to batten down should the new hurricane head in our direction.

The Caymans probably have suffered storm damage more often than any other island group in the Caribbean, because they are located on the path of least resistance along prevailing hurricane tracks. The year 1980 proved to be no exception, and as reports from Jamaica described the storm's destruction on that island's north coast, it became clear that Allen

was pointed northwest toward the Cayman Islands. Radio warnings became more frequent, and offshore, as the oncoming storm gathered strength over water again, the air became ominously still and the seas flat calm.

Before long the wind and sea signaled a change in the atmosphere, and the sky grew dark. We began to collect our boats from the water, dragging them into the bush and tying them down to the stoutest trees. Loose equipment was carried into the house, and sheets of plywood and scraps of timber were assembled to secure every window, door, and opening. Although the project headquarters was the windwardmost building on the island, it had been built with cement blocks on a rock bluff above the sea. We trusted the house to withstand a major storm, especially when we compared it with other dwellings of wood and mortar along the beach.

Around-the-clock preparations began in earnest before dawn on August 6. Every container in the house was filled with fresh water. Kerosene lamps and stoves were made ready, and extra blankets, cots, and provisions were brought to the second floor, where we planned to weather the approaching storm. By midmorning several of the crew members were down in the village in howling winds and driving rain to offer assistance and shelter to whoever felt unsafe at the water's edge. The town hall and village school had been designated as hurricane shelters and soon were filled with reluctant townspeople. No one seemed frightened, only resigned to the workings of nature.

Seventy miles to windward, the islands of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac had lost communication with the outside world as the hurricane passed nearby. Incredible seas began to pound the eastern edge of Grand Cayman. We watched thirty- and forty-foot waves smash over the outside reef. The steel hulls of two large freighters, grounded on the reef in the early 1960s, gradually came apart. The larger one buckled in two before our eyes, while the other freighter spun around and almost disappeared beneath the raging waves. Contemplating what it must have been like to be at sea in a small ship during a hurricane in the days of sail, we began to feel more reverence for the unfortunate crews of the wrecks that we had been investigating for the past two years.

Eight-foot seas pushed across the normally placid lagoon, broke over the bluff, and sprayed the side of the house. East End Sound became a churning mass of muddy turbulence, and we began to count fragments of docks, boats, and fishing huts as they floated by the bluff, wrenched from the shore. Retreating into the house, we listened to the radio, which barely

was audible over the sound of the storm. Word came in the late afternoon that Allen had passed to the north of the island, pushing winds of up to 215 miles per hour in the open sea. Although rough weather and heavy rains continued for several days, no lives had been lost in the Cayman Islands, and damage was minimal compared with that sustained on Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba. We later learned that this storm, which narrowly missed Grand Cayman, was considered one of the most powerful Caribbean hurricanes of the decade.

New beaches had appeared on either side of our headquarters where mangroves had been torn away and replaced by sand from the bottom of the lagoon. After the project dried out and began survey operations once more, the reef line was explored again to see what had happened to familiar wrecks and their environments. We were flabbergasted to discover the seabed transformed into a wasteland, barren even of the fish that usually congregated in profusion. They had retreated into deeper water for protection. Incredibly, portions of wrecksites that we were recording had vanished, other sections of the seabed had eroded to expose wreckage we hadn't seen before, and several of the larger modern sites had been totally rearranged.

As the field season came to a close, our inventory of wrecksites around Grand Cayman had grown to more than fifty, each carefully examined and documented. Now, entire days were spent indoors, despite good weather, because the paperwork was piling up. In addition to older sites, we had investigated the remains of a wrecked PBY flying boat, a trading ship laden with cases of Cuban beer, and a copper-sheathed turtling schooner. A wrecked yacht loaded with drugs smuggled from Colombia naturally was off limits to the survey crew, but we did have an opportunity to help the government to locate the remains of its mosquito-spraying aircraft that had crashed into the water one evening during a low-altitude turning maneuver.<sup>1</sup>

The project had come full circle since its inception. I had first visited the Cayman Islands in 1978 as a young graduate student at Texas A&M University's Institute of Nautical Archaeology. Late one afternoon in the spring semester, Professor George F. Bass called another student, Donald Keith, and me into his office. As was typical for a widely published scholar in a unique field, he had been contacted by representatives of another country, who sought his assistance in matters relating to ancient shipwrecks. However, this request came from the Caribbean, a region with which he was unfamiliar, having worked primarily in the Mediterranean.