

Migration to the Bahamas

Pre-Columbian to 1888

Pre-Columbian Peoples

Beginning in 1492, Spanish and British imperialism significantly influenced the demography of the Bahamas (Figure 2.1) by first exterminating the existing population and replacing it with European and African peoples and their customs and institutions, including slavery. This influence continued unchallenged until the events of the American Revolution in the 1770s resulted in the migration of large groups of “Loyalists” from the United States to the Bahamas. In time, the American settlers became the dominant class, and were largely responsible for transforming the colony through the institution of a plantation economy fueled by African slavery. After Emancipation, they introduced the pre-capitalist “truck” labor system in which the dominant class maintained control of production and consumption loans. In 1888, this white elite class attempted to protect its monopoly on state and economic power by ensuring social control through the introduction of a predominantly Barbadian police force. The distinctive ethnic groups that emerged during the period examined helped to shape modern Bahamian history and influence present-day Bahamian class structure.

Christopher Columbus is historically credited with the discovery of the people on the island of San Salvador in what later became the Bahamas during his epoch-making voyages to the Americas beginning in 1492. Columbus offered an eyewitness account of these early Bahamians:

They go about naked as they were born . . . everyone appeared to be under thirty years of age, well proportioned and good looking. The hair of some was thick and long like the tail of a horse, in some it was short and brought forward over the eyebrows, some wearing it long and never cutting it. Some, again, are painted, and the hue of their skin is similar in colour to the peoples of the Canaries, neither black nor white. (Granberry 1973:22–30)

Columbus believed he had sailed to the East Indies and presumed the natives he first met to be East Indians. The people, however, called themselves *Lukku-cari*, which is traditionally interpreted as “island people.” Europeans later translated this as “Lucayans.” Archaeologists Charles Hoffman Jr., James MacLaury, and Julian Granberry used this term interchangeably with “Arawak” to identify the pre-Columbian Bahamians. Dr. Granberry, one of the earliest archaeologists to excavate pre-Columbian sites in the Bahamas, recognized the distinctive pottery of the Lucayans, which he named “Palmetto Ware” and which was found in sites throughout the Bahamas (Granberry 1973:31).

Archaeologists, in the absence of written records, speculate on the origin, social organization, subsistence technology, and population of these early Bahamians on the basis of surveys of the central and southern islands (Keegan 1992:72–76). Recent discoveries of a possible aceramic people who already inhabited the northern islands are provoking a reevaluation of the prehistory of the Bahamas. The evidence collected from excavations on Grand Bahama, the Berry Islands, New Providence, Long Island, Conception Island, Samana Cay, and San Salvador led Keegan (1992) to suggest pre-Columbian populations of between 20,000 and 40,000, but Hoffman and Granberry both estimate the number closer to 20,000. This supports Columbus’ claim that he found “innumerable small villages and a numberless population” in the islands in 1492 (Granberry 1973:33).

The pre-Columbian natives reportedly “sailed or drifted to the Greater Antilles following large sea mammals from the Yucatan and Central America possibly as early as 5,000 B.C.” (Cash 1992 [1978]). Cash also suggested that the early Bahamians were “chased by the Caribs, a very warlike people,” and so were forced to migrate north to the Bahama Islands (1992 [1978]). However, archaeological evidence suggests that the *Lukku-cari* reached the Bahamas, probably via Hispaniola or the Virgin

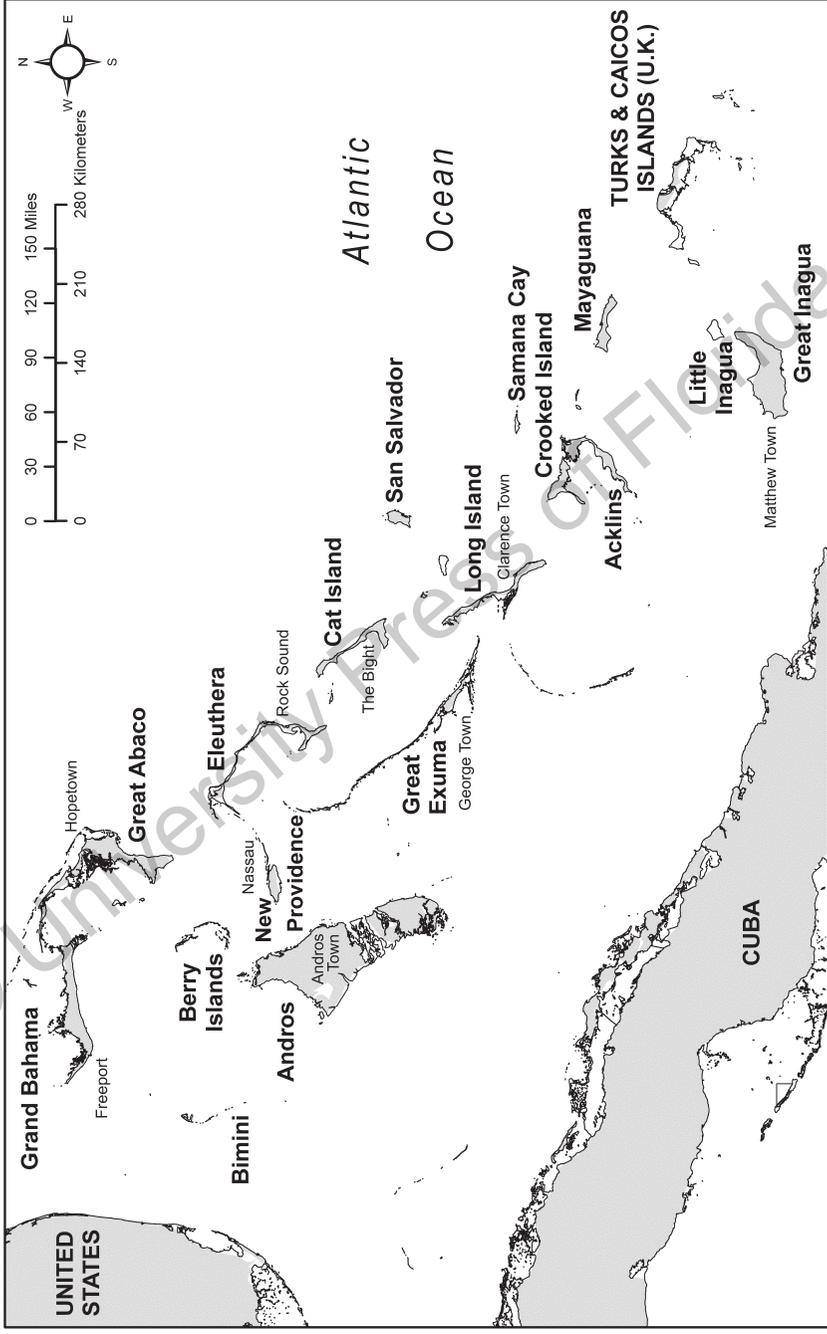


Figure 2.1. The Bahamas.

Islands, around 800 to 900 A.D. Granberry says Palmetto Ware pottery demonstrates a close similarity to the “Ostiones” pottery found in the Virgin Islands. Two other pottery styles, namely “Meillac” and “Carrier,” were found in the Bahamas, “but are known to have originated in northern Haiti, Meillac around 900 A.D. and Carrier around 1,000 to 1,100 A.D.” (Granberry 1973:31–33). They were a seafaring people, “traders who originally came from various sections of the West Indies to the south of the Bahamas, but who maintained contact with the lands of their origins” (Keegan 1992:74). The northerly migration of the Lukku-cari to the Bahamas was halted and traumatically reversed in the years following their historic encounter with the Spaniards.

Between 1509 and 1613, the Lukku-cari population of the Bahamas was compelled to migrate southward as slaves by the Spaniards they had earlier welcomed. The Bahama Islands were virtually ignored until 1509 when Governor Ovando of Española dispatched a raiding force to the archipelago to capture slaves for labor on Cubagua, the famed pearl island off the coast of Venezuela. According to Granberry (1973:34), Alonso de Hojed, who led an initial slave raid into the Bahamas, had in 1499 found the pearl fisheries off Cubagua, and presumably requested that Governor Ovando authorize him to capture laborers from the islands to exploit the resource. The Spanish cleric and Indian-rights activist Bartolomé de Las Casas described the situation: “the Spanish began to send the Lucayan Indians to gather pearls [on Cubagua], because they are in general excellent swimmers. . . . In that arduous and pernicious work . . . they finally killed and finished them off in a few years; and in that way the entire population of those islands which we called Lucayos perished” (Iglesias 1969:8–10). Ponce de León passed through the Bahamas in 1513 and reportedly found just one elderly native woman on a cay north of Grand Bahama. Less than twenty years after Spanish “discovery,” the indigenous population of the Bahamas was exterminated (Cash 1992:18 [1978]).

Eleutheran Adventurers, Buccaneers, and Pirates

According to most accounts, the name “Bahamas” is probably a corruption of *baja mar* (shallow sea), which appeared on Spanish maps dating from 1523. Smith (1986:5–6) noted that other Spanish places seem to indicate the initial impression sailors had of the areas in question. For

instance, Honduras means “depths,” Costa Rica is “rich coast,” and Trinidad (“trinity”) may have referred to the three mountains that Columbus saw upon approaching the island. According to Mary Moseley (1926:7–8), “the earliest reference to the present name found in any book is in a narrative of John Hawkins’ voyage in 1567 in which the chanell and gulfe of Bahama which is between the Cape of Florida and the Ilandes of Lucayo is mentioned.” The Spanish made no serious attempts to colonize the islands, choosing instead to exploit the more profitable Spanish Main.

The Bahamas remained a Spanish possession, virtually unpopulated for over 100 years after the forced expatriation of the natives. It is not certain when the islands came under English dominion. However, one historian suggests that the presumption of King Charles I of England to grant the islands to Sir Robert Heath indicates that by 1629 the English considered the Bahamas to be a possession of their crown (Albury 1976). However, it was not until almost twenty years later that the first permanent European settlers came from Bermuda.

Religion was perhaps the primary motive for the migration from Bermuda to the Bahamas. In 1640 a major religious conflict, which mirrored the dissension that engulfed England in a bloody civil war, seriously divided Bermudans into camps of Anglicans and Puritans. Anglicans systematically persecuted the Puritans and denied them freedom of religion to the point where, as the Pilgrim Fathers left England for Massachusetts in the 1620s, so in Bermuda a group of Puritans sought the Bahamas as a home where they could enjoy religious freedom. The group, called the Company of Adventurers for the Plantation of the Islands of Eleutheria, was led by Captain William Sayle, a former governor of Bermuda. According to Albury, the company replaced the name Bahamas with the Greek word “Eleutheria,” meaning freedom, to demonstrate its intention to allow freedom of religion and justice for all citizens of the new republic (Albury 1976:38). The company of about seventy persons, including twenty-eight slaves, sailed to the Bahamas in 1648 aboard the 100-ton *William*. The settlers organized themselves into a republic, with a governor, a Council of twelve, and a Senate of 100 members, respectively.

Albury states that the government in Eleutheria constituted the first republic established in the New World (1976:41). Over the next decade many criminals, free slaves, and troublesome slaves from Bermuda and New England were sent into exile in Eleutheria (Albury 1976:45). In 1684

the colony was attacked and destroyed by a Spanish force dispatched from Havana. The slaves were captured and the settlement, located near Preacher's Cave and Governor's Harbour "was plundered and burnt, never to rise again from the ashes," and the settlers were reportedly so devastated by and fearful of Spanish military incursions that they deserted the island and migrated to other English colonies (Albury 1976:45).

In the mid-seventeenth century a group of buccaneers-turned-pirates migrated to the Bahamas, where they proceeded to dominate trade and politics in the islands. Buccaneers were European (mostly French, Dutch, and English) robbers, shipwrecked seamen, and runaway slaves who inhabited the islands of Española and Tortuga, whence they attacked Spanish ships and settlements. The buccaneers cooked large quantities of meat on wooden grates over a slow fire. The grate was called a *boucan*, and from this word buccaneer is reportedly derived. In 1689, when England went to war with France and Spain, many English buccaneers separated from their French cohorts in Tortuga and migrated to the Bahamas. There, the buccaneers-turned-pirates, who were formerly authorized by the English authorities to attack Spanish treasure fleets, illegally preyed upon unsuspecting ships of any nationality (Miller 1945:33–46). In 1692, other English pirates came to the Bahamas from Jamaica, after the governor there, Sir Thomas Lynch, introduced harsh laws against them, and after the pirate base at Port Royal was destroyed by an earthquake.

Nassau, the main center of pirate activity in the late seventeenth century, became an arena for Spanish, French, and English imperialist conflicts. From 1703 to 1715, the town was invaded thirty-four times by Spanish and French forces seeking to end attacks on their shipping and colonies (Miller 1945:42–43). Pirate infestation of the Bahamas continued until 1718, when Woodes Rogers was appointed the first royal governor of the colony, and a concerted effort was made by the colonial government to expel the pirates and legitimize commerce (Cash et al. 1992:17–18). These authors noted that although some 600 of the estimated 1,000 pirates who terrorized the islands surrendered to Governor Rogers, many disregarded their "oaths of allegiance . . . to their sovereign [and] plot [ted] . . . to mutiny and feloniously and piratically steal [from the] islands" (1992:17–18). The Bahamas, with the demise of piracy, became sparsely populated and grossly impoverished until the arrival of the Loyalists in 1783.