

Florida's Bahamian Connection

Glenn Anderson
Independent Scholar

"Culturally distinct settler groups almost always maintain...some elements of their homeland cultures, at least for a few generations" (Castles and Miller 1993)

A massive exodus of Loyalists from British East Florida (peninsular Florida) to the Bahamas and other destinations occurred at the close of the American Revolution. Thousands of white Loyalists, together with their slaves, chose to relocate to the nearby islands where they could return in the event of favorable circumstances. The Loyalist exodus initiated a process which eventually transformed coastal Florida.

Bahama Loyalists began to drift back to East Florida and southern Georgia almost immediately after the British evacuation of East Florida. They came singly, like John Wood (1752-1829), now resting on the grounds of St. Marys Presbyterian Church on the Georgia shore, or in groups, like the white fishermen of Riviera Beach, or the Black migrants to the Lower East Coast, who labored on great construction projects in the early years of the twentieth century (Parrish 1940 to 1953; Cate 1956). The movement, modified by United States immigration laws, continues to this day and is responsible for many groups in Florida with links to the Loyalist past.

The process was sometimes complex. Georgia historically played a major role in peopling the peninsula. Return to southern Georgia frequently served as only one stage of the migration process. Camden County, in the days of communication by water, had a key role, because that part of Georgia had a common history and cultural identity with East Florida (Smith 1983).

Riley (1983) mentions 3,000 return migrants from the Bahamas to southern Georgia. Many of those migrants must have entered through St. Marys, the closest port in Georgia to the Bahamas, and a large percentage of them probably made Camden County their

home, as argued by Smith (1983). Later, as the focus of economic activity shifted, those migrants were subjected to the "pull" of a developing Florida. Westward of Camden County lay the inhospitable Okefenokee, eastward the Atlantic, northward established populations, but, only about thirty miles to the south, Jacksonville developed as the "Gateway City" to Florida. Like the Bahamas, Camden County was, for many Loyalists and their descendants, a way-station on the road to Florida.

Blacks sailed to the plantation islands of the Bahamas with their Loyalist masters and shared many common values. They were an integral part of the Loyalist march through history. Some had ties of blood with their former masters, but even more shared the thrift, industry, and ambition of the restless white Loyalists. The Bahamian Blacks really constituted a subgroup of the Southern Loyalist population (Saunders 1983). Their subsequent migration to Florida reintroduced Loyalist traditions to parts of the Lower East Coast.

Mack Walker (1964 in Scott, 1968), in his examination of German immigration to the United States, emphasizes the factors of economic marginality and income fluctuations as catalysts for the early immigration of relatively prosperous, modern, skilled, and educated people. The first stream of return migrants from the Bahamas easily conformed to the paradigm (Kershaw 1978). Cotton's precipitous decline in the Bahamas and the relaxation of governmental restrictions in East Florida prompted the re-settlement of Volusia's plantation country. Men with capital, education, and ambitious plans were the first to realize the limitations of the Bahamas environment and to establish the initial Bahamian immigration networks in Florida (Strickland 1963).

The seafaring peoples who settled the Florida Keys in the 1830's also proved the validity of Walker's paradigm. One or two generations removed from the earlier planter migrants, they were of more moderate means than the earlier Loyalist subgroup, but possessed resources superior to those who came later. Poorer white fishermen at Riviera Beach and the Black migrants to the Lower East Coast represented the next logical extension of that trend.

The Sugar Plantations

With the retrocession of Florida to Spain, most of the British colonists withdrew and these estates were abandoned. About the turn of the century

Spanish immigration policy became more liberal, and numerous loyalist refugees...were induced to return...the economic development of this short stretch of the upper east coast exceeded that of any other part of the territory... (Boyd 1951)

The re-development of the sugar plantations south of St. Augustine, around the turn of the century, became the most important, and perhaps the only, agricultural innovation during the second Spanish period. Failed Bahamian cotton planters formed the driving force behind this form of economic activity. The sugar plantations continued to be the most successful and significant Florida centers of agricultural production until their destruction by the Indians and their Black allies in the Second Seminole War. The end came in the winter of 1835/1836 (Strickland 1963).

Both capital and labor proved essential for this industry. The Loyalist planter elite of the Bahamas possessed those key resources, but struggled to utilize them efficiently in the Bahamas because the field of economic opportunity seemed too limited. East Florida offered greater potential, was well known to the Loyalists, and was close-at-hand. Under those circumstances and with the change in attitude of the Spanish colonial administration, represented by the laws of 1788 and 1790, a return migration of some of the Bahamian planters appeared almost inevitable (Rutherford 1952). Need, proximity, and opportunity dictated the time and direction of that movement. Further, it involved the development of a well remembered area and the revival of former British plantations.

Although the number of white immigrants remained small, their economic and social impact loomed large, and they brought many slaves with them. The tradition of heavy investment in commercial agriculture initiated during the British period was maintained and enhanced by this development. Additionally, the introduction of large numbers of Blacks to East Florida's population, which also began during the British period, continued and its demographic consequences can be seen today (Strickland 1963). Both the focus of modern peninsular Florida's agriculture and the composition of the state's population appeared foreshadowed and influenced by this Loyalist migration.

Florida's state park authorities have identified sixteen plantation sites in a narrow coastal strip, no more than a few miles wide, starting at the Bulow plantation, now included in the southernmost

portion of Flagler County, in the north, and running to just south of New Smyrna Beach (signs posted by park authorities). Boyd (1951) had earlier named fifteen possible plantation locations in the same area, but sixteen is now the accepted figure. Bulow Creek, the Halifax Creek and River, the Tomoka River and Basin, and the Indian River North provided a secure, connected network of tidal waterways, protected by the coastal barrier island and accessible from the Atlantic at Ponce de Leon Inlet, near New Smyrna Beach. Bulk cargoes moved easily and cheaply along this network and the coastal lands provided a richer environment for agriculture than the sterile interior (Strickland 1963).

New Smyrna developed as an independent center because its natural transportation network dictated that approach (de Brahm 1971). When the Loyalists returned, those geographic realities remained. An enclave type structure reflected communication directly with the sea and relatively important links with the Bahamas. Convenient access by water to the Bahamas became an important factor in this population movement, but it also played the same role for all other Bahamian settlements in Florida.

These riverine plantations were very large, although only part of the total acreage was actually cultivated. For example, John Russell, who immigrated from the Bahamas, received a grant of 4,000 acres which his heirs sold in 1821, the year Florida became an American possession, to Charles W. Bulow of Charleston, South Carolina, founder of Bulow plantation (Strickland 1963). The three hundred Bulow slaves cultivated 1,000 acres of sugar cane, 1,200 acres of cotton, and some food and fodder crops (Tebeau 1971).

Robert McHardy's plantation on the Tomoka of 1,762 acres was another Loyalist enterprise with ties to the Bahamas. He had worked for his brother's Nassau mercantile firm before moving to Florida. When his wife died, McHardy sent his Florida-born son to Nassau to be educated, which he soon left to join the Royal Navy. These ties of family and culture with the Bahamas and Britain remained common on the Loyalist plantations of East Florida (Strickland 1963).

Captain James Ormond I, former employee of Panton Leslie and Company and former cotton planter from the island of Exuma in the Bahamas, developed a 2,000 acre plantation at the head of the Halifax River. Although his wife and son Emanuel returned to Scotland on his death, in the 1820's credit problems encouraged the family's return to the plantation. The oldest son, James Ormond II,

left Britain so quickly that he had to send for his wife and four children. James's wife, the former Isabella Chrystie, was probably a part of the famous Bahamas' Loyalist family of the same name (Strickland 1963).

General Samuel Williams, the descendant of a wealthy British family, received a large grant on the present site of Daytona Beach. Williams's widow later married Joseph M. Hernandez, a name famous in Florida history. The old Loyalist's estate passed to his wife, four children in Florida, and his illegitimate daughter in the Bahamas (Strickland 1963).

Sugar constituted the most successful crop produced by this small, cohesive elite, but cotton remained almost as important. They were Florida's two most important commercial crops. Corn was grown for domestic consumption and every plantation had stone hand-mills to grind grist. Industrious slaves had time to tend their own small plots, and to hunt and fish. However, only the impressive ruins of the steam sugar-mills survive to mark this way-of-life (Strickland 1963)

The Keys

With Florida ceded to the United States by the treaty with Spain, the way was open for actual permanent colonization of the lower Florida coast by the Bahamas. By the 1830s, the Conchs and their tiny settlements along the Keys and coast had grown perceptibly. By the time of the War Between the States, the migration had reached proportions of a colonization (White and Smiley 1959).

In 1831, there were 12,259 Blacks in the Bahamas, representing three-quarters of the population, and 9,268 of them were slaves. August 1, 1834, the day slaves won their freedom in the British Empire, seemed a day of agony for the Loyalists with their harsh racial attitudes because they were confronted with a potential threat to their position. It became yet another factor encouraging a wave of immigration to Florida. This time the immigrants came from a humbler strata of society (Craton 1986).

American annexation of Florida in 1821 had been the initial factor strengthening the "pull" of the peninsula for the maritime

people of Abaco and its satellites. The island environment of the Florida Keys, so similar to the Bahamas, had provided a refuge from the Black problem and the opportunity to pursue such traditional vocations as wrecking and turtling. Governor Colebrook of the Bahamas on July 9, 1835 had written his superiors in Britain that "many settlers in Abaco who possess sloops and trade with the United States have lately...speculated in quitting the colony." Records show a decrease in the total population of Abaco of seventy-three persons between 1834 and 1836 (Riley 1983).

Bahamian colonization of the Keys had commenced soon after American annexation and had shaped the unique cultural patterns of those islands. As early as February 1, 1834, a man named Curry had sailed his American registered sloop into Nassau harbor from Key West with a cargo of turtles for a firm of Bay Street merchants (Riley 1983). Even earlier, in 1828, Congress had established a territorial superior court in Key West with admiralty jurisdiction, at least partly to prevent wreckers from taking salvaged ships and goods to Nassau or Havana (WPA 1949). Before the Civil War, immigration from the Bahamas had helped make Key West Florida's largest city and had insured that the Conchs would be one of the most important groups in the city (Tebeau 1971). Key West, with the opportunities afforded by rapid growth and with its harsh restrictions on Blacks, had been a congenial world for white Bahamians in those days (WPA 1949).

This immigrant stream from Abaco and its satellites was composed of a population formed by intermarriage and cultural fusion between the Loyalists and their Conch neighbors. The old name for the original inhabitants of the Bahamas, "Conch," became the common appellation for all white Bahamians in Florida. It seemed fitting that the more plebeian population of the Abaco group should first carry this name to Florida, because the process of merger was more advanced there (Riley 1983).

Smiley and White (1959) characterized the Key West Conchs as "fundamentally sea folk." They also said Conchs were "an extremely close-knit group...gracious, clean-living, kind and church-going." Langley and Windhorn (1974) described the Bahamian population of the Florida Keys as Methodist, "honest and possessed of great family pride." Both works claimed the speech of the Conch population of the Keys continued to vaguely reflect its Bahamian background. Many of the traditional values of the Conch cultural complex reflected the Loyalist background of the immigrants.

In the first period of settlement, Key West had almost all of the permanent population of the Keys, but by the early years of the twentieth century Bahamians were well established on Key Largo (Fernald and Purdum 1992). Penetration of that area commenced with the traditional Bahamian activities of mahogany cutting and boat building. These were accomplished by transients, a common feature of the early Bahamian utilization of Florida resources. Later permanently settled farmers grew pineapples, tomatoes, melons, and key limes (Langley and Windhorn 1974).

It seems certain that the discrete Conch populations of the Keys and Riviera Beach formed part of a much broader population movement. Judge Curry and his family history, as narrated to the author, illustrate the lives of other immigrants who lost their distinct Bahamian character through contact with other, much larger, groups and through isolation from the centers of Conch culture. His family settled in Manatee County before the Civil War (Curry 1994). In those days, the water connection between the Manatee County area and Key West was the most important means of communication with the outside world and there was some Bahamian immigration to the county. Even a sugar industry, so typical of Loyalist Florida, became a feature of the area, as evidenced by the famous Gamble Plantation (Tebeau 1971).

The Conch populations of the Keys and Riviera Beach constitute relic groups that survived as discrete populations because the Keys remained geographically isolated and Riviera Beach had been too recently settled by a numerically dominant group. Key West, of the two, became more important because it served as a dispersal point for other currents of settlement and evolved into a more fully developed cultural center. Conch residents of the island exercised a more active role in all facets of its life than their counterparts in Riviera Beach. For example, the unique Conch architecture of some of Key West's buildings is famous and remains a major tourist attraction (Smiley and White 1959: 25-7; Riley 1983). Further, the city itself was founded many years before the other community and developed into an important center during the early years of American rule in Florida.

In terms of numbers involved as well as contributions made, the migration of Bahamians to Key West, including some Blacks, was very significant. By 1892, 8,000 of Key West's 25,000 people were Bahamians. The maritime activity of sponging constituted their principal livelihood (Mohl 1987). A numerous population, coupled

with a clannish tradition, encouraged by the Loyalist past, guaranteed group survival in a polyglot city with a strong Cuban element. Their isolated and insular culture contributed to an environment which accommodated the free and permissive lifestyle of other groups in the Keys.

Black Migrants

Bahamian blacks had been familiar with Florida's lower east coast, and particularly the Florida Keys, long before the building of Miami....According to one Bahamian writer, "these early visitors regarded Florida much as another island of the Bahamas." (Mohl 1987).

Miami has always been an attractive destination for the Caribbean peoples, but Bahamian Blacks seemed especially subject to the "pull" of the city on Biscayne Bay. From 1896 to 1920, the city grew from a few hundred to almost 30,000, and Black islanders, nearly all from the Bahamas, totaled 4,815 at the end of that period. The islanders were over half the city's Black population, giving Miami a unique Caribbean flavor (Mohl 1987).

Blacks came because they had long been familiar with the Florida coast and the rapid pace of development of the Lower East Coast created many opportunities. The scrubby pine and oolitic limestone, comprising important parts of the physical environment of South Florida, were similar to the unyielding soil and struggling vegetation of the Bahamas. Bahamians knew how to coax trees, vegetables, and fruits from rocklands. A rapidly expanding economy and the ease with which Bahamians could practice their subsistence gardening in a familiar environment certainly seemed strong inducements to immigrate (Mohl 1987).

Ten to twelve thousand Bahamians, one-fifth of the entire population of the islands, had crossed the narrow seas to Florida between 1900 and 1920. Rising Florida agricultural production and increased import duties on Bahamian agricultural products had crippled the fragile economy of the colony. The consequent unemployment and underemployment had been important "push" factors encouraging emigration. Regular steamship service between Florida and Nassau for the first time had made that option affordable and readily available to Bahamian Blacks (Mohl 1987).

Florida's construction industry experienced boom conditions in those days and the Florida East Coast Railroad was extended to the Florida Keys after 1905, producing many jobs for manual laborers. The reputation of the Bahamians for masonry skill certainly made them attractive employees in the building trades. Florida citrus groves and vegetable farms expanded and Bahamians had the necessary experience in both forms of husbandry. This early phase of the development of the Lower East Coast required manual labor to build infrastructure and to establish the primary industries. With their determination and tradition of hard work, Bahamian Blacks had the right qualities to exploit these opportunities (Mohl 1987).

Culturally, the Bahamian impact on Miami, and especially on Coconut Grove, remained notable. They created a cohesive ethnic community with its own churches and social organizations. Guy Fawkes Day was celebrated for many years and the annual Coconut Grove Goombay Festival was a permanent addition to the calendar (Mohl 1987). Some of the unique Bahamian Black contributions to the Miami cultural milieu certainly derived from the larger Loyalist community. Even the Bahamian Black presence in Miami, and in the Bahamas itself, took place as a consequence of the Loyalist migration of long ago.

Riviera Beach

Between 1910 and 1914, about twenty-five fishermen built shacks to shelter them on the island. At first the Conchs stayed only during the fishing season....By 1920, the settlement had become a permanent community of about sixty families, but many shanties were still occupied only during the winter fishing season (Foster 1991).

Riviera Beach in some respects experienced a different kind of colonization than the process which started about eighty years before in the Keys. Both movements were initiated by a white, maritime people, but the numbers involved in the Riviera Beach migration were much smaller and that population settled in a very limited coastal area. Working class in its self-image, the name "Conch" was not used with the same pride as in the Keys and "Conchtown" was a term of opprobrium. They also faced the suspicion of racial mixture, which relegated them to a lower social position, and the "Conch" name carried the taint of that mixture.

Both groups were noted for their sincere dedication to the Protestant religion, but the dominant sect appears to have been Methodist in the Keys and Pentecostal in Riviera Beach (Langley and Windhorn 1974; Foster 1991).

The primary sources of the Riviera Beach migration, Spanish Wells and Eleuthera, suggest a greater representation of the descendants of the old Conch inhabitants of the Bahamas. Only Long Island, of the three sources named by Foster (1991), was in the Loyalist settled islands. Movement to the Keys had been, conversely, largely from Abaco and its satellites and it involved the vigorous descendants of the Loyalists from those northern islands. The presence of some racially mixed persons as an integral part of the Riviera Beach Conch community is consistent with the more tolerant racial attitudes of the original British population of the Bahamas, and certainly not of the Loyalists (Foster 1991).

Other cultural traits and common historical themes link Riviera Beach with the pervasive Loyalist culture of the Bahamas. Foster (1991) described them as "a close-knit group," in the same words most authorities used to describe the Conch population of the Keys. They were so close-knit in the early days that marriages between cousins became common and about ninety percent of them were related to one another. Riviera Conchs continued the defiant Loyalist tradition of deep pride in their British heritage. Like all Loyalist populations, they maintained a respect for the law and civilized behavior (Foster 1991).

Bahamian fishermen initiated the movement to the Riviera area by establishing temporary quarters at the old inlet during the fishing season. They had long known and used the rich areas within the Gulf Stream, and it was inconvenient to return to the Bahamas after each fishing trip. In 1922 their settlement at Riviera Beach had become permanent and legally incorporated. Riviera grew to a little over 800 inhabitants in 1939, including a large majority of Conchs (Foster 1991).

Fishing remained the dominant occupation, but boat building became another important Riviera activity. During Prohibition, building fast boats and smuggling from the Bahamas became very profitable. Several points in the Bahamas were within sixty miles of the Florida coast. The whole community benefited economically from this illegal trade, but only a few people actually participated (Foster 1991).

Their primary maritime activity continued to be fishing. They formed a cooperative named the Fisherman's Corporation which remained active for twenty years. Riviera Conchs even tried to establish a statewide fishermen's union, but others lacked their vision and cohesion (Foster 1991). These activities seemed consistent with the old Loyalist tradition of trying to maximize economic opportunity and attempting to exploit every favorable circumstance.

Immigration from the Bahamas to Riviera remained easy. "No one in the colony remembers ever being bothered by the U.S. immigration authorities." In the first part of this century, British subjects from the Bahamas entered because it was inconvenient to return to the Bahamas after each fishing trip. In 1922 their settlement at Riviera Beach had become permanent and legally incorporated. Riviera grew to a little over 800 inhabitants in 1939, with a large majority of Conchs (Foster 1991).

Conclusion

The community at Riviera Beach proved to be the last Bahamian settlement founded along the Florida coasts. Although its development seems not to have been hindered by the new immigration laws, they ultimately precluded further enclave type Bahamian colonization of the peninsula. Migration of poorer whites to Riviera and Blacks to the Miami area closed an era in the history of immigration from those Loyalist islands.

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