NOTES ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CAYMANAS

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Abstract

Until the Cayman Islands began to develop as an international finance centre in the mid-1970s, most people had probably never heard of them, let alone been able to locate them on a map. This was certainly true of me when my family moved to Grand Cayman in 1979 from Jamaica, where we had lived since first arriving in the Caribbean from Scotland some 14 years previously. Over the next 12 years or so as I went to school and then worked as a teacher on the islands, my ignorance of the Caymans and her people receded, although the history of the islands remained largely obscure to me. When this article was first drafted in the mid-1990s, there were relatively few academic publications concerned with the history of the Caymans. Indeed, the aim of the article was to research that history with a particular focus on the role of slaves and their owners in the century between their first arrival in 1734 and emancipation in 1834. To that end, this article chronicles the early history of the Caymans, their political connections with Jamaica, the rise of permanent settlements on Grand Cayman, and the development of a viable economy on the islands based at varying times on mahogany, the sea, and cotton. As much as anything else, the article attempts to shed light on the fierce determination of early Caymanians, enslaved and free alike, to carve out a life for themselves in arguably one of the most geographically and economically marginal territories in the western Caribbean.

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In August 1834, a detachment of the 2nd West India Regiment arrived in Grand Cayman at the behest of Governor Sligo of Jamaica to maintain law and order on the island in the wake of the emancipation of slaves there and in the British West Indies at large. When the soldiers and officers of the regiment disembarked, they did so on islands that had been associated with the Crown in one way or another for almost 250 years. For much of that history, the Caymans had been ignored by the representatives of Her Majesty's Government in the West Indies. As a result, the people of these islands had clung to the margins of economic prosperity that came with the establishment of sugar plantations in larger and more fertile British colonies in the Caribbean between the mid-17th and early 19th centuries. To explore the reasons behind the arrival of the 2nd West India Regiment on Grand Cayman that August day in 1834 is to examine the settlement history of the Caymans and, more particularly, the place of slaves and owners in that history.

**EARLY HISTORY AND THE CONNECTION WITH JAMAICA**

The Cayman Islands entered recorded history on 19 May 1503 when Christopher Columbus sighted Cayman Brac and Little Cayman en route from Porto Bello to Hispaniola on his fourth and final voyage of “discovery.” On account of the prodigious number of turtles observed both in the sea and on their shores, Ferdinand Columbus recorded that his father named the islands Las Tortugas. In the explorer’s papers, there is no mention of a third, larger island some 60 miles to the southwest, although by 1523 cartographers had begun to place three islands on their maps under the name Lagartos. By 1530, the islands appear as the Caymanas, a name or variant of which has survived to this day. The name Tortuga had meanwhile been assigned to a small, turtle-shaped island off the northwest coast of Hispaniola (Williams 1970, 3).

Once discovered and charted, the Caymans remained largely unexplored and unsettled until the 1590s, when they began to develop as a resupply point for English privateering vessels operating in the northwest Caribbean. Denied the rights to commerce and colonization in the New World by the Treaty of Tordesillas and by successive kings of Spain, the Crown government of England had taken to sponsoring the plunder of Spanish fleets and the sacking of shore
settlements in an attempt to gain a share of the vast mineral wealth of the
Americas. Islands such as the Caymanas, which lay within striking distance of
the Flota and Galleones and which afforded safe anchorage as well as adequate
supplies of food and fresh water, were held in high regard by English privateers
and by the freebooters, smugglers, buccaneers, and pirates who came in their
wake. Thus, in 1592 a Captain William King aboard the Salomon sailed from
Jamaica and landed at Grand Caymanas “where we found no people, but a
good river of fresh water, and . . . three score great tortoises, two of which . . .
fed 10 men for a day.” King also noted in his journal that the doves, wild geese,
and other fowl on the island were a welcome addition to a seaman’s diet (Hirst
1910, 3).

The reputation of Grand Caymanas as a place where ships could obtain fresh
water and provisions spread over the next half century, and by 1643 a Captain
William Jackson wrote that the island was “. . . much frequented by English,
French and Dutch ships that come purposely to salt up the flesh of these
tortoises . . .” (Hirst 1910, 4).1 The English connection with the Caymanas was
strengthened in the aftermath of the capture of Jamaica from the Spanish by
Admiral Penn and General Venables in May 1655 as part of Oliver Cromwell’s
ill-fated Grand Design. With a squadron thereafter based at Port Royal,
references to naval vessels calling at the Caymanas for water and turtle become
more frequent. On 26 June 1655, Henry Whistler, aboard Penn’s flagship
Swiftsure, recorded in his diary that the vessel intended to “touch at the Kie of
Manus to get some turtle for our sick people.” The following day, Swiftsure
encountered the frigates Dover, Arms of Holland, and Hound, also “sent to the
Kie of Manus for turtle for the fleet” (Hirst 1910, 7).

Movement towards a more formal relationship between Jamaica and the
Caymanas began in 1661. In the Royal Instructions issued in London that year
to Lord Windsor, before he assumed the governorship of Jamaica in 1662, the
Caymanas were for the first time officially referred to as part of the territory of
Jamaica. Forts were to be raised on the Caymanas in order that these might
preserve an “advantage towards the security and well settling of our island of
Jamaica” (Hirst 1910, 18).

Tradition has it that the first European settlers to arrive on the Caymanas
were deserters from Venables’s army, that two men named Bodden and Watler
reached the Lesser Caymanas from Jamaica sometime around 1658, and that
they and/or their descendants were among the individuals on the Caymans granted an amnesty by the governor of Jamaica in 1671 (CO140/1, ff.223–35). Whatever their origins, most of the “soldiers, planters, privateers and inhabitants” who took advantage of the amnesty and returned to Jamaica had originally been encouraged to settle on the Caymans in the 1660s as successive governors of Jamaica sought to use the islands as a buffer against Spanish attacks on Jamaica. For the next 60 years or so, the Caymans remained a safe anchorage from which buccaneers and freebooters could launch raids on vessels plying the main shipping routes between Central America, Cuba, Jamaica, and Florida. As well, the islands were destinations for itinerant turtlers, who came over from Jamaica whenever it was safe to do so.

**Permanent Settlements**

On 9 November 1735, an Issac Bodden (or Bawden) was married in Port Royal to a former widow named Sarah Lamar. In the Port Royal parish register, Issac is described as a mariner, and both he and his bride are noted as being “of Caymanas.” On the same day, a separate entry in the register records the baptism of their two sons, Benjamin Lock Bawden, born 17 December 1730, and William Price Bawden, born 11 November 1732 (CINA MSD 82/347). If it is assumed that these boys were born on the Caymans, then clearly Issac had been living on those islands for a number of years. The fact that his wife Sarah was a widow probably suggests that there were other inhabitants then on the Caymans as well.

The observations of a George Gauld, who carried out a hydrographic survey of the Caymans for the British admiralty in 1773, seem to confirm that Bodden had been living on Grand Cayman since at least the early 1730s. Attached as appendages to his hand-drawn maps of the three Caymans are the meticulous notes Gauld made on the history and settlement of Grand Cayman as told to him by settlers then on the island. In his notes, Gauld wrote of meeting Old Issac Bodden, a native of the island “now upwards of 70 years of age...” and almost certainly the same Issac Bodden who appears in the Port Royal parish register of 1735. Bodden himself had probably been one of several itinerant turtlers from Jamaica who sometime in the early 18th century decided that it
was safe enough to remain permanently on the Caymans. According to Gauld, he had established one of the first permanent settlements at a place called Old Issacs on the southeast shore of Grand Cayman near the present village of East End (CINA, George Gauld Map).

The first documentary evidence of the early settlement of Grand Cayman confirms that if the area around Old Issacs was one of the island’s first settlements, it did not remain so for very long. The evidence in question is contained in the patents to five grants of land in the Caymans made to a like number of individuals by the authorities in Jamaica between 1734 and 1742.

The patent for the first grant was drawn up on 28 February 1734. By it, 3,000 acres of land at Grand Cayman were given over jointly to Daniel Campbell, John Middleton, and Mary Campbell. According to the land grant, the Campbell-Middleton holding incorporated a stretch of land on the North Sound running west from Red Bay Estates to the eastern outskirts of modern George Town, south to land east of Jackson Point, and then east again to Red Bay Estates (Hirst 1910, 38–40).

Of the four remaining land grants made to individuals between 1741 and 1742, 1,000 acres were given to each of Samuel Spofforth, Murray Crymble, William Foster, and to Mary Bodden. Two of these patentees, Spofforth and Crymble, were absentee merchants based in Bermuda and Jamaica respectively. Their interest in land on the Caymans seems to have been largely speculative. However, William Foster and Mary Bodden were both directly involved in the economic life of the islands.

From the patents themselves, if appears that the 1,000 acres granted to Murray Crymble were located north of the Campbell-Middleton grant and traversed the neck of land between present-day George Town and West Bay. Samuel Spofforth’s grant covered 1,000 acres on the northwest tip of the island and stretched from North-West Point through Boatswain’s Point and as far east as Spanish Bay. William Foster’s patent granted him title to land from the centre of George Town south through Jackson’s Point (forming the western boundary of the Campbell-Middleton land) to South West Point near the western entrance to South Sound (Craton 1998, 12–13). The location of Mary Bodden’s land is less certain. However, because it did not abut the sea on any side, and because the surveyor was a Thomas Newland, George Hirst believed the grant to be in the vicinity of present-day Newlands, an area in the relatively
fertile centre of the island between Savannah and Bodden Town (Hirst 1910, 53–55)

Apart from fishing and turtling, some of the clearest information on the activities of early settlers in Grand Cayman is found in the details of a commercial lawsuit brought against William Foster (to whom land would be patented in 1741) by a Benjamin Battersby, filed at the magistrate's court in Spanish Town, Jamaica, in September 1739, but covering the period from December 1734. On 11 December 1734, Foster and Battersby had contracted a "John Bodden of Grand Caymanas, Mariner..." to take "eight negro men slaves... the property of the said William Foster to the Grand Caymans in order to cut mahogany plank." Under the agreement, Bodden was to receive either one quarter of the mahogany plank or one quarter of the proceeds of the sale of the total.

For a while at least, the Foster-Battersby partnership worked well enough for William Foster to arrange for an additional 20 slaves and a skilled Sawyer named William Proser to be sent over to Cayman. Sometime in 1737, the Foster-Battersby partnership was dissolved (JA 1A/3, Chancery Court Liber 28, 344–52). The real significance of the details contained in the subsequent lawsuit is that they illustrate that the economy of the Caymans during the early period of settlement was primarily an extractive one, with small groups of slaves working the scattered timber cuts on the island.

**The Economy of the Caymans**

Descriptive information about the society and economy evolving on Grand Cayman during the second half of the 18th century is available in the remark books kept by Royal Navy officers who often passed by the Caymans while on patrol or convoy duties in the northwest Caribbean. Several of the remark book entries confirm many of Gauld's observations about life on the Caymans at that time and suggest that most early settlers on the islands lived for most of the year on the margins of subsistence. On 26 May 1764, for example, Captain George Watson aboard _HMS Alarm_ noted that at the Hog Styes there were "a few poor cottages" and that "16 familys in different Parts that subsists in Fishing and Cutting Mahogany. Small vessels from Jamaica brings them
necessaries and carry off their produce . . . turtle in abundance . . . and one small schooner at the Place” (Remark Books, vol. 2 (Aii), 42a, 36, 47).

_HMS Adventure_, commanded by Captain Thomas Fitzherbert, visited the Caymans on several occasions between January 1768 and May 1769. Anchoring at “Georgetown,” Fitzherbert wrote of:

A great abundance of firewood to be cut very conveniently but fresh water is very scarce only got from two small wells. Poultry, Turtle, Fish, Yams Potatoes and Greens to be bought from the Inhabitants which are a few English . . . this Island produces Mahogany, cedar, dyewoods and cotton. (Remark Books, vol. 2 (Aii), 342)

By the time George Gauld arrived on the Caymans in 1773, there were 39 families on Grand Cayman “consisting of at least 200 white people and above same number of Negroes and Mulattoes” scattered over four settlements. Twenty-one families lived in Bodden Town, 13 in the West End (the Hoy Styes), three in East End, and two at Spotts (CINA, George Gauld Map). With respect to governance, the islanders had no legislature, but had:

A chief, or governor, of their own choosing, and regulations of their own framing, they have some justices of the peace among them appointed by a commission from the governor of Jamaica (but) scarcely any form of civil government. (Long 1774, vol. 1, 312)

Gauld noted that these settlers on Grand Cayman in the early 1770s were producing unspecified quantities of cotton, principally for export. For their own consumption and to supply passing vessels, they grew corn, yams, sweet potatoes, plantains, melons, limes, oranges, and other fruits and vegetables. Sugar cane was grown and converted into syrup for domestic use only. Gauld also noted that a few of the people of “considerable property” between them owned about half a dozen sloops and schooners, which were employed in turtling and “trafficking to Jamaica” (CINA, George Gauld Map).

Some indication of the nature of this carrying trade between the Caymans and Jamaica during the middle years of the 18th century is contained in the Jamaican Shipping Returns (1680–1818) at the Public Record Office in London. From these, there appears to have been an upswing in trade between Jamaica and the Caymans at the end of the Seven Years’ War (1756–63). Towards the end of February 1764, for example, several mahogany carriers arrived in Kingston from “Grand Caymanoes.” The 50-ton brig Success and a 30-ton sloop
Eagle together unloaded 80 tons of timber at Kingston during the third week of February while their escort, a 40-ton sloop also named Eagle, carried 30 tons of mahogany. In April of the same year, the 15-ton Greyhound came into Kingston from Grand Cayman with 15 tons of mahogany on board. Both the Success and the larger Eagle had sailed from Kingston in January 1764 bound for the Caymans with “dry goods” on board (CO 142/17, ff.54–5, 18, 91–96).

Although settlers on the Caymans were exporting mahogany and cotton to Jamaica, their status as colonists on the periphery of the Sugar Revolution as this played itself out on larger and more fertile islands and mainland territories in the British Caribbean is confirmed by the relatively limited quantities of these crops being shipped, and by the precise nature of the carrying trade with Jamaica. The shipping returns suggest that this “trafficking to Jamaica” observed by Gauld in 1773 was actually one leg of a triangular trade in mahogany, logwood, and fustic between Jamaica, the Caymans, and British settlements in Central America, in particular Belize (British Honduras) and along the Mosquito Shore. When the 30-ton sloop Diamond arrived in Kingston from Grand Cayman on 30 March 1768, for example, she off-loaded 400 feet of mahogany, 260 pieces of timber, and two tons of fustic, and then set sail almost immediately for Belize in ballast (CO 142/17, ff.82–83).

The precise role of the Caymans in this trade is suggested in a memorandum and sketch map seized by the Spanish authorities in Cartagena from a Robert Hodgson Jr, the British superintendent of the Mosquito Shore, who had been captured en route to England in 1783 (CINA, MSD/1881). The memorandum contained a recommendation that the reciprocal trade between British and Spanish colonies was to be continued, even though such trade was not formally permitted by either country’s laws. A crudely drawn sketch map enclosed in the Hodgson memorandum appears to illustrate that the Caymans were an important relay station in this indirect and essentially clandestine trade (CINA, MSD/1881), a circumstance that may also explain why several of the ships arriving in Kingston from the Caymans during this period carried logwood, cocoa, and sasparilla produced in Central America but not in the Caymans (Cragon 1998, ch. 5, 24).

As a final point on the history of early settlement in the Caymans, the trade link with Central America was to have a direct impact on the size of population
in the island. When the Mosquito Shore was evacuated by the British in 1787 under the terms of the Convention of London signed the year before as an extension to the Treaty of Versailles (1783), most of the Shore evacuees and their slaves departed for the Belize territory, but some headed instead for the Caymans. An entry in the remark book of Captain John Hull aboard the *HMS Camilla*, "standing off and on" George Town on 17 August 1787, notes that "... about 300 people are lately settled on this island from the Mosquito Shore, and adjacent islands, who are making large plantations for Cotton" (Remark Books, vol. 43 (ac 5), 560–61).

While settlers on Grand Cayman had been growing cotton before the immigration of these evacuees and their slaves from the Mosquito Shore, their arrival coincided with the onset of a short-lived Caymanian slave plantation economy.

**Slave Plantations in the Caymans**

For the most part, and with the exception of mahogany cutting, the economy of the Caymans appears to have retained a primarily subsistence focus for much of the 18th century. To revisit the Royal Navy remark books, Robert Christian aboard the *HMS Active* noted that on Grand Cayman in 1765:

Salt provision none to be got Fish and Turtle in great plenty some few refreshments at certain Seasons of the Year Yames, Plantons, Potatoes, Lymes, fowls and Hoggs ... As to Trade but little, there is about 20 Familys in the Island most of there Employment is cutting mahogany, Fustick and &c. which they send to Jamaica. (CINA MSD/174/421, vol. 9, 1765)

When he arrived on the Caymans in 1773, the naval hydrographer George Gauld observed that:

... for their own consumption, and to supply the Vessels that pass by, they raise Indian Corn, yams, sweet potatoes, pompions, plantains, melons, besides Limes, Oranges and most kinds of fruit and vegetables that are to be found in Jamaica. The Sugar Cane like wise grows very well, of which they make as much syrup as serves for their own use ... There are plenty of goats on the island but neither sheep nor black Cattle, and only two horses. (CINA, George Gauld Map)
It has already been noted that at the time of Gauld’s stay in the Caymans, Grand Cayman was producing “... a great quantity of Cotton which is their principle article of export, besides Turtle ...” (CINA, George Gauld Map). Unfortunately, Gauld is silent on exactly how much cotton settlers on Cayman were exporting to Jamaica. However, in providing his own estimate of the island’s population and, more particularly, a description of where they lived, the hydrographer hints at the location of the main growing areas on Grand Cayman at the time. According to Gauld, there were 39 families in all resident on the island, 21 of whom lived “at the South Side, which we have called Bodden Town, 13 at the West End commonly called the Hogsties, 3 at the East End, and 2 at Spot’s Bay” (CINA, George Gauld Map). Significantly, when Edward Corbet was despatched in June 1802 from Jamaica by Governor George Nugent to compile the islands’ first official census and to make general observations on the state of the Caymans, the population had more or less doubled since 1773, while its distribution had remained generally the same.

Thus, Bodden Town was still the largest settlement, with 24 white and eight free-coloured families, totalling 374 persons (including slaves) in all; there were 211 persons living at George Town (the Hogsties) spread across 17 white and five free-coloured families; while three white families lived at Spotts, seven at South West Sound, and two each at Prospect and Little Pedro, totalling 212 persons altogether (Corbet 1802, 21).

Since 1773, settlers on Grand Cayman had also moved into West Bay and North Side, but the bulk of the population was living on and working the land in the centre of the island, that is, on an eight-by-two mile swath of land running east from George Town through Prospect to Bodden Town. Here, according to Corbet in 1802:

The soil is good and altho’ interspersed with Rocks, is capable of producing Cotton and probably Coffee ... yams, plaintains and &c. From Prospect to George Town and across the Island to the northside the soil near the Coast is black ... and now produces Cotton, Sugar Canes, Corn and ground provisions ... (Corbet 1802, 5)

Corbet was unable to determine “with any degree of certainty” the acreage of land under cultivation on Grand Cayman at the time of his visit, but the settlers with whom he spoke estimated that they produced about 30 tons of cotton annually (Corbet 1802, 5).
It appears that Edward Corbet had arrived in the Caymans when a cotton "boom" (at least by local standards) was well under way on the islands. The single most important event precipitating this experiment with plantation agriculture had been the arrival in the Caymans of a relatively large number of immigrant settlers and slaves, most of whom had experience of plantation agriculture. As noted above, these migrants had come to the Caymans from the Mosquito Shore territory, which they had been obliged to abandon under the Convention of London signed in 1786. Colonial Office records confirm that between February and May 1787, at least three groups of evacuees arrived on Grand Cayman from the Mosquito Shore aboard the schooners *Nancy* and *Phoenix*, which carried 26 persons (of whom 24 were slaves) and 31 persons (24 slaves and 7 free) respectively, and on an unnamed vessel owned by Joseph Wood that left Pearl Lagoon on 30 May 1787 with 80 persons aboard, including Wood's entire family and 40 slaves (CO123/6, ff.83–84). There were almost certainly other slave owners and would-be planters to arrive on the Caymans from the Shore. As mentioned above, in August 1787, Captain John Hull noted that about 300 people from the Shore had lately settled on Grand Cayman, of whom approximately 50 were free persons and the remaining 250 slaves (Remark Books, vol. 43 (Ac.5), 560–61). While these numbers were small in absolute terms, given Gauld's estimate of "at least 200 white people and above the same number of Negroes and Mulattoes" in 1773, the new arrivals on Grand Cayman had effectively increased the island's free population by as much as 60 per cent and probably doubled the number of slaves in the colony. The Shoremen who arrived on Grand Cayman in 1787 seem to have been encouraged to take up most of the unworked lands on the island that were best suited to planting. Thereafter, they sought to establish private estates primarily for the production of sea-island cotton.

Although there do not appear to have been any systematic records kept of the quantities of goods and provisions produced on the Caymans at the time, the information contained in the Jamaican shipping returns relating to these islands are particularly full for a 30-month period between January 1802 and July 1804. During this time, 25 vessels varying in size from 14 to 85 tons were engaged in trade between Grand Cayman and the Jamaican ports of Kingston and Montego Bay. There are 46 inward Caymanian entries in the Jamaican port books covering the period and cotton almost invariable formed the bulk of the
inward cargoes. In all, 18 ships made 30 return voyages to Jamaica from Grand Cayman, carrying a total of some 200,000 lbs of cotton fibre, suggesting an annual Caymanian output of about 40 tons a year in the early 1800s, when the plantations in Cayman were probably close to peak production. The balance of these cargoes comprised turtles and relatively small amounts of mahogany cut and planked in the Caymans, together with sasparilla, fustic, and cocoa brought in from Central America. Very occasionally, the inward cargoes to Jamaica included “wreck goods” from vessels that had come to grief in Cayman waters. By way of illustration, in January 1804 Captain John Smith brought “the schooner Eliza into Kingston from the Caymans with 2 cannons, 15 bags of cotton, 32 mahogany logs, and 500 pieces of tortoise shell on board” (CO142/13–29, ff.37).

As far as the outward cargoes from Jamaica to Grand Cayman over the same period are concerned, these tend to reflect the demands of an increasing population and an expanding plantation economy. The items most commonly listed are “dry goods” (iron pots and crockery, oznaburgh, crocus sacking, soap, candles, and clay pipes), “provisions” (usually flour, butter, and salted fish), and puncheons or kegs of rum. Broadly typical of these outward cargoes was that aboard the William and Mary, which cleared Kingston for Cayman on 3 March 1803. Owned and captained by James Watler of Caymanas, the 36-ton schooner had a consignment of 21 barrels of flour, seven barrels of tar and pitch, five barrels of salt, four boxes of soap and candles, three firkins of butter, two boxes of clay pipes, 2,972 lbs of mixed provisions, and 2,250 board feet of pine planking, probably for house construction (CO142/21, ff.67–68).

The William and Mary also carried “9 Negroes,” who were listed in the manifest like any other item of cargo. According to Michael Craton (1998) this entry, and others like it in the shipping returns for 1802–04, may be significant in terms of what they reveal about the strength of the Cayman economy and the optimism among cotton planters on the island at the turn of the 19th century. Between January 1802 and July 1804, some 153 slaves were conveyed from Kingston to Grand Cayman on 14 separate voyages, always in small groups numbering from four to 25. These “new” slaves were likely to have been paid for either in produce already consigned or on credit for goods to be sent later. If these slaves were mostly adult males (they were described neither by condition, age, nor sex in the shipping returns) and recently arrived in Jamaica.
from Africa, their average unit price would have been about £100 Jamaican currency. For Cayman cotton growers, £15,300 for these slaves alone must have represented a considerable investment and may reflect high expectations of profit among the main planters on Cayman (Craton 1998, ch.6, 18).

Unfortunately, it is not known to whom these slaves were delivered once they were off-loaded on the Caymans. However, if we assume that most of these slaves were bought by the major slave owners listed in the census drawn up by Edward Corbet in 1802, it is possible to estimate the average size of cotton holdings on Grand Cayman at the time plantations on the island were either at, or close to, optimum production. In June 1802, Corbet counted 545 slaves on Grand Cayman, 313 of whom were the property of 10 white owner families living in the central “cotton belt” between George Town and Bodden Town. Thus at Bodden Town, John Bodden Snr and William Bodden owned 51 slaves each, Joseph Bodden 37, Waide Watler Snr 31; at Spotts, another William Bodden owned 21 slaves and William Eden 9; at Prospect, Thomas Thomson owned 56 slaves and Waide Watler Jnr 17; while at George Town, John Drayton owned 23 slaves and Rachel Rivers 17. The only free person of colour in the Cayman cotton belt to own what might have constituted a small working gang was John Tatum of Bodden Town, who had 10 slaves (Corbet 1802, 10-19). Contemporary estimates of the amount of arable land in the eight-by-two mile central belt approach 1,200 acres, which suggests that at the peak of the cotton “boom” in the Caymans at the beginning of the 19th century, there may have been roughly a dozen plantations on Grand Cayman averaging approximately 100 acres in planted cotton and worked by labour units of about 30 slaves each (Craton 1998, ch.6, 19).

As in the Bahamas, which enjoyed a similar pattern of economic development at about the same time, cotton plantations on the Caymans seem to have declined as rapidly as they had developed. Competition from cotton growers in the American South, insect infestations, and exhausted Caymanian soils together made it necessary for plantation owners to reorganize their slave labour force and to diversify into more provision farming and stock raising for export to Jamaica and to supply passing ships. Unfortunately, here again precise figures to chart the relative success or failure of this attempt at diversifying the Cayman economy are not available. However, the fragmented Jamaican shipping returns for the decade after 1808, for example, record a
sharp decline in the number of vessels regularly engaged in the Cayman-Jamaican trade. Presumably, less cotton to export meant that fewer ships were needed for the carrying trade, while those vessels that continued to call at Kingston from Cayman carried reduced cargoes. Broadly typical of this trend was the consignment of 80 bushels of corn, one bag of cotton, 31 barrels of ginger, and two tons of logwood along with a quantity of “wreck goods” landed at Kingston in November 1817 by the William and Mary out of George Town (CO142/26, ff.91; CO142/27, ff.47).

With the end of the experiment in plantation culture on the Caymans by the second decade of the 19th century, it seems that land owners on Grand Cayman who had previously concentrated the efforts of their slaves on growing sea-island cotton for export had been forced to turn their estates into more diversified holdings focused on the cultivation of crops with a proven track record on the Caymans, and which George Gauld had observed growing on the island in 1773. While cotton was still cultivated on Grand Cayman through to emancipation in 1834, albeit not on the scale of the boom years at the start of the 19th century, the pattern of ownership of slaves does not appear to have changed significantly with diversification. Indeed, the 80 bushels of corn in the above-noted cargo of the William and Mary suggests that in some years agriculture on Grand Cayman post-cotton was practiced on a more than strictly subsistence level. That said, the observations of a Captain J.W. Carter who called at Cayman in December 1819 are indicative of the general economic malaise that had beset the Caymans some years before the 2nd West India Regiment arrived. In his remark book, Captain Carter aboard HMS Wasp noted that “...Turtle, ground provisions and fruit may be obtained here but not very plentifully. . .” (Remark Books, vol. 43 (Ac. 5), 438–39). Significantly, Carter makes no mention of cotton or mahogany.
Notes on The Early History of The Caymanas

NOTES

1. To protect its treasure fleets, the Spanish Crown established a convoy system by which two fleets sailed across the Atlantic and through the waters of the Caribbean each year. The Flota left Seville in April or May and divided when it reached the West Indies, with some vessels putting into ports such as San Juan, Santo Domingo, and Santiago, Cuba while the remaining vessels sailed on to Vera Cruz in Mexico. The Galleones left Seville in August and made for Spanish ports in Central and South America. Both the Flota and the Galleones reassembled in Havana in April or May of the following year and, after refitting and taking on supplies, the combined fleet set sail across the Atlantic to Spain under heavy escort. Although the entire convoy was captured only four times in its 150-year history, each year several vessels were lost in storms and to privateers and freebooters based on islands like the Caymans. As well, local Spanish shipping tended to follow the convoy routes around the Caribbean and, without the kind of protection afforded the Flota and Galleones, were far more likely to come under attack.

2. I was kindly given copies of Craton’s work by Dr. Philip Pedley of Cayman Islands National Archives (CINA) on condition these are returned when I completed my study. Craton was aware that I had copies of his research work.

3. From the records of the lawsuit, it appears that relations between the two merchants soured over a debt of £1,000. According to Battersby, sometime in 1737 Foster entered an undisclosed partnership with John Bodden, William Proser, and certain local inhabitants on Grand Cayman to cut and plank mahogany. The basis of the lawsuit that ensued was Battersby’s determination to recover what he regarded as his share of the slaves, the saws, and other supplies sent; as well as the mahogany trees cut and shipped after 1737; and to secure the chance of patenting the land worked on Grand Cayman.

4. After 1761, and in addition to their normal ships logs, Royal Naval captains were obliged to keep remark books while on duty in the various seas and oceans of the world. Copies of these remark books are held at the Hydrographic Office in London and the entries quoted here are from photostat reprints of those relevant to Cayman held at Cayman Islands National Archives.

5. Robert Hodgson Jr succeeded his father as superintendent of the Mosquito Shore in or about 1776. After his capture by Spanish forces in 1783, he agreed to perform the same role for Spain once the British evacuated the Shore as per the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the Maritime Wars (1775–83) between England and Spain.
6. A copy of the sketch map taken from Hodgson during his interrogation in 1783 is held at CINA but is of a sufficiently poor quality to prevent its inclusion in this article.

7. We know from CO137/86 (A List of Settlers, their Slaves &c on the Mosquito Shore, 16 October 1786) that Joseph Wood of the District of Bluefields owned 40 slaves at the time.

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