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Between Swamp and Sea: Bahamian Visitors in Southeast Florida before Miami

by Devin Leigh

Until 1896 South Florida might as well have been an island joined to the Bahamas by sailboat and custom, separated from the rest of the state by miles of swamps and rivers.

The land on which the settlers lived was a rock ridge, a rim of rock with the sea on one side and the watery expanse of the Everglades on the other. The land was a mere backdrop for the action which took place on the water.

—Helen Muir, *Miami U.S.A* (1953) ¹

In 1865, George Franklin Thompson, a representative of the Freedman's Bureau, wrote that southeast Florida could become the "garden of the United States," but only if the water levels of Lake Okeechobee could be lowered by at least six feet.²

Devin Leigh graduated with his MA in History from Loyola University Chicago in May, 2015. He will continue his studies at UC Davis, writing his dissertation on the history of the Black Caesar legends of Biscayne Bay. The following essay was conceived for a course in comparative urban history taught by Leslie Dossey. The author would like to thank the professor and his classmates for their feedback. He would also like to thank the following people for their support: Paul George, Victoria Cervantes, Suzanne Kaufman, Ogenga Otunnu, John Donoghue, Peter Ferdinando, and Connie Lester. Finally, Devin would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this work, all of the staff who make regional history journals possible, and anyone who works to make historical sources more accessible to the general public.

1 Helen Muir, *Miami U.S.A.* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 6.

2 James Cusick, ed. and transcriber, *George F. Thompson: A Tour of Central Florida and the Lower West Coast, Dec. 1865 through Jan. 1866.* George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00096285/00001>

In this assessment, Thompson epitomized the nineteenth-century, triumphalist belief that settlement in the region of present-day Miami would depend upon a severe manipulation of the natural environment. According to the Miami metropolitan narrative, this manipulation came in the year 1896, when a widowed heiress and “plucky” pioneer from Cleveland named Julia Tuttle capitalized on the Great Freeze of 1894-1895, and convinced the cofounder of Standard Oil and railroad tycoon Henry Flagler to extend the tracks of his Florida East Coast Railway south from present-day West Palm Beach to the “wilderness” of the Miami River.³ In this singular moment, the natural landscape of southeast Florida was finally conquered by industrialism. Three months later, on the afternoon of Tuesday, July 28, the modern American city of Miami was officially incorporated through the ballots of 344 voters from the greater Dade County.⁴

While these anecdotes reveal an enduring tension between the natural and the human in the history of southeast Florida, they also occupy the same end of the narrative spectrum. Not all visitors to southeast Florida during the preindustrial age wanted to drain the lake, nor did they all subscribe to the belief that a railroad terminus was a necessary caveat for civilization. In fact, far from dreaming about the wholesale manipulation of their natural surroundings, many individuals actually hoped that the environment would remain unchanged. Borrowing concepts from John Mack Faragher’s *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (1988), this essay focuses on the experiences of a particular group of these individuals: Bahamian sailors.⁵ These sailors had been sojourning in the waters and littorals of southeast Florida since at least the 1680s. Before industrialization took place in the region, they had operated as traders, divers, slavers, oilers, wreckers, whalers, salt-rakers, spongers, foresters, eggers, turtlers, anglers, hunters, agriculturists, pilots, privateers, and pirates. In particular, Bahamian fishermen frequented Key Biscayne, just across the bay from present-day Miami, because, in addition to plenty of conch, deer, raccoon, birds, fish, wood, and turtles, the island was “noted

(accessed February 10, 2014), 55.

3 Arva Moore Parks, *Miami: The Magic City* (Miami: Centennial Press, 1981), inside jacket fold.

4 For the incorporation of Miami, see Larry Wiggins, “The Birth of the City of Miami,” *Tequesta* 55 (1995): 5-38.

5 John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

for affording a greater quantity of good water...found in natural wells about four feet deep."⁶

This study briefly addresses three of the most important professions that brought Bahamians to southeast Florida: foresting, turtling, and wrecking. It suggests positioning Bahamian foresters, turtlers, and wreckers in an intermediate stage between the first-known, subsistence-oriented natives of southeast Florida and the capitalist-driven, American transplants who would come to define the region, as well as its greater historical narrative, after industrialization. As the social historian Alan Taylor has summarized, such intermediate groups formed the middle section of a "tripartite division." They often engaged in hybrid practices of communal and private property; they cleared some land for settlement, but they also grazed their livestock unfenced and partook in communal work parties; they were enmeshed in markets, yet they sought only a "modest competence rather than the perpetual accumulation of capital;" and, perhaps most importantly, they interacted with the natural environment in unique ways that would eventually become both obsolete and forgotten.⁷

Present-day Miami is located in the northern part of Biscayne Bay, a 35-by-8-mile shallow and tropical lagoon in southeast Florida. The bay is a mixture of both salt and freshwater. It is partially enclosed by the southernmost barrier islands of the United States and the uppermost chain of the Florida Keys. The opening between these two archipelagos is the Safety Valve, a series of sand flats separated by tidal channels. This 8-mile opening unites the lagoon with the swift, thermal, Atlantic Ocean current known as the Gulf Stream. At 4.5 knots, the velocity of this stream is unparalleled. It is not an exaggeration to state that South Florida, Cuba, and the Bahamas are bounded by one of the greatest natural highways on earth.⁸ To make matters even more interesting, the western end of

6 Andrew Ellicot, quoted in Charlton Tebeau (ed), "From Tampa Bay to Biscayne Bay in 1799," *Tequesta* 38 (1978): 75; Sir Thomas Lynch to the Governor of New Providence (Robert Clark), August 20, 1682, CO 1/49, no. 35i. Source available at the National Archives in Kew, London, England.

7 Alan Taylor, "Unnatural Inequalities: Social and Environmental Histories," *Environmental History* 4 (1996): 9-10.

8 The environmental and historical significance of the Gulf Stream, including its biodiversity, its known history of human exploration, and its relationship to the European colonization of the Americas, has been described by the geologist and meteorologist Stan Ulanski in *The Gulf Stream: Tiny Plankton, Giant Bluefin, and the Amazing Story of the Powerful River in the Atlantic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Writing in the 1770s, a German cartographer phrased it this way: the Gulf Stream was "anxiously compressed

the Gulf Stream is home to the Great Florida Reef, a submerged tract of living coral formations that extends around the entirety of the peninsula. The eastern boundary of the stream is formed by the Bahaman banks, and the southern and southwestern boundaries of the stream are bordered by the atoll of Cal Sal Bank and the northern coast of Cuba. This means that Bimini, the westernmost district of the Bahamas, lies only 53 miles east of Miami.⁹

Modern Miami is bordered to the west by an entirely different, yet equally remarkable, natural phenomenon. This is the Everglades, a complex network of palustrine ecosystems that covers the majority of southern Florida.¹⁰ These wetland ecosystems include saw-grass marshes, water-lily sloughs, tropical hardwood hammocks, pine rocklands, cypress swamps, mangrove and coastal prairies, and the marine environment of Florida Bay, situated between the Florida Keys and the southern end of the peninsula. Historically, these ecosystems have been home to a vast array of flora and fauna, attracting both temperate species from the north and tropical species from the south.

The Everglades natural region occupies the lowest-lying, southern portion of the Florida peninsula. It is filled seasonally by a horseshoe system of watersheds; these elevated areas funnel rainwater downward from the Kissimmee chain of lakes, through the Kissimmee River, and into Lake Okeechobee. When this lake overflows, the excess water spills south over the limestone shelf in massive sheets; these sheets cannot disperse through the porous

by the islands Cuba and the Bahamas on one side, and the promontory [of Cape Florida] on the other." William John Gerard de Brahm, *The Atlantic Pilot*, (London: T. Spilsbury, 1772), 7.

- 9 For scientific descriptions of the natural environment of Biscayne Bay, as well as a comprehensive bibliography, see A.Y. Cantillo, K. Hale, L. Pikula, and R. Caballero, *Biscayne Bay: Environmental History and Annotated Bibliography* (Silver Spring, MD: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, 2000).
- 10 The environmental and historical significance of the Everglades, including its biodiversity and its history with humans, was first described by the activist and journalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas in *The Everglades: River of Grass* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1947). Since this salient publication, numerous works have focused on articulating the environmental and human history of the Everglades natural area, whether for scientific, conservation, education, or academic purposes. Some of the most well-known works include: Charlton Tebeau, *Man in the Everglades: 2000 Years of Human History in the Everglades National Park* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1968); David McCally, *The Everglades: An Environmental History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); and Michael Grunwald. *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Grunwald provides a helpful list of lesser-known dissertations on the Everglades in an appendix to his book.

and shallow water table, so they are forced to seek drainage in Florida Bay, the coastal prairies, and the traverse glades of Biscayne Bay. Water that remains in the Everglades will gradually evaporate; then, southerly winds will carry rainclouds back to the watersheds, where the cyclical process will begin again. However, it is important to note that present-day Miami is protected from these seasonal inundations because it rests on top of a 20-to-24 foot, narrow band of oolitic limestone known as the Atlantic coastal ridge.¹¹

One cannot understand the triumphalist, American narrative of southeast Florida without first understanding this geography. When Thompson proposed draining Lake Okeechobee in 1865, he imagined liberating the potential for settlement beyond the confines of the Atlantic coastal ridge. When Henry Flagler extended his railway 31 years later, he was forced to do so along the stone scaffolding of that same ridge. From the perspective of American homesteaders and entrepreneurs, who inherited south Florida through the imperialism of the Seminole Wars and the policing of the US West Indies Squadron, the complete conquest of Miami would be made possible only by what Ted Steinberg has called "the new consumer economy."¹² Only by importing foodstuffs and everyday items of mass production from elsewhere would a major, postindustrial city on the edge of southeast Florida become possible. This logic explains why Miami became one of the last major American cities to be founded in the United States.¹³

Unfortunately, the secondary literature regarding the history of southeast Florida too often reflects this triumphalist narrative. While there are strong literary traditions that focus on the conflicts of the Seminole Wars, the environmental battles to conquer and then conserve the Everglades, the cultural experiences of early American homesteaders, and the racialized history of the bay during Jim Crow, far less has been written about the fluid relationship between southern Florida and the Caribbean

11 At the time of this writing, a recreated portion of this ridge, known as the Silver Bluff, was on display as part of an exhibit titled "Topical Dreams: A People's History of South Florida" at *HistoryMiami: The Museum of South Florida*, 101 West Flagler Street, Miami, FL 33130.

12 Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75. For the US West Indies Squadron, see Allen Gardner, *Our Navy and the West Indian Pirates* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1929).

13 Only a few major American cities were founded after Miami. These cities include Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1898, Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1905, and Anchorage, Alaska, in 1914.

before industrialization. These regional, Atlantic connections have generally remained confined to highly specialized journals like *Tequesta*, the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, and the *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*. As such, relationships connecting Florida and nearby islands have been largely marginalized in this context, appearing mostly as background in histories on the Bahamas or Bermuda. Often times, the exceptional reputation of Florida, as the only east coast American state that was a Spanish-language colony in the early-modern era, is used as a reason for American scholars to overlook its inclusion.¹⁴ A notable exception to this rule is the excellent work of Jane Landers, who has conceptualized the geographic region as the “circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, historians like Landers have focused their studies largely on the administrative realms of Spanish Florida in the northeast, around St. Augustine and its environs.

When regional journals address the early Bahamian presence in southern Florida, there is a tendency to base interpretations on homesteading or the national narrative. These assumptions have led authors to associate the early Bahamian presence in southeast Florida with three specific incidents in the nineteenth century: the land grant bestowed to a Bahamian named John Egan on the Miami River in 1808, the activities of Bahamian conductors on the southern branch of the Underground Railroad in 1821, and the arrival of Mariah Brown, the first-known black Bahamian migrant to the bay community of Coconut Grove in 1889.¹⁶ Occasionally,

14 See Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 24. See also Marcus Rediker *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004). For discussion of the pirate haven on New Providence, Bahamas, that includes the sinking of the 1715 Spanish treasure fleet off the Florida coast and the arrival of the loggers from the Bay of Campeche, see David Cordingly, *Spanish Gold: Captain Woodes Rogers & The Pirates of the Caribbean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

15 Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). In the former monograph, Landers coined the phrase “circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida” to describe the relationship between Florida and its greater Atlantic connections during the early-modern era. This essay proposes an even smaller region of analysis, a zone encompassing the Gulf Stream border states of Florida, the Bahamas, and Cuba.

16 For more on this interesting chapter of the Bahamian presence in southeast Florida, see Margo Harakas, “Voyages Freedom,” *Sun Sentinel*, February 22, 2005, 1-4; Adam Wasserman, *A People's History of Florida: How Africans, Seminoles, Women, and Lower Class Whites Shaped the Sunshine State* (Sarasota, FL: Adam Wasserman, 2010), 192-198; Rosalyn Howard, “Black Seminole Diaspora: The

scholars like John Goggin and Roland Chardon have refocused the Bahamian presence in southeast Florida to the mid and late eighteenth century by citing a wave of publications, most written by naturalists, that began with the English acquisition of the peninsula in 1763.¹⁷ While all of these dates represent pivotal moments in the history of Bahamian relations with southeastern Florida, Bahamians had been visiting the peninsula regularly since at least the 1680s.

In general, nationalism has obscured the fact that southeast Florida was always southward looking. As the historian Raymond Mohl once wrote, "Miami has always had a magnetic attraction for peoples of the Caribbean."¹⁸ The consequences of this oversight were made obvious in the year 1980, when mass emigrations of Cuban and Haitian refugees landed on the shores of Miami. Without a doubt, this event shocked the metropolitan psyche, galvanizing a new generation of American authors to re-evaluate the multicultural history of the Magic City. Although the American journalist Helen Muir is generally credited with writing the first postwar history of Miami in 1953, what was billed as the next "comprehensive history of Miami" was not published until 1981, exactly one year after this incident. Likewise, several additional studies of Miami were partly inspired by the Elián González affair of 2000.¹⁹

Caribbean Connection," in *Caribbean and Southern Transnational Perspectives on the U.S. South: Proceedings of the Southern Anthropological Society*, ed. Helen A. Regis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 73-88. Howard is an anthropologist who began conducting research on Andros Island, Bahamas, in 1996. Her article includes an overview of that research as well as a brief recapitulation of historiography concerning the Black Seminole community of Red Bay, Bahamas. Howard cites authors who have done earlier work on the diaspora, including Mary Moseley, Kenneth W. Porter, and John Goggin.

- 17 This wave of publications includes works by James Grant, George Gauld, William John Gerard de Brahm, William Storke, John and William Bartram, Juan Joseph Elxio de la Puente, Bernard Romans, Frederick George Mulcaster, David Fanning, Andrew Ellicot, James Grant Forbes, John James Audubon, Benajamin Beard Strobel, and Charles Blacker Vignoles. With the exception of Mulcaster and John Bartram, all of these individuals mentioned the presence of Spanish and Bahamian sailors off the coast of east and southeastern Florida. Many of their major works are available on *The Internet Archive*, a non-profit, digital library founded in 1996 by Brewster Kahle (accessed March 1, 2014). See also John Goggin, "The Indians and History of the Matecumbe Region," *Tequesta* 10 (1950): 21; Roland E. Chardon, "Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776," *Tequesta* 35 (1975): 46. Chardon demonstrates how place names on maps can be used as evidence of the early Bahamian presence in southeast Florida.
- 18 Raymond A. Mohl, "Black Immigrants: Bahamians in Early Twentieth-Century Miami," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1987): 271.
- 19 Parks, *Miami: The Magic City*, inside jacket fold. It appears that at least two attempts at short histories of Miami predated Muir's publication. One was E.V.

Most of these publications based transformations of the region on the metropolitan narrative, which dated to Flagler and the coming of the railroad.²⁰ They looked to events that occurred after the industrialization of the region—mainly, the influx of black migrant labor from the Bahamas and the American South, the upheaval of the Cuban Revolution, and the coming of the Mariel Boatlift—to explain the character of a modern, multicultural identity in southeast Florida. In this context, the animating historiographical question became whether or not Miami should be characterized as a “new immigrant city.” A scholar of human migration, Melanie Shell-Weiss, joined other historians in arguing that Miami should not be characterized as a “new immigrant city” because foreign-born migrants, particularly from the Caribbean islands, had been coming to the area since at least the end of the nineteenth century.²¹

Historians of the early-modern world, and those interested in working with the concept of the *longue durée*, may become frustrated with the character of historical scholarship produced since 1980.²² Much of this work seems to accept the nationalistic

Blackman, *Miami and Dade County, Florida; its Settlement, Progress, and Achievement* (Washington, DC.: Victor Rainbolt, 1921) and the other was William Coolbaugh Freeman, *Miami* (New York: Bower-Mackey, 1921). Studies partly inspired by the Elián González affair include Alex Stepick et al, *This Land is our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and Melanie Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami: A Social History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009).

- 20 I am thinking particularly of five works that cover a significant range: Stepick et al, *This Land is our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami*, Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), T.D. Allman, *Miami: City of the Future* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987), Arva Moore Parks, *Miami, the American Crossroad: A Centennial Journey, 1896-1996* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), and Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami*. These works were written by sociologists, journalists, and historians; most of them emphasize the multicultural makeup of Miami since its founding in 1896 or the Cuban Revolution of 1959. For a discussion about whether the multicultural origins of Miami are based in the late-nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, or after the Cuban Revolution, see exchanges between Alex Lichtenstein and Melanie Shell-Weiss in “Commentaries,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (Summer, 2005): 112-125.

- 21 Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami*, 7.

- 22 The idea of the *longue durée* is typically associated with historians from the French Annales School in successive waves of the twentieth century. Some of the scholars connected with this approach are Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel. For an early work that demonstrates this approach, see Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England* (New York: Dorset Press, 1990), originally published in French as *Les Rois Thaumaturges* in the year 1924.

assumption that, when Miami was incorporated in the year 1896, it somehow erased the southward orientations that had long defined its existence. In other words, early-modern historians are prone to wonder: should we debate whether Miami became multicultural after 1889 (when black laborers began arriving) or after 1959 (when Cuban refugees began arriving) if Atlantic historians can confirm that Spanish and Bahamian seamen had been visiting the region for roughly two centuries prior? Perhaps it is more accurate to speak about the geographic region of Miami, which should definitely not be understood as a “new immigrant region.”²³ Consequently, this essay addresses Bahamians who plied the calm, turquoise waters around southeast Florida before the American period. It begins with an overview of their presence—in regards to foresting, turtling, and wrecking—and suggests some ways in which urban and environmental historiography can guide future and more-meaningful studies.

The Bahaman island of San Salvador was the first place that Columbus landed when he reached the New World in 1492. By 1520, the entire native population of Lucayans had either died or been carried into slavery by the Spaniards; and the islands remained unpopulated for roughly 128 years. Then, in 1648, English settlers from Bermuda migrated to the Bahaman out island of Eleuthera. These seamen were already familiar with many of the Bahaman islands and cays because they had frequented them as foresters, oilers, turtlers, salt rakers, and harvesters of ambergris, a resinous and gray whale secretion that was used to make perfumes. Although settlement of Eleuthera was sporadic and often interrupted, it continued throughout the century, eventually leading to a faction

23 It is for this reason that southeast Florida is best conceptualized according to what the historians Joseph Roach and David Armitage have respectively called the “circum-Atlantic” and the “*cis*-Atlantic.” Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). In the second work, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), the British historian Armitage conceived of “*cis*-Atlantic” history, a concept that fits the potential of the Miami region excellently. *Cis*-Atlantic history “studies particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world and seeks to define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wider web of connections” (21). In my view, Biscayne Bay needs a *longue durée* history that foregrounds its relationship to such regions as America, Cuba, Haiti, and the Bahamas. Such a history will help people gain a greater perspective on immigration questions today. Although this essay only deals with the region of the Bahamas, it is my hope that it will contribute something to this greater effort. It is also my hope that a similar article will be written on the Spanish visitors to southern Florida from Cuba.

of these settlers branching off toward the rocky island of New Providence in the year 1666. By 1671, 913 residents lived on this island, which is located only 188 miles from present-day Miami.²⁴

In 1670, the English monarchy granted the Bahamas to the Lord's Proprietary government of the Carolinas. From the 1680s, the great harbor, endemic poverty, and loose administration of the Bahamas, as well as its proximity to shipping lanes in the Gulf Stream and the Old Bahama Channel, made New Providence an ideal home for wreckers, privateers, and pirates from across the Caribbean colonies. The islands also served as home to numerous ancillary industries that sprouted up to support their inhabitation. The actions of these residents made the island the target of periodic Spanish assaults that interrupted its development several times. Nonetheless, New Providence's harbor continued to remain "the greatest Succour for all distressed ships." In 1708, the colonial secretary John Graves had "known upward of Fourteen Sail a year" to come in for shelter.²⁵ After the War of Spanish Succession ended in 1713, the islands became a base for unemployed and demobilized merchantmen, privateers, foresters, and sailors.²⁶ In particular, New Providence became an undisputed pirate haven until 1718, when British authorities began cracking down on illicit shipping endeavors. After the American Revolution, the population of the Bahamas swelled as loyalist families relocated with their slaves from the former British territories, particularly East Florida.²⁷

24 Michael Craton, *A History of the Bahamas* (London: Collins, 1962), 70.

25 John Graves, *Memorial to the Proprietors of the Commissioners of Customs*, quoted in Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*, 94. According to Craton, the only copy of this *Memorial* is archived in the Nassau Public Library.

26 For a source that makes this observation as early as 1724, see Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (London: Charles Rivington, 1724), preface.

27 This recapitulation of Bahaman history is taken from Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*. This book, now over fifty years old, was considered the most definitive historical work on the islands for decades. The work was expanded to a third edition in 1986 and remained dominant until the year 1992, when the Canadian scholar Michael Craton and the Bahamian archivist Gaul Saunders combined their efforts for a two-volume *New Social History of the Bahamas* entitled *Islanders in the Stream* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992). This two-volume series is hailed as the first comprehensive social history of the islands. For more work on the Bahamas, see Paul Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas* (London: Macmillan, 1975) and Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850* (Nassau, Bahamas: Riley Hall, 2000). For a social history of Bermuda with an Atlantic perspective, see Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

As maritime historians like Robert Ritchie remind us, sailors in the early-modern era left behind very few records. They were often gone at sea during census taking, they “rarely owned enough property to appear on tax lists” or probates, and they seldom left wills or kept journals, logbooks, or diaries.²⁸ All of this is especially true when talking about local sailors. These sailors were probably illiterate, and they stood in contrast to deep-sea sailors employed in trans-Atlantic commerce on slavers, the merchant marine, or the Royal Navy. These sailors operated family-style businesses in remote locations with modest, inshore vessels. To overcome this difficulty, historians must filter information about Bahamian visitors through a variety of sources. Among these are the writings and maps of naturalists who visited the region during the early-modern era, the works of contemporary historians and diarists, and the various correspondence of colonial officials who chronicled their impressions of the roving seamen. Historians can also extrapolate from the secondary work of scholars like Marcus Rediker, who have generalized about the demographics of seafaring peoples living on the edge of European empire in the early-modern world.²⁹

In all likelihood, the “gentlemen of providence” who sojourned in southeast Florida were culturally creole. This means that they had lived apart from mainstream societies long enough to develop their own culture. As their name suggests, most of them came from New Providence rather than the out islands of Harbour or Eleuthera. They were probably young-to-middle-aged men from the low or lower-middle classes. Some may have been the married descendants of religious radicals, but most were transplants from places across the Atlantic world, especially English colonies like Carolina and Jamaica.³⁰ Many were fair-weather pirates and smugglers, and many others were victimized by pirates.³¹ Regardless, most Bahamians had strong seafaring and amateur boatbuilding skills. The quintessential Bahamian fishing vessel, known as the shallop, was

28 Robert Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 63.

29 See Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, particularly 49-53.

30 The contemporary author John Oldmixon states “Carolina was the nearest colony” and “the People of Providence traded most thither.” See John Oldmixon *The History of the Isle of Providence* (Nassau: Providence Press, 1966), 20. Originally from John Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America* (London: John Nicholson, 1708 and 1741).

31 For an example of pirates plundering Bahamian fishermen, see Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, 152. Johnson states a group of Black Flag pirates robbed “seven or eight Fishing-Boats in Harbour Island.”

the mainstay of their livelihood. This was an open, light, single-masted, undecked, and shallow-draft boat, equipped with both oars and sails. These specific features were ideal for crossing the Gulf Stream quickly, as well as for maneuvering between the many banks, shoals, reefs, and blind-mouthed channels that lay on either side. Young Bahamian creoles would need to know how to build, clean, and repair these boats, both at home and away.³²

Sailors who made their living off the Florida Straits were either too poor or unambitious to invest in the more lucrative enterprises of English plantation society, were enslaved peoples, or simply refused to adopt the strict regimens and constraining social conventions that another life required. Many of these individuals were accustomed to living at their own whim, eating the plentiful fish of the Bahamas, and were generally considered lazy or strange by property owners who were more securely invested in the project of English colonization. Finally, the "Providence fishermen" were likely multicultural, although race can be particularly difficult to discern in the historical record. Nevertheless, what historians already know about both enslaved Indian divers and black maritime laborers in the circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida suggests that at least some of these individuals were of nonwhite and mixed parentage.³³

If the racial makeup of the waters surrounding the Bahamas was anything like the racial makeup on land, then we can assume that there were many figures of African descent. In 1671, slaves comprised 40.4% of the total population of Eleuthera and New Providence.³⁴ By the year 1722, 35% of residents counted on New Providence were black.³⁵ Instead of using their slaves for gang or task labor on plantations, as was more common in later periods of Bahamian history, owners would have taken along, rented out, or ordered their slaves on fishing, diving, turtling, foresting,

32 For basic information on the shallop and its importance to early American colonists, see the online teaching tool *Captain John Smith's Shallop*: http://www.johnsmith400.org/Captain_John_Smiths_Shallop.pdf, created by Chris Cerino of Sultana Projects (accessed February 11, 2015); also the work of the maritime historian Angus Konstam, *The Pirate Ship 1660-1730* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 15-16.

33 For an introduction to native and African slavery off the coast of Florida for the purpose of salvage and diving efforts, see Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* 92, no.4 (March, 2006): 1327-1355.

34 Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*, 70.

35 Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 119-120.

salt-raking, and wrecking voyages. To prevent slaves from being captured and resold elsewhere, slaves would have been given papers or accompanied by at least one white individual who could attest to their status; it is possible that naturalists called these people the "gentlemen of Providence" while ignoring much of the nonwhite help who accompanied them.

The Jamaican governor Thomas Lynch indicates that Bahamians had been crossing the Gulf Stream to sojourn near the Florida peninsula since the early 1680s.³⁶ A document may turn up in the colonial archives that will backdate this presence even further. Contemporaries like John Olmixon and John Graves state the journey from New Providence to Carolina "Tis about a Week's sail," and only "three days from Havana."³⁷ This suggests the much shorter trip to the coast of southeastern Florida would have taken one day, even less with favorable winds. These visits can be explained partly by the early-modern orientations of all Caribbean seamen, who depended upon stopover isles for victualing, refitting, careening, and resting. Like Cuban sailors, who considered the Florida Keys to be the *Norte de Havana*, Bahamians saw little reason to distinguish between areas now understood as southeast Florida and the Bahamas.³⁸ After all, for many years the Bahamas had actually fallen under the same colonial charter as the Carolinas, with southern Florida as an ambiguous wedge between the two. With the exception of two short-lived missions to Biscayne Bay in 1567 and 1743, the thinly stretched Spanish empire concentrated their operations at the provincial capital in the northeast. This left the southern portion relatively unpoliced and open to contest. When black Bahamians began relocating to southeast Florida for work toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, many of them still regarded familiar regions like Key West "much as another island of the Bahamas."³⁹

But seasonal journeys from the Bahamas to southern Florida can also be explained by environmental conditions; for instance, despite what English boosters sometimes wrote, the moderate

36 Ibid. 86-89; Sir Thomas Lynch to the Governor of New Providence (Robert Clark), August 20, 1682, CO 1/49, no. 35i. Source available at the National Archives in Kew, London, England.

37 Oldmixon, *The History of the Island of Providence*, 20. Originally published in Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America*; Graves, *Memorial to the Proprietors*, quoted in Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*, 94.

38 For South Florida and the Florida Keys as the *Norte de Havana*, see Charles Arnade, "Florida Keys: English or Spanish in 1763?" *Tequesta* 15 (1955): 43, 46.

39 Mohl, "Black Immigrants," 272.

temperatures and poor, rocky soil of the Bahamas were virtually unsuitable for cultivating the most profitable New World cash crops in large scale. Bahamians were more likely to grow food provisions like sapodillas, guinea corn, ground nuts, and pigeon peas than they were to grow cotton, indigo, ginger, sugar, cocoa, or tobacco. As a result of these unique agricultural conditions, the colonists of the Bahamas were forced to find new and inventive ways to make themselves relevant in the English, Atlantic economy. One of the most important items that Bahamians would seek in order to fulfill this purpose was wood.⁴⁰

In 1648, the first cohort of Bermudian transplants foundered off the island of Spanish Wells and received material aid from colonists in Boston. In return, this pioneer group of settlers sent ten tons of dyewood back to New England.⁴¹ While this initial act of reciprocity was based upon Bermudian precedent, it also set the tone for the nascent Bahamian economy, which would continue to rely upon the export and sale of native hardwoods to sustain itself throughout the early-modern period. In particular, Bahamian dyewoods like fustick, ironwood, cedar, *lignum vitae*, and brazilletto were extremely valued in England as a result of their unique red hues. These woods made beautiful cabinets, *escrittoires*, and armoires. The dyes extracted from their sawdust were used to make red and purple linens and woolens.⁴² In addition, Bahamians extracted barks from species such as the cascarilla to market tonics, stimulants, and fever reducers. In 1670, the unlicensed cutting of Bahamian woods was already being banned by the colonial government. Two years later, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, instructed John Wentworth, the contemporary governor of the Bahamas, to place even more severe restrictions on the cutting of these precious woods on the Bahaman islands.⁴³

Notwithstanding these attempts at regulation, many of the native timbers of the Bahaman islands were unable to escape their greater destiny with English consumers. By the 1720s, the naturalist Mark Catesby noted that none of these valuable trees remained. He writes that "the inhabitants of the Bahama Islands formerly got [a] great part of their subsistence by cutting this wood, but it is now much exhausted." He continues, "the value of this wood" in

40 Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 70.

41 Ibid., 62.

42 Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 219.

43 Ibid., 72.

England “has occasioned a scarcity of it on the Bahaman islands.”⁴⁴ As a result of high demand, the only remaining brazilletto trees by the early 1720s were completely undesirable for trade; they were less than three inches thick and less than eight feet tall. Although these trees had been cut by Bermudians since the 1640s, this process of deforestation was accelerated by offshoot Bahamian settlements; it was also exacerbated following the conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession, when Spanish soldiers expelled English foresters from their illicit logging camps off the Bay of Campeche. Like other rovers in the Caribbean during the early-modern period, these seasoned foresters resettled in the Bahamian capital of New Providence, where they must have felt right at home amongst a hearty population of resident woodcutters.⁴⁵

As Catesby writes, Bahamian sailors reacted to native deforestation by crossing the Gulf Stream in order to cut mahogany (known in Jamaica as *madeira* wood) that grew in the Florida Keys and southeast Florida. Like brazilletto, mahogany was a beautiful, tropical hardwood that was capable of growing in the rocky soils of the circum-Caribbean and was highly valued for its multipurpose use in cabinetry. Additionally, the extreme durability of mahogany allowed it to replace English oak for “all domestick uses,” particularly among carpenters and upholsterers. The unusual hardness of the wood also made it a prized commodity for shipbuilding. In a world of almost incessant maritime warfare, ships made of mahogany were perfect for “burying the shot without splintering” and “resisting gunshots.”⁴⁶ In addition to this breed of wood, Bahamians cut the mancaneele tree, the balsam tree, the acacia, and the lignum; the latter of these materials was actually believed by some to hold curing properties for syphilis.⁴⁷ Sadly, the fate of mahogany trees in the Florida Keys was similar to that of the other Bahamian hardwoods. By the late eighteenth century,

44 Mark Catesby, *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, volume II (London: the Royal College of Physicians, 1747), 51. The second volume of this text was not completed until the year 1743, and the first volume was not completed until 1731; however, Catesby based his work on observations he conducted in the West Indies and Carolina since 1714.

45 Angus Konstam, *Blackbeard: America's Most Notorious Pirate* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 28, 98.

46 Catesby, *Natural History of Carolina*, 81.

47 Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1972), 154.

English and American surveyors, like Bernard Romans and Andrew Ellicott, noted that “little or none now remains here.”⁴⁸

Another commodity that was essential for Bahamian visitors to southeast Florida was turtles. The herpetologist Archie Carr has noted that, “more than any other dietary factor, the green turtle supported the opening up of the Caribbean.” Likewise, it is hard to ignore the prominence of turtles noted by contemporary writers like the French buccaneer Alexander Olivier Exquemelin and the English buccaneer William Dampier.⁴⁹ Similarly, Catesby tells us that green turtles abounded off the Bahaman islands, but they did not choose to lay their eggs there. Instead, these turtles crossed both the Old Bahaman Channel and the Gulf Stream to lay their eggs seasonally on other coasts.⁵⁰ For this reason, Catesby provides his readers with a priceless image: Bahamian and Spanish tortoise hunters treading water off the shores of Cuba and south Florida during moonlit nights in springtime.⁵¹ As these visitors knew, mating season for turtles began in early April, when flocks of hawksbill, green, loggerhead, and trunk turtles would storm the white-sandy beaches of the circum-Caribbean. Sailors would wait for these turtles to plant upwards of 100 eggs in holes that they had burrowed in the sand. Afterwards, the sailors would come ashore and immobilize the turtles by overturning them. Then they would haul these creatures, along with their eggs, into their boats. They would cut the meat out of the animals to make turtle soup or salted,

48 Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York: For the Author, 1775), 293.

49 A.F. Carr, *The Windward Road: Adventures of a Naturalist on Remote Caribbean Shores* (New York: Knopf, 1956); Alexander Olivier Exquemelin, *The History of the Buccaneers of America*, translated directly from the original by Alexis Brown (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), 72-75. The original work was published in Dutch as *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers* (Amsterdam: Jan Ten Hoorn, 1678). See also William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World, Volume 1* (London: James Knapton, 1699), 58, 75, 101-109.

50 The environmentalist David Campbell describes in his work *Ephemeral Islands: A Natural History of the Bahamas* (London: Macmillan, 1977), “Sea turtles must lay their eggs on the shore, buried in the sand above the reach of high tides... The green turtle [for example] is highly specific in choosing her nesting site; by means of chemical cues or more subtle means of navigation, she returns to the same beaches on which she was born. These homeward exoduses often entail thousands of miles of swimming over a period of many weeks,” (34-36). This fascinating environmental adaptation proved to be a significant vulnerability in this particular case, as Caribbean catchers were able to easily predict the arrival and behavior of mating turtles.

51 Catesby, *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, 2:39.

turtle steaks; or they would store the turtles in a freshwater weir or crawl (*krawl*) off the coast until they could secure a buyer.

Catesby states that green turtles were what all “the maritime inhabitants of America, that live between the Tropicks, subsist upon,” and that “the inhabitants of the Bahaman islands by often practice are very dexterous at taking them.”⁵² These turtles were sold as rare delicacies in Carolina; but Catesby also indicates that Bahamians marketed their catches across the circum-Caribbean, in places like Bermuda, Hispaniola and Jamaica.⁵³ Like Exquemelin, Catesby went so far as to include an entire section in his book entitled “On the Manner of Taking Turtle.”⁵⁴ This section describes the unique process by which Bahamian sailors plucked turtles directly out of the water. Sailors would use a two-inch, iron spike attached to a twelve-foot pole. After jamming the spike into the hard shell of the turtle when it surfaced for air, they would leverage the pole to bring the creature closer to the hull, at which point they would slip a noose around its neck, harpoon it in the side, and haul it on board. These turtles were such easy catches because “they are timorous and make little resistance when taken.” In regards to southeast Florida, it was Loggerhead turtles that came in droves to mate annually on the shores of barrier islands like Key Biscayne; these turtles, combined with an abundance of wood, fresh drinking water, and other local food sources, made southeast Florida and the upper Florida Keys an especially desirable place for Bahamian sailors to sojourn.⁵⁵

The third industry that was essential to Bahamians who visited southeast Florida in the early-modern period was wrecking, or *wracking*. This business referred to cannibalizing wrecked ships for their essential parts as well as robbing them of their cargo. It could include everything from diving for sunken valuables to deplanking the hull for its wood or burning it for its iron fastenings. Depending on how the wreckers felt about the circumstances of the distressed vessel, they could either help the stranded crew recover their belongings and obtain safe passage—for a nominal fee or percentage of the salvaged loot, of course—or they could simply rob the crew of their belongings and leave them marooned. Either way, wrecking was such an essential business to Bahamians

52 Catesby, *Natural History of Carolina*, 2:38.

53 Ibid., appendix, 2:xxxviii.

54 Ibid., 2:39.

55 Ibid., 2:40.

that provisions for its regulation were actually written into the constitutional charter. In their *Articles and Orders* in 1648, the settlers of Eleuthera deemed that any salvaged goods would be held in common for the defense of the colony, and all other materials would be delivered to designated agents, “made fit for sail,” and then sold, with one-third of the proceeds going to the wreckers.⁵⁶ Of course, it is doubtful that many of these salvaged goods actually made it back to New Providence once they were in the hands of individual sailors. As the schemes of nineteenth-century, American wreckers in the Florida Keys—such as the infamous Jacob Housman—suggest, some wreckers would do just about anything to avoid registering their salvaged loot at the designated port of entry.⁵⁷

Once again, environmental factors can explain why Bahamian wreckers converged on the mangrove coasts of southeast Florida. Since the 1560s, a massive convoy of between 30 and 90 heavily guarded Spanish galleons, known as the *Flota de Indias* or *Carrera de Indias*, had been crossing the Atlantic Ocean annually—from Havana Bay to the *Casa de Contratación* in Seville—via the swift, natural current of the Gulf Stream. Before the annual transports were commissioned, this route had already become the chosen method of trans-Atlantic travel. The Spanish navigator and pilot Antón de Alaminos is often credited with sailing the first West Indies treasure fleet back to Spain via the Gulf Stream in the year 1519.⁵⁸ Since then, the combination of the swift, northward current of the Gulf Stream with the swift, eastward-blowing Atlantic trade winds made this route the standard way to travel from the Americas to Europe.

56 Paul Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1975), 131-132.

57 See John Viele, *The Florida Keys, Vol. 3: the Wreckers* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 2001).

58 According to Craton, the conquistador Ponce de León mounted the first European expedition that experienced the effects of the Gulf Stream during its trip through the Bahamas to Florida in 1513. The strength of the current has been posited to explain the landing of his ships as much farther north on the east coast of Florida than previously thought. See Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*, 43. The only contemporary narrative of the account of the voyage of Ponce de León was published by Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, the royal historiographer of the Spanish Indies. For an English translation of that account, see Robert H. Fuson, *Juan Ponce de León and the Discovery of Puerto Rico and Florida* (Granville, OH: McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, 2000), 103-115.

This annual treasure convoy was comprised of two groups of colonial fleets that united each spring at Morro Castle in Havana. The first was the *Flota de Nueva España* from Veracruz, Mexico, and the second was the *Tierra Firme Flota*, which left from Cartagena in present-day Columbia. These convoys carried massive quantities of silver and gold mined by enslaved natives from the colonies of Spanish America; for example, when eleven galleons from the 1715 Plate Fleet wrecked upon the Florida reef, the ships dumped approximately 14,000,000 pesos worth of treasure in the shallow, aquamarine waters of southeast Florida. So, while the rapid northward currents of the Gulf Stream were ideal for travel between the Caribbean and Europe, the tropical storms and jagged Florida reefs guaranteed that vessels would periodically be cast astray by hurricanes and smashed upon the exposed rocks.⁵⁹

In the early 1500s, when the Spanish treasure ships were relatively less guarded, pirates and privateers were able to rob them in both the Caribbean basin and the Atlantic Triangle with opportune timing and only a few vessels.⁶⁰ By the year 1628, the vice-admiral of the Dutch West India Company, Pieter Pietersen Heyn, required an entire squadron of 2,300 sailors and 1,000 soldiers in order to capture a portion of the treasure fleet that had run aground on sandbars at the Bay of Matanzas, in Cuba. This suggests that while local Bahamian wreckers could not hope to launch physical assaults on the annual treasure fleet from their tiny, 25-foot shallops, they could hope to scavenge the remains of unfortunate vessels like maritime vultures. Although some of the most famous vessels—both Spanish and otherwise—to crash upon the reef were wrecked in the years 1605, 1622, 1656, 1695, 1715, 1733, 1741, 1744, 1769, and 1770, the exact number of Florida shipwrecks during the early-modern period is still unknown.⁶¹

Historians of southeast Florida are united in their opinions about what brought Bahamian sailors to the coasts of southeast Florida in the early-modern period. Charlton Tebeau states that

59 For more on Bahamian wreckers, the Spanish treasure fleet, and the inhabitants of New Providence, see Timothy R. Walton, *The Spanish Treasure Fleets* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 2002).

60 For more on the evolution of the Spanish treasure fleet during the sixteenth-century, see Paul E. Hoffman, *The Spanish Crown and the Defense of the Caribbean, 1535-1585: Precedent, Patrimonialism, and Royal Parsimony* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

61 A list of major wrecks off the Florida Keys can be found in Nikki Beare, *Pirates, Pineapples, and People: A History, Tales, and Legends of the Upper Florida Keys* (Ocala, FL: Atlantic Publishing Company, 1961), 24.

"Bahamians came to Indian River Inlet [near present-day Sebastian] to hunt turtles, cut wood, and gather salvage from wrecked ships."⁶² Likewise, Arva Moore Parks claims that "the uninhabited Florida coast became a natural rendezvous for Bahamian wreckers and fishermen."⁶³ Finally, the retired naval officer John Viele acknowledges that "Bahamian vessels were coming to the Keys to hunt turtle, cut timber, and salvage wrecks."⁶⁴ Although many of these historians have dated the Bahamian presence to the period of British rule in Florida (1763-1783), earlier sources have proven that the "gentlemen of Providence" had been visiting the peninsula since the second half of the seventeenth century. As early as 1682, the Jamaican governor Thomas Lynch had written that the Bahamas "are people'd by those that intend rather the pillaging [of] Spanish wrecks than planting," and they do it "upon the Coast of Florida."⁶⁵ One hundred and seventeen years later, the American surveyor Andrew Ellicot was able to provide an update:

Some of the Keys or Islands, were formerly very well timbered, but the most valuable kinds, such as lignum vitae, fustick and iron wood, have generally been cut off by the inhabitants of the Bahama Islands. [Now] Key Biscanio is much frequented by the privateers, wreckers, and turtlers.⁶⁶

After tracing the Bahamian presence in southeast Florida to the late seventeenth century, and outlining three of the most important raw materials that encouraged their migrations, it is important to suggest theoretical models by which scholars can evaluate this seasonal inhabitation. Scholarship in the burgeoning subfield of new environmental history is significant in this regard. Among other things, historians in this field have dedicated themselves to recapturing the social dimensions of spatial change, be they

62 Tebeau, *A History of Florida*, 98.

63 Parks, *Miami: The Magic City*, 18.

64 John Viele, *The Florida Keys: A History of the Pioneers* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1996), 13-14. This book is the first installment of a three-part series Viele has written on the history of the Florida Keys. The second and third installments are called "True Stories of the Perilous Straits" (1999) and "The Wreckers" (2001). These works are essential reading for the Florida Keys as a point of contact between American and Caribbean cultures.

65 Sir Thomas Lynch to the Governor of New Providence (Robert Clark), August 20, 1682, CO 1/49, no. 351. Source available at the National Archives in Kew, London, England.

66 Andrew Ellicot, *The Journal of Andrew Ellicot* (Philadelphia: William Fry, 1803), 255.

related to environmental degradation or preservation. In updating trends from the New Social History with the environmental spirit of activist writers like Rachel Carson and Marjory Stoneman Douglass, many of these works have contributed to a pushback against the triumphalist tones of the preceding conservation movement, notably by discussing conservation as the commodification of space for ecotourism among elite groups.⁶⁷

Arva Moore Parks has stated that “Bahamian wreckers were in for a rude awakening” when the Florida region was annexed by the United States.⁶⁸ Further research should be done on how the incorporation and development of southern Florida affected the ancestors of these early Bahamian visitors. Some of them, like the coconut and lime grower John Egan, applied for official land grants and tried their hand at the cultural model of American homesteading; other Bahamians squatted on common property until its enclosure and development, brought about by new legislative incentives, industrialization, and increasing demographic pressures during the American period.⁶⁹ In general, historians should investigate the psychological and commercial implications of an American culture—based strictly upon land ownership and agricultural notions of progress—upon liminal groups of people who were never interested in settling the region, but nonetheless depended upon its raw produce.

In writing to his patron Lord Dartmouth—who was the principle investor of an ambitious yet unrealized plantation project known as the Cape Florida Society—the English surveyor John William Gerard de Brahm expressed his desire that potential investors “may be possessed the necessary knowledge if possible

67 For two examples that follow this model, see Matthew Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) and Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). For an historical discussion of “new environmental history,” see John T. Cumbler, “Environmental History: A Road Map to Today,” *Sustain: A Journal of Environmental and Sustainability Issues*, 19 (Fall/Winter 2009): 3-6.

68 Arva Moore Parks, *The Forgotten Frontier: Florida through the Lens of Ralph Middleton Munroe* (Miami, FL: Banyan Books, 1977), 8.

69 On John Egan, see Sidney Walter Martin, *Flagler's Florida* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1949), 150. Egan was also a pilot for John James Audubon. See Lucy Audubon, ed. *The Life of John James Audubon, the Naturalist* (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1869), 264. For mention of Bahamians who did not apply for land grants, see Arva Moore Parks, *Miami: The Magic City*, 22-26. Squatters on mainland Biscayne Bay in the 1820s were called the “Cape Florida Settlement.” See Joan Gill Blank, *Key Biscayne: A History of Miami's Tropical Island and the Cape Florida Lighthouse* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1996), 27.

of all occurencys in America.” Among other concerns, this “necessary knowledge” included being aware that South Florida was a “country, where [settlers] will be by themselves without any counsel to their advantage” *except* the “providence fisher man.” On this point, de Brahm expressed his genuine concern that British settlers would “meet dissuasions” from these fishermen, “who for the sake of injoying all the benefits...at Cape Florida, would look with invious [sic] Eyes upon these new Settlers.”⁷⁰ If these Bahamian fishermen were considered a threat to the English boosters of the late eighteenth-century, then it is probable to assume that many of their ancestors would have reacted adversely to the American developments and speculations that occurred in the following century.

Like all periods of significant change, the American conquest and development of southeastern Florida surely offered both opportunities and problems for seasoned Bahamian visitors. As previously mentioned, many Bahamian visitors were able to successfully transition to the American period; shortly after John Egan began his lime and coconut plantation, Temple Pent found employment in the US West Indies Squadron of Commodore David Porter. In the 1870s, many Bahamian pioneers who joined the culture of American homesteading had relocated themselves to settlements like Lemon City, north of the Miami River.⁷¹ This town existed independently until it was annexed by Miami in the year 1925. But, just as history is a discipline that serves to explain the present, it is also a discipline that serves to reveal missed opportunities for the past. With this in mind, one has to wonder what would have happened to the Bahamian fishermen if southeastern Florida was allowed to continue as an undeveloped hinterland. Would the environment have been better served as an area of periodic resource extraction for seasonal foresters, turtlers, and wreckers than as a region of permanent urban development? Would common lands still exist; and, perhaps more importantly, would our growing knowledge of the environment be enough to make them sustainable?

There is no ignoring the fact that the coasts of southeast Florida were multicultural during the preindustrial period.

70 Roland E. Chardon, “The Cape Florida Society of 1773,” *Tequesta* 35 (1975): 23. This 1773 letter from William de Brahm to the Cape Florida Society of London is included in its entirety as Appendix A of the article.

71 For more on Lemon City, see Thelma Peters, *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay: 1850-1925* (Vancouver, CA: Banyan Books, 1976).

The published narratives of Jonathan Dickinson, Mark Catesby, Andrés González de Barcia, Briton Hammon, Bernard Romans, David Fanning, James Grant, and other contemporaries attest to the diverse nature of the circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida. Although interactions were often violent and far from congenial, it was not uncommon to see Cuban and Spanish fishermen, Ais and Jeaga divers, Creek guides, African turtlers, Bahamian pilots, Seminole hunters, Tequesta and Matecumbe canoeists, Jamaican wreckers, Barbadian privateers, Italian captains, Bermudian foresters, and French buccaneers trolling the turquoise waters of south Florida throughout the period. The experiences of these individuals can help us remember that late nineteenth and early-twentieth century events were not just the beginning of a modern, regional multiculturalism; they were also the abrupt re-emergence of a multicultural model that had been long ago suppressed and forgotten.⁷²

Discussions about the social implications of land enclosure lend themselves to another extremely important question about the early Bahamian presence in southeastern Florida. This is the seemingly eternal issue of whether preindustrial groups possessed mentalities that prevented them from over-exploiting their natural environment, even at their own expense. This question is most commonly discussed in the subfield of Native American history, where it is positioned as representative of either the bane or the virtue of pre-Columbian societies; in one unforgettable example, the historian William Cronon discussed the willingness of indigenous peoples in New England to go hungry in the late winter months of the early-seventeenth century. He called this “the paradox of want in the land of plenty,” and he noted that many early European explorers considered this logic to be absurd. After all, why would any population willingly restrain itself from exploiting the environment?⁷³

72 For evidence of violence between Bahamian fisherman and South Florida natives, see Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*, 292. Romans states, “The people of Providence, who came here for turtle or Mahogany wood, came always armed, and had frequent brushes with [the Indians], so that the dislodging of these fierce savages has been a service to navigation.” For a violent encounter that occurred between southeast Florida natives and Plymouth loggers in 1747, see Briton Hammon, *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings* (Boston: Green & Russell, 1760).

73 William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 41.

In *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, the environmental historian Ronald Lewis has contributed his thoughts on this controversial question. He has stated that preindustrial “West Virginians made every attempt to use the woods to maximum economic advantage.” In contrast to the native peoples of early New England, the exploitation of the landscape by these mountain residents was restricted only “by the lack of capital, technology, and transportation facilities” available to them at the time. It was these deficiencies that “shaped their economic relationship to the forest around them, not the lack of enterprise or a pre-capitalist mentality.”⁷⁴ While there is certainly enough historical evidence to justify this outlook in specific contexts, as an essentialist perspective it depicts preindustrial peoples as frozen in an amber of technological backwardness, anxiously waiting the invention of industrial tools.

There is no denying that Bahamian foresters, turtlers, and wreckers were exploiting the natural environment in both southeast Florida and the Florida Keys.⁷⁵ As the primary sources suggest, these exploitations had noticeable consequences. Historians like Michael Craton, Gail Saunders, and Michael Jarvis leave no doubting that Bahamians were firmly enmeshed in a capitalistic, Atlantic economy that rewarded those who made themselves useful by exporting raw materials for sale in distant, European and colonial markets; however, perhaps historians should not be so quick to overcompensate by lumping the “gentlemen of Providence” in with the rest of the European plantation economy. After all, many English naturalists and colonial officials who referred to the “gentlemen of Providence” addressed them as a separate group. This evidence of cultural creolization makes reading Catesby fascinating. Ever the meticulous chronicler, Catesby was careful to distinguish between the culture of “Providence men” and the

74 Ronald Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 35.

75 John James Audubon reminds us that some of these “gentlemen from Providence” were much more industrious than others. He relays the astounding story that “eight hundred green turtles were caught by one man in twelve months.” See Marie Audubon, *Audubon and his Journals* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1897), 379. Likewise, Charles Blacker Vignoles writes about an industrious gentleman from Nassau who purchased the turtles from the Florida Keys that were not desired for consumption in the Bahamas. This man prepared, preserved, canned, and shipped a jelly-like turtle soup to London for profit. See Charles Blacker Vignoles, *Observations Upon the Floridas* (New York: Bliss & E. White, 1823), 128.

culture of the native Englishmen; as he states, the Bahamians would eat poisonous fish that no sensible Englishmen should ever touch; they would speak in a vulgar tongue that corrupted the King's English; and yet, they were foremost authorities on the unique flora and fauna of the subtropical Caribbean. As Michael Craton reminds his readers, Jamaican governors like Sir Thomas Lynch, and Bahaman merchants like John Darrell, rarely considered the "lazy" Bahamians—who liked to leave "none but old men, women and children to plant" while they ran "a-coasting in shallows"—on equal footing with the industrious planters of other English colonies.⁷⁶

This is where the tripartite division of John Mack Faragher becomes useful for making distinctions. After all, if Bahamian sailors were no more exploitative than their English brethren on Barbadian, Virginian, and Jamaican plantations, then why did they express no sincere interest in colonizing the region of southeastern Florida? While some will attribute this reluctance to the inhospitable nature of the region—infested with mosquitos, mired with swamps, claimed by the Spanish, and occupied by relatively hostile native groups like the Calusa—others might suggest an interpretation that foregrounds the cultural model of the Bahamian visitors themselves.

The maritime historian Jeffrey Bolster provides a theoretical model for understanding the early activities of Bahamians in the circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida in his book *The Mortal Sea*.⁷⁷ Bolster was inspired by a publication in the journal *Nature* which suggested that predatory fish in the oceans of the world had declined by as much as 90 percent.⁷⁸ In reaction, he wrote a *longue durée* environmental declension narrative about fisheries in the northwest Atlantic boreal region between the years 1492 and 1930. This herculean task required "a new geography of the early modern world to include oceanic regions;" it required recapturing the experiences of individuals who "were more familiar with tarred hemp rope and leather fishing aprons than with charts of

76 Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 68. Also quoted in Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 89. See also the remark of the East Florida governor, Francis Ogilvie, who called "the people from Providence... unruly rascals" who must be seized and punished. See Charles Arnade, "Florida Keys: English or Spanish in 1763," 51.

77 Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

78 *Ibid.*, 3.

the world;⁷⁹ and, most importantly, it required parting from “the dominant narrative of America as a New World.”⁸⁰ The result of these efforts was a brilliant and complex survey that foregrounded the contributions of technology, science, human effort, and government regulation in advancing civilization at the cost of widespread and protracted environmental destruction. While Bolster was honest about depicting the extent of environmental devastation, he also endeavored to treat his subjects fairly. As fishermen caught within the metaphorical net of early-modern and modern capitalism, these hardened individuals both protested and perpetrated the gradual depletion of the very environments upon which they depended.

The Mortal Sea suggests an investigation that lies at the heart of studying early Bahamian and Cuban interactions with southeast Florida and the circum-Atlantic; this is related to what Daniel Pauly has named the “shifting baseline syndrome,” referring to the troubling concept that every subsequent generation of inhabitants considers the specific populations of flora and fauna which they encounter to be standard. For this reason, historians may not be able to rely upon the cursory observations of European naturalists—who were seeing the environment at a specific moment—to determine whether foresters, fishers, and turtlers were engaging in sustainable practices, or whether they were destroying the environment beyond repair.⁸¹ In order to truly evaluate the environmental impact that Bahamian sojourners had on the marine and coastal ecosystems of southeast Florida, historians must first collaborate with environmental scientists to establish reliable baselines against which to measure the degradations of the past. In other words, they must do the work that Bolster has begun in regards to the northwest Atlantic.

Finally, the early-modern fishermen of the Atlantic provide a solid comparative model for understanding the activities of early Bahamian and Cuban sailors in the circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida. For example, in writing *The Mortal Sea*, Bolster was seeking to correct generations of romantic histories that had emphasized “the voyage of the *Mayflower* or the settlement of Quebec” because the dominant national paradigm had created “a desperate need” to explain colonial beginnings. Likewise, regional histories of

79 Ibid., 14.

80 Ibid., 16.

81 Ibid., 10.

southeast Florida are now valuable as critiques of the romantic, frontier narratives that have sprouted up to explain the origins of cities like Miami. For too long, the triumphalist narratives of colonial and American history, and the founding narratives of metropolitan cities, have drawn both strict physical boundaries along the coastline and hard temporal boundaries along dates of incorporation. In doing so, these narratives have regarded “the ocean as a non-place,” while relegating pre-urban inhabitants to the prologues of relevant history. As Bolster summarizes:

The eventual colonization of North America by Europeans, and the subsequent creation of nations there... overshadowed the fact that for more than a century the familiar coastal marine ecosystem was the only part of North America of consistent interest to Europeans.⁸²

And such was the case with Bahamian and Cuban fishermen in the circum-Atlantic periphery of Florida. Historians of the peninsula simply cannot recapture the experiences of these unique individuals without first understanding how different they were from their nineteenth-century successors, developers like George Franklin Thompson and Henry Flagler. After all, not all people in the preindustrial era looked beyond the tangled canopy of the mangroves and dreamed of dredging the swamp; not all people stepped upon the Atlantic Coastal Ridge and fantasized about driving the final spike on a railroad tie. On the contrary, some visitors were content to take what they needed—and, perhaps, just a little bit more—while watching the forested coast of the peninsula from the cool shade of a copperwood tree, or enjoying the calm waters of the bay from the rocking, pinewood boards of a small shallop, anchored off Key Biscayne. For these seasonal visitors, the waters and shores of southeast Florida were not simply an obstacle; nor were they simply a means of travel. Instead, they were much more than that. They were the final destination. They were the whole reason for coming in the first place; and, as the evidence suggests, the reason was well worth the trip.

⁸² Ibid., 17.