
Wrecked Emigrant Ships in The Bahamas: The Wreck of the Barque *William and Mary*

Jim Lawlor

 0000-0002-6771-8063

The Bahamas Historical Society

Abstract

The Bahamian archipelago is strategically located between the Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea. However, the hidden reefs and shoals, the changing sandbanks, and the unpredictable winds and currents, especially in the hurricane months, all conspired to make Bahamian waters the terror of navigators and the delight of wreckers during the age of sail. This article explores the wrecks of four emigrant ships in The Bahamas in the early 1850s. The European passengers were leaving poverty-stricken Europe to pursue the American dream but did not reach their destination without enduring the combined perils of weather and the hazards of Bahamian waters. Fortunately, they were rescued by humane Bahamian wreckers and assisted by inhabitants of Nassau and Governor Gregory, who organized their onward journey. In particular, the wreck of the *William and Mary* exposes the greed and lack of care that ship owners and captains showed in attempting to carry hapless passengers from Europe to the United States of America.

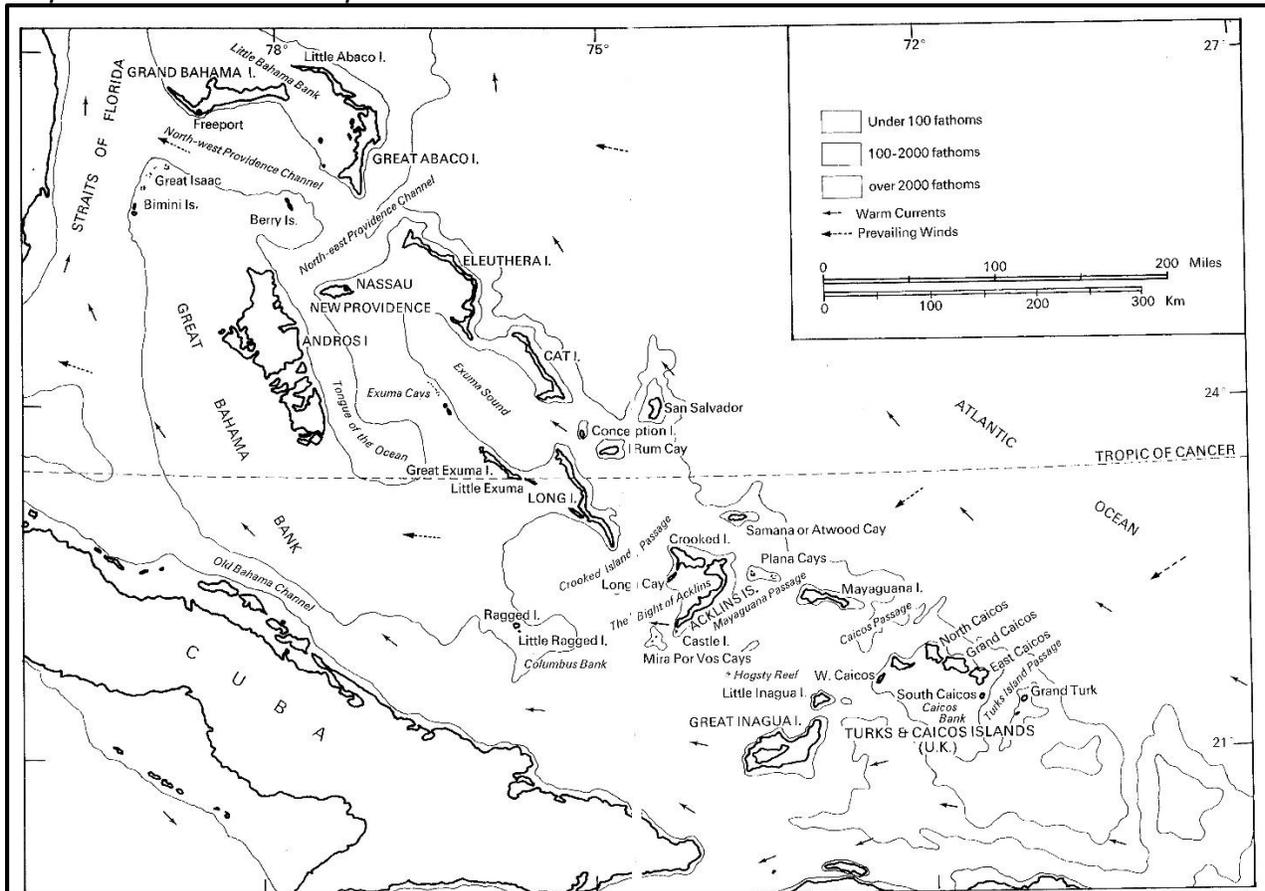
Introduction

The entire Bahamas archipelago is strategically located at the gateway to the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the entire Central American region (see, for example Lawlor, 2018). The Northeast Providence Channel was the single body of water through which significant numbers of merchant sailing vessels had to pass to go to New Providence or to access the Florida Gulf for destinations farther south. In the days of sail, the north-east winds and uncertain currents drove many a vessel onto the notably dangerous spots: the windward coasts of North Eleuthera, Harbour Island and Abaco, Great Stirrup Cay, the Gingerbread Grounds, the Bimini Cays and the west end of Grand Bahama (Lawlor & Lawlor, 2008, p. 155; see Figure 1). Wrecking vessels patrolled these

areas in search of floundering ships to rescue passengers, salvage cargoes, and gain large rewards in both goods and money.

The growth of commerce in the 1800s was a great boost to the wrecking industry. American industrial expansion began in the early 1820s, before the time of inter-connecting roads and railways. New Orleans became an important transshipment port between towns upriver on the Mississippi River and Europe and the Eastern Seaboard of America. By the mid-19th century, the wrecking industry of The Bahamas had mushroomed into a thriving business due to American expansion west and increased trade, which resulted in more wrecks. In 1850, the total imports for The Bahamas were valued at £92,756; imports from wrecked

Figure 1
Map of Currents and Depths in The Bahamas



Note. From *The Story of The Bahamas*, by P. Albury, 1975, p. 2. Copyright 1975 Macmillan.

goods were valued at £16,768 or 18% of total imports. By 1852, the total imports for The Bahamas were valued at £139,563 and imports from wrecked goods were valued at £46,515 or 33% of total imports (Lawlor & Lawlor, 2008, p. 173).

The early 1850s is an interesting period to study as it encompasses not only the dying days of the sailing ship and the early days of the steamship but also the rise of large numbers of emigrants from Europe to the United States of America. With poverty prevalent in many parts of Europe, many people sought a better life in the booming economy of the United States of America.

Context

In just over the 25 months between March 1851 and May 1853, four ships carrying people from Europe seeking a better life in the United States of America were wrecked in The Bahamas. On March 29, 1851, the American ship *Cato*, carrying 300 English and Irish passengers from Liverpool to New Orleans, was wrecked on the Moselle Shoal off Bimini (CO23/138/131, Governor Gregory to Earl Grey, 14th April 1851). In December 1852, the American ship *Ovando*, carrying 149 German and French passengers from Le Havre to New York, was driven by a heavy wind close to Nassau Harbour and

caught on fire (CO23/140/254, Governor Gregory to Sir John Pakington, 7th December 1852). On Good Friday, March 25, 1853, the American ship *Osborne*, carrying more than 200 English and Irish passengers from Liverpool to New Orleans, was wrecked off Grand Bahama (CO23/143/147, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 2nd April 1853). On May 3, 1853, the American barque *William and Mary*, carrying 208 English, Irish, and Hessian passengers from Liverpool to New Orleans, was wrecked on Little Isaacs Rock (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

These four wrecked passenger ships can inform us greatly about life and conditions in the mid-19th century. First, the contrasting conditions in Europe and America explain why impoverished peoples of Europe would pursue the American dream of financial success in the New World. Second, they show the importance of the maritime highway of channels through The Bahamas to reach either the Gulf of Mexico or the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Third, they illustrate the dangers faced by ships sailing through the Northeast and Northwest Providence Channels into the Straits of Florida. Fourth, they reveal the burden placed on the Government of The Bahamas and Britain and the kindness of inhabitants of Nassau to provide food and shelter to the passengers of the wrecked vessels. Fifth, the wreck of the *William and Mary* exposes the greed and lack of care that ship owners and captains showed in attempting to carry hapless passengers from Europe to the United States of America.

As has been well established, mid-19th century Europe, particularly Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany, was going through extreme economic hardship. People living through the years 1843 to 1853 had suffered from bad harvests, epidemics, and the after-effects of adjusting to new surroundings in

the search for a better life. In Ireland, famine and disease killed over a million people for the six years up to 1851, and a million more emigrated and spread disease and death in places where they settled. In England, Scotland, and Wales, jobs and accommodation were scarce, and, when work was found, the conditions were appalling. Desperation forced some people to resort to criminal activity, hoping that they would be judged guilty and transported to a colony or sent to prison where they would be fed, clothed, and have a roof over their heads (Hoffs, 2016, p. 2).

The *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* of October 23, 1852, quoted an essay portraying the American dream:

America is to modern Europe ... the land of aspirations and dreams, the country of daring enterprise and the asylum of misfortune, which receives alike the exile and the adventurer, the discontented and the aspiring and promises to all a freer life and a fresher nature. The European emigrant might believe himself as one transported to a new world governed by new laws and finds himself at once raised in the scale of being – the pauper is maintained by his own labour, the hired labourer works on his own account and the tenant is changed into a proprietor, while the depressed vassal of the old continent becomes co-legislator and co-ruler, in a government where all power is from the people and in the people and for the people. (Hoffs, 2016, p. 1)

New Orleans was in a prime position at the mouth of the Mississippi River for collecting goods carried down the river for transshipment to Europe. The new United States government, under President Thomas Jefferson, bought the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. Louisiana became the 18th State of the Union in 1812. New Orleans

became the leading port receiving goods, such as cotton, sugar, molasses and tobacco shipped by steamboat down the Mississippi River and sent onward to the European ports of Liverpool, Le Havre, Bremen, Genoa, and Trieste or to the Eastern Seaboard ports of Boston and New York (Reindeers, 1964, pp. 36, 41, 49).

The area relied on foreign agricultural workers, and, by 1850, the city of New Orleans had 20,200 Irish immigrants from Liverpool and German immigrants from Le Havre, Bremen, and Hamburg working as unskilled labour (Reindeers, 1964, p. 18). Many more immigrants passed through New Orleans to other parts of the United States. During the winter season, there were as many as 200 sailing vessels in the harbour of New Orleans, mainly coastal packet lines from New York but some also destined for ports on the Gulf Coast and California (Reindeers, 1964, p. 36).

Many of those ships from Europe and the Eastern Seaboard would have used the Northeast and Northwest Providence Channels through The Bahamas. The entrance of the Northeast Providence Channel was between South Abaco and Egg Island, North Eleuthera, and transitioned into the Northwest Providence Channel at the Berry Islands. The Northwest Providence Channel met the Florida Straits north of Bimini.

As shown in Table 1, the volume of traffic through those channels in 1847 is reflected in the schedule of vessels passing the Hole-in-the-Wall Lighthouse. Out of a total of 1,924 vessels, eight were steam ships and the rest were sailing ships (CO23/126/428, Lt. Governor C. N. Nesbitt to Earl Grey, 11th January 1848).

It was not until 1865 that it was discovered that British Admiralty Chart #269, which

showed the reefs of the Little Bahama Bank, was inaccurate. The reefs were shown too far north of Walker's Cay Reef and there was a difference of 5 degrees latitude and 4 minutes longitude for the Man O'War Cay anchorage, Pelican Cay, Little Harbour Cay, Whale Cay, and Green Turtle Cay. Winds and currents added to the danger by hampering sailing ships' ability to keep on course (CO 23/181/29, Captain W. H. Stewart from Lighthouse Yacht *Georgina* to Governor Rawson, 6th October 1865).

Table 1
Traffic Observed at Hole-in-the-Wall Lighthouse in 1847

January	195
February	130
March	150
April	146
May	233
June	207
July	89
August	128
September	98
October	217
November	149
December	197

Note: Lt. Governor C. N. Nesbitt to Earl Grey, 11th January 1848 (CO23/126/428).

The first of the four emigrant ships to wreck in The Bahamas in the early 1850s was the *Cato*, under the command of Captain Robinson. She sailed from Liverpool on February 23, 1851 and took five weeks to cross the Atlantic. She sailed through the Northwest Providence Channel, but, on entering the Straits of Florida, she struck the Moselle Shoal near the Bimini Islands.

Magistrate W. R. Inglis, of Abaco and Bimini, praised the prompt action of the Bahamian wreckers from Bimini, who soon

reached the vessel and rescued the passengers. In particular, Inglis praised:

the poor female emigrants being carefully lifted out in the arms of the stalwart wreckers and placed in a boat and conducted on shore with utmost compassion and tenderness and the comfort of all as adequately attended to as is practical. (CO23/139/51, W. R. Inglis [District of Abaco] to Governor Gregory, 25th August 1852)

The wrecking boats took all 300 emigrants to Bimini where they lodged for two nights before leaving on Monday. Then a wrecking vessel carried them to Nassau, arriving on Saturday, the fifth of April. Captain Robinson remained close to the wreck to oversee the removal of the luggage. Scantily dressed men, women, and children wandered through the streets of Nassau without food or shelter. Captain Robinson sent a letter with one of the passengers to Mr. Krislebaum, the American Consul, in Nassau, asking him to provide food, shelter, and passage to New Orleans for the passengers. In his report, Governor Gregory praised the inhabitants of Nassau:

The benevolent kindness of all classes of the people of Nassau toward the shipwrecked emigrants in the first day of their arrival was peculiarly sterling and while I gratefully acknowledge the charitable and humane conduct of the white portion of the inhabitants ... the negro portion came forward one and all with offerings of bread baked for the number of children and provided tea and coffee. (CO23/138/131, Governor Gregory to Earl Grey, 14th April 1851)

Two brigs and a schooner that were lying in the harbour took about 180 adults off by the end of the week and a further 60 departed on one or two other vessels (CO23/138/131,

Governor Gregory to Earl Grey, 14th April 1851).

The second emigrant ship to wreck in The Bahamas was the *Ovando*. The German and French passengers on the *Ovando* lost all their luggage and property and about 130 individuals were wandering utterly destitute around Nassau without food or shelter. Governor Gregory felt he could not neglect them, so he kindly ordered them food from the Commissariat Department and accommodation in the military barracks. The 10 French passengers were taken care of by the French Vice Consul in Nassau. The Vice Consul of the Hanseatic Towns could not take care of the other 139 emigrants as they did not belong to the towns he represented. Governor Gregory used some Crown Funds from the sale of waste lands to send the emigrants to America (CO23/140/254, Governor Gregory to Sir John Pakington, 7th December 1852).

Following the third wreck, the American ship *Osborne* off Grand Bahama, over 200 Irish and English passengers were taken to Nassau by a fleet of wrecking schooners. Governor Gregory again showed compassion and housed them in the empty artillery barracks and provided food from the commissary, which was to be repaid by the Master of the *Osborne* under a guarantee of the American Vice Consul. Fortunately, a large ship, the *Polar Star*, in the harbour at the same time and bound to sail the following week for New Orleans, was able to take the emigrants to their destination (CO23/143/147, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 2nd April 1853).

The fourth wreck, the *William and Mary*, was built in 1852 at Harward Yard in Bowdoinham, Maine. Bowdoinham was the foremost place for the building of ships in Maine in the 1850s. John Harward built the ship and was part owner along with 32-year-

old Captain Timothy Reirdan Stinson, Stinson's father-in-law, and several others (Hoffs, 2016, p. 18). Harward named the boat *William and Mary*, which seemed to be a popular name in America in honour of King William and Queen Mary, who inherited the throne of England in 1688. "She was insured in Boston for 26,000, at the following offices, New England, 10,000 dollars, City, 8,000 dollars, and Hope, 8,000 dollars" ("Wreck," 1853, p. 2).

On January 4, 1853, the three-masted sailing ship *William and Mary*, under the command of Captain Stinson, sailed from Charleston, South Carolina, bound for Liverpool, England, fitted out for the emigrant trade. This was her first voyage across the Atlantic. Apart from the port of Liverpool, vessels from America sailed to London, Glasgow, Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Londonderry (Hoffs, 2016).

Although Liverpool had the reputation for handling the greatest number of ships, it was considered the lowest for the treatment of passengers. The fare was inexpensive, but the passengers had poor accommodations, small, overcrowded cabins with little space to store baggage (Hoffs, 2016, p. 17). Irish and German agricultural labourers were the majority of the 20,000 emigrants who sailed from Liverpool each month to pursue the American dream (Hoffs, 2016, p. 22).

Not only were the passengers treated badly on the voyage, but they were also misled before the journey. The agent handling passengers at Liverpool was James Chambers, who advertised the *William and Mary* as a 1,500-ton vessel, about three times larger than its true 512 tons. There were only five lifeboats on the *William and Mary*, nowhere near enough for the over 200 passengers and crew (Hoffs, 2016, p. 70). There was no doctor hired to accompany the 80 German passengers, who intended to settle

a tract of land they had purchased together in Illinois, or the other emigrants, who were English, Scottish, and Irish; Irish were the largest national group ("Wreck," 1853).

The barque *William and Mary*, under the command of Captain Stinson, embarked from Liverpool on March 24, 1853, and sailed across the Atlantic toward New Orleans. The progress was slow due to stormy weather and then a hurricane. The passengers were stricken with violent sea sickness; the suffering was so bad that their quarters below deck could not be cleaned of vomit (Hoffs, 2016). The captain ordered reduced provisions, as the food had run out and the ham had rotted. There was no ship's surgeon to treat the resulting illnesses, and 14 passengers died on the journey. Conditions worsened as the voyage continued and a further reduction of food and water was ordered by Captain Stinson. The voyage across the Atlantic took two months (Hoffs, 2016, p. 58).

On May 31, they entered the dangerous Northeast Providence Channel under a dark cloudy sky. A strong southeast wind was blowing and there was a heavy sea. At 7:00 a.m. the barque safely passed the Hole-in-the-Wall lighthouse, Captain Stinson steered for Stirrup's Cay, and at noon he was about 12 miles away from his next landmark. The weather worsened with increased clouds and an increased wind. "The vessel kept on her course ..., but at 8:30 she struck on a sunken rock, where she remained for 15 mins, receiving extensive damage" ("Wreck," 1853, p. 1). With the setting sun in his eyes, it appeared that Captain Stinson lost sight of the Cay, mistakenly headed south, and did not discover his mistake until the barque struck ("Wreck," 1853).

The passengers and crew were terrified, but after 15 minutes the ship cleared but struck another rock. The water rushed into the ship

so rapidly that the pumps couldn't cope despite the frantic efforts of the crew. By midnight, there was four feet of water in the hold; at 4:00 a.m. it had risen to eight feet and by daybreak it was 10 feet and the pumps were abandoned ("Wreck," 1853).

The passengers later gave their written accounts of their terrible ordeal. One passenger, Broer Baukes Haagsma, explained the difficulty of entering the Northeast Providence Channel as the wind was strong. Then, on passing the lighthouse at Hole-in-the-Wall, they knew they were in that Channel which was only 20 feet deep and the draft of the *William and Mary* was 17 feet. Haagsma recognized the great danger posed by the shallows of the Great Bahama Bank where the Northwest Providence Channel meets the Straits of Florida (Hoffs, 2016, p. 64).

Sjoerd (Bekins) Bekius described the atmosphere of panic and terror of the 200 passengers and 12 sailors when they heard what sounded like a clap of thunder and a severe shock as the ship struck a rock. They were stranded as the ship rolled with the rising wind and water leaked into the ship. Rockets were fired high into the sky to signal their distress (Hoffs, 2016, p. 66).

Robert Silcock wrote:

All around us as far as we could see by the starlight, was one sheet of foam. To windward were the gigantic breakers coming on with race-horse speed, ... lifting [the ship] up and letting her fall again on the coral rock, crunching it beneath her and the water rushing over the side, nearly washing us away as we clung to the ropes and belaying pins. ... every crunch went through us like an electric shock. Wet and frightened, we spent the hours until daylight in misery and wretchedness. (Hoffs, 2016, p. 69)

Izaak Epkes Roorda testified that as daylight slowly broke, the passengers saw a lifeboat lowered into the sea. The captain, two steersmen, and six sailors had abandoned ship. Hendrik Jans Kas reported that the captain turned and called, "Friends, may you fare well" (Hoffs, 2016, p. 76).

The five lifeboats had been unshipped from the davits, but three were swamped. Captain Stinson and the crew manned one lifeboat and about 30 passengers manned the second of the remaining two lifeboats, leaving the rest of the passengers on board the sinking ship screaming for help ("Wreck," 1853). Luckily, the waters around The Bahamas and the relatively nearby coast of Florida formed part of a busy shipping route—a general highway to vessels bound to and from America.

Captain Stinson, the first and second mate, and six crew members in one lifeboat were picked up by the brig *Reuben Carver*, commanded by Captain Edward Cobb, which was sailing from Saqua la Grande to New York ("Wreck," 1853). Captain Stinson made a report in America that the small boat and crew had been rescued but that the 200 passengers died in the waves (Hoffs, 2016, p. 124). The passengers, especially Haagsma, thought that Captain "Stinson had deliberately left them on the wreck to die" (Hoffs, 2016, p. 82).

Governor Gregory's report to England commented that the loss of the *William and Mary* showed that Captain Stinson was a most discreditable character. From the very moment the ship hit Little Isaacs Rock, he acted without feeling. Stinson and his crew left the ship with a box of coins and left the emigrants without a lifeboat. The sinking *William and Mary* floated free of the rock and drifted with the current along the Straits of Florida. Gregory believed that it was by

divine providence that the 166 passengers and the cargo of railway iron and crockery did not disappear into the depths of the ocean (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

Captain Stinson's report of the death of the passengers was a lie and probably wishful thinking, as there would be no one to report his gross negligence and cold-hearted actions. Back on the sinking *William and Mary*, at dawn on May 5, the passengers sighted a ship on the horizon, and they shed tears of joy as it headed toward them. Captain Robert "Amphibian" Sands, his nickname reflecting his tremendous ability as a swimmer, guided his wrecking schooner, the *Oracle*, toward them (Hoffs, 2016). Sands and his crew were family men and skilled sailors with vast experience in saving lives and were deeply sympathetic to frightened passengers on wrecked ships. It took five hours for the crew of the *Oracle*, under William Sands, to transport the women and 50 children the 25 miles to Grand Bahama. They ensured the comfort of Susannah Diamond, who had lost her one-year-old daughter, her husband, and her newborn child during the voyage; Captain Sands personally lifted her carefully from the sinking ship into the *Oracle* (Hoffs, 2016, p. 108).

Governor Gregory's report to England praised Captain Robert Sands as a shining example of practical humanity as the moment he sighted the wrecked ship he instantly went to the rescue. Captain Sands had no thought of the cargo or salvage but rescued as many women and children as the 41-ton burthen *Oracle* could carry. Captain Sands and five of his crew remained on board to help the remaining passengers pump out water that was rushing into the sinking ship (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

After five hours, the *Oracle* returned to the *William and Mary* and found another wrecking vessel, the *Contest*, alongside her. The two wrecking crews worked together to take the majority of the remaining passengers on board, but there was no room for cargo. When everyone was taken off the *William and Mary* except two old men, the ship sank bow first. Fortunately, the two old men floated up and were rescued by the wreckers. The passengers were taken to a sandy shore on Grand Bahama where they suffered dreadfully with mosquito bites (Hoffs, 2016, p. 111).

The wrecking ships the *Oracle* and the *Contest* visited a few settlements and after eight days arrived in Nassau. The inhabitants of Nassau rallied together to provide time, money, food, and clothes to the survivors. The *Nassau Guardian* reported "we have much pleasure in recording the benevolent acts of a committee of ladies of our town, who have been administering to the necessities of the unfortunate emigrants wrecked in the Am. ship '*William and Mary*'" (Hoffs, 2016, p. 119).

Governor Gregory had the emigrants housed in the empty barracks and food provided from the commissary. He also subscribed £20 from crown funds and collected £90 from private donations toward assisting the poor passengers, who had lost so much in the shipwreck. Clothes were provided by the Archdeacon and clergy (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

Governor Gregory enclosed a petition from the Captains of the *Oracle* and the *Contest* requesting compensation for their loss of time and their expense of feeding the emigrants from the sinking vessel in the passage to Nassau. Captain Robert Sands claimed £131 for wages and expenses.

Governor Gregory suggested “a small token of the Queen’s approbation” (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853) be presented to Robert Sands, the man who first went to the rescue of the sinking ship. The Governor hired three small vessels, the *Time*, the *Rover*, and the *Clyde*, “outfitted appropriately with plentiful food and water,” for the purpose of sending the emigrants to their destination of New Orleans (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

Governor Gregory was under the impression that many of the emigrants were Dutch, but actually they were Hessians from the German state of Hesse-Cassel. He thought it unreasonable that the British Treasury should bear the expenses and hoped that they could be recovered from the owners or master of the *William and Mary* under the 50th Section of the Imperial Passengers Act of 1852. But he feared that as the ship was American, the Master would not be found and the owners and charterers would be residents of the United States and impossible to locate (CO23/143/321, Governor Gregory to Duke of Newcastle, 28th May 1853).

On July 7, 1853, the Committee of the National Life-Boat Institution:

voted ... the silver medal to Mr. Robt. Sands (a man of colour), master of the schooner *Oracle*, of Nassau, New Providence, West Indies, for his gallant services to the passengers, consisting of 160 persons, of the ship *William and Mary*, of Bath, State of Maine, which struck on one of the coral reefs off the Bahama Islands. (“Meetings of the Committee,” 1854, p. 77)

There were two awards granted to Abaco wreckers in 1853. Albert Saunders, another man of colour, received a Royal Humane

Society Medal and £100 for the rescue and saving life of American seamen wrecked off Abaco. Also, a Royal National Institution for the Saving of Lives Silver Medal was awarded to Robert Sands, Master of the wrecking vessel *Oracle*, for his exertions in saving from drowning in the Bahama Channel the passengers of the *William and Mary*, bound from Liverpool to New Orleans; in addition, Lt. Governor Nesbitt expressed gratitude to Sands and crew: “William Sands, mate, Benjamin Roberts, James Roberts, Octavius Dorsett, John Cash, and Richard[son] Sands” (CO 24/26/98, Chalmers Papers: Letter from Lord Newcastle, 30th July 1853).

Governor Gregory praised the wreckers and boat builders of Abaco:

The wrecking vessels are a fine class of sailing schooners, many of them beautiful models, the most superior of them built at Green Turtle Cay, Abaco, where the genius of the people is manifested in their shipbuilding, the timbers being principally of native cedar or horse flesh mahogany of a very durable nature and the planking of a beautifully grained yellow pine from North Carolina, one of the southern states of America. The wrecking business is conducted on the whole very creditably, and these small vessels and their hardy crews skilled in diving in deep water are the means of saving annually much valuable property from vessels stranded on various reefs, shoals and coasts of the numerous Bahama group besides no inconsiderable number of valuable lives. (CO23/140/254, Governor Gregory to Sir John Pakington, 7th December 1852)

No doubt Governor Gregory would have enjoyed presenting the awards to the wrecking captains, but he died at

Government House on July 29, 1853, after a short illness (CO23/144/3, Lt Governor C. R. Nesbitt to Duke of Newcastle, 30th July 1853).

On October 31, 1853, Lt. Governor C. R. Nesbitt presented the Silver Medal of the Royal National Institution to Captain Robert Sands at Government House, assisted by Major D'Arcy, the Garrison Commander. *The Life-boat*, the journal of the British-based National Life-Boat Institution, featured the article published in the *Nassau Guardian* on November 2, 1853, which reported the presentation and speeches (Nesbitt, 1853).

Lt. Governor Nesbitt praised Captain Sands:

Your disinterested conduct on this occasion has attracted very general attention, not only in England but in America, and, contrasting so strongly as it did with the discreditable abandonment of those passengers by the master of the *William and Mary*, it has reflected great honour upon yourself. ("Medals," 1854, p. 87)

Furthermore, it was noted that the awards from the Royal National Shipwreck Institution were usually limited to shipwrecks on the coasts of the United Kingdom:

Major D'Arcy spontaneously made the representation which has elicited from the Royal National Shipwreck Institution (whose rewards are usually limited to shipwrecks on the coasts of the United Kingdom), the silver medal which I am about to present to you, in admiration of your humane and prompt exertions on the occasion; and the Committee of Management of that Society congratulate you on having been made the happy instrument, under Divine Providence, in rescuing from inevitable destruction so

large a number of your fellow-creatures. ("Medals," 1854, p. 87)

Major d'Arcy told Captain Sands and his crew that their

service [was] not limited to the saving of life, in the particular instance, but enhanced by the example of generosity and courage shown to the numerous body of [their] fellow-colonists engaged in an occupation so trying to the character as that of wrecking. ("Medals," 184, p. 87)

He also referred to an article he had published "as an incitement to others to act, in the true spirit of Christian philanthropy exhibited by you, on similar occasions of distress" ("Medals," 1854, p. 87).

Captain Sands expressed his thanks and gratitude for the medal and kind words. He said he felt proud that wreckers would now be viewed with greater appreciation. He said that "he acted upon feelings which arose out of sentiments early inculcated by the example of his parents" ("Medals," 1854, p. 87). Captain Sands was referring to the tarnished reputation of the wrecking industry caused by tales of Bahamian wreckers doing all the following: colluding with American captains to purposely wreck their ship at a certain location for a share in the salvage proceeds; lighthouse keepers intentionally not switching on their lights at night; and wreckers placing lights on the beach to mislead trading ships.

The people of Harbour Island and Abaco were very incensed at the erection of the lighthouse at Elbow Cay and condemned the lighthouse keeper for preventing many wrecks. In wrecker's philosophy, the furnishings from the bilged or stranded vessels were not a part of the cargo. Many homes in Harbour Island were furnished with

salvaged mirrors, clocks, chests of drawers, chairs, tables, and even beds from the cabins of these ill-fated vessels. These undeclared items were regarded as trophies of the wrecking adventure (Lawlor & Lawlor, 2008, p. 125).

Conclusion

The passengers on the *Cato*, the *Ovando*, the *Osborne*, and the *William and Mary* were escaping destitution in Europe. They had no knowledge that to pursue the American dream, they would have to bear physical discomfort and a near-death experience. The voyage of the *William and Mary* started out in Liverpool and the ship was not adequate for the journey. The passengers suffered violent weather and sea sickness across the Atlantic. The inexperienced captain was not up to the task of navigating the ship through the hazardous channels of The Bahamas in foul weather and the ship was wrecked. In the

lore of the sea, a captain must stay with his ship and care for his passengers. Captain Stinson callously deserted his ship and left the passengers to die. Luckily, they were rescued by wrecking Captain Sands and crew, who took great care to guarantee their safety. The generosity of Governor Gregory and the inhabitants of The Bahamas ensured they were housed, fed, and clothed, and Governor Gregory organized transport to their intended destination.

An article in *The New York Times* severely condemned Captain Stinson of the *William and Mary* but he never faced prosecution for his cowardly and callous actions (Hoffs, 2016, p. 140). Captain Sands was the first Bahamian to receive the prestigious silver medal and would deservedly go down in history for his humane actions, whereas Captain Timothy Reirdan Stinson would gain notoriety (Hoffs, 2016, p. 139).

References

- Albury, P. (1975). *The story of The Bahamas*. MacMillan.
- Hoffs, G. (2016). *The lost story of the William and Mary: The cowardice of Captain Stinson*. Pen & Sword Books.
- Lawlor, A., & Lawlor, J. (2008). *The Harbour Island Story*. MacMillan Caribbean.
- Lawlor, J. (2018). The Bahamas in international intrigue: Lighthouses and Cay Sal Bank. *International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 24, 41–52.
<https://doi.org/10.15362/ijbs.v24i0.314>
- Medals of the National Shipwreck Institution. (1854, January 1). *The Life-boat, or, Journal of the National Life-Boat Institution*, 2(1), 86-87.
<https://archive.org/details/lifeboatorjourn00unkngoog/page/n232/mode/2up?q=divine+providence>
- Meetings of the Committee. (1854, January 1). *The Life-boat, or, Journal of the National Life-Boat Institution*, 2(1), 75-78.
<https://archive.org/details/lifeboatorjourn00unkngoog/page/n232/mode/2up?q=divine+providence>
- Nesbitt, C. R. (1853, November 2). Commendation of Captain Sands. *The Nassau Guardian*.
<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/00388/2x>
- Reindeers, R. (1964). *End of an era: New Orleans, 1850-1860*. Pelican Publishing Company.
- Wreck of the *William and Mary*. (1853, June 3). *Southport Visiter*.
<https://rollingharbour.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/wreck-of-the-william-and-mary-pdf.pdf>