

GRANTS TOWN AND THE HISTORICAL  
DEVELOPMENT OF "OVER-THE-HILL"

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Prior to the coming of the Loyalists in 1783, the black and white inhabitants of New Providence virtually lived together. The increase of the Loyalist slaves threatened the security of the Nassau residents and as a result the House of Assembly passed an Act for regulating the police of the town of Nassau and the suburbs thereof, and for other purposes therein mentioned.<sup>1</sup> This required that all persons of colour be domiciled beyond the city limits, and a curfew of sundown was imposed unless special permission was granted by the master. As a result land was set aside for the blacks employed in Nassau on an uncleared worthless piece of land with poor drainage; and the first settlement was established.

This settlement was called Headquarters. It developed unsupervised with houses being found here and there. It was said to have been located some short distance from Nassau. A rather controversial site, Headquarters was also regarded as Carmichael, another southern settlement. Sir James Carmichael Smyth in his despatch of 13 March, 1830, to Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for the colonies, explained that some Africans "... were now located on small lots of ground a short distance from the town at a place called Headquarters."<sup>2</sup> Founded at the suggestion of Mr Poitier, Collector of Customs, Headquarters was designed to guide the Africans in their development. However, Governor Smyth was to find that the Africans at Headquarters were "idle

and desolute" although they were "industrious and living in comparative comfort."

By 1830, Headquarters was neglected and lacked supervised discipline. The initial onus of establishment was placed on the church which was to provide religious instructions. The Bahamas Legislature, well aware of the problems inherent in settlement if development was harnessed properly, sought to provide a salaried superintendant, a schoolhouse and a scheme for reconstruction of houses.

To date, a distinct settlement known as Headquarters does not exist. However, both Michael Craton in his A History of The Bahamas and Michael Doran and Renee Landis in their article "The Origin and Persistence of an Inner-city Slum in Nassau"<sup>3</sup> postulate that Grants Town is on the side of Headquarters. In time, then Headquarters became absorbed into what became known as Grants Town.

Another such settlement that came as a result of securing the protection of Nassau's residents was Delancy Town. Originally an 150 acre land grant to the Honourable John Brown in the 1780s Delancy Town was sold in 1789 to the Honourable Stephen Delancy.<sup>4</sup> The land was then divided into eighty lots by Surveyor, General Benjamin Lord<sup>5</sup> in 1801. It was properly laid out, sold to private parties, and formed a part of what was then called Deans Town.<sup>6</sup> An annex to the city, Delancy Town, was on the north-central urban periphery of the negro settlements in the south. Delancy Town emerged as a well

planned site and surpassed Headquarters in its development. Although its settlement had been originally attributed to the Africans, their families and descendants, Delancy Town, was noted for its fairer skinned residents and for its intermediary position viz a viz the larger white society. However, it too, became absorbed into the precincts of Grants Town and what later became known as 'over-the-hill'.

The influx of Africans after 1807 necessitated carefully planned settlements. The first of these settlements was Grants Town which began as a government sponsored project to provide land for the African recaptives and which in the course of its development encompassed the extant settlements and their residents both to the south and to the north, Headquarters, Carmichael and Delancy Town respectively.

The increasing number of recaptives precipitated the need for new settlements outside the city of Nassau. It was found that by 1825 a large number of recaptives and their families had already moved to a tract of waste land located near the south of the town of Nassau and bordered by the Blue Hills and acquired property nearer the town so that they might sell their farm produce. Thus as a matter of course, Sir Lewis Grant formally established Grants Town in 1825.<sup>10</sup>

The need for settlement, however, was more pressing than just relieving the population overflow. There was a demand for cheap African labour, but in time, even the local white inhabitants resented the Africans' presence and sought desperately to prevent their arrival. "The feeling of white hostility was based on their seeming maintenance of the colour ratio, fear of losing their allegedly superior positions and the expense of their support."<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, the Governors of the day were faced with insurmountable opposition on this issue and in no light manner forced to create a relieving situation.

"That tract of land situated between the town of Nassau and the Blue Hills on the south, having from its sterility been regarded as worthless,"<sup>13</sup> was originally divided into quarter acre allotments which were offered for sale. By 1835 confusion

had arisen due to the uncertainty of the tenancy if the Grants Town settlers<sup>14</sup> and Governor Cockburn in an exercise of practicality offered the quarter acre lots for 10/- per lot or £2 per acre.<sup>15</sup> By so doing he afforded the Africans a substantial interest in their settlement and also raised sufficient funds to fix the settlement's main roads.<sup>16</sup>

Many embraced the offer confident of their freehold rights<sup>17</sup> and in time the property in Grants Town rose to a nominal rate of £5 - £6 per acre.<sup>18</sup> Governor Cockburn, in his wisdom, foresaw the rapid expansion of this settlement and wrote in his despatch of 25 July, 1835.

"...The settlement may be expected to extend rapidly and improve themselves may come into."<sup>19</sup>

Between 1825 and 1835 there were 477 lots sold in Grants Town with approximately half being built upon or in "...a state of improvement."<sup>20</sup> It was also projected that future extension of Grants Town could be had by means of selling allotments of adjacent crown lands.<sup>21</sup> The 1835 census of population enumerated a total of 547 persons in Grants Town (160 men, 176 women, 93 boys and 118 girls).<sup>22</sup> The effect of this settlement, in part, was seen to improve the health of the town and provided a constant supply of farm produce and industrious labour.<sup>23</sup>

There was every indication from 1835 that Grants Town had the potential to thrive and act as a buffer to the city of Nassau. Grants Town too, became self contained and was more of a reinforcement to Nassau and not a part of it as it maintained a separate identity. As progress became evident a school was started in an old wooden chapel and the Central School opened in 1836. Roads and streets were relative to progress and their improvement helped to hasten the construction of a market place in the mid 1840s.

"Bain Town, the sister settlement to Grants Town, was settled as the result of the rapid expansion and overflow of the latter. As with Headquarters and Delancy Town, Bain Town too became absorbed into the precincts of Grants Town. Bain Town situated to the west of Grants Town bounded by

Hospital Lane on the east, Meadow Street on the north, Blake Street<sup>24</sup> its southern boundary has since expanded to Wulff Road.<sup>25</sup> Originally, a part of a 140 acre grant to Susannah Weather-  
spoon,<sup>26</sup> it was sold to a wealthy Bahamian merchant Charles Bain,<sup>27</sup> who divided his estate into lots which were sold at reasonable prices to mostly negroes of African descent. Most of these sales were transacted in the 1850's as is evidenced by the number of indentures made in Bain Town.

The Africans that settled in these areas represented the principal African tribes, the Yorubas and Congoes.<sup>29</sup> In his story of Bain Town Dr Eneas points out the distinct tribal differences and settlement patterns of both the Yorubas and Congoes. The population of Grants Town observed and upheld their African traditions and customs. Their homes, shops, farms and gardens were characteristic of small vibrant communities.

In 1845, the House of Assembly voted moneys for a road from Market Street to Nassau as roads as such were considered a necessity.<sup>30</sup> This road was not constructed, however, until in 1849 the civil Engineers reported that serious repairs had to be done especially to the slips and roads to the south of the town. Again, Market Street was in dire need of surfacing, drainage and an access route to the city. In order to make a connection with Grants Town, it was ordered that the unsightly quarry at the head of Market Street be cut through.<sup>31</sup> At a cost of £270, Mr John Minns was contracted to remove the "eye score" and excavate the proposed tunnel with two arches,<sup>32</sup> which subsequently became known as Gregory's Arch, named for the then Governor, Sir John Gregory. With the same stroke of luck, both the public market and the ice house were improved.<sup>33</sup> Further, the roads or rather the lanes of Bain Town and Grants Town were more than always in a state of disrepair and in 1852, Governor Gregory ordered all roads overgrown with weeds should be cleared so as not to impede the visits of medics whose task during the cholera epidemic was almost unbearable.<sup>34</sup>

Roads served as a public means of travel

of passage, and as boundaries which linked the population. Roads, too, by their very name, had a history all their own for they bore the names and legends of their principal residents or patrons. Originally lanes, the roads in Grants Town criss-crossed each other and these mere foot paths came to bear the names of their more outstanding residents or memory of some exciting event that happened there.<sup>36</sup> There were names in Grants Town such as Vesey Street, obviously named for William Vesey Munnings a leading member of the Executive Council and also a lot owner in Grants Town; Chapel Street because the Wesleyan Chapel was on its corner; and Panza Corner where the Panza family lived. Lanes that were originally numbered had names such as Lane 1 - Home Trouble Avenue, which was renamed Taylor Street or Lees' Street (for Honourable John Campbell Lees Governor); Lane 2 - Cudda Ross Corner (William and James Ross had grants of land on this street); and Lane 3 - Dan Marshall's Corner (Lilly of the Valley or Red Lion Bar Corners).<sup>37</sup>

In Bain Town 3Ps Corner or 3 Peas Corner; Rupert Dean's Lane named for Rupert Dean; West Street because it was the western most extremity; Blake Street for Governor Blake; Dumping Ground Road because at its southern end was a public dumping ground; and Augusta Street or Farrington's Church Corner, were characteristic streets.<sup>38</sup> The main street in Bain Town was Meadow Street named for the Honourable John Meadows a wealthy merchant who owned land in the southern district. There was also Meeting Street on the north named for the Baptist Meeting Chapel.

The development of Grants Town was subject to severe economic trends and differed markedly from that of the city, Nassau. During the later 1840's the Bahamas government was in dire financial straits<sup>39</sup> and as a result many proposed projects for the general improvement of the country were delayed. Added to the latter frustration was the distressing famine of 1844-1845,<sup>40</sup> the visitation of small pox and yellow fever, the hurricane of 1846 which destroyed even more property than was officially reported, and the cholera epidemic of 1849.<sup>41</sup> However, in the midst of this, an effort was made to erect a church in Grants Town, later called St. Agnes, and a school.<sup>42</sup> The market in the eastern district was

removed to Grants Town because "...they never kill beef, and very seldom mutton."<sup>43</sup>

The 1850s began with a fearful tornado.<sup>44</sup> The southern district of New Providence was first and most severely hit as "many frail houses of the poor fell,"<sup>45</sup> fifty in all, as well as six persons including the sexton at the Grants Town Chapel (St. Agnes) met untimely deaths.<sup>46</sup> In the face of such tragedy and destruction the Bahama Legislature appointed a tornado Relief Committee chaired by Mr Fred Duncombe, M. D., to settle damage claims.

The imminent threats of yellow fever and cholera were the driving forces behind settlement improvements in New Providence, especially in Grants Town. As a direct result, roads were cleared, swamps drained and converted for agricultural purposes, and every precaution was taken toward off these fatal diseases. The Grants Town market which was opened in 1850 was used as a supply house and part hospital to tend the sick in the south. St. Agnes Church, registered as a place of worship in May 1849,<sup>47</sup> was enlarged in 1853.<sup>48</sup> Further to relieve the situation in the burial grounds, the Governor on the advice of the Executive Council, sanctioned the provision of a cemetery in the suburbs of Grants Town.<sup>40</sup> Reconstruction in the 1850s embraced the conversion of leaseholds to freeholds<sup>50</sup> thus enabling more exslaves to own land outright and to further break the prolonged sentimental attachment of the master-slave relationship.<sup>51</sup> The government's proposed policy of fully vesting in the exslaves possession of the land was realized by 1857 according to Governor Bayley in his report to Labouchere of the same date. He was also pleased to note that due to the philanthropic policies of previous governors the exslaves were now, twenty years after emancipation, exhibiting a moral and material independence.<sup>52</sup>

During the 1860s many cases of endemic diseases emanated from the unsanitary conditions at the governments newly built Royal Victoria Hotel or from its guests.<sup>53</sup> The suburbs were also affected by the city's overhang of disease. It was alleged that Grants Town was very unhealthy and that its inhabitants lived

in a "...nominal state of debility".<sup>54</sup> Anxious to dispell this misconception and to emphasise the improvements of this settlement since the arrival of the liberated Africans forty years earlier, the Board of Health reported thus:

"The progress made, and being made in Grants Town maybe seen in the state, style and size of the numerous buildings and shops in all directions and in the state of the roads, many of which have been cleared and macadamized."<sup>55</sup>

The residents of Grants Town were further encouraged in their development by the establishment of schools, namely the Woodcock School, churches and the founding of a savings bank. The government was urged to increase their legislative grants so that roads in Grants Town could be opened, widened and improved. There was also a need for an additional supply of fresh potent water wells. In order to further facilitate settlement development, the Police were to rigidly enforce the clearing of lots, the maintenance of dividing walls, out door cleanliness, the "restricting of dancing saloons to certain hours and to supression of disorderly crowds".<sup>56</sup>

The extension of settlements was the direct result of the increase in population, the ready availability of land and the building of more houses. There was virtually no way in which settlement expansion could be limited. Instead, the government under the auspices of the Board of Health, tried to direct the proper development of the settlement by issuing special regulations "...the size, locality and mode of building ...", sanitary conditions and also by public lectures on relative topics such as house construction and surveyance. The Board of Health also proposed a model plan of a house which would be suitable to the financial position of the Grants Town resident and big enough to accommodate a family.<sup>58</sup> It was also stipulated that houses were to be erected well off the ground so as to provide ventilation and that each abode had a regular privy. The surface drainage of Grants Town was also to be improved upon.

The destructive hurricane of 1866 did enough

damage in one day to set the Bahamas back one whole year. However, the townspeople set about repairing and rebuilding the many shackled homes, so that by 1868 New Providence was on firm footing once again. The Grants Town Market destroyed by the 1866 hurricane was re-established by an Act for these purposes in 1873.<sup>59</sup> At this Market the inhabitants of the southern suburbs were able to secure and man stalls where they sold their agricultural produce, fowls etc., and congregated to discuss local issues and gossip.

In comparison to the city of Nassau, the number and quality of houses in Grants Town were inferior. In the 1870s the native houses of over-the-hill were scattered over the large expanse of Nassau's south. Mainly the wood, the homes were grey from both age and weather, detached with shingle roofs and surrounded by fruit trees and vegetable plots.<sup>60</sup> There were a few recently built homes which sported the gayest colours. The homes of the negro population were considered tidy and neat and as an incentive to maintain such a high standard, the government offered prizes for the best kept cottages.<sup>62</sup> Verandahs were an essential feature of negro houses. In the back yard was a wall, an oven made from rocks and mortar, a kitchen and an "outhouse" (the privy).<sup>63</sup> Those people living on the main streets usually possessed the more impressive and comfortable homes. The house was barely used for anything other than sleeping as most of the daily activity took place in the yard around the kitchen.<sup>64</sup>

Over a period of time both Adelaide and Carmichael lost their settling population to Grants Town and its environs. In times of economic prosperity, these people moved closer to the economic hub where they either lodged with relatives or after a reasonable time acquired property within its limits.

Development in the over-the-hill section of New Providence, the all inclusive Grants Town, was unique. It extended far beyond its originally planned limits: beyond Wulff Road to the south into what was known as "Conta Butta". On land once owned by Stephen Delancy Conta Butta was settled precariously about 1870, although no exact date is known. It was also settled by people of African descent who according to Dr Eneas "were definitely not Yorubas" and therefore definitely of no particular consequence.<sup>65</sup> To the west it extended onto Farringtons, Pohlemus and Chippingham.

By 1888 the Grants Town resident also became more wealthy and economic conscious as can be seen in the increased number of shops, grocery and liquor, and the improvements made on their homes.<sup>67</sup> The more well-to-do had bigger houses with decorative gardens. The lanes were now properly named streets, community buildings such as churches and lodge halls were sturdily built, and there was much order and peace prevailed in Grants Town.

ENDNOTES

1. Laws of the Bahamas 1795 - 1799, 35 George III.
2. James Carmichael Smyth to Sir George Murray, 13 March 1830, #31, Duplicate Governors Despatch.
3. Michael Craton. A history of the Bahamas, London, 1962 p. 207 and Michael Doran and Renee Landis, "The Origin and Persistence of an Inner-City Slum in Nassau", The Geographical Review, Vol. 70, No. 2, April, 1980 p. 186. This article precisely states that the blacks lived on the slope to the south of Mount Fitzwilliam.
4. Grant Book 02 Registrar General's Department, pp 159-161.
5. Bahamas Almanack 1879, ed. Edwin Moseley, Nassau Guardian, New Providence 1879.
6. Commutation Book C2, Department of Lands & Surveys.
7. Governor Colebrooke to Glenelg, Governor's Despatch, 5 December 1835. Colonial Office Series 23/94.
8. Colebrooke to Glenelg - 5 August 1835, #17 CO 23/94.
9. Ibid.
10. Bahamas Argus, 27 November 1835.
11. Peter Dalleo, "the African Recaptives, A Preliminary Study", Unpublished Work, Nassau, Bahamas, 1978, p. 7.
12. Ibid.
13. Bahamas Argus, "An Account of Grants Town" 16 December 1835.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Bahamas Argus, 15 December 1835.
18. Colebrooke to Glenelg, 25 July 1835, #72, CO 73/93 Reel 2.
19. Colebrooke to Glenelg Duplicate Governor's Despatch #72, 25 July 1835 p. 218.
20. Bahamas Argus, 15 December 1835
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Now called Hutchinson Street off Meadow Street.
25. From a copy of an Old Dilapidated Plan of Bain Town c. 1856, Department of Lands and Surveys.
26. Crown Grant - Book B. Department of Lands and Surveys, p. 20.
27. Bahama Herald, 26 February 1851.
28. Indneture Index 1815 - 1862. Registrar General's Department.
29. Dr Cleveland W. Eneas, Bain Town, Nassau, Bahamas 1977 p. 3.
30. Laws of The Bahamas 1845.
31. Nassau Guardian, 12 December 1849.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid

34. Executive Council Minutes, 5 October 1852.
35. Copy of a Plan of Grants Town, Department of Lands and Surveys.
36. Eneas, op cit, p. 2.
37. From a Copy of a Plan of Grants Town copied from an original done c. 1850. Department of Lands and Surveys.
38. Copy of an old Dilapidated plan of Bain Town done c. 1850 Department of Lands and Surveys. See also Eneas op. cit. p. 2.
39. Report on the State of the Peasantry 1847 by Justice Cartwright Colonial Secretary's Papers, P.R.O. Nassau.
40. Ibid.
41. Bahamas Herald, 15 May 1849.
42. Nassau Guardian, 21 July and 25 August 1849.
43. Nassau Guardian, 12 April 1850.
44. Nassau Guardian, 30 March 1850.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Nassau Guardian, 26 May 1849.
48. Nassau Guardian, 3 December 1853.
49. Executive Council Minutes, 28 September 1852 and also Bahama Herald, 29 September 1852.
50. Laws of The Bahamas 1857.
51. Governor Bayley to H. Labondiere, Duplicate Governor's Despatch #57, 23 September 1857.
52. Ibid.
53. Report of Board of Health 1862. Votes of House of Assembly 1862.
54. Report of Board of Health 1863. Votes of House of Assembly 1864 pp. 86 et. seq.
55. Report of the Board of Health 1863. Votes of the House of Assembly 1864.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Strachan to Earl of Kimberley, Duplicate Governor's Despatches, #19, 18 February 1873.
60. Bahamas Almanack 1879, p. 72.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Eneas, op. cit p. 3.
64. Ibid. 1 p. 6.
65. Eneas op cit, p. 22.
66. Louis Powles, Land of the Pink Pearl, London 1888, p. 150 et seq.
67. Nassau Quarterly Mission Papers, No. 1 June 1886, p. 10.