

# History of Hope Town, Elbow Cay, and the Abacos

## Introduction

Hope Town, nestled on tiny Elbow Cay in the Abaco Islands, is a living tableau of Bahamian history. The Abacos themselves form a northern archipelago of the Bahamas, consisting chiefly of Great Abaco and Little Abaco and a scattering of smaller cays<sup>[1]</sup>. Stretching roughly 90 miles from north to south, these islands lie about 170 miles off the coast of Florida<sup>[1]</sup>. Today, Marsh Harbour on Great Abaco is the commercial hub and third-largest town in the Bahamas. At the same time, Elbow Cay's Hope Town remains a quaint settlement known for its candy-striped 1860s lighthouse and New England-style clapboard cottages – vivid testaments to its Loyalist past<sup>[2][3]</sup>. Yet beyond the picturesque veneer, the Abacos have a rich and turbulent history. From the peaceful **Lucayan** indigenous society that first inhabited these isles, through eras of piracy, British colonial settlement by American **Loyalists**, and cycles of boom-and-bust in shipwreck salvage and agriculture, to the rise of tourism and contemporary challenges, the story of Hope Town and the greater Abaco Islands is a microcosm of Caribbean and Bahamian history. This report traces that history in depth, organized chronologically into chapters that explore each major era: the indigenous Lucayan period; the arrival of Europeans and the age of piracy; the post-American Revolution Loyalist settlement and 19th-century developments; the early 20th-century hardships and the dawn of tourism; the transformative impact of modern tourism and political change; and finally the contemporary issues facing the Abacos in the 21st century. Throughout, key figures and events that shaped the region – from Lucayan leaders and pirate captains to Loyalist matriarch **Wyannie Malone**, colonial administrators, and modern local leaders – will be highlighted. By examining these phases, we can understand how Hope Town and Abaco evolved into their current form, and appreciate the indelible imprint of history on this unique island community.

**Using this book:** Chapters 1 through 6 are offered in ‘main’ sections with ‘deep dives’ per chapter identified as the chapter number and a sub-letter. For example, chapter 1 looks at indigenous prehistory before the colonial period, and ‘deep dive’ 1A looks at a deep dive on the Lucayan Indigenous lifeways of the Abacos. The main ‘content’ of the book, in this edition, spans only roughly 10,000 words, while all content approaches 60,000 words.

Chapters 5 and 6 have sub sections explaining different aspects of more recent history and considerations for the abacos, in Chapter 5 for example, split in sections 5.1 and 5.2.

We also have reference materials available in the appendices, with Appendix A as a reference for Abaco place names, their origins and history, and Appendix B being a Nature Checklist mainly focused on Elbow Cay’s natural communities.

## Acknowledgements and Other Readings

We stand on the shoulders of giants, and this book is no exception. Many of the stories referenced in this book have been better and more thoroughly captured in other books on the History of Hope Town, the Abacos, and the Bahamas. I highly recommend the following sources to dig deeper with local storytellers and history-keepers:

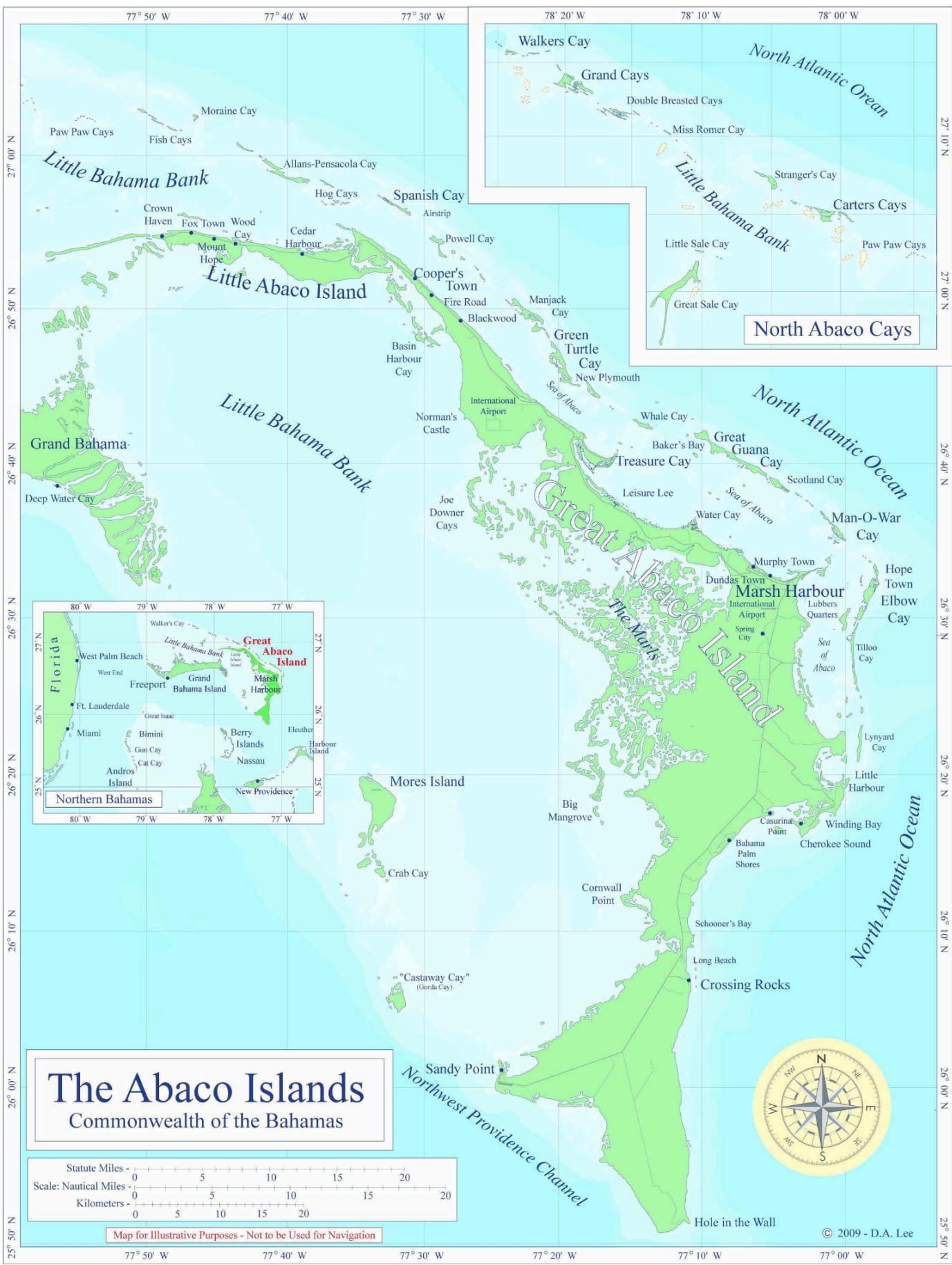
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Additionally, in lieu of a full dedication, I want to extend great thanks to those who supported me through the preparation of this first edition.



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# Chapter 1: Indigenous Heritage – The Lucayan Era

Long before any Europeans or Americans set foot on Abaco soil, the islands were home to an ancient people: the Lucayans. The Lucayans were a branch of the Taíno/Arawak cultural group who began migrating into the Bahamian archipelago from Hispaniola and Cuba as early as **700 A.D.**, seeking refuge from predatory Carib tribes farther south[4]. By the time of European contact, it is estimated that as many as **10,000 Lucayans** lived across the Abaco Islands, including what is now Elbow Cay[4]. These first inhabitants of Abaco, whose name “Lucayan” derives from *Lukku-Cairi*, meaning “island people” in their language[5], developed a vibrant, if technologically simple, island society. They were adept farmers, fishermen, and seafarers. Archaeological evidence indicates the Lucayans grew crops like cassava and sweet potatoes in the thin Bahamian soils and harvested abundant fish and conch from the sea[6]. They produced distinctive artifacts: a style of shell-tempered pottery known as *Palmetto Ware*, intricately woven straw baskets, and wooden duhos (ceremonial seats) carved from durable local hardwoods[6]. The Lucayans navigated the shallow banks in hand-hewn canoes and traded with neighboring islands.

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## 1A. Lucayan lifeways in the Abacos: settlement patterns, foodways, navigation, and belief

A single wooden paddle can carry an entire archipelago’s prehistory in its grain. One example, recovered from a cave on Mores Island north of Abaco and now documented in museum and research collections, is carved from mahogany and has been radiocarbon dated to the Late Lucayan and early colonial centuries. Its proportions, its simple geometric embellishment near the upper blade, and the care required to shape dense hardwood without metal tools are all material reminders that mobility was a practiced craft and that seawater travel was ordinary work rather than exceptional adventure. Even where the archaeological record is fragmentary, the survival of wooden objects in caves and sinkholes anchor interpretations that might otherwise rest too heavily on ceramics and shell.

The Abacos, and the northern Bahamas more broadly, offered a geography that rewarded people who could read shallow waters. Great Abaco sits beside broad banks and is ringed by cays that create sheltered passages and predictable crossings, while reefs and coral heads impose sharp constraints on safe routes. This physical setting matters for reconstructing Lucayan settlement patterns as it links daily subsistence to the same environmental knowledge required for inter-island ties. Archaeology and comparative ethnohistory have characterized the Lucayans as seafaring horticulturalists whose communities relied heavily on marine protein, supplemented by cultivated and gathered plants, and whose inter-island networks moved materials that the limestone islands themselves could not easily provide, especially hard stone (such as flint) suitable for celts and other edge tools.

Where recorded history is unclear, chronology is clearest where artifacts carry time-sensitive signatures. The earliest settlement of the northern Bahamas is commonly placed in the early first millennium CE (estimated around roughly 300), with rapid expansion through the archipelago inferred from radiocarbon and paleoecological signals, while “Palmetto Ware” ceramics mark a long-lived local tradition that emerged as people adapted to island constraints. In the Oxford-led synthesis of Lucayan material culture, Palmetto Ware appears by about AD 800 at sites such as Three Dog on San Salvador and persists into the period of European arrival, formed from locally available clays and red loams tempered with burned shell. Regional ceramic studies describe multiple “Palmettan” variants in the Bahamas, including forms sometimes discussed as “Abaco Redware,” and the technological choices embedded in these wares can show local innovation within broader Caribbean traditions.

Abaco-specific evidence increasingly comes from two complementary contexts: open-air coastal deposits and the unusual preservational environments of blue holes and sinkholes. A widely cited example is Great Cistern on Great Abaco, where human remains recovered near the modern shoreline were directly dated to the late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries (1200s-1300s) CE using calibration methods that account for mixed marine and terrestrial dietary signals. The same study revisited the chronology of remains from Sawmill Sink on Abaco, yielding revised date ranges for interment. These deposits cannot, by themselves, describe the full texture of daily life for ancestral residents of the Abacos, yet they provide rare chronological anchors and demonstrate that Lucayan mortuary practices and site use included karst features close to coasts and settlements. In the same research frame, Gilpin Point appears as an additional Abaco reference point in archaeological research, reinforcing that the island's archaeological map is beginning to be drawn through a mixture of coastal sites and karst contexts.

Settlement location, when reconstructed cautiously, tends to follow a practical logic that ties land and sea. Coastal villages in the Bahamas are frequently described as positioned behind dunes or on slightly elevated ground near landing places, with quick access to reefs, flats, and tidal creeks, and with at least some proximity to freshwater lenses or manageable catchments. Where Abaco's environment differs from smaller cays, its larger landmass supports more extensive pineyards and coppice mosaics, which likely shaped where gardens could be maintained and where fuelwood and construction timber could be harvested without long portage. Accounts that generalize from Hispaniola and Cuba describe bohío-style houses, often round-to-oval with high-pitched thatch, and early European observers describe Bahamian houses as "tent-like," implying conical roofs and light, airy construction suited to heat and storms. These descriptions are not Abaco-specific in a narrow sense, yet they supply a plausible architectural baseline that can be paired with the kinds of posthole and midden traces archaeologists actually find.

Foodways in Lucayan life were structured around a marine-first protein economy that still depended on land-based labor. Ceramic compositional studies framed around Lucayan mobility describe communities who "obtained most of their protein from marine sources," including fish, mollusks, and sea turtles, while also characterizing Lucayans as horticulturalists who cultivated plants such as manioc and maize (corn) and harvested native starches such as zamia. That combination matters for Abaco because it fits an island where reef and bank ecologies are spatially close to gardenable patches and where seasonal rhythms in fisheries are buffered by cultivated staples and durable foods. Evidence from elsewhere in the Lucayan archipelago also suggests that certain terrestrial animals, including the Bahamian hutia, were moved and managed within human networks, which offers a model for how Abaco communities may have treated scarce terrestrial protein and culturally valued foods. The safest argument on the diet of the Lucayans is about patterns: the strongest direct dietary evidence comes from isotopes, faunal assemblages, and plant remains, while specific meal reconstructions are limited by preservation and uneven sampling across the Abacos.

Tools and crafts point to the same interplay of constraint and connection. The limestone geology of the Bahamas makes high-quality hard stone scarce, and research on Lucayan stone tools emphasizes imported celts (prehistoric cutting tools) and other implements arriving through exchange networks that remained robust enough to meet demand across the archipelago. Ceramics tell a parallel story: early settlers initially maintained links to homelands for both hard stone and pottery, while later communities produced locally distinctive Palmetto wares that signaled adaptation to local materials and cooking practices. Even in the northern Bahamas, compositional "fingerprinting" of ceramics has been used to trace mobility and interaction, and related work on Lucayan artifacts emphasizes that spectacular wooden objects, including ceremonial seats and paddles, were often recovered in the late nineteenth century from caves mined for guano. These histories of collection are ethically complicated because they often involve site disturbance and removal, yet the surviving objects still supply rare evidence of carving traditions, woodworking skill, and the social meaning of crafted forms.

Belief and social life are the hardest elements to reconstruct for Abaco in particular, and the most important place to state limits. The term "Lucayan" covers communities spread across many islands, while most detailed ethnohistoric descriptions were recorded by Europeans in moments of first contact or in colonial contexts shaped by violence and misunderstanding. Even so, there is a responsible path for inference when interpretations are tied to material evidence. Research on Lucayan duhos, for example,

documents that the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos hold the highest concentration of known wooden ceremonial seats in the Caribbean, with surviving examples dating largely between about AD 1000 and the early colonial centuries. These objects, along with iconography and associated ritual practices described for Taíno societies more generally, indicate that leadership, ceremonial authority, and relationships with ancestors or spiritual forces were expressed through materially elaborate “seats of power,” likely used in highly structured gatherings. Applying this to Abaco requires restraint, since most duhos with secure provenance come from other islands, yet their existence within the Lucayan world places Abaco communities within a broader ideological landscape where prestige, exchange, and ritual knowledge intersected.

The disturbance of societal structure and subsequent rupture after 1492 is one of the best-documented parts of Lucayan history, and it is also the part most likely to flatten Lucayan people into a tragic footnote unless handled with specificity. Scholarly reviews of Spanish–Lucayan interaction emphasize that slave raiding began early, expanded as Spanish labor demands grew, and resulted in mass deportations to Hispaniola and other centers, with epidemic disease and coercion amplifying demographic collapse. One synthesis notes that by the time the Spanish crown began to prohibit Indian slavery in 1513, large-scale raiding had already occurred, and it cites estimates that tens of thousands of Lucayans were taken in the first decades of contact, leaving the Bahamas effectively depopulated by the early sixteenth century. For Abaco, the implication is stark: whatever continuity existed in settlement locations, garden plots, canoe routes, and ceremonial life was disrupted within a few generations, and the later British and Loyalist settlement histories unfolded on islands whose Indigenous communities had been forcibly removed.

Taken together, the most defensible reconstruction of Lucayan life in the Abacos is one that keeps returning to the kinds of evidence Abaco actually preserves. Open-air sites document domestic life through pottery, shell, and faunal remains. Karst contexts such as Sawmill Sink and Great Cistern provide dated human remains and, in some cases, exceptional preservation that expands what can be said about chronology and practice. Museum-held artifacts like paddles and duhos reveal craft traditions and social meaning that rarely survive in ordinary sediments. The insertions that follow in this chapter can build from these anchors: Abaco as a canoe landscape; Abaco as a place where gardens, reefs, and pineyards formed a coupled system; and Abaco as part of a Lucayan world that produced distinctive local material culture while remaining connected to, and later devastated by, wider Caribbean and Atlantic forces.

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For centuries, the Lucayans lived in relative isolation and peace. However, their world was irrevocably upended in **October 1492**, when **Christopher Columbus** made landfall in the Bahamas, initiating contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas[7]. While Columbus likely did not land on Abaco itself (his first landing was to the south, on San Salvador), within a few decades the Spanish reached and heavily impacted the human history of the Abaco region. The Spanish were searching for labor and wealth, not searching for new friends or trading partners. Having found little gold in the Bahamas, the Spanish turned to **slave-raiding**. They recognized the gentle Lucayans as skilled free-divers and swimmers and began to **forcibly deport them** to work in the mines and pearl fisheries of Hispaniola and Cuba[8]. From about 1492 to 1520, in a cruel and catastrophic process, virtually the entire Lucayan population of the Bahamas was **enslaved or perished**. Lacking immunity to Eurasian diseases such as smallpox and measles, thousands of Lucayans died in epidemics; thousands more were literally worked to death under Spanish enslavement[8]. Within a single generation, by roughly **1520**, the Bahamas' original inhabitants had been wiped out, “the entire Lucayan population in the Bahamas (estimated by the Spanish to be about 40,000) had been wiped out”[8][9]. Abaco’s Lucayan people were no exception to this tragic fate.

The eradication of the Lucayans left **Abaco devoid of permanent inhabitants for more than a century**[10]. Spanish explorers did sporadically chart the area (the island appeared on early maps as *Habacoa* or *lucayonique*[11]), and the Spanish navigator **Juan Ponce de León** is recorded to have landed on Abaco in **1513** during his quest for new lands[11]. Yet Spain never attempted to colonize the Abacos, considering these low islands unprofitable and dangerous to navigate (indeed, a Spanish treasure fleet wrecked off Abaco in 1593, underscoring the hazards of its reefs)[12]. Thus, through the 1500s and most of the 1600s, the once-populous Abaco islands lay **untouched and overgrown**, with only ruins of Lucayan villages and the occasional shipwreck survivor or buccaneer venturing ashore.

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## 1B. Native ecology of the Abacos: aquatic systems (Sea of Abaco, brackish zones, freshwater lenses, tidal pools, blue holes and anchialine caves)

Between the Lucayan era and the first enduring European-descended settlements lies an environmental constant that quietly organizes every human story that follows: water, in many forms, at many scales. Abaco’s shallow banks, protected lagoons, tidal creeks, freshwater lenses, intertidal edges, and inland blue holes do more than supply food and scenery. They create routes and constraints, set seasonal rhythms, and shape what kinds of work, risk, and leisure become plausible across centuries. In this text, we describe the Lucayans as adept at harvesting marine foods and navigating the shallow banks by canoe, trading across islands, which is a reminder that Abaco’s “geography” has always been partly aquatic geography.

The Sea of Abaco, the long, shallow lagoon running between Great Abaco and the barrier cays, is the most obvious example of water acting as connective tissue. It is generally shallow and protected compared to the open Atlantic, while still punctuated by reefs, shoals, and tidal “cuts” that demand local knowledge and attention to tide and weather. In ecological terms, a lagoon like this is a mosaic of

ecosystems: seagrass meadows, sandy patches, mangrove-fringed margins, and nearby reef structures combine into a connected seascape where movement is as fluid as the water, especially for juvenile fish and invertebrates seeking shelter and food before shifting to deeper habitats. Decades of Caribbean research describe these reef–seagrass–mangrove linkages as foundational to fisheries productivity and coastal resilience (Harborne et al.).

Within the Sea of Abaco system, seagrass meadows matter because they are both habitat and ecological process. Turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*), and shoal grass occur widely across Bahamian banks and are regularly highlighted in Bahamian conservation materials because they stabilize sediment, support invertebrate communities, and provide feeding and nursery functions for many species. In sheltered waters, seagrasses reduce wave energy at the bottom boundary and help maintain the clarity that visitors often associate with “Abaco water.” That clarity can be ecological work in disguise: when fine sediments stay bound, sunlight reaches the benthos more consistently, supporting the photosynthetic base of the shallow-water food web. Where seagrass is damaged by prop scarring or intense storm disturbance, recovery can take time because regrowth depends on rhizome expansion and seed recruitment that varies by species and conditions (Bahamas National Trust).

Along the lagoon’s margins and in the creek networks of the Abacos, mangrove-fringed brackish waters add another layer of productivity. Red mangrove prop roots create a three-dimensional refuge where small fish can avoid predators and where invertebrates graze biofilms and detritus. Peer-reviewed work from the wider Caribbean shows strong connections between mangrove extent and juvenile reef-fish survival, including families such as snappers and groupers, because structure and food availability increase early-life survivorship (Paillon et al.). In Abaco specifically, protected-area proposals and local conservation organizations describe East Abaco’s creeks and wetlands, including the Cherokee Sound area, as nursery habitat that helps sustain marine fauna and links to reef systems offshore. These nursery dynamics scale up into the modern flats fishery: the Marls and associated mangrove-flat networks on the western side of Great Abaco are repeatedly identified as critical habitat for bonefish (*Albula vulpes*), with conservation groups emphasizing connectivity between feeding grounds and spawning-related movements across protected areas.

Freshwater, by contrast, is sparse, vulnerable, and therefore historically decisive. On low carbonate islands like Abaco and its cays, rainfall can form a freshwater lens that “floats” above saline groundwater because freshwater is less dense, a configuration long treated as a defining feature of Bahamian hydrogeology (Whitaker and Smart). Work focused on Abaco’s karst and cave systems describes how this freshwater lens is stored and expressed through the island’s limestone geology, and how mixing zones can be revealed directly in flooded cave passages (Walker). For travelers and settlers, this means that potable water historically concentrated around reliable wells, wetlands, and managed catchments, and that drought, storm surge, and saltwater intrusion could quickly turn an otherwise navigable landscape into a logistical problem. Contemporary research across the Bahamas continues to emphasize the fragility of freshwater lenses on small islands, especially under extreme events and sea-level rise (Welsh-Unwala).

At the shoreline, tidal pools and intertidal edges function as small, legible classrooms in a system that can otherwise feel vast. On rocky or reef-backed stretches, pools trap water as tides recede, concentrating heat, salinity shifts, and predation risk into a few square meters. Even without “collecting” or handling organisms, a visitor can learn to read the intertidal by noticing how algae and small invertebrates occupy microhabitats defined by exposure time, splash, shade, and substrate. These edges also show how storms and seasonal winds rearrange material: wrack lines of seagrass and macroalgae mark recent high water, while sand movement and scoured rock surfaces reveal episodes of high energy. The point is not to turn every shoreline stop into a species checklist. It is to see how physical forcing, tide cycles, and habitat structure shape what can live where, and when.

Blue holes and cave aquatic systems add the most dramatic, and scientifically distinctive, component of Abaco’s waterscape. Abaco’s inland blue holes are expressions of karst, and many function as anchialine systems, meaning they are inland but hydrologically connected to the sea through subterranean pathways. A hallmark of anchialine caves is vertical stratification: a surface layer influenced by meteoric

freshwater, an underlying marine layer, and a mixing zone at the “halocline” where chemistry, microbes, and light conditions can change abruptly (Pérez-Moreno et al.). In Sawmill Sink on Great Abaco, published research and long-form science reporting describe a conspicuous, sometimes opaque microbial layer associated with hydrogen sulfide, with clear anoxic saltwater beneath that contributes to remarkable preservation of fossils and archaeological materials (Steadman et al.; National Geographic). These conditions also support specialized cave-adapted fauna, including crustacean lineages documented from Bahamian anchialine caves such as remipedes (pronounced like “centipedes”), a group whose biodiversity and evolutionary distinctiveness have been evaluated using global datasets (Neiber et al.). These same environments that preserve deep natural history can also preserve traces of human history, creating an archive that is literally underwater and chemically mediated.

Taken together, these aquatic environments shaped travel routes and seasonal rhythms long before tourism. In the pre-contact period, shallow-bank navigation and predictable harvest sites would have favored canoe corridors that balanced shelter, visibility, and access to food, while tides and wind would set day-scale constraints on crossings and fishing effort. That logic persists into later centuries in a new register. The draft history notes that modern cruising guides celebrate the Sea of Abaco as a protected corridor for yachts, and the region’s tourism economy built heavily around boating access to exactly the same sheltered waters and cays that made earlier movement feasible. This continuity is not romantic, it is infrastructural: a lagoon and its cuts create the easiest paths, the safest anchorages, and the most reliable places to work a net, pole a skiff, or later, run a charter.

A brief guided ride across these aquatic habitats can convey this without turning it into a fantasy. Imagine leaving the settlement shoreline in a small boat at a conservative speed, because shallow water punishes haste. Look for color changes first: darker patches suggest seagrass, lighter areas suggest sand, and scattered darker lumps near the edges can indicate hardbottom or patch reef. Staying off seagrass scars protects habitat, and it also keeps the prop where it belongs. Near a mangrove-lined creek mouth, shift your attention from scenery to process. Leaf litter and fine organic particles collect in eddies, microbial films coat submerged roots, and small fish often use these roots as shelter when predators pass through. On a rising tide, more habitat becomes available; on a falling tide, water funnels out of creeks, concentrating movement and making both fishing and predation more efficient. This is the same tide logic that would have governed canoe travel and shoreline foraging, and is the same logic that now structures a flats-fishing day plan and, increasingly, conservation planning for habitats described as nurseries and migration corridors.

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Modern archaeology has helped fill in some blanks about Abaco's first people. Notably, a discovery in Hope Town in 1990 provided direct evidence of Lucayan presence on Elbow Cay. That year, a local resident digging a foundation unearthed a human skull and bone fragments. Carbon dating revealed the remains to date to around **1390 A.D.**, and forensic analysis identified them as a Lucayan male, approximately 21–25 years old[5]. This find, along with artifacts recovered from caves and **blue holes** (water-filled sinkholes) on Abaco, confirms that Lucayans inhabited these islands for many centuries. (In fact, the flooded cave known as **Sawmill Sink** on Great Abaco has yielded an archaeological treasure trove, including Lucayan bones alongside fossils of extinct Bahamian fauna, all preserved in its oxygen-deprived depths[13][14].) The legacy of the Lucayans today lives on mainly through such archaeological records and in the very name "Abaco," likely derived from the Lucayan or Spanish rendering of a Lucayan toponym for the isles.

In sum, the **pre-contact era** of Abaco was defined by the Lucayans' peaceful tenure and tragic annihilation. By the early 17th century, the islands were uninhabited wilderness. But this would not remain so. As the age of European expansion continued, new actors – pirates and colonists – would eventually arrive to stake their claims on Abaco's shores, setting the stage for the next chapter in the islands' history.

## **Chapter 2: From Desolation to Colonization – Pirates, Privateers and Pioneers (1492–1783)**

With the Lucayan people gone and Spanish interest waning, Abaco languished unpopulated for many years. It wasn't until the **late 1600s** and early **1700s** that Abaco's strategic geography began to attract a new set of transient inhabitants: pirates. The "Golden Age of Piracy" in the Bahamas peaked around 1715–1725, centered on New Providence, but the remote **Abaco cays** also saw their share of pirate activity. The island's **shallow banks and hidden harbors** made ideal havens for buccaneers to careen ships and lie in wait for unwary merchant vessels. Notorious pirates such as **Henry Morgan, Edward "Blackbeard" Teach, Charles Vane, Calico Jack Rackham**, and the female pirates **Anne Bonny** and **Mary Read** all frequented the waters around Abaco's reefs[15]. According to later reports, in 1718 (the year the British moved to suppress piracy in the Bahamas) a pirate crew under Charles Vane detained a brigantine at Green Turtle Cay, robbing it "as they saw fit," quite possibly with Bonny and Read among Vane's company[16]. The sheltered coves of Abaco offered these lawless mariners temporary refuge – a place to **hide from pursuing navy ships, clean and repair their vessels, and divide plunder**[15].

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### **2A. Piracy, Passage, and the Problem of Control in Abaco Waters (c. late 1600s–1720s)**

In mid-September 1718, the new royal governor of the Bahamas, Woodes Rogers, found himself governing by rumor and improvisation. A Royal Navy captain had just sailed away, leaving Rogers short of men, short of ships, and still sick, with defenses unfinished. He had been warned to expect the pirate Charles Vane "every minute" near Abaco. The day after the Navy vessel departed, Rogers received an express reporting that three vessels believed to be Vane and his prizes were lying at "Green Turtle Key near Abacoa." With no warship to pursue, Rogers did what weak colonial governments often did in the Bahamas' piracy crisis: he deputized experience. He fitted out a small sloop under Captain Benjamin Hornigold, a former pirate newly turned hunter, to watch, identify, and, if possible, take Vane.

That dispatch captures Abaco's paradox in the so-called Golden Age of Piracy. The Abacos were not a "pirate capital" like Nassau, yet they were repeatedly useful: a place to hide in plain sight along major sea-lanes, to provision and "turtle," to careen and refit, to exploit confusion created by reefs and shallows, and to barter with locals who could plausibly claim they were doing ordinary maritime work. In other words, Abaco mattered because it sat at the hinge between oceanic trade and island-scale geography; it had channels that concentrated shipping, and banks that fractured enforcement.

#### **Why Abaco's geography made piracy workable**

The northern Bahamas lie adjacent to routes that linked Britain's North American colonies, the Caribbean, and Europe. Ships moving from the mainland seaboard toward Atlantic crossings frequently threaded their way past the Bahama banks, where pilots (knowledgeable guides for localized navigation) mattered, reefs punished navigational error, and weather could trap vessels into predictable lanes. That predictability was valuable to predatory crews. Yet the same waters that concentrated targets also created refuge: banks and cays could be read like a second chart, full of places that larger pursuers hesitated to enter. Shallow approaches, narrow cuts, and reef-sheltered anchorages allowed smaller craft to linger, observe, and withdraw, while naval vessels faced the constant risk of grounding or losing maneuverability in constrained, shallow channels. Those conditions supported piracy directly, and they also supported its

close cousins: privateering that slipped into piracy when wars ended, and smuggling that used the same hidden routes and social networks.

Abaco's use-value to pirates therefore sat in the overlap between ecology and infrastructure. "Turtling," for example, carries double meaning, appearing in official correspondence as both an ordinary livelihood and a cover for illicit trade. Rogers reported that Hornigold returned towing a local sloop that had received leave to go turtling, yet had been "trading" with Vane. The act itself, capturing sea turtles, was legitimate and commonplace in the Bahamas' maritime economy. In the age of sail, on small islands with sparse documentation, provisioning voyages and smuggling runs were often indistinguishable; that lack of clarity is what let the golden age of pirates flourish.

### **A documented Abaco episode: Vane at Green Turtle Key, September 1718**

Rogers's account is unusually concrete, and it provides the kind of primary-source grounding that piracy history often lacks. He explains why Abaco was on his mind before the report even arrived: on 1 September, three men who had come in a boat from Vane, then on Cuba's coast, "confess'd" they had promised to meet him again "about this time," and Rogers and Captain Whitney therefore expected Vane at Abaco. When the express confirmed sightings at Green Turtle Key near Abacoa, Rogers could not dispatch a warship. He sent Hornigold to "view them," and Hornigold spent most of three weeks concealed, watching for chances to surprise Vane or intercept boat traffic. Hornigold failed to catch Vane, yet he returned with evidence that ties Abaco's waters to piracy's logistics: he seized a local sloop that had been licensed for turtling but instead traded with Vane, and Rogers immediately arrested the merchant involved, keeping him "in irons" for eventual transport to England because Rogers lacked local power to make an example of him.

Rogers's dispatch also sketches how pirates exploited regional trade flows: Vane had with him "two ships and a brigantine," and the two ships were prizes taken "coming out of Carolina," loaded with rice, pitch, tar, and skins bound for London. Rogers names them, along with their captains. He reports that Vane sank the larger, the *Neptune* (Captain King), and stripped the other, the *Emperour* (Captain Arnold Gowers), taking provisions. In a few lines, Abaco becomes legible as a node in a wider Atlantic economy: mainland exports, transatlantic cargoes, and an insurgent maritime labor force that could seize that value, then retreat into the geography of banks and cays.

### **From pirate waters to imperial governance: law, courts, and coercion**

The same passage shows why piracy drove institutional change in the Bahamas. Rogers begs that if warships are stationed in the islands, they should be under the direction of the governor and council, because naval captains without local orders were inclined to leave at precisely the wrong moment. That complaint represents more than bureaucratic frustration, it marks a shift toward stronger imperial authority in the Bahamas, built from three interacting tools: coercive force (naval presence and militia), legal machinery (admiralty jurisdiction and piracy trials), and administrative surveillance (licenses, passes, and the policing of trade).

Scholarship on early eighteenth-century piracy emphasizes that piracy was rarely "outside" the economy. It parasitized, redistributed, and sometimes merged with markets, often depending on onshore trade, corrupt officials, and buyers willing to convert plunder into cash. That entanglement is part of why metropolitan authorities treated piracy as a challenge to imperial order, and why campaigns against it fused economic governance with maritime policing.

In the Bahamas, these pressures helped end the earlier pattern of thin oversight and episodic enforcement. Rogers's pursuit of Vane shows the pivot in motion: pardons and reintegration for some pirates, aggressive prosecution for others, and a growing insistence that coastal spaces be made governable. Abaco's relevance here is indirect but real. It was precisely the sort of peripheral space, close to shipping and hard to police, that exposed the limits of authority and encouraged officials to demand more reliable systems of control.

## Folklore, attribution, and what can be said responsibly about “Abaco pirates”

Local histories and popular accounts often attach famous names to Abaco waters, and many manuscripts, including the draft you are building, reflect that broad cultural memory. The difficulty is that celebrity pirates traveled widely, and “being in the Bahamas” does not always equal a documentable tie to the Abacos specifically. Rogers’s correspondence gives strong evidence for Vane at Green Turtle Key and for the way local turtling voyages could become supply lines. Beyond episodes like this, claims require careful grading. When a particular pirate’s name appears in Abaco oral tradition, place-names, or tourism storytelling, it can be treated as cultural evidence about identity and memory, while being labeled clearly as tradition unless corroborated by logs, correspondence, court testimony, or contemporary newspapers.

That distinction matters for the arc of this larger Abaco history. Piracy in Abaco is part of a documented regional crisis, and also part of a later heritage imagination that helps communities narrate themselves to visitors and to each other. Treating those as two distinct kinds of evidence strengthens the chapter’s historical spine while preserving the stories’ social meaning.

## Why piracy’s shadow reaches forward to lighthouses and coastal control

A lighthouse is not an anti-piracy weapon, yet piracy helped clarify the stakes of navigational safety and coastal administration. In Rogers’s dispatch, the problem is framed as the security of trade, the credibility of government, and the need to coordinate naval force with local intelligence. A generation later, the northern Bahamas continued to be shaped by maritime risk, including shipwrecking and salvage economies that thrived on the same reefs and shallow approaches that had aided pirates. Over time, imperial and colonial priorities expanded from chasing predators to managing the seascape: mapping, pilots, port regulation, wreck law, and eventually, fixed aids to navigation that reduced losses on reefs and made maritime movement more predictable and therefore more governable.

Seen from Abaco, that long transition runs from opportunistic use of geography to infrastructural inscription of authority. Pirates used reefs, banks, and anchorages as tactical advantage. Governments responded by trying to reduce the space of ambiguity: stronger courts, tighter administration, more consistent patrol, and, in the nineteenth century, a built environment of navigational safety that redefined hazardous waters from opportunity into regulated passage.

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Pirate dominion in the Abacos was short-lived. Britain, which had claimed the Bahamas as a colony, appointed Captain **Woodes Rogers** as Royal Governor in 1718 with orders to eradicate piracy. Rogers’s campaign was largely effective; by the **1720s**, the pirates of Abaco had been **driven out or hanged**, and the islands once again fell silent[17]. For the next half century, Abaco remained largely **uninhabited**, passed over even as other

“Out Islands” of the Bahamas (like Eleuthera and Harbour Island to the south) saw small settler populations. The early British settlers in the Bahamas – a group of English Puritans from Bermuda known as the **Eleutheran Adventurers** – had established Eleuthera in 1648, and over the 1700s a modest colonial society grew around Nassau on New Providence. But **Abaco’s isolation and sparse resources kept it undeveloped** through the mid-18th century. That would change only in the aftermath of a major geopolitical upheaval: the American Revolution.

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## 2B. Native ecology of the Abacos: terrestrial mosaics (pine forests, coppice hardwoods, dunes, rocky south Abaco, marl flats, shrub cays)

Before the narrative turns to named settlements and recorded arrivals, it helps to read Abaco as a set of working landscapes. The pattern of where people built, planted, cut timber, and later welcomed visitors was never random. It followed the island’s ecological “infrastructure”: the dry, fire-shaped pineyards that occupy much of the interior, the denser hardwood coppice that gathers where soils and freshwater allow it, the exposed dunes and beach vegetation that stabilize the ocean edge, the limestone rocklands and ridges that govern drainage and travel, the western marl flats that grade into mangrove wetlands, and the low shrub systems that define many of the smaller cays. Each habitat carried a different bundle of constraints and opportunities, which helps explain why Abaco’s human geography consolidated along protected harbors and breezy cays, why farming remained patchy and contingent, and why timber, guiding, and second-home tourism became historically plausible forms of livelihood at specific moments.

On Great Abaco’s interior, the dominant terrestrial template is the Caribbean pine forest, often described in Bahamian contexts as “pinyards” or “pineyards.” These stands are anchored by the Bahamian variety of Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribaea* var. *bahamensis*), a northern Bahamian lineage that gives the pineyards their distinctive structure and species associations. Ecologically, Abaco’s pineyards are fire-dependent systems: periodic burns keep hardwoods from closing the canopy, sustain pine regeneration, and maintain the open, park-like physiognomy that historically made interior travel and resource extraction feasible in ways that dense coppice did not. Fire on Abaco has never been a simple binary of “natural” versus “human-caused,” because lightning, drought, land clearing, and accidental ignitions can all drive burns. The key point for an island-scale map is functional: when fire is too rare, coppice succeeds into pine; when fire is too frequent or too intense, regeneration can fail and erosion and invasive plants become more likely.

That fire-shaped interior became the foundation for Abaco’s most explicit episode of industrial land use. In the early twentieth century, a concessionary timber economy developed around Abaco’s pine forests and adjacent coppice, culminating in a sawmill complex and company town at Wilson City, built south of Marsh Harbour to process pine for export. Timber did not thrive because Abaco had “good forest soils.” It thrived because the pineyards could produce straight, merchantable trunks in an otherwise agriculturally reluctant landscape, and because harbors and shipping routes linked those trunks to Florida markets. The same interior also holds a conservation story that folds ecology back into settlement history. Abaco National Park was established to protect the northern Bahama Parrot breeding grounds, and the Abaco population is unusual in that it nests in underground limestone cavities within pine forest, rather than tree cavities. In other seasons, these parrots rely heavily on hardwood coppice foods, which means the ecological map is already a social map: protecting “the parrot” is inseparable from protecting both pine and coppice across a connected landscape.

Coppice, the broad category for Abaco’s hardwood forests, is the second major terrestrial pillar, and it is where the island’s plant diversity is most visible at a human pace. Bahamian coppice varies with soil depth and moisture, with “blackland” coppice often associated with relatively richer soils and more reliable freshwater influence. In Abaco terms, coppice often occupies slightly higher ground, interior margins, and sheltered lee exposures where salt spray is moderated. The canopy can be tight and shaded, with a

layered understory that shifts dramatically after hurricanes or clearing. This is the landscape that historically supplied durable woods for boats, houses, and everyday implements, and it is the landscape that made small farming possible in pockets, because it tends to signal soils with more organic accumulation and microtopography that can retain moisture. The early Loyalist experience on Abaco, as described in settlement records, makes the agricultural constraint plain: thin, stony soils and brackish wells limited broadscale planting, pushing many households toward fishing, small plots, and a settlement pattern that favored breezier cays and workable harbors.

Along the ocean edge, dunes and beach vegetation form a third, highly legible habitat that later became one of Abaco's principal tourism assets. The ecological logic is straightforward: dunes are living landforms built and stabilized by plants that trap sand and tolerate salt, wind, and burial. Sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*) are a flagship example across parts of the Bahamas and the wider region, because their growth form and rhizomes help bind foredunes and promote dune accretion over time. In the Bahamian archipelago, dune zones also support suites of hardy coastal shrubs and succulents, and, depending on island and exposure, local endemics in genera such as Agave can appear on back-dunes. The caution for an Abaco-specific map is that species composition varies by island, disturbance history, and proximity to settlements. Still, the functional link remains consistent: stabilized dunes protect freshwater lenses and interior vegetation from saltwater overwash, and they create the wide, bright beaches that became central to resort development and second-home marketing in places like Treasure Cay and along barrier-cay shorelines.

Southward and across many smaller cays, limestone and rocklands become more conspicuous. The Bahamas are carbonate islands, so "rock" often means porous limestone with solution holes, shallow depressions, and rapid drainage. The ecological consequence is chronic water limitation and strong microsite effects. A few meters can separate a scrubby, wind-pruned shrub assemblage from a slightly deeper-soiled patch that supports taller coppice. This variability mattered for livelihoods. It constrained plantation-scale agriculture, encouraged household-level provisioning where soils permitted, and directed settlement toward sites that combined landing access with some prospect of wells or rainwater collection.

On the western side of Great Abaco, the map opens into the marl flats and wetlands commonly referred to as the Abaco Marls. Here, the "ground" is a broad, low-relief expanse of carbonate mud and shallow wetlands that grades into mangrove-fringed systems. In conservation descriptions, these flats are explicitly linked to bonefish habitat and to connected movements between feeding areas and spawning corridors, which is one reason they have become central to modern guiding economies and protected-area planning. Even in a terrestrial ecology profile, the vegetation signal matters: buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*) often occupies slightly drier, better-drained positions around salinas and along sandy or rocky shores, and it can dominate zones that are transitional between upland and mangrove wetland. Paleoecological work from Great Abaco wetlands also documents buttonwood and other wetland-associated taxa in the pollen record, underscoring that these marl-associated plant communities are not just "recent" products of tourism-era disturbance.

Wildlife ties these habitats together in ways that a purely scenic map misses. Several of Abaco's signature species are habitat-bridgers. The Abaco population of the Bahama Parrot depends on pine forest for nesting and on coppice for much of its foraging through the year. The Bahama Swallow, an endemic Bahamian breeder, relies on pineyards for nesting cavities, which makes mature pines and cavity-bearing trees disproportionately important in an otherwise fire-maintained system. Even Abaco's reptiles reflect this mosaic: the Abaco Island boa (*Chilabothrus exsul*) is reported primarily from coppice, with occurrences in pine forest and disturbed habitats, which is a reminder that "development edges" are ecological edges too.

Finally, an island-scale ecology profile has to name stressors, because they help explain recent shifts in settlement, land value, and conservation urgency. Hurricanes are an obvious driver: they reset forests through windthrow, salt spray, and overwash, and they can force rapid transitions from closed coppice to early successional scrub, or from intact pineyards to snag fields that burn differently. Freshwater constraint is a chronic limiter beneath the drama of storms. Abaco, like other low-lying carbonate islands, depends on thin freshwater lenses that are vulnerable to overuse and to salinization following storm surge

and sea-level stressors, which raises the stakes for land conversion and water-demanding tourism growth. Invasive species add another layer. On Abaco, raccoons have been studied as introduced populations in the northern Bahamas, and their presence is implicated in predation dynamics on native fauna and in broader beach and wetland food webs. Predator pressure from introduced mammals is also a recurring theme in Abaco parrot conservation discussions, because ground nesting is a remarkable adaptation that carries real risk where non-native predators are established.

Read this, then reread the first settlement accounts, and the logic of place sharpens. The Loyalists' attraction to offshore cays for breezes and fewer insects sits alongside the thin soils and brackish wells of the mainland, while later timber and tourism booms align with the pine interior and the sheltered coastal and reef-fringed margins. Abaco's communities did not emerge "on" a landscape. They emerged through it, selecting and reselecting among habitats that offered, at different times, food, wood, water, safety, and a marketable sense of beauty.

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The **American War of Independence (1775–1783)** ended in triumph for the rebelling colonies – and in calamity for American colonists loyal to the British Crown. Thousands of **Loyalists** (also called Tories) faced persecution and exile after the British defeat. The British government, suddenly gaining East Florida and the Bahamas in the post-war Treaty of Paris (1783)[18], sought to reward and re-settle these Loyalists in remaining British territories. **Abaco, with its vast unsettled land, was earmarked as one such destination**[18]. In July 1783, General **Sir Guy Carleton** (the British commander overseeing the Loyalist evacuation from New York) arranged for a convoy of Loyalist refugees to sail for Abaco[19][20]. Between 1783 and 1785, several waves of displaced Loyalists from New York, East Florida, and the Carolinas arrived in Abaco, bringing with them their families, enslaved African laborers, and dreams of rebuilding their lives under the Union Jack[21][3].

The first contingent, about **1,300 people**, landed in late summer 1783 and hastily founded a makeshift town they named **Carleton**, in honor of Sir Guy Carleton[22]. This rudimentary settlement of canvas tents and crude huts was located at the north end of Great Abaco, near present-day Treasure Cay[22]. Carleton in those early months was essentially a **refugee camp**, with Loyalist families anxiously awaiting promised land grants and supplies. By November 1783, additional shiploads of evacuees swelled Carleton's population, and another group of Loyalists (mostly from British East Florida, which had been ceded back to Spain) set up a second encampment 18 miles to the southeast at **Marsh's Harbour** (modern Marsh Harbour)[23]. The Crown had been overly optimistic about Abaco's capacity: officials had advertised Abaco to the Loyalists in glowing terms – "among the most fruitful" of isles, needing only settlers to become a flourishing colony[24]. The reality was far harsher.

By 1784, it became apparent that the Abaco mainland was **ill-suited for large-scale agriculture**. The Loyalists attempted to plant cotton, indigo, and provision crops, but they found the soil exceedingly thin and stony. One report from the frustrated settlers noted that the ground was so shallow that during dry months "the sun heated the rock beneath and burned anything they planted," and the wells they dug yielded only brackish, undrinkable water[25]. Basic necessities ran short within months. The Carleton settlers, in a petition to Governor Carleton, pleaded for additional provisions, tools, shoes, and medicines, describing themselves as "landed very sickly from the

ships” and unable to clear land or harvest crops for at least a year[26][27]. Tensions grew. With over 600 people crammed into Carleton and food scarce, **factional disputes** and “friction soon arose” among the hungry refugees[28]. Within a year or two, Carleton began to disintegrate. Roughly two-thirds of the settlers pulled up stakes and moved. In 1784–85, some relocated a short distance east to found a new settlement at **Marsh Harbour**, which offered a better harbor and (marginally) better land[28]. Others gravitated to the offshore cays nearby, having realized that on the low mainland “the air was still and humid” (and mosquito-infested), whereas the small cays enjoyed cooler breezes and fewer insects[29]. Groups of settlers thus moved to **Green Turtle Cay**, **Great Guana Cay**, **Man-O-War Cay**, and **Elbow Cay**, establishing the enduring settlements of **New Plymouth** (on Green Turtle) and **Hope Town** (on Elbow Cay), among others[30]. Those Loyalists who stubbornly remained at Carleton met a fateful end – a devastating hurricane in 1785 obliterated the abandoned encampment, which today is marked only by a monument amid the sands[31].

One of the noteworthy pioneers of this period was **Wyannie Malone**, a widowed Loyalist from South Carolina who arrived around 1785 and became **the founder of Hope Town**. Along with her children, Wyannie (sometimes called Anne) Malone settled on Elbow Cay, likely motivated by the same promise of ocean breezes and accessible fishing[32]. Records show that in 1807 Wyannie’s son-in-law **Jacob Adams** and son **Ephraim Malone** (both Revolutionary War veterans) received sizeable Crown land grants on Elbow Cay – 260 acres in Adams’ case – as reward for their service to King George III[33]. Around this nucleus, Hope Town grew as other Loyalist families joined them, building a settlement on the protected harbor of Elbow Cay. The Malone family name remains significant in Hope Town to this day (the local historical museum is named the **Wyannie Malone Museum** in her honor[34]).

Thus, by the late 1780s, **Abaco’s permanent population** was finally established, comprising these hardy Loyalist émigrés and their enslaved people. It was a diverse lot: the settlers included not only aristocratic plantation owners but also “mostly modest white families, former soldiers and farmers, [as well as] slaves and free blacks”[21][35]. Some Loyalists were well-educated and brought a taste of Southern gentility; others were pragmatic frontiersmen and seamen. Meanwhile, some of the enslaved Africans brought to Abaco would later become the ancestors of Abaco’s Afro-Bahamian communities (slavery would persist in the Bahamas until emancipation in 1834). In fact, a number of free black Loyalists were among the early arrivals and, “**perhaps fearful of being re-enslaved**,” they split off to form their own settlements in the Abacos during this period[28].

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## 2C: Hope Town interlude: harbor, reef, and the long work of staying

A documentary of place, especially for Hope Town, should start with geography because geography is what does the persuading. On Elbow Cay, the sheltered harbor at Hope Town sits close to the Sea of Abaco, while the ocean side breaks hard over the barrier reef. That pairing, protection on one side and hazard on the other, explains why a settlement could endure here when other early Abaco experiments failed, and why the town’s most durable institutions, from boatbuilding to the lighthouse, were built as

responses to risk rather than as expressions of comfort. This larger volume frames Hope Town as a Loyalist-founded community whose “picturesque veneer” sits atop cycles of survival, maritime labor, and later tourism.

### **1783–1807: from refugee Abaco to a cay with breezes**

Hope Town’s founding belongs to the afterlife of the American Revolution. The British evacuation and resettlement of Loyalists pushed thousands toward the Bahamas, and Abaco became one of the places where officials promised land and stability. What the newcomers met instead was thin soil, brackish water, and a mainland that could feel airless in summer. Historians of the Bahamas emphasize how quickly many Loyalist plans for plantation-style agriculture collapsed in the northern islands, forcing a pivot toward maritime livelihoods and smaller, more flexible settlement patterns.

The early Loyalist settlement on Great Abaco at Carleton, established as a camp for evacuees, is a useful foil for Hope Town. Carleton’s impermanence has been documented as a product of mismanaged expectations, disease and scarcity, internal conflict, and then storm damage that erased what remained. In that larger dispersal, offshore cays became attractive because they offered wind, fewer mosquitoes, and immediate access to fisheries and safe anchorages. In the Hope Town story as preserved by local historical interpretation, a central figure is Wyannie (also recorded as Anne) Malone, a Loyalist widow credited as the settlement’s founder, whose family lines became woven into the town’s later civic and memory institutions. The draft manuscript also places Wyannie Malone at the center of this move to Elbow Cay, linking her family to land grants and the town’s long Loyalist genealogy.

What matters, in these first decades, is the shift from an imagined agricultural colony to an island economy that treated the sea as both pantry and highway. Abaco’s Loyalist-era history is often told through the failure of cotton and other export schemes on limestone and sand, and through the persistence of households who blended small gardens with fishing, small stock, and boat work. That pattern, documented for Abaco in studies of the Loyalist plantation period, helps explain how Hope Town could be small and still durable, because durability came from versatility.

### **1648–1863: wrecking as a livelihood, and as a moral argument**

From the seventeenth century into the nineteenth, Abaco’s reef geography created an economy that outsiders often misunderstood. Wrecking, the practice of racing to shipwrecks to salvage cargo and sometimes assist crews and passengers, was both an industry and a contested moral category. The Hope Town Museum’s narrative emphasizes that local wreckers were motivated by salvage profits while also providing life-saving services that formal institutions could not deliver quickly in remote waters.

A single documented episode captures the tension between opportunism and rescue. In 1853, Captain Robert Sands of the schooner *Oracle* rescued passengers from the wreck of the ship *William and Mary* and received recognition from the National Shipwreck Institution, later the RNLI, which awarded medals for acts of maritime rescue. That record matters for two reasons. It anchors Hope Town’s wrecking story in a primary, contemporaneous institutional source, and it shows how the same maritime skills used for salvage could also be applied to rescue at scale, especially in reef-strewn waters where delay meant death.

In the wider Bahamian record, wrecking appears as part of a regional maritime system tied to currents, shallow banks, and the shipping routes between the Atlantic and the Gulf. Scholarship on wrecked emigrant ships in the Bahamas underscores how reef hazards, storm tracks, and navigational uncertainty produced recurring disasters, and how Bahamian responders became entangled in the aftermath through rescue, salvage, quarantine, and legal disputes over cargo and compensation. Against that backdrop, wrecking in places like Hope Town became a livelihood that required fast boats, reef knowledge, and a community infrastructure for provisioning crews and repairing vessels.

This is also where governance enters. Wrecking forced colonial authorities to arbitrate between private salvage rights and public maritime safety, and it made Abaco visible to the state mainly through maritime law, customs, and later lighthouse policy. The political problem was simple to state and hard to resolve: reefs were killing trade and people, but reducing wrecks threatened an island economy that had learned to survive on wrecks.

### **1863: lighting the reef, and the economics of safety**

The Elbow Reef Lighthouse is often remembered as a landmark first and an aid-to-navigation second, but its original purpose was administrative and economic: to reduce loss. Heritage documentation and local history sources converge on the lighthouse's opening in the early 1860s, as part of a broader British effort to build manned lightstations across the Bahama Islands. Hope Town's museum framing places the lighthouse at the end of the wrecking era, a state-sponsored intervention intended to make passage safer, lower insurance risk, and stabilize trade.

The lighthouse also arrives in local memory as a contested object. Accounts of resistance, including sabotage and refusal to support construction crews, circulate in Abaco historical writing as evidence that some residents understood navigational safety as a direct threat to local income. Even if particular sabotage stories cannot always be pinned to a single corroborated document, the underlying conflict is historically plausible and widely attested as a pattern across wrecking societies: safety infrastructure redistributes economic advantage, shifting wealth away from responders and toward shippers, insurers, and state administrators.

Once built, the lighthouse created new forms of local employment and status. Lighthouse keeping, under government appointment, tied Hope Town to the colonial state through payroll, supply chains, and bureaucratic oversight. Later documentation from the Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society frames the lightstation as continuously manned and manually operated since the nineteenth century, emphasizing the persistence of keeper labor as a form of heritage and as a continuing navigational service.



### **1840–1921: boatbuilding as an island technology**

If wrecking defined the drama of Hope Town's nineteenth century, boatbuilding defined its craft economy. The Hope Town Museum calls the settlement the "boat building capital of Abaco," locating shipwright activity at Harbour Mouth Cay and documenting locally built schooners, working boats, and dinghies associated with named builders, including Winer Malone. Around 1900, the museum reports Hope Town as the homeport for at least 200 vessels, a number that signals both productive capacity and the town's integration into inter-island and regional trade networks.

Boatbuilding mattered because it solved multiple problems at once. It created exportable value without requiring deep soils. It supported wrecking and fishing by providing fast, shallow-draft craft suited to reef passages and banks. It also produced the material culture that later became tourism's visual language: painted hulls, waterfront workshops, and a harbor crowded with small sail.

The shift away from wooden sail in the early twentieth century, noted in the museum's narrative as steam shipping rose and wooden ship demand fell, helps explain a later demographic contraction. As maritime technology changed, the comparative advantage of small-craft shipwright towns narrowed, and Abaco households faced renewed pressure to migrate, diversify, or accept a smaller local economy.

### **1932–1975: storms, depopulation, and slow infrastructure**

The twentieth-century Out Islands were shaped by two forces that can look contradictory in hindsight: recurrent hurricanes that made life precarious, and an incremental modernization that arrived late and unevenly. For Abaco, the 1932 hurricane stands out in regional disaster history as a devastating event that reshaped settlement patterns and accelerated movement toward safer or more economically connected places. Hope Town's own museum narrative compresses these longer trends into stark

demographic statements, describing a late nineteenth-century population around 1,200 and a 1968 population around 100, before later recovery and growth.



Infrastructure markers help periodize this slow transition. Marsh Harbour's airport, built in the late 1950s, changed Abaco's connectivity with Nassau and Florida, and ferry services soon translated that connectivity into access for the cays. Hope Town's electrification in 1975, replacing scattered generators, is recorded locally as a turning point that made the settlement more livable year-round and more legible to a growing visitor economy.

A civic leader can be placed into this modernizing arc without forcing heroism into the narrative. Leonard M. Thompson, a Hope Town native whose aviation career became part of Bahamian public memory, later gave his name to the Marsh Harbour airport, showing how national commemoration can loop back to small settlements through infrastructure and naming.

#### 1977–2018: heritage as strategy, tourism as identity

Tourism in Hope Town is frequently narrated as a shift from industry to image, but the more accurate framing is that tourism reorganized existing assets: harbor safety, distinctive building forms, and a walkable settlement scale. Local institutions helped translate that history into a public story. The Wyannie Malone Historical Museum, proposed in 1977 by community members including Byrle Patterson, Shirley Higgs, Vernon Malone, and David Scott, used an available "Wee House" offered by Harrington Albury and volunteer labor to build a site of curated memory. This is preservation as community infrastructure, and it becomes part of how Hope Town maintains continuity even as property ownership and seasonal population change.

The lighthouse underwent a parallel process. Heritage and diplomatic documentation emphasize the lighthouse's continued manual operation and the institutional work required to keep it functioning as a

navigational aid and as a visitor site. In this era, debates over authenticity, automation, and maintenance costs are inseparable from tourism because the lighthouse's value becomes both functional and symbolic.

### **2019: Hurricane Dorian and the modern test of continuity**

On 1 September 2019, Hurricane Dorian made catastrophic landfall in the Abacos with extreme winds and storm surge, and it stalled, multiplying damage. In the post-disaster assessment prepared for the Bahamas, Hope Town is identified among the most affected locations on Abaco, with widespread housing and infrastructure loss and long recovery timelines.

Dorian's significance for a Hope Town interlude is not that it introduces vulnerability, since storms have always been part of the settlement story. Its significance is that it forced the modern tourism-and-heritage economy to reveal its underlying dependencies. When buildings, docks, and utilities are damaged, a town built around seasonal population and visitor services has to choose what recovery means: whether to rebuild for resilience, for historical continuity, or for both, and who gets to decide. Documentation from the lighthouse's custodians frames post-Dorian restoration as both preservation and operational necessity, including reopening efforts and later grant-supported repair work.

In documentary terms, this is the scene where the narrative loops back on itself. Hope Town began as a response to displacement, learned to live with maritime danger, built institutions around reef risk, and then made those same institutions a positive attraction to visitors and a symbol for the region and country. Dorian did not change the core themes. It sharpened them.

### **Bridge forward**

Placed between a nineteenth-century maritime chapter and an early twentieth-century chapter, Hope Town's story works as a hinge. It shows how a Loyalist-founded cay settlement survived the collapse of plantation dreams by treating the sea as livelihood, how wrecking and boatbuilding created wealth and controversy, how the lighthouse rebalanced the politics of safety, and how twentieth-century infrastructure and tourism remade the meaning of heritage. If the next chapter turns toward Abaco's "industrial modernity" experiments and wider shifts in Marsh Harbour's trajectory, this interlude clarifies what those shifts displaced and what they depended on: small harbors, reef knowledge, and communities that repeatedly rebuilt the conditions for staying.

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By **1790**, Abaco's settler society was coalescing. Reinforcements even came from older Bahamian settlements: after a catastrophic hurricane struck Harbour Island and Eleuthera in 1806, some families from those islands (including descendants of the original 17th-century Eleutheran Adventurers) migrated to Abaco for a fresh start[36]. Surnames like Russell, Albury, Bethell, Curry, Lowe, Roberts, and Pinder – some of Eleutheran origin, some of Loyalist – intermingled on Abaco[37]. Over time, these groups merged into a unique community. "The old inhabitants contributed seafaring experience and a work ethic born of pioneer life. The Loyalists brought education, culture and gentility... Together, after decades of poverty and want, they would forever change the history of Abaco," transforming it into a distinct and even prosperous region of the Bahamas[38].

The late 18th century thus closed with Abaco firmly settled by a mix of people determined to survive by whatever means the islands could afford. As the next chapter will show, the **19th century** would challenge the Abaconians to adapt repeatedly – shifting from failed plantations to maritime trades like **fishing, boat-building, and wreck salvage**. Despite many lean years, these settlers and their descendants carved out a living and a legacy that endures in the settlements of Abaco and Elbow Cay to this day.

## Chapter 3: Loyalist Legacy – Abaco in the 19th Century (1783–1900)

In the decades after the Loyalists' arrival, the people of Abaco gradually learned to make the most of their rugged environment. The **19th century** was a time of both **hardship and ingenuity**. Early attempts at a plantation economy quickly faded. By **1800**, it was evident that large-scale cotton or tobacco farming on Abaco was untenable – soil exhaustion, pests, and hurricanes saw to that<sup>[27]</sup>. Many of the erstwhile planters gave up and left. Those who remained turned increasingly to the **sea for sustenance and profit**<sup>[39]</sup>. Abaco's historical destiny lay not in fields of cotton, but in sails, hulls, and the bounties of the Atlantic.

One of the first booming industries in 19th-century Abaco was **wrecking** – the art of salvaging cargo from shipwrecks. The waters of Abaco, bordered on the east by a treacherous 100-mile-long barrier reef, were a notorious trap for ships in the age of sail<sup>[40]</sup>. Before modern navigation aids, many a vessel ran aground on the hidden reefs. Local Abaconians became adept at responding to these wrecks with remarkable alacrity. By salvaging valuable cargo and assisting (or sometimes plundering) stricken ships, they could earn windfalls far greater than anything coaxed from the thin soil.

**Green Turtle Cay** emerged as the “wrecking capital” of Abaco. One account notes that by 1806 a Green Turtle captain, **Gideon Lowe**, master of the wrecking schooner *Carpenter's Revenge*, was making a handsome living as a salvor<sup>[41]</sup>. Wrecking was risky and competitive – the first boat to reach a wreck might claim the richest pickings – but it became a cornerstone of the local economy. It also shaped society: the settlements on Abaco's outlying cays grew in importance as **bases for wreckers**, since being closer to the reef gave an advantage. Men would keep a sharp lookout from high dunes or lookouts for the telltale distress flags or flares of a grounded ship, then launch their schooners and sloops to the scene at top speed. Salvage from wrecks (everything from textiles and cigars to machinery and spices) brought a degree of prosperity to places like Green Turtle Cay and Hope Town in the early-mid 1800s<sup>[40][41]</sup>.

Wrecking was not always entirely opportunistic; often it provided genuine lifesaving services. For instance, in 1853 a Hope Town wrecker, Captain Robert Sands of the schooner *Oracle*, heroically rescued all passengers of the ship *William and Mary* when it foundered en route from Liverpool to New Orleans<sup>[42]</sup>. His reward was a Silver Medal from Britain's Royal National Lifeboat Institution – a reminder that Abaco's wreckers, while profiting from maritime disasters, also saved many lives<sup>[42]</sup>. Nevertheless, wrecking did breed unsavory practices: some desperate souls were said to **deliberately mislead ships** with false signal lights to draw them onto reefs – the very behavior that made the word “wreckers” synonymous with pirates in some minds<sup>[43]</sup>. Such rumors (and the general chaos of an economy based on shipwrecks) eventually prompted authorities to bring order. The United Kingdom established a network of lighthouses in the Bahamas, culminating in the Elbow Cay Reef Lighthouse in the 1860s (more on that later), specifically to reduce wrecks. This of course met with local resistance, as it threatened the wreckers' livelihoods.

### **3A. How to Read a Lighthouse: Elbow Reef (Elbow Cay) as Engineering, Infrastructure, and Maritime Politics**

To “read” a lighthouse well, it helps to treat it as three objects at once: a daymark meant to be understood in full sun, a night signal engineered to be legible in bad weather and high stress, and a worksite where routine human labor converts fuel, optics, and mechanics into navigational order. Elbow Reef Lighthouse, set above Hope Town Harbour on Elbow Cay, is especially readable in this sense because it remains a manually operated, keeper-run station in a world where most lights have been automated and demanned.

#### **Reading the site: why here, and why it mattered to 19th-century Abaco**

Start with where the tower is placed. A lighthouse is never “on the reef” in the casual sense, even when it is built “for” the reef. Instead, it sits where builders can secure elevation, foundations, and resupply, while still projecting a warning to the hazard that causes losses. Elbow Cay protrudes toward the Atlantic edge of the Little Bahama Bank, and the lightstation’s hill sits near a protected harbor: a combination that supports both visibility and logistics. The Hope Town Guide’s station notes describe the choice as a response to deep Atlantic water rolling toward the fringe reef, and to the frequency of strandings on Elbow Reef, with the site offering protected high ground close to settlement and supply.

In the economic history of Abaco, that siting decision sits inside a hard-edged political economy. Wrecking, meaning the salvage of cargo from wrecks and the rescue of crews, provided employment and cash flow in a place where capital was scarce and shipping hazards were plentiful. In the mid-19th century, insurers and shipping interests increasingly pressed for better navigational aids, and a lighthouse was the most visible form of that pressure translated into colonial infrastructure. A local newspaper history account notes both the scale of wrecking activity and the predictable opposition that followed when construction began at Elbow Cay, including acts of sabotage against stored tools and materials.

#### **Reading the tower: geometry, materials, and the meaning of stripes**

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre’s tentative listing for Bahamian imperial lightstations provides the core technical profile that matters for navigation and maintenance: Elbow Reef’s tower is about 89 feet tall, the focal plane is roughly 120 feet above sea level because of the hill beneath it, and the characteristic shown is five white flashes every 15 seconds. Those numbers explain why the lighthouse became economically consequential: it extends a predictable warning signal beyond the nearshore zone where reefs are visible, and it does so across the approaches that carried mail, timber, provisions, passengers, and later tourists.

The striped paint scheme is not decoration. In daylight, the tower’s horizontal red-and-white banding functions as a high-contrast daymark, a pattern chosen to separate the tower from sky glare and coastal vegetation. The same UNESCO listing explicitly describes the red-and-white bands and notes the lantern’s metallic dome. In practice, stripes compress complex information into something a mariner can interpret quickly: there is land ahead, it is the marked point, and the reef hazard is offshore of it. That legibility also became, over time, a form of cultural capital. A working daymark became a civic emblem that later tourism economies could brand, photograph, and sell without changing the tower’s navigational function.

On structure and material, sources emphasize layered construction rather than a single “tower material.” The Hope Town Guide describes the tower as concrete over brick, with a two-story metal lantern section using corrosion-prone metals that demand continual care. Even without exhaustive architectural drawings, the maintenance logic is clear: the tower’s vertical envelope must shed water, resist salt spray, and remain paintable, while the lantern must seal glass and metal interfaces that fail through rust, vibration, and thermal cycling.

#### **Reading the light: optic, lens type, fuel, and why the flash pattern matters**

A lighthouse's "voice" is its light characteristic. Elbow Reef's five white flashes every 15 seconds are a kind of maritime punctuation, a cadence meant to be distinguishable from other lights along the Bahamian archipelago. The UNESCO listing ties that signature to a revolving first-order Fresnel lens. First-order lenses are the largest class in the Fresnel system: they concentrate available light into a narrow beam, which is why a fuel-limited station can still project a signal far enough to matter.

Several sources agree that the station's most significant technological shift came in the early 20th-century rebuild era, when older fixed optics and burners were replaced with modernized components. The Hope Town Guide notes that, before the 1936–1938 major rebuild, the light used a fixed, non-rotating lens and a concentric wick burner that likely burned some form of vegetable oil, and that the rebuild introduced pressure kerosene burners and lens-rotating machinery. The UNESCO listing generalizes this modernization across the Bahamian system, describing upgrades in the 1920s and 1930s that included Fresnel lenses, Chance Brothers mercury-bath turning mechanisms, and mantle-burning Hood petroleum vapor burners. A heritage description of Elbow Reef specifically connects the shift from a steady, fixed light to a rotating, bull's-eye Fresnel optic that produces the modern flash signature, a change motivated by the need for easy identification at sea.

This is the core interpretive point for a lay reader: the flash pattern is not a stylistic flourish, it is a navigational ID system. A fixed light tells you "something is there." A timed group-flash tells you "this specific station is there," which is what reduces insurance losses and lowers the probability of navigational error in crowded, reef-fringed waters.

### **Reading the machinery: manual operation as an engineered labor system**

Elbow Reef's continued manual operation is not nostalgia, it is a living mechanical design with specific requirements. The station's keepers still wind the mechanism and tend the fuel system, converting stored potential energy (weights and gearing) into controlled rotation, and converting kerosene into stable illumination. The Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society's history page places emphasis on continuity of operation since the 1860s and on the station's non-electrified, hand-operated status within the wider Bahamian system. The Bahamas' official tourism material offers a vivid operational detail: the keeper climbs the 101 steps and cranks a hand winch repeatedly on an approximately two-hour cycle, and the light emits its flashes at a 15-second interval.

Mechanically, the key idea is friction management. A large Fresnel lens assembly is heavy, and the design problem is to rotate it smoothly and predictably without a large motor. In the Bahamian system, a mercury-bath turning mechanism is repeatedly documented as the solution, because it dramatically reduces friction at the lens bearing surface and allows a weight-driven clockwork to do the work of rotation. This design choice has economic consequences: it makes a bright, distinctive signal possible in a remote station where electricity would historically have been unavailable and where resupply is costly and weather-dependent.

### **Reading the station: supply, inspection, and corrosion as hidden economic costs**

A lighthouse is also a small industrial complex. Elbow Reef's station includes keeper housing and outbuildings: spaces for fuel storage, tools, food, and the daily work of keeping the light reliable. In a 19th-century maritime economy, this mattered as much as the optic. A light that cannot be supplied fails, and a failure is expensive in human life, cargo, and insurance risk.

The UNESCO listing outlines how the Imperial Lighthouse Service handled this logistical problem across the archipelago: keepers maintained lights nightly, while the service conducted inspections, authorized major repairs, and undertook painting and structural maintenance, with semi-annual inspection trips based out of Nassau. That institutional pattern helps explain how the system could exist in the Out Islands at all. Maintenance cycles were formalized, and so were accountability and technical standards, even when local politics were contentious.

Corrosion and weather are the unglamorous throughline. Salt air attacks metal frames and fasteners, humidity drives rust and rot, and hurricanes test every joint in the envelope. A contemporary restoration account describes extensive work replacing lantern room glass panels and rehabilitating rusted metal framing, and it frames those repairs as essential to protecting the lens and turning apparatus. In other words, the station's economic function depends on mundane materials science: seals, paint systems, glasswork, and preventive maintenance that keep optics dry and gears clean.

### **Navigational safety as politics: from wrecking to governance to heritage**

The lighthouse's engineering cannot be separated from its governance. Colonial-era lightstations in The Bahamas were designed through Trinity House in London and commissioned through the Imperial Lighthouse Service, a reminder that navigational safety was treated as an imperial responsibility tied to trade corridors and strategic mobility. After Bahamian independence in 1973, oversight shifted to Bahamian institutions, and many lighthouses were automated, while Elbow Reef became a notable exception because local organizations committed to maintaining the tower and its historic operational mode.

In a 19th-century maritime economy chapter, this is an interpretive bridge worth underscoring: the same light that reduced wrecking opportunities also stabilized commerce, reduced loss, and reconfigured local labor markets over time. A local historical account notes that wreckers opposed lighthouse construction and that their resistance ultimately gave way as navigational aids expanded across the archipelago and maritime work diversified. Later, the lighthouse became a tourism asset precisely because it remained legible as working infrastructure, not as a ruin.

If you want a single practical conclusion, it is this: to read Elbow Reef Lighthouse is to see how a small, hand-run machine sits inside global systems of risk, insurance, colonial administration, and local livelihood. Its stripes are a daylight language, its flash pattern is a nighttime signature, and its upkeep is a continuing negotiation between environment, economics, and institutions.

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### **3B. Wrecking as work: *William and Mary* (1853), the reef, and the local economics of rescue**

In the northern Bahamas, "the reef" is less a line on a chart than a working landscape: a moving boundary where shallow banks, coral heads, tidal set, and wind-driven sea state translate quickly into material consequences. In the mid nineteenth century, that landscape produced a specialized kind of labor. Abaco and other Out Island mariners became skilled at reading water color, sounding for safe passages, and working small, fast vessels close to hazards because the same knowledge that supported fishing and inter-island trade also determined who reached a grounded ship first, who could hold position without

being driven onto the same reef, and who could turn chaos into a salvageable outcome. Wrecking, in this sense, was an economy built around risk management, seamanship, and law, with moral stakes that contemporaries argued about fiercely.

A useful “microhistory with receipts” begins on the night of 3 May 1853, when the emigrant ship *William and Mary* found the limits of charted knowledge. Contemporary reporting describes the vessel as bound from Liverpool to New Orleans, carrying emigrant passengers and a heavy industrial cargo: railroad iron intended for the American market. Accounts place the ship near the Great Isaacs, among the northern cays and shoals that vessels threaded when approaching or crossing the banks. In the terms that matter for wrecking work, this was an especially unforgiving scenario. Iron cargo is dense and difficult to shift quickly. A ship set onto coral in rising wind tends to pound, open seams, and flood. A reef system with narrow safe water leaves rescuers little room to maneuver, especially at night and in weather.

The most persistent detail across contemporaneous retellings is that the ship’s passengers stayed alive by doing something that sounds mundane until you imagine it under those conditions: they kept the pumps going. The same newspaper coverage that identifies the cargo and location also emphasizes the labor of survival that preceded rescue, with passengers and remaining hands maintaining the ship long enough for help to arrive. In wrecking economies, time is everything. The longer a vessel holds together, the more there is to save: people, mail, tools, rigging, cargo that can be lightered, and even the ship itself if it can be kedged or hauled off. When time collapses, wrecking becomes triage.

Help came in the form of a local wrecker, Captain Robert Sands, operating the schooner *Oracle*. In Nassau, officials later treated Sands’s actions as exemplary enough to warrant formal commendation, a public marker of how colonial authorities wanted wrecking to be seen: as disciplined seamanship aligned with “calls of humanity,” and as the practical extension of state interest in safe navigation. The *Life-Boat* journal, reproducing the Lieutenant-Governor’s address at the medal presentation, frames Sands’s approach to the wreck as a passage through heavy seas to a ship “struck on the coral reefs,” and it highlights both the immediate life-saving work and the public meaning attached to it.

That official framing is worth pausing over because it points to the central tension the wrecking vignette needs to explain. Wrecking was never only a matter of rescue. It was also a system for converting maritime misfortune into locally captured value, through salvage services, through claims adjudicated by courts, and through the redistribution of goods and cash into small households, boat crews, and merchants who provisioned them. Even when the *William and Mary* episode ended with the ship lost, the logic of wrecking shaped what happened around it. A wrecker’s vessel was an expensive asset whose crew expected to be paid. The work required provisions, tackle, lines, and the ability to stay on station. The legal economy of salvage existed precisely to translate that investment of labor and risk into a monetary award when property could be saved.

The “how” of salvage labor is highly technical, but it can be explained in plain terms. Wreckers stabilized a grounded ship when possible, often by setting anchors (or kedges) from boats to keep the vessel from slewling broadside to the sea, by cutting away damaged rigging to reduce strain, and by lightering cargo into smaller craft to reduce draft and pounding. These techniques appear repeatedly in nineteenth-century salvage practice in the wider region, including the Florida Reef, where salvage was professionalized under court oversight and where testimony about weather, squalls, and “real danger of losing the brig” could become the hinge for a judge’s award. The same basic mechanics applied across the northern Bahamas: do what you can to prevent the sea from finishing the job before you can separate value from wreck.

In the Bahamas, wrecking also sat inside colonial governance. Museum and heritage accounts emphasize that wrecking developed from opportunistic plunder into a licensed and regulated maritime occupation, shaped by the state’s desire to curb disorder, collect revenue, and exert control over goods moving through imperial space. That regulatory impulse is one reason wrecking cannot be understood as simple piracy, even though accusations of “false lights” and deliberate wrecking circulated widely in the Atlantic world. Scholarship on wrecking cultures shows how easily the practice attracted moral suspicion,

even as observers also recorded the professionalism and hospitality of wrecking crews and the fact that communities depended on this work to survive.

The law mattered because it defined what counted as salvage, what counted as theft, and what counted as legitimate reward for risk. Under Anglo-American maritime norms, salvage awards were intended to incentivize voluntary rescue of imperiled property, and courts weighed factors tied to labor, skill, danger, and the value saved. Those principles clarify why lighthouses became politically charged in places like Abaco. Improved navigational safety meant fewer wrecks. Fewer wrecks meant fewer opportunities for salvage awards and fewer moments when Out Island crews could inject cash and goods into an economy that otherwise ran on thin margins. In that light, the push for navigational infrastructure was not simply “progress” arriving from outside. It was also a reallocation of risk and revenue away from local hands and toward safer, more predictable trade.

This is where the vignette’s analysis needs to widen from the reef to the network. Wrecking connected Abaco and the northern Bahamas to external markets in at least two ways. First, wrecks were tied to trade routes: Liverpool to New Orleans in the *William and Mary* case, but also the steady traffic moving between the Atlantic and Gulf ports through hazardous waters. Second, wrecking drew local mariners into transnational legal geographies. Courts, insurers, and merchants cared intensely about salvage because salvage awards redistributed losses. In the Florida Straits, the wrecking industry was explicitly organized around licensing and admiralty adjudication at Key West, with wreckers earning significant sums in some years.

That Key West connection matters for Abaco because it suggests how legal and technological shifts could redirect people and capital. As charts improved and lighthouses multiplied, wrecking as an everyday Out Island livelihood became harder to sustain. At the same time, the institutionalization of salvage cases in U.S. courts and the concentration of maritime commerce at Key West created a gravitational pull for expertise, boats, and ambition. In regional memory, this movement often appears as a story of “wreckers leaving,” or of younger men pursuing work where the rewards were larger and the legal system more legible. The deeper point is structural: when navigational safety improved, it did not eliminate risk. It relocated it, and it narrowed the set of people authorized to profit from managing it.

Returning to the *William and Mary* helps keep the argument honest. Contemporary accounts make clear that the wreck was severe, that the ship eventually went down, and that saving lives depended on endurance and timing more than on clever extraction of cargo. In a wrecking economy, such a case becomes emblematic precisely because it sits at the boundary between two interpretations. On one side is wrecking as necessary maritime labor in a hazardous geography, with crews like Sands’s celebrated for skill and courage. On the other side is wrecking as a system of incentives that could pull communities into uneasy alignment against the very safety measures that would reduce local income. The nineteenth-century argument over lighthouses in the Out Islands, including Abaco, belongs to that boundary. It is the argument over whether protection from shipwreck should be treated as a public good insulated from local economic consequences, or as a policy that must account for what it displaces.

The vignette can therefore close with a transition rather than a moral. The reef remains an “active hazard,” and Abaco mariners remain central to how vessels and visitors move through the region. What changes over the long nineteenth century is the balance between local seamanship and external infrastructure, between informal response and formal regulation, and between an economy that paid people to meet disaster and an economy that tried to prevent disaster from happening at all. When that balance tips, the consequences show up in migration patterns, in the rise of places like Key West as salvage and trade hubs, and in the slow transformation of maritime risk from a community livelihood into a managed, bureaucratized domain.

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Alongside wrecking, Abaconians honed other seafaring trades. **Boat-building** became an honored craft on several cays, especially **Man-O-War Cay** and Hope Town. Abaco had stands of hardwoods and abundant Caribbean pine, useful for ship timber. By the mid-19th century, skilled "shipwright families" like the Alburys, Lowes, and Knowles were constructing sloops, schooners, and dinghies renowned throughout the Bahamas. Hope Town in particular gained renown as the "boat-building capital of Abaco" in the late 1800s<sup>[44]</sup>. As many as 200 sailing vessels (from small one-masted boats to three-masted schooners up to 500 tons) might be registered to Hope Town at its peak around 1900<sup>[45]</sup>. These locally built ships served in inter-island trade, wrecking, sponge fishing, and beyond. The boat-builders' expertise became a cultural hallmark – indeed, the graceful Abaco dinghy is still celebrated today in regattas<sup>[46]</sup>.

The people of Abaco also engaged in intensive **fishing and turtling**. The surrounding seas teemed with groupers, snapper, crawfish (spiny lobster), conchs, and sea turtles. Green Turtle Cay got its very name from the abundance of sea turtles which were caught and exported (often alive in pens) to markets for their meat and shells<sup>[47][48]</sup>. During the 19th century, a number of Abaconians even migrated temporarily to the fertile fishing waters of the Florida Keys to pursue these trades. Notably, when the **U.S. Congress passed the Wrecking Act of 1825** – requiring that salvage from wrecks in U.S. waters be brought to an American port – many Bahamian wreckers shifted base to Key West to continue working legally<sup>[49]</sup>. This contributed to the growth of Key West, Florida. In fact, by 1860 some **two-thirds of Key West's 3,000 residents were of Bahamian (many Abaconian) descent**<sup>[47]</sup>. Entire families from Green Turtle Cay and other Abaco settlements moved to Key West in the 1830s, even ferrying their wooden houses on barges to transplant their lives there<sup>[49][50]</sup>. The Lowes, Currys, and Alburys of Abaco left their stamp on Key West, which for a time became the **wealthiest city per capita in America**, thanks largely to wrecking and sponging by these Bahamian transplants<sup>[51]</sup>. As late as 1912, **60% of Key Westers could trace their ancestry to the Bahamas**<sup>[52]</sup> – a testament to this 19th-century diaspora of Abaco's seafaring people.

Back in Abaco, the late 19th century saw cycles of **boom and bust**. After the American Civil War began in 1861, some Abaconians engaged in **blockade running** to aid the Confederate states (or simply to profit). With U.S. Navy blockades choking off the South, British and Colonial smugglers ferried arms, ammunition, and supplies through the Bahamas to Confederate ports, and brought out cotton. Enterprising Abaco sailors used their swift sloops and knowledge of the islands to run this blockade. They loaded in Nassau or Abaco and slipped past Union patrols, a risky venture that could reap huge

rewards. Some did it from pro-Southern sympathy, others purely for profit[53][54]. In either case, the Civil War years were lucrative for Abaco mariners – until the war ended in 1865 and “the heady days of blockade running ended overnight,” as one historian notes[55].

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### 3C. Neutral Waters, Risky Runs: A Blockade-Running Case Routed Past Abaco

On 27 April 1862, the British steamer *Bermuda* was seized at sea by the United States gunboat *Mercedita* in the approaches to the Bahamas, “within range of Abaco light,” at a distance the courts later described as roughly five to seven miles off the shore of Great Abaco. In the legal paper trail that followed, the capture became a useful hinge for understanding how the Civil War’s Atlantic blockade pulled the northern Bahamas into a tense geography of neutrality, profit, and enforcement: a zone where water depth, reef passages, and the practical reach of a warship mattered as much as proclamations from Washington or Downing Street.

The *Bermuda*’s seizure is unusually well suited to a book-scale microhistory because it survives as a “case with receipts.” The record preserved in U.S. prize proceedings and the later Supreme Court appeal includes testimony, ship’s papers, and the kind of anxious behavior that authorities treated as evidence of intent. When the boarding party came aboard, the captain admitted that “the letters had been burned” and that multiple boxes of documents were thrown overboard before capture. Those details are not decorative. In blockade law, paper mattered because the war’s commerce often traveled under a costume of neutrality. The Bahamas, and Nassau in particular, were the most famous stage for that costume, serving as an entrepôt where cargo could be landed, re-labeled, re-shipped, and “laundered” through a neutral port while still heading toward Confederate use.

The voyage itself, as reconstructed in the decision, reflects that logic. *Bermuda* had sailed from Liverpool with cargo that included war material and supplies, then proceeded to St. George’s, Bermuda, and from there left for Nassau on 23 April 1862, only to be stopped four days later off Great Abaco. The legal dispute that followed turned partly on jurisdictional edges and partly on intention. How close was too close to a neutral shore for a belligerent seizure? What counted as a neutral voyage when the real commercial destination was suspected to be a blockaded coast? These questions were not academic to Abaco, because the answers determined whether warships would patrol the island chain as though it were an outer belt of the blockade itself.

Abaco’s relevance sits in a deceptively simple physical fact. The northern Bahamas are threaded with shallow banks and intricate reef passages. That hydrography created a tactical asymmetry between fast, light-draft blockade runners and deeper-draft cruisers that could not safely “cut corners” across the banks without pilots or local knowledge. One participant in the wartime trade later wrote that runners carried Bahama bank pilots “who knew every channel,” while U.S. cruisers, drawing more water, “were compelled to keep the open sea.” He added a specific operational detail that helps explain why Abaco keeps appearing in the documentary record: “their usual cruising ground was off Abaco Light.” In that account, Abaco’s headlands and lights become a navigational bottleneck. Ships moving between Nassau and the wider Atlantic had to decide whether to flirt with the banks and reefs or give them a wide berth, and either choice carried risk.

That risk was distributed through politics as much as through weather. Britain proclaimed neutrality early in the war, which in practice meant two constraints that pulled against each other. The colonial government had obligations to prevent the fitting-out of belligerent warships in its ports under the Foreign Enlistment Act, yet the colony’s merchants benefited from trade that was formally legal in a neutral harbor even when its ultimate purpose was morally and strategically contested. Governor Charles Bayley’s correspondence around the Confederate vessel *Oreto* (later the CSS *Florida*) captures this balancing act.

He emphasized that colonial officials had done their duty by ensuring a suspect vessel did not leave Nassau “equipped and prepared to act offensively,” while also acknowledging that suspicion alone could be hard to convert into a clean condemnation under the statute. The language is careful, legalistic, and defensive, which tells you something about the political temperature. Nassau was close enough to U.S. cruisers to make encounters frequent, and close enough to Confederate agents to make every clearance controversial.

This is where Abaco enters the neutrality problem as geography made visible. The *Bermuda* seizure, occurring off Great Abaco, illustrates how aggressively the United States interpreted blockade enforcement in the wider seascape. A runner did not need to be caught at Charleston’s bar to be treated as guilty. It could be intercepted on a route that began in Liverpool and passed through neutral ports, provided the court believed the “innocent” voyage was a segment of a single continuous plan to reach a blockaded destination. In British eyes, that posture could look like a rolling projection of belligerent power toward colonial waters. A modern scholarly edition of the Milne Papers, summarizing contemporary British complaints, notes that the detention of the steamer *Adela* “within sight of Abaco Lighthouse” fed allegations that U.S. warships violated territorial limits in the Bahamas. Even when a seizure occurred beyond the strict three-mile belt, the optics were combustible: warships lingering near Abaco’s lights signaled that “neutral waters” were, functionally, being treated as contested approaches to the blockade.

For Abaco communities, the blockade-running episode sits less as an ideological story than as an economic and technical redirection of existing skills. The cays had long produced mariners fluent in reef navigation, boat-handling, and the opportunistic logistics of a maritime frontier. In this book, we frame wartime commerce explicitly as mixed-motive labor: some mariners ran cargo with pro-Confederate sympathies, others for money, and the income was real until it evaporated quickly with the war’s end. The Civil War briefly rewarded local competence in speed, shallow-water knowledge, and discretion. It also linked Abaco more tightly to Nassau’s boom economy, where warehousing, transshipment, and pilotage turned a small colonial capital into a crowded marketplace of cotton bales, speculative capital, and surveillance.

The shock came in 1865. When blockaded ports reopened, the risk premium collapsed. Vessels and crews that had lived on wartime margins faced a sudden reversion to peacetime constraints, including the slow tightening of navigational safety and regulation that reduced the older wrecking-and-salvage windfalls. Abaco’s postwar “whiplash” is legible in the same kinds of evidence that make blockade running visible in the first place: population movement, changing occupational mixes, and the renewed search for livelihood in agriculture and migration circuits that tied the Bahamas to Florida ports. In other words, the Civil War did not create Abaco’s maritime economy. Still, it briefly intensified and monetized it, then released it back into an Atlantic world where prices, laws, and technologies were changing faster than small settlements could comfortably absorb.

Placed within the late-nineteenth-century arc of this book, the *Bermuda* case serves as a compact lens. It shows a neutral archipelago pulled into war by routes rather than armies. It demonstrates how Abaco’s lights and banks served as practical infrastructure for both evasion and enforcement. It also clarifies why “neutrality” was never only a diplomatic posture. In the northern Bahamas, neutrality was experienced as a set of daily calculations about depth, distance from shore, the presence of cruisers on the horizon, and the legal meaning of a ship’s papers once a boarding officer stepped onto the deck.

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### 3D. Abaco to Key West: a house on a barge, diaspora logistics, and the making of a port town

In the late 1840s, on Green Turtle Cay, the act of leaving could look like carpentry. Captain John Bartlum, a mariner from a Loyalist family rooted in Abaco, is documented as having moved his own house to Key West in 1847, dismantling it in the Bahamas and reconstructing it on Eaton Street after he purchased land there. The surviving record is unusually concrete for an Out Island migration story: the Historic American Buildings Survey links the structure's Abaco origin to a dated Monroe County deed and to a specific Key West corner lot, then places Bartlum, newly arrived, within the city's maritime trades (Historic American Buildings Survey 1–2). That paper trail matters because it lets a familiar Atlantic-world trope, "people carried their houses with them," land as more than metaphor. In this case, the house itself became a cargo, one that crossed a narrow but politically meaningful strait.

The logistics of that move were shaped by hurricane damage, building scarcity, and a regional maritime skill set that was already mobile. A Key West Maritime Historical Society article situates Bartlum's relocation in the wake of the 1846 hurricane, pairing him with his brother-in-law, Richard "Tuggy" Roberts, and framing their house transfers as a response to storm loss and reconstruction demand in Key West. It describes the two men moving their houses from Green Turtle Cay and rebuilding them on the corner of Eaton and William Streets, effectively importing Abaco's built environment into a rapidly expanding American port ("Florida Keys Letters from the Bahamas"). A Key West Art and Historical Society entry goes further for the Roberts house: it states that Roberts disassembled his Green Turtle Cay home and placed it "on a barge," brought it across to Key West, and reassembled it at 408 William Street, a claim presented as institutional history rather than casual travel lore (Key West Art and Historical Society).

Those two sources allow a careful grading of the famous "house-by-boat" memory. The verified core is that Bartlum's house was built on Green Turtle Cay before 1847 and reconstructed in Key West in 1847–48, with the Key West purchase and later chain of title anchored in courthouse records (Historic American Buildings Survey 1–2). The barge detail for Roberts is best treated as verified-at-the-institutional level, meaning it is asserted by a museum/heritage body whose mission includes documentation, even if the public-facing summary does not reproduce the underlying shipping receipt or bill of lading (Key West Art and Historical Society). The broader idea that "families" commonly moved whole houses by water remains plausible rather than proven in the aggregate. What the record supports with confidence is that at least some Abaco households treated the house frame as a transportable asset, and they could do so because their economy had already trained them in moving heavy things across shallow, reef-guarded seas.

That economy was wrecking and salvage, work that demanded intimate knowledge of passages, banks, weather windows, and the legal theater that followed any successful recovery. By the 1820s, Key West's rise as a port of entry and court-centered salvage hub was being driven by policy as much as by geography. Territorial and federal measures sought to regularize wrecking, curb predation, and channel salvage into adjudication. A widely cited local synthesis highlights a Florida territorial Salvage Act (1823) and then describes a "Federal Wrecking Act" (1825) as pivotal because it required salvaged property claimed in territorial waters to be taken to an American port of entry, with Key West the most accessible

one for Florida Reef operations (Bertelli). Even when read cautiously as an interpretive secondary account, the underlying institutional shift is clear: the business moved toward places where courts, customs officials, and merchants could convert perilous recovery into lawful title and cash.

Federal law also framed wrecking as a matter of state power, not simply seafaring custom. The U.S. Code's legislative history traces anti-wrecking provisions back to an Act of March 3, 1825, embedding the suppression of plunder and associated violence within federal statute and signaling that "wrecking" would be regulated through American legal infrastructure rather than left to local practice alone (United States, Office of the Law Revision Counsel). That legal environment helps explain why Abaco mariners who already possessed the technical competence for salvage and reef navigation increasingly oriented toward Key West. A salvage job on the Florida Reef did not end when cargo was brought off a vessel. It ended when a court recognized a claim, when an auction converted goods into money, and when networks of merchants, ship chandlers, and insurers absorbed the proceeds.

The figure of William Marvin, a nineteenth-century jurist who served in Key West and wrote on salvage and maritime law, illustrates how the port turned wrecking from improvisation into a routinized industry with paperwork and precedent. Florida Memory's biographical sketch emphasizes Marvin's legal and civic prominence and, by implication, the degree to which Key West's maritime economy required legal expertise alongside seamanship (State Library and Archives of Florida). The point is not that Abaco migrants needed to become lawyers to thrive, but that the wages of their labor depended increasingly on courts, documentation, and the authority to define what counted as lawful salvage.

Seen through that lens, the Bartlum house move reads as a migration strategy tuned to institutional opportunity. Bartlum was not merely a fisherman chasing a better shore. The HABS narrative places him as a shipbuilder who became significant within Key West's maritime world, and it ties his biography to a city whose prosperity drew talent from across the northern Bahamas (Historic American Buildings Survey 2). The house he moved functioned as shelter, wealth, and social statement. It also embodied a kind of trans-island continuity: Abaco material culture could be re-sited without being erased.

Yet diaspora reshaped Abaco as well as Key West, and the house story can make that too easy to forget. Migration offered a hedge against volatility in an economy dominated by maritime risk, storm cycles, and later technological change that reduced wreck frequency. It also drained people, skills, and capital from small settlements that had organized themselves around reef work and small-ship commerce. What was lost was not simply population, but the density of local exchange that made Out Island life viable across lean seasons. What persisted were kin networks, religious affiliations, and a shared building vocabulary that could travel back and forth with boats and letters. The "new connections" were commercial and legal. Key West's courts and markets became a second horizon for Abaco families, and that horizon could be reached with the same competency that wrecking had already cultivated: moving through shallow water, reading wind and reef, and turning an uncertain sea into a managed, if still dangerous, livelihood.

For a reader moving through the book's transition from the wrecking era toward the early twentieth century, the house-on-a-barge detail works best when it stays tethered to evidence and remains honest about scale. One can tell it as a single, documentable line of movement, from Green Turtle Cay to Key West, anchored by deeds and heritage documentation, then use that line to illuminate a larger truth: Abaco's maritime economy produced people whose skills were portable, and U.S. governance structures in the Keys created a new kind of port town that could absorb those skills and convert them into wealth. The diaspora did not end Abaco's story, but it changed the terms on which Abaco's maritime labor would be valued, remembered, and eventually repackaged, sometimes as heritage, sometimes as architecture, and sometimes as a legend that turns out, in at least one case, to have receipts.

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After the Civil War and the decline of wrecking (which waned as better charts and lighthouses reduced shipwrecks), Abaco's resourceful residents found "sweeter" opportunities. They discovered that certain **cash crops** actually thrived in their sandy soils. By the 1870s–1880s, **pineapple farming** had taken off, especially on the Abaco cays and in nearby Eleuthera. Abaco pineapples – sweet and small – were exported to the U.S. until Hawaii's dominance later. Abaco farmers also planted **citrus orchards**, producing oranges and grapefruit for export[56]. Another crop, **sisal** (a fibrous agave used for rope), was introduced and did well for a time[57]. Meanwhile, the shallow banks provided a living in **sponge harvesting** – divers collected natural sponges from the seabed, a major Bahamian industry in the late 1800s. Abaco, like other islands, participated in the sponge trade, with dozens of men employed in "sponging" crews[58]. Together, these activities – **wrecking, boat-building, tropical agriculture, and sponging** – created a diversified local economy and a period of relative prosperity by the late 19th century[57][59]. The growth was evident: the little town of New Plymouth on Green Turtle Cay, for example, swelled to nearly 2,000 inhabitants in the 1880s (compared to only a few hundred a century later)[59][60]. Those were boom times. Visitors in the 1880s would have found tidy, prosperous settlements with rows of nicely built two- and three-story wooden homes, some even with imported stone, decorated with breezy verandas and *gingerbread* trim – the architectural signature of Loyalist Bahamian communities[61].

However, as the 19th century drew to a close, **economic storm clouds** gathered. Abaco's pineapple fields started to **decline** due to soil depletion and competition from new pineapple plantations in Florida and Cuba[62]. Citrus too suffered once Florida and California entered the market on a large scale[62]. The sisal plantations were hit by plant disease and a glut in supply[62]. And the sponging industry was devastated around 1893–1895 by a mysterious fungal **blight** that wiped out sponge beds across the Bahamas[63]. By 1900, Abaco's 19th-century economic heyday had cooled into stagnation. A telling metric is population: lacking a viable export economy, many Bahamians emigrated. Between **1900 and 1920, an estimated one in five Bahamians left for the United States**, lured by jobs in bustling Florida[64]. Many Abaco families joined this migration wave, seeking better prospects in Key West, Miami (which boomed after Henry Flagler's railroad reached it in 1896), or beyond[65][64]. Indeed, Miami's early growth was tied to Bahamian labor – at one point in the 1890s, Green Turtle Cay's population was larger than Miami's, but soon Miami would far outstrip the out islands and even draw Bahamians to help build it[66][67].

By the dawn of the **20th century**, Abaco was a place of dwindling fortunes and **scattered, self-reliant communities**. Hope Town's population, for instance, had fallen sharply (from perhaps 1,200 people in the late 19th century to only about 100 by 1968, according to local records[68]). The surviving Abaconians "cobbled together a living" however they could – fishing, subsistence farming, a bit of lumber cutting, perhaps a government job like lighthouse keeping – and remained resilient. As challenging as the 1800s had been, the next era would test Abaco even further, with new industries rising and falling, and nature itself dealing heavy blows. Yet it would also set the stage for the modern transformation of Abaco, as we shall see, with the arrival of better transportation, foreign investment in lumber and agriculture, and eventually the stirrings of a new economic force: **tourism**.

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### 3E: Keeping the Light at Elbow Reef: Work, Family, and Authority on the Edge of the Abacos

Near the end of day on Elbow Cay, the most consequential work in Hope Town can look almost ordinary: a keeper leaves the settlement, crosses toward the Atlantic side, and climbs into a tower that was built to make the surrounding waters less profitable for those who once depended on wrecks. In contemporary descriptions of the Elbow Reef Lighthouse, this routine is conveyed through numbers that are easy to remember because they are burdensome: 101 steps, a hand winch cranked 427 times, repeated on a cycle of roughly every two hours to keep the clockwork mechanism running. These details are often told as heritage trivia for visitors. They are also a compact way to understand lighthouse keeping as a form of skilled, embodied labor that tied a small community to a larger maritime economy, and to the politics of navigational safety in a reef bound archipelago.

A useful entry into the social history of Elbow Reef is the continuity of keeper families that local and public facing sources emphasize. Bahamas.com identifies Jeffery Forbes Jr. as "Keeper of the Light" and frames his work as part of a lineage that includes his father and grandfather. A community oriented profile likewise reports that Forbes Jr. learned the work from his father, Jeffrey Forbes Sr., described there as having served for decades as a Bahamian lightkeeper. A Caribbean diaspora newspaper profile presents Forbes Jr. as the principal keeper maintaining a kerosene light whose replacement parts have become difficult to source, which makes family knowledge and improvisational skill more than sentimental themes. Even when the names of 19th century keepers remain harder to pin down in readily accessible online records, this emphasis on intergenerational transmission matters historically because it points to the way lighthouse keeping blurred the boundary between state service and household economy. The keeper's expertise lived in the body and the family as much as in formal appointment.

The staffing structure described for Elbow Reef also locates the station within a recognizable bureaucratic pattern. A Hope Town reference site notes that, during the era it calls the Imperial Lighthouse Service days, the standard arrangement employed three keepers: a Principal Keeper, an Assistant Keeper, and an Occasional Keeper who covered vacation or sick leave. This hierarchy aligns with the broader principal and assistant division that characterized British and Irish lighthouse work, where principal and assistant grades structured both authority and the rotation of responsibility. In that sense, the social architecture of the lightstation reflected imperial administrative habits even as the work itself had to accommodate the distinctly Abaconian problems of reefs, storms, salt, and isolation.

What did a "day in the life" involve at a station like Elbow Reef, especially in the transition from the wrecking economy to the early 20th century when the lighthouse's presence had already begun to reshape local livelihoods? The clearest way to answer is to separate what can be verified at Elbow Reef from what is best understood as period typical practice that would have structured keeper life in many comparable stations. Verified features include the continued human staffing of the station, the institutional

tie to the Bahamas Port Department in contemporary operations, and the persistent use of kerosene and manual systems in the heritage narrative. The Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society describes itself as working “in tandem with the Bahamas Port Department who oversees the Lighthouse Keepers and the kerosene requirements of the station,” and it publicly identifies Forbes Jr. as principal keeper within that framework. In a separate post about reopening after Hurricane Dorian, the same organization notes that the Port Department and the principal keeper control access to the government property and require visitor tracking, which signals a modern expression of an older truth: keepers were gatekeepers in a literal sense, regulating who entered the station and when.

Period typical routines, by contrast, are best reconstructed from lighthouse service instructions and well documented keeper systems elsewhere, while acknowledging that local conditions would have altered the details. Trinity House instructions from 1839 specify frequent wick trimming as an operational requirement and forbid bedding in the watch spaces, emphasizing that the keeper’s task was vigilance rather than mere maintenance. In U.S. lighthouse practice, the night was organized through watches that rotated among keepers, with a principal keeper and assistants dividing four hour periods so that the light could be monitored continuously. The particular technology at Elbow Reef has changed across time, which would have changed the feel of the work. A travel oriented Abaco guide notes that the current kerosene lamp, Fresnel lens, and clockwork rotation mechanism were installed in the 1930s from an abandoned lighthouse, which implies that earlier keepers would have tended a different apparatus and spent less time winding a mechanism and more time on the steady, repetitive attentions of oil flow, wick condition, soot, and glass. Still, across both regimes, the keeper’s work depended on disciplined repetition: cleaning optical surfaces, managing combustion, recording conditions, and treating corrosion as a constant adversary. The stakes were not aesthetic. When the Abaco Sun describes restoration work after Dorian, it highlights how rust pressure cracked glazing and allowed water intrusion, a modern illustration of how quickly the marine environment can degrade the materials that make a lighthouse function.

Supply logistics were another axis of daily life, and they tied the keeper’s household to maritime networks in ways that resemble provisioning systems for other Out Islands livelihoods. The Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society’s description of Port Department oversight foregrounds kerosene as a managed necessity rather than a casual fuel choice. The Caribbean Camera profile adds a more intimate dimension: replacement parts for the kerosene apparatus are described as no longer manufactured, and locals are portrayed as having to undertake “extraordinary efforts” to secure what is needed to keep the apparatus working. For a keeper family, this means that technical competence included a working knowledge of supply chains, improvisation, and the capacity to stretch equipment life under salt exposure and storm risk.

Community cohesion is often easiest to see in the small frictions that appear in visitor guidance. A major travel guide notes that the lighthouse keepers and their families live in cottages at the base of the tower and asks visitors to keep noise down because someone may be resting before night duty. That detail matters because it frames the lightstation as a lived domestic space rather than a detached piece of infrastructure. It also hints at the keeper’s social position within Hope Town. A keeper was not simply another tradesperson. He was entrusted with a state asset, was responsible for a signal that structured maritime movement, and had to remain dependable under conditions that could isolate the station for days.

The most historically consequential aspect of keeper life, however, lies in why the station existed at all, and how that purpose reverberated through local identity. In Abaco’s 19th century economy, wrecking was a rational response to a reef rich seascape and uncertain navigation. The same history that celebrates wreckers’ daring also records the moral ambiguity that surrounded deliberate deception and opportunism, and it notes that the British lighthouse network, culminating locally in the Elbow Cay light in the 1860s, aimed to reduce wrecks and faced local resistance because it threatened the wrecking trade. Contemporary tourism material repeats a sharper version of that conflict: Hope Townees resented the light as a threat to their livelihood and, according to that account, went so far as to sink a barge transporting building materials, though the lighthouse still entered operation in 1863. Whether one interprets that story as sabotage, protest, or economic self defense, it clarifies why lighthouse keeping became a community defining occupation. The keeper embodied a shift in the local political economy: from benefiting when ships failed, toward benefiting when ships passed safely. The “day in the life” of a

keeper, in other words, sat inside a longer transition from wrecking toward boatbuilding, trade, and later tourism, where the lighthouse became an asset rather than an adversary.

By the early 20th century, lighthouse keeping on Elbow Cay likely combined monotony and sudden crisis. Much of the work would have been quiet: routine cleaning, fuel management, inspection, and the careful adherence to rules that were meant to make a light dependable in bad weather and human error alike. Yet the job also required readiness for the rare moment when routine broke: storms that demanded daytime burning, corrosion failures, injuries, and the constant possibility that a vessel would still find the reef. The keeper's social contribution to Hope Town was therefore practical and symbolic at once. Practically, he maintained a signal on which strangers depended. Symbolically, he represented the community's relationship to the sea as a space governed by obligation and safety, even when earlier generations had survived by treating maritime disaster as an opportunity.

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## Chapter 4: Hard Times and New Beginnings – Abaco in the Early 20th Century (1900–1945)

The early 20th century was a defining period for the Abacos, marked by economic experiments, environmental challenges, and the first seeds of the modern era. As traditional 19th-century industries waned, Abaco's inhabitants welcomed any new enterprise that might revive prosperity. Around **1905**, such an opportunity arrived in the form of the **lumber industry**. Abaco's interior on Great Abaco Island was covered in stands of Caribbean pine and hardwood coppice. In **1906**, a group of American investors established the **Bahamas Timber Company**, securing a 100-year concession to harvest Abaco's pine forests<sup>[69]</sup>. They built a large, state-of-the-art sawmill at a place called **Wilson City**, a company town they carved out of the forest about 5 miles south of Marsh Harbour<sup>[70]</sup>. For the isolated Abacos, Wilson City was a modern marvel: it boasted electric lights, an ice plant, even the island's first tennis court<sup>[70]</sup>. The company erected workers' housing and imported U.S. supplies; by Bahamian standards circa 1910, Wilson City was remarkably advanced (one contemporary account noted it had amenities and "low-cost housing as well as a medical plan" for employees)<sup>[70]</sup>. Hundreds of Bahamians, including many Abaconians, found employment there cutting and milling pine lumber for export.

For roughly a decade, **1907–1916**, Wilson City thrived as a lumber hub. Abaco's pine was cut and shipped off to fuel Florida's construction and railroad boom. However, by the **late 1910s** the venture faltered. The outbreak of World War I and logistic difficulties, combined with the depletion of easily accessible pine stands, made the operation less profitable. By 1916, the Bahamas Timber Company abruptly **shut down Wilson City**, leaving the model town a near-ghost overnight<sup>[71][72]</sup>. The closure was a harsh blow: many local men suddenly lost steady jobs and incomes. A number of families **migrated away** – some to Nassau, some back to a subsistence life in their home settlements, others perhaps to Florida where the timber company's American owners had other operations<sup>[72]</sup>. Today, the site of Wilson City is ruins engulfed by forest, though it lives on in Abaco lore as an early brush with industrialization.

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### 4A: Abaco's Brief Experiment with Industrial Modernity: The Bahamas Timber Company and Wilson City

In April 1910, a North American trade journal carried what reads like an ordinary hiring notice, and yet it opens a rare technical window onto Abaco's most ambitious early twentieth-century industrial project. The Bahamas Timber Company, operating at "Wilson City, Abaco Island," advertised for skilled mill labor and shop trades, including a sawyer, a circular-resaw operator, an engineer, and an electrician, and it described the plant itself as "a two-circular mill with circular resaw." The language matters because it signals an operation built around mechanized throughput, a mill complex with power generation and electrical systems, and a workforce differentiated by specialized roles rather than the flexible labor typical of small settlement economies.

That contrast is the point of Wilson City as a historical episode. For most of the nineteenth century and into the early 1900s, Abaco's livelihoods relied on a maritime logic: wrecking and salvage, boatbuilding, fishing, small-scale farming, and inter-island trading that paired craft skill with local knowledge of reefs

and weather. Wilson City did something else. It attempted to turn Abaco's interior pinewoods into an export-oriented industrial landscape, complete with a company town, built infrastructure, and a production schedule calibrated to distant markets rather than to the seasonal rhythms of subsistence and sail.

The enabling condition was a colonial concession and outside capital. In 1906, an American investor group established the Bahamas Timber Company and secured a long timbering contract in Abaco, then built a large sawmill and a planned settlement, Wilson City, several miles south of Marsh Harbour. Contemporary and later historical accounts converge on the same basic outline: Wilson City was conceived as a model industrial town, with electric lights and an ice plant, and it operated intensively for roughly a decade before closing by the end of 1916.



Site and access were strategic; heritage documentation places the company town on Spencer's Point, positioned near the Sea of Abaco's protected waters and close to navigational channels that could carry outbound lumber shipments. A later environmental assessment of the Wilson City road corridor, prepared in connection with modern infrastructure planning, preserves a useful detail for historians: the unpaved "Wilson City Road" follows the legacy access route into pine forest uplands and is explicitly described as the route used during the period when Wilson City drove Abaco's "wood industry" (1906–1916). In other words, Wilson City was not simply a mill at the edge of the sea, it was a corridor project that stitched interior forest to coast through built transport.

The scale of investment, relative to the Bahamas of the period, was extraordinary. The Grand Bahama Museum's historical exhibit characterizes Wilson City as a boom town with "modern amenities unknown elsewhere in the Bahamas except for Nassau," including electricity and running water, and it notes the presence of a railroad for moving lumber. The exhibit also highlights the magnitude of the capital outlay, describing an investment of £300,000, framed as several multiples of the annual colonial budget. Even allowing for the interpretive tone typical of museum exhibits, the underlying point is well supported by multiple accounts: Wilson City represented a rare attempt to impose an industrial template on an Out Island landscape.

How did the work system function on the ground? The best reconstructions come from heritage syntheses that combine field observation of ruins with the scattered paper trail of the industry. Neil Sealey's "Abaco logging story" emphasizes an engineering constraint that a forester might miss if thinking in the idiom of river drives: Abaco's Caribbean pine yields dense wood and, as Sealey notes, "logs actually sink rather than float." That single property reshapes everything. It helps explain why Wilson City depended on rail

transport and a log-pond system rather than on floating timber down creeks, and why the company had to invest in mechanical movement from stump to mill. Sealey describes a rail system with steam engines bringing logs to the mill and notes visible offshore stone cairns that supported railroad track over water and helped form the log pond.

Within that transport spine, labor sorted into linked tasks. Felling and bucking in pinewoods supplied the log stream. A second labor component built and maintained the rail network itself, which Abaco Sun reports was a major employment category in the peak years. At the mill, the technical profile comes into focus through the trade-journal description of the plant's two circular saw lines and circular resaw, which implies a production line designed to break down round logs into boards at volume, with resaw capacity for controlling thickness and maximizing yield from each stem. The same advertisement's inclusion of an electrician, alongside an engineer, is consistent with a plant whose operations depended on generated power, wiring, and maintenance under conditions of salt air and high corrosion risk.

Company-town life is unusually well documented for Abaco because writers and museums treat Wilson City as a marker of "modernity." Abaco Sun's account, drawing on excerpts from Amanda's historical work and attributing specific figures to historian Steve Dodge, reports that Wilson City had street lights, electricity, an ice plant, Abaco's first tennis court, and a large store stocked with supplies imported from the United States. It also states that employees came from across Abaco and had access to low-cost housing and a medical plan. The same source provides a snapshot of scale: by 1912, 540 people were employed at Wilson City, presented as more than 12 percent of Abaco's population at the time, and the mill's output at peak is reported as 15 to 18 million feet of lumber annually for local use and export to Nassau, Cuba, and the United States.

Those figures help anchor a question that matters for interpreting this episode: why would industrial lumber "make sense" in the Bahamas at all? A conventional forestry lens points to constraints. Abaco's pine grows on thin soils over limestone, with root systems adapted to shallow substrates, and growth is often described as slow, with stand structure shaped by repeated disturbance. Sealey underscores the marginal growing conditions and the rarity of large trees even decades after harvest, and scientific and conservation literature on Bahamian pine systems emphasizes their dependence on disturbance regimes, including fire, and their sensitivity to conversion. From that viewpoint, a decade-scale extraction boom looks fragile, and it is.

Yet the investment becomes legible when placed in regional economic geography. Abaco's pinewoods offered a nearby supply of workable softwood at a time when North American timber markets were tightening in places, and the Abacos sit close to Florida's rapidly growing coastal economy. Wilson City's coastal placement and its rail-to-wharf logic reduced internal transport friction, and the company-town model bundled labor supply, basic welfare provision, and retail into a single system that could function in a remote setting with limited public infrastructure. Abaco Sun's report of exports to Nassau, Cuba, and the United States, plus the mill's reported output, points to a business plan built around external markets and continuous shipment rather than around local consumption alone.

Ecology also shaped operations in ways that feed back into the collapse story. Fire-adapted Caribbean pine forests can persist as open systems when disturbance regimes remain within historical bounds, and they can shift when those regimes are disrupted by logging intensity, road-building, and land conversion. The DEPP environmental assessment, written much later for a different purpose, contains an incidental observation that is still historically suggestive: it describes sections of pine forest near the corridor as lacking age diversity and showing planted spacing patterns, and it notes subsequent agricultural conversion nearby. This is later than Wilson City, yet it reflects a broader pattern in which timber extraction and land-use change simplify forest structure, which in turn affects regeneration and long-term yields. In short, the forest that made Wilson City possible also set limits on the duration of industrial profitability under the company's chosen intensity.

By the mid-1910s those limits were visible. Abaco Sun reports that within a decade much of the pinelands had been "logged bare," employment fell, and annual production declined to about nine million board feet before the mill's permanent closure by the end of 1916. The Grand Bahama Museum exhibit uses slightly

different phrasing but converges on the same endpoint, stating that by 1916 the surrounding old-growth forest had been fully exploited and that Wilson City was abandoned the following year. Sealey's account similarly places the end of the Wilson City operation around 1915 and then frames the postwar resumption of lumbering at other Abaco sites. Taken together, these sources support a cautious conclusion: the collapse reflects a mix of local depletion of accessible timber, market and logistics shocks in the World War I era, and the inherent vulnerability of a remote, capital-intensive system operating in corrosive coastal conditions and thin-soiled pinewoods.

The afterlife of the enterprise matters for Marsh Harbour's trajectory. Wilson City did not become the lasting urban center its planners imagined, but it concentrated labor, skills, and infrastructure in the Marsh Harbour region, and it left behind corridors, ruins, and a memory of wage labor that later development could draw on. Even the modern assessment of the Wilson City road emphasizes how improvements in access would make ruins reachable to "cultural investigators and preservationists," a reminder that industrial landscapes can re-enter local economies as heritage and tourism assets long after extraction ends. This is one way Wilson City extends into the twentieth-century story: it is a bridge between a maritime settlement economy and a later era in which Abaco's value, for outsiders and increasingly for locals as well, is packaged through infrastructure, interpretive narrative, and place-based identity.

Wilson City's significance, then, is not that it permanently industrialized Abaco. Its significance is that it briefly tested an industrial modernity on Abaco's terms: shallow limestone, fire-shaped pinewoods, a coastline built of reefs and channels, and communities whose earlier wealth had come from sea skill rather than mill discipline. The experiment failed as a town, and succeeded as a historical hinge. It reoriented the island's sense of what development could look like, it altered labor geographies around Marsh Harbour, and it left a material palimpsest that later Abaconians and visitors would read in ruins, photographs, and stories.

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As if economic setbacks weren't enough, Abaco in the late 1920s and early 1930s endured a series of **natural disasters that were devastating**. A trio of major hurricanes struck within a six-year span: powerful storms in **1926, 1928/29, and 1932** battered the Abacos mercilessly[73]. The culmination was the catastrophic storm of **1932**, remembered in Bahamas history simply as the "Great Abaco Hurricane." This Category 5-equivalent hurricane roared over the Abaco Islands in early September 1932 and quite literally **flattened entire settlements**[74]. An enormous storm surge swept over low-lying cays and the main island, obliterating houses and crops. Contemporary reports indicate wind instruments failed above 140 mph, so the exact strength wasn't recorded, but anecdotal evidence and damage suggest it rivaled the worst storms on record[75]. Many lives were lost or upended. It was said that "some

parts of The Abacos were never re-inhabited” after this disaster[76]. Indeed, in the aftermath, the colonial government decided that certain destroyed villages on less sheltered cays should not be rebuilt. Instead, they **encouraged survivors to relocate** to presumably safer ground on Great Abaco. The government offered **5-acre tracts of land and materials for small stone houses** in places like **Dundas Town** and **Murphy Town** (new settlements on the outskirts of Marsh Harbour) to entice people away from the most exposed cays[76]. This 1930s resettlement policy reshaped Abaco’s demographic layout, bolstering Marsh Harbour’s population and laying foundations for its later emergence as the central town. Nonetheless, many Abaconians remained deeply attached to their home isles; some rebuilt on cays like Man-O-War and Elbow Cay despite the risks, while others took the opportunity to move to Nassau or even emigrate, accelerating the inter-island migration that had begun earlier[77].

Between the economic depression and the hurricanes, **the late 1920s–1930s were grim**. Abaco’s economy virtually collapsed. A local historian notes that after the 1932 hurricane, “many Abaconians were forced to migrate to Nassau in search of work”[77]. Those who stayed had to be extraordinarily resilient and resourceful, essentially returning to a **subsistence lifestyle**. Families survived through a patchwork of activities: **fishing, farming, and traditional crafts**. They planted what food crops they could (corn, peas, potatoes, cassava) in backyard plots. Some grew **sugarcane** which they processed into molasses or locally distilled rum. They harvested thatch palms to braid into straw, making baskets and hats for sale – part of the Out Island “straw work” cottage industry that particularly engaged women[78]. Men dove for conchs and sponges (though the sponge industry was still recovering from the blight). In one brief and curious venture, Green Turtle Cay even had a **shark fishing industry** in the 1930s – fishermen hunted sharks for their skins (used as leather) and their livers (rich in Vitamin A, for vitamin oil)[79]. This provided a handful of jobs for a time[79]. Such endeavors, though small, underscore how Abaconians “cobbled together a living through subsistence” in those lean years[78].

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#### 4B: Farming with salt spray: pineapple, citrus, and the practical science of Out Island agriculture

In Abaco, “agriculture” has rarely meant the deep, forgiving soils that temperate readers may imagine when they picture orchards and fields. It has meant wind that carries salt, sun that pulls moisture quickly from shallow ground, and limestone that tends to dissolve away rather than weather into rich earth. Across the Bahamian archipelago, soils are often thin and poorly developed, and their alkalinity can complicate plant water and nutrient uptake: one synthesis of Bahamian land constraints describes widespread “protosols” on limestone substrates and reports typical soil pH values in the alkaline range (about 7.5 to 8.5). Those constraints do not make farming impossible, but they shape what “practical science” looks like in the Out Islands. Farming becomes a craft of placement, protection, and water capture, and it becomes an economic story that hinges on whether the boat arrives on time, whether fruit survives the trip, and whether distant markets change the rules.

By the late nineteenth century, Abaco’s communities were already experienced in building livelihoods around ecological limits and maritime opportunity. As wrecking declined with improved charts and navigational aids, many Abaconians turned toward export crops that could tolerate sandy, calcareous settings if cultivated with care. In local historical reconstructions of Abaco’s economy, pineapple farming is

described as taking off in the 1870s and 1880s, with Abaco fruit exported to the United States, and citrus orchards producing oranges and grapefruit for export as well. The shift should be read as an adaptive strategy as much as an “agricultural revolution.” It relied on the same seaborne networks and small-boat expertise that earlier supported wrecking, sponging, and trade. It also relied on households’ ability to split labor across sea and land, and to treat farming as seasonal, opportunistic work rather than as a stable plantation regime.

That household scale matters when we ask what happened on places like Elbow Cay. The surviving record is uneven, but one locally compiled timeline grounded in administrative reporting makes a specific claim that helps discipline speculation: pineapple production in the Abaco region was broadly comparable to other northern settlements, yet pineapples were generally not grown commercially on the cays themselves. Instead, residents from cays such as Elbow Cay traveled to the Abaco “mainland” to tend fields, then returned home. If that description is accurate, it suggests a pattern closer to dispersed smallholder plots and commuter agriculture than to plantation-style monoculture on the cay. The logic is straightforward: the cays offered harbors, boatbuilding sites, and maritime access, while Great Abaco offered more continuous land where pockets of soil, pine woodland, and coppice could support larger cultivated patches.

The “science” of this system begins with finding soil in a limestone world. A useful reminder comes from scholarship on older Bahamian practices: pothole farming, attributed to Lucayan innovation and still documented in parts of the Bahamas, exploits karst bedrock by planting in small pockets where ash and soil accumulate after burning vegetation. Late nineteenth-century Abaco farmers were not necessarily practicing pothole farming in a strict sense, yet the principle is the same across many calcareous islands: cultivation concentrates in micro-sites where organic matter collects and moisture persists slightly longer. On Great Abaco, those microsites could occur along the edges of coppice, in swales behind dunes, or in low-lying areas where windblown material and leaf litter built a thin but workable layer. The system rewards close observation, incremental clearing, and repeated amendment rather than wholesale transformation.

Water is the second constraint, and it ties directly to shipping, credit, and migration. Fresh groundwater on small carbonate islands often exists as a vulnerable freshwater lens, and in many Out Island settlements domestic supply historically depended on rain capture. An OAS technical overview of Caribbean small-island water systems notes that rooftop catchments and cistern storage have been central to household water supply for more than three centuries. This matters for pineapple and citrus because reliable watering is less a question of irrigation infrastructure than of household storage, rainfall timing, and labor. A productive season can be undone by a dry spell that empties cisterns, or by a hurricane that contaminates catchments with saltwater and debris. Where water is limited, planting layouts and crop choice become water policy in miniature: gardeners cluster plantings near catchment-fed homesteads, prioritize drought-tolerant crops, and treat trees as long-term investments that must survive lean years.

Salt spray, meanwhile, shapes field placement and the need for wind protection. The historical record for Abaco does not always spell out “windbreak design” in modern agronomic terms, yet the landscape itself supplies the likely toolkit. Farmers could site fields and orchards on the leeward side of ridges, behind coppice margins, or farther inland where salt aerosols weaken. These choices can be framed as inference from constraint rather than as directly documented practice. The need is clear, even when the technique is not described in a surviving report: salt-laden winds desiccate leaves, scar fruit, and shorten the productive life of exposed citrus. Where vegetation buffers existed, they served as living infrastructure, reducing wind speed and trapping salt before it reached the crop canopy. Such protective siting is one reason agriculture and settlement patterns often align, with homes and gardens nestled where the land breaks the wind and where cisterns can be maintained.

Pineapple fits these conditions better than many crops, which helps explain why it became a signature export in the northern Bahamas. A contemporary overview of Bahamian agricultural history notes pineapple cultivation expanding in the nineteenth century, tied to North Atlantic markets for tropical produce, and then declining in the early twentieth century under shifting tariffs and competition. Abaco histories echo that arc, describing pineapple exports during the late nineteenth-century boom and then a

falloff as soil fertility declined and competing producers expanded in Florida and the wider region. Here, “soil depletion” should not be read as a moral failing or ignorance. Thin soils have limited nutrient reserves, and repeated cultivation without sufficient organic inputs can exhaust productivity quickly. Farmers responded with the tools available, which likely included adding organic matter when possible and rotating or abandoning worn patches, yet the system’s vulnerability remained: once distant markets could source pineapples more cheaply or reliably, Abaco’s margin narrowed.

Varietal detail illustrates both what we know and what remains frustratingly hard to pin down for Abaco specifically. Local narrative accounts often describe Abaco pineapples as “sweet and small,” emphasizing quality and character rather than cultivar names. In Caribbean horticultural literature, cultivars such as Red Spanish are documented and studied for post-harvest behavior, which helps explain why packing and shipping practices mattered so much to island producers. Still, without a clear Abaco-specific planting record that names varieties in the late nineteenth century, the responsible move is to treat cultivar identification as a research question rather than a settled fact. What can be said with more confidence is that fruit quality was inseparable from handling. The Abaco economy depended on whether pineapples could be harvested at the right maturity, cushioned against bruising, and delivered fast enough to avoid spoilage, all within the constraints of schooner schedules and weather.

Citrus tells a complementary story because it anchors people to place and time. Orchards require years of care before they yield, and in thin, alkaline soils that care includes persistent attention to water and nutrients. Abaco accounts highlight oranges and grapefruit as export products, and regional timelines also mention shipments of grapefruit, lemons, and limes moving to Florida markets. That Florida connection is more than geography: it is a political economy. When Hope Town was designated a Port of Entry in the late nineteenth century, the designation was linked in part to produce exports, revealing how agricultural expansion could reshape administrative importance and maritime routines. Citrus thus becomes a way to see the Out Island economy as both agricultural and intensely maritime, and to understand why boom and bust translated into migration. When markets tightened and yields fell, households that had invested years into orchards could find themselves with sunk costs, fewer local alternatives, and strong incentives to seek wage labor abroad.

This bridge between centuries therefore belongs in the same breath as Abaco’s early twentieth-century “experiments” with new industries. Agriculture’s late nineteenth-century boom created expectations of cash income and export relevance. Its decline exposed the structural fragility of island farming under thin soils, limited freshwater, and market dependence. In that light, the move toward new wage work, the attraction of Florida’s expanding economy, and the willingness to entertain outside investment in ventures like timber should be read as part of one continuous story: the search for livelihoods that could survive the constraints of limestone, wind, and distance.

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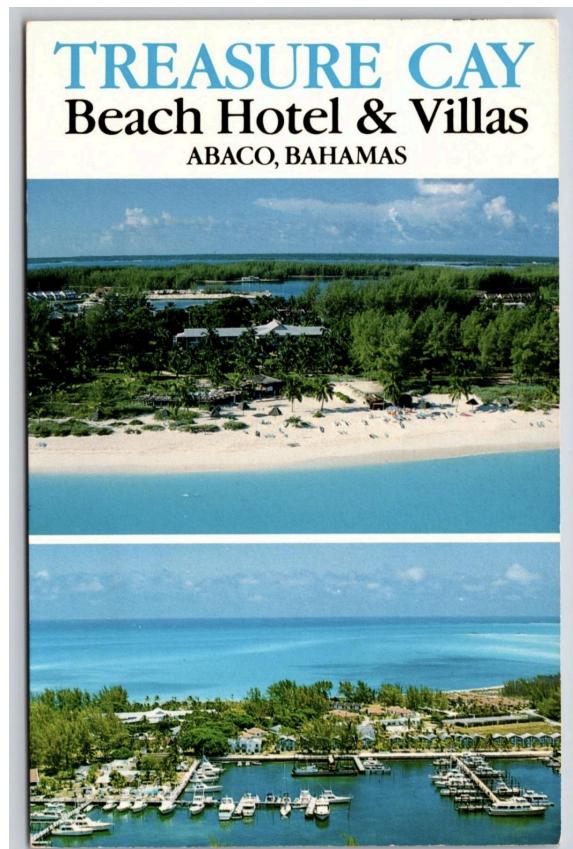
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Not all was stagnation, however. Amid the hardship, the seeds of **tourism** were quietly being planted. The Bahamas’ tourism sector in the early 20th century was mostly

confined to Nassau, where steamships brought winter visitors. But after World War I and into the 1930s, a trickle of adventurous American and Canadian travelers began to “discover” Abaco. Yachtsmen on cruises, sport fishermen seeking record catches, and a few intrepid vacationers were drawn by Abaco’s unspoiled cays, abundant fish, and quaint villages. Oral histories mention that by the late **1930s** a handful of North Americans had bought winter homes on Abaco or established fishing camps[80]. This was very limited – Abaco had no hotels to speak of then, and access was only by mailboat or seaplane. But it was a harbinger of change.

A significant development came in **1945**, just after World War II: with the war’s end, there was pent-up demand for leisure travel. The era of the “**Out Island**” tourism began. The Bahamian government and enterprising individuals started promoting outlying islands for sport fishing and relaxing getaways. Abaco benefited from this trend in the late 1940s and 1950s. Small **fishing lodges and guesthouses** opened. Visitors from Florida could fly in on newly established flights as aviation improved. One pivotal infrastructure upgrade was the **construction of an airstrip at Marsh Harbour in 1958**[81], which vastly improved accessibility. Additionally, the founding of **Albury’s Ferry service in 1959** made it easier for travelers to hop between Marsh Harbour and the offshore cays like Hope Town and Man-O-War[81].

By the **1960s**, tourism to Abaco was gathering pace. The decade saw the development of the **Treasure Cay Resort (c. 1968)** on Great Abaco – a modern marina, golf course, and beachfront hotel largely financed by American investors[82]. Treasure Cay even got its own airport (opened in 1968) and quickly became an “Americanized” enclave distinct from traditional settlements[83][84]. Meanwhile, modest resorts or clubs sprang up at Green Turtle Cay and other locales. Hope Town, still a sleepy village (electricity would only arrive there in 1975[85]), nonetheless saw cruisers and yachts anchoring in its harbor, charmed by the **Loyalist architecture** and the famous kerosene lighthouse. Tourism was on its way to becoming Abaco’s **economic mainstay**, something unimaginable a generation earlier[86].



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#### 4C. Overlooked settlements across Abaco: Cooper’s Town, Cherokee Sound, Sandy Point, Little Harbour, and smaller cays

If Hope Town reads as Abaco's postcard harbor, the wider archipelago reads more like a stitched network of working places. Settlements did not appear at random. They clustered where a few advantages overlapped: a landing you could trust in most weather, water routes that connected you to mailboats and markets, soils or timber that could feed a household economy, and enough rain-catchment potential to survive dry spells. Even within the Loyalist-era founding generation, people learned quickly that the low mainland could trap "still and humid" air and mosquitoes, while the cays offered breezes that changed daily comfort and, over time, the geography of churches, schools, and trade.

That logic is easier to see if you read Abaco as a constellation, with each community oriented toward a particular slice of water and a particular problem of making a living. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are especially revealing: maritime labor remained central, yet people increasingly leaned on mixed livelihoods and place-specific infrastructure, from long docks that solved shallow-water access to schools and churches that stabilized community life through cycles of boom, bust, and storm.

### **Cooper's Town: a northward service port built on crossings and cash crops**

Cooper's Town sits in North Abaco, a position that makes sense when you remember how often Abaconians had to think in terms of crossings. North Abaco is closer to routes that link Great Abaco to nearby islands and to the wider corridor of Bahamian and Florida-bound traffic. In the late nineteenth century, Cooper's Town is generally described as a comparatively late settlement, often dated to the 1870s, associated with the Bootle family, and shaped early by a mix of small-scale pineapple growing and sea-sponge harvesting rather than by a single deepwater harbor economy. The fact that the town developed without "a natural harbour" in some accounts is part of the point: where protected anchorages were scarce, north-side communities learned to substitute road spines, landing places, and inter-island sailing skill for the kind of sheltered port geography that made Hope Town or Marsh Harbour obvious nodes.

By the time Abaco's economy begins to tilt toward the twentieth century, Cooper's Town also reads as an administrative and schooling center for the north, the kind of place where government services, clinics, and secondary education consolidate because families need predictable institutions as much as they need fish and freight. The town's later role as a service center helps explain why it continues to matter even when the industries that supported earlier out-island cash booms, including pineapples and sponging in parts of the Bahamas, waxed and waned.

### **Cherokee Sound: shallow banks, deep skill, and the infrastructure of a long dock**

Cherokee Sound, on South Abaco, highlights a different settlement logic. Public-facing histories consistently place its origins in the Loyalist period, with settlement commonly dated to the 1790s and linked to Loyalists who moved through Florida and the Carolinas before consolidating in the northern Bahamas. This matters in a constellation chapter because it shows how Abaco's "later" communities still rest on the same older scaffold of maritime adaptation: small harbors, shoal-protected waters, and travel competence that made it possible to live at some distance from the better-known ports.

Cherokee Sound's most legible historical artifact is also one of its most practical: the unusually long wooden dock that reaches out over shallow water. Even without a single dramatic event to pin it to, that structure is an argument about coastal geography. South Abaco's flats are ecologically productive but navigationally restrictive, and a long dock becomes a translation device between a shallow shelf and a trading world that expects loads to move efficiently. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when maritime economies depended on moving fish, provisions, timber, mail, and people, infrastructure like this helped a small settlement remain connected without needing a naturally deep basin.

### **Sandy Point: founded late, oriented west, held together by institutions**

Sandy Point's story is valuable because it is comparatively well anchored in named founders and a clear "why here" geography. Reporting in *The Abaconian* describes Sandy Point as founded around 1870 by Caroline and James Lightbourn, with John Dames, after the Lightbourns moved from Cherokee Sound. That is a classic Abaco move: a family relocates within the same island system to match livelihood to landscape. Sandy Point sits at Great Abaco's southwestern end, with an orientation toward bank waters and routes that historically linked Abaco to the smaller western islands and to Nassau via inter-island shipping. The western side's shallower seas can look like a constraint on a chart, yet for working boatmen it also offered shelter, familiar passages, and fishing grounds that supported household economies.

Sandy Point also gives you unusually specific evidence for the institutions that made out-island life durable. The same *Abaconian* account notes two prominent churches, St. Martin's Anglican and Mount Zion Baptist, and points to schooling as part of the village's public identity, including a primary school associated with local leadership. That denominational and schooling infrastructure is not mere background texture. It is one way a settlement turns maritime labor into community cohesion, with church calendars, school terms, and shared events helping households coordinate in a place where supply boats and weather dictate the rhythm of life.

The Sandy Point story also illustrates how hurricanes repeatedly reorganize community space. In the same account, Hurricane Floyd in 1999 is described as destroying the picnic grounds that had long anchored local gathering, a reminder that festivals and "social infrastructure" are also coastal infrastructure, vulnerable to surge and wind. Sandy Point offers an earlier, well-documented example of how storms push communities to rebuild the physical stages on which social life happens.

A final connective thread is maritime labor as mobility. White Sound Press's *Island Captain: The Memoirs of Ernest Dean* emphasizes that Dean, from Sandy Point, built a life around inter-island seamanship and mailboat work, including childhood journeys to learn basic literacy under difficult conditions. Even at the level of a brief bibliographic note, the implication fits a general theme: as wrecking declines and maritime opportunity shifts, the same skill set that once made a living off reefs and salvage can reappear as transport, mail, and inter-island service work, with education and institutions slowly tightening the weave.

### **Little Harbour: a mid-century outlier that previews cultural tourism**

Little Harbour belongs in this constellation because it breaks the expected timeline. Official tourism and heritage descriptions credit Randolph Johnston and his wife Margot with settling at Little Harbour in 1951, after which the protected cove became associated with an artist's compound and a working bronze foundry, later entwined with visitor culture. Placed against the nineteenth-century maritime economy, Little Harbour shows the continuity beneath change: the same features that mattered to wreckers and boatmen, namely shelter, anchorable water, and access by small craft, later become the preconditions for an experience economy. It is a shift in what is "exported," from fish, sponges, or pineapples to art, dining, and a sense of place, yet the geographic logic is older than the tourism chapter that eventually claims it.

### **Smaller cays and their role in Abaco identity: Man-O-War Cay and Great Guana Cay**

The smaller cays sharpen the Abaco story because they compress risk and identity into narrow strips of land. Man-O-War Cay's heritage timeline offers unusually granular anchors: settlement dated to 1798, a named founding family network, the establishment of an Anglican church in 1833, and schooling that begins in the late nineteenth century and becomes a dedicated school building in the early twentieth. This is exactly the kind of evidence that shows how "community cohesion" was built, one institution at a time, in a place where boatbuilding and maritime skill became more than an occupation. They became a civic brand, reinforced by churches, schoolhouses, and the practical necessity of mutual reliance through storms and hard seasons.

Great Guana Cay, by contrast, is a strong case study in how tourism and development reshape a community's sense of control over land. In the late eighteenth century, as Loyalist settlers abandoned the ill-fated mainland settlement of Carleton and sought cooler breezes and fewer insects on the barrier cays, families began relocating to what would become Guana Cay alongside other Abaco cay settlements, a move that anchored habitation around Guana Harbour's protected leeward landing and the working seascape of reef-and-bank fisheries (Abaco Sun). By the early 2000s, before the Baker's Bay purchase and buildout, the settlement remained small in population terms: the Privy Council record describes 153 full-time residents at the start of 2004, most engaged in fishing and crabbing, living in and around the mid-cay settlement that already supported a modest, fast-growing tourism economy and the local-government responsibilities of the Hope Town District created in 1999 (Save Guana Cay Reef Association Ltd. v. The Queen and Others 3–5). The *Abaconian*'s coverage of the early 2000s Baker's Bay dispute documents local protest and legal action associated with the Save the Guana Cay Reef Association, with arguments centered on consultation, environmental risk, and government authority in development agreements (Hudson 1). In the arc of this book, Guana is where the constellation of islands leans forward into the politics of the tourism era: a small settlement's identity is no longer defined only by fishing, boat work, and intermarriage, it is also defined by land value, permitting, and the terms on which the cay's landscapes become "assets" for outside capital.

### Closing the constellation

Read together, these places make the transition from the wrecking era into the twentieth century feel less like a single storyline and more like a set of linked adaptations. Cooper's Town shows how a late-founded north-side community could still become durable by aligning itself with crossings, cash crops, and public services. Cherokee Sound shows how a Loyalist-rooted harbor community solved the shallow-water problem with infrastructure and maritime work. Sandy Point shows how a west-facing settlement founded around 1870 held itself together through churches, schooling, and shared events that had to be rebuilt after storms. Little Harbour previews cultural tourism while remaining grounded in an old Abaco fact: protected anchorages make new economies possible. Man-O-War Cay demonstrates how craft identity is institutionalized over generations. Great Guana Cay shows how the tourism era turns land, reefs, and permitting into a civic battleground.

That is the constellation's historical payoff. Abaco's communities are distinct, yet they speak to one another through shared surnames, shared sea lanes, shared churches and schools, and shared exposure to hurricanes. The nineteenth-century maritime economy produced skills and networks that could be redirected, into mailboats, agriculture, wage work, or tourism. When you place these settlements beside Hope Town's more familiar arc, the Abacos read less like a single town with satellites and more like an archipelago of neighborhoods, each with its own founding logic, its own institutions, and its own way of negotiating the same questions: how to live with reefs, shallows, storms, and distance.

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Before we delve further into the tourism boom and political changes of the later 20th century, a final note on **World War II** and the early 1940s: Abaco, like the rest of the Bahamas, was largely a bystander in WWII, though the war did indirectly benefit the islands economically (through increased demand for Bahamian salt, sponges, etc., and Nassau hosting Allied air bases). Abaco itself had no military installations, but some Abaconian men enlisted in the Caribbean Regiment or British units. Also of note, during the war a few **German U-boats** prowled Bahamian waters; in 1942 a U-boat infamously sank a tanker off Abaco's coast. While there was **no major combat** in Abaco, islanders on Elbow Cay recall the shock of a **torpedoed freighter** that drifted offshore during WWII, a story preserved in the Wyannie Malone Museum[87]. These events were footnotes in Abaco's history, yet they contributed to the sense of entering a modern, globally connected era.

Thus, by **1945**, Abaco was poised at a turning point. The population was still relatively small and traditional, but critical foundations had been laid: an airfield, budding tourism interest, and the end of its long isolation. In the next chapter, we will explore how Abaco navigated the profound transformations of the mid to late 20th century – an era that brought prosperity through tourism, but also political tumult as the Bahamas moved to independence and Abaco briefly balked at that change.

# Chapter 5: The Era of Tourism and Political Change (1945–1990)

In the decades after World War II, the Abaco Islands underwent rapid evolution, driven by two powerful forces: the **rise of tourism** and the **sweeping political changes** in the Bahamas. From the 1950s onward, Abaco transitioned from a remote backwater to a beloved destination for boaters and second-home owners, fundamentally altering its economy and society. At the same time, the march toward Bahamian independence in the 1960s–70s brought Abaco into national politics in an unprecedented way – even spurring a short-lived separatist movement. This chapter examines those intertwining threads from the post-war era through the late 20th century.

## 5.1 *The Tourism Boom Transforms Abaco*

By the mid-20th century, improvements in transportation meant that Abaco was no longer days away from Nassau or Florida – it was hours. In 1959, the **Marsh Harbour Airport** opened (later upgraded to international status), allowing regular flights from Nassau and Miami[3]. With that, tourist access vastly improved. Small **hotels, marinas, and clubs** sprang up to cater to anglers, sailors, and sun-seekers. One early example was the **Out Island Inn** at Marsh Harbour, which welcomed sport fishermen in the 1950s. In the **1960s**, major projects took shape. The **Treasure Cay Hotel and Golf Resort** on Great Abaco was built by American developers and opened towards the end of the 60s, featuring a marina and one of the Bahamas' finest beaches[82]. It essentially created a new resort town (Treasure Cay) out of scratch, with modern amenities that felt very foreign to native Abaconians[83][88]. Meanwhile, on Elbow Cay, the Abaco Inn and Hope Town Harbour Lodge began attracting visitors to the charms of Hope Town. **Donnie's Boat Rentals**, **Albury's Ferry**, and charter yacht companies blossomed to serve the boating crowd. The Abaco “**sailing capital**” reputation grew: cruising guides touted the Sea of Abaco – the calm, protected lagoon between Great Abaco and the barrier cays – as a paradise for yachts. Indeed, by the 1970s and 1980s, **yacht tourism** became a cornerstone of Abaco's economy, filling harbors with sailboats and giving rise to businesses from boatyards to beachfront restaurants. A travel writer in the 1980s observed that Abaco had become “a favorite off-the-beaten-path tourist spot, especially for boat owners,” thanks to its beautiful waters and islands[89].

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### 5A: Vernon Malone's Grocery and the Upper Crust Bakery: provision, memory, and continuity in Hope Town

In Hope Town, “the grocery” is less a retail category than a social form. The settlement's scale and layout, a tight grid of lanes tucked behind a protected harbor, makes everyday exchange conspicuously public. A line at a counter becomes a cross section of island life: year-round residents timing errands around work, second-home owners stocking up for a week, and visiting crews provisioning for the next leg across the banks. Over time, repeated transactions in the same small room can harden into an institution, a place where practical needs are met while community knowledge is quietly produced and circulated. Accounts of Vernon Malone's *Vernon's Grocery* and its attached *Upper Crust Bakery* describe exactly this kind of

institution, one that visitors often approach as a “must-stop” and locals recognize as part of the settlement’s working infrastructure.

The documented public profile of Vernon Malone is unusually dense for an Out Island shopkeeper, which helps explain why the store can carry so much symbolic weight without losing its utilitarian character. Local historical material and community reporting describe Malone as a seventh-generation descendant of Wyannie Malone, associated with the Loyalist founding of Hope Town, and as a lay preacher at St. James’ Methodist Church. His civic presence extends beyond church life. The Wyannie Malone Historical Museum’s own institutional history records that in 1977, the museum idea was brought forward to the community by a small group that included Vernon Malone, before the museum opened to visitors later that year. This matters for a tourism-era chapter because heritage work, guided interpretation, and the everyday labor of keeping a settlement legible to outsiders often sit on the same small set of shoulders. In Hope Town, the same name appears in the museum’s founding narrative and in the commerce of daily provisioning.

The bakery’s reputation also folds Vernon’s store into the sensory memory of Abaco tourism. Abaco Sun describes Malone as proprietor of Vernon’s Grocery and the Upper Crust Bakery, known for “legendarily good bread and key lime pies,” along with the hand-written signs that entertain customers while they wait. A separate Abaco Buzz item, written around the time of his 900th wedding ceremony, presents the same overlap of roles: storekeeper, minister, and marriage officer, with the quoted line, “All weddings are special and unique in their own way.” Tourism writing amplifies these features because they translate easily into a visitor’s story, yet they also signal something structurally real: when formal services are limited, community capacity concentrates in people who can do multiple kinds of work reliably.

What, materially, does the store do across the tourism era? At the most basic level it supplies staples and perishable items that are costly to import and easy to run short on, with published visitor guides noting groceries, milk, and fresh produce alongside baked goods. It also functions as a provisioning node for maritime tourism. A boating magazine piece frames Vernon’s as a place for “specialty galley provisioning,” advising cruisers to call ahead, and even noting contact by VHF, a detail that situates the shop within the communications practices of small-craft travel in Abaco. This is an economic geography story in miniature: as Abaco’s mid-century infrastructure expanded, with air access and regular ferry links noted in the Hope Town museum’s timeline, the provisioning of cays became more regular and more exposed to visitor demand patterns. The store’s “flexible” hours, as described in contemporary local listings, read as charming to tourists, yet they also track the realities of staffing, supply arrivals, weather, and the fact that one person’s labor can be the limiting factor in an island service economy.

A longer-arc timeline is harder to reconstruct cleanly, which is itself instructive. Small businesses in the Out Islands often leave light archival footprints unless they intersect with formal institutions or outside media. In this case, the trace appears episodically: institutional memory in the museum narrative beginning in the late 1970s, periodic travel accounts that treat the shop as a fixed landmark by the early twenty-first century, and community reporting that documents how shocks reorder daily life. Within that documentary pattern, certain continuities are clear and sourceable: the bakery products, the store’s role in provisioning, and the signage as a recognizable feature of the shopping experience. Other continuities, such as how credit and informal exchange operated, should be handled as oral-history questions rather than asserted facts in the absence of direct testimony. In many small settlements, shop credit, reciprocal favors, and information exchange are part of how households manage thin margins and seasonal income. In Hope Town, it is reasonable to treat the store as a likely venue for such practices, then let interviews confirm, complicate, or reject that expectation.

The strongest evidence for the store as an institution of continuity comes from disruption, especially Hurricane Dorian in 2019. Abaco Sun reports that Vernon and Bobbie Malone survived the storm by sheltering in the bakery, lost their home, moved repeatedly afterward, and that community rebuilding efforts supported reconstruction, while also noting that Vernon returned within months to patch the bakery and resume baking. Here, the store is more than a commercial site. It becomes a signal that the settlement’s basic routines can restart: bread returns, the counter opens, the familiar signs reappear, and

a place for everyday coordination exists again. That is how an institution behaves in a small community: it absorbs shock, then provides a platform for the return of ordinary life.

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Traditional industries receded further as tourism expanded. For instance, boat-building – once vital – nearly vanished by the 1970s with the advent of fiberglass boats (though Man-O-War Cay's craftsmen continued to hand-build wooden skiffs for a niche market)[89][90]. Fishing remained important, but increasingly for guiding sport fishermen (bonefishing flats, deep-sea fishing) rather than subsistence. Many locals found employment in construction (building vacation homes), hospitality, and guiding services. Throughout the 1980s, Abaco's economy grew robustly on tourism dollars, especially from the United States. This period saw the population of Marsh Harbour and the cays rise again after the earlier decline – evidence of economic opportunity. By 1990, Marsh Harbour had paved roads, banks, grocery stores, and a busy port, far removed from the one-street village it had been mid-century[91]. Hope Town, while still quaint and largely car-free, also benefitted from a real estate boom: those old Loyalist cottages, once humble abodes, became sought-after vacation properties and inns (their pastel-painted, white-trimmed style celebrated as "Loyalist architecture" and preserved by local efforts)[46]. Abaco's natural and cultural heritage – the very history that had made it different – was now an **asset** to draw visitors. The candy-striped **Elbow Reef Lighthouse** in Hope Town, for example, went from being resented as a wrecker's nemesis in the 1800s to beloved as a tourist attraction and national icon on the Bahamian \$10 bill[92]. In fact, locals fought to keep the 1863 lighthouse functioning in its original kerosene, hand-cranked form when authorities considered automating it – and they succeeded, preserving it as one of the last such lighthouses in the world[93][94]. This ethos of **heritage preservation** paralleled the tourism rise: by the 1970s, communities established museums (the **Albert Lowe Museum** in Green Turtle Cay opened in 1976 as The Bahamas' first historical museum[95], and the Wyannie Malone Museum in Hope Town followed in 1978) to celebrate Abaco's Loyalist and maritime past. Festivals like Man-O-War's "**Sojer Day**" and Green Turtle Cay's "**Island Roots Heritage Festival**" began to celebrate local history and culture[96][97].

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### 5B. The Cultural Afterlife of the Hope Town Lighthouse, from Seemark to Symbol

A useful way to begin Abaco's tourism story is to "read" the Hope Town lighthouse as both an engineered object and a public argument. In the nineteenth century, a lighthouse was a state-backed technology of

navigational safety: it reduced risk, stabilized trade routes, and shifted who benefited from maritime hazard. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the same structure became an image that visitors came to collect, circulate, and perform, a landmark that increasingly stood for Abaco in the national imaginary. That transition, from seamark to symbol, did not happen automatically. It emerged through conflict over wrecking and salvage, later through the politics of preservation, and finally through the way tourism remade “authenticity” into an economic resource and a cultural standard.

The Elbow Reef Lighthouse was built in 1863 as part of a broader British effort to reduce wrecks across Bahamian waters, which were notorious for reefs, shallow banks, and sudden weather shifts. In Abaco’s maritime economy, however, shipwrecks also meant work. Salvage and wrecking could provide income, materials, and trade goods, and local communities had strong incentives to maintain the older moral economy of hazard. The British lighthouse program, by design, changed that balance. In Hope Town and elsewhere, there are long-running accounts of early resistance to the lighthouse precisely because safer navigation threatened livelihoods connected to wrecking. Local historical interpretation keeps the memory of that resistance vivid, including narratives of sabotage, refusal of water, and direct obstruction of construction and maintenance efforts. Whether every episode can be pinned to a single archival record, the pattern matters: from the outset the lighthouse sat at the boundary between local maritime practice and external authority, where “safety” and “livelihood” could point in different directions.

Tourism later flipped the terms of that older dispute. What had been resented as an economic threat gradually became a visual and experiential asset. The Bahamas’ own destination marketing now frames Hope Town’s lighthouse as a defining landmark, widely recognized in images of the Out Islands and central to how visitors are taught to “see” Elbow Cay. The same features that once signaled institutional intrusion, its visibility, its regularity, its insistence on guiding traffic away from reefs, became the basis for a tourist encounter: climb the stairs, read the view, photograph the stripes, buy the postcard. In that transition, the lighthouse becomes a kind of infrastructure for perception. It organizes the harbor and reefscape into an interpretable scene and supplies a durable icon that can travel outward through brochures, cruising guides, and social media.

Preservation politics sharpened that symbolic role. In the era when automated lights could replace staffed stations, Hope Town’s lighthouse became a site where “modernization” was debated as a cultural and economic choice, not simply an engineering upgrade. Local and heritage accounts emphasize that residents resisted automation and sought to keep the lighthouse operating in its traditional form, with manual systems and historic practice treated as part of the site’s meaning. This has continuously been a conscious community effort: the lighthouse shifted from a nineteenth-century nemesis of wreckers into a beloved tourism draw and even a national icon, with locals fighting to retain traditional operation when automation was considered. The Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society’s own institutional history provides a concrete mechanism for how this kind of preservation became possible, describing a preservation group formed to keep the station running and, later, a reorganization that supported restoration, maintenance, and public access, including post-disaster repair work. In other words, Abaco’s tourism-era lighthouse is also an organizational project: it requires governance, fundraising, volunteer labor, and negotiated authority over what counts as legitimate change.

National symbolism reinforces this local dynamic. Several heritage accounts note that the lighthouse has been treated as a Bahamian emblem, including its appearance on the Bahamian ten-dollar note, a striking instance of an Out Island structure becoming a national sign. That move matters for Abaco’s political-cultural position within The Bahamas: it suggests a national willingness to represent “Bahamian identity” through an Abaco landmark, even as economic power and administrative centrality have often been concentrated elsewhere. The lighthouse, in that sense, becomes both a



tourist brand and a symbolic claim: Abaco is not peripheral to the nation's story, it is one of the images through which the nation explains itself.

The lighthouse's afterlife also extends into popular literature and music, which is where visitor expectations can become especially sticky. Jimmy Buffett's *A Salty Piece of Land* is a useful case study because it turns a functional lighthouse into a plot engine and a moral object. In reviews and synopses aimed at general readers, the novel is described as centering on a fictional island, a lighthouse, and a restoration effort entangled with questions of community, belonging, and stewardship. For a tourism history, the key point is not whether the novel is "about" Hope Town in a documentary sense. The key point is how the novel participates in a broader cultural pattern: it trains an audience to treat a lighthouse as a vessel of authenticity and local meaning, then invites them to go looking for the real-world place where that feeling can be purchased as experience. In that way, the lighthouse becomes a bridge between narrative consumption and place consumption.

The Abaco link, however, needs careful handling, because it often enters as interpretation rather than explicit authorial claim. Abaco-focused travel writing sometimes suggests that the lighthouse in Buffett's novel is thought to be based on the Hope Town lighthouse, while presenting this as local inference rather than documented fact. That is a valuable data point for cultural history because it shows how communities and visitors actively map fiction onto geography, yet it should not be overstated. At the level of sourced documentation available in accessible interviews and promotional material, what is most defensible is a restrained conclusion: Buffett uses a fictionalized Bahamian setting and a lighthouse-centered storyline that resonates strongly with Abaco's real lighthouse heritage, and readers, tourism outlets, and local interpreters sometimes connect those dots, but the connection typically functions as an associative reading rather than a confirmed one-to-one identification. The distinction matters because it is precisely in that gap, between what is documented and what is popularly believed, that tourism narratives often gain their power.

Seen this way, the Hope Town lighthouse is a primer for the tourism chapter as a whole. It shows how Abaco's nineteenth-century maritime economy produced material heritage, how later technologies and policies created moments of potential loss, and how preservation turned "operational authenticity" into a community value and a visitor expectation at the same time. By the twenty-first century, to visit the lighthouse is to participate in layered histories of hazard and safety, local autonomy and national representation, and the ongoing work of deciding which changes count as improvement, which count as erasure, and who gets to make that call.

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In short, by the late 20th century, **tourism had replaced farming, fishing, and logging as the primary engine of Abaco's economy**[\[86\]](#). The Abacos became one of the more prosperous Family Island regions of the Bahamas, second perhaps only to Nassau and Freeport (Grand Bahama). Yet this new prosperity also had side effects – including environmental pressures from developments (one example in later years was the contentious *Baker's Bay Golf & Ocean Club* project on Great Guana Cay in the 2000s, which sparked a legal battle between developers and local environmentalists concerned about reef damage[\[98\]](#)[\[99\]](#)). But in the mid-20th-century context, most Abaconians welcomed growth. After generations of struggle, the steady jobs at resorts, the rental income from second-home owners, and the resurgence of population felt like a renaissance.

## *5.2 Abaco's Role in the Road to Independence*

Parallel to these economic changes was a period of significant political development for the Bahamas as a whole – developments in which the Abacos played a noteworthy and sometimes controversial part. In the 1950s and 60s, the political power in the Bahamas shifted. The majority-black Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) under Lynden O. Pindling rose to challenge the old guard (the British-aligned United Bahamian Party). In **1967**, the PLP won control of the Bahamian government, marking the “Black Majority Rule” moment after centuries of oligarchic governance. Pindling’s government steered the colony toward full **independence from Britain**, which was planned for 1973.

The prospect of independence was not universally embraced. Many in the white Bahamian minority, and some conservative blacks as well, feared the change – some out of concern for economic stability, others due to racial and political anxieties (Cold War-era fears that an independent Bahamas might turn socialist/communist were whispered by opponents). **Abaco, with its unique demographics and history, became the center of resistance to independence**. By 1970, Abaco’s population was still small (a few thousand) but relatively evenly split racially, and it had strong ties to Britain through its Loyalist heritage[\[100\]](#)[\[101\]](#). Many Abaco white residents (often called “Conchs” or “Loyalists”) were uneasy about Nassau’s rule under Pindling; even some black Abaconians worried about being neglected or exploited by the Nassau government. This sentiment gave rise to the **“Abaco Independence” movement** – essentially a secession movement – in the early 1970s.

In **1971**, when Prime Minister Pindling announced he would seek Bahamas independence, prominent Abaconians formed the **Greater Abaco Council** (GAC), a local political action group, to lobby for Abaco to remain British[\[102\]](#)[\[103\]](#). They petitioned Queen Elizabeth II, requesting that Abaco be allowed to become a “completely self-contained and fully self-supporting” Crown Colony if the rest of Bahamas went independent[\[102\]](#)[\[104\]](#). The British government in London, however, quickly **refused** to entertain any such partition of the Bahamas in 1971[\[104\]](#)[\[105\]](#). Still, the Abaco separatists persisted. Abaco’s two parliamentary seats in the 1972 general elections reflected the split: one PLP (pro-independence) and one opposition Free National Movement (anti-independence) were elected, showing the island was fairly divided in opinion[\[106\]](#)[\[107\]](#). As the Bahamas Independence Bill was being drafted in 1972–73, the GAC and their allies made a **last-ditch appeal in Britain**. In May 1973,

Errington Watkins, the MP for Marsh Harbour and a vocal independence opponent, delivered a petition signed by half of Abaco's voters to London<sup>[108][109]</sup>. A sympathetic British MP, **Ronald Bell**, even introduced an amendment in the House of Commons to **exclude Abaco from the Bahamas' independence** and retain it as a separate colony<sup>[108][110]</sup>. This proposal was debated – an extraordinary moment where Abaco's fate was discussed at Westminster – but it was ultimately **defeated in both the Commons and Lords** by June 1973<sup>[110][111]</sup>. Britain had no desire to fragment the Bahamas or maintain colonial fragments.

On **July 10, 1973**, The Bahamas became an independent nation, *including* the Abacos. But the story did not end there. In August 1973, just a month after independence, hardline Abaco secessionists formed a political party called the **Abaco Independence Movement (AIM)**<sup>[112][113]</sup>. AIM, led by Abaconians like **Chuck Hall** and **Bert Williams**, had the avowed goal of achieving **self-government for Abaco**, ideally as a sort of autonomous territory within a federation<sup>[114][115]</sup>. They garnered local support – reportedly around 1,000 members (nearly half the electorate) by mid-1974<sup>[116][117]</sup> – and even drew international attention. AIM reached out to American libertarians and wealthy backers, notably **Michael Oliver** of the Phoenix Foundation, who envisioned creating a free-market utopia in Abaco<sup>[118][119]</sup>. Oliver, a financier known for new-country projects, did provide some funding and a draft constitution for a "Commonwealth of Abaco"<sup>[120][118]</sup>. AIM published a newsletter, *The Abaco Independent*, articulating libertarian principles of limited government and individual freedom<sup>[112][113]</sup>. In early 1974, they even held a conference ("Prosperity '74") inviting international experts and a British supporter, Lord Belhaven, to discuss Abaco's economic potential as a separate entity<sup>[121][122]</sup>.

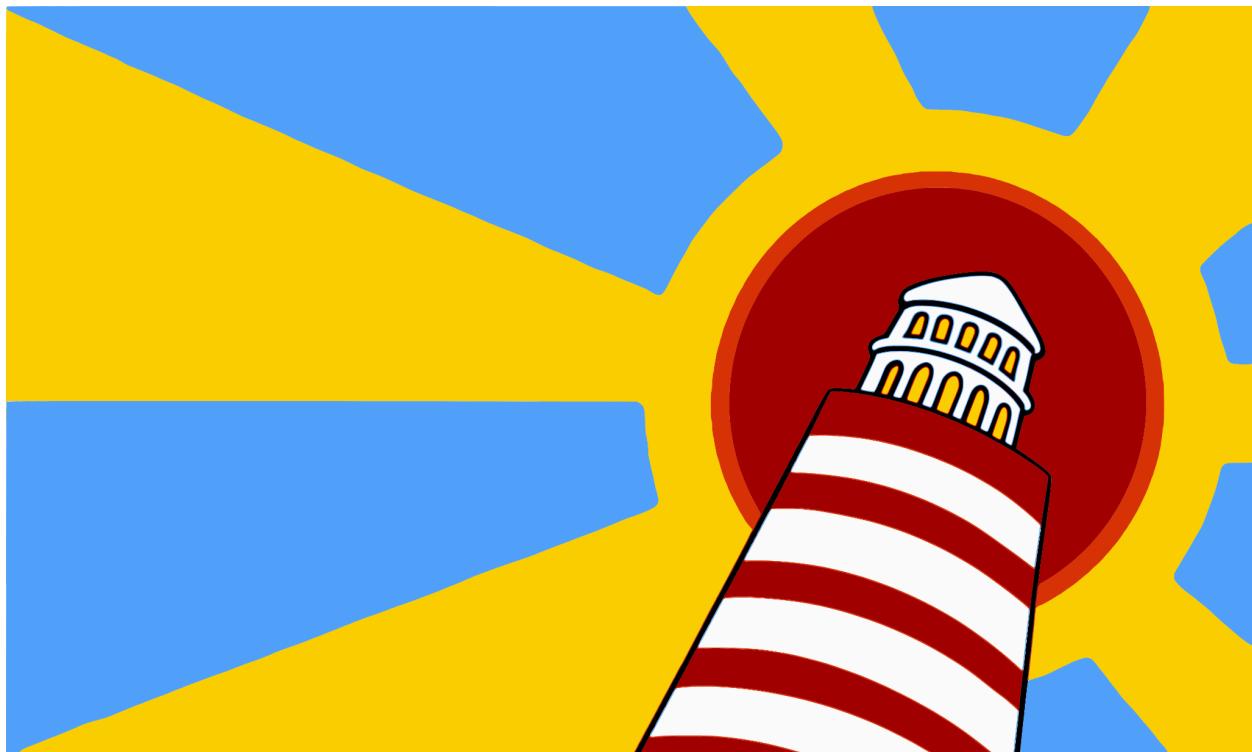
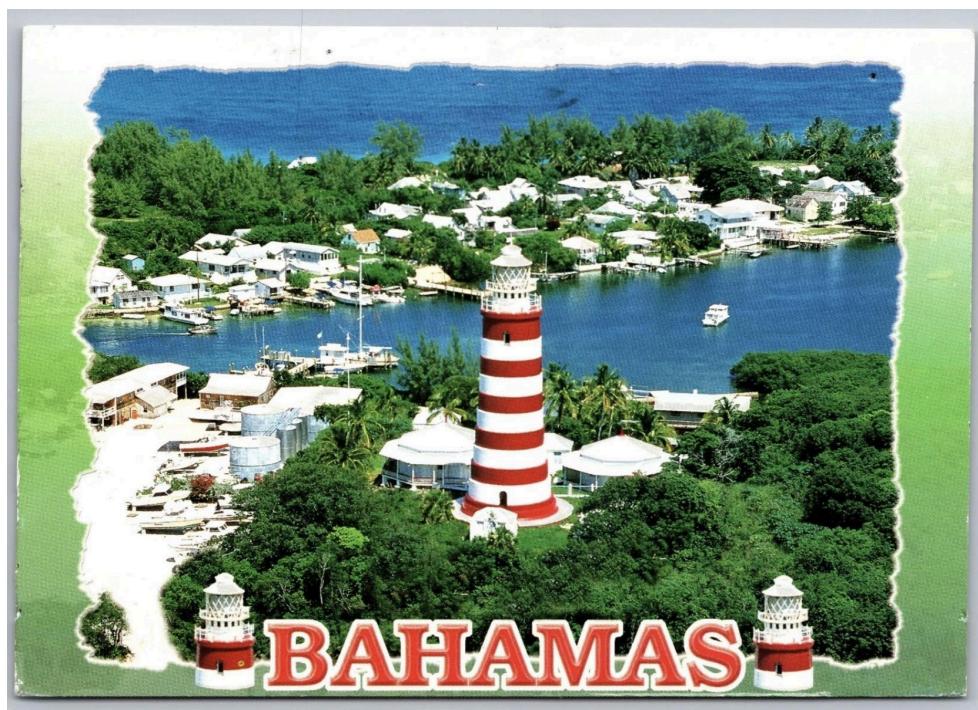


Figure: Redrafted Abaco Independence Movement party flag.

For a moment, it appeared as if a micro-nation might emerge. However, AIM overestimated its leverage. The Bahamian Prime Minister, Sir Lynden Pindling, took a hard line against any breakup. His government warned that separatism would be treated as treason. Moreover, AIM's credibility suffered when more extreme elements became involved – e.g., **Mitchell WerBell**, an American mercenary and arms dealer, who reportedly offered to raise a small private army to defend an independent Abaco<sup>[123][124]</sup>. This militant posturing alarmed many and undermined the movement's legitimacy at home and abroad. By 1975, the Bahamian government arrested some AIM proponents for incitement (though no serious uprising ever took place). **Ultimately, the Abaco Independence Movement fizzled out**, especially after the 1977 Bahamian general elections solidified PLP rule and no foreign power lent support<sup>[125]</sup>. Pindling's confident quip in 1973 that Abaco's rebellion was just "growing pains" of a new nation<sup>[126][127]</sup> proved apt. Abaco remained Bahamian.

In retrospect, the 1970s Abaco secession episode, while a curious footnote, highlighted the islands' special place in Bahamian political history. It was the only instance of overt separatist sentiment during independence. It also propelled some Abaconians into national politics. Notably, a young **Hubert Ingraham** of Abaco emerged in the late 1970s as a rising political figure (initially in the PLP (considered contemporarily a centre-left oriented party), later switching to the **Free National Movement** (FNM), considered a centre-right oriented party). Ingraham – born 1947, raised in Cooper's Town, North Abaco<sup>[128][129]</sup> – became an MP in 1977 and by 1990 led the FNM to victory, becoming **Prime Minister of The Bahamas** in 1992<sup>[130]</sup>. He was the first Bahamian Prime Minister from outside Nassau, symbolizing the integration of Out Island leadership at the highest level. Ingraham's tenure (1992–2002, and again 2007–2012) brought many developments to Abaco, including infrastructure upgrades. His rise from humble beginnings in Abaco to the nation's premiership is a point of pride for many Abaconians, and it underlines Abaco's contribution to the **national political landscape**<sup>[131]</sup>.

By the end of the 1980s, Abaco had settled into the Commonwealth of The Bahamas as an important district. Politically, it tended to support the FNM (Ingraham's party) which advocated development of the Family Islands (defined as all islands in the Bahamian archipelago not Nassau/New Providence, the "out islands"). Economically, Abaco was often cited as a Family Islands success story – it had a higher standard of living and more self-sufficiency than most other islands outside New Providence. The combination of an industrious local population, historical ties to an entrepreneurial Loyalist culture, and the influx of tourism and second-home owners yielded a relatively dynamic society. Yet challenges remained – many rooted in the very success Abaco was experiencing, as well as new social changes such as immigration. We now turn to the current era, examining how Abaco has fared in recent decades and the contemporary issues that define it in the 21st century.



*Figure: Hope Town scene on a postcard ca. 2001.*

# Chapter 6: Contemporary Abaco – Challenges and Resilience in the 21st Century

The story of Hope Town, Elbow Cay, and the Abaco Islands in the **21st century** is one of both **continuity and upheaval**. On one hand, the heritage of the past – the Loyalist flavor of the towns, the maritime lifestyle, and the tourism-driven economy – continues to shape daily life. On the other hand, recent decades have brought stark new challenges.

Environmental threats, particularly catastrophic hurricanes like **Hurricane Dorian** in 2019, have tested the community's resilience as never before. Meanwhile, social issues such as immigration and development vs. conservation have come to the forefront. This chapter examines the contemporary landscape of Abaco, neutrally discussing these current issues and the role of the Abacos in the broader context of The Bahamas today.



## 6.1 The Importance of Abaco in The Bahamas Today

With a population of around 17,000 by the 2010s (prior to Dorian) and a sizable contribution to the nation's tourism earnings, Abaco has solidified its place as one of the leading regions of The Bahamas outside the capital. Abaco's main town, Marsh Harbour, functions as a second-tier city in the country – it is often termed the “third largest city” of The Bahamas<sup>[132][133]</sup> (after Nassau and Freeport). The **Abacos are represented in Parliament** by multiple constituencies (North, Central, and South Abaco), and their voices have weight. Abaco's status was elevated symbolically by having produced Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham, and practically by ongoing government investments: new roads, a new international airport terminal (Marsh Harbour's Leonard M. Thompson Airport opened a modern facility in 2014), and public services expansions.

Economically, the Abacos play a pivotal role in **Bahamian tourism and fisheries**. Abaco remains a yachting mecca; its marinas at Marsh Harbour, Treasure Cay, and Boat Harbour are frequently filled with foreign-flagged vessels whose owners contribute to the local economy. Second-home communities (like Treasure Cay, Great Guana Cay's Baker's Bay, and others) attract high-net-worth individuals, expanding the property tax base and generating construction jobs. Abaco's fisheries (notably crawfish/lobster diving) also supply a significant portion of the Bahamas' export catch,

thanks to skilled Abaconian fishermen and the rich fishing grounds around the islands[134]. Culturally, Abaco has a distinct identity within the Bahamas – its blend of white and black Bahamian populations (roughly 14% white per the 2010 census, compared to under 5% nationally[135][136]) and its Loyalist-tinged traditions (from Junkanoo to regattas to church congregations) give it a character sometimes described as “friendly but independent-minded.” All these factors make Abaco important in the wider Bahamian tapestry.

Yet integration into the national fold has also brought **national issues to Abaco’s doorstep**. In the late 20th and early 21st century, The Bahamas has grappled with substantial **immigration**, particularly from Haiti. Abaco, with its jobs in farming, construction, and fishing, became a magnet for Haitian migrant workers. Over decades, several informal settlements – most famously **The Mudd** and **Pigeon Peas** on the outskirts of Marsh Harbour – grew into large shantytowns inhabited mainly by Haitian-Bahamians and undocumented Haitian immigrants. By the 2010s, these two communities housed perhaps a few thousand people living in very poor, dense conditions (wooden shacks, no proper sanitation). They were controversial within Abaco – on one hand supplying much-needed labor to Abaco’s economy, on the other hand existing outside of the regulated housing and infrastructure systems, and stoking social tensions and prejudice (anti-Haitian sentiment has at times flared in Bahamian discourse). The vulnerability of these marginalized communities was tragically highlighted when **Hurricane Dorian** struck in 2019, as we shall detail shortly.

Abaco also finds itself at the center of the **development vs. environment** debate prominent in The Bahamas. The islands’ pristine reefs, fishing grounds, and terrestrial ecology are a treasure worth protecting, yet economic pressures push for development of new resorts and housing. A vivid example was the **Great Guana Cay dispute (2005–2009)**: when a \$500 million resort (Baker’s Bay Golf & Ocean Club) was approved for Guana Cay, local residents formed the Save Guana Cay Reef Association and legally challenged the project, citing its potential to devastate coral reefs and fisheries[137][98]. The case went through Bahamian courts to the Privy Council in the UK. Despite raising important issues about public consultation and environmental impact assessments, the challenge ultimately failed and the development proceeded[99][138]. The resort today is successful, but the debate left a lasting awareness among Abaconians of the need to balance growth with conservation. Similarly, other projects (marinas, cruise line private islands, etc.) have been carefully scrutinized by local stakeholders.

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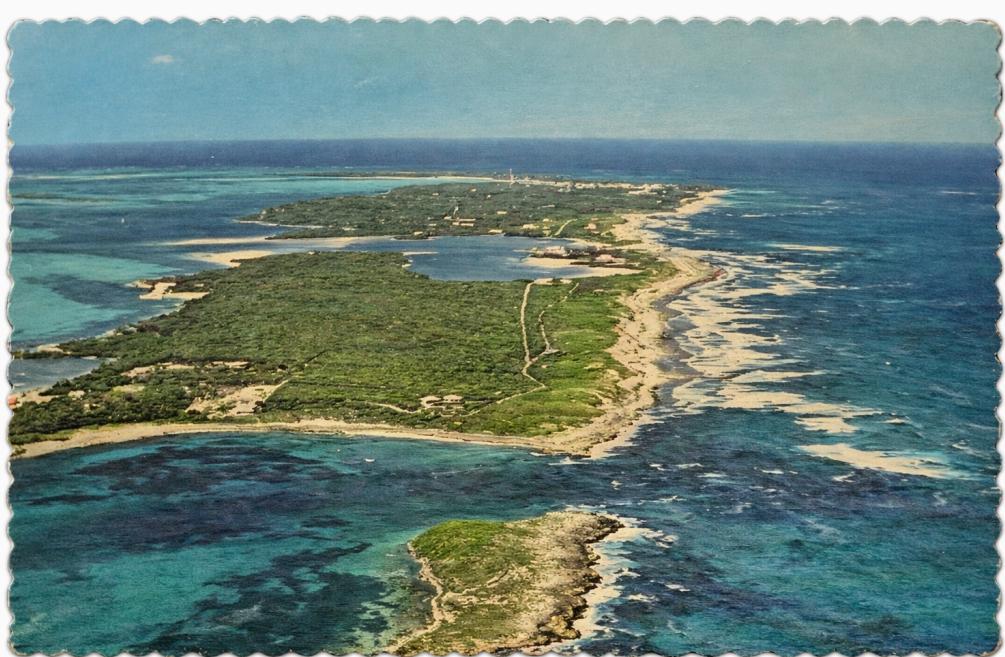
## 6A: White Sound on Elbow Cay: geography, anchorage culture, and development history

White Sound is easiest to understand as the “working hinge” of Elbow Cay: a narrow waist in the island’s long, reef-backed barrier form where a shallow, protected basin opens on the Sea of Abaco side, while the Atlantic shore lies only a short walk away across dune ridges and limestone. The place matters in Abaco’s tourism era because it translates a regional physical advantage, the calm “inside” waters that make the Sea of Abaco such an inviting cruising ground, into a site where boats can actually be brought alongside, fueled, watered, fed, repaired, and connected to shore life. Cruising descriptions of Abaco

emphasize the Sea of Abaco as a sheltered lagoon between Great Abaco and the barrier cays, and that shelter is the enabling condition for the archipelago's modern sailing economy.

As an anchorage and marina landscape, White Sound's defining feature is not depth so much as manageability. The basin is usable because it has an entrance channel that can be followed with attention, and because its surrounding landforms reduce wave energy and provide dependable lee during the prevailing seasonal patterns that worry boaters in the northern Bahamas. Cruising guidance for White Sound highlights the practical threshold plainly: the entrance channel is shallow enough that tidal stage matters, and many skippers will anchor outside the entrance and go in by dinghy or with a plan tailored to draft and tide. That single constraint helps explain why White Sound developed a distinct role alongside Hope Town Harbour. Hope Town's historic harbor, shaped by reef and inlet, reads as an older maritime settlement: intimate, highly legible, and culturally iconic. White Sound, by contrast, reads as an infrastructural landscape of the tourism era: it is where the maritime city meets the service economy.

Those economic functions sit on top of older patterns of movement and work. For centuries, Abaco livelihoods depended on making narrow, shallow geographies productive and safe, whether the work was fishing, moving produce and mail between cays, or building and maintaining small craft suited to banks and sounds. White Sound belongs to the same logic. Even before marinas and resorts gave it a formal visitor economy, a protected basin close to both the Sea of Abaco and the Atlantic shore would have been an obvious working shelter for small boats and a sensible place to move between coasts in a landscape where reefs, shoals, and weather frequently decide routes more than straight-line distance does. The difference in the late twentieth century was that the visitors arriving by air, ferry, and charter began to arrive in larger numbers, with different vessel types and expectations, and the island's settlement geography expanded to meet them.



*Figure: The South End, Tiloo Cut, Garbanzo Beach, and White Sound before recent development.*

The postwar and early post-independence tourism pivot in Abaco created the conditions for White Sound's modern development. Local historical narratives of Hope Town often place the turning point in the late 1950s and 1960s, when air access to Marsh Harbour and more regular ferry connections reduced the friction of reaching the Out Islands, and when early small hotels helped convert seasonal visitation into a patterned economy. At the scale of Elbow Cay, White Sound is where this shift becomes visible as land use. One way to read the landscape is to treat it as an alternative harbor system for a car-free town: Hope Town could remain tightly bounded in form and traffic, while White Sound became a zone where

docks, slips, and visitor-facing services could grow without breaking the spatial compact that visitors and residents alike associate with Hope Town's identity.

The Abaco Inn provides a useful marker for this moment, because its own institutional memory frames the site as an early node in the visitor economy on Elbow Cay. Its historical account emphasizes a mid-twentieth-century origin as a sport-fishing and leisure outpost, followed by a later phase of ownership and expansion that helped consolidate White Sound as a destination rather than simply a convenient basin. Whether one approaches that narrative as local booster history or as evidence of changing regional markets, it still points to the same underlying process: the conversion of "good water" into a durable shoreline economy through built infrastructure, hospitality labor, and networks of supply.

Marina development strengthened that conversion by doing something deceptively simple: it made the boat-to-shore transition reliable. Contemporary descriptions of White Sound often connect the basin to marina facilities and to the short, navigable relationship between White Sound, Hope Town, and the broader Sea of Abaco cruising circuit. In practice, that means that provisioning stops could be planned around fuel docks, slip availability, restaurants, and short trips to town services, and that local businesses could synchronize with those rhythms by offering rentals, ferry service, and charter operations. In Abaco's broader tourism chapter, these linkages matter because they describe how a "sailing capital" is built: less as a brand than as a mesh of small enterprises, accessible anchorages, and predictable logistical pathways between visitors and residents.

White Sound also concentrates a key tension of tourism landscapes in small-island settings: the same protected water and nearshore ecology that make an anchorage attractive are sensitive to dredging, prop wash, shoreline modification, and the accumulated footprint of coastal development. Even when environmental impacts are mitigated through permitting, best practices, and local stewardship, the basin still experiences the basic dilemma of working waterfronts in ecologically productive coastal zones: economic value increases precisely because the place functions as habitat and as shelter. That is part of why White Sound works well as a case study, because it shows how Abaco's ecological form becomes an asset that then requires governance, maintenance, and community negotiation.

Storm history brings that point into sharper relief. In the northern Bahamas, hurricanes periodically reset the built environment and the shoreline, and they do so in ways that are uneven across small distances because exposure, elevation, and coastal geometry matter. Hurricane Dorian's impacts on Elbow Cay are widely remembered as catastrophic, and local reporting placed White Sound clearly within the zone of severe destruction, including damage to resort and marina infrastructure associated with the basin. Statements from affected businesses in the White Sound area describe the same event as a totalizing loss followed by a long recovery process, which is itself part of the development history: rebuilding becomes a second phase of place-making, shaped by financing, insurance, building codes, and debates over what "resilience" should look like in a historic, low-lying, tourism-dependent community. If you want a longer arc, humanitarian reporting on earlier major storms in the region underscores that even before Dorian, hurricanes produced repeated episodes of beach erosion and infrastructure damage on Abaco's cays, creating a background condition in which shoreline stability is never guaranteed.

Seen this way, White Sound is not simply "where the yachts go." It is an engineered social geography that emerged from a specific physical niche, and it helps explain how Hope Town could remain symbolically and spatially distinctive while still participating in the modern Abaco economy. The protected basin, the shallow approach that rewards local knowledge, and the short hop to Hope Town's harbor and lighthouse together create an anchorage culture that is simultaneously practical and performative. Visitors experience the place as ease, calm water, and access, while residents experience it as employment, supply chains, property markets, and the risks of being built close to the sea. When you place White Sound in the tourism chapter, you can treat it as a hinge between the Sea of Abaco's regional geography and the everyday mechanics that turn that geography into an economy.

## Further Reading

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## 6.2 Hurricane Dorian and Aftermath

No discussion of contemporary Abaco can omit **Hurricane Dorian**, which struck in September 2019 and was arguably the **greatest disaster in Bahamian history**. Dorian was an unprecedented Category 5 hurricane that stalled directly over the Abaco Islands on September 1–3, 2019. Its sustained winds reached **185 mph with gusts to 220+ mph**, tying it for the highest winds of any Atlantic hurricane ever to make landfall[139][140]. The storm's effects were apocalyptic. Dorian made initial landfall at Elbow Cay (directly hitting Hope Town and its lighthouse) on September 1, 2019[141]. It then mowed over Great Abaco, with the eye passing near Marsh Harbour, pounding the island for almost two days. A towering **storm surge, 20+ feet high in places**, submerged whole neighborhoods. In Marsh Harbour, the entire downtown and surrounding residential areas (Dundas Town, Murphy Town, Marsh Harbour proper) were under **as much as 10–12 feet of ocean water** driven inland[142][143]. Buildings not made of solid concrete were simply shredded. A colossal wave of debris – boats, cars, lumber – swept inland. When the eye's temporary calm arrived, survivors crawled out to find nearly everything flattened or flooded. Then the backside of the storm hit.

The human toll was horrendous. Officially, **67 people were confirmed dead** in The Bahamas due to Dorian, with 282 missing (most of those from Abaco)[144][145]. Unofficial estimates from Abaco residents and relief workers suggest the true number of lives lost in Abaco alone is likely in the **hundreds**[143]. Unfortunately, many of the missing may never be conclusively identified, as some bodies were swept out to sea. Particularly hard hit were the Haitian shantytowns: The Mudd and Pigeon Peas were utterly obliterated, their tightly packed wooden shacks turned into a toxic rubble pile. Pastors and officials who had urged evacuation described the aftermath: "Less than 10 hours later, the Mudd and Pigeon Peas would be gone and hundreds would be feared dead under its rubble"[146]. Heart-breaking scenes unfolded of families clinging to roofs or swimming for their lives. In one account, a young couple with children recounted how they swam out of 30 feet of water during the surge, witnessing neighbors being hit by flying debris and swept away[147][148]. It was a humanitarian catastrophe that laid bare social divides – those in well-built homes on higher ground fared better than those in low-lying, substandard housing – yet in the immediacy of crisis, all Abaconians, "regardless of socio-economic backgrounds," found themselves converging at the only refuge left: the sturdy concrete government complex on high ground, where people of every station huddled together after the storm[149][150].



The physical destruction of Abaco's infrastructure was near-total in places. An estimated **75% of all structures on Abaco were damaged or destroyed**[\[151\]\[145\]](#). This included homes, churches, clinics, schools. In Marsh Harbour, entire districts were reduced to naked foundations. The central Marsh Harbour healthcare center was knocked out of service. Roads were scoured off or blocked by mountains of debris. Key utilities were down: **electricity and water** remained unavailable to most residents for months after. A year later, in September 2020, the majority of Abaco's population still did not have reliable power or water service restored[\[152\]](#). The estimated economic loss was staggering – around **\$3.4 billion USD in damages and losses** across The Bahamas, with Abaco accounting for the lion's share (87% of losses, 76% of damage)[\[144\]\[145\]](#). Abaco's thriving tourism industry ground to a halt as resorts were wrecked and airports closed.

In the immediate aftermath, a **large-scale evacuation** took place. Thousands of Abaco residents were evacuated by air and sea to Nassau, or to Eleuthera and other islands, and many were taken in by the United States[\[153\]](#). The population of Marsh Harbour likely fell dramatically as displaced people sought shelter. The government faced the immense challenge of debris clearance, restoring order, and planning reconstruction. International aid poured in – from the US Coast Guard rescue operations to NGOs providing relief supplies. Yet the recovery was painfully slow, hindered further when the **COVID-19 pandemic** struck in 2020, causing many relief agencies to temporarily withdraw and the government to impose border closures that complicated logistics[\[152\]](#).

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## 6B: Reprise on Vernon's Grocery

In the contemporary Abacos, the same features that make Vernon's Grocery attractive to tourists, its baked goods, its signage, its centrality, also make it a useful lens on vulnerability and resilience. Post-Dorian rebuilding shows how housing, small-business continuity, and heritage institutions interlock in Hope Town, with community reporting documenting loss, displacement, and organized reconstruction efforts alongside the reopening of everyday services. As climate risk sharpens and visitor economies intensify, the store's practical function remains the anchor: provisioning, coordination, and the quiet production of local knowledge in a place where many decisions still travel by word of mouth across a small set of counters and docks.



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Three years on (as of 2022–2025), Abaco has been rebuilding, though scars remain. Some communities, like Hope Town and Green Turtle Cay, have made significant progress thanks to private rebuilding efforts and their appeal to donors. The Elbow Cay lighthouse itself remarkably survived Dorian's onslaught (though it went dark for the first time in history for several days after the storm)[139][154], and it stands again as a symbol of resilience – relit and still manually operated by dedicated keepers and volunteers. Marsh Harbour, however, faces a longer road. The Mudd and Pigeon Peas shantytowns were cleared and the land bulldozed; the future of their former residents remains a sensitive issue, touching on immigration policy, poverty, and human rights. Many Haitian-Bahamians who lost everything in Dorian worry about being marginalized in the rebuilding process or even deported, even as reconstruction plans attempt to prevent the return of unsafe shanties[155][156]. For Abaco's economy, there are signs of revival – the Marsh Harbour port reopened, some resorts (like Treasure Cay) are under repair or have partially reopened, and tourists and second-home owners are returning. The government has expressed commitment to “building back better,” with

more resilient building codes and storm-hardened infrastructure. But challenges such as insurance costs, equitable recovery for all residents, and environmental restoration (Dorian also devastated mangroves and ecosystems) persist.

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## 6C. After Dorian: rebuilding drinking-water access as infrastructure, governance, and ethical storytelling

In Abaco, “water” after Hurricane Dorian was rarely a single infrastructural concern. It was power and pumps, it was saltwater pushed inland by storm surge, it was laboratories and chlorine, it was trucks and jerrycans, it was a question of who could wait out a system reboot and who could not. In this book, the storm is framed as an infrastructural rupture that left core services down for extended periods, and water is named alongside electricity as one of the systems that did not quickly return to normal life. Dorian made drinking-water access visible as both a political and technical problem, one that sits underneath the tourism economy and everyday life alike.

### Sunny Waters Abaco and the remaking of municipal water resilience

A useful way to tell this story is to treat a single rebuild effort as a central goal, then show how other actors and stopgap systems braided around it. The central project here is the “Sunny Waters Abaco” effort to stabilize and harden municipal water production around Marsh Harbour by integrating a large solar array with the local grid and the water system that depends on it. Water Mission, writing one year after the storm, describes the municipal supply as ‘compromised by saltwater and other contaminants during storm-surge flooding,’ and it frames reverse osmosis as the immediate purification method used to stabilize potable water needs in the response phase. As the response moved from emergency provisioning into reconstruction, Water Mission presents the solar integration project as a long-run intervention: solar power tied to municipal water operations, designed with public authorities, to reduce single points of failure that Dorian exposed.

The logic of how to get freshwater back to the Abacos was easy enough to plan, even if the implementation was not. Abaco’s municipal water production depends heavily on electricity, and the Dorian shock revealed how quickly “water scarcity” can be manufactured by a grid collapse, debris-blocked access to wellfields, and damaged pumping stations. In the first weeks after landfall, regional situation reporting describes WSC’s work as a moving target: assessing wellfields to determine what could be restored, producing treated water via a combination of reverse osmosis and conventional treatment, procuring generators for pump stations, and struggling with intermediary storage and last-mile distribution to people who could not access water through ordinary channels. That same report captures an important governance detail: UNICEF representatives coordinating the WASH cluster alongside WSC with support from a mix of NGOs and agencies, which is a polite way of saying that emergency water quickly became a coordination problem across institutions with different mandates, procurement rules, and accountability structures.

This is also where Abaco’s geography becomes policy. The IFRC’s early reporting notes that wellfields and aquifers were impacted by saltwater intrusion, and it emphasizes that restoring water required assessing and “treating” aquifers, with road clearance and access as practical constraints. In other words, Dorian did not simply break pipes. It altered the boundary conditions of water quality and forced the state, donors, and residents to decide how to live during a slow return of trust in the system.

Sunny Waters Abaco is best read as a response to that precise set of constraints. Water Mission describes the project as integrating solar with the local grid to provide reliable power to run municipal water systems in the Marsh Harbour community, and it notes coordination with WSC and the Ministry of Education as part of a paired emphasis on water infrastructure and schools. In that telling, the solar array is an engineering response to a political reality: when fuel supply chains are interrupted and grid stability

is uncertain, “water” becomes hostage to logistics, and the quickest way to add resilience is to diversify power inputs for pumping and treatment.

By 2024, Bahamian state media reporting frames the WSC rebuild as a system-wide push for resiliency and redundancy, and it enumerates what that looks like on the ground: commissioning a new Marsh Harbour Pumping Station and Solar Facilities, including the installation of 540 solar panels generating 221 kilowatts of power, plus new buildings for operations and electrical storage, alongside standby generators across multiple settlements and upgrades to reverse osmosis plants and storage tanks in the wider Abacos. The same report describes a deliberate strategy to reduce single points of failure through backup generation and storage, a direct technical answer to Dorian’s lesson that a single damaged node can shut down an entire service landscape. The specifics matter because they tie the story to verifiable outputs: kilowatts installed, tanks commissioned, pump stations rebuilt, generators placed, and mains replaced.

### **Where governance and philanthropy meet the valve box**

Even when the engineering is clear, the governance is rarely simple. In the emergency phase, the CDEMA situation report shows the WASH response as a dense mesh of organizations: WSC working with UNICEF coordination and support from IFRC, PAHO, Samaritan’s Purse, Water Mission, Mercy Corps, and others, with reverse osmosis plants, generators, bladder tanks, and ad hoc distribution methods described as simultaneous interventions rather than a single linear plan. This is infrastructure with social life. A reverse osmosis unit is an object that must be staffed, fueled, secured, and maintained. A storage tank changes bargaining power because it changes who controls timing and distribution. A lab report can pause distribution because credibility, and liability, ride on “no contamination” being documented.

Interpretation: this is the moment where “rebuilding Abaco” becomes a debate about what counts as recovery. A system rebuilt to serve tourism corridors first will look like a different Abaco than one rebuilt around dispersed settlements and everyday household needs. The sources above document the multi-settlement generator strategy and the pump-station modernization effort, but they cannot, by themselves, adjudicate whose priorities were centered in sequencing and funding. What they do show is that post-Dorian water recovery required policy choices about redundancy, maintenance, and the geography of service.

A separate, complementary governance story plays out in schools, and it clarifies why “drinking-water access” remains an issue even when a municipal system is being rebuilt. The Liquid Legacy’s “Safe Drinking Water for Abaco” program frames its entry point as the absence of free safe drinking water in Abaco’s schools, developed after meetings with the Ministry of Education and local school principals. Their plan is structured as phased implementation: classroom gravity filters as a temporary solution, then atmospheric water generators (AWGs) in larger schools, then expansion to remaining schools. In their public fundraising description, the scope is concrete: a goal of reaching thirteen schools and roughly 1,600 students and staff with free safe drinking water. They name Patrick J. Bethel High School as the immediate priority and describe a procurement and installation pathway for AWGs, including shipping units from Nassau and a transition plan in which interim filters later move into homes via teachers and administrators.

This school-based story does not replace municipal rebuilding. It exists because municipal recovery, even when technically successful, does not automatically guarantee reliable, affordable, and trusted access at every point of use. School water is also its own political object: a school is a public institution with routine demand peaks, constrained budgets, and a duty of care to minors. When philanthropic water systems enter that space, they can relieve immediate risk, and they can shift long-term expectations about what the state should provide, what parents should purchase, and what “normal” water access looks like.

Wine To Water appears in the Abaco aftermath primarily through the disaster-response mode that the CDEMA reporting captures at the cluster level. Reporting from Appalachian State University’s campus newspaper states that Wine To Water delivered hundreds of water filters for Hurricane Dorian response work, describing filter distribution as a fast-deployable intervention during the emergency period. This is a

weaker evidentiary class than an audited program report, and it should be treated as such, but it is still useful in the narrative because it represents the kind of portable, household-scale technology that bridges gaps while municipal infrastructure is repaired.

### **Ethical guidelines for interviewing and attribution in a post-disaster water story**

If you add interviews to this insert later, the ethics are not an appendix. They are part of the method. Consent should be specific to use: interviewees should know whether their words will appear under their name, under a role description, or anonymized, and they should have the option to withdraw a quote after seeing it in context. Trauma-aware practice should be explicit: do not treat loss as a narrative resource, and do not ask people to relive the worst day of their lives to generate color for a chapter. When an interview informs a claim about outcomes, the chapter should distinguish between experiential evidence (“we waited weeks for deliveries”) and documentary evidence (“this plant produced X gallons per day”), and it should avoid collapsing memory into measurement. The most respectful practice in a story like this is a two-track citation habit: link operational claims to program pages, procurement documents, engineering specs, and agency statements, and use interviews to explain how those objects moved through daily life.

### **What this story shows about Abaco’s long water story**

The deeper pattern, visible through Sunny Waters Abaco and the school-based safe water work, is that recovery becomes a long conversation about maintenance. Solar panels, generators, and RO plants deliver resilience only if parts and technicians remain available, budgets remain stable, and institutions keep training people to run what was built. The IADB’s assessment of Dorian’s impacts, written in the language of recovery planning, treats water and sanitation as part of a larger system of dependencies, including power, logistics, and institutional capacity, which helps explain why “rebuilding” becomes a multiyear project rather than an event.

To echo this story later in the contemporary chapter, you can return to a single sentence-level reminder: Abaco’s tourism-era growth rests on water systems that are technically impressive and socially fragile. Dorian made that fragility plain, and the rebuild projects that followed show something else that is easy to miss. When the taps run, the success is shared and mostly invisible. When they do not, governance becomes a daily household problem.

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### **6.3 Resilience and the Way Forward**

Contemporary Abaco stands at a crossroads of **hope and caution**. The events of recent years have underscored the islands' vulnerability to **climate change** and extreme weather. There is now an acute awareness in Abaco (as in all low-lying island communities) that rising sea levels and intensifying hurricanes are existential threats. This has spurred conversations about climate resilience – from elevating buildings and critical infrastructure to safeguarding wetlands and reefs that act as natural buffers. Organizations and local leaders are advocating for sustainable development practices, ensuring that rebuilding doesn't set the stage for future calamities. In Hope Town, for instance, efforts are being made to restore and reinforce the beloved waterfront and to archive historical materials (the Wyannie Malone Museum's collection was largely saved, albeit the museum building was damaged).

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### **6D: Loyalist Abaco architecture: form, function, materials, and the ethics of preservation**

*Author's note:* For a much more detailed, pseudo-archival perspective on Hope Town and the abacos' Loyalist architecture, read *Hope Town: Reality of a Dream* by Richard Seaborg. Part 2 of that book captures some pre-Dorian architecture found in Hope Town in great detail.

Visitors often describe Hope Town and other Abaco settlements as "New England-like," and the comparison has real visual hooks: narrow lanes, wood-frame houses with clapboard siding, bright paint, and crisp trim that is interpreted as coastal and orderly. In Hope Town, this look is reinforced by an everyday streetscape of board cottages and verandas that has become part of the settlement's public image. Hope Town is explicitly characterized in the main text by "New England-style clapboard cottages" and, in late nineteenth-century descriptions, by verandas and gingerbread trim that signal a Loyalist-era aesthetic in Bahamian form.

That same comparison can mislead if it implies a simple transplant. What you see in Abaco is better understood as Bahamian vernacular architecture that carried Loyalist and Anglo-American preferences into a subtropical archipelago, then adapted through local materials, maritime skills, Afro-Bahamian labor and knowledge, and the daily pressures of heat, rain, hurricanes, and salt air. A board house can resemble a New England cottage at the level of cladding and gable silhouette while behaving very differently in section, airflow, and storm strategy. Seeing the houses as "Loyalist-influenced" rather than "Loyalist copies" makes room for creolization and for the fact that these buildings were practical instruments of island life before they were tourism icons.

#### **From Loyalist settlement to Abaco vernacular**

Abaco's Loyalist founding moment is central to why wood-frame domestic architecture became so prominent in its cays. A museum account of Hope Town's early settlement places Loyalist arrivals in the 1780s, and it also ties the community's nineteenth-century economy to small craft, sailing, and coastal work. Those maritime skills mattered on land. In the Bahamas more broadly, clapboard and board-house construction grew during the nineteenth century as shipbuilders applied woodworking expertise to houses, using methods and tolerances learned in boatyards. On Elbow Cay, that link is not abstract: the Hope Town museum identifies the settlement as a boatbuilding center and locates shipwright activity near the lighthouse, with schooners and smaller craft built in volume before steam shipping undercut demand.

In a place where sawn lumber, fasteners, and skilled joinery were already part of the local economic toolkit, wood houses made sense, especially when stone was scarce and when importing masonry materials raised costs.

### **How to read a house: elevation, air, and the logic of the veranda**

The first thing to “read” in an Abaco board house is often its relationship to the ground. Across the Bahamas, clapboard houses were commonly raised on blocks, stilts, or masonry piers, which created a shaded underfloor plenum that helped cool interiors and placed living floors above minor flooding and storm runoff. That lifted stance also made certain kinds of repair possible after a storm and, historically, it permitted relocation when a household moved within a settlement or shifted land use. In Abaco’s low relief and porous limestone, where freshwater is limited and sheet flow can be sudden, elevation also protected the structure from persistent damp and termites, even as it introduced new requirements for bracing and anchorage.

If elevation is the base note, ventilation is the melody. Bahamian vernacular houses were “angled to promote airflow,” with openings and interior layouts that encouraged cross-breezes rather than treating walls as sealed envelopes. The veranda belongs to this same climate grammar. In Hope Town’s streetscape the veranda is frequently the social hinge between private interior and public lane, but it is also an environmental device: it shades walls, buffers windows from direct rain, and creates an outdoor living room that reduces reliance on fully enclosed, cooled space. The fact that visitors remember the veranda as “breezy” is an architectural observation, not a metaphor, because that intermediate zone is where heat is dissipated and where daily life can unfold in a way that makes the interior less thermally and socially overburdened.

Windows in this tradition tend to be large relative to wall area, and they are paired with external shutters that behave like adjustable microclimate machines. The push-out “Bahama shutters” described in national discussions of clapboard construction are designed to throw shade, shed rain, and still permit air movement, which matters in humid conditions where an airtight shell can trap heat and moisture. In Abaco, where salt-laden wind is ordinary, shutters also reduce weathering on interior finishes and add a sacrificial layer that can be repaired more readily than a window assembly. These are not decorative add-ons that merely “look tropical,” they are evidence of a building culture that treats sunlight and rain as design parameters.

### **Materials, joinery, and the maritime imprint**

The visual signature of “clapboard” can obscure how materially heterogeneous these houses were. A typical Abaco settlement house might combine locally available timber, imported milled boards, metal fasteners brought by sea, lime-based coatings, and later, twentieth-century replacements that followed changing supply chains. In the Bahamas as a whole, commentators have connected the rise of wood-framed clapboard houses to shipbuilders and to the portability and repairability of timber construction. In Abaco, the boatbuilding economy made those connections even tighter. Boatbuilding demands straight grain, careful fastening, and an eye for rot and corrosion, and those habits translate naturally into a domestic building tradition that prioritizes replaceable boards, readable structural frames, and pragmatic maintenance cycles.

Paint and trim traditions sit at the intersection of climate and identity. Bright paint protects timber from sun and moisture by sealing and reflecting, while white trim clarifies edges and reveals craft, even as it ages and needs renewal. The so-called gingerbread elements, frequently highlighted in visitor descriptions and late nineteenth-century imagery, matter because they show how an outwardly “Victorian” taste was metabolized into a Caribbean context, often attached to verandas that are climatically rational. Color also became legible at settlement scale, contributing to a coherent town image that later tourism marketing could reproduce in photographs and brochures.

### **Why the “New England” comparison persists, and where it breaks**

The comparison persists partly because Loyalist migrations linked Abaco to Atlantic coastal building habits, and partly because Abaco settlements preserve a density of wood-frame streetscapes that have vanished in more heavily redeveloped islands. A national account of Bahamian vernacular architecture singles out “Harbour Island and the Abaco Cays” as places known for preservation of traditional board-house forms, a pattern that shapes the visitor’s sense of authenticity. Green Turtle Cay, another Loyalist-founded Abaco settlement, describes its main village as a rowed streetscape of pastel-painted clapboard houses “reminiscent of a New England fishing village,” which shows how local heritage organizations themselves sometimes adopt the frame for interpretation. The Bahamas’ official tourism site uses similar language for Harbour Island, explicitly calling its architecture “New England-style”.

The frame breaks when it erases Bahamian social history and environmental adaptation. New England cottages were not designed around year-round hurricane risk, nor around the need for continuous ventilation in humid heat. Abaco houses, by contrast, belong to an island building tradition that assumes weather will attack materials, so it designs for repair, replacement, shade, and air movement. The “New England” analogy can also flatten the labor history embedded in these towns. Construction was rarely the work of a single cultural stream. It drew on local building practices, on maritime craft, and on the skills of Bahamians whose lives were shaped by colonial economies. Treating the architecture as creolized makes preservation debates more honest, because it refuses to turn living towns into museum dioramas built for an outsider’s comfort.

### **Preservation as an economic strategy, and the post-hurricane dilemma**

By the mid twentieth century, tourism and second-home development made the aesthetic of these settlements economically valuable. The Hope Town museum timeline explicitly marks the “age of first hotels and second homes” and, later, tourism as the dominant industry, which matters for architecture because it changed what it meant to maintain a wooden cottage. A house could function as a home, then become a rental asset, then become a heritage object whose market value depended on looking “right”. Preservation therefore became a business model as well as a cultural choice. Even contemporary construction often mimics the board-house look through modern cladding choices, including fiber-cement products used to replicate traditional appearances while meeting contemporary expectations about durability and insurance.

Hurricanes sharpen the ethical edge of this story. Heritage architecture becomes most fragile, and most politically contested, when a storm turns “authenticity” into a safety question. National discussions after major storms argue that Bahamian building codes target high design wind speeds and that wood-frame construction can be structurally comparable to masonry when it is well-built and properly detailed. Post-Dorian recovery guidance produced with Bahamian government agencies emphasizes minimum residential standards, referencing the Bahamas Building Code and “Build Back Better” principles that push construction toward demonstrable resilience. Research and public commentary after Dorian also emphasized the opportunity, and the public desire, for stronger enforcement of building standards, which intersects directly with how historic districts rebuild.

In Hope Town and similar places, the preservation dilemma is therefore not aesthetic. It is a negotiation among safety, cost, climate, and identity. Keeping an old board house can require specialized maintenance and careful detailing, yet replacing it with a generic storm-hardened structure can erode the town fabric that tourism depends on and that residents recognize as their inheritance. After Dorian, the Hope Town museum itself reported repairs and conservation efforts, a small institutional indicator of how storms pressure heritage infrastructure and local memory at the same time. The ethics of preservation, then, include questions of who gets to rebuild in place, who can afford code-compliant restoration, and whether “historic character” becomes a tool that privileges second-home capital over year-round residents.

### **Toward a more honest reading of “authenticity”**

A careful architectural history of Loyalist Abaco should make the visitor's first impression legible, then complicate it without scolding. Yes, the houses can look "New England-like." The resemblance is historically grounded through Loyalist migration and Atlantic craft traditions. Yet Abaco's board-house streetscapes are also deeply Bahamian: raised floors and shutters that stage airflow, verandas that are climatic infrastructure, and a building culture shaped by boats, storms, salt, and local labor histories. The preservation story is therefore a story about adaptation across centuries, and about how tourism turns that adaptive tradition into a branded image that can either fund conservation or distort whose past is being protected.

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Socially, Abaco is at a point of **reflection and change**. The shared trauma of Dorian, while devastating, also showcased profound community spirit: in the immediate aftermath, Abaconians of all backgrounds helped each other survive and evacuate. Volunteers from unaffected Bahamian islands poured in to clear debris and deliver aid. This solidarity provides a foundation for addressing longer-term social issues, such as formalizing housing for migrant communities, improving access to healthcare (Abaco is constructing a new hospital facility), and ensuring that as Abaco rebuilds, it does so inclusively.

Politically, Abaco remains an integral part of The Bahamas, and its input in national affairs is valued. In the 2021 general elections, Abaco's constituencies were hotly contested, reflecting that the island's recovery is a national priority. The Abaco Independence Movement of the 1970s is now a historical curiosity – today's Abaconians, younger generations especially, are more focused on practical governance issues like disaster response, economic opportunities, and education, rather than revisiting separatist ideas. If anything, the dependency on national and international aid

post-Dorian reinforced the interconnectedness of Abaco with the wider Bahamas and world.

In conclusion, as the Abaco Islands move through the 2020s, they carry forward a **rich historical legacy** while confronting modern trials. The story that began with the Lucayans, continued through Loyalists and wreckers, and flowed into a thriving 20th-century community, has now reached a chapter defined by resilience in the face of adversity. Hope Town, with its cherished lighthouse still shining, and the greater Abacos will continue to rebuild and adapt. The history detailed in the preceding chapters shows a pattern of perseverance: time and again these islands have been forged anew by challenges – whether economic collapse, political revolution, or natural disaster – emerging each time with a renewed sense of identity and purpose. In the 21st century, that indomitable spirit endures. As one surveys Hope Town’s harbor from atop the Elbow Cay lighthouse, one sees not only the tranquil blue waters and the neat rows of Loyalist-era cottages, but also the memory of all that has transpired here. It is a living history – a **story of hope and survival** that continues to unfold, guiding the Abacos into the future.

## Conclusion

The history of Hope Town, Elbow Cay, and the Abaco Islands is a sweeping saga that mirrors the broader Caribbean experience while remaining uniquely local. We have journeyed from the ancient Lucayan days, through the drama of colonization and Loyalist settlement, into an era of schooners and shipwrecks, onward to the transformative 20th-century winds of tourism and independence, and finally into the present-day crucible of rebuilding and reflection. Throughout these epochs, certain themes resound: **adaptation, courage, and community**. The indigenous Lucayans adapted to island life and left their gentle mark; the Loyalist pioneers courageously forged new settlements from wilderness; generations of Abaconians formed tight-knit communities to survive isolation, whether by harvesting the sea or building boats. Even the painful episodes – the displacement of peoples, the wrath of hurricanes – elicited responses that became part of the cultural DNA.

Important figures have punctuated this narrative: from legendary (if infamous) characters like Blackbeard and Anne Bonny lurking in Abaco's pirate lore, to pioneers like **Wyannie Malone** establishing Hope Town, to modern statesmen like **Hubert Ingraham** bringing Family Island sensibilities to the national stage. Each, in their way, shaped the trajectory of these islands. Yet, it is arguably the **collective will of ordinary Abaconians** – the shipwrights, the wreckers, the pineapple farmers, the teachers, the seamen, the volunteers – that most defines Abaco's story.

In writing a history as extensive as this, styled almost as a regional chronicle, one is reminded of how **interconnected** the phases of history are. The Abacos' prosperity in the 19th century due to wrecking and boat-building set the foundations (harbors, seamanship traditions) that later enabled a tourism economy. The hardships of the 1930s Out Island life fostered a self-reliance that has been invaluable in post-hurricane recoveries. The Loyalist ideals of self-determination echoed in the 1970s autonomy debates. History lives on in the very layout of New Plymouth's streets (still bearing names like King, Parliament, and Loyalist Road[157]) and in the boats that compete in the annual Regatta Time in Abaco, many captained by descendants of those original settlers and wreckers.

As of the 21st century, the Abacos stand as a region that is simultaneously one of the **most traditional** and **most forward-looking** parts of The Bahamas. On Elbow Cay, you can attend a museum to see artifacts from the 18th century one day, and on the next, attend a town meeting on climate resilience strategies for the future. This blending of past, present, and future makes Abaco's ongoing story particularly compelling.

In sum, **Hope Town and the Abacos have been shaped by waves of people and events – Lucayan, British, American, African, Caribbean – each leaving an imprint and then receding**. What endures is the spirit implied by Hope Town's very name: *Hope*. Despite adversities from slavery and piracy to isolation and hurricanes, Hope Town and the Abacos continually rejuvenate themselves and remain places of hope – for a better life, for community, for memory, and for the future. The history recounted in these chapters is more than an academic tale; it is the lived experience of a resilient island people. And as the Abaconians carry their heritage forward, they ensure that this

history is not static on a page, but a **living narrative**, steering the course of the islands as surely as the Elbow Reef Lighthouse guides ships past the reefs.

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# Appendix A: Abaco Islands Place-Names Guide

## Major Islands and Districts

**Abaco (Great Abaco Island)** – The name “Abaco” originates from early Spanish and Taíno references. Spanish explorers recorded the island as *Habacoa* (1500 map by Juan de la Cosa), which may have derived from a Taíno term. Linguist Julian Granberry proposed it came from Taíno “*abacó lia*” or “*abacó nagua*”, meaning “large upper outlier,” originally applied to a different island and later a mapmaker’s error shifted it to Abaco. Another Taíno-derived name was “*Lucayoneque*,” meaning “the people’s distant waters land,” which also referred to Abaco in early colonial times. Abaco’s name thus reflects its Lucayan heritage and geographic position. **Historical Note:** Abaco (specifically Great Abaco) is the main island of the group and was a center of Loyalist settlement after the American Revolution. By 1785, “Marsh’s Harbour” on Abaco had become home to almost half the islands’ population, surpassing the first settlement of Carleton.

**Little Abaco Island** – Named simply in contrast to Great Abaco, Little Abaco is a smaller island just off Abaco’s north end. The name is descriptive (little vs. great) and does not have a separate origin story in records. **Historical Note:** Little Abaco remained sparsely populated in the Loyalist era; later communities like Crown Haven and Fox Town were established on Little Abaco, but the island has always been the quieter appendage of Great Abaco.

**Moore’s Island** – Named for an early settler or family named Moore (the exact namesake is not well-documented). Moore’s Island lies to the west of Great Abaco. **Historical Note:** Moore’s Island is one of Abaco’s districts today. It was settled in the 19th century by Bahamians (including Loyalist descendants and free blacks), and its two small settlements are known for their evocative names: Hard Bargain and The Bight. The island’s isolation has kept its communities small and traditional.

**Grand Cay** – The northernmost inhabited cay in Abaco, “Grand Cay” simply means “large cay.” It was likely named for being the biggest of the northern cays (distinguishing it from nearby smaller islets like Little Grand Cay). **Historical Note:** Grand Cay is a fishing settlement and now a separate district. Notably, U.S. President Richard Nixon frequented the nearby “Big Grand Cay” (a local name for the area) as a private retreat in the 1970s. The cay’s name reflects its prominence among the Walker’s Cay group.

**Green Turtle Cay** – This island’s name honors the once-abundant green sea turtles in its surrounding waters. Early sailors and settlers found green turtles around the cay, making it a notable locale for turtle harvesting. **Namesake:** The green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) was historically important as food. **Historical Note:** Green Turtle Cay was a major Loyalist settlement. Its town of New Plymouth became a thriving community of shipbuilders, wreck salvagers, and farmers in the 1800s. The entire cay is still often just called “Green Turtle.” The name preserves the memory of the turtles that were integral to the island’s early economy.

**Man-O-War Cay** – Named after the *man-o'-war* bird (the magnificent frigatebird). The frigatebird, nicknamed the “man-o'-war,” was likely observed by locals and mariners; its soaring presence gave the island its name. **Historical Note:** Man-O-War Cay was settled by Loyalists and became famed for shipbuilding. The Albury family and others built wooden boats here for generations. The small village of Man-O-War retains a very traditional character (it’s a dry town with Sabbatarian heritage). The cay’s name harkens to its maritime environment – the frigatebird and perhaps an echo of naval terms (a “Man-O-War” was also a warship). Today it is synonymous with boat-building craftsmanship.

**Great Guana Cay** – The name “Guana” comes from iguanas – it’s essentially “Iguana Cay.” Although iguanas no longer live on Great Guana Cay, the name provides “circumstantial evidence” that rock iguanas once inhabited it. (“Guana” is a local shortening of iguana.) **Historical Note:** Great Guana Cay (7 miles long) was another Loyalist-era settlement site. Its current settlement is scattered along the beach and is known for tourism and the famous Nipper’s and Grabber’s bars. Culturally, the cay is sometimes called “the last outpost before Africa” due to its far eastern location. The name preserves a natural history memory of iguanas on the cay, linking it to other Bahamian “Iguana cays.”

**Elbow Cay** – Named for its shape – an elbow-like curve along its length. Elbow Cay juts out and then bends, resembling a bent arm. Early sailors thus described it as “Elbow.” **Historical Note:** Elbow Cay is home to Hope Town and the famous red-and-white lighthouse on Elbow Reef. The cay was settled by Loyalists (Wyannie Malone and others in 1785) and became known for its picturesque New England–style village. The name “Elbow” is reflected in local landmarks: the reef off its coast is called Elbow Reef, and the lighthouse is often referred to as the Elbow Reef Light. The cay’s name is purely descriptive of its geography, but it has become synonymous with the rich maritime heritage of Hope Town.

**Lubbers Quarters Cay** – The origin of this name is colorful though not definitively documented. In nautical slang, a “landlubber” is an inexperienced sailor, and local lore holds that pirates or sailors might have left non-sailors or reluctant crew on this small island while they went on raids – hence “Lubber’s Quarters.” (This lore, while plausible, is anecdotal; no specific archival source confirms the practice.) **Historical Note:** Lubbers Quarters is a small cay between Great Abaco and Elbow Cay. It remained uninhabited until the 20th century. Today it’s sparsely populated and known for a laid-back lifestyle (it’s home to the notable Cracker P’s bar). The vivid name “Lubbers Quarters” thus hints at an era of pirates or privateers, contributing to Abaco’s romantic pirate folklore.

**Scotland Cay (formerly Conary’s Cay)** – A private residential cay now called Scotland Cay. In the Loyalist period it was known as “Conary’s Cay,” but the origin of that name is obscure. The modern name “Scotland Cay” likely comes from later owners or developers – possibly chosen to reflect a personal heritage or simply for marketing. **Historical Note:** Scotland Cay is adjacent to Great Guana Cay and was largely undeveloped until the late 20th century when it was turned into an airstrip community. The historical record (Lord Dunmore’s survey of the 1780s) notes land grants on

“Cotnary’s (Scotland) Cay,” indicating the early name and that it eventually took on the name Scotland Cay. Today it’s known for upscale private homes, and its name distinguishes it from the other cays in the Abacos.

**Spanish Cay** – A name reflecting Spanish presence. This cay is said to have been used by Spanish ships (and much later, it hosted a small U.S. drug interdiction outpost in the 1980s). The name likely comes from Spanish explorers or fishermen who frequented the cay during the colonial era. **Historical Note:** Spanish Cay now is a privately owned resort island with an airstrip and marina. During the 19th and 20th centuries it was largely uninhabited. Its name endures from the age when Spain laid claim to the Bahamas. (No specific etymology beyond “Spanish” is documented, but the name underscores the island’s position on the historic maritime routes of the Spanish Main.)

**Walker’s Cay** – Named after Thomas Walker, a British privateer-turned-judge who was sent to this remote cay around 1706 to suppress piracy. Walker established a base but died in 1721, after which the cay remained uninhabited for over two centuries.

**Namesake:** Judge Thomas Walker (d. 1721) – his anti-piracy role earned him this namesake. **Historical Note:** In the 20th century, Walker’s Cay became legendary as a sport-fishing resort – the northern gateway of the Bahamas. Owned by the Abplanalp family for decades, it drew big-game fishermen and even U.S. presidents. After Hurricane damage and closure, it is now being revived by new owners. The cay’s name is an enduring link to an early 18th-century chapter of anti-piracy efforts in Abaco lore.

**Castaway Cay (Gorda Cay)** – Originally known as Gorda Cay, from the Spanish “*gorda*,” meaning “fat” or “round,” referring to the island’s roundish shape. Disney renamed it Castaway Cay after leasing it in 1996 and developing it as a cruise private island. **Namesake:** *Gorda* (Spanish “fat/round”) described the geography; *Castaway Cay* is a modern invention evoking pirate castaways (and indeed local folklore claimed pirates hid here in the 18th century, inspiring Disney’s choice). **Historical Note:** Gorda Cay was uninhabited but had a checkered past – used by smugglers in the 1970s due to its airstrip. It was leased and transformed by Disney Cruise Line into **Castaway Cay**, a family-friendly island destination. Despite the new name, one can find the old name in historical accounts of shipwrecks and local memory. The dual names illustrate the transition from historic outpost to contemporary resort.

## Smaller Cays and Islands

**Garden Cay** – A small private cay just off Marsh Harbour, noted for its sheltered location and lush vegetation. Likely named for the garden-like greenery early visitors observed or cultivated there, Garden Cay features a protected harbor used by local ferries. It has periodically hosted private residences and landscaping, living up to its name as a tranquil “garden” isle near the town.

**Glenn Cay** – A minor islet in the Abaco chain (little detailed information is published on it). The name suggests it was named after an individual (possibly a surname “Glenn”), but the cay itself is undeveloped and seldom referenced in historical records. It may be

one of the many small mangrove cays that dot the Sea of Abaco, known only to locals and chart-makers. (*No specific documented origin; likely a namesake island.*)

**Great Sale Cay** – An uninhabited island on the remote northwest of Abaco, often used as a safe anchorage by boaters crossing to Florida. The name “Sale” is thought to derive from “salt” (Spanish *sal*), hinting that the cay may have had salt ponds or been a source of salt in bygone days. Historically, sailors would stop at Great Sale Cay as the last (or first) landfall in the Abacos. Apart from transient sailors, the 3-mile-long cay has remained largely untouched. Its northwest harbor provides excellent protection and is a well-known overnight stop on the Little Bahama Bank.

**John Doctor’s Cay** – A small cay amid the Snake Cay mangrove creek system of East Abaco. Local lore holds that it was named after a man known as “John Doctor,” perhaps an individual reputed for healing or a nickname of a settler, though the exact story isn’t documented. Today the cay itself is uninhabited, surrounded by tidal creeks and mangroves within a protected national park. Its peculiar name endures on marine charts, a faint echo of whoever “John Doctor” was.

**Joe Downer Cays** – A group of low-lying cays on the western side of Great Abaco. These cays (sometimes also charted as “Big Joe Downer Cay” and smaller isles nearby) are mostly mangrove-covered and uninhabited. The name likely comes from a person – perhaps Joseph “Joe” Downer – associated with these islands in the past, though specific records are scarce. Today, the Joe Downer Cays are mainly noted by fishermen and cruisers navigating the shallow “Marls” area; they mark fishing grounds and serve as landmarks on the expansive bank.

**Manjack Cay (Nunjack Cay)** – An island in the northern Abacos, **also known as Nunjack Cay**, located about 5 miles north of Green Turtle Cay. The two names refer to the same place – locals pronounce it “MAN-jack,” while older charts often spell it “Nunjack.” The origin of the name is not definitively documented. Some speculate it could relate to the word “munjack,” referring to a form of asphalt (pitch) or bitumen found in the Caribbean, but also used colloquially to mean an average person or “anybody”, but in absence of proof it’s simply accepted as the cay’s dual identity. *Namesake:* No specific person is known to be the namesake; it’s likely a descriptive or inherited name from early chart-makers. Manjack Cay is a “hidden gem” known for its pristine beaches, mangrove trails, and a small lagoon teeming with turtles. *Historical Note:* Land grants on Manjack Cay were recorded in the Loyalist era (1780s), although the island never developed a full-time settlement. Today it has a few private homes and is a popular stop for boaters seeking an undeveloped paradise.

**Miss Romer Cay** – A small cay often labeled “**Big Romer’s Cay**” on maps, but locally called Miss Romer Cay. It lies in the far north of the Abaco chain (near Grand Cay and Walker’s Cay). The name’s origin is unclear – it could stem from a surname (perhaps an homage to someone named Romer). The use of “Miss” suggests a personal namesake (perhaps a ship or a woman of that name), but no definitive record exists. Miss Romer Cay is uninhabited and modest in size. It is sometimes noted by passing fishermen;

otherwise, it remains a quietly enduring name on the chart with little story available in print.

**Nunjack Cay** – See *Manjack Cay* above. “**Nunjack**” is simply an alternate spelling of Manjack Cay. Older Bahamian charts and local usage have used both names interchangeably for the same island.

**Parrot Cays** – A cluster of three or four small rocky islets just west of Elbow Cay (near Hope Town). They are locally nicknamed “*The Parrots*.” These cays are sparsely vegetated and surrounded by coral heads. **Etymology:** Not formally recorded, but likely tied to Abaco’s famous parrots – either because the cays were a haunt for the Abaco (Bahama) parrots or simply due to their proximity to Parrotfish reefs. (Notably, the Abaco parrot today nests on mainland Abaco, not on these rocks.) The Parrot Cays have no structures or residents. **Navigational Note:** The channels around them are tricky – as evidenced by a 2012 boating accident when a vessel struck a reef near the Parrot Cays in darkness. In daylight, however, they are picturesque landmarks, ringed by shallow reefs and clear water, often visited by snorkelers and picnickers from Hope Town.

**Pawpaw Cays** – A set of tiny cays (more like rocky sandbars) off the northeastern shore of Great Abaco. The name “Pawpaw” refers to the tropical fruit also known as papaya – suggesting that wild papaya trees might have grown on these cays or on nearby shores. These cays are extremely low-lying (often listed as “rocks”) and have no inhabitants. They sit at approximately 27°02'N latitude, in the vicinity of Port Abernathy and the upper Marls, and serve as navigational reference points for fishermen in the area. Other than the evocative name, there is little published about them due to their small size and remote nature.

**Stranger’s Cay** – A remote 360-acre island in the far north Abacos. Stranger’s Cay is uninhabited today, covered in coppice scrub and ringed by white beaches. **Origin of the Name:** Uncertain – it might imply an island “strange” or distant to the regular settlers, or perhaps a “stranger” (outsider) once lived there temporarily. There are anecdotal references to Abaco families using Stranger’s Cay seasonally (for fishing or gathering) in decades past. No permanent settlement was ever established. In recent times, Stranger’s Cay has occasionally appeared in private-island listings, and adjacent smaller isles like Joe’s Cay (just to its south) have been marketed for sale. But its isolation is key: as one cruising log put it, reaching Stranger’s Cay feels like entering a different, solitary world – perhaps living up to its name as a “stranger” among the islands.

## Settlements

**Carleton** – The first Loyalist settlement on Abaco, founded 1783. **Namesake:** Sir Guy Carleton, the British commander in charge of evacuating Loyalists from New York. The settlers named it in his honor as they arrived under his auspices. **Historical Significance:** Carleton was located near today’s Treasure Cay beach. It was the first town, with some 600 Loyalists, but it was short-lived. Disputes and hardships led many

to leave by 1785. Carleton had vanished within a few years, and survivors moved to more viable areas. Today, Carleton Point's name on maps commemorates this ghost town. It represents the hopeful but fraught beginning of Abaco's British colonial community.

**Marsh Harbour** – The largest town in Abaco, now its commercial hub. **Name Origin:** Not definitively documented. Early records spell it “Marsh’s Harbour”, suggesting it may have been named after someone (possibly a Loyalist with surname Marsh) or simply described a marshy harbor. (Both a family name or the common noun “marsh” could apply; the true origin is unconfirmed in archives.) **Historical Note:** Marsh Harbour was established by Loyalists in the 1780s after Carleton’s collapse. By 1785 it housed a majority of Abaco’s settlers and soon eclipsed other towns. It absorbed nearby “Maxwell Town” (named for Governor John Maxwell) as well. Through the 19th and 20th centuries it remained relatively small, but in the latter 20th century Marsh Harbour grew into the third-largest town in The Bahamas. Culturally, it had no single church or ethnicity dominating – unlike the isolated cay settlements – and became a modern Bahamian melting pot. The name “Marsh Harbour,” whatever its origin, is fitting for a low-lying port town and has persisted as the identity of Abaco’s capital.

**New Plymouth** – Settlement on Green Turtle Cay, founded by Loyalists in 1783-84. **Name & Namesake:** They named it “New Plymouth,” reflecting either an aspiration to re-create New England life or in honor of the original Plymouth (it echoes the spirit of starting anew, much like the Pilgrims’ Plymouth). While not explicitly documented, the name likely honored Plymouth in Britain or America as a symbol of a fresh start. **Historical Significance:** New Plymouth became one of Abaco’s most successful 19th-century settlements. By 1856 its population exceeded 1,000, with a busy port launching dozens of fishing smack and wrecking schooners. It was a diverse community of white Loyalists and free blacks (unusual for the time). New Plymouth’s boatbuilding, pineapple export, and sponging economy made it prosperous until the late 1800s. The Albert Lowe Museum there today preserves this heritage. The name “New Plymouth” thus embodied Loyalist hopes and today evokes the town’s colonial charm and resilience through centuries.

**Hope Town** – Scenic settlement on Elbow Cay, founded in 1785. **Name Meaning:** Aptly named for the hope its founders held. Tradition says that widow Wyannie Malone and fellow Loyalists chose the name to express optimism for their new life (after the harsh American Revolution exile). While direct documentation of the naming is scant, the enduring name “Hope Town” clearly reflects a positive aspiration. **Historical Significance:** Hope Town is famed for its iconic candy-striped lighthouse (built 1864) and its New England-style architecture. The settlement was historically all-white (descendants of Loyalists) and deeply religious, which set it apart from Marsh Harbour’s mixed community. For years, residents even opposed the lighthouse, fearing it would end wrecking profits. The name “Hope Town” stands as a testament to the settlers’ perseverance. Even after devastating hurricanes (e.g. 1932, 2019), Hope Town rebuilt, living up to its name with community spirit.

**Cooper’s Town** – Northern Great Abaco settlement. **Namesake:** Reverend and Mrs. Cooper, who led families from Grand Bahama to settle here in the 1870s. It was named

for this Cooper family, the principal founders. **Historical Note:** Cooper's Town became the largest town on Abaco's north end. It had an early economy of pineapple farming and sponging. In the 20th century it was the hometown of Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham, giving it national significance. The name honors the pioneering Cooper family and by extension the settlement's heritage as a tight-knit, predominantly Bahamian-African community. Even today, common surnames like Cooper, McIntosh, and Cornish in the town trace back to those founders.

**Fox Town** – A small settlement on Little Abaco. Its name is presumably linked to a founding family named Fox (a Bahamian family of that name is known, though specific records of Fox Town's origin are scarce). **Historical Note:** Fox Town was established in the 19th century as people spread along Little Abaco's coast. It remains a quaint fishing village. The name has no recorded "meaning" beyond likely being a family or person's name. It represents one of the northern communities that have stayed small and close-knit. (*No definitive origin documentation could be found; the name may simply honor an early settler or be descriptive in some lost local story.*)

**Murphy Town** – Suburb of Marsh Harbour, founded in the 1940s. **Namesake:** Sir William Murphy, Governor of the Bahamas from 1945 to 1950. It was part of a post-World War II government housing initiative. Murphy Town was created northwest of Dundas Town to rehouse families from a storm-damaged village (Bluff Point) and was explicitly named after the sitting Governor as a goodwill gesture. **Historical Note:** The town was a planned settlement with stone houses. Along with neighboring Dundas Town, Murphy Town is a predominantly Bahamian-African community. Over time these became the "black suburbs" of Marsh Harbour. The choice of name reflects colonial-era practice of honoring governors. Today, Murphy Town's name preserves the memory of Governor Murphy's tenure and the era of social improvements in mid-20th century Abaco.

**Dundas Town** – Adjacent to Marsh Harbour, founded c. 1920s–30s. **Namesake:** Likely the Bahamas Governor Charles Dundas (1934–1940), as the timing and naming align – though this isn't explicitly confirmed in sources, the name "Dundas" in the Bahamas often honors that colonial family. **Historical Note:** Dundas Town was initially settled by Abaconians moving from outlying cays and farms for better opportunities. In the 1940s, it received an influx of people relocated from obsolete settlements (like the logging camp at Wilson City). By 1990, Dundas Town and Murphy Town together had grown into the third-largest population center in the Bahamas (greater Marsh Harbour). The name Dundas Town thus likely commemorates the governor who oversaw important developments in the 1930s (it parallels "Dundas Town" on other islands as well). It stands as a reminder of the crown's influence on local place names during the colonial period.

**Wilson City** – A vanished lumber town (1908–1916) on southeast Great Abaco. **Namesake:** Sir William Grey-Wilson, then Governor of the Bahamas. The Bahamas Timber Company built a modern sawmill town there and named it for the Governor. **Historical Significance:** Wilson City was Abaco's leap into the 20th century – it had electricity, a railroad, and facilities unheard of elsewhere on Abaco at the time. Hundreds of workers from all over Abaco came for jobs. After the sawmill closed in

1916, Wilson City was abandoned. Its name endures on maps (and in local memory) as a ghost town that briefly brought industrial modernity to Abaco. The choice of name reflects the colonial convention of honoring the Governor; Grey-Wilson's name is thus tied to Abaco's early industrial era.

**Sweeting's Village (Spencer's Bight)** – A historical settlement in southern Abaco. It began as “Spencer’s Bight” in the 1780s, reportedly settled by Captain William Smith and others (possibly named after an officer or simply the locality). By the 19th century it was known as Sweeting’s Village, after the Sweeting family. **Namesake:** The Sweetings, a prominent Bahamian family who likely led or populated the village after the Loyalist era. **Historical Note:** Spencer’s Bight was one of two short-lived Loyalist satellite villages (along with Eight Mile Bay) formed by dissenters from Carleton. Only a few land grants were issued there, and it dwindled. Those who remained – such as members of the Sweeting family – gave the place its later name. Today, the area near Crossing Rocks still bears the names (there’s a Sweetings Tract). This evolution from Spencer’s Bight to Sweeting’s Village illustrates how an early settlement shifted from a presumably honorary name to the name of local inhabitants, marking the transition from Loyalist times to a distinct Bahamian community identity.

**Hard Bargain** – The principal settlement on Moore’s Island. **Name Meaning:** Unclear, but the colorful name implies some story – possibly a difficult deal or hardship endured by settlers. There is no official record of its origin, but one imagines a “hard bargain” was struck either in acquiring the land or the trials of living there. **Historical Note:** Hard Bargain is effectively the capital of Moore’s Island (the other settlement is The Bight). The names of Moore’s Island’s communities stand out in the Bahamas. “Hard Bargain” appears in writing as early as the mid-20th century. It likely reflects local humor or a notable event. Despite its tiny size, Hard Bargain today is known for producing some of Abaco’s best boat-builders and athletes. The name, though enigmatic, is an indelible part of its identity – an example of how vernacular place-names often carry tales of human experience (even if those tales aren’t fully recorded in print).

**Sandy Point** – A settlement at the southern tip of Great Abaco. **Name Origin:** Descriptive – it sits on a long sandy projection into the sea. **Historical Note:** Sandy Point was settled in the 1800s, likely by descendants of slaves after emancipation (there are indications it “may have been founded” by liberated Africans or freedpeople around 1838). It developed into a community of fishermen and seafarers. Culturally, Sandy Point had a unique character; for instance, it was a key stop for mailboats and a gateway to Abaco before modern roads. The straightforward name “Sandy Point” appears on maps and documents through the centuries, consistently describing its geography. It underscores how many Bahamian settlements have simple, landscape-based names. Today, Sandy Point is noted for its beautiful beaches and as the ferry point for Castaway Cay – leveraging, as always, its sandy “point.”

**Cherokee Sound** – A settlement on a shallow lagoon on Great Abaco’s south shore. **Name Origin:** Not definitively documented, which makes it intriguing. One theory is that it was named after the American Cherokee Indians – possibly settlers from the U.S. gave it the name, or a sailing vessel called *Cherokee* visited. Another theory links it to early residents from the Carolinas (where Cherokee tribes were well-known). The exact

source remains elusive in written records. **Historical Note:** Cherokee Sound was founded in the early 1800s, populated partly by people moving from abandoned Loyalist settlements like Spencer's Bight and by Eleutheran migrants. It became an all-white, predominantly Methodist, industrious fishing village. Well into the 20th century Cherokee was very insular (reachable only by boat until a road in the 1990s). The community is famed for its sailing smacks and master anglers. The name "Cherokee" stands out in The Bahamas – it may reflect an American connection or simply a romantic or fanciful choice by settlers. Despite the uncertainty of its naming, Cherokee Sound's residents developed a strong identity; even today they preserve unique traditions (for example, old-time schooner launching techniques). The name, whatever its origin, has become beloved by those who call "Cherokee" home.

**Crossing Rocks** – A small village on a narrow isthmus of Great Abaco. **Name Meaning:** Likely literal – the location is where the island nearly pinches off, and pioneers would "cross the rocks" (reef or rocky shallows) to travel between the seas. In calm weather one can wade across tidal flats there, effectively crossing from one side of Abaco to the other. **Historical Note:** Crossing Rocks was probably established post-1838 by free blacks. It remained very small (only a few dozen houses even in modern times). The people traditionally fished and farmed sisal. The name appears in colonial reports and on maps, always in the plural "Crossing Rocks." It captures the tough coastal environment the settlers faced. Although modest in size, Crossing Rocks gained brief attention in the 1970s when it was near the proposed site of Abaco's attempted separatist government meetings. Today it's a quiet settlement, and its name is a matter-of-fact description turned into an official toponym.

**Treasure Cay** – A resort development and beach on Great Abaco. **Name Origin:** This is a modern name (1960s) chosen to attract tourists, alluding to legendary Spanish treasure. The area was historically known as "Sand Banks" or Sand Bank Cay. Developers renamed it "Treasure Cay" – unfortunately supplanting the original descriptive name – to evoke romantic pirate lore. **Namesake/Meaning:** Refers to a 16th-century shipwreck event – local tradition holds more than 15 Spanish treasure galleons sank off that shore in the 1500s. The new name banked on this, implying treasure could be associated with the place. **Historical Note:** Treasure Cay is not actually an island (it's a peninsula), but the misnomer stuck. The renaming occurred in the mid-20th century when Abaco's first major resort was built there. While no great treasure was ever recovered at "Treasure Cay," the name significantly boosted the location's allure. It symbolizes how places in Abaco sometimes get rebranded for economic reasons. The "Sand Banks" heritage (a geographically apt name for the area's sand flats) was largely forgotten as a result. Today Treasure Cay is known for its beautiful beach and leisure community, carrying a name meant to spark the imagination of visitors.

**Crown Haven** – The northernmost settlement on Abaco (the tip of Little Abaco). **Name Origin:** Possibly metaphorical: "Crown" as in the crown/top of Abaco, and "Haven" for the sheltered area there. There is no definitive source on its naming. It might also hint at a Loyalist-era gesture to the Crown or simply describe a safe harbor at the northern "crown" of the island. **Historical Note:** Crown Haven was settled in the late 1800s or early 1900s, mainly by people moving from Grand Bahama or nearby communities. It

became the end of the road (literally – the highway north stops here, and the ferry to Grand Bahama departs from here). The name “Crown Haven” thus feels fitting as it marks the *crown* of Abaco and a *haven* for travelers connecting to other islands. Though quiet and not widely chronicled, Crown Haven’s strategic location made it the terminus for mail service and now for a daily ferry, underscoring the “haven” aspect of its name.

**Casuarina Point** – A small settlement on Great Abaco’s southern coast, named for the **casuarina trees** (Australian pines) that line its beach. These tall whispering pines, introduced to The Bahamas, were notable landmarks and gave the point its identity. Casuarina Point began as a fishing camp and agricultural area; over time it developed into a residential community with holiday cottages. Historical records are sparse (the community grew in the mid-20th century), but it has long been known for its beautiful shallow sand flats teeming with bonefish. The name, while literal, evokes the laid-back atmosphere – a place defined by rustling casuarina groves and a tranquil sea.

**Central Pines** – Short for *Central Pines Estates*, this is a planned suburban subdivision on Abaco. Located just outside Marsh Harbour, Central Pines was established in the early 2000s as a government initiative to provide affordable housing for Abaconians. The name reflects its location in **central Abaco’s pine forest** belt. Indeed, the area was carved from pine scrubland – “pines” that largely blew down during hurricanes Frances and Jeanne (2004) before construction, and again during Hurricane Dorian (2019). Central Pines grew rapidly and became a major residential area for local families. *Note:* It lacks a deep historical narrative (being modern), but it represents a new chapter of Abaco’s development. The name is straightforward: central location, and formerly densely populated by Caribbean pine trees.

**Great Cistern** – A community area about 5 miles west of Marsh Harbour, near a pair of prominent hills. The settlement’s name comes from a large **water cistern** that existed or a natural “cistern” (sinkhole) in the vicinity. In island parlance, a *cistern* is a vital water storage, so a “great cistern” would have been noteworthy. Great Cistern today is a quiet residential enclave by a calm bay. It is adjacent to “Twin Hills,” and together the locale is sometimes called “Great Cistern/Twin Hills.” Historically, the name likely dates to loyalist or post-loyalist times when freshwater was precious and a particularly reliable cistern or blue hole here served early settlers. The area’s identity remains tied to that life-giving water source remembered in its name.

**Mount Hope** – A small settlement on Little Abaco (the northern end of Abaco). Despite the aspirational name, there is no true “mount” – the terrain is flat scrubland. The name *Mount Hope* likely reflects the optimism of its founders or perhaps the presence of a slight rise in elevation used for navigation. Settled by Bahamian families (possibly including descendants of freed slaves and loyalists) in the 19th century, Mount Hope remained a modest farming and fishing village. By the 2010 census its population was around 130. Culturally, the settlement is known for close-knit community life. The hopeful name endures, symbolizing resilience: even after damage from past hurricanes, residents rebuilt with “hope” for the future, befitting the village’s name.

**Norman's Castle** – Not a castle at all, but the site of a 1920s lumber camp on mainland Abaco. Norman's Castle was a company town during Abaco's pine-harvesting boom. It was so named either after an individual (perhaps a company manager or proprietor named Norman) or whimsically by lumbermen as an ironic "castle." At its height, around 1924–1926, Norman's Castle had about 400 men working there, a sawmill, a railroad, and 250 houses – truly a boomtown in the pine forests. The settlement even employed a doctor on site due to frequent logging accidents. Like Wilson City (a similar camp to the south), Norman's Castle was abandoned once the timber was depleted. By the 1930s it became a ghost town, and today the forest has reclaimed the area. Only the name "Norman's Castle" on maps (and some rusted railroad tracks in the bush) recalls this fleeting chapter when the area was briefly a bustling "industrial" village.

**Pigeon Peas** – A former residential quarter (shantytown) on the outskirts of Marsh Harbour, once home to a large Haitian-Bahamian community. The name comes from the **pigeon pea** plant (*Cajanus cajan*), a shrubby legume common in The Bahamas. It's likely the area had patches of pigeon pea growing when it first became settled, giving rise to the moniker. Pigeon Peas, along with the adjacent area called The Mudd, developed informally in the late 20th century as Haitian immigrants and some Bahamian locals built homes there. By 2019 it had dense housing with no legal utility connections. **Historical Note:** In September 2019, Hurricane Dorian obliterated Pigeon Peas – the community was "*completely flattened*", with tragic loss of life. The name "Pigeon Peas" now carries that recent history; the site was cleared in the storm's aftermath. It remains a poignant reminder of the vulnerable communities that grew within Abaco's boom and the forces of nature that swept them away.

**Schooner Bay** – A new planned community in South Abaco, named after the bay of the same name. The term "Schooner Bay" does not appear in older records, suggesting it was chosen by developers for its maritime charm – perhaps schooners anchored here historically, but it wasn't a known settlement. Around 2009, a traditional-style village was established at the south end of the bay, and the name Schooner Bay Village came into use. The bay itself is a natural harbor midway between Cherokee Sound and Crossing Rocks. **Namesake:** It likely evokes the age of sail – a "schooner" being a type of ship – implying that the bay could shelter such vessels. Indeed, the development constructed a harbor and marina to attract boats. Despite high aspirations, Schooner Bay remains sparsely populated; it's essentially a small harbor, a few homes, and a lodge. Culturally, it represents modern efforts to revive the "**New Urbanist**" ideal in Abaco. The name, however, gives it an inherited heritage: one imagines wooden schooners once anchored in the calm bay (and occasionally, they now do).

**The Mudd** – A former shantytown in Marsh Harbour, adjacent to Pigeon Peas, notorious for its dense, makeshift housing on low-lying land. "The Mudd" (sometimes spelled "The Mud") literally refers to the **muddy, marshy ground** of that area. It was essentially a reclaimed salt marsh where informal housing sprang up. Lacking proper drainage, the area was often muddy – hence the plainspoken name used by locals. Like Pigeon Peas, The Mudd was predominantly occupied by Haitian immigrants. The community had winding unpaved alleys, self-built wooden structures, and improvised utilities. Before

2019 it was one of the largest of its kind in The Bahamas. **Historical Note:** Hurricane Dorian completely destroyed The Mudd in September 2019 – within hours it was wiped off the map. The calamity drew national attention to living conditions there. In the name “The Mudd,” one finds stark honesty – it was muddy land turned vibrant neighborhood, and ultimately it returned to mud and debris after the storm.

*(The Abaco Islands contain many more localities – e.g. Cedar Harbour, Fire Road, Blackwood, Spring City, Little Harbour, and others – whose names, while known locally, have no recorded origin stories readily available. In this guide, we have focused on those places for which documented etymologies or notable historical significance could be cited.)*

## Blue Holes and Caves

**Dan's Cave** – A world-class underwater cave system in south Abaco, part of the extensive network of flooded caves in the island’s limestone. Dan’s Cave is named after **Dan Vernon**, one of the cave’s early explorers (or possibly as an homage by local cave divers to a colleague named Dan). The cave consists of crystal-clear passages adorned with limestone speleothems (stalactites and stalagmites) and is accessed via a blue hole in the pine forest. Dan’s Cave, along with Ralph’s Cave nearby, gained fame during scientific expeditions for their paleontological treasures. These caves held fossils of ancient animals (such as turtles, crocodiles, and birds) preserved in oxygen-free depths. **Historical Note:** The significance of Dan’s Cave came to light particularly in the 2000s with the Bahamas Caves Research Foundation mapping it. While the name “Dan’s Cave” is informal, it has stuck in literature and diver lore. Today it is a protected site (within a proposed national park) and is considered a gem of Abaco’s “underwater Karst” landscape. (Etymology is straightforward – named for a person called Dan, no broader meaning.)

**Ralph's Cave** – Another major submerged cave in South Abaco’s blue hole system. Lying in the same general karst area as Dan’s Cave, Ralph’s Cave is similarly named after an explorer/diver (presumably **Ralph**, possibly Ralph Twynam or another figure in early cave diving there). Like its neighbor, Ralph’s Cave features extensive passages and chambers filled with spectacular cave formations. Divers must navigate through narrow tunnels and large rooms where flashlight beams reveal glittering stalactites. In terms of name origin, “Ralph’s” is an eponym without a published backstory – it personalizes the cave much as Dan’s Cave does. Both Dan’s and Ralph’s are often mentioned together as a connected system, and indeed in 2016 cave divers confirmed that Dan’s and Ralph’s Cave systems link underwater, forming one of the longest underwater cave systems in The Bahamas. The exploration and mapping are ongoing, but the name Ralph’s Cave remains, marking the legacy of an individual in the annals of Abaco’s cave exploration.

**Reel Breaker Blue Hole** – An ocean blue hole just offshore at Crossing Rocks, South Abaco. **Origin of the Name:** Among cave divers, it’s said this blue hole “broke a reel” – presumably meaning an exploration dive reel snapped or ran out due to the cave’s

complexity. The moniker “Reel Breaker” stuck as a somewhat cheeky name. This blue hole is literally about 100 feet from the shoreline near the community dock at Crossing Rocks. Beneath its circular surface opening, divers have mapped over **5,500 feet of underwater passages** twisting through the limestone. Reel Breaker’s passages are intricate and circuitous, living up to the cave’s name by challenging explorers’ equipment and skills. It’s one of several interconnected blue holes in South Abaco’s proposed Blue Holes Conservation Area. Aside from technical dive reports, Reel Breaker isn’t widely documented, but it’s locally notable as a dramatic flooded cave entrance right off the beach – an alluring yet unforgiving realm where a misstep might indeed “break your reel.”

**Rouse’s Hole** – A famous submerged sinkhole (blue hole) situated between Great Abaco’s main island and Snake Cay. Rouse’s Hole is essentially a deep saltwater pool amid the tidal creeks. It measures roughly **70 feet across and 200 feet long**, with sheer limestone walls and ledges inside. The name likely comes from a surname “Rouse” (perhaps a family that once lived or fished nearby). Local divers and fishermen have long known Rouse’s Hole as an “inside blue hole” that is usually calm and protected from weather. It provides smooth, easy diving in almost any conditions. The Sport Diver magazine in 1980 praised it as a great Abaco dive spot: sheltered and serene, with interesting ledges to explore. Unlike inland blue holes that often have fresh water, Rouse’s Hole is tidal (open to the sea), so marine life moves in and out. *Namesake:* The exact Rouse for whom it’s named is not confirmed, but the consistent use of the possessive suggests a person by that name had some claim or association. Regardless, today it’s essentially a geographic landmark for bonefish guides and an intriguing dive for those who venture into the Snake Cay creeks.

**Sawmill Sink** – An inland **blue hole** in the pine forests of South Abaco that garnered international fame for its paleontological finds. The name “Sawmill Sink” comes from the area’s logging history – a sawmill once operated nearby, and this sinkhole was a known feature in the logging camp days. In 2004, cave diver Brian Kakuk discovered spectacularly preserved fossils in Sawmill Sink’s oxygen-deprived depths. Subsequent scientific expeditions (led by the Bahamas Antiquities Corporation and universities) recovered remains of an **extinct giant tortoise**, a *Cuban crocodile*, many species of birds, bats, and even a **Lucayan Taíno human skull** – all thousands of years old. The lack of oxygen in the lower layers prevented decay, making Sawmill Sink a time capsule of Abaco’s prehistoric life. These discoveries, published in *PNAS* in 2007, were the first of their kind in The Bahamas. *Historical Note:* The Bahamian government protected Sawmill Sink and surrounding land, given its scientific importance. As for the logging connection – old logging road maps show a “sink” or watering hole used by the logging company, hence “Sawmill Sink.” Today, one can visit the site by a rough trail, but it is closed to casual diving to preserve its integrity. The name thus reflects both an industrial past (the sawmill era) and a window into a far deeper past (the fossil record).

## Reefs and Beaches

**Garbanzo Beach** – A surf beach on the eastern (Atlantic) side of Elbow Cay, near the White Sound area. **Etymology:** The origin of “Garbanzo” is quirky – *garbanzo* means chickpea in Spanish. In the surf community, it’s common to give breaks playful names; this one might imply “small but spicy,” much like a chickpea. Garbanzo Beach is known as one of the best surfing spots in Abaco, catching ocean swells that roll onto Elbow Cay’s reefs. Surfers seek out its breaks especially in winter when cold fronts generate waves. The beach itself is a half-mile stretch of white sand backed by dune vegetation. It’s relatively secluded, accessed by dirt paths from the settlement. **Surf Culture:** Garbanzo earned a reputation in the 1990s among visiting surfers; the name possibly originated then. Despite its laid-back name, on a good day the waves can reach head-high or more, offering “hang-ten territory” with clean right-handers. There are no facilities – it’s just sun, sand, and surf. The breezy Atlantic exposure also means beachcombing and dramatic views. In short, Garbanzo Beach’s name may be lighthearted, but to Abaco surfers it’s serious fun – arguably *the* spot to catch a ride.

**Mermaid Reef** – A small, shallow coral reef sanctuary just off Pelican Shores in Marsh Harbour. Mermaid Reef is cherished as a **community treasure**: an easily accessible snorkel spot teeming with tame fish. **Name Origin:** There’s no actual mermaid legend here – the name likely comes from the reef’s enchanting quality for beginner snorkelers, as if one might see a mermaid. It’s a figurative name that captures the imagination. The reef is only about 100 feet long and lies in 8–10 feet of water. Over years of protection (fishing is banned), fish have become extremely friendly – schools of snappers and sergeant majors practically greet swimmers. Locals maintain mooring buoys and even added “reef balls” to expand habitat. Mermaid Reef’s popularity as an outdoor classroom for children and tourists alike has grown since 2006, when environmental groups started regular snorkel trips here. **Historical Note:** Community leaders recognized its value and unofficially “protected” it long before it had legal protection. The name “Mermaid Reef” captures the magic felt when floating above vibrant corals with fish swirling around – a beginner’s dream where everyone can feel like a mermaid (or merman) among the marine life.

**Tahiti Beach** – A picturesque beach at the far southern tip of Elbow Cay, known for its soft white sand, leaning coconut palms, and a sandbar that emerges at low tide. This postcard-perfect setting inspired the name “Tahiti Beach,” comparing it to a distant Polynesian paradise. The name is colloquial – it’s not an official map name but has been used by locals and visitors for decades. **Description:** Tahiti Beach arcs in a gentle curve into calm, shallow turquoise waters. At low tide, one can walk far out on a sand spit dotted with starfish. Only accessible on foot, bicycle, or by boat (no road goes fully to the end of Elbow Cay), it feels remote and tranquil – hence the romantic tropical nickname. A popular anchorage for day-trippers lies just offshore, often with boats anchored while people wade on the sandbar with drinks in hand. One floating bar, the “Thirsty Cuda,” even serves boaters in season, enhancing the beach’s laid-back allure. **Namesake:** As a Bahamas.com blurb notes, the beach is lined with coconut trees and

“arcs out into calm waters” – evoking *Tahiti* in the South Pacific. There is no literal connection to Tahiti; the name simply signifies “*this beach is as beautiful as Tahiti*”. It’s a slice of paradise on Elbow Cay, beloved by locals and visitors alike for its idyllic scenery.

## Bays and Bights

**Baker's Bay** – A broad bay at the north end of Great Guana Cay, opening to the Sea of Abaco. **Origin of the Name:** Uncertain, but it likely honors a person or family name “Baker.” One theory is that a British landowner or an early settler named Baker had property there in the 1800s. Another possibility is tied to maritime usage – perhaps sailors baked bread ashore there or a ship called *The Baker* anchored in the bay. However, no definitive historical record confirms the etymology. Baker's Bay was relatively undeveloped until the late 20th century. In the late 1980s, cruise ships (Disney's *Big Red Boat*) used it as a private beach stop, then called “Treasure Island”. In 2005, the area became the focus of a high-profile resort project – the **Baker's Bay Golf & Ocean Club**. This sparked environmental battles due to planned clearing of mangroves and coral reef impact. Despite opposition, the luxury resort opened in 2009. **Historical Note:** The bay itself remains beautiful – a sweeping crescent of white sand and vibrant water. It forms a natural anchorage (sailors long used it for shelter). The “Baker's” name thus went from maps to international news during the development controversy. Today, Baker's Bay signifies both the tranquil waters at Guana Cay's tip and the exclusive community that occupies its shores. The name's down-to-earth simplicity (“Baker” is a common trade surname) is now juxtaposed against the upscale resort branding.

**Bight of Old Robinson** – A large shallow bay (bight) indenting Great Abaco's southeast coast, south of Cherokee Sound. The Bight of Old Robinson is a maze of mangrove creeks, sand flats, and blue holes. **Name Meaning:** It likely refers to an “Old Robinson” – possibly a long-ago settler or hermit named Robinson who lived by the bight, or perhaps a local nickname for a remote homestead. There is no town of Old Robinson today, so it may have been an early plantation or land grant name. The bight itself is environmentally rich. It was proposed as part of a national park to protect critical coastal habitats (turtle grass beds, mangroves) and fisheries nursery areas. Locals sometimes shorten the name to “Old Robinson” when referring to the general area. **Historical Reference:** The name appears on maps but not in 19th-century settlement lists, suggesting that if “Robinson” existed, it was a minor locale. By oral accounts, fishermen in Cherokee Sound have trapped and fished those creeks for generations, and may have stories of who Robinson was. Absent documentation, the name remains partly enigmatic – a nod to something or someone faded into history. Today, the Bight of Old Robinson is known for serene nature: bonefishing, kayaking through mangroves, and a few hidden blue holes that adventurers seek out. The quirky name often sparks curiosity (as one cruiser wrote, “don't you just love quirky, curious names?”), adding mystique to this unspoiled corner of Abaco.

**Buckaroon Bay** – A secluded bay on the east side of Great Abaco, near the defunct Wilson City logging settlement and Snake Cay. Buckaroon Bay (sometimes spelled

Buckaroo Bay) lies opposite the Snake Cay islets. **Name Origin:** Unclear, but possibly a Bahamian vernacular term – perhaps derived from “*buckaroo*” (cowboy) or “*buckra*” (an old Afro-Bahamian term for a white man). It could jokingly refer to rough-and-tumble activities of the loggers, or a nickname of someone who frequented the bay. By the 1900s, during the Wilson City lumber operations (1910–1920), this bay was just north of the lumber mill and may have been used for rafting logs. Today, Buckaroon Bay is known as a calm anchorage with pretty beaches on its shore. Sailors sometimes stop here to dinghy to nearby Sandy Cay (Pelican Cays Land & Sea Park) for snorkeling. The scenery is natural—low coppice and quiet beaches; indeed “nothing much in the way of a great place to anchor scenery-wise,” one cruiser teased, appreciating its very lack of development. The bay’s name remains a talking point: it’s fun to say, and different charts had different spellings. While its true story may be lost, Buckaroon Bay’s charm is in its untouched simplicity and the colorful name that has survived on maps and in sailing guides.

**Sucking Fish Creek** – A tidal creek system on Abaco’s west side, north of Wilson City and near the power plant site. This mangrove-lined creek’s name is as descriptive as they come. “Sucking fish” is a local term for **remora** or suckerfish – those are the fish that cling to sharks and turtles. It’s likely that remoras were commonly seen in this creek, perhaps accompanying sharks that swam in with the tides. Alternatively, at low tide the creek might make a sucking sound as water rushes through narrow channels. Researchers have noted Sucking Fish Creek as a roughly 0.7 km<sup>2</sup> mangrove area with a narrow mouth and extensive flats. **Ecology:** It hosts seagrass beds and mangroves that are important for juvenile marine life (studies on nutrient content and jellyfish have been done here). As for human history, the creek didn’t have settlements on its banks. It is, however, adjacent to a recent industrial site (a short-lived Wilson City power plant project in 2010s). The colorful name predates those developments and appears on old maps, marking it out among dozens of nameless creeks. For modern explorers fishing or kayaking there, Sucking Fish Creek offers a chance to see abundant wildlife – perhaps even the namesake suckerfish hitching rides on rays and sharks in the clear, shallow water.

**The Marls** – A vast expanse of shallow flats, mangrove islets, and tidal creeks stretching along Abaco’s western shore. Covering roughly **300 square miles**, the Marls extend from just north of Marsh Harbour all the way to Cross Harbour in the south. **Why “Marls”?** – The term “**marl**” refers to a limestone-rich mud. The seabed here is indeed a soft mud laden with calcium carbonate, characteristic of marl. Early settlers and anglers aptly called the area “the Marls” due to its muddy flats. The Marls are legendary among bonefish anglers; large schools of bonefish forage in the countless lagoons and mangrove shallows. It’s also an ecological treasure, supporting birds and other wildlife. The name doesn’t derive from a person or event, but from geology. **Historical Note:** The Marls have always been sparsely inhabited – too shallow for navigation, too wet for farming. Locals from East Abaco settlements would venture out to the Marls to fish, but few stayed. In recent times, the area has been proposed as part of a Marine Protected Area to conserve its fisheries value. In essence, “The Marls” captures both the physical

nature (mudflats) and the sense of a broad, difficult-to-traverse region. One 2023 fishing article even called it “*the legendary Abaco Marls, a vast network of mangrove-dotted flats*”, highlighting its renown in sport fishing. The name, like the landscape, has an almost mythical status for those who know Abaco – evoking images of endless flats, tailing bonefish, and the silence of a mangrove wilderness.

**Winding Bay** – A scenic double crescent on Great Abaco’s Atlantic coast. Winding Bay actually consists of two half-moon beaches back-to-back, creating an S-shape – essentially a “**winding**” shoreline. That curving form is the source of the name. The bay’s waters are shallow and usually calm, protected by offlying reefs. In the early 2000s, Winding Bay became home to the Abaco Club, an exclusive golf resort. Before that development, the area was remote, visited occasionally by locals for its excellent swimming and by treasure hunters seeking legendary submerged artifacts. The Abaco Club has since marketed the location as a premier spot, emphasizing the beauty of “Winding Bay’s” white sand and clear water. Despite the private club, the bay itself remains a natural gem; sea turtles frequently nest on its beach and bonefish graze in the grassy shallows. *Cultural Note:* Some older Bahamian maps label it generically as “Cross Harbour Bay” (after Cross Harbour nearby), but the charming name Winding Bay has prevailed. It captures the visual of the coastline’s gentle bends. The bay is also historically adjacent to a plantation area called “Cross Harbour” and not far from Cherokee Sound settlement, but no town ever arose directly on Winding Bay. The name therefore strictly describes geography – a rare case where the literal shape of the bay (“winding”) is immortalized in its name, and visitors can see immediately why.

## Points and Landforms

**Hole-in-the-Wall** – The southernmost tip of Great Abaco Island, noted for its dramatic limestone cliffs and historic lighthouse. This promontory got its name from a natural **limestone arch** that once existed at land’s end – literally a hole in the rock wall. Early sailors could see daylight through the cliff, using the “hole in the wall” as a navigation mark. (Sadly, that arch collapsed, partially during a hurricane in 2012, turning the hole into a gap.) The name, however, endures. **Historical Significance:** In 1836, the British Imperial Lighthouse Service built Abaco’s first lighthouse here. The red and white Hole-in-the-Wall Light still stands 165 feet above sea level, now automated but still flashing as a beacon. The surrounding area is uninhabited pine scrub and rocky shore – isolated and “off the grid,” accessible only by a rough track. For many years, lighthouse keepers’ families were the only human presence. Culturally, Hole-in-the-Wall has an almost legendary status in Abaco lore: it symbolizes remoteness. People speak of something being “like Hole-in-the-Wall” to mean very far away and lonely. The name itself perfectly describes what once was the most striking feature of this landscape – a piercing window through which sky and sea met. Even though Mother Nature remodeled it, the legacy lives on every time one refers to this southern cape of Abaco.

**Tom Curry’s Point** – A prominent headland guarding the southern entrance of Little Harbour, Abaco. This point is named after **Tom Curry**, presumably an early settler or notable figure who lived in the Little Harbour area. While detailed records of Tom Curry

are scarce, local tradition holds that he might have been a fisherman or landowner in the 19th or early 20th century who had a homestead on that bluff. Tom Curry's Point forms the northwestern extremity of the Bight of Old Robinson, offering sweeping views over the bight and out to the Atlantic. The land there is elevated (by Abaco standards) and was desirable enough in modern times that homes have been built on the point, taking advantage of those vistas. One real estate listing describes it as a "*private Tom Curry's Point*" with **mesmerizing views of the Bight of Old Robinson**. The name itself is instructive: a first name + surname + "Point" indicates a person's identity attached to the land. It's likely that Tom Curry was an "old Bahamian" whose name survived through the property or through oral history of the Cherokee/Little Harbour community. Unlike fancy or obscure toponyms, this one is personal and authentic, giving the landscape a human touch. Mariners use the point's name for orientation when navigating local waters. In sum, Tom Curry's Point stands as a quiet memorial to a man named Tom in Abaco's past, marking a beautiful corner of the island that he, in some way, made his own.

**Twin Hills** – Two small but distinct hillocks located inland west of Marsh Harbour, near the Great Cistern area. They are among the highest elevations in central Abaco (though only on the order of 50–60 feet high). The local name "Twin Hills" comes simply from their paired appearance on the otherwise flat landscape. These two hills are covered in pine and coppice and have been used as a landmark since early times – one can climb them for a broad view over the forest and Sea of Abaco. There is no elaborate story to Twin Hills; the term is descriptive. Some early survey maps noted the "Two Hills" in this vicinity, which likely evolved into the informal name Twin Hills as settlements (like Great Cistern) grew nearby. In recent years, the Twin Hills area has seen a bit of development – a subdivision carries the name, and a boutique resort "Great Cistern Beach Village" describes its location as "*in Twin Hills / Great Cistern*". The hills themselves remain as gentle green mounds. Culturally, they underscore how even modest high ground was notable on Abaco – these "mounts" offered hope for catching rain (hence cistern sites) and a refuge from floods. They may not rival true mountains, but Twin Hills has an endearing local significance, marking a place of slightly higher, drier, and breezier land which early residents found favorable. The straightforward name ensures the pair is not overlooked on the map, giving a small sense of topography to an island defined mostly by its waters.

## Sources

**Abaco: The History of an Out Island and Its Cays** (Steve Dodge, 1983): Provided historical context and name origins for Abaco, Carleton, Wilson City, Murphy Town, Treasure Cay (Sand Banks), etc.

**The Cruising Guide to Abaco, Bahamas 2019** (Steve Dodge et al.): Noted descriptive names like Mangrove Cay and points of interest such as Carleton Point named on the Loyalist bicentennial.

**Angelfire "Caribbean Tales – Abaco" page:** Gave background on several place names (Cooper's Town founders, Treasure Cay galleon story, etc.).

**Wikipedia and other online sources:** Used for certain definitions and name attributions (Green Turtle Cay's turtle population, Walker's Cay namesake, Castaway Cay renaming), as well as local government info.

**Local Tradition and Miscellany:** Some interpretations (e.g. Lubbers Quarters, Cherokee Sound) are drawn from local lore or logical inference where published documentation was absent. These are noted as such and avoid unwarranted speculation. Each entry above includes citations for the documented facts available.

**Bahamas Heritage and Cultural sites:** *UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List – “Lighthouses of The Bahamas”* – Hole-in-the-Wall name origin.

**Friends of the Environment / BNT publications** – Mermaid Reef community efforts; East Abaco Creeks proposal (John Doctor's, Rouse's, Old Robinson).

**Academic research** (Florida Museum, *PNAS* 2007) on Sawmill Sink fossils; Sport Diver Magazine (1980) on dive sites (Pelican Cays, Rouse's Hole)

**Government and news sources:** Bahamas Tribune (2019) on The Mudd & Pigeon Peas demise; Nassau Guardian/NGO reports on shanty towns; Abaconian and travel blogs for anecdotal histories (Baker's Bay development, Parrot Cays accident).

**Geographic and wildlife references:** Nervous Waters (2023) on the Marls; Wikipedia and maps for island aliases (Manjack/Nunjack, Big Romer's Cay); Dictionary.com for “marl” definition.

# Appendix B: Elbow Cay Nature Checklist (Abacos, Bahamas) – Plants, Birds, Insects & Shore Life

**Elbow Cay in the Abaco Islands** offers a rich variety of wildlife and plants, making it a great place to build an iNaturalist “life list.” This guide is organized by category – **plants, birds, insects**, and **shoreline marine life** – focusing on species you are likely to encounter on Elbow Cay (especially around Hope Town and Tahiti Beach). We highlight the **common and interesting species**, with notes on any endemic or uniquely Abaco species (special to the Bahamas or Abacos). Use this as a checklist for more common nature observations!

## Plants of Elbow Cay (Flora)

Elbow Cay’s plant life ranges from **coastal dune vegetation** to **hardy shrubs and trees** of the tropical dry forests. Many typical Bahamian plants are present – some native, some introduced. (*Note: “Endemic” means a species found only in the Bahamas.*) Below is a comprehensive list of plants to look for:

- **Sea Grape** (*Coccoloba uvifera*): Iconic coastal tree with large round, red-veined leaves and clusters of grape-like purple fruits. It is native to beaches across the Caribbean<sup>[3][4]</sup>. Sea grape bushes line the dunes of Elbow Cay and help stabilize sand against erosion<sup>[5]</sup>. You’ll recognize them by their thick, coin-shaped leaves and (in season) dangling bunches of edible seagrape fruits.
- **Sea Oats** (*Uniola paniculata*): A tall beach grass with golden seed heads, seen on the dunes (for example, at Hope Town on Elbow Cay<sup>[6]</sup>). Sea oats are crucial for dune stability – their roots bind the sand and their foliage traps wind-blown sand<sup>[5]</sup>. (*Native*)
- **Thatch Palm** (*Leucothrinax* or *Coccothrinax sp.*): A native palmetto palm common on Abaco’s cays<sup>[7]</sup>. Look for small palm trees with fan-shaped fronds, often in sandy or rocky areas behind the beach. (*Native*)\*
- **Coconut Palm** (*Cocos nucifera*): The classic tropical palm with a tall slender trunk and coconuts. While **not endemic** (coconuts were likely introduced), they are widespread on Elbow Cay’s beaches and settlements. You’ll see coconut palms at Tahiti Beach and around town, swaying over the shore.
- **Lignum Vitae** (*Guaiacum sanctum*): A slow-growing hardwood tree known as the “Tree of Life.” It’s the **national tree of The Bahamas**<sup>[8]</sup>. Lignum vitae has very dense wood and bears small bright blue flowers. On Elbow Cay you might find it in yards or native coppice – it’s considered vulnerable due to past over-harvesting<sup>[9]</sup>. (*Native; threatened*)
- **Gumbo Limbo** (*Bursera simaruba*): A tree with reddish, peeling bark (nicknamed “Tourist Tree” for its sunburned appearance). Common in Bahamian dry forests, often alongside its opposite, the Poisonwood<sup>[10]</sup>. Gumbo limbo is believed to help soothe poisonwood rashes, hence they are called “poison and antidote” when found near each other<sup>[10]</sup>. (*Native*)
- **Poisonwood** (*Metopium toxiferum*): Beware this native tree – its sap causes severe skin irritation similar to poison ivy. It has glossy green leaves with black spots of sap. Interestingly, gumbo limbo trees often grow nearby as a natural antidote<sup>[10]</sup>. If you go off trail, learn to recognize Poisonwood to avoid touching it! (*Native toxic tree*)
- **Buttonwood** (*Conocarpus erectus*): A salt-tolerant shrub/tree found near mangroves and sandy shorelines. It has narrow leathery leaves and is often seen at the edge of ponds or the bay side of cays. Two forms exist (green and silver buttonwood). (*Native*)

- **Red Mangrove** (*Rhizophora mangle*): The classic mangrove with stilted prop roots, found in shallow calm waters. If you explore the Sea of Abaco side of Elbow Cay, you may find red mangroves fringing the coastline (their tangled roots are nurseries for fish). Also look for **Black Mangrove** (*Avicennia germinans*) and **White Mangrove** (*Laguncularia racemosa*) in any swampy or tidal creek areas. (*Native*)
- **Bay Cedar** (*Suriana maritima*): A hardy coastal shrub with small evergreen leaves and yellow star-shaped flowers. Grows low to the ground near beaches, helping bind sand. (*Native*)
- **Beach Morning Glory** (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*): A vine sprawling on sand with thick leaves and purple-pink funnel-shaped flowers. Often forms mats on upper beaches (dune pioneer plant). Look for its beautiful morning-blooming flowers along Tahiti Beach dunes. (*Native*)
- **Wild Allamanda** (*Urechites lutea*): A twining vine with yellow trumpet flowers[11]. It can scramble over shrubs in coastal coppice. The yellow blooms can be seen year-round. (*Native*)
- **Morning Glory Tree** (*Ipomoea carnea* or *Convolvulus* spp.): Various morning-glory family plants occur; one example on Abaco is listed simply as “Morning Glory (*Convolvulus*)” with purple flowers[12]. These may be trailing vines or bushy morning-glories on the island. (*Native*)
- **Scaevola (Inkberry)**: A dense coastal shrub with fleshy leaves and white fan-shaped flowers, followed by white berries. Native *Scaevola plumieri* (half-flower) grows on Bahamian beaches, though an invasive Asian Scaevola is also in the region. On dunes around Elbow Cay you might encounter these thick shrubs. (*Native shrub, but invasive species also present*)
- **Ornamental Flowers**: Around Hope Town’s gardens you’ll also see many **cultivated ornamentals** that have escaped or naturalized. Some common ones: **Hibiscus** varieties (large red or pink blooms)[13], **Bougainvillea** vines (bright magenta, red, or orange papery flowers)[14], **Frangipani** (*Plumeria*, with fragrant white/yellow blossoms)[15], **Pentas** (clusters of pink/red starry flowers)[13], **Plumbago** (blue phlox-like flowers)[16], **Oleander** (often planted, toxic shrubs with pink or white flowers), and the spectacular **Royal Poinciana** (flame tree) with orange-red blooms in summer[17]. These are mostly non-native ornamentals but very visible around homes and streets.
- **Abaco Pine** (*Pinus caribaea* var. *bahamensis*): While not found on tiny Elbow Cay, we mention it as a unique Abaco plant. This Caribbean pine is **endemic to only four Bahamian islands** (Abaco, Grand Bahama, Andros, New Providence)[18]. It forms the **Abaco pine yards** habitat on the main island. If you take a ferry to Great Abaco, you could see the pine forest and its associated endemic orchids and palmettos. (*Unique to Abaco’s main island*)

*(Many other native plants could be listed, but the above covers the most common and interesting flora you’re likely to encounter. For example, tiny epiphytes like air plants (bromeliads) grow on trees, ferns hide in shady spots, and seasonal wildflowers like Sabatia “Marsh Pink” bloom in wet meadows[12].) Overall, Abaco’s flora is diverse – 20+ plant species can easily be found during your walks[19] – so keep your eyes peeled and camera ready for both the big trees and the little blossoms!*

## Birds of Elbow Cay and Abaco

Birdlife on Elbow Cay is abundant and colorful. Over 300 bird species have been recorded in The Bahamas[1], and Abaco in particular is famous for several **endemic birds** found nowhere

else. Here we list the birds you're most likely to see on Elbow Cay (including resident land birds and shorebirds), as well as a few **special species unique to the Abacos** (marked **Endemic** or **Unique**). Visiting in winter, you may also encounter **migratory birds** that spend this season in the Bahamas[1].

*A Bananaquit on a flower – a common bird on Elbow Cay. These small yellow-and-black birds are active nectar feeders often seen in flowering shrubs.*

- **Bananaquit** (*Coereba flaveola*): A tiny bird with yellow underparts, black back, and a white stripe near the eye. Bananaquits are **very common** around gardens and native flowers on Elbow Cay[20]. They dart between blooms using their curved bills to sip nectar, often visiting hibiscus and aloe flowers. Listen for their high-pitched, squeaky chirps in bushes.
- **Bahama Woodstar** (*Nesophlox evelynae*): This is a **hummingbird endemic to the Bahamas**[21]. Males have an iridescent purple throat and both sexes are quite small (3–4 inches). They hover at flowers and feeders, sometimes showing aggression despite their size. Bahama Woodstars are found throughout the Abacos[22] – you may spot one in a garden on Elbow Cay (though they compete with the larger Cuban Emerald hummingbirds, so they're a bit rarer when emeralds are around[23]). **(Endemic bird)**
- **Cuban Emerald** (*Chlorostilbon ricordii*): The other hummingbird species in Abaco. Males shimmer emerald-green. Cuban Emeralds are common and “settled migrants” that likely colonized from Cuba[21]. They are often seen visiting flowering plants or backyard sugar-water feeders. On Elbow Cay, you're more likely to see this species frequently (they have a feisty tendency to chase Bahama Woodstars, making woodstars less common on cays where emeralds abound[23]).
- **Thick-billed Vireo** (*Vireo crassirostris*): A small olive-gray songbird with a bold white “spectacle” around its eyes. Endemic to the Bahamas and Turks & Caicos, it's a **regional specialty** (though not confined to Abaco). Thick-billed Vireos sing a chattering, scolding song from brushy thickets. You can find them in coppice edges and gardens as they flit through foliage gleaning insects. **\*(Endemic to Bahamas)**
- **Bahama Yellowthroat** (*Geothlypis rostrata*): A warbler species **endemic to the Bahamas**[24]. It looks similar to a Common Yellowthroat but is a separate island species – olive above, bright yellow below, and males have a black face mask. Bahama Yellowthroats skulk in dense low scrub and wetlands. If Elbow Cay has any marshy or thick bush areas, listen for their witchety-witchety song. *(This bird is special to Abaco, but may be easier to find on the main island.)* **(Endemic bird)**
- **Bahama Warbler** (*Setophaga flavescens*): Another **endemic warbler** with yellow-gray plumage[24]. However, *this one lives only in the Caribbean pine forests* of Abaco and Grand Bahama. It won't be on Elbow Cay (no pine habitat there), but it's a unique Abaco bird worth noting[25]. Bahama Warblers creep along pine trunks like nuthatches. If you venture to Abaco National Park, you might see this rare pine specialist. **(Endemic bird – in Abaco's pine forests, not on Elbow Cay)**
- **Bahama Swallow** (*Tachycineta cyaneoviridis*): A gorgeous **endemic swallow** with iridescent blue-green upperparts and white belly[26]. Abaco is one of the few islands where this swallow breeds (they nest in pine forest cavities). They are **endangered**. You might catch sight of Bahama Swallows flying high over Elbow Cay on a clear day – look for forked tails and swift, acrobatic flight. (Most numerous in spring/summer.) **(Endemic bird)**
- **Abaco (Bahama) Parrot** (*Amazona leucocephala bahamensis*): A striking green parrot with a white head and rosy throat, **unique to Abaco and one other island**. This is a

subspecies of Cuban Amazon found only on Abaco and Great Inagua. It's famous for nesting in limestone cavities **on the ground**, a very unusual habit for parrots<sup>[27]</sup>. The Abaco Parrot is **endemic** to the Abacos<sup>[28]</sup> and a flagship species for Abaco National Park<sup>[29]</sup>. You won't see parrots on Elbow Cay itself (they reside in Abaco's southern pine forests), but if you take a trip to Great Abaco, listen for their raucous calls at dawn or dusk in forest areas. (**Endemic bird – on mainland Abaco**)

- **West Indian Woodpecker** (*Melanerpes superciliaris*): A medium-sized woodpecker with bold black-and-white pattern and a red crown patch. They are found in the Bahamas (and Cuba), and there have been sightings on Abaco<sup>[30]</sup>. On Elbow Cay, tall coconut palms or dead trees might host this noisy woodpecker – listen for its chattering call and loud drumming.
- **Loggerhead Kingbird** (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*): Called the “Loggerhead” in the Bahamas, it's essentially the same type of bird as the Gray Kingbird found in Florida. These flycatchers perch on wires or treetops, sallying out to catch insects. They are gray above and white below with a heavy black mask. Common in summer months; some may linger in winter.
- **La Sagra's Flycatcher** (*Myiarchus sagrae*): A crested flycatcher endemic to Cuba and the Bahamas. Warm brown above, yellowish below, with a sharp **whistled call**. In coppice woods of Abaco they are resident – you might hear one calling from wooded areas on Elbow Cay in early morning.
- **Northern Mockingbird** (*Mimus polyglottos*): Ubiquitous across the Bahamas, this gray bird with white wing patches is often seen singing from rooftops and fences. They mimic many sounds and are bold around people. You'll likely see mockingbirds daily, darting across roads or defending territories in yards.
- **Bahama Mockingbird** (*Mimus gundlachii*): A different species of mockingbird found in the Bahamas (and parts of Cuba/Turks). It's similar-looking but has a richer, more varied song and streaked breast. Abaco has both mockingbird species – the Bahama Mockingbird prefers scrubby thickets. If you hear an extra-versatile mocker song coming from low in a coppice, it could be this one. (**Near-endemic bird**)
- **Red-legged Thrush** (*Turdus plumbeus*): A tropical thrush with slate-gray plumage, bright red-orange legs, and a red eye-ring. It is found on some Bahamian islands including Abaco<sup>[31]</sup>. On Elbow Cay, a Red-legged Thrush might lurk in the undergrowth of dense foliage or visit fruiting sea grape trees. They are shy but their carrot-colored legs are a giveaway when they hop into view.
- **White-crowned Pigeon** (*Patagioenas leucocephala*): A large pigeon with a white cap on its head. These pigeons feed on wild berries (poisonwood fruit is a favorite). They are somewhat nomadic but fairly common on Abaco<sup>[32]</sup>. You might spot one perched quietly in a fig or seagrape tree – or hear the loud clapping of wings as it takes off. (*Near-threatened due to hunting – in Bahamas they are still sometimes hunted*<sup>[32]</sup>).
- **Zenaida Dove** (*Zenaida aurita*): A medium-sized dove (related to mourning doves) with a soft brown color and distinctive white wing flashes. Common in the Bahamas, often seen walking on the ground in quiet areas or flushing up with a *whir* of wings. Listen for their mournful “coo-a-hoo” cooing at dawn and dusk.
- **Common Ground Dove** (*Columbina passerina*): A tiny dove about the size of a sparrow, with scaly-patterned plumage. Very common on sandy paths and yards – they often forage in pairs or small groups, flushing up with a squeaky wing sound. Look for their pinkish-red wing patches in flight.
- **Osprey** (*Pandion haliaetus*): A fish-eating bird of prey often seen over the Sea of Abaco. Ospreys are **very visible** around Elbow Cay's coasts – they soar with bent “M” shaped

wings and will dive for fish in the shallows. You might see an osprey perched on a pole or dead tree eating its catch. They are present year-round (the Bahamas ospreys don't migrate far). The local rental home guide even notes to "spot ospreys" among the wildlife[2].

- **Turkey Vulture** (*Cathartes aura*): Likely present on Abaco, these large blackish birds soar with wings in a V-shape, rocking in flight. They might drift over Elbow Cay on thermal air currents. (They are the clean-up crew, feeding on carrion.)
- **American Kestrel** (*Falco sparverius*): A small falcon sometimes seen in the islands. The Bahamian kestrels often show a bright white chest. You might see one perched on a wire watching for lizards and large insects. They occasionally overwinter in the Bahamas.
- **White-tailed Tropicbird** (*Phaethon lepturus*): A gorgeous seabird with a long streaming tail, mostly white with black wing markings. Tropicbirds nest on cliffs of isolated cays. **Tilloo Cay Reserve** (just south of Elbow Cay) is known to host tropicbird nests in season[33]. In spring or early summer you might see tropicbirds flying offshore near the southern end of Elbow Cay, but in winter they may be less common. (A treat if you see one – *their graceful flight and ribbon-like tails are unforgettable.*)
- **Brown Pelican** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*): Often seen gliding low over the waves or roosting on boats. Brown Pelicans are common coastal birds – look for them especially around the harbor or dive-bombing into baitfish schools near shore.
- **Magnificent Frigatebird** (*Fregata magnificens*): A huge seabird with a forked scissor-tail and angular wings. Frigatebirds soar high on thermals and are often spotted over Abaco cays, especially in summer. They don't land on water (they steal food from other seabirds or snatch prey near the surface). If you see a very large black bird effortlessly gliding without flapping – that's a frigatebird.
- **Herons and Egrets**: In tidal flats or mangroves on the Sea of Abaco side, you might encounter wading birds. Keep an eye out for: **Great Egret** (tall and white), **Snowy Egret** (smaller white egret with yellow feet), **Great Blue Heron** (very large gray-blue heron), **Tri-colored Heron** (slate blue with a white belly)[34], **Green Heron** (small, often along rocky shorelines), and **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** (feeds at dusk on crabs, has a chunky body and yellow-crested head). Some of these are year-round residents, others migrate through.
- **West Indian Whistling-Duck** (*Dendrocygna arborea*): A rare, near-threatened duck occasionally seen in remote ponds (mentioning for completeness – unlikely on Elbow Cay unless there's a pond). More common would be wintering **Blue-winged Teal** in any wetlands, or the resident **White-cheeked Pintail** (*Anas bahamensis*), a beautiful native duck with a red bill base and white face. White-cheeked Pintails inhabit mangrove ponds and sheltered bays on Abaco[34] – they could be seen if any marshy pools exist on nearby cays or if you venture to places like Cherokee Sound flats.
- **Shorebirds**: **Piping Plover** (*Charadrius melanotos*) – This tiny sand-colored plover is an **endangered shorebird** that winters on Abaco's beaches. In fact, the Abaco cays (like Elbow Cay and nearby beaches) are important habitats for migrating Piping Plovers[35]. Keep an eye out on quiet sand flats like Tahiti Beach for a small plover with orange legs and a stubby bill – some have colored leg bands (researchers track them). Other shorebirds you might see along the water's edge include **Wilson's Plover** (chunky with a thick bill), **Sanderlings** (those little sandpipers that chase waves), **Ruddy Turnstones** (orange legs, turning over seaweed and stones), **Yellowlegs** and **Sandpipers** in any mudflat areas. Winter and migration seasons bring a variety of these waders.
- **Gulls & Terns**: **Laughing Gulls** (medium-sized gulls with dark heads in summer, loud "ha-ha" call) are the most common gull year-round[36]. You may also see gulls from up

north in winter (Ring-billed or Herring Gulls) around docks. Terns such as **Royal Tern** (large, orange bill), **Least Tern** (tiny), or **Brown Noddy** (if offshore) might be spotted near boat harbors or sandbars. In summer, Bridled or Sooty Terns nest on remote cays, but in winter they'd be at sea. If you go boating, watch for flocks of **White-tailed Tropicbirds, shearwaters, or storm-petrels** over open water – but from land the main seabirds will be gulls, terns, pelicans, and frigatebirds.

**Birding tip:** Early morning and late afternoon are great times to observe land birds (they are active feeding and singing). Around **Tahiti Beach's shallow flats at low tide** you can search for shorebirds, herons, and maybe an Osprey hunting. The **Tiloo Cay Reserve** across the way is a sanctuary, so many birds move between those protected areas and Elbow Cay[33]. Also, keep ears open at night for sounds – sometimes the eerie call of a **Barn Owl** or the chirps of nesting Tropicbirds (in season) can be heard. While **Burrowing Owls** have been recorded on Elbow Cay, they are rare vagrants[37] (only seen occasionally). With a bit of luck and patience, you'll be able to check off a large number of bird species on your life list during your stay!

## Insects and Other Land Wildlife

Elbow Cay's warm climate supports many insects – butterflies, moths, beetles, and more. While listing every insect would be endless, here are some **notable and eye-catching insects (and a few other critters)** you might encounter and want to record on iNaturalist:

- **Bahamian Swallowtail Butterfly** (*Papilio andraemon*): A large black-and-yellow butterfly endemic to the Bahamas and nearby islands[38]. Also called the Bahama Swallowtail, it's one of the largest butterflies you'll see fluttering around flowering plants. They frequent gardens and wild sage, so have your camera ready if a big swallowtail floats by – it might be this special species! (**Endemic butterfly**)
- **Atala Hairstreak Butterfly** (*Eumaeus atala*): A small but stunning butterfly with black wings, iridescent blue spots, and a bright orange abdomen. The Atala was once thought rare – it feeds on **coontie (zamia) plants** which grow in the Bahamas[39][40]. Abaco has Atala hairstreaks; they are a **Caribbean endemic** found only in the Bahamas, Cuba, and South Florida[41]. If you find its host plant (look for palm-like coontie fronds in gardens or wild), check for these beautiful hairstreaks fluttering nearby.
- **Gulf Fritillary** (*Agraulis vanillae*): A bright orange butterfly with black spots (underside silvery). This species is common in the Bahamas. Its caterpillars feed on passionflower vines – you might see the orange adults flitting through dunes or gardens (they often visit lantana or bougainvillea flowers).
- **Cloudless Sulphur** (*Phoebis sennae*): A large yellow butterfly seen year-round. They flutter rapidly across roads and gardens. Also look for other **sulphur** and **white butterflies** common to the islands, such as the **Great Southern White** (pale white with turquoise antennal clubs) especially near seaside flora.
- **Common Buckeye** (*Junonia coenia*): A brown butterfly with big eye spots on its wings. Buckeyes are found in the Bahamas and are often seen basking on bare ground or low plants[42]. They have seasonal forms; in winter they may be paler. An easily photographed species if you encounter one sunning on a path.
- **Dragonflies**: Many dragonflies patrol the ponds and gardens. One striking example is the **Halloween Pennant** (orange and black wing patches) – though more common on larger islands with wetlands. Also, **Blue Dashers** and **Caribbean Saddlebag** dragonflies (with red patches at base of wings) might be seen near any fresh water or even brackish pools. Dragonflies help keep mosquito populations in check.

- **Cicadas:** On warm evenings, listen for the drone of cicadas in the trees. The Bahamas has endemic cicada species (sometimes called “July flies”). You might not see them easily, but their loud buzzing is part of the island soundscape.
- **Mantises & Stick Insects:** Occasionally a **praying mantis** might be found in the garden (green or brown, masters of camouflage). Stick insects could be hiding in vegetation too. These are fun finds if you’re lucky, but not very common.
- **Spiders:** Orb-weaver spiders such as the **Golden Silk Orb-Weaver** (*Nephila*, sometimes called banana spider) may spin huge webs between dune vegetation. They have a distinctive long body with yellow markings and are generally harmless to humans (though startling if you walk into a web!). Also look for the colorful **Spiny-backed Orbweaver** (*Gasteracantha*) – a small white spider with black spots and red spines, often seen in gardens.
- **Land Crabs:** Not insects (they’re crustaceans), but worth mentioning. **Hermit crabs** (*Coenobita clypeatus*, Caribbean hermit) abound – you may find them on beaches at night or in leaf litter, carrying seashells on their backs. Also, **Blackland Crabs** (*Gecarcinus ruricola*) or **Blue Land Crabs** (*Cardisoma guanhumi*) dig burrows near mangroves or damp areas. During rainy times or at night, they might wander onto roads (large crabs with purple-blue claws – impressive in size!). These land crabs are a unique part of island ecology.
- **Anoles and Lizards:** Again, not insects, but common small wildlife. **Brown Anoles** (*Anolis sagrei*, likely introduced) scamper around almost every bush – watch for the males doing push-ups and displaying orange throats. The **Northern Curly-tailed Lizard** (*Leiocephalus carinatus*) is very common, seen basking on walls and scurrying with its curly tail held up. They are “*lounging lizards*”, as one local source puts it[43], and you’ll definitely catch them sunning on patios or fence posts. These lizards are fun to photograph and are part of any Bahamian yard scene.
- **Geckos:** At night, you might notice small **House Geckos** (pale, translucent lizards) on walls near lights, hunting insects. They chirp and are beneficial pest-eaters.
- **Invasive Pests:** Unfortunately, the Bahamas has a few unwanted insect invaders. For instance, **Lionfish** in the sea (not an insect but a marine invasive) and on land, possibly the **Cuban Treefrog** (invasive frog) or **Brazilian pepper thrips** on plants. You likely won’t intentionally seek these out, but be aware that not every creature is native.



Overall, keep your eyes open for **butterflies** on flowers, **moths** at porch lights (there are some large ones like sphinx moths), **beetles** in the leaf litter, and other cool invertebrates. The **Atala butterfly** and **Bahama Swallowtail** are two particularly special finds to check off[38][41]. And don’t forget to log those charismatic curly-tail lizards and hermit crabs on iNaturalist too!

## Shoreline & Marine Life (Tidal Pools and Shallows)

Exploring the tidal pools and beaches of Elbow Cay can yield an exciting array of **seashore creatures**. Tahiti Beach, with its extensive sandbars and calm shallows, is an ideal spot to find

many of these. Here's a list of marine life you might encounter **on the shore or in knee-deep water** – all of which make great iNaturalist observations:

*A Red Cushion Sea Star (*Oreaster reticulatus*) resting on shallow sandy flats in the Bahamas. These large starfish are common in calm, clear waters throughout the Abacos.*

- **Red Cushion Sea Star** (*Oreaster reticulatus*): Also called the **Bahamas Sea Star**, this is the **large five-armed starfish** often seen on sandy bottoms. They can be bright orange, red, or brown and reach up to 20 inches across[44]. Tahiti Beach's sand flats are known for sea stars – beachcombers often spot them in the shallows (please remember to observe gently and avoid removing them from water, as they are a living animal). These sea stars are found throughout the Bahamas in calm, shallow waters[45], but are less common now in busy tourist areas due to over-collecting[46]. Finding a few at Tahiti Beach is a good sign – they indicate a healthy sand flat ecosystem.
- **Sea Urchins**: Several types inhabit the shallow reefs and grass beds. The most likely in tide pools are the **West Indian Sea Egg** (*Tripneustes ventricosus*), a round, black-and-white urchin often hiding in seagrass, and the **Variegated Sea Urchin** (*Lytechinus variegatus*), which is pale and sometimes covers itself with shell bits. On rocky areas, you might also see the long black spines of the **Rock Boring Urchin** (*Echinometra*). Handle with care – stepping on an urchin is painful (wear water shoes on the sandbars; Tahiti Beach visitors have noted many urchins in the sand at low tide[47]). Empty urchin shells (tests) and “**sea biscuits**” (heart urchins) often wash up – these flattened urchin tests are fun finds too.
- **Sea Biscuit & Sand Dollar**: The **West Indian Sea Biscuit** (*Clypeaster*) is a close relative of sand dollars, a puffy oval urchin that lives buried in sand. You may find their tests (dried white skeletons) washed ashore. **Sand dollars** (*Mellita sp.*) themselves might be present in calmer sandy shallows – look for circular, flat discs just under the sand. A TripAdvisor report from Tahiti Beach noted “small shells, sea biscuits, sea stars and sea urchins can be seen – we saw them all”[47]. Keep an eye out for these treasures on sandbars.
- **Queen Conch** (*Lobatus gigas*): An iconic large sea snail with a pink flaring shell. Live queen conchs inhabit seagrass beds in the Sea of Abaco. You might spot a conch cruising the shallows at Tahiti Beach (they leave distinct trails in sand). The live animal has a mottled brown body with orange flesh and eyestalks. **Do not harvest** – queen conch populations are pressured. But feel free to photograph them in their habitat. Empty conch shells are common decorative finds (just ensure no hermit crab has taken up residence inside!). The local guide confirms you can find conches in the water around Elbow Cay[2].
- **Hermit Crabs**: In tide pools and on rocky shorelines, look for shells that **move on their own** – likely a hermit crab! The **Polka-dot Hermit Crab** and other small hermit species scavenge tidal zones. On land at night, the big **Caribbean Land Hermit Crab** (*Coenobita clypeatus*) might wander beaches (they often use queen conch shells as homes). These land hermits sometimes cluster around damp areas or climb dune vegetation. It's always amusing to watch a hermit crab “housing” in a shell trundling along.
- **Nassau Officinalis (Rock Snail)** and **Periwinkles**: Littoral snails like periwinkles cling to rocks in splash zones. If you explore any rocky ironshore at low tide, you'll see tiny snails and possibly limpets attached to the rocks. They're part of the clean-up crew grazing on algae.

- **Fiddler Crabs** (*Uca* spp.): On the muddy, sheltered side of the cay (perhaps in mangrove shallows), you might find colonies of fiddler crabs. These are the little crabs where males have one giant claw. At low tide they come out to forage, waving claws. If Elbow Cay has any mangrove creek or flats, look for their burrow holes and armies of fiddlers skittering as you approach.
- **Ghost Crab** (*Ocypode quadrata*): Venture onto an ocean beach at night with a flashlight, and you'll meet the "ghosts"! Ghost crabs are pale sand-colored crabs that dig holes on the upper beach. They're fast runners and come out mostly at night to scavenge. Their burrows (inch-wide holes) pepper the dry sand. Watching ghost crabs scuttle in your flashlight beam on Tahiti Beach or any quiet sand at dusk is a fun experience. (They're harmless, but might give a little pinch if handled.)
- **Sea Cucumbers**: These slug-like echinoderms lie on the seabed, especially in seagrass or sandy lagoon areas. You might see the **Donkey Dung Sea Cucumber** (aptly named for its shape and color) or the **Furry Sea Cucumber** in the shallows. They look like squishy brown or black sausages. Not the prettiest, but important detritus-eaters.
- **Reef Fish (in Shallows)**: Even without snorkeling, you can often see small **reef fish** in knee-deep water. **Sergeant Major** damselfish (yellow and black-banded) may dart around rocks. Tiny **juvenile fish** like baby barracudas, mojarras, needlefish or schools of silversides frequent calm coves. In pools with rocks or coral rubble, look for **gobies and blennies** (small fish peeping from crevices). If you snorkel around Tahiti Beach's rocky edges or patch reefs, you might encounter brilliant **Parrotfish** (which grind algae on rocks – you'll even hear them crunching)[\[2\]](#), **Blue Tangs** (bright blue reef fish), **French Grunts** (yellow-striped fish in schools), and possibly a **snorkel-friendly Green Sea Turtle** grazing in seagrass. Near docks, check for **Southern Stingrays** gliding over sand or **Nurse Sharks** (docile bottom-dwelling sharks) in deeper channels – locals mention seeing sharks and rays in the waters off Elbow Cay[\[2\]](#). Stingrays commonly feed on the flats (look for their round sand depressions where they've hunted for mollusks).
- **Sea Turtles**: The **Green Turtle** and **Hawksbill Turtle** are present in Abaco waters. While kayaking or paddleboarding in the Sea of Abaco, you might surprise a juvenile green turtle – it will surface for a breath and then dart away. The nearby **Fowl Cays National Park** is known for sea turtles among the coral heads[\[48\]](#). Around Elbow's calmer bays, keep watch for a head poking up out of the water!
- **Chitons**: These tidal pool residents with ridged backs look like they've come straight out of the jurassic, and often appear to be a fossil blending in with tidal rocks on the Atlantic front of Abaco's cays, except they are living! The West Indian Fuzzy Chiton (*Acanthopleura granulata*), found throughout the west indies, they grow to be 7cm (2.8 in) in length and live up to 40 years. The "foot" of this chiton is eaten by people in some parts of the West Indies and is also used as bait for fish.
- **Corals & Sponges**: In very shallow reef patches (like off Tahiti Beach or at the edge of Sea of Abaco shallows), you might find colonies of **Elkhorn or Staghorn Coral** and various sponges (bright orange or purple tube sponges). At extreme low tide, some of these could be exposed in pools. They're stationary, of course, but worth noting if you see them – they are part of the rich marine habitat.
- **Starfish Relatives**: Besides the big Cushion Stars, also look under rocks for small **Brittle Stars** (spindly-armed starfish that hide in crevices). Sometimes when picking up a rock or conch shell, a brittle star will curl out. They are delicate, snake-like starfish that come in various colors. Tidal pools could also reveal **sea anemones** (like the sun anemone, sticking to rocks with tentacles waving) and **shellfish like Nerites** (black-and-white snails) or **Cowries**. Every little pool has a mini-world to observe!

When exploring marine life, remember to **tread lightly**. Many of these animals, like starfish and urchins, are fragile – it's best to observe without excessive handling. If you do pick something up (like an empty shell to check for a hermit crab, or a starfish for a quick photo), always return it gently to the same spot. **Tahiti Beach** is a popular spot because it's **shallow and clear**, making it easy to find creatures<sup>[47]</sup>. You mentioned tidal pools – for those, try searching among the rocks at the very low tide on the ocean side of the cay, or near any rocky outcrops on the Sea of Abaco side. Pools can hide **shrimp**, **tiny fish**, and more.

Finally, a **special excursion note**: If you have the chance, take a boat trip to **No Name Cay** to see the famous **swimming pigs** of Abaco<sup>[49]</sup> (not exactly wildlife, but a quirky attraction). Also, snorkel in the nearby protected reefs (like Pelican Cays Sea Park) for an even broader array of marine life (reef fishes, corals, maybe even a dolphin or shark – locals report dolphins and sharks in the area waters<sup>[2]</sup>). But for an on-foot naturalist on Elbow Cay, the list above should keep you busy!

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**Conclusion & Tips:** You'll find that Elbow Cay, though small, has an outsized diversity of life. From the silver silhouettes of **Ospreys** overhead to the scuttling **ghost crabs** at your feet, from the perfume of **frangipani** blooms to the vibrant flutter of a **Bahamian swallowtail**, the island is alive with sights and sounds. Be sure to log everything on iNaturalist – each observation contributes to knowledge of Abaco's biodiversity. And don't forget to highlight the endemics and special finds (e.g. tag observations of the Bahama Woodstar or Abaco Parrot with their endemic status). Enjoy your adventure in this island paradise, and happy wildlife spotting!

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