

Rum Club Social Club  
13th Anniversary Banquet  
Pilot House Hotel, Nassau, N.P.  
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Rum Cay Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

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Madam President, Honoured Patrons, Distinguished Guests - - -

I am delighted at having been invited to briefly address you this evening on the 13th Anniversary of the Rum Cay Social Club, and I have chosen as my subject one dear to my heart, our hearts, the enchanting island of Rum Cay.

Rum Cay's history, as we know it, began in 1492, when Christopher Columbus, searching for a western route to Asia, made a landfall on 12th October at the Lucayan/Arawak inhabited island of Guanahani, which he renamed San Salvador. Two days later, on 14th October, he discovered another island 12 miles long and 5 miles wide at its furthest points, giving an area of about 30 square miles, which the Lucayans/Arawaks called Mamana, or Manigua, and he renamed it Santa Maria de la Concepcion (Blessed Virgin Mary), and which in later times was renamed Rum Cay.

Information on Rum Cay's early history is scant, since most books deal with the Bahamas as a whole and not with the separate islands, especially one as small as Rum Cay. There are some bits of information in different books though, which give clues to its past history.

Rum Cay was inhabited at the time of Columbus' arrival by the amiable Lucayan/Arawak Indians. Evidence of their existence on the island can be found in the Hartford Cave on the northern coast of Rum Cay. In coral walls, most of the drawings resemble faces or suns and are similar to drawings found in caves on some of the more southerly islands.

In times past, residents removing fertilizer (bat guano) from the cave, unearthed Indian bowls, plates and other artifacts. The Arawaks were awed by the sudden appearance of the Spaniards, thus treated them kindly, figuring they were sent from the heavens. Unfortunately for the Indians, they themselves became the greatest commodity the Spanish could find in the Bahama Chain. The small Bahamian Islands were too unprofitable with their treacherous shoals, compared to newly-discovered places such as Hispaniola, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru, where there were already sugar

fields, gold mines, and plantations in production. Where labor was needed to maintain those industries, the Arawaks were deceptively coaxed onto ships headed southward, where they believed their departed ancestors' souls rested. Through this practice, the Bahamas were cleared of their original inhabitants by 1513. Most of them died at their labor or through disease, starvation, or suicide. After the Spanish used up the Arawak labor supply, their interest in the Bahamas diminished.

Title to the Bahama Islands was given to Spain by the Pope after Columbus' discovery, but it was the English and Bermudans who, during the seventeenth century, first attempted to do any colonizing here. These attempts were very unstable though, because of the buccaneering, pirateering, and wrecking that were the primary enterprises of the times. The coral reefs of the many scattered islands provided a conveniently hazardous sea for the seamen to work in. With ships accidentally wrecking on the reefs and others being lured or forced into dangerous waters, it was a profitable business for the scavengers.

From 1670 to 1718 there were a series of twelve proprietary governors in Nassau. Charles II of England gave the Lord Proprietors of the Carolinas a charter to set up a government in the Bahamas comparable to the type in operation in the Carolinas. Despite the presence of the governors, the pirates were still the majority.

It was not until 1718, after the last of the twelve Proprietary Governors, that some order came to the settlement, with the arrival of Woodes Rogers. Rogers realized the strategic location of the Bahamas, its lack of leadership, and wanted to develop the islands. The Crown responded to his petition and genuine interest in the area, and pressured the Lord Proprietors into giving up their civil and military government of the Bahamas. Rogers proceeded then, with his background as a seaman and privateer, to pacify the area with the containment and ousting of the pirates.

In 1783 when the thirteen American colonies gained their independence, there was a migration of Loyalists to the Bahamas because they wanted to remain under British rule. Many of them were southern planters with their slaves, which caused the plantation system in the Bahamas to expand tremendously. So many people moved in, that the population of the islands tripled, three quarters of the total being slaves. (Craton 1963:163) With this great influx of people, several of the Out Islands were settled for the first time. The population of the Bahamas continued

to increase through the end of the eighteenth century, as slaves were brought in to fill the need for plantation labor. In 1787 with the Bahamas proceeding so well, the Lord Proprietors gave up their title to the islands.

The abolition of slavery came in 1833. With it a system of apprenticeships of four and six years were set up to help ease the change to freedom for master and slave. Masters often adopted the system of giving their apprentices land and more time off instead of the former allotment of food and clothing. To enforce and assist the new systems, special magistrates were placed on the islands. Many of the white plantation owners moved to other islands that still permitted slavery, while others returned to the nations of their birth. The government then began on the task of accommodating the islands to the new situation of its population. The providing of land was a major concern; unfortunately, the lands had been very much over worked by that time. Other concerns were the establishment of schools, churches, and local governments. As outlined by one author, a period of calm ensued.

The nineteenth century saw some commercial advancement for the islands. The period of the American Civil War brought in considerable American trade, all not necessarily legal, to Nassau in particular. Industries were also developed in sisal rope, pineapple, fishing, sponge, salt, and even tourism, the industry which survives most successfully today.

### Rum Cay History

Rum Cay was probably first resettled as a result of the American Revolution--if not before. Craik's History of the Bahamas lists Rum Cay as one of the islands where land grants were given to the in-coming American Loyalists. The island most likely became a plantation site, as the majority of the Loyalists were former southern plantation owners. The island probably continued to gain inhabitants through the addition of slaves to its plantations. The Royal Registry of Slaves, 1822-1834 lists the following slave population figures for Rum Cay:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Male Slaves</u>	<u>Female Slaves</u>	<u>Total Slaves</u>
1822	102	127	229
1825	251	218	469
1828	266	264	530
1831	286	282	568
1834	317	330	647

In 1834, Rum Cay had the sixth largest slave population of all the islands in the Bahamas, after New Providence (Nassau), Turks and Caicos Islands, Eleuthera, Exuma, and Cat Island.

The plantations on Rum Cay produced mostly cotton, some pineapple, and assorted vegetables for consumption on the island: corn, potatoes, beans, and pigeon peas.

An engineers report of the Bahamas in 1858 lists the population of Rum Cay to be about <sup>900 of which</sup> 42 were white. Another report gives one an idea of what Rum Cay was like in 1858, 25 years after the manumission of slaves.

This island can boast of a very rare advantage in the Bahamas, of roads, Two good ones run through the cay....There is no church or school house belonging to the establishment of the island. Divine service is held in the police office over the jail....There are two salinas, Port Nelson and Carmichael. About 150 persons are employed on the salt works of the first of these. The canal that has lately been cut through the rock to the sea, to let off the rain water which had flooded the salt pond, gives them the hope of raking salt this year... There is very excellent land and pasture on this island. A few pineapples are raised but the cultivation is not extensive, though the planting of fruit trees generally is progressing. There are 600 head of cattle, 900 head sheep, and a few goats.

Nine years later, an American from South Carolina, wrote an official report on the agriculture situation on each of the islands. Near Black Rock, he notes, there was a ten acre field of cotton — — —

quite equal to any I saw on the Out Islands...Here too I observed the most wanton destruction of soil by fire: not only was the soil burnt where it was planted in cotton, but the fire had been applied to the soil where the timber had not been cut, doing considerable damage....The laboring classes of the Out Islands complain that the seasons are much drier than formerly. I think this is a mistake. The soil has been destroyed by fire...

As for the condition of Rum Cay's stone walls, he complains - - -  
these old land marks are fast disappearing. If not  
arrested by the proprietors, the destruction will be  
complete in a very few years. The old blacks had  
a veneration for these margins, impressed upon them  
by their old masters. The present generation seems  
determined to take all that is left, and leave nothing  
for those who come after.

### Prosperous Times

The most prosperous and active times known to the people on Rum Cay seem to have  
been during the first two decades of this century. Then there were five settlements,  
three major industries to keep everyone busy, and roads around the island which  
combined it all into a whole. The population during this time was 529 in 1901,  
and 430 in 1911, nearly 70 percent, in the later census year, living in the  
"capital of the district,"

From Port Nelson travelling North was Major Hill, then Port Boyd on Northside, then  
West to Gin Hill (so called because the cotton gin was situate there during the  
plantation era--later the Deveauxs homestead), Times Cove, Lord Land, Carmichael,  
South to Black Rock, then East to Nesbitt, Munroe, the White Land and back to  
Port Nelson. Of these, Port Nelson, Port Boyd, Carmichael and Black Rock were  
the main settlements.

Of all the places mentioned, Port Nelson is the only area that remains settled.  
It has always been the capital and harbor for the island--the center of activities  
and civil affairs. In the past, it was also referred to as the "township" or  
"harbor." The island's only jail house, constable's office, post office,  
commissioner's house, school, and businesses have been located there. All the  
children from the island used to walk to go to school every day. Three churches  
are also located in Port Nelson. The first church was a Mt. Zion Baptist Church  
located near the school. It was damaged in the 1908 hurricane, and was rebuilt  
at its present location on the road leading out of town, north towards Major Hill.  
St. John's Baptist Church was built next on the same road but closer to town. St.  
Christopher's Anglican Church came last, being built on the same road, but even  
closer to the center of town.

Churches were the one institution included in settlement outside of Port Nelson

Port Boyd had a Baptist church with the same name as the one in the capital, Mt. Zion. Along with the church, they had their own reverend and cemetery. Black Rock had a reverend but no church.

### Industries

The major industries of Rum Cay, which provided a lot of jobs for the people and brought an income to the island, were salt, sisal, and pineapple. Salt was the largest industry on Rum Cay and Rum Cay was one of the largest producers of salt. The Salt Lake just east of the town was where it was all collected. There was also a small salina in Carmichael, ~~but no islanders mentioned it in connection with the industry during this century.~~ The Salt Lake was specifically set up for large production. The lake was joined to the ocean in two places for control of the lake's waters. The Eastern Canal, on the east end of the island had a dam and gate that was used to regulate the flow of water into the pond. A side benefit of that canal was its use as a fishing place.

The other canal came out on the southern end of the island by the town dock. It was used to drain water out of the pond when too full or after damaging rain. It also served as a waterway for the flat boats, to take the bagged salt out to the ocean front from the pond.

The salt industry was the biggest business until damaged by the hurricane of 1908. The damage done was fixable though, and the industry continued at a slower pace until 1926, when it was irreparably ruined by the great hurricane.

The Bahamas, starting in the mid-nineteenth century were the first commercial producers of pineapple on a large scale. The first Bahamian postage stamp even had a picture of a pineapple on it. On Rum Cay, the "pine" industry was on the western end of the island where there was good red "pine soil". The families that ran the business were Strachan, Butler and Deveaux.

This industry "went down" as people died or moved away from the area. Then the hurricane of 1926 came and destroyed much of what was left in production, putting a final damper on the industry. Also, other countries had begun to grow pineapples which cut the demand for the fruit.

The growing of sisal for rope was the other big industry in Rum Cay's history. According to Craton, the plant was first introduced to the Bahamas in 1845. This industry reportedly lasted the longest, not dying out until the 1930's, when nylon rope took its place. Additional income was derived from roadwork and the sale of sea shells.

Before World War I, some people worked on contract in South in Central America. Along with the industries and occupations, there was the standard practice of family farming and animal husbandry for main food stuffs.

### Government

A commissioner lived and officiated on Rum Cay until 1950's, when Rum Cay and San Salvador were amalgamated into one district so as to have the same commissioner. Rum Cay was getting too small to warrant having its own. When the commissioner lived on the island there was a twelve-room wooden house where a new government residence now stands.

### Decline

The major trend in the history of the island, in the twentieth century, has been its decline in economic opportunities as well as population. People started leaving after the hurricane in '26.

Many left for Nassau and the States to get jobs.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Total</u>
1851	438	420	858
1861	310	340	650
1891	193	209	402
1901	235	294	529
1911	171	259	430
1921	135	203	338
1931	101	151	252
1943	87	132	219
1953	50	83	133
1963	37	40	77
1970	34	46	80
1975	38	55	93

A big employment opportunity came with the start of World War II. There was a contract system of labor set up between the United States and the Bahamas. The Americans needed more labor because of the number of men who went off to war.

My earliest recollections of Rum Cay are the summers that I spent with my grandmother and other family members, when it took three days to travel from Nassau via Cat Island and San Salvador to Rum Cay. The caring, well-knit religious community where Sunday was a day of worship and nothing else. The well-bred horses, good fishing, crabbing and swimming. The pristine beaches, with coconut trees galore, barns overflowing with corn, peas, melons and other farm produce. The August Monday picnics, etc.

### Rum Cay's Future

The newest chapter in Rum Cay's history began in the 1950's when Carl Heyser acquired acreage in Rum Cay and developed a small tourist resort. This changed hands over the years until David Melville took possession in the late 1970's and transformed it into the Rum Cay Dive Club, which officially opened ~~14TH~~ <sup>14TH</sup> JAN. '83 and is the life-blood of Rum Cay's ~~economy~~ today, offering jobs for the majority of Rum Cayans. Fred Sturruv writing in the Nassau Guardian's Family Island News column some years ago quite rightly stated that Bahamians have done very little to preserve the existence of communities in our outlying areas. If it were not for foreign investors, many of the islands would either be deserted or very near that point.

The Rum Cay Dive Club has brought new hope and inspiration to many. Coupled with the world's focus on this region through the Columbus Quincentennial Celebration in 1992, this could be the renaissance of our homeland, but we must all work together to restore our heritage.

Thanks to Mr. Melville and the Bahamas Government, the airstrip is being repaved. This is vital to Rum Cay's budding tourism, and equally beneficial to Rum Cayans who can travel from Nassau to Port Nelson in an hour, as opposed to a couple of weeks in my mother's time, and three days that I could remember as a boy.

The other requirement to enhance the redevelopment of Rum Cay is a deep-water dock, which will facilitate the transportation of marine cargo and passengers. These, coupled with the Quincentennial boom envisaged, the improvement of air

transportation to nearby Exuma, a possible port of entry in North Long Island, continuing development in solar power and communications, advanced technologies in agriculture and fishing, all point to a brighter future for Rum Cay, provided we all cooperatively work to rebuild our island home. The challenge is ours.