



Forgotten Dreams: A People's desire to chart their own course in Abaco, Bahamas

Part One

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Preface:

This brief essay is the first of two parts. Part One is based on the factual accounts available through the local press, the Internet and personal stories of some of the participants as published in books and journals. Part Two will focus on what might have been, had the people of Abaco won the right to pursue their dreams.

Introduction

The island of Abaco in The Bahamas was settled by British loyalists and enslaved Africans in the years following the American War of Independence. In the second half of the 20th century, many of their descendants sought to keep Abaco British as The Bahamas pushed for its own independence.

From the beginning of the loyalist influx, the Bahamian population had been mostly black, although economic and political power rested with the minority of English and American whites. After the British abolished slavery in 1834, the African population made gradual progress towards full citizenship.

Political parties did not appear until well after the Second World War. The predominantly black Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) was formed in 1953, and this led to the formation of the United Bahamian Party (UBP) by the mostly white governing class five years later.

The PLP came to power in an historic, non-violent election in 1967 (dubbed the Quiet Revolution) and the expectation was that the new government, led by a young black lawyer named Lynden Pindling, would seek independence from Britain. This was opposed by many Bahamians at the time and Abaco-nians, in particular, made it known they would launch their own "quiet revolution" in response.

At the time, a clear majority of both black and white Abaconians wanted their island to remain British - as the Turks and Caicos, the Cayman Islands, Anguilla and other bits and pieces of the old British Empire would be able to do. This desire would find expression through several different political movements - each more determined than the other - before finally collapsing in the mid-1970s.

The Greater Abaco Council

In June 1971 Prime Minister Pindling formally announced his government's independence agenda. By this time, the UBP had disbanded and many of its members had joined with a breakaway faction of the PLP to form a new opposition party - the Free National Movement. The FNM was opposed to early independence for The Bahamas.

On Abaco, a number of community leaders - including former parliamentarians Leonard Thompson and Sherwin Archer, and leading businessmen like Lucien Stratton - formed the Greater Abaco Council to lobby for continued British rule. The GAC drew black and white supporters from Crown Haven in the north to Sandy Point in the south.

The more prominent supporters included Jeremiah Russell and Kenneth Major (Cooper's Town); Cecil Mills (Murphy Town); Walter Lightbourne, Blach Dames and Rev. Samuel Sands (Sandy Point); Ulrick Bethel (Guana Cay); Roy Russell (Cherokee Sound); Chester Thompson and Willie Russell (Hope



Members of the Greater Abaco Council
Photo Courtesy of The Tribune

Town); John Ward (Dundas Town); Roswell Sawyer (Green Turtle Cay); Floyd Thompson (Fox Town); Lucien Stratton and Ivan Russell (Marsh Harbour); Whitfield Russell (Crown Haven); William Albury (Man-O-War Cay); Hayward Russell (Crossing Rocks); James Cooper (Grand Cay) and James Williams (Moore's Island).

In July 1971 they submitted a petition to the Queen via the British governor - Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce - in Nassau, seeking to have Abaco remain under "the British Crown and jurisdiction" and asking the monarch to "protect the rights of the loyal British residents".

The petition claimed to have the signatures of two thirds of Abaco voters ((in 1970 there were about 6,500 people living on Abaco and 2,350 registered voters). It envisioned a "completely self-contained and fully self-supporting" territory that would be available as "a base for operations of Your Majesty's

armed forces and forces of other nations friendly to Your Majesty, should the necessity ever arise."

The petition was forwarded by the governor to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. The governor also informed the government in Nassau.

Bahamas Independence - All or nothing

Although it was seeking independence from Britain, the Bahamas government wasn't about to contemplate an independent Abaco. Addressing a political rally in Nassau on July 9 1971, Prime Minister Pindling had this to say about the GAC and its petition:

"The rest of us, who have been taking things for granted, now realise that the unity of the Bahamas could be threatened."

In early August the British informed the GAC that their petition would be considered only "at the request of the Bahamas government". Pindling then declared that he would seek a mandate for immediate independence in a general election scheduled for September 1972.

The result of that election was decisive. With a turnout of 86 per cent, the PLP won 60 per cent of the overall vote and 28 seats in parliament, while the FNM won only nine seats. But there was a mixed result on Abaco. The PLP won the North Abaco constituency by a razor-thin margin, while the FNM held onto the South Abaco seat by a wide margin.

As Tribune Publisher Sir Etienne Dupuch noted in an editorial, "a majority of the votes polled in the September 1972 election (in Abaco) were cast for candidates who were opposed to independence for The Bahamas. These people wanted to retain their link with the Union Jack."

Nevertheless, the government considered the election a successful referendum and published an Independence White Paper in October, setting out policy details. All-party talks took place in London that December to draft a new constitution.

Abaco Insists on Being Heard

The government in Nassau viewed the Greater Abaco Council as a fringe group, inferring that the minority white population was up to no good. Meanwhile, some opponents of independence were warning of a campaign of "destructive black nationalism" by the Pindling administration.

According to Sir Etienne Dupuch, "from the beginning (Abaconians) have not been happy with the Pindling government. It is unfortunate that some of this feeling has a racial overtone, but they are on solid ground when they say that the PLP has fallen far below the standards maintained under a British administration...with the result that everyone living in the islands must accept the harsh injustices inflicted on many of them by this government."

Norwel Gordon - an American who arrived in Abaco during the 1960s, married a Bahamian, and became a permanent resident - agreed with this view: "By far the greatest motivation was fear of more exploitation and victimization by a PLP government released from any possibility of British constraints. Without an understanding of the rampant, overt political victimization occurring since 1968, the history of these efforts is incomplete."

And according to Abaco businessman Chester Thompson (in a recent interview), "We were simply trying to remain British, and do it constitutionally. We wanted no part of independence." He noted that Abaconians were descended from British loyalists and had a right to be heard: "My brother Leonard had fought for the British in World War Two and represented Abaco in parliament for three consecutive seven-year terms. He was the logical choice to lead a delegation to England."

At the request of sympathetic members of the British parliament, the Council sent representatives to London that December for a so-called "collateral conference" that ran simultaneously with the official talks between the Bahamians and the British. The official conference achieved unanimous agreement between the PLP and FNM leaderships on the independence constitution.

The GAC collateral meeting included Leonard Thompson, Sherwin Archer and Errington Watkins. "It was an ambitious and costly undertaking," according to Chester Thompson. "Leonard and I agreed to underwrite the expenses and it took us two years to pay for everything. But we received a very cold, and frankly rude, reception from Lord Balniel, the Minister of State for the Colonies.

"He told us that Britain did not want to fragment the Bahamas, and feared that if they gave Abaco the right to remain British, similar requests would come from other islands. We accepted our defeat with great disappointment, but were satisfied that those involved, both black and white, from north to south Abaco, had done the best we could do. After that, we set ourselves to the task of nation building as Bahamians."

Following the London conference, Leonard Thompson quit politics altogether. According to his brother, Chester, Prime Minister Pindling "never held any malice against some of us who were involved with the Greater Abaco Council. He seemed to regard it as one of the growing pains of becoming a new nation."

Norwel Gordon took a somewhat different view: "I cannot know whether Pindling felt 'malice'. Possibly he just considered victimization part of normal political activity. Leonard frequently expressed a different opinion. He gave up his dream of developing the Great Abaco Beach Resort because of overt victimization by the Pindling government. I, and many other Abaconians, also felt discriminated against by Pindling and the PLP."

Meanwhile, although the opposition FNM had achieved a consensus with the PLP government on nationhood, Errington Watkins, the FNM representative for South Abaco, declared himself unalterably opposed to independence. He argued that the Pindling government would "fall apart economically" and become "a second Uganda or Cuba."

The Council for a Free Abaco

The Greater Abaco Council died at the end of 1972, but Watkins carried on with other ardent loyalists like Chuck Hall and Albert Albury, who organised a successor group called the Council for a Free Abaco. This new group produced a 10-page manifesto on *Independence and Freedom*, criticising Nassau's exploitation of Abaco.

The CFA believed that Abaco had a legal right to self-determination, and circulated another petition that was signed by half the registered voters on the island. In May 1973 Watkins carried this petition to London, hoping to influence the debate on the Bahamas Independence Order in the British Parliament.

During this debate, Conservative MP Ronald Bell introduced an amendment that would have excluded Abaco from an independent Bahamas. The amendment read:

"Greater Abaco shall continue to be a colonial dependency of the Crown under the name of the Colony of Abaco, and shall be governed in accordance with the provisions of any Order in Council which may be made by Her Majesty."

According to a transcript from the House of Commons Hansard (vol 857 cc 393-428), Bell cited several cases of political victimization against Abaconi-

ans, as well as statements by Bahamian cabinet ministers characterizing black supporters of the CFA as traitors and white supporters as racists.

The House of Commons rejected the amendment and approved the Independence Order on May 22. A similar amendment providing for Abaco to remain British was defeated in the House of Lords on June 12 (House of Lords Hansard vol 343 cc 619-49).

Watkins returned to Nassau, and later that month introduced a last-ditch resolution in the House of Assembly calling for a United Nations-supervised referendum on Abaco. This gained support from a few FNM MPs (Mike Lightbourn, Cleophas Adderley and former Premier Sir Roland Symonette), but the measure was easily defeated and Watkins then dropped out of the fight.

"I suppose it is fair to say that the Pindling government feel it would be an affront to their pride and dignity if land occupied by the descendants of loyalist slave owners were to be carved out of their kingdom," wrote Sir Etienne. "It is unfortunate that the leaders of the FNM apparently shared that feeling."

The Bahamas became independent on July 10 1973 in a ceremony at Clifford Park attended by Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne. For The Bahamas, it was the end of more than 250 years as a British Crown colony.

The Abaco Independence Movement

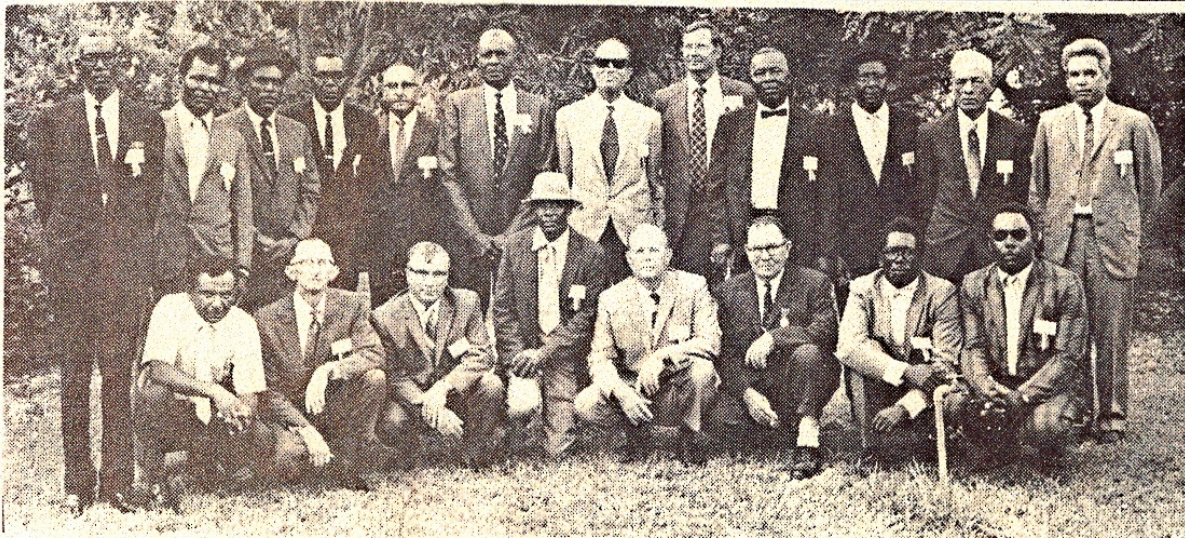
But the movement for a free Abaco did not die with independence. Within three months, Prime Minister Pindling warned at a PLP convention that Abaco's continuing separatist tendencies carried "serious implications" for the Bahamas.

After Watkins' departure, some islanders decided the only option left was to seek some form of autonomy for Abaco. Among the die hards were Chuck Hall and Bert Williams who, in August 1973, formed a political party called the Abaco Independence Movement. The goal of AIM was self-determination within a federal Bahamas.

Hall had been in touch with an American financier and political activist named Michael Oliver, who had published a libertarian manifesto in 1968 entitled *A New Constitution for A New Country*.

To be continued...

Addendum



Abaco petitioners

THE GROUP of 20 Abaconians from all the settlements of Abaco who presented a petition to Governor Lord Thurlow today to remain apart from the Bahamas should it become prematurely independent.

BACK ROW (l. to r.): Jeremiah Russell, Cooper's Town; Cecil Mills, Murphy Town; Walter Lightbourne, Sandy Point; Kenneth Major,

Cooper's Town; Urick Bethel, Guana Cay; Capt. Sherwin Archer, UBP member for Abaco; Capt. Roy Russell, J.P., Cherokee Sound; Chester Thompson; the Rev. Samuel Sands, Sandy Point; John Ward, Dundas Town; Willie Russell, Hope Town; Roswell Sawyer, Green Turtle Cay.

FRONT ROW (l. to r.): Floyd Thompson, Fox Town;

Lucien Stratton, Marsh Harbour; Ivan Russell, Marsh Harbour; Whitfield Russell, Crown Haven; Capt. Leonard Thompson, O.B.E. Hope Town; William Albury, Man-O-War Cay; Hayward Russell, Crossing Rocks; Blach Dames, Sandy Point. Not shown in the photo are James Cooper, Grand Cay, and James Williams, Moore's Island. PHOTO: Stanley Toogood.

Photo compliments of The Tribune

" A PETITION "

TO

HER MAJESTY, QUEEN ELIZABETH II AND HER GOVERNMENT:

We, the undersigned citizens and land owners of GREATER ABACO, being primarily British subjects, 18 years of age and older, do herewith humbly request HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT, on behalf of the Crown, to take immediate action to preserve and honour the rights of those loyal British Subjects, whose forefathers and we the descendents, settled and developed the Bahama Islands.

We humbly and respectfully request, that the area of GREATER ABACO be granted full and complete separation from the Bahama Islands. That the said area of GREATER ABACO, comprising all of the islands and Cays of THE LITTLE BAHAMA BANK, save and excepting therefrom the island of GRAND BAHAMA and those islands or Cays immediately adjacent to same and presently under the jurisdiction of authorities based in GRAND BAHAMA, together with the small group of Cays known as Mores Island. The remaining islands and Cays of the Little Bahama Bank Group, which make up the area known as GREATER ABACO, do herewith humbly request that after separation from the Bahamas group, GREATER ABACO be retained under the British Crown and jurisdiction, in the same manner and with the same rights and basis as the Cayman Islands enjoy.

We humbly and earnestly beseech HER MAJESTY to immediately take the action necessary to separate the area of GREATER ABACO from the Bahamas group and **retain** same as outlined above, in order to protect the rights of the loyal British residents of these islands in particular and through-out

the Bahamas in general and to insure their having a place of asylum here in GREATER ABACO, if and when the Bahama Islands are granted full and complete independence, as presently being advocated.

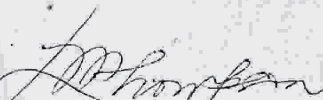
We further humbly suggest to HER MAJESTY, that the Island of GREATER ABACO, retained on the basis suggested herein would be completely self-contained and fully self-supporting. Our residents, primarily British subjects, are proud of their heritage and the right to fly the UNION JACK. We would be pleased to have the honour and privilege of being available as a base for operations of YOUR MAJESTY'S armed forces and forces of other Nations, friendly to HER MAJESTY, should the necessity ever arise.

The Bahamas Government recently published the latest census figures and these show GREATER ABACO having an adult population of 2350 persons and we are holding a signed petition exceeding 67% of the eligible total.

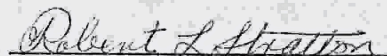
We humbly beseech YOUR MAJESTY to accede to this request from your obedient servants, whose signatures are attached hereto.

We certify that the information contained in this letter is true and correct.

signed


Leonard Thompson, O.B.E.

signed


Robert L. Stratton, Merchant

Marsh Harbour, Abaco
Bahamas
March 24th, 1971

" A PETITION "

Copy of original # 8

TO

HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH AND HER GOVERNMENT.

We, the undersigned residents and or land owners of GREATER ABACO, being primarily British Subjects, 18 years of age and older, do herewith humbly request Her Majesty's Government, on behalf of the Crown, to take immediate action to preserve and honour the rights of those loyal British Subjects whose forefathers and we as decedents, settled and developed the Bahama Islands.

We humbly and respectfully request, that the area of GREATER ABACO be granted full and complete independence from the Bahama Islands and that the said area of GREATER ABACO be retained Under the British Crown and jurisdiction, in the same manner, basis and rights, as the Caymen Islands presently enjoy. Such action is desireable and we believe necessary, to protect the rights of British Residents, of these Islands in particular and through-out the Bahamas in general and to insure our having a place of asylum here, in GREATER ABACO, rather than being forced to leave the Bahamas, should this country be granted full independence as presently being suggested, without this area of GREATER ABACO being withheld from any such agreement.

Your obedient servants,

Robert L Stratton
A. J. Russell
Derek Bethel
P. P. Figgs
Frederick Abney
Capt Lambert Sands
Van Stratton
Harry H. Collins
Maudie W. Allum
Sharon A. Albam
George H. H. H.
A. S. Roberts
Allen Key
Donald R. Lowe

The British Parliament and its Papers: <http://cnx.org/content/m12841/latest/>

House of Commons Hansard: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1973/may/22/colony-of-greater-abaco>

House of Lords Hansard: http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1973/jun/12/bahamas-independence-bill#S5LV0343P0_19730612_HOL_380

Cover image: Proposed flag for the Commonwealth of Abaco