

SEA-ISLAND COTTON: A 200 year old gold rush on North and Middle Caicos

Text & photos by Mark Parrish

It is commonly thought that it was the British Loyalists who brought cotton to the Caicos Islands from the United States towards the end of the 18th century. A report on the suitability and type of soil in the Caicos Islands by Lieutenant John Wilson prior to their arrival provided the settlers with the assurance that the cultivation of this staple crop would be worth the effort and investment. For 15 years they strove to make that a reality and for a time their productivity outstripped that of the rest of the Bahamas.



However, 300 years earlier, when explorers first arrived from across the Atlantic they discovered that the Lucayan Taino Indians, despite the fact that they wore little to no clothing, were successfully growing, weaving, and trading in cotton threads. They used the cotton to make very comfortable hammocks (known as Hamada) and mosquito nets. The European Navies later adopted these 'sling beds' for the crews on their vessels who had previously been sleeping on the hard wooden decks. Another interesting fact is that this strain of cotton received the name 'Sea-Island Cotton' (*Gossipier barbadense*) only after it was taken from the West Indies to the barrier islands off the coast of the Carolinas. It was, and still is, considered a very high quality cotton; 'the finest in the world' some say, and it commanded a high price.

After the American Declaration of Independence the Loyalists were considered traitors and a short time later were expelled from the former colonies. In order to compensate the loyalists, large land grants in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands were given to many of them by the British Government. The size of the grants they received was dependent on the size of the family (20 acres to every man, women and child), the amount of assets that were confiscated by the United States and their contribution during the revolutionary war. The first boat of refugees arrived in Nassau in 1783 and a flood of migration continued into the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands until 1785.



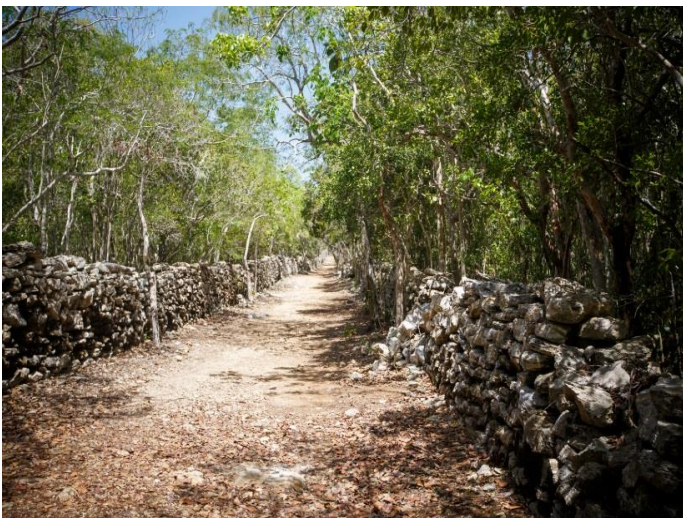
The optimism of the settlers and early success in growing cotton fueled the frenzy of cotton plantations in the Caicos Islands. Prior to 1787 no one was living permanently in the Caicos Islands; by 1788 there were over 40 white families and some 1200 slaves. In 1788 a crop of 5 tons was produced. In 1789 it reached 20 tons, or at least would have done if the crop had not been destroyed by the boll weevil; a problem that was going to continue to plague the cotton planters. In 1790 the crop was 100 tons and in the following year it reached an all-time high of 260 tons



Some of the most productive soil proved to be over towards the eastern side of Middle Caicos near the Windward-Going-Through. Here the 'grand old man' of Middle Caicos, an old British Army doctor and surgeon called John Lorimers was granted 504 acres and built his famous 'Haulover House' near the edge of a creek and village that later took his name. Next to Dr. Lorimers, Brigadier General Robert Cunningham, formerly of the Royal Militia of South Carolina, received 608 acres and another wealthy Loyalist doctor, John Bell, founded the Increase and Industry plantations on 1100 acres further to the south. There were at least another 14 plantations in this area alone and the Caicos Islands flourished for the first time since the demise of the Tainos Indians.



In order to facilitate transport between the plantations, the 'gentlemen' of North and Middle Caicos petitioned for a road to be constructed that connected Lorimers on the east side of Middle Caicos to Bellefield Landing on the west side of North Caicos, a distance of some thirty miles. It was more or less straight, lined with stone walls and well maintained. It became known as the Royal or King's Road. Parts of it are still in use today; to access the caves near the Middle Caicos village of Conch Bar for example and this section continues on to complete a fun mountain biking circuit. Visitors to the large and once successful Wade's Green Plantation on North Caicos also experience a short but delightful walk along the King's Road from the car park up the small slope to the main plantation compound. The 'other' inhabitants of these two islands had to make do with walking along footpaths and following coastal routes to conduct their communication and trade. The 'Crossing Place Trail' was used to connect the villages on Middle with those on North by crossing channels & sandbars at low tide & beautiful sections of the trail along the wild coast of Middle can still be enjoyed by day hikers.



The invention in the Bahamas of an ingenious wind driven cotton gin helped to increase the production of cotton in the Caicos Islands but despite the best endeavors of the Loyalist industrialists, the plantations started to decline shortly afterwards. It is apparent that the Boil Weevil, and its larvae the Chenille Worm, wreaked havoc on the developing cotton buds but it was the depletion of the nutrients in the shallow soil that ultimately caused the rapid deterioration of the crops. By 1800 it was evident that the cotton plantations would fail. By 1804 many of the plantations had been abandoned; their owners moving themselves and their slaves to Grand Turk or to other countries within the British Empire. A few struggled on but in August of 1813 a large hurricane swept through the islands causing massive destruction of the plantation buildings and flooded the crops; it was the final straw. Wild Sea Island cotton can still be seen growing along the side of the road on most of the Caicos Islands, testament to a bygone but noteworthy era in the history of the Turks and Caicos.