"I'SE A MAN": THE 1942 RIOT AS AN ATTACK ON BAY STREET, DISCRIMINATION AND INJUSTICE IN THE BAHAMAS

by

Nona Patara Martin
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Director: Lois Horton, Professor
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband and my parents.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were so many that unknowingly helped make this project possible including the zumbanistas and bodycombaters that helped me to work out the stress that inevitably comes from a project of this magnitude, those at my favorite vegan joint who nourished my body, the baristas of my favorite cafes, and the facebook friends and email pen-pals who provided me the much needed mental break and connection through what can be a lonely solitary process.

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Most of all, I owe a debt that cannot be paid to my husband, who read every draft of every chapter (even those that do not appear here). He offered me criticism, sometimes gentle and sometimes scathing but always constructive. He offered me praise when I was my worse detractor. He kept me in running shoes and thusly, I kept my sanity. He cheered me on every step of the way.
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ABSTRACT

“‘I’SE A MAN:’ THE 1942 RIOT AS AN ATTACK ON BAY STREET, DISCRIMINATION AND INJUSTICE IN THE BAHAMAS

Nona Patara Martin, Ph.D.
George Mason University, 2012
Dissertation Director: Dr. Lois Horton

My dissertation, “‘I’se a man: The 1942 Riot as an attack on Bay Street,” explores a watershed event in the Bahamas’ social and political history. On June 1st, 1942 there was a riot on Bay Street in Nassau, Bahamas, that involved thousands of Bahamian blacks marching to Bay Street and ultimately destroying the main commercial district in the city. The 1942 riot, though an exciting story, was more than a colorful tale from an earlier time. It was arguably the first time that it became clear that Bahamian blacks would not stand for minority rule indefinitely. Consequently, it should occupy a significant place in the history of the Bahamas’ transition from a colony to an independent country.

Yet, the significance of the riot has been downplayed and mischaracterized in the Bahamas’ historiography. Additionally, the historical analysis of the Nassau riot has
described it as a momentary outburst by a group of disgruntled workers that had little long term effects. Moreover, the riot has been linked to the labor riots that occurred across the Caribbean in the 1930s.

The 1942 riot, however, was the first sign of a political awakening in the country’s black community and set in motion a political snowball that resulted in majority rule and eventually independence for the country. Also, the riot was not caused by a mere disagreement over wages but was caused by a sense of economic injustice as well as political disenfranchisement and social exclusion. Finally, the 1942 riot in Nassau differs in important respects from the riots that occurred throughout the Caribbean in the 1930s.
CHAPTER ONE: THE STORY OF THE RIOT AND A TRUE HISTORY OF PARADISE

Winnie’s house was just a few blocks from Bay Street, the main street in downtown Nassau, Bahamas, and along the route used by the crowd of protestors on their way to House of Assembly that fateful day. It was on a Monday morning when she heard what sounded like “the buzzing of bees” as she sat on her porch with her one year old little girl “catching the breeze.” The low buzz got louder and louder as thousands of men and women marched “over-the-hill” from their worksite on their way downtown. Shortly after they arrived on Bay Street the low buzz grew in volume and intensity and eventually erupted into yells and shattering glass as the crowd rioted and looted the stores along the thoroughfare.

Surprise was the most common reaction to the riot by the most people living in the Bahamas. As Morton Turtle testified at a commission of enquiry set up by the government to explore the causes of the riot, “I was amazed to find that the crowd felt hostile towards me. … I have always felt in sympathy with the labourers and given

**Footnote:**

them a good wages.” 2 Similarly, Etienne Dupuch stated, “The riot came as a complete surprise to me. I never thought that our people could be agitated to the point of rioting because they have always enjoyed the enviable reputation of being patient docile and law-abiding.” 3 J.P. Sands spoke for many when he said, “I thought that everybody in the island was quite happy until about 8 o’clock on June 1st.” 4 To understand how the safety and quiet of this idyllic island was shattered, it is necessary to understand what led to the disturbances. 5

This story began with an agreement between two countries. In September of 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, British Ambassador Lord Lothian (Philip Henry Kerr), American President Franklin Roosevelt and Secretary of State

2 Evidence of Morton Turtle, Report of the Russell Commission Appointed to Enquire into Disturbances in the Bahamas which took place in June 1942, Nassau Public Records Office, 127. This source will be referred to as The Russell Commission for the remainder of the document. A note about the Russell Commission, originally Parliament did not see the need to appoint a Commission or Enquiry, but the governor explained in three separate telegraphs that there were racial feelings stirred up on each side and the only way to assure that such disturbance did not take place again was to appoint an independent commission of enquiry. Telegram from the Governor (HRH, The Duke of Windsor) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 10 June 1942 A 5432 and 11 June 1942 A 5481. FO 347/30644. The meeting of the Russell Commission finally started in October of that year. Official Gazette, 30 September 1942, 405-406.

3 Evidence of Etienne Dupuch, The Russell Commission, 301. This is a false notion by many that the Bahamians were docile people. This riot was yet one more proof that they were not.

4 Evidence of J.P. Sands, The Russell Commission, 293.

5 An important contextual point of reference here is the racial make-up of the Bahamas during the time of the riot. There were the white British that ruled on behalf of the queen. But they are ostensibly outside of the context that we are dealing with. Bahamians divided themselves general in terms of black and white. The majority of the population was black and the minority ruling class (politically and economically) was white.
Cordell Hull came to an agreement that in exchange for fifty US destroyers, the British allowed the United States to build naval and air bases in several British colonies around the globe. Several of these training bases were to be located in the British West Indies, in a strategic location just a few miles away from the United States’ eastern seaboard. The plan included the construction of two operational bases on the island of New Providence, in the archipelago of the Bahamas, the closest of group of British West Indian islands to the Florida coast. One base was to be built at Oakes Field on an airfield owned and built by the famous Canadian multi-millionaire Sir Harry Oakes. Often referred to as the Main Field, this site was located south of Grant’s Town and is currently the site of the Queen Elizabeth Sports Centre. The other base, known as the Satellite Field, was to be built in Pine Barren at the western end of the island. Together they were referred to as “The Project” and the route used to ferry workers and equipment between Main Field and Satellite Field was often called the Burma Road, making reference to the Burma Road in Southeast Asia that connected British Burma to China.

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6 New Providence is also the most populous island in the archipelago and seat of the government in Nassau.

7 Sir Harry Oakes was a Canadian ex-patriot that earned his millions in the diamond minds of Canada. He was a member of the House of Assembly at one time as well as the owner of the British Colonial, one of the swankiest hotels on the island. A year after the riot his murder would become the most talked about crime and the most discussed trial in the islands’ history.

Though many men from the British West Indies—the Bahamas included—joined the Royal Navy or the West Indian Brigade, the excitement over “The Project” was not necessarily reflective of their eagerness to do their part in the war effort. These bases were important to these colonial subjects because they promised employment to thousands of Bahamian men. 

“The Project” was to be a windfall to Bahamian workers at a time when jobs were in short supply. Although investigation shows that on this colony the “approximate numbers employed” was generally higher than the rest of the West Indies, “the cost of living was appreciably higher.” Over two thousand Bahamian skilled, minimally skilled and unskilled workers were hired at the two construction sites at a time when there was high unemployment and underemployment on the island and throughout the archipelago. Indeed, when men on the outer islands of the Bahamas

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10 By this time in Bahamian history, a Bahamian a descendants of the white Eleutheran Adventurers, Loyalists, Africans that came to the Bahamas both as enslaved and liberated people.

11 Major G. St. J. Orde-Browne, OBE Report on Labour Conditions in the West Indies (London: Printed and Published by His Majesty’s Stationary Office), 208. The living had increased so much in the colony that Major Nash a Defense Security Officer in the Bahamas sent a letter to Colonel Butler to draw attention “to the very high cost of living in Nassau.” He felt it was necessary to “ask [Butler] to consider the question of salaries and allowances for this Colony as a whole. It is easily the most expensive place in his part of the world, and in the last few months it is estimated that the cost of living had increased by 68%... An additional burden which has to be borne in this climate is a very heavy laundry bill.” “Extract from letter from Major T.J.O Nash, Defence Security Officer, Bahamas.” 31 January 1943. FO 3371
heard of this employment opportunity, hundreds of them migrated to New Providence in hopes of gaining employment.\textsuperscript{12}

It was not just the opportunity for a job that excited the workers. It was that American projects in the past tended to offer higher wages; the wages on these projects were typically pegged to the American wage scale instead of the domestic one. Unfortunately, these workers would be disappointed. Although this was an opportunity for steady employment, they were nevertheless upset to find that instead of their being paid the historically high foreign wage rate they were only offered the domestic wage rate.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to this disappointment, there was a gross inequity between the wages paid to Americans working on the project and those paid to Bahamians laborers that were engaged in the same kind of work. The American skilled workers often earned wages that were ten times higher than Bahamian skilled workers performing the same tasks. Neither of these conditions sat well with the Bahamian laborers, whose anger increased when they heard from the white American workers (supervisors and skilled laborers) on the project that the construction company had originally wanted to pay

\textsuperscript{12} A more in depth coverage of the economic situation in the Bahamas will take place in the Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{13} Gail Saunders, \textit{Bahamian Society after Emancipation} (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 105. Also see Telegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Governor (HRH the Duke of Windsor) A5547. FO 68141/42.
them a higher wage but were prevented from doing so by the Bahamian government. On June 1st 1942, they marched to Bay Street carrying sticks in order to vent that anger.

As the workers made their way from the Main Field through the black Over-the-Hill neighborhoods to the government buildings at Public Square on Bay Street, their ranks were swelled by the women and children who joined them. It is not surprising that they marched to Bay Street. Bay Street has always been an important space in Nassau, the capital city of the Bahamas. Since the 18th century, it has been the country’s main commercial hub, the seat of government and a key site for Bahamian cultural expression. Bay Street was at the time of the riot and still is the site of the carnival like festival of Junkanoo. It was and remains home to dozens of stores selling jewelry, wine and spirits, the latest in high fashion, expensive paintings and sculptures by Bahamian locals, and an array of straw bags or hats, once handmade by Bahamian women but now imported from China or Latin America. Bay Street was and still is home to a handful of banks, dozens of restaurants and a smattering of nightclubs. In 1942, most of these were owned by white Bahamians and restricted access to Bahamian black. Additionally, Bay Street was at the time of the riot and is still the home of the House of Assembly.

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14 The structure of the government of the Bahamas was typical of British colonial governments. At the head of the government was the Governor. He represented the Queen of England, reported to the Colonial Office in London; and was the chief executive in the colony his actions moderated only by that office. The House of Assembly was made up of local Bahamians who were elected to office by male property holders and held the power of the purse (as they controlled taxation). It was not until 1967 that blacks held a majority of the seats in the Assembly and it was not until 1973 that the Bahamas became an independent country.
In 1942, most of the members of that legislative body were the same merchants who owned the stores or had their law offices or medical practices on Bay Street. Indeed, at the time, the controlled was controlled politically and economically by a group of prominent white Bahamian businessmen known collectively as the Bay Street Boys. According to A. Creech Jones, they were a “clique living in an artificial atmosphere of a luxury tourist resort, while the rest of the population is left to drag out a miserable existence with the very minimum of social services, economic encouragement or common amenities of life.”  

Similarly, Klaw described them as “a dozen or so Nassau merchants, lawyers, and real-estate brokers who are … [so named after] the street where they have their shops and offices … [and are] in firm control of the Bahamas government, running it with a free hand.”

The most significant political, social and economic events in the Bahamas history occurred on Bay Street. Once the workers arrived on Bay Street, the Attorney General, Eric Hallinan who had been working to ease tensions in the days leading up to this protest, addressed the crowd from the steps of the Colonial Secretary’s office. He promised that if they sent a representative to either the Colonial Secretary or the Acting Governor that they would receive immediate attention. In an attempt to placate them, Hallinan mentioned that originally the Americans had planned to bring in their own

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16 Spencer Klaw, “Nassau’s Bustling Bay Street Boys,” *Fortune* 59 no. 1 Jan 1959, 92.
workers but because Bahamians were such good workers they had not. Thus, he encouraged them to return to the job site and “not spoil the good impression that they had made.”\textsuperscript{17} This encouragement had the opposite effect than Hallinan had anticipated. Although there are reports that some of the crowd threw their sticks down and went home, some workers interpreted his speech to mean that they were in danger of being replaced and became even more agitated. A few other government representatives including Mr. Christie and Police Captain Sears attempted to convince the crowd to disband, but to no avail. As Leonard Storr Green, who was later convicted as one of the leaders of the group, explained, Captain Sears’ presence on Bay Street “made them angry because it looked as if he would do something.”\textsuperscript{18} Eventually, a group of men broke off from the main assemblage, tired of listening to what they must have thought were merely efforts to placate them. They headed down Bay Street, “smashing as they went.”\textsuperscript{19}

There was a Coca-Cola delivery truck parked on the corner of Bay Street and Parliament Street. This vehicle was loaded with full bottles of sodas which provided ready ammunition for the rioters. Some threw full bottles. Others, on the hot June day, first drank the contents and then used the empty bottles as missiles. “The window of

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18}Evidence of Leonard Storr Green to \textit{The Russell Commission}, 184.

\textsuperscript{19}Evidence of Leonard Storr Green to \textit{The Russell Commission}, 184.
Moseley’s Book Store was smashed and what had begun as a labour demonstration now turned into an unqualified riot.”\textsuperscript{20}

Where were the police at this time? According to some of the witnesses, it seemed that “the police just stood easy and let the looters take what they wanted.”\textsuperscript{21} For a full forty-five minutes after the smashing of the first window, the police remained inactive in the Public Square. By the time the police acted, Bay Street was in shambles.

When they were finally moved to action, the police used a tried and proven method of emptying Bay Street. To clear the street after the year end festivals that take place in New Providence, the police would march down Bay Street side by side forming a horizontal line. This time around, however, this method did not meet with success. Instead of being pushed down Bay Street, the rioters scampered up the many side streets only to return after the police line had passed.\textsuperscript{22} As a witness in the Commission of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Report of the Select Committee, Nassau, 1942. Nassau Public Records Offices, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Evidence of Roland Theodore Symonette to the Russell Commission, 490.
\item \textsuperscript{22} The Acting Governor sent telegrams to the Secretary of State for the Colonies throughout the disturbances. The first was assuring him that all was in hand. “This morning about 1000 unskilled workers have made a demonstration with some disorder against the wages being paid by American Constructors. Wages are being paid at current rates with some slight increases. Police have the matter in hand.” Cypher Telegram from the Officer Administering the government to Secretary of State for the Colonies. Telegram No. 151. 1 June 1942 (A 5263) FO 371/30644. Later, however he sent a telegram to the contrary stating that “The situation has not improved. Considerable damage and looting has taken place in business section. The rioters have now been cleared back to the coloured quarters... Curfew has been proclaimed with effect of 8pm tonight. Shooting has taken place, to date 2 rioters and 1 military have been injured.” Cypher Telegram from the Officer Administering the government to Secretary of State for the Colonies. Telegram No. 152 1 June 1942. FO 371/30644. The next day he indicated that “No attempt made last night to leave coloured quarters but this morning crowds gathered again in various places and to be dispersed but no shooting. Have refused to negotiate with labour until disorders were
Enquiry that looked into the riot noted, “there can … be no real comparison between the festival crowds and the crowd of labourers armed with thick sticks and clubs that came down Bay Street on the 1st of June.”

Although there were reports of the police being assaulted by flying bottles and rocks, the armed police only fired 2 shots during this melee. There was no violence against civilians reported, as the rioters it seemed, were focused more on property rather than violence to people. For instance, one merchant, Roscoe W. Thompson was able to convince the crowd not to further destroy his store. Not only was he not harmed but his store sustained no further damage after he made the request. Also, Roland Symonette, a prominent white businessman and a member of the House of Assembly, walked down Bay Street during the height of the riot and was not harmed. There was also widespread looting during the 1942 riot. Sir Clifford Darling told the story of a little girl who, following the example of her elders, wandered into a fabric store to choose a bolt of fabric. The bolt, of course, was too heavy for her to carry. Determined, she rested the

over.” Cypher Telegram from the Officer Administering the government to Secretary of State for the Colonies. Telegram No. 153 2 June 1942. FO 371/30644.

23 Russell Commission, 13.see also Telegraph from Viscount Halifax to Foreign Office 4 June 942. A 5431FO 371/30644.

24Evidence of Corporal Howin Pinder to the Russell Commission, 99. Corporal Pinder, one of the officers who arrested Leonard Storr Green, reports that he had to hide under G. W. Sweeting’s store.


26 Evidence of Roland Theodore Symonette to the Russell Commission, 490.
bolt on the ground, grabbed the edges of the material and dragged it slowly but resolutely towards her house.27

The property destruction and looting, however, was not indiscriminate. As Mrs. Morton Turtle testified, “such shops as those owned by the Speaker of the Assembly and the wife of one of the white Project supervisors were almost gutted, but the shoe store owned by Percy Christie, the white would-be labor organizer, was left untouched.”28 More than leaving his store untouched, the rioters went even further. As Christie reported, “eight to ten men with arms interlocked” stood guard protecting his store from other looters.29 Additionally, as Alvin Braynen testified, “On the morning of the 1st June, I sent my truck out to make a delivery and they came back and told me that the delivery could not be made because of the crowd in Rawson Square...The crowd told the truck driver that they would not hurt it because it belonged to me and no damage was done to my truck.”30

Before the police were able to restore order to the city center and get the rioters to leave Bay Street, most of the liquor stores, clothing stores and perfume stores lining the


28 Evidence of Mrs. Morton Turtle to the Russell Commission, 97.

29 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission, 17.

30 Evidence of Alvin Rudolph Braynen to the Russell Commission, 455. Although from a mix-raced background and a member of the ruling elite, Braynen would go on to play a pivotal role in the Bahamas gaining majority rule and would serve as speaker in the first majority led House of Assembly.
thoroughfare had been completely ransacked. As the *New York Times* noted that for days after the riot, “scenes in the Bay Street business section were reminiscent of a tropical hurricane, with storm shutters covering gaping holes in windows and doors.”\(^{31}\) By midday the police had managed to push most of the crowd “over the hill,” to the poorer neighborhoods outside the city center. The rioting continued throughout the night and into the next day, as various bands of rioters (much smaller than the crowd on Bay Street) went through the settlements nearer to their homes looting the white owned businesses that serviced these neighborhoods.\(^{32}\)

The riot that took place on June 1st, 1942, though an exciting story, was more than a colorful tale of an earlier time. Dame Doris Johnson, noted Bahamian politician, for instance, has argued that the 1942 riot was a defining moment in Bahamas’ political and racial history. It was when “the first awakenings of a new political awareness began to be felt in the hearts of black people … time, and the remarkable foresight, courage, and initiative of a few dedicated members of that majority were all that were required to

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\(^{31}\)*Nassau Resumes Trade: Military Patrols Remain on Alert as Troubles are Eased,* *New York Times,* 4 June 1942, 7. Although the rioters were eventually forced to leave Bay Street, they looted and destroyed businesses and public buildings in and around the city over the next two days. See Nona Martin and Virgil Storr, “I’se a Man: Political Awakening and the 1942 Riot in the Bahamas,” *Journal of Caribbean History,* 41 (1 & 2) 2007.

\(^{32}\) When the rioters went Over the Hill into the settlements, they did damage a non-commercial building. They set fire to the Southern Police station. By the 4 of June order had been restored in such a way that “the Grant’s Town Library [was] being used a substitute for the Southern Police Station.” *Tribune* 4 June 1942
crystallize this awareness into a mighty political force.” Sir Randol Fawkes, Bahamian labor leader and parliamentarian, agreed with Dame Doris. They both viewed the riot as the first major collective action in the Bahamas with political overtones. It was the first sign of a political awakening amongst the majority black population in the Bahamas and was arguably the first time that it became clear that Bahamian blacks would not stand for minority rule indefinitely.

Consequently, it should occupy a real place in the history of the Bahamas’ transition from a colony to an independent country. Yet, the significance of the riot has been downplayed and mischaracterized in the Bahamas’ historiography. Political and social historians have doubted its significance. Colin Hughes, while accepting it as a precursor and a symbol that was profitably mythologized described the riot as “a momentary outburst of raw energy” that “provided martyrs and a heroic moment... once a political movement had finally started.” In the same vein, Gail Saunders described the riot as a “short-lived spontaneous outburst” after which “the black masses

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slept on.” Both Saunders and Hughes argued that this was the only disturbance of its kind and that it had no direct link to the dramatic socio-political developments that would take place in the 1960s.

This dissertation will advance and defend the thesis that the riot was more than an isolated act of venting. Although it was utilized as a symbol for agency among the black population, the 1942 riot, however, was the first sign of a political awakening in the country’s black community and set in motion a political snowball that resulted in majority rule and eventually independence for the country. Also, the riot was not caused by a mere disagreement over wages but was caused by a sense of economic injustice as well as political disenfranchisement and social exclusion. Finally, the 1942 riot in Nassau differs in important respects from the riots that occurred throughout the Caribbean in the 1930s.

37 Gail Saunders, Bahamian Society After Emancipation (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 119.

38 The Russell Commission concluded that they received “conflicting evidence.” As the report discussed, “on the one hand, we are informed to the effect that there are deep-lying causes of discontent...; that they don’t feel that they receive a fair deal from their elected representatives, who are collectively known as ‘Bay Street’... and that urgent reforms are necessary.” “On the other hand, we are informed to the effect that no political reforms are necessary.” Official Gazette, 19 January 1943, 72. They also dismiss the possibility that the riot had a racial component. A chief goal of the dissertation is to adjudicate between the possible causes of the riot.

39 Not surprisingly, neither Hart nor Lewis includes them in their studies of the labor and social Rebellion that occurred in that region during that time. Richard Hart, “Labor Rebellions of the 1930s” and Arthur Lewis “The1930 Social Revolution” can both be found in Hillary Beckles and Verne Shepherd ed. Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society From Emancipation to the Present. (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993), 370-392. Although there are some similarities with the American race riots of earlier in the century, the differences are too numerous and significant for a profitable comparison. This is discussed in chapter 5.
At the end of the day, the riot occurred because Bahamian blacks would no longer quietly accept the Bay Street Boys’ domination of the colony’s political, social and economic spheres. As men and women, the rioters were stating quite boldly that they would be treated one way and not another. They would be heard and not ignored. And, if they were ignored, they were demonstrating that there would be consequences. The riot was an opportunity for them to stand up as men and women. For many of the rioters, Green’s bold declaration “I’se a man!” the day before the riot, explained their actions.
CHAPTER TWO: THE RIOT AS A POLITICAL AWAKENING

I. Introduction

Something of a consensus has emerged amongst Bahamian politicians and citizens, about the meaning and significance of the 1942 riot. Most of them saw the 1942 riot as a watershed event in the Bahamas’ political and social history. Dame Doris Johnson, for instance, described the rioters as being consciously engaged in a struggle for their rights and suggested that the riot caused “stirrings in the hearts of the poor and the not-so-poor Bahamians” that ultimately led to political and social change in the Bahamas. As she pointed out, at the time of the riot, Bahamian blacks were disadvantaged politically and repressed socially. The system of open voting that was in place in the 1940s, she explains, led to voter intimidation and political exploitation of poorer black Bahamians by richer white Bahamians. As Dame Doris wrote, it was

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40 Doris Johnson was a trained educator but was also very involved in politics. She would eventually become the first female appointed to the Bahamian Senate and a leader in the women’s suffrage movement. Doris Johnson, The Quiet Revolution in the Bahamas (Nassau, Bahamas: Family Islands Press Limited, 1972), 27.

41 “There is no doubt that the present system of open voting in the Out Islands in the presence of the candidates or their agents is liable to abuse and there is no doubt that abuses occurs. .” Official Gazette, 19 January 1943, 82.
during the riot that “the first awakenings of a new political awareness began to be felt in
the hearts of black people.”42

Similarly, assemblyman and labor leader Sir Randol Fawkes began his clarion
call for members of the Bahamian workforce to unionize in 1955 by recalling the riot.43
For him, the riot was the first time Bahamian laborers united and showed what could be
accomplished if laborers rose up against unfair working environments. Likewise, when
the Bahamas’ first Prime Minister Sir Lynden Pindling summed up the pathway to
Independence in the Bahamas, he began with the 1942 riot. “When the great heroes of
our struggle … stood on Burma Road,” he began, “they did not stand alone.”44

Importantly, this perception of the riot as a significant part of the Bahamas’
political and social development was not just the opinion of those at the vanguard of the

42 Doris Johnson, The Quiet Revolution in the Bahamas (Nassau, Bahamas: Family Islands
Press Limited, 1972), 27.

43 Rosalie Fawkes, ed., Labour Unite or Perish! The Writings that Launched A Movement by Sir
Randol Fawkes, ((Florida: Dodds Printing, 2004), 2. Randol Fawkes was an attorney who turned
his attention to the plight of the un-unionized worker. Not only did he become a member of the
House of Assembly (1956-1972) but he also established the first successful trade union in the
Bahamas, The Bahamian Federation of Labour. In 1958, while president of the BFL, he led the
General Strike which resulted in real and lasting labor reforms in the colony. He claimed that it
was from the efforts of the 1942 riot leaders that he learned to “substitute the Conference Table
for the Riot Act.” Randol Fawkes The Faith that Moved the Mountain: A Memoir of a Life and the
Times. 196.

44 This excerpt was taken from a speech given by Pindling to the 41st General Convention
of the Progressive Liberal Party on January 30th, 1997. In 1992, Pindling was ousted from his 25
year control of the government by Hubert Ingram and his party, the Free National Movement.
When this speech was given, he was campaigning to regain his position and his party’s place as
the government in power. The rest of the speech similarly reviews the glory days of the PLP. The
PLP did not win that election. Patricia Beardsley Roker, ed. The Vision of Sir Lyndon Pindling: In
His Own Words, (Nassau Bahamas: The Estate of Lyndon Pindling, 2002), 162.
country’s majority and independence movements. Just four years after the riot, for instance, Methodist minister H. H. Brown asked his congregation to take responsibility for their government and punctuated his point by referring to the riot. “That a people have the kind of government that it deserves,” he explained, “goes without saying. A criticism of the local government is therefore a criticism of the entire population. Until people waken to their own responsibilities, they will not have a responsible government. But nothing can possibly justify the attempt of any government to keep the people asleep. Who has learned the lesson of the [1942] riot?”

While Bahamian politicians and citizens tended to see the riot as the awakening of a people from their political slumber, however, most historians have not shared this assessment of the riot. Instead, most historians and scholars who have studied the riot have argued that it was not a significant precursor to the movement toward the political inclusion and power of the black majority that would take place in the Bahamas over the decades following that event. The 1942 riot, they asserted, was but a momentary outburst and its effects, if any, are very difficult to trace.

Colin Hughes, for instance, argued that the riot was merely a symbol. Although he admitted that it was no small symbol, with a collection of myths being built around it as the popular movements in the country got underway, Hughes insisted that it was not

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a cause or an instrument in creating those movements. Rather, the riot, according to Hughes, was but “a momentary outburst of raw energy” that “provided “martyrs and a heroic moment” to Bahamian blacks “once a political movement had finally started.”

Like Hughes, preeminent Bahamian historian Gail Saunders did not see a link between the riot and the dramatic developments in the socio-political arena in the 1960s that led to majority rule and independence in the Bahamas. According to Saunders, after the riot occurred, “the black masses slept on.” For Saunders, the riot was a “short lived spontaneous outburst by a group of disgruntled labourers … [that] occurred against a background of narrow socio-economic and political policies.” And, more recently, she argued (with Michael Craton) that the 1942 riot, “though a warning, did not precipitate major constitutional, political or social reforms… They were merely a spontaneous reaction to underlying conditions, triggered by the wage issue.”

This riot, however, was more than a symbol. It was more than just an episode of Bahamian blacks blowing off steam. It was more than an attack against the cars and

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50 Many in political office and in other places of power during the militant civil rights movements of the 1960’s (that is the Black Power movement) did not see it as justified reactions.
buildings on Bay Street. It was, instead, an attack on the Bay Street Boys’ control of the colony.\textsuperscript{51} As Doris Johnson reminded us, “the usually docile and cheerful Bahamian workers” marched towards Bay Street, the space of white wealth and power, “in an angry and belligerent mood.”\textsuperscript{52} Their attack on Bay Street proved that the control of the Bay Street Boys over the colony was not unassailable.

Moreover, the riot was an awakening of the public to their political power. The day before the riot not even those in the riot would have predicted the events of the next day. The riot, therefore, served as a very public transformation of the black laboring class in the Bahamas from apparently docile and compliant to active and defiant. The

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\textsuperscript{51} Even in 1942, Bay Street, the economic, political and social center of the Bahamas, was a contested space, a place for seeking political power, and a place for protest. Not only did it house the Assembly and the colonial offices, it was also the colony’s main commercial district and the site of many of the colony’s key cultural events. “Not surprisingly, Bay Street has been very much a contested space; a place where different groups vied for recognition, redress and control. Racial groups in the Bahamas, for instance, ‘negotiated’ this place since the earliest days of the colonies, with whites using the law to limit where and when blacks could be on the street; and blacks working within and around those laws to carve out a place for themselves on the same street.” Martin, Nona P and Virgil H. Storr “Whose Bay Street? Competing Narratives of Nassau’s City Centre” \textit{Island Studies Journal}, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2009, p 26. The rioters were, I contend, raising their voices and wielding their sticks and projectiles in an effort to claim Bay Street.

\textsuperscript{52} Doris L. Johnson, \textit{The Quiet Revolution}, 15. Dame Doris and many others hold on to this docile and cheerful view of the Bahamian because of the lack of political demonstrations but they discount the other ways of dissent such as the festival of Junkanoo. See Wood, Vivian Nina Michelle, PhD. \textit{Rushin’ hard and runnin’ hot: Experiencing the music of the Junkanoo Parade in Nassau, Bahamas}. Indiana University, 1995. p111.
riot showcased a black proletariat that was not afraid to resist the ruling white oligopoly. And, it was an opportunity for them to express that budding identity. The riot should, thus, be thought of as an important precursor to the evolution of the labor movement, the black political movement and the independence movement in the Bahamas. Contrary to Saunders and Hughes, this chapter argues that the 1942 riot (a) was an attack against the dominance of Bay Street, (b) was the first signs of a political awakening in the Bahamas’ black community, and (c) signaled the emergence of a black proletariat that was not afraid to challenge Bay Street.

II. An attack against the dominance of Bay Street

Throughout the Bahamas’ history, Bay Street has been a divided and contested space. It was a place of power and, thus, a place to challenge that power. So many of the most dramatic and significant social events in the Bahamas’ history were played out on the stage of Bay Street and, as a result of these events, Bay Street was in turn

53 See Nona Martin and Virgil Storr, “I’se a Man!: Political Awakening and the 1942 Riot in the Bahamas”, Journal of Caribbean History, 41 (1 & 2) 2007, 4. As we argue in that paper, the riot was the start of a political awareness that would ultimately lead to majority rule and independence.

54 Note that they proletariat were awakened to challenge Bay Street. Theirs was not aspiration of success; there was only the determination of expression. They were not content to sit on their frustrations and to bury their anger over injustices. They were finding their voice after a too long period of silence. How their uttering would be heard was not the thing utmost on their minds.
transformed into a street where Bahamians came together in displays of unity and a place where they sought to act out dissenting viewpoints.55

Before the riot, however, Bay Street could safely be called a “white controlled space.” Although many blacks walked the sidewalks and even, when funds afforded it, shopped in the finer stores on Bay Street, it was with the knowledge that they were just visitors. Even though some blacks were allowed to work in the stores on Bay Street, the choice jobs were not available to them. For example, a 1941 employment advertisement in the Nassau daily newspaper the Nassau Guardian, asked for a “White man or woman for secretarial work and book-keeping.”56 It was unusual to have such an advertisement placed. Not because clerical work was not normally restricted to white (or light-skinned blacks of good social standing as discussed later) but because it was just so much a part of everyday life, that the act of putting this prejudice in print was not really necessary. As Anglican Bishop Gilbert Thompson explains, Bahamian blacks just knew not to apply for those jobs because they “knew that only certain colors could work in the store as clerks.”57

55 Lefebvre conceived of social space as both the result of spatial practice and the basis for all social activity. He also argued that spaces can simultaneously be the stage for and the result of spatial practices which both connect and separate people. For instance, he described “capitalist space” as “whole and broken, global and fractured, at one and the same time.” Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 355-6. Also see Nona Martin and Virgil H. Storr “Bay Street as Contested Space” Space and Culture, forthcoming for an extended discussion of this point.

56 Saturday March 1, 1941, The Nassau Guardian.

57 Interview with Bishop Gilbert Thompson, The 1942 Riot The National Archives.
It is also true that whites controlled the colony politically from their perch on Bay Street, which is also the site of the House of Assembly. For example, the overwhelming majority of the elected officials who went in and out of the lawmaking body of the colony, were white men (that is until the latter third of the twentieth century). Of the 104 men who served to parliament between 1900 and 1942 and whose races are discernible, for instance, only 14 were not white.\textsuperscript{58} This is partly explained by the efforts that the Bay Street Boys took to prevent black entrance into the Assembly.

Milo Butler, who would eventually become the first Governor-General of an independent Bahamas and one of the first black politicians to be vocal on behalf of the masses, 1938 campaign for the seat in the House of Assembly that was left vacant by the black lawyer A. F. Adderley (who had moved up to the Legislative council) provided a clear illustration.\textsuperscript{59} Butler’s opponent for this seat was white millionaire and Canadian immigrant Harry Oakes. Although it was a hotly contested race, it cannot be considered a fair one. In the election, the Bay Street Boys put pressure on the Royal Bank of Canada, where Butler had a line of credit, to discontinue his credit. Additionally, voters were

\textsuperscript{58} There were men in the House with African ancestry that did not identify with blacks. Their wishes were accepted by those of the time. Throughout this dissertation I will characterize them by their self-identity and the way the way they were received by others

\textsuperscript{59} The legislative council was renamed the Senate in 1964 when the colony was granted self-rule. It was the “upper house” of the local parliament. Although this was a prestigious appointment (made by the Governor), those in this council were still had limited power, as the House of Assembly had the power of the purse.
openly bribed as they came to the polls to cast their ballots.\textsuperscript{60} Even though Butler did become a member of the House of Assembly, he did not significantly impact the make-up of the legislature nor was he able to ensure that the decisions of the House took into account the interests of poor black Bahamians. Out of the 28 members in the House of Assembly at the time of his election, only 6 were not white.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, the few black men that managed to get elected to the Assembly before 1960 were not enough to really shape policy in the colony.

At the time of the riot, most of the Bay Street stores were also white owned. Some of the most popular, for instance, William H. Sands Outfitter and Clothier, H. G Christie Real Estate and John S. George & Company bore the name of their owners and proprietors, all of whom were white businessmen. Asa H. Pritchard’s John Bull tobacco house, which he opened right after the 1929 Hurricane, was also located on Bay Street. Anthony Baker’s dry goods store, A. Baker’s and Son, was also located on Bay Street. Baker’s store is still on Bay Street though it is now run by the Baker sisters. \textsuperscript{62} There were, however, a few black-owned stores on Bay Street. Charles Christopher (C.C.) Smith and his wife owned a large shop opposite the Johnson House. Additionally, in 1921 when T. G. Johnson died, Mr. and Mrs. Smith purchased the building and the business that sat on the corner of Bay Street and Union Street (now renamed Elizabeth

\textsuperscript{60} Craton and Saunders, \textit{Islanders in the Stream}, 271.

\textsuperscript{61} From the Files of Marcus Thynes Master Parliamentary Clerk, Nassau, Bahamas.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Tribune}, 12 March 2011.
Avenue). Another black-owned store on Bay Street was Weeks’ Bicycle Shop. Willie Weeks opened his store in 1915 and though his store was on Bay Street, he lived in a black neighborhood over-the-hill.

Admittedly, this paucity of black owned stores on Bay Street was a recent phenomenon. There had been quite a few black businessmen who benefitted from the rum running during prohibition in the US and had set up businesses on or near Bay Street. However, they were forced off of Bay Street in the 1930s by the “wealthy white

63 Valeria Moseley Moss and Ronald G. Lightbourn ed. Reminiscing: Memories of Old Nassau. (1999) 171. On the day of the riot, C. C. Smith heard the crowd and followed them. He left his store and went to hear the Attorney General address the crowd opposite Rawson Square (this was some ways from his store). After the speech which the crowd seemed to resent, they “began to make a noise, hooting and so on and a few seconds later Mr. Moseley’s window was smashed.” Although he saw the crowd vandalize stores and deemed them violent and was urged by his sons to go as “this is going to be serious,” he by his own testimony, went to his store, stayed for a while and then left to walk towards the Western End of Bay Street. All this time his store had not been touched and although there was no evidence that his store would be touched (as others around him had been vandalized and looted already), he still took precaution. “A crowd came along who were breaking windows and I stood in front of my shop and took some money out of my pocket and said ‘Oh, boys, I haven’t done anything.’—so they took the cash and left the windows.” Evidence of CC Smith to the Russell Commission, 257-258.

64 These black owned stores catered to black and white alike.

65 Miami Times 1 December 1967, page 27 and conversation with Paul Aranha. Sources show that he was most likely between Charlotte and Frederick Streets, on the north side of Bay Street although he did not front on Bay Street. It seemed however that he was on a footpath connecting Bay to the waterfront.

66 Although there were only a handful of black owned stores on Bay Street, there were, of course, many black owned stores that were just off of Bay Street. Mrs. Ruth Sands, for instance, located her Dressmaking and Haberdashery Shop was located just off of Bay Street. Tourists brought fine materials (e.g. doe skin) that they purchased from Suzy’s or another fine goods store on Bay Street into her shop and within a day or two at the most, they could pick up a complete tailor made suit. Stanley Kemp’s tailor store was, similarly, on a corner street off of Bay Street. Ruth Sands, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011. Paul Arhana, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, February 2011.
competition… Those whose businesses survived the depression underwent little expansion… A number of upwardly mobile blacks, many of them originally from the Out Islands, like Herbert and Eugene Heastie, Edgar Bain, and Ulrich Mortimer managed to keep their businesses going. Many established businesses over-the-hill.”

By the time of the riot, then, Bay Street was inextricably linked in the minds of Bahamians with the white ruling class. It was from this bastion that the Bay Street Boys wielded their political and economic control over the colony. The 1942 riot was, amongst other things, a rebellion against Bay Street’s dominance. Stated another way, at the very least, the riot was a deliberate endeavor to (re)capture and (re)appropriate Bay Street and, if those lofty goals were not possible, to at least lash out at Bay Street. This riot demonstrated that Bay Street and, thus, the Bay Street Boys were indeed vulnerable after all. The political and economic controls that the ruling group thought they had on the Bahamian blacks were shown to be incomplete and not completely effective. The majority black population showed that, if given a just cause, they could literally dismantle the bricks and mortar and bring down the entire edifice from which the white minority wielded their power.

By examining the salient aspects of this riot as well as the significance of Bay Street as a stage for and a product of this event, it becomes clear that this riot was an

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68 Martin and Storr, “Ise a Man!: Political Awakening and the 1942 Riot in the Bahamas,” 74.
attack on the control of the Bay Street Boys over the colony. It is important to remember that the riot targeted space and not people.\textsuperscript{69} Although there were reports of police officers being hit with stones and bottles, the rioters were much more concerned with destroying property than perpetuating violence against people.\textsuperscript{70} There were no civilians attacked on Bay Street. Even, Roland Symonette, one of the Bay Street Boys, was able to walk down Bay Street during the height of the riot completely unharmed.\textsuperscript{71} As he recalled, “Glass was flying. They just gained momentum as they went along and after they drunk the liquor they were not prevented from doing anything… I was in the

\textsuperscript{69} Not only were the actions of the rioters (i.e. the target of their looting) constrained but the island returned to normalcy rather quickly. The riot happened on a Monday and by Thursday they were back to work. As the \textit{Tribune} reported three days after the riot, “the situation was very quiet throughout the island today and business in the City had almost returned to normal. Military patrols continue to cruise through the island and an official notice appearing in the press tonight emphasizes the importance of observing curfew.” Additionally, “apart from the rigid enforcement of curfew last night, everything has been normal in Nassau during the past 24 hours. Most of the strikers have gone back to work pending negotiations and queues stood outside the Labour Bureau seeking registration this morning. Over 2000 are now employed and the full complement for the project at this stage has just about been reached.” \textit{Tribune} 4 June 1942, Additionally, parents felt safe enough returning their children to school the following Monday. \textit{Tribune} 8-9 June 1942.

\textsuperscript{70} Evidence of Corporal Howin Pinder to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 99. Corporal Pinder, one of the officers who arrested Leonard Storr Green, reports that he had to hide under G. W. Sweeting’s store.

\textsuperscript{71} Evidence of Roland Theodore Symonette to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 490. Roland Symonette was from the island of Eleuthera. He made his fortune during the Prohibition era by supplying alcohol to the United States. During this time he owned liquor stores, shipyards and quite a bit of real estate. He was a Member of the House of Assembly and would become the first premier when the Bahamas was granted self-governance. By the time of the riot he had served in the assembly for 17 years and would go on to serve for 35 more.
midst of it for about an hour and a half.” Similarly, Bruce Johnstone, recalled a man’s success at stopping others from pillaging a store. As he recalled, “a Methodist minister, came along and succeeded in stopping the people who were pillaging Mr. Yanowitz’ store.” Even so, “as the minister stopped them from taking goods from Yanowitz’ store they would leave and take things from another store. He would go there and stop them taking goods from there and while he was stopping them there they would go back and take things from Yanowitz’ store and the crowd kept this up.” Mr. Johnstone notes that eventually “this minister gave it up as I suppose he thought it was a hopeless job.”

Similarly, Roscoe W. Thompson convinced the rioters to stop tearing apart his store. He was not harmed and his store sustained no further damage after he made the request.

Not only was there not violence against people but, even when people tried to prevent violence against property, they were not harmed and were occasionally even able to be persuasive. There were two buildings, explained Mr. Christie, that he knew of on Bay Street that were not damaged during the riot. The first was “the Prince George Hotel of which ‘Scott’ [a black man] is porter… Scott managed to persuade the crowd not to damage the hotel. Then there was the Central Gas Station owned by Mr. Carl Brice. A

72 Evidence of Roland Theodore Symonette to the Russell Commission, 490. Restrictions were placed on the selling of liquor because of the part liquor played in the riot. Interesting enough, the restrictions did not apply to guests of the hotels.” Official Gazette, 12 January 1942.

73 Evidence of Bruce Johnson to the Russell Commission, 168.

74 Evidence of Roscoe Whittleton Thompson to the Russell Commission, 230.
friend of Mr. Brice, Fuzzy Lightbourn... stood outside the garage and persuaded the crowd not to break it up.”

Another salient factor of the riot was that specific targets were chosen or, more accurately, specific targets were spared. Indeed, the division of these targets suggests that the riot was an attack on Bay Street as a space of white power and black subordination rather than simply an attack by poorer Bahamians against the spaces of richer Bahamians. Racial divisions rather than class divisions played a key role in the riot. Recall, as historians Michael Craton and Gail Saunders have indicated, “the damage was not indiscriminate; such shops as those owned by the Speaker of the Assembly and the wife of one of the white Project supervisors were almost gutted, but the shoe store owned by Percy Christie, the white would-be labor organizer, was left untouched.” Christie reports that there were “eight to ten men with arms interlocked” protecting his store. As he described, “when I arrived in front of my shop I found a dozen people were holding arms and protecting the shop.” In contrast, John Bull, an upscale store, owned by Bay Street Boy Asa Pritchard, had its windows completely shattered and broken.

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75 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission 26

76 Craton and Saunders, Islanders in the Stream, 287.

77 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission, 17.

78 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission 26
Harry S. Black’s Candy Kitchen was another story. By all accounts, it seemed to have been owned by a nonwhite, light skinned black man who practiced color discrimination against blacks. Whites and blacks with the lightest complexions, for instance, were seated in the back of the store while blacks were restricted to service at the counter. He was, however, one of the few who hired blacks as clerks albeit those with light complexions. At the time of the riot, there were two light colored black women who worked as counter clerks. It was the presence of these women that saved the store.79

Similarly, Old England, a fine haberdashery and fine goods emporium employed a very light skinned black woman as a counter clerk. Ms. Rowena “Winnie” Eldon recalled watching as the men smashed windows and looted stores but “went right by our shop and didn’t do a thing to ours. Our big plate glass stood the entire time.”80 On the other hand, Suzy’s, another fine goods and luxury items store, was stripped down to the bare shelves.81


81 Though they give no definite amount when the House of Assembly discussed compensation for goods lost and property damaged during the war, they surmised that “if these people were re-imbursed, the Colony would have to pay thousands of pounds.” 3 February 1943. The idea of compensation was first introduced to the Assembly by Bay Street Boy Stafford Sands in the form of a petition from the Chamber of Commerce which asked for “full compensation to all innocent persons who have suffered loss or damage to their property as a result of the civil
That the rioters focused on specific spaces can be seen by how they behaved when they were pushed off of Bay Street and returned to their neighborhoods over-the-hill. When the rioters left Bay Street and they entered Grant’s Town, they were still in an excitable state. They were still as inebriated or even more inebriated when they arrived in that residential section. Yet, in spite of that fact, the businesses in Grant’s Town were spared. As Hallinan describes, “It was quite clear in my mind, the mob did respect the property of residents over the Hill more than they had done in Bay Street, in fact there were, I think, twenty-seven premises broken into and most of them were bar rooms. There were about eight or ten clubs over the hill with liquor and they were not broken into.”

Admittedly, Bay Street was a contested space long recognized before the riot. Until the 1942 riot, however, Bahamian blacks’ dissatisfaction with their socio-economic circumstances and the enduring hegemony of Bay Street was expressed symbolically through Junkanoo.

disturbances on the 31st day of May and the 1st and 2nd days of June A.D. 1942.” Even though this bill was championed by many of the Bay Street Boys, it would never be passed. Times 26 January 1943.

Evidence of Eric Hallinan to the Russell Commission, 524/556.

Not surprisingly, given the history of cooperation then, the only model that the police had for dealing with large crowds of blacks engaged in protest, was more appropriate for dealing with the peaceful occupations of Bay Street that occur during Junkanoo than the destructive occupation that occurred during the riot. As Lieutenant Colonial Reginald Erskine Lindop, the commissioner of police who was in charge or clearing the street that day describes, “On the first of January there is a carnival here and at nine o’clock in the morning the custom is for the police to form up opposite East Street corner, and drive the people down Bay Street and up over the
Junkanoo on Bay Street as a vehicle for symbolic protest

Twice a year, before sunrise on Boxing Day and New Year’s Day, costumed revelers make their way down Bay Street, dancing to a rhythm made by a unique combination of cowbells and drums made of metal barrels and dried goatskin. Although the carnival-like festival dates back to the time of slavery, the present day parades are very different from the traditional Junkanoo celebrations.

Although the traditional Junkanoo instruments (cowbells, goatskin drums and often whistles) were played during the earlier parades, the more recent parades have added a variety of brass instruments, modified cowbells and horns as well as different kinds of drums. Moreover, while celebrants in the earlier parades were typically divided into “gangs” (usually representing different neighborhoods) who wore very simple costumes, modern day parades feature brass sections, choreographed dance routines, organized groups and increasingly colorful and more complex costumes consisting of

Hill; and my experience is that when we do this, the people go to their homes over the Hill into Grant’s Town and do not return to Bay Street after the police have passed.” Evidence of Lt. Col. Erskine-Lindop to the Russell Commission, 52. However, this is exactly what they did on the day of the riot. Yet, even though they were unsuccessful in their usual method of crowd dispersal, Lt. Col. Erksine-Lindop was reluctant to use force. As he explains it, he “did not actually see any acts of violence myself and in Bay Street, I never met any action which would have justified me in taking extreme measures such as ordering fire.” Evidence of Lt. Col. Erskine-Lindop to the Russell Commission, 51. As a matter of fact, the Bahamian police force was not equipped for or aware of some of the more extreme measures of crowd dispersal. “At that time, the police were not furnished with tear gas bombs or apparatus. There is a regulation drill for dispresement of a crowd using butts of rifles which is a recognized drill’ but my men have not been instructed in the drill.” Evidence of Lt. Col. Erskine-Lindop to the Russell Commission, 51.
headpieces, shoulder-pieces and skirts covered with crepe paper and made with a variety of materials including cardboard, Styrofoam, wood, wire mesh and plastic tubing. By the 1920s, however, masqueraders began decorating their costumes with colorful tissue paper instead of newspaper and sponges as they had in even earlier periods. Still, the costumes during that era were quite basic consisting of clothing and headpieces covered with “fringed” crepe paper and did not include the cardboard skirts or shoulder pieces that are now commonplace.

Besides the costumes, Junkanoo has changed in other ways as well. In the 1800s, the parades were a means of revelry for enslaved peoples, a break from their everyday lives. Beyond a release of extra energy and an outlet for frustration as it was for the enslaved, it has developed into a semiannual spectacle. The earlier groups were community affairs, solidifying the ties between neighbors and friends. The later groups are bigger and encompass members of a wider geographic community (not just small neighborhoods). However, the group itself formed a tight community. Those from different parts of the island felt themselves connected through their shared identity as a member of groups with names like the Saxons, One Family, The Roots or The Valley

84 The denial of freedom is the chief frustration of a slave. Hoffman and Cleare-Hoffman recognized Junkanoo “as an early expression of freedom that can be traced back to the times of slavery. It is also a symbol of the resiliency of Bahamian culture. Junkanoo, they explained, was a powerful form of meaning that helped the Bahamians survive through times of intense struggle.” Louis Hoffman and Heatherlyn Cleare-Hoffman, “Existential Therapy in a Bahamian Context,” Presented at the Caribbean Regional Conference of Psychology 15-18 November 2011, 7.
Boys. More recent parades are much more extravagant events than earlier parades. Nowadays participants begin preparing for the next parade almost as soon as the previous parade has concluded. Currently, the larger Junkanoo groups secure corporate sponsors and spend thousands on every parade, while the poorest of Bahamians as well as tourists, for that matter, are still able to participate. Though still on Bay Street, the route has also changed and the number of participants as well as spectators has grown considerably.

Despite this evolution, Junkanoo has for a long time, defined and still defines Bahamian cultural experience. Bethel describes Junkanoo as “the ultimate national symbol.” And, as a “street festival of West African origin held at Christmastime, it represents poverty and wealth, discipline and rebellion, competition and co-operation, creative genius and physical prowess.” There is a wonderful spirit of competition amongst the groups (sometimes pitting brother against brother or even mother against child) but a beautiful spirit of cooperation within each group: costume designers working with costume builders, dancers working with musicians and so on and so on.

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85 The Roots, One Family and The Valley Boys and The Saxons are four of the largest present day Junkanoo groups.

86 Junkanoo also takes place on other islands in the Bahamas as well as in Jamaica and The Turks and Caicos Islands. The twice yearly parades are, however, unparalleled in terms of size or spectacle.

Bay Street, the site of the 1942 riot, has been the space of Junkanoo since the nineteenth century. There were reports, for instance, of “grotesquely dressed” Junkanooers parading down Bay Street in 1879. Nash-Ferguson has written beautifully about Junkanoo’s place on Bay Street. “For two mornings a year,” she stated, “historic Bay Street becomes the stage whereon we demonstrate our sovereignty of spirit, and celebrate the triumph of a proud heritage.” “On Bay Street,” she explained, “in our costumes, we would feel complete.” That the space of Bay Street is also commercial and political space imparts economic and political significance to these festivals. Again, Junkanoo took place on Bay Street, a space where Bahamian blacks were allowed to work (in some areas) and to shop but were never meant to control. Junkanoo was an opportunity for Bahamian blacks, as Nash-Ferguson wrote, to “reverse the trend of history” and to “joyously proclaim the triumph of the Bahamian spirit: parade it in the intricate steps of the dance, thunder it from the bounding of our drums, shout it in the

88 Throughout history it has continued to be representative of what is essentially Bahamian. It is the first and foremost way that Bahamians represent themselves to others as we see in Chicago in September of 1972 when some “200 Chicagoans came to see and applaud something called “Bahamas Day”. And how did the “twenty-one youngster express the Bahamian spirit? They dressed and performed in Junkanoo costume. Chicago Defender (Sep 09, 1972) p.17, col.7

89 Keith Gordon Wisdom, Bahamian Junkanoo: An Act in a Modern Social Drama (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1985), 44.

90 Arlene Nash Ferguson, I Come to Get Me!: An Inside Look at the Junkanoo Festival (Nassau: Doongalik Studios, 2000), 16.

91 Nash-Ferguson, I Come to Get Me!: An Inside Look at the Junkanoo Festival, 30.
sound of our cowbells.”

“Junkanoo,” Nicolette Bethel similarly explained, “has the quality of an occupation, an invasion of the centres of authority; it occurs at the heart of the commercial power of the white Bahamian elite.”

Likewise, as Wood wrote, “Bay Street and Junkanoo are synonymous with each other. When Junkanooers talk about ‘goin [sic] to Bay Street’ they are talking about rushing in the Junkanoo parade.”

Something significant takes place during Junkanoo on Bay Street. As E. Clement Bethel suggested, “the temporary occupation of Bay Street was a custom popularised by the Junkanoos.”

Junkanoo demonstrated that Bahamian blacks could possess and control the city center even if only temporarily and metaphorically.

From its inception, Junkanoo has contained both covert and overt statements of protest. Interestingly, Junkanoo was often a time when participants expressed their personal as well as political grievances. As Wood informed, “until [the 1960s] Junkanoo was a time when many individuals sought vengeance for wrongs they had suffered at

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92 Junkanoo on Bay Street reversed the process that Lefebvre discussed, whereby the dominant form of space attempts to recast its space, eliminating difference.

93 Nicolette Bethel, “Junkanoo in the Bahamas: a Tale of Identity,” 122. And although Bay Street profited from the tourists that Junkanoo brought it, the riot was such a disruption of the regular use of the city center that this celebration was suspended for the following 5 years.


95 E. Clement Bethel, Junkanoo: Festival of the Bahamas, 73.
the hands of others during the past year. Bay Street became the battlefield, and cowbells became the weapons … [they] also used as weapons whips to the ends of which they had attached dried testicles of bulls.”96 For the masqueraders, E. C. Bethel noted, “Junkanoo was … a celebration; but as times grew harder, and they had fewer things to celebrate, it also provided them with an annual forum for airing grievances.”97

When Bahamians grew dissatisfied with the prevailing political, social and economic order, Junkanoo became an opportunity for them to express their discontent. “An example of this,” as Wisdom noted, “would be the sponge costumes, with painted protest signs attached, seen in the 1941 Junkanoo parades, which were worn in silent protest of the high interest rental rates White outfitters were charging Black sponge fishermen.”98 That many of the Bay Street Boys were surprised by the riot, however, speaks to the ruling elite’s success in pushing protest into more symbolic forms.

Again it is important to note that Bay Street was not just a street. It was the street. When visitors came by boat, as they most often did during the 1940s, the first impression of the island was Bay Street. Visitors were able to purchase handmade straw works from various black street vendors, bargaining for the price they thought


98 Wisdom, Bahamian Junkanoo: An Act in a Modern Social Drama, 91.
reasonable. Many of the stores, however, sold luxury items (no bargaining there) and were owned and staffed by white Bahamians or blacks with light complexions. The visitors could buy foods such as accra, a retention of their African diet, and fish fresh from the sea from the black street vendors and in the Public Market. Or, they could eat in the finest restaurants in which black Bahamians were servers but not patrons. There were strict laws of behavior on Bay Street, how one could dress (e.g. you had to cover up the swimsuit) and how one should speak (profanity was prohibited). It was where the House of Assembly met and handed down laws that favored the merchants and the tourists over black residents. It was where the solicitors, accountants and realtors had their offices, very few of whom were black. Black Bahamians were allowed on Bay Street but in a particular role. It was during the Junkanoo parade, however, that black Bahamians turned Bay Street on its head and reversed that order. They were loud, present and in control of a space that for every day but these exerted a form of control over them.

From their reactions to the riot, it is evident that even 100 years after emancipation, Bahamian whites believed that Bay Street was the domain of the white merchants (i.e. the Bay Street Boys) and gave little thought to the possibility that the

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99 Such as women straw workers.

100 For instance, George Perpal was fined 2/6 or 7 days for riding a bicycle without a bell on Bay Street. *Tribune* 23 January 1943. Isabel Delancy was fined £10 or 1 month for using profane language on Bay Street. *Tribune* 10 January 1943. Lewis Miller was fined £6 or 14 days for using profane language on East Bay Street. *Tribune* 20 January 1943.
quite poor and dependent black laboring class might rise up and stand up to Bay Street (except maybe through the symbolism of Junkanoo). Mrs. Morton Turtle, whose husband owned a store on Bay Street, for instance, could not understand “why [her] husband should have been apprehensive of the workmen. For years he had employed hundreds of workmen and he was of the opinion that they were very fond of him in fact.”

J.P. Sands echoed the sentiments of many when he said, “I thought that everybody in the island was quite happy until about 8 o’clock on June 1st.” Even Etienne Dupuch, a journalist, politician and an activist who recognized the economic, political and social inequalities in the colony, was not prepared for what occurred. Dupuch testified that “the riot came as a complete surprise to [him] ... [he] never thought that our people could be agitated to the point of rioting because they have always enjoyed the enviable reputation of being patient, docile and law-abiding.”

In attacking the buildings during the 1942 riot, then, Bahamian blacks were challenging this notion that Bay Street was and would always be exclusively the space of white wealth and political power and, thus, of black lowliness and poverty. Admittedly, that perception of Bay Street (i.e. as a white owned space) seems to have survived for


103 Evidence of Etienne Dupuch, *The Russell Commission*, 301. He makes similar remarks in an editorial nine months after the riots. He wrote ”... the June 1st riot came as a complete surprise to us.” *Tribune* 13 March 1943.
some years after the riot. Again, the 1942 rioters were frustrated with their socio-economic circumstances which they believed to be the result of their living under the Bay Street Boys’ control and so they marched to the Bay Street for redress. They were turned away, told to voice their concerns in writing and through the correct channels, to wait, to be peaceful. In short, they were not heard and so they vented their frustrations on parked automobiles and store glass panes. Besides the symbolic attacks on Bay Street’s hegemony during Junkanoo, before the riot, Bahamian blacks had not voiced their political and economic grievances, at least not collectively. In addition to being a direct assault on Bay Street’s dominance, the riot then was arguably the first sign of a political awakening amongst Bahamian blacks.

III. First signs of a black political consciousness

Of course, in one sense, the 1942 riot can be thought of as a “momentary outburst.” The labor disturbances and riots that occurred throughout the West Indies in the 1930s, for instance, tended to last for several days and some stretched over several months.\textsuperscript{104} The riot in St. Vincent ebbed and flowed over multiple days between October 23, 1935 and late January of 1936. Similarly, the 1938 disturbances in Jamaica, for instance, took place in three phases. The first phase was April 29-May 2, the second phase was May 2-28 and the last between May 23 and June 11. The 1942 Nassau riot was

\textsuperscript{104} The other riots throughout the Caribbean will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
a two-day affair; hostilities began the morning of June 1st, 1942 and by the afternoon of Tuesday, June 2nd, 1942 the rioting and looting was over. Even if one extends the riot to consider the demonstration on Main Field that occurred on May 31st, the riot has to be seen as a relatively brief performance.\textsuperscript{105}

Although most historians did not see the riot as anything more than “a momentary outburst of raw energy” or a “short lived spontaneous outburst by a group of disgruntled labourers,” the riot was, as Bahamian political leaders attest, the first battle in the fight for majority rule and independence in the Bahamas. Recall, even Hughes, who viewed the riot as “a momentary outburst of raw energy,” has conceded that the riot has been frequently referenced in the political struggles of Bahamian blacks and continues to be a powerful symbol of black agency in the country. As discussed earlier, the riot represented a qualitative shift from the forms of protest that Bahamians typically engaged in. It both resulted in short term political gains and had long term political effects.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105}\textit{Official Gazette}, 7 January 1943.

\textsuperscript{106}The riot revealed clear examples of both accommodation and rebellion. This is very similar to the pattern that Eugene Genovese identifies in his discussion of paternalism in the American south. Genovese, in \textit{Roll Jordan Roll}, uses the concept of paternalism to provide a complex read of the master-slave relationship that stresses the extreme ambiguities and incongruities of human nature inherent in such relationships. While Genovese’s idea of paternalism has value there are some (considerable) flaws in Genovese’s view of paternalism. For example, Genovese describes slavery as “cruel unjust exploitive [and] oppressive” yet, for the rest of his discussion of paternalism, he seems to forget the oppressive nature and focus on the benevolence of the master and harmony of the symbiotic connection between slave and master. Additionally, perhaps as a result of his Marxism, he emphasizes class to the detriment of race and (purely) racialized motives for and measures of oppression. Moreover, as he explored the
The 1942 riot was, thus, a watershed event in the social and political history of the Bahamas. It was certainly more similar to the forms of political action on the part of Bahamian blacks that followed it than it was to the events that preceded it. The political awareness that was evident during the riot would increase during subsequent years. Indeed, it is much easier to connect the riot with the General Strike, Black Tuesday and the other political battles on the road to independence than it is to connect it with any other single event that preceded it in the Bahamas’ history.

The willingness of Bahamian blacks to directly engage Bay Street’s dominance was rarely exhibited before the riot. Again, prior to the riot, black protest in the colony, was usually expressed symbolically through Junkanoo. There are only two possible exceptions in the 20th century: the 1937 riot in Matthew Town, Inagua, and the 1935 labor disturbance at Bay Street Boy Roland T. Symonette’s Prince George Hotel in Nassau. These riots, however, were more dissimilar than similar to the 1942 riot.

The 1937 riot involved just a few people, “resulted from a personal vendetta,” and “failed to develop into a political or labour riot” or even one that captured popular complexity of the slaves’ culture, he does not give enough (if any credit) to the influence of the lifeways that the slaves would have brought with them from Africa. Still, Genovese presents a framework that is useful in understanding how people in power can control others by engendering a relationship in which deference is expected and given by oppressed in exchange for protection and provisions. For further explanation and other critical comments see Walter Johnson, “A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five: Rereading Roll Jordan Roll,” Common Place vol.1 no. 4 (July 2001) and “Massa’s New Clothes: A Critique of Eugene D. Genovese on Southern Society, Master-Slave Relations and Slave Behavior,” Clarence E. Walker, Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reprisals (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).
imaginations. After being charged and convicted of arson, Willis Duvalier and his brother went on a rampage against the two Erickson brothers who were new transplants to Inagua. The Erickson family had managed to revive the salt industry, bringing jobs to Inagua, and yet at the same time alienated both the ruling elite on the island (by shifting the power center) and the local laborers (who had decided to strike for higher wages).

The Duvalier brothers had a personal vendetta against the Erickson family and their employees for a slight that occurred six months earlier. On August 19, 1937, the Duvaliers attacked a witness in their arson trial who they thought to be an informant for the Erickson brothers. They also attacked the commissioner and the Erickson’s store, setting fire to the Commissioner’s house and the Erickson’s store. They also killed John Monroe, a black man, who got in the way when the Duvalier’s were after the Ericksons. Erickson and his crew escaped, leaving the island. The Duvaliers terrorized the town for two days, though causing very little harm, and then left the island on a little boat. They were later found in Haiti and eventually sent back to the Bahamas. Greg and Willis Duvalier were hanged for murder on November 22nd of that year. As mentioned earlier, the Erickson brothers alienated many, but the Duvalier brothers were alone on their rampage. Though many on the island had reason to join in with the Duvaliers, no one did. Although this has been called a riot within the historiography of the Bahamas, it

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was far from an event in which a cross section of the population revolted against perceived offenses. Again, this was a personal vendetta.\textsuperscript{108}

Similarly, though the 1935 disturbance in Nassau did involve between three and four hundred men, it can hardly be considered comparable to the 1942 riot. In 1935, Bay Street Boy Roland Symonette began construction of the Prince George Hotel on Bay Street. About 300 or so men showed up for employment. When they found out that they would not be hired, they were quite upset and made a lot of noise and threats but there was no riot. That this was only a near-riot is actually notable considering that, according to Napolean McPhee, the reason that there were not many jobs available to Bahamians at the hotel was because there were Cubans brought in to fill employment vacancies.\textsuperscript{109} Perhaps it was the memory of this importation of labor that got the laborers so upset on the morning of the 1942 riot. Remember, some believe that the implicit threat to bring in foreign workers by Attorney General Hallinan was what pushed the workers from assembling and pressing their demands on Bay Street to rioting on Bay Street. Perhaps the memory of this near-riot might be why the actions in 1942 came as such a surprise to whites in the Bahamas, it was such a departure from the worker’s normal course of action.


\textsuperscript{109} Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.
There are other differences between the 1935 near-riot and the 1942 riot. Unlike the 1942 riot, this near-riot involved only a few hundred men rather than thousands. Secondly, this near-riot was not a disturbance over wages and certainly was not a disturbance that had to do with the political or social circumstances of Bahamian blacks. Again, the chief cause of the 1935 disturbance was a lack of employment opportunities, which speaks to the economic condition but does not incorporate the political and social issues as does the 1942 riot. And, lastly, it was questionable whether the momentary anger of a group of men who were upset because they did not receive a job can be considered a riot, a protest or the signs of a political awakening among Bahamian blacks.

There was no time prior to the 1942 riot, when blacks ventured into the white oligarch controlled city center to openly voice their dissatisfaction with their political and social circumstances. The political consciousness that fueled the push towards majority rule and independence in the Bahamas was not clearly in evidence before 1942. But, there are signs of it after 1942. It is certainly evident in the General Strike in 1958 and Black Tuesday in 1965.

**The 1958 Strike and the start of a political movement**

The 1958 strike was a strike across various industries including sanitation, hotel, restaurants, and utilities that brought Nassau to a virtual standstill for about three weeks. It was spearheaded by the Bahamas Taxicab Union and was engineered by the Bahamas Federation of Labour. In 1955, Randol Fawkes started the Bahamas Federation
of Labour (BFL), which brought together all of the little craft unions in existence at the time as well as the unskilled workers. There were several strikes held throughout that first year of the union’s existence. They struck for and earned higher wages for garbage collectors, shorter hours for constructions workers, protective gear for concrete workers and other such concessions through collective bargaining.

The BFL’s plan during this period was straightforward. “The workers of the country,” Sir Clifford Darling, head of the taxi cab union at the time, explained, “had to continually agitate for better working conditions and to protest job discriminations.”

Although they received some concessions, the taxi union members were “still mistreated by the very same Bay Street fellows that were running everything.”

The taxicab drivers had a contentious relationship with the hotels which, instead of relying on the taxi drivers, made monopolistic arrangements with particular tour companies to convey tourists to their establishments. When the new airport was built, the taxicab drivers hoped that things would be different but eventually heard that “a tour company and a meter-cab company also owned by Bay Street had made deals with the Hotel Owner’s Association to transport” their guests to and from the brand new airport. As this would almost completely cut the private taxicab owners and drivers out of servicing the new airport, the Taxicab union decided to do something about it.

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110 Sir Clifford Darling, *A Bahamian Life Story*, 204.

111 Sir Clifford Darling, *A Bahamian Life Story*, 204.

Sir Clifford Darling, the president of the taxicab union (who would later become the 2nd Governor-General of the Bahamas), organized a 24 hour blockade of the airport in November of 1957 hoping to get the attention of the Assembly and perhaps negotiate the terms of the airport’s transportation agreement. There was an initial proposal that might have pacified the union but there was never a satisfactory bargain settled on and, subsequently, on the 11th of January 1958 a strike was enacted by not only by the Taxicab Union but the entire Bahamas Federation of Labour which, as noted above, included hotel workers, garbage collectors and manual laborers who all joined in the strike. The willingness of the workers beyond the taxi drivers who were directly affected to join in meant that this strike was not just about who would provide transportation. Workers were fed up with the high cost of living as well as the restrictions placed on collective bargaining in the colony. The Bay Street Boys apparently felt that they could wait out the strikers. They were wrong and, thus, the strike lasted some nineteen days when concessions were made.

The 1958 General Strike was, thus, a key event in the Bahamas’ socio-political history that is more closely connected to the 1942 riot than it is to the events which preceded the 1942 riot. Like the 1942 riot, the 1958 General Strike was carried out by a cross section of black Bahamian workers (both skilled and unskilled). Additionally, the General Strike was not an aimed at one employer or company. It targeted the ruling group who the workers believed were stifling their wage earning capabilities. They were striking against the perceived unfair actions of the ruling class. Another way in which
the General Strike was similar to the 1942 riot was that it had a racial undertone. There existed a color bar in so many segments of Bahamian society at the time but the taxicab and chauffer arena was one place that one’s color did not stand in the way of employment or advancement. This new transportation agreement, however, seemed to be introducing a color bar into the taxicab and chauffer industry. This fact was commented on in the British Parliament when the subject came up there. Member of the British Parliament Frank Allaun, although other members tried to assure him that there was no real color bar in the Bahamas, asked “was not the origin of the strike the fact that the taxi-drivers were being driven out of the one well-paid job which the colour bar had not yet entered?” The 1958 would also lead to the development of a majority black political party in the colony. If the 1942 riot was the first signs of a political awakening amongst of Bahamian blacks, the 1958 strike was the first real evidence that a political movement that would result in majority rule and perhaps independence was well underway. Similarly, Black Tuesday in 1965 was signaled that majority rule was inevitable.

**Black Tuesday and the demystification of Bay Street**

Black Tuesday is the term given to Tuesday, 27 April 1965, when black Bahamians gathered outside of the House of Assembly with signs and placards, singing

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in protest while the black Bahamians inside the House of Assembly acted out a political
drama that, arguably, changed the colony forever.¹¹⁴ Both actions demonstrated yet
again that it was possible, as a group, to defy Bay Street. This protest took place during
the debate surrounding the drawing of the constituency boundaries. At the time, the
House of Assembly was controlled by the United Bahamian Party (UBP), the party of the
Bay Street Boys, and prominent Bay Street Boy Roland Symonette was the Premier of the
colony, it had been granted self-rule a few years earlier. The Progressive Liberal Party
(PLP), a new political party that represented the black majority, was unhappy with how
the constituency boundaries were drawn and motioned to have the constituency lines
redrawn under the oversight of the United Nations. That motion was rejected by the
House. It was at that moment that Lynden Pindling, leader of the PLP, took action.
Condemning the Bay Street Boys as little more than dictators, he punctuated his point by
throwing the ceremonial mace out of the window, where a crowd waited.¹¹⁵ Another of
the PLP, Milo Butler, then sent the quarter-hourglasses, which the speaker used to keep
time, out of the window as well.¹¹⁶ With that, the members of the PLP stormed out the
House. It was a defiant and defining act for both the PLP and Bahamian people. It

¹¹⁴ Nona P. Martin and Virgil Henry Storr, “Demystifying Bay Street: Black Tuesday and
the Radicalization of Bahamian Politics in the 1960s,” Journal of Caribbean History 43. 1 2009: 37-50

¹¹⁵ The ceremonial mace is an ornamental staff that represents the power of the monarch
in a parliamentary monarchy or the power of the representatives to meet on behalf of the people
in a parliamentary democracy.

demonstrated that the PLP was the party of the people and Bahamian blacks were prepared to defy the ruling minority. It demonstrated that the Bay Street Boys were powerless against an increasingly organized, increasingly defiant, and increasingly recalcitrant Black majority.

Although the Bay Street Boys had an overwhelming majority in the House and were able to pass the boundaries legislation without having to give in to pressure by the PLP to alter them, in other respects, the Bay Street Boys were quite impotent against a more confrontational PLP. The Premier’s inability to stop the PLP’s supporters from continuing to picket outside the House is a case in point. From the beginning of the debate over the boundaries legislation, there was a “well-orchestrated show of objection from the PLP Members, supported by crowds outside the House.”

Black voices both in and out of the House were growing louder as the debate wore on. And, there was no reason to believe that the protest would grow quiet. On the contrary, in their public meetings, and through their pamphlets, the PLP were urging sustained action.

On April 26th and again on April 27th, Black Tuesday, Premier Roland Symonette gave radio address in an attempt to quell the protests. His April 27th broadcast was in direct response to “leaflets which were distributed in Nassau [on the 26th] by members or sympathizers of an anti-Government group” which urged people to “Storm Rawson’s

117 Craton, Pinndling: The Life and Times of the First Prime Minister of the Bahamas, 119.

118 See Fawkes, The Faith that Moved Mountains, 263.

119 Colin Hughes, Race and Politics in the Bahamas, 86.
Square.”\textsuperscript{120} As was typical during that time, Premier Symonette’s tone was paternalistic and not conciliatory.\textsuperscript{121} He encouraged the “peaceful and law abiding people” of the Bahamas to not be influenced by the “misrepresentations that are being made about the report of the Constituencies Commission.”\textsuperscript{122} He accused “certain sections in the community” of making false statements “which have the sole object of creating disturbances in our community” and of believing “that they can force their will upon the Government and the population by intimidation, threats and violence.”\textsuperscript{123} Premier Symonette then warned his listeners to “not be persuaded to take part in disturbances which will injure yourself and your family.”\textsuperscript{124} And, he threatened that “should there be disturbances today, the Government is prepared and will take whatever action is necessary. I cannot believe, however,” Premier Symonette concluded, “that the people of the Bahamas, for whom I have worked and worked hard for over 40 years, will allow themselves to be misled by this vicious, inaccurate and seditious propaganda.”\textsuperscript{125} His encouragements and threats, however, were not headed. PLP supporters came to Bay

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Guardian} 27April 1965.

\textsuperscript{121} MHA Milo Butler found it to be an attempt at “intimidation.” \textit{Tribune} April 27, 1965.

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Tribune} 27April 1965.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Tribune} 27April 1965.

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Tribune} 27April 1965.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Tribune} 27April 1965.
Street in large numbers to show their support for this new majority black party and their dissatisfaction with the Bay Street Boy led UBP.¹²⁶

Black Tuesday as well as the 1958 General Strike were more similar than dissimilar to the 1942 riot than to the protests that occurred before 1942. The 1942 riot, the General Strike were mass protests against Bay Street. By Black Tuesday there was clearly a black proletariat in the Bahamas that was not afraid to defy the Bay Street Boys. The 1942 riot signaled the emergence of that defiant black proletariat.

IV. The emergence of a black proletariat not afraid to challenge Bay Street

Admittedly, very little legislative changes came out of the riot.¹²⁷ But, as Sherouse explains, “the threat of mob violence surely impacted those in power. To

¹²⁶ See Randol Fawkes, The Faith that Moved Mountains: A Memoir of a Life and The Times (Hialeah, FL: Dodd Printers), 1977

¹²⁷ Nine months after the riot there were Voting Bills to come before the House of Assembly such as the one to place stricter term limits on the Members on the House of Assembly and to extend the Secret Ballot to the Out Islands. The editor of the Tribune comments that “although the House Committee now claims that measures recommended by the Royal Commission and adopted by it had no connection with the riot. It is more than a singular coincidence that reforms for which people have fought, pleaded and struggled for generations in the Colony are all now coming about in great rush. Tribune 13 March 1943. Additionally, in the British Parliament the riot brought some interesting debates concerning the Bahamian Legislative Council and proposed solution. Creech Jones asked if “in view of the continuous opposition of the Legislative Council to progressive labour legislation, can consideration be given at an early date to the revision of the Constitution of this territory.” “Text of Questions and Answers in the House of Commons regarding Bahamas riot” in Telegram sent from the Secretary of State for the
forestall more radical change, white leaders made minor political adjustments.”128 And, these minor reforms sent a great signal. A chink in the armor of Bay Street Boys had appeared. They were now making concessions when before such demands would have been rejected out of hand. The riot impressed upon the Bay Street Boys the understanding that they could not hold the space of Bay Street as their own domain, to be lent out one or two days a year during Junkanoo.129 Bay Street had changed from a place where Bahamian blacks only went to work and to shop into a place where Bahamian blacks could go to exercise political power, at least through protest. Moreover, the concessions that the white oligarchs made in the wake of the riot, especially labor union legislation and the extension of the secret ballot to the Out Islands, were critical for political transformation that was to occur later.130

Colonies to the Officer Administering the Government. 19 June 1942 FO 371/30644. Labor legislation was passed in the colony in 1943.


129 Because the riot was so heavy on the minds of the ruling elite, they banned the semiannual celebration of Junkanoo in which people from over the hill claimed Bay Street in a loud and boisterous parade.

130 The workers did get some immediate concessions. One important concession was that it “arranged with the American contractors to provide free mid-day meals for the 2,000 employed.” Telegraph from Governor (HRH The Duke of Windsor to Secretary of State for the Colonies 8 June 1942 CO: 23/731. As explained in another telegram, “it appears that the American contractors demand a heavier and more unremitting labour than is usual for local unskilled workmen, and it was for that reason that I arranged for a free meal.” Telegraph from Governor (HRH The Duke of Windsor to Secretary of State for the Colonies 10 June 1942 CO: 23/731. In another telegram he elaborates that “the greater part of the unskilled workers income is spent on food, and he will now be able to spend on the support of his family the money he would have ordinarily spent on providing a dinner for himself.” Telegraph from the Governor (HRH Duke of...
As discussed above, trade unions were an important part of the movement toward majority rule and independence in the Bahamas and the labor laws which facilitated their existence came about as a direct result of the 1942 riot. The Bahamas Trade Unions Act, for instance, was passed in 1943 and provided for “the formation and registration of unions.” 131 It also established the "legality of strikes, though work stoppages would be illegal if interpreted as coercing the government or inflicting undue hardship on the people." 132 Admittedly, this act was lacking teeth in that there was no labor department to facilitate collective action and hotel workers, the largest group of workers, were not allowed to organize. 133 Still, soon after they became legal, Bahamian workers began to believe that their best hope for bettering their circumstances lay in the trade unions and in the union’s defiance of the establishment. Several of the prominent black Bahamian political figures at the time of majority rule and independence were previously union leaders including Sir Randol Fawkes, Sir Clifford Darling, who would

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become a Governor-General, and Sir Lynden Pindling, a union lawyer who would go on to become the first black Prime Minister of the Bahamas. In attacking Bay Street, then, the rioters secured legislative concessions that facilitated the move toward majority rule and independence.

The attack also represented a qualitative change in the posture of the black majority in the country vis-à-vis Bay Street. Before the riot, the black Bahamian laboring class was thought to be not only lazy but also easily placated. The Bay Street merchants were so surprised by the riot because they were mistakenly convinced that the Bahamian masses were docile. To be sure, before the riots, black Bahamian resistance to the white merchants’ political hegemony was muted at most. As argued above, the riot was the first sign of a political awakening in the country. But, the riot signaled the rise a black proletariat that would stand up the rule of Bay Street.

Indeed, the riot was not merely a revolt of disgruntled laborers hoping for an increase in wages. Although the wage dispute is what triggered the disturbance, by the time the crowd arrived on Bay Street it was made up of cross-section of black workers (skilled and unskilled) from all over the Bahamas. Moreover, as the crowd marched to Bay Street, black men not affiliated with the Project, women and even children joined them. These additional people did not sit on the sidelines as cheerleaders but fully

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134 The British Parliament was confused as well. Weeks after the riot, they were still debating what exactly happened, how many British troops were used and the state of trade unions in the colony. Tribune 20 June 1942.
participated in the events that took place that day. Additionally, the rioters (even if we just consider the workers on the Project) seemed to be concerned with more than simply receiving a higher wage. The rioters had much broader socio-economic and political concerns.

Alfred McKenzie, a witness to the disturbance, testified that both “young men and women made up [the] crowd” that he saw rioting. 135 Oswald Moseley, an agent with the Canadian-owned Sun Life Insurance Company, witnessed the riot and reported that “there were lots of women in the crowd and they were inciting the men on and the women to my mind started the looting, which the men joined.” And, “I saw a woman getting into a window and walking about inside the store making a selection of ... stuff.”136 Additionally, Felix Cartwright insisted that “most of the looting was done by the youngsters and women. I saw a girl come with a stick and she smashed a window which had not been broken, then she ran away, then she came back and took what she wanted out of this window she had broken.”137 Stafford Sands, a Bay Street Boy, agreed the “the unruly element in the crowd on Bay Street was very small, maybe two or three dozen people at the start but once the windows had been broken everyone helped themselves to something. Women and children took advantage of the situation

135 Evidence of Alfred Rhodriques McKenzie to the Russell Commission, 318.

136 Evidence of Oswald Moseley to the Russell Commission, 266.

137 Evidence of Samuel Felix Cartwright to the Russell Commission, 370.
which was offered.’’\textsuperscript{138} According to Alfred R. MeKenzie, ‘‘the majority of the crowd was looking for what they could get after the places were broken into. Young men and women made up this crowd.’’\textsuperscript{139}

The black working class population of the island seems to have been broadly represented amongst the rioters. And, this crowd drew from all of the Bahamas, not simply the city of Nassau. Recall that the Bahamas is an archipelago with dozens of inhabited islands besides the island, New Providence, which hosts the Bahamas’ capital city, Nassau. It is noteworthy that the crowds, although drawn mainly from the ‘‘over-the-hill’’ area, contained individuals who were originally from these ‘‘Out Islands.’’

When the announcement was made that there would be a construction development on New Providence that would employ over two thousand laborers, men from the Out Islands, which were at the time poor and agrarian, flocked to the capital. Tariffs, hurricanes, droughts and blight made the once profitable crops that they grew in the Out Islands barely able to sustain the average farmer. Oscar Johnson, a produce agent turned tailor, explained to the Select Committee just how bad things had been. He told them that in, ‘‘1928, a tariff was put on which prevented us from importing our tomatoes into the United States. It was then necessary to get a new market and I then represented

\textsuperscript{138} Evidence of Stafford Lofthouse Sands to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 503.

\textsuperscript{139} Evidence of Alfred Rhodriques McKinzie to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 321.
Canadian firms sending the tomatoes to Canada. We had a number of hurricanes intermittently about 1932 and in between them we had droughts.”

Witnesses of the riot confirm that many of the rioters were not from over the hill but were from the Out Islands. Moreover, some of them even list the overpopulation caused by Out Islanders seeking a better life in Nassau as one of the reasons for the riot. For instance, Bertram Cambridge, a resident of Grant’s Town which is an over the hill settlement, insisted that the rioters were “all strangers” to him and “that they were people from the out islands who were quite unfamiliar to [him] and must have come over to get work at the project.” He was no doubt exaggerating. Many of the workers on the Project were from the Grant’s Town community where he resided and, these, more than likely participated in the riot. Still, Percy Christie also claims that he did not recognize the rioters as laborers that he knew. In his opinion, the rioters “were worthless kinds of people who lived by their wits and picked up what they could and not genuine workman.”

Additionally, the crowd contained both skilled and unskilled workers.

Interestingly, an effort to establish a broadly representative union just a few years before

140 Evidence of Oscar Johnson to the Russell Commission, 191

141 Evidence of Bertram Cambridge to the Russell Commission, 176.

142 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission, 21. Christie was a labor leader. Perhaps this condescending attitude towards the most needy and fragile of laborers explains why the union was such a tenuous organization.
the riot had failed because skilled workers would not participate.\textsuperscript{143} In fact, it took the Bahamas longer to unionize than the rest of the West Indies.\textsuperscript{144} One reason is that there was no real union legislation in the colony until after the 1942 riot. Every time one was introduced, it was rejected by the Bay Street Boys who controlled the House of Assembly. Moreover, the Governor of Bahamas, the Duke of Windsor, received rather strong opposition from the House of Assembly when he suggested that a trade union legislation (that would line the Bahamas up with the rest of the Caribbean Colonies) be adopted.\textsuperscript{145} Another reason that it took so long for the Bahamas to unionize relative to other West Indian colonies is because skilled Bahamian laborers did not see the need for a union. The first real effort to push for a labor union to represent Bahamian laborers was headed by Percy Christie, a sympathetic white merchant. Many skilled laborers saw no need to join and without them, success was not possible. The next attempt came merely weeks before the riot when black merchant Charles Rhodriquez started the Federation of Labour. Possibly another reason for the lack of interest in a union was the transient nature of Bahamian laborers. Often men would come to Nassau just for

\textsuperscript{143} Craton and Saunders, \textit{Islanders in the Stream}, 270.

\textsuperscript{144} As will be discussed in Chapter 5, not only would they gain sanctioned unions before the Bahamas but they had effective labor movements and labor leaders before their riots. In Trinidad, for instance, there was an illegal but effective union since 1923, the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association (TWA), under the leadership of Arthur Cipriani and Rienzi. Reinzi along with labor leader Uriah Butler would play a key role in encouraging the strike and it would be the attempt to arrest Uriah Butler that triggered the Trinidad riot.

\textsuperscript{145} Telegraph from Governor (HRH The Duke of Windsor) to Lord Lloyd, confidential, 23 December 1940. CO23/712/13.
seasonal work and return to the Out Islands as soon as that job ended. Also, there was before the war, the possibility of emigration to the United States for employment. The riot, thus, brought laborers together as they had not been before.

The riot marked the first time that a cross-section of black workers (skilled and unskilled) from all over the Bahamas stood together in a common cause. Although the workers were protesting against what they considered unreasonably low and unfair wages, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, more generally they were bothered by economic injustice. Fairness was really the issue here. Moreover, the workers were told and understandably, albeit mistakenly, believed that that the Bay Street Boys were to blame for the injustice. After all, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, they had been mistreated in the past by the Bay Street Boys; this injustice bore their fingerprints.146 As McPhee explained, at the time of the riot, Bahamian blacks felt like they had about as much power as a “creeping baby.”147 Milo Butler expresses a commonly held view amongst Bahamian blacks when he described how the Bay Street Boys used their control of the Assembly to promote their own interests at the expense of the black population in the Bahamas. As Butler testified, “the Government has had a policy for many many years of assisting the representation of the classes and not the masses and in the Council the classes are represented but the masses are entirely left out. The Government knows

146 Evidence of Richard John Anderson Farrington to the Russell Commission, 271.

very little about the masses." Additionally, as he testified, "there are a lot of things that ought to be gone into and thoroughly thrashed out so that the masses would have a fair chance of having their say in this Government and getting their due from this Government." It is, thus, not surprising given this context that they would readily believe that it was the Bay Street Boys that were standing between them and the higher wages they expected to and believed that they deserved to earn.

During the riot, then, it is reasonable to assume that Bahamian blacks were lashing out at not only their unfair wages but all the other injustices that they blamed on the Bay Street Boys.

The riot seems to have also been related to a desire for full citizenship. While marching, the rioters sang songs along the way. Bahamians are very expressive people and have a wealth of folk songs in their repertoire from which the workers could have chosen as they marched to Bay Street. They could have sung a popular rake-n-scrape song or a Goombay melody. They could have sung one of dozens of hymns that everyone in the crowd would have known. Instead of choosing ethnic songs, they chose songs that expressed their patriotism and their loyalty to the British Empire—those were their songs of protest.

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148 Evidence of Milo Butler to the Russell Commission, 338/370

149 Evidence of Milo Butler to the Russell Commission, 343/375.
Benedict Anderson’s work on nations and “nation-ness” can give insight into why the Bahamian workers would sing British tunes at this time. People picture themselves as tied or connected to others in their nation as part of an “imagined community” as Anderson describes it. They imagine that these ties connect them as citizens together even over long distances (in the Bahamas from island to island and between the Bahamas and Britain) as well as through time (connecting them with their forbearers and their progeny). According to Anderson, national symbols such as national anthems and patriotic songs are a few of the stronger symbols that connect people together. “No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes,” Anderson explains, “there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance… the echoed physical realization of the imagined community.”

The same holds true for other national symbols such as the flag or the coat of arms; they also serve as representations of an imagined community. That it was a time of war would only heighten their sense of this connection because at no other time in an empire’s existence are the symbols of the empire (flags, songs and the image of

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the monarchy) so engaged in their performative work of national bonding as during a
time of war.\(^{151}\)

Oscar Johnson, a tailor who observed the riots from his shop that was located on
Bay Street, remembered that “it was a large crowd of people marching down George
Street singing ‘We’ll never let the old Flag Fall’ and that intermingled with the patriotic
songs some were saying, ‘we want more wages’.”\(^{152}\) ‘We’ll never let the old Flag Fall’
was a marching song from World War I about the British flag, the Union Jack. It declares
the virtues of Britain (e.g. “Britain’s flag has always stood for Justice”) and the singers
love for the country and its flag (e.g. “we’ll never let the old flag fall/For we love it best
of all”).\(^{153}\) To the workers, their singing of patriotic songs and their pleas for higher

\(^{151}\) Every day during this period the local newspapers reported on the war. For instance,
on the front page of the Tribune 11March 1943 were these headlines “Hitler Reported Ill,”
“German Planes Raid England and on the front page a month before the riot also in the Tribune, 1
May 1942, were these headlines: “Hitler and Mussolini meet in Russia and “Burma Situation not
Hopeless.”

\(^{152}\) Evidence of Oscar Ernest Johnson to the Russell Commission, 160

\(^{153}\) The words of this song extol Britain’s greatness and engenders a nation a pride.
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=U1ARTU0003662

Verse 1: Britain’s flag has always stood for Justice, Britain’s hope has always been for
Peace, Britain’s foes have known that they could trust us To do our best to make the cannons
cease. Britain’s blood will never stand for insult Britain’s sons will rally at her call, Britain’s pride
will never let her exult, But we’ll never let the old flag fall.
Chorus: We’ll never let the old flag fall, For we love it best of all, We don’t want to fight to show
our might, But when we start, we’ll fight, fight, fight. In peace or war you’ll hear us sing, God
save the flag, God save the King. At the ends of the world, the flag’s unfurl’d, We’ll never the let
the old flag fall.
Verse 2: Britain’s sons have always call’d her Mother, Britain’s sons have always lov’d her best,
Britain’s sons would die to show they love her, the dear old Flag laid on each manly breast,
wages were not at all inconsistent. Both the songs that they sang and their demands were appeals to the rights they believed were being transgressed, their rights as loyal subjects of the Crown. They were also appealing to the justice denied them as British subjects.

There were, however, two exceptions to this show of patriotism, two instances where imperial symbols were the subject of attacks. In the first instance, the Union Jack was burned by Napoleon McPhee and, in the second, a picture of the royal family was burned by rioter Alfred Stubbs. Napoleon McPhee, the flag burner, offered a poignant explanation for his behavior. “I willing to fight under the flag,” he explained, “I willing even to die under the flag, but I ain’t gwine starve under the flag.” ¹⁵⁴ Later in an oral history interview, McPhee explained that the Union Jack “symbolized something for me that I didn’t respect anymore. [I] didn’t care about empire at that time and from then on the empire didn’t shine as bright anymore.” ¹⁵⁵ So although they were appealing to their rights as subjects of the Crown, some of them were at the same time distancing themselves from the Crown, showing that they felt alienated from the imperial structure which had not ensured the justice that they sought.

¹⁵⁴ Fawkes, Faith that Moved the Mountain, 24.

They were, however, not turning their back on the British Empire. They were British subjects through and through. But, they were dissatisfied British subjects. Looting and the smashing of Bay Street was an assault on the political and economic status quo in the colony. The riot was not a rejection of British citizenship. Remember, when the employees did not get a satisfactory answer from the company, they marched to the center of government in the colony, the Parliament Building and the Colonial Office which housed the British officials.

In addition to their demands for economic justice and political empowerment, the rioters were also concerned with the lack of racial equality in the colony. The Russell Commission concluded that the riot had nothing to do with the question of race. The Governor claims to have reached a similar conclusion in his public addresses after the riot.\textsuperscript{156} In private, however, the Duke who had called for the Commission confessed that he was certain that “there was strong racial feelings on both sides.”\textsuperscript{157} When the Duke telegraphed London, he affirmed that the “strike with disorders commenced morning of 1st June for higher wages on an important development.”\textsuperscript{158} But, he later insisted in his report that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{156} Telegraph from the Governor (HRH Duke of Windsor) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 10 June 1942. A5538.
  \item \textsuperscript{157} Report from Duke of Windsor to London. CO 23/731/127.
  \item \textsuperscript{158} Cypher Telegram from HRH The Duke of Windsor to Secretary of the Colonies. 3 June 1942. A 5252/10/45.
\end{itemize}
... wage rates was only an excuse to make a vigorous and noisy protest against the white population. I regret to say that that the flame of local race antagonism is still fanned by a certain section of Bay Street on the one hand as an excuse for the continuation of reactionary police and by negro agitators on the other hand who, but for the presence of a large military force and considerable firepower, would not hesitate to incite the negro population from further rioting on a larger, better-organized and more dangerous scale.  

Indeed, although underplaying the significance of racial antipathies, Saunders conceded that “racial tension was an underlying cause of the riot.” Similarly, the Chicago Defender, which reported a great deal on the riot, did not disentangle the economic issues from the racial issues. They, for instance, quoted the NAACP’s call for the “abolishment of wage differentials between Negro and white workers engaged in constructing naval and army bases in the Caribbean and the end of other discriminations.”

Again, while on Bay Street, the rioters took pains not to target black owned stores or those protected by black workers. Napoleon McPhee, one of the rioters, explains how the rioters initially had “no plans” of rioting but then attacked “any store in that area which was not “black people’s business.” Likewise, the rioters were hostile though not violent to whites that they encountered. As John Damianos, a

\[160\] Saunders, Bahamas Society After Emancipation, 112.
\[161\] Chicago Defender 13June 1942, 15.
grocery merchant on Bay Street observing the crowd commented, “my impression was that when they saw a white face they were particularly infuriated and I think it had reached a point which was largely motivated by some racial feelings. I have never seen anything like this before.”163 Additionally, Roland Cumberhatch overheard the mob proclaim, “no white man is passing here today.”164 John Wyley, whose uncle was in the riot, remembered his uncle telling him that the riot was about wages but it was also about “the conchy joe running the country.”165 The riot then signaled a transformation of Bahamian blacks into a black proletariat that was not afraid to challenge the Bay Street Boys.

V. Conclusion

The 1942 riot has been viewed by social leaders, politicians and activists as a definitive event in the colony’s history, as the first time the Bahamian people took a stand against the established social and political structure in the colony. Historians, however, have almost all viewed the riot as little more than a “momentary outburst” or describe it as merely a useful political symbol. This interpretation, however, is flawed. The riot did not occur in a vacuum and was instead a public transformation through

163 Evidence of John Damianos to the Russell Commission, 296.

164 Evidence of Roland Cumberhatch to the Russell Commission, 476.

165 John Wyley, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, February 2011. Conchy Joe refers to a white Bahamian or a Bahamian that simply looks white though he might also have African ancestry.
which black Bahamians. The riot was an attack against the control that the Bay Street Boys had over the colony. The riot also represented a qualitative change in the way that Bahamian blacks voiced their concerns and asked for redress, toward direct action and beyond symbolic and indirect protest. Moreover, the riot signaled that the black proletariat was not afraid to challenge Bay Street.
CHAPTER THREE: ECONOMIC INJUSTICE SPARKED THE RIOT

I. Introduction

Bahamians have historically considered themselves an exceptionally blessed people. In fact, the colony’s folklore and its historical narratives are replete with incidents of Bahamians succeeding in spite of obstacles and thriving in challenging times. It is, thus, not surprising that “there is a legend in the Bahamas that ‘something will turn up’.” After all, in the past, something always had turned up.

Initially, Bahamian laborers believed that the Project was exactly the type of serendipitous “something” that always turned up when things were at their most desperate. For instance, Napoleon McPhee, a Project worker who participated in the riot, recalled that he was excited when he heard about the Project. He believed that

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166 This is particularly true of those who live in New Providence. Indeed, there is even a folk tale about God himself keeping the devil out of New Providence. Hurston, Zora, “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” The Journal of American Folklore Vol. 43, No. 169 (Jul. - Sep., 1930), 303.

167 Evidence of Robert Merivelle Bailey to the Russell Commission, 247.

168 Recall, the Project was the result of an agreement between the British and the American government whereby the British granted the Americans the right to build military bases in British colonies. The two bases on New Providence were contracted to be built by the Pleasantville Construction Company of New York.
finally there would be “no more scrapping,” as he expected that there would likely be plenty of work to go around once the construction began.\textsuperscript{169} There were examples of the high wages from foreign projects in the years preceding the Project which justified the hopes of the Bahamian workers. In their recent memory, there was the Levy endeavor in Eleuthera. Austin Levy, a textile tycoon from the United States who was known for being fair and generous with the laborers at his mill in Rhode Island, became enamored with the colony while on his honeymoon. Levy, grateful to the Bahamas, for it was there that his wife was able to reclaim her health, wanted to give back in some way. “One of the first things he noticed was that milk was almost unattainable, except in cans, that Bahama [sic] chickens appeared to be fattened on a diet of carpet tacks and fish scales and that all eggs not imported from Canada seemed to have undergone a sort of shrinking treatment.”\textsuperscript{170} In 1937, he established a farm in Hatchet Bay, Eleuthera. Not only did it introduce residents to new practices in farming (which produced fresh milk and high quality eggs), Levy also paid his Bahamian workers a higher wage than was the Bahamian standard.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{169} Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau. By scrapping he is referring to living on scraps or piecing scraps together to make ends meet.

\textsuperscript{170} Kenneth Roberts, \textit{The Sixth Sense} (New York: Doubleday, 1953) 229

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Life} Magazine, 8 June 1941, p 133. It was under Charles Dundas’ governorship that Levy’s Harrisville Company was established. That is fortunate because some of his practices, particularly the practice of paying his workers higher wages, received complaints from the Duke of Windsor, who followed Dundas as Governor of the colony.
Like the wages they received from Levy and other American run projects, the workers on the Project expected high wages. But, the Project did not result in their receiving the high wages that they expected. They knew from experience and also from what the American contractors told them that the “Americans wanted to pay them more.” In fact, it had been the policy of the Americans to pay wages that were higher than the prevailing wages in the British colonies where they were building of bases. As Steven C. High explained in his work, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere, 1940-1967*, a factor that "no doubt influenced U.S. policy in the region was the fact that the United States could not compel local labor to work for them. They therefore had to rely on the ‘carrot’ of higher wages and good public relations.”172

Cleophas Adderley Sr. offered an explanation for why he believed that the Project did not pay the workers what they had expected.173 “The Bahamians [in government] – I can’t say who say [did not want them paid the high wages] … ‘you gonna spoil ‘em, pay ‘em this amount.’ That was why [the workers] had it out against the Bahamians [in government]. They could have gotten more money and somebody got

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172 Steven C. High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere, 1940-1967*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Note that the American government was inclined to pay higher wages on the Project for this very reason and indicated such to the British government. However the British government, in consultation with the some of the local colonial governments, specifically Bermuda and Trinidad decided that local wage rates should be offered. There was no indication that the Bahamas government was included in this consultation as the Bahamas was not originally considered for a construction site.

173 Cleophas Adderley was an electrician and eventually a Member of the House of Assembly in the black majority-led government.
in the way.” When the Project turned out to be not as fortuitous as they had expected, when it turned out that they had been given a “squeezed lemon,” they found themselves unable to make the usual lemonade out of their sour situation. So, they marched to Bay Street to express their dissatisfaction and when those grievances were not redressed they voiced their frustration by smashing windows and looting stores.

The riot seems to have come as a shock to just about everybody in the colony, including many of the rioters. One day before the riot, on the morning of May 31, 1942 and for weeks before, for instance, the colony and the United States was abuzz with the news of the Governor and his wife, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, planned visit to the US. Newspapers in both the Bahamas and the US treated them as celebrities, reporting on where they planned to visit (e.g. “would the Duke visit New York?”) and updating readers when the couple’s plans changed (e.g. “no visit to New York is likely

174 Cleophas Adderley Sr. interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording 26 Feb 2000, National Archives, Nassau. Interestingly, Adderley repeats in this interview fifty plus years after the riot the same mistaken belief that the Bay Street Boys prevented the workers from receiving higher wages that sparked the riot.

175 Evidence of Robert Merivelle Bailey to the Russell Commission, 247.

176 Stating what many workers were thinking, Napolean McPhee explains that the only “people close enough to Pleasantville to interfere with our wages would be the white merchants and businesses in Bay Street.” Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

177 The Duke of Windsor was formerly King Edward VIII of England. In 1936, he abdicated the throne in order to marry Wallis Simpson. The Duke was installed, much to his irritation, as governor of the Bahamas in 1940.
but the Duchess would visit her home town of Baltimore, Maryland’

The diplomatic speculation concerning whether the President would meet with the Duke who purportedly was not seeking aid but rather encouraging further collaboration between the two entities was also featured in the news reports. He had left the colony on May 27th for the United States but it was not until May 31st that he finally left Miami for a week’s long trip to Washington DC to discuss trade and defense. His goal was to negotiate trade between the Bahamas and the United States as the colony “faced economic ruin” since its trade was cut off due to the war. Additionally, he hoped to make arrangements for the joint defense of the Bahamas and the United States.

Although there had been conversations between colonial and government officials and labor leaders about a growing dissatisfaction amongst Project workers about their wages, the local newspapers made no mention of the possibility of a serious disturbance. This is, perhaps, understandable since wartime censorship made it so that

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178 “Duke Flies to Key West” LA Times, 31 May 1942; “On Tuesday.. the Dutchess will go to Baltimore to consult with her physician and to visit relatives” Washington Post 30 May 1942

179 Articles following this trip can be found in the Nassau Guardian as well The Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic Posts, New York Times and Chicago Daily Tribune just to name a few.

180 He reminds the Bahamian people in his speech the evening after the riot that he “left Nassau that week to go to Washington to carry on conversations which would assist not only in the war effort, but also in the question of employment in the Bahamas.” Governor, HRH Duke of Windsor, Speech to the Colony, 2 June 1942, transcript in Tribune 4 June 1942


182 Additionally the Governor would place a censor of the local newspapers immediately after the riot.
there were many things that did not show up in the local papers. In fact, the editor of the Nassau Tribune, Etienne Dupuch, explained that he was not given permission to publish the very information about the Project that would have perhaps prevented the riot; specifically, that it was not the Bay Street Boys and the local government who stood against their getting higher wages but rather it was the British colonial government that was responsible. “The rigid censorship imposed on the Press in the Colony,” Dupuch explained, “was probably largely responsible for the misunderstanding” that led to the riot.\textsuperscript{183} Labour Officer John A. Hughes added that the secrecy was carried too far. As he explained,

\begin{quote}
The government in its usual smug self-sufficiency did not consider it at all necessary to tell labour that it had good reasons for fixing a lower wage or that it had made the best bargain for labour. Everything was secret although the men were going to work on the project –although it was being given out elsewhere that American defense work was being carried on in Nassau. The secrecy was carried too far that the press were extra careful how it described the project…\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

Indeed, the press was well aware of why the Project was not paying the high wages that the workers expected. There was a press conference of sorts at the beginning of the Project, which included Colonel Hayes of the United States Army, Mr. Donohue representing the Pleasantville Company and the Labor officer Mr. Hughes.

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\textsuperscript{183} Evidence of Etienne Dupuch, to the Russell Commission, 311/335.
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\textsuperscript{184} Evidence of John Stanley to the Russell Commission, 321/360.
\end{flushright}
Representatives from each major newspaper were also in attendance. As Etienne Dupuch, editor of the *Nassau Tribune* since 1919, reported he did not publish anything about the Conference because most matters are regarded as ‘secret’ these days and I got the impression that the explanation was designed solely to prevent the Press from making damaging misstatements.\(^{185}\)

This kind of censorship of the press was apparently common during the war.

We were never allowed to print much about [the] survivors [that] landed at Nassau from ships sunk by enemy action. …[W]e waited to get our information until after the survivors had arrived in Miami where the Miami newspapers were not only permitted to carry the fullest detail and interviews, but also to publish photographs of the group.\(^{186}\)

Mr. Lowe, the editor of a smaller newspaper, one with a tighter connection to the colony’s working class, explained that there was not even a clear line of censorship for the press.

We of the press while we have seldom seen the official appointed censors, receive our orders from more than a half dozen sources while receiving none from the censors themselves. Almost everywhere one may turn and find a self-appointed censor. So we see how it was that the press had so little to report to the workers in connection with what to expect on the project which we were afraid to even name.\(^{187}\)

Although an understandable decision since they were dealing with censorship from multiple corners, the press may have been too cautious when it came to reporting

\(^{185}\) Evidence of Etienne Dupuch to the *Russell Commission*, 311/335

\(^{186}\) Evidence of Etienne Dupuch to the *Russell Commission*, 305/337. On 1 May 1940, for instance, a British refrigerated cargo ship, was wrecked off of the island of Mayaguana, Bahamas. The American Ship, the Panama rescued the 78 crew members. It was not reported in the Bahamian newspapers until well after it appeared in the American papers.

\(^{187}\) Evidence of John Stanley Lowe to the *Russell Commission*, 391/423.
on the Project. The Labor Officer Mr. Hughes, for instance, explained that he did not wish to censor the press with regards to the Project. “Some of the press,” he explains, “was not sure what they might say or what they might not say... [although the information was given to them] to use this information as they deemed necessary... I had no direct instructions to ask the press to publish anything at all neither did I have anything to the contrary to tell them to keep secret. There were lots of things that couldn’t be said.” 188

Additionally, Bahamian businessmen, some of whom had participated in those discussions over the weekend with labor leaders, were clearly not concerned that the dissatisfaction would escalate. 189 They do not appear to have made any effort to protect their Bay Street stores and there is no evidence that any of them stayed away from the downtown area. Nor did the adults keep their children away from downtown for fear of their safety. Paul Aranha, for instance, remembered being in school the day of the riot, as does Sir Arthur Foulkes and Dame Ivy Dumont. 190 All three either had to walk through Bay Street to reach their school or were in close enough proximity to hear the

188 Evidence of John Anfield Hughes to the Russell Commission, 391/423.

189 Those that fashioned themselves labor leaders included Charles Rhodriguez, a black Bay Street merchant, Percy Edward Christie, merchant, member of the house of assembly and self-appointed spokesman for labor and musician and community leader, Bertram Augustus Cambridge. They were no more able to control the rioters than were the police or the Colonial Officials. Telegram from the Governor (HRH, The Duke of Windsor) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 11 June 1942 A 5481. FO 371/30644.

190 Dame Ivy Dumont, Sir Arthur Foulkes and Paul Aranha, interviewed by author, digital voice recording, Nassau Bahamas, February and April 2011.
commotion. Sir Arthur, who attended Western Senior School (now C.R. Walker) which was located on top of the hill between Blue Hill Road and Market Street, recalled very clearly being out on the playground during recess and looking over toward the commotion to see grown men pour what looked and smelled—for they were close enough and the fragrance strong enough for him to smell it—like expensive perfume on themselves and each other.\textsuperscript{191}

Additionally, the riots probably came as a surprise to the rioters themselves as there was no indication that it was planned or organized. For instance, one of the rioters Napoleon McPhee, remembered that “at that time we didn’t have any leaders. When they got to West Bay Street no one knew what to do so someone said, let’s go to Bay Street.”\textsuperscript{192} McPhee reiterated that those that the officials took to be the leaders, such a Leonard Storr Green, were not. In Green’s case, McPhee believed it was his size that set him apart. He was a large tall man with a booming voice. That he was outspoken, not that he was leading the laborers, McPhee believed, made him a target for the police.\textsuperscript{193} Sir Clifford Darling, who was an apprentice electrician and though not a project worker

\textsuperscript{191} Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, digital voice recording, 23 April 2011. The School was up the hill from Bay Street. He would have seen the men pass right by the school as they were scampering away from the police or as they were on the way “over the hill.”

\textsuperscript{192} Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{193} Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau. The fact that Leonard S. Green also had a criminal record validated the police’s assumptions.
himself helped lay the infrastructure for the project. He had taken the day off from his work to run some errands when he witnessed the riot first hand. Sir Clifford explained that the riot was spontaneous on the part of the workers.\textsuperscript{194}

Although the riot supposedly came as a surprise to everybody in the colony, there were arguably warning signs. Underlying economic conditions in the country certainly had something to do with the riot.\textsuperscript{195} Gail Saunders, for instance, in her article, “The 1942 Riot: A Demand for Change,” explored the socio-economic conditions which precipitated the riot.\textsuperscript{196} Like the Russell Commission, she believed the Project laborers’ dissatisfaction with their wages was so readily acted upon because it occurred against a backdrop of already extreme economic conditions. Saunders argued that the riots were a result of the “oppressive socio-economic conditions under which the masses lived.” In particular, Saunders highlighted the decline of the tourism industry brought about by the World War II and the Great Depression which added to the already burdensome

\textsuperscript{194} Sir Clifford Darling, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{195} Interesting the Labor Undersecretary of State, Harold MacMillian for the Colonies visited the Bahamas a short time before the riot and “he had very definite ideas on the need for certain reforms in the Colony.” 20 June 1942 and 13 March 1943 \textit{Tribune}.

unemployment situation in the colony as well as the rising prices for everyday consumption items that accompanied the war.\textsuperscript{197}

The riot, however, was not merely a reaction to the state of the Bahamian economy in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. Admittedly, the cost of living in the colony was already quite high and was rising in early 1940s. There was rampant unemployment and underemployment that had its roots in both the Great Depression as well as World War II. Indeed, the international economic downturn and the war wreaked havoc on the Bahamian economy. The war as well as the economic depression, for instance, was to blame for the decline in a tourist industry which had become quite an important job provider and income producer for Bahamians. Additionally, various environmental challenges (e.g. hurricanes, agricultural diseases, etc.) and internal migratory issues added to the dire economic circumstances. The war, for instance, also lead to a tightening of immigration laws in the United States which meant that Bahamians who had emigrated were forced to return to their homeland, cutting off the flow of funds that they repatriated to the colony from abroad as well as adding to the local labor pool and, thus, putting a strain on the colony’s already tense employment

\textsuperscript{197} Limited supplies due to wartime interruption of trade drove prices up. For example, The \textit{Tribune} reports a month before the riot about the interruption the delay of shipment. “Due to the present war conditions the United Fruit Co. has been obliged to temporarily suspend its steamship sailings between New York and Nassau.” \textit{Tribune} 16 May 1942. Since 1924 at the expansion of the harbor in Nassau, the United Fruit Company has been using the island as a station between Jamaica and the United States to bring various fruits into the country. The colony benefited from by getting cheaper fruits. And various individuals and firms sprung up to serve as consignors for the shipment. \textit{The Evening Independent} 29 Aug 1925.
The constriction during the war of the global market for goods made in the Bahamas also made the economic situation in the Bahamas particularly hard. The riot was not just a reaction to the dire economic circumstances of the late 1930s and the early 1940s but rather economic unfairness and injustice.

II. The economic promise of the Project

During World War II, the Bahamas faced a number of economic challenges besides the drop in the tourism. These included but were not limited to an extremely high rate of unemployment; a tightening of immigration in the US and, thus, the return of laborers to their homeland, and the end of their remittances; the depression and the resulting squeeze on exported goods; agricultural failure; the rise of tariffs; the increased migration of Bahamians to the mainland from the Out Islands; and, unfortunate

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198 There was quite a large migration from the Bahamas to Florida. The 1924 Bahamas Handbook cited that “the total population of the colony according to the census in 1921 was 53,031... The decrease of 2,913 since 1911 is attributable chiefly to the emigration to Florida.” The Bahamas Handbook, Nassau: Tribune, 1924, 95.

199 Morton Turtle gives the sponge business and other industries the credit for the high wage rate that existed less than 20 years before the riot. “We started in 1924 to build a house for myself, and I will remember in that year paying from six to ten shillings a day for common labour. This was due to the fact that the sponge business was flourishing, bootlegging was at its’ peak, and other enterprises were flourishing which utilized common labour such as sisal growing, some tourist business, can the Cat Islands were more flourishing than they are now.” Evidence of Morton Turtle to the Russell Commission, 128/159 Industries that would pay a higher rate dropped and manual labour no longer had competition for a growing labour pool, the going wage rate dropped. Yet the cost of living did not plummet. It did not stay the same. It increased.

200 The Out Islands are now referred to as the Family Islands. This change, however, did not occur until the 1970’s. I will refer to these islands (i.e. Bahamian islands besides New Providence) as they were referred to at the time.
weather and blight. Some of these challenges were related to the worldwide depression that was going in the 1930s and World War II and some represented problems endemic in the colony’s economy.

The economic woes experienced in the Bahamas can be divided into three broad categories: those brought about by external factors, those resulting from domestic concerns and those that were environmental in nature. These tended to manifest themselves through their effect on (i) the level of unemployment and (ii) the cost of living in the colony.

Unemployment was extremely high

The Bahamas has a peculiar economic history that has involved both legal and extra-legal activities. The legal activities that were made possible through the bounty

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201 McKinney tells about the hurricane that occurred the year before the riot. “In November, 1941, a storm passed over central Andros…. Mr. Hughes and a doctor from the hospital [and] I flew to the district. In one of the settlements where we landed, all the boats had been damaged and the heavy weather had blown all the crops to pieces. At another settlement the Government had to rebuild practically every house there. On my return I obtained a boat and sent the necessary foods to keep those people alive.” Evidence of Basil McKinney to the Russell Commission, 443/476. Not only did the storm destroy crops and properties but it damaged future wages as well as it was difficult for the farmers to recover as they were not able to recoup their losses and started the next year in a grave deficit. Johnstone, an insurance agent, explains that “as far as I know there is no insurance for agricultural matters. The hurricane insurance is mainly for buildings.” Evidence of Bruce Eric Johnstone to the Russell Commission, 170/201. Johnstone believed that in such cases, it was in the government’s best interest to help the out islanders in this situation as a means of protecting the capital from over population. “I consider that if an island has been struck by a hurricane, one of the duties of the government would be to endeavor to keep the status quo so as to prevent the labourer drifting to New Providence. They should do that in any case and one of the results would be that the people would not drift to New Providence.” Evidence of Bruce Eric Johnstone to the Russell Commission, 170/201.
of the sea or by the tilling of land were often cyclical, with periods of prosperity followed by periods of sharp decline. The extra-legal activities such as wrecking, blockade running during the American Civil War and rum running during the American prohibition seem always to have come at a time of decline and afforded the colony opportunities to reverse its fortunes. Bahamians tended to thrive when they were engaged in extralegal activities such as wrecking, rum or drug running. In fact, “many of the successful industries in the Bahamas (piracy, wrecking, gun smuggling, and rum running) were piratical in nature." When there was a lag in these ventures, the Bahamian economy seemed to lag as well. There simply were not enough jobs in the colony. The problem was exacerbated on the capital island of New Providence because the unemployed of the Out Islands often migrated there in search of employment.

As E. Dupuch, newspaperman and Assemblyman, complained following the riot,

...only under such abnormal conditions as bootlegging, land building booms, tourist promotion, and now The Project can the wages to which people have grown accustomed in Nassau be maintained at their present level or increased to keep abreast of the rising cost of living. This situation will be more and more aggravated by steadily rising prices on articles imported into the Colony from the US - where they are produced by the highest paid labour in the world-for consumption by our low-priced labour.

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When the Project came, then, it was a major boon for the colony. “Before the project came to Nassau,” Dupuch explained, “the Colony was faced with the possibility of a very serious unemployment problem. The tourist business had collapsed in consequence of America’s entry into the war, and building construction and other engineering projects had been curtailed or abandoned because of the difficulty to obtaining material or because of the uncertainty of the future.”  Moreover, the large scale employment projects that had absorbed some of the colony’s laborers had just recently ended. For instance, “the Wenner-Gren Estates on Hog Island which had absorbed a great deal of labour,” Morton Turtle explained, “was closing down.” Axel Wenner-Gren, a Swedish billionaire, had purchased a large portion of Hog Island (now known as Paradise Island—a small island off of New Providence) in the 1930s. He employed a large number of Bahamians to improve the land. The Bahamian workers dug a canal across the island as well as built a marina strong enough to resist hurricanes. He also employed them to help develop a large tract of land on the island of Andros and enlisted Bahamian labor to build and work in The Yacht Club and Lighthouse Club. Mr. Wenner-Gren’s alleged Nazi sympathies, however, made his time in the Bahamas a short one. The British and United States essentially froze his assets in the Bahamas in

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205 Evidence of Etienne Dupuch, to the Russell Commission, 301/33.

206 Evidence of Morton Turtle to the Russell Commission, 129/159
1942, after which Wenner-Gren relocated to Mexico.\textsuperscript{207} His time in the Bahamas, though short-lived, was beneficial for many Bahamians. And, his leaving the Bahamas signaled a significant loss for the Bahamian workers. “The severest blow to local labour,” Dupuch testified, “came when the Wenner-Gren Projects, which had been employing hundreds of people, the majority of whom received 3/- a day, were closed down.”\textsuperscript{208}

Napoleon McPhee agreed that things were very bad before the Project. He had for a time found employment with Harry Oakes’ project to develop estates in the western part of New Providence but, by 1942, that project had ended.\textsuperscript{209} Oakes employed approximately 1500 Bahamians in the development of Oakes Field and the renovation of the British Colonial Hotel. When established, the Oakes’ developments were very fortuitous as this was around the same time the sponge industry came to a halt.\textsuperscript{210} Additionally, the Windsor Farm, which the Duke was instrumental in establishing “with the idea of absorbing some part of the employment,” was not yet up and running.\textsuperscript{211} The Bahamian workers were, thus, between sources of major employment when the American base project presented itself.

\textsuperscript{207} \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} 17 May 1942 and \textit{The Atlanta Constitution} 29 May 1942.

\textsuperscript{208} That is, 3 shillings. Evidence of Etienne Dupuch to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 301/33.

\textsuperscript{209} Napoleon Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{210} A blight struck the sponge beds in 1938 and, by 1939, the industry was all but dead.

\textsuperscript{211} Evidence of Morton Turtle to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 129/159
There were several external factors that contributed to the economic downturn in the colony. The fact that the world was in the middle of a World War definitely impacted the economic environment. With a war of the magnitude of World War II, there was less travel between countries and the Bahamas’ tourism industry suffered. Admittedly, tourism, which is presently the largest industry in the Bahamas, did not always hold that place of distinction. There was, however, a steady incline before the war. Sir Stafford Sands, Harry Oakes and others made major strides to make the colony a tourist’s delight. As such, Americans discovered a tax free island paradise right on their doorstep. By the beginning of the war, airfields and luxury hotels were added to delight and entertain by the beginning of the war. In 1941, before America’s entrance into the war, the number of visitors from that nation totaled 14,711. Yet, by 1943 only 3,439 tourists made their way to the Bahamas from the United States.\(^{212}\) With the death of the sponge industry and the repeal of prohibition, the tourist economy had become even more important and, thus, its decline was all the more injurious.

The Governor recognized and addressed the unemployment issue in a 1940 speech at the opening of the legislature. “I have given special thought to a problem which confronts all government, namely unemployment... I have taken steps to appoint an Advisory Board to consider wages in relation to the cost of living.”\(^{213}\) Unfortunately, 

\(^{212}\) George Hunt *The Bahamas*, 1975, 74

\(^{213}\) *Tribune* 29 October 1940.
the Bay Street Boys were very stingy with the funds they allowed the Governor to use. When, for instance, he asked for funds to establish a Labour Bureau in 1940, he was denied. The Colonial Government created the Labour Bureau in 1942 to link unemployed workers to potential employers. Once more in January of 1942, the Duke requested funds (538 pounds) to set up a Labour Bureau. The House again denied him but did allow him 100 pounds to establish a “register for the unemployed.” 214 “When the Labour Bureau was opened,” Etienne Dupuch explained, “the names and trades of men and women [in the colony] were recorded.” 215

Napoleon McPhee was one of those who placed his name on the list. He explained that those on the list would gather in large groups all over the southern portion of the island. When a worker’s name was chosen, that worker would collect his tools and go to whichever worksite he was slated to work on. Those who owned their own tools (such as a machete) were the first ones chosen for work but there was no guarantee that your name would ever be picked. 216 There were many men that waited and waited, never to hear their names called. As the economic situation in the colony

214 John Hughes, senior commissioner for the out island took on the task of Labour Officer for no pay and with very little staff. Is there any wonder that it was unable to create an environment that would stop the riot from occurring? Votes of the Legislative Council 1940-1941, pp. 2-7. The Duke asked in a telegram that parliament provide him with the money. They of course refused. Telegram 436, 1940. National Archives.

215 Evidence of Etienne Dupuch to the Russell Commission, 301/333.

worsened, the number of men hoping to hear their name called grew and more and more went away disappointed.

Again, unemployment in the Bahamas in 1942 was quite high. James Edward Roberts, superintendent of Water and Sewerage department of the Public Works, explained that, “there has always been a surplus of labour since I have been working with the labour board.”217 According to Roberts, “the highest number of natives employed was 4,242, which was barely a half of the number who wanted work.”218 By 1942, the Labor Bureau had quite a list of out-of-work laborers. “As a matter of fact,” Mackay, an assistant with the Labour Office in charge of the registration at the Labour Bureau, explained, “two hundred or more men were at the Labour Bureau that morning, June 1st, asking for employment. The men were eager to work. I have seen some men with pieces of their shirts in their hands where people have torn them off their backs to get ahead of them in line for work.”219

Even when men were able to find jobs, the jobs were either seasonal or otherwise temporary or more likely than not, did not provide nearly enough income to sustain them or their families. Cleophas Adderley, an electrician that worked for the Bahamas Electrical Corporation, for instance, left the colony in 1943 (a year after the riot) because his salary as a skilled worker with a permanent wage of 2 pounds 10 shillings per week

217 Evidence of James Edward Roberts to the *Russell Commission*, 113/143.

218 Evidence of John A. Hughes to the *Russell Commission*, 297/429.

219 Evidence of William Granville Mackay to the *Russell Commission*, 399/431.
—which was much more than the typical wage earned by unskilled laborers—was not enough to support himself, his wife and his new baby.220 Moreover, places like the public works department cycled men through jobs, distributing the wages amongst many but not giving any nearly enough. “The minimum wage for men employed in public works,” Public Works Superintendent, James Edward Roberts explained, “is four shillings [a day]. We change men frequently, sometimes twice a week, so that a man employed by us would not necessarily get more than ten shillings a week. There are skeleton crews who work practically all the year round, but the bulk of the employees are changed.”221 Mr. Van Zeylen, Director of Public Works, explained the department’s policy of alternating (unskilled) labor. “For the last ten years,” he testified,

we have had considerable difficulty in dealing with our workmen and the policy is to distribute the work that there is among workmen. In turn, only the skilled or semi-skilled workman are almost sure of a steady job with us, the other workmen, the common laborer – as we can employ them, we employ them; if we have not sufficient work for them our instructions are to alternate those labourers. We have gone so far as to only employ men for two or three days during this week. When we have lack of employment thereof, it means that our ordinary labourers don’t get more than one or two shillings a day during the week. In fact, we have considerable trouble at the nursery in hiring these people as more apply to us for work than we have jobs to give them. Some of these people do not

220 Cleophas Adderley interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording 26 Feb 2000, National Archives, Nassau.

221 Evidence of James Edward Roberts to the Russell Commission 112/142
have more than one week in the course of a month according to the demand.\textsuperscript{222}

The tightening of immigration laws in the United States and the difficulty of immigrating to the United Kingdom during the war were also factors which worsened the unemployment situation in the colony. For years, immigration to the United States and to United Kingdom had been an outlet for excess labor in the Bahamas. Working abroad for a period, whilst sending money home for family members, was a common practice. Beginning in the 1920s, however, the United States started reducing the number of British West Indians that were allowed in the country and the Bahamas had to absorb the influx of returning laborers and forgo that extra income. Prior to 1924, the United States had treated the British colonies as a part of the Western Hemisphere exemption.\textsuperscript{223} All British Caribbean countries were, thus, allowed into the United States without counting against a quota. According to a new immigration law introduced in 1924, the British colonies were now to be counted as a part of Great Britain’s quota which diminished the number of West Indians allowed in the United States. According to Senator Daniel Reed of Pennsylvania, who discussed the matter in a Congressional debate that took place on April 18, 19 and 24 in 1924,

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\textsuperscript{222} Evidence of Cornelius Van Zeylen to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 106/136.
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\textsuperscript{223} May 24, 1924 [H.R. 4122] [Public No. 138], Sixty-Eight Congress. Session I. Chs 185, 190. 124
\end{flushright}
there has developed within the last six months a rather considerable immigration of negroes from the colonies of Great Britain in the West Indies, and it was for that reason, and because the immigration seems to us to be undesirable, that we [the Senate Immigration Committee] struck out the West Indies dependencies’ from the Western Hemisphere exemption.224

The number of West Indians had been decreasing since that law (and additional laws passed later in 1924 and again in 1941 that further restricted immigration). “It has only been for ten or fifteen years,” Milo Butler explained in 1943, “that we have not had access to going into the United States and only since then have we had trouble with unemployment. I have been in the United States and found the scale of wages was much higher even considering the cost of living there.”225

The unemployment situation in Nassau, the colony’s capital, was further exacerbated by the influx of unemployed laborers from the Out Islands.226 “Owing to the fruit of conditions and the inducements that Nassau holds out,” tailor, educator and eventual member of the House of Assembly, Robert M Bailey explained, “there are a


225 Evidence of Milo Butler to the Russell Commission, 342/374

226 C. C. Smith, a black businessman, remembers a time when the island to island migration went the other way. “In the past when there was a pineapple industry and we used to go from Nassau to work on the islands and help the people to send their pineapples away.” Evidence of CC Smith to the Russell Commission 141/172 But once again tariff and lack of education raise their ugly heads and two causes of agricultural decline. “The pineapple industry has died out partly because of the very high tariff put on by the United States and particularly because of a lack of scientific method in taking care of their fields. Peasants are acquired to burn the fields which destroys all the humus and that is a very grave matter.” Evidence of CC Smith to the Russell Commission, 141/172.
great number of workers in Nassau; more than ordinary working conditions can
support.”\textsuperscript{227} Kenneth Williams, a Nassuvian and life long civil servant, remembered that
his family moved from Long Cay, an island in the south of the colony near Acklins and
Crooked Island, to Nassau in order to find work. And, that rather than returning to
Long Cay they stayed in Nassau. Ironically, Nassau did not always provide the
employment his father needed and Mr. Williams remembered that his father, a
construction supervisor, often had to leave the island to get work (sometimes taking the
family; sometimes not).\textsuperscript{228} Similarly, Wilfred Forbes, a farmer from Andros who had
migrated from Andros, explained that it was economic concerns that drove his decision
to relocate. As he explained, his philosophy was that “if there is nothing here I am going
back to Andros”\textsuperscript{229} and “I am a farmer. I like it in Nassau. I like it in Andros. If you work
hard in Nassau and can get work [then] the food is better.”\textsuperscript{230}

The temporary migration of workers from the Out Islands to the capital island
was not unusual.\textsuperscript{231} “In the old days,” Frederick C. Van Zeylen, Director of the Public

\textsuperscript{227} Evidence of Robert Merivelle Bailey to the Russell Commission, 222/252.

\textsuperscript{228} Kenneth Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording,
April 2011.

\textsuperscript{229} Evidence of Wilfred Forbes to the Russell Commission 479/512

\textsuperscript{230} Evidence of Wilfred Forbes to the Russell Commission 470/512.

\textsuperscript{231} In the past, Nassau employers actually incentivized the workers decision to return to
their home islands. As Turtle described, “in the year 1938, Sir Harry Oakes endeavored to set this
matter right in the following way. He would get groups of fifty men from the Labour Bureau
mainly men who lived at the islands and employ them for a period of three weeks, postponing
Works Department, testified, “workmen used to come frequently from the islands, staying a few months and then going back to the islands; that is not so frequent now, though it still does happen.” Instead, these workers tended to “remain permanently in Nassau.”

Internal migration because of both the numbers of Out Islanders involved and the length of their intended stay in Nassau had become a real problem. As Mr. Van Zeylen explained, “formerly it enabled islanders to come to Nassau, work from two to three months, save a little money and go home to the islands. Now they remain, as far as I can see. They are more permanent than before, remaining in Nassau, and when there is no work for them to do, they are out of work.”

Agreeing with Mr. Van Zeylen, the Superintendent of the Water and Sewerage Department of Public Works, James Roberts reiterates that

... there used to be a custom for the Islanders to come over to Nassau for a few weeks or a month of work, and then return to their islands; now the growing practice is for them to come over and remain settled in Nassau and it is this which is the cause of a great deal of unemployment in Nassau. I also regret this growing practice as I have seen men who were unable to obtain the necessities of life and have tried to persuade them to

half their pay so that at the end of the time they would have half their pay so that at the end of the time they would have half their pay for three weeks, the condition being that they would take the last half at the islands. The half of the money which had been postponed was to be paid to them by the commissioner.” Evidence of Morton Turtle to the Russell Commission, 132/163.

Evidence of Frederick Cornelius Van Zeylen to the Russell Commission 107/138.

Evidence of Frederick Cornelius Van Zeylen to the Russell Commission 107/138.

Evidence of Frederick Cornelius Van Zeylen to the Russell Commission, 107/138.
go back to the islands saying ‘why don’t you work here for a while and then go back to your islands’ but they prefer to remain in Nassau.  

Although the unemployment situation in Nassau in the 1930s and early 1940s was particularly bad, Out Islanders flocked to Nassau because the employment situations on their home islands were even worse.

By 1942, opportunities to earn a living wage in the Out Islands seemed to be very elusive. By 1942, the agricultural situation in the Out Island was teetering. “In years gone by,” MHA Frank Christie lamented, “the Out Islands were the backbone of the Bahamas and if we can get them back to fifty per cent of what they were before, they will be of great assistance to themselves and to Nassau.” Admittedly, the agricultural situation in the Bahamas has always been a little tenuous owing to the relatively poor soil. However, the Out Islander had long been able to feed themselves and to sell their crops and catch in the capital.

Financial conditions on the island were tightened because of increased taxes and tariffs charged by foreign governments which made it difficult for Bahamians to export foodstuffs during the war. One such tariff was the tomato tariff. Oscar Johnson, a fruit

235 Evidence of James E. Roberts to the Russell Commission, 114/144.

236 Evidence of Frank Christie to the Russell Commission, 377/409

237 They grew tomatoes, pineapples and cassava, just to name a few.

238 It is but one agricultural product in the long list of those guarded by a series of America’s highly protective tariff during this Great Depression. The most famous of all is the Smoot Hawley Tariff of 1930.
broker, explained that in “about 1928 … there was a tariff … put on which prevented [Bahamians] from importing our tomatoes into the United States. It was then necessary to get a new market.” A similar tariff contributed to the demise of the pineapple industry years earlier. Poor soil quality as well as competition from Cuban and Hawaiian growers was the other nail in the coffin.

Part of what had been taking place in the colony in the 1930s and 1940s was that fishermen and farmers were being enticed away from their farms and boats on the Out Islands to pursue higher paying jobs in the capital. Another reason for the decline of the Out Island way of living, at least according to Claudius Walker, was the lack of education. The ways of living off the land and seas were not being taught in any systematic way and any education on the islands was geared towards clerical training. “Agricultural education,” he offered, “should be a part of our vocational training … Too many feel that farming should be done by old people or ignorant people. Education is

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239 Evidence of Oscar Ernest Johnson to the Russell Commission, 169/190

240 Curiously, there had been a tariff placed on Bahamian pineapples as early as 1904 to protect the newly developed pineapple industry in Hawaii. However, that industry progressed so phenomenally that by 1912, the pineapples produced in the Hawaiian Islands were bigger, had thinner skin and shallow-set eyes thus “the waste in paring is much less.” The New Jersey firm that owned and operated the pineapple industry in the Bahamas argued before the Congressional Ways and Means Committee that the industry was “always handicapped by a pretty heavy duty, the business has never been very profitable, but afforded modest returns on investment.” Tariff Schedules. Hearings before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives (Vol III, Schedules D,E,F,G and H, 1913) Schedule G, Paragraph 274: Preserved Pineapples 2897.

looked upon as training man for white collar desk jobs. There is no school of seamanship or navigation and if men want to study navigation they have to go to Jamaica or some other place. I think that the scientific side of seamanship should be included in our education.”242 There were problems affecting agriculture in the colony, however, besides the lack of agricultural and naval education. H.G. Christie, a realtor and a member of the House of Assembly, agreed that agriculture was important but pointed out that even if every farmer stayed on his farm that there was not enough arable land for the farmers to make a living high enough to induce them to stay. “The farm land,” he noted, “is scarce.”243

These may well have been concerns but there were critical issues affecting agriculture in the Bahamas. One of these was transportation. There was simply not an efficient way to get produce from Out Island farms to the Nassau marketplace. Mr. Turtle, an architect and a contractor that held the contract for building the administration buildings at the base sites, testified that “the islander is not getting an even break in many instances. He sends his goods here [to Nassau and] quite often he sends them into a crowded market where he doesn’t get good prices for them. In some instances, the transportation is not good enough and results in his produce such as fruit


and vegetables not being in good condition.”244 Spoiled produce brought in very little, if any, money. The farmer, already near the margins of subsistence, was often pushed over the boundary by a poor market showing. Harold Forbes, a native of Andros, explains that he left farming in Andros to work in Nassau because of the difficulties of simply getting his produce to market and his frustration over his inability to regulate the amount of produce grown in connection with the demand. The Produce Exchange, in Nassau was supposed to help on this front.245 The exchange does not seem to have helped very much. “If I was coming to Nassau,” Mr. Forbes explains, “I would bring my crops myself, otherwise I had to send them through the Exchange. That was not always satisfactory. When we sent our produce up, sometimes we did not get much for it. It was better for us to bring it ourselves. I have not sent anything to the Produce Exchange for the last six months... The real trouble is lack of boats and guaranteed prices. We grew good fruit and vegetables as we have good soil.”246

On other Out Islands, they were having a similar problem. Oscar Johnson explained that

244 Evidence of Morton Turtle to the Russell Commission, 133/164.

245 “The Bahamas Produce Exchange is a section of the Agricultural Department controlled by the Board of Agriculture. Its function is to market out-island produce locally and to help the farmers’ associations by the provision, on repayment, of seed and fertilisers [sic] at cost price. The entire overhead charges are borne by the Bahamas Government and the Exchange itself is operated on a non-profit-making basis.” House of Commons Debates 26 January 1960 vol 616 c15W accessed at http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1960/jan/26/produce-exchange-nassau.

246 Evidence of Harold Forbes to the Russell Commission, 483/516.
... the difficulty about carrying on agriculture in Eleuthera is the question of regulating the markets because at times there is a glut and at times you can’t give produce away. I think that [it] is possible for a man to farm in Eleuthera for the purpose of making use of his own products but there is not much scope for exportation. It might be possible to develop agricultural implements and suitable arrangements made for taking away their produce.247

Christie, a land broker agreed that “in the islands, when the peasant produces vegetables or fruit, he very often cannot get anything for it nor can he conveniently send it in to Nassau. If those conditions were altered I should expect them to prefer to live on their own estates.”248

In addition to transportation issues, farmers also had to contend with blight and pestilence. A prime example was the blight that destroyed the sponge industry in the late 1930s. “Things went nicely until about 1938 or 1939,” MHA Bailey explained, “our sponge industry then lamentably failed. The Government assisted the sponge gatherers but there were a number of other labourers employed in clipping and cleaning sponges who were thrown out of work and who had to shift for themselves.”249 The sponge industry engaged quite a few men in the colony. “We have been engaged in the sponge industry,” Damianos, a Bay Street grocery merchant explained, “but the sponge industry is not functioning now at all….There might have [at one time] been five thousand people

248 Evidence of CC Smith to the Russell Commission, 141/172.
employed in the sponge industry in the Bahamas, fishermen, laboureres, etc."\textsuperscript{250} And, the death of that industry did not bode well for the Nassuvian laborer. According to Howard Rolle, a project worker who did not participate in the riot, he was plunged into unemployment when the sponge industry dried up. "For twenty years, I was a sponge sorter for the Greeks here in Nassau. I don't think there is sponging at all now [but] I have had nothing to do for four years"\textsuperscript{251}

So, for a number of reasons, unemployment in the colony was extremely high. In addition to unemployment in the colony being extremely high, the cost of living was also very high and (arguably) the government made the situation worse by raising and maintaining duties on essential goods (while reducing duties on locally produced goods).

**Increased cost of living**

In 1942, the ordinary worker in the Bahamas was having a hard time making ends meet. Consider, for instance, Kenneth Williams' recollections about the economic situation in the Bahamas in the 1940s. His father was a construction contractor and worked on many projects all across the islands. He did not work on the base building project from which the riot sprang because he was employed in a private building project elsewhere. Mr. Williams' mother did not work outside of the home because,

\textsuperscript{250} Evidence of John Damianos to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 298/330.

\textsuperscript{251} Evidence of Howard Rolle to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 481/514.
often times, they relocated as a family with his father on particularly lengthy employment projects. This was the reason he was not in Nassau during the Riot.

Mr. Williams recalled that goods were scarce during the 1940s. He explained that the scarcity was because the mercantile ships were not able to travel during the war and, thus, many goods usually imported were conspicuously absent from shelves. Families, he explained, were really close at that time because times were really tough and people had to depend on each other. He remembered his nuclear family relying on and supporting his extended family. And, he remembered his mother squeezing coconut milk from the meat of the coconut because they were unable to get cream.252

Similarly, Ruth Sands recalled that many would spread the meat of ripe avocadoses, which were native to the Bahamas, on their bread because there was a scarcity of butter during the war. Avocados, she explained, were “poor man’s butter.”253 Ms. Sands remembered that times were difficult for her and her family growing up in the 1940’s and 1950’s. We were poor, she explains “but we didn’t know we were poor.” And, indeed, like Williams, they were never so impoverished that her mother needed to find employment outside of the home. Her mother did, however, make extra money by baking bread and other pastries to sell to neighbors and friends.

252 Kenneth Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, 25 April 2011.

253 Ruth Sands, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, 23 April 2011.
Likewise, C. R. Walker remembered that there were food shortages during World War II and that things did not get better until after the war.254 For the common working man, things were, indeed, tight.

The Bahamian laborer had real reason to gripe. The cost of living was definitely increasing. Percy Christie, a shoe store merchant on Bay Street that was also a would-be labor organizer, estimated that “the general increase in the cost of living is 75%.”255 Mr. Christie’s guess was somewhat exaggerated. The table below shows “that a number of the articles [needed to live as well as work] added together in 1938 cost eleven shillings and eight pence and in 1942 the same articles added together cost one pound, two shillings and ten pence.”256 The prices listed in the 1942 column were “taken from central Bay Street retail houses and not from small Suburban Shops which usually sell the same articles higher than the city.”257 The final column is the percentage of increase over a six year period. The price of goods rose from as low as 33% for rice a food staple in the Bahamas to 60% for flour and 65% for cheese.258

Table 1: Increased Cost of Goods


256 Evidence of Charles Rhodriquez to the Russell Commission 92/123.

257 Russell Commission, 2.

258 Donald’s Cash and Carry Market in May of 1942 advertises pork as 1/3 instead of 1/2 and lard as 2/ instead of 1/1.5d. Tribune 1 May 1942.
Comparative Prices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1938</th>
<th>1942</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice per quart</td>
<td>3d</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grits per quart</td>
<td>2.5d</td>
<td>4.5d</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lard per lb</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>1/1.5d</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pork per lb</td>
<td>8d</td>
<td>1/2d</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour per lb</td>
<td>1.5d</td>
<td>2.5d</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar per lb</td>
<td>2d</td>
<td>3.5d</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese per lb</td>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>2/-</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt Beef per lb</td>
<td>8d</td>
<td>½</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corned Beef per tin</td>
<td>6d</td>
<td>1/-</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cond Milk per tin</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton per yard</td>
<td>6d</td>
<td>1/-</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prints per yd</td>
<td>6d</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill per yard(^{260})</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Shirts</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>5/-</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis Shoes</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>5/-(^{261})</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1942, it would take £1.1.10½ to feed and house a family of five for a week (a 53% increase since 1938).\(^{262}\) This is less than Mr. Christie reported but is still substantial. Items such as clothes, shoes, amusements etc. are excluded from that total but it does include cooking fuel, (either coal or wood) at 1/0, 3 quarts of grits at 10.5d, 3 cakes of soap at 6d and fish 2/6d.

Insurance broker Bruce Johnstone, whose agents went throughout the islands selling insurance and collecting payments, claimed to have had a pulse on what was

\(^{259}\) The British pound sterling (£) was the currency of the colony. Shillings were abbreviated with a slash or s. 1/6 is the 1shilling and 6 pence or 1/- is 1 shilling and zero pence. There are 20 shillings in a pound and 12 pence in a shilling equaling 240 pence in a pound. The abbreviation for pence is d. 9d is 9 pence.

\(^{260}\) Drill was heavyweight cotton that was used often for uniforms.

\(^{261}\) Russell Commission, 2. This was a 121% increase.

\(^{262}\) Russell Commission, 7.
going on amongst the population. According to Johnstone, “I have a large number of labourers and laboring families among the clients.”263 He reported that according to the wives of the workmen from whose homes they were collecting insurance premiums, “the main things I heard was that the workmen were finding it harder and harder to get along owing to the increased cost of living.” Even if his agents were not explicitly told of the financial hardship, the agents could view it for themselves as they entered the homes of laborers to make their collections. While the houses tended to be clean and well kept, it was not uncommon to find 2-3 laborers living in a single room house. Although a water works system had provided a sewage infrastructure in 1929, it was not uncommon to find that many of these dwellings did not have bathrooms but still employed outhouses.264

The government was also aware of the increased cost of living. According to RM Bailey, for instance, when

His Royal Highness had appointed a committee sometime before with a view to seeing whether there should not be a reduction on the import duties of certain necessities, that committee reported that there was a substantial increase in the cost of living. In any case, if the cost of living has gone up, labour, which spends all, should have a corresponding benefit. The Government was well aware that the cost of living had gone up.265

263 Evidence of Bruce Eric Johnstone to the Russell Commission, 165/196.


265 Evidence of R. M. Bailey to the Russell Commission, 217/248. This is exactly the problem, the artificial limitation on the work of their labor. If the American’s were allowed to pay the workers more than the Bahamian employers would need to raise the wages they offered in order to keep their best workers from being lured away.
The increased cost of living meant that the Project laborers had trouble making ends meet on the four shillings a day that they were paid. John Stanley Lowe, editor of the biweekly paper, The Herald, a paper that “identifies itself with labour,” for instance, testified that he “told Colonel Hayes that while he had five shillings as a maximum to pay to some workers as he felt fit. It would be wisdom to pay it to all as the rate of four shillings today took no cognizance of the rise in the cost of living over a four year period.”

Similarly, Claudius Walker, a physician and member of the House of Assembly, agreed that “the standard rate of wage on the 1st of June should have been five and six shillings a day. If such things as lumber and cement were allowed to rocket up to sky-high prices, why would not labour be allowed to get what it should get.”

Percy Edward Christie, merchant, member of the house of assembly and self-appointed spokesman for labor, also agreed that, “based on the cost of living...every labourer should get eight shillings, but the fact is that they simply cannot get it and there are Government projects being carried out where they got four shillings a day.”

Robert Dunlap Albury, a merchant and manufacturer’s agent, while rejecting the means that the rioters employed, understood their frustration. “I wish to make it quite clear to my audience,” he testified, “that while I denounce in the strongest possible terms the

266 Evidence of John Stanley Lowe to the Russell Commission, 329/361.

267 Evidence of Claudius Rowland Walker to the Russell Commission, 471/504.

268 Evidence of Percy Edward Christie to the Russell Commission, 24/49.
ruthless destruction to property in our city, I am in sympathy with labour in so far as it was not given a higher wage, in view of the greatly increased cost of living, at the present time.”

Even if the laborers could make-do on 4 shillings a day, there were still a couple of issues with that wage rate. First, families would be unable to place something aside for larger purchases or for a rainy day. Another issue is that the Project was a temporary job. One might be able to live on such narrow margins if they had a permanent job. But, on temporary jobs like the Project, the workers hoped for a larger payday to carry them through tougher and leaner times. “For labourers,” Thaddeus Johnson explains, “four shillings a day would be quite a good wage, if it was steady, the trouble is that it is not steady and therefore a man can sometimes only earn one shilling a day.”

Bahamian laborers, who were not on the Project, often made less than four shillings a day. As Harold Christie explained, “the rate of four shillings a day was arrived by consideration of the mass employment in Nassau. Three shillings a day would be the wage for ordinary work and four shillings a day would be the wage for...


270 Evidence of Thaddeus George Johnson to the Russell Commission, 126/157 This was actually the reason that there were not more men in line for Project jobs. Men with lower wage permanent jobs, such as the men employed by the public works, would not leave them. Those men who are working “steadily are quite satisfied to remain with us instead of trying to go to the project to get more [money]. They felt that if they went down to the project and got more money, why, some other labourer might come into our employ and take their place, more or less permanently on the skeleton crews. We are using our skeleton crews pretty steadily but we are not engaging casual labour. I have no idea how long this project will last.” Evidence of Frederick Cornelius Van Zeylen to the Russell Commission, 112/142.
According to Reuben Edward Cooper, a Baptist minister who testified for the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of New Providence, even a year after the riot Bahamian workers were still unsatisfied with their wages. Because “even the minimum wage of four shillings is not enjoyed by all unskilled working class; many are now paid only two or three shilling per diem of over eight hours, [this is] especially true of the domestic class…[it caused] the dissatisfaction at the Project [and] the recent disturbance [and] is still the cause for the present restive condition of the people.”

Another factor that the regular citizen was unable to control but that mightily affected his standard of living were taxes in the form of customs duties charged by the Bahamian government on essential foodstuffs. According to Etienne Dupuch, “in this country we are depending largely for sustenance on goods purchased with a depreciated pound in a high wage dollar country—goods which are, furthermore, being increasingly heavily taxed as they pass through the Customs.”

When importers pay duties on imported goods, they pass this cost onto the consumer by charging a higher price for that good. In an already hard time, heavy duties, particularly on non-luxury items, made goods even more expensive for the everyday Bahamian. Attorney General

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272 Evidence of Reuben Edward Cooper to the Russell Commission, 347/379.

Hallinan, for instance, agreed that “the proportion of revenue derived from indirect taxation is unduly high.”

As it stood, the poor paid more by way of indirect taxes from tariffs than did the rich. Similarly, Arnold K Cole, a customs collector, explained that “the customs duties must increase the cost of living. The tariff could be arranged to partly lighten the cost of living for the poorer classes by reduction or elimination of duties.” Mr. Cole then highlighted a list the items on which he believed the duty should be lowered. These included such necessities as coffee, flour, grains, sugar, books, matches and nails, none of which were grown or manufactured domestically. Likewise, Samuel White, a resident of Grant’s Town and manager of Weary Willi’s hotel at the time of the riot, agreed that, “the import duties should be reduced and there should be a five percent general reduction. Clothes and boots and shoes should have their duty reduced. [But] the duty on tobacco and liquor should be maintained.”

Ironically, while the colony was raising or maintaining customs duties on some imported goods, they were also lowering protective tariffs on goods that were grown in

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274 Evidence of Eric Hallinan to the Russell Commission, 329/563. Hallinan suggested that a shift to an income tax or a land tax or a poll tax would shift the burden of taxation away from the poorer people and onto the rich. And, he suggested that “some form of direct taxation should be introduced like income tax or a land tax or a poll tax which is a simplified form of income tax. I have had experience in drafting income tax legislation. It is alleged that the cost of running an income tax is so great that it swallows up all the tax but I don’t agree with that.”

275 Evidence of Arnold Kirkland Cole to the Russell Commission, 429/462.

276 Evidence of Samuel White to the Russell Commission, 421/453.
the Bahamas. For example, “the duty has been reduced from 10/- to 3/- on bananas.”
By decreasing the price of foreign bananas (which were grown more cheaply), the local growers had to decrease their price in order to compete. This, of course, did not sit well with growers. Although this decrease in the tariff was good for the consumers who were, as mentioned earlier, getting by on low wages, it decreased (or possibly deleted) the profit margin of the local banana growers. Lowe, a government official, explains how this halted the growing of that particular crop altogether. “With regard to an order-in-council cutting down the duty on bananas,” Lowe explained, “after telling the people to grow fruit they drop the duty on bananas. Unless a farmer feels the government is going to protect him, he will not grow produce. This is bad management on our part. We have not guaranteed this market.”
Because of acts like lowering the tariffs on bananas, many farmers had lost faith in the government’s ability and desire to protect them. In fact, Lowe believed that the government should have gone a step further to convince its citizens to eat locally. “The government,” he complained, “has

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277 Evidence of Basil McKinney to the Russell Commission, 439/472.

278 Many believed that bringing agricultural goods in the country was bad economically for the farmers. Some believed that it actually could harm the industry through the introduction of blight. As Basil McKinney complained, “A rather sore point with me at the moment as a member of the Agriculture Board is that of the Government permitting the importation into this colony of certain fruits which had a prohibitive tariff up until three weeks ago, bananas, pineapples, grapefruit, avocado pears and many other items. If we permit these fruits to be imported we are only bringing in diseases which the country has not now. As a member of the Board of Agriculture, I would say this is not right. We would do better to go without the fruit not available.” Evidence of Basil McKinney to the Russell Commission, 439/472.

done very little to encourage the consumption of our native grown produce. Propaganda should be put out to make people eat their own produce.”

III. Bahamian workers were making do

There was, thus, a convergence of many events that caused the economic climate of the riot. Bahamian workers were pummeled from all sides. Fewer jobs, more competition for jobs as workers returned from international locations and out islanders migrated to Nassau, an increased cost of living brought about by the global economic downturn and the various taxes and tariffs. Each of these affected different workers in different proportions but it all led to one conclusion: things were really bad economically.

Although the economic situation in the Bahamas was quite bad at the time of the riot, what we learn from those who experienced the deprivation is that even though finances were tight, they were making do. Indeed, Bahamians have had to “make do” through a lot of tight times. This constricting of income, however, often led to a constricting of their “belts” and some inventiveness on their part.

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280 Evidence of John Stanley Lowe to the Russell Commission, 454/487.

281 In addition to the colony being economically ripe for riot, it was arguably also politically and socially ripe for revolt (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4).
There are three reasons, however, why the lower than expected wages offered during the Project lead to rioting, looting and vandalism. The first was that their expectations were not met; the second was they were placed in an unfair situation; and, the last was that their freedom to negotiate was taken away from them. In other words, the rioters did not riot because there was an economic downturn and they were being offered lower wages than they expected and believed they needed to survive. They viewed the lower than expected wages and the reaction of the colonial government to their calls for redress as act of aggression against them. They rioted because of economic injustice.282

Again, the Project laborers expected the Project to pay them higher wages than they were paid. The Bahamian economy was notorious for its boom and bust cycle. “The Bahamas suffered successive periods of dramatic and momentary booms followed by equally dramatic but protracted busts.” 283 Bahamians were used to serendipitous wage earning opportunities appearing when they needed them most. Remember, the Bahamian economy was at times supplemented by wrecking/salvaging. It was once saved by blockade running during the American Civil War and again by rum running during the American Prohibition Era. These opportunities were often short lived which

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282 “In my opinion the riot was brought about because our common labourers was told by the foreigners that they could get more wages but they were being prevented because our Government said, “No.” I feel sure of that.” Evidence of Alvin R. Braynen to the Russell Commission, 456.

made them even more important. As Storr reminded us, “the riches from blockade running during the American Civil War, for instance, evaporated just as soon as the war ended and the Bahamas remained a ‘depressed’ area until American Prohibition presented visitors and citizens alike with another smuggling opportunity.”

Apart from these extralegal activities, Bahamians knew that another opportunity for a boom of sorts was for the taking in foreign projects. Remember, foreign entrepreneurs such as Wenner-Gren, Oakes and Levy popped on the scene with large construction or agricultural projects that offered the Bahamian worker a higher than domestic wage. They expected the same from the Project and that expectation was not met. That was not the first time that this had happened made matters worse. Two years earlier, the United States built a Navy Base in George Town, Exuma and wages were fixed then as well. “On my arrival at George Town,” Richard Farrington remarked, “I found a strong feeling against all white men in Nassau. The Exumans, getting 80 cents a day expressed the opinion that it was the white man in Nassau who had prevented them from getting the $2.00 a day that the Construction Co. had intended paying for unskilled labour.”

In spite of this occurrence, the workers fully expected to be paid a higher

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285 Evidence of Richard John Anderson Farrington to the Russell Commission, 272/304. Because of their proximity with America and their tendency to work in the United States, it was common to calculate wages in US Dollars. At this time the Pound was pegged to the USD at the exchange rate of 1£=4.03 dollars. Based on this rate the workers were hoping to get 10 shillings (2USD) but were instead paid 4 shillings (.80USD). S. E. Harris, “The Official and Unofficial
price. As Robert Bailey explained, “Then when they found themselves turned over to the Project here at the same wage, that resentment grew. No explanation was given to them or to their leaders. I understand that some explanation was given the Press but that never appeared in print.”\textsuperscript{286}

What also could have made this situation more of a slight from the perspective of the Bahamian workers was that they were being paid wages that were lower than the wages that non-Bahamians were being paid to perform the same jobs. At this time in their social development, Bahamians were not much concerned with civil rights even though racial segregation was practiced in the Bahamas.\textsuperscript{287} Bahamian blacks at that time were of the opinion that their night clubs, their places of worship, their restaurants were as good as or better than any to which they were not allowed access. But, in this instance the ugly monster of racism raised its head in a way that could not be ignored. Although the newspapers, businessmen and politicians downplayed the racial aspect of the riot, it was a definite and major contributor to the unrest. As noted earlier, the Governor did not emphasize the racial aspect of the riot publicly but, in a communication with the Colonial Office in London, he admitted that “racial feelings have been aroused on both

\textsuperscript{286} Evidence of Robert M. Bailey to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 217/248.

\textsuperscript{287} This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
sides, and it is the situation which is causing me most concern.” They were used to racism but were bothered by the unfairness and inequality. Bahamian workers simply could not get over being paid less to do the same work as the person working next to them simply (it appeared) because of race.

The final reason why this discontent with the economic situation resulted in such an extreme measure was that Bahamian workers felt that the right to negotiate a fair wage for their labor had been taken from them. Yes, the Bahamas had an established minimum wage. This wage, however, was now being treated as a wage ceiling instead of as a wage floor, as it was intended to be. Thus, they were arbitrarily and artificially kept from negotiating a wage that kept up with the cost of living. For example, John Stanley Lowe claimed that “Bermuda’s wages for unskilled labour were two and a half times above our legal minimum wage for the same work, the cost of living in Bermuda was something like only thirty percent or less above our cost of living. The comparison showed that this colony has not kept the pace in the payment of wages to its worst paid labourers.” This lack of power over their own labor was made worse by reports from their American bosses that they were indeed willing to pay them more. It is not as if the riot was their first resort. They first attempted to negotiate with the Pleasantville Construction Company. Samuel Cartwright, a barber testified that he overheard

288 Telegram from the Governor (HRH, The Duke of Windsor) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 11 June 1942 A 5481.FO 371/30644/120.

289 Evidence of John Stanley Lowe to the Russell Commission, 324/356.
American workers expressing their concern with the wage issue. “There were three American men from the project in my shop and they were discussing the project generally and the price of labour. They said that the company wanted to pay higher wages to the working people here but that the Government and the Bay Street merchants had been hindering this payment of higher wages.” When that failed they attempted to negotiate with the government but were rebuffed, ignored and rebuked. They were asked to submit their grievance in writing, which they did. They were asked to wait, which they did. It was only when they did not get a response from the government did they go to Bay Street. They then assembled in front of the House of Assembly on the day of the riot and the answer they got was not to sully their good name as docile workers lest they face the threat to being replaced by foreign laborers.

**IV. Conclusion**

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290 Evidence of Samuel Felix Cartwright to the *Russell Commission*, 370/402.

291 The Governor, Duke of Windsor, makes it seem as if the workers had moved too quickly with their protest and had not given the diplomatic channels time to work. “On Tuesday of last week [less than a week before the riot] a Delegation of the Bahamas Federation of Labour interviewed the Labour Officer about an increase in wages for those working on a certain project on New Providence. As a result of these discussions Governor on Friday received a letter from the Federation requesting substantial increase in wages and stating grounds for this request. The matter was received by the acting Governor, when on Monday morning, serious disturbances occurred which have made it impossible for the time being to consider the questions discussed in that letter.” Governor, HRH Duke of Windsor, Speech to the Colony, 2 June 1942, transcript in *Tribune* 4 June 1942.
The 1942 riot was not just a reaction to the economic downturn that the colony was experiencing. To be sure, there was an increase in the cost of living. And, there were avenues of labor (e.g. farming, foreign work) that were closed off to the Bahamian worker for various reasons. But, Bahamian blacks had experienced these things before and alone they would not have caused the riot. That their expectations were not met, that they were treated unfairly and that they were denied the right to negotiate the value of their labor are all factors that distinguished their outlook during this time as opposed to in previous periods of economic decline. It was not just the depth of economic despair that caused the riot. Rather, it was the reality of economic injustice.
CHAPTER FOUR: DISCRIMINATION PROVIDED THE FLAMMABLE MATERIAL

I. Introduction

In the 1940s, as a result of the Great Depression and World War II, the Bahamas was experiencing a severe economic downturn. Both unemployment and the cost of living were extremely high. The wages that the Bahamian laborers were receiving from the Pleasantville Company for their work on the Project were not high enough for them to be able to support themselves and their families. As I argue in Chapter 3, however, the riot had less to do with the economic woes and the paucity of their wages than it had to do with issues of unfairness and economic injustice. Not only had they expected to earn more from their work on the Project but the representatives of the Pleasantville Company claimed that they wanted to pay higher wages but were prohibited from doing so by the government. The workers were also upset because the Bahamian worker thought it unfair that the American workers on the Project were paid higher wages for performing similar tasks.

The unfairness surrounding the wages that Bahamian workers earned on the Project, thus, sparked the riot. Arguably, the degree of social exclusion that existed in the Bahamas during the first half of the twentieth century explained why the colony was
ripe for the riot. Additionally, the repeated incidences of discrimination that they experienced in the colony at the hands of the Bay Street Boys explains why they were so ready to believe that the Bay Street Boys were standing in the way of their earning higher wages.

There is widespread agreement following the 1942 riot that, while the proximate cause of the riot was a labor dispute, the colony’s underlying social circumstances were also important contributing factors. Gail Saunders, for instance, has argued that the riot occurred because of an “absence of effective political and social organizations through which grievances could be vocalized.”\(^{292}\) According to Saunders, part of the problem was that “there were no political parties and no modern legislation dealing with trade unions or labour federations in Nassau.”\(^{293}\) Project workers were, thus, pushed toward protest and, ultimately, to riot because there was an absence of effective paths through which they could seek redress. Similarly, the Russell Commission listed wage dissatisfaction as the chief reason for the riot and concluded that racial issues did not lead to the riot. It did, however, point to overpopulation and the social tensions that were caused by the (political and social) situation in the colony.

Others have foregrounded the importance of racial factors in explaining the riot. Indeed, another material cause of the riot was the system of segregation and


marginalization that existed in the Bahamas. Kuss explained that the 1942 riot was “triggered by racial tension under the guise of a labor dispute.” While the Governor’s official report to the British Parliament omitted any indication that the riot had anything to do with race, privately he admitted that racial feelings were a cause of the riot.

Likewise, Napoleon McPhee, a participant in the riot, explained that “the socio-political situation – made it so [Bahamian workers] had no power.” McPhee suggested that the riot was as much a venting of frustration over that powerlessness as it was a reaction to lower than expected wages. Similarly, John Wiley explained that the riot was over both wages and white dominance over black Bahamians. As he explained using his colloquial parlance, black Bahamians were bothered by “Conchy Joe running the country.”

Recall, at the time the colony was controlled politically and economically by a group of prominent white Bahamian businessmen known collectively as the Bay Street Boys.

Dr. Claudius Walker has also pointed to socio-economic factors. “The underlying causes for this social unrest,” he noted, “are manifold. We are in the majority

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295 After he abdicated his throne, Edward VII was given the title of Duke of Windsor and was named the Governor of the Bahamas.


297 A Conchy Joe is a term that refers to native born white Bahamians. John Wiley interview by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital recording, April, 2011
but we have minority problems. … Truth to tell, we are the wretched of the earth.”

According to Dr. Walker, in the Bahamas, “the coloured man makes all the concessions … I challenge any man in this colony to say that I am wrong in that. The coloured man is discriminated against in the churches, in the theatres, in the private schools.” If there is harmony between the black and white populations in the colony, Dr. Walker went on to say, “it is harmony at the expense of the coloured population.”

This chapter will explore those aspects of social life in the Bahamas which made the country ripe for the kind of social disturbance that occurred on 1 June 1942. During this time, Bahamian blacks were marginalized and suffered under a very real system of discrimination. For much of the colony’s history, the black majority population had been to one degree or another under the thumb of the ruling white minority. This relationship started as one of slave and slave master. By the time of the riot, the relationship was one where the majority black population was relegated to the periphery of power and excluded from access to some institutions and some vocations by racial segregation.


300 Dr. Claudius R. Walker interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital recording, 31 July 1970, Bahamas National Archives, Nassau.
II. Race and color in the Bahamas

Historian Alvin Thompson has explained that “racial prejudice and discrimination often have as their bedfellows color prejudice and discrimination.” It was not uncommon, for instance, to substitute color for race. As Thompson continued, “so close historically was the relationship between race and colour that it was common to substitute a colour classification for a racial one.” Like in the rest of the West Indies, color was often substituted for race in the Bahamas. And, as with other parts of the Caribbean, the Bahamas had its own particular color classification. As linguist Jeffery Reaser described, “one important set of words [in Bahamian English] are the many terms used to identify and taxonomize Bahamians.” Some terms characterize people by origin and others group people by skin color. “The term white,” Raeser explained, “is broadly used to describe Bahamians with Anglo-Ancestry as well as those light-skinned Afro-Bahamians of mixed ancestry.” In addition to the term ‘white,’ Raeser continues, the “Afro-Bahamian community sometimes uses the term Conchy Joe


303 “Many of these terms are used to denote people from particular towns or islands; for example, Crabs lived in Hope Town and Cigillians are from Spanish Wells.” Jeffery Reaser “Bahamian English,” in Daniel Schreier ed. The Lesser-known Varieties of English 162
or Conchy Joe to describe people of Anglo descent.” According to Reaser, however, in spite of the close attention paid to color, “generally, however, Bahamians self-identify as simply white or black along lines similar to the distinction made in the US.”

The color system in the Bahamas was both more and less complex than Reaser concluded. Dupuch, a Bahamian reporter and parliamentarian, explained, for instance, that the social hierarchy in the Bahamas could be “determined entirely by degree of color, starting with black at the bottom, through to off-black, dark brown, brown, light brown, ‘high yaller’- and near white.” But, while in the Bahamas’ light-skinned blacks and those of mixed ancestry are both referred to and often self-identify as white, this was not the case in the United States, which operated under the one drop rule. L.D. Powles, a stipendiary magistrate in the nineteenth century, has similarly described the complexity of race/color in the Bahamas. “Where the line separates the white-man, so called, from the coloured is drawn in Nassau,” he writes, “must ever remain a mystery to the stranger.”

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304 Here there is a bit of a space between what Reaser wrote and what was actually so. There is no consensus among black Bahamian whether the term Conchy Joe refers to a white Bahamian or a Bahamian that simply looks white though he also has African ancestry.


307 L.D. Powles Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas (London: Simpson, Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1888), 120.
Notwithstanding their prejudices, Bahamian whites tolerated a certain “co-optation of the coloured middle classes.” These lighter skinned blacks could become a part of the elite and were encouraged to mimic whites when it came to their attitudes about the social status of their darker brothers.  

In some ways tempering the blow of the system of discrimination in the colony, if a black person had a light enough complexion and enough money then some of the rules that hampered most black Bahamians would not apply to him. Arguably, in some ways, this exception made the whole situation even bitterer as a black Bahamian might face discrimination from someone who was literally a family member. It is possible that through enough visible European ancestry and what amounts to strategic breeding some families could eventually move into whiteness.

In addition to race being a matter of how you appeared to others, whiteness was also a matter of self-identity. Paula Williams, for instance, explained that in the Bahamas there were some people who appeared as white as their European counterparts but who considered themselves black and there were people whose grandmother was known by everyone to be black but because of their complexion considered themselves to be white. Ms. Williams, in fact, describes her grandmother as a


309 Bishop Thompson explained how that worked in practice. “I knew there was a white ball park (Garfunkel Field) that Blacks couldn’t play at. I mean my color black that is. Psuedo-blacks could play.” Bishop Gilbert Thompson interview in *The 1942 Riot*, video recording, The National Archives, Nassau.
Conchy Joe, a term that refers to native born white Bahamians, but states that there is “no way in this world could I think of myself as anything but black.” Refusing to self-identify as white, she also tells how her grandmother’s family “refused to notice her [grandmother] because she had married a jet black man.” Black Bahamians who were too dark to pass as white or those who simply chose not to pass could not escape the system of discrimination that existed.

III. A very real system of discrimination

Although there was never a formal segregation system in the Bahamas and no Jim Crow style laws were ever enacted by the Bahamian House of Assembly, there was de facto segregation in the Bahamas in the 1940s. Admittedly, Bahamian experience

310 Paula Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011. Paula also retells a story that her cousin Cecil Wallace Whitfield had often related to her. Whitfield was one of the founders of the PLP, the first minority party. One day on the floor during a debate, Whitfield reminded an assemblyman that identified as white and held himself superior that they were cousins. That probably did nothing to further the debate but it did serve to show a connection to the darker Wallace-Whitfield that the assemblyman would have rather not acknowledge it Paula Williams

311 Paula Williams interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

312 Interestingly, not everyone agreed that the system of discrimination in the Bahamas was truly milder than it was elsewhere. John Wyley, for instance, went to work on the work contract in the 1950’s and in spite of the situation in the Unites States, he claims that he “face[d] more discrimination in Nassau than [while] on the contract.” John Wyley, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

313 Although until the legislation presented by Etienne Dupuch in the House of Assembly in 1956 “condemning discrimination in ‘public’ places on the grounds of race and color” there were no laws prohibiting discrimination. Alan West, African Caribbean: A Reference Guide, (NY: Greenwood 2003), 20. Although even then, the House of Assembly did not go as far as it could
with this system of discrimination was relatively mild; there were no lynchings, no poll taxes, no cross burnings like there were in other places at the time.\textsuperscript{314} But, it was oppressive.\textsuperscript{315} As Kenneth Williams, a black Bahamian who grew up in the Bahamas during the time riot, explained, the system of discrimination in the Bahamas was not “something that was soft. It was hard.”\textsuperscript{316} In 1942, blacks in the Bahamas clearly did not and refused to call together a committee to inquire into actually ending the practice of discrimination in schools, restaurants, cinemas and elsewhere. 24 January 1956 \textit{Nassau Guardian}. The segregation was not matter of law. It was a matter of custom. Bishop Gilbert Thompson explained that you just knew. “We knew you couldn’t go into the Grand Central. We tried it once…” Again, McPhee reiterated that this was not “a discrimination being implemented by law. It was more a custom than law… No one told you were you could or couldn’t go. You just knew we don’t go there.” Napolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{314} Interestingly enough, the British Colonial Secretary saw the segregation in the Bahamas as similar to the that in the American South which was why he was okay with sending Bahamians to work in the American South during World War II. “‘Bahamians, Stanley reasoned, were accustomed to the sort of racial segregation they would experience in the Jim Crow South… The Bahamas imposed similar sorts of restrictions on black Bahamian’s use of hotels, restaurants and cinemas.’” Cindy Hahamovitch \textit{No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in American and the Global History of Deportable Labor}. 50.

\textsuperscript{315} Bermuda and the Bahamas were considered two of the most reactionary of the British West Indian holdings. Both these islands practiced some form of Jim Crow type segregation. Segregation, according to Steve C High, developed because of these islands’ dependence on American tourists. As an attempt to make the Americans comfortable, they maintained strict segregations in hotels, restaurants, cinemas, theatres and various other venues. Steven C. High, \textit{Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere}. 1940-1967, 160

\textsuperscript{316} Kenneth Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011. As Williams describes, during that time a person could come from Greece to work in the sponge industry (which was controlled by Greeks) and open up a restaurant in which he could enforce the rule that no blacks could be served in that restaurant. Blacks, he explains, had a lower status than non-Bahamians; “that person wasn’t even a Bahamian” he laments when recounting the story. “If that is what a non-Bahamian could do,” he continues “imagine the way it was with white people who were born there.”
enjoy the same rights and privileges as whites in the colony.\textsuperscript{317} Moreover, they had grown accustomed to the color line that had been established. As Bishop Thompson describes, “we grew up with these things. We saw it in the United States. We saw the colored side and the white side. We knew but we thought that’s just how things were.”\textsuperscript{318} Historian Gail Saunders confirmed that “until the late 1950s, blacks were barred from all hotels, were not allowed in some restaurants, movie houses and were only allowed to enter some churches by the rear door. Certain schools did not accept black children and many business firms were closed to them as places of employment.”\textsuperscript{319} Dr. Bethel, similarly, explained that although white Bahamians comprised only about 10\% of the population, they “controlled both the government and the major part of the wealth of the country. The society was strictly segregated along

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\textsuperscript{317} Whittington Johnson seems to argue that it was the imperial laws and attitudes that insured that the Bahamas did not have legal segregation; that it was not like the southern United States. Horrible southern debacles such as actual race laws, lynching and other violence from whites against blacks would never happen because the British were adamant that all men born in the Bahamas be treated equally under the law; no poll taxed that served to eliminate black votes; no rules against black Bahamians serving in the House of the Assembly and no segregation is government sponsored schools. Whittington B. Johnson, \textit{Post Emancipation Race Relations in the Bahamas} (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006). Also unlike the United States, the bulk of the discriminatory practices in the Bahamas were not codified. Roslyn Themistocleous explains that “there was not legal segregation in the Bahamas, but there was a white exclusiveness as they segregated themselves in their residential areas and social activities,” and places of business and places of worship. Rosalyn Themistocleous, \textit{The Merchant Princes Of Nassau: The Maintenance Of Political Hegemony In The Bahamas 1834-1948} (Ph.D. diss., University Of Kent at Canterbury, 2000), 138.

\textsuperscript{318} Bishop Gilbert Thompson interview in \textit{The 1942 Riot}, digital video recording, The National Archives, Nassau.

racial lines, and access to major hotels, restaurants, theaters, some private schools, and even some churches was [sic] denied to people of color."  

This system prevented blacks from frequenting or gaining employment at some establishments. There were glass ceilings in some establishments along color lines such that blacks would be hired but would not be promoted above a certain level. Dr. Keva Bethel, for instance, reminded us that “the highest forms of employment to which the majority of Bahamians were likely to be able to aspire during that period were posts in the Civil Service (generally at clerical and lower technical or administrative levels), teaching, nursing, or the church. Moreover, only a proportionately modest number

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321 There was, of course, similar exclusion along color lines throughout the US. As jobs were won in the commercial center of Harlem, 125th Street, for instance, they went to light complexioned black women. As Hamilton explained “mid-thirties, spurred on by successful reports from other cities, increasingly deplorable unemployment rates, and blatant evidence of insult and humiliation of Negro shoppers, the New York community seemed ready to mount a sustained protest against employment discrimination by the white merchants on Harlem’s main commercial thoroughfare-125th Street...That such discrimination existed was not denied. Some merchants openly admitted that they had no intention of hiring Negroes as sales people. Although, in some instances, blacks constituted as much as 75 percent of the purchasing power, the owners asserted that white shoppers would be offended by being served by blacks... For about two and a half years, Harlem was a scene of constant protest activity from various groups demanding the end of job discrimination on the part of the merchants...Still other bones of intercommunity tensions were introduced into the protests—namely, the ‘color’ problem... The ‘color’ problem was even more vexing and divisive. As a few store owners capitulated and agreed to negotiate the demand of some hiring of Negroes, in many cases the new sales clerks turned out to be very light skinned, white-looking Negro women.” Charles V. Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell Jr: The Political Biography of an American Delimma. NY: Cooper Square 2002. 91-92.
actually achieved those positions.”

And, as Kenneth Williams described, Bahamian blacks looked around, and they saw that “the governor was white. The bishop was white. Anybody who was in a high place was white. There were very few blacks in high places.”

Residential segregation was also the norm. Dividing the black and white residential communities in New Providence was an almost ineradicable barrier. Most of the blacks were very poor and lived outside of the city center in the “over-the-hill” communities such as Bain Town and Grant’s Town. Originally settled by liberated Africans and ex-slaves in the nineteenth century, these communities were located to the south of Bay Street and separated from the city center by a small hill. As was true a century earlier, in 1942, Bahamian blacks worked but did not ever live in the white areas like Montague. According to Craton, early on as “Nassau became a town of right-angled streets, more densely clustered buildings and recognizable districts … there was increasing racial as well as class separation.”

As Paula Williams explained, blacks just did not live in the western area of the island. Not only was the price of the property beyond the reach of the mostly working

322 Keva Bethel was not only the first president of the College of the Bahamas but also grew up during the time of segregation. Keva Bethel, “Educational Reform in the Bahamas,” The International Journal of Bahamian Studies

323 Kenneth Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

class black man, as she explained, but there also were incidences where the price of the real estate would be raised when they knew it was a black person inquiring to purchase. Only if your skin color was light enough or your social status high enough, she explained, would you perhaps be permitted to cross over the racial line and get a place in the white community.  

Nassau was not the only island in the Bahamas on which there was division of residences along racial lines. There were quite a few settlements in the Out Islands that were segregated such as Dunmore Town on Harbour Island, Eleuthera. Dunmore Town, in fact, was as segregated as Nassau. Local historians Anne and Jim Lawlor explain that “the residential segregation in Harbour Island was but a physical manifestation of growing prejudice against blacks.” Similarly, the town of New Plymouth on the island of Green Turtle Cay was another example of residential segregation. The black Bahamians lived on the fringes of the settlement in the rather unhealthy swamp. And, while they were kept neat and tidy, their houses were overcrowded and visibly in disrepair. The white residents of that town lived near the harbor in “neatly whitewashed or painted stone or wood buildings.”

325 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

326 Ann Lawlor and Jim Lawlor, The Harbour Island Story, 105.


328 Craton and Saunders, Islanders in the Stream, 150.
Moreover, black Nassuvians left their all black neighborhoods they experienced segregation along racial lines elsewhere on the island. There were certain clubs and theaters on the island, mainly on Bay Street, that were off-limits to blacks. Carpenter and pastor Ralph Russell, a native of Eight Miles Rock, Grand Bahama, only spent five years in Nassau but he recalled quite clearly that there were two theatres that he could not attend because he was black. “It just became natural,” he describes, “theatres were segregated and certain restaurants.” Similarly, Paula Williams recalled that black Bahamians were not supposed to go into the Savoy theatre. As was often true, however, she also remembered that those who could pass (i.e. those who were light enough to appear white) were allowed access. Sir Arthur Foulkes also remembered that the Savoy was off limits to blacks.

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329 Reverend Ralph Russell, interviewed by author, Eight Miles Rock, GB, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

330 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

331 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011. Additionally, he remembered that Bay Street prevented the black theatres from showing the movie No Way Out, starring native son and Hollywood icon, Sidney Poitier for racial reasons. The Censorship Board (members of which were the Bay Street Boys) thought the movie would be potentially inflammatory to Bahamians. They had reason to think that a society that was discriminated against socially politically and economically would find the film about the struggle of black over white to be inspirational and instructive. Sir Arthur believed the formation of the Citizens Committee to fight that ban was the continuation of the same spirit that was awakened in the 1942 riot. This “decision [to ban this and earlier Poitier films] irked even the mixed-race middle class, a social strata that traditionally accepted their intermediary status for its relative benefits over the black majority. But by the early 1950s, instances of over discrimination including bans on message movies—stimulated some cautious reformism.” The Committee pressed until the Board allowed the film to be showed.
In addition to clubs and theatres, there were restaurants and hotels that followed the policy of racial discrimination either with regards to clientele or employees. As Craton and Saunders explained, Bay Street hotels like the Colonial Hotel, “attempted to exclude blacks from all but the most menial work, employing Cubans and Latin Americans in the absence of suitable and willing local whites.” John Wyley, who grew up in Nassau during 1940s, remembered that his mother had one of those menial jobs and worked as a chambermaid at the Emerald Beach Hotel for about five years but also remembered that blacks would never be allowed to stay in the hotel. Paula Williams, similarly, recalled that blacks were not permitted in certain hotels and hotel night clubs until the 1960s.

While blacks were not allowed to frequent the hotels and hotel clubs, these hotels and hotel clubs were a vital part of the social life for young white Bahamians. “Social life,” E. Dawson Roberts informed, “revolved around the three particular hotels: The

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332 Sir Arthur explained that when they were teenagers they tried to buck the system by doing something like going into the Grand Central. But they knew that when they asked you to leave, you better leave quickly or they’d call a policeman and “people were afraid of being sent to jail. People were afraid of being sent to court. For your own piece of mind, you didn’t want to buck the system.” Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011..

333 Craton and Saunders, Islanders in the Stream, 245.

334 John Wyley, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
British Colonial Hotel, the Fort Montague Beach Hotel and The Royal Victoria Hotel.”

The soiréees hosted at these hotels were legendary but they were for whites only. During the tourist season, the whites-only rule also applied to the musicians who provided the entertainment. Interestingly, the hotels did make exceptions for colored musicians during the off-season. Although black Bahamian musicians were not allowed to stay in

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336 As far as entertainment goes, the over-the-hill clubs were where the talented black musicians (and there were many) were able to showcase their gifts. Amongst the most famous were the Cambridge Orchestra, led by Bert Cambridge (formed in 1923) the Chocolate Dandies, led by Leonard White (formed in 1935); the Rudy Williams Orchestra (formed in the late 1930s and the Lou Adams Orchestra (formed during the 1930s and still active in 2008). Timothy Rommen, Funky Nassau: Roots Routes and Representation: Bahamian Popular Music, 91. In some clubs, they danced to the rhythm of the house band. So competition was stiff for booking gigs. As there were many popular bands and they had to find work in one of the over-the-hill club as the Bay Street clubs and dancehalls hired only foreign musicians. Gail Saunders, Historic Bahamas, 102. That is they hired only white foreign musicians to play in their dining rooms, reception halls and ball rooms, they relegated black Bahamian orchestras to the pool sides or the patios. Timothy Rommen, Funky Nassau: Roots Routes and Representation: Bahamian Popular Music, 91. Three famous black Bahamian orchestra leaders (Bert Cambridge, Noel Maellet, and Leonard White) complained that they were good enough for local and off-season functions but were not good enough for exclusive events. Tribune 13 January 1934. Periodically, however, they were hired during the off season (when there were fewer or no tourists) for the hotels and the rather exclusive Porcupine Club. It is to be noted that Cambridge had billed his orchestra as “high class music for high class people.” Gail Saunders, History Bahamas, 103. Yet those high class people, they [the tourists] came over and enjoyed themselves and some white Bahamians did as well.” In a note of reflection Mr. Williams that in the darkest days we had with discrimination “we had blacks and whites that were very close and it wasn’t a token thing at all.” If black orchestras had a bad time in the face of discrimination, they were at least not faced with the becoming the objects of exoticism as the troubadours did. Troubadours were the small musical groups. Usually a singer backed by a small instrumental ensemble. Although they too were not permitted on Bay Street’s main stage, they did appear in some Bay Street locales and when they did “the presence of the Bahamian entertainers in these spaces was predicated on the appeal of their otherness… Their image thus had to meet the expectations of their almost exclusively tourist clientele. And these venues remained segregated spaces within the Bahamas until well in the 1960’s.” Timothy Rommen, Funky Nassau: Roots Routes and Representation: Bahamian Popular Music, 92
the hotels nor were they allowed to play in the main venues of the hotel, during the off-
season they were allowed to play to segregated audiences on the patio or by the pool.337

The Grand Central restaurant was, similarly, infamous for its discriminatory
policy. Sir Arthur tells the story of a Bahamian of mixed ancestry who attempted to go
to Grand Central station with his English girlfriend. This gentleman was what
Bahamians of his day would have referred to as “high yellow” i.e. a person with some
African ancestry whose skin was very light in color. Upon entering the restaurant, he
was informed that although his girlfriend could eat in the restaurant, he could not.338

Sir Arthur also recalled that, growing up on the island, he did not really think
about the system of segregation but, as he graduated from school in New Providence,
got a job and actually had disposable income, he was “made to understand” that there
were certain places that he just could not go. “We knew we couldn’t go to the Savoy
theatre.” He remembered specifically that the Imperial Club on Bay Street was a
segregated establishment. “We were in our late teens” and went “to a place called the
Imperial Club, in front of the British Colonial Hotel and that was segregated and a
group of us went there one evening and we ordered some drinks and we decided that
we were not going to move. They didn’t like it but they didn’t throw us out.” But that bit

337 The same would be true (i.e. black musicians playing to all white audiences) when
they played for those on Bay Street’s Nassau Yacht Club.

338 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording,
April 2011.
of civil disobedience was rare. Sir Arthur also said that “not too many people tested this thing.” Blacks would instead go to the Silver Slipper over-the-hill on East Street or the Cat in the Fiddle on Nassau Street, which catered to the black community. These establishments would not only open in the evenings for the adult crowd but also hosted matinee dances for the younger folks in the black community.

The churches were also segregated at the time of riot. As McPherson recalled, “there was a time you couldn’t go to white churches.” Reverend Ralph Russell, who worked as a carpenter in New Providence for five years just after the riot, recalled that there were no whites in the black churches and no blacks in the white churches. He went to Zion Mission Church when in Nassau and he recalled that it was all black; no white people attended that church, although whites were welcomed. Everyone, he explained, went to their own church.

Paula Williams, a long time Nassau resident, also remembered (partial) segregation in churches. For instance, she remembered that Ebenezer Methodist Church


340 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

341 Napoolean Mcphee interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau. McPherson remembered that such a rule was not a major problem since most blacks did not want to go white churches.

342 Reverend Ralph Russell, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
on Shirley Street allowed black people to attend services but they were to enter through a certain door and sit in a certain section of the church. Blacks, she recalled, entered “through the back door and the white people through the front door.” Similarly, Myra Virgill remembered the story of an incident where a black Baptist minister was invited to attend a service at Ebenezer Methodist Church. When the service at Ebenezer ended, the Methodist minister asked the Black minister his thoughts. The black Baptist minister commented on the fact that when the Methodist minister was invited to the black church, he sat in the front of the church. But, that he, the black minister, was not given the same courtesy at Ebenezer. The black minister had to enter through the back door and sit in the black section. “I’m not even sure,” the black minister concluded, that “God could get into this church.” It is important to note that the source of this discrimination was its white Bahamian congregation and not the church. Indeed, the Wesleyan Missionary Society had tried to place a black minister in Nassau but was stopped by the congregation which threatened converting to another denomination.

Reverend Whittleton, a Methodist minister on the Nassau circuit, wrote the Society that

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343 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

344 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

345 Myra Virgill, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
appointing a colored minister would drive whites from the Methodist church straight to the Anglican Church.\textsuperscript{346}

To be sure, the Methodists were not the only denomination guilty of such discrimination. The Anglicans were guilty as well. They simply went about it another way. Christ’s Church Cathedral on George Street, for instance, engaged in the practice of pew rental, which all but assured that the white parishioners sat in the choicest of seats and the blacks sat in the back. Additionally, although there were a quite a number of nonwhite Bahamian Anglicans who had been trained for the ministry, there were only white priests at this time.\textsuperscript{347} The many nonwhite Bahamians were forced to serve as deacons for a long period of time before becoming priest or without ever becoming priests.

In addition to the churches, there were many stores, mainly on Bay Street that also practiced racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{348} Black Candy Kitchen (on Bay Street), for instance,

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\textsuperscript{348} The Bay Street of 1942 started at Baillou Hill Road on the West and Dowdswell Street on the East. It was about 1.25 miles in length. Although the rioters covered this entire length in their march, the disturbances were more contained. “On Bay Street, to the south, there is a square known as Public Square, which is surrounded by public offices, including the Post Office and the House of Assembly. In the centre of this square there is a statue of Queen Victoria. On the opposite side of Bay Street, facing the Public Square, is Rawson Square. The occurrences…took place in the Public Square, in Rawson Square and the part of Bay Street which lies west of the two squares until it comes to an end at the grounds of the Colonial Hotel. The distance from the
was notorious for its discrimination. Bishop Thompson recalled, “We knew when you went into Black’s Candy Kitchen, you had to stay at the counter while the whites could go in the back and sit down. We knew.” Contrast Thompson’s experience with Dawson Roberts. Roberts was a white Bahamian who attended Queen’s College, was 14 years old at the time of the riot, and whose father worked at a foreman for Symonette Shipyards. Roberts, for instance, fondly remembered that he would go “to the Savoy…on Saturday afternoons” to watch “serials like… Tarzan of the Apes... and Zorro. After the movies I went to Black Candy Kitchen and had a chocolate milk shake or a marshmallow sundae with maraschino cherry on top.”

Those Bay Street stores that did serve blacks tended to treat them poorly. Sir Arthur Foulkes, for instance, recalled his experiences at City Market, which was owned

Squares to the end of Bay Street is about four hundred yards.” Official Gazette, 19 January 1943, 50.

349 There has been some disagreement about Black’s Candy Kitchen and the way it was viewed by Bahamian blacks and thus why it was spared in the riot. There was evidence that it was not totally destroyed by the looters, which on the surface doesn’t make sense if the discrimination was so rife. There is a relatively simple explanation. A black pair, aunt and niece, were employed at Black’s Candy Kitchen. This pair of Bahamian blacks has been described as being “light.” Their light complexion allowed them access to employment at this establishment but it was their blackness that saved the establishment. Paula Elaine Williams interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.


then owned by Stafford Sands.\textsuperscript{352} “Certain things that were in City Market shops,” he explained, “could not be found in other shops and my mother would send me to City Market for these items.” When he arrived there, however, he would not queue up with the other customers. Instead, he would stand against the wall and “when all of the white folks had stopped coming and going, I would buy what my mother sent me to buy... it was important for you to know that you had to behave this way.”\textsuperscript{353}

Similarly, while blacks were allowed to shop at JP Sand’s, on Bay Street, they would only be served at the ‘black counter.’ Sir Arthur’s grandfather had a grocery story on Long Key (one of the Out Islands) and would often send a list to his son to gather some items for his store from JP Sands’ in Nassau. The task would fall to young Arthur. Arthur explains that he had to use the “black counter.”\textsuperscript{354} Bishop Gilbert Thompson explained how some Bahamians would only go to Sands for things that they could not get elsewhere in order to avoid the humiliation. Because Bahamian blacks “knew that when you went to JP Sands, you had to be on one side and when they saw fit, they would serve you,” he explained, “we went to JP Sands only for Fleishman’s Yeast, they

\textsuperscript{352} Stafford Sands, one of the Bay Street Boys, Minister of Finance and Tourism and owner of Nassau Food Stores (City Market) sold his chain of food stores to United States Winn Dixie in 1979, the year that the PLP came to power. Anthony Thompson, \textit{An Economic History of the Bahamas}, 104.

\textsuperscript{353} Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{354} Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
had the exclusive agency on that.” Dame Ivy Dumont, who grew up in Long Island and came over to Nassau on a scholarship to go to Government High School, recalled the first time she encountered JP Sands’ particular segregation. She would walk down Bay Street on her way to Government High. On one particular day, her aunt, with whom she was staying, asked her to deliver the grocery list to JP Sands’ grocery store. She walked into the grocery store that was located across from where the House of Assembly now stands. As Dame Ivy recounted,

It was a long narrow aisle and on either side was a counter… I saw a girl that I knew on the right hand side so I went to the right hand side and she wouldn’t take it [the grocery list]. She said ‘you have to go to that side’ and I left the list… I thought it was strange so when I went home… I told [my aunt that] I wanted to give the list to Kathleen this morning and she wouldn’t take it and I could see the color drain out of her face. She [my aunt] said, ‘I should have told you that you have to go to the western counter.’ The arrangement was for Conchy Joes or white people, they could give their list to the girl who worked on the … right hand side and the rest of us would have to go to the western counter. And that was my introduction to segregation.

There were also many types of businesses closed off to Bahamian blacks. The large money making businesses, for instance, were in the hands of the Bay Street


356 Kathleen was a schoolmate of Dame Ivy at the newly formed Government High School.

357 Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

358 Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
merchants. It was perfectly acceptable for Bahamian blacks to be seamstresses and tailors but they did not own clothing stores or haberdasheries. Sir Arthur explained that it was not easy to break into the certain businesses in the colony. He gives the example of Rodney Kemp. Mr. Kemp “broke into the liquor business over the hill.” Sir Arthur explained that the Bay Street Boys did business with him and allowed him to do business because he served the over-the-hill population but “he did so at their sufferance.” 359 He explained that Bay Street did not mind black Bahamians having their “li’l local things…but they were not allowed into the main stream, into big business.” 360

Blacks were also cut off from some private educational opportunities because of discrimination. Although many of these institutions were closed off to most black Bahamians, however, not all of them were closed off to all blacks across the board. These restrictions could be bypassed, as was frequently the case with discriminatory practices in the Bahamas, if the student was light enough in complexion and so not noticeably black or if the student’s family was rich enough. It was widely believed, for instance, that Queens’ College, the oldest private school on the island, was started to educate

359Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

360Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
white children, not just for the purpose of educating Methodist children.\textsuperscript{361} As Dame Ivy described, Queens’ College was ostensibly created to educate “children of Methodist parents but really it was to educate people of white descent.”\textsuperscript{362} Similarly, as Bishop Thompson stated, “we knew a certain family, children of a certain shade were allowed to go to Queens College.”\textsuperscript{363} Paula Williams also listed Queens College as closed off to blacks, with the guise of exclusivity based on religion.\textsuperscript{364}

As noted earlier, there were certain jobs that were closed off to blacks. Blacks, for instance, were not typically hired as clerks or any positions in the banks where they would interact with customers. As Bishop Thompson remarked, “we knew that only certain colors could work in the store as clerks. We knew you couldn't work in the banks if you're black.”\textsuperscript{365} Similarly, Dame Ivy explained that, in those days, there were certain jobs that were filled where the “selection was by color.” For instance, all [of] the

\textsuperscript{361} Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{362} Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{363} Bishop Gilbert Thompson, interviewed in The 1942 Riot The National Archives, digital video recording, Nassau, Bahamas.

\textsuperscript{364} She remembered it slowly changing its policy and in the 60’s she remembered when the future Bishop of the Bahamas (Bishop Michael Eldon) and his sister were admitted. She speculates because his father was a prominent figure. Paula Elaine Williams interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{365} Bishop Gilbert Thompson, interviewed in The 1942 Riot The National Archives, Nassau, Bahamas.
telephone operators and all of the bank clerks were “conchy joes.”\textsuperscript{366} And, in some careers, Bahamian blacks could only advance so far. Sir Arthur, for instance, explained that “the British were educating us mainly to be second tier civil servants.”\textsuperscript{367} According to McPhee, during the time of the riot, when “colonialism was at its peak,” blacks were nothing but “faithful dogs who did their master’s bidding.”\textsuperscript{368} They were trained to be “a good servant but never a master; a good butler or chauffer but never a clerk.”\textsuperscript{369} McPhee explained that “sometimes a man is smarter than his boss but he is afraid to try for his job. No one said he couldn’t. He just knew they would not hire him because he wasn’t white.”\textsuperscript{370} Additionally, while there were no non-white counter girls in Bay Street’s Mademoiselle, a clothing store owned by one of the Bay Street Boy Mr. Solomon, they did hire black seamstresses such as Winifred Virgill.\textsuperscript{371} Even then, it was not simply a skills based hire. They wanted to hire the right kind of black person. Winifred’s

\textsuperscript{366} Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{367} Sir Arthur Foulkes, interview interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

\textsuperscript{368} Napolean Mcphee, interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{369} Napolean Mcphee, interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{370} Napolean Mcphee, interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 24 November 1982, The National Archives, Nassau.

\textsuperscript{371} Paula Williams w/Myra Virgill, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
husband Charles “Spring” Virgill, a tailor, had sewn for Mr. Solomon for years and, 
thus, Mr. Solomon knew that Winifred was the right kind of black. As Ms. Williams put it, “not just any black. [They wanted] blacks with class.”372 

At the time of the riot, there was a well-established system of segregation in the country. That this system did not spur protest, however, might signal that the system was significantly milder in the Bahamas than in other places. That this insult and denial did not lead them to action more likely spoke to the attitudes that black Bahamians had toward the system.373

IV. Against the backdrop of but not because of the system of discrimination

Black Bahamians tended to see their separate establishments, with the exception of hotels, as being equal if not superior to most of the white establishments. And, though humiliated by the racism they sometimes faced, they were often able to avoid it by avoiding the white areas altogether. As Sir Arthur explained, “we had our institutions. We had lodges and all that.” So unlike in the Unites States, he continued, “I don’t think we felt shut in or shut out. There was no envy. It was just that this was a bloody

372 Paula Williams w/Myra Virgill, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

373 While Dame Ivy like so many didn’t see a reason to try. “I never put myself in the way of these people [those who practiced segregation]. Others talk about not being allowed into the Savoy Theatre. I didn’t.” Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
Indeed, he explained that black Bahamians did not necessarily care to be in the company of whites. What the black Bahamians “cared about was the idea of discriminating against [me] in my own country.”

Of course, as with any other system that parceled out access, rights and favors based on race, this led to feelings of inferiority amongst Bahamian blacks. As Ken Williams described, there were “a lot of people in the Bahamas that grew up with low self-esteem because of the discrimination.” During this time, there were “blacks telling other blacks that they were not as good as the whites.” “Yes,” he reiterated, “there were blacks who would tell you in your face that you could never become as good as a white person. That is what they believed.” Similarly, McPhee, a stone mason, remarked that during this time there was a general “feeling of inferiority.” This imposed inferiority often ended in indignation. For instance, on the floor of the House of Assembly, during the discussion over Dupuch’s 1956 civil rights legislation, Member of the House of Assembly (MHA) Burt Cambridge explained that as a musician, he “worked in hotels on

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374 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

375 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

376 Kenneth Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

this island and I know that common prostitutes are admitted to places in Bay Street because they are white and decent coloured people are refused admission.”

Many black Bahamians, however, developed a dismissive attitude about the system of discrimination that existed in the colony. Bishop Thompson explained that many black Bahamians were not too upset with segregation because black Bahamians were just laid back with the attitude of “if you don’t appreciate me then I don’t appreciate you. If you don’t accept me then I don’t accept you.” Dame Ivy, similarly, explained that black Bahamians liked one another. They were okay being in each other’s company. “We had fun together,” she explains, “so we might have done it [allowed segregation to continue for so long] to ourselves.”

As a child, like most black children in the islands, Lynden Pindling who would become the first black leader of an independent Bahamas and who did much to end discrimination in the colony, interestingly, did not experience much of the segregation. “Whenever possible, Pindling avoided that world finding his joys and diversions in the colorful and closely-knit Over the Hill Community.”

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378 Nassau Guardian 26 March 1956. Cambridge would again run for the Assembly, starting his campaign in the weeks after the riot. Tribune 25 May 1942.


380 Dame Ivy Dumont, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

381 Ebony June 1967, 72.
Black Bahamians, for instance, did not feel that they needed to join white lodges. They had their own lodges. Paula Williams likewise shrugged off the discrimination that occurred in the theaters on Bay Street, noting that there were theatres over-the-hill in the black section of the island. Capital Theatre, the Cinema on East Street as well as the Nassau Theatre just off Bay Street on Elizabeth Avenue let blacks in and typically showed the same movies as the Bay Street theatres (though the Savoy Theatre often showed them a few days earlier). Sir Arthur confirmed that he and his friends frequented the Nassau Theatre and, when younger, the Cinema was their theatre of choice. Sir Arthur, in fact, recalled that he went to the Savoy Theatre just after things changed, “but didn’t go back because it was a dirty little place.”

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382 Rowena Eldon, interviewed by Gail Saunders, digital voice recording, 31 July 1975.

383 Indeed, these lodges were important places. It was there they were “taught morality, the principles of parliamentary procedures and other virtues. Here they discussed events and issues of the day and thoughts and ideas of the time: ideas such as Garveyism and Pan Africanism. Uriah McPherson, interviewed by Gail Saunders, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording.

384 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011. For instance, the movie *In This Our Life*, which was released broadly in the United States on May 16, 1942 was shown in the segregated Savoy on May 17th and 18th and appeared at the black theatre, the Cinema less than a week later, on May 21st. *Tribune* 14 and 21 May 1942.

385 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

386 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
Arthur went on to explain that the segregation of the theatres and restaurants it just “didn’t affect us much…. [although] we knew of it and it was [considered] an insult.”  

Bahamian blacks had a “very healthy society over the hill” that was considered preferable to the Bay Street society that they could not participate in. When asked her favorite restaurants on Bay Street when growing up, Mrs. Williams answered incredulously that “black people didn’t go on Bay Street to eat … we went to the Palm Tree on Market Street over the hill. They had the best hamburgers in the world.” Sir Arthur agreed, noting that “we had nice restaurants over the hill… East Street, Blue Hill Road, Market Street: here was a vibrant black culture in the Bahamas.” Similarly, as Kenneth Williams explained, Bahamian blacks “had the best clubs and the tourist came over the hill to look for the best clubs.” E. Dawson Roberts, a white Bahamian, remembered that when he was a young man he would visit the hotels along Bay Street.

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387 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.

388 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011

389 Paula Elaine Williams, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011

390 Sir Arthur Foulkes, interviewed by author, Nassau, Bahamas, digital voice recording, April 2011.
and then, around one o’clock in the morning, “we drove over the hill” to catch the shows at the clubs over there.391

Indeed, Bahamian blacks felt that, unlike in the political and economic spheres, they were not missing out on much on the social front. They believed the system was unfair but they did not believe that the discrimination they faced barred them from quality services or places.

V. Conclusion

The 1942 riot happened in a colony where the majority of the population was discriminated against on the grounds of their race and color. It, thus, made sense that black stores were spared and some of the chants uttered during the riot were against white men and those who acted as their pawns. The riot was the first overt demonstration by mass action against this system of racial discrimination. Moreover, it is unlikely that the riot would have occurred if there was not a system of discrimination in the Bahamas. It was because they had suffered discrimination by the Bay Street Boys

391 E. Dawson Roberts, “Aspects of Life in Nassau and the Bahamas During the 1940 and 1950s” Journal Bahamas Historical Society, 18. He called out two by name: the Silver Slipper and the Zanzibar. Along with the Cat and the Fiddle and Weary Willies, these clubs, both built in Grant’s Town in the 1930s were quite popular. The Silver Slipper was actually owned by Davis Rashaw, a Jewish man who owned a dry goods store or the Corner of Deveaux and Bay Streets. The Zanzibar was a black owned establishment. It was run by Felix Johnson who co-owned it with Milo Butler, Bert Gibson and Preston Moss. Though it drew in a large mixed patronage, it was basically segregated by table. Alcohol was bought by the bottle and sent to the table with some sort of soft drink with which to mix it (think rum and coca-cola). The table pretty much controlled the sphere of socialization: whites at one tables, blacks at another. On the dance floor, though the dance pairs were segregated, one littler brushed up against those from different races.
that they were so frustrated when they believed they were facing yet another injustice caused by Bay Street. However, given the attitude that Bahamian blacks adopted toward the system of discrimination they experienced, it makes sense why the riot was not sparked by the system of discrimination in the colony.
CHAPTER FIVE: THOUGH SIMILAR IN SOME RESPECTS THE 1942 NASSAU RIOT IS NOT JUST ANOTHER WEST INDIAN LABOR RIOT

I. Introduction

The Bahamas is quite different from other West Indian countries for several reasons. Chiefly, its history and culture has much in common with both other West Indian countries and parts of the southern United States. As such, the Bahamas is something of an amalgam. It is located in the Atlantic Ocean, not in the Caribbean Sea. At its closest point, it is less than fifty miles from the United States, making it the closest West Indian nation to the United States. Being thusly situated between the United States and the Caribbean contributes to its hybrid nature. That it has been a transshipment point for goods and people moving from the Caribbean to the US and vice versa has also contributed to its hybrid character.

Historians and social scientists studying the Bahamas have consistently pointed to the extent to which Bahamian history and culture as well as its political and socio-economic life in the country have been influenced by forces affecting both regions. In making his choice to include the Bahamas in his study of the Caribbean, for instance, Gordon Lewis commented that like Bermuda, the Bahamas, though outside of the Caribbean, has “traditionally been shaped by most of the same forces shaping the West
Indies proper - English colonization, the implanting of English political institutions, slavery and Emancipation, the post-Emancipation decline.” 392 Yet the Bahamas, he adds, has seen itself as “apart from the West Indies and West Indians, in turn, have not accepted them as members of the family.” According to Lewis, this lack of acceptance is partly because of the nature of the Bahamas’ economy and partly because of the Bahamas’ proximity to the United States.393 Thus, Lewis concludes, it is only in “the geographical and historical sense that the island chains may be considered part of the West Indies.” 394 Indeed, both socially and economically, the Bahamas is actually quite distinct from the rest of the West Indies.395 Its economy has outpaced other West Indian countries. Its history and culture were heavily influenced by the British Loyalist that moved there during the American Revolution as well as aspects of the Southern slave


395 For instance, in 2011, GDP per capital was $30,900 in the Bahamas, $23,600 in Barbados (the next richest independent country in the Caribbean), $20,300 in Trinidad and Tobago and only $9,000 in Jamaica. The World Fact Book https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html
states. And, like Barbados, the Bahamas tends to be more racially conservative than the other British West Indian Islands.  

Whether or not Bahamians or other West Indians recognize their familial attachments, the 1942 riot in the Bahamas was much more like the disturbances that erupted in rest of the British West Indies in the 1930s than it was like the race riots that occurred in the United States during the early 20th century. The pressures resulting from the global economic depression which began in 1929, the stress put on the local economy by returning immigrants and the struggles of rising costs of living and stagnant wages, agricultural disease, protective agricultural tariffs and an overall slowdown in tourism resulted in a general unrest among laborers and farmers in Britain’s West Indian colonies. The 1942 riot and all of the other West Indian disturbances during that period were the result of labor disputes, had some form of strike or public demonstration to mark the uneasiness, had an underlying racial component and led to some form of labor legislation. These riots were characterized by vandalism and other violence against  

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396 Gordon Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*, (New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1968), 308. Steven High also explains that these two “were among the most reactionary colonies in the British Empire. These were Jim Crow islands. Both governments, elected by a very restrictive franchise were controlled by white oligarchies that exercised full legislative control.” The type of segregation that existed was directly related to the growing dependence on tourism. They needed to make their American tourist comfortable. It was eventually extended to “restaurants, cinemas, theatres and virtually all aspects of daily life.” Steven C. High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere, 1940-1967*, 160. In 1954 these two colonies were censured by the British House of commons for their race segregation. When the British made funds available through the “Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940” if colonies enact social reforms and appoint labor officers, while most colonies did so quickly these two colonies did not and forfeited the funds.
property, but very little, if any, violence against people (sometimes the presence of armed forces escalated the level of the disturbance).\textsuperscript{397} The West Indian labor riots lasted anywhere from two days, as in the case of the riot in St. Kitts, or took place on and off for years as in the case of the Jamaican riots; its most famous disturbances, however, occurred over the course of three months. Although the proximate response to the West Indian riots varied from diplomatic endeavors to the deployment of warships to end the riots, all of the West Indian riots inspired legislation that sought to improve labor conditions in the contexts.

The riots in the first quarter of the 20th century in the United States, on the other hand, though similar to each other in many respects, were very different from the Bahamian riot (actually all the West Indian riots) for several key reasons. First, the race riots in the United States that occurred during the first quarter of the 20th century were typically cases of angry whites lashing out against blacks (e.g. the Red Summer of 1919).\textsuperscript{398} Although blacks began to fight back in the next quarter of the century, these

\textsuperscript{397} Lewis gives a great summary. Arthur Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution” in Hillary Beckels and Verene Shepherd \textit{Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society From Emancipation to the Present: A Student Reader}.

\textsuperscript{398} The high levels of unemployment at the end of the war (which whites blamed on blacks for taking their jobs), added to the racism that existed in the United States at this time and the fear of a black population that they could not control led to a culture of lynching and a powder keg situation in which riots were easy to erupt. Most of the riots, like that in Longview, Texas and Norfolk, Virginia and Chicago, Illinois (all in July 1919) ended in the destruction of black commercial areas or black residential areas. See William M. Tuttle, \textit{Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919} University of Illinois Press, 1996, White, J (1981), ”The summer riots of 1919,” \textit{New Society}, Vol. 57 No.978 and Stanley B. Norvell and William M. Tuttle, Jr. “Views of a Negro
riots usually entailed whites rioting against blacks, black businesses and black communities. Second, unlike the 1942 riot which had underlying racial components but was not triggered by racial antipathies, the US riots were overtly racial in nature.399

Admittedly, historians have differed in their treatment of the 1942 Nassau riot in relationship to the riots the West Indian riots. Historians who focus primarily on the 1942 Nassau riot, for instance, rarely connect it to the West Indian riots that occurred in the 1930s. Similarly, historians who focus on the West Indian riots rarely include the 1942 Nassau riot in their analysis. Given the similarities between the 1942 Nassau riot and the other West Indian riots failing to connect them seems to be an error. Though more like the West Indian riots than the US riots during the early part of the twentieth century, however, it would be a mistake to characterize the 1942 riot as just another West Indian riot. It is not simply, as Saunders describes, the “last in the series of riots


399 This difference, however, might be somewhat overstated. Interestingly, in 1971, Spilerman’s analysis stated that black poverty and the disparity of income along racial lines were directly correlated to racial tensions and racial riots in the United States. Extending that analysis, Olzak and Shanahan have found that those cities where racial tension found its release in racial violence experienced not simply racial tension but also the loss of job opportunities; under and unemployment appear to have direct correlation with the riots. The United States riots had a racial overtone but according to this analysis were also labor related. On the other hand, the motive for the West Indian riots were decidedly labor riots, however, the racial component was a significantly strong driver. Susan Olzak and Suzanne Shanahan, “Deprivation and Race Riots: An Extension of Spilerman’s Analysis” Social Forces, Vol. 74, No. 3 (Mar., 1996), pp. 931-961. Additionally, even overtly racial riots had a labor component as well, as some whites perceived blacks as competitors to scarce jobs. Some even held nonviolent demonstrations when some black workers were hired at particular places of business. See: East Louis riot of 1917 and the Detroit riot of 1943.
and strikes that had occurred throughout the British West Indies after 1934." There are considerable differences between the 1942 Nassau riot and the riots that occurred in the West Indies in the 1930s.

II. Comparing the 1942 riot to the US race riots

The 1942 riot is very different that the race riots that took place in the US in the early 20th century. Unlike in the 1942 riot, in the US riots whites were the primary aggressors and the violence was against people as well as property. Consider, for instance, the race riots that took place in Atlanta, Georgia and Chicago, Illinois. The 1906 Atlanta Race Riots encapsulated four full days of violence against blacks acted out by various bands of white men that resulted in the deaths of 25 blacks. A similar scenario occurred a decade later during the Red Summer. As O. A. Rogers wrote, “Human relations in America were at a nadir for six months during ‘The Red Summer’ and fall of 1919. More than twenty race riots took place in as many urban (and a few non-urban) centers from June through December of that year.” Likewise, the 1919 Red Summer riot in Chicago was sparked by the murder of a black teenager on the Lake Michigan shores. The majority of the violence during the riot was perpetrated by athletic clubs of

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400 Gail Saunders, Bahamian Society After Emancipation, 117.

white youths who terrorized black Chicagoans. The differences between these US riots and the 1942 riot will become even starker once we explore some of them in more detail.

Occurring in the South, then the North and finally in the West, the wave of race riots in the US continued after the Red Summer. In 1921, Tulsa, Oklahoma had one of the nation’s worse race riots with an estimated 300 deaths. This riot had a similar racial tone as the Red Summer riots. When in 1921, a black youth accused of accosting a white female elevator operator was taken into custody, the rumor mills, aided by the Tulsa Tribune, churned out stories of his imminent lynching. About 75 armed black Tulsans went to the courthouse to protect the young prisoner against the over one thousand

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402 A black teen was in a homemade raft in a “nonbeach” in Lake Michigan. A white man threw stones at him, pummeling him until he drowned. The friends of the boys got black police officers and pointed out the stone thrower to the officer. At that time a white officer was present and not only refused to arrest the man but refused to allow the black policemen to do so. The boys ran back to their neighborhood, reporting what happened and a hundreds of black men returned angrily crying for justice. One of the black men, James Crawford, fired into the crowd injuring a white policeman. James Crawford was shot and killed. That was the start of the race war, with white gangs “protecting” others from the “renegade” blacks. Janet L. Abu-Lughood Race, Space and Riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 100.


404 It was the lynching of a youth that was stolen from a jail in Longview Texas that started that riot just a month earlier. William M. Tuttle, Jr.”Violence in a ‘Heathen’ Land: The Longview Race Riot of 1919” Phylon (1960), Vol. 33, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1972), 330.
white Tulsans who had gathered outside.405 During a struggle between a black and a white Tulsan, a gun was fired and, as a Tulsan sheriff described it, “all hell broke loose.”406 The outnumbered blacks scattered but were chased into a black neighborhood called Greenwood. Some prepared for a standoff and others fled the city. There were small skirmishes in many parts of the neighborhood. Although some blacks, realizing they were outnumbered, eventually surrendered, others fought to the bitter end. Many innocent blacks that simply happened to be out of doors on that night were attacked for no other reason than their being black. Houses were looted and burned. The Tulsa law enforcement, using left over World War I planes and armaments, actually dropped incendiary bombs on black Tulsa to keep this “Negro uprising” in check. The estimated property loss in the black Greenwood neighborhood was one and a half million dollars ($12.5 million today).407

The pattern of violence that occurred in Tulsa was not unique even though there were various incidents that triggered the racial violence that occurred in other places. In the earlier riots in “East St. Louis, Illinois, and Elaine, Arkansas and other towns,” Hirsh explained, “whites invaded, robbed and torched black areas.”408 As Cohen writes,


408 Hirsch, Riot and Remembrance: America’s Worst Race Riot and Its Legacy, 120.
Despite the variety of immediate causes, one fact stands out clearly: in each of the major 1919 riots the initial violence came from whites... it seems evident that some elements of white society were profoundly disturbed by the changes taking place in the condition of blacks, and the triggering incidents generally stemmed from a white desire to make it clear to the Negroes that they were and would remain an alien race with no rights a white man was bound to respect.409

The direction of racial violence was not the same in the Bahamas and elsewhere in the West Indies. In the US race riots in the early part of the twentieth, it was whites rioting against blacks. In the Bahamas and elsewhere in the West Indies, it was instead nonwhite laborers (mostly blacks but, in places like British Guiana and Trinidad, also East Indians) rising up against whites and white owned businesses. In the West Indian disturbances, the direction of violence and property destruction involved blacks enacting their dissatisfaction and rage against whites.

Later in the United States, of course, blacks added to the violence and mayhem by fighting back. The tide turned in the second quarter of the 20th century. Consider, for example, the Harlem Riot of 1935 when, on one March day, a group of black citizens rioted. What sparked the riot was a series of misunderstandings that led to rumors that police had seriously hurt if not killed a young black boy who had attempted to shoplift at Kress, a Woolworth type department store. Protestors, incited by speakers as well as by the presence of the police, “began to break windows and to loot from white-owned

stores." The people of Harlem were probably more organized than those of the other cities during the time and had led organized and peaceful demonstrations earlier (e.g. protesting stores which would not hire black workers in 1934). Ironically, it was when the organization broke down and riots ensued that they were able to claim what had been denied them in peaceful protest. Abu-Lughod, for instance, claims that the construction of public housing for blacks was directly related to the riots. 

Although the Harlem riot seems very much like the 1942 riot, with the destruction of white property by blacks, the motivation was entirely different. Like the earlier American riots, the Harlem riot was an expression of pent up anger over economic, political and social injustice on the basis of race. Here in the Harlem riots, the black community mistakenly accused the police of brutality towards a 16-year old black boy. Lino Rivera attempted to steal a penknife from Kress and, when a store clerk caught him, a struggle ensued. He was then taken to the basement and threatened. Although he was not physically harmed, a witness to the event screamed that the boy had been hurt or possibly killed. This caused a crowd to gather. With the particularly unfortunate timing, a hearse rounded the corner confirming the suspicion that the boy

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410 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race Space and Riots* in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. 142. In the Watts riot in the 1960s there was also evidence that white-owned stores were targeted

had been killed. No matter what the store owner said to the contrary, the crowd believed some violence had been done.\footnote{Cheryl Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem’s Riot of 1935 and 1943,” \textit{Journal of Urban History} 1992; 18; 406. It is important to note that this rumor was not without basis. The black community has evidence of police brutality in the past.}

There were four riots that came in following years that are also worth consideration: The Detroit riot, The Zoot Suit Riot, the Beaumont Riot and the Harlem Riot of 1943.\footnote{Johnson, Marilynn S. “Gender, Race, and Rumours: Re-examining the 1943 Race Riots” \textit{Gender & History} 1998 10, no. 2, 252-277.} Like the American riots in the earlier part of the century, the pattern of violence was different than that of the Bahamian riot. In both the Beaumont Riot and the Detroit Riot, there was white violence against black in response to rumors of an assault of a white woman. And, in the case of the Zoot Suit Riot, the conflict chiefly involved Latinos and whites engaging in mutual violent attacks. White sailors (about 50), stationed at the Naval Reserve Training School, on the 3 of June, and went through a predominately Mexican American neighborhoods stripping Zoot Suits off of young men. These men fought back. These were riots against people.

The Harlem Riot of 1943 had many similarities with the 1942 Bahamian riot. Like other US riots, this 1943 riot was overtly racial and not directly related labor issues, which are major characteristics that the Bahamian and the West Indian riots share, and also involved gangs carrying out the violence. Unlike the 1942 Bahamian riot, the 1943
Harlem Riot started because of a personal slight against an African American soldier. Like the 1942 Nassau riot, however, the 1943 Harlem riot involved women and children. Like the 1942 Nassau riot, the 1943 Harlem Riot was also an explosion of frustration against racially discriminatory practices that resulted in attacks on property. Although this is a rather important riot, it is so different from the US riots that proceeded it that to classify it with them would be inappropriate. Actually, it fits much better in the category of the riots that followed the war.

Although the Bahamas’ character and social environment had been formed and informed by its proximity to the United States, the similarities are more apparent between the Bahamas’ 1942 riot and the 1930s riots in the British West Indies. It, thus, makes sense to compare the 1942 riot to the West Indian riots. The next section will review the historiography of the West Indian riots in general and the riots of Jamaica and Trinidad (the two largest Anglophone Caribbean countries and the first two to

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415 Those post war riots will not be considered as they took place in a different epoch, In an era where there was a change in attitude among blacks as the experiences of the war shed a light on racial attitudes in the United States, raising questions about citizenship and rights. This underlying attitude was at the center of the post war urban conflicts and thus it is a mistake to compare the riots in the post war era with the Bahamian 1942 riot. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* Princeton University Press, Aug 1, 2005 and Harvard Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 58, No. 3, Dec 1971.
receive independence from Britain) as particular case studies. The final section will explain why the 1942 riot is enough like the West Indian riots that it should be counted amongst them but different enough from them that it should not be considered just another West Indian labor riot.

III. A brief historiography of the 1930s West Indian Riots

In Beckles and Shepherd’s anthology of the Caribbean’s quest for freedom there are two chapters on the 1930s West Indian riots. The first, by Richard Hart, categorized these uprisings as labor rebellions while the other, by Arthur Lewis, focused on the social aspects of the disturbances.\footnote{Richard Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930s” Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers 1993) 370-375 and Arthur Lewis “The 1930s Social Revolution,” Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers 1993) 376 – 392.} Hart’s chapter outlined the pre-disturbance labor laws and describes the early forms of trade unionism that existed. It also explained the change in those labor laws and the growth in the union movement that took place after the disturbances. Hart, in his chapter, began, however, with a discussion of the warning signs of the upcoming riots, with the first being the demonstrations in Trinidad in the early 1930s, and then chronologically described all of the disturbances that took place from 1935.
Beginning in the mid-1930s, Hart wrote, “a wave of militant working class
protests …began to swell across the Caribbean.” According to Hart, the West Indian
riots in the 1930s were primarily an expression of discontentment with low wages or of
frustrations with high prices by the poorer blacks in these communities. For example,
the riot in St. Kitts, in January of 1935, started because the sugarcane cutters were still
unhappy with the wages they were forced to accept only a year earlier. Similarly, the
riot in St. Vincent was sparked by a protest against rising prices in popular consumption
goods. During the Depression, the prices for imported foodstuffs increased as did the
prices of all other imports while wages stayed the same. As Hart explained, these high
prices further exacerbated the dire financial straits of the population because of the
already “static and extremely low wages, threatening a further reduction in an already

417 Richard Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930” in Beckles and Shepherd Caribbean
Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers,
1993), 370. Labor disturbances, however, occurred in Jamaica from the century before. In 1845,
in 1863 and once again in 1864, there were strikes for wages on various sugar plantations. Cigar
makers and printers struck in 1908 and the railway workers in 1919. These strikes were all for
higher wages and better working conditions.

418 In many instances, like in St. Vincent, petitions or list of grievances were presented to
the government and went unanswered or poorly responded to, leaving the people what they
considered their most forceful options of voicing their complaints: public disturbance.

419 O. Nigel Bolland The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean (Kingston: Ian Randle

420 Richard Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930” in Beckles and Shepherd ed..
Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present, (Kingston: Ian Randle
desperately low standard of living.” Additionally, the middle and upper classes on the islands, Hart explained, were unaware of the unhappiness brewing amongst the poorer blacks in the region and were surprised by the disturbances. As Hart wrote, “colonial officers, representatives of the big foreign owned enterprises and the local employers and upper middle classes generally felt confident and secure.”

The West Indian riots, Hart informed, were also characterized by attacks on property and persons but often resulted in (sometimes quite violent) military response by the government. In St. Kitts, for example, the armed forces that came to keep order fired on a crowd of about 500 protestors, killing three men and wounding eight others. Similarly, in St. Vincent, where protestors cut telephone wires and destroyed quite a few bridges, the unarmed crowd of protestors was fired upon by the police, this time under direct charge of the Governor of the island.

Hart further noted that these riots often resulted in legislation concerning trade unions but that it took a third wave of social upheaval late in the 1930s before trade unions were legal in all of the Anglophone West Indies. Although trade unions were


423 As Hart explains that what preceded that incident was a small scuffle “the Attorney General was cuffed [and] the governor was pushed and struck and is alleged to have received several cuts” Richard Hart “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930s” Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1993), 371.
legal in Britain, there were still considerable restrictions on trade unions under the law of the colonies, and, for the most part, unions were illegal. After the riots, however, West Indian governments either passed legislations to make the unions legal (as they did in Jamaica and Guyana) or they further restricted collective action (as they did in Trinidad).

Like Hart, Lewis chose the strikes on St. Kitts in 1935 as his starting point and ended his study with the particularly dramatic rebellion in Jamaica in 1938. While recognizing that each uprising had its own distinctive spark, Lewis posits that the cause of the rebellions was almost always one or a combination of low wages, high taxes, high prices and unemployment. For example, the riot in St. Lucia in August of 1937, he explained, started when the agricultural workers sought higher wages. Similarly, the riot in British Guiana, in September of 1935 began because the workers asked for wage increases in light of the season’s record-breaking crop. As Lewis wrote, “a number of factors have combined to increase political consciousness of the workers.” According to Lewis, the West Indian riots were the start of a “socio-political movement in the

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424 Peter Weiler explains that the British were walking a tight rope with recognizing trade unions. If they let them grow unchecked, they would meld with the independence movements and cause quite a bit of trouble for the British government, but restraint would increase the rebellions. Peter Weiler, “Forming Responsible Trade Unions: The colonial Office, Colonial Labour and Trades Union Congress,” Radical History Review 1984 (28-30):367-392.


region and, thus, a part of a wider social revolution.”

As Lewis explained, the riots were pivotal in contributing to the rise of a black collective consciousness in the region as well as to the sense of betrayal that West Indian blacks felt because of Britain’s dealings with Ethiopia. “West Indians felt,” Lewis writes, “the British Government betrayed a nation because it was black and that tended to destroy their faith in the white government and to make them more willing to take their fate in their own hands.”

Explaining why West Indian blacks resorted to the destruction of property and violence during these disturbances, Lewis argued that they were following the examples of strikes and protest in France and America that they read about in their local newspapers. Additionally, Lewis noted that because labor unions were outlawed there was no “constitutional machinery” on the island by which the workers could find redress. Indeed, had such mechanisms existed, Lewis argued, the rebellions would not have occurred. “But the government and employers have always been hostile to collective bargaining,” Lewis wrote, “consequently, the general strike and the riot would have been the worker’s only weapons for calling attention to the his conditions.”

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428 Lewis “The 1930s Social Revolution,” Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society: From Emancipation to the Present, 376. This is an example of the paternalistic relationship between the colonies and the British Empire. The 1942 riot follows in that tradition.

In his analysis, Lewis pointed to several common socio-political results of the West Indian riots. First, all the riots resulted in the creation or growth of unions on the islands where they were or became legal and the development of similar collective bargaining institutions where legislations still did not support unions outright. For example, in 1933, the passage of a trade union bill in Grenada made trade unions legal. Similarly, in St Lucia workers did not have a legal trade union until 1939. Second, following the riots in Jamaica, the British government established a Royal Commission to investigate the conditions in her West Indian holdings. According to Lewis, this was “revolutionary” as the commission was specifically tasked with inspecting the social conditions in the West Indian colonies. Finally, as Lewis argued, workers became politically organized after the riots. “What has emerged from these years of working class upheaval with their tale of strike and riot, death and victimization,” Lewis explained, were “the rise of trade unions and the entry of the working classes into West Indian politics.” These labor movements would eventually lead to majority rule and political independence throughout the region because, as he writes, the major issues

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discussed “no longer revolve[d] round the aspirations of the middle class but are set by working class demands.”

Nigel Bolland’s *On the March* is the only comprehensive history of the 1930 labor disturbances in the West Indies. Bolland not only provides detailed descriptions of each of the West Indian riots, he also provides a competent and compelling analysis of the circumstances which precipitated these riots and a thoughtful examination of their consequences. Following contemporary intellectuals and social critics like C.L.R. James and W. Arthur Lewis, Bolland argued that the West Indian labor rebellions were watershed events in the region and were just as important as emancipation to the liberation of blacks in the region in that these rebellions laid the foundation for the anti-colonial and nationalist movements which eventually led to self-government in the colonies.

“After these events, and largely because of them,” Bolland claimed, “the political culture and institutions of the British West Indies were irrevocably changed in several crucial ways.” Although the various colonies in the region took different paths to independence, according to Bolland, each path found its basis in the sentiments, ideologies and consciousness that sprang to life during the riots. “Above all,” he wrote,

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“the rebellions achieved a shift in the political culture, as the working people of the British Caribbean made it clear that they would no longer be defined as merely the cheap labor of sugar kings and oil lords.”

Just as Bolland recognized a common legacy, he also points to common causes of the West Indian riots. In particular, he focused on the Great Depression, the subsequent limits placed on labor during that period and the return of migrants to their homelands. For Bolland, these were three of the overarching international causes of the riots. For instance, in Belize, the Great Depression and a particularly bad hurricane resulted in the collapse of an already fragile island economy and was the basis for labor unrest on that island. Additionally, in Guyana, “as the Depression worsened, hundreds of Guyanese migrated to Georgetown to look for work, thereby increasing job competition in the capital.” These tensions, Bolland explained, would go toward creating an environment ripe for the disturbances of the 1930s.

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436 O. Nigel Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, 368. As we will see in chapter three, a similar political awakening happened amongst Bahamian blacks after the 1942 riot.

437 David Meredith, an economic historian, explains that the Great Depression had another negative effect on the colonies. He claims that the “difficulties the depression caused highlight rather than mask the inadequacies of government policies, the effect of which was to exacerbate the problem of falling prices and contracting world trade by retarding export diversification and relegating colonial interest to a position of less importance than the metropolitan ones.” David Meredith “The British Government and Colonial Economic Policy, 1919-39 “ The Economic History Review, New Series, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Aug., 1975), pp. 484-499, 485.


Bolland also highlights several local reasons for the riots. First, he points to the slow changes in the colonial policies regarding labor and the franchise. As Bolland noted, even in Jamaica, one of the most politically forward colonies, only “one-twelfth of the population qualified for taxpayers franchise.” 440 Secondly, Bolland argued, the racism and strict social hierarchies made the colonies receptive to ideologies such as Garveyism, Ethiopianism and Marxism. 441 Bolland also acknowledged “how deeply rooted and interrelated with the class struggle the phenomenon of race and racism [was] in Caribbean society.” Consequently, he explained, the “Pan-African and anti-colonial aspects of Garvey’s philosophies became a major force in the labour rebellions.” 442 Bolland credited Garvey with a political legacy of uniting the Caribbean, American and Central American black communities into a transnational black community with the creation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the political ideological

440 O. Nigel Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, 359. Lewis also discusses that West Indians despised this “half-baked system and agitation for further reform persisted throughout the 1930s” Lewis 1968:100.


developments that accompanied Pan-Africanism. But, Bolland argued, it was the
coronation of Ras Tafari of Ethiopia and Italy’s invasion of that country, on top of the
foundation of Garveyism’s reorientation to Africa, that brought about the “pro-Ethiopia
and anti-colonial movement” evident in the new religion of Rastafari. These
movements, according to Bolland, gave West Indians a racial consciousness that infused
with the injustice they faced to inspire the rioters.

Interestingly, Bolland did not simply tell colony specific stories but locates the
disturbances as part of larger tale of capital, class and colonialism. Although Bolland did
not neglect the racial aspects of the riots, he did not make it his focus but instead mixes
his discussions of racism and how it might have contributed to the riots with a Marxist
critique of the socio-economic circumstances that existed in the Caribbean during the
1930s. Ultimately, Bolland’s On the March characterized the riots as a continuation of the
emancipation of slaves that serves as an important midpoint between that act and the
independence movements that would follow. The labor disturbances, for him and
other scholars, were considered stepping stones for the development of labor
movements in the British West Indies during and after World War II.

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443 Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, 171. To find out more about the
eyearly days of Ras Tafari in Jamaica and Jamaican society see Frank Jan van Dijk’s Jahmaica (One


Not surprisingly, the West Indian riots in the 1930s factor prominently in the histories of organized labor in the British Caribbean. In the collected volume *Revisiting Caribbean Labour*, for instance, several chapters including Reddock’s essay on working women include discussions of the 1930s riots. Penny Mars and Alma Young’s edited work on Caribbean labor and politics also takes note of the disturbances. Even though this work focuses on labor leaders Cheddi Jagan and Norman Manley, most chapters pin point the 1930s riots as the embryonic stage of the development of a labor consciousness in the region. Even in books with a political and more international focus like Horne’s *Cold War in a Hot Zone*, which looked at the Caribbean labor movements from the perspective of United States involvement in the region, the riots serve as the starting point of labor union developments and a place where labor leaders earned their stripes and begin their transformation into political leaders.

Even general histories of Caribbean that do not specifically deal with labor movements mentioned the riots as important to the development of organized labor and the independence movements in the West Indies. See, for instance, Knights’ *The

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446 See the article by Rhoda Reddock in the collected volume, *Revisiting Caribbean Labour* edited by Constance R. Sutton, “Working Women Study” which prominently features the British Caribbean riots.


Caribbean and Parry and Sherlock’s A Short History of the West Indies. Similarly, in A History of Organized Labor in the English Speaking West Indies, Robert Alexander viewed the riots that took place in the Anglophone West Indies as direct and important predecessors to the labor movements that developed in those colonies. In his description of the West Indian riots, Alexander also identified a common link between them in that they were all “marked by more or less spontaneous strikes, marches, demonstrations and the formation of unions (even where they were still illegal) and in some cases of political parties closely associated with the new labour movement.” Alexander agreed with Lewis’ assessment that the riots also caused Britain to pay more attention to her West Indian colonies. As he wrote, the “history of organized labor in that region begins in the 1930s when widely scattered worker’s revolts of that decade launched both the trade union movement and the definitive struggle for self-government and political democracy in the British colonies in and around the Caribbean Sea.” Moreover, he continued, “only then did the British government take a serious look at the conditions in its British West Indian possessions and began to take tentative steps towards doing something about them.”


Additionally, Alexander noted, in each context the riots resulted in the emergence of a “public figure who combined the role of a trade union official and a political party leader.” For example, Norman Manley and William Alexander Bustamante in Jamaica, Grantley Adams in Barbados, Ayube Edun, Cheddi Jagan and Linden Burnham in British Guiana, Albert Gomes of Trinidad and VC Bird in Antigua all carried dual roles. These leaders, according to Alexander, were usually members of the mixed race, middle-class who stepped into that role because the working class had no knowledge of organizing and activism and because of the classism


454 Bustamante was the son of a black Jamaican mother and an Irish planter. After spending his young adulthood away from Jamaica, he returned to make a modest fortune at money lending. His charisma served him well, and seeing the plight of the working class in Jamaica became a labour leader. He was arrested in this capacity; this increased his followers. He founded numerous organizations, among them the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union. He became Jamaica’s first chief minister and eventually the first Prime Minister in 1962. Norman Manley was Bustamante’s cousin. Manley was born to mixed race parents. He attended Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship and was called to the bar when he had completed his education. He worked alongside Bustamante and founded the Peoples National Party. He also served as chief minister and prime minister.

455 He was a labor leader that became the first Premier of Barbados and the Prime Minister of the West Indies Federation.

456 Edun founded the M.P.C.A to represent the sugar workers. Jagan along with Burnham founded the People’s Progressive Party and was Chief Minister of British Guiana from and later President of Guyana. Burnham also became both Chief Minister and later President of an independent Guyana.

457 A. Gomes worked with labor during the riots. He founded the Political Progressive Groups and led the Party of the Political Progressive Groups. He was the first Chief Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

458 VC Bird founded Antigua’s labor party and became the first Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda.
and racism of the ruling class who would not seriously consider or bargain with a member of the lower class workers or those of a darker race.\textsuperscript{459}

Alexander included Bermuda and Bahamas in his analysis, because, as he argued, they shared similar origins, fates and characteristics of other West Indian colonies though they were geographically and in some ways culturally different. Additionally, as he points out, the riots in Bermuda and the Bahamas do not fall in the chronology of the others (they happened in 1941 and 1942) and they had peculiar catalysts and results.\textsuperscript{460}

Despite the differences and given the similarities between the West Indian riots and the 1942 riot in the Bahamas, the Bahamas’ 1942 riot should be considered alongside these riots. It is a mistake to ignore or dismiss it like most of the studies.\textsuperscript{461} That said,

\textsuperscript{459} “The class and racial stereotypes were so deeply engrained that neither the ‘plantocracy’ and its allies nor the British officials at the top of the colonial administration were likely to deal with clearly lower class trade union leaders, whereas they could hardly adopt such totally negative attitudes toward union leaders emerging from the generally mix-race middle class figures who already had considerable prestige or influence in the local societies before the emergence of the trade union movement.” Alexander, \textit{A History of Organized labor in the English Speaking West Indies}, 8. As was discussed in chapter 4, race and class were complicated by issues around colorism.

\textsuperscript{460} In Bermuda, the protest was that of the white oligarchy who were not satisfied with the high wages being offered on the contract. In the Bahamas, on the other hand, it was the laborers who were protesting against the local government (their white oligarchy) for allegedly prohibiting the contract firm from offering higher wages.

\textsuperscript{461} Most general histories of the West Indian disturbances ignore the Bahamas 1942 riot. See, for instance, George. T. Daniel, “Labor and Nationalism in the British Caribbean.” \textit{The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science} March 1957 vol. 310 no. 1162-171.
the differences are meaningful and it should not be considered as just another West Indian labor riot.

IV. Situating the Bahamas’ 1942 riots: Similarities and Differences to the other West Indian Rots

As argued above, the Bahamian riots have much more in common with the labor riots that occurred throughout the British West Indies in the 1930s than they do with the race riots that took place across the United States during this period. Even with their similarities, however, there are enough differences between the Bahamian riots and the other West Indian riots that the events in the Bahamas can be seen as much as outliers as they can be considered a continuation of the disturbances that seemed to have been jumping from island to island in the late 1930s.

Among the characteristics that were similar were the preexisting socio-political conditions on the islands at the start of the disturbances (including the economic downturn and the political underrepresentation of the majority population), the racial aspects of the riots (i.e. blacks rebelling against white control), the immediate causes of the riots and the political results of the riots. The differences are found in the characteristics of the labor leaders, the time frame of political gains, the types and scale of violence and destruction meted out during the riots, the expectation for rebellion, and the extent to which the riots were spontaneous.
Each of the islands in the British West Indies was suffering from the economic downturn that was the result of a worldwide depression in the prewar world. Underemployment and unemployment were rampant. The prewar era in the region was a time that one West Indian historian refers to as a time of “acute economic distress.” Additionally the tightening of immigration policies around the world made for a mass return of islanders and their foreign born children who had moved to be employed elsewhere. During the Depression, countries that had previously opened their borders to West Indian laborers such as the United States, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Central American countries, ended these migrant worker agreements, seeking to stabilize their own economies and seeing these black West Indian foreigners as undesirable competition for their own laborers. Additionally, the completion of the Panama Canal saw many laborers return to their home islands. This return of laborers who had gone abroad not only added to the numbers seeking employment or better employment but meant that the resources that came to the islands by way of remittances were cut off as well. Another factor exacerbating the economic downturn was the agricultural diseases that all but destroyed so many chief crops; coffee, citrus, coconuts, coca, bananas and sugar all suffered from some blight in the years before the war.

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462 Jan Rogonzinski, A Brief History of the Caribbean, 259.

463 Knight, The Caribbean, 290.

Consider, for instance, the socio-economic situation in Jamaica prior to the 1938 rebellion there. In the interwar period, just before the riots took place, Jamaica’s economy on the whole was in dire straits. Although Jamaica, the largest of the British West Indian islands, had a more diverse agricultural sector than did other colonies, it was not able to withstand a global decline in sugar prices, the spread of the Panama banana disease, the migration of rural workers to the city that these agricultural events precipitated and the repatriation of Jamaicans who had gone abroad to work.\textsuperscript{465} At the time of the rebellions in Jamaica, much of the Jamaican population were unemployed, underemployed, temporarily employed, had unreliable employment or earned very low wages.

Trinidad also had a distressed economy even though it was different from the other British West Indian colonies because her economy was not agriculturally based. At the beginning of the twentieth century, commercial oil deposits were discovered, further diversifying the economy. Yet, as Williams explained, one should not assume that "Trinidad’s oil economy differentiates it [substantially] from its agricultural neighbours, and [thus] ignore, behind the outward signs of limited prosperity, the grim social realities."\textsuperscript{466} In Trinidad, even though the sugar production all but doubled in the decade preceding the riots, sugar workers still survived on low wages and maintained

\textsuperscript{465} Banana was 55\% of agriculture while sugar was a mere 18\%. Lewis 383.

\textsuperscript{466} Eric Williams, History of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, 229.
an equally low standard of living. The same was true of Trinidad’s cocoa industry. The industry was in decline and, as the commission established to look into the causes of the riots concluded, “there would appear to be no prospect of the cocoa industry recovering to its former position as the principal agricultural staple.”

Similarly, the grapefruit crop was being surpassed by those grown in Palestine. As far as oil was concerned, in a report to the governor, Sir Thomas Holland found that, “the oil working displaces and on other ways injures the staple agricultural and planting industries, without contributing from its profits a sufficient compensation by way of revenue.” He continued by noting that many consider “the development of the oil-fields is economically a drawback rather than an advantage.”

As discussed in Chapter 3, the effects of the Great Depression on wages and employment in the Bahamas were also pronounced.

Aside from the economic pressure, the absence of a system of representation for labor disputes and simple representation for the majority of the population were also part and parcel of the environment in which most of the West Indian riots took place. Additionally, as noted above, race was an important factor in each of the West Indian riots. Most of the British West Indies has a legacy of racial division. For much of the period of European rule, people of color served as slaves or indentured servants to


468 Thomas Holland. Report to the governor on the state of the oil industry.
European slave masters or bosses. This marginalized status and the resulting (contributing) racism led to racial tensions that still needed to be addressed at the start of the twentieth century.

Trinidad, for instance, had an extra wrinkle to its racial milieu through which they would have to struggle and work. Historian Yogendra Malik explained that Trinidad can be described as a multiethnic society where the divisions are not only racial but also cultural. Additionally, the structures of the institution as well as cultural distinctions make for a society that is divided racially (and culturally) amongst those of African, East Indian, and European heritage.\footnote{Yogendra K. Malik, \textit{East Indiains in Trinidad}. 1, 17.} The British government, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, set in motion a system of indentured servitude that brought East Indians to the West Indies. Thousands of Indian natives found themselves in Trinidad (and British Guiana). Trinidad would eventually have a demographic makeup with about forty percent of the population of Indian heritage and about forty percent of African Heritage.\footnote{Daniel Miller “Absolute Freedom in Trinidad” \textit{Man, New Series}, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 325}

Additionally, the indenture system in Trinidad was abolished in 1916.\footnote{Eric Williams, \textit{History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago}, 215.}

However, that system of indentured servitude that existed during a time when the black population on the island, though still disadvantaged in several ways, was not enslaved,
put Indians on quite a different socioeconomic plane than most blacks in the colony during that time. Still, their circumstances were more similar than different. Both the Afro-Trinidadians and East Indians, at one time or another, experienced the sting of institutional racism in various institutions such as the schools, courts, commerce and even in popular festivals.\textsuperscript{472} Throughout Trinidad, Brereton argued, Europeans attitudes would “reflect the racist ideology of nineteenth [early 20\textsuperscript{th} century] Britain.”\textsuperscript{473} Although as one letter to the editor notes, in the market place, there seemed to be no racial barriers, in social matters the divides were pronounced. “Our merchant and tradesmen...have always been on the best of terms,” Pax writes, “while the distance between the social barriers has always been scrupulously observed.”\textsuperscript{474}

From as early as 1860, Jamaica was staunchly divided both geographically and racially. The rich white and colored planters lived on the outer rim of the island with blacks as their employees, sharecroppers or service workers. Meanwhile on the island’s interior the blacks sought to survive on their tiny subsistence farms, many of which had soil that had been overtaxed since the days of plantation farming. Farmers faced a hard


battle to eke out a proper harvest. Moreover, Jamaica has always been a hotbed of racial tension even in the pre-emancipation era.

As discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, the black Bahamian population, like the black and East Indian populations in Trinidad and Jamaica, experienced institutional racism in the form of racial segregation. Bahamian blacks were banned from hotels and from certain restaurants and cinemas. Additionally, some of the private schools were not open to black children, even if school fees and tuitions could be afforded. And, there were even certain churches that had separate entrances for its black members.

Arguably, the most important difference between the 1942 riot and the other West Indian riots was the nature of the labor leaders. As Alexander argued, there arose a “it became common and accepted for members of the middle class who supported the worker’s movements of revolt to emerge quickly as leaders of the new union (even where they were still formally illegal).”\textsuperscript{475} This is the case in almost every labor disturbance in the British West Indies.

In Trinidad, for example, a former Captain in the British West Indies (BWI) regiment, a member of a Creole family and a self-avowed socialist, Arthur Cipriani, took the helm of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association (TWA) in 1923. This Association was not a union at its inception. Under Cipriani’s leadership, however, it became a representative body for the disgruntled workers on the island; it had become a

“powerful voice for change.” 476 Cipriani recruited from among the ranks of Black and Indian workers thanks to his association with Rienzi, an Indian, and co-founder of the TWA. 477 Cipriani did not lead the 1937 oil workers’ strike which ultimately resulted in the riots. Instead, Uriah Butler, a labor leader and Baptist Minister from Grenada, became the leader during the strike, particularly for black laborers working in the oilfields. Although the attempted arrest of Uriah Butler triggered the rioting in Trinidad and Rienzi played a key role in negotiating for the workers after the rioting started, Cipriani was one of the figures around whom the rioters rallied and he was the one who would take the momentum of the rebellion and forge it into a political organization. 478

In Jamaica, the labor leader of record was Alexander Bustamante. This successful businessman had the ear of the people and he would use that connection during the 1930s disturbances. He organized a series of mass meetings for the strikers. His place in the labor movement was cemented when the British imprisoned him for sedition in 1938 and again in 1940 (this time he was imprisoned without trial). 479 Bustamante became the

476 Robert J. Alexander, A History of Organized Labor in the English Speaking West Indies, 288. Take note that even if it performed all the functions of a trade union it could not be registered or recognized as such because until 1932, trade unions were illegal under the colony’s laws.

477 Eric Williams, History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago, 224.


voice of the poor black dock workers and subsistence farmers, though he himself was a middle class colored man.\textsuperscript{480}

The trend is evident in Belize as well. Antonio Soberanis was one of the chief leaders of the disturbances there. He started his organizing efforts in the Belize City and quickly moved beyond. Additionally, he organized a strike of the dock workers in Stann Creek and won the workers seventeen cents per hour wage increase.\textsuperscript{481}

The workers who participated in the 1942 riot, however, could not meaningfully be said to have a leader. Those riots were spontaneous, as were many of the demonstrations in Jamaica, Trinidad and the rest of the West Indies, but, unlike the riots elsewhere in the West Indies, there was no labor leader in the Bahamas urging the Project workers to strike or to stick with it until more of their requests were met. And, there was no leader that organized their march to Bay Street. There was no Cipriani or Manley or Bustamante leading mass meetings to inspire workers, making hard demands on colonial administrators and businessmen, or being imprisoned, or deported for their role in inciting riots. There are some key figures associated with the 1942 riot but they were quite different than the labor leaders elsewhere in the West Indies. Would-be labor leader and Member of the House of Assembly, Bertram Cambridge, who in the days

\textsuperscript{480}In the British West Indies, colored indicates a mixed racial heritage, while black is a “pure” African heritage.

\textsuperscript{481}Mark A. Moberg “Class Resistance and Class Hegemony: From Conflict to Co-optation in the Citrus Industry of Belize” \textit{Ethnology}, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul., 1990), 189.
before the riot was representing the workers’ concerns to the colonial government, was on his way to tune a piano as the workers marched to Bay Street.\textsuperscript{482} Similarly, supposed labor leader, Charles Rhodriquez, had no influence over the workers that he was supposedly representing. As A.F. Adderley testified, before the workers marched to Bay Street, “spoke and pleaded with the men to go to work as he was trying to assist them by communicating with the Government on their behalf. When Mr. Rhodriquez insisted on work they practically shouted him down and told him that if he only came to tell them that, we had better go back to town as they wanted the wage question settled immediately before they went to work.”\textsuperscript{483}

The disturbances in the Bahamas and the rest of the British West Indies were different not only in terms of leadership but also the extent to which immediate political gains were made. While in the Bahamas no true labor leaders came to prominence as a result of the riots, the leaders that emerged from these turbulent times of disturbances and rioting elsewhere in the British West Indies became important political leaders. In the aftermath of the 1938 riots, for instance, Jamaica ended up with not one but two labor parties. After the disturbances, Bustamante parlayed his fame as a labor leader to create a labor party, the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP). This would be Jamaica’s second labor party. The first, the People’s National Party (PNP), was founded in 1938 by both

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Evidence of Bertram Cambridge to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 174. \textsuperscript{482}
\item Evidence of Alfred Francis Adderley to the \textit{Russell Commission}, 146. \textsuperscript{483}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Bustamante and his distant cousin Norman Manley. Like Bustamante, Manley was a leading labor figure during the Jamaican labor rebellions. Unlike Bustamante, however, Manley sought mediation and amelioration through legal means. As such, Bustamante was able to connect to the working class, while Manley found favor among the middle class. For the next thirty years, Manley and Bustamante would alternate control of the government, with Manley enjoying support from the middle class and Bustamante enjoying support from the working class and white businessmen.484

The government in Trinidad unlike the other colonies experienced serious government repercussions because of the riots. Both the Governor of Trinidad and the colonial secretary were removed from their posts very soon after the end of the riots. This was not, however, evidence of significant political gains for laboring Trinidadians, as these two officials denounced the starvation wages that were being paid after the strike. The political gains in Trinidad were evident though limited. Within a year after the riots there were four legally recognized trade unions on the colony where there were none before; the Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Worker’s Trade Union, Seaman and Waterfront Workers Trade Union, Amalgamated Building Workers Union and The Oilfield Worker’s Trade Union were all established shortly after the riots. Rienzi was the

484 Manley adopted a staunchly socialist platform that called for amongst other things the nationalization of utilities and major industries and for the state management of many sectors of the economy and increased redistribution of wealth through a widened welfare program. For these reasons, the white businessmen would side with Bustamante’s party. As a business man himself, Bustamante was instead a friend of business and free enterprise. This is not the case in the Bahamas, as will be discussed later there existed considerable tension between the Bahamian black laboring class and the local white businessmen.
leader of both the oil union and sugar union and was aware that action in politics would be the thing that cemented the gains that labour only recently secured. He helped draft a labor ordinance, the Arbitration and Inquiry Ordinance of 1938 also known as the Trade Disputes Ordinance, which “laid down the conditions for a tripartite system of collective bargaining, although peaceful picketing and immunity from civil actions were not introduced until 1943.”

The organization, political gains and mass participation that were growing in the British West Indies with the establishment and the growth of labor unions and political organizations in the late 1930s and early 1940s continued after the World War II. In Trinidad, Cipriani moved from being purely a labor leader to the leader of the Trinidad Labor Party. Like elsewhere in the British West Indies, Trinidadians tended to support particular political parties not necessarily because of ideology but as a result of a connection with a charismatic leader. Cipriani was an example of such a leader. Another such leader that transferred from labor organizer to politician was Albert Gnomes, leader of the Party of Popular Organization. The trend continued throughout the Caribbean.

The roots of political change were evident in the labor actions and organizations of the 1930s in Belize as well. Soberanis not only founded the Labor and Unemployed Association (LUA) shortly after the riot, but he also organized the British Honduras

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Workers and Tradesmen Association. And, although his popularity waned somewhat after the riots, his charisma was such that he organized political campaigns that led to the election of pro-labor candidates into the legislator; not an easy task in an environment of such strict suffrage requirements. We can see similar occurrences in Antigua as well. The Antigua Trades and Labour Union was founded and gained prominence because of the late 1930 disturbance in that colony. Vere Cornwall (V. C.) Bird would eventually assume leadership of that union and under his leadership it quickly became a political unit as well. 486

Throughout the British West Indies, then, political parties tended to grow out of the labor unions that themselves had grown out of the riots. In the Bahamas, however, that was not the case. At least that was not the immediate result the 1942 riot. As discussed in Chapter 2, the 1942 riot were the start of a quiet revolution in the Bahamas but the immediate political or socio-economic results were nowhere as dramatic as in the other West Indian colonies.

The response of law enforcement to the rioters also sets the Bahamian riots apart from the other West Indian riots. Of course, the law enforcement responses to the disturbances varied in each colony. Some called out their volunteer or their home defense forces, others called out policemen and some went as far as to call in warships and military troops. In Trinidad, for instance, the disturbances were relatively peaceful

until the police were called in to arrest labor leader Uriah Butler. The presence of the police turned the disturbances into a riot and the rioters overran the police. Fearing more violence, the government called in the British Navy that was at that time stationed in Bermuda. When the sailors arrived they were able to quell the riots and regain order. In the process, however, 59 people were injured and fourteen were killed.\textsuperscript{487} The situation was similar in Jamaica where after the police forces failed to put down the disturbances and corral the rioters the governor finally called in military troops. In the process, 115 protestors were injured and 29 of them were killed.\textsuperscript{488} In Barbados, on the 27th of July, 1937, there is a similar response from the local government. The crowd of workers began rioting and vandalizing shops and cars in Bridgetown. The news of this led to the riots on the countryside as well. In response, the police opened fire on the crowd, killing 14 people and wounding almost 50 more.\textsuperscript{489}

In the Bahamas, the response to the riot was not nearly as drastic. The day before the riot, the police chief with a small cadre of officers broke up a protest at the construction site. The next morning as the protestors walked to Public Square, the police chief was on site as they sought redress. When the rioters got out of hand, it was the

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\textsuperscript{488} Knight, \textit{The Caribbean}, 290.

\end{small}
police force and the volunteer defense force that strove to regain peace. They, however, did not use extreme military tactics; there was no use of heavy artillery or any weaponry as a matter of fact. In their confrontation with the rioters, fewer than 5 died and fewer than 10 were seriously injured. There were, however, numerous prosecutions. In connection with the riot, 80 people were prosecuted and 67 were convicted. For breaking curfew, 48 were prosecuted and 47 were convicted.

490 The volunteer police gave a report of every round expended during the riot. Of the 41 rounds expended, two were “expended on Bay Street during the riot on the morning of 1st June 1942.” 5 of the rounds were lost and 4 were expended while unloading the rifles. The bulk of them, 13 and 17 were expended respectively, during an attack on the Police Station in Grant’s Town after the rioters were dispersed from Bay Street and keeping of the curfew that evening.” Sgt. Major Charles King Report to the Commission, 16. Even when the Acting Governor asked for the assistance of the military, he only “ordered half the emergency platoon “and ordered the men “not to fire unless absolutely necessary.” Lt Col. Haig Report to the Commission, 15.

491 Someone among the Bay Street merchants reportedly called for the use of machine guns when the Attorney General met with the business leaders as their stores were being looted. I don’t know which of them but certainly one of the deputation said that if a machine gun had been turned on Bay Street, the thing would have been over and they certainly thought that there should have been some shooting on Bay Street. I don’t recall who made that remark but i do remember that it was made.” Evidence by Eric Hallinan to the Russell Commission, 515/549. Perhaps Hallinan was remembering the comments of Stafford Sands (store owner and Member of the House of Assembly) who, though he "would never suggest machine guns... suggested using a rifle if necessary." And he thought it was necessary to "Shoot and shoot definitely at the leaders, not to fire over the heads of the crowd as it only encourages them and they feel that the police are not able to deal with them." Evidence by Stafford Lofthouse Sands to the Russell Commission, 504/538.

492 James Rolle, David Smith and Roy Johnson were killed. Wellington Bain, Cleveland Sands, Cecil Ferguson, Joseph Fowler, George Bowles and Herbert Minis were injured. “Memorandum of the Chief Medical Office” included in the Russell Commission, 17.

493 Official Gazette, 19 January 1943, 71. The curfew was set that no one be “out of doors between the hour s of 8pm to 6am.” Official Gazette, 1 June 1942. This was most felt by the blacks that lived over-the-hill, who during this time of the year spend many late evening hours outside as it was much cooler than some of their house. The governor recognized that in his
V. Conclusion

The 1942 riot had common characteristics with the West Indian riots of the 1930s. Among these commonalities are the economic preconditions. The Depression had left the Bahamas and the other British West Indian colonies in tight economic conditions with fewer jobs than people. An agricultural sector damaged by blight and protective restrictions from potential trading partners added to the difficulty. These riots also grew out of the racial tensions present on the islands where blacks formed the majority but held very little political power.

Interestingly, the riots themselves garnered different reactions from the various colonial administrations, from simply alerting the police force to be on the ready to calling in the British military from neighboring islands. Also, while Jamaica, Trinidad and the other West Indian colonies had very charismatic leaders who both stirred up

address to them a week after the curfew was set. Telegram from the Governor (HRH, The Duke of Windsor) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 11 June 1942 A 5481.FO 371/30644/120

The trials started a little over a week later. “Bell Hall” for instance, “was fined £20 [and 2 years of probation] or 4 months imprisonment... for being in possession of a slip, a pair of shoes and a China doll suspected of having been stolen or unlawfully obtained and not being able to give a satisfactory account of how she came by them. The same sentence was imposed on Irene McDowell for having 3 sweaters, 13 balls of wool, 3 balls of ribbon...The following were sentenced to 2 months imprisonment on similar charges: Hubert Dames for having 1 bottle of rum; Benjamin Dames, 1 bottle of rum; Richard Sweeting, 1 pint of Brandy; David Johnson, 1 piece of woolen cloth.” Tribune, 9 June 1942. By June 23, Police were still prosecuting looters and discovering looted items and were asking vendors to identify them. ______.Official Gazette, 2 January 1942, 8. and ______.Official Gazette, 23 June 1942, 288
workers into a frenzy before the riots and talked them down from the edge once the riots were underway, there was no such leader in the Bahamian disturbances. These leaders also went on to establish strong trade unions that formed the basis for later labor parties. Again, this was not so in the Bahamas. The other West Indian riots also shared obvious stepping stones in the road of democratization and self-government. During the period directly after the riot there were specific legislative outcomes of the disturbances. For instance, as Alexander wrote, the “constitutional and political evolution of Jamaica [in particular] proceeded under the general supposition that the island would emerge to ultimate independence.” This would be the case in Trinidad as well. Both Trinidad and Jamaica would receive their independence in 1962, less than 20 years after their disturbances took place. It would take the Bahamas until 1973 to gain its independence from Great Britain.

Given how much the 1942 riot and the other West Indian riots have in common, it would be a mistake not to connect them. Although more like the West Indian riots than the US riots during the early part of the twentieth century, however, it would be a mistake to characterize the 1942 riot as just the last of the West Indian labor riots. There are important differences between the 1942 Nassau riot and the riots that occurred in the West Indies in the 1930s.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The day before the riot, the Project workers at Satellite Field gathered around the pay master to express their dissatisfaction with the wages they were receiving. Leonard Storr Green, who was a man with a large stature and a booming voice, was among them. On that Sunday evening he was so vocal in his dissatisfaction with the unfair wages that he was receiving on the Project that, when the police officers came to see about the disturbance, he was singled out not only as a trouble maker but the instigator. Somewhere between the brandishing of a firearm by law enforcement and the dispersal of the crowd, Green sustained an injury to the head. The injury was not serious but it probably still stung the next day as he and thousands of his fellow workers decided they would march to Bay Street rather than remain at work. They refused to work in positions in which one race was paid more than another. They refused to work for wages that would not sustain them and, moreover, were significantly lower than they had expected to receive, especially when this disparity seemed to be an artificial condition that was manufactured by a greedy ruling class that was more interested in maintaining the status quo than allowing them to get what they needed and deserved.
Instead, he and hundreds of men made their way to the city center. They had no plan, no real strategy and no real leader.

They did, however, have an objective. On the most elemental level they wanted to give expression to their frustration. They no longer wanted to be the alleged “docile, happy” workers as they were often described; the ones that took whatever they were given. They wanted to articulate that things were difficult, that they were struggling, that they were not content with their social and economic circumstances. The unfairness regarding their wages sparked the 1942 riot but there were economic and social issues in the colony that made something like the riot more likely. With every step they took down Bay Street, with every word they yelled, every note they sang, with every stone they threw, they were proclaiming with visual and vocal exclamation points that they were not at peace with being employed to cook the food but were not allowed to eat in certain restaurants, with being employed to make the beds but not being allowed to frequent certain hotels, with being allowed to clean but not being allowed to sit in certain theatres. The rioters were pronouncing very clearly that those in power did not know them; that those in the Assembly were not rightly representing their interests; that blacks in the colony were disempowered and disenfranchised.

Although the system of discrimination that blacks experienced did not trigger the riot, had it not existed it is unlikely that they would have reacted so forcefully to their receiving such low wages. Moreover, the riot did not occur because black Bahamians were poor and wanted more money but because they were angered by the
injustice they were experiencing. They were poor. The cost of living was on the rise and wages were not keeping up. There were many out of work and that number was being added to by workers abroad forced home by war time immigration quotas, by farmers forced out of work by blight and protective tariffs and by the decline of tourism during the war. But, Bahamians had gone through tough times before and were well aware of how to “make do.” This time was different because they felt an act of aggression on a part of the local government, who they mistakenly believed had denied them their opportunity to negotiate the cost of their labor, and who then refused to negotiate with them when they expressed their grievances.

Blacks in the colony whispered amongst themselves about the unfairness of living in the shadow of the white minority, about not being allowed access to certain businesses and schools, but, black Bahamians believed that their theatres were good enough, their restaurants were better, their clubs more enjoyable. Although they could not visit the white nightclubs, tourists and some white Bahamians ventured out of lamp lit Bay Street into the starlit black sections of Nassau to dance and party in black nightclubs until the sun rose. Similarly, though Bahamian blacks were not allowed into the most expensive private schools on the island, the schools that blacks attended, the newly developed Government High, the older Western Senior and Eastern Senior, were educationally sound. This is not to suggest that services and facilities in the colony were separate but equal. But, though they whispered about the disparity, it was not until they
were also denied the opportunity to earn a wage they felt they deserved, that they raised their voices.

Some have argued that because Bahamian blacks appear to have gone silent after the riot that we should not think of the riot as the start of anything significant in the political or social consciousness of the black community. Recall, the riot has been described by historians as “a momentary outburst of raw energy” which “provided martyrs and a heroic moment... once a political movement had finally started.”495 Others called it a “short-lived spontaneous outburst” and have suggested that, upon subsiding, “the black masses slept on.”496 Also, the riot has been relegated to merely “a warning [that] did not precipitate major constitutional, political or social reforms... They were merely a spontaneous reaction to underlying conditions, triggered by the wage issue.”497 This dissertation, however, has shown that although it was spontaneous and short-lasting, its significance was not short lived. It was the first signs of a political awakening amongst Bahamian blacks and signaled the emergence of a black proletariat.

In spite of its close proximity and historical ties to the United States, the riot was more like the riots in the West Indies than the riots in the United States during the early


496 Gail Saunders, Bahamian Society After Emancipation (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 119.

20th century. Indeed, there are a lot connect the 1942 riot with the West Indian riots. As such, the 1942 riot is too quickly ignored by historians looking at the West Indian disturbances. But, there a significant differences between the 1942 riot and the West Indian riots. As such, the 1942 riot should also not be considered just another West Indian labor riot.

Within twenty-five years of the 1942, the sense of collective identity and power they discovered on June 1st, 1942, would lead to a group of Bahamian blacks walking down Bay Street to the House of Assembly to take their place in a self-governed, majority-ruled government in the colony.
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