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**The Bahamas Lost Ships Project: A Major  
Maritime Sea Lane off Greater Abaco**

Photo: Heather Forde Prosa, Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society

# The Bahamas Lost Ships Project: A Major Maritime Sea Lane off Greater Abaco

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The Greater Abaco region is the second area to be assessed by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project. The pattern of wrecked vessels analyzed through historical sources is very different to the western Little Bahama Bank. A total of 596 ships were lost from 1657-1945. Some 95% were merchant vessels, dominated by schooners and brigs. Reefs and shoals causing strandings were the most dangerous hazards. The sunken ships once held 189 types of cargo ranging from alcohol and foodstuffs to military supplies, clothes and dyestuffs. Wreckers salvaged a high proportion soon after sinking; the names of their ships and percentages of salvaged goods they received provide rare insights into the industry. This study shows that the majority of ships lost off Greater Abaco left from and were heading to US ports, and reveals an unknown major shipping lane in the history of colonial shipping, used to avoid the dangers of the Gulf Stream along the coast of America.

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**T**he Greater Abaco region centered on Abaco Island (Figs. 1, 3) is the second maritime zone to be investigated by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project, sponsored by Allen Exploration. The profile of shipping that exploited this area, this report's historical analysis demonstrates, differs markedly from the western Little Bahama Bank. The 596 shipwrecks lost off Greater Abaco between the 17th and mid-20th century were dominated by vessels originating in the United States and destined for US ports. The wide variety of 189 cargo types points to this zone being exploited for daily

trade, compared to more specialised commerce off the western Little Bahama Bank.

The pattern revealed has identified an unknown sea lane heading southwards down the eastern side of Abaco Island for the Providence Channels, used especially by US shipping sailing for major ports in the Gulf of Mexico and Cuba. Despite the route's natural dangers, The Bahamas Lost Ships Project proposes that the Greater Abaco route was used specifically to bypass the perils of the Gulf Stream.



Fig. 1. Satellite view of the Abaco Islands. Photo: Michelle Bouchard using Landsat data from the US Geological Survey.

## 1. Introduction

The first phase of The Bahamas Lost Ships Project, which focused on the western Little Bahama Bank, identified 176 shipwrecks from historical

sources. The region was extensively exploited as a maritime 'highway' for shipping along the strong north/south Gulf Stream current flowing through the Florida Strait. This sea lane was established in the 16th century as the channel of choice for Spain's fleet galleons sailing between Andalusia and the Americas, and subsequently by colonial shipping.

The area covering what is referred to in this report as the Greater Abaco region (from the northeastern Little Bahama Bank to the eastern side of Abaco Island and west to the south of Grand Bahama Island) witnessed far more extensive everyday trade. A total of 596 shipwrecks have been historically identified in this zone (Figs.4, 8-9), some 340% times more numerous than in the western Little Bahama Bank catchment.



Fig. 2. Hurricane Dorian passes over the Abaco Islands and The Bahamas on September 1, 2019. Photo: National Hurricane Center.

This report presents navigational and commercial information for the region, with a special emphasis on the causes of the losses, the types of ships and cargoes using this sea lane, their origins and destinations and to what degree wreckers salvaged distressed crews, the lost ships and cargoes.

## 2. Statistical Analysis

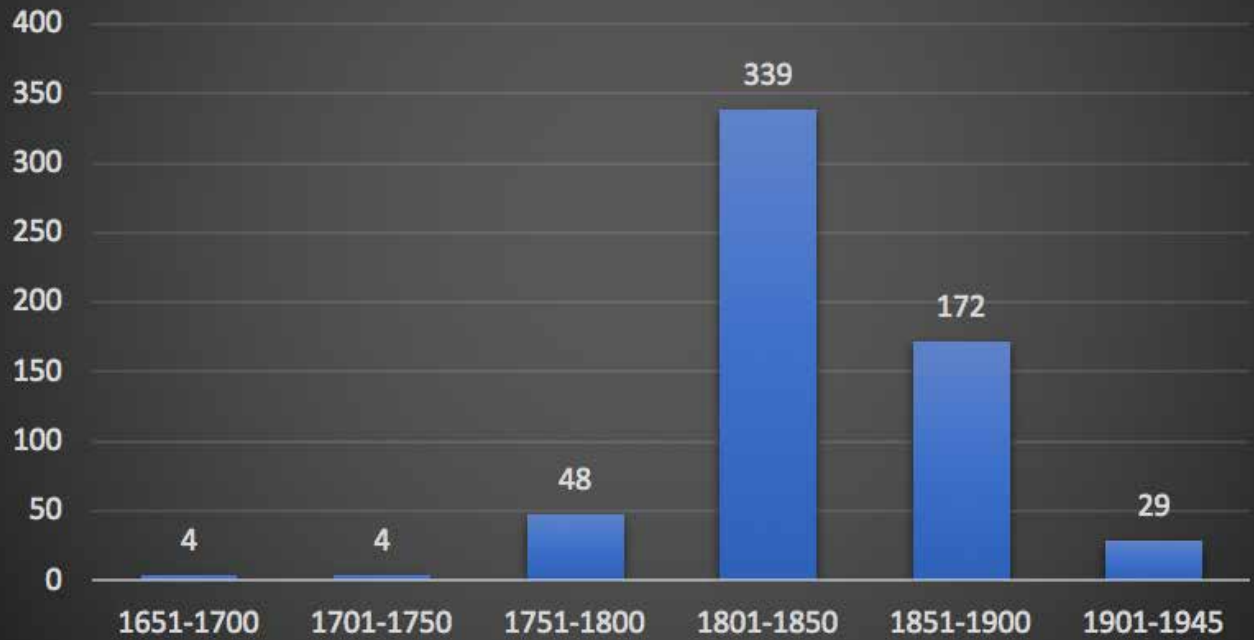
The 596 Greater Abaco shipwrecks sank between 1657 and 1945 (Fig. 4). Four were lost between the years of 1657 and 1700 and another four between 1701 and 1750. An additional 48 ships perished from 1751 and 1800. The current data identify a peak in shipping in the half century between 1801 and 1850, represented by 339 shipwrecked vessels (57% of the total inventory). The years of 1851 to 1900 experienced a further peak

Fig. 3. Aerial view over Great Abaco Island in The Bahamas. Photo: Shutterstock.





## Greater Abacos Shipwreck Chronology (No.)



Figs. 4-5. The date range (above) and nationality (below) of the vessels documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the Greater Abaco region.

## Greater Abacos: Flag Nation (%)

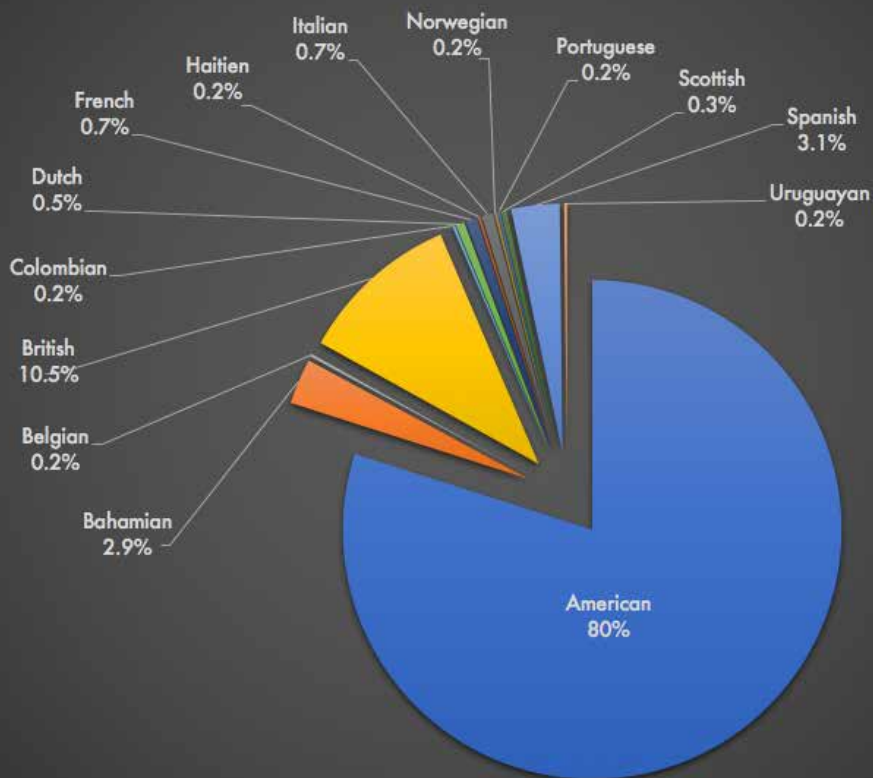




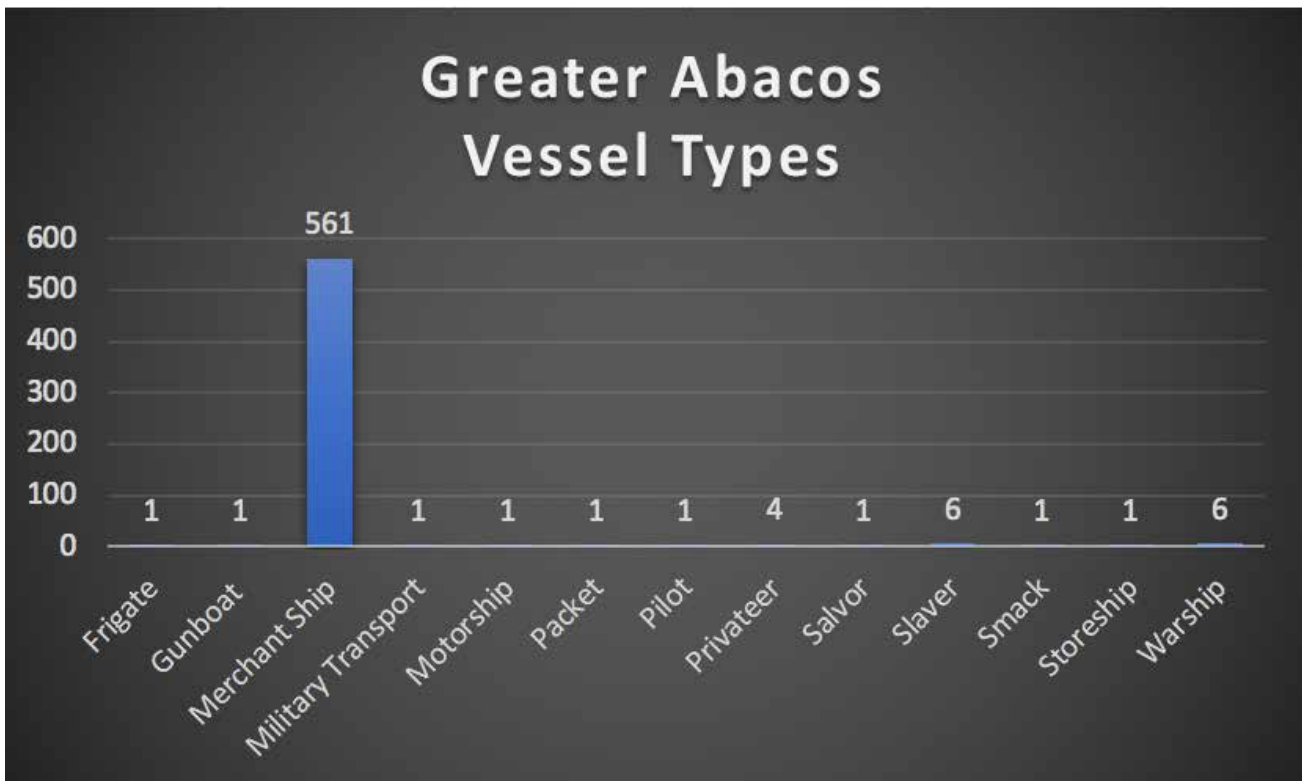
Fig. 6. Vessels documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the Greater Abaco region by month.

of 172 losses (28% of the total inventory), with just 29 casualties registered between 1901 and 1945.

The majority of the lost ships, 561 and 95%, were merchant vessels (Fig. 7). Ninety-five are only generally classified as such, while the rest consists of

12 classes of ships ranging from barks, brigs and schooners to a ketch, snow and steamship. By far the most abundant merchant vessels sailing the Greater Abaco waters were schooners (212 or 45%) and brigs (173 or 37%) (Fig. 19).

Fig. 7. Types of vessels documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the Greater Abaco region.





Figs. 8-9. Distribution of wrecked ships around the Greater Abaco Islands based on historical sources. Photo: © Allen Exploration.





As in the waters off the western Little Bahama Bank, shallow reefs and shoals were the most dangerous hazard in the northern Bahamas. This environmental threat was responsible for 513 ships being lost after becoming stranded. The next most common form of disaster was ending up ashore and sunk (34 losses) or ashore and bilged (27 losses). The historical records describe the main causes of the losses as storms (90), navigational error (75), hurricanes (52), bad weather (43) and leaking hulls (20). Beyond these prime movers, additional curiosities include losses to currents (6), fire (6), being adrift (2 ships), collisions (2) and fog (2), as well being taken by privateers (2), lost to mutiny (1), a fraudulent act (1) and being lured ashore to their fate by unscrupulous wreckers in one case.

In total, 477 (85.6%) of the casualties clustered



Fig. 10. The beach and lighthouse in Hope Town on Elbow Cay, Great Abaco Island. Photo: Shutterstock.

around Abaco Island (out of a sample of 557 wrecks for which the loss location is recorded), followed by 37 losses off Grand Bahama Island (6.6%) and 36 off the northern and eastern Little Bahama Bank (6.4%) (Figs. 8-9).

A major difference between patterns identified off

the western Little Bahama Bank and Greater Abaco is the dominance of US commercial shipping in the latter region. Whereas America, Britain and Spain saw the greatest losses off the western Little Bahama Bank, at 77, 36 and 19 wrecks respectively, America witnessed the majority of casualties off Greater Abaco at 434 shipwrecks and 80% of the sample.

British losses accounted for a far lower 57 losses (10.5%), followed by Spain 17 (3.1%) and The Bahamas 16 (2.9%). Ten other countries

Fig. 11. View of the waters off the Elbow Cay lighthouse on Great Abaco Island. Photo: Shutterstock.



from Belgium to Uruguay account for no more than an additional four losses each. Whereas the Florida Strait sea lane off the western Little Bahama Bank was used as an international highway, the current data demonstrate that the waters of Greater Abaco were primarily exploited for America's inter-regional trade (see section 6 below).

Out of 28 countries from where the lost ships departed, 81% left from a US port, followed far behind by Cuba (4.9%) and The Bahamas (3.7%). The 22 countries where the lost ships were heading were dominated by the United States (42.7%), Cuba (36.5%) and The Bahamas (9.7%) (Fig. 5).

The rich diversity of 189 cargo types ranges from alcohol and foodstuffs to military supplies, clothes and dyestuffs. Lumber, flour and dry goods are highly conspicuous, while passengers, sugar and enslaved people are striking. A surprisingly significant number of ships sailed in ballast searching for lucrative cargoes in The Bahamas and Cuba (discussed in detail in section 4 below; Figs. 26-40).

### 3. Causes of Losses

#### Terrific Storms & Hurricanes

While the discovery and study of a wreck can reveal unique granular data about ship construction, cargo lading and everyday life at sea, the cause of its loss can rarely be reconstructed from material remains alone. The historical sources, by contrast, usually define why



Fig. 12. The harbor and lighthouse in Hope Town on Elbow Cay, Great Abaco Island. Photo: Heather Forde Prosa, Elbow Reef Lighthouse Society.

any given vessel foundered. Behind the general causes – storms, hurricanes, currents, leaks, fraud or bad navigation – lie fascinating color. Every lost ship has its own unique human and environmental back story of tragedy, near miss or a slice of good luck.

Other than a low of 20 ships wrecked in the months of July be-

tween 1657 and 1945, no dramatic seasonal losses are evident (Fig. 6). Maritime casualties peaked in March with 74 losses. The winter seasons (December to February) witnessed a total of 166 shipwrecks in the Greater Abaco region, spring time 154 losses (March to May), the summers 103 wrecks (June to August) and the falls 175 maritime casualties (September to November).

The 90 losses of ships to storms, and 43 more generally to bad weather, together represent 73.4% of all causes of maritime casualties off the Greater Abaco region. Fourteen American vessels were said to have been wrecked on Abaco alone around April 28, 1809, including the *North Star*.<sup>1</sup> Hurricanes, too, were not infrequent reasons for awful losses of life and cargoes in the case of 52 ships (28.7% of all casualties) destroyed in 1806,

1825, 1837, 1838, 1843, 1865, 1866, 1871, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1907, 1908 and 1935.

In terms of specific cases, in 1837 Captain Ranlett abandoned the *Mablehead* as winds were destroying it during a hurricane in the accurate hope his ship would be forced over outer reefs onto the main part of a bank 15 miles south of Walker's Cay.<sup>2</sup> The American sloop the

Fig. 13. Destroyed houses in Marsh Harbor on Great Abaco Island after Hurricane Dorian swept by on September 5, 2019. Photo: Shutterstock





*Union* sank in a “marvelously terrific” hurricane off Abaco Island on September 5, 1838.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, another hurricane sank five vessels off Abaco, with a loss of up to 86 lives, on September 30, 1843, including a Bahamian trader.<sup>4</sup>

The *Addie E. Barnes* lost off Crossing Rocks, Cherokee Sound, with its cargo of oranges and coconuts was one of six ships wrecked to a hurricane off Abaco on September 24, 1866, and 80 total in The Bahamas that day.<sup>5</sup> A further hurricane in the middle of August 1871 was unprecedented in living memory in terms of the destruction wrought. Four local spongers, including the *Ebenezer*, were tossed ashore near Green Turtle Key on the 15th of the month.<sup>6</sup> After the three-masted American schooner *Jennie F. Willey* was dismasted, half sunk and at the total mercy of the wind and sea on October 23, 1898, on its way from Jacksonville to Martinique with 45,000 feet of lumber, the crew spent 23 days adrift, nearly starving to death, before running ashore some 4 miles west-southwest of Walkers Key.<sup>7</sup>

The loss of the 15-ton British schooner *Mary Jane* off Grand Bahama Island on August 13,

1899, while sailing from the Bimini Islands, was but one of 62 vessels wrecked in what was described as one of the worst hurricanes to ever strike The Bahamas.<sup>8</sup> On its maiden voyage in 1900, the three-masted American schooner *Mary E. Lermond*, with its cargo of hard pine lumber heading from Fernandina in Florida to Port-au-France in Martinique, was dismasted and so severely damaged in a hurricane that it was abandoned at sea on September 17. The ship drifted at the mercy of sea currents and wind for 76 days before stranding ashore near Hope Town on Abaco.<sup>9</sup>

Around April 11, 1907, the British Barkentine the *Trinidad* was almost torn to pieces off Fish Cay on its way from Santa Cruz in the Canary Islands to New York City. The crew barely survived on the dismasted vessel for five days without food or water before they were picked up and taken to Nassau by a small sponging schooner. The ship itself drifted ashore to be wrecked.<sup>10</sup> Finally, on October 1, 1908, a British steamship in ballast, the *Hesleyside*, heading from England to Key West, was lost near Cherokee Sound.<sup>11</sup>

Fig. 14. Destruction inflicted by Hurricane Dorian on Marsh Harbor on Great Abaco Island on September 5, 2019. Photo: Alamy.





## Reasons for Wrecking

The preservation of ships lost to storms and hurricanes depended on multiple interacting human and environmental factors. Some ill-fated ships broke apart offshore. The stern, for instance, was all that survived of the 192-ton American brig *Potosi*, which was heading from Portland, Maine, to Cardenas in Cuba when it came ashore on Abaco Island on January 1, 1855.<sup>12</sup> When the gloriously named 874-ton *Knickerbocker* struck a large rock 1.5 miles off the Cherokee Sound of Abaco Island on May 23, 1858, the American ship's rudder and part of the stern were swept away. Miraculously, the shipwreck witnessed just three casualties among the 111 passengers and crew traveling from Liverpool to New Orleans.<sup>13</sup>

Vessels like the 297-ton American bark *General W.T. Sherman* shattered on a rock off Lantern Head, about 3 miles from the Hole-in-the-Wall, in the hurricane of October 1, 1866. There the ship ground to pieces within a short period of time, leaving nothing surviving, except presumably its scattered and concreted cargo of railroad iron.<sup>14</sup> The 1,064-ton Italian bark *Barba Luigi* began to break apart as soon as it hit the Little Bahama Bank on February 12, 1899, en route from Pensacola in Florida to Genoa in Italy with a cargo of pitch



Fig. 15. Detail of the Abaco Islands in The Bahamas in John Cary's *A New Map of Part of the United States of North America Containing The Carolinas And Georgia. Also The Floridas And Part of The Bahama Islands &c...* (London, 1806).

structural damage to a ship than the destruction caused by a storm. The American brig *Sterling*, sailing from Belfast in Maine for Matanzas, Cuba, with a cargo of sugar box shooks, ran ashore on Elbow Cay Reef on Abaco Island on March 8, 1847 with such force that the quarterdeck broke off from the hull and floated away.<sup>16</sup>

Other ships eventually sunk in Greater Abaco lost their battle with the elements far out to sea. Around November 26, 1844, an unnamed vessel drifted ashore at Abaco bottom-up with a cargo of flour, fish, boots, shoes and cotton goods.<sup>17</sup> The abandoned American brig the *Alexander Kirkland* drifted

Fig. 16. Map of the Abaco Islands in relation to its surrounding topography in The Bahamas. From Fielding Lucas Junior's *A New General Atlas of the West India Islands* (Baltimore, 1823).



Beaching often resulted in equally bad

structural damage to a ship than the destruction caused by a storm. The American brig *Sterling*, sailing from Belfast in Maine for Matanzas, Cuba, with a cargo of sugar box shooks, ran ashore on Elbow Cay Reef on Abaco Island on March 8, 1847 with such force that the quarterdeck broke off from the hull and floated away.<sup>16</sup> Other ships eventually sunk in Greater Abaco lost their battle with the elements far out to sea. Around November 26, 1844, an unnamed vessel drifted ashore at Abaco bottom-up with a cargo of flour, fish, boots, shoes and cotton goods.<sup>17</sup> The abandoned American brig the *Alexander Kirkland* drifted onto Walker's Cay on November 28, 1870 on its way from Baltimore to San Juan, Puerto Rico, with a cargo of kerosene, tobacco, merchandise and manufactured items after running into a boisterous storm in the Atlantic in early September.<sup>18</sup> The 102-ton American schooner *San Blas* met a similar fate after



Figs. 17-18. Details of the Abaco Islands from *The Bahama Banks and Gulf of Florida* by the hydrographer Edmund Blunt, 1833 (New York, 1834).

vanishing in the eye of a hurricane on September 10 with 130,000 coconuts in its hold while heading home to Baltimore from Port Morant in Jamaica. After disaster struck, its stern drifted onto a beach 6 miles north of Green Turtle Bay over a month later on October 15. The crew was never seen again.<sup>19</sup>

The 427-ton, three-masted American schooner *Ida Francis* was a ghost ship for even longer, drifting unmanned over 1,500 miles for nearly ten months before washing ashore on Fish Cay near Green Turtle Cay in January 1887.<sup>20</sup> Then, on January 5, 1905, on a voyage from Philadelphia to Cardenas in Cuba with 836 tons of coal, the three-masted American schooner *Mary Lee Patton* ran ashore on Hog Cays, Abaco. The table was still set for dinner and its sails had been lowered, but no trace of the 550-ton ship's crew could be located.<sup>21</sup>

When leaks were found at sea, and proved impossible to seal, captains' preferred action was to beach a ship and hope to save the crew and cargo. This was the case of the Bahamian ship *Primrose* heading from Charleston to Nassau on May 16, 1834 with rice, lumber and tobacco.<sup>22</sup> In 1861 history repeated itself when the 386-ton American bark *Eglantine*, southbound from Philadelphia for Havana carrying coal and lumber, lost its anchors, chains and nearly twisted off its rudder head before being deliberately run ashore off southeast Grand Bahama Island on August 15.<sup>23</sup> The same year also saw the 198-ton American brig *Forest City* grounded by the captain

on Elbow Cay, Abaco, on November 28 while sailing from Cardenas in Cuba to Portland, Maine, with 150 hogsheads of molasses. The ship had sprung a leak in a heavy gale in the Florida Strait that several days of pumping had failed to control.<sup>24</sup>

On occasions, circumstances did not even leave time for deliberately running a vessel ashore. The American brig *Orlando* started leaking ten days out of New York City on its way to New Orleans after running into bad weather and sank off Elbow Reef near Abaco on December 5, 1809. The crew hung onto the rigging till daylight before "with great difficulty" getting over the reef and reaching Man of War Key without clothes or provisions. The sunken brig, 4 miles off, was totally lost.<sup>25</sup>

Many colorful and quirky acts of being wrecked pepper the historical accounts. The crew of the *Three Sisters* survived after the American sloop struck Great Guana Cay on Abaco on March 22, 1792 by building a raft from hencoops and hanging on until a passing whaleship took them to Nassau.<sup>26</sup> At times, crews had to wait what must have felt like an age to be saved, as in the case of the *Ann*, whose crew drifted for five days in the American sloop's boat after being sunk off Abaco on November 15, 1822 while sailing from Charleston to Matanzas in Cuba with rice, lard, cheese, shoes and dry goods.



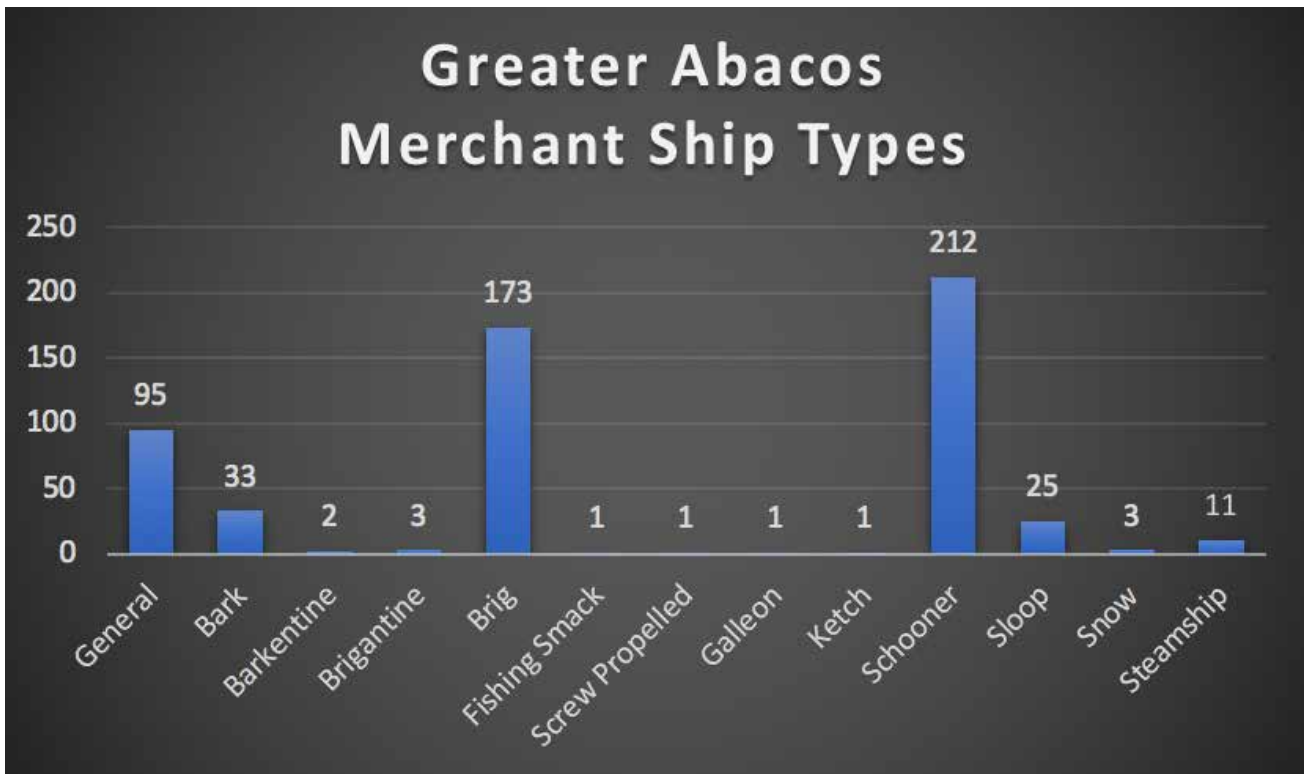


Fig. 19. Types of merchant vessels documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the Greater Abaco region. Photo: © Allen Exploration.

Eventually the British schooner *Centipede* brought them safely to Nassau.<sup>27</sup>

On November 12, 1838, the crew and 20 passengers aboard the American packet *Russell Baldwin*, en route from New York City to Mobile, Alabama, expected a doomed fate after being cast away in incredibly high seas on a reef a ½ mile off the Man-of-War Keys. When the ship struck the reef, instead of breaking up, however, its upper deck broke free from port to starboard, letting the survivors drift safely ashore.<sup>28</sup>

Even when a storm was not too vicious to throw out two anchors and try to ride it out, as the American *Belle America* attempted on January 21, 1858, while travelling in ballast from New York City to Mobile, its chain parted and the anchors began to drag. The ship heaved uncontrolled over a reef at Strangers Cay on the east side of the Little Bahama Bank, tearing out its bottom and sinking in four fathoms of water.<sup>29</sup>

Although death commonly stalked these shipwrecks, many crew members lived through horror stories to tell the tale. The crew and 85 enslaved Africans trafficked on the American ship the *Heroine* – Charleston to New Orleans – were cast onto Whale Key on October 7, 1807 for two weeks

before being saved.<sup>30</sup> After stranding off southeast Grand Bahama on December 8, 1863, the men of the 310-ton American bark *John J. Philbrick*, transporting coal from Philadelphia to Key West, survived being castaway for 13 days on a remote island after the ship “filled in a few hours after striking and soon went to pieces.”<sup>31</sup>

Storms, hurricanes, high winds and strong currents bedevilled most of these lost ships, but some excuses were more creative. Henry J. DeFrees explained the stranding of the American brig *Cicero* and loss of its cargo of ice on the Elbow Key Reefs on May 30, 1818 as down to inaccurate navigational charts.<sup>32</sup> At other times, equipment failure was the culprit. Captain Barstow blamed the total loss of the *Queen Adelaide* on August 18, 1839, after stranding near Green Turtle Key at the north end of Abaco, on a faulty chronometer and mate who did not understand how to take lunar observations. The ship and “valuable cargo” worth more than \$80,000 were a total loss.<sup>33</sup>

Captain Thomas E. Phelan blamed the sinking of the 327-ton American bark *Acacia* on Carter’s Reef, Little Bahama Bank, on January 26, 1883, losing its cargo of empty hogsheads while heading from New York City to Matanzas in Cuba, on a

defective chronometer too.<sup>34</sup> The loss on December 31, 1864 of the 2,200-ton Union Navy's USS *San Jacinto*, the flagship of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, on No Name Key, Abaco, after running too close to shore, was undoubtedly the most high-profile loss to a navigation error in the Greater Abaco region (Fig. 44).<sup>35</sup>

The captain of the 829-ton three-masted American schooner *Horatio L. Baker*, carrying coal from South Amboy, New Jersey, to Tampa expected to ride out a leak when a hatch cover tore loose on March 1, 1915, 14 miles from Stirrup Light in the Northwest Providence Channel, rapidly sinking the ship.<sup>36</sup>

On occasions, devious intent lay behind a ship's wrecking. On December 12, 1763, the *Bella* was stranded about a league from Walker's Key on its long haul from Havana to Liverpool in England. Six months later, a sailor who was aboard the ship when it was lost reported that after the vessel sprung a leak, a passenger with a financial interest in the ship



Fig. 20. The *Thomas*, a "miserable class" of schooner in which George Coggeshall sailed from Milford and New Haven to the West Indies in 1802, exchanging produce from Connecticut for Caribbean rum, sugar, molasses, coffee, and fruit. From Coggeshall, 1858.

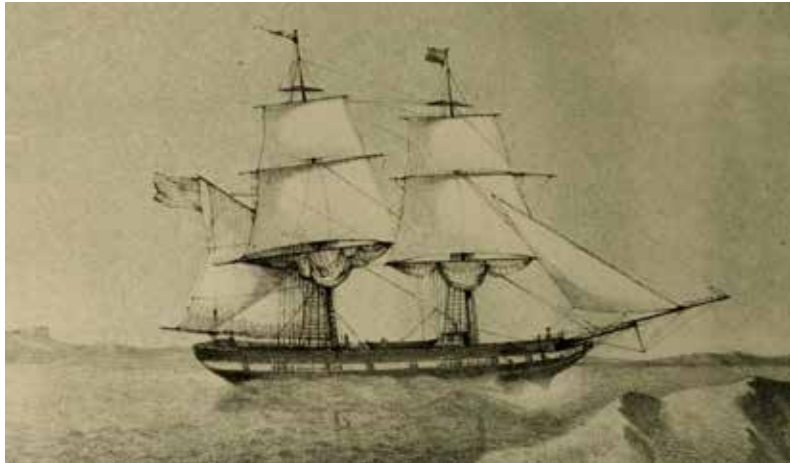


Fig. 21. The 181-ton *Nymph* brig in which George Coggeshall sailed as supercargo from New York to Cadiz in 1824 with beef, pork, flour, bread, rice & other provisions that cost \$9,069. From Coggeshall, 1858.

Fig. 22. The 80-ton *Julia & Laura* schooner bought by George Coggeshall to ship flour, provisions and other articles to the West Indies in 1830. From Coggeshall, 1858.



and the captain conspired to intentionally run the *Bella* ashore and run off with its specie.<sup>37</sup> Eighty-five years later, the *Levant* was lost off Abaco Island on December 28, 1848 after a mutiny left the American brig transporting lumber, tar and pitch from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Havana with insufficient crew to safely work the ship.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Ships & Cargoes

Out of the 561 wooden merchant vessels recorded by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as wrecked in the Greater Abaco region, the greater majority were schooners (212, 45%) and brigs (173, 37%), followed by barks (33, 6%) (Fig. 19). The historical ship inventory shows that schooners were used and sank in the area between 1741 and 1943, brigs from 1768 to 1887 and barks between 1837 and 1903.

Schooners came into vogue in the first half of the 18th century and would remain the characteristic vessel of the American coastal trade for more than 150 years (Figs. 20, 22,



23). Their rigging, characterized by both a foremast and mainmast that bore fore-and-aft sails, was simple in design, easily lowered, reefed and furled from the deck. Close-hauled, a schooner could outpoint any square-rigged craft, and for quickness and sureness in stays was incomparable. An added attraction was that they cost less to build than square rigs and needed fewer men to work.<sup>39</sup>

The schooner, described as first having been developed on 'Yankee' shores in 1713 or the following year by Captain Andrew Robinson of Gloucester, New England, has been termed "the greatest gift of American shipyards to the merchant fleet of the era before the Revolution." The name schooner derived from *scoon*, an 18th-century word for the skipping of a flat stone over water, the movement of which this class of craft aimed to replicate. The schooners of New England were well suited to the region's many rivers and estuaries that required

Fig. 25. The US brig *Victress* leaving Hog Island in The Bahamas, from the diary of William H. Meyers, 1838-1839. Photo: New York Public Library, MssCol 1986.



Fig. 23. The schooner *Ajax* leaves Delaware, from the diary of William H. Meyers, 1838-1839. Photo: New York Public Library, MssCol 1986.

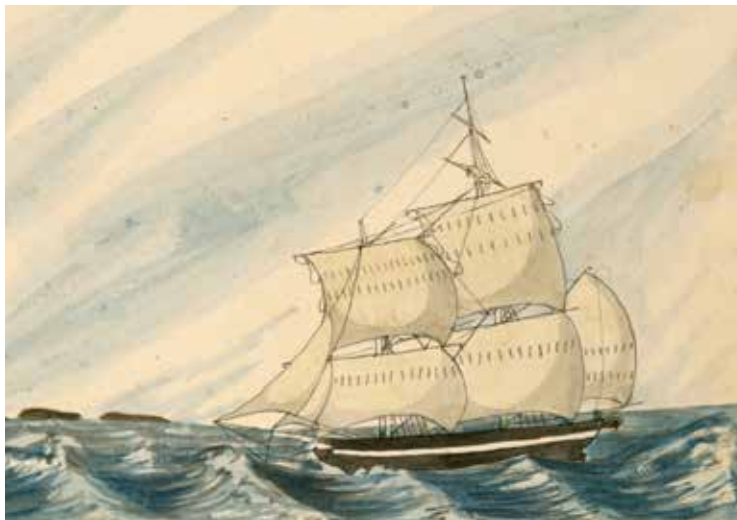
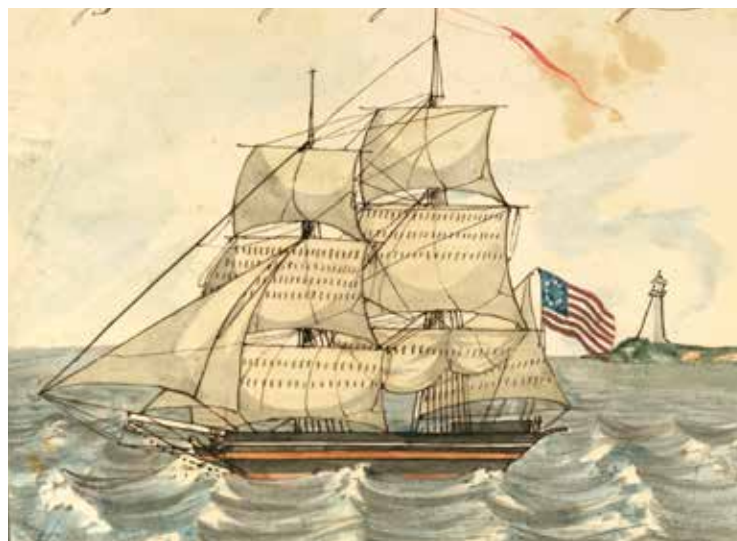


Fig. 24. The brig *Lucy* sailing past keys on the Bahama Bank, from the diary of William H. Meyers, 1838-1839. Photo: New York Public Library, MssCol 1986.



substantial beating to windward in relatively short tacks and were more superior for this purpose than square-rigged ships with two to three masts. By the later 18th century, schooners of up to 150 tons became the favorite rig of all American merchant vessels. At their greatest size, American 'monster' schooners of 7,000 tons carried five to seven masts.<sup>40</sup>

The seaman George Coggeshall, who worked his way up from a cabin boy to a wealthy merchant and shipowner, sailed extensively in schooners of 80 to 234 tons during his voyages from New York and Milford and New Haven, Connecticut and New Orleans to Savannah, Havana, Vera Cruz, Barbados, the West Indies, Tenerife and Cadiz, Spain, between 1799 and the first quarter of the 19th century. Coggeshall described how this class of vessel, used for everything from fishing to pilot boats, privateers, cargo ships and pirates, was:<sup>41</sup>

"built expressly for fast sailing, but require very skilful management and constant watchfulness; otherwise they are very dangerous. A captain only accustomed to sail



a ship, is not always competent to manage one of these sharp and delicately-built schooners. They have often been compared to a racehorse with an unskilful rider, when commanded by a man unaccustomed to manage them.”

Brigs combined the advantages of two vessel types, being a two-masted vessel, square-rigged on the foremast and schooner-rigged on the main mast (Figs. 21, 24, 25).<sup>42</sup> Barks were square-rigged vessels with fore and main masts rigged like a ship, its mizzenmast like a schooner.<sup>43</sup>

Various packet ships routinely sailed through the Greater Abaco region, where at least 14 were wrecked. These included the American brig the *Charlestown Packet* lost on March 21, 1768 somewhere off the Grand Bahama Bank en route from Philadelphia to New Orleans.<sup>44</sup> The brig *Betsey* followed on December 11, 1784, meeting its fate southwest of Abaco, perhaps near Gorda Cay, while heading from Nassau, New Providence, to Charleston.<sup>45</sup> The ill fortune of the American packet schooner the *Olive* included being captured by a French privateer on its penultimate voyage before being lost off Abaco Island on July 23, 1798 on its way from New York City to Havana.<sup>46</sup>

The American schooner the *Gabriel Duval* joined the cemetery of packet ships when it was wrecked off Green Turtle Key on April 12, 1807 when heading from Charleston to Nassau, New Providence.<sup>47</sup> The American brig the *Savannah Packet* lost its battle with a hurricane on October 14, 1818 when it ended up beached on the island of Man Jack off Abaco

with “a valuable cargo.” The ship had run between two reefs to reach inshore protection from the sea. The anchor set inside the key dragged as the wind increased, stranding the bilged packet ashore, filled with water.<sup>48</sup>

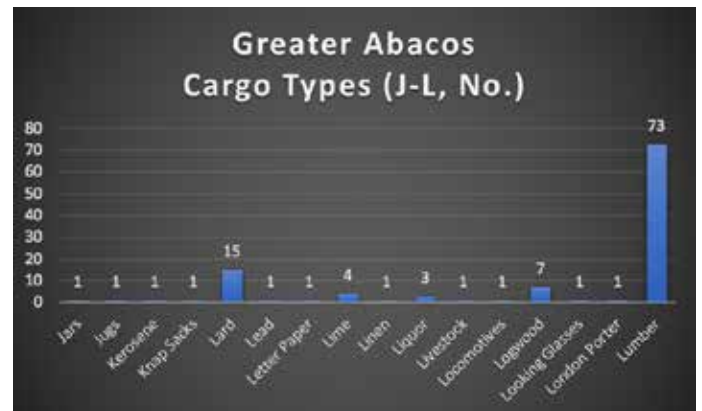
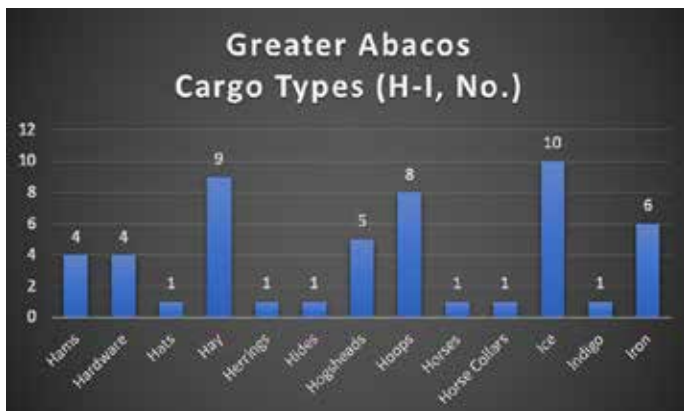
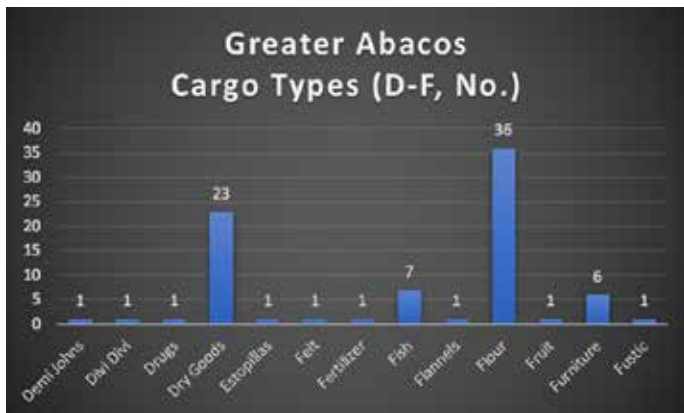
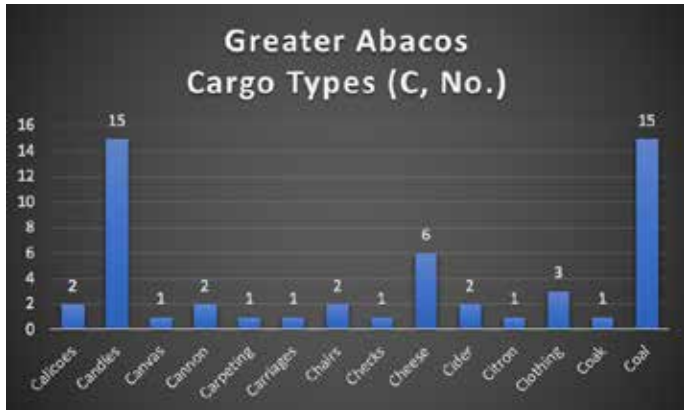
The *Washington* was another regular packet traveling between New York and Mobile when it ran ashore and was wrecked off Abaco before May 15, 1835. Alongside a heavyweight cargo of millstones – saleable ballast – the ship and cargo insured for \$150,000 suggests a more lucrative but undisclosed consignment was lost as well.<sup>49</sup> The crew of the *Russell Baldwin* packet, owned by Messrs. E.D. Hurlburt & Company, had a near-divine escape on November 12, 1838 when it was wrecked in unusually high seas on a reef about half a mile off Man-of-War Keys. The packet that had left New York City never reached Mobile. At risk of drowning at any moment, a highly unusual event saved the crew and 20 passengers. When the ship struck the reef, the upper deck broke free horizontally from port to starboard and everyone onboard drifted safely ashore.<sup>50</sup>

The *Marshall Ney* packet, owned by K.G. Robinson, was southbound from New York to Mobile when it ran ashore on Allen’s Key on February 21, 1839.<sup>51</sup> The *Trenton* packet ship was carrying 50 passengers, hardware and dry goods on its way from New York City to New Orleans when it was lost on the eastern Man-of-War Key, near Elbow Key, on December 2, 1842.<sup>52</sup> The 685-ton *Fairfield* packet, from New York City to New Orleans, followed on September 16, 1844, when it was wrecked on Elbow Key with a cargo of dry goods and hardware.

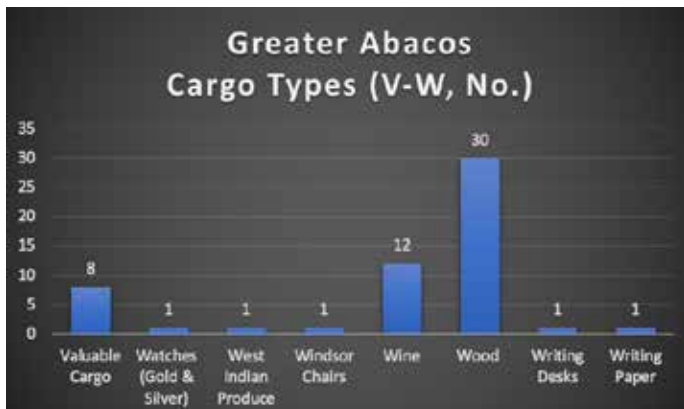
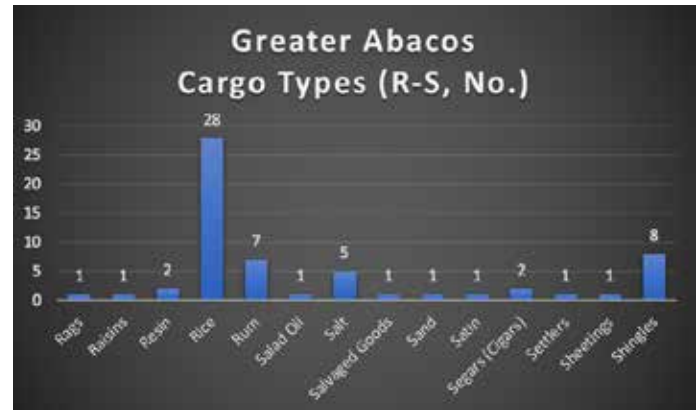
### **INVENTION OF THE SCHOONER**

“The origin of the distinctively Yankee type is one of the cherished traditions of New England. In the year 1713 or 1714 Captain Andrew Robinson, of Gloucester, built a vessel of two masts, bearing on each a fore-and-aft sail set from a gaff and boom, with a jib forward. The model was sharp; the vessel was designed, as Gloucester craft ever have been, for speed as well as for seaworthiness. As the unique two-master was launched, she glided so swiftly and gracefully over the water that an enthusiastic spectator cried, ‘See how she scoons!’ Thereupon worthy Captain Robinson, who had been puzzled to find a name for his odd craft, instantly replied, ‘A schooner let her be!’ This word, which had reference at the outset only to the peculiar qualities of Captain Robinson’s hull model, came by natural and easy transfer to characterize the two-masted fore-and-aft rig, which was destined to stand for a century and a half as the favorite and distinctive rig of American waters.”

*Marvin, W.L., The American Merchant Marine. Its History and Romance from 1602-1902 (New York, 1902), 22*



Figs. 26-33. Types of cargoes documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the Greater Abaco region. Photos: © Allen Exploration.



Figs. 34-40 Types of cargoes documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project as sunk in the reater Abaco region. Photos: © Allen Exploration.

The ship struck the shore at about 20 minutes before midnight in relatively calm seas, and by morning the water had reached the cabin floor.<sup>53</sup>

The 97-ton packet schooner *Lady Warrington* was heading from Baltimore to Port Isabel in Texas with provisions for US troops when it went to pieces off Little Harbor, Abaco, on June 24, 1846.<sup>54</sup> The vast 1,500-ton *Gallia* packet was traveling from New York City to Havre, France, on its regular route when it was lost with its cargo and passengers off Green Turtle Key on October 29, 1852.<sup>55</sup> The 1,000-ton *New York* packet, New York for Mobile, lost on February 6, 1856, may have been sailing in ballast but the value of the \$60,000 vessel made salvage worthwhile.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the 260-ton *Charles*



A. Coe brig packet and its assorted cargo, owned by Messrs. Smallwood, Anderson & Co., New York City for St. Marks, Florida, succumbed to the elements on November 21, 1856 off Elbow Cay Reef.<sup>57</sup>

The 189 types of cargo registered in The Bahamas Lost Ships Project's inven-

tory for the Greater Abaco region (Figs. 26-40) include everything imaginable from Spanish aguardiente alcohol from Tenerife to missionary books shipped from New Haven. Other sunk alcoholic beverages included ale, brandy, cider, gin, rum and wine. Foodstuffs were more common, with a veritable shopping list of essentials wrecked, ranging from herring, mackerel, apples, bananas, beef, bread, butter, cheese, coconuts, coffee, flour (36 shipments), ham and limes to mustard, olive oil, onions, oranges, pepper, pickles, pineapples, pork, potatoes, rice (28 cargoes), salt and tea.

Blankets, boots, Indian calicoes, cotton, estopillas cloth, hats, hides, Chinese nankeens (yellow cloth),

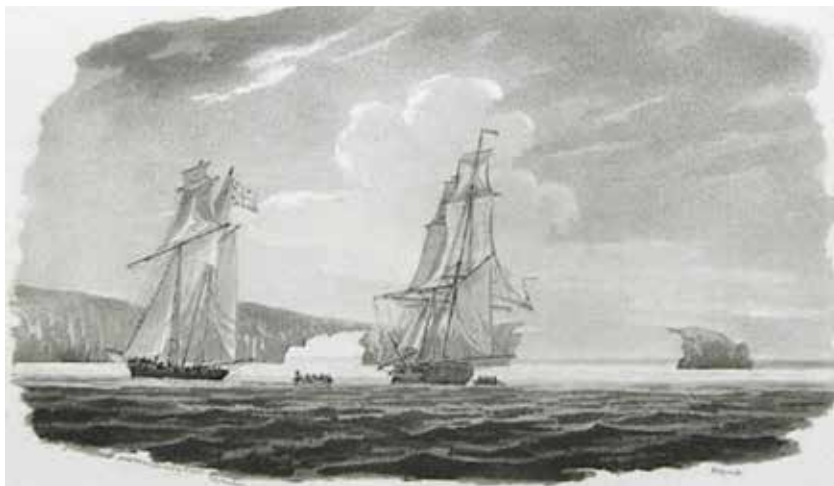


Fig. 41. The navigational landmark at Hole-in-the-wall at the southern end of Great Abaco Island. From *Naval Chronicle*, January-July 1803.

osnaburg fabric, shoes (10 cargoes) and silk cloth and clothing were carefully stowed in dry holds. Those with a taste for luxury hoped for the safe arrival of gigs and harnesses, logwood, looking glasses, marble, cigars, turtle shell, gold and silver watches and even Castille soap, Panama hats

and Windsor chairs. The character of eight cargoes loosely described as "valuables" remains enigmatic.

The war machine lost various supplies, such as ammunition wagons, cannon, gunpowder, horses, military uniforms, muskets, bayonets and pistols, naval stores and ten consignments of provisions for US troops. Soldiers themselves were wrecked on three occasions. Unusual cargoes included ten shipments of ice, railroad iron, locomotives and, on one occasion, salvaged goods wrecked a second time.

Ice and logwood (7 cargoes) comprise intriguing shipments. Ice sank on ten American consignments heading mainly from Boston, but also New

### THE HOLE-IN-THE-WALL LANDMARK

"The 'Hole in the Wall' is in a rocky point at the south end of Abaco, the most northern of the Bahama Islands.

It is the land generally made by vessels from Europe and the American continent, when bound to New Providence; as well as to the Havannah and the Mexican gulph, by such as prefer this passage to that of the 'Old Bahama Channel.'

What the Providence pilots call white water, extends a short distance from the point, yet there is no danger but what can be easily avoided in the day time. The sea is so very transparent that the bottom can plainly be distinguished at a considerable depth...

The perforation in the rock was most probably occasioned by the force of the waves in eastern gales, it being exposed in that direction to the whole reach of the Western Ocean; and it would seem from the form of the detached rock, as well as the point of the island, that they once joined.

The Providence privateers found this a very productive cruising ground during the late war, owing to the quantity of contraband articles smuggled by the Americans to the Havannah and the other Spanish settlements. Under shelter of this island they were enabled to examine suspicious vessels with security, and the Admiralty-Court at Nassau was but a short day's sail from it."

*The Naval Chronicle* 9 (1803), 440

York City, to St Joseph in Florida, New Orleans and Attakapas in Louisiana, Mobile, Tampico in Mexico, and Havana, Cuba, between May 1818 and July 1860. The trade in ice was often composite, with dry goods, general cargo, lumber, furniture, shoes, passengers and even locomotives stowed in the same holds or carried on the same ship. By apparent ill luck, two ships from Boston hauling ice, both called *Cicero*, sank in May 1818 and May 1860.

The ten most numerous lost consignment types were:

- Lumber/Timber: 59 (including 11 yellow pine, 3 cedar, 2 white pine, 1 hard pine, 1 pitch pine)
- Wood: 36 (including 8 shooks, 8 sugar box shooks, 5 scantling boards, 3 mahogany, 3 staves, 2 boards, 2 pine boards, 2 spars, 1 lignum vitae, 1 posts, 1 white oak staves)
- Flour: 36 (1 in barrels)
- Ballast: 35
- Rice: 28
- Passengers: 20
- Sugar: 19 (including 2 in hogsheads, 1 in bags, 1 in casks, 1 muscovado)
- Candles: 15
- Coal: 15
- Lard: 15

## 5. Slave Ships

Within the sample of lost ships in the greater Abaco region, both the wrecks of merchant vessels trafficking enslaved peoples from West Africa to the Americas, and equipment, cargoes and commodities linked to the colonial plantation economy for cultivating sugar and coffee in Cuba between 1704 and 1887 are highly conspicuous. The nature of this trade and wrecks are discussed in a stand-alone edition of *Ocean Dispatches*.<sup>58</sup>

The ships concerned were lost between 1767 and 1887. Of the 14 vessels wrecked while trafficking enslaved peoples over this 93-year period, 11 or 78% were US flagged, one Spanish and the nationality of two are unknown. The number of the trafficked humans in a single vessel ranged from 15 people on the *Atalanta*, heading from Charleston for New Orleans in 1806,<sup>59</sup> to 400 people trafficked by Captain Rich on the American schooner the *Peter Mowell* in 1860.<sup>60</sup>

## 6. Departures & Destinations

Of all the wrecks The Bahamas Lost Ships Project recorded in the Greater Abaco zone, 477 or 85% are scattered around Abaco Island, 37 off Grand Bahama Island and 36 on the east, northeast and southeast flanks of the Little Bahama Bank. Hot spots identified around Abaco consist of 47 wrecks off Elbow Key, 22 at or near Man-of-War Key, 20 off Green Turtle Key, 18 in the vicinity Hole-in-the-Wall, 16 off Spanish Key, 14 at or near Allen's Cay, 13 off Fish Key (and another four within 5 miles of it) and 12 lost ships at Guano Key (Figs. 8-9).

The sailing patterns identified off the Greater Abaco area differ greatly from the western Little Bahama Bank. American-flagged vessels account for 52% of wrecks in the western Little Bahama Bank area, British ships for 24% and Spanish for 13%.<sup>61</sup> The ships wrecked there originated in and were heading to far-flung ports. Most departures began their last leg in the USA (74 ships) and Cuba (41 ships). Overall, the vessels set sail from one of 13 countries. Their destinations lay in 25 nations or regions that were far more distant, ranging from Antigua to Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain and West Africa. The top five most common destinations were the United States (52 ships and 38% of the sample), 12 Cuba (17 or 12.5%), England (16 or 12%), Spain (10 or 7%) and The Bahamas (9 or 6.5%) .

The origins of the ships lost off the Greater Abaco area, by contrast, were much broader at 27 countries and regions, ranging from Antigua, The Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil and Canada, the Canary Islands to Jamaica, Scotland, Tenerife and the USA. Out of a sample of 504 wrecks, the USA dominated shipping at 80% of all losses. The next three most frequent origins consist of Cuba (5%), The Bahamas (3.7%) and England (1.7%) (Fig. 42).

The ships crossing the Greater Abaco region when they sank were heading for 21 countries or regions (Fig. 43). From a sample of 493 lost ships for which data exist, the overwhelming majority (211 ships, 43%) were destined for US ports. The highest number of destination ports were located in Louisiana, Alabama and Texas in the Gulf of Mexico. New Orleans dominated the US destination ports at 88 ships lost off the Greater Abaco, followed by Mobile with 36 losses. North of the Gulf of Mexico,



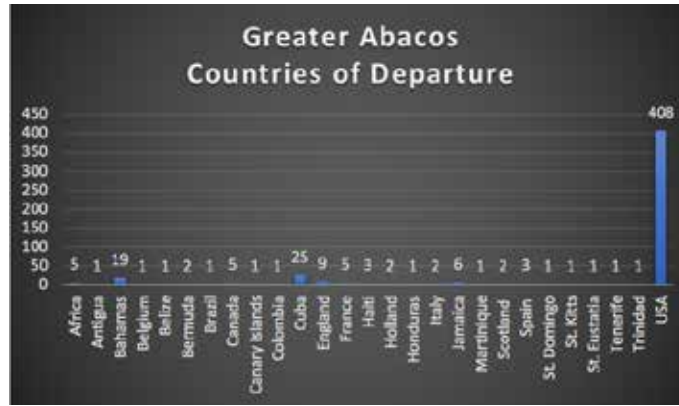
New York City (10 ships), Pensacola (7), Key West (6) and Tampa Bay (5) are significantly represented intended destinations.

The next most common destinations for the ships sunk off Greater Abaco were Cuba at 36.5% of the sample (180 losses) and The Bahamas (9.7%, 48 losses). In Cuba, Havana (130 losses) and Matanzas (28) dominated. Forty of the ships heading for The Bahamas aimed for Nassau, New Providence.

The high predominance of vessels sunk off Greater Abaco both originating in the USA and heading for American ports has led The Bahamas Lost Ships Project's lead researcher, James Jenney, to hypothesize that this area was exploited by US shipping as the most efficient sea lane for sailing between the coast of America and the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba and the West Indies. The shipping lane that passed through Greater Abaco was evidently highly familiar to captains working in the Americas. By stark contrast, very little has been written about this route in navigational guides. A few supporting historical sources, however, reinforce this theory.

On August 31, 1807, George Coggeshall sailed from New York for Vera Cruz on the *Hamilton* with a rich cargo of German and English goods under the command of John Waller and a crew of 15 men. Their crossing sailed by way of Turk's Island on the southern periphery of The Bahamas. On a second voyage on the *Hamilton* in December 1808, again from New York to Vera Cruz, the ship reached Turks Island in 10 days, safely navigated through the adjacent passage and ran down between Cuba and Jamaica. In all, the voyage from New York took 23 days.<sup>62</sup>

Many years later, Coggeshall left New York for Havana in the schooner *Swan* on April 27, 1823.



The large Baltimore-built vessel, three years old, had a 234-ton capacity. The ship was armed with four six-pounder cannon, muskets, swords and pistols to protect the valuable freight that included 1,598 doubloons. The ship's route followed the south end of Abaco Island,

where Hole-in-the-Wall, a natural arch and navigational landmark (Fig. 41), was reached on Friday, May 9. From there, the *Swan* steered westward around the Great and Little Isaac Rocks – 70-100 feet high conspicuous landmarks – rather than crossing over the Great Bahama Bank, keeping in white water close to the western bank edge at 8-9 knots per hour to avoid being pulled into the Gulf Stream.

Coggeshall and the *Swan* next aimed for the island of "Bermini" (Bimini), from where they sailed all day along the western edge of the bank under the lee of the small islands generally running north/south and described as renowned good harbors for pirates and wreckers. The *Swan* then passed within a mile and a half of Cat Key bearing 12-15 miles south-southeast of Double-headed Shot Keys. After being chased by a local pirate schooner, the schooner hauled in for Cuba.<sup>63</sup>



Figs. 42-43. Countries of departure & destination documented by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project for the vessels sunk in the Greater Abaco region. Photos: © Allen Exploration.

Edmund Blunt's *American Coast Pilot*, first published in 1804, was an early work to identify the Greater

Abaco sea route and how the Bahama Bank and adjacent keys "lie directly in the course of all vessels bound to New Orleans and Havana" but nevertheless have "long been the dread of our West India mariners..."<sup>64</sup>

Knowledge about this navigational route was backed up by Charles Philippe de Kerhallet in his *General Examination of the Atlantic Ocean* of 1870, which described how "In leaving the USA for the Havana or Gulf of Mexico, you can also pass through

the Northwest Providence Channel, and on reaching the Florida Channel, keep along the western edge of the Great Bahama Bank... You can besides by taking the Crooked Island Passage, reach Havana through the Old Bahama Channel.”<sup>65</sup>

The reason for following the circuitous nature of this route, as opposed to sailing north/south along the coast of America, is believed to be caused by the complexities of understanding and navigating the Gulf Stream and the waters filled with sandbanks that it created. David’s Steel’s *Atlantic and West-Indian Navigator* of 1804 clearly did not yet understand this force of nature. Steel wrote how the Florida or Gulf Stream set violently around the Dry Tortugas islands and along the Florida Reef and that “In this course, finding a passage through the Gulf of Florida, it sets in a great and powerful stream to the northward into the Atlantic, and forms one of the most remarkable facts on the face of the ocean.”<sup>66</sup>

As Blunt explained, sailors “require no ordinary skill and knowledge to avoid those extensive and intricate shoals that line our shores, rendered still more dangerous by rapid currents and eddies peculiar to the American seas, and by a strong current running counter to the Gulf Stream...” To make matters even more complex, Blunt’s readings determined that as late as 1822, extant maps were largely inaccurate. “In almost every instance, the old charts have been found to be incorrect in the delineation of the coast, the depth of channels, and the extent of shoals,” he wrote.<sup>67</sup>

## 7. Abaco Wreckers

At least 263 ships listed in The Bahamas Lost Ships Project database were salvaged by local wreckers. What was recovered was always a matter of chance dependent on an interplay of forces: a storm’s ferocity, how and in what environment a ship settled, how quickly a vessel sank and the degree to which it formed a wreck or was destabilized by marine forces. Sometimes, all hands and the cargo were saved, on other occasions just the crew. The typical outcome was a mix of both.

By way of example, just \$12,000 of the \$75,000 minimum cargo value carried by the *De Witt Clinton*, New York City for New Orleans and cast away at Elbow Cay in January 1832, was recovered and subsequently sold in Nassau for half that value.<sup>68</sup>

Some 25% of the *Equator*’s cargo, valued at between \$100,000 and \$200,000 and wrecked at Umbrella Key, could be salvaged in September 1839.<sup>69</sup> Just 10% of the *Fairfield*’s American-flagged cargo of dry goods and hardware were saved off Elbow Key in September 1844.<sup>70</sup> Salvors of the *Charlotte* managed to bring up and sell 850 of the ship’s 1,661 bales of cotton lost off Hog Cay Reef in March 1852.<sup>71</sup> Just 20% of the *Navasota*’s hogsheads and bags of sugar, stranded on a reef between Spanish Cay and Powells Cay, could be saved and taken to Nassau in May 1876.<sup>72</sup> At the other extreme, about two-thirds of the *Catharine*’s valuable cargo of sperm oil and candles was salvaged and taken to Nassau after it was stranded on Green Turtle Key in January 1839.<sup>73</sup>

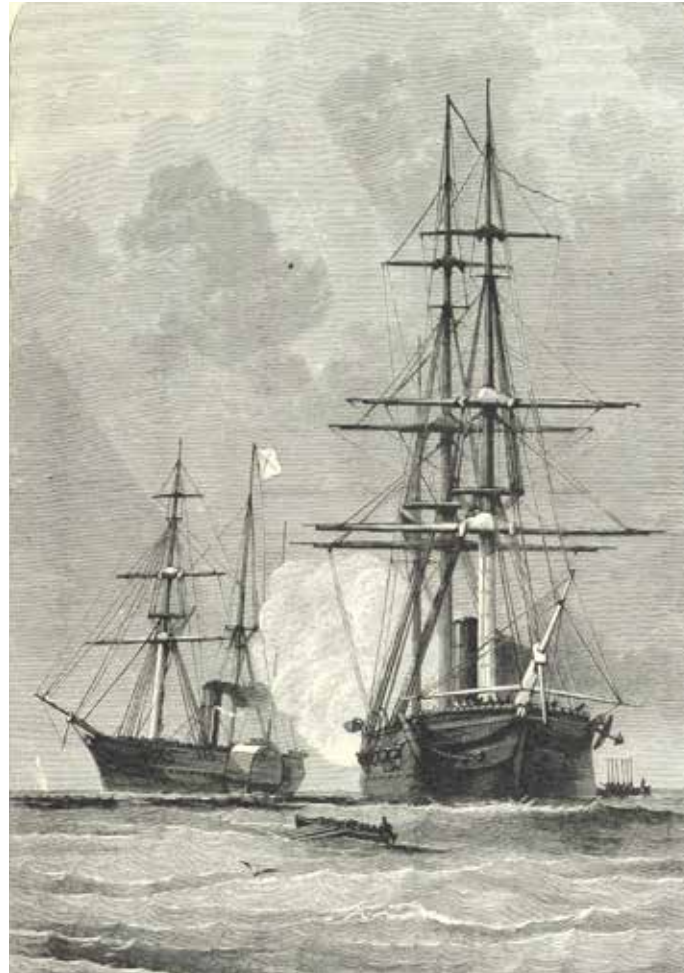
Wrecks often attracted multiple salvors. Twenty wrecker ships notably tried their luck on the *Robert Russell*, New Orleans for Liverpool, England, after it sank with cotton and logwood at Sandy Key off western Grand Bahama Island in February 1834.<sup>74</sup> Five schooners together stripped the packet ship *Trenton*’s hardware and dry goods, intending to sail for New Orleans, of \$15,000 in December 1843 and even set fire to the hull off Man-of-War Key to salvage its metal fasteners.<sup>75</sup> A dozen wrecking vessels converged on the *Sentinel* in April 1856 after it ran ashore on Leonard’s Cay, despite its low-value and partly unrecoverable cargo of ice and shoes.<sup>76</sup>

The split of the salvaged profits is reported in the historical records from time to time, which reveals what a disruption and financial hit wreckage always caused, even for insured shipping. The percentages wreckers could expect often depended on the difficulty of a salvage operation. The *Hornet* took 50% of recoveries (most of the cargo and rigging) made from the *George* lost off Stranger’s Key while sailing for the Gulf of Mexico in October 1835 with hardware and dry goods.<sup>77</sup>

At the far extreme, the schooner *James Power* took 70% of the profits recovered off Man-of-War Key from the schooner *Sterling*, southbound from Wilmington to New Orleans in March 1844 with pitch, tar, turpentine and rosin.<sup>78</sup> The salvors of the 91,653 feet of lumber cargo onboard the 40-year-old Charleston trader the *Aurora*, after its loss off Green Turtle Key in November 1856, were granted a 70% recovery award as well; the timber was later sold at \$12 per thousand feet.<sup>79</sup> Wreckers



Fig. 44. Confederate diplomats Mason and Slidell being removed by the USS *San Jacinto* on November 8, 1861 (at right) from the British mail steamer *Trent* in the Old Bahama Channel. Photo: *Le Monde Illustré* 1861, Library of Congress.



received a high of 80% of the profits from a cargo of provisions salvaged from the *Joseph Henry* off Green Turtle Key in September 1853.<sup>80</sup>

Profits sometimes fluctuated within single ships depending on states of preservation and, hence, profit potential. Salvors of the 800-ton *Michael Angelo* lost off Grand Bahama Island in January 1861, worked the ship's 2,450 bales of cotton, 1,960 staves and four packages of merchandise in return for 40% for dry cargo and 50% for wet cargo; it was a risk, but ultimately 2,008 bales of cotton were salvaged dry.<sup>81</sup> The sales profits

achieved at auction typically amounted to a fraction of a ship's value. The *Miranda* and its cargo may have been insured for \$8,000 when it capsized off Grand Guana Key Reef in August 1837, but the wreck sold for just \$30.<sup>82</sup>

After Captain Malloy's ship the *C.P. Williams* was wrecked in March 1840 near Hole-in-the-Wall after following a decoy revolving light shoreward, presumably shone by criminal wreckers, the sale of the vessel and its dry goods, lumber and ice, valued jointly at \$29,000, made just \$500.<sup>83</sup> The wrecked hull of the packet ship *Gallia*, sunk in October 1852 while sailing from New York City to Havre,

France, made a meager \$800 at auction against its near \$80,000 operative value.<sup>84</sup> The wreckers of the *Emma Frances* had to make do with their 50% split

### THE SAN JACINTO & WRECKERS OF ABACO

"The United States steam sloop-of-war *San Jacinto*, rendered famous as being the vessel which, in November, 1861, under command of Capt. WILKES, took from on board the British steamer *Trent* the rebel commissioners, SLIDELL and MASON, when on their way as Ministers of the Southern Confederacy to France and England, was wrecked on a reef of No Name Key, on the Bahama Banks, on the morning of the 1st inst. [1865], particulars of which were published in yesterday's *TIMES*.

At the time of her loss she was the flagship of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, and commanded by Capt. R.W. MEADE. The day previous to her wreck she had been chasing a blockade-runner, which escaped by reaching neutral waters...

The wreckers of the Bahama Banks are a peculiar class of men. Nearly all negroes or creoles, strong, daring and inured to hardships, good seamen, and well acquainted with every reef and current in the gulf stream and the adjacent waters, they will put out to sea in the darkest night and in the most threatening weather, lured only by the hopes of picking up a few boxes or bales from some stranded ship or perhaps only a few masts and spars. Their vessels are usually small sloops, light, swift, and of but little draft. They are frequently the property of small capitalists of Nassau, Abaco or Key West, and are manned by a captain, mate and three or four hands. The Bahama Banks, Abaco, the Little Bahamas and the Hole-in-the-Wall are the localities most frequented by the wreckers. Here they lie waiting for what Providence may send them. A dark night and a stormy sea, it may be supposed, they pray for. A wreck is, indeed, a prize, but a vessel in

of the poor return of \$25 of salvaged materials after the ship was lost off Man-of-War Key in February 1853.<sup>85</sup> Just \$4,000 of the *Mataoka's* \$30,000-worth of sugar from Demarara in Guyana could be saved off Grand Bahama Island in December 1876.<sup>86</sup>

Rarely were cargoes or hulls too modest to attract the attention of salvors. Even though the *Teazer* of New York was in ballast when it sank traveling southbound in January 1845, the wreckers stripped the ship's materials off Elbow Key for a return of \$685.<sup>87</sup> The brig *Ashland* was worked in March 1846 off Gilpin Bay, Abaco, although its cargo consisted of 1,300 unappealing barrels of bread for government troops.<sup>88</sup> Most of the *Walter Hoxie's* cargo, which included 400 barrels of Rhode Island potatoes lost off Elbow Reef in in September 1851, was auctioned off.<sup>89</sup> In March 1854, salvors persisted in stripping the *James Wright*, destination New Orleans, of its cargo of ice and general cargo, including furniture and dry goods, down to recovering its ballast before declaring the ship a loss off Barnett's Point.<sup>90</sup> The 1,000-ton *New York* was an eager prospect for wreckers in February 1856 despite the reality that it was again sailing in ballast; blocks and tackle, sails, cordage, anchors and other fittings were saved from the \$60,000 vessel.<sup>91</sup>

The names of Bahamian salvage ships survive in a minority of instances. The *Triton* ship that saved the

crew of the *William Keais* north of Hole-in-the-Wall in March 1816, while sailing from Georgetown to New Orleans, was based in New Orleans.<sup>92</sup> In February of the following year, Captain Baker's ship the *Sisters* salvaged "wrecked articles" from the *Frances Mary* off Stranger's Key.<sup>93</sup>

The salvage schooners *Francis* and *Jasper*, alongside the *Two Brothers* sloop, saved part of the *Elizabeth's* rice, sails and rigging in March 1836 after it ran aground at Carter's Key; the crew were saved but the ship was a total loss.<sup>94</sup> The sloop *Ann* and other wreckers salvaged 120 hogsheads of molasses from the brig *Cornelia*, heading for Boston from Cuba, also with Havana cigars, when it was lost on Grand Bahama Island in March 1837; the molasses was trans-shipped from Nassau to Newport, Rhode Island.<sup>95</sup> In April 1852, seven wreckers from Grand Bahama Island drowned while bringing up cotton from the *Duke* in "tempestuous weather."<sup>96</sup>

In November 1855 the *Spy* worked the New Orleans-bound *Mary Ward* after it struck Elbow Cay, although the trader was in ballast.<sup>97</sup> The schooner *Violin* took 75% profit from the *William Skinner's* "valuable" cargo, including coal, when it hit Spanish Cay off Abaco in December 1856.<sup>98</sup> The *Trial* recovered most of the *Hudson's* mixed cargo of carpeting, nails, slates, memo books, letter paper; various linens and axes after it ran ashore on Elbow

distress is not to be despised. So soon as a wreck is signed, away dash the wrecking-schooners, the one which reaches it first, according to wrecking laws, claiming it as a prize. A swift schooner is therefore an absolute necessity to the wrecker. If the vessel should only show signals of distress without being absolutely a wreck, the wreckers offer their assistance and do not disdain to make a hard bargain, even when many lives hang upon the result. But a derelict vessel is what they most desire to meet with. Instances have been known of a wrecking-master making a fortune in a single trip by coming up with a vessel abandoned by its crew. By law he can then claim the whole vessel and cargo as his. As a general thing, however, all that a wrecker can hope to get from a stranded ship are a few boxes or bales of damaged goods, and a few roasts, spars and planks. With the result of his night's work, he proceeds usually to Nassau, and there disposes of the articles. In the case of the *San Jacinto*, the wreckers were probably driven off by the English and American war steamers that came to her assistance, and the vessel will not, therefore, prove a total loss to the Government pecuniarily. The frightful storms which rage in these waters at this season of the year, the blind reefs and perplexing currents give the wreckers ample employment, and render this portion of the coast a terror to the mariner. More wrecks take place here than in any other portion of the world, and it is affirmed that the inhabitants of Nassau are, in a great measure, dependent for their support on the wrecking trade. It is certain that an enormous quantity of wrecked goods are annually sold here at merely nominal prices, money being scarce on the Island."

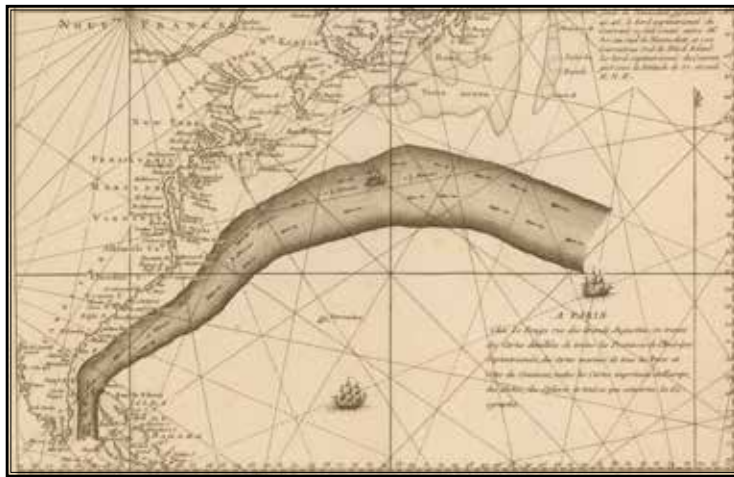
*New York Times*, January 17, 1865: 8



Key in March 1855.<sup>99</sup>

Off Fish Cay the *Carleton* successfully worked the *Ellen Hayden*, sailing in ballast for Cuba in 1859.<sup>100</sup> The competitive nature of The Bahamas' salvors is all too conspicuous in the name of the wrecking ship the *Outdo* that recovered yellow pine lumber from the *Serafina* when it was en route for Havana in October 1860.<sup>101</sup> The schooner *Undine* brought up most of the brigantine *Jennie Clark*'s cargo lost off Crossing Rocks, Abaco, in May 1871.<sup>102</sup> When the *Anna M. Knight* was lost off southeast Abaco in May 1876 while heading for Cuba with lumber, the *Challenge* recovered the crew, part of the cargo and ship's materials to Nassau.<sup>103</sup> The *Darling* wrecker brought in additional salvors from Green Turtle Cay to work the 104-foot *Bright Star*'s cargo of molasses, melado and palm leaf after the schooner hit Stranger's Cay on the eastern Little Bahama Bank in 1878 while heading from New York City for Cuba.<sup>104</sup>

The administrators who managed the auction of salvaged goods are occasionally recorded. So, an unidentified ship's cargo of "25 tierces of rice, sails, rigging, anchors, cables, cambouse, boat, &c." was sold at public auction at the wharf of R.W. Elliot & Co. in Nassau in April 1808.<sup>105</sup> In June 1819 the *Sarah Ann* wrecking sloop brought "stranded materials to Baillou & Rae," a firm of marine agents who represented the dispersal of salvaged goods by auction in Nassau.<sup>106</sup> Part of the sugar and coffee stored in bags and boxed cigars lost on the Spanish schooner



Figs 45-46. The first true chart of the Gulf Stream, by Benjamin Franklin and Timothy Folger, 1768. From *Remarques sur la Navigation de Terre-Neuve a New York Afin d'Eviter les Courrants et les Bas-fonds au Sud de Nantucket et du Banc de George* (Paris, 1782).

the *Marinero* off Grand Bahama Island in August 1837, sailing for Cadiz from Havana, was publicly auctioned at Nassau "by the order of John F. Cooke, Esq. for and on account of the underwriters and others therein concerned."<sup>107</sup> The cargo of the *Catherine* salvaged off Grand Bahama Island was sold in June 1907 at Warehouse No. 3 of H.F. Armbrister in Nassau, New Providence.<sup>108</sup>

Not all cargoes and hulls fished up off the Greater Abaco region were auctioned at Nassau. Some materials, such as from the *Joseph Henry* (1853) and *Rebecca Fogg* (1857), were sold off at Green Turtle Cay.<sup>109</sup> Disposing of wrecked goods beyond the view of Nassau's Vice Admiralty Court may have allowed crews to retain higher profits, which may explain why the *Mary Jane*, *William Edward* and *Resolute* were content to agree to a split of just 35% for the *Bennington*'s profits in 1858; the salvaged cargo was partly taken to Moore's Island.<sup>110</sup> Salvors took 75% of profits from the *Lodi* after it sank near the Double Breaster Keys in May 1859 and its 150,000 feet of white pine lumber were sold at Green Turtle Cay.<sup>111</sup>

Materials from the *Hattie S. Emery* (December 1869), lost 2 miles off No Name Cay with sugar box shooks and hoops,<sup>112</sup> the *Florence Mayo* stranded off Marina Cay (provisions, February 1876),<sup>113</sup> the *Lunt* sunk near Stranger's Cay (yellow pine lumber, November 1876),<sup>114</sup> the *William A. Marburg* off Spanish Cay (pebble stones, May 1892),<sup>115</sup> the *Albertine Adoue*



wrecked near Hog Cay, Abaco (938 tons of coal, March 1894)<sup>116</sup> and the sinking off Abaco Reef of the *Amelia Hearn* (ballast, May 1902)<sup>117</sup> were again all sold at auction at Green Turtle Cay.

Other wrecked goods were sold on Abaco Island. These included materials saved from a reef near Fish Cay, Abaco, on the *Maria* and its cargo of 90,000 feet of yellow pine lumber, 25 barrels of tar and 15 barrels of rosin in March 1860,<sup>118</sup> as well as yellow pine lumber lost near Man-of-War Cay en route for Havana from St Mary's, Georgia, on the *Serafina* in October of the same year.<sup>119</sup> The potatoes, herring and empty hogsheads on the New York City to Cuba-bound *Pajaro* were also landed at Abaco in December 1876.<sup>120</sup> The reason for selling off goods outside Nassau was almost certainly due to local contacts: the wreckers of the *B.S. Kimball*, for instance, wrecked off Elbow Cay Reef in October 1867, worked out of Elbow Cay and Green Turtle Cay.<sup>121</sup>

## 8. Conclusion: Profit & Terror

The historical accounts for the Greater Abaco region examined by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project reveal a major cluster of 596 shipwrecks wrecked in this zone. This number is 340% times greater than for the wrecks identified off the western Little Bahama Bank. The vessels concerned met their fates between 1657 and 1945 and were dominated by schooners (212 or 45%) and brigs (173 or 37%). Most ships succumbed to stranding after striking shallow reefs and shoals.

The wide variety of cargo forms and details describing how the ships were lost underscores the vitality of the sources for reconstructing the maritime history of The Bahamas. Archaeology and history must work in tandem to develop the fullest models of shipping histories. Many of the lost cargoes, such as Bibles, cigars, coconuts, coffee, hats, ice, and pickles, simply cannot be expected to survive in the archaeological record.

The catch-all term shipwreck conceals the truth that no universal type of maritime casualty exists. Sometimes, a ship and crew survived largely intact. The crew reached the shore alive at others, but their ship was a write-off. Then, there's the Greater Abaco's own version of the *Mary Celeste*: when the 550-ton American schooner *Mary Lee Patton* ran

ashore on Hog Cays in 1905, the table was set for dinner, but the crew had vanished.

The sources reinforce the theoretical accuracy of different sections of a ship breaking apart, as has been hypothesized for the missing stern section of the Spanish galleon the *Nuestra Señora de las Maravillas* off the western Little Bahama Bank. By way of example in the Greater Abaco region, when the American packet *Russell Baldwin* struck a reef near Man-of-War Keys in 1838, its upper deck broke free and drifted safely ashore with its passengers onboard. The stern was all that survived from the 192-ton American brig *Potosi* in 1855. Different sections of ships can readily break apart and survive or be destroyed.

The sea route running southward down the east side of Abaco Island to the Northeast Providence Channel and Northwest Providence Channel served as a major shipping lane for three centuries. Ships from small spongers to the US Navy's 2,200-ton *San Jacinto* (Fig. 44) and the 3,500 tons of general cargo on the 1920s steamship *Wisconsin Bridge*<sup>122</sup> all exploited "the dread of our West India mariners" and succumbed to the area's "frightful storms." But why? If the Greater Abaco region was so deadly, why risk its hazards?

Nothing in the historical accounts suggests the vast shipping drawn to the area sailed these waters for regional commercial reasons, trading along the way. So, the dominant reason can only be that the shipping was compelled to. This report demonstrates for the first time how long-term shipping in the Greater Abaco region was dominated by vessels originating in and destined for ports in the United States. A total of 434 shipwrecks and 80% of the sample were American. British losses accounted for 10.5% of the casualties, followed by 3.1% for Spain and 2.9% for The Bahamas. As explained, despite the documented ships departing from 28 countries, an overwhelming 81% left from a US port, followed far behind by Cuba (4.9%) and The Bahamas (3.7%). When lost, 42.7% of these ships were heading for US ports followed by Cuba (36.5%) and The Bahamas (9.7%).

Whereas logic would dispatch shipping for Cuba, the West Indies and wider Caribbean world through the Greater Abaco region, the mass destinations in the Gulf of Mexico seem less explicable. The



scale of the losses implies that sailing through this zone must have made the soundest economic sense. There would otherwise be little rationale to risk sailing through the Greater Abaco with enslaved people, packet ships and passengers. Traveling in ballast was avoided throughout history as a priority, yet 35 ships sailed in ballast through these waters, this project's sources reveal. The profits to be drawn from sailing fast, especially to Cuba, made the risks worthwhile.

The ultimate reason why so much shipping ex-

ploited the Greater Abaco route was the extreme troubles caused by the Gulf Stream. Specifically, seemingly, to avoid its violence around the Dry Tortugas and along the Florida Reef.<sup>123</sup> This report of The Bahamas Lost Ships Project covering the Greater Abaco region, sponsored by Allen Exploration, has thus identified a major unknown shipping lane in the history of colonial shipping and uncovered The Bahamas' key role in connecting the United States with its southern ports and those in the Gulf of Mexico.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, May 8, 1809: 3.
- <sup>2</sup> *Boston Courier*, September 1, 1837: 2.
- <sup>3</sup> *Nautical Magazine* 8, 1839: 33-34.
- <sup>4</sup> *Bridgeport Republican Farmer*, November 14, 1843: 2.
- <sup>5</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, October 31, 1866: 3.
- <sup>6</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, September 2, 1871: 2.
- <sup>7</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, November 2, 1898: 2.
- <sup>8</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, August 23, 1899: 2.
- <sup>9</sup> *Topeka State Journal*, December 17, 1900: 6.
- <sup>10</sup> *Lloyd's Registry. Returns of Vessels Totally Lost, &c*, 1st April to 30th June, 1907.
- <sup>11</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, October 7, 1908: 2.
- <sup>12</sup> *Manufacturers' and Farmers' Journal*, February 22, 1855: 2.
- <sup>13</sup> *New Orleans Price Current*, June 26, 1858: 3.
- <sup>14</sup> *New York World*, February 11, 1867: 2.
- <sup>15</sup> *Bahama News*, February 21, 1899: 3.
- <sup>16</sup> *New York Spectator*, April 17, 1847: 4.
- <sup>17</sup> *Philadelphia North American*, December 18, 1844: 1.
- <sup>18</sup> *New York Herald*, December 18, 1870: 10.
- <sup>19</sup> *New York Herald*, October 31, 1884: 1.
- <sup>20</sup> *Savannah Morning News*, February 6, 1887: 9.
- <sup>21</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, January 11, 1905: 2.
- <sup>22</sup> *Royal Gazette*, May 24, 1834: 3.
- <sup>23</sup> *Boston Post*, October 7, 1861: 3.
- <sup>24</sup> *Boston Traveler*, December 28, 1861: 3.
- <sup>25</sup> *Royal Gazette*, December 20, 1809: 3.
- <sup>26</sup> *Claypoole's Daily Advertiser*, April 20, 1792.
- <sup>27</sup> *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, December 16, 1822: 3.
- <sup>28</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, December 4, 1838: 2.
- <sup>29</sup> *Boston American Traveler*, March 6, 1858: 3.
- <sup>30</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, November 19, 1807: 3.

- <sup>31</sup> *New Bedford Evening Standard*, January 16, 1864: 2.
- <sup>32</sup> *Portland Gazette*, July 21, 1818: 3.
- <sup>33</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 18, 1839: 2.
- <sup>34</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, February 3, 1883: 2.
- <sup>35</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 21, 1865: 4.
- <sup>36</sup> *Duluth News-Tribune*, March 6, 1915: 1.
- <sup>37</sup> *New York Gazette*, December 30, 1765: 3.
- <sup>38</sup> *Boston Semi-weekly Atlas*, January 20, 1849: 4.
- <sup>39</sup> Marvin, 1902: 356.
- <sup>40</sup> Marvin, 1902: 22-24.
- <sup>41</sup> Coggeshall, 1858: 370.
- <sup>42</sup> Marvin, 1902: 24.
- <sup>43</sup> Marvin, 1902: 25.
- <sup>44</sup> *Boston Chronicle*, May 16, 1768: 2.
- <sup>45</sup> *Charleston Columbia Herald*, January 17, 1785: 2.
- <sup>46</sup> *Baltimore Telegraph and Daily Advertiser*, September 22, 1798: 2.
- <sup>47</sup> *Newburyport Herald*, May 12, 1807: 3.
- <sup>48</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, November 25, 1818: 2.
- <sup>49</sup> *New York Evening Star*, June 2, 1835: 2.
- <sup>50</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, December 4, 1838: 2.
- <sup>51</sup> *New York Spectator*, March 18, 1839: 2.
- <sup>52</sup> *New York Spectator*, January 7, 1843: 1.
- <sup>53</sup> *New York Spectator*, October 12, 1844: 2.
- <sup>54</sup> *New York Evening Express*, July 24, 1846: 3.
- <sup>55</sup> *New York Herald*, November 20, 1852: 9.
- <sup>56</sup> *New York Herald*, February 29, 1856: 9.
- <sup>57</sup> *Bahama Herald*, November 26, 1856: 2.
- <sup>58</sup> Pateman et al., 2024.
- <sup>59</sup> *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*, May 3, 1806: 3.
- <sup>60</sup> *New York Herald*, August 3, 1860: 8.
- <sup>61</sup> Jenney et al., 2023: 4, 6.
- <sup>62</sup> Coggeshall, 1858: 84, 89.
- <sup>63</sup> Coggeshall, 1858: 368-73.

- <sup>64</sup> Blunt, 1822: viii.
- <sup>65</sup> *General Examination of the Atlantic Ocean*, de Kerhallet, 1870: 152.
- <sup>66</sup> Steel, 1804: 6.
- <sup>67</sup> Blunt, 1822: vi.
- <sup>68</sup> *Boston Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, March 17, 1832: 3.
- <sup>69</sup> *New York Journal of Commerce*, October 19, 1839: 2.
- <sup>70</sup> *New York Spectator*, October 12, 1844: 2.
- <sup>71</sup> *Charleston Courier*, April 21, 1852: 3.
- <sup>72</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, June 3, 1876: 2.
- <sup>73</sup> *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, February 1, 1839: 3.
- <sup>74</sup> *Royal Gazette*, March 15, 1834.
- <sup>75</sup> *New York Spectator*, January 7, 1843: 1.
- <sup>76</sup> *Boston Daily American Traveler*, April 22, 1856: 2.
- <sup>77</sup> *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 1, 1835: 2.
- <sup>78</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, April 4, 1844: 2.
- <sup>79</sup> *Charleston Courier*, December 9, 1856: 4.
- <sup>80</sup> *Boston Statesman*, October 15, 1853: 3.
- <sup>81</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, February 20, 1861: 4.
- <sup>82</sup> *Salem Gazette*, September 12, 1837: 3.
- <sup>83</sup> *New York American for the Country*, April 28, 1840: 2.
- <sup>84</sup> *New York Herald*, November 20, 1852: 9.
- <sup>85</sup> *New York Herald*, February 24, 1853: 9.
- <sup>86</sup> *Nassau Times*, January 3, 1877: 2.
- <sup>87</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, February 21, 1845: 3.
- <sup>88</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, April 13, 1846: 3.
- <sup>89</sup> *Charleston Courier*, October 20, 1851: 2.
- <sup>90</sup> *Bahama Herald*, April 12, 1854: 2.
- <sup>91</sup> *New York Herald*, February 29, 1856: 9.
- <sup>92</sup> *New York Evening Post*, April 9, 1816: 2.
- <sup>93</sup> *The Royal Gazette*, March 1, 1817: 3.
- <sup>94</sup> *The Royal Gazette*, March 23, 1836: 3.
- <sup>95</sup> *The Royal Gazette*, March 22, 1837: 3.
- <sup>96</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, April 28, 1852: 2.
- <sup>97</sup> *Bahama Herald*, November 7, 1855: 2.
- <sup>98</sup> *New York Herald*, January 13, 1857: 8.
- <sup>99</sup> *Bahama Herald*, March 21, 1855: 2.
- <sup>100</sup> *Manufacturers' and Farmers' Journal*, April 21, 1859: 2.
- <sup>101</sup> *Baton Rouge Daily Gazette and Comet*, December 8, 1860: 4.
- <sup>102</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, May 31, 1871: 2.
- <sup>103</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, June 3, 1876: 2.
- <sup>104</sup> *Nassau Times*, October 16, 1878: 2.
- <sup>105</sup> *Royal Gazette*, April 16, 1808: 3.
- <sup>106</sup> *Royal Gazette*, June 16, 1819: 3.
- <sup>107</sup> *Royal Gazette*, August 16, 1837: 3.
- <sup>108</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, June 26, 1907: 2.
- <sup>109</sup> *Boston Statesman*, October 15, 1853: 3; *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 25, 1857: 3.
- <sup>110</sup> *Bahama Herald*, December 1, 1858.
- <sup>111</sup> *Nassau Herald*, June 4, 1859: 2.
- <sup>112</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, January 6, 1869: 3.
- <sup>113</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, February 24, 1876: 4.
- <sup>114</sup> *Nassau Times*, November 11, 1876: 2.
- <sup>115</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, May 21, 1892: 3.
- <sup>116</sup> *Nassau Guardian*, April 14, 1894: 2.
- <sup>117</sup> *New York Evening World*, May 31, 1902: 9.
- <sup>118</sup> *Bahama Herald*, March 10, 1860: 2.
- <sup>119</sup> *Baton Rouge Daily Gazette and Comet*, December 8, 1860: 4.
- <sup>120</sup> *Portland Daily Press*, January 15, 1876: 3.
- <sup>121</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, October 29, 1867: 3.
- <sup>122</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 4, 1929: 31.
- <sup>123</sup> Steel, 1804: 6.

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