

LOYALISTS AND BAHAMIANS IN EAST FLORIDA

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Hypothesis

The Loyalist and Bahamian impact was of importance to the development of peninsular Florida and the Loyalists and Bahamians influenced Florida more than any other state.

Concepts

Historical geography and regional interpretation are the analytical approaches employed here. D.W. Meinig suggests his American historical geography is both idiosyncratic and an uncommon application to historical questions (Meinig, 1986). As America's best known living practitioner of the genre, his opinion is persuasive. This limited examination of the role played by Loyalists and Bahamians in shaping peninsular Florida fits that paradigm.

Andrew W. Clark provides a classic example of a more sharply defined and focused field of historical geography in his examination of the Acadians of Nova Scotia (Ward, 1977). An examination of the relationship between Loyalists and Bahamians with the Florida peninsula must rest on the foundation of his pioneering work. Exile and emigration are integral to both studies and both are considered within the context of a historical epoch. Each work tries to analyze and describe the elusive impact of a particular people on a discrete region (Clark, 1968).

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Fernand Braudel and his colleagues of France's famous *Annales* school are pertinent to the methodology and texture of this work. *Annales* scholars employed a cross-disciplinary approach and statistical tools to define time and place (Burke, 1990). Geography was but an element which was subsumed into a broader, more scientifically based, history (Braudel, 1976). Modern historical and geographic thought have been profoundly influenced by this approach and the author is indebted to them for their inspiration.

Regionalism has evolved over time. My introduction to the field, many years ago, was the widely used treatment of Latin America by Preston James (James, 1959). That study, typical of an era in geography when comprehensive studies of large regions were common, provided a logically and systematically organized view of a region's physical and human geography. James' model has been muted by changing tastes in geography and has little to offer for this effort.

Jean Gottman's geographies brought to regionalism the same methodology and set of assumptions employed by Fernand Braudel (Gottmann, 1962). Historical developments and statistical analysis were used, as in the work of Braudel and his *Annales* colleagues, to provide a more multi-faceted and individually shaped regional explanation. Physical geography assumed a less commanding role and impressionistic treatments became more common (Gottmann, 1964).

Symbolic of the growing presence of other disciplines in the field of regional studies is the preeminence of the historian David Hackett Fischer. His study of the transfer of British regional folk traditions to discrete parts of North America defines and explains regional differences in the eastern United States. Physical geography is largely absent from his concerns and his regions are rooted in human variation. Boundaries are subtle, but real (Fischer, 1989). Fischer's example helps explain the pre-

ponderance of the human element in this study and its somewhat subjective conclusions.

Background

Florida is the fourth most populous state in the United States. It possesses a unique culture, character, and history. Seemingly endless, sun-washed beaches have lured millions of visitors and residents to a landscape starkly different from any other part of the United States. Dramatic and continuous population growth change and mask the peninsula's original character. Understanding that unique combination of people and place becomes ever more difficult. However, the state's solitary character and commanding position within the nation render the effort to understand the real cornerstone of modern Florida well worth the effort.

Loyalists and Bahamians are that cornerstone. During the American Revolution, many individuals and groups came, in one degree or another, to be identified with the cause of Great Britain. Peninsular Florida, or East Florida as it was then called, remained behind British lines for the whole of the war and almost the entire population of the region could properly be identified as Loyalist. Many other Loyalists fled from the South during the war years and joined the king's friends in East Florida (Wright, 1975). After the war, the second largest group of Florida based Loyalists sought refuge in the nearby Bahamas (the largest group returned to the United States) (Troxler, 1981). Many Loyalist influenced Bahamians later returned to Florida in a series of distinct migrations (Anderson, 1996). These varied groups of Loyalists and Loyalist influenced populations changed peninsular Florida and this study attempts to weigh their impact.

Here the Loyalist and Bahamian economic, political, and cultural contribution to peninsular Florida is placed in perspective, especially to the vital coastal areas. Data supports the claim

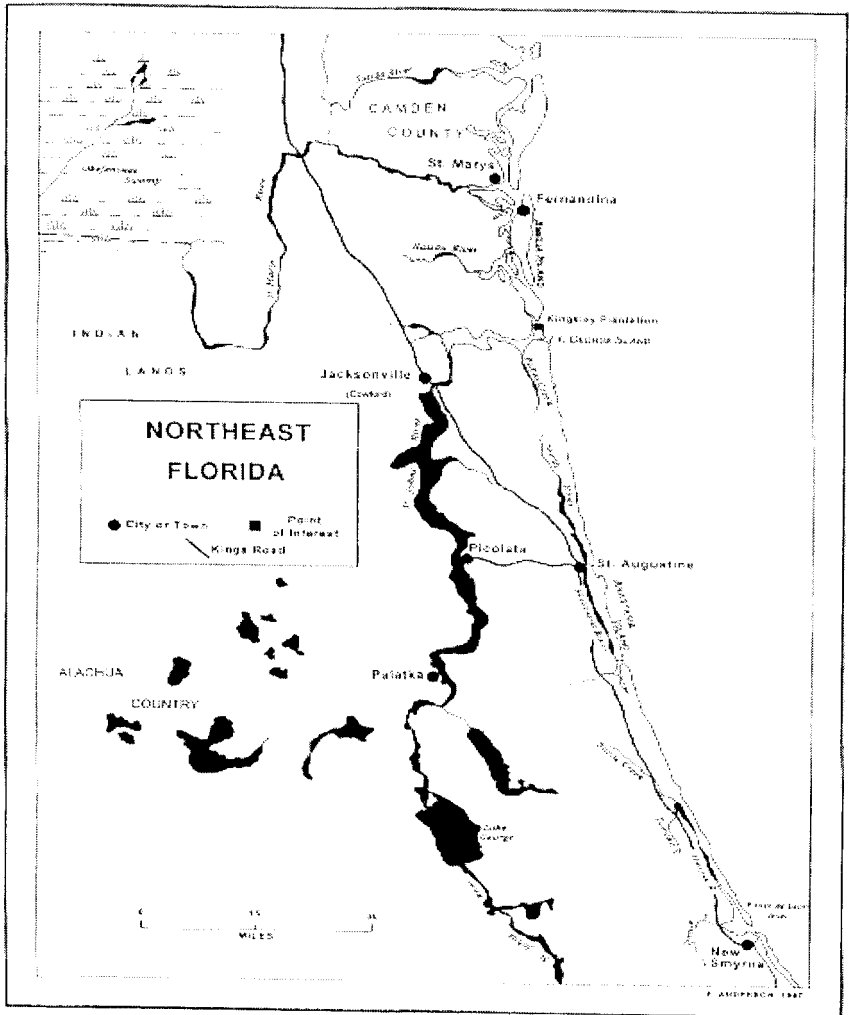
that the Loyalist and Bahamian impact was of importance to the development of peninsular Florida and that Loyalists and Bahamians influenced Florida more than any other state. The Loyalist and Bahamian contribution has long rested in relative obscurity.

The king's supporters were political refugees and displaced persons before the terms were invented. Shared experiences gradually gave them many common attitudes and traditions (Calhoun, 1973). Cultural links with the Patriot party in the United States were severed and ties with British culture strengthened. They became a distinct people in their primary refuges of Canada, the Bahamas, and Florida.

Loyalist groups formed peninsular Florida's English speaking population during the second Spanish administration (1784-1821) (Wright, 1975). They preserved the legacy of British East Florida (1763-84) which, although of short duration, laid the foundations of modern Florida's agriculture, commerce, racial attitudes, and ethos. Loyalists founded a trading empire, established a cattle industry, imported slaves, and created a coastal enclave of sugar plantations.

The Bahamas were also integral to the Florida Loyalist tradition because they were one of the primary refuges of the peninsula's Loyalists (Craton, 1986). Even more importantly, the Bahamas became the source of almost all of the return migrations of Loyalists, their slaves, and their descendants. Bahamians had been forced to adapt to their island environment and Bahamian conditions influenced both their attitudes and events in Florida. They became a more maritime people, who viewed Florida's coasts as mere extensions of their own watery world (Saunders, 1983). The effort to coax vegetables, fruits, and crops from the rocky soil of the Bahamas shaped them for a similar struggle with South Florida's rocklands (Sealey, 1985). Florida and the Bahamas are so linked by these ties that it is impossible to completely understand one without reference to the other.

Figure 1



VARIATIONS OF TIME AND PLACE

East Florida at the close of the Revolution included all of peninsular Florida and what became, after American annexation, the plantation world of Middle Florida. At the time of the Revo-

coasts of East Florida (Anderson, 1996).

Northeast Florida includes the areas first populated by Loyalist and Bahamian refugees, but the Bahamian presence is more notable today in such South Florida communities as Riviera Beach, Miami, and the Florida Keys (Figure 2). Colonial America was a coastal and maritime land and Loyalist culture reflected that condition (Cusick, 1991). As noted, the sojourn of many Loyalists in the Bahamas magnified that orientation. Today much that seems uniquely Floridian is actually that tradition written large.

Loyalists faced hard choices and difficult times in Canada, Florida, and the Bahamas (Wynn, 1987). Survival forced them to employ otherwise questionable methods (Riley, 1989). Bahamian wrecking and smuggling should be seen in that light. Incongruous as these two activities may be to their lifestyle, Bahamian immigrants earned their reputation for religiosity, respect for law, and preference for structured society (White and Smiley, 1959). The presence of these elements in the society of English-speaking Canada is hardly fortuitous (McGreevy, 1988).

All the North American Loyalist populations served, ironically, as cat's-paws for the United States. Because they spoke English and retained common cultural links with their former countrymen, American statesmen sought to use them to influence events in America's favor (Smith, 1983). Even though they frequently resented republican America and gradually shaped a distinct culture, individual Loyalists returned to the old country in a steady flow and adapted to the new American way (Calhoon, 1973). When the border of the United States advanced to include a whole Loyalist population, as at Natchez, Mississippi, they quickly became part of the general population (Pratt, 1957). It is hardly surprising that for a long time Americans regarded Loyalist populations as an excuse to annex the lands they held and, in fact, they always served as potential advance guards of American

civilization (Norton, 1972). Cultural distance, or the lack of it, proved more decisive in the end than old hatreds, and real cultural differences were less important than the bonds of a common language.

The most numerous group of Loyalists remaining in East Florida, the small farmers, faced many challenges. Ties with the nearby American community remained stronger than those maintained by other Loyalist populations. Further, that population of Loyalists contained a higher percentage of persons born in America, than Bahamian Loyalists did. One of the reasons they initially chose to remain in East Florida was the existence of greater ties to their former homes (Parker, 1990). In any event, their relatively speedy incorporation into the larger American culture seems to have been more complete and to have occurred earlier. This small group of typical Southern backlands people, who remained on both sides of the Florida/Georgia border, had few slaves. When opportunity presented, they spread through the whole of peninsular Florida (Parker, 1990). Central Florida's most famous cattle barron, Jacob Summerlin, owner of fifteen thousand head of cattle shortly after the Civil War, helped shape a Florida way-of-life and signals the importance of descendants of these backlands pioneers in shaping modern Florida (Brown, 1997 and Brown, 1991).

Many of the prominent descendants of the Loyalist remnant of East Florida remained conscious of their heritage for well over a century. Francis Philip Fleming, Florida's governor 1889-1893, and his family, descendants of British East Florida's richest and most powerful remaining settler, Francis Philip Fatio, long resided at the same location on the St. Johns (Willis, 1985). Julien C. Yonge, patron and inspiration of the well-known Florida historian, Rembert W. Patrick, is equally worth mentioning (Patrick, 1954). Their activities as shapers of opinion and values contributed to the development of the whole Florida community.

These prominent and powerful individuals remained in St. Augustine or on large holdings in the countryside, where they exercised an important commercial role in Spanish Florida. Accommodations in matters such as religion were sometimes made by them and they were usually treated with deference by the colonial authorities. They continued to exercise important leadership roles in American Florida. Both the small farmers and the Loyalist elite received additions to their number by return migrations from the Bahamas, Georgia and elsewhere (Johnson, 1989). Zephaniah Kingsley, the well known slave trader and smuggler of the St. Johns, represents an important example of an addition to the colonial elite of a return migrant (Bennett, 1989). The tide of migration varied with local and international conditions.

A small group of planters and a much larger group of their slaves returned to the sugar plantation area of Volusia, beginning in the 1790's (Boyd, 1951). Perhaps, this group preserved the strongest sense of their British identity. Their enclave maintained an almost Caribbean atmosphere and close ties with the British Empire. They certainly created the most important center of commercial agriculture in Spanish Florida and the American territory which followed (Strickland, 1963).

Large numbers of poorer white Bahamians deserted the Bahamas for Key West, starting in the 1830's. They were church-going and followed such traditional vocations as wrecking and turtling (White and Smiley, 1963; Viele, 1996). When Key Largo was settled, mahogany cutting and boat building, customary Bahamian trades, served as initial economic activities. Later they grew Bahamian style commercial crops like pineapples, tomatoes, melons, and key limes (Windhorn and Langley, 1974). Their contribution to the development of an entire Florida region remains clearly evident.

Black Bahamians migrated in large numbers to Key West and Miami. Their labor helped build the infrastructure of the

Florida Keys and the lower East Coast. An ability to produce crops from rocky soil proved especially valuable in South Florida. They dominated the local Black communities and helped perpetuate Loyalist values and traditions, such as a traditional celebration of Guy Fawkes Day in Coconut Grove (Mohl, 1987).

A small pre-Civil War settlement served as a Loyalist enclave in Manatee County. Interestingly, at least some of these migrants, came from the small and marginal Loyalist community of the Mosquito Coast. The unique culture of the county partially bears their mark (Curry, 1994).

Rivera Beach, with its access to the open sea, attracted a group of working class Bahamian fishermen in the early years of this century. They were suspected of being racially mixed and relegated to a lower social position than the Bahamian migrants to the Keys. Respect for law, a high incidence of marriage within their group, a fervent Pentecostal faith, and deep pride in their British heritage were prominent characteristics (Foster, 1991).

Florida's Loyalist experience presaged other movements to Florida. Loyalists began as political refugees, who usually reached Florida by migration. The Cuban refugees from Fidel Castro serve as a modern parallel. Who has the temerity to question their impact on Florida or the fact they represent a different cross-section of the Cuban people than their revolutionary compatriots? Both Cubans and Loyalist refugees frequently came from a richer, better educated background than their revolutionary compatriots. They have also forged separate subgroups based on class, race, and location in Florida, New Jersey, and elsewhere. Cuban Miami has a complete range of social classes and is a full partner in Florida government. Conversely, New Jersey Cubans form a niche community on the fringes of New York City which clearly lacks the complexity and clout of Miami.

Progeny of the original Loyalist remnant, no more than four hundred and fifty, who elected to remain on the peninsula,

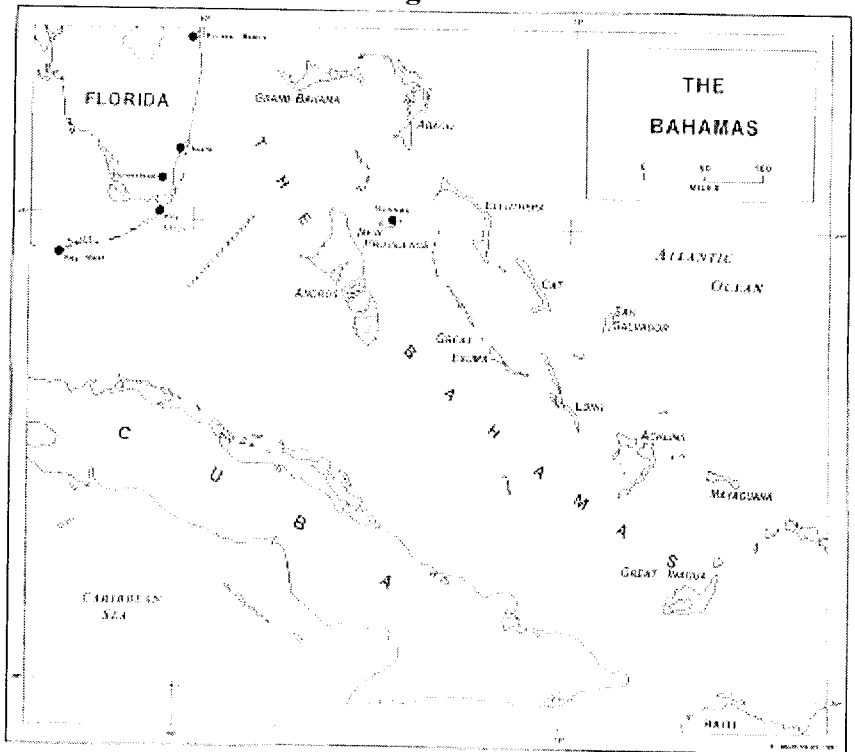
would today number but 16,500 to 30,000, if they married only among themselves (Troxler, 1981 and Parker, 1990). Intermarriage with other peoples, which certainly took place, would have yielded a present population of at least a half-million and, perhaps, a figure equal to or greater than the population of modern Florida. In any event, they are demographically significant and there is agreement among the authorities that the early arrival of such populations insures their disproportionate influence (Weber, 1992).

Loyalist numerical impact was not limited to this remnant, because others arrived as the peninsula was settled. The white Volusia planters comprised a small group, but the slaves they brought with them were more numerous and helped perpetuate the Loyalist legacy. Riley cites Thomas Brown's estimate that three thousand Bahamians deserted the islands for southern Georgia during the second Spanish period and many of them drifted farther south when conditions beckoned (Riley, 1989). Judge Curry's family migrated to a small pre-Civil War Loyalist settlement in Manatee County (Curry, 1994). Mohl believes eight thousand Bahamians lived in Key West by 1892, and that 4,815 Black West Indians, almost all from the Bahamas, lived in Miami by 1920 (Mohl, 1987). Riviera Beach, according to Foster, had a population of eight hundred by 1939, most of them Bahamians (Foster, 1991). Migration to the Florida peninsula from the islands became significant in the 1830's, and between 1900 and 1920, ten thousand to twelve thousand Bahamians, one-fifth the population of the islands, migrated. The progeny of all these population movements almost certainly equals or exceeds the present population of the Bahamas.

Conclusion

Florida proved attractive to Bahamian migrants for the same reason that Cuban refugees from Castro made the state their

Figure 3



favorite destination. It was accessible, close, and filled with their fellow Bahamians. Both Cuba and the Bahamas were so near to the peninsula and the transportation facilities so good that it would have been surprising if these two peoples had failed to colonize the state (Figure 3). Prior to the enactment of American immigration controls, movement from the Bahamas to Florida proved cheap and easy, facilitating the “pull” of a stronger economy.

Bahamian immigrants and the remnant of Loyalists, who remained on the Florida peninsula, proved significant in shaping the character of Florida. They were the original English-speakers

in almost every location where they settled, so they had a disproportionate influence on the resulting culture and landscape. Largely concentrated in coastal locations, they helped determine the future of the most populous and best known part of Florida. Loyalists initiated many new or revived forms of economic activity such as large trading enterprises, plantation agriculture, cattle ranching, importation of slaves, commercial fishing, and wrecking. Florida would have been a different place without them.

The Caribbean flavor and links of peninsular Florida with the Bahamas and West Indies were certainly enhanced by their presence. Long before tourists, winter visitors, and retirees transformed Florida, the Loyalist influenced populations had given the peninsula a culture and a destiny different from the American South. Peninsular Florida's emphasis on a water-centered lifestyle owes much to their contributions and was, in fact, anticipated by the primacy of the sea in their culture.

Cumulatively, Loyalist influenced populations form an impressive part of Florida's total. Separated by space and time, their impact is far from uniform, but the aggregate population numbers are significant. Their importance, however, transcends mere numbers and rests, instead, on a landscape which mirrors Loyalist values and choices. A glance at the map suggests this result appears almost inevitable.

The evidence in support of the hypothesis is simply overwhelming. Cattle barons, legislators (Viele, 1993), judges (Curry, 1994), governors (Tebeau, 1988), historians, plantation owners, the descendants of slaves, pioneers of South Florida's rocky soil (Mohl, 1987 and Derr, 1998), and many others created the Florida we see around us. They, and the Minorcans, were the first who came and stayed, and their imprint established a Florida landscape unique from all others.

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