

Blockade-Running in the Bahamas During the Civil War*

by THELMA PETERS

THE OPENING of the American Civil War in 1861 had the same electrifying effect on the Bahama Islands as the prince's kiss had on the Sleeping Beauty. The islands suddenly shook off their lethargy of centuries and became the clearing house for trade, intrigue, and high adventure. Nassau, long the obscurest of British colonial capitals, and with an ordinarily poor and indifferent population, became overnight the host to a reckless, wealthy and extravagant crowd of men from many nations and many ranks. There were newspaper correspondents, English navy officers on leave with half pay, underwriters, entertainers, adventurers, spies, crooks and bums. Out-islanders flocked to the little city to grab a share of the gold which flowed like water. One visitor reported that there were traders of so many nationalities in Nassau that the languages on the streets reminded one of the tongues of Babel.¹

All of this transformation of a sleepy little island city of eleven thousand people grew out of its geographical location for it was near enough to the Confederate coast to serve as a depot to receive Southern cotton and to supply Southern war needs.

England tried to maintain neutrality during the War. It is not within the scope of this paper to pass judgment on the success of her effort. Certain it is that the Bahamians made their own interpretation of British neutrality. They construed the laws of neutrality vigorously against the United States and as laxly as possible toward the South. In other words, the Bahamians were pro-Confederate.

There were many bonds of friendship and business between the Bahamians and the Confederates. At one time the six proprietors to whom the Carolinas were granted also controlled the Bahamas. At the conclu-

*A paper read before the Historical Association of Southern Florida at its meeting of May 5th, 1943.

1. Frank I. Wilson, *Sketches of Nassau* (Raleigh, 1864), 13.

sion of the American Revolutionary War the population of the Bahamas was doubled by the immigration to the islands of the Loyalists most of whom came from southern states bringing their slaves with them. When the Declaration of Independence caused the removal of the Earl of Dunmore as governor of Virginia he was appointed to the Bahamas. The similarity between the arrangement and style of the public buildings of Nassau and those of the colonial capital at Williamsburg, Virginia, is probably due to the influence of Dunmore.

Most of the trade between the Bahamas and the United States had been through Southern ports. Both the Bahamians and the Confederates had had the same attitude toward slavery. Slave owners in the Bahamas had violently protested Britain's freeing of the slaves in 1834.

Bahamian sympathy for the South increased as the war progressed. The gallantry and courage of the Southerners won friends for their cause. The haughty and offensive tone often assumed by representatives of the United States turned public feeling even farther away from the Union. Men refused to see why the Confederates should be branded as "rebels" or "pirates." The "stone" blockade of the Federals, the harsh treatment of captured crews, and, most of all, the high-handedness displayed in the *Trent* Affair all served to intensify the feeling against the North. The Bahamians saw in blockade-running not only business opportunities but a way of getting back at the Federals for actions which they considered nothing less than piratical.

The pro-Confederate activities of the Bahamians were concealed beneath an apparent effort at the stern enforcement of neutrality. Upon the approach of United States warships the Queen's proclamations were upheld to the letter.² To give substance to their claim of strict neutrality they occasionally seized a Confederate warship and held a mock trial. These cases were usually dismissed for lack of evidence. No one was fooled. The double-dealing of the Bahamians enraged the Americans, who complained about it long and loudly to Earl Russell.

In 1863, the representatives of the United States government in Nassau, W. G. Thompson, acting-consul, actually refused to hoist the Stars and Stripes on the consular flagstaff on the Fourth of July because the national emblem was so little respected in Nassau.³

In December, 1861, Lewis Heyliger of New Orleans was appointed

2. James M. Wright, "History of the Bahama Islands," in George Burbank Shattuck, ed., *The Bahama Islands* (New York, 1915), 574.

3. *The Nassau Guardian*, September 2, 1863.

by the Treasury of the Confederacy as head of the "depository" of Confederate funds in Nassau. His duties were to forward shipments of cotton to England, and to make purchases of return cargoes.

One of the most difficult problems of the Confederate agents was to get sufficient coal to keep the blockade-runners supplied, for each steamer required from 160 to 180 tons for a round trip to Charleston or to Wilmington. The coal business was almost as profitable to the merchants of Nassau as cotton trading. The coal yards of Henry Adderly and Company, Johnson and Brothers, and the Navy Yard reached mammoth proportions. Across the harbor on Hog Island was a mountain of coal, the yard of Saunders and Son. All the coal dealers were local merchants. The bulk of the coal came from England but some, anthracite, came from Pennsylvania. If a ship could get coal of both kinds the anthracite was saved for the critical run through the blockade.

Coaling was done efficiently by Negroes, a double line passing to and fro from the yard, located on or near the wharves, to the ship, some with hand carts and iron barrows, and others with huge lumps on their heads.

Sometimes cotton soaked in turpentine was used as fuel as it gave intense heat with little smoke. On one trip back to Nassau the captain had to burn all the coal, the mainmasts, bulwarks, deck cabin, all other available wood, and all the cotton and turpentine on board in order to get back to the islands.⁴ Sometimes there would only be enough fuel to reach the nearest of the Bahamas, for the archipelago reaches out a hundred miles north of New Providence. Then, if there were no Union ships lurking about, coal could be obtained by sending to Nassau.

The two Confederate ports with which blockade-runners did the most business were Charleston, 560 miles from Nassau, and Wilmington, S. C., 640 miles. Some runners operated out of Havana and Bermuda but Nassau held the place of importance since it was nearer and less coal was required. Then, too, there was no great depth of water in Nassau harbor and navigation in the Bahamas was treacherous. This was an advantage to the light-draft, speedy blockade-runners, which always had skilled Bahamian pilots aboard, and a disadvantage to the heavier Union boats which were often unable to hire Bahamian pilots.⁵

Mr. Bunch, who was the British consul in Charleston, wrote to Lord

4. Thomas E. Taylor, *Running the Blockade* (New York, 1896), 82.

5. James Russell Soley, "The Blockade and the Cruisers," *The Navy in the Civil War*, III, 36.

Lyons in Washington in April, 1862, as follows:

"The blockade-runners are doing a great business . . . Everything is brought in in abundance. Not a day passes without an arrival or a departure. The Richmond Government sent about a month ago an order to Nassau for Medicines, Quinine, etc. It went from Nassau to New York, was executed there, came back to Nassau, thence here, and was on its way to Richmond in 21 days from the date of the order. Nearly all the trade is under the British flag. The vessels are all changed in Nassau and Havana. Passengers come and go freely and no one seems to think that there is the slightest risk -- which, indeed there is not!"⁶

With cotton selling for sixty cents a pound in England and one dollar in New York⁷ it was not surprising that Bahamians should have attempted to revive what had once been a thriving agricultural staple sixty years earlier.⁸ Seed was distributed by the government to all those desiring to plant cotton, cotton gins were purchased and a bounty offered for island-grown cotton. For the most part this effort resulted in failure. The soil was rocky, cultivation slow, and labor difficult to get since many of the out-islanders had temporarily moved to Nassau where jobs were easy to get and wages high. Moreover, forty-eight hours across the water cotton could be had for eight cents a pound. Tilling the soil had never had much appeal for these maritime sons of pirates and wreckers. Taking cotton from under the prows of Yankee blockaders was a much more attractive way of getting it.

Nassau's wharves were piled high with the mammoth bales. Stores and warehouses and open porches were crammed with cotton. In a place where there were no facilities for handling or storing such quantities a new problem presented itself. Merchants lived in constant dread of fire. Volunteer firemen were organized. The local Police Inspector was placed in charge of fires and empowered to pull down or blow up any house necessary to prevent the spread of fire, the houseowner to be compensated from the public treasury.⁹ If cotton caught fire while it was piled on the docks or along the water front, the rule was to throw it overboard as quickly as possible. Smoking was strictly forbidden among the bales and close watch was kept. Yet in spite of all these precautions fires did occur occasionally to add their spectacle to the general excitement of the day.

6. E. D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York, 1925), I, 266, n. 2.

7. Horatio L. Wait, "The Blockade of the Confederacy," *Century Magazine*, LVI (1898), 914-928.

8. *The Bahama Herald*, February 18, 1862.

9. *The Nassau Guardian*, November 2, 1864.

Besides cotton other articles in Nassau awaiting shipment were Confederate uniforms, ammunition, guns, medicines, salt and various luxuries, these to be run through the blockade into the Confederacy.

Between 1861 and 1865 about 400 vessels entered Nassau from Confederate ports, 156 of these coming from Charleston and 164 from Wilmington.¹⁰ During the period of the War 588 ships left Nassau for Southern ports, though 432 of these ostensibly cleared for New Brunswick or ports in the West Indies.¹¹

Nassau harbor, ordinarily quiet enough, was teeming with activity during these war years. *The Bahama Herald*, May 14, 1862, listed all the craft in the harbor on that particular date, conclusive evidence that the world had at last discovered the Bahamas. These craft included eight steamers, H.M.S.S. *Bull Dog*, the *Thomas L. Wagg* (also known as the *Nashville*, a famous Confederate privateer), the *Stellin*, the *Kate*, the *Cecile*, the *Nelly*, the *Elizabeth*, the *Nassau*; one British ship; two barques, one British and one French; six brigs, four American, one British, and one Spanish; six schooners, American; one Brazillian barque; five topsail schooners, British; with innumerable smaller craft from schooner downward, and the steamers, *Minnow* and *Oreto*, lying at Cochrane's Anchorage nearby.

The *Oreto* was at the point of making an interesting metamorphosis. She had been built in England where she had been called a merchant ship although she had the unmistakable build of a man-of-war. When the *Oreto* arrived in Nassau, where she was to take on her armament, the American consul evinced so much interest in her that it was thought expedient to move her to Cochrane's Anchorage, fifteen miles away. The consul finally succeeded in bribing an ex-boatswain of the *Oreto* into declaring that the *Oreto* was a Confederate gunboat. The consul's protests that neutrality had been violated forced the British commander of the H.M.S. *Greyhound*, then in Bahamian waters, to seize the *Oreto* and the case was brought before a local admiralty court.

The case was heard August 2 before Judge Lees. The courtroom was crowded and electric with excitement. Henry Adderly, prominent merchant of Nassau, testified that the ship had been consigned to him by Fraser, Trenholm and Company of Liverpool as a merchant vessel and that they considered her as such.¹² The trial lasted half an hour. The

10. Rawson W. Rawson, *Report on the Bahamas for the Year 1864* (London, 1866), 54.

11. Anonymous, "The Bahamas," *Harper's*, XLIX (1874), 761-772.

12. *The Alabama Claims* (London, 1872), I, 64.

judge ordered the vessel released, declaring that there was not sufficient evidence that an attempt had been made to fit her out as a warship. One writer insists that it is a well-established fact that \$80,000 was brought from England and divided between Chief Justice Lees, who received \$20,000, and other parties in Nassau engaged in the transaction, a legal luxury for which England later paid several millions (i.e., in the settlement of the Alabama Claims Case).¹³ The *Oreto* became the Confederate warship, *Florida*, second in importance only to the *Alabama*. Both ships figured in the Alabama Claims Case by which England paid the United States \$15,000,000 for having been so indiscreet as to have permitted them to be built in England.

After the *Oreto* was released by the admiralty court in Nassau she was moved to Green Cay, about sixty miles south of Nassau, and there her transformation into a full-fledged warship took place, a task that required about ten days.

Lieutenant J. N. Maffitt of the Confederate Navy was commissioned to outfit the *Oreto*. In his journal he tells of some of the hardships experienced at Green Cay:

"Now commenced one of the most physically exhausting jobs ever undertaken by naval officers. All hands undressed to the buff, and, with the few men we had, commenced taking in one 6 and 7 ¼ inch guns, powder, circles, shell and shot, etc. An August sun in the tropics is no small matter to work in. On the 15th C. Worrell, wardroom steward, died and we buried him on Green Cay. At first I thought it but ordinary cases, originating from hard work and exposure to the sun, but in twenty hours the unpalatable fact was impressed upon me that yellow fever was added to our annoyances. Having no physician on board, that duty devolved upon me, and nearly my whole time, day and night, was devoted to the sick. On the 16th of August all the armament and stores were on board; took the tender in tow and ran to Blossom Channel, in which we anchored at sunset."¹⁴

There the Confederate flag was hoisted and the *Oreto* was christened by her new name, *Florida*. It was not, however, a day of rejoicing, for the yellow fever was spreading. Maffitt became very ill and his stepson, Captain Read died. When he had recovered Maffitt was put in command of the *Florida* and the ship sailed away to commence her career of depredation. She gained a piratical reputation for herself and proved entirely elusive so far as Federal warships were concerned until she was

13. "The Bahamas," *Harper's*, *op. cit.*, 766.

14. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion* (Washington, 1894-1922). (Hereinafter referred to as the *Naval War Records*) I, 764.

finally tracked down and captured by the U. S. *Wachusett* in the Bay of San Salvador, Brazil, October 17, 1864.¹⁵

In January, 1863, the *Florida* paid a visit to Nassau harbor to obtain coal. If we believe Samuel Whiting, the United States consul, the Fort Adjutant boarded the *Florida* to welcome Maffitt and to escort him and the other officers to a breakfast at the Royal Victoria Hotel, where he was enthusiastically greeted by the secession sympathizers under a display of secession bunting.¹⁶ Maffitt wrote in his journal of this visit ashore as follows: "On shore the demonstration was most friendly and congratulatory. Nassau is decidedly a Confederate stronghold."¹⁷ Of Maffitt's visit to Nassau Whiting wrote, "Pretty neutrality this, I must say."¹⁸

In the beginning blockade-running was amateurish. During the first year much of the trade was carried in sailing vessels, chiefly schooners and sloops, and many of these were unseaworthy and incautiously handled. Even two open boats of one or two tons ran the blockade from the coast of Florida in 1862.¹⁹ Later, as the blockade was drawn more tightly, larger and swifter boats became a necessity. Work was suspended on all wooden ships in England as early as May, 1862, and all hands were engaged in building iron ships. One of the first of these to be used in blockade-running was the *Banshee*, described as a "magnificent vessel of 440 tons." Her first three voyages from Nassau to Wilmington and back were made within a space of six weeks, with heavy cargoes each way. On her first trip out of Wilmington she brought tobacco valued at £7000 and cotton valued at £25,000. On the fourth trip the *Banshee* was captured but nevertheless she had already done enough to make her shareholders 700 percent on their investment.²⁰

The ships used during the last two years of the blockade were long, slim and cut down to the level of the rails so that nothing but masts arose above the deck. They were painted a dull white or lead grey, colors found to be best for dark nights. They were side-wheelers of light draft and a capacity of 400 to 600 tons. The speediest steamers, such as the *Coquette* and the *Vulture*, could make the trip from Wilmington to Nas-

15. *Ibid.*, III, 255.

16. *Naval War Records*, *op. cit.* II, 59.

17. *Ibid.*, II, 660.

18. *Ibid.*, II, 59.

19. Rawson, *op. cit.*, 54.

20. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 85.

sau in forty-eight hours. Usually three days were allowed for loading and unloading. It was necessary to work fast while conditions were right, for the dark of the moon and high tide were favored for running the blockade. Steamers left Nassau at an hour to insure their arrival off Charleston or Wilmington at night. Slipping in through the ever-watchful Union fleet required the nicest precision. If seen, the runner put out to sea, piled on the coal, and made a get-away if possible.

One of the best-known and most successful of the blockade-runners was Thomas E. Taylor. He was only twenty-one in 1862 when he was sent out to Nassau by a firm of Liverpool merchants which was striving to offset the losses due to the War by engaging in the illegitimate and highly lucrative business of blockade-running. He had general supervision of the *Banshee*, already mentioned. With his level-headed captain, Steele, and his dependable engineer, Erskine, he made many daring runs through the enemy's squadron. After the *Banshee* was lost Taylor got, in succession, the *Will o' the Wisp*, the *Wild Dayrell*, lost on her second trip, the *Stormy Petrel*, and the *Wild Rover*. The latter made five runs and survived the war.

It was on one of Taylor's ships that an incident occurred which brought a good laugh from the blockade-runners in Nassau. A very valuable horse had been secured by the Southern agent in Egypt and sent to Nassau to be taken through the blockade to become a gift for Jefferson Davis. Louis Heyliger, the Confederate agent in Nassau, entrusted the horse to Taylor. In the thickness of a black night Taylor was about to ease into Wilmington through the network of vigilant Yankee ships, when the horse began to neigh. Several coats were hurriedly thrown over the horse's head in an effort to smother the sound but it was too late. The Union ships had been aroused and they opened fire. There was nothing for Taylor to do but make a run for it. Lucky for him, and the horse, he made it.²¹

On one of his trips back from Wilmington Taylor discovered a Negro stowaway among the cotton bales. When they landed the Negro was given quite an ovation by the sympathetic blacks of Nassau. He was allowed to keep his freedom but this generosity cost Taylor dearly, for on his next trip to Wilmington he had to pay \$4,000, the price of the Negro.²² After this the ship captains before leaving Wilmington had the holds

21. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 97-99.

22. *Ibid.*, 80.

and all spaces between cotton bales thoroughly smoked, a process which, if continued long enough, was sure to force out the stowaways.

On one trip out Taylor had as passengers General George W. Randolph, ex-secretary of war, who was an invalid, and his wife, on their way to Europe. There were no accommodations for women on board but a safe place, a kind of room, was made for Mrs. Randolph among the cotton bales on deck and the voyage was made very comfortably. On that particular round-trip, requiring twenty days, Taylor cleared for his firm a profit of £ 85,000.²³

Blockade-runners never surrendered to the enemy when they could avoid it. If attacked they would try to get away, taking to the open sea on the hope of out-distancing their pursuers. If they could not escape they scuttled their ship and took to small boats which had been supplied with rations for ten days and could be lowered at a moment's notice. If off Wilmington when attacked, ships were sometimes run ashore under the protection of the guns of Fort Fisher, where the cargo, at least, could later be saved.

For all its thrills and high adventure blockade-running was not attended by any great amount of physical danger. It was never the purpose of Yankees to destroy a ship. They wanted to make a capture so the cargo could be sold. Then each man on the Union ship would share in the prize and the ship itself would be turned over to the Union navy. Officers and crew of captured boats were punished by imprisonment, the length of time being greater for Southerners than for Bahamians or English. More often than not the crew got safely to shore in life boats.

The amount of prize money received by the officers and crew of a Union vessel was immense. In 1862 when the U. S. *Magnolia* captured the blockade-runner *Memphis*, which carried a cargo of cotton and resin, and there was no other vessel in sight so that the prize money did not have to be shared, more than a half million dollars was divided among the officers and crew of the *Magnolia*. The officers received \$38,318.55 each for their day's work, while the share for an ordinary seaman was \$1,700. When the *Eolus* captured the *Lady Stirling*, another blockade-runner, the cargo and vessel sold for \$200,354.64 and each of the acting ensigns of the *Eolus* received \$9,569.67 and each seaman received \$2,000.²⁴

Most of the meat supplying Lee's army in 1864 was run through the blockade. It came originally from New York, was received in Nassau

23. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 142-144.

24. James H. Stark, *History and Guide to the Bahama Islands*, (Boston, 1891), 99-100.

and re-shipped. Since the meat was sometimes spoiled, it was facetiously suggested at the Confederate capital in Richmond that the South needed to keep a meat inspector in New York.²⁵ Shiploads of pistols packed in lard were brought to Nassau from Boston and run through the blockade.²⁶

Occasionally a ship would be wrecked within the waters of the Bahamas, where hidden rocks and strong currents have always given an element of peril to navigation. One such wreck occurred when a ship was driven ashore on Hog Island, a small island across the harbor from Nassau. The cargo was composed of shoes and boots, and the residents of the island were well supplied with these for some time. Some claimed the officers of the ship were drunk, others that the whole thing was a put up job.²⁷ The latter is entirely likely in view of the fact that Bahamians had been guilty of unethical wrecking practices for two centuries.

Most of those who belonged to the inner circle of that gay society of blockade-runners which centered in the Victoria Hotel in Nassau made private financial ventures of their own. Ladies had their favorite captains and ships and there was always suspense when these were out on a run and rejoicing when they came safely into harbor. Some sent money with captains to purchase cotton on which to speculate, others sent in articles that could expect to be sold at a large profit. It was possible for the ladies to pick up a nice amount of pin money in this way. One sent in a large quantity of yellow soap and realized an enormous profit.²⁸

Captain A. Roberts, one of the most dashing and romantic figures in Nassau during the war, never failed to do some private trading on his own account. It was his theory that every blockade-runner had to look out for himself. On his first trip, which was directly from England, he took in, as his private venture, 1,000 women's corsets, 500 boxes of Cockle's pills, and a quantity of toothbrushes. The corsets he sold easily in Wilmington at a profit of 1100 percent, and the toothbrushes found a sale in Richmond at seven times their cost, but no one seemed to want Cockle's pills. He decided to take them to Nassau which was, to quote him, "a place where every one was bilious from overeating and drinking on the strength of the fortunes they were making by blockade-running."²⁹

25 Francis B. C. Bradlee, *Blockade-Running During the Civil War* (Salem, 1925), 64.

26. Stark, *op. cit.*, 69.

27. Charles Ives, *The Isles of Summer or Nassau and the Bahamas*, (New Haven, 1880), 161.

28. Captain A. Roberts (pseud. for A. C. Hobart-Hampden), *Never Caught* (London, 1867), 67.

29. *Ibid.*, 22-26.

He could not sell them for cash in Nassau but he was able to trade them to an enterprising pharmacist for two chests of lucifer matches upon which he made a fair profit in the Confederacy.

So immense were the profits made in the blockade-running business that it was said that if a steamer had the good fortune to run into Charleston twice with merchandise, and out twice with cotton, the Yankees were welcome to her after that. Some claimed if one cargo in three could be run in safely it paid; and that they would still be out nothing if only one cargo in four made it. An old captain who made sixteen successful trips said that profits were about 800 percent. A clear profit of \$300,000 for a round-trip was not uncommon and one ship carried out 7,000 bales of cotton worth \$2,000,000 before it was captured.³⁰

Bounties paid to officers and crew of a first class steamer for a round trip were as follows: captain, £1000; chief officer, £250; second and third officers, £150; chief engineer, £500; pilots, £750; crew and firemen, £50.³¹ There were usually two pilots—one a Bahamian who took the ship out of and into Nassau harbor, and one a Charleston or Wilmington pilot. Half the bounty was paid before leaving Nassau and after it was paid no one was allowed ashore. The other half was paid when the round-trip had been completed.

In addition to their bounties the officers were allowed to stow away little cargoes of their own. The captain was given the privilege of carrying ten bales of cotton on his own account, the pilots five bales each. It was said a captain could retire with his nest well-feathered after six months of employment.

Seamen also did a little trading on the side. In one instance some seamen tried to smuggle tobacco into Nassau. Their method was to cover their bodies with the unfolded leaves as smoothly as possible. They soon became extremely ill—pulse feeble, nausea, and cold sweats. They were found to be suffering from severe cases of nicotine poisoning.³²

In Nassau so plentiful was money that dollars were tossed around like pennies. Living expenses mounted. A newspaper notice of September, 1864, laments the high prices of foodstuffs, remarking that fish was 400 percent higher than before the war.³³ Frank I. Wilson, a visitor from North Carolina who spent several weeks in Nassau during the war,

30. Wait, *op. cit.*, 914-928.

31. Roberts, *op. cit.*, 41.

32. *The Nassau Guardian*, November 2, 1864.

33. *Ibid.*, September 17, 1864.

reported that persons were pointed out to him who were poor before the war and were at the time of his visit worth from a half million to three million dollars in hard cash or its equivalent in inflated real estate. He compared Nassau's boom with the California gold fever.³⁴ Henry Ad-derly, Nassau's most prominent merchant, was given the title of King Conch by the runners and was reported to be as wealthy as the "Roths' children."³⁵

Blockade-running had its humorous aspects, as no one knew better than the runners themselves. This was evidenced by the appearance of a spicy paper, *Young Punch*, edited in Nassau by a witty Confederate for the amusement of his friends. One of these papers told of a rather grim joke played at the expense of the rebels. A large order of prayer books brought from England was sent to Charleston to supply the devo-tional wants of the Confederacy. Imagine the surprise of the Charles-tonians when they discovered that the books contained prayers for the Congress and the President of the United States!³⁶

The gay social life of Nassau centered in the Royal Victoria Hotel which is still one of the show places of Nassau. The hotel had been started in 1859 as a government project calling for an expenditure of £ 6000. However, the tide of wealth which came as a consequence of the war caused the government to decide to finish and furnish the hotel much more elaborately than at first planned. No expense was spared in the purchase of elegant plate, china and glassware. Every detail of fur-nishings and service was planned to suit the most fastidious. Beautiful furniture and lamps were imported. There was a wonderful grand piano, the most amazing thing the islanders had ever seen. By turning a crank the piano could be made to "perform any overture, waltz or quadrille with surpassing brilliancy of execution."³⁷ The hotel was crowded with blockade-runners, their wives, Confederate agents, and war corre-spondents.

The safe return of a "runner" was always occasion enough for a dance. Teas, maroons (as they called their picnics), boating parties and balls kept the town lively and warded off boredom for persons whose schedules alternated fitful activity with periods of waiting. The Civilian Cricket Club was reorganized and society turned out to watch the matches

34. Frank I. Wilson, *Sketches of Nassau* (Raleigh, 1864), 7.

35. John Wilkinon, *Narrative of a Blockade-Runner* (New York, 1877), 141.

36. "The Bahamas," *Harper's*, *op. cit.*, 767.

37. *The Nassau Guardian*, February 25, 1863.

played on the grounds below Fort Charlotte,³⁸ a cricket field that is much the same today as it was then. The bi-weekly band concerts (seats were provided for the ladies!) and the dress parades of the Second West India Regiment provided popular entertainment. Wilson described the regiment as a "parcel of fine looking darkies in bright uniforms who made very respectable holiday soldiers."³⁹ Today the imposing British Colonial Hotel covers the old parade grounds and the barracks have been moved to the "black" side of the ridge.

Actors, singers, fortune-tellers, magicians and other entertainers began to include Nassau in their tours. Even a small equestrian show, the first for the Bahamas, came to delight the natives and amuse the visitors. Horse racing, interspersed with mule racing and other comic features, was popular.

Not everyone could enjoy the comfortable living that the Royal Victoria offered. There were many who wanted less pretentious and expensive accommodations. For them housing was a real problem. Out-islanders, lured to Nassau by so much activity, doubled up in houses with relatives or friends and, since most of the houses had not more than three or four rooms, often less, overcrowding was inevitable. If the Negroes from the out-islands had been willing to camp out, some of the evils of overcrowding could have been mitigated. The weather in Nassau is mild and delightful during most of the year, making camping ideal, but Bahamian Negroes are superstitious and become such cowards at night that they are unhappy unless inside a cabin with all the doors and windows tightly closed. If forced to remain outside at night a favorite refuge was among the cotton bales, where they increased the fire hazard by their carelessness.

Ordinarily the Bahamians are a law-abiding people but prosperity was more than they could stand. The result was a wave of lawlessness and immorality. Of this Editor Moseley of *The Nassau Guardian* wrote, December 24, 1864: "There is scarcely a night but adds sorrow to the dawn, by disclosing the fatal consequences of the orgies which are unblushingly engaged in at the dens of iniquity skirting our otherwise fair city."

Doubtless the city was none too clean. J. Wilkinson described it as "that haven of blockade-runners, El Dorado of adventurers, and paradise of wreckers and darkies—filthy Nassau."⁴⁰ At any rate there were two

38. *Ibid.*, February 20, 1864.

39. Wilson, *op. cit.*, 9.

40. J. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, 120.

epidemics of yellow fever during the war period. There were about 250 deaths from the fever, quite a toll considering that the population of Nassau didn't exceed 15,000 during this time.

How did it all end? The Union took Charleston, then Fort Fisher which guarded the entrance to Wilmington. Blockade-running came abruptly to an end and Nassau's visitors disappeared as mist before the sun.

"What good came of it all at last?" asked one writer. "The Americans, at any rate, those who won the day, owed us no thanks, and threatened, indeed, to come down and shovel the pestiferous little sandbank (so they dared to call the Fernandina of Columbus) into the sea."⁴¹ He went on to say a few undertakers had profited on account of the deaths from yellow fever, the government had managed to clear away a small debt, and a few gained enough capital to put them in a position to continue business after the war. The majority, particularly the Negroes, emerged from the period indolent and dissatisfied, spoiled by three years of high pay and gay life.

Wilson, whom we have already mentioned as having visited the Bahamas in 1863, said that he asked a Negro what he thought would happen when the war ended. The negro replied: "Whar you suppose Nassau will go when dis war is over? Well, de war make Nassau, and when de war's over it go right straight to de debbel whar it came from!"⁴²

Certainly there was a dreadful fate in store for Nassau. In 1866 the worst hurricane of a century hit the Bahamas. The ocean rolled completely over Hog Island and into the harbor with the crests of waves sixty feet high. Boats were dashed to pieces, houses and forests went down like reeds. Nassau was like a city that had been sacked and burned by the enemy. Many of the new buildings and other improvements acquired during the war disappeared. So great and so complete was the tragedy that many saw in it the hand of providence punishing a wicked people for their over-indulgence and recklessness. Orchards, farms and sponge beds were damaged. Repeated drouths followed the hurricane and most of the Bahamians were reduced to poverty.

A period of stagnation set in. The Bahamians returned to their former isolation which lasted for fifty years. Then the United States passed the Prohibition Amendment and the Bahamians, ever opportunists, went skyrocketing to prosperity on a new venture of running the blockade. But that is another story.

41. J. T. W. Bacot, *The Bahamas: A Sketch* (London, 1869), 51.

42. Wilson, *op. cit.*, 12.