Black Immigrants: Bahamians In Early Twentieth-Century Miami

Raymond A. Mohl

From *Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. LXV, no. 3 (January 1987)

Miami is generally thought of as a new immigrant city—a city that only recently became the haven of Caribbean and Latin American exiles and refugees. Until the first big wave of Cubans began to arrive in 1959, Miami seemed the quintessential tourist town and retirement haven. From the 1920s through the 1950s, sun and surf, gambling and horse racing, and endless promotional extravaganzas helped to shape Miami's public image. The fact is, however, that Miami has always had a magnetic attraction for peoples of the Caribbean. Indeed, the magnitude and diversity of current immigration to Miami tends to mask the fact that the city had a substantial foreign-born ingredient from its early days in the 1890s. Black immigrants from the Bahamas, in particular, gave immigration to Miami its special character in the early years of the twentieth century.

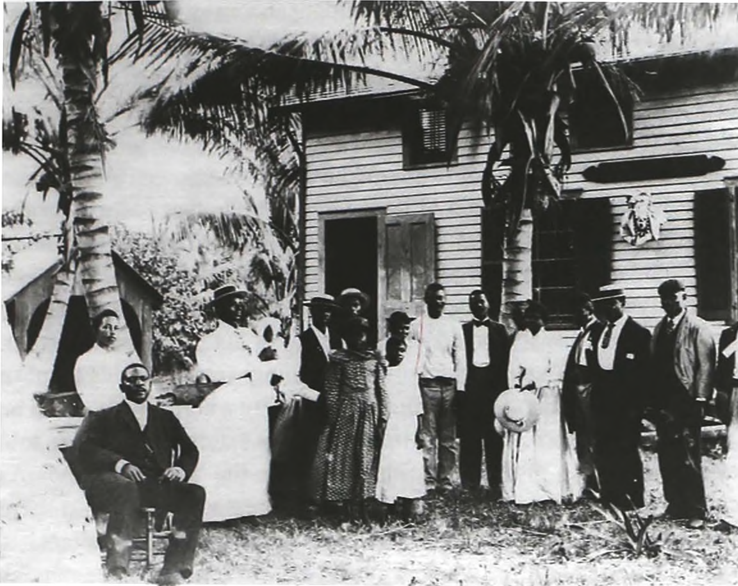
The extent of the Bahamian influx to Florida's new tourist town is revealed in the United States census reports. Miami had only a few hundred people when it was incorporated as a city in 1896. By 1900, the population had increased to 1,681, including a sizable number of black immigrants from the Bahamas. Over the next twenty years, the Bahamian influx helped to swell the population. By 1920, when Miami's population stood at 29,571, the foreign-born made up one-quarter of the total population. More than sixty-five per cent of Miami's foreign-born residents were blacks from the West Indies. Black islanders, almost all from the Bahamas, totaled 4,815. They comprised fifty-two per cent of all Miami's blacks and 16.3 per cent

of the city's entire population. By 1920, Miami had a larger population of black immigrants than any other city in the United States except New York.[1]

The story of how Miami became a destination for black immigrants from the Bahamas begins early in Florida history. Bahamian blacks had been familiar with Florida's lower east coast, and particularly the Florida Keys, long before the building of Miami. In the early nineteenth century, when Florida was isolated and undeveloped, the area was commonly frequented by Bahamian fishermen, wreckers, and seamen, as well as traders who dealt with the Seminole Indians. According to one Bahamian writer, these early visitors regarded Florida "much as another island of the Bahamas." In fact, many black Bahamians first arrived in the islands from Florida as slaves of the 3,200 British Loyalists who fled after the American Revolution. Still later, in the early nineteenth century, numbers of Seminole Negroes from Florida settled on Andros Island. Through the middle years of the nineteenth century, British officials in the Bahamas made sporadic efforts to recruit black immigrants from the American South. Thus, from an early date Bahamians were knowledgeable about Florida, and many Bahamians immigrated to the islands from there.[2]

But a reverse migration had also begun by the mid nineteenth century. Unlike the rest of the British West Indies, plantation agriculture was never very successful or profitable in the Bahamas. Only about two per cent of the total Bahamian land area of about 4,000 square miles was considered suitable for crops. Most nineteenth century Bahamians earned a livelihood from the sea or from subsistence agriculture. By the 1830s, black and white Bahamians were beginning to migrate to the Florida Keys, especially Key West, where they worked in fishing, sponging, and turtling. The distance was short, and jobs in Florida paid cash wages. Facing meager economic prospects at home, free Bahamian blacks found better employment opportunities in Key West. By 1892, according to a recent study of blacks in the city, "8,000 of the 25,000 people in Key West were Bahamians and sponging was their mainstay." A large majority of Key West blacks can trace their ancestry to Bahamian origins.[3]

By the late nineteenth century, a second stream of Bahamian blacks had begun arriving on Florida's lower east coast for seasonal work in the region's emerging agricultural industry. As a result, after



Black Bahamian community of Coconut Grove, late nineteenth century. Munroe Collection, HMSF, 68C.

about 1890 these newcomers from the Bahamas served as an early migrant labor force in Florida agriculture. Until about 1900, one chronicler of early south Florida has noted, "all of our heavy laborers were Bahamian negroes." The scrubby pine and oolitic limestone topography of south Florida was similar to that of the islands. The Bahamians "knew how to plant" on this land, and they brought in "their own commonly used trees, vegetables, and fruits." Thus, they demonstrated to native American planters the rich agricultural potential of what seemed at first a desolate and forbidding land.[4]

The building up of Miami after 1896 created new opportunities for Bahamian immigrants. Indeed, black Bahamian immigrants were attracted to Miami for the same reasons that European immigrants poured into the industrial cities of the northeast and midwest at the turn of the century. The new and rapidly growing resort center provided opportunities for better jobs and higher wages than they had known in the islands. As one Bahamian historian put it, "wonderful things were going on in Miami, and there was a great demand for

labour there. ... A remarkable building boom was on, and any Bahamian who wanted a job could find it." According to Bahamian population studies, ten to twelve thousand Bahamians left the islands for Florida between 1900 and 1920—about one-fifth of the entire population of the Bahamas.[5]

The economic lure of the United States had a powerful influence in the West Indies, as it did in Italy, Greece, and other parts of southern and eastern Europe at the same time. John Wright, a Bahamian immigrant interviewed by Ira De Augustine Reid for his book, *The Negro Immigrant*, recounted a typical immigrant's story. Agriculture was depressed and job prospects discouraging in the Bahamas, Wright said, and many young Bahamians were sailing west to Florida to make their fortunes. "Miami was a young Magic City where money could be `shaken from trees'," Wright noted. "Home-returning pilgrims told exaggerated tales of their fame and fortune in the `promised land'. As convincing evidence to their claims, they dressed flashily and spent American dollars lavishly and prodigally. Those American dollars had a bewitching charm for a country lad who worked for wages ranging from 36 to 50 cents a day. Moreover, the splendid appearance of those boys from the States stood out in striking contrast to us ill-fashionably clad country lads." At age nineteen, and with his parents' permission, Wright arrived in Miami in 1911, along with more than 3,200 other Bahamian immigrants.[6]

The Bahamian immigration to Florida in the early twentieth century represented only one aspect of a larger pattern of Caribbean migration. As geographer Bonham C. Richardson noted in his study, *Caribbean Migrants*, "West Indians have for generations migrated from and returned to their islands to sustain their local societies. In many smaller Caribbean islands, migration traditions are so pervasive and of such long standing that they are a way of life." Centuries of plantation agriculture in the Caribbean islands resulted in extensive deforestation and consequent soil erosion. These ecological disasters severely affected island agricultural patterns, making it difficult to produce a sufficient food supply and provide full agricultural employment. As a result, migration became a form of economic adaptation, an essential economic strategy that enabled Caribbean people to survive despite their depleted and insufficiently productive lands.[7]

Caribbean migration actually began in a substantial way in the mid-nineteenth century. The destination, at first, was Panama. In the early 1850s, when an American company began building a railroad across the Isthmus, several thousand Jamaicans were recruited for the heavy clearing and construction work. When a French company began work on the Panama Canal in 1881, some 35,000 Jamaican laborers migrated to Panama within three years. That project failed by the end of the decade, but in 1905, the American controlled Isthmian Canal Commission resumed the building project. Over the next decade, about 150,000 West Indians migrated to Panama for canal labor.[8]

The Panama Canal migrations provided, perhaps, the most dramatic early example of the mobility of the Caribbean work force. By the early twentieth century, Caribbean workers were on the move throughout the region. Jamaicans and Barbadians labored on sugar, banana, and coffee plantations in Trinidad, Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. Haitians cut sugar cane in the Dominican Republic, Cubans rolled cigars in Key West and Tampa, while Cuba itself attracted workers from both Haiti and Jamaica. The opening of oil fields in Venezuela in 1916 drew black workers from Barbados, Trinidad, and Curacao. Puerto Ricans were coming to the United States long before the massive post-World War II migrant waves. Residents of smaller islands in the British Caribbean moved to larger ones in search of employment, while British colonial officials tried to fill changing labor needs by permitting the importation of first Chinese, and later, East Indian indentured workers—a migration pattern that continued until 1917. The Caribbean, in short, had developed incredibly complex patterns of "livelihood migration" by the early decades of the twentieth century.[9]

The Bahamian migration experience was part of the larger Caribbean labor migration pattern. By the 1890s the islanders' migratory urge had intensified. The governor's official report for 1898 noted that Bahamian laborers were in demand as stevedores and deck hands on steam ships engaged in the fruit and lumber trade to Central America. Ships from United States ports had begun to call at islands in the southern Bahamas, particularly Inagua, Mayaguana, and Long Cay. Signed to labor contracts, the Bahamian workers traveled on these ships to ports in Panama, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, where they

unloaded and loaded cargo, and then were dropped off again at their home islands as the steamers carried their cargos of bananas, lumber, and other products to Atlantic coastal cities in the United States. In 1899, sixty-nine steamers outbound from American ports called at Inagua, picking up almost 3,000 Bahamians for short-term shipboard and dock work in Central American ports. The new labor pattern, the governor optimistically reported, "bids fair to become ... an important source of prosperity by affording excellent remuneration for the unskilled labour which abounds in these Islands, but has hitherto sought in vain for an outlet."[10]

Work on the steamers expanded horizons and opened new labor opportunities. Soon Bahamians were working all over Central America. Many worked for the United Fruit Company or the Hamburg-American Line as stevedores in Central American ports. Others worked for railroads in Panama and Mexico, as canal laborers in Panama, or as contract laborers in the lumber trade, on banana and coffee plantations, or clearing land and building roads in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, British Honduras, and Spanish Honduras. In fact, the American consular agent at Inagua served as well as a labor agent for private United States companies, supplying by 1906 as many as 150 Bahamians a month for contract work in Panama, Mexico, and Nicaragua.[11]

Contract labor in Central America had its costs, however. Bahamian workers were often exploited by unscrupulous labor agents and storekeepers. As Bahamas Governor Grey-Wilson noted in 1906 in an official dispatch to the Colonial Office, "the system under which coloured laborers are now shipped under contract from the Southern Islands of the Colony for service in Mexico & Panama is very far from satisfactory." Heavy charges for food and drink put the workers in debt to the company stores; workers were sometimes forced to labor for longer than contracted periods, or were discharged with little or no pay as a result of indebtedness to storekeepers. The abuses of the contract labor system led in 1907 to the passage of legislation in the Bahamas to protect these wandering Caribbean workers. Indeed, a labor migration that appeared to be a positive economic advantage in 1898 had become onerous to British officials in the Bahamas by 1905. The governor addressed the question in his report to the Colonial Office for 1904-1905: "It is questionable whether this movement of

Nat Simpson and Alice Burrows, Bahamian workers at Peacock Inn, Coconut Grove, late nineteenth century.
Munroe Collection, HMSF, 392E

population in search of work is of any benefit to the interests of the Colony. ... These islands are not over-populated, and by the same hard work which the labourers have to give on board ship, and working on the mainland of the Gulf, they could make as much at home with greater ease and less risk." British officials, apparently, preferred to keep the Bahamians on the land and maintain population stability.[12]

But it was not to be. Indeed, soon after the turn of the twentieth century, a vast Bahamian migration to Miami began to dwarf the earlier contract labor migration to Panama and Central America. The Bahamian economy was in the midst of a great "squeeze," as new citrus and vegetable production in Florida competed with the output of the Bahamas. Rising American import duties on Bahamian agricultural production made superfluous much of the islands' pineapple, orange, grapefruit, banana, and tomato output. Both the sisal (hemp)

and sponging industries fell on hard times, as well. At the same time, new economic opportunity beckoned in Florida with the building up of Miami after the mid-1890s, and the extension of Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway south from Miami into the Florida Keys after 1905. The introduction of regular steamship service between Miami and Nassau by the early twentieth century made the trip to Florida cheap and convenient for Bahamians. It was a classic case of immigration prompted by economic pushes and pulls—the same kinds of economic forces that lay behind the massive European migration to the United States during that same era. The changing economic pattern had a powerful impact on Bahamian migration trends.[13]

While Bahamians from the southern islands went off to contract labor in Central America, residents of the northern Bahamas tended to be among the first of the islanders attracted to Florida in this period. The governor's report for 1901 noted the decreasing population in Abaco, Bimini, and Harbour Island, and explained that "the decrease is mainly due to emigration to Florida." The trend continued over the next decade, as Bimini, Eleuthera, Harbour Island, Crooked Island, Rum Cay, Long Cay, and Inagua all had population losses ranging from three per cent to twenty-five per cent between 1901 and 1911.[14]

By that time, Bahamians from the southern islands had joined the migration stream to Florida. In a 1911 report on Bahamian contract laborers to the British Colonial Office, the colony's governor, W. Grey-Wilson, noted the beginnings of a shift in the destination of Bahamian migrant workers. An economic downturn in the United States in 1908, Grey-Wilson suggested, "paralyzed" the Central American mahogany industry, while the fruit steamers that had engaged numbers of Bahamian stevedores ceased to call at the southern islands. But new labor opportunities for these workers were opening up in Florida, the governor wrote: "Florida has been offering for free labour very much better terms than have hitherto been obtainable under contract. The draining of the Everglades and the development of the hinterland of Florida is proceeding apace, and I anticipate that the labourers of the Colony will find an adequate outlet in that direction."[15]

In Florida, the Bahamian newcomers found jobs in a variety of occupations and activities. The Bahamians were noted for their masonry skills. In particular, they were adept at building with the oolitic limestone common to the Bahamas and south Florida. Thus,

Bahamian blacks who came to Miami after its founding in 1896 found work in the burgeoning construction industry. As Flagler pushed his railroad south into the Keys, some of the heavy clearing and grading work was assigned to Bahamians, along with another group of West Indian labor migrants-Cayman Islanders. The Bahamians also worked in local lumber yards and gravel pits, as stevedores on the docks, in the rail yards and terminals in the city, and, more generally, as day laborers in whatever jobs could be found in Miami's growing economy. Most of the Bahamian newcomers were men, but the emergence of Miami as a tourist resort provided special job opportunities for Bahamian women, especially as maids, cooks, and laundry and service workers in the city's new hotels and restaurants. In addition, Bahamians worked as domestic servants and caretakers for wealthy whites with permanent or winter residences in Miami.[16]

Agriculture prospered in the Miami area along with tourism. Given the agricultural pattern in the islands, it is not surprising that many Bahamians worked in the local citrus industry, particularly in and around Coconut Grove, a community near Miami where some Bahamians had lived since the 1880s, working primarily at an early hotel called the Peacock Inn. The Bahamian presence in Coconut Grove gave the area's black community "a distinctively island character that is still evident." They also labored in the expanding vegetable farms on Miami's agricultural fringe. Many of the Bahamians came as migrant laborers during harvest season, returning to the islands each summer. This pattern was especially evident during the World War I years, when the federal government sought to boost Florida agricultural production. Indeed, in the years before effective federal regulation of immigration, Bahamian blacks moved easily and at will between south Florida and the islands.[17]

Manuscript census schedules for 1900 and 1910 give a more detailed picture of the black Bahamian immigrants in Miami. The McCloud family typified the early Bahamian presence in South Florida. Hiram McCloud, a forty-eight year old Bahamian, had come to the United States in 1878. The census described him as a "common laborer." He was a naturalized United States citizen. He rented his house in Coconut Grove, he could read but not write, and he had been unemployed for two months during the year. His thirty-nine year old wife, Clotilda, also came to the United States in 1878, although she

was not yet a citizen. A "washerwoman" who worked continuously throughout the year, Clotilda could read and write. During twenty years of marriage, she had given birth to eight children, although only five were still living in 1900. The oldest child, Curtis McCloud, had been born in Florida in 1881, and was also working as a laborer. Four other children, ranging in age from five to fifteen, had all been born in Florida; two were attending school.[18]

The McClouds came to Florida before the establishment of Miami in 1896. Many other Bahamians arrived during the 1890s, typically young, single males who worked as farm laborers or fruit pickers. Few were naturalized American citizens. They lived together in groups of four and five in rented premises, or lodged with Bahamian families. Other occupations listed by the census enumerators for Bahamians included carpenter, fisherman, boatman, blacksmith's helper, deck hand, seamstress, dressmaker, cook, chambermaid, house servant, and "odd jobs."[19]

By 1910, the Bahamian community in Miami had increased to well over 1,500. Indeed, a veritable wave of new Bahamian immigrants had arrived in Miami in 1908 and 1909—an early boatlift from the islands that captured the attention of the city's leading newspaper, the *Miami Metropolis*. According to the paper, more than 1,400 Bahamians arrived in Miami during the single year after July 1908, many of them temporary farm workers. They came fifty or sixty at a time on small schooners, often "so crowded with people that there was barely standing room on their decks." Apparently, these new arrivals were processed by immigration authorities, for the *Metropolis* noted that about ten per cent of the Bahamians were sent back to the islands after "failing to meet the requirements of the immigration laws."[20]

The new wave of Bahamians worked extensively in citrus groves and vegetable fields. As the census schedules suggest, these workers tended to be young, single men living in boarding houses; most of them had been in Miami less than a decade. Some had already applied for citizenship, perhaps in order to get or retain an agricultural laboring job. Another large segment of the Miami Bahamian community continued to work as common laborers or in the resort town's service economy as maids and porters in hotels, cooks, waiters, and dishwashers in restaurants, servants and housekeepers in private homes, and the like.[21]

A typical Bahamian household during this period was that of Albert A. Taylor, a thirty-eight year old "car cleaner" in a local railroad shop. Taylor entered the United States in 1898, and in 1910 was renting a house at 721 Third Street in Miami's Negro section. Taylor lived with his Bahamian-born wife, two American-born children, a sister (a cook for a white family), a brother (an odd-job laborer), and two cousins (both laborers). Completing this extended Bahamian household were three boarders, two young men who worked as laborers, and a twenty-one year old girl who worked as a maid for a white family.[22]

The surge of migration from the Bahamas to Miami intensified between 1910 and 1920. This mass movement of population is reflected in several sets of population statistics. Bahamian census reports, for instance, showed decennial increases in total population ranging from four to twenty-nine per cent between 1851 and 1911. But in the decade after 1911, the Bahamian population decreased by over five per cent, slipping from 55,944 in 1911, to 53,031 in 1921. Most of the missing Bahamians went to south Florida. Indeed, the 1915 census taken by the state of Florida reported 3,743 foreign-born blacks in Dade County, 1,870 in Monroe County, 615 in Palm Beach County, and 490 in Broward County. About eighty-one per cent of all the immigrant blacks in Florida resided in the state's four southeast counties in 1915. And by 1920, over 4,800 immigrant blacks lived in the city of Miami alone; over sixty-eight per cent of these newcomers came to the United States after 1910.[23]

More detailed, year-by-year migration statistics are reported in the annual reports of the governor of the Bahamas to the British Colonial Office. These records reveal a constant flow of Bahamians to Florida and an equally constant pattern of return migration. While some Bahamians came to Florida permanently, it is clear from these reports that for many other Bahamians temporary or seasonal labor provided the chief attraction. As one observer noted in 1913, "our people go away in October to meet the great demand for labour in Florida for the winter crops of tomatoes and peas and they return after that is over in May." In fact, in some years, such as 1915 or 1917, more Bahamians returned to the islands than left for Florida. Bahamian officials attributed the decline in emigration in 1915 to "decreased rates of wages in Florida." Like European immigrants of the early twentieth century, Bahamians were knowledgeable about American eco-

nomic conditions and apparently based their migration decisions on the labor market situation in the United States.[24]

Workers from other Caribbean islands were making similar migration decisions during this period. Between 1900 and 1920, West Indian immigration to the United States surged far ahead of the totals for the late nineteenth century. Almost 231,000 West Indians immigrated to the United States between 1901 and 1920. During World War I, in particular, Bahamians and other West Indians filled agricultural jobs in an expanding wartime labor market. Between 1916 and 1920, as European immigration declined markedly during the war, West Indian immigrants (including Bahamians) totaled almost five per cent of all immigrants to the United States—a dramatic proportional increase over earlier years.[25]

The dimensions of the Bahamian migration to Florida created official concern and tension among the Bahamian commercial elite. The British ambassador to the United States, James Bryce, noted these concerns as early as 1911 in a dispatch to the Foreign Office: "The attraction that Florida has for the labouring classes of the Colony is now very great and the emigration from Nassau to Miami, has now reached such proportions as to cause anxiety to the Government and inconvenience to the sponge outfitters and other employers of labour." Similarly, in a letter to the *Nassau Tribune* in 1913, "A Planter" complained that the exodus to Florida would leave few workers for the sisal and sponge industries. "In a very short time our lovely islands will soon be depopulated, gone to swell the millions on the great American continent." This correspondent suggested that only greater government support for agriculture in the Bahamas could stem the outward migration. Another observer argued the need for a better distribution of land among the islanders "to anchor them in the Bahamas." "Now is the time to help," one worried employer wrote, "before the great part of the population leave the Colony to go to Florida and elsewhere to earn a livelihood."[26]

The Bahamian government did little, apparently, but the *Nassau Tribune* embarked on an extensive campaign in 1913 to check the migration to Florida. The paper published a series of long editorials on "The Exodus to Florida," calling attention to the potentially serious economic consequences of "the continuous drain upon our labour sup-

ply." Numerous suggestions were offered, including the promotion of tourism, the renewal of the pineapple industry, and the attraction of foreign capital and new industries to the Bahamas—all of which might create more jobs and keep people in the islands. Land in the Bahamas could be as productive as land in Florida, the *Tribune* argued, and "if the Bahamian labourer is good for Florida, he should be better for the Bahamas." The paper found it difficult to explain why "men who scorn the idea of field labour here, do it over there in Miami and many other things that they won't do here."[27]

But the Bahamian labor migrants themselves found that an easy question to answer. As one Bahamian who made the trip to Miami put it in a letter to the Tribune, "there is plenty of guessing as to what may be the cause of this emigration but if your various correspondents would only take a trip to the states they themselves would be a goner." Wages were higher in Florida, this migrant from the islands asserted, and "the half starved labourers here that go there—gets better to eat, to drink, to wear, to sleep, and so he got very little use for his home." Another writer put it differently. For men forced to migrate by poor agricultural conditions in the Bahamas, the discovery "that they could earn money and bring some of it back was an inducement to more timid neighbors, and they too went to Miami."

For thousands of Bahamians, the widespread perception of economic opportunity in Florida was too strong to resist. As the *Tribune* put it in 1913, "most of our people who go are afflicted with a severe attack of travel fever which is epidemic here."[28]

But while the Bahamians found economic opportunity in Florida, they also encountered segregation and white racism. The Miami press routinely denigrated the Bahamian newcomers as lazy and shiftless, and generally referred to them as "Nassau niggers." One Bahamian interviewed by Reid in *The Negro Immigrant* quickly became disenchanted by conditions in Miami: "Arriving in Colored Town, I alighted from the carriage in front of an unpainted, poorly-ventilated rooming house where I paid $2.00 for a week's lodging. Already, I was rapidly becoming disillusioned. How unlike the land where I was born. There colored men were addressed as gentlemen; here, as 'niggers'. There policemen were dressed in immaculate uniforms, carried no deadly weapon, save a billy; here, shirt-sleeved officers of the law car-

ried pistols, smoked and chewed tobacco on duty. Colored Miami certainly was not the Miami of which I had heard so much. It was a filthy backyard to the Magic City."[29]

Not only were the Bahamians discriminated against because of their race, but also because of their foreign citizenship. The Miami newspapers carped at the reluctance of the islanders to seek citizenship. Years later, one Bahamian immigrant who arrived in Coconut Grove in 1911, remarked on his early refusal to become a citizen: "I filled out an alien card every year. I didn't take out no citizenship. I kept thinking I'm not going to stay here because of the way white people treat you." This Bahamian later joined Marcus Garvey's black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association as a means of taking a stand against white racism. Not surprisingly, in 1911, Miami Bahamians protested the imposition of a hefty public school fee of $1.50 per month on all black Bahamian students whose parents remained British.[30]

No issue stirred as much anger and hostility among the Bahamians in Florida as conflict with local police. The Bahamians were unaccustomed to the racial segregation of America's deep South. By nature and practice, Miami historian Paul S. George has written, "these British subjects were less obsequious toward whites than native blacks. Many Bahamian blacks preached racial equality, causing a majority of whites, including the police, to regard them as troublemakers."[31]

Racial confrontations involving white Miami policemen often resulted. As early as 1907, British officials received complaints about police brutality directed toward Bahamians in Miami. In a May 1907 dispatch to the Foreign Office, British Ambassador Bryce reported that a Bahamian had been shot in the back by a Miami policeman "after having been otherwise maltreated by the police, and afterwards died." This shooting came shortly after a similar killing of a black Bahamian in Key West. Bryce urged the Foreign Office to send a letter of protest to the United States government, but he was quite candid in his analysis of the situation: "There seems no doubt that the aggressors were whites and the victims blacks and, in such cases, little hope can be entertained of getting justice in certain Southern States."[32]

Police brutality and other forms of racial discrimination led Miami's Bahamians in 1911 to petition Bahamas Governor W. Grey-Wilson for a greater degree of official protection, perhaps with the

appointment of a British vice-consul for Florida. As Ambassador Bryce put it in a letter to British Foreign Minister Edward Grey, "the treatment of Bahamians in Florida is not from a British standpoint, altogether satisfactory, and I venture to think that the appointment of a British Vice Consul at Miami would be welcomed by the inhabitants of the Bahamas and would relieve the Governor of a considerable amount of work and anxiety." But when Foreign Minister Grey sought the opinion of the British consul general at New Orleans on such an appointment, he received a rather negative response: "A British vice consul at Miami would have practically nothing else to do but investigate the complaints and grievances of the coloured Bahamians." Not only was Consul General Lewis E. Bernays unsympathetic to the plight of Bahamians in Florida, but he did not think much of Miami either. "The Town of Miami," Bernays wrote, "is situated in the most inaccessible part of Florida and is of no commercial importance whatever." Racial discrimination and police brutality, Bernays seemed to suggest, were insignificant problems, and certainly no self-respecting British diplomat would want to be stationed in a backwater town like Miami.[33]

The boom years of the 1920s brought tremendous population growth and urban development to south Florida. Miami more than tripled its population to over 110,000. The Bahamians continued to flow into Florida, too. Officially, Miami's immigrant black population increased by about 1,800 during the 1920s giving the city some 5,512 foreign-born blacks in 1930. The black islanders, according to the census reports, comprised about twenty-two per cent of Miami's total black population. As in 1920, only New York City had more immigrant blacks than Miami.[34]

These aggregate census numbers, however, do not reveal the full extent of the Bahamian migratory urge. In addition to Miami's Bahamian population, many thousands more came to Florida for seasonal work each year. The *Miami Herald* noted the pattern in 1924: "Negro laborers from Nassau and Bimini have poured into Miami. ... They worked on the municipal docks, on new Miami buildings or in the tomato fields stretching from Fort Pierce to Florida City, and then after six or seven months returned to their homes in the Bahamas, to come back for work the next year."[35] In fact, during the 1920s Bahamians migrated to Florida at the rate of about 6,000 per year (see Table 1).[36]

There is evidence that during the 1920s large numbers of uncounted Bahamian farm workers were being brought into the south Florida area illegally by large farm operators—at least it would seem that they were by-passing the normal immigration channels. As early as 1921, newspaper reports from Palm Beach County revealed that "the smuggling of negroes from the Bahama Islands has attracted the attention of the immigration department in the past few weeks." By mid-1924, when new immigration quotas went into effect, the Nassau newspapers were suggesting that prohibition-era bootleggers had turned to smuggling people into Florida, with West Palm Beach a favored destination.[37]

New federal immigration legislation in 1924 introduced the national-origins quota system and temporarily muddled the situation for Bahamians in Florida. Confusion over the details of the law, and particularly how it might affect the Bahamian labor migrants, created a panic in the south Florida labor market. One Miami labor agent, for instance, suggested that local agriculture would suffer "a serious labor shortage" and that wages would be driven up rapidly as a result. The *Miami Herald* noted that "since 75 per cent of Miami comes from the Bahamas, the sudden checking of this stream would injure Miami commerce." Local businessmen believed that the Bahamian immigrants would come under the general quota of Great Britain and be limited to 100 per month.[38]

This was startling news to the Miami business community, which had come to rely on the steady supply of cheap labor from the islands. The Miami Chamber of Commerce and other local organizations led an effort to get the Bahamians excluded from the immigration law's restrictive provisions. Petition drives were organized, seeking particularly the help of Florida senators and congressmen. Amid the confusion, Bahamians crowded the steamers plying between Nassau and Miami, trying to beat the deadline of July 1, 1924, when the immigration law became effective. "Boats in the Miami-Nassau passenger and freight service are laden to their capacity rushing the people into America," the *Herald* reported, "causing a virtual evacuation of Nassau and the Bahamas."[39]

In Nassau, the news of the new immigration law came "like a bomb" to islanders planning to work in Florida. The business community in Nassau was worried, too. Work in Miami and South Florida

Table 1
Bahamian Migration, 1919-1940

Year	Total Population	No. of Arrivals in Bahamas	Numbers Departing Bahamas	Percentage of Population Departing
1919	55,944	2,234	5,477	9.8
1920	55,352	2,964	5,134	9.3
1921	56,151	4,763	4,955	8.8
1922	56,924	6,057	5,614	9.9
1923	56,886	5,877	8,126	14.3
1924	55,423	5,872	5,665	10.2
1925	56,854	6,140	5,171	9.1
1926	58,101	3,188	2,178	3.7
1927	56,294	6,976	5,801	10.3
1928	60,230	8,343	7,844	13.0
1929	60,848	8,864	8,862	14.6
1930	61,741	7,555	7,317	11.9
1931	60,650	7,136	6,903	11.4
1932	61,812	4,851	4,714	7.6
1933	62,679	5,099	4,918	7.8
1934	63,763	7,684	7,578	11.9
1935	64,982	8,941	8,774	13.5
1936	66,219	11,308	10,917	16.5
1937	66,908	13,466	13,947	20.8
1938	67,720	11,377	11,489	17.0
1939	68,903	12,905	12,696	18.4
1940	70,332	13,656	13,360	19.0

Source: Bahamas Government, *Bahamas Blue Book, 1919-1940* (Nassau, 1920- 1941).

had provided a sort of safety valve for Bahamians without jobs or prospects in the islands. The remittances sent back by laborers in Florida and the capital brought in by returning migrants helped keep the Bahamian economy afloat at a time when the local commercial elite had failed to invest in economic development. By the early twentieth century, the islands had become heavily reliant on the economic

connection with the United States. Bringing the Bahamas and the British West Indies generally under the quota system, the *Nassau Guardian* asserted, "cannot fail to affect the economic condition of those colonies materially, and it will become more necessary than ever to take effective measures to secure the development of local industries." Ten years earlier, the Nassau papers had complained about the economic consequences of emigration, but now they worried about the economic impact of its termination.[40]

As it turned out, however, the 1924 quota law had little impact on the Bahamian migration to Florida. According to the law, British West Indians, including Bahamians, were included under the quota of Great Britain. But since Britain's generous annual quota of 65,000 was never filled, Bahamians found little problem in obtaining permanent entry to the United States. And by the 1920s most of the Bahamians coming to the Miami area were temporary labor migrants, who were able to enter the United States with six-month work permits. Thus, once the initial confusion was sorted out, the pattern of Bahamian movement to and from Florida continued uninterrupted, as the emigration statistics collected for the *Bahamas Blue Book* demonstrate (see Table 1). Only in 1926 was there any marked decline in Bahamian emigration—a drop in labor migration most likely due to the end of the Florida real estate boom, a severe economic decline, and a disastrous hurricane in September 1926.[41]

Actually, the Bahamian migratory urge intensified in the 1930s, when the numbers of annual emigrants from the islands surpassed 10,000 in most years. In the single year 1937, for instance, almost 14,000 Bahamians left the islands—more than twenty percent of the total population of the Bahamas. Almost the same number returned to the islands in 1937, suggesting the dual nature of the migratory flow (see Table 1). Many of the islands continued to lose population during the 1930s as well, some substantially so. The Bahamas during this period serve as a classic case of the "livelihood migration" that had typified the Caribbean since the late nineteenth century.[42]

The number of short-term labor migrants was on the rise through the 1920s and 1930s, but apparently fewer Bahamians were staying permanently in the Miami area. The 1935 Florida state census recorded 5,047 Bahamians in Dade County, down from the Miami total for 1930. And the United States census reported 4,063 foreign-born

blacks in Miami in 1940, a decline of about 1,500 since 1930. In fact, as the Miami area became more urbanized, and as agriculture expanded northward into Palm Beach County, the geographical distribution of Bahamian labor migrants followed suit. In 1945, for the first time, the Florida state census recorded more West Indian blacks in Palm Beach County than in Dade County.[43]

The Bahamian influx continued into the 1940s. Labor shortages during World War II led to federal recruitment of temporary agricultural laborers from the West Indies, as well as of workers from Mexico, Central America, and Canada. Both the War Food Administration and the War Manpower Commission were involved in this labor recruitment effort. Under this program, some 3,000 to 6,000 Bahamians annually picked fruit and harvested vegetables in Florida. Florida's county agricultural extension agents supervised the recruitment process and distributed the Bahamian workers to farm labor camps as needed.[44]

The annual recruitment of Bahamian farm workers continued after the war, as well, at first under a special agreement between the United States and Bahamian governments. This intergovernmental agreement expired in 1947, but private American companies were permitted to negotiate similar agreements for West Indian and Bahamian workers. Under this arrangement, the Florida Vegetable Committee, a growers group, contracted with the Bahamian government for several thousand temporary laborers a year for farm work in Florida. As late as 1951, some 4,500 Bahamians were laboring in Florida fields. As in the past, British officials in the Bahamas believed that "their employment makes a notable contribution towards the economy of the Colony."[45]

From the early 1930s fewer Bahamians were coming to south Florida for permanent residence. Yet some islanders continued to drift into Miami with the idea of remaining in the United States. One such Bahamian immigrant, a boy of fifteen, arrived in Miami in 1943. In his autobiography, *This Life*, Sidney Poitier wrote of the torn emotions that must have confronted many Bahamians about to make the trip across the Gulf Stream: "For many days before my departure I had been anxious about leaving. ... Yet much of me was straining to go and see this Miami—this America—this other part of the world." Poitier was the son of Cat Island tomato farmers, who twice a year packed up a hundred or so boxes of tomatoes and brought them to market in

Miami. Actually, Poitier had been born in Miami on one of these economic pilgrimages in 1927. Fifteen years later, with few prospects in Nassau where the family then lived, he journeyed to Miami to make his fortune. He lived first with an older brother and then an uncle, both earlier migrants to Miami. Like most Bahamian newcomers throughout the early twentieth century, Poitier had a succession of service-type jobs—cleaning up in a hotel, parking and washing cars, working in a warehouse or as a delivery boy, and washing dishes in restaurant kitchens. His autobiography reflects the typical Bahamian dismay about white racism in Miami, reports the seemingly ubiquitous police harassment of Bahamian blacks, but also exudes the essential determination and optimism of the Bahamian immigrants.[46]

Poitier's later success as an actor belied his modest Bahamian immigrant origins. Poitier did not remain long in Miami, but most of the islanders who came permanently to the United States tended to stay in Miami or Coconut Grove or Key West. The permanence and stability of their neighborhoods, along with strong links to the islands, contributed to cultural maintenance and a strong sense of nationality. From Miami's earliest days in the late nineteenth century, the Bahamian presence made the city's black population distinctively different from that in most southern cities. The Bahamians had an impact on food ways, cultural patterns, work habits, educational aspirations, musical and artistic activities, and other social characteristics. They had several distinctively Bahamian churches and fraternal organizations, all of which conveyed the sense of a cohesive ethnic community.[47]

The Bahamian newcomers brought many of their cultural traditions with them to the United States. Florida Bahamians, for instance, annually celebrated the anniversary of West Indian slave emancipation. In 1911, Bahamian farm workers in West Palm Beach celebrated the coronation of King George V. Following British and Bahamian traditions, Miami's black immigrants regularly observed Guy Fawkes Day. They paraded through the streets every November, carrying an effigy of Guy Fawkes, the celebration ending with the burning of the Fawkes effigy. These parades ended in the 1930s, however. As one Bahamian later remembered, when Miami city officials "found out that this person they were burning in effigy was a white man," they put an end to the celebration.[48]

Despite such official efforts to stamp out islander traditions, a

definable Bahamian presence continues in Miami to this day a testimony to the powerful surge of immigration from the islands in the early years of the twentieth century. Coconut Grove, in particular, retains the "indelible imprint" of the Bahamas. As one writer put it recently in the *Nassau Tribune*, the Grove still has "an atmosphere more akin to a Bahamas settlement than an American neighborhood." An annual Bahamian Goombay Festival in Coconut Grove, complete with a visit from the Royal Bahamas Police Band, reflects local enthusiasm for the celebration of black ethnicity in modern Miami.[49]

The Bahamian immigration to the United States shared many of the characteristics of the more general European immigration of the early twentieth century, especially in the economic motivations of the newcomers. But there were some obviously distinctive patterns to the Bahamian migration experience. From a very early period, there had been considerable movement back and forth between the islands and south Florida. By the late nineteenth century, the Bahamians were participating in the wider "livelihood migrations" of the other Caribbean islands. The nearness to Florida and the opportunities opening up in Miami by 1900 drew the islanders to the Magic City like a magnet. The flow of agricultural workers back and forth across the Gulf Stream continued up to mid-century, but enough Bahamians came to Miami permanently that they were able to build thriving communities with a strong sense of nationality and cultural distinctiveness. In this sense, the Bahamians established a pattern that would be replicated by later waves of newcomers from the Caribbean who found a congenial home in Miami.

Endnotes

1. U. S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population, II (Washington, 1913), 332; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population, II (Washington, 1922), 760, 795.
2. Quotation from Larry Smith, "Coconut Grove: Bahamian Roots in Florida," *Nassau Tribune*, October 12, 1977, clipping file, Miami-Dade Public Library, Miami. See also, Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Loyalists and Their Slaves* (London, 1983), 1-17; Sharon Wells, *Forgotten*

Legacy: Blacks in Nineteenth Century Key West (Key West, 1982), 7-9. The Bahamas Public Records Office (hereinafter cited as Bahamas PRO) in Nassau contains a thick sheaf of correspondence detailing British efforts to recruit black immigrants to the Bahamas from the United States. See Emigration and Immigration File, 1803-1921, Bahamas PRO.

3. Wells, *Forgotten Legacy*, 7, 12-13; Robert C. West and John P. Augelli, *Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), 233-26; Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850 with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period* (Miami, 1983), 228-31.
4 George E. Merrick, "Pre-Flagler Influences on the Lower Florida East Coast," *Tequesta* 1 (March 1941), 5; Thelma Peters, *Biscayne Country, 1870-1926* (Miami, 1981), 229, 239.
5. Paul Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas* (London, 1975), 168-69; Bahamas Government, *Demographic Aspects of the Bahamas Population, 1901-1974* (Nassau, 1976), 5.
6. Ira De A. Reid, *The Negro Immigrant: His Background, Characteristics and Social Adjustment, 1899-1937* (New York, 1939), 184-85.
7. Bonham C. Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants: Environment and Human Survival on St. Kitts and Nevis* (Knoxville, 1983), xi, 6, 172.
8. Stephen Knox, "The Men Who Dug the Canal," *Caribbean and West Indies Chronicle* 100 (February/March 1985), 24; Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *Population Movements in the Caribbean* (Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, 1950), 14-15; Bonham C. Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900-1920* (Knoxville, 1985), 3; Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981* (Pittsburgh, 1985), 4.
9. Dawn I. Marshall, "The History of Caribbean Migrations: The Case of the West Indies," *Caribbean Review* 11 (Winter 1982), 6-9, 52-53; Proudfoot, *Population Movements in the Caribbean*, 13-17; Richardson, Caribbean Migrants, 8.
10. L. D. Powles, *The Land of the Pink Pearl: or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas* (London, 1888), 254, 271; Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1898 (London, 1899), 49-50: Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1899 (London, 1900), 47
11. Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1904-05 (London, 1905), 32-33; Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1905-06 (London, 1906), 37; D. D. Sargent to Alvey A. Adee, U. S. State Department, January 26, 1905, Despatches from U. S. Consuls in Nassau, New Providence Island, 1821-1906, Record Group 59, microfilm edition, reel 24, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

12. W. Grey-Wilson to Colonial Office, June 11, 1906, Governor's Despatches, 1904-1912, Bahamas PRO; Bahamas: Report for 1904-05, 32.
13. Bahamas Government, Demographic Aspects of the Bahamas Population, 4-5; Michael Craton, *A History of the Bahamas* (London, 1962), 246-55; Anthony A. Thompson, *An Economic History of the Bahamas* (Nassau, 1979), 17-18.
14. Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1901-02 (London, 1902), 32; Bahamas Government, Report on the Census of the Bahama Islands, Taken on the 2nd April, 1911 (Nassau, 1911), 2.
15. Grey-Wilson to Lewis Harcourt, June 7, 1911, Governor's Despatches, 1904-1912, Bahamas PRO.
16. Merrick, "Pre-Flagler Influences," 5; Carlton J. Corliss, "Building the Overseas Railway to Key West," *Tequesta* 13 (1953), 16-17; Thelma Peters, *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay, 1850-1925* (Miami, 1976), 230; *Miami Metropolis*, June 12, 1909. On Bahamian women "running away" to Miami, see Amelia Defries, *The Fortunate Islands: Being Adventures with the Negro in the Bahamas* (London, 1929), 15.
17. Arva Moore Parks, "The History of Coconut Grove, Florida, 1821-1925," (master's thesis, University of Miami, 1971), 38-41; Bruce Porter and Marvin Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980: Crossing the Bounds* (Lexington, MA., 1984), 2; Paul S. George, "Criminal Justice in Miami, 1896-1930," (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1975), 185; Peters, *Biscayne Country*, 264; Helen Muir, *Miami, U. S. A.* (New York, 1963), 11.
18. Manuscript Census Schedules, Dade County, 1900, microfilm edition, reel 167, National Archives.
19. Ibid.
20. *Miami Metropolis*, June 12, 1909; Albury, *Story of the Bahamas*, 168-69; Thelma Peters, *Miami 1909: with Excerpts from Fannie Clemon's Diary* (Miami, 1984), 24-26.
21. Manuscript Census Schedules, Dade County, 1910, microfilm edition, reel 158, National Archives.
22. Ibid.
23. Bahamas Government, Report on the Census of the Bahama Islands Taken on the 24th April, 1921 (Nassau, 1921), 1-2; W. A. McRae, The Fourth Census of the State of Florida, 1915 (Tallahassee, 1915), 66: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population, II, 795.
24. Walter F. Wilcox, *International Migrations*, 2 vols. (New York, 1929), I, 515; Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1914-15

(London, 1915), 25; Great Britain, Colonial Office, Bahamas: Report for 1915-16 (London, 1916); Nassau Tribune, December 9, 1913.

25. Wilcox, *International Migrations*, I, 263-87; Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants*, 3-31.
26. James Bryce to Edward Grey, April 13, 1911, Colonial Office Records, microfilm edition, CO 23/268, Bahamas PRO; *Nassau Tribune*, November 8, 1913. See also, James Martin Wright, *History of the Bahama Islands, with a Special Study of the Abolition of Slavery in the Colony* (Baltimore, 1905), 583.
27. *Nassau Tribune*, October 23, November 8, 11, 13, 22, 1913.
28. Ibid., October 23, November 13, 1913.
29. *Miami Metropolis*, June 12, 1909; Reid, *The Negro Immigrant*, 189.
30. *Miami Metropolis*, June 12, 1909; *Miami Herald*, February 10, 1975; Grey Wilson to Harcourt, November 17, 1911, Governor's Despatches, 1904 1912, Bahamas PRO.
31. George, "Criminal Justice in Miami," 185-86.
32. *Miami Metropolis*, May 8, 1907; Bryce to Grey, June 21, 1907, Colonial Office Records, microfilm edition, CO 23/262, Bahamas PRO.
33. Bryce to Grey, April 13, 1911, Colonial Office Records, microfilm edition, CO 231268, Bahamas PRO; Lewis E. Bernays to Grey, July 11, 19 11, ibid.
34. U. S. Bureau of the Census, Negroes in the United States, 1920-32 (Washington, 1935), 32-33.
35. *Miami Herald*, July 6, 1924.
36. Bahamas Government, *Bahamas Blue Book, 1919-1930* (Nassau, 1920-1931).
37. *Palm Beach Post*, July 29, 1921; *Nassau Guardian*, August 9, 1924.
38. *Miami Herald*, June 24, 28, July 6, 1924; *Miami Daily News and Metropolis*, July 2, 8, 1924.
39. *Miami Herald*, June 28, July 6, 1924; *Miami Daily News and Metropolis*, June 24, 1924.
40. *Nassau Guardian*, July 1, September 16, 1924; Nassau Tribune, June 11, September 20, 1924.
41. Rekd Ueda, "West Indians," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA., 1980), 1021-22; President's Commission on Immigration and Naturalization, Whom We Shall Welcome (Washington, 1953), 54.
42. Bahamas Government, *Bahamas Blue Book*, 1930-1940 (Nassau, 1931-1941); Bahamas Government, Report on the Census of the Bahama Islands Taken on the 25th April, 1943 (Nassau, 1943), 2.

43. Nathan Mayo, The Sixth Census of the State of Florida, 1935 (Winter Park, 1935), 110; U. S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Population, II (Washington, 1943), 142; Nathan Mayo, The Seventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945 (Tallahassee, 1945), 118-19. In 1945, there were 4,609 West Indian blacks in Dade County, 5,957 in Palm Beach County, and 712 in Broward County.
44. Wilbert E. Moore, "America's Migration Treaties During World War II," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 262 (March 1949), 34; William S. Bernard, ed., *American Immigration Policy: A Reappraisal* (New York, 1950), 47-48; International Labour Office, *Labour Policies in the West Indies* (Geneva, 1952), 117-18; Julia Henderson, "Foreign Labour in the United States during the War," *International Labour Review* 52 (December 1945), 609-31; *Miami Herald*, January 24, 1945.
45. U. S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Immigration of the Committee on the Judiciary, *The West Indies (BWI) Temporary Alien Labor Program: 1943-1947*. 95th Cong., 2d sess., 1978, 8; Bahamas Government, *Votes of the Honourable Legislative Council of the Bahama Islands, 1946-1947* (Nassau, 1947), 167; Bahamas Government, *Votes of the Honourable Legislative Council of the Bahama Islands, 1947-1948* (Nassau, 1948), 141-44; Great Britain, *Colonial Office, Report on the Bahamas for the Years 1950 and 1951* (London, 1952), 3.
46. Sidney Poitier, *This Life* (New York, 1980), 1, 36-52.
47. Bahamas Government, *The Bahamian American Connection* (Nassau, 1976), 38; Arva Moore Parks, "Yesterday," in *Coconut Grove U. S. A. Centennial, 1873-1973* (Miami, 1974); *Miami Herald*, July 11, 1973.
48. *Nassau Tribune*, August 14, 1911; *Miami Herald*, February 1, 1976.
49. *Nassau Tribune*, October 12, 1977; *Miami Times*, June 5, 1986; *Miami News*, June 6, 1986.