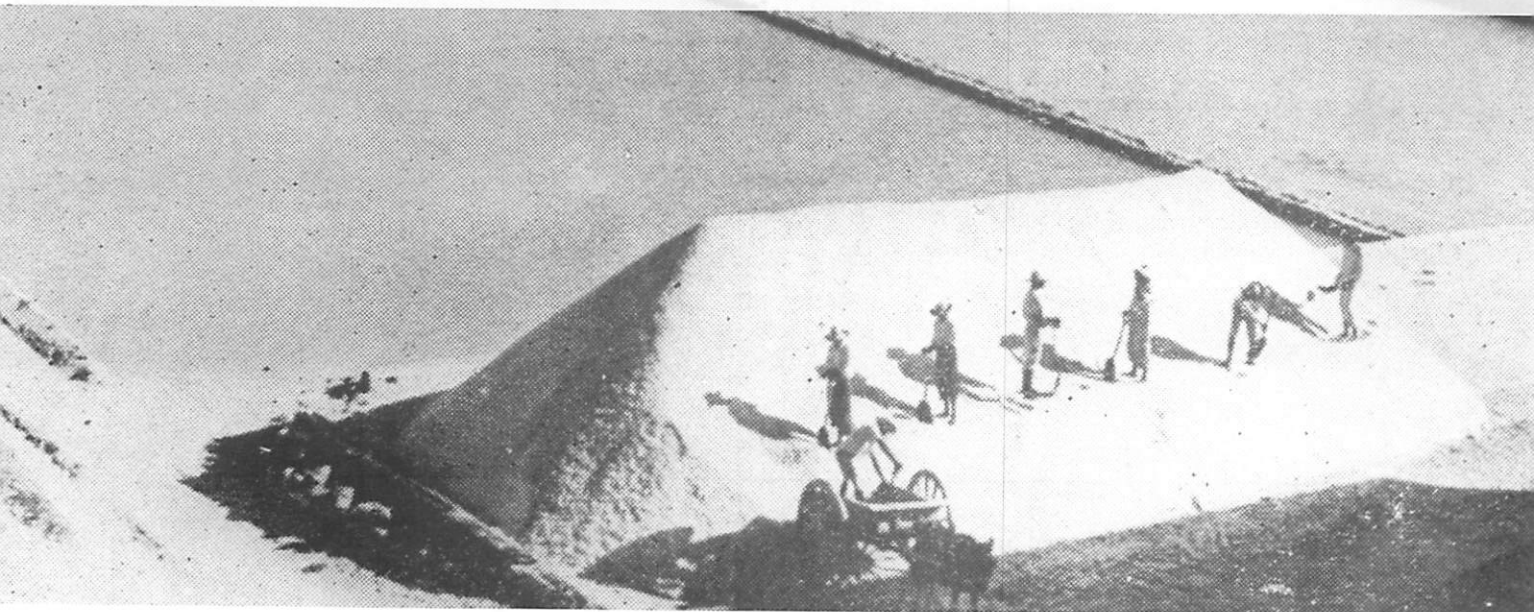


TURKS ISLANDS' SALT, ENSLAVEMENT AND THE NEWFOUNDLAND-WEST INDIAN TRADE

BY MARGOT MADDISON-MACFADYEN

All photos courtesy of the Turks and Caicos Islands National Museum.



Trimming salt on Salt Cay; Salinas in background.

Ballast stones are strewn thickly across the seabed of Cockburn Harbour, Grand Turk Island, one of the eight larger islands comprising the Turks and Caicos Islands archipelago in the West Indies. Vessels arriving at the harbour in the days of sail – sloops, schooners, brigantines – purged their ballast stones in order to take aboard the cargo they had come for. Although some stones were later used in construction on the island, and possibly retrieved from the seabed to do so, large numbers were discarded, tossed overboard to sink to the seabed where they are still obvious today. The vessels were then loaded with Turks Islands' salt, a fantastically precious cargo. Also known as 'white gold', this solar-evaporated salt was destined for New England, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland.

Before refrigeration, salt was needed for preservation of both meat and fish. A nation couldn't equip an army or float a navy without salt. One of the many commodities produced by slaves in the days of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans – such as sugar,

tobacco, rum, rice, and coffee – salt also preserved the codfish that fed the slaves working on plantations in the West Indies. This 'slave food' was produced in the northern colonies and shipped south where it was part of the meager rations provided for slave labourers. When slave owners eventually established provision grounds on their plantations, salt cod was a supplement to the sweet potatoes, yams, bananas, plantains, pigeon peas, and other nutritious foods slaves grew for their own and for their owners' consumption.

Much of this salt was produced on Grand Turk and the neighbouring islands of Salt Cay and South Caicos. Bermudians originally visited these islands seasonally for their naturally occurring salinas (salt ponds) that provided salt for the taking. Over time, this developed into a full-scale enterprise based on slave labour. Some scholars say that Bermudians were in the Turks Islands raking and gathering salt as early as the 1650s, but others give the date 1670, saying that a John Darrell was aware of salt on the island of Little Exuma and that,

thereafter, the Bermudians began harvesting salt in the Turks Islands.¹

This may be the same John Darrell listed in the Keith Matthews Name Files at Memorial University of Newfoundland's Maritime History Archive, who in 1669, sailing the *Adventurers*, brought 'bleffings' to Newfoundland from Anthony Peniston, a resident of Bermuda. It may have been his grandson or another relative bearing the same name of John Darrell, who, also listed in the Matthews Name Files, arrived at Newfoundland in 1715 from New York aboard the vessel *Parnell* that was laden with Bermuda salt. Very likely, both these landings were at Ferryland.

Also likely is that in addition to bringing greetings, or trading salt for other commodities, these men were visiting kin. Settlers of a small island colony and pressed for space, Bermudians were constantly engaged in betterment migrations to other North American colonies, which "created the linkages of kinship and affiliation that facilitated the operation of the highly social world of maritime commerce."²

The physical structures of solar-evaporated salt production of the past remain on Grand Turk, Salt Cay, and South Caicos. Salt ponds, today serving as ready-made bird sanctuaries, are easily recognizable, the canals connecting the ocean to these ponds are still identifiable, and masters' mansions and slave dwellings still stand. For it was slaves toiling in extremely harsh conditions who built these canals and ponds and labored in them for their Bermudian masters. Mary Prince, a Bermudian-born West Indian woman, was one. She told her life-story, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, to Susanna Strickland (later Susanna Moodie) of the London-based Anti-Slavery Society, who then compiled it. Approximately ten (1802-1812) of the 40 years that Prince was enslaved were spent on Grand Turk toiling in the salt ponds of her recently identified master Robert Darrell, the great-great-grandson of John Darrell, captain of *Adventurers*.³

"I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning until nine," Prince said. After a brief



Salt loading, old style.

break for "blawly," corn soup, she and her fellow slaves "worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon [their] heads like fire, and raising salt blisters ... [Their] feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone." They broke again at noon for more blawly but quickly returned to their labour in the ponds until dark. Then, they "shoveled up the salt in large heaps, and went down to the sea, where [they] washed the pickle from their limbs, and cleaned the barrows and shovels from the salt."⁴

Thousands of slaves worked in these conditions of the Turks Island salt industry. In 1822, for example, Turks and Caicos reported 1,912 slaves.⁵ Although this does not come close to the number of slaves working in the sugar industry on the sugar islands, they enriched

1 Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616-1782*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1999, p 269.

2 Neil Kennedy, "William Crashaw's Bridge: Bermuda and the Origins of the English Atlantic, 1609-1624", *English Atlantic Revisited*, ed Nancy Rhoden, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p 118.

3 Margot Maddison-MacFadyen, "Mary Prince and Grand Turk," *The Bermuda Journal of Archaeology and Maritime History*, 19 (2009), p 109.

4 Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, revised edition, ed Moira Ferguson, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p 71-2.

5 Nigel Sadler, "Slave History of the Turks and Caicos Islands: The problems encountered researching slave history", paper presented at the Museums Association of the Caribbean's 13th Annual General Meeting, Grand Turk, 23-27 October, 2001, Turks and Caicos National Museum, p 29.

their masters substantially, in some cases creating family fortunes. The salt industry was an integral part of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans operating in the North Atlantic, that trade route joining Africa, the West Indies, North America, and Europe that held its own, in spite of numerous rebellions, uprisings, and runaways, for over 400 years. There were several other island territories producing solar-evaporated salt for the trade, such as the Dutch colonies of Bonaire and Salt Tortuga, and British colonies Anguilla, Exuma, and Ragged Island.⁶

Salt islands such as these are low, sandy, and have little annual rainfall. Crashing waves and ocean surge fill their salinas with seawater that evaporates quickly, leaving crystallized salt around the edges that can be easily raked and gathered. In the Turks Islands these ponds were ingeniously developed and expanded into a lucrative and highly organized salt production. At Grand Turk and Salt Cay, seawater was let into cleaned and readied human-built common reservoirs or ponds by wide canals with sluices. At South Caicos, the seawater was let in by the 'boiling hole,' a naturally occurring formation that worked with the tides.⁷

The brine remained in the common reservoir for approximately ten days in good, sunny conditions. At this point, it was moved by slave-powered water wheel, into the 'weak' or No 1 ponds where evaporation was rapid. In another ten days it developed a 'saffron' hue due to 'vegetative matter', the physical sign it was ready to be moved to 'strong' or No 2 ponds where its strength was further increased. Here it took on a 'pinkish' tint, and its volume was reduced to one-sixth of the original. In another month, and after further evaporation, it was crystallized and ready for raking into huge mounds awaiting shipment.⁸

Donkeys, carts, and windmills were brought into use after Emancipation on August 1, 1834, when England freed all slaves in its overseas territories. Prior to this, slaves provided the labour to move the salt in tubs and wheelbarrows. At one of three beaches along the shore of Cockburn Harbour, slaves measured the salt into sacks, each holding just over half a bushel. Five sacks at a time were carried on the heads of the 'boat crew' to salt lighters

waiting in the shallow water. The loaded salt lighters, taking from 400 to 500 bushels per trip, then moved the salt out to larger anchored vessels, such as sloops and schooners, where it was handed up to men aboard by means of a hatch cover slung over the side of the ship. As the salt was emptied into the hold, the sacks were counted to keep track of the number of bushels taken aboard. Because the salt was so valuable, vessels leaving harbour for northern colonies travelled in convoys.⁹

Perhaps it was this well-developed method of production that made Turks Islands' salt desirable over all others, even to George Washington. Bermudians were the traditional suppliers of salt to the 13 American colonies prior to the War of Independence. When war broke out and British colonies were forbidden to trade with their American cousins, a British naval blockade was set up preventing trade at American ports, yet Bermudian salt rakers and ships' captains ignored it.¹⁰ Some 20 Bermudian-built sloops – captained by 'rebel' privateers in the eyes of the British – continued shipping salt to Washington's army.¹¹ The Royal Navy, aware of these offences, tried to put a stop to them. For example, in 1776 a naval cutter chased Captain John Seymour's sloop the *Dick Cole* to Grand Turk where it was seized and sent to auction in Jamaica.¹²

The prices received for Turks Islands' salt at an American Atlantic port during the war were fabulous and may have been why the rebel privateers took the risk. Once reaching an American port, the salt was frequently bartered for another prized commodity that could be traded up. A Baltimore advertisement dated July 24, 1778, and headlined SALT read: "Just imported in the Sloop *Experiment*, Captain Jofiah Cox, and now fitting by him at Mr. Spear's Wharf, at a very reasonable Price. Tobacco, in Hogsheads, will be taken in Exchange for a Quantity."¹³ Personal politics may have been another reason why these Bermudians ran the British naval blockade. Josephus and Richard Darrell's vessel, *Their President*, for example, which had many landings at Ferryland, Newfoundland, in the early 1800s, broadcast their political leanings, and possibly affiliations, right on its bow.

A year prior to the *Dick Cole*'s capture, Palliser's Act was passed. This Act, possibly conceived to encourage the loyalty of the Newfoundland colony - some members

6 Cynthia Kennedy, "The Other White Gold: Salt, Slaves, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and British Colonialism", *The Historian*, 69 (2007), p 218.

7 H E Sadler, *Turks Islands Landfall: A History of the Turks and Caicos Islands*, Kingston, Jamaica: United Cooperative Printers, Ltd, 1967, p 98.

8 H E Sadler, p 99.

9 H E Sadler, p 99-100.

10 Cynthia Kennedy, p 228.

11 H E Sadler, p 60.

12 *Ibid*.

13 *Ibid*.

of whom had sympathies with the American colonies - only allowed fishers from England and His Majesty's European colonies to fish the Banks and to dry their catch on Newfoundland shores.¹⁴ Nonetheless, 34 Bermudian sloops ranging from 30 to 60 tons, each with eight to 12 men, three-quarters of whom were "robust able black men," natives of Bermuda and slaves to their vessels' owners, fished the Banks in 1788.¹⁵ Concerned with reinventing their economy after the American War of Independence, they had arrived laden with their own Turks Islands' salt, and they had hired old countrymen for instruction in splitting, salting, and conducting fishing on the Banks. Fishing room masters were either paid directly by the Bermudians for curing their fish or, in the case of the larger vessels, the Bermudians took possession of vacant fishing rooms south of St John's, occupying them in the same manner as a British vessel and crew.¹⁶

This sudden and unexpected competition in the fishery incensed many a British fisher, especially when it was soon realized that the Bermudians were quick to learn the art of fishing and that they exceeded them in 'dispatch'. Excellent sailors, no wind prevented them from reaching the Banks, and in calm waters the slaves could row their sloops at two and a half to three miles per hour. One Newfoundland master reported being stopped at St John's Narrows by a strong wind but that two Bermudian sloops passed him, working their way out under low sail. The next evening he made it out of the harbour but took five days to reach the fishing grounds. Once there he fell in with one of the Bermudian sloops that had passed him only to discover that it was returning fully laden with fish after just four days.¹⁷

The Bermudian fishers were made out to be alarming rivals of the British and who were not only depleting the fish stocks but were also the 'second selves' of Americans. Because they used their own Turks Islands' salt and had slaves to do the work, it was argued that they had far less expenses and would undercut prices in the West Indies with their product. Also, since they were friends of the Americans, they would easily smuggle New England salt cod to the West Indies and sell it as a Newfoundland product. Finally,

14 D W Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland*, accessed at <http://archive.org/stream/historyofnewfoun00prowuoft#page/iv/mode/2up>, p 344-5.

15 Jeremiah Coghlan, "Report on 'Bermudian Irruption' 25th October 1788," St John's, p 345.

16 Coghlan, p 345-6.

17 Coghlan, p 346.

known to be bootleggers of the worst type, they would bring American goods into the bays and creeks of Newfoundland under the sanction of fishing.¹⁸ The 100 sail they bragged of bringing to the Banks the following year capped it. They were allowed to dry their fish on Newfoundland shores in 1788, but were strictly forbidden in subsequent years. Taking fish from the Banks back to Bermuda for processing was useless. It was too far a trip for green fish plus the climate of Bermuda was too humid for satisfactory drying, so the enterprise was abandoned.¹⁹

Some of these Bermudians ventured into whaling, others turned to privateering and were after French prizes, and still others migrated to Newfoundland to take part in the fishery.²⁰ Having extensive family connections linking them to other British colonies, they were likely exercising familial associations when settling in Newfoundland. Bermudian ship-owners soon filled a void left by the American Revolution: transport of goods between Newfoundland and the West Indies. By 1805, the Governor of Newfoundland reported that trade with the West Indies had, "fallen chiefly into the hands of the Bermuda ship owners."²¹

In 1810, a total of 39 Bermudian vessels made 54 voyages from St John's to Bermuda and the West Indies.²² Most took their cargo to Bermuda for later re-shipment in the same or other vessels to final destinations. In many cases these ship owners were Turks Island salt proprietors. They produced and owned the Turks Islands' salt that their vessels carried north, thereby vastly increasing their long-term gain. Also in 1810, four Bermudians established mercantile houses in St John's: John Dunscombe, John Trimmingham, Richard Wood, and Robert Reed.²³ Denying Bermudians the right to fish the Banks and to dry their fish on Newfoundland shores certainly had interesting repercussions. Some twenty years later they were established as Newfoundland merchants and controlled the West Indian trade.

18 Coghlan, p 347.

19 Prowse, p 347.

20 Michael J Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010, p 452-3.

21 Keith Matthews, "The Newfoundland-West Indian Trade and Bermuda Ship-owners, 1650-1815," Maritime History Group, 1984, unpublished paper, Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland, p 26.

22 Matthews, p 29.

23 Matthews, p 33.

Thousands upon thousands of bushels of Turks Islands' salt came north with other trade goods on Bermudian ships to trade for commodities produced in the northern clime. The *Grand Turk*, for example, a 138-ton brigantine owned by S S Ingham and captained by J G Frith, both of Grand Turk Island, made two trips to Prince Edward Island in 1824. Combining figures from the two trips, the *Grand Turk* off loaded 1,352 bushels of salt, plus rum, brown sugar, refined sugar, molasses, gin, aniseed cordial, cotton, shop clothing, lemons, honey, castor oil, oakum, and blankets.²⁴ On its combined return trips to Bermuda, it took oats, potatoes, corn, cranberries, hogs, poultry, dry fish, pickled fish, butter, pork, beef, cheese, lard, and candles. The *Grand Turk* also took 78,050 feet of deals, 13,500 shingles, 2,500 laths, and 30 spars for the Bermuda ship building industry.²⁵

Their President, the 133 ¾-ton brigantine owned by the Darrells who were relatives of Robert Darrell, the slave-owner of Mary Prince, made 14 trips to Newfoundland from 1807 to 1811.²⁶ These were the same years Prince was brutally enslaved on "that horrible island" - Grand Turk. In the fall of 1810, *Their President* is reported arriving at Bermuda from Newfoundland carrying codfish, herrings, mackerel, salmon, cod tongues, oil, soap, loaf sugar, hoops, hardware, glassware, pork, hams, and port.²⁷

24 Public Archives and Records Office of PEI, Collector of Customs Shipping Inwards, Reel 1.

25 Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Customs Shipping Outwards, Volume 47.

26 Keith Matthews Name Files, 1500-1850, Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

27 Colonial Office records, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, UK, 41/8.

In 1812 Mary Prince left Grand Turk Island. She would be enslaved another 16 years and have one more owner, her fifth, John Adams Wood Jr. In the late summer of 1828, Wood took her to London to serve as the family's nanny and also as a washerwoman. Three months after their arrival, she left, using to advantage the fact that slavery in England had been unsupported by law for several decades, although this did not yet apply to the rest of the British Empire. She was able to quit his service and walk out his door to freedom.

The salt trade in which she and thousands of other slaves toiled was a significant part of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, and it was strongly tied to economic pursuits in the northern colonies, a fact often overlooked. Possessed of a selective memory about their historical involvement in the slave trade, many Canadians prefer to remember the Underground Railroad when American slaves escaping from southern masters ran north to American free states and to Upper Canada, a history that did not begin in earnest in Canada until the British Parliament's 1833 Slavery Abolition Act became law on August 1, 1834, a date now celebrated in the British West Indies as Emancipation Day. Reclaiming transatlantic slave trade histories such as these stories of slaves raking salt in the Salt Islands, of slaves fishing the Grand Banks and drying their catches on Newfoundland's shores, and of Bermudians setting up as merchants in St John's so that they might control the Newfoundland-West Indian trade, shows that our historical involvement was not as benign as we may once have assumed. **NQ**

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NEXT ISSUE

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ON THE COVER



John Stokes' Horse (2007)
by David Blackwood
Aquatint, 16" x 20"
Photo credit: Brian Ricks

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The Chinese, the Scots, the population of Brunette Island. They come for opportunity. They nurture their own subsistence economy. They leave for work. Demographics shift, and whole communities fall away. What remains? Memories, artifacts. Here we have tales of a Norwegian writer, an American-born folklorist, and the best friend of a beleaguered beauty salon owner, among many others whose journeys have brought them here or taken them away. Our cover, too, is a story in itself.

The cover image, *John Stokes' Horse* (aquatint, 20" x 16", 2007), was inspired by a small, hand-carved child's toy David Blackwood saw in the Bonavista North Museum & Gallery. The piece had been donated by a man, in his 80s, from Cape Freels. It was made for him by his grandfather.

"I was astonished when I saw it for the first time," said David Blackwood. "It's a little tiny toy horse. The little horse was brown with dabs of white paint, all house paint. It had a frayed rope tail and a frayed rope mane. The key, from a tin of corned beef, is embedded in its breast as a harness."

"It had an incredible presence. There is a little bronze horse in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, from 3000 BC, that has the same sort of tremendous, primal, primordial power. I did a whole series of drawings and watercolours, photographed it inside out and upside-down. The prints evolved and it's now also a big painting. It's such a simple shape, it works powerfully in the painting."

"I did two [print] versions, one almost black and white, the other coloured. You don't want to get too involved with colour. But when it was black and blue it looked so cold, so desolate. [Set against] that background, that's a real Cape Freels landscape, it looks monumental."

Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland, is on exhibit at The Rooms June 9 – September 9, 2012.

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It is our creative ability that ensures our survival as a recognizable people and culture, and enables us also to contribute to the enrichment of the nation of which we form a distinctive part.

—George M Story

A Cultural Journal of Newfoundland and Labrador

