

from his pulpit a vessel in trouble began a period of silent prayer. By the time everyone opened their eyes, he was out of the church and heading for the wreck!

Apart from salvaging the cargo, the wreck's survivors needed to be rescued. Some rescuers were rewarded with medals for their bravery in this, but there were times when no attempt was made to save any survivors. In fact, Bahamians sometimes went beyond the law to *make* a ship crash upon the rocks. Often warning lights were extinguished, or false beacons set up on treacherous rocks, luring in the unsuspecting ships. On the island of Eleuthera we can still find hollow rock mounds that were once used as wrecking towers.

Wrecking eventually declined as a means of earning a living, partly due to the building of lighthouses. The one at the entrance to Nassau Harbour was the first to be built (1817) by the Imperial Lighthouse Service of Britain. This was small in comparison to others in the Out Islands, including those on Great Isaacs (1859), Cay Lobos (1860), Sturup's Cay (1863), Elbow Cay (1863), Inagua (1868) and Bird Rock (1876).

Many Bahamians – such as the inhabitants of Elbow Cay, Abaco – opposed the building of lighthouses because it threatened their profits from wrecking. They sank the small boats used for transporting building supplies to the lighthouse site. They even refused to supply the lighthouse workers with food. When lightning struck the new lighthouse and extinguished the light, they called it an act of God. Today the red and white-striped lighthouse guides ships as far as 30 miles away.

Other factors helped to bring wrecking to an end; the British Admiralty for the first time prepared accurate charts of the reef-strewn waters to help mariners, and

captains and pilots were better trained. In addition, steam power replaced sail. This meant that ships were easier to manoeuvre, could travel more by day than night, and were less at the mercy of storms or gales.

## ● Salt

Another industry that provided profits for its owners and wages for its workers was salt production. Salt had been exported from The Bahamas since the time of the Eleutheran Adventurers, but became a principal industry in the early 19th century. Before 1838, slaves were used to collect the salt. Once freed, many found work in the salt ponds.

The work was very hard, partly because it was done manually with few tools. The salt and the sun caused discomfort for their hands and eyes. For all this effort, workers were paid very low wages, and were away from home for long periods, living in shacks or bush houses.

From the 1850s onwards, the industry went into decline. There were several reasons for this. The Turks and Caicos Islands had been the main producers of Bahamian salt, but these islands were separated from The Bahamas in 1848. In addition, the cost of labour and the unreliability of the workers were a problem. The manual collection methods and the working conditions limited production. Rain could spoil the collected salt. Finally, when the USA developed its own salt ponds, the American government placed a tariff (Custom's duty) on imports. As a result, salt prices fell, and it became more difficult to make a profit from salt in The Bahamas.

## ● The Depression Years

Soon after the American Civil War, the prosperity from blockade-running came to an end. Some people again turned to



## 16 EARNING A LIVING IN THE 19TH CENTURY

### Key Ideas

- Throughout the 19th century, the population of The Bahamas needed to look continuously for new ways of making a living.
- A major cause of this was the poor Bahamian soil. However, other natural resources, along with geographical location, sometimes provided alternative sources of income.
- Industries such as wrecking, and various forms of agriculture, were successful for a while but then eventually declined.
- Bahamians tried to find alternative ways of providing for themselves and their families, but most still faced poverty.

As you read in the last chapter, Bahamians sometimes used situations in America to increase their income. This was also the case with Prohibition, which you will read about in the next chapter. In this chapter you will read about the many other ways in which Bahamians tried to earn a living in the 19th century.

### ● The wrecking industry

The sea has often been a source of livelihood for Bahamians, and the wrecking industry was no exception. The cry of 'Wreck ashore!' came frequently. The people then flocked to their boats and scrambled towards the once-majestic ships that had met their end on one of the many nearby reefs.

The early 19th century saw wrecking at a high point – salvaged goods became The Bahamas' largest export. Between 1855 and 1864, over \$120 000 worth of goods were salvaged. So popular had wrecking become that the government passed a law to regulate it. All Bahamian boats and men had to be registered if they wanted to take part in wrecking. In 1858, over 300

vessels were registered. The first person to arrive at a wreck was designated the 'wreck master', and the amount each wrecker would gain from a wreck was also laid down in law.

All kinds of people took part in wrecking. On one occasion at a church on Harbour Island, when a wreck was announced the Minister demanded that everyone remain in their pews until he could disrobe – so that he would have equal chance of getting to the wreck! On another occasion, a clergyman who spied



▲ 16.1 A wrecking