

The Beginnings of an English Settlement: Woodes Rogers, Piracy, and Political Economy in the Eighteenth Century Bahamas

Vito Whitmore

History

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Vaughn Scribner

In the evening of July 24, 1718, a small convoy of British ships sailed into the harbor of Nassau, hitherto the undisputed center of global piracy. The ramshackle settlement in the Bahamas had been without any semblance of official government for nearly two decades, and for the last several years had been controlled by a loose confederation of pirates who called themselves the Flying Gang. Some 1,000 pirates accounted for the vast majority of Nassau's inhabitants, who now looked apprehensively towards the approaching ships. They had known for some time that the famous privateer Woodes Rogers had been commissioned Governor of the Bahama Islands, and that he carried with him a royal pardon for any pirate willing to take it. With the Governor's ships now in the harbor, the fearsome pirate Captain Charles Vane, swearing he would suffer no governor but himself, sent Rogers a blunt message:

Your Excellency may please to understand that we are willing to accept His Majesty's most gracious pardon on the following terms, viz.-That you will suffer us to dispose of all our goods now in our possession. Likewise, to act as we think fit with

everything belonging to us...If your Excellency shall please to comply with this, we shall, with all readiness, accept of His Majesty's Act of Grace. If not, we are obliged to stand on our defence. We wait a speedy answer.¹

The Governor's reply was speedy indeed: he sent two sloops in pursuit of Captain Vane, who cut his cable and lit aflame a recently captured twenty-two-gun French prize in the middle of the harbor. In the resulting confusion, Vane escaped through the narrow eastern passage of the harbor, his guns firing and his black flag fluttering defiantly in the blazing night.

The next morning, Rogers landed in Nassau. Despite the drama of the previous night, around 200 pirates greeted him with much ceremony, forming up two lines and firing off their muskets in his honor. They all of course made haste to avail themselves of the King's pardon, which was duly read out in the ruins of Nassau's fort. Over the next several years this newfound alliance between the reformed pirates and their energetic Governor would be sorely tested, as they would soon discover that they could no longer "act as we think fit," as Vane had demanded. Over the next fourteen years, the interaction between these radically different forces would lay the foundations for the future development of the Bahamas as a British colony.

Issues of domestic political economy in the Bahamas during the governorship of Woodes Rogers fundamentally shaped the long-term economic development of the colony. The conflicts between the gubernatorial regime of Rogers and the largely ex-pirate populace over matters of economic development resulted to some degree in the reorganization of the former pirate nest into a proper British-American

¹ As quoted in G.E. Manwaring, *Woodes Rogers: Privateer and Governor* (Nassau: Deans Peggs Research Fund, 1957), 31-33.

settlement.² However, it was also to retain a distinctive reliance on maritime commerce and opportunism, and to remain economically underdeveloped, as Rogers was ultimately unable to regularize the economy of what in many ways remained a pirate society. Until his death, Rogers firmly believed that the Bahamas could become a flourishing and profitable colony that would be an invaluable asset to the Crown if appropriate measures were taken to develop the economy and promote settlement. He thus pursued policies to improve the defense, agriculture, and legitimate commerce of the colony. These policies were almost always met with the resistance of the inhabitants: mariners unaccustomed to the way of life which the Governor sought to introduce, preferring less labor-intensive, higher-reward occupations, like wrecking and privateering, as well as other extra-legal activities. Given the relative neglect of the colony by the metropole, the society resulting from these conflicting forces necessarily would come to define the course of Bahamian history.

The story of Woodes Rogers has been treated by numerous historians. Foremost among these are the early-mid twentieth century scholars G.E. Manwaring and Bryan D. G. Little, whose biographical works on Rogers have influenced essentially all subsequent scholarship on both the man and on the Bahamas during his tenure. More recently, David Cordingly and Graham A. Thomas have also written biographies on Rogers. These biographers, though they all treat extensively on the conditions in the colony during his tenure, tend to analyze it in the context of Rogers' own life, viewing the outcomes in terms of the Governor's success in carrying out his designs. They sometimes gloss over the developments during Governor Phenny's tenure (1721-1728, between Rogers' two terms as Governor) and do not give full attention

² For a general overview of the evolving role of piracy in British colonial development, see Mark Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

to the role of the interplay between popular preferences and governmental policy. One would be remiss to fail to mention the works of scholars of Bahamian history like Gail Saunders, Michael Craton, Sandra Riley, and the members and contributors to the Bahamas Historical Society and its journal. Their scholarship on this era of Bahamian history is invaluable, and they have convincingly and comprehensively written on the role of this period in the islands' history, particularly on the long-term effects of the introduction of Crown rule, British neglect of the colony, and the role of piracy in Bahamian history. However, they generally overlook the importance of political economy issues during this period in setting the course for colonial development, preferring to see it in the context of the islands' earlier period under proprietary government and the limitations imposed by their environmental conditions and resources.³

This paper will examine the various policies pursued by the colonial government during Woodes Rogers' two terms as Governor of the Bahamas (1718-1721 and 1728-1732) as well as during the intervening term of Governor George Phenney (1721-1728), analyzing their social and economic context and how their results were shaped by support or resistance among the ex-pirate populace. Specifically, this paper will examine the measures taken to improve the defenses of the colony, to promote the agricultural settlement of the islands, and to encourage commerce. How each of these policies fit into the larger agenda of establishing a "proper" colony will be treated along with how

³ For biographies of Governor Rogers see G.E. Manwaring's concise work *Woodes Rogers: Privateer and Governor* and Bryan Little's seminal *Crusoe's Captain: Being the Life of Woodes Rogers, Seaman, Trader, Colonial Governor*. More recent works include David Cordingly's *Pirate Hunter of the Caribbean*, which puts Rogers' efforts in the context of the larger War on Piracy, and Graham Thomas' *Pirate Hunter: The Life of Captain Woodes Rogers*. Volume 1 of Craton and Saunders' *Islanders in the Stream* is the most definitive account of early Bahamian history to date. See also Sandra Riley's *Homeward Bound* for a history of the Bahamas to 1850.

the actual outcomes were shaped by domestic controversy. Finally, how the distinctly Bahamian society which had emerged from these controversies by the time of Rogers' death in 1732 affected later developments in the colony's history will be generally analyzed.

That the pirates of Nassau had greeted their Governor with such apparent enthusiasm in 1718 probably had more to do with the fact that the island was utterly indefensible than with any repentance they might have felt. Indeed, Nassau had been attacked and destroyed some thirty-four times by the French and Spanish during the recent War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Rogers was keenly aware of his vulnerable position. Other than a garrison of 100-150 men consisting largely of outpatients of London's Chelsea Hospital and the forty-gun Indiaman *Delicia*, which Rogers and his private backers maintained as a guardship at their own expense, the Governor was left largely to his own devices in securing and defending the colony.⁴ Given the ever-present danger of a Spanish or French attack, or even a return of the pirates, it is unsurprising that the first measures taken by Rogers' Governing Council in August 1718 were for the repair of the fortifications. He had all able-bodied men set to work in repairing the bastions, mounting as many guns as possible, constructing a palisade, and clearing out all the brushwood and shrubs within gunshot of the fort.⁵ He furthermore organized the entire population into three companies of militia to keep watch at night. Within a month the most urgent repairs to Fort Nassau had been made and a small redoubt of eight guns was constructed to guard the passage through which Vane had escaped. Cleverly, he recommissioned several of the reformed pirates, including Benjamin

⁴ For details on the recruitment of Rogers' Independent Company see Joseph Addison, *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison*, vol. 6 (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854-1856), 496.

⁵ David Cordingly, *Pirate Hunter of the Caribbean: The Adventurous Life of Captain Woodes Rogers* (New York: Random House, 2011), 156.

Hornigold (Blackbeard's former mentor), as privateers to hunt down their unregenerate friends.

Fear of a return by the pirates plagued Rogers' entire first term.⁶ The Governor of South Carolina had written to the British Government as early as November 1718 warning that the pirates "promise themselves to be repossessed of Providence in a short time."⁷ A well-orchestrated mass hanging of pirates in December was sufficient to overawe the inhabitants, but their loyalty remained suspect. Rogers had written back to England in October that he did not trust even half of his militia to stand by him if "their old friends" returned, as Vane was threatening to at the time.⁸ Nevertheless, common enmity for the Spaniards temporarily united the Governor and his subjects in the project of defense. For a period of two weeks after the outbreak of war with Spain in December 1718, he was able to get the inhabitants to work feverishly on repairing the fortifications in the face of an expected attack, despite that in so doing they were also "strengthening a curb for themselves," as he aptly put it. This was apparently not long lost on the ex-pirates, who lapsed once more into indolence after the initial war fever had passed away. As Rogers himself noted in 1719, "It was as bad as treason is in England to declare our design of fortifying was to keep out the pirates."⁹

Paradoxically, the ex-pirates needed to cooperate with the government in building up the fortifications to defeat the common enemy, though in doing so they entrenched royal authority ever more deeply. The decisive moment came with a failed Spanish assault on New Providence in February 1720, in which the combination of the

⁶ His first term lasted from 1718 to 1721. The number of pirates in the Caribbean continued to increase throughout this entire period.

⁷ Letter of November 4, 1718, as quoted in G.E. Manwaring, *Woodes Rogers*, 35-36.

⁸ Governor Woodes Rogers to the Council of Trade and Plantations, 31 October 1718, in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Vol. 30, 1717-1718*, 359-381.

⁹ 37. see note 5 above.

newly repaired fortifications and the tough ex-pirate militiamen was able to ward off a much larger Spanish invasion force. Both Rogers and the inhabitants knew that their alliance was born only of necessity, and Rogers thus ordered the rudders removed of all the ships whose owners' loyalty was suspect only days later. With no help from Britain, the defenses remained in a haphazard state until the end of his tenure.

Governor Phenny experienced no more luck. Over the course of his seven years in office (1721-1728) he was able to repair a few of the bastions and design a new gateway for the fort, but the fortifications were still little more than shambles by the time Rogers returned in 1729.¹⁰ Though the threat of pirates had abated, his primary concern continued to be strengthening the defenses. He requested and received a second Independent Company, which turned out to be little more than a motley collection of sick and elderly men. He begged the newly instituted Bahamian legislature to fund repairs of the fortifications, but it obstructed all proposals on the matter.¹¹ Rogers personally blamed this on its Speaker, but it was likely also a genuine expression of the inhabitants' longstanding aversion to the imperial control and oversight that the defenses represented.

This impasse inevitably came to define the conditions in the colony for the rest of the century. The garrison was perpetually weak and under-supplied, and even resorted to open mutiny in the 1740s. Though Nassau was a boomtown for privateering during the numerous wars of the mid-late eighteenth century, the militia was also chronically undermanned. Britain's grasp on the Bahamas was characterized by a

¹⁰ The woodwork of some of the guns had even collapsed when firing Rogers' welcoming salute. See Bryan Little, *Crusoe Captain: Being the Life of Woodes Rogers, Seaman, Trader, Colonial Governor* (London, U.K.: Oldhams Press, 1960), 213.

¹¹ Lewis Bonnett to Charles Delafaye, 10 February 1731, in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Vol. 38, 1731*, ed. Cecil Headlam and Arthur Percival Newton (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1938), 31-51.

military presence just large enough to maintain its sovereignty over the isles, but ultimately insufficient to enforce unpopular domestic policies; the garrison remained, as an exasperated Rogers had declared to the British Government in 1721, “a few sick men to encounter five hundred of the pirates.”¹²

Governor Rogers knew even before he left England that a stable and prosperous plantation settlement could not be established in the Bahamas without some fresh blood to kickstart the project. Thus, when he arrived in Nassau in 1718, he was accompanied by some 200 settlers, primarily Germans from the Palatinate. He also brought provisions and farming implements in the hopes that they could start farms and plantations along the lines of Britain’s other possessions in the West Indies. To attract immigration, he offered each new settler a plot of 120 square feet. Meanwhile, he charged the locals with clearing the plots of land they occupied and encouraged them to build houses of their own. Rogers had high hopes that immigrants would come from as far afield as Anguilla, the Virgin Islands, Carolina, and Bermuda to help reform the settlement. However, things went wrong from the beginning. By November 1718, tropical diseases had carried off almost half the settlers, and essentially all the skilled laborers. The local pirates apparently had little taste for the toilsome life of the farmer, and the Governor had to report that almost half of them had absconded, which he himself had supported, “for they are not the people I ought to think will make any land improvements.”¹³ Of those who remained, Rogers complained bitterly of their laziness. Evidently fish and fruit were plentiful enough

¹² Woodes Rogers letter of February 10, 1721, as quoted in G.E. Manwaring, *Woodes Rogers*, 38.

¹³ Woodes Rogers letter to Lords of Trade 6 November 1718, as quoted in Phillip Cash, Shirley C. Gordon, and Gail Saunders, *Sources of Bahamian History* (Hong Kong: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1991), 75.

to sustain the seamen, and so by October 1718 hardly a small patch had been cleared for yams and potatoes in the whole of New Providence.¹⁴ Nevertheless, supplies started to run low and before the year was out the population was close to starving; Rogers was forced to buy provisions to feed the town out of his own pocket.

Not much had been accomplished in this regard by the end of his term in 1721, with war having preoccupied the Governor for much of the period. However, the remaining Palatine settlers had by this time established a small village west of Nassau that at least provided some foodstuffs to the local population. Governor Phenny, relieved of immediate danger from pirates and Spaniards, made a stronger push towards plantation settlement. He established his own plantation in the Palatine village, began a serious effort to import slaves to the colony (including 295 in 1723 alone), and passed a set of slave regulations in 1723 and 1724. *New Articles for Engagement of New Settlers* in 1722 promised free passage and twenty-five acres to every settler. Phenny would go on to confidently report a growing population and a list of exports which included the “finest cotton in the world.”¹⁵ The reality behind these statements was far less encouraging. Other than the slaves, immigration to the Bahamas under Governor Phenny was inconsiderable. A number of contingencies made the Bahamas an undesirable destination for potential immigrants, not least of which were the legal monopoly that the absentee Lord Proprietors continued to hold on land ownership, the apparent tyranny that the Governor’s wife managed to exercise over the population, and above all the lingering reputation of the Bahamas as a pirate nest. The ex-pirates remained similarly unpersuaded by the new incentives, and only 800 acres were being cultivated on New Providence by the end of Phenny’s term. The truth was that, as Phenny admitted to the Lords of Trade in

¹⁴ See note 6.

¹⁵ Cordingly, *Pirate Hunter of the Caribbean*, 230.

1724, agriculture in the Bahamas “for want of people applying themselves to cultivate the soil, has hitherto been very inconsiderable and uncertain.”¹⁶

Woodes Rogers was undeterred by his predecessor’s apparent failure, and, armed with a new weapon in the form of the Bahamian House of Assembly, resolved to push forward with plantation. Among the first acts the Assembly passed in 1729 were for encouraging settlers and the planting of cotton. Some cotton plantations were indeed established during Rogers’ second term, and by 1730 two sugar plantations were also in operation. However, the nascent Bahamian sugar industry fizzled out by 1732, the soil proving unfit for that crop. Illustrative of the population’s apparent apathy towards the agricultural efforts, Speaker John Colebrooke was able to win support by undercutting the remaining Palatines with imported crops, until they finally gave up and left. The only part of a plantation economy the ex-pirates were apparently able to stomach was slavery, and the black population thus continued to increase throughout the century. Governor John Tinker perhaps best summarized the lingering, and distinctly piratical, attitude of the Bahamians towards cultivation in a letter of 1748, in which he declared that “neither the soil nor the disposition of the inhabitants being...for agriculture,” when they might “step aboard a privateer and in a six weeks cruise return often with a booty of a hundred pounds, sterling to his share and sometimes more.”¹⁷ The Bahamas were thus indeed transformed into a slave-based society by the establishment of royal control, but the aversion of the inhabitants to a settled agricultural lifestyle, coupled with a problematic

¹⁶ Phenney to Lords of Trade, 1724, as quoted in Cash, Gordon, and Saunders, *Sources of Bahamian History*, 124.

¹⁷ As quoted in Patrice M. Williams, “War and its Consequences: The Bahamian Experience 1700-1763,” *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* 12 (October 1990): 17.

soil and low immigration, precluded its development into a typical plantation economy.

The British government had no greater incentive to assert royal control than to stop the pirates of New Providence from raiding the lucrative trade routes that ran through the Bahamas. Actually developing the pirate nest into a commercial asset, however, would turn out to be a far greater challenge than pacification. Initially, Governor Rogers entertained high hopes for the development of the local economy. In addition to agriculture he had ambitious plans for the development of such varied industries as whaling, timber, ambergris, salt raking, shipbuilding, and turtle shells. He believed, for instance, that the colony would be able to produce enough salt to supply the fisheries of "Newfoundland and all North America."¹⁸ These proposals, like so many others, proved to be unamenable to the conditions he encountered after his arrival in 1718. The death of essentially all his skilled laborers was a major setback, and he lamented in October that wages were "extravagantly dear." He thus provided a list of urgently needed resources that included bricklayers, blacksmiths, and able-bodied laborers.¹⁹ With pirates still roving freely through Bahamian waters and the necessity of imposing an embargo during the war with Spain, Rogers was able to make little progress for much of his term. Ironically, even at this early juncture he was forced to recognize the easy economic opportunities presented by piracy, and he consequently made no secret of his desire that the privateering commissions he issued would bolster the colony with provisions and other booty.

With the threat of war and piracy removed, it was up to

¹⁸ Governor Woodes Rogers, 1718, as quoted in Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850 with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period* (South Miami: Sandra Riley, 1983), 71.

¹⁹ House carpenters and masons round out the list. The absence of skilled workers made Rogers entirely dependent on the industry of the inhabitants for labor. See Cordingly, *Pirate Hunter of the Caribbean*, 156.

Governor Phenny to attempt to wean the inhabitants off transient plunder and onto the strait and narrow of legitimate commerce. Some casual trade in dyewoods, fruits, and turtles with South Carolina had indeed already started by the time he took office. One area in which he was to have some noteworthy success was shipbuilding, with the number of Bahamian vessels over three tons' burden nearly doubling during his tenure, with special reference to the eighty-ton *Phenny* built of local mahogany and cedar. The island of Abaco also came to be frequented by whalers from New England. However, trade in general remained confined to localized bartering with neighboring colonies. The inhabitants preferred quick and easy methods of profit to any attempt at systematizing local industry. Thus, Phenny wrote that "the inhabitants depending too much on expectation of finding ambergris, wrecks, occasions their being destitute of any certain commodity to ship off annually."²⁰ Scavenging wrecks for treasure was a primary occupation for many of the ex-pirates, as it had it had been since before the establishment of royal control. The Governor's attempts at encouraging trade also ran into a very different problem: his wife. Mrs. Phenny was apparently able to establish a monopoly on retail trade on the island and charge prices exorbitant enough that some of the aggrieved went as far as London to make sure their complaints were heard.

Despite whatever bitterness Mrs. Phenny's business practices may have occasioned, the casual nature of the economy and what Governor Rogers would call "the conveniency of wrecking" were the real hindrances to an expansion of trade and industry.²¹ The revived

²⁰ See note 15.

²¹ During the Seven Years' War, Governor Tinker would also refer to a not unrelated "spirit of privateering... [which had] extinguished every other industrious and commercial application." As quoted in Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People, vol. 1* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 159.

House of Assembly would pass numerous acts designed to remedy this, including specifically for timber and shipbuilding. By 1731 there were fourteen sloops between eight and fifty tons in Nassau that were used for export and some thirty open sloops engaged in fishing.²² The reformed pirates proved capable of applying themselves to fishing or bartering dyewoods and turtle shells as a means of subsistence, but they were largely unwilling or unable to do more than what bare necessity dictated. Consequently, provisions were often scarce and poverty was endemic.

Rogers and Phenny had thus lain the foundations of an essentially maritime and subsistence-oriented economy, in many ways resembling that which had characterized the islands during their earlier period of proprietary government, which was to prevail in peacetime conditions for the remainder of the century. This was only half the story, however. During times of war, the piratical ethos of the inhabitants was inevitably awakened, and a surge in privateering and illicit trade followed. As late as 1768 Governor Thomas Shirley remarked that the inhabitants “live by Wrecking and Plunder and are People of a very bold daring Spirit.”²³ Recurrent episodes of privateering and smuggling illustrate that the allure of transient prosperity and the pragmatic attitude toward legality which characterized piracy resurfaced whenever conditions allowed, hindering the advance of legal commerce.

The extent of the changes resulting from the establishment of royal control and the policies of Governors Rogers and Phenny should not be understated. By 1732, the Bahamas were free of piracy and the

²² This was in addition to seventeen other sloops of three-eight tons used to bring produce from Eleuthera and Harbour Island. See Jim Lawlor and Ronald V. Shaklee, “1700s-Era Map of New Providence Island,” *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* 36 (October 2014): 18.

²³ Governor Thomas Shirley’s report, 1768, as quoted in Grace Turner, “Bahamian Ship Graffiti,” *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 35, no. 2 (2006): 259.

rudiments of a productive economy and an organized settlement were firmly in place. As Captain Thomas Southey aptly put it, “these islands began to look like English settlements.”²⁴ But it was only a beginning. The piratical nature of the inhabitants helped ensure that the colony remained weakly secured, relatively uncultivated, and dependent on illicit maritime ventures for economic prosperity throughout the eighteenth century. The lasting legacy of piracy in the Bahamas thus lies not in the theatrical antics of notorious and unrepentant figures like Charles Vane, but in the common sailors who were left to adapt to the new conditions of royal government. Behind the famous Bahamian motto “Expulsis Piratis, Restituta Commercia” (Pirates Expelled, Commerce Restored), instituted by Woodes Rogers himself, lies the complex reality of how a society is shaped by the interplay of governed and governor.²⁵

²⁴ Captain Thomas Southey, *Chronological History of the West Indies*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, & Green, 1827), 261.

²⁵ The official motto of the Bahamas from 1728 until independence in 1973.