Model of Bahama House, home of Richard "Tuggy" Roberts, on display in the Albert Lowe Museum, Green Turtle Cay.

FROM CAY TO SHINING KEY

A shared history of shipwrecking

At first glance, one might think it's a well-made doll house. But the carefully crafted model on display at the Albert Lowe Museum in Green Turtle Cay is not a child's plaything from a bygone age. Instead, it's a symbol of a rich and complicated history that spans two centuries.

Like so many Bahamian stories, it begins in the age of sail. In the early 19th century, international trade was growing rapidly. Colonial expansion, the industrial revolution, and the end of the Napoleonic Wars contributed to a boom in commercial shipping.

Merchant vessels traveling from New York, Boston, and Baltimore to the West Indies all sailed past the shores of Florida and Abaco. European vessels often made landfall at Hole-in-the-Wall on south Abaco before continuing on to ports in the Gulf of Mexico.

But for every safe harbour, there was a dangerous passage. There were no buoys or lighthouses. Charts and maps were rudimentary at best. And an unforgiving north wind propelled ships perilously close to the 100 miles of reef that run along Abaco's east coast.

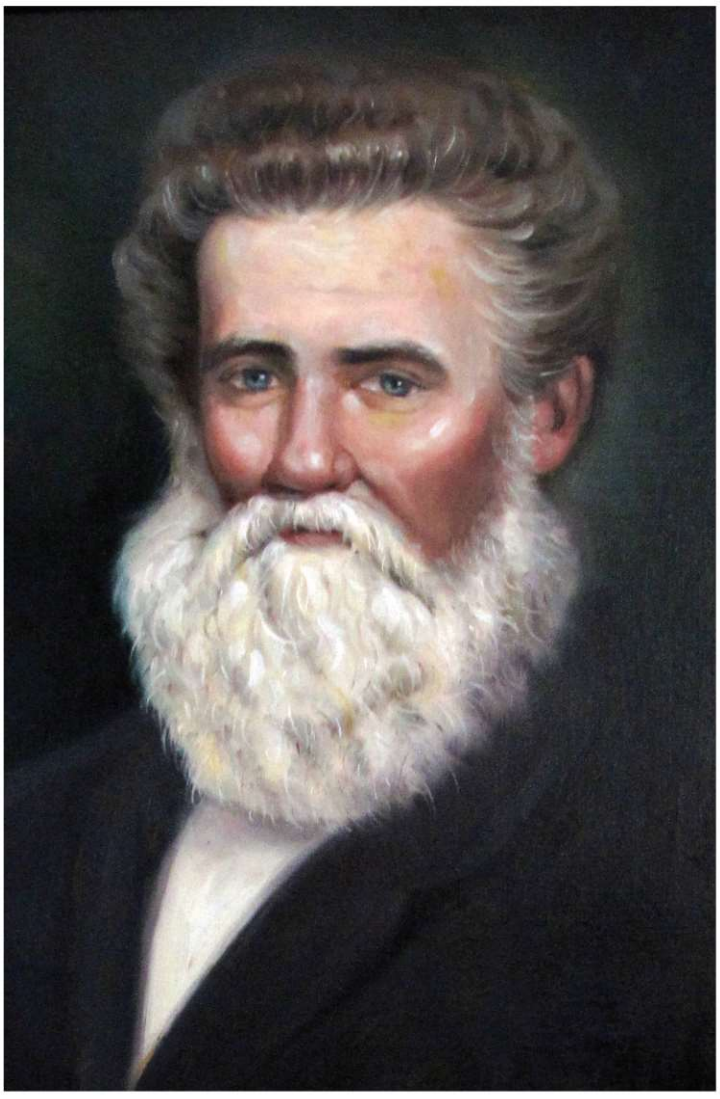
The waters around the Florida Keys were no safer. The area had long been notorious for fast currents, shallow coral reefs, and dangerous shoals.

For much of the 19th century, media reports described the hazards in vivid detail. The Wichita Weekly called the area, quite simply, "the most treacherous coast in the world." The New York Times wrote that the navigational gauntlet "renders this portion of the coast a terror to the mariner. More wrecks take place here than in any other portion of the world."

Of course, the wrecks that meant a loss for some, represented a gain for others.

While the so-called golden age of piracy had ended in the 18th century, there was still plenty of interest in the valuable cargo carried by merchant ships. In a somewhat blurry transition, outright robbery on the high seas gave way to a more respectable enterprise, salvaging goods from ships in distress.

Above: Key West, Florida in 1856.
Below: John Bartlum. Original oil painting by Alton Lowe.



Maritime salvage was not a new idea, but during this period it became an organized industry, with clear rules for disposing of the spoils and dividing the proceeds.

The trade was encouraged. For one thing, the Crown's 15% share was fast becoming the major source of government revenue in The Bahamas. And there was also a humanitarian argument. After all, if there were few aids to navigation, there were no aids at all for shipwrecked sailors. Their best chance of rescue was the timely arrival of profit-minded local entrepreneurs.

And as the increase in commercial shipping resulted in an increasing number of wrecks, the salvage business became very profitable indeed.

James M. Wright, in the journal *Political Science Quarterly*, writes that wrecking, "diverted energy from every other kind of labor." In fact, he says, "Landsmen caught the infection and swelled the ranks until salvor seamen became… the most important body of laborers the small colony possessed."

With their knowledge of shipbuilding and their decades of maritime experience, Abaco men were highly skilled wreckers. They would rush out to a foundering or sunken vessel and save the crew, as much of the cargo as possible, and sometimes the ship itself. Salvaged goods were brought ashore, appraised, and auctioned off.

Wrecking became such an economic force in Abaco that, in the early 19th century, the population of Green Turtle Cay exploded from fewer than 200 to nearly 1,000. With so many wreckers plying their trade in local waters, it was inevitable that some would expand into the waters around the nearby Florida Keys.

The boost to Abaco and the entire Bahamian economy from wrecking in Florida waters did not go unnoticed. According to *Marinalife* magazine, "Commercial New England fishermen spent winters off the Keys supplying fish to Havana wholesalers. Sensing a use for their boats more lucrative than fishing, the New Englanders began cutting into the business of the Bahamian salvagers. Conflicts between the two groups soon arose."

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"BOYS OF TEN YEARS OLD WILL PLUNGE IN AND GO DOWN TWENTY FEET TO PICK UP A SIXPENCE."

In 1821, Florida became U.S. territory, and Congress acted quickly to stake a claim to the wrecking business. In 1825, it passed the *Federal Wrecking Act*, which stipulated that salvage from any vessel wrecked in American waters must be brought to a U.S. port for auction.

As a result, hundreds of Abaconian wreckers relocated to Key West, which soon grew from a largely uninhabited island to become Florida's leading port and largest city.

But the Bahamians were not welcomed with open arms. Perhaps the wreckers from New England resented the competition. Or perhaps there were still lingering animosities from the Revolutionary War, when their families had been on opposing sides. Much of Abaco had been settled by American colonists who remained loyal to the Crown, and who left the United States when it declared independence.

John Bartlum was the youngest son of Loyalists who found their way to Green Turtle Cay. At 18, Bartlum was captain of a wrecking boat named the *Wanderer*. And he would soon join the migration to Key West.

Just two years later, at the age of 20, he had set aside wrecking and was working as a shipwright.

Having learned his trade through reading and practical application, Bartlum became a master of the craft without ever serving as an apprentice. He built the 10-ton sloop *Mary McIntosh*, said to be the first boat of her size built in Key West.

But he didn't stop there. He turned his attention to building large schooners, including the *Stephen R. Mallory*, the only clipper ship built in the U.S. Deep South and reportedly the only clipper ship in the world built of mahogany.

Another transplant from Green Turtle Cay was William Curry. He was just 16 when he arrived in Key West and began his career outfitting and provisioning wrecking boats. He met and married fellow Abaconian Euphemia Lowe.

Curry's new father-in-law, Captain John Lowe, operated his own wrecking vessel, and the two men went into business together. Their joint venture would be successful enough that they would eventually own a fleet of wrecking schooners, including the pride of the port – the John Bartlum-built *Stephen R. Mallory*.

William Curry. Original oil painting by Alton Lowe.

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Part of William Curry's set of gold, Tiffany tableware. Photo courtesy of Albert Lowe Museum.

In 1846, when the most devastating hurricane in the island's history leveled most of Key West, carpenters could not keep up with the demand for their services, and those fortunate enough to hire the local tradespeople did so at exorbitant rates.

Many Bahamians, including John Bartlum and his brother-in-law, Richard "Tuggy" Roberts, returned to Green Turtle Cay, dismantled the homes they still owned there, and transported them aboard boats to Key West.

Bartlum and Roberts reassembled those houses at the corner of Eaton and William Streets, where they remain to this day.

By the middle of the 19th century, their new Florida home had grown to a town of 3,000 people – two thirds of them Bahamian. And yet, for all their contributions to Key West, resentments remained. They were called "Conchs," and viewed with contempt by Americans.

In an 1853 article about Key West, a *New York Daily Tribune* correspondent wrote that that the Conchs were, "proverbially peaceful, honest, temperate and religious." But what sounds like a laudatory list of Christian virtues was merely a prelude to a scathing depiction of them as inbred and homely.

The writer continued, "They are the descendants of English emigrants and the royalists of Georgia and Carolina, who settled upon and fled to the sandy and barren Bahama Islands. Living there in comparative indolence and disregarding the laws of Nature and of Nature's God, by marrying and intermarrying within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity, they have become a distinct class or race, whom the Almighty has, apparently, marked with degeneracy.

"Among their children – and they are legion, you can only occasionally recognize an expression or a feature of the 'human face divine.' The conch-men of this day and generation, at least upon this island, are a cadaverous, sorry and fishy-looking *genus hominum*."

It was only after casting doubt on their membership in the human race that the writer noted their extraordinary skill as free divers; a backhanded compliment that reinforced the idea that they were different from the rest of the species.

"There is a portion, and a very important and interesting portion of the wrecking business," he wrote, "performed exclusively by the Conch-men. It is the diving and working under water. When a vessel bilges and fills with water, or sinks, they are employed to dive into the hold of the vessel and there make fast to and save the cargo. Forty and fifty feet is regarded as a good working depth of water, and a Conch has been known to 'dive down' ninety feet, carrying along a cable and make it fast to an anchor.

"They are trained to diving from early childhood and boys of ten years old will, at any moment, plunge in and go down twenty feet to pick up a sixpence. Their endurance of protracted submarine existence, is certainly most astonishing, and their amphibious labors are not only important but indispensable (sic) in saving wrecked cargoes."

However, it is said that "a rising tide floats all boats," and so it was in Key West. By the latter part of the 19th century, the Conchs and the wrecking trade had made Key West, per capita, the most prosperous city in the United States.

Finally, "the Conch-men" were no longer seen as outsiders, but as the respected founders of a vibrant American community.

When John Bartlum, the shipbuilder, died in 1871, the local newspaper said, "The drooping flags at half-mast from each cupola

and place of business in our city, and the shipping in our harbour, testify to the appreciation in which he was held by our citizens."

As for William Curry, his success in business was matched by success on the stock market. In *Key West: The Old and The New*, Jefferson Browne wrote: "His capacity for making safe and lucrative investments amounted to genius."

In 1880, Curry commissioned New York's Tiffany & Co. to create a gold table service for 24. The set cost $100,000 – the equivalent of more than $2 million dollars today. Instead of locking the gold service away, the Curry family put it into everyday use at their Key West home.

When Curry died in 1896, he was not only Florida's first millionaire, but the richest man in the state. Admired for his benevolence, intelligence, humility and integrity, Curry was given the largest funeral in Key West history. The entire town reportedly came to a standstill as people paid their final respects.

Today, some 200 years after the arrival of their first Abaconian ancestors, Key West residents take pride in being called "Conchs." New arrivals are jokingly called "freshwater Conchs" and foreigners active in the community are feted with the title "honorary Conchs."

In 1977, recognizing the shared history of their citizens, Key West and Green Turtle Cay's New Plymouth declared themselves sister cities. They celebrated with an Island Roots Heritage Festival, which featured the music, art, and cuisine of their mutual ancestors.

As part of the sister city commemoration, the Old Island Restoration Foundation of Key West commissioned and donated a model of Bahama House, the home of John Bartlum's brother-in-law, Tuggy Roberts. Once transported, piece by piece, to Key West, the house made a return trip – in miniature – back to Green Turtle Cay.

Today, those who know the story can look at the model and see both past and present.

In a language of their own, the model's fine details – its delicate balcony railings and its tiny windows – tell of 200 years of shared Bahamian and American history; a history of conflict and contempt and prosperity and ultimate respect, all leading up to what exists today. A treasured and timeless kinship. ●