SLAVEHOLDERS’ REPARATIONS: THE BAHAMAS COLONY

Olivia C. Saunders

Business & Hospitality Management
University of The Bahamas, Nassau, The Bahamas
Email: olivia.saunders@ub.edu.bs

Working Paper Series

No. 16, November 2018

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

RESEARCH EDGE Working Paper Series cannot be republished, reprinted or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper’s author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not represent the views of the Office of Graduate Studies & Research and University of The Bahamas.

Compiled and edited by:
Dr. Vikneswaran Nair  
Dr. Earla Carey-Baines  
Virginia Ballance

Office of Graduate Studies & Research  
University of The Bahamas  
University Drive  
P.O. Box N-4912, Nassau, The Bahamas

Tel: (242) 397-2601/2602  
E-mail: grants@ub.edu.bs
SLAVEHOLDERS’ REPARATIONS: THE BAHAMAS COLONY

Olivia C. Saunders

University of The Bahamas, Nassau, The Bahamas
Email: olivia.saunders@ub.edu.bs

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As is the case with the Caribbean region, the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries, the modern Bahamas has its origins in the dehumanising of people and was founded as a slave society. The trading and enslavement of Africans by Europeans began in the mid-15th century by the Portuguese and later spread to other European countries. Slavery was (and continues to be in some parts of the world today) an economic modality of production that reduces human beings to property possessed by other human beings. The economics of slavery and the slave trade was encompassed within the triangular trade as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The Triangular Trade](image)

Slavery was an economic enterprise as much as it was a political and social instrument. Williams (1970) shows that the slave trade was “one of the most important business enterprises of the seventeenth century” (p. 141-142) and illustrates the relative importance of the West Indies to Britain’s international trade in 1697 as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British West Indies</td>
<td>£326,536</td>
<td>£142,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>£279,582</td>
<td>£140,129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>£6,615</td>
<td>£13,435</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some 20 million pounds were approved by the British Parliament to pay compensation to slaveholders in the Caribbean. This pay-out represented some 40% of Britain's annual spending (Manning, 2013) and about 5% of its total national product (Goldin, 1973). In contrast, former slaves were not compensated for the free labour they gave to their former masters or for the denial of their humanity. In fact, they had to purchase their freedom even after the 1833 Emancipation Act became law.

A population census of 1671 of the Bahamas colony demonstrates the categorisation of peoples during that time: 1,097 residents were recorded in the colony, 913 in New Providence and 184 in Eleuthera. There were 334 males, 320 females and 443 slaves.
(Saunders & Williams, 2006). Slaves were separated into their own category and were not included with the dominant class. With the 1807 act to abolish the slave trade, many Africans were liberated from slave ships and settled in the Bahamas colony. They were under the auspices of the Chief Customs Officer for placement with white masters or mistresses “to learn a trade or handicraft, for periods not exceeding fourteen years” (Saunders, 2010, p. 39). These apprentices were generally not treated differently from slaves.

As can be expected, slaves throughout the West Indies revolted unceasingly against their plight. According to Williams (1999), there were three slave revolts between 1827 and 1832 in the Bahamas colony – two in Cat Island and one in Exuma. As with the justification for maintaining the slavocracy, economic and moral arguments contributed to the eventual abolition of African enslavement by Europeans.

There were several reasons given for maintaining slavery. The defence of the institution of the enslavement of Africans by Europeans entailed arguments such as: it is the natural order of things; the inferiority of slaves (Africans); the inability of slaves to care for themselves; slavery is better than dying; slavery satisfies the needs of business enterprises; slavery maintains the existing culture and legal framework.

This paper brings to light some aspects of the economic significance of slavery. By using descriptive statistics, this paper answers four questions: (1) How much compensation was received by former slaveholders in the Bahamas colony in 1834? (2) What was the distribution of this compensation? (3) What is the 2017 price equivalent of the compensation paid? (4) What would be the value of the compensation in 2017 using prevailing interest rates? Six different types of awardees received compensation: owner-in-fee, executor/executrix, administrator, trustee, judgement creditor and mortgagee. The total compensation paid to slaveholders in 1834 was distributed according to the number of slaves held. The total number of pay-outs to former slaveholders was 1,057 in the amount of some £126,848.70 in compensation for 10,087 slaves. This total compensation, using prevailing Retail Price Indices up to 2017, is equivalent to £11,588,494.36. In terms of investment value, the 2017 equivalent is £342,031,365.63.

Compared with some other Caribbean colonies, the Bahamas colony was small in comparison to its overall population and its complement of slaves. The just over 10,000 slaves in the Bahamas colony for whom compensation was paid represented only 1.25% of some 800,000 emancipated slaves in the Caribbean. The Bahamas colony was therefore more beneficial to Britain from a geo-political and imperial standpoint than an economic perspective.

The bulk of compensation was paid to slaveholders holding fewer than ten slaves and the number of slaves they were compensated for represented 28% of all slaves. 5,920 slaves were held by 996 slaveholders holding fewer than 30 slaves each. Only 11 slaveholders held more than 100 slaves. It is fair to conclude then, that slaveholding in the Bahamas colony was primarily for domestic and very small agricultural/plantation purposes. Well after emancipation, in 1901, 18 of 29 members of the House were classified as merchants, one member identified as a manufacturer and another as a planter. This perhaps explains the current dearth of manufacturing and the deficiencies of the agricultural sector. This also provides a possible explanation for the current dominance of the indirect regressive tax system of customs duties and value added tax (which is calculated on the customs duties). When using the Retail Price Index to project the compensation paid in 2017 dollars, the average compensation for each slave would be £1,136.23 or US$1,465.80. This approximates to about six weeks of the country’s current minimum wage. It is sobering that
one group of human beings were legal owners of other human beings and that this amount is considered representative of the value placed on a person. Distressingly, throughout the world even today, millions of persons work for a year and receive less than this amount.

This is an exploratory descriptive research that provides an overview of the payments received by former slave-owners who were compensated for the loss of their property in the Bahamas colony. That is, they were compensated for their slaves after Emancipation. The data used for this study are from the University College London’s, Legacies of British Slave-ownership Centre (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/).

**Keywords**: Abolition, Bahamas colony, emancipation, compensation, slavery

**References**


Professor Saunders is an educator, consultant, public speaker and author. She is a member of the Faculty of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies of University of The Bahamas, holding master’s degrees in Economics and Business Administration and a doctorate in Business Administration (International Business).

Professor Saunders has been a member of the University of The Bahamas community for more than 30 years. Her main areas of teaching are economics and research, but she has taught an array of courses including statistics, tourism and banking at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Professor Saunders is a former academic Dean and was Team Leader of the University Transition Secretariat. She returned to UB in January 2018 from a two-year secondment as Principal of the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College in Saint Lucia.

Professor Saunders co-edited the book, The Bahamas in the 21st Century (2009), with Nikolaos Karagiannis which brought together researchers from a broad spectrum of the Bahamian intellectual community to address issues ranging from agriculture to monetary policy to education, taxation, sex, workforce, maritime and legal issues. She is the author of the book, Tomato Economics (2015), which challenges the fundamental scarcity premise of the economics profession. Her other works include presentations at conferences and symposia, book chapters and other published works focusing on Bahamian socio-economic issues.

Professor Saunders is deputy chair of the board of directors of the Access Accelerator Small Business Development Centre.