

Naming the Bahamas Islands: History and Folk Etymology

Wolfgang P. Ahrens
Canada

Abstract

The names of the individual islands of the Bahamas and place names on them reflect major currents in their history. Names from the Lucayan period are reflected in Spanish writings of the 16th century; British settlement from Bermuda and from Providence Island influence naming in the late 17th century, while British loyalists from the United States after the Revolutionary War in the late 18th century contribute further names. Even in more recent times there has been some naming and renaming. Historical facts and academic writings, however, have often been disregarded by the population and this has given rise to curious local folk etymologies.

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Introduction

The Bahamas is an island nation lying in the Atlantic Ocean to the southeast of the Florida coast. The country consists of eighteen larger inhabited islands and more than seven hundred smaller islands, cays, and islets that are either unpopulated or very sparsely settled. The Bahamas belong to the Caribbean area culturally, but not geologically, as they lie further north in the Atlantic Ocean, just east and southeast of Florida. They are of limestone formation and differ in this from the Caribbean islands which are mainly of volcanic origin. The settlement history of the Bahamas also differs from that of the Caribbean region.

Settlement history is reflected in the naming of the islands and in this paper I restrict myself to the naming of the major populated islands. I will also point out some folk etymologies of island names and mistaken explanations of names of these major islands. I will also hint at some possible solutions to the derivation of several of these island names.

The islands were first settled by the Lucayan people between 600 and 800 AD. The Lucayans were a branch of the Arawaks, who settled throughout the Caribbean area, including the larger islands of Cuba, Hispaniola and Jamaica, where these people were known as Taíno. It is estimated that about 40,000 or more Lucayans inhabited the Bahamian islands around 1500. After the Spanish came to Cuba and Hispaniola around 1500, they deported the Bahamian population and used them as slave labour in their silver mines and as divers in their pearl industry based at the island of Cubaqua, located in the Caribbean Sea just north of the South American coast. By about 1550 the Bahamian islands are said to have been totally depopulated and the Lucayans had perished in Spanish captivity.¹ Records of the

¹ Historians place Lucayan depopulation as early as 1520, but a growing body of radiocarbon evidence suggests that Lucayan sites lasted into at least the first third or mid-1500s (see Berman 2011). Sinelli (2010) has suggested that some Lucayans may have survived into 1600s (Keegan, Hofman and Rodríguez Ramos 2013: 275).

Lucayan names² for various islands can be found in Spanish documents recorded mainly by Spanish clergy. Over the last fifty years linguists have been able to establish the meaning of these island names by resorting to existing languages in the northern regions of South America and Central America that are cognate to the older, no longer spoken Arawak languages.

After the demise of the Lucayans, the Bahamas were not resettled for about 150 years. In the 1640s the first English-speaking settlers arrived. These were Puritans who came via Bermuda and Providence Island, located off the coast of Nicaragua, where they had attempted a settlement twenty years earlier. The new settlements were on the islands of Eleuthera and New Providence. There were gradual further arrivals of English-speaking settlers, so that by 1670 Great Britain claimed possession of the Bahamas and Charles II granted the islands to the Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas; in 1718 the Bahamas became a British Crown Colony.

After the American Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the Bahamas saw a large influx of arrivals from the new United States of America. These were loyalists to Britain. They came at first from the New England States and New Jersey. Soon loyalist plantation owners from the southern states of Georgia and the Carolinas arrived as well, having been granted land in the Bahamas by Britain. They came with their large number of plantation slaves and tried to establish a plantation society in the Bahamas. Thus, some of the as yet very sparsely populated outer islands were settled, for instance Cat, Long, Acklins and Crooked islands, as well as the Exuma Cays. A further influx of English-speaking settlers also arrived from Florida after the area of East Florida reverted back to Spain with the Treaty of Paris in 1783.³ Also, some few settlers came from Haiti as a result of the establishment of an independent Haiti in 1806; additionally, a significant group of Black Seminoles arrived from Florida. Black Seminoles were black run-away slaves who lived and sometimes intermarried with the Seminoles, an Amerindian group. The Haitians and the Black Seminoles left their mark on family and settlement names, but not on names of islands themselves.

Early maps of the 16th and 17th centuries have a number of names attached to islands in the Bahamas.⁴ However, the islands cannot really be identified with present day islands as

² Lucayan refers to the name of the people inhabiting the Bahamas. They spoke Ciboney-Taíno, which was also spoken in Hispaniola (central and southern Haiti), all of central Cuba, Jamaica, and all Lucayan islands, but not the southern ones. In the southern Lucayan islands and the Turks and Caicos, Classic Taíno was spoken (see Granberry 2013).

³ In 1782, a Spanish fleet arrived at Nassau and Nassau surrendered to Spain without resistance. Florida had been Spanish, but became British with the Treaty of Paris (1763), thus there were English settlements there after that date. With the Treaty of Paris (1783), Britain returned Eastern Florida to Spain and the Bahamas were returned to Britain.

⁴ Maps in the 16th century were not consistent as far as capitalization. Also, some spelling of familiar modern names may appear to be spelling mistakes to us, e.g. binimi or Biminy for modern Bimini, Bahamna for modern Bahama. I have listed the names as they appear on the various maps.

Sebastian Cabot 1544: Bahama, binimi, yucayo, Beque, Ciguateo, guateo, trianguso, samana, maraguana, yubaque

Jacopo Gastelde 1546: Bahama, Lucaio, Guanaban, Cabacos, Imagua, Maiaguanao, Cayaces, Anaian

Bolognino Zalterius 1556: Bahama, Lucaio, Guanaba, Maniga, Moiagora

Gerardus Mercator 1569: Luayo, Ciguateo, Xumete, Marunque, Abrecao

Abraham Ortelius 1570: Lucaya, Gunao, Limanana, Cuaba, Amnano

Cornelius van Wytfliet 1597: Bimiy, Bahamna, Lucaio, I. baqua, Cignateio, Jumet

mapmakers then did not have exact information and simply indicated islands with a few blobs. The same name also shifted location from one map to another. Maps from these eras show islands maintaining Lucayan names, with practically no Spanish names, even though the islands were under Spanish administration in the early 16th century. From 1650 onwards many of the islands gradually changed to an English-derived name. Previously unnamed smaller islands and cays normally started to receive English names

Below I list some of the island names, first with the original Lucayan⁵ names with an English translation. These were recorded in the early 16th century. Then I list the Spanish names for some islands which were given by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage.⁶ One cannot be sure which islands these actually referred to, but the islands indicated here with a Spanish name are the most probable choices made by scholars in the field. It is not clear whether these Spanish names were actually used officially, because Lucayan names continue to appear on maps until they are replaced with English island names.

Lucayan name	Spanish name	English name
Bahama ('large upper middle land')		Grand Bahama
Nema ('middle water')		New Providence
Ciguateo ('distant rocky land')		Eleuthera
Yuma ('middle high land')	Fernandina	Long
Curateo ('outer far distant land')		Exuma Cays
Guateo ('distant land')		Little San Salvador/ Half Moon Cay
Guanima ('middle waters land')		Cat
Habacoa ('large upper outer land')	Espiritu Santo	Andrew[s] /Andros
Lucayoneque ('the people's distant waters')		Abaco
Yabaque ('large western land')		Acklins
Jumento ('upper land of the middle distance')	Isabella	Crooked
Mayaguana ('lesser Midwestern land'); Mariguana		Mayaguana
Samana ('small middle forested land')		Samana Cay
Manigua ('mid waters land')	Santa Maria de la Concepción	Rum Cay
Inagua ('small eastern land'); Baneque ('big water land')		Inagua

Edward Wright 1599: Bahama, Ciguateo, Mayaguano, Abrecaso

Arnoldus Montanus 1671: Bahama, Lucaiomena, Ciguateo, Guanahani ó San Salvador, Triagala, Samana, Yumeta, Maiaguara, Cucos

Henry Popple 1733: Bahama, Lucayos or Abaco, Long Island, Providence, Andrew Islands, Exuma, Cat Island, Watlings Island, Crooked Island, Maguana

⁵ I have cited the Lucayan (Ciboney-Taíno) names from Granberry and Vescelius (2004).

⁶ It is interesting to note that now several islands of the Galapagos Islands bear the same names (Fernandina, Isabela, and Santa Maria). The Galapagos Islands had English names and were renamed in 1892 by Ecuador in honour of the 400th anniversary of the landing of Columbus in the Caribbean.

Utiaquia ('western Hutia land')	Islas de Arena	Ragged Islands
Bimini ('the twins')		Bimini Islands
Canimisi ('northern waters swamp')		Williams
Amaguaya ('toward the middle lands')		Plana Cays
Guanahani ('small upper waters land')		Watlings/ San Salvador

Table 1. Some island names in three languages: Lucayan, Spanish, English

Comments on the Naming of Some of the Islands

New Providence and *Eleuthera* were settled by English-speaking Puritans in the middle of the 17th century and named by them. *Eleuthera* is Greek and means 'land of freedom'. The population of both islands was heavily augmented by loyalists from the United States after 1783. *Harbour Island* just off *Eleuthera* still has a hint of a New England seaside village about it.

The Lucayan name for *Long Island* varied and the following can be found: *Saomete*, *Xumete*, *Youmeta*, *Youma*, *Yuma*, *Xuma*, *Easuma* and finally *Exuma*. In the 16th century an [x] was pronounced as [š=sh] in Spanish, the language of the documents in which all these names were recorded. The name was transferred to name the nearby *Exumas*. *Great Exuma*, *Little Exuma* and the *Exuma Cays* still bear the name.

Little San Salvador was probably named when the larger neighbouring island, *Cat Island*, still had the alternate name of *San Salvador* (late 19th and early 20th centuries) and had not been as yet legislated in 1926 to use exclusively the name of *Cat Island*.⁷ *Little San Salvador* is now *Half Moon Cay*. The Holland America Cruise Ship Line purchased the island in 1996 and renamed it. All of their ships touring the Caribbean dock there for a short stay. Similarly, in 1997, the Walt Disney Cruise Line purchased a 99-year lease from the Bahamian government for *Gorda Cay*, which lies near the southern tip of *Abaco Island*; it was renamed *Castaway Cay*. In 1990, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. acquired *Little Stirrup Cay*, in the Berry Islands, and promptly renamed it *Coco Cay*. Royal Caribbean and Celebrity cruise ships now dock there.⁸ Other influences of the tourist industry in renaming islands can be seen in the renaming of *Hog Island* to *Paradise Island*. It lies just north of *New Providence* and is reached by two short bridges.

⁷ A typical description of the naming of *Cat Island* is the one on the Bahamas Government web site: 'Originally called "San Salvador" and thought to be the gateway to the New World, *Cat Island* was given its present name in 1926—reportedly for the pirate Arthur Catt (a friend of Blackbeard) who used to make frequent stops here'. If one examines maps and atlases from the 18th and 19th centuries, one notes that the name *Cat Island* was used throughout these centuries. Exceptions are *the Royal Atlas of Modern Geography* (1864) which follows the name *Cat Island* with small script 'supposed S. Salvador', and *The Home Atlas* (1888) which has 'Cat Island or Guanahani'. In contrast, practically all atlases from the middle of the 19th century onwards give 'Watlings Island or San Salvador'. By 1918, some, like the *Doubleday Geographical Manual and New Atlas*, list only 'San Salvador' without an alternate 'Watlings Island'. Thus, the Bahamian Government legislation of 1926 can be seen as a clarification and an affirmation of what had already become the common usage.

⁸ Princess Cays are actually not separate islands but it is rather a tourist resort located on the southern end of *Eleuthera Island*. Since 1992, Princess Cruises dock here. *Isla Catalina* in the Dominican Republic is owned by Costa Cruise Lines and *Great Stirrup Cay* in the Berry Islands is owned by Norwegian Cruise Lines. Neither island was renamed by the respective cruise lines.

Abaco Island probably received its name by name transfer from Habacoa, earlier used for the present Andros Island.

Samana Cay, Samana meaning ‘small middle forested land’, is now uninhabited, but archaeological evidence shows that in the 16th century it was home to a large Lucayan population. Five hundred years ago, there was also a fresh water lake and forest cover on the island. English-speaking settlers lived on the island till the early 20th century. Fresh water has now all dried up, but the island still has abundant vegetation. Samana was previously also known as Atwood Cay.

The Spanish name for *Rum Cay*, Santa Maria de la Concepción, derived from Columbus’s ship *Santa Maria de la Inmaculada Concepción*, gave rise by name transfer to the naming of *Conception Island* which lies not too far away from Rum Cay. The small Conception Island is now uninhabited.

Nowadays, the two islands of the *Plana Cays* are uninhabited as well, but their location may have served as an important landing stage for the Lucayans on their way to Samana Cay. Hence, the meaning of the Lucayan name *Amaguaya*, ‘toward the middle lands’.

The Lucayan name for *Ragged island*, *Utiaquia*, refers to the hutia, a local rabbit sized rodent. The Bahama hutia is the only land mammal native to the Bahamas. There is only one native colony of them still extant. It is located on East Plana Cay.

Guanahani was the name recorded by Columbus as the name of the island of his first landfall. It is still debated which island it actually was. Columbus gave the Spanish name San Salvador to the island. *Watlings Island*, named after a land holder in the 17th century who also was an occasional pirate, was renamed to *San Salvador* by a Bahamian government act in 1926, claiming that this was the official first landfall of Columbus (see this paper, fn 7). In the 19th century, Cat Island was presumed to be the first landfall and more recent scholarship has also advocated for the Plana Cays (see Pickering 1994) and Samana Cay (see Judge 1986 and Valdés 1994).

Large portions of the western coast of *Andros Island* are a mangrove swamp and although I have not seen the small uninhabited *Williams Island* off the western coast of Andros Island, I have no doubt that the Lucayan name *Canimisi*, ‘northern waters swamp’, is quite appropriate, or at least it was appropriate five hundred years ago..

Bimini Islands means ‘The Twins’ in the Lucayan original name for the islands. There are indeed two larger islands in the Bimini Islands group—North and South Bimini.

Jumento, meaning ‘upper land of the middle distance’, is the Lucayan name for *Crooked Island*. The name is still found in the Jumentos Cays located in the Ragged Island Range.

Some Problems and Questions Regarding the Island Names

Bahamas. Tourist guides and tourist literature will usually tell people that *Bahamas* is derived from the Spanish *Baja/Baha Mar* ('shallow sea').⁹ This is a folk etymology that has somehow arisen over the years. There is even a large tourist development in Nassau, funded and built by Chinese developers, that is called *Baha Mar*. *Baja Mar* is reasonable only if it is an unusual or notable feature, or a warning; in any case, everyone knows that sea farers after a long voyage would notice the island and not the sea. The name *Bahama* for the present Grand Bahama Island meant 'large upper middle island' in the language of the Lucayans. However, it seems hard to convince people in the tourist industry that the name is not of Spanish origin and to correct their view basing on scholarly literature.

Andros. It seems to be generally accepted that Andros Island is named after Sir Edmund Andros, a 17th-century military leader in Barbados, later governor of Virginia and prior to that governor of other American colonies. The problem with this is that Sir Edmund had no connection with the Bahamas. Also, maps from the 18th century called the island *Andrews Island or Islands*, or *San Andreas Islands*. A much more logical explanation is that it was named in the late 17th century after San Andres Island, earlier Andrews Island, which lies to the southwest of Providencia Island (Old Providence Island). This has been rejected because there is no evidence that people from San Andres Island settled on the new island, but it does not take settlement for an island to be named or for there to be a transfer naming; certainly the people settling on New Providence coming from (Old) Providence Island would have known of Andrews Island and also the large island lying to the southwest of New Providence. It is unclear when the name changed to Andros in the 19th century or who changed it. It probably was just a variant pronunciation that found its way into script.

Cat Island. For the naming history of Cat Island vs San Salvador see this paper, note 7. The origin of the name *Cat Island* is less clear. It certainly was not from numerous cats which were reputed to have lived on the island. The most widely circulated derivation is from Arthur Catt, apparently a pirate in the 18th century. He is reputed to have been a contemporary of Edward Teach, Blackbeard. However, in the early 1700s, pirates had completely taken over the Bahamas. In 1718 however, Woodes Rogers,¹⁰ the British governor of Nassau, New Providence, pardoned or expelled most of these pirates, others he hanged or had flogged. After this event, it is hard to imagine why an island would be named after a pirate—particularly, a pirate who had no connection with this island and who is not readily found in contemporary records, despite Bahamian tourist literature claiming that Catt toured these waters. Could this naming interpretation be merely an invention of the 19th-century Romantic imagination?¹¹ I would like to suggest that the Lucayan name *Guateo*

⁹ The Bahamas government web site (www.bahamas.com/history) even has Columbus as the originator of *Baja Mar*. There is of course no documentary evidence for this. 'Inspired by the surrounding shallow sea, he [Columbus] described them as islands of the "baja mar" (shallow sea), which has become The Islands of the Bahamas'.

¹⁰ Woodes Rogers was the captain of the ship that rescued the marooned Alexander Selkirk from Juan Fernandez Island, off the western coast of South America. Alexander Selkirk served as the model for Robinson Crusoe, the hero of a novel by Daniel Defoe; this author also happens to have been a friend of Woodes Rogers.

¹¹ Websites seem to pick the most widely known pirates of the 17th and 18th centuries and name Arthur Catt as a contemporary. *Caribtourism.net/bahamas* states 'Cat Island. Named after Arthur Catt a British pirate who was in league with Henry Morgan and Edward Teach (Blackbeard)'. Morgan's dates were 1635-1688, and Teach's

for the present Half Moon Cay (Little San Salvador), an island very close to Cat Island, was transferred to Cat Island during the Spanish rule. It is not a wide stretch to see *Guateo* becoming *gato* and then to be translated into English *cat*.

Conclusions

There are a few other stories related to place names and pirates. Part of Elizabeth Harbour (named after Elizabeth II) on Great Exuma Island is called *Kidd's Cove*, after the first harbour master on the island, who was named Kidd and was alive in the late 18th century. The popular imagination has the famous pirate William Kidd become the harbour master and the person after whom the harbour cove name is derived.¹² However, the pirate William Kidd was hanged in 1701, well before Great Exuma Island was settled after 1783.

Morgan's Bluff on Andros Island is said to be named after Henry Morgan, a pirate and British privateer (1635-1688), whose exploits included the sacking of Panama City (1671) and the capture of Providence Island (1661). He was active in the Western Caribbean and resided mostly in Jamaica. There is no evidence of his presence in the Bahamas and Andros was very sparsely inhabited during his lifetime.

Here is one last example of how a place name in the Bahamas can evolve through local interpretation and spelling errors. A sign in Great Exuma near the village of Baraterre¹³ says Annis Track. On various maps this is actually Anne's Track, or Anne's Tract. Names after a woman's first name are rare in the Bahamas. This area is a coastal stretch and if one takes Baraterre as an indicator of some French speaking settlers, probably from Haiti or perhaps Louisiana in the 19th century, one can easily deduce that Anne's is actually *Anse*, the French word for a cove.

Names in the Bahamas tell of a varied and colourful history which sometimes is embellished by local imagination. The names and settlement history tell of Bahamian existence from Lucayan times starting from around 600 AD through modern times when huge cruise ships disgorge their passengers onto its shores and Cruise Ship lines invent new names for islands—names that are supposed to be more appealing to the tourist crowd, but have no relation to Bahamian tradition and history.

Wolfgang P. Ahrens
York University
Canada
wahrens@yorku.ca

1680-1718. Morgan was most active in the 1660s and early 1670s and Teach in the 1710s. Time wise, it is a stretch to see Catt in league with both of them.

¹² A tourism map issued by the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, *Great Exuma, Little Exuma, Exuma Cays. Maps & Island Guide*, states 'Kidd's Cove got its name from the infamous captain Kidd who was once the Harbor Master and frequented the island during the time when piracy was popular in The Bahamas'.

¹³ Baraterre occurs with various spellings on maps and road signs: Barraterre, Barreterre and Barataria Settlement. Barataria was the stronghold off the coast of New Orleans, Louisiana by Jean Lafitte (1780-1823), the French-American pirate/buccaneer. Today, there is still a Barataria Bay and a Barataria Preserve off the southern coast of Louisiana. There is also a Barataria in Trinidad. Some readers may also recall the fictional kingdom of Barataria mentioned in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*. The name Barataria stems from a mythical island granted as a joke to Sancho Panza in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

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