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EDUCATING AN ISLAND: CREATING SAN SALVADOR'S SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the creation of schools on San Salvador from the 1830s through the 1930s, including the building of new school buildings on the island. DePaul University conducted a site survey and mapping project at Polly Hill Settlement in 2008, including the school building.

INTRODUCTION

We know relatively little about the lives of Afro-Bahamian children on Out Islands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This paper is intended to use the development of schools on San Salvador, including their physical remains to better understand children's experiences.

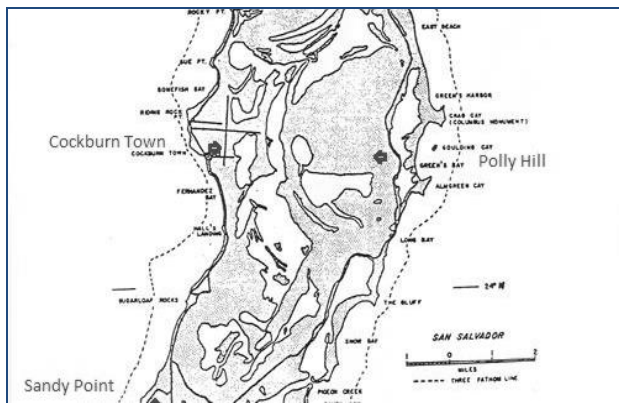


Figure 1. Location of San Salvador Schools.

FIRST SCHOOL - COCKBURN TOWN

The first school on San Salvador was established in 1835 in Cockburn Town. Mary Farquharson, the oldest daughter of Charles Farquharson, was the first teacher. The first attendance records date from 1839 and show twenty-six

students. Given that the island's population at the time was about 300 and probably at least a third were school-aged, this attendance rate was relatively low. These figures may not suggest a lack of interest in education, however. San Salvador's geography made getting to school difficult for many on the island. School attendance seemed to remain in the twenties for the 1830s, but rose to thirty-nine by 1847 and forty-five by 1849. This enrollment probably represented a significant percentage of the children living in or near Cockburn Town, however.

In 1850, new school teachers were appointed, Mr. Gipson assisted by his wife who was unpaid; they only remained two years. For the first time, enrollment figures by gender were reported; thirty men and seventeen women attended the school. The school seems to have operated out of rented quarters in the Baptist meeting house. The curriculum most likely focused on reading and writing. The next teacher, Mary Nairn remained the school teacher twelve years from 1853 to 1865. In her first years at the school, enrollments remained strong, over forty-five and sometimes in the fifties, but began to fall thereafter, until they numbered only fourteen in 1865. Consistently more boys enrolled in the school, but girls almost always represented at least a third of the enrollments.

The school underwent an important transition in 1866 when A.A. Fernander was appointed school master. Enrollments increased to fifty-four, including thirty boys and twenty-four girls, with an average attendance of about forty. The school inspector reported that the "school has gone through a great change in the past year." The new school teacher seems to have been popular at first, the inspector noted that he "is highly spoken of by the people and judging from the

condition of the school, I would say deservedly so” (Board of Education Annual Reports 1866).

MOVE TO UNITED ESTATES

San Salvador continued without its own school building for most of the nineteenth century. An 1883 Board of Education report demonstrated the geographical challenges facing San Salvador. An 1881 Island Commissioner report showed that more children, ages four to fourteen, lived in United Estates (110) than in Cockburn Town (35). When the school reopened in 1885 it was moved to United Estates. The new schoolmaster was an island resident, Thomas Williams. At that time literacy must have been very low on the east side of the island; Williams was reported to be the “only person in that section who can read and write fairly well, who was willing to be the school master” (Island Commission Record Book 1885-1890). The removal of the public school from Cockburn Town led to the establishment of a church school there, probably by the local Anglican minister, which lasted until at least 1890. Forty-two students were reported in 1885, eighteen men and twenty-four women, one of the rare cases in this period when more women than men attended school. Enrollments continued to range from about thirty-five to forty students, about the size of the old Cockburn Town school.

POLLY HILL SCHOOL

We know more about the new United Estates School at Polly Hill than any of the earlier ones. The school year ran for eighty-eight days, from July to December. A record eighty students registered in 1885 but average attendance was only forty. The difference between registrations and average attendance probably reflects in least in part the desire of parents for their children to attend school, but the difficulty of reaching the school from the various parts of the island. The school remained open until 1890 but closed again “for want of a suitable person to conduct it.” Moreover, the residents had not provided an adequate school building. In response, residents “made a lime kiln and erected thereon walls of

building forty feet in length by twenty wide & have enough lime on hand to smooth plaster the walls in and out” (Board of Education Reports 1887, 1888). The island commissioner requested lumber for doors, windows, a floor, roof, and hinges. Unfortunately, without a school master, the request went unfulfilled until 1897 when the Board of education authorized the supplies and construction could continue. This remains of this building still stand at the south end of United Estates. In appearance and size it was much like a large house, with well-constructed stone walls. Its original roof would have been thatched. Bathroom facilities would have been outdoors and there was probably no running water.

According to the 1909 school report, few students attended for more than three years, with school being conducted three to four days a week, and the school years lasting about 180 days total. Few children remained in school after the age of thirteen.



Figure 2. Polly Hill School today.

TWENTIETH CENTURY - ADDITIONAL SCHOOLS

In 1919 a second school was established in Cockburn Town. The Cockburn Town school was opened for a shorter period of time (70 versus 171 days) and for fewer days a week (about two and a half days compared to three or four) and the average attendance was about half that of United Estates (twenty-eight versus forty-nine in 1920).

The creation of a second school may have allowed for more regular attendance of the remaining students in United Estates; the school had one of the highest pass rates in the colony and received a silver medal. The school would win a silver medal again in 1923. One of the curricular innovations of the 1920s was the introduction of more practical topics into the curriculum. Agriculture lessons included a school garden, and students learned about plant diseases and insect pests. In addition, health became a regular subject, with the focus on improving community health overall.

In 1935 a third school, called the Creek, was opened at the south end of the island at Sandy Point. The creation of three schools around the island considerably increased enrollments. The average daily attendance in United Estates was seventy-six, fifty-nine in Cockburn Town and forty-three at the new Creek School. Overall average attendance on the island was 178 and overall enrollments were 209, probably representing virtually all of the school-aged children. For the first time, most students under the age of fourteen were spending some time in school each year. These enrollments would remain level through to World War II. After 100 years of schooling, San Salvador finally had a comprehensive system of primary education available to most of its children. About 80-90 percent of the students were able to pass their annual exams each year, and history and geography were now a regular part of the curriculum. Although children probably had work responsibilities at home, finally education was central to most children's lives on the island.

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