



# **THE HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS**

**THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
CAYMAN ISLANDS' COAT OF ARMS  
14TH MAY 2018**

# Caymanian history

The Cayman Islands were first discovered by Europeans in 1503, when Christopher Columbus sighted the islands known today Cayman Brac and Little Cayman on 10th May. To date, there is no evidence that the native peoples of the Caribbean, the Taino, Arawaks, Caribs and Lucanyos ever lived on the Islands, although they may have visited it on occasion. As Europeans began to visit and colonise the region, sailors would stop at Cayman to get fresh supplies of food and water.



A 1597 map depicting the Islands (from the WIC Collection)

Although many, such as Sir Francis Drake, visited the Islands and, in one instance, a Dutch crew was shipwrecked for several days, Cayman was not colonised by Europeans until after the English Conquest of Jamaica in 1655. It is believed that deserters and demobilised men from the army went to the Islands to catch turtles. The Sister Islands of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman were settled first, with people later migrating to Grand Cayman. The Sister Islands became completely depopulated and not re-inhabited until the early nineteenth century.

The early settlers of Grand Cayman in the seventeenth century traded turtles and mahogany, which was in demand to make furniture. Life was hard

in the isolated Cayman Islands and many Caymanians were subsistence farmers. Although technically under the authority of the Governor of Jamaica, Cayman largely fended for itself, choosing their own leader whom they titled 'Chief Magistrate'.

The nineteenth century saw the Governors of Jamaica take a greater interest in the Islands, although they were still largely left to their own devices. In 1832 Cayman's first legislature was established, the Justices and the Vestry. Based on Grand Cayman, it administered the three islands. The abolition of slavery in 1835 caused social upheaval in Cayman. The second half of the century was marked by greater isolation, leading to the nickname of the "islands that time forgot". In 1863, the Cayman Islands were formally made into a dependency of Jamaica. Towards the end of the century a mail service was created and a British Civil Servant introduced to administer the small local government; he held the title of Commissioner.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Cayman became less isolated. During the First World War, many Caymanians used their skill as sailors to serve in the British Merchant Navy. The 1930s saw many developments but also the dreadful Hurricane of 1932 which devastated the Sister Islands. In the Second World War many Caymanians joined the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and patrolled the Caribbean, or again served in the Merchant Navy. Two-thirds of Caymanian men contributed to the war effort, the highest of any allied nation.

The war showed the world the skill of Caymanian sailors and, in the post-war years, many found employment with international shipping firms, bringing more money into the Islands and leading to an increased standard of living. Amid the discussions surrounding the creation of the West Indies Federation, the Cayman Islands received a grant of their own Coat of Arms in 1958, and the next year they ceased to be a dependency of Jamaica, gaining their first Constitution. The breakup of the Federation led to the Cayman Islands deciding to remain a British territory in 1962.

From then to the present, Cayman has achieved a remarkable economic transformation through tourism and financial services. Although Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and Hurricane Paloma in 2008 caused extensive damage, necessitating reconstruction, the Islands continue to thrive.



## The Coat of Arms

A Coat of Arms of the Cayman Islands was originally proposed by Major Alan Hilliard Donald, Commissioner of the Cayman Islands, in 1957. The Assembly of the Justices and Vestry approved the idea on 3rd April 1957 and seven days later the Government of the Islands requested interested Caymanians to submit their designs for consideration.

The Royal College of Arms in London is responsible for grants of arms and are custodians of heraldic records that date back centuries. A coat of arms depicts the identity of a nation and are often comprised of emblems of both natural and man-made heritage.

Using designs submitted by Caymanians, the College of Arms began work on the Cayman grant the same year. The suggestions of Mr. James Ford were the most influential. The initial design was rejected as Caymanians felt that it did not adequately reflect their link with Britain, instead highlighting links with Jamaica and Christopher Columbus. They also wished to emphasise their link with the sea and the unity of the three islands of Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. Thus, alternative designs were created and one of these was chosen. The Royal Warrant permitting use of the Coat of Arms was granted on 14th May 1958.

The three stars on the wavy lines of blue and white represent the three islands and their link with the sea. The English lion at the top of the shield represents Cayman's historic link with Britain, whilst the turtle on the crest represents not only Cayman traditional link with these animals but also the name originally given to them by Columbus, '*Las Tortugas*'. The pineapple at the very top of the crest represents Jamaica and the historic connection that Cayman has shared with that island, poignantly alluded to as the pineapple sits behind the turtle. The nation's motto is taken from Psalm 24 of the Bible, representing Cayman's Christian heritage and link with the sea.

Properly described in heraldic language, the arms are: "*Barry wavy Argent and Azure, three Mulletts Vert fimbriated Or on a Chief wavy Gules, a Lion passant guardant Gold, And for the Crest On a Wreath of the Colours In front of a Pine-apple plant leaved and fructed Or, a Green Turtle Vert, together with this Motto: He hath founded it upon the Seas.*"





## Silver Thatch Palm and its uses

The national tree of the Cayman Islands is the Silver Thatch Palm (*Coccothrinax proctorii*). It gets its name from the distinctly silvery undersides of its leaves and is endemic to the Islands. The hardy properties of this plant have enabled islanders to create a unique, hard-wearing fibre to manufacture hard-wearing goods, used by the people of the Cayman Islands and also highly prized by those abroad. The leaves of the palm were used to thatch the roofs of traditional Caymanian houses.

The most famous use of the Silver Thatch Palm is in the production of rope. The Silver Thatch Palm Tree is highly resistant to salt and rope, made out of the centre shoots of the trees, resists the rotting effects of salt water longer than other types of rope. Silver Thatch Rope was therefore much in demand for use on ships, particularly amongst the fishermen of Jamaica. The leaves were traditionally picked at full moon in the belief that the trees held less sap and that the shoots would produce a stronger rope.

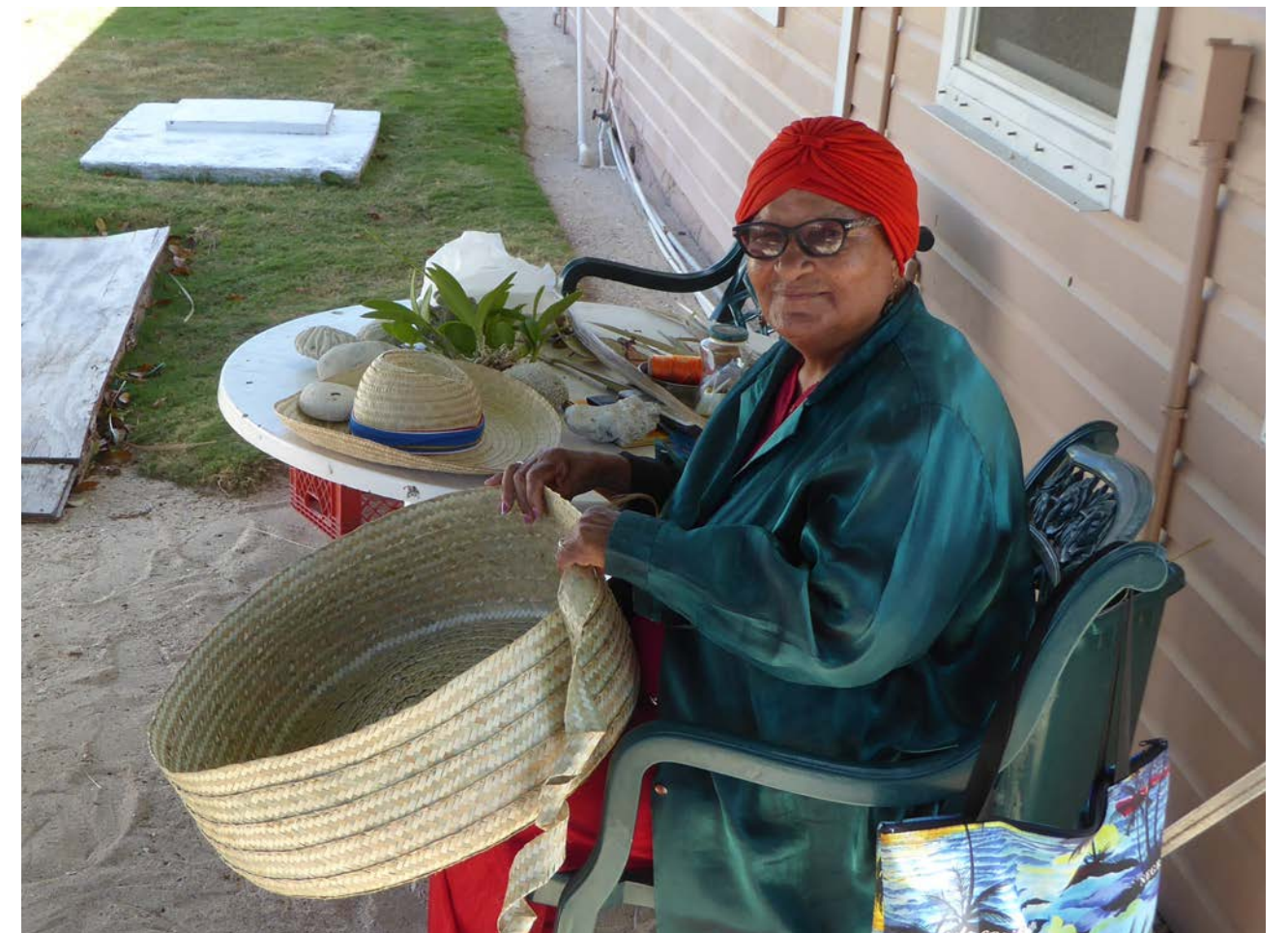


*The Silver Thatch Palm  
(from the WIC Collection)*

Production of this rope was something of a cottage industry and served as a means of support for many of the poorer residents of the Islands, particularly women and children, who would produce rope by the fathom and then sell it to local merchants in exchange for money or goods. At one point, over a million fathoms were produced per annum. Other items produced using the palm included hats and baskets, the latter of which was also exported abroad. The introduction of even tougher, artificial, fibres meant the end of the industry. The tradition of thatch palm weaving is nonetheless still alive and well, with younger generations learning the skill. To encourage the craft, the island of Cayman Brac in 2018 held its first competition to make Thatch Palm rope between the different government departments on the island, with the Fire Department emerging victorious.



*A Coil of Thatch Rope*



*Ms. Annalee Ebanks weaving a basket (from the WIC Collection)*



# Turtles

When Columbus first sighted the Cayman Islands he arrived in the middle of the annual migration of sea turtles. His son Ferdinand later wrote, *‘We were in sight of two very small and low islands full of tortoises (turtles), as was all the sea about, insomuch that they looked like little rocks, for which reason these islands were called Tortugas’*.

The abundance of turtles led many European sailors to stop at the Islands despite the dangers posed by the surrounding reefs and currents. Turtle provided sailors with a reliable source of meat that could either be salted to preserve it or even taken aboard and kept alive so long as they were supplied with enough sea water. In centuries past, turtle was regarded as a superfood, reputed to cure diseases. Eventually, it became regarded as a gourmet meat, with over two-hundred tureens of turtle soup being consumed each year at the Lord Mayor’s banquet in London. The shell of the Hawksbill turtle, known as tortoiseshell, was used to make jewellery, combs and even inlay for furniture. The turtle meat and turtle shell industries would continue until the second half of the twentieth century.

Overfishing led to a lack of turtle in Caymanian waters by the end of the eighteenth century and Caymanian fishermen then began to hunt off the south shore of Cuba. In time Caymanian turtlers hunted their quarry off the Mosquito Cays of Nicaragua, something that eventually led to a diplomatic incident between Britain and Nicaragua over fishing rights. Although overfishing from several countries severely reduced the global population of sea turtles, the first-hand knowledge of Caymanian turtle captains aided scientists such as Professor Archie Carr, *‘the man who saved sea turtles’*, in understanding these remarkable creatures and establishing protection and recovery programmes.

Today the Cayman Islands are home to the Turtle Centre, a government run facility open to tourists, that works to breed sea turtles. Since its establishment in 1968, it has released over thirty-one thousand turtles bred in captivity into the wild. A number of these now return to the Islands to lay their eggs. Some of the turtles bred at the farm are used for food, in the belief that farming turtles helps to prevent the poaching of wild turtles.



*Green turtles nesting on a beach*



*The Hawksbill turtle*



*The Turtle Centre (from the WIC Collection)*



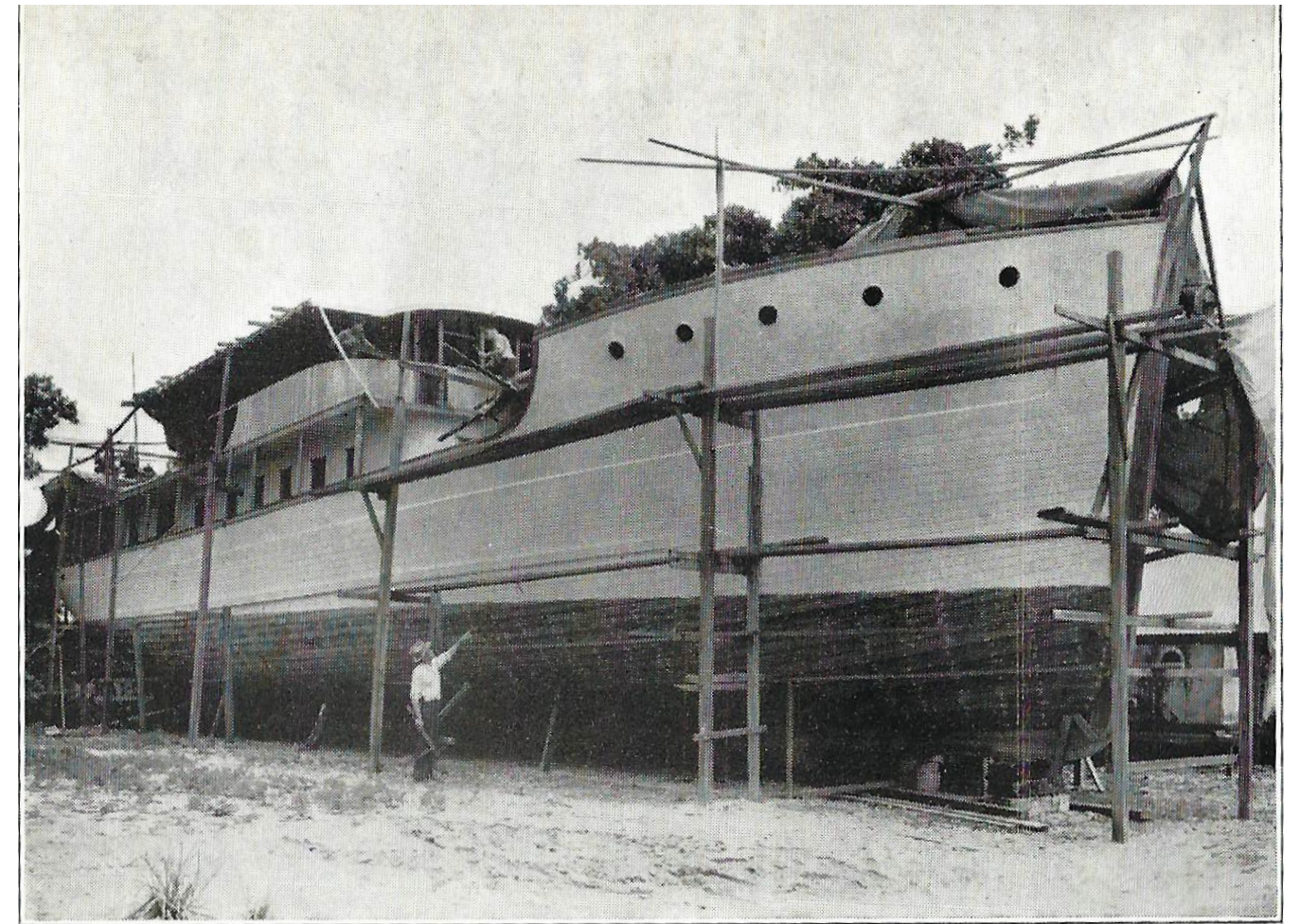
## Sailors and shipbuilding

As a small island nation, Cayman has always had a deep connection with the ocean and many of its menfolk in past times went to sea. Boys would accompany their fathers from a young age to acquire marine skills, learning how to handle a vessel proficiently and basic navigational techniques. Although many Caymanians worked on the turtling boats sent out from the Islands, others found employment further afield. There is record of at least one Caymanian serving in the Royal Navy as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. Caymanian skill at sea came to greater prominence with their service in the Second World War and afterward shipping companies, notably National Bulk Carriers, came to Cayman specifically to recruit. Many of this generation of Caymanian sailors were promoted to high ranking positions aboard these ships.

It was the isolation of the Islands that led Caymanians to become expert shipwrights. In later years, ships were normally built out of the local hardwoods, with planking imported from the USA and cables from Britain. The vessels were made with hand tools which meant that build times were slow and that only a few vessels were completed each year. The high quality of the craftsmanship was recognised and shipwrights such as Rayal Bodden of Grand Cayman and Keith Tibbetts of Cayman Brac became well respected.

The launch of a completed vessel was a major social occasion in the Cayman Islands, with a party being held at which men, women and children would all join in pulling the ship down into the water whilst singing traditional sea shanties.

A unique boat to the Cayman Islands is the Catboat, designed by Daniel Jervis of Cayman Brac in 1904 to help in hunting the elusive Hawksbill turtle. Traditionally 16ft long and 4ft wide, it is formed with a prow at both ends so it can move quickly forwards and back, is highly manoeuvrable and equipped with both oars and a wide single sail. The whole boat is coloured a distinctive shade of blue, as are all of its articles that are used in the water, to provide camouflage. Although the traditional turtle fishing industry has faded, the Cayman Catboat Club keeps the tradition of these boats alive.



*A Caymanian motor vessel under construction  
(from the WIC Collection)*



*A Caymanian Catboat in full sail*



## 50 things you didn't know about the Cayman Islands

1. They may have formed part of a chain of islands by which humanity first entered the Caribbean from central America.
2. Tradition says that the original settler was a man called Bawden or Bodden who originally came from Cornwall.
3. Columbus originally called the Islands Las Tortugas (The turtles) after all the turtles that he sighted on and around them. They were later called Lagartos (lizards) before they were named Cayman after the Amerindian word for Crocodile (Caiman).
4. Despite their reputation as a centre for financial services, Cayman did not get its first commercial bank until Barclays opened a branch in 1953.
5. Due to their location, they are more likely than any other islands in the Caribbean to be hit by hurricanes.
6. The vast amount of immigration over the last few decades means that the majority of the population was not born within the Cayman Islands.
7. At one point the majority of the government revenue came from the sale of postage stamps, primarily to stamp collectors around the world.
8. Georgetown, the capital, is named after King George III, but was originally named Hogstyes until the late eighteenth century.
9. Their geographic isolation means that they are home to many unique species and sub-species of animals, such as the Blue Iguana which can only be found on Grand Cayman.
10. There are many plants endemic to the Islands, such as the Silver Thatch Palm and the Wild Banana Orchid, the national flower. Some are so rare that they have only been given scientific names and no name in English.
11. They have never had income tax, instead historically relying on a poll tax.

12. Nearby is the Cayman Trench, the deepest point of the Caribbean and home to the deepest and hottest volcanic vents in the world.
13. Historically they have had one of the most racially balanced societies in the Caribbean.
14. Their isolation led to the Caymanian dialect preserving some aspects of Elizabethan Cockney Speech, such as pronouncing Vs as Ws.
15. There is a place in the Islands called Hell, due to the seemingly unearthly rock formation that can be found there.
16. They are home to a unique type of semi-precious stone, Caymanite.
17. The world-famous Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman is in fact only about 5.5 miles long.
18. Cayman Brac is named for the large limestone bluff that is its distinctive geographical feature and the highest point on the Islands. Brac is a Gaelic word for bluff or cliff.
19. Although their National Anthem is *God save the Queen*, they also have a national song, *Beloved Isle Cayman*.
20. The coral reefs and currents surrounding the Islands mean that many ships have been wrecked over the centuries, particularly at night.
21. When the Cayman Islands were very poor, shipwrecked vessels provided a welcome source of supplies to help the islanders survive.
22. The wood of the Caymanian Ironwood tree is so dense that it sinks in water. Its toughness means that it is termite resistant and has been used to make building foundations.
23. They were one of the earliest British territories to abolish slavery in its entirety.

**24.** Buried treasure used to be found on the Islands, although it is by no means clear that it was deliberately left by pirates.

**25.** They had a reputation of being home to pirates, although there is no evidence to support anything but an occasional visit.

**26.** For a brief time in the late eighteenth century, they had a booming cotton industry that helped support the Industrial Revolution.

**27.** In the American Civil War Cayman was visited by both the Union and Confederate Navies and Caymanian sailors may have served in those forces.

**28.** To celebrate the tradition that pirates called them home, they have an annual festival called Pirates Week.

**29.** The national bird is the Caymanian Parrot, a subspecies of the Cuban Parrot.

**30.** Little Cayman is home to the world's rarest snail, *Cerion Nanus*.

**31.** The national carnival, Carnival Batabano, is named after the traditional term for finding turtle tracks in the sand, a cause for celebration.

**32.** Their nearest neighbour is Cuba, over 227 miles away.

**33.** Due to their isolation, people used to be marooned on the Islands. This still occurred in the twentieth century.

**34.** Obeah, the Afro-Caribbean practice of religion and sorcery is still illegal in the Islands today.

**35.** In the late eighteenth century, the islanders built two forts to defend themselves from attacks by the Spanish who viewed them as pirates.

**36.** Choosing their own leader made them almost unique amongst British Caribbean territories in the eighteenth century.

**37.** Today, there are still active licenses to catch turtles in the Islands.

**38.** The Islands used to be home to so many mosquitoes that cattle were reputed to die from suffocation as the insects had clogged up their noses.

**39.** A folk tale from the Islands tells of the May Cow, a demonic cow that drags chains behind it and which appears in the month of May.

**40.** During the prohibition era, alcohol was imported into the Cayman Islands, and would be later taken by Rum-runners to America.

**41.** Cayman was once named the world's friendliest country.

**42.** Caymanian ship design influenced their architecture, with roofs shaped like a ships' keel. Many shipwrights were also architects.

**43.** There are in fact five Cayman Islands rather than three, although Owen Island and Little Cayman Brac are little more than large rocks in the sea.

**44.** There may have been a sixth island, which possibly sunk in the earthquake that submerged much of Port Royal in 1692.

**45.** Stingray City, a major attraction of the Islands, started when fishermen cleaned their catch in the sea and stingrays came to feed on the remains.

**46.** More businesses are registered in the Islands than there are people.

**47.** The Cayman Islands have one of the highest GDPs in the world.

**48.** When beef was a luxury treat in Cayman, at Christmas people would eat Cayman Style beef.

**49.** Many Caymanians have also served in the American military.

**50.** A local legend states that a Royal Prince was rescued by Caymanians from a shipwrecked vessel and in gratitude the King granted Cayman exception from taxation and conscription.



# Timeline of the Cayman Islands

30 million years ago

Formation of the Cayman Islands

1503

Christopher Columbus discovers Cayman Brac and Little Cayman

1655

Cromwell sends an army to the Caribbean

1670

Manuel Riveiro Pardal attacks the settlement on Little Cayman

1735

First record of Isaac Bawden/Bodden

1794

The Wreck of the Ten Sail.

1832

The Justices and the Vestry, the first Caymanian legislative bodies are formed

1834

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire

Circa 4000 BC

Humans enters the Caribbean

1586

Sir Francis Drake and his men become the first known Englishmen to visit the Cayman Islands

1658

Bodden/Bawden and Watler reach the Cayman Islands (according to tradition)

1670

The Treaty of Madrid recognises the Cayman Islands as English

1775

William Bodden become Chief Magistrate

Circa 1800

Hogstyes is renamed George Town after King George III


1833


Cayman Brac and Little Cayman are inhabited again

1835


The Marquess of Sligo visits the Cayman Islands to announce the end of apprenticeship

A picture of the fleet that Sir Francis Drake took to the Caribbean






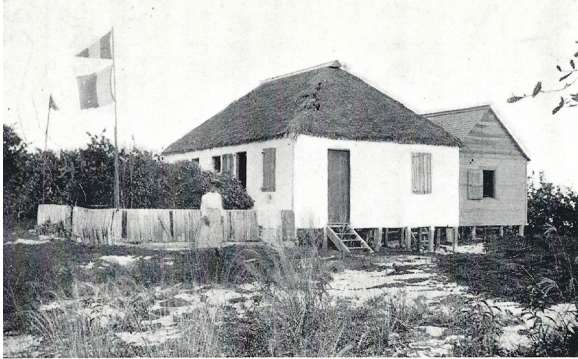
A Merchant Navy Poster



The Legislative Assembly



King George III of Great Britain and Ireland



A traditional Caymanian cottage

1863

Cayman officially becomes a dependency of Jamaica

1898

Edmund Parsons retires as the last Custos. Frederick Sanguinetti becomes the first Commissioner

1930

Leila Ross Shier composes Beloved Isle Cayman

1939-1945

The Second World War. Two thirds of Caymanian men assist in the war effort

1959

Cayman receives its first Constitution and ceases to be a Dependency of Jamaica. Women get the vote and a new Legislature is formed

1972

Cayman receives its third Constitution

2003

The first National Heroes Day is celebrated

2009

Cayman receives its fourth Constitution

1889

The Cayman Islands Post Office opens

1910

Commissioner George Hirst publishes Notes on the History of the Cayman Islands

1932

The hurricane of November 1932 causes much damage and loss of life

1958

Cayman receives its Coat of Arms

1962


After Jamaican independence, the Cayman Islands remains a British Colony

1992

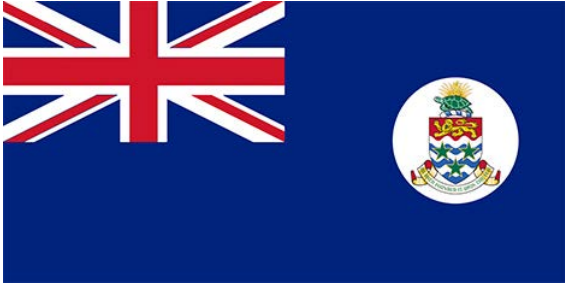
The first Caymanian National Heroes are recognised

2004


Hurricane Ivan



The original Caymanian Post Office is now the National Museum



The flag of the Cayman Islands



Damage in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan





This booklet has been produced by the West India Committee, a Royal Charter institution founded in London circa 1735. The Committee's library and archive has been inscribed by UNESCO as a Memory of the World. The West India Committee is currently working with the Government of the Cayman Islands to bring a greater understanding of the history and heritage of the Cayman Islands to not only the wider world, but the Islands themselves.