

The Cotton Trees (ceiba, kapok) of Grand Cayman Island



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Memphis Tennessee
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**(with the collaboration of Catherine Childs,
The National Trust of the Cayman Islands)**

The Cayman Islands are a relatively small group of three main islands in the mid-Caribbean Sea, about 200 miles northwest of Jamaica. Their approximately 100 square miles of land surface include Grand Cayman (by far the largest), Little Cayman, and Cayman Brac. They remain a self-governing British Overseas Territory – like Bermuda, Gibraltar, and twelve other small insular colonial places (Cawley 2015).

Surprisingly, in spite of being low-lying, coralline based, sandy, oceanic islands, the Caymans have a considerable forest history. During the mid-1700s, early European exploiters brought slaves from Jamaica to cut the mahogany for local shipbuilding and export for housing, and furniture (Sauer 1982: 9; Doran 1953, Long 1774: I, 313) Logwood, ironwood, coconut palms, and silver thatch palms have also been important components in the vegetative economy of the islands.

There is no indication that other forest giants, such as *Ceiba pentandra*, the subject of this report, were native to the islands. Of the 417 plants listed and photographed by iNaturalist on Grand Cayman, no ceiba was included. Brunt and Davies (1994) and Fawcett (1888) make no mention. Proctor has slight notations (1948: 364, 385, 809). As in Jamaica and elsewhere in the British Caribbean, ceibas are usually known as “cotton tree.” “Silk cotton” and “kapok” are used occasionally.

“Cotton Tree” toponyms. Among the four sheets of 1/25,000 topographic maps of the Cayman Islands only one toponym can be seen: “Cotton Tree Bay” on the northwest coast of Cayman Brac. Places with “Cotton Tree” names include a hotel/estate at West Bay, 372 Conch Point Road, on Grand Cayman, and “Kapok residential building” at 108 Bismarckia Way in George Town.

Historical notices/Cultural History of the Cotton Tree on Grand Cayman

It is often thought that Cayman life has been most influenced by the Afro-Caribbean heritage of Jamaica. However, the massive, “spiritual” lore surrounding “cotton trees” on Jamaica (Beckwith 1929: 30, 89) is not found on Caymans. While other plants have been associated with mythical characters (“Duppy bush/basil (*Phyllanthus angustifolius*),” “Duppy gun (*Ruellia tuberosa*),” the ceiba, apparently, has not played a significant role in the culture history of the Caymans.

Cayman literature seems to confirm this notion. A sampling of books from the George Town Public Library by Hezlep (1984), Fuller (1967), Meekings (1997), and Shipman (2012), all tell tales of “spirits of the dead” and trees, but none mention cotton trees.

One major exception, however, is the frequently repeated modern story of the large ceiba planted within the major fort at George Town. It is said that during the Second World War the tall tree was used by islanders as a lookout post for German ships.

“Under a huge gnarled silk-cotton tree you find the crumbling walls of an ancient fort, built no one knows when, as a protection against gentleman adventures who once roamed the Spanish Main.” (*Saturday Evening Post*, July 21, 1928)

“During World War II six lookout posts were set up at strategic locations in Grand Cayman to spot hostile ships, including German submarines. Around 1943, a lookout hut was constructed in the branches of the cotton silk tree at the fort.” (Staff 2015)

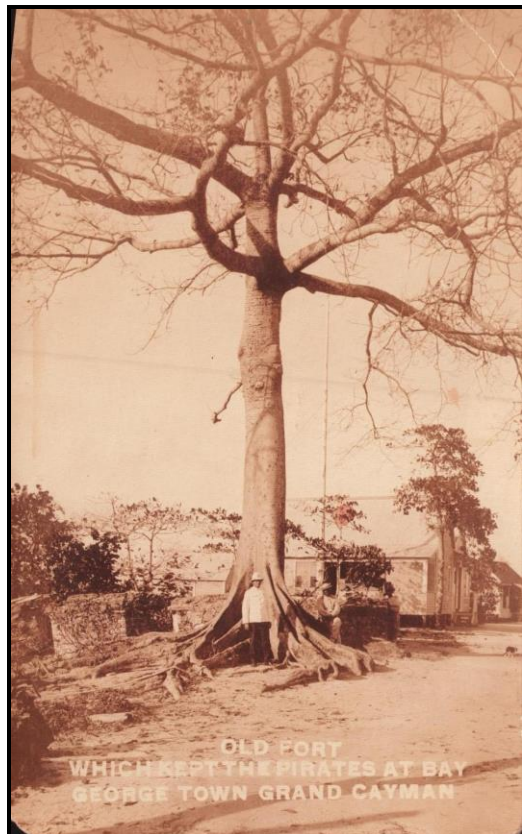
“At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Fort enclosure was sand-bottomed. Children from the adjacent school used to play in it, under the shade of a huge silk-cotton (kapok) tree, which stood right beside it . . . During World War II, the tall silk cotton tree was used as a lookout post. The Home Guard, whose barracks were next to the Fort at Dobson Hall, would climb up into its branches to watch for German submarines.” IBP (2012: I, 241).

“Clifton Bodden, who also attended the ceremony, said Fort George is a site he was familiar with, having served as a sergeant at the fort during World War II. The 90-year-old said he fondly remembers the view from the cotton tree and recalls being able to see the entire north part of the island as there were no tall trees or buildings at that time.

We had a little cotton tree now for a lookout. We had 42 steps from the ground to the cotton tree and in that lookout we had some very good binoculars, and when you go up in that, you could see everything from Spotts beach down from the North West point, because at that time we didn’t have all those tall trees and buildings,” said Mr. Bodden “(NTCI 2016).

By grand coincidence, in a conversation with the Director of the National Trust, Frank Roulstone, a personal touch was attached to the story. He said that his grandfather, Frederick William McTaggart, built the watchtower in the ceiba (personal communication March 6, 2024).

Historical photograph of ceiba at the fort. (Courtesy Bryony Dixon and Catherine Childs).



The *West Indian Pilot* (1918: 350) notes, while writing of the George Town anchorage: “A conspicuous cotton tree is situated close to the northward of a white house with a red roof; it is, however, only conspicuous at a distance.” From this description, unfortunately, the tree cannot be located.

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Before field observations in Grand Cayman, March 5-8, 2024, from social media and Google Earth Street Views (GESV) 21 ceibas were located and most were photographed. Over 60 more were found during our visit. In both instances, approximately 85% of the trees were near the Camana Bay development project.

The Camana Bay area.

The greatest concentration of cotton trees on Grand Cayman can be seen in the Camana Bay development area.

Ceibas of Grand Cayman, numbered according to March 2024 photography route.

Camana Bay, north roundabout (13)

1. Adult on east side (northern), 140 inch circumference.
2. sapling growing off north side of above tree.
3. young tree, west of adult 1.



4. adult, east side, south of adult 1, 121 inch circumference. To left, in background, trees 1 and 5, a young.



- 6, 7, 8, 9. Group of 4 saplings, north roundabout (northwest side)



10. sapling south of adult 4.

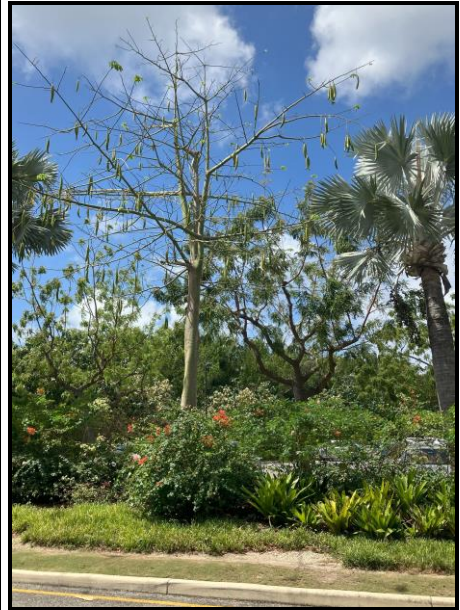


11, 12, 13. Group of 3 saplings, north roundabout (south side)



Camana Bay, Emeritus Drive (north to south) (9)

14. corner tree, north, young; 15. Young.



16. young adult, 91 inch circumference.



17, 18. two saplings, entry to elevated walkway at El Paseo



19. young adults, 92 inch circumference. 20. Parking lot entry north, 89 inch circumference.



21. young adult, parking lot entry south, 88 inch circumference.



22. young adult, corner tree, south, not photographed, not measured.

Camana Bay, northwest of south roundabout, west side of street (12)

23. Adult, west of south roundabout, across street.



24, 25. two adults, along highway before tunnel, first one with supports, neither measured.



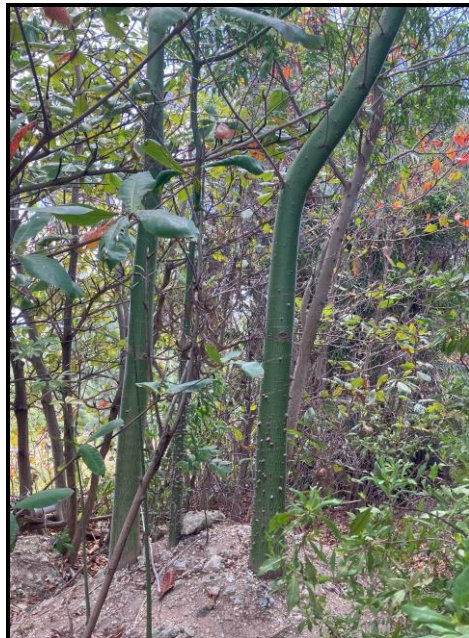
Tree 24. Adult still supported with braces, not measured.



26, 27. two saplings, not planted, interior (west) of tree 24 in dump area. 28, 29, 30. three saplings, north of 24, probably not planted.



31. sapling, not planted, near entrance to dump area. Southwest of tree 24. 32, 33, 34. Three saplings, not planted, in dump site, south of tree 31.



Camana Bay, south of southern roundabout, south of Lawrence Blvd. (11)

35. adult, 122 inch circumference, no good photograph. 36, 37, 38, 39, 40. five saplings, in dump area, not planted, north of adult 35.



41, 42. A young adult and a sapling, just south of adult 35.



43, 44, 45. three saplings in Growing Beauty Nursery.



Camana Bay, Esterley Tibbetts Highway, north of the National Arts Gallery, walking north to south along western side.

46, 47. The first two saplings, undoubtedly accidental propagations, can be seen on the downslope along the narrow relict waterway west of the highway.



48, 49. Young in foreground (west side) and smaller one in median.



50, 51. Young in foreground (west side) and smaller one in median.



52, 53, 54, 55, 56. Five young trees surround a water cistern (?), west side of highway.



57-64. Two young trees in foreground (west side) and six smaller ones in the median.



49, 51. Median trees photographed from the south.



Tree 50. returned to be measured.



65. Young, not photographed, farther south on highway, before National Gallery of Art.

66, 67, 68, 69. Northernmost Tibbetts trees, northeast corner before Nexus Way entry.



Camana Bay Buildings
70. National Cayman Bank



71, 72. Two adults, not measured, guards to entrance of 89 Nexus Way, headquarters of Camana Bay Development



Isolates, near buildings

73, 74. Two saplings, north side of Kimpton-Sealife Resort, Raleigh Quay.



75, 76. Two mature trees, Magellan Quay, near Governor's Creek (Columander Court 146), north and south.



77. the mature tree at the Island Montessori School, 325 inch circumference.



Tree was measured by A. J. McGovern of the Cayman Trust and school owner/ director Jennifer Cowdroy.



78. The mature tree at the so-called Glass House on Elgin Avenue, 286 inch circumference. When I measured the tree I was surprised with the consistency of distance between the buttress planks. The first three were exactly 60 inches apart. The other two were 36 and 70.

This tree has a remarkable story (Thanks to Ann Stafford). It was supposedly planted during the term of Governor Peter Lloyd, 1982-87, and it was thriving, a nice landmark. Then, in 2004, arrives Hurricane Ivan whose 150 mph winds uprooted the large tree. Islanders, apparently realizing the recuperative skill of ceibas, propped up the tree, and as can be seen today, it is a magnificent landmark again.

October 28, 2004 (Courtesy Ann Stafford)



July 28, 2006 (Courtesy Ann Stafford).



March 7, 2024



Isolates, others

79. Young adult, Canal Point Drive, east end, at lagoon.



80, 81. Two young adults, North Sound Golf Club, north of Safehaven Drive, west of lake on hole 4.



82, 83. Two saplings, Esterley Tibbetts Highway, far north, east side before Batabano Road. No photograph.

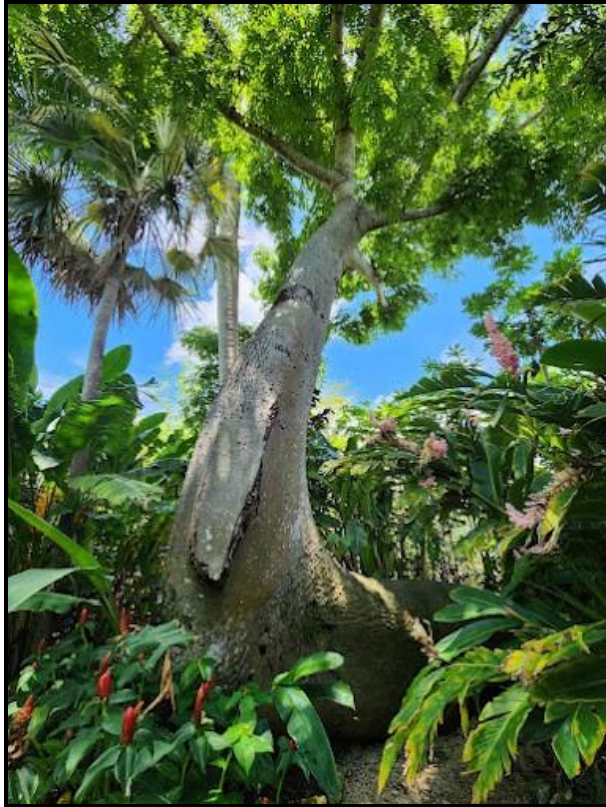
84. The surprise find: on departure from the airport as I looked to photograph the Montessori tree, I saw a young tree in a forest, just south of airport, near mid-runway, northwest of Montessori School.



85. If we add the ceiba of the Botanic Garden, which I did not see on the March trip, a total of 85 trees are known.

The Botanic Park Cotton Tree, tree 85.

It appears that the adult cotton tree in the Queen Elizabeth Botanic Garden was once blown down and re-rooted forming a new trunk. Its descriptive plaque indicates it is not a *Ceiba pentandra*.



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Cotton Trees on Grand Cayman according to Geographical Zones

Camana Bay Development Area [72]

North Roundabout (13)

Emeritus Drive (9)

West of South Roundabout

Northwest Sector, north of Lawrence Boulevard (12)

Southwest Sector, south of Lawrence Boulevard (11), including 3 in

Growing Beauty Nursery

Esterley Tibbetts Highway, South Roundabout to National Art Gallery

West Side (10)

Median (8)

East Side (1)

Far south, front of Art Gallery (1)

Southeast corner, Nexus Way at Tibbetts Highway (4 saplings)

Buildings (3)

89 Nexus Way (2)

Cayman National Bank (1)

Isolates, near buildings (6)

Island Montessori School (1 large)

Glass House (1 large)

Kimpton-Sealife Resort, north side, Raleigh Quay (2)

Magellan Quay (2 large), near Governor's Creek (Columander Court 146)

Isolates, others (6)

Esterley Tibbetts Highway, far north, east side before Batabano Road (2)

Canal Point Drive, east end, at lagoon (1)

North Sound Golf Club (2), north of Safehaven Drive, west of lake on hole

South of Airport, in forest near mid-runway, northwest of Montessori School (1)

Botanic Garden, not seen, but photographed earlier (1)

85 total

72 trees (85%) are within the Camana Bay development region

Cotton Trees on Grand Cayman, according to approximate Age/Size
(slight variations may be caused by environmental conditions)
Arbitrary descriptive categorization

- Mature (4)** 50+ years; circumference at 4 feet above ground, over 200 inches, heavily buttressed, few or no spikes
Adult (8) 20+ years; circumference at 4 feet above ground, over 100 inches, large buttresses, few spikes
Young adult (9) 15+ years; circumference 50+ inches, normally spiked, moderate buttressing
Young (20) 5+ years; 15-30 feet tall, normal spiking, incipient buttressing
Sapling (43) less than 5 years old, 1-15 feet tall, often spiked, no buttressing
Seedling (0) recently planted, less than 1 foot high

Trees Measured on Grand Cayman, March 6-7, 2024.
(circumference at 4 feet above ground)

- 325 inches** Island Montessori School, Crewe Drive
286 inches Glass House, Eglin Avenue
140 inches North Roundabout, east side (northern adult)
122 inches South of South Roundabout, adult south of Lawrence Blvd.
121 inches North Roundabout, east side (southern adult)
92 inches Emeritus Drive # 6
91 inches Emeritus Drive # 3
88 inches Emeritus Drive # 8
87 inches Emeritus Drive # 7
51 inches Tibbetts Highway, west side, tree # 50

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank especially Catherine Childs, Environmental Programme Manager (NTCI) for her initial interest in the project and for her introductions to other specialists on the island. I also appreciate the assistance, knowledge, and support of Frank Roulstone, Executive Director of the National Trust of the Cayman Islands, Andrew (A. J.) McGovern, Environmental Policy and Development Officer (NTCI), Jennifer Cowdroy, Director/Owner of the Island Montessori School, Terry Ballard, George Town Public Library, Ann Stafford, and Bryony Dixon.

Traveling companions: wife Sharon, son Drew (with wife Diana), sis-in-law Angela Weems and her daughter Tiffany White.

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The West Indies Pilot

1918 vol 1. "The Caymans," p. 350.

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EPILOUGE

The author is a cultural geographer, retired from the Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. His interest in ceibas dates back into the 1960s, but only since 2017 have he and his wife Sharon been traveling to document specific ceiba locations in cultural context. Their son Andrew publishes their reports in PDFs on the web page williamvtdavidson.com.

2018 The “Kapkoks” of Key West, Florida, 8 ceibas.

2019 Silk Cotton Trees of Nassau and Vicinity, The Bahamas, 168 ceibas.

2019 YAXCHÉ: Ceiba pentandra in Yucatán, a cultural geography, 2,574 ceibas.

2020 Ceiba, Plaza, and *Cruzo’ob* Towns, Quintana Roo, México: A Settlement Geography, 2,898 ceibas.

2021 The Ceiba Trees of Honduras, a cultural geography, 2,134 ceibas.

2022 The Ceibas of Central America: Belize, 319 ceibas.

2022 The Ceibas of Central America: Managua, Nicaragua, 144 ceibas.

2023 The Ceiba Trees of Puerto Rico, a cultural geography, 710 ceibas.

2023 The Cotton Trees of Grand Cayman Island, 85 ceibas.

[9,040]

Additional ceibas, located, but not yet published:

Guatemala, 1,092

El Salvador, 716

Nicaragua, 516

Costa Rica, 130

Panama, 69

[2,523]

Grand Total = 11,563