

**William V. Davidson**

**The Silk Cotton Trees of Nassau and Vicinity,  
The Bahamas,**

**with the results of a brief field trip, April 2019.**

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## **The Silk Cotton Trees of Nassau and Vicinity**

**Silk cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra*) are a major, but often overlooked, component of the cultural landscape of New Providence Island, in the Bahamas. These trees represent a rich tradition, particularly in areas occupied by Afro-Bahamians after Emancipation in the nineteenth century. One particularly notable tree – a large, ancient silk cotton surrounded by public buildings in the center of Nassau – became famous as probably the most illustrated and photographed ceiba in the world before its demise in the mid-1900s.**

**Geographer William Davidson and his wife Sharon, who have studied extensively the ceibas of Central America and Yucatán, report herein their April 2019 field reconnaissance of Nassau and its environs, including the history and legacy of the iconic Nassua silk cotton tree.**

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## The Silk Cotton Trees of Nassau and Vicinity, The Bahama Islands

The Bahamas became an intriguing place to study *Ceiba pentandra* when I first saw an early 19<sup>th</sup> century illustration of the famous, and perhaps most-photographed-ever, ceiba, amongst the public building complex in Nassau. I learned later that this “silk cotton” tree, as ceibas are known in the English-speaking West Indies, might have lived 250 years or more, brought to Nassau by a planter from South Carolina, perhaps around 1700. The giant dying tree was removed during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ([1950] Lawlor 2010; [1970s] Craton and Saunders 1998: II, 190). It has been said that it was the mother tree from which all others in the Bahamas were propagated.

If I am wondering about the role man plays and has played in the modern distribution of ceibas, is this not a good case study?

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### The most famous silk cotton tree of Nassau

To my knowledge, the first notice of the famous Nassau silk cotton tree (NSCT) is from the 1784 botanical investigation by the German naturalist John David Schoepf (1788, II: 308): “[Another flora transplant] is the **Silk-Cotton-Tree** (*Bombax pentandrum* L.), the seed-case of which yields a very fine, light brown wool. The tree is comely, large and strong; the branches of the one I saw, no doubt the only one on the island, shaded a circuit of at least a hundred yards.” If the tree was indeed “large and strong” and “shaded . . . at least a hundred yards,” it must have been planted in Nassau by at least the early 1700s. In all probability, the tree described by Schoepf is the same one in the early illustration mentioned above.

A subsequent visitor to the island, Charles Ives (1880: 91) heard from a learned Nassauvian that the large tree was brought from South Carolina and that all other silk cottons in the islands came from that mother tree. A few years later A. J. Adderley (1883: 14) passed along hearsay that the tree was brought to New Providence and “planted some two hundred years ago by John Miller, esq.” [or about 1680+/-]. Botanists Gardner and Brace (1889: 367), added from their 1886 visit that: “The large specimen at Nassau is said to have been brought from South Carolina, and to have given rise to all others on

the island." Later writers have passed on the same notion of its origins (Northcroft 1900: 155; Howe 1906: 218-19; Bacon 1927: 5).

It is true that Nassau was connected with South Carolina through the port of Charleston during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century (Edgar 1998: 41, 48). The Lords Proprietors of Carolina obtained a grant of the Bahamas in 1670 and Carolina was settled by English-West Indians, primarily from Barbados, but with many others coming from the Bahamas. *Ceiba pentandra* is recorded among the flora of South Carolina (Shecut 1806: I, 286), but specific evidence of John Miller, the planter, and his transfer of the plant has not yet been established in primary documentation.

However, the oral tradition of an early 1700s silk cotton tree in Nassau does give supporting evidence for the date of 1802 for the earliest illustration, given the size and obvious age of the tree in the drawing.



BS NSCT 1. "A view of a silk-cotton tree on the island of New Providence, Bahamas, March 12, 1802." (view to south, domed building is the old jail and the current library, Courtesy Bahamas Historical Society, Nassau).

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By reviewing several dated photographs, engravings, and illustrations of the famous Nassau silk cotton tree, after the first rendering of 1802, four types can be identified, primarily based on whether or not a kind of enclosure is shown.

- 1) The first illustration, mentioned above, the pen and ink drawing from 1802, stands alone. It is the first known representation of the tree.
- 2) The tree is enclosed by several pipe posts connected by chains (first episode), 1870-5.
- 3) The tree is portrayed surrounded by a picket fence, 1875-1878.
- 4) The tree is encircled with pipe posts and chain (second episode), 1880-1914.
- 5) The tree is without an enclosure, after 1922.

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Something of a timeline referring to the iconic Nassau silk cotton tree follows, with a sampling of the countless illustrations and an occasional commentary about photographers and other pertinent information.

1784 See Schoepf, above.

1802 Apparently, it was George Shattuck (1905: 588) who first informed us that the Nassau public library had an early pen-and-ink drawing of the tree.

When Sharon and I visited the library in April 2019 in search of the drawing a renovation was underway and we were unable to search for the drawing. By good fortune, on a visit to the Bahamas Historical Society the drawing was seen hanging on the south wall. With permission of the current BHS president Andrea P. Major, we photographed the drawing and inserted it above. The title at the bottom of the original is too blurred to discern, except for a few obvious words, but on the reverse a text in ink is clear: "This view of the Silk Cotton Tree and Public Gaol with a distant view of Fort Fincastle in the town of Nassau on the island of New Providence in The Bahamas." This title is far too long to fit on the narrow strip of paper at the bottom of the drawing. It was Howe (1906: 219), however, who recorded the title properly: "A view of a silk-cotton tree on the island of New Providence, Bahamas, March 12, 1802."

1870 circa, Fred R. Case took several photographs around Nassau about 1870 including the one of the tree (below) and another, a stereoscopic version, with German

translation of "Roots and Trunk of the Great Silk-Cotton Tree, Nassau." The stereograph was published by J. F. Jarvis and distributed by Underwood and Underwood Company. (See Caribbean Photo Archive.)



BS NSCT 2. Photograph of Fred Case, ca. 1870. BS NSCT 3. "Roots and Trunk of the Great Silk Cotton Tree, Nassau." "Burzein und Stammes grossen Geidens Baumwollbaums, Nassau."

1875 Epes Winthrop Sargent (1813-1880), a Nassau-born man, published an engraving by Abbey based on a photograph. The famous tree is shown enclosed with a picket fence and a lone man walking in foreground (1876a: 12).



BS NSCT 4. Copy, New York Public Library.



1876b Sargent, *Guide to Nassau* . . . reproduces the same illustration on p. 25.

1878 Mrs. Frank Leslie (p. 239) in her husband's *Illustrated Newspaper* published another version of the tree with picket fence. Her discussion is as follows: She looked "at the great silk-cotton-tree beside the Public Buildings, its roots extending out like buttresses twenty feet on every side, forming wooded walls twelve to fifteen in height, with narrow cell-like chambers between. The seeds of this tree are enveloped in a fluffy down like substance, which becomes quite troublesome in the season by its attachment to coats, hats, and hair of passers-by, and the top has been severely shortened to repress this nuisance." An engraving of "The Great Silk-Cotton-Tree" appears on page 240.



BS NSCT 5.

1878 Another version of the above two illustrations (with picket fence), with five people just outside the fence, can be found on the Zazzle.com. Zazzle admits that its "art" has been "professionally edited." This seems to be the case here because the arches of the background building have been removed.

1880 Charles Ives

"A most remarkable specimen of the ceiba, or silk cotton tree may be seen in the rear of the central one of a collection of public buildings which form three sides of a quadrangle at the southwest corner of Bay and Parliament streets. It has a spread of 116 feet from east to west and of 90 feet in the opposite direction." (p. 90) Engraving by T. Rapp (or TRAPP) appears between pages 90/91.



BS NSCT 6. "A Ceiba or Silk Cotton Tree," Engraving by T. Rapp (TRAPP?).  
(Courtesy Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.)

1883 Lady Anna (Annie) Brassey (1839-1887) was an English travel writer who married a member of Parliament and sailed around the world on their yacht *Sunbeam*. While in Nassau in November 1883 she wrote that "In the grounds outside the library are the huge silk-cotton tree and the remains of the old banyan tree." (p. 346) An illustration, from an engraving on wood, shows the Lady sitting in front of the silk cotton tree (p. 345).



BS NSCT 7.

1883 A. J. Adderley (1883: 14) in his study of the Bahamian fisheries, quotes extensively from “Mr. R. Davey of Nassau” in describing the town and the tree, and in naming the person who brought the tree to Nassau.

“The chief monument of Nassau is not one built by hand, but a silk cotton tree, planted some two hundred years ago by John Miller, Esq., opposite where now stands the ‘public buildings.’ It is a stupendous tree of Titanic proportions. The roots, unable to find their way down through the rocky soil, swell up like great buttresses, radiating round the trunk some fifteen years, and rising from the ground six and eight feet, making a part of the actual bulk of the tree, and giving the huge plant the appearance of a web-footed monster, standing in solemn reverie. Among these gnarled and weird roots are ravines, in whose dark hollows a legion of elves could dwell and hold the revels. High above this root-works spreads a canopy of leaves of the most exquisite, tender green. Singular to say, the gigantic plant flattens its branches at the top, nearly squared off in correspondence with the flatness its roots are obliged to assume owing to the paucity of earth. Had Shakespeare seen this august tree, which travelers from California declare to be even more imposing than any of the Mammoth trees, he would have immortalized it in a few grand lines. Or, perhaps, made it the background of some quaint fairy scene, or the home of another Herne the Hunter, Oberon and Titania, Ariel or Puck. There are several other fine silk-cotton trees on the island, and in Cuba this tree grows to perfection; but *the* tree I have attempted to describe is universally acknowledged to be the finest known. I was much surprised to notice the rapidity with which this plant puts forth its leaves. On my arrival, I saw one of the trees in the grounds of the hotel [the Royal Victoria], which seemed dead. The rest were in leaf, but this one was quite barren. In three days it was lost to sight, hidden in its own new foliage, put on in at most two nights. The silk-cotton tree is so called because it bears a pod full of flossy silk, which is used for filling pillows instead of down, but they say the fibre is too short to be woven.”

Author note: The “Mr. Davy” mentioned is Richard Patrick Boyle Davey, a well-known journalist who visited Nassau in 1878 and wrote letters of his experiences (see Plarr 1899: 272). See Richard Davey for original statement (1898: 229-30).

1885 William Drysdale (1885: 11, 15, 16, 41)

“The most wonderful tree on the island, to my mind, is the ceiba, or silk-cotton tree, just back of the police station near the public wharf. (p. 15) This is the largest tree I ever saw, and by all odds the most curious. As if to support it against the terrible force of the wind

it has to encounter, it is provided with a series of natural props, like roots, but forming part of its immense trunk. They grow out at regular intervals, and their peculiar bark gives them the appearance of elephants' ears thickened and enlarged. They reach eight or nine feet from the ground, and extend laterally five or six feet, leaving spaces between them like rooms, each of which is large enough for eight or ten men to stand." The accompanying illustration, portraying the picket fence (p. 16), is that of Leslie (1878: 240), which follows the examples of Sargent (1876a, b). Drysdale's illustration "Government House, Nassau" (p. 11) probably shows the tree in the foreground.

1885 Thompson (2006: 100) noted that a Nassau visitor (probably Drysdale) saw silk cotton tree in 1885, but used one of Jackson's photographs from 1901 as her example (pp. 98/99).

1886 Gardner and Brace (1890: 367), in 1886, saw "The large specimen at Nassau . . . said to have been brought from South Carolina, and to have given rise to all others on the island."

1888 Louis D. Powles

The author, who was an English Magistrate in the island for 1887 (Munnings, Jr. 2005: 32), saw that "Between the Chief Justice's Court and the Police Court stands a gigantic specimen of the ceiba, or silk-cotton tree." An engraving of the tree appears on page 30.



BS NSCT 8.

Powles confirms that the public library, at the time of his tenure, was formerly the jail (gaol) (p. 195). He also learned that the “Coloured settlements were apart from the whites in suburbs of Nassau.” (p.138.) The main one was Grant’s Town. Others were Bain, DeLancey, Fox Hill, and Adelaide. They were occupied by native Africans [and their offspring] rescued from slavers.” (p. 139)

1888 F. A. Ober, named special commissioner to the West Indies for the Chicago World Columbian Exposition, visited Nassau in 1888 and proclaimed the “magnificent silk-cotton in the court-house yard” as one of the must see “attractions.” (p. 115). His photograph of the tree and two men shows the pipe/chain enclosure (p. 114).



BS NSCT 9.

1890 circa Jacob Frank Coonley (1832-1915)

Although Coonley was once identified as a “well-known botanist” (*Picture Magazine* 1893, vol. 2, p. 220), he was in fact a well-known photographer. (See Treadwell and Darrah 2003: 178.) Coonley took at least three photographs of the Nassau tree: one with five men in uniforms and one woman dressed in white; pipe-chain fence, another with seven people; pipe/chain fence, and the third is tree with one young man with hat, pipe/chain fence.

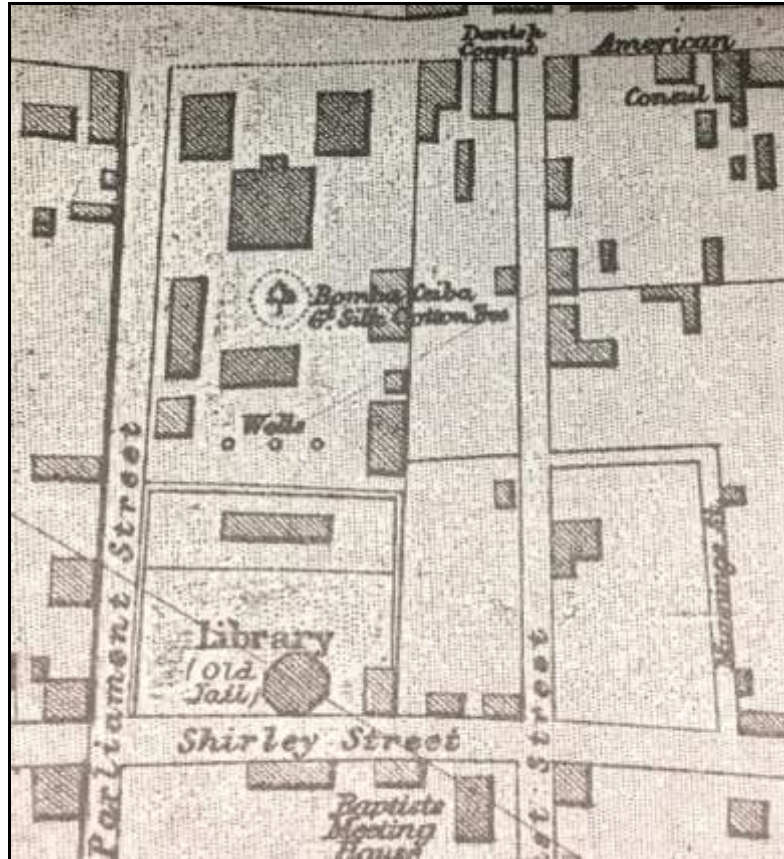


BS NSCT 10.

1891 James H. Stark published the "Map of Nassau 1891" (pp. 116/117) that was drawn by the office of the Surveyor General in Nassau. This is perhaps the earliest map to place the tree amongst the government buildings of Nassau: "Bombax ceiba Gt. silk cotton tree." It is located north of Shirley Street and east of Parliament. While Stark does not mention the tree in his text, he does include two photographs (pp. 113, 173).



BS NSCT 11. Stark 1891: 173.



BS NSCT 12. "Map of Nassau 1891," from Stark 1891: 116/117.

1893 *The Picture Magazine* (vol. 2, p. 220) presents two "engravings" of the tree with the following commentary: "These engravings represent the finest and most curious cotton tree known. It has been recently examined by Mr. J. F. Coonley, the well-known botanist [sic], from whose report we take some interesting facts. The tree covers with its branches a surface nearly 200 ft. long, while the immense roots, shown in our second illustration, rise about 40 ft. above the soil. The tree grows upon rock, which does not allow the roots to penetrate deeply into the earth, and a wonderful adaptation to the circumstances is displayed by these enormous supports in the form of roots which enable the gigantic mass to maintain itself on the surface of the earth. The leaves fall at the approach of spring, but reappear a few days later. "I have seen this tree," says Mr. Coonley, "with bare branches on Saturday night, and on Monday morning following it was in full leaf. The rapidity with which the leaves appear seems magical." In the spring the tree lets fall, from its open fruit, a fibre light as cotton, but finer, which covers the soil to a great distance round, wherever the wind carries the filaments." The engravings were produced by the well-known Frenchman Henri Thiriat (1843-1926).



BS NSCT 12, 13.

1893 *Book Plate Prints, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, Nassau, Bahamas*, p. 461. The photograph “Silk-cotton tree, Nassau, Bahamas” comes from the collection of the Royal Photograph Gallery. The author claims “this tree is the monarch of all trees on the island.” This photograph was also published in 1904 by the journal *Forest Leaves* (Souder 1904: 134). Another edition “Bahama Islands, Nassau, New Providence, Silk Cotton Tree,” can be seen in the collection of the Reading (PA) Public Museum and Art Gallery.



BS NSCT 14.

1896 Annie (Adams) Fields (see Gollin 2002)

In her “Diary of a West Indian Island Tour” (p. 30) Annie Fields found that “a silk cotton tree of gigantic size especially attracted our wonder. It grows behind an old bank and is the own cousin of the elephant – its prototype in plant life – if one may say so. Its huge bulk and strange grey wrinkled surface of the bark gives one sense that each arm is a proboscis and will soon be approaching to ask a biscuit or for some recognition. The tree



has a magnificent pedestal as if a giant foundation were needed for such a world of green loveliness and bird-land as it stretches out above. I presume we had none of us ever seen so huge a tree so lovely in its upper world of greenery in spite of a sense of monstrosity in its lower growth." She was on the island, January 12-23, 1896. The on-line copy of the Massachusetts Historical Society manuscript includes the illustration of the tree published by Powles 1888: 30).

1899 One essayist visiting Nassau in 1899 explained the remarkable above-the-ground root system in the following paragraphs (Worthington 1899: 521). "There are several ceibas or silk cotton trees growing in the public places of the city, remarkable for the tremendous size of the roots, portions of which spread in every direction from the trunk. The rocky soil on which they grow seems to have pressed back the roots which would have entered into the too small crevices, making them hump up like the backs of a drove of camels. There is [sic] lots of rooms for the scholars of a small school to play hide and seek among the folds of a silk cotton tree."

The reputation of the tree passed throughout the U.S. press after it survived a hurricane in 1899. Of course, the claim of the world's largest tree was a bit exaggerated.

## **"LARGEST TREE IN THE WORLD**

### **Called the Hurricane Tree in the Capital of the Bahama Islands**

In Nassau, the capital city of the Bahama Islands, they say "the tree in the public square" –not "the trees." Now, the public square of Nassau is quite large as that of most cities of the size, but there is only one tree in it, and that tree literally fills the square and spreads its shade over all the public buildings in the neighbourhood. **For it is the largest tree in the world at its base although it is hardly taller than a three-story house.** It is variously known as a ceiba, or a silk cotton tree, but the people of the low islands of the the West Indies call it the hurricane tree. For no matter how hard the wind blows it cannot disturb the mighty buttressed trunk of the ceiba. In the hurricane of last spring all the palms and many of the other trees of Nassau were overturned, but the great hurricane tree, although it lost all of its leaves, did not lose so much as a branch. Its trunk throws out great curving, wing-like branches, some of them 20 feet wide and nearly as high. These extend into the ground on all sides and braces the tree against all attack, while the great branches spread a thick shade overhead. In the tropic sunshine of midsummer, hundreds, even thousands, of people may gather in the cool of its shadow. No one knows how old the great tree is, but it must be hundreds, if not thousands of years. A very old picture in the library of Nassau shows the tree as big as it is at present, and even the oldest negro in the island cannot remember when it was much smaller."

*Wilkes-Barre Daily News*, Pennsylvania, United States, March 31, 1900  
(Taken from Bahamianology.

[Before its demise in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the tree did withstand other major hurricanes in 1926 (July 26), 1928 (September 16), and 1929 (September 26) (see Neely 2006).]

1900 After his reference to “The great ceiba or silk-cotton tree behind the Post Office” (p. 26), George J. H. Northcroft (p. 150) praised the “Fine specimens of the silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*) . . . [that] are found in Nassau. The enormous one standing behind the Public Buildings is undoubtedly of a great age: it is said to have been introduced from South Carolina, and to be the Ancestor of all the others. Growing from its trunk are several buttress-like extensions evidently thrown out to brace it and assist in bearing the weight of its giant branches which spread out on all sides as far as one hundred and sixteen feet. Its pods contain a soft silky material often used for stuffing pillows. Evil spirits are said to haunt these trees, and the negro very much objects to cutting them down.”

1901 William Henry Jackson (1843-1942)

The famous photographer (and paint artist) of the U. S. West was in Nassau in 1901 according to the photographs dated in the Amherst College collection (no. 53748). His photographs of the tree, with and without the “child with basket,” are among the highest quality (clearest) produced (re-published by Adam 1905: 32). Jackson’s autobiography was published in 1940 (Jackson 1940). He was employed at the Detroit Publishing Company (also Photographic Company) where many versions of his Nassau photographs were placed on postcards. See Treadwell and Darrah 2003a: 386.



BS NSCT 15. Photograph of William H. Jackson, 1901.  
Courtesy, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.



BS NSCT 16. Photograph of William H. Jackson, 1901. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Noted artist Charlthorn Strachan (b. 1991) selected the latter photograph for his painting "The Great Silk Cotton Tree." In his description of this work he wrote "The silk cotton tree is pivotal in Bahamian history as it symbolizes perseverance and strength of the former black slaves of the Bahamas. Although the financial economy of which the cotton tree was planted deceased due to emancipation of slavery the cotton tree survived and endured the hardship of the Bahamas' infertile environment and climate just like the slaves that were left behind. Thus, the cotton tree, great in stature, reflects the will to thrive."



BS NSCT 17. Painting by Charlthorn Strachan.

**Author note:** In the April 1902 issue of G. R. (*The Geographical Journal*, p. 539) the Royal Geographical Society of London reported their receipt of 119 photographs from the Bahamas taken by Coonley, Davenport and Mancel. Included among those were at least three of silk cotton trees: items 37 and 38 were trees near the public buildings and item 39 was a tree at the police barracks. Item 57, of the grounds of the Royal Victoria Hotel, probably included silk cottons also.

1904 Harrison Souder (p. 134), a professional forester writing for the Philadelphia periodical *Forest Leaves* noted that "Visitors to Nassau, the capital of the beautiful Bahama Islands, are greatly interested in the peculiar formation of the trunk and spread of roots of the large tree back of the government building. This is a fine specimen of the "*Bombax Ceiba*," or silk-cotton tree, a view of which is herewith presented. (The photograph published here is that from the 1893 *Book Plate Prints*, see above. Here it is entitled "Silk Cottonwood Tree"). The large curved buttress-like ribs or roots, reaching from top to bottom of the trunk, have a spread of close to 30 feet. The silk-cotton tree attains very great age. This particular specimen is reputed to be between 200 and 300 years old, and is the largest and oldest on the islands. . . It has long been the custom of the people of the Bahamas to plant a silk-cotton tree at various public places, generally thus marking the seats of government."

1905 William Coker (1905: 213) and George B. Shattuck reported that the *Ceiba pentandra*, an old tree, near the post office, is said to have been brought from South Carolina and is the mother of all others in the islands.

George B. Shattuck (1905: pp. 588-589) "One of the objects not to be overlooked is the huge silk-cotton tree, *Ceiba pentandra* [plate LXXXVIII], which stands immediately behind the Post Office. Aside from the striking appearance of this tree, it has an additional interest in that a sketch of it, which now hangs in the Public Library at Nassau, was made over a hundred years ago, in 1802. This drawing shows that the tree at that time had the same figure as today, and approximately the same proportions. It is difficult to estimate the age of this tree, but it is said that it was the first silk-cotton tree brought into the islands, and that it is the parent of all the others in the Bahamas."



BS NSCT 18.

1905 M. A. Howe (1906: 218-19) in his *Torreya* article of 1906 published a photograph of the tree taken in March 1905 by Chamberlain. Chamberlain is probably John N. Chamberlain (see Treadwell and Darrah 2003a: 143).

Howe is credited with placing the appropriate title on the sketch in the public library at Nassau representing "A view of a silk-cotton tree on the island of New Providence, Bahamas, March 12, 1802."



BS NSCT 19.

1904 circa. A postcard in the collection of the University of San Diego, dated March 14, 1905 depicts the tree, probably photographed the previous year, by an unknown photographer.



BS NSCT 20.

1906 Franklin Davenport Edmunds (1874-1948), an architect from Philadelphia, mislabeled the famous tree as an “old cottonwood tree, Nassau, Bahamas.”



BS NSCT 21.

1908 A postcard of the tree enclosed with pipe and chain was published by Walter Kingsbury Moore (1883-1957), a Nassau-born, prominent businessman and politician knighted in 1924. The photographer is unknown.



BS NSCT 22.

1910 Northrop (1910: 121) noted silk cotton trees in the parks (p. 1) and at Ryswick, three miles from Nassau shore.

1910 F. S. Armbrister, a Nassau photographer trained at the Illinois College of Photography in Effingham (1908) (*The Photographic Times* 1910: v. 42, 364), was responsible for a postcard that shows the "Silk cotton tree, Nassau, Bahamas" with eight people beneath. There is an edition of 1914 also. He is also credited with an undated, unusually clear photograph (SB NSCT 24).



SB NSCT 23. Photograph of F. S. Armbrister, 1910.



BS NSCT 24. Photograph attributed to F. S. Armbrister, ca. 1910.

1911 In the four volume compilation of *The Wonders of the World*, H. H. Johnston, *et al.* presents the "Silk Cotton Tree, Bahama Islands -- the finest and most perfect known is that at Nassau, situated behind the Post Office." (vol. 3, p. 526). The photograph reproduced on p. 527 is that of William H. Jackson, from 1901, published by the Detroit Photographic Company.

1914 Worldwide praise for the Nassau tree was followed by recognition in the "Standard Cyclopaedia of Horticulture" (Bailey 1930 edition, vol. I: 700). The selected example of the *ceiba pentandra*, worldwide, was the engraving below.



BS NSCT 25. "Ceiba Casearia, the great silk-cotton tree at Nassau."



1922 At the time of the visit by the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Patrick J. Hayes, local photographer James Osborne (“Doc”) Sands (1885-1978) took several photographs of the tree (AANY 1922), many of which appear on postcards for several years. These are often misdated. This is perhaps the first instance, since 1880, of the tree being shown without its surrounding guard fence. [Sands was the student of photographer J. F. Coonley (*The Nassau Guardian*, September 1, 2018).] (Sands’ biography can be seen in Lawlor 2019b.)



BS NSCT 26. Photograph by J. O. Sands 1922 (AANY 1922).

Among the undated photographs of the famous tree, often on postcards of the era and not reproduced here, are those by George Cole (1840-1913), the “Father of Bahamian Education,” a post card “The Great Silk Cotton Tree, Nassau;” and Percy M. Lightbourn of Nassau (a post card “Nassau, Bahama Islands.”

1943 James Leasor (2001: 29), in his story of the death of Sir Harry Oakes in 1943, paints one of the finest settings for the tree:

“... a huge silk cotton tree cast welcome shade over an open square. This tree stood virtually in the administrative centre of the capital. On one side was the Post Office; on another, Fire Brigade headquarters and the Central Police Station . . . Next to this stood the Supreme Court, another Palladian building, but smaller than the Assembly House.

Under the tree every day that the court was in session, litigants, lawyers, witnesses, and policemen . . . waited . . . rehearsed their statements, discussing the relative merits . . .”

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## The Silk Cottons of the Royal Victoria Hotel

According to Sargent (1876b: 7), The Royal Victoria Hotel was built by the government in 1861 (or maybe in 1860, Sargent 1876 a: 3) and was a startling success for one century as a place for the rich and famous, especially those who sailed down to the “Summer Isles” and the “Sanitarium of the Western Hemisphere” from New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Its operation ended in 1971, but its silk cotton trees remain.

Just to the north of the hotel was the Library, and bit farther north were other public buildings and famous silk cotton. Aside from the tree north of the library, the ceibas of the RVH were the most photographed on the island. Like the library tree, they have great age. Sargent’s illustration of “The Royal Victoria Hotel,” includes a large silk cotton tree with sitting platform (p. 25).

Several trees photographed during the late 1800s can be recognized in our photos in April 2019.



BS RVH 1. The hotel with stairs unto the largest silk cotton. View to east (Sargent 1876b: 25).

Ives (1880: 90): "There are a number of silk cotton trees upon the grounds of the Royal Victoria Hotel . . . One of these is very large, many of its huge branches are almost horizontal, and a spacious platform, with seats for the accommodation of musicians and others, erected in the tree, is reached by a wide wooden railed stairway."

BS RVH 2. Drysdale (1885: 41) re-published the engraving of Sargent above (BS RVH 1.)

1900 circa, Photographer O. Pierre Havens, who claimed the hotel as "his summer house," and 1 more ca 1900, see below.



BS RVH 3. In 1901 the Detroit Photographic Company placed William H. Jackson's photograph on a postcard "Nassau Harbor, Bahama Islands." The grounds of the hotel, in the foreground, are dominated by several silk cottons. Another tree, without leaves, has the elevated platform, seen in the lower right corner. View is to northwest.

1901 Several other Jackson photographs of the hotel eventually became postcards of the Detroit Photographic Company.



BS RVH 4, 5. Photographs of W. H. Jackson, 1901.

When the hotel closed in 1971 at least seven silk cottons still remained on the grounds.

Our photograph of April 2019 shows very little change during the last 120 years. Both views to the north. In the Havens' photograph the dome of the library can be seen, left center.



BS RVH 6. Photograph by the author, April 2019.



BS RVH 7. By O. Pierre Havens, ca. 1900.

Other photographs of the hotel and its silk cottons can be seen in the Caribbean Photo Archive via flickr.

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Aside from the famous Post Office tree and those at the Royal Victoria Hotel, a few others notables have been reported around Nassau. Howe (1906: 224) photographed the leaf-less tree at the Asylum in Nassau, March 1905.



BS The Asylum, Nassau, 1905.

And historically, the grounds of The Hermitage (Nassau) and Grant's Town have been sites known for their silk cottons.



BS Hermitage. Postcard, no date.



BS Grant's Town. Postcard by George M. Cole, 1902.

On Cat Island, at Bight Village, in 1920 (Britton and Millspaugh 1920: 274-5) saw "a large silk cotton tree . . . however, it shows no evidence of successful regeneration." And the large highway marker tree at Central Palmetto Point on Eleuthera is famous.



BS Eleuthera Island silk cotton.

## **Blackbeard's Tree ?**

It was probably Schoepf (1788: II, 264) who initiated the notion of a Black Beard tree in Nassau. He wrote that the pirate met beneath a giant fig tree to distribute his booty and pass judgments. Shortly afterward, McKinnen in his "Tour through the West Indies, 1802-03" (1806: IV, 389) mentioned that "Under a wild fig tree, the trunk of which still remains, and was shown to me in the eastern part of the town, he [Black Beard] used to sit in council amongst his banditti, concerting or promulgating his plans and exercising the authority of a magistrate."

Hart (1827), in her "Letters from Bahamas 1823-4" might have been insinuating that the famous ceiba tree of Nassau had a connection with Black Beard, the "Bloody Pirate." In one of her letters, the author mentioned that "This island was once the residence of the renowned 'Black Beard,' and the remains of an immense tree are to be seen, on which it is said he hung his prisoners, and it is supposed by many, that large treasures were buried near it." (p. 90) Further, the writer notes "The coffee and cotton trees are not very numerous." (p. 88) It is uncertain if her "cotton trees" are silk-cottons/ceibas and if her "immense tree" is the famous tree. Others, below, make a more direct connection between the Black Beard tree and the famous old ceiba.

A visitor writing from Nassau in 1885 (Stevens 1885: 171-2) wrote that he "eagerly searched for the noted silk-cotton tree, beneath whose giant boughs Blackbeard held his councils and courts. [But] man had laid his ax at its roots. We found the spot where it had stood, however, and trod upon the ground with sacred awe. The good people of Nassau . . . have in the court of the Royal Victoria Hotel a large silk-cotton tree which sprouted from a root of the Blackbeard tree, although it stood a quarter of a mile away." At the time the Royal Victoria Hotel had constructed "a kind of a gallery which had been constructed on the huge branches of a silk-cotton tree – the one which sprang from a root of the Blackbeard tree."

Lady Brassey (1885: 335) weighed in on the matter of the Black Beard tree and probably has it right: "It can scarcely be considered a matter of great importance which tree was patronized by Black Beard; especially as the two in question stood within a hundred yards of each other."

Academic outlets still mention that the Nassau silk cotton tree was the tree of Black Beard lore (Craton and Saunders 1998: II, 190).

**Author note:** Edward Teach (also, Thache, Theach, Thatch) lived roughly 1680-1718, dying in a battle with the British on November 22, 1718, off North Carolina. Because his most intense pirate days were only for two years before his death, it seems

highly unlikely that, during his days in Nassau, he would have had a large tree to interact with. Like almost all stories circulating about the Caribbean past and its pirates, the tales about Black Beard, his “tree,” and the famous ceiba of Nassau are fabulous and fun, but false. Scholars have concluded that Black Beard was in reality not an especially cruel representative of his profession (Lee 1984).

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### **The Nassau Silk Cotton Tree Survey of April, 2019**

Sharon and I spent five days in early April 2019 conducting a rapid reconnaissance in Nassau and vicinity seeking silk cotton trees. We can account for 168 trees, including 98 that we photographed, 56 that we saw but did not photograph, and 14 we learned about from other evidence (informants and the photographs of others). Seven areas had at least nine trees in fairly close proximity, eight cultural settings were recognized, and we found three places named for the tree. See Table 1.

We found startling generational differences in attitudes toward the tree. Of the ten or so residents under 35 years old we spoke with about the tree, none knew the location of the “nearest silk cotton tree” or what the tree looked like. The tree essentially plays no role in their lives. Of the ten or so older men, 60+, that we spoke with all recalled from their childhoods of chasing the “cotton” when it blew down from the tree pods. They ate the “nuts” [seeds] contained in the floss because they were “oily and tasty.” Several residents reported the trees were now protected as a part of national heritage. They say, by law, silk cottons may not be destroyed. One 60+ man said the silk cotton was also known as “teapot” because when the pods open they appear like the top of a teapot when it flops open. Taxi drivers all agreed that when the floss fell all over the streets and was rained upon breaking became more dangerous from sliding. Other residents mentioned that walking was more precarious from slipping on the wet cotton silk floss.

Older heads also thought that the areas where silk cottons are now concentrated were once places settled by native Africans, slaves and freed, and Grant’s Town, Bain, Fox Hill, Adelaide Village, and Gambier Village were named specifically. This notion appears in the literature frequently (Powles 1888: 139; Lawlor 2010). Grant’s Town was laid out in 1821 by the governor (of the same name) to house Africans freed from slaves ships (Dodge 1987: 50) and the others neighborhoods were organized in the 1830s to be occupied by liberated Africans and emancipated slaves (Adderley 2006: 121, 124, 162).

However, our taxi survey of Gambier village streets revealed only one tree – the very large one on Douglas Street in the southwest part of town. Heavy concentrations of ceibas were seen in Fox Hill, and Bain-Grant’s Town neighborhoods.

Local nurseries confirm that they do not sell silk cottons because the plant grows too fast for pots. Propagation normally begins with seeds, although reproduction by cutting is recognized.

### **Silk Cotton Uses and Folklore in The Bahamas.**

In the settlement areas occupied formerly by freed slaves during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Grant’s Town, Bain, and Fox Hill -- it was in these settings that “silk cotton justice” was dispensed. Here the elders meted out appropriate punishment to offensive residents. According to one distinguished member of the community:

“Huge silk cotton trees lined the side of the main roads leading from the northern hill range southwards to the Coconut Groves and to Big Pond; so that in Grant’s Town as one proceeded southwards from the Southern Recreation Grounds at the foot of the hill, there were not less than seven or eight such giant landmarks, standing as silent sentinels at regular intervals down the eastern side of the road.”  
(Lawlor 2019)

“The grandeur of the cotton trees gave authority and credence to "cotton tree justice" which was dispensed from these venues, for the traditional tribal practice was still prevalent in that period whereby the respected elders of the district dealt with reported neighbourhood wrongdoing. They received the complaint, heard the evidence of the various witnesses and persons concerned, and handed down their summary judgment which was always accepted, otherwise neighbourhood ostracism was the penalty.

There is not much heard about "cotton tree justice" these days, but it was quite a feature of "ova-da-hill" life in times past.

Young boys, in particular, who were caught, or reported, for cursing, pilfering, ill-manners to their elders, or other such bad behaviour, they were summarily dealt with under the cotton tree, receiving the appropriate number of strokes with a belt or switch. And frequently they begged their chastisers not to report the infraction to their parents, lest they afterwards receive a double dose of punishment at home.”

(The lines above are an excerpt from “Reflections on ‘Over-The-Hill’” in the 2010 *Journal of The Bahamas Historical Society*, by Sir Orville A Turnquest, see in Lawlor 2010).



Unlike many other Antillean isles the silk cotton trees of modern Nassau do not seem to have made the cultural imprint of those found on other islands. Few are the historical notes on the uses and lore surrounding the tree on New Providence. Souder (1904: 134) mentioned that the cotton floss of the plant was used for stuffing pillows and quilts. Also, he wrote that when cut into planks and saturated with limewater, the wood will stand exposure for many years. Bahamian boats used to be caulked with silk cotton fibers (Craton and Saunders v 2: 141)

At the turn of the last century, Northcroft (1900: 150) passed on that “Evil spirits are said to haunt these trees, and the negro very much objects to cutting them down.” Hoefer and Whittier (1988: 269) note that “3-legged animals that resemble the “Leprechauns” of Ireland, supposedly live in the silk cotton trees and get up to all sorts of mischief.” Adderley (2006: 193-98) documents some details from the Grant’s Town and Bain neighborhoods that suggest supernatural beliefs from Africa surrounding the silk cottons were at play there. However, I suspect that few Nassauvians of today have any of these superstitions.

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### **Table 1. Key to Photographs of Silk Cotton Trees in the Bahamas (BS), April 2019**

- BS 1. Behind Bahamian Brewery & Beverage Co. on govt. property, Nassau St.
- BS 2. Towne Hotel, east side Cumberland St.
- BS 3. West off Blue (Ballou) Hill Road, north of School Lane.
- BS 4 a, b, c. Dillett x Hospital Lane (2).
- BS 5. Bethel Baptist Church, east side.
- BS 6. Ballou Hill Rd., off west side, north of St. Agnes Church, sickly.
- BS 7. Ballou Hill Rd., east side, north of St. Agnes.
- BS 8. Ballou Hill Rd., west side, north of St. Agnes Church.
- BS 9. Ballou Hill Rd., west side, 3 trees, across from church (3).
- BS 10. Ballou Hill Rd., west side, 2 trees, across from church (2).
- BS 11. Line of trees along Cockburn St., north side, north of St. Agnes Church (7).
- BS 12. Ballou x Cockburn, northeast corner, two trees within fence (2).
- BS 13. Sharon with two entry trees at park, north of St. Agnes on Cockburn.
- BS 14. Sharon at largest of St. Agnes trees on Cockburn, chest high girth: 24 ft., 4 in.
- BS 15. St. Agnes Church and largest tree on Cockburn.
- BS 16. Largest tree in St. Agnes complex, in park north of church.
- BS 17. Sign on one of the St. Agnes trees: Matthew 34: 37-39.
- BS 18. Cockburn St. tree roots destroy blacktop.
- BS 19. Market St., two trees on west side, looking north from Cockburn (2).

- BS 20. Market x School Lane, front of police station, back of Govt House property.
- BS 21. Market St., east side, McDonald's office parking lot, two trees (2).
- BS 22. Market St., west side, two trees on Govt. House property (2).
- BS 23. Breezes Resort.
- BS 24. Breezes Resort, young tree in interior driveway.
- BS 25. Baha Mar Resort, two trees on grounds near highway (2).
- BS 26. Royal Victoria Hotel, grounds.
- BS 27. Royal Victoria Hotel, grounds.
- BS 28. Royal Victoria Hotel, grounds (2).
- BS 29. Royal Victoria Hotel, grounds (2).
- BS 30. East St. x Sands Road.
- BS 31. Main Police Station, East St.
- BS 32. Northeast grounds , below Fort Fincastle.
- BS 33. Sands x Elizabeth, southwest hospital grounds.
- BS 34. Princess Margaret Hospital.
- BS 35. Two off Elizabeth St., across street northeast of Bahamas Historical Society (2).
- BS 36. Behind, on grounds of Bahamas Historical Society.
- BS 37. Sharon at Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, southwest corner.
- BS 38. Sharon at largest tree in Freedom Park, southwest corner, same as BS 37.
- BS 39. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, across street to northeast (5).
- BS 40. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, across street to northeast, behind buildings (3).
- BS 41. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, northwest corner.
- BS 42. Freedom Park, nearby up Bernard Road to northwest (2).
- BS 43. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, headed southwest from park (13).
- BS 44. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, dead end street to east.
- BS 45. Freedom Park, Fox Hill Road, northeast, behind basketball court (10).
- BS 46. St. Mathews Church/cemetery, northeast corner at foot of Poitier Bridge.
- BS 47. Church St., south of Poitier Bridge (2).
- BS 48. St. Mathew's cemetery wall, north side (2).
- BS 49. St. Mathew's Church cemetery.
- BS 50. One at Genesis Academy, west of St. Mathew's cemetery.
- BS 51. Another at Genesis Academy, west of St. Mathew's cemetery.
- BS 52. Church and cemetery, South x Augusta.
- BS 53. Round-about east of Breezes Resort, Prospect Ridge Road.
- BS 54. Pitt Road south of Boyd, at school (2).
- BS 55. Ballou Hill Rd., east side, north of St. Agnes Church complex (2).  
(56 photographs, 98 trees)

- \*Trees seen, but not photographed, in regional settings, April 2019
- \*\*Other evidence of 2019 trees, from informants, others' pictures.

### **Regionalizations (7)**

*Freedom Park/Fox Hill Road* [36]

*St. Agnes Church (Grant's Town) and near vicinity* [31]

- \*Two, Lewis St., south of St. Agnes Church (2).
- \*Two, School Lane x Market St. (2).
- \*Two at Nassau x Meadow St. (2).
- \*Five others in Bain, southwest of St. Agnes Church (5).
- \*\*One, Grant's Town Library, southwest corner, Chapel x West St.

*Eastern Sector (Mackay–East Bay/Eastern Road–Fox Hill–Bernard/Wulff Rd.)* [28]

- \*Ten along Bernard west of Freedom Park (including 3 at church/cemetery and at St Augustine College,)
- \*Five large along south side of East Bay St., between bridges and Harbour Bay Plaza
- \*Seven along bus route = Village Road - Wulff Road – Collins Ave.
- \*\*Orchard Garden Hotel, off Village Road (3)
- \*\*Silk Cotton Cottage, south of Eastern, east of The Retreat Park.
- \*\*Silk Cotton Villas, south of Shirley Road, in Montague Heights
- \*\*Camperdown subdivision, east of Fox Hill Road.

*Nassau Centro (Govt-RVH-BHS-hospitals)* [22]

- \*One, Duke x Market, northeast grounds of Government House.
- \*Large one upon hill south of Shirley St. between Collins x Mount Royal.
- \*\*One, Ladies Medical Centre, on First Terrace

*Northwest Coast (Gambier Village to Cable Beach to Goodman Bay)* [15]

- \*One, Gambier Village, Douglas Street, southwest section of village.
- \*South, upslope behind Caves Heights subdivision (2).
- \*One, Bay Roc Resort
- \*One, Blue Water Resort
- \*Two young on golf courses, south of Bay St. (2)
- \*Two, north inside fence, at Goodman's Bay round-about (2).
- \*One, north side road, east of Breezes, West Bay St.

*West Central* [10]

- \*Two in park at Nassau x Dean (2).
- \* Botanical Gardens, Chippingham Road (3)
- \*One at school on Farmington x Oakes Field.
- \*Two at Farmington x Maxwell Lane (2).

*St Mathew Church and near vicinity* [9]

- \*One in cemetery, St. Mathew Church.

**Outliers, locations not in regional concentrations of trees [8]**

- \*Behind Adderley Building, JFK Drive
- \*West of Adderley Bldg, on JFK Drive
- \*\*St. James Anglican Church, Adelaide Village (2)
- \*\*Old Fort Bay, gated subdivision (4)

**Cultural Settings for Silk Cotton Trees (number of places, not number of trees)**

- 10 Tourism (Hotels, Resorts, Forts)
- 09 Government (Police, Hospitals, Libraries, Museums)
- 06 Churches
- 05 Parks, Gardens
- 05 Educational institutions
- 04 Roundabouts, lining roadways
- 04 Residential subdivisions
- 03 Cemeteries

**Toponyms/Businesses**

- Silk Cotton Drive
- Cotton Tree Plaza, Bernard Road
- Cotton Tree Convenience Store, Bernard Road

**168 total trees**

\*\*\* \*\*



BS 1



BS 2



BS 3



BS 4a



BS 4b



BS 5



BS 6



BS 7



BS 8



BS 9



**BS 10**



**BS 11**



**BS 12**



**BS 13**



**BS 14**



BS 15



BS 16



BS 17



BS 18



BS 19



BS 20





BS 21



BS 22



BS 23



BS 24



BS 25



BS 26



**BS 27**



**BS 28**



**BS 29**



**BS 30**



**BS 31**



**BS 32**



BS 33



BS 34



BS 35



BS 36



BS 37



BS 38



BS 39



BS 40



BS 41



BS 42



BS 43



BS 44



BS 45



**BS 46**



**BS 47**



**BS 48**



**BS 49**



BS 50



BS 51



BS 52



BS 53



BS 54



BS 55

\*\*\* \*\*

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