

Ramble Bahamas: Pioneering Bahamian History and Culture in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The digital humanities offer a unique vehicle for bridging the past and present. Interactive media formats encourage user engagement while maintaining the integrity of historical methodologies and digital platforms enable audiences to easily access information. Both these advantages carry special value for students, educators, and scholars who are investigating 20th-century Bahamian history. Such audiences suffer a grave shortage of readily available resources. *Ramble Bahamas* seeks to remedy this deficit by providing a curated collection of easily accessible place-based exhibits in an innovative medium. Each geo-tagged exhibit includes a cohesive narrative that centers on the story of a historically significant site or object. Additional context is built through the inclusion of historical images, newspapers, other documents, and contemporary photographs. Select audio clips taken from oral history interviews with authoritative narrators are also featured within each exhibit to deepen the sense of place and further stimulate the sensory experience of the visitor. Techniques for construction include carrying out oral history interviews, conducting documentary and archival research, and performing audio-visual digitization and editing, as well as deploying and customizing the Omeka content management system powered by Curatescape.

History

“From Dat Time”: The Oral & Public History Institute (“FDT”) was established in 2013 as part of the College of the Bahamas’ process of transitioning to university status, a milestone reached in 2016. Its mandate is to develop curricular and recreational materials in a variety of media to bring the Bahamian experience to local and global audiences and to invest in building a cohort of professional academic and public historians. Its work, conceived in the context of the University’s nation-building mandate, is intended to do more than simply advance the research of

academic and independent investigators. Its work is also intended to affirm the value of the experiences of community elders and expand historical resources that are available to primary and secondary-school teachers and students and to the wider community. *Ramble Bahamas* (<http://ramblebahamas.org/>) is the publication engine for all research undertaken by the Institute.

Ramble began in 2015 when the Institute undertook a project to celebrate, in 2017, the 50th anniversary of a turning point in Bahamian political history: the advent of majority rule. We envisioned creating not

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only a digital trail that would be accessible to all Bahamian students but also a platform that could serve as a publication engine for all research undertaken by the Institute. The outcomes of this work were “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail” and its host digital platform, *Ramble Bahamas*.

The intended audience of “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail” is Bahamian students who are enrolled in Grades 7 through 12 of secondary school. The Trail offers such students key information about majority rule that can strengthen their performance in national examinations in history. The Trail is also intended to be a curricular resource for secondary-school teachers of history and geography, many of whom find it hard to locate resources about Bahamian history as they prepare for their classes. The Trail also aims to enhance historical awareness in the community by providing general audiences with a better understanding of the Bahamian political journey in the post-World War II era. Indeed the Trail is a first step towards realizing *Ramble Bahamas*’ ambition to become the digital destination of choice for anyone located anywhere who wishes to indulge an interest in 20th century Bahamian history and culture.

Contribution to the Field

A pioneering initiative in Bahamian historiography, “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail” is the first and only digital project to investigate majority rule through the lens of place. Furthermore, it multiplies not only the perspectives that are brought to analyzing the majority rule phenomenon but also the volume of critical appraisal that is brought to bear upon the event. That is because the monograph scholarship on 20th century Bahamian political history remains limited in scope. While memoirs and biographies such as Henry Taylor’s *My Political Memoirs* (1987), Michael Craton’s *Pindling: The Life and Times of Lynden Oscar Pindling* (2002),

Clement Maynard’s *Put on More Speed* (2007), and Randol Fawkes’ *The Faith that Moved the Mountain: A Memoir of a Life and the Times* (1979/2013) have emerged during the past five decades, a dearth of scholarly research and publication continues to mark the field. In developing “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail,” the “FDT” research team drew upon those few critical texts that were available to offer a road map through highlights of the journey to majority rule. Volume Two of *Islanders in The Stream: A History of the Bahamian People* (1998) by Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, together with Michael Craton’s earlier *History of the Bahamas* (1986) and Paul Albury’s *Story of the Bahamas* (1975) laid out comprehensively the broad contours of Bahamian social and political development as the 20th century unfolded. More narrowly focused works such as Colin Hughes’s *Race and Politics in The Bahamas* (2010) and Doris Johnson’s *Quiet Revolution in The Bahamas* (1972) also lent guidance to the critical exercise undertaken by the research team in the production of “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail.” But by stepping beyond culling information from these texts to collecting information that was previously inaccessible to the public using oral history methods and then curating that added body of data, the Trail succeeds in expanding the volume of critical discourse surrounding post-war Bahamian political life.

The *Ramble Bahamas* platform, for its part, is the only digital humanities project in The Bahamas which hosts oral history excerpts that were gathered from community elders, many of whom played significant roles in the social, educational, and political developments of the 20th century. These audio excerpts draw from an archive of oral narratives being collected and preserved by “FDT.” By virtue of the limits of oral history work, the archive takes as its starting point the 20th century rather than earlier periods. The

research carried out by “FDT” and the content of the oral archive currently focus on the following four topics: national politics in the postwar era, Bahamian participation in World War II, the evolution of the nursing profession, and the development of the sport fishing industry. Drawing on this body of oral data, the content presented on *Ramble* is structured either as individual exhibits or as exhibits strung together by common theme or event to form trails. Each exhibit on *Ramble*, whether presented in stand-alone fashion or as part of a thematically-linked string of exhibits, offers a place-based narrative, an interactive map, both historic and contemporary images, and excerpts from audio-recorded oral histories. These multimedia exhibits breathe life into encounters with the Bahamian past while fueling new conversations around questions of social structure and dynamics, power, and political change.

Methodology

Each exhibit required the completion of multiple oral history interviews. Narrators who were interviewed were selected with an eye to their ability to speak authoritatively, from first-hand knowledge, about the situations, personalities, and relationships that they were asked to recall. During the interviews, narrators were invited to grant to the University of The Bahamas permission to use their recollections and their images in connection with research and with education. They were also invited to share with the University relevant supplemental material that they might possess, including personal photographs. Next, the audio and audiovisual data that emerged from these interviews was processed for archival storage and web publication. In addition, so as to validate information supplied by the narrators and to provide further historical context, documentary historical research was undertaken. Archival and bibliographic research were carried out at the Department of

Archives of The Bahamas, in the Special Collections unit of the Harry C. Moore Library of the University of The Bahamas, in the Hilda Bowen Library of the University, and through contact with various historical and academic institutions located in the United States of America. Where it proved to be necessary for completion of an exhibit, copyright permissions from selected organizations or institutions were solicited in order to reproduce and present digital copies of an image or document. Such was the case with a letter that was written by Bahamian pastor Dr. Harcourt W. Brown to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and that is featured in the Bethel Baptist Church exhibit. While a copy of this letter could not be obtained locally, The King Center in Atlanta, Georgia provided access to and permission to use this letter on *Ramble Bahamas*. Credit is given accordingly in the caption and file details page.

A number of Bahamian historic images are featured within the exhibits. Of special note is that some of the images taken during the 1960s and 1970s, generally speaking, were drawn from The Counsellors Limited Collection housed in the Special Collections unit of the Harry C. Moore Library of the University of The Bahamas. This image archive was donated to the University by The Counsellors Limited, a Bahamian public relations and media consulting company, with the request that the images be preserved and utilized by the University. These images span a wide array of subjects including political leaders, other public figures, and significant sites and events. As a result of the *Ramble Bahamas* project, over a thousand of these images were digitized in high-resolution format and were archived for posterity. After digitization, selected images from the collection were edited for optimum web quality prior to being incorporated on *Ramble Bahamas*.

With the research phase complete, the next

step in bringing “The Majority Rule Heritage Trail” to fruition was data upload. First, it was necessary to select a domain name. After much reflection, the name *Ramble Bahamas* was chosen by the “FDT” team because of the affectionate connotations of the word “ramble” for many Bahamians who grew up in or near the countryside; because of the aura of cultural authenticity surrounding the word; and because of the appropriateness of the word in relation to the kind of intellectual experience that the site could offer, so the “FDT” team hoped, to those who chose to visit it. To “ramble,” in Bahamian parlance, means to speak at length on a topic; but it also means to wander in unhurried and enjoyable fashion under sparkling blue skies through the coppice forest that covers parts of the

archipelago of islands. To the mind of the “FDT” team, both these meanings fit with the hope that visitors to the site should find themselves able to stroll in leisurely fashion through the place-based historical discourses that would be made available there. To build *Ramble Bahamas*, the Omeka content management system (<https://omeka.org/>) was installed on remote servers and Curatescape (<https://curatescape.org/>) was utilized to provide the framework. To populate the website, each item, image, and audio file was uploaded to Omeka. Here, individual metadata was assigned using Dublin Core, the default metadata setting for Omeka. Finally, each exhibit’s specific narrative was written and uploaded as illustrated in Figure 1.

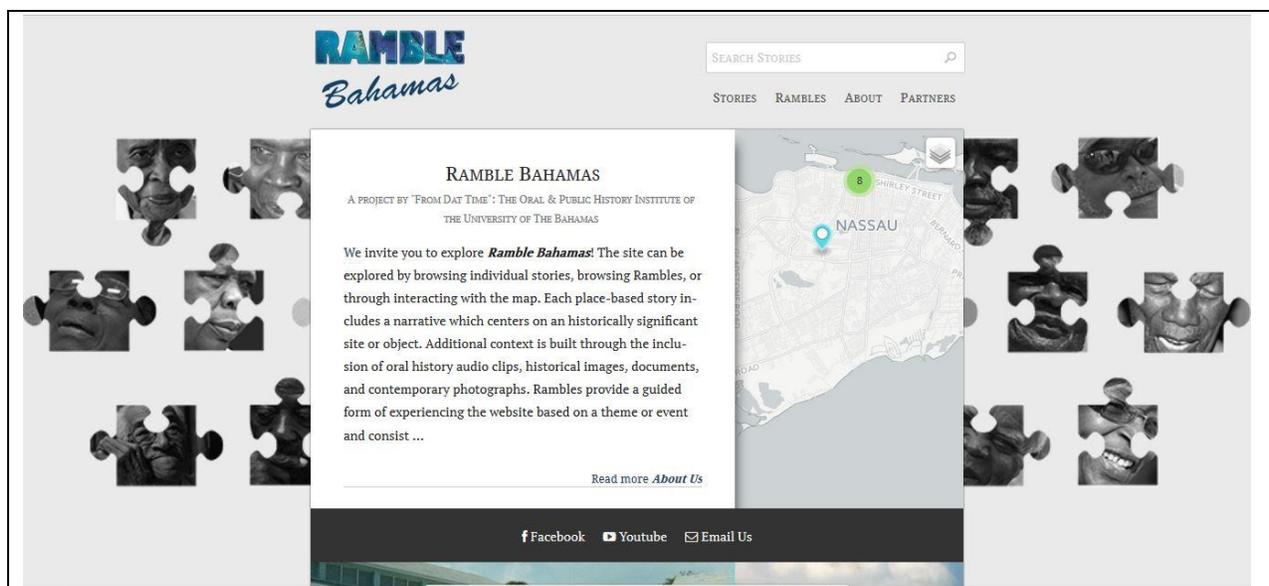


Figure 1. The home page of *Ramble Bahamas*

Design

Once the “FDT” team had deployed Curatescape, the team customized it with design elements including a signature logo and background. The concept underlying these two design elements is that only when many voices join together can *Ramble Bahamas* fulfill its mission. This mission is to gather, preserve, and disseminate the

recollections of knowledgeable Bahamians regarding diverse people, places, situations, and events that are important for configuring the collective identity of the Bahamian community. A satellite image of the waters of The Bahamas provides the fill for the block lettering in the *Ramble Bahamas* logo in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. The team incorporated the iconic waters of The

Bahamas not only for their instant recognizability but even more because they have served and will continue to act as the critical bond linking the inhabitants of the 700 rocks, islands, and cays of the country. The puzzle background, present on every page accessed conventionally (not available on mobile devices), reinforces this same narrative of individual voices connecting to form a chorus of recollection. The images of oral history narrators, who range from social activists to mariners and from entertainers to educators, are contained within individual pieces, which together form a disarticulated puzzle band.

Impact

Ramble Bahamas was formally launched in January 2017 and the preliminary user data, gathered during the first 60 days (January 1 through March 1), foreshadows the impact of the website. In this time frame, the site received 588 visits and 1,431 page views. Eighty-two percent of these site visitors came from The Bahamas, affirming the national impact of the project. In total, visitors from 16 other countries, with the majority coming from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, visited the website during this initial data-procurement period, which suggests an international interest in the data hosted on *Ramble Bahamas*. We were also interested in how our site is being accessed,

whether by mobile or desktop device. Interestingly, site visitors were slightly more likely to visit *Ramble Bahamas* on their mobile device (48%) compared to their desktop device (47%), with tablet access accounting for the final percentage (4%). At the beginning of this project, we placed a high emphasis on utilizing a responsive platform for this project. These metrics confirm the value of a responsive site.

At this time *Ramble Bahamas* is in the initial stages of production and is poised for growth. In the near future, we plan to continue the research and production of exhibits in our current research areas: national politics in the postwar era; Bahamian participation in World War II; the evolution of the nursing profession; and the development of the sport fishing industry. Additionally, we are developing a fifth area of research that will be built around the maritime economy of The Bahamas. *Ramble Bahamas* is primarily and will remain a scholarly platform with the objective of adding to the existing body of academic publications on Bahamian historiography and culture. Furthermore, by leveraging the strengths of the digital format, *Ramble Bahamas* will also connect local audiences as well as international visitors with public scholarship, providing insights into the Bahamian experience.

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