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## Bermuda's unburied history

Published Jul 15, 2014 at 8:00 am (Updated Jul 14, 2014 at 9:37 pm)

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Controversy: Tucker's Town is only one example of locations in Bermuda where land acquisition schemes were carried out. It was followed almost immediately by the scheme to create the Bermuda Railway in the 1920s, which affected landowners from Sandys to St George's

RG: In our opinion Just as the unswerving route of the old Bermuda Railway cuts across the landscape like a long, straight scar, so the story of controversial land expropriations mars Bermuda's modern history.

Before construction could begin on that foredoomed single-track, standard-gauge railway in the late 1920s, what was then among the largest and most contentious land acquisition schemes in Bermuda's history had to take place.

Rich man, poor man, black or white, every land owner with property along the proposed 21-mile route from Sandys to St George's had to surrender some of their real estate in return for compensation from the Bermuda Railway Company. That British-backed concern was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1924 to survey and construct a modern transportation system for the then automobile-averse Island.

The Bermuda Railway Company expressly planned its line to follow a coastal route, minimising the amount of private property the firm would have to purchase (which is why the gasoline-powered trains crossed so many

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are calling "the historic theft and dispossession of land" in Bermuda. Meanwhile the other cases of wholesale compulsory acquisition, including the building of the Bermuda Railway, are largely forgotten or ignored.

A community, like the individuals who comprise it, is the sum total of all of its experiences: dramatic, prosaic and traumatic. Also, as is the case with individuals, the unburied aspects of a community's past will continue to haunt the present until properly interred. There is no doubt the circumstances which led to the creation of the luxurious Tucker's Town sanctuary remain both painful and little understood. They desperately need to be laid to rest after more than 80 years.

And the empanelment of a bipartisan commission of inquiry with a remit to study the history of land expropriations, as recently proposed by Parliament, might be the best vehicle for achieving this end.

We have an obligation not just to history but to our present and future to explain, examine and learn from our past. This requires us to place controversial subjects in their proper context because some issues cannot be properly understood without a simultaneous understanding of the times which gave rise to them.

Harry Truman once said the only thing new in this world is the history you don't know. And the fact is too many Bermudians simply aren't familiar with whole swathes of their own history, lacking even the most fundamental grasp of how our people and our community evolved.

Any number of myths need to be expunged, chief among them the casually levelled and quite incendiary charge that those required to part with their land because of expropriation were victims of theft. Compulsory purchase orders have certainly been used in both a cavalier and sometimes immoral manner in Bermuda and elsewhere. But the fact is compulsory acquisition by the Crown or its approved agents is not only legal, it constitutes one of the oldest traditions in British common law. Beginning in the 19th century, both Bermudian and British authorities routinely engaged in the expropriation of private property on the Island if it could be argued such acquisitions would serve the greater public interest.

Beaches once in private hands found their way into what is now the Bermuda Parks System based on compulsory acquisition. Road improvements to modernise the glorified cart tracks which served as Bermuda's highways well into the 20th century required the shaving off of what eventually amounted to dozens of acres of private property adjoining the old Tribe Roads, trails and footpaths criss-crossing the Island. And, of course, most of the British military's fortifications were built on large tracts of expropriated land as were the US bases constructed at the East End and in Southampton during the Second World War.

The Tucker's Town scenario was played at a time when Bermuda was rushing headlong into the 20th century, when the foundations of our modern infrastructure were being laid. It was not a deviation from the practices of the time, rather it was an extension of them and cannot be viewed in isolation from our current perspective.

It is time to allow the scar of expropriation to begin to heal, to stop picking away at it either out of ignorance or for mercenary, short-term political gain.

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Derek A. G. Jones • 5 years ago

'It is time to allow the scar of expropriation to begin to heal, to stop picking away at it either out of ignorance or for mercenary, short-term political gain.'

Based on the fact that it is now almost 10 pm and there have been only two comments made all day I think we can summarize that the actions occurring are both from ignorance and for mercenary short-term political gain.

This article was clear and informative. The people who have been commenting day-in day-out will not touch it as they know it tears their agenda to shreds. It definitely seems to be the season for cherry picking.

2 ^ | v • Share >



Bermuda male • 5 years ago

One of the largest mass movements of Bermudians of all races from their homes and land was in the early forties when the U.S. built the runway and baselands for the war effort.

Not only were homes demolished but cemeteries re located.

The people were paid, probably not what they thought it was worth, but they left Southside and its beautiful coves, beaches and bays for the sake of a greater cause. St Davids Islanders deserved more I am sure but they are not ones to complain long, they adapted and got going again in their new locations.

It may be relevant here to consider how many properties down through history were settled on without ever purchasing the land in the first place.

3 ^ | v • Share >



Skeptic • 5 years ago

A well balanced perspective, thank you. And there is also a history of assumed land transfers from the community to private persons, such as the Church glebe lands taken up by individuals, particularly at the time of emancipation. I am uncertain whether the land upon which the freed people established homesteads was willingly granted, or whether the church respectfully accepted the duty to provide for the community. There is probably a much deeper and more intriguing tale to be told through land transfers of how our community has evolved if we are willing to do the research with an open mind.

6 ^ | v • Share >

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- Bradshaw, Sherdon Wilfred
- Clamens, Marcelle Giovanni
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