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# BDA SUN

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## Do YOU know Bermuda's racial history? The Media Council of Bermuda has done the hard work for you. Here's a potted guide...

Media Council of Bermuda Tuesday, July 2, 2013 1:33 PM Like 104 Tweet Comments (0)

The extent of knowledge of Bermuda's racial history varies tremendously among members of the media.

It is difficult even for experienced Bermudian journalists to have anything approaching a complete knowledge of the factual history. Even the best educated, experienced and most understanding journalist will be challenged by the long legacy of historical events, which include modern social and political problems and widespread fears and suspicions, myths and misconceptions.



Flare-ups: In decades past, civil unrest spilled out into the streets of Bermuda. \*File photo

The history and background presented here is, at best, a brief outline of the fundamental facts upon which so many subsequent complications are based. While most Bermuda journalists are probably familiar with most of it, it ought to serve as a baseline of knowledge, especially for beginning reporters and journalists newly arrived from overseas.

### Critical Role

Nearly 180 years after the abolition of slavery, and despite the substantial progress that has been made towards racial equality, race continues to play a critical role in Bermuda. While there are class divisions, Bermuda has been largely divided along racial lines.

Race is a crucial element in voting patterns, residential, school, church and parish populations and the make-up of sports teams and clubs. It even often determines one's choice of an undertaker! As documented in Census reports over the past two decades, the gap in wealth between black and white households points to a significant economic disparity, indicative of the fact that the impact of historical racial inequality is still being felt by the Island's society.

### Settlers

Bermuda has been continuously inhabited since a group of English settlers was shipwrecked on the island in 1609. In 1616, the first black person and the first Indian arrived as permanent residents, creating an interracial society. Blacks initially worked as indentured servants. Slavery was subsequently established and remained a feature of Bermuda society until 1834.

During the first 50 years of settlement, Bermuda successfully grew tobacco as a cash crop for export, but the island was eventually overtaken by its vastly larger sister colony Virginia as a tobacco producer.

Bermudians then turned to the sea, becoming privateers and pirates and earning fame for their skills as mariners, and in the case of white Bermudians, vast fortunes.

White slaveholders sailed the seas with their black male slaves. This form of bondage put whites and blacks in close contact, forcing them to work together in the interest of survival on the high seas.

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### PRC status

Should PRC holders get status?

- Yes
- Some of them
- No
- Don't know

It has been argued that this created in a system of patronage that characterized white-black relations up to the 1960s, although not all scholars agree.

Just as in the US and the Caribbean, Bermuda had a community of free blacks and also experienced its share of slave revolts.

### Emancipation

In 1833, the UK Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. Bermuda's Parliament subsequently passed its own Emancipation Act.

Black Bermudians, slave and free, welcomed Emancipation on August 1, 1834. But laws aimed at keeping power in white hands were quickly enacted. To give just one example, prior to Emancipation, adults had to own property assessed at £40 or more in order to vote.

After Emancipation, the value of property for qualified voters was raised to £100. Author Dr. Kenneth Robinson, writing in *Heritage*, described that law as a "cold-blooded retrograde piece of legislation."

This property-based voting system would remain in place until 1963. While black property owners enjoyed voting rights, political power was concentrated in the hands of wealthy white landowners, who could vote in every parish where they owed property.

### Compensation

White slaveholders received financial compensation from the British government, but there was no matching payout for slaves. This impeded the economic prospects of newly-freed slaves.

Still, black leaders played a central role in the post-Emancipation era, establishing schools, libraries and businesses, often under the auspices of lodges or friendly societies, which placed great emphasis on self-development.

The annual Cup Match holiday began a celebration of Emancipation by friendly societies.

### Economy

Over four centuries, Bermudians made their living in various ways. They became adept at creating new sources of revenue in response to economic conditions. The tobacco industry was followed by shipbuilding, privateering, salt-raking in Turks and Caicos and then farming.

In the latter half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bermuda supplied produce such as the famous Bermuda onion to the US east coast. Tourism replaced farming as the dominant industry from the 1920s, and international business supplanted tourism in the 1980s.

In the early 1920s, a community of about 400 black Bermudians, mainly farmers, fishermen and boat-builders living in Tucker's Town, were forced out to make way for the creation of an exclusive enclave for wealthy white American tourists.

The development of Tucker's Town laid the foundation for Bermuda's success in tourism for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but the eviction policy faced strong resistance then and engenders controversy today, especially among some descendants of the displaced residents. One consequence of the Tucker's Town development was the 1930 Hotel Keepers Protection Act, which gave hotels the right to turn away black and Jewish guests.

### Military Bases

Bermuda's location, halfway between the United Kingdom and the United States, has proved to be fortuitous. For nearly 200 years until 1951, the British government operated a naval base, HM Dockyard, in the West End. The US built bases in St. David's and Southampton during the Second World War.

HM Dockyard and the US bases were both a boost to the economy and had a major effect on the society. Hundreds of black and white men received trades training—in an integrated setting—in a rigorous apprenticeship programme at the Dockyard.

And the Bermuda Workers Association, the forerunner of the Bermuda Industrial Union, was started by a group of black Bermudian workers employed at the US base in Southampton.

### Ancestry

Bermuda's racial make-up is 54 per cent black and 31 per cent white, with the remaining 15 per cent of mixed race, Asian or other races. Most white Bermudians are of British/Irish ancestry while black Bermudians have African ancestry. A smaller minority living in St. David's are descended from Native Americans who were brought to Bermuda during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as slaves.

Throughout Bermuda's history there has been racial intermingling and it is commonly accepted that blacks and whites have ancestry of both races.

In 1849, the first group of Portuguese settlers was brought to Bermuda as farm workers from the island of Madeira. Subsequent Portuguese arrivals would come from the Azores.

According to the 2010 Census, seven per cent of Bermudians claim Portuguese ancestry. Portuguese are widely perceived to be a distinct ethnic group within the white population. They encountered prejudice for many years. Some Portuguese Bermudians adopted English names to hide their ancestry.

### Segregation

For most of its existence, Bermuda was run by a white elite who were known as the oligarchy and also as the "Forty Thieves". Primarily merchants, whose centre of domain was Front Street, they established a reputation for their business acumen, but maintained a system of social and economic control and segregation in schools, churches and in business. Blacks and others who dared to push for change risked losing their jobs or having their mortgages called in.

The first significant challenge to segregation came in 1944 with the formation of the Bermuda Workers Association (BWA). For president Dr. E. F. Gordon, the BWA became the vehicle for a major push for social and political change. In 1946, he took a petition to London on behalf of nearly 5,000 BWA members. His appeal to

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Jul 30, 2014



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Crown and Anchor lessons will be given by Hattie Armstrong at Harbour Nights on Wednesday. [bit.ly/1o9xHaw](https://bit.ly/1o9xHaw) #Bermuda

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the United Kingdom to investigate a host of issues, among them segregation, the property vote and for free education, met with limited success.

The only tangible result was free schooling for primary students. Segregation would remain in effect until 1959. A Theatre Boycott in June of that year ended separate seating policies in cinemas. Major hotel resorts also opened their doors to black and Jewish tourists and restaurants soon followed suit.

In 1963, the property-owning qualification for voters was dropped. But the Parliamentary Election Act of 1963, raised the voting age from 21 to 25 and property owners were given an extra "plus" vote—concessions, political observers have said, were aimed at diluting blacks' new political power.

In addition, Commonwealth citizens, the majority of whom were white, were given the right to vote after three years' residency and voting constituencies were drawn up in a way that was said to enhance the political fortunes of the white minority.

Increased immigration from the UK from the 1950s onwards, the period when discriminatory barriers began to be lifted for blacks, laid the groundwork for the tension between black Bermudians and white expats and other foreign workers.

#### Civil Unrest and Reforms

Bermuda saw major political reforms in the 1960s. The formation of the Progressive Labour Party in 1963 and the United Bermuda Party in 1964 established the two-party system. Full universal adult suffrage became a reality in 1968, when the plus vote was dropped, and Bermuda had its first democratic election.

From the 1960s onwards, policies were enacted aimed at desegregating the school system and expanding educational opportunities.

Bermuda would not escape the social tumult that convulsed other Western societies in the 1960s and 70s. There were riots in 1965 and 1968. Over a span of 10 months in 1972 and 1973, the police commissioner, the governor and his aide-de-camp, a supermarket owner and his bookkeeper were shot to death. The executions of Erskine "Buck" Burrows and Larry Tacklyn for their roles in the murders led to riots in 1977.

In the wake of both riots, commissions chaired by distinguished international figures were established. The reports without exception pointed to historic racial inequities as the root cause.

Bermuda's racial dynamics are a key component of our voting system—a majority of blacks support the Progressive Labour Party and virtually all whites backed the United Bermuda Party, and since its disbanding, the One Bermuda Alliance.

#### Foreign Workers

Throughout its history, Bermuda has relied heavily on foreign workers to fill its labour needs. The majority have come from the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Canada and the Caribbean and have contributed much to the society.

The last decade has seen an increase in foreign workers from Asia, although workers from such countries as the Philippines represent only four per cent of the population. This had added a new dimension to the society and resulted in public expressions and displays of intolerance against Asian workers in particular.

Concerns by Bermudians that foreign workers receive preferential treatment in the workplace have been the subject of much debate, in both public and private spheres, for many years. Over the years, immigration laws have been tightened.

Historical divisions between white and black Bermudians, those who are Bermudian by birth and those with Bermuda status who were born elsewhere (derisively referred to as "paper" Bermudians) continue to play out in contemporary Bermuda society.

#### Cultural diversity

Bermuda has become a more multicultural society, both in terms of race and religion. It is overwhelmingly Christian, but non-Christian denominations, such as Muslims and Baha'is, have taken root since the 1960s.

There is also a small Jewish community. Their small numbers reflect Bermuda's history of anti-Semitism as Jewish immigration and Jewish tourism were actively discouraged.

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