



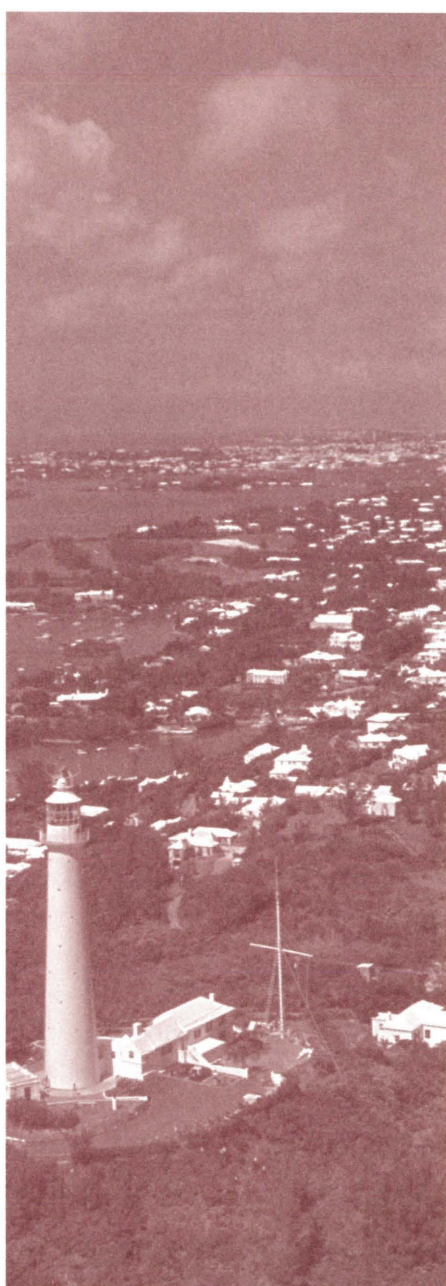
## AN INTRODUCTION TO Bermuda

by W. S. Zuill, Sr.

B

ermuda is a remarkably lovely archipelago with a temperate, subtropical climate where crops can be grown the year through. Its far-flung reefs were monstrous toothy traps for unwary masters and





navigators of homebound carracks and galleons — and later frigates, sloops and schooners, clippers, side-wheelers and ocean liners — but those who could work their way through the reefs found safe and commodious harbors among the five main islands and the 300-odd rocks and islets.



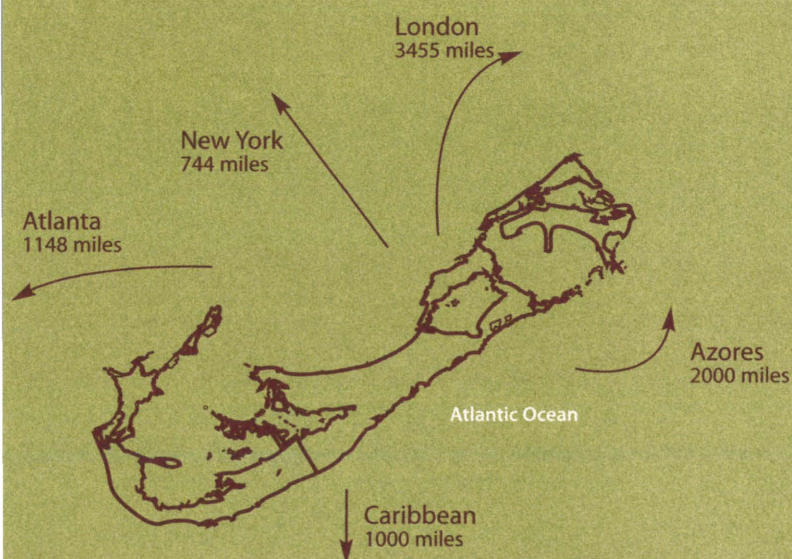
Bermuda was, and is, one of the most isolated island groups in the world, more than 600 miles from the nearest land, which is Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. At the same time it happens to be located on various trade routes, for the wind-ship passage from the Straits of Florida to Europe runs north along the Gulf Stream to the latitude of Bermuda, where the favorable westerlies begin to blow – and so the island was both a helpful navigation point as well as a considerable danger to shipping. In the steamship age, the island lay on the most direct route from the Mediterranean to the Straits of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, and today, in the age of flight, its airspace is traversed by several airliners a day. Thus, throughout its history, Bermuda's strategic significance has allayed its isolation and shaped Bermudian life, thought, and custom.

An island is similar in many ways to a ship, and this is particularly true for Bermuda. During World War II we were called "an unsinkable aircraft carrier," providing the

Allies an antisubmarine base way out in the Atlantic. It was a role which continued during the Cold War, when we were an important part of the U.S. Navy's tracking network that kept tabs on Russian missile submarines.

Islanders, like ships' crews, have to be self-reliant, struggling to use and reuse, conserve, and make do when the proper tool or spare part is not available. Water is a precious commodity in Bermuda, for our island has no creeks, brooks, or rivers, and we learned as children to conserve the water channeled off the roof and carefully stored in underground tanks or cisterns. Like seafarers, we tend to be both fatalists and pragmatists.

Our folkways stretch back to our beginnings as a community some hundred years after Captain Juan Bermudez in *La Garza* happened upon an uninhabited Bermuda in around 1505. In 1609 the *Sea Venture*, flagship of a relief fleet bound for the new Virginia colony at Jamestown, was wrecked on Bermuda. All 150 men and women came safely ashore, including the admiral of the fleet, Sir George Somers, and the governor-designate of Virginia, Sir Thomas Gates. The survivors built two vessels



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Bermuda map courtesy the Bermuda Government



and sailed for succor to Jamestown – but found, instead, that they were the rescuers. Only 60 persons were left alive out of the colony of some 500 the autumn before, and they were dying of starvation. The ship's stores from Bermuda saved them. Somers and Gates and the leaders of the colony decided to return to England, but before they could reach the open ocean another relief fleet arrived, and all turned back to Jamestown. Somers volunteered to return to Bermuda to collect supplies, for he seems to have fallen in love with the place and had even picked out an island for himself, which is still called Somerset – Somers's Seat.

But worn out by his exertions, he died, and his nephew Matthew Somers decided to sail back to England. They and other survivors told about Bermuda's beauty and the readily available wild hogs and fish, about the occasional sharp storms, about the seabirds mewing as the crew came ashore. The story of the shipwreck clothed the island in glamour and inspired (so we believe) William Shakespeare to write *The Tempest*. The Virginia Company decided to colonize Bermuda, and in 1612 sent out a ship called the *Plough* with the first colonists. The Virginia Company spawned a second company, the Bermuda Company, who took over the island for £2,000. Christopher Carter, a survivor of the *Sea Venture* wreck who had been on Bermuda ever since, is properly Bermuda's first inhabitant, as he was the only one of the survivors to make his home on the island. Governor Daniel Tucker sent the ship *Edwin* to the West Indies in 1616 to bring back tropical plants to try out in Bermuda. The ship also brought the first persons of African and Native American descent to come to the island. Thus the African, European, and Native American strands of population that make up Bermuda today were present from very early times.

It seems likely that cassava (or manioc) was among the tropical plants the *Edwin* brought, and our traditional Christmas cassava pie – made with cassava paste in both crust and filling – probably stems from this very early period. One writer declared, "it took some ingenious housewife" to



The State House was an early archetype for Bermuda limestone architecture.  
Photo by Kristen Fernekes, © Smithsonian Institution





## Our vibrant island has the curious motto

The Bermuda Regiment parades at official events throughout the island. Photo courtesy the Bermuda Government

turn cassava into an edible pie, and today, after nearly four centuries, it remains our principal and unique Christmas dish.

On August 1, 1620, Bermuda organized its first meeting of the House of Assembly, one year after the House of Burgesses was instituted in Virginia. The State House was the first major building of Bermuda coral limestone. Until recent times Bermuda architecture has developed from the use of stone blocks and stone roof tiles, cut with a saw from the Aeolian limestone, and Bermuda cedars, which rarely gave more than 16 feet of usable timber. This limited the size of the largest rooms and determined the dimensions of buildings. Stone roof tiles made a heavy load for the roof timbers but enabled island homes to defy hurricanes.

When Governor Tucker arrived in 1616, he initiated the growing of tobacco, which was a successful export crop until the small fields became exhausted. The

Bermuda Company, controlling Bermuda's economy under a royal charter, had insisted on tobacco culture and tried to limit trade with England to one Company ship a year. Once free of the Company in 1684, Bermudians turned their attention to the sea to make a living — an economic base which continued for more than a century. They took over the isolated Turks Islands and made salt there, which they traded for food up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Of course, not all men were sailors; some built ships. Bermuda cedar was ideal for this, pliable and resistant to sea worms and barnacles. The vessels proved to be unusually swift and are credited with being the inspiration for the famed Baltimore schooners. Today Bermuda dinghies race on weekends and are reminders of our seafaring past.

By 1775 Bermuda was a small cog in Britain's vast American empire. In culture, the island was closest to the mid-Atlantic colonies, governed in much the same way.



The British efforts to confine trade within its own empire tended to benefit Bermuda's seafarers and salt rakers, and the British defeat in 1783 was a blow to Bermudians' way of life. The British then began to use Bermuda as a replacement for their lost Eastern Seaboard harbors. Thus Bermuda became a garrison island, and the British soldiers and sailors stationed there had an important effect on our culture.

Colonel William Reid, governor from 1839 to 1846, realizing that in time of war the island fortress could be starved out by an enemy blockade, imported ploughs (there were only three on the island when he arrived) and brought in two English farmers to show what might be done. The result was that the colony rapidly developed an export trade to the Eastern Seaboard in garden vegetables, particularly Bermuda onions, from which the people gained the nickname "Onions." With a yearlong growing season, there was time to grow crops for home consumption as well. In 1849, the barque *Golden Rule* brought 58 Azorean immigrants as agricultural laborers, starting the 150-year connection between the two

isolated Atlantic archipelagos, and giving Bermuda a new cultural element. High U.S. import tariffs and refrigerated train transport from the warmer states to northern U.S. cities after World War I destroyed Bermuda's vegetable export business, but the farm culture lingers on.

Bermudians turn out in large numbers for the annual three-day Agricultural Exhibition, where amateurs and professionals vie with one another in showing their livestock, produce, home cooking, and flowers.

From the British garrison Bermudian men learned new trades and construction methods, working under the army and navy engineers. In addition, the Royal Navy Dockyard ran an apprenticeship scheme that produced well-trained artisans, thus creating an important addition to Bermuda's education facilities. By the end of the 19th century, two segregated local army units developed – the White-officered Black Royal Garrison Artillery (later the Bermuda Militia Artillery) who manned the massive guns in the coastal forts, and the all-White Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps, an infantry unit. Many Bermudians are descended from army and navy families, and November 11,

## "Quo Fata Ferunt," "Whither the Fates Lead Us."



Janice Tucker embellishes the black velvet cape of a Gombey captain with sequins, embroidery, beads, and ribbons. Gombeyes are the masked dancers of Bermuda. Photo by Leslie Todd, courtesy the Bermuda Government

the day marking the end of World War I, is observed annually with great decorum at a parade of the Bermuda Regiment (the integrated descendant of the BMA and the BVRC) on Hamilton's Front Street at the Cenotaph – the war memorial.

As the 20th century drew near, war broke out between Britain and two Boer Republics in South Africa. As there was a large garrison in Bermuda, the British decided to send Boer prisoners to the island, and to reinforce the garrison with the West India Regiment. The influx of West Indians, coupled with a further influx of workers to expand the Dockyard, strengthened Bermuda's ties with the Caribbean and influenced our culture.

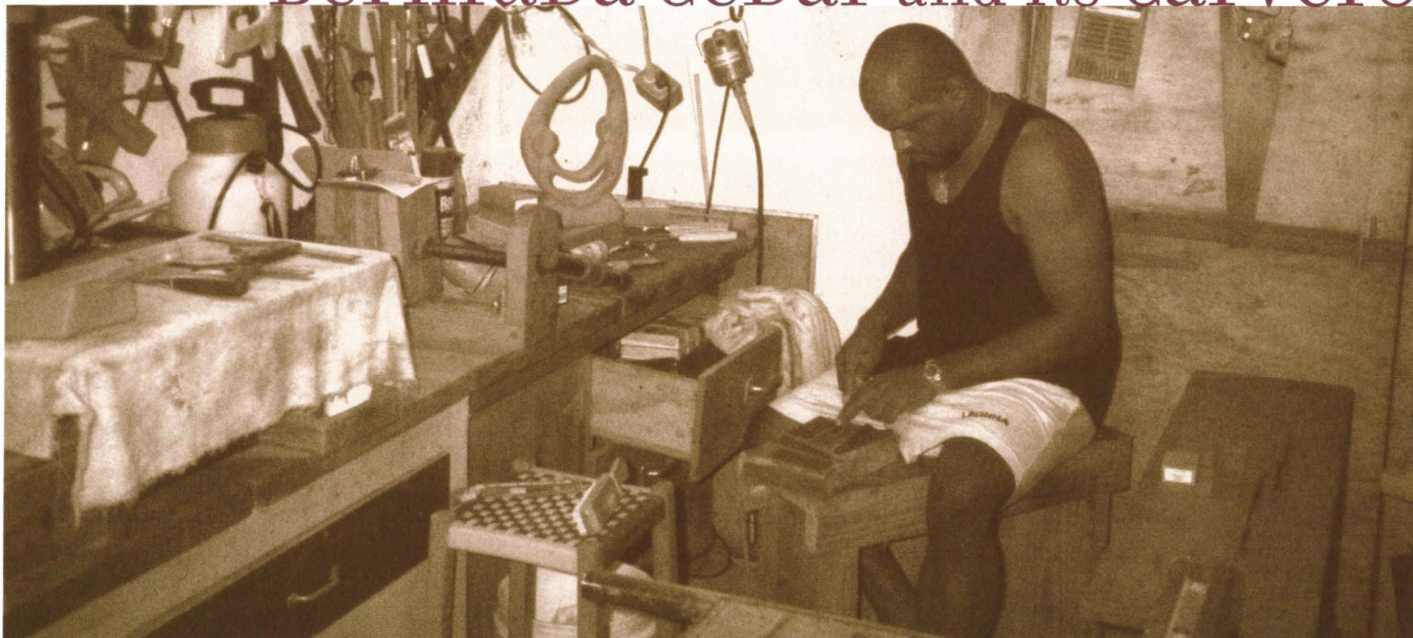
The dawn of the 20th century brought increasing tourist trade. People had visited Bermuda for their health from at least the mid-18th century, but the island gained recognition as a resort in the late 1800s with the visit of Princess Louise, the artistic and rebellious daughter of Queen Victoria, and steamships made frost-free, subtropical Bermuda easily accessible to New York. Distinguished visitors such as Mark Twain and Woodrow Wilson gave



by James Ziral

Bermuda's first 350 years of economic development were intricately tied to *Juniperus bermudiana*. Luxuriant cedar forests sprawled across sloping hills and into shallow valleys, and well into the 20th century they remained the stage for cicadas, or, as locals called them, "singers," whose high-pitched arias heralded the twilight. That environmental picture changed virtually overnight.

## Bermuda Cedar and Its Carvers



Cedar carver Garen Simmons makes cedar tables, chairs, rocking horses, and masks in a shed he built himself. Photo by James Ziral

The unwitting introduction of the oyster shell scale (*Lepidosaphes* sp.) and the juniper scale (*Diaspis visci*) insects in the 1940s set loose a tiny marauding horde that reduced the forests by 97 percent. The legislative protection on current growth has also contributed to a scarcity of suitable logs for sculpting.

The nature of the wood itself contributes to this scarcity as well. Cedar should be cured for at least three and preferably for ten or twenty years before it is carved. Its strong, wood-musk-scented oils must be completely dried out to prevent the sculpture from "bleeding."

Whether with a Chesley Trott female abstract, a Roy Boyer crab, or a Garen Simmons mask, cedar's grain varies inconveniently, although beautifully, not only from piece to piece, but often within the piece itself. "There is no easy way to [work with] cedar," says Boyer. "One slip and the sculpture can be ruined." Where many talented carvers fail is in the art of "finishing." "Cedar is like a jewel, a precious stone. Anyone can learn to carve, but finishing is a whole different ball game.

[Sometimes] you can look at a carving and still see sandpaper scratches or something that throws it off. Because of its beautiful grain, cedar needs to be polished smooth," Boyer says.

From time to time, fine pieces can be found in local shops. They intrigue visitors, costing hundreds, even thousands of dollars. But after being purchased, some of these pieces crack during the first chill of a North American winter; Bermuda cedar, with a rich boat-, home-, and furniture-making history, is not always at home away from home. (To prevent cracking, experienced carvers will use turpentine and linseed or tung oil during finishing before applying a thin coat of lacquer.)

Interestingly, no cedar sculptures are known to have been produced before the 20th century. Only within the last four decades has there emerged a woodcarving culture, which is now evolving from a focus on abstract designs to the representation of realistic themes.

*James Ziral is a freelance writer and television producer who is writing a book about Bermuda's cedar carvers.*



important publicity to Bermuda's qualities, and the winter season became an important part of Bermuda life. After World War I tourism became the mainstay of the economy, doing so well that the island was not seriously influenced by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

World War II wrought many changes, swiftly modernizing the quiet holiday backwater still drowsing in the 19th century. Bermuda automatically went to war in 1939 when Britain did, and this rapidly killed the all-important tourist trade. For a time the government became the prin-

connections with the Eastern Seaboard and Europe. The fact that Bermuda was in the sterling area but enjoyed an American-style way of life attracted wealthy Britons, and go-ahead banks and law firms found that a company in Bermuda could help shelter their capital from tax collectors.

In 1959, during the celebrations of the 350th anniversary of Somers's shipwreck, a group of young Black professionals decided to try and get rid of segregation in the principal movie theater. They organized a boycott, which

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yet, because of our isolation and our constitution,  
we are also a small nation.**

icipal employer, hiring men on meager pay for public works projects. Construction of U.S. military bases and an airfield started in 1941; Bermuda became acquainted with the latest modes of rapid construction as well as tough American construction workers. Bermuda workers were unhappy as prices went up and they were paid at the same low rate as on the Bermudian government projects. The Bermuda Workers Association was formed, and this quasi-union succeeded in improving pay.

The continued interest in agriculture was important during World War II, particularly when in 1942 German U-boats sank a Bermuda-bound supply ship and put the island on very short rations — including oats for the island's horses, the main means of transport. This situation, along with defense requirements that motor vehicles traverse every part of the island, reversed the ban on automobiles that had been imposed in the early 1900s.

It was a changed island that greeted the peace in 1945. The face of the land had been altered with the building of U.S. bases, which took up one-eighth of the island. Bermudians awakened to ideas of a greater democracy, which two decades later were to change the voter's franchise from one qualified by land ownership to one of universal adult suffrage. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Edgar Fitzgerald Gordon (whose daughter would be Bermuda's first woman premier) the trade union movement gained in strength until it became a potent force in industrial relations, ensuring the workers a share in a burgeoning economy.

For burgeon it did! Bermuda's new airfield facilitated

succeeded so well that soon major restaurants and hotels dropped all segregation. Businesses changed their employment practices as well. It was the breaking of a dam that led to universal adult suffrage, a new constitution, and greater internal self-government for the colony. Although women in Bermuda could not vote until 1944, today both political parties are led by women.

A community of 60,000 people is a small town by North American standards, yet, because of our isolation and our constitution, we are also a small nation. Our politicians debate garbage collection one day and relations with the United States the next. Although we are still a British colony, we have more independence than any of the 50 U.S. states or Puerto Rico.

Our vibrant island has the curious motto "Quo Fata Ferunt," "Whither the Fates Lead Us." It seems a bit bizarre for a remarkably successful community, but an island is always in the hands of the fates, whether they bring a hurricane or a shipwreck. We were drawn into a world war, which first destroyed our economy and then built it up so that the island is more prosperous than before. Our livelihood depends on bending and turning the winds of fortune to our advantage. Thus we have succeeded in the past, and thus we must go into the uncertain future.

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