

CHAPTER 9

THE LURE OF CRAB

One of the strangest chapters in the story of Anguilla's earliest generations of settlers concerns their repeated efforts to settle Crab Island, then also called by the English 'Bieque Island'. It is better known today by its Spanish name of 'Vieques'. It lies a few miles east of Puerto Rico, and is now a part of that US territory. The Anguillians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries knew it as Crab Island.



5. Vieques, lying to the east of Puerto Rico.

The story begins in 1683. It is the ultimately tragic epic of the Anguillian attempt to settle Crab Island. The Danes, who settled St Thomas and St John in the 1670's,

were also interested in Crab Island. They claimed ownership of it as well. The Spanish in Puerto Rico, just a short distance from Crab Island, prevailed in the end in expelling both of them. The Anguillians wished to settle Crab because that island was greener and more fertile than their drought-ridden island and had an excellent harbour. They knew it well as their ships were in the habit of visiting it in search of dye-wood and building timber. These they traded with the merchants in the other Leeward Islands. The Anguillians claimed that Crab was unoccupied by either the Spaniards from Puerto Rico or the neighbouring Danes, and therefore available for the English Crown to authorise settlement. They were involved in three attempts to colonize the island, first in 1683, then in 1688, and again in 1717. In this Chapter we shall deal only with their first two attempts of 1683 and 1688. In the next chapter we shall deal with their final abortive attempt of 1717.

We first learn of the interest of the Anguillians in Crab Island in August 1683 when **Sir William Stapleton** wrote a dispatch¹ to the Committee for Foreign Plantations. He revealed that he was petitioned by the inhabitants of Anguilla to let them settle Crab Island. He wrote that he refused them permission for fear that the Spaniards and buccaneers of Puerto Rico might cut them

¹ CO.1/51, No 9: Stapleton to the Committee on 30 August 1683.

off in one night, though, as he put it, “*Anguilla is fit for little or nothing but goats.*” He was generally supportive of the initiative to settle Crab Island. He recommended that if two or three hundred men could be found to put on Crab Island and build a fort, there was no doubt that it would be a successful settlement.

The Anguillians under the leadership of **Abraham Howell** did more in 1683 than merely solicit Stapleton’s permission. They actually sent settlers to occupy Crab without waiting for permission. This action caused **Adolph Esmit**, the Danish Governor of St Thomas, to dispatch a military force under the command of a captain to Crab. He also signed and delivered a formal diplomatic protest. For one reason or another, probably more related to the Danish Captain and his military force than to the protest, the Anguillians under Howell showed discretion. They ceased temporarily on this occasion to occupy Crab Island, at least in any large numbers. Howell returned to Anguilla with his men, frustrated, but, as we shall see, still determined to claim Crab Island for the Anguillians.

We know that Howell returned to Anguilla. We see him in 1684 granting land to **John Lake** at Stoney Ground.² In a 1685 dispatch,³ Governor Stapleton

² Chapter 5: The Second Generation.

³ CO.1/58, No 126, folio 370: Stapleton to the Committee with a List of the Deputy Governors of the Leeward Islands.

mentioned that he was still the deputy governor of Anguilla. We also know from Chief Justice **George Suckling**⁴ that around this time Anguillians were settling in the Virgin Islands. The toil and merit, he wrote, of first cultivating the Virgin Islands were reserved for the English of Anguilla. He claimed that Anguilla was first possessed by the English, French and Dutch. Some of them, he wrote, embarked with their families and fortunes and settled in the Virgin Islands about the year 1680. Besides Suckling, there is no other reference to French and Dutch occupying Anguilla in 1680. The usual claim, for example, by **de Rochefort**,⁵ is that the English alone first settled Anguilla. But, considering the disorganised state of society at the time in Anguilla, there is nothing unlikely about Suckling's statement that there were people of other nations, including runaway African slaves, who settled on Anguilla. The island was never possessed throughout its history by any other authority but the British, if only nominally, and the Anguillians themselves.

Nothing further is heard of Crab Island until five years later in 1688. Governor-in-Chief **Sir Nathaniel Johnson** raised⁶ the matter again in February 1688. He reported that some of what he called his poorer Leeward

⁴ George Suckling, An Historical Account of the Virgin Islands in the West Indies (1780).

⁵ Charles de Rochefort, Histoire Naturelle et Morale des Isles Antilles de L’Amerique (1658).

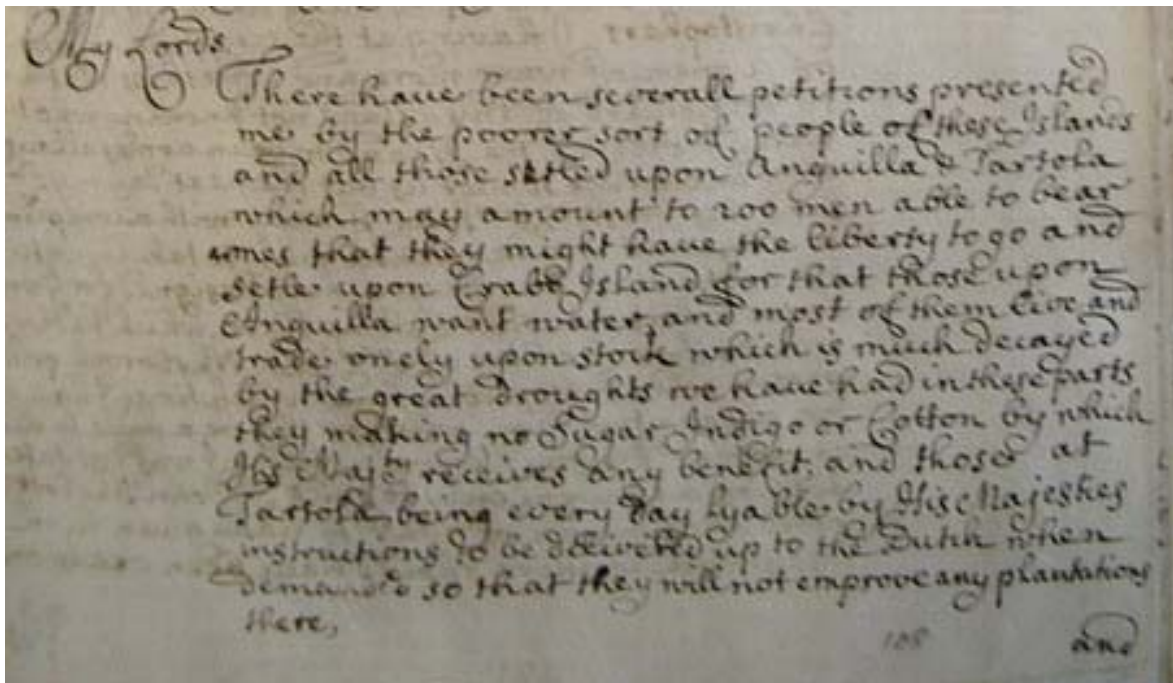
⁶ CO.1/64, No 25, folio 105: Johnson to the Committee on 20 February 1688.

Island subjects were seeking his permission to settle Crab Island in the name of the English Crown. He wrote (see ill 1):

My Lords, there have been several petitions presented me by the poorer sort of people of these islands and all those settled upon Anguilla and Tortola which may amount to 200 men able to bear arms that they might have the liberty to go and settle upon Crab Island for that those upon Anguilla want water and most of them live and trade only upon stock which is much decayed by the great drought we have had in these parts, they making no sugar, indigo or cotton by which His Majesty receives any benefit, and those at Tortola being every day liable by His Majesty's instructions to be delivered up to the Dutch when demanded, so that they will not improve any plantations there, and those in these islands not having wherewith to subsist are daily going to other parts.

But I have for the present deferred them till His Majesty's pleasure be further known, because the said island is so near a neighbour to Porto Rico which is well settled by the Spaniards, though it be an island well-watered and of larger extent than any of these and in all other respects very fit for the produce of what our islands afford, so that if His Majesty shall think fit either to settle that or any other of the adjacent islands which of right he hath laid claim to, I should be glad to know His

Majesty's pleasure that if I might take his frigate and some of those forces which are at St Christopher with ammunition proportionable, I would not doubt by God's assistance to go down and to settle those people there so as to give His Majesty a good account of them and to make no breach of the Articles of Peace with the Spaniards, designing no attack upon them but to defend ourselves in maintaining the King's just right.



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All which I refer to your Lordships judgements
and beg a speedy answer fearing els some of them
may venture without leave and so be cut off as they
were formerly at Tortola.

2. Dispatch from Sir Nathaniel Johnson to the Council of
20 February 1688: CO.1/64. (UK National Archives®)

*All which I refer to your Lordships' judgment and beg
a speedy answer fearing else some of them may venture
without leave and so be cut off as they were formerly at
Tortola (see ill 2).*

A few months later, Governor Johnson's qualms notwithstanding, the second attempt on Crab Island took place. He wrote⁷ that he permitted about fifty men to go to Crab Island from Nevis. He granted them no commission, so that they were without the protection of official sanction for the settlement. Governor Esmit again sent him a diplomatic note of protest.⁸ In this 1688 protest he wrote that he planted the Danish flag on Crab Island in 1682 and claimed the island for the Danish King. He related that in 1683 he placed a Captain with his men on Crab Island when Abraham Howell tried to take possession of it. Since that time, he asserted, the English left Crab Island undisturbed.

From the documents preserved in the National Archives we learn some of the details of this 1688 incident. It was a Scots adventurer from Nevis, **William Pellet**, who led this second attempt of the islanders on Crab Island. He landed there together with a group of his fellow Scots settlers, and with some persons from Anguilla and others from Tortola. These Scots of 1688 were probably Presbyterian refugees from **King James II's** policy to Catholicize Scotland. They would shortly be followed to the West Indies and the Americas by Catholic Scots, persecuted in their turn when the Protestant **King William** and **Queen Mary** came to the throne and

⁷ CO.152/37, No 5, folio 277: Johnson to the Committee on 8 January 1689.

⁸ Calendars of State Papers: Governor Esmit's Protest.

Catholic **King James II** fled to France. The first 50 settlers on Crab were followed by over 200 women, children and slaves. By December 1688, there were over 250 English and Scots settlers, including many Anguillians, on Crab. One of these adventurers was one of Abraham Howell's sons, exactly which one is not stated. They elected Pellet their captain and leader. Their troubles were just about to begin.

On 23 December 1688, two Spanish ships, a sloop and a brigantine, arrived at Crab Island from their assault on Anguilla. There, we have previously seen⁹, they were beaten off by Abraham Howell and the Anguilla militia. We also have the depositions of **Mannin Rogers**,¹⁰ **Peter Simmons**, **Edward Noy**, **John Price**, and **John Hilton**.¹¹ As Rogers and Simmons explained, the Spanish flotilla arrived at Crab Island and anchored offshore. The Spanish captured Hilton's sloop Neptune anchored in the bay and made Hilton and his men their prisoners. The Spanish captain next sent a boat with a white flag of truce and three men to the little settlement on the island intending to trick them. The Spanish landed unopposed and explained to the settlers that they were sent to find out whether the settlers were French or English. If they were French, they were in peril. However, as they were

⁹ Chapter 6: War and the Settlers.

¹⁰ The name Manning Rogers crops up in other early Anguillian and Tortolan deeds. It is likely that he was one of the early Anguillian settlers of Tortola.

¹¹ All of which are enclosed with Johnson's dispatch No 5 of 8 January 1689.

English they would not be hurt. They asked Captain Pellet to come with them to their ship as their captain wanted to meet him. If he did so, they promised, not one hair on his head would be touched. They warned him that if he did not go voluntarily with them, their commander would sail closer to the shore and destroy them all with his great guns.

Pellet replied that he and his men did not fear for they had enough ammunition to defend the place. He explained that they were there in Crab Island by the King of Great Britain. Their instructions were to defend the island from the Danes or anyone else who would attempt to settle there or to oppose their presence. He claimed that he was prepared to defend the settlement against any enemy that should oppose them. He and his men would fight until they died. However, if the Spanish captain would come on shore, he would receive such entertainment as the island could afford.

The ship's boat with its flag of truce then returned to the Spanish ships. The reconnaissance party accomplished its purpose, which was to determine the approximate number of settlers and the presence of any cannon. Once they were safely back on board, the Spaniards commenced firing at the settlement. They fired both cannon and small arms in the direction of the settlers

on the beach. Pellet ordered his men to lie down low and to secure themselves from the shot.

Rogers reported that Pellet's initial courage seems to have melted away. He lay down behind a barricade with his eyes shut fast and called out to his men not to fire back. Rogers approached Pellet and found him lying down against a barricade on his back and with his eyes closed. Rogers asked permission for the men to fire back. Pellet's response, Rogers claimed, was, "*Let no man fire on pain of death.*"

Simmons on his part testified that the cannon shot cut down the limbs of the trees around. Several of the men became frightened which caused them to run back from the beach into the forest. Rogers then asked for permission for the men to withdraw to a safer spot. But, Pellet ordered them to stay where they were, and he lay back down again behind the barricade. Simmons told him that several of the men were running away and asked Pellet to call them back. Pellet, still lying low on his back called out to the deserters, "*Where are you running? What are you afraid of?*" He shouted to them to come back. But, they did not heed his call.

Several other men came up to Pellet and demanded that they be permitted to fight back. But the majority sided with Pellet in refusing to return fire against the superior Spanish force. They persuaded him to surrender

the island, provided the Spaniards would give them a vessel to carry them off in safety.

When the men saw that Pellet would not permit them to resist the landing, a great many withdrew to the forest to save themselves. Rogers and Simmons and the others who did not side with Pellet took to the woods and hid themselves until the Spaniards departed. Among the Anguillians who managed to save themselves were Mannin Rogers and Abraham Howell's eldest son. Another of Abraham Howell's sons who is not named perished in the enterprise. If he took after his father, the likelihood is that he gave his life ensuring the safe escape of his countrymen.

Pellet was content to go along with the suggestion that he surrender the settlement. He approached the water's edge waving a white flag of surrender. **Ensign Mathews** ran at him with the butt end of his gun to knock him down. Pellet dodged the blow, and turned to the remaining men and asked if they really wanted to fight. **Richard Hays** called out that there were not twenty men left who wished to fight. At that, Pellet became convinced that there was no point in putting up any resistance. He continued waving the white flag.

The Spaniards sent a small boat to the shore, and Pellet, accompanied by **Michael Webb**, went on board one of the Spanish ships. The Spanish then sent ashore

for the settlers to give up their guns. When asked why they should want to disarm the settlers who did not return their fire, the Spanish replied that their commander was concerned that they might come on board the ships in the night and make a disturbance. The settlers then surrendered their small arms. The Spanish confiscated about seventeen guns and some swords and ammunition. It seems that the Anguillians had no cannon, and resistance against the Spanish ships would probably have been futile. The Spaniards permitted the settlers to spend the night quietly on shore.

The next morning, Pellet sent a note to the remaining settlers on shore. He ordered them to bring their wives, children, slaves and private possessions to the settlement. The Spaniards wanted to examine them. He warned that if they did not do so immediately, the Spaniards would send ashore 300 cow killers or buccaneers to destroy them all, men, women and children. However, the majority of Anguillians appear to have remained in hiding. The Spaniards sent an ex-slave, **Tony Croker**, together with some of the surrendered settlers into the forest to hunt for the rest of those that were hiding. Several, both white and black, were found and surrendered themselves. The Spaniards promised the settlers that if they would bring in their slaves they would take nothing else, and would let them

continue with the settlement. However, not capturing as many of the fugitives as they hoped, they kept watch ashore to seize any more of the people who might wander into the settlement.

Edward Noy explained what happened next. He arrived at Crab Island on board his sloop at about 10:00 PM on the night of 27 December and anchored offshore. He hailed the settlement, expecting to find all things as normal. No one replied to his shout at first. He called out several times to **Peter Winkle** whom he knew was among the settlers. Eventually **Peter Simmons** responded. When they were sure of each other's identity, Simmons called out to him that the island was cut off by the Spaniards and most of the inhabitants taken away. Noy then landed on the island and discovered that the settlement was ruined. He found between 40 and 50 survivors, both white and black, whom he transported to the various islands they belonged to, including St Thomas and Anguilla.

As we have seen, Abraham Howell did not accompany those that followed William Pellet to Crab Island. He remained in Anguilla. He was in Anguilla, we recall, on 21 December when the same two Spanish vessels attacked the island before going on to Crab Island. While the Spaniards were rebuffed in their assault on Anguilla, they had no such difficulty in dealing with the

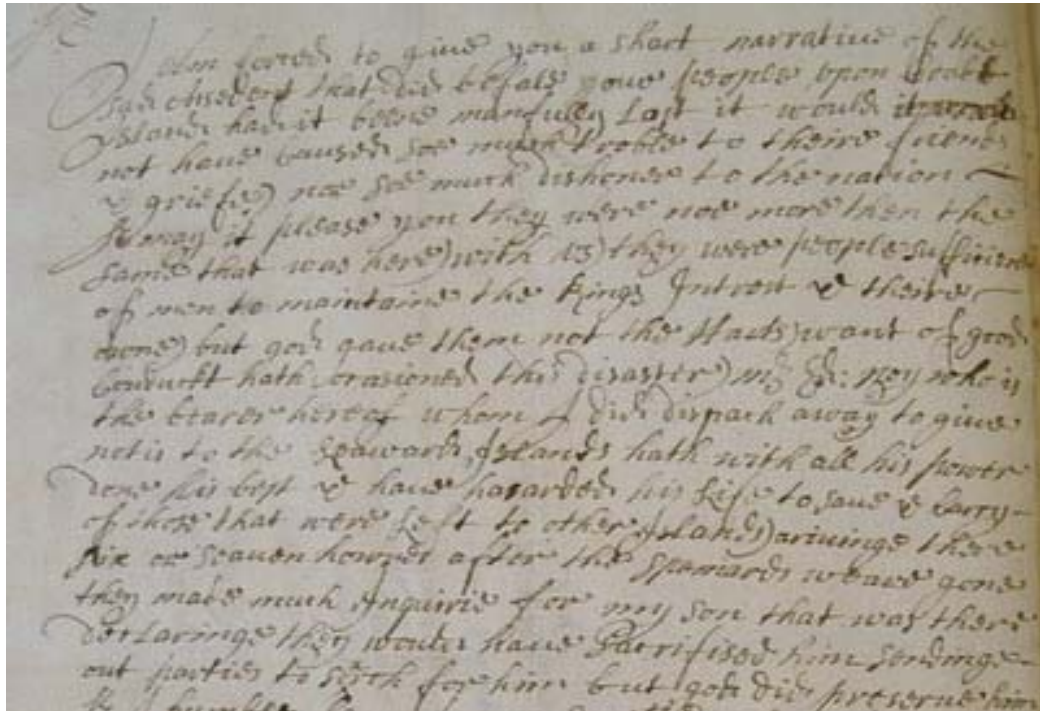
settlers on Crab. As Howell lamented in his 1689 letter¹² to Governor Johnson (see ill 3),

Had it been manfully lost, it would not have caused so much trouble to their friends, and grief too, nor so much dishonour to the nation . . . There were sufficient men to maintain the King's interest and their own, but God gave them not the hands. Want of good conduct has occasioned this disaster. Mr Edward Noy, who is the bearer hereof, whom I did dispatch away to give notice to the Leeward Islands has with all his power done his best, and has hazarded his life to save and carry off those that were lost to other islands. Arriving there six or seven hours after the Spaniards had gone, they made inquiries for my son who was there, declaring they would not have sacrificed him, sending out parties to search for him, but God did preserve him.

I humbly beg of your Excellency to be kind to the said Noy in case he has any occasion, he having done much on behalf of His Majesty's subjects. They have carried away from Crab Island, according to the best computation, two hundred and fifty persons, men, women and children, black and white. I humbly beg of your Excellency that you will be pleased to furnish me with a barrel or two of powder and some lead that you may not have the like relation of us. It is nothing other than the

¹² CO.152/37, No 5, folio 348, enclosure 6: Howell to Johnson on 6 January 1689.

lack of supplies that caused this disaster and so much dishonour to our nation.



3. Extract from Abraham Howell's letter of 6 January 1689 to Governor Johnson. CO.152/37. (UK National Archives®)

Governor Johnson had the last word on the conduct of the Spaniards in their destruction of the settlement on Crab Island. He wrote,¹³

Those of Crab Island were inexperienced men, and commanded by a villainous coward (though he had formerly been otherwise esteemed) which occasioned their disaster; yet I cannot but observe the perjuries and stratagems made use of by their enemies to encompass their design, such as I am sure an honest heathen, pagan,

¹³ CO.152/37, dispatch No 5, folio 338: Johnson to the Committee on 20 April 1689.

or Mahometan would be ashamed to put in practice, but nothing better is to be expected of such sort of Spaniards as people the West Indies . . .

From Governor Hamilton¹⁴ later in 1716, we learn that the Spaniards took the prisoners to Santo Domingo. There, they were kept for several months before they were released. While in captivity, he reported, they were treated as slaves by the Spaniards. They were, as he described it, put to all the hardships that slaves usually underwent at that time. In 1689 **Sir Francis Watson** commanding the Leeward Islands station sent HMS Drake to bring the prisoners back from Santo Domingo. How many of them survived and returned to the Leeward Islands we do not know.

With conditions in Anguilla deteriorating during the Nine Years War (1689-1697), Anguillians continued to emigrate in numbers to the Virgin Islands, including Crab Island. Captain **Thomas Southey** recorded for the year 1694 that about this time some Englishmen with their families removed from Anguilla to the Virgin Islands where they developed considerable estates. As in Anguilla, government in Tortola was in the beginning quite informal. They nominated the deputy governor and his Council from among themselves. They did the same when they landed on Crab Island.

¹⁴ CO.152/11, No 6: Hamilton to the Committee on 10 April 1716.

In spite of all, the lure of Crab remained. So long as Abraham Howell was alive, pressure was repeatedly brought on the Governor-in-Chief to authorize the Anguillians to settle on Crab Island. Those who left Anguilla and emigrated to Tortola and Virgin Gorda needed no permission. Those islands being British, no consent was required. In the following Chapter we will look at this indomitable old man's final effort in 1717, in the midst of a terrible drought, to move his people to greener pastures on Crab Island.