

CHAPTER 9

THE LURE OF CRAB

One of the strangest chapters in the story of the first generation of Anguillians concerns their repeated efforts to colonise the island named by the Spanish after its Amerindian name 'Vieques', meaning little island. Vieques lies seven miles east of Puerto Rico, and is now a part of that US territory (see illus 1). The English-speaking Anguillians sometimes called it 'Bieque'. The name is easily explained. The Castilian version of Spanish pronounces the letter 'v' as if it were a 'b', as in the familiar 'Benezuela'. To the English-speaking Anguillians, it seemed the Puerto Ricans were calling Vieques [Vi-ai-que] 'Bi-que'. English speakers do not normally emphasise the last syllable. Rather, they place the emphasis on the first syllable. So, the Spanish sounding 'Bi-que' becomes in English 'Bieque'. It was the Danes who named the island 'Krabbeninsel' or Isle of Crabs. The Anguillians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more commonly knew it as 'Crab' Island.



1. Vieques, lying a few miles to the east of Puerto Rico.

Following a number of unsuccessful earlier attempts, the Danes began their official settlement of St Thomas in in the year 1672. They gradually took possession also of St John, and later of St Croix in 1733. Governors Lorentz and Esmit made efforts to add Crab Island to the King of Denmark's Caribbean holdings. From 1689 to 1693, the Danes of Brandenburg-Prussia controlled Crab Island. But continuous disputes with the Spanish, and with the Scots in 1698, culminated in Crab Island being formally given up to the Spanish in 1811. The Danish West Indies were finally sold to the United States in 1917.

The story of Anguilla's interest in Crab Island begins in 1683. It is the ultimately tragic epic of various Anguillian attempts to settle Crab Island. The Danes,

who occupied 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 the Danes and the English. These Danish and Spanish interests in Crab Island combined to defeat the Anguillian efforts to find an alternative home, a refuge, from their dusty and impoverished island, parched and made nearly uninhabitable as a result of the long drought of 1680 to 1725.

The Anguillians were attracted to Crab because it was so much greener and more fertile than their drought-affected island. As a sea-faring people, they particularly noted its excellent harbour. They knew Crab Island well, as their ships habitually visited it in search of valuable dye-wood and building timber. They traded these commodities with the merchants in the other Leeward Islands, where it was used in local construction or exported to Europe.

In pushing their case, the Anguillians claimed that Crab Island was unoccupied by either the Spaniards from Puerto Rico or the neighbouring Danes in St Thomas. They considered it was available for the English Crown to authorise their settling it.

Anguillians were involved in three attempts to colonize the island. The first was in the year 1683, then

in 1688, and then again in 1717. We shall deal here only with their first two attempts of 1683 and 1688. Later, we shall look at their final, abortive attempt of 1717.

We first learn of the intense interest of the Anguillians in Crab Island in August 1683 when Governor in Chief Sir William Stapleton wrote a dispatch to the Committee for Foreign Plantations in London.¹ He revealed that he was petitioned by the inhabitants of Anguilla to let them settle Crab Island. He wrote that he refused to give them permission for fear that the Spaniards and buccaneers of Puerto Rico might cut them off in one night. He sympathised with the Anguillians, since, as he put it, "*Anguilla is fit for little or nothing but goats.*" Throughout the correspondence, he was generally supportive of the Anguillian initiative to settle Crab Island. He recommended to London 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. But, at no time did the English authorities in London respond by showing any sign of encouraging the Anguillians in this enterprise.

In spite of what he wrote, the Anguillians in 1683 under the leadership of Abraham Howell did more than merely ask Stapleton for permission. Without waiting to hear whether they had permission or not, they actually

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

went off to occupy Crab. Then, as now, Anguillian leadership followed the dictum, *“If it is a good idea, go ahead and do it. It is much easier to apologise than it is to get permission.”*²

The mass descent of Anguillians on Crab Island caused Adolph Esmitt, the Danish Governor of St Thomas, to dispatch a military force under the command of a captain to Crab Island. He also signed and delivered to the Governor in Chief in Antigua a formal diplomatic protest. For one reason or another, probably more related to the Danish Captain and the strength of his military force than to the official protest, the Anguillians under Howell showed discretion. They ceased temporarily on this occasion to occupy Crab Island, at least in any large numbers. Howell and his men returned to Anguilla, frustrated, but, as we shall see, still determined to claim Crab Island for themselves.

We know that Howell returned to Anguilla. We see him in the following year 1684 granting land to John Lake at Stoney Ground.³ The year after, in a 1685 dispatch to London on the state of his colony of the Leeward Islands, Governor Stapleton mentioned that Howell was still the deputy governor of Anguilla.⁴ We also know from Chief

² Made famous by US Admiral Grace Hopper.

³ Chapter 5: The Second Generation.

⁴ CO.1/58, No 126, folio 370: Stapleton to the Committee with a List of the Deputy Governors of the Leeward Islands.

Justice George Suckling of Tortola that around this time Anguillians were settling in the Virgin Islands.⁵ “*The toil and merit,*” he wrote, “*of first cultivating the Virgin Islands were reserved for the English of Anguilla*”. Chief Justice Suckling claimed that Anguilla was first possessed by English, French and Dutch persons. Some of them, he wrote, sailed from Anguilla 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 in 1658, is that the English alone first settled Anguilla.⁶ 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. However, the island was never, throughout its history, possessed by any other European nation.

Nothing further is heard of Crab Island in the correspondence about Anguilla until five years later, in 1688. The long drought, which began in about 1680 and which was to last until about 1725, was now well under way. The poor and landless class of Antiguans, Nevisians, Kittians and Anguillians were desperate to get

⁵ George Suckling, An Historical Account of the Virgin Islands in the West Indies (1780).

⁶ Charles de Rochefort, Histoire Naturelle et Morale des Isles Antilles de L’Amerique (1658).

fertile land that they could work to ensure their survival. That, Crab Island possessed in abundance.

In February 1688, Governor-in-Chief Sir Nathaniel Johnson raised with London the matter of the poorer Leeward Island subjects, including the Anguillians, wishing to move to Crab Island.⁷ He still had not heard back from London in reply to his earlier correspondence starting five years previously. He reported that they were seeking his permission to settle Crab Island in the name of the English Crown. He wrote:

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

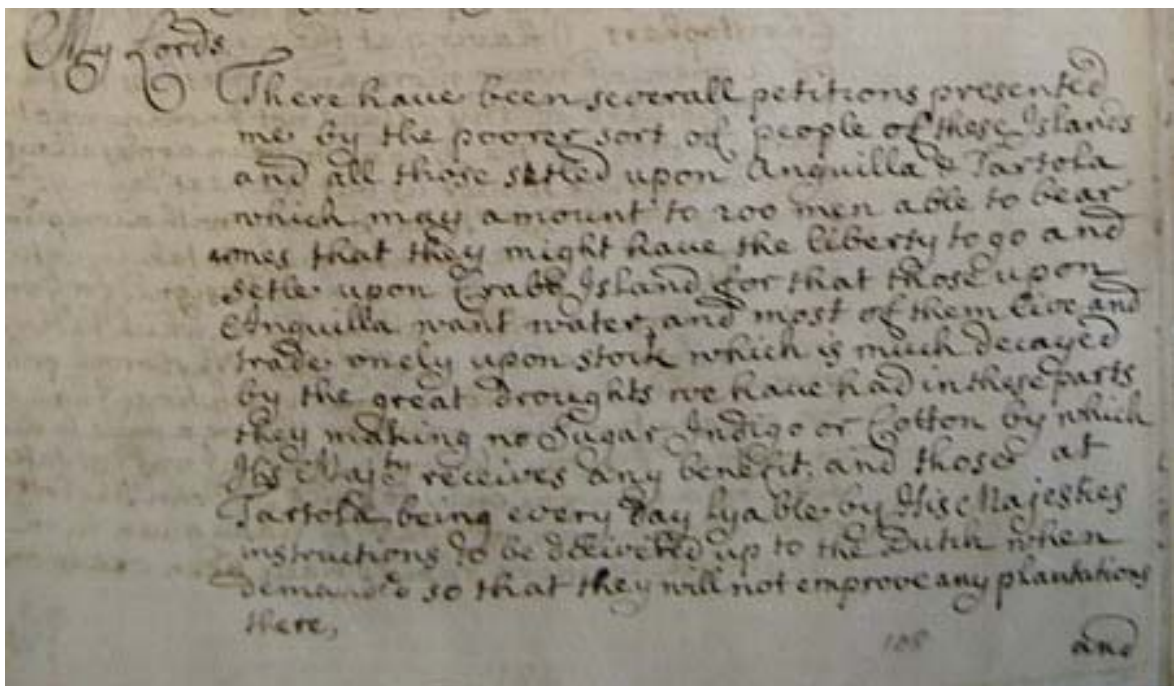
⁷ CO.1/64, No 25, folio 105: Johnson to the Committee on 20 February 1688.

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 deterred 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.

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 illus 2).



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

A few months later, Governor Johnson's qualms about granting permission without word from London notwithstanding, he allowed another attempt at settling Crab Island. He wrote to London that he permitted about

fifty men to go to Crab Island from Nevis.⁸ He granted them no commission, so that they were without the protection of official sanction for the settlement. Governor Esmit of St Thomas again sent him a diplomatic note of protest.⁹ In this 1688 protest he wrote that in 1682 he planted the Danish flag on Crab Island and claimed the island for the Danish King. He related how 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. He therefore protested at this latest attempt by the English to settle illegally on a Danish island.

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 to settle on Crab Island. He landed there with a group of his fellow Scots, accompanied by persons from Anguilla and others from Tortola. Two of these adventurers were Abraham Howell's sons, but exactly which ones we are not told. They elected Pellet to be their captain and leader. 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 Roman Catholic Scots,

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

⁹ Calendars of State Papers: Governor Esmit's Protest.

persecuted in their turn when the Protestant King William and Queen Mary came to the throne and Catholic King James II fled to France. The correspondence reveals that the first 50 settlers on Crab were followed by over 200 women, children and slaves. By December 1688, there were over 350 English and Scots settlers, including many Anguillians, on Crab. 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 failed assault on Anguilla which has been previously described. On Anguilla, they were beaten off by Abraham Howell and his militia.¹⁰ They were to have more success on Crab.

From the enquiry into the debacle conducted by Governor Johnson, we have the depositions of Mannin Rogers,¹¹ Peter Simmons, Edward Noy, John Price, and John Hilton.¹² 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.

¹⁰ Chapter 6: War and the Settlers.

¹¹ 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.

¹² All of which are enclosed with Johnson's dispatch No 5 of 8 January 1689.

and those in these Islands not having wherewithth
to subsist are daily going to other parts, but I
have for the present deferr'd them till His
Maj^{ty}s pleasure be farther known, because the
said Island is so neer 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 Maj^{ty} shall think fit
either to settle that or any other of the adjacent
Islands which of right he hath laid claim to, I
shoud be glad to know his Maj^{ty}s pleasure, that
if I might take his frigate and some of those forces
which are at St Christophers with ammunition
proportionable I would not doubt by Gods assistance
to go down and to settle those people there so as
to give His Maj^{ty} 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 our selves in maintaining the Kings just right
All which I refer to your Lordships judgements
and beg a speedy answer fearing as some of them
may venture without leave and so be cut off as they
were formerly at Tortola.

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

The Spanish landed unopposed and explained to the settlers that they were sent to find out whether they were French or English. If they were French, they were in peril. However, as they were 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 did not fall for their stratagem. He 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 authority of the King of England. 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 was prepared to defend the settlement against any enemy that should oppose them. He and his men would fight until they died. However, he counter-offered, 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's response was to order his men to

lie down low and to secure themselves from the Spanish shot.

Rogers reported that Pellet's initial courage seems to have melted away. He lay down behind a barricade 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 tight. 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 from the beach into the forest. Rogers 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 then 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 pay any attention to him.

Several other men then crawled up to Pellet through the cannon and musket fire and demanded that they be permitted to fight back. But the majority of the Scots 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 in courage, 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, turning to the remaining men, 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 more 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 a boat to the shore demanding that the settlers 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 gave up and surrendered their small arms. The Spanish confiscated about seventeen guns and some swords and ammunition. It seems that, as they had no cannon, they decided that resistance against the heavily armed Spanish ships was futile. The Spaniards permitted the surrendered 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 give up and bring their wives, children, slaves and private possessions to the settlement which the Spanish now controlled. He explained that the Spaniards just wanted to interview 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 next 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 remaining hidden settlers that if they would bring in their slaves they would take nothing else, and would let them continue with the settlement. However, the survivors knew better than to trust the promises of the Spanish and remained in hiding. Not capturing as many of the fugitives as they hoped, the Spanish kept watch ashore to seize any more of the people who might wander into the settlement. At the end of the third day they gave up waiting and sailed away to Puerto Rico.

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, four days after the first arrival of the Spanish expedition, 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 that most of the inhabitants were 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.

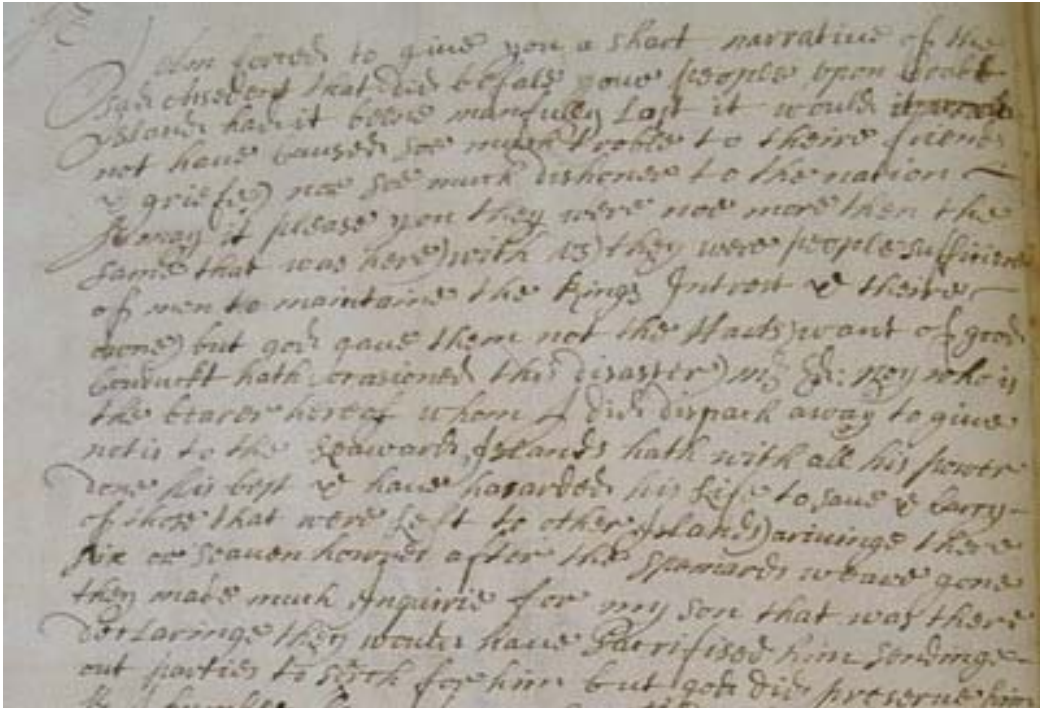
As we have seen, Abraham Howell did not accompany those that followed William Pellet to Crab Island. He was in Anguilla, we recall, some days earlier, on 21 December, when the same two Spanish vessels attacked the island before going on to Crab Island. While the Spaniards were rebuffed in their assault on Anguilla, they had no such difficulty in dealing with the settlers on Crab. As Howell lamented in his 1689 letter to Governor Johnson (see illus 3):¹³

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.

¹³ CO.152/37, No 5, folio 348, enclosure 6: Howell to Johnson on 6 January 1689.

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 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,¹⁴

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,

¹⁴ CO.152/37, dispatch No 5, folio 338: Johnson to the Committee on 20 April 1689.

*pagan, 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 . . .*

Nine years later, the Scots were to return to Crab Island, then firmly in Danish hands. After numerous attempts to buy the island were unsuccessful, the Scots fleet in 1698, en route to the doomed Scots settlement of Darien in Panama, made landfall on Crab and took possession of it in the name of the 'Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies'. Scots sovereignty over the island proved short-lived, however, as a Danish ship arrived shortly after the Scots fleet departed and reclaimed the island in the name of the King of Denmark.

From Governor Hamilton writing later, we learn that the Spaniards took the prisoners to Santo Domingo.¹⁵ 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 naval 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.

¹⁵ CO.152/11, No 6: Hamilton to the Committee on 10 April 1716.

With conditions in Anguilla deteriorating during the Nine Years War (1689-1697), Anguillians continued to emigrate in numbers to the Virgin Islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, St Croix and St Thomas. Captain Thomas Southey recorded for the year 1694 that at 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 their own deputy governor and his Council from among themselves. We saw they did the same thing when they landed on Crab Island.

In spite of all the tragic outcomes, the lure of Crab remained. So long as Abraham Howell was alive, he repeatedly brought pressure on the Governor-in-Chief to permit him and his fellow Anguillians to settle on Crab Island. If permission to occupy Crab Island was not forthcoming, the desperate and starving Anguillians had alternatives available to them in the Virgin Islands. Those who left Anguilla and emigrated to St Croix and St Thomas did so illegally, as they became Danish subjects. Those who shipped out to Tortola and Virgin Gorda needed no permission to do so. Those islands were British, so that no consent was required.

In the following Chapter we will look at the final effort in 1717 of this indomitable old man, Abraham

Howell, in the closing years of the long and terrible drought, to move his people to greener pastures on Crab Island.