



The Remarkable Legacy of Captain R. E. Foote (Cap'n Foote) in Belize

Richard Elsworth Foote was born in Pembroke, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia on 26th March 1881 and died in Hebron, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia on 17th April 1959, at 78 years of age. What happened in between made a lasting contribution to Belize.

Captain Foote was of the fifth generation of his family who lived in Yarmouth. Prior to that, they had spent five generations in Salem, Massachusetts. The Foote who came from England, Pasco Foote, was born in South Wiltshire in southwest England in 1604 and died in Salem in 1670. Other Footes' seem to have come into the Yarmouth area from Scotland. There are many Footes' in the area today.

It could be said that Richard was three Footed, and on a couple of counts. His father, Isaac, married a Foote, Adelaide, in 1871, and they had a daughter. Adelaide died around 1876, whereupon Isaac married her sister, Henrietta Foote, in 1878. They had three boys; the eldest died as an infant, and Richard was the youngest. Things settled out with Richard having an older brother and an older half sister.

Captain Foote's wife, Lennie George Cann, was born in Cheggin, Yarmouth County, close to Richard's birthplace, seven months after him, on 25th October 1881. She outlived her husband by seven years, until November of 1965. Married on, oddly enough, 21st September 1907, they enjoyed 51 years of marriage.¹ They had no children, which, as we'll see, opened the door to a seafaring life together.

Foote was obviously sufficiently educated, but quite likely went to sea at a young age, as many in Nova Scotia did. Craig (1966) mentions a long career in sailing ships. In Foote's time, the square rigged barquentines and brigantines that one tends to associate with the phrase "sailing ships" had largely given way to fore and aft rigged schooners.



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

The Captain's wife	2
Lure of the Caribbean	2
The Franklin Baker Story.....	3
The HM Beliveau	3
The Lobster Industry	4
The Sponge Industr	4
His Enduring Legacy.....	4

SPECIAL POINT OF INTEREST

- Cap'n Foote lived in the very location in which the One South Place Hotel is located. Every thing possible was done to restore the original architectural features of this elegant colonial home and to keep his amazing story alive by sharing it with Guests.

SHIPS AND THEIR CREWS

While the square riggers had certain advantages in running downwind in the trades and in heavy weather, they required larger crews. Sailing vessels were now operating in a market niche defined by steamships, and economy was paramount. Surprisingly, perhaps, their market niche persisted even up to WWII. The cargo sizes were such that the vessels could load in a single port. They were often bulk cargos that took some time to load, and the lay by time of the sailing vessels was less costly than that of a steamship. Some

seven to eight hundred three or four masted schooners were built in the Canadian Maritime Provinces, the majority of them in Nova Scotia, from the latter part of the 1800's through the 1920's.

They were built for the provinces' exports of salt fish, lumber, gypsum and, to an extent, coal. Much of the lumber and fish went to the Caribbean (as anyone who has breakfasted on ackee and salt fish in Jamaica can attest), but trading was done with the U.S., Africa and Europe also.

"One vessel, the *Vogue*, launched in 1917, "in one year carried out the following voyages: loaded lumber at Bridgewater, N.S., for New York, from there with coal to Santo Domingo City, in ballast to Belize and loaded coconuts for New York, coal to Halifax, flour to St. John's, Newfoundland, dry fish to Brazil, coco beans to New York and back to Halifax, with coal".

THE CAPTAIN'S WIFE

Lennie Foote was on the Puerto Rico trip and on the first Belize trip. The immigration manifest lists her as "stewardess". In actual fact, she was "the old woman", as the captain's wife was always known, according to Parker, "no matter her age or her appearance".⁸ It was not uncommon for captains to take their wives along, and the ones who went loved it. They particularly looked forward to the social life in foreign ports, both ashore and amongst other vessels that had the Mrs. aboard.

Parker cites one captain whose rules for his wife were to "not interfere with the cook, to keep absolutely clear of the galley and to give no orders of any kind to the crew".⁹ These seem to be common sense rules, so they were probably universally observed. The galley was located forward, adjacent to and aft of the fo'c'sle; the cabins of the captain, mate and steward aft. The cargo hold separated the two, and meals for the aft saloon were carried aft on deck by the steward, so the galley rules would not have been hard to observe.

FOOTE PROBABLY HAD THE CARIBBEAN HOOK SET IN HIM EARLY ON, AS PARKER (1960) SO ELOQUENTLY DESCRIBES...

"The days in the tropic ports flew past as the crew discharged the cargo in the sweltering heat. At knockoff time, a wash-up, supper aboard, then off ashore in the gathering darkness of the tropical nights that seemed too good to be true. This sort of life caught many a young fellow on his first voyage. It was wonderful to leave home with ice and snow over all, with hard days running down to the moderate weather, to cross the Gulf Stream and find the air fine and warm, the sea a new colour. To a young fellow, the first time in the tropics struck him so forcibly he never got over it – the light-green sea fringing the white sand beaches, waving palms, exotic blooms, and the pungent aromatic spicy smell that pervades almost every tropic port."

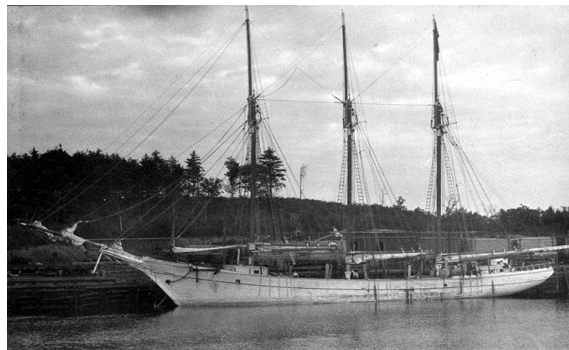
The keys to understanding the voyages of 1918 and thereafter, as well as the subsequent thirty years of Captain Foote's life, are found in a news snippet in "The Tampa Tribune", 3rd December, 1919:

"SCHOONER BELLIVEAU IS SOLD TO KIRKCONNELLS

Schooner M. A. Belliveau (British) has changed owners, it was announced yesterday. Barton H. Smith, local manager of the Franklin Baker Company, former owners, has sold the Belliveau, through William M. Filder, to R. B. Kirkconnell, Charles G. Kirkconnell, Nathaniel R. Kirkconnell and Moses I Kirkconnell. R. B. Kirkconnell is master of the Leonie O. Louse. It is probable that C. G. Kirkconnell will sail as master of the Belliveau on its next voyage. He was captain of the schooner Campania until he sold it as announced a few days ago. The Belliveau is a three-masted schooner about five years old, of 199 tons net."

The Franklin Baker Company is in the coconut business. The company still exists and, with plants located in the Philippines, is one of the largest global suppliers of desiccated coconut products, according to the company website. Founded in Philadelphia in 1894, in 1913 Franklin Baker moved their manufacturing facilities to Brooklyn. Following an ownership change of the *Belliveau*, it seems that Captain Foote was delivering coconuts to Brooklyn in the company ship.

In April of 1918 the *Belliveau* entered New York after a 22 day passage from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. In June, she concluded a 21 day voyage from Belize. In September, a 25 day trip from Roatan, and in December, a 23 day passage from Belize. The ship's complement was seven, which was normal for a tern schooner: Captain Foote, master; a mate, a steward (cook) and 4 AB's (able bodied seamen). Ethnicities on board tended to be European-extraction mates and stewards, with a wider assortment of A.B's: San Blas Indians from Panama; a Hawaiian from Honolulu; men of "African birth" from Columbia, the British West Indies, and the Dutch West Indies; a French "Negrew" and an English "Negrew".⁷



Franklin Baker's Product and the MA Belliveau loading lumber in Nova Scotia – photo kindness of John Belliveau

By 1919 the Franklin Baker Company was apparently able to process coconuts in Tampa, FL, a move that makes total sense, given the origins of the raw product. The "Tampa Times" of 24th March 1919 notes the arrival of *Bellivean* (Am.), Foote, from Belize, with 800,000 coconuts for Barton H. Smith." This was to become a steady pattern. She would load lumber for Cuba for the return trip to Belize or Roatan, as the case may be. Sometimes she would go up on the Tampa Steam Ways for repairs. Captain Foote last loaded lumber for Cuban ports in August, and presumably did his last coconut delivery thereafter. After the sale date, an interim captain made a couple of trips, and then C. G. Kirkconnell took over as planned; coconut deliveries continued uninterrupted.

Although Captain Foote was out of a job driving the truck, so to speak, it seems that the company had bigger plans for him. And, at age 38, Captain Foote was probably ready to embrace whatever shore-based plans there were. The relationship with the company endured for Captain Foote's entire professional life, albeit we can't say that it didn't evolve and change over time. When Foote travelled from Belize in the early years, he tended to list his occupation as "agent". In later years he used "exporter". We can imagine that the Footes' settled in Belize soon after the sale of the *Belliveau*; when Captain Foote and Lennie sailed home to Yarmouth from Belize on a passenger vessel in 1921, Foote declared his permanent address to be Belize, and the name of the nearest relative or friend in Belize as the Baker Coconut Co. When he and Lennie flew from Havana to Miami on a Pan American Airways flight in 1947, he listed their address in the U.S. as the Barton Smith East Dock, Tampa.

M.A. Belliveau's Story

Whatever Captain Foote's exact career path may have been, we at least know something about his last command, the *M. A. Belliveau*.

The ship was a tern, that is, a three masted schooner, built in Belliveau's cove, Nova Scotia in 1914 by C.C. LeBlanc for Benjamin Belliveau. . The Belliveaus' were a notable ship owning family. They owned seven of these graceful schooners from 1887 to 1933. The *M. A. Belliveau* was 115 feet long on deck, 30.1 feet wide, with a 10 ft. deep hold. She was of 199 net tons (cargo capacity) and 238 tons gross deadweight (cargo plus crew, water, supplies).⁵ We see her under the command of an Acadian Nova Scotian from the Belliveau Cove area, R.V. Comeau, in 1915, delivering a cargo of lumber from Nova Scotia to Bridgeport, Connecticut.⁶ But in 1918 she is found voyaging between the Caribbean and New York under the command of 3 Captain R. E. Foote.

FOOTE AND THE HARBOUR REGATTA

In Foote's day it seems that Canadians were British subjects, as "British" was the nationality Foote provided when travelling. And, indeed, Britain maintained control over Canada's foreign affairs until the 1930's. In any case, Foote apparently fit very well into colonial society. This can be surmised from a newspaper account of the first harbour regatta, held in 1926, as follows: "the idea originated with the Hon'ble C. D. Douglas Jones, C.M.G., Colonial Secretary and with the assistance of the Hon'ble V. Grey Wilson, Messrs. R. K. Masson, E. J. Hofius, R. E. Foote, T. W. F. Bowman, L. G. Chavannes and A. E. Pollard, the necessary arrangements were made in a comparatively short space of time..."¹⁵

The notice of the regatta, incidentally, is dated March 11, two days after Baron Bliss's death on March 9th. It seems quite likely that the Baron was aware of the planning of the race and that this is what inspired the annual March 9th regatta stipulated in his will. The Baron's yacht, the *Sea King*, marked one end of the starting line in that race.

The Belize Maritime Museum that operated above the water taxi terminal at the bridgefoot in the 1990's had on display a silver trophy cup from that day, inscribed:

Presented by
Mrs. J. A. Burdon
Sailing Dories Competition
Won by
Rock Lobster
Captain R. E. Foote
1926

Mrs. J. A. Burdon was the wife of the popular governor, Major Sir John Alder Burdon, KBE, CMG, MA – well remembered for his monumental *Archives of Belize* and for the Burdon Canal, which provided an inland water route from Belize City to the Sibun River.



FOOTE'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE LOBSTER

Captain Foote's most enduring contribution to Belize came early on – **the lobster trap**. This happened in the course of operating the first successful canning operation for lobster meat.

Price (1984) says, "*Foote, spent his time travelling the "cocals" on the various cayes. His work, no doubt, provided him with an excellent opportunity to observe the legions of spiny lobsters crawling along the coastal shallows.*"

Foote's canning operation began in 1923 and operated under various permutations until 1935. The fishermen were using bully nets, i.e. the hamo, a sort of short handled scoop net, and catching the lobsters by hand. Foote introduced the Nova Scotia lobster trap. He found that it worked well, but with a difference. Rather than responding to bait, the lobster were using the trap for shelter on the grass beds. Eventually the net throat of the Nova Scotia design was replaced with the same pimento slats that the rest of the trap was made of, and a double entrance was replaced with a single opening. With those changes, the trap design has endured to this day; traps are the main method of catching lobster, at least in the northern part of the country and in the Turneffe lagoon.

Foote's first barge mounted cannery commenced operation at South Water Caye. Yields declined there rather rapidly, and we know today that the deeper water of the inner channel there doesn't lend itself to trap fishing. He moved it to Caye Caulker around 1925, then to Calabash Caye at Turneffe, where it was destroyed in the 1931 hurricane. He replaced it, presumably with an even better cannery, and resumed its operation on the lee side of Caye Caulker. It had a few very successful years there, employing some 25 women and keeping a dozen smacks busy, according to Craig. Around 1935 depression conditions in the U.S. took their toll, and the canning operation was discontinued. In the meantime, fishermen at Caye Caulker were trained in the use of lobster traps, and the Caye remains the center of the trap fishing lobster industry.

FOOTE DESIGNED THE LOBSTER TRAP STILL IN USE TODAY



Craig (1966) says that, "by all accounts, Foote was an energetic man of impressive physical appearance". I have heard the same thing. Absent a photograph, we don't know exactly what made his physical appearance impressive. Foote was 5'10" tall, which, by 1920's standards, was tall. He was generally the tallest man on the immigration manifest of the Belliveau.

CAP'N FOOTE AND THE SPONGE INDUSTRY

The most defining aspect of Foote's tenure in Belize remains his lease of the **Turneffe Atoll**. Along with it endured his close relationship with the people of Caye Caulker. He must have obtained the lease from the outset, as its first expiry date is reported to have been in 1927.¹² In any case, it was obviously renewed from time to time. He developed cocals on the eastern side and utilized Calabash Caye at Harry Jones channel, also on the windward side, as the base of operations. He employed Garifuna labor in the cocals and men from Caye Caulker as carpenters, shipwrights, boat operators, fishermen and – **sponge fishery workers**.

We have seen that Foote's first attempt at utilizing the Turneffe lagoon's resources was with the lobster fishery. Actually, Foote's lease must have really been for the land area of Turneffe for the purpose of growing coconuts. In the mid 1920's, Government divided the lagoon into 1,000 acre concessions for a revival of the sponge industry. Foote was a concessionaire, along with others. Foote's men were trained to harvest wild specimens and put them into the live well of a smack. They would then be transported to a staging area, where they would be broken into small pieces while, again, being kept under water. Each piece would be fastened to a concrete or clay disk about 6 inches in diameter and about the thickness of a johnny cake. The disks had a slightly concave surface and had a small hole in the middle, through which the sponge could be fastened. The disks were then put into a fish car (a small dorey shaped live well that floated at the surface, with the body submerged) and towed out to an area in the lagoon or behind the reef to be released to the bottom.

The sponge industry thrived, with a brief hiatus to recover from the 1931 hurricane. In 1939, however, a sponge disease spread through the Caribbean from the Bahamas, and that was the end of the industry at that time. The anchor disks remain as a reminder. Many have been picked up over the years, and no doubt, many more will be in the future.

For the Caye Caulker men working out of Calabash Caye, it was a period that they remember as the best time of their lives.

It may be that Foote's impressive physical appearance was an outward reflection of a strong moral character. I have always heard that he was a morally upstanding man, and, indeed, he seems to have been a strong influence for good for his men. The one's I've known went on to be outstanding citizens – people like Peter Young, William "Buster" Thomas, Tony Vega, and Gerald Badillo. They all held Captain Foote in admiration.

Life must have had a dream like quality, with one day blending into another. Occasionally something unusual would happen that would make the day stand out. Buster Thomas told of the time a small ship stood into shore from the "blue". It anchored outside the reef at Calabash Caye so that the captain could ask directions. He complained, "I brought a pilot along, and all he's done is take me from coconut tree to coconut tree!"

During the war years, the men were always on the lookout for flotsam and jetsam that drifted ashore, much of it from torpedoed ships. Bales of rubber were a frequent and valuable prize; it was something that Buster Thomas spoke of often. Government created a market by buying it from the salvagers and re-exporting it.

Relying on maritime transportation, Captain Foote operated a number of boats. By and large, they were coconut lighters, a category of boat not seen today. Unlike the sand lighters we see in Belize City that are open day boats, these were cargo vessels that had a small cabin trunk aft and a large cargo hold and hatch amidships. Originally built without power, they needed to sail even in light winds, so had large rigs with topsails and double jibs. With bowsprits and overhanging rounded sterns, they were gorgeous. All of Captain Foote's boats had diesel engines installed., including *Turneffe* – a diesel powered sailing lighter, *Corozal Packet* – two masts, rig unknown, *Admiral* and *the Ave Maria*.



Cap'n Foote Money Gaaan – Lawd, me no know weh ih gaan!”

It would be an easy trip to the newspaper archives in Belmopan to piece together the details of the crime that spawned the song. But, with apologies to readers who know the story better than I, the gist of it, as I have heard it, is that a large iron safe was stolen from the Cap'n Foote Building. The safe was found empty “back a Yabra”, but the culprits were somehow caught in association with the safe. There were arrests and a trial. It's possible that there were some convictions, but the alleged chief perpetrator had an alibi that couldn't be penetrated, and he got off. The money was never recovered, and shortly thereafter the acquitted opened a popular night club. This would have been in the late 1940's.

The story has elements that captivated the public's attention:

It was a bold heist, removing a safe from a downtown building; it must have also been quite an engineering feat.

The alleged chief perpetrator, a son of a prominent creole family, apparently got away with the crime. This gives the story an “Anansi” aspect.¹⁶ The evidence of this is the fact that today, 70 years later, the acquitted is just as associated with the incident as Captain Foote is – and he's never mentioned in the song!



Jim Currie is the author of this wonderful article with his wife Laura providing the research. Thanks to Valdemar Andrade from the Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association for permission to adapt the article for this pamphlet to be used at One South Place where the Captain



THE CAPTAIN—THE LEGEND

Captain Foote and Lennie lived in a house they owned on South Street, two houses off the Southern Foreshore. This building was carefully restored with most of its colonial architectural details intact and is now the One South Place Hotel and Meg's Corner owned by David Craig and Judy Munoz.

Most people in Belize City associated Captain Foote with the “Cap'n Foote Building”, the two story building on the south side of Regent Street between the market



and Scot's Kirk church. The building opened onto the river and served as his warehouse. It's probable that it was being operated for this purpose by the Franklin Baker Company before Captain Foote's day. On his 1921 trip abroad he listed his ad-

dress as number 1 Regent Street.

In addition to utilizing the building for export goods, he did a certain amount of trading locally. According to Denys Bradley, he bought corned (salted and dried) grouper from fishermen for sale to the mahogany camps upriver.

It was probably sometime in the very late 1940's that Captain Foote and Lennie retired to Yarmouth. Maybe the safe incident told him the time had come, who knows?

To summarize Captain Foote's remarkable legacy to Belize, we can enumerate:

1. He gave us the lobster trap, the same one that's in use today.
2. He was an early pioneer in utilizing the lobster resource, taking the perception of lobster from that of a trash fish to that of a valuable product.
3. He was a pioneer in the sponge industry, which, for all we know, may yet make a comeback.
4. His exports of canned lobster, sponges and coconuts assisted the colony's balance of payments for years.
5. He was part of, evidence suggests, the genesis of the Baron Bliss regatta.
6. He formed the characters of a generation or more of young men who went on to make their own contributions to their families and to society!

Although an unwilling participant, Cap'n Foote gave us a timeless Anansi story, complete with ballad. Because of this, his name lives on in the Belizean consciousness!