



# GRAYCLIFF

300 YEARS OF GRAND BAHAMIAN LUXURY



BY AARON SIGMOND & NICK KOLAKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW FURMAN



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# THE HISTORY





**O**VER THE PAST THREE CENTURIES, pirates, world leaders and vacationers have all found themselves drawn to Nassau’s white-sand beaches and tropical air—as well as to Graycliff’s hospitality and elegance.

At the dawn of the 18th century, Charles Town changed its name to Nassau and operated as a favored hideout for buccaneers of every stripe. The British Crown appreciated these sea wolves’ efforts raiding French and Spanish

**“Upon my first visit, there was a magnetism I will never forget; just like love at first sight, the house beckoned me.”** -*Enrico Garzaroli*

ships, but eventually decided the time had come to make the Bahamas a more civilized place. In 1718, King George I appointed Captain Woodes Rogers as the islands’ first governor. Rogers made it clear that pirates had two options: a royal pardon in exchange for settling down, or continue their operations at risk of death.

John Howard Graysmith, one of those famed raiders of Spanish galleons, took the settling-down option. Retiring sometime in the 1720s, he used a

portion of his plunder to build a mansion on a hill overlooking Nassau’s growing streets. Thus begins Graycliff’s story.

Nassau’s newfound calm remained intact until the tumultuous year of 1776, when the newly born American Navy seized it from the British without firing a shot. The occupiers demonstrated fantastic taste by making Graycliff their garrison for a two-week stay. As a parting gift, they left the bars still visible today on the wine cellar’s windows.

By 1783, after a short dalliance with the Spanish, the Bahamas again fell under British control. The following decades saw a series of economic booms, each drawing new waves of people to Nassau. In November 1844, owner Mrs. Nathaniel French advertised the property (then known as Victoria House) as “one of the pleasantest [sic] and most healthy situations of the town.” Thus was born Nassau’s first Inn, offering guests meals at reasonable rates and the use of a carriage.

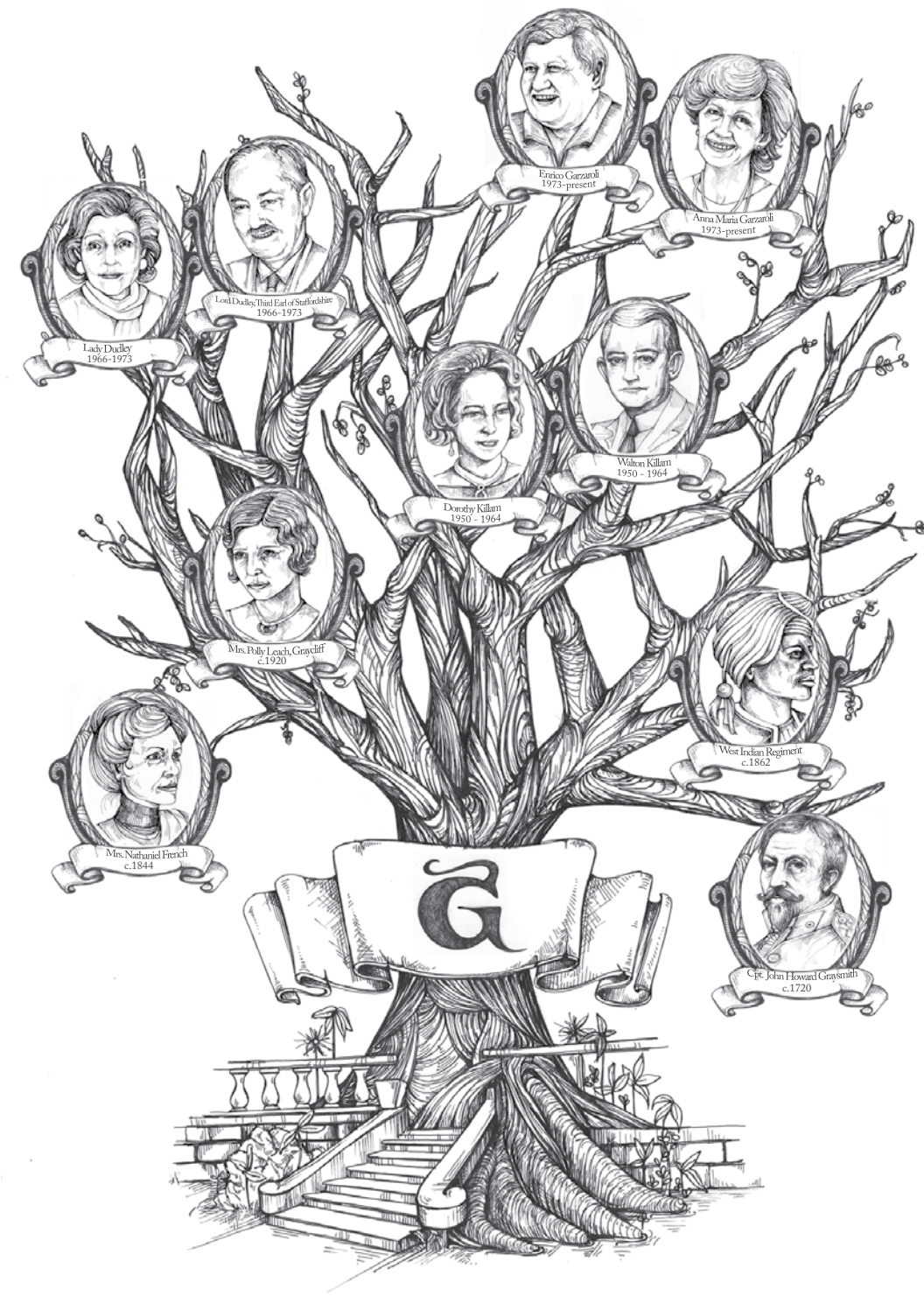
Victoria House soon became known as French’s Hotel, but the mansion’s first stint as lodgings came to a temporary halt a few years later. With the Civil War raging across the United States, Nassau was transformed into a hub for blockade-runners and cotton traders. Graycliff’s elegant rooms were again employed as a garrison, now playing host to the West Indian Regiment.

Preceding pages and this page: Previously unpublished photographs of Graycliff gardens & house, and parlor room, respectively, circa 1900.



# The Many Names of Graycliff

West Hill Street, once described as “the most beautiful street in the Caribbean,” has been Graycliff’s majestic roost for almost 300 years. Over the course of those centuries, this manor house and inn has served as home and hearth to a diverse group of owners—from the retired pirate that built it, to a Lord and Lady, to innkeepers and restaurateurs.



“The sun, sea, wind and rain have all significantly shaped man’s place of abode in the Bahamas.” - Anonymous

Things turned a little livelier in the 20th century, when, during Prohibition, Americans looking for a drink away from eyes of the law ventured to Graycliff. Under the enterprising hand of Polly Leach (who was reportedly friends with Al Capone), the mansion became a destination for wealthy sophisticates. Sir Winston Churchill was a guest, along with his family, and reputedly accomplished a good deal of smoking in what would later become the Pool Cottage.

Prohibition may have crumbled, but those sophisticates’ loyalties did not. They kept returning to the Bahamas, and Graycliff evolved yet again, this time under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. I. Walton Killam, who built the gardens and the 25-meter outdoor pool—the first pool in the Bahamas.

British Royalty immediately recognized the value of the residence. In 1966, Lord and Lady Dudley, the Third Earl of Staffordshire, moved into the house, where they played host to a steady stream of illustrious guests, including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Royalty left its stamp on Graycliff’s décor in the form of antiques and English-style furnishings. In 1973, when the Bahamas achieved sovereignty, Enrico and Anna Maria Garzaroli purchased a mansion whose rooms seemed to combine the best of the past with the potential for something new and daring.

“Upon my first visit, there was a magnetism I will never forget; just like love at first sight, the House beckoned me,” Enrico would write, years later. “I started to imagine what Graycliff would be like if I could fulfill my dream of creating a five-star restaurant and hotel where none existed.”

Today, three centuries after its construction, Graycliff continues its grand traditions, while the Bahamas’ tropical rhythms provide a lively and energizing counterpoint. Graycliff’s past is impressive, but its future promises to be even more spectacular. **G**



Columbus Taking Possession of the New Country





# GRAYCLIFF TODAY



Preceding pages: View of Graycliff's main entrance from West Hill Street.



**T**UCKED BEHIND ITS HIGH MASONRY wall, Graycliff continues its role as the Bahamas' most revered historic hotel, yet also one of its more modern. Peer behind that wall and you'll find Graycliff's famous tropical gardens, described by Caribbean guidebooks with the sort of hyperbole usually reserved for Caravaggio paintings and royal weddings. At its heart sits the pool, recently updated with an intricate tile mosaic. A certain cigar-chomping British prime minister, in the years before he led his country through the perils of World War II, enjoyed staying at the nearby Pool Cottage; if nobody minds, you can follow in his footsteps by torching up one of Graycliff's premium cigars there.

Until the Garzarolis took over, Graycliff's borders stopped at the high wall that surrounds the property. Today, however, Graycliff extends far beyond the original mansion. Setting himself the modest goal of creating the Bahamas' preeminent luxury enclave, Enrico Garzaroli purchased the nearby West Hill House in 1984, incorporating its pool and gardens into his growing compound. The home itself remains a private residence. Then, almost a decade and half later, he acquired the land around the beautiful ruins of the Postern Gate, where he soon installed the Graycliff Cigar Company (which now employs just shy of 20 rollers, avatars of the age-old art of rolling tobacco leaves). Their blends of the finest tobaccos from Honduras, Nicaragua, Brazil and Ecuador are world famous, but those who think they can do better are encouraged to take lessons here in blend creation. In the same building you'll also find the Humidor Churrascaria restaurant, which focuses on Brazilian barbecue, along with additional hotel rooms.

Chefs at the original mansion's five-star Graycliff Restaurant bring together some of the islands' best traditional fare with French and Italian cuisine. Local fresh fish is a staple here (as is Certified Angus Beef), perfectly paired with a fitting wine. The staff makes every part of the service look effortless.

"Our challenge began as soon as the doors opened," recalls Garzaroli. "The Government House next door needed a unique place to bring its dignitaries. This told us that Nassau was ready for a restaurant of our caliber."

Great food deserves great wine, so it's fortunate that the Graycliff wine cellar nearly qualifies as a Wonder of the World, boasting some 275,000 bottles from over 400 vintners in 15 countries. The result of decades of traveling to auctions around the world, these wines include the 1727 Rudesheimer Apostelwein, more expensive than some Ferraris.

For its guests, the hotel's 20 rooms combine an Old World sense of







...the Graycliff wine cellar nearly qualifies as a Wonder of the World...


## The Future Of Graycliff: Heritage Village

elegance with top-of-the-line amenities. Your laptop's data-port sits beside an antique lamp chosen by British royalty. In-room dining offers the chance to sip port from your balcony overlooking the lush gardens and pool. Graycliff presents an oasis not only from the hum and bustle of Nassau's beaches and casinos, but also from the clamor of daily life.

Indeed, while other hotels find themselves seized by the overpowering urge to modernize every detail, Graycliff keeps one foot planted unapologetically in its illustrious past. Many guests' rooms include sitting and dining areas furnished with handpicked antiques—features more common to an 18th century mansion than a modern inn.

Graycliff's common areas further extend that spirit. The long front porch opens onto a lobby inlaid with thick wooden flooring and woven carpet. The original formal dining room's Baccarat crystal chandelier looks like something that Graycliff's builder, the retired buccaneer John Howard Graysmith, might have "borrowed" from a Spanish galleon.

Across the hallway, the parlor's colorful prints, deep cushions, and dark wood create a deeply relaxing atmosphere, perfect for long conversations over cool drinks. Come nightfall, many guests will find themselves drawn here, slowly realizing that that a scotch or cognac has made its way into their hands.

The Garzarolis have utterly transformed Graycliff — the property now operates with the speed, precision and style of a Swiss timepiece (something that never goes out of style) — while maintaining the old-world charm that makes it so special. And their expansion is not finished quite yet... 

Having purchased all the property directly opposite Graycliff and West Hill House on the north side of West Hill Street — the former Sisters of Charity Convent, its chapel and the Mountbatten House (also known as the O'Donnell House) — the Garzaroli family plans their latest endeavor: Graycliff Heritage Village. It will involve restoring the aforementioned structures, and recreating West Hill Street as a pedestrians-only promenade, replete with cobble stone walkways, a chocolate factory, outdoor café, residences for local artisans, and even high-end boutiques— a true 'old town' experience.

Work on Heritage Village commenced in November 2009 and is expected to continue for several years. "The idea is to create a space where visitors can comfortably explore the fascinating culture of our historic island," says Paolo Garzaroli.

Graycliff CEO Enrico Garzaroli concurs: "They'll see artists and crafts makers at work; enjoy some of our local products and get a real feeling for the Bahamas. It will be great fun and they'll leave with a better understanding of our country."

Once completed, Heritage Village will not only transform the entire neighborhood surrounding Graycliff, but also complete a renaissance of West Hill Street — the apex of decades of hard work, careful planning and re-gentrification.