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**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BUENA VISTA ESTATE  
HOME TO JOHN WATLING'S DISTILLERY**

In early 2013, the Buena Vista Estate once again opened its doors to the public. Its latest incarnation is as the home to John Watling's Distillery, Ltd., a micro- distillery producing premium Bahamian spirit brands while offering a unique visitor experience to locals and visitors alike. Its products, like the estate, are steeped in the history and heritage of The Bahamas. The distillery's location has been part of the history of Nassau, New Providence and The Bahamas since 1789. Construction started on the house the same year as the United States Constitution was enacted; George Washington was elected President of the United States, and the start of the French Revolution.

The story of the Buena Vista starts in 1789 when the Royal Governor John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and Viscount of Fincastle granted 150 acres to the Honourable John Brown, Esq. Brown served as the President of His Majesty, King George III's, Council for these Islands and lived in The Bahamas for more than 50 years. A plaque on the Senate building at Rawson Square commemorates Brown and reads: *"In 1790 this property, later known as 'The Public Lot', was purchased by the Honourable John Brown, a member of the Governor's Council. The centre building was erected prior to 1790. After renovation, the Upper House was occupied by the House of Assembly (from 1796 to 1805) and the Governor's Council. In 1841, when the Governor's Council was divided into the Executive Council and the Legislative Council, the latter today continues to meet here."*

Six months later John Brown entered into an indenture with Stephen Delancey (1748-1798) for twenty acres of land. Delancey was a Loyalist and slave owner from New York. He had distinguished himself as lieutenant-colonel of the 1st New Jersey loyal volunteers in 1782 and



was rewarded by the King (the family's property was confiscated by the Continental Congress) with the position of Chief Justice of The Bahamas. Less than a decade later, Delancey went on to become the Captain General, Commander in Chief and Governor of the (British) Colony of Tobago. He died in 1798 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire en route to England.

In 1801, the original land grant was divided into eighty lots by Surveyor General Benjamin Lord. The land surrounding the Buena Vista was sold to well to do freed slaves who made up what became known as Delancy Town. For the next 50 years ownership of the Buena Vista Estate is unknown. According to the Nassau Guardian, in 1851, the Buena Vista passed into the hands of the Reverend William Woodcock who is best remembered for his advancement of education in the colony, especially amongst blacks.

After Woodcock's untimely death the Buena Vista passed to the Rev. Robert Dunlop, Minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Then, in 1896, the Nassau Guardian advertised that the Buena Vista was once again up for sale. At this time the house was occupied by the Hon. Charles George Walpole, Chief Justice of The Bahamas starting in 1894. Walpole was knighted by Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle in 1897 for his service and in honour of her Diamond Jubilee.

In 1912 another advertisement for the sale of the Buena Vista appeared in the Nassau Guardian. At this time the house was being occupied by William Hart Bennett who was a British colonial minister in Nassau. He held the second most important post in the colony, that of Colonial Secretary. He was later appointed Governor of British Honduras, now known as Belize. His wife Ella Mary Tuck from Norwich, Ontario was a prominent figure in Nassau society. She grew up in Japan and is best remembered as the author of *An English Girl in Japan* (1906). She died in 1914, en route to England, when her ship the *Empress of Ireland* was hit by a Norwegian ship in the St. Lawrence River.

Then, in 1918, title to the Buena Vista once again becomes clear when Sir Joseph Brown, no relation to John Brown and member of the Legislative Council of the Bahama Islands, sold the house to Harold James Petrie from Hamilton, Ontario for £1,500. Brown served in the House of Assembly for 34 years and in 1914 was knighted for his public service. The Nassau Guardian wrote "Sir Joseph Brown retires from political office after an unusually long service which began in 1882, when he entered the House of Assembly as one of the representatives of



the District of Andros at a General Election.” He died the following year and is buried close-by at the Western Cemetery.

The Petries occupied the house from 1918 until 1922 when Sarah Levantia Petrie, widow to Alexander Bain Petrie originally from Guelph, Ontario sold the estate to Edward Schlager Toothe of Madison, New Jersey. The house continued as a private residence until 1947 when Mrs. Toothe, now widowed, opened the house as a hotel and restaurant.

The guest register from the 1960s is a list of “who’s who”. It includes amongst others the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland, Earl Caernarvon whose family was of King Tutankhamen fame, Zachary Scott, Robert Mitchum, Bobby Kennedy and his sister Eunice Kennedy with her husband Sargent Shriver, Jack Parr, Sidney Poitier, Ed Sullivan, Ralph Belamy, Joan Crawford, Sir Malcolm and Lady McAlpine, Debbie Reynolds, Eddie Fisher, Morton Downy Jr. amongst others. In its time the Buena Vista was the premier restaurant at Nassau and one of the best in the West Indies.

The Nassau Daily Tribune wrote that; *“Its large high-ceiling rooms, it’s [sic] interesting old pictures and furniture, its spacious nooks and crannies gave a dignity and charm to the life of its period that is not associated with modern living but which is, nevertheless, still sought by men and women of cultivated taste. There are not many of these homes left in the island and its historical associations alone seem bound to attract the interest of the visitor.”*

Operating as a hotel and restaurant the Buena Vista once again passed hands and in 1962 was purchased by McAlpine & Sons, Ltd. Less than a decade and a half later, it once again was sold to a group that eventually was headed by Stan Bocus. A 1994 article from The Islander tells us that *“From the early 1860s until the turn of the century the Buena Vista matured into a graceful, colourful old-mansion influenced by the life- styles of its occupants. There have been many owners of the property since the beginning of the 20th century, each of whom has contributed particular character and interior designs now reflected in the graceful home.”*

Under Mr. Bocus’ supervision the Buena Vista prospered. Those visiting the house included Eddie Murphy, Crocodile Dundee, Jimmy Dean, Regis Philbin and Julius Erving (Dr. J) to name a few. Shortly after appearing in James Bond film Casino Royale with Daniel Craig the Buena Vista was sold in 2006 to the National Insurance Board. Five years later John Watling’s Distillery, Ltd. transformed the Buena Vista into a micro-distillery and visitor attraction.



Today JOHN WATLING'S rum, the "*Spirit of The Bahamas*" offers complimentary tours at its home, the Buena Vista Estate, in Downtown Nassau. The historic Estate, founded in 1789 and overlooking the harbour, is the site where Bahamians hand-craft JOHN WATLING'S small-batch rums. At the Estate, John Watling's features a production and museum-like tour, shopping and signature Bahamian cocktails at its Red Turtle Tavern. Within walking distance from the cruise ship port in Downtown Nassau, John Watling's Distillery is located on Delancy Street and is open from 10am-6pm, seven days a week.

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