

A Visit to Hispaniola

The Athenaeum

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In fourteen hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

He had three ships and left from Spain;
He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.

He sailed by night; he sailed by day;
He used the stars to find his way.

A compass also helped him know
How to find the way to go.

Ninety sailors were on board;
Some men worked while others snored.

Then the workers went to sleep;
And others watched the ocean deep.

Day after day they looked for land;
They dreamed of trees and rocks and sand.

October 12 their dream came true,
You never saw a happier crew!

"Indians! Indians!" Columbus cried;
His heart was filled with joyful pride.

But "India" the land was not;
It was the Bahamas, and it was hot.

The Arakawa natives were very nice;
They gave the sailors food and spice.

Columbus sailed on to find some gold
To bring back home, as he'd been told.

He made the trip again and again,
Trading gold to bring to Spain.

The first American? No, not quite.
But Columbus was brave, and he was bright.

Good evening, President Cope, Secretary/Treasurer Nicolos, Fellow presenter Powell and members of the Athenaeum. My paper this evening is entitled, A Visit to Hispaniola.

I'm sure many of you memorized a few stanzas of this poem back in your school days. I also know that you are likely happy that I only read one stanza. This poem, during my early education was a popular study to expose students to some history about Columbus' exploits. When Columbus started his venture to circumnavigate the earth landing on the eastern coast of the known world, little did he realize that the land spotted on October 12, 1492 was a whole new world. His first stop was the Bahamas and later the pearl island that he named Hispaniola. Greeted by a cordial group of Arakawa natives, Columbus and his crew received numerous gifts, The most important of which was gold. His ventures brought considerable wealth to Spain and his supporters.

Much less publicized than his discoveries was the devastation he brought to this Pearl of the Caribbean, problems that are at the root of present day Haiti's current plight.

He brought sugar cane which grew prolifically in the fertile soil with a 12 month growing season. Unfortunately for the Arakawa natives growing and harvesting sugar cane was extremely labor intensive. The Spaniards who follow Columbus to this new land of wealth had little trouble coercing the natives to work in slave like fashion.

At the same time, the Spanish newcomers brought with them European maladies which found fertile ground in the here-to-fore healthy natives. A few decades of foreign illnesses soon reduced the native population to a level that could not support the labor demands of the Spanish sugar plantations.

Subsequently Spain lost interest in Hispaniola and moved on to later conquests in North, Central and South America.

Enter the French.

Confounded by the lack of labor to work the fertile land and their own repugnance against such work, the French had little trouble transporting shiploads of West African natives as slaves. These natives brought with them the customs and habits of their African culture including their religion, voodoo.

As the African population grew, unrest associated with their slave state grew to the point that the black slaves overthrew their French master, putting them to the machete or the sea.

From that day until the early 1800's the island was a haven for battling groups of natives striving for control of general areas. Eventually the eastern portion of the island isolated itself politically from the western and formed the present day Dominican Republic. In 1804 the leadership of Haiti, reveling in their hatred for Spanish and French domination which included forced Catholicism or execution, declared the national religion of Haiti to be voodoo. It remained that way until the late 1800's...

The southern border of Haiti near the city of Jacmal became a base of operations for the "Pirates of the Caribbean" style acts as portrayed by Owensboro's Johnny Depp in the popular television movie series.

Haitians were viscous to their own kind. One coup d'etat followed another. During one 5 year period in the early 20th century saw 6 presidents executed or forced into exile by their own military leaders in less than 4 years.

The US of A isn't blameless in the current Haitian plight either. In 1915, amid the chaos of the annual demise of leaders, President Woodrow Wilson sent in the Marines beginning a military occupation that prevailed in varying degrees until 1996 when the United Nations troops took their place. UN troops are the only law and order in the country today.

One of the most controversial Haitian leaders of this occupation period was Francois Duvalier, who ruled from 1951 to 1971. Known as Papa Doc by the citizens he was both loved and hated. Much of the slim infrastructure that exists in Haiti today was developed under his watch. Also, much of the criminal element including drug running, black market, and smuggling thrived. His son, Jean-Claude, known as Baby Doc succeeded his father but didn't last long being "escorted" out of the country by US troops in 1986.

Both Duvalier's thrived in the wealth afforded the upper layer of Haitian leadership via United States "economic aid". Since 1973 to this date the United States has led the world in providing the Haitians with financial resources.

Concurrently with the political turmoil of the last 100 years in Haiti has been the ecological devastation of the country. At the dawn of the 20th century nearly 70% of the Haiti territory was forested with lush tropical growth. Today it is less than 2%

The deforestation has been driven primarily by the need for fuel. Since there is very limited energy infrastructure in the country and 100 % of the fossil fuel resources are imported, Cooking with charcoal has been the principal consumer of the forest resources. Couple the logging of the mostly hillside/mountainous land with huge herds of wild feral goats that graze the deforested land gives new growth zero opportunity. *The bare mountainous terrain gives rise to vast areas of topsoil erosion with an estimated 15,000 acres per year being lost.* This condition gives rise to the agriculture productivity of the land declining annually.

I'll visit this more later, but to explain a current circumstance I'll share what a 30 year resident Southern Baptist Missionary told me. He said that a 100 years ago a "happy Haitian" owned a 2-4 acre plot of land. On that land his complete family, likely comprised of three generations, lived and survived well. Because of the then fertile land, and 12 month growing season, the hand tilled soils yielded 3 to 4 "double crops" annually. I say double crops realizing that I must explain that and Haitian double crop is unlike one here in Christian county. Here it means two grain crops a year, say wheat and soybeans. In Haiti it means planting a root crop and grain/vegetable crop in the same seed hole. The Haitian farmer would harvest his crops; have enough to feed his family and some extra to sell for needed cash. As the yield potential of the soil decrease over time, the farmer struggled to meet the need. Another family custom fostered by their voodoo religion has had a serious effect. As a senior member of the family dies, their religion encourages them to go all out. Great ceremony was required. A voodoo priest commanded a healthy fee to organize a parade, the musicians and the like. The farmer, wanting to honor his deceased parents and pressured by custom, and finding himself without the cash to finance the burial event, mortgages his land. As time goes on, his productive ability declines and ultimately he loses his land to debt holder. Without a place to live and raise his family his only choice is to move to the city where he builds a house in the backyard of an acquaintance. As result there is a burgeoning population in Haitian cities, especially Port-au-Prince.

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The dilemma stemming from this rural to urban migration and the Haitian reproductive practices is a skyrocketing population and unemployment. Presently the unemployment in Haiti nears 95%. You know ole Chaucer's quote, "Idle hands...". It seems that the only thing the adult population in Haiti has to do with their idleness is reproduce. Without the good nutrition mothers are unable to feed their newborn and frequently abandon them soon after birth. The growth of AIDs and other infectious diseases decimates the weak adults in the population. Haiti has more orphans per capita than any country in the world.

I have not intended to give you the complete history of Haiti but to give you a perspective of the circumstances that existed in the country before January 12, 2010.

January 1, 2001 I became a free... an R O M. (retired old man). Several years before my retirement I had become interested in the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Ministry and went through some of the preliminary training required to serve. However, work and family responsibility precluded my participation until retirement. Since retirement a year has not passed that we are not somewhere serving those displaced by disaster. In 2005 I was asked to become a member of Kentucky Baptists' Rapid Response Team, a group of individuals who could travel on rather short notice and were trained to enter a disaster zone and assess what Southern Baptists could do to serve. The Kentucky Baptist Team is "on call" two months out of the year, to respond world wide, January and September. In September 2008 our number was called to respond to the Republic of Georgia after the Russian invasion. Our prerequisite to serve is to have our immunizations and our passport up to date and to have enough cash on hand to pay for our transportation to and from the area.

On January 13th of this year I received another of those calls. Better prepare to go to Haiti for the earthquake response was the word. Although I wasn't included in the 5 person assessment team that went to Haiti the next week, I was asked by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to serve on the initial Incident Command team as the Communications Officer. Our disaster relief incident command teams usually comprise 6 to 10 persons and their general function is the logistical management of incoming and outgoing resources, usually volunteers, equipment and supplies.

For the Haitian response communications would be a major challenge. The country has limited communication infrastructure before the earthquake beyond cellular telephone service and that had been disrupted by the quake.

As you likely recall, early in the response, transportation into Haiti was non-existent. The ports both marine and air were out of service. An additional circumstance was security. It appears that the quake broke open the country's main prison freeing nearly 4,000 violent criminals.

A pre-trip briefing heightened my anxiety just a bit. We were admonished never to venture out of our compound after dark and to never travel alone, ever. We were told not to wear jewelry; watches, rings, etc. visibly. We were told to carry our passport in our inner clothing, certainly not in the pouch hanging around our necks, a custom often followed by American travelers. It seems that in Haiti an American passport was worth from \$3,000 to \$5,000 and since the machete was the weapon of choice, it was the practice to separate the barrier support for the passport pouch, grab it and run.

I didn't share that little tidbit with my family or others who questioned my sanity about going there.

I describe this trip and this paper as a visit to Hispaniola, for that it was. Since travel into Port-au-Prince was impossible, entry into Haiti was via Santo Domingo, then overland by bus to Port-au-Prince, a 16 hour trip.

There were to be 8 of us on the Incident Command team. Our travel plans were simple, from across the country we would descend on Alpharet, Georgia (Atlanta suburb), have a briefing, and depart Hartsville field, as a group, the next morning.

I drove to Nashville only to find that my early morning flight to Atlanta had been canceled because of icing there. Similar plight affected 4 other members of the team from other areas of the US. I was able to get another flight from Nashville to Miami and then to Santo Domingo, arriving just minutes after my original flight from Atlanta was scheduled. There were only two problems. First I would not be able to pick up the NAMB "go box", which contains all of the communications hardware I would need, and second, I would be traveling by myself. Now I'm a big boy, but I'm no James Bond, so the thought of flying by myself into a foreign country, where I didn't speak the language, didn't know what I would do next and without the equipment I needed, was a little disconcerting. Seated on the plane the thought of a Scripture crossed my mind, "...oh ye of little faith". I must admit a prayer for guidance was on my breath when a gentleman, who was to be my seat mate, boarded the plane. Wow! Imagine that, he spoke perfect Christian country English. I explained my plight and he quickly scribbled down names and locations where I could make contacts that would get me safely into Port-au-Prince, wherever I wanted to go and the fee would be a couple hundred bucks.

As the plane landed, I thanked the gentleman, and made my way toward the terminal exit. You can only imagine the joy when among the throng of black faces was a lone Caucasian lady holding a sign with our disaster relief logo. It was the lovely wife of the missionary I mentioned earlier. She led me through the crowd to 5 other yellow shirted Baptist DR volunteers, all members of the incident command team.

After an airport meal of pizza, we went to a house where we got a shower and a few hours sleep. We departed Santo Domingo at 2:00 am. The plan was to arrive in Port-au-Prince before dark. I fully understood later why. When the sun went down there it was dark...pitch dark. No street lights, no house lights...dark.

As we traveled and daylight came, the Dominican Republic landscape was interesting. In my impression, is equally as poor as Haiti. Small plots of land were being cultivated by hand with shovels and spades. No power equipment except an occasional ox. Oddly those plots of land were surrounded with fences comprised of vertical posts made of trees, 2 to 3 inches in diameter. They were placed so close together you'd had trouble putting your hand between them. The Dominican Republic mountains offered a beautiful view with lush forests and valleys. Most of the roads to the border had been paved at one time, but were full of holes that required our driver to meander around them.

As we approached the Haitian border we were instructed to pull closed curtains on the bus and to keep quiet. The border was defined by a chain link fence with a 20ft rolling gate. Eight or 10 smartly dressed Dominican soldiers or National Police, armed with AK-47's stood guard. Our driver spoke with the leader, showed some papers and we were in motion again. Ah! That was easy. We were now in Haiti, or so we thought. After driving about 100 yards through a raft of 18 wheeler box trailers, open and

seemingly filled with something, we were stopped by another AK-47 bearing individual attired only in a black shirt and pants. It had been quiet in the bus to that point but it really got quiet then. We were directed to pull around several of the trailers where we parked in a relatively open space. After about an hour our bus was approached by another armed individual who spoke with the driver briefly and left. In another hour, another individual approached the bus. He was unarmed and spoke in a much more relaxed tone. Turns out, all he wanted was \$100 per person and we'd be free to proceed. We had been told that such a payment might be necessary to get in country. We paid our money and soon made our way through a crude barb wire gate and an angry mob of Haitians wanting at the trailers full of supplies. It was as if we had gone from the oasis to the desert. We were still some 6 hours out of Port-au-Prince and surrounded by a stark wasteland with only wild grass here and there. The roadway, all gravel was however passable.

As we entered Port-au-Prince from the east, the devastation was immediately visible. Rarely was there a building undamaged. Most were flattened like a stack of pancakes. As we entered the center of the city, we saw the Presidential Palace and other public buildings were equally flattened. The landmark Archdiocese of Haiti Cathedral was also a pile of rubble. Streets were hardly passable. Almost always a single lane where you wandered around piles of rubble...

We arrived at the compound that was our base of operations. Called the Florida Mission House, we found a beautiful built multi-story house with sufficient rooms to house 40 to 50, sleeping 8 to a room, double deck. That house, built in the 1930's was framed with wooden timbers, likely the only reason it was still standing. The property, a *30 minute drive from the earthquake epicenter, did sustain some damage. A balcony had fallen and a second floor overhanging room had cracks and steel posts had been installed to shore it up. The 10 foot stone/block wall that comprised the perimeter had crumbled in places but was already being repaired.*

From a second floor veranda, you could view almost 360 degrees and nothing but pancaked houses, many of which still covered the remains of the occupants.

The compound was quite secure, protected by the 10 fence topped with razor wire, a steel entrance gate that was kept closed at all times and two guards armed with sawed off shotguns.

Let me explain why the devastation was so great. Construction practices there are the bad and their raw materials are even worse.

Fact 1. Because of the deforestation wooden building materials are a premium and must be imported or salvaged.

Fact 2. Portland cement as we know it, the basic ingredient in concrete, is non-existent in Haiti. The cement manufactured by a government owned company did not contain sufficient ingredients compared to filler.

Most building in Haiti including the residences of the rural to urban migrants were built totally from home/hand made concrete blocks, owner mixed concrete and salvaged reinforcement steel. Most buildings follow a similar construction pattern. The corners, and exterior walls, if the wall is long enough, are marked with square concrete columns. A builder begins by driving re-bar into the ground with 4 to 6 pieces marking the space of the 12 inch square column. A square box, or concrete form, the desired height of the column is constructed from scrap lumber around the column of rebar and

anchored. As you may know, the strength of concrete depends in part of the ratios of sand-cement and aggregate. I saw little aggregate being used as they made their concrete and less than half the Portland that your or I would use for a supporting column strength. They mix their concrete using the volcano method and pure muscle power. The mixture is carted by bucket to the column, up a ladder and poured in.

Once the corner and mid-wall column have been built and the forms removed, it is time to build the wall. Homemade concrete blocks or salvaged blocks are the main ingredient. Again, the mortar mix used to lay the blocks is substandard. Brick layers can tell you the best mix. Typically above ground mortar is 1 part cement to 5 parts sand and the sand is fine particles. As I observed, the Haitian ratio was 1:8 or 1:10 where the sand was a very coarse grade. More than once I obtained a handful of recently mixed mortar and squeezed it into a ball, only to have it crumble when released.

The roofs of homes are made in a similar manner. Concrete beams of rectangular shape are formed across the building space. They are positioned so a concrete block will lie between them. When they harden, the space between them is filled with concrete blocks with the smooth surface up and/or down, and supported from below with poles and board. The voids between the lying blocks and beams are filled with wet concrete and left to dry. Voila! A concrete roof. Mind you, 80% of the general populations' residences are built on property to which the "owner" has no legal title.

So what is wrong with that? Several things, concrete made with too high proportions of sand and aggregate crumble easily. Concrete walls are simply laid adjacent to columns without any ties to the column or stiffeners between the layers of blocks. At earthquake time, walls shook, mortar joints crumbled, walls fell, ceilings collapsed. Sometimes the building contained three or four stories. Finally, the resident is afraid to leave his house and he's afraid to go in it, so he is sleeping on the street.

Haiti construction was an accident waiting to happen.

Haitians have to be the unhealthiest population on the globe.

The early Southern Baptist Response was primarily medical with support teams doing structure assessment and well reclamation/drilling.

During my stay there two or three medical teams dispersed daily. Their work site usually was open air, under a tarp if fortunate. If the first 2 weeks the care was 100% trauma surgery or trauma related. Nurses performed triage with presenters, routing serious cases to the doctors and performing first aid service themselves. The caseload for 2 doctors and 3 nurses was from 800 to 1000 daily. Simple and compound fractures and lacerations were the order of the day. A complicating factor lay in the fact that some of the victims had been without any medical care for several days. Often the medical procedures were done on a couple of salvaged planks sitting on salvaged concrete blocks. Flashlights provide the illumination when needed. Cleaning wounds was a high priority.

As the trauma cases diminished more time was spent with a generally unhealthy population. 100% of the women examined exhibited some form of gynecological infection. "Stomach problems" was high on the list of complaints. Burns were common, a surprise to me. Burns that had not been treated and that had become infected was high on the list.

At one time during my stay, word came down the line that the current president, Preval wanted the doctors to leave. His quote was, "now that the trauma needs have been met, you can go home, you are spoiling my people".

Building assessment teams were going first to churches, pastor's homes and church member's homes evaluating their safety for occupancy. Baptist strategy was to get pastors back in their homes and churches back operational so they could be a hub for service response in the community. If the home or church had a well its purity was tested. If it had a pump it was made operational. Teams from Oklahoma were drilling wells and outfitting them and other wells without pumps, with a PVC designed manual pump. Fresh, potable water is a critical need.

The crowding in Port-au-Prince was hard for me to conceptualize until I had seen it. The missionary told me that Haitians have no personal space. I soon saw why. As the inward migration from the country side began, all of the yard space of a typical house was filled with more houses. Literally houses were so close together, I was unable to walk between them. A typical house has no window, no doors. Openings; but nothing to fill the space. In most cases to get to the house behind yours it required those residents to walk through yours. The houses have no electricity, no plumbing. There are no sanitary facilities anywhere. Since the earthquake, hundreds of porta-potties line public squares. Only one problem. They weren't being serviced and were long without any supplies.

Usually I consider myself a "can-do" person. Haiti however doesn't seem to have any short term solutions. Even with unlimited resources it is hard to see where to start.

My stay in Haiti was cut short by a few days because of my sister's terminal illness; however, I was able to leave by plane for the Port-au-Prince airport. Getting out was as difficult as getting in. I stood in line for two hours, outside in the sun waiting for my passport to be checked. Once inside the terminal my luggage was examined, piece by piece, including my mesh bag of dirty clothes. My passport was check 4 more times, *including once when I stepped from the ramp into the plane's cabin and I was patted down 4 times, from my ankles to the top of my head.*

I must say, I was relieved when I felt the plane lift off.