

# THE BERMUDA FILES

By: Will Johnson

Sometime back my nephew-in-law Ernest Obermaier called me all excited from Bermuda. He was visiting the old dockyard museum. There he had seen a chart on the wall claiming that Saba of all little places in the world had supplied one third of the immigrants to Bermuda. I told him that I did not realize it was that many but I knew there had been a lot. This past week the Sinclair/Johnson clan was here from Bermuda celebrating their roots, and from the size of this one group alone, it is believable.

Back when St. Eustatius was the Golden Rock there was much commercial activity between that island and Bermuda. The stones in the walls of the Old Dutch Reformed Church come from Bermuda. There were also marriages between families from that island and Bermuda. As back then, Saba and St. Eustatius functioned as one community I am sure that Sabans were aware of Bermuda. The Gosling family which still exists on Bermuda was intermarried with the Simmons family of Saba as far back as the late eighteen hundreds.

As a boy I was told that a man from Hell's Gate with the nickname of "Crawlight", working on a schooner, put in at Bermudas in the 1870's. He found out that there was work to be had there. On returning to Saba he informed people here about it. At the time Saba had close to two thousand people living here, all dependent on the sea and native soil. A schooner load of men decided to go and check it out. Thus is supposed to have started the opening of the route to Bermuda.

However in the marriage registers here I found evidence of earlier connections. In Russell White's book: "Our Heritage", he provides lots of information on his family, including the branch of the Simmons' from Saba.

Already in 1857 there is a Captain Abram Simmons marrying an Elizabeth Sarah Pitt of Bermuda. They lived in Victoria Cottage, where they raised their family. How they met, or when Abram first came to Bermuda is unknown. In the 1860's Abram was Captain of the schooner "Thrasher", which made regular trips between Bermuda and Demarara, British Guyana with cargo of Bermuda produce. It probably can be assumed that Abram visited Saba during these trips between Bermuda and Demarara as well as other Caribbean Islands to pick up and discharge cargo and passengers. We do not know if his father was still alive. We do know his mother was on Saba along with sisters Joanna and Mary Ann and his brother Joseph prior to his removal to Barbados. The husband of Mary Ann (John Joseph Heyliger) of Saba was also a sea-captain and planter – in 1859 he was master of the Netherlands schooner "Thetis". Johanna's husband Thomas Charleswell Vanterpool was also a sea captain. By about 1870 Capt. Abram

Simmons was in command of a vessel named the "Jabez". Another sea captain writes from "Berbice", a port further up the coast." Captain Simmons was at Demarara in a small vessel called the "Jabez" going to Bermuda. Your mother, thinking she had enough of sea-going for a time thought she would go home and I took her and the children to Demerara to go in her. Capt. Peniston and his wife Lily were also going in her...We went down the coast in a small steamer running there. I put them on board the "Jabez" for Bermuda."

We next read of Abram Simmons in the 12 December 1871 issue of the Bermuda newspaper the "Royal Gazette" where the following article appeared; LOSS OF THE BRIGANTINE 'JABEZ'.

"It becomes our extremely painful duty to announce the loss on the 25 November last, at Cape Canso, Nova Scotia of the Brigantine "Jabez", Capt. Simmons of these islands, with all her passengers and crew, with the exception of one of the latter....we have received the following:

Cape Canser, Nova Scotia 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1871

....of the loss of the Brigantine "Jabez", Capt. Abram Simmons from Charlottetown (Prince Edward Island), bound to Bermuda, on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> Nov. At Fox Island, about six miles from here... there were ten on board eight men and two passengers...whom we have buried in our Protestant burying ground (cape Canso, Nova Scotia) at two this afternoon (28 Nov. 1871).

"The 'Jabez' was anchored at Port Mulgrove in the Straits of Canser, and during a very severe gale (one of the worst we have had for many years, and bitterly cold), she dragged out of the Strait on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> – the foremast was cut away which took with it the bow sprit; they did this in hopes that the vessel could ride out the gale, but she continued to drag clear across the bay – a distance of perhaps twenty miles..until she struck the Bar...the mainmast was then cut away, the vessel then drove over the Bar, when the anchors brought her up a few hundred yards from shore...a heavy sea swept away the house forward...taking with it six men, all of whom drowned. All died except the crewman Manuel. The Captain died only half an hour previous to Manuel's rescue. Among those who died was a young man named Stanford Linzey, about 19, from the Island of Saba." Our captains always had sailors from Saba wherever they went.

At the time of Abram's death in 1871 his widow was then 36 years old and had five children ranging in age from four to thirteen. She never remarried and continued to live at Victoria until her death in 1895. It is remarkable that four of her children married Saba people, three on Saba and one on Barbados. One of the sons Abram Wynford or "Braw" married Roseita Davis of Saba. He was a Captain of a government owned boat on Grenada for many years which traded between Grenada and Demerara, Trinidad and so on. His children were all born on Grenada but came to live on Saba between 1902 and 1918 and then went to the United States. Another daughter of Capt. Abram, named Anita married a John W. Johnson from Saba who lived on

Barbados. Capt. Abram Simmons was born on Saba on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1832 and his parents were Abraham “Braw” Simmons and Elizabeth “Mam” Horton. Believe it or not their house is still standing in The Bottom, the former home of Walter and Ernestine Sluicer.



The Simmons Family  
Saba – Circa 1906  
Vera, Doris, Edith, Roseta, Frank, Peter (?), Ina

In Captain Ernest Alfred Johnson’s manuscript “Life and Adventures”, he writes about leaving Saba two months short of making sixteen. He left Saba for St. Kitts on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1900 on a Saban schooner the “Lillie” and on arrival at St. Kitts and stayed at the Montesaires Hotel waiting on the steamship “Tiber” to go to Bermuda and left on May 15<sup>th</sup> with two other Saba young men, Tommy Hassell and Bloomfield Hassell. He described life on board the ship as terrible. So much so that when the immigration officer at Bermuda asked him if he had ever been to jail he answered: “Yes, Sir,” On the next question as to where, he answered, “On the Tiber, sir!” He arrived at Bermuda on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. There he met a friend from Saba William Barnes who told him; “I am going to take you home with me, and I have a job for you, to work with me on Mrs. Mary Master’s farm.” He also describes the Boer war and the fact that Sabans worked among the prison guards. The British thought that the Sabans being Dutch would be able to communicate with the Boers. I remember someone telling me once how he became friends with one of the famous Boer generals, a Melaan. Freddie left Bermuda shortly after on a three master windjammer the “Nellie T. Morris” of Bath, Maine. He met a cousin and a friend on

board who were sailors. The friend was Johnnie Ben Hassell who was quartermaster on the "Tiber" in which he had come to Bermuda.

There was much work to be had on the dry docks. Not only people from Saba but also from St. Eustatius went to Bermuda to work. My father was among the many from the village of Hell's Gate who went to work in the dry docks. Many men from the village of Palmetto Point, Cow Pasture, Middle Island and St. John's went to work on Bermuda. Austin Johnson used to tell me how my father became Boxing Champion of Bermuda. Being a young sturdily built man, the Sabans placed their bets on him. My father knew nothing about ring fighting but enough of a street brawl to walk up to his opponent and hit him one lick and knock him to the ground. Although not exactly according to the rules of boxing, being supported by a large crowd of enthusiastic Sabans the Bermuda Judges had no choice but to declare him champion. When my father came back from Bermuda he brought with him some oleander plants which he planted at our home at "Behind-the-Ridge". They were the first oleander plants introduced into Saba. Up until recent times several people from Saba with family living on Bermuda went to Bermuda to live. Among them, former Commissioner Lenny Hassell, went to live there in the nineties.

In 1967 I went there for a week to spend time with my aunt Mrs. Vera Every-Simmons who lived at Spanish Point and had ten children, and they all remained there. There is still a coming and a going of families between Saba and Bermuda especially in the summer vacation months. Some of the Sabans living there did well with real estate, owning hotels and so on. My brother Guy on a trip to Bermuda met a Woods from the Bottom who owned a small hotel there. Because many of the Sabans were into farming when they first went there, the farmland they acquired became extremely valuable as Bermuda's tourism continued to grow. I have asked several people with connections to Bermuda to try and compile a list for me of people they knew who went to live on Bermuda and their descendants there. Some of the Sabans mixed with immigrants who came into Bermuda from Madeira and the Azores. On Saba we have a couple of people who are of Saban Descent but who were born on Bermuda. The well known Harry L. Johnson's first two children were born there when he lived on Bermuda, where he made his first paintings. Wayne and Elsie Johnson, who have a home on Saba, come regularly from Bermuda and stay here, Wayne's parents both went from Saba to Bermuda to live. When I went to Bermuda in 1967 the first thing I did was to go to the Dutch consul to get an "Attestatie de Vita". The consul was Sir John Cox who I later understood owned half of Bermuda. Neither he nor his Secretary had ever heard of such a document. Later I understood that his Secretary was a distant relative of mine. I needed the document so that a friend on St. Maarten could collect my \$125.—a month salary. As I walked out of the building a pickup truck was passing by and it turned out was a cousin of mine Vernon Every. His mother had told him where I had gone so he concluded it must be me. As I walked down through Hamilton past a shoe store someone called out to me: "Will, what are you doing here?" Turns out it was Sheila Johnson a cousin of

mine and in the store working with her was a Holm from Booby Hill. Bermuda is not a big place. Any speck of dirt is added to the claim of how many islands Bermuda has. The island is only twenty one square miles. Yet the island has built up such a reputation as a unique tourist resort for more than one hundred years that it is hard to equal. On my arrival from Antigua on a BOAC airplane in the middle of the night, the immigration officer welcomed me as if I was his grandson, brother, and all of his family combined that he had not seen in years. The only difference of opinion we had is when I told him I was only staying for a week. Well he could not get over the fact that I would do that to the many Bermuda people who would want to entertain me in their homes, take me fishing, golfing and so on. Turns out on that point he was right. I never did get around to seeing all my family even though I tried to even out the rounds of visiting the hotel bars and visiting family. I believe that Mark Twain was among those who loved Bermuda and after my visit there and reading so many books about the island I came to see why he would have loved the island of Bermuda.

+ + + + + + + + + + +