

The Chimneys of Saba

By: Will Johnson

I am writing this while sitting on the verandah of my house. Just in front of me, and for the past days, two “yellow breasts” have been toiling away building a nest in the gennip (kennip) tree just a few feet away from me.

I am truly amazed at how careful they have been in selecting the right part of the tree, just heavy enough to hold the nest, yet too light for their predators; the black cat which lives with my land turtles, the rats who survive the cat, the snakes who survive both of the aforementioned, and not to forget the thrushes who prey on everything.

Here on Saba having to contend with the forces of nature; hurricanes, earthquakes, heavy rainfall, man has always been careful in the construction of a house in which to shelter himself and family. The original owners of Saba the Arawaks and the Kalinago are thought to have only lived in caves, but in recent year's, evidence of stable buildings have been found by archaeologists on Calabash Ridge.



Recently Dave Levenstone sent me an e-mail letting me know that he had done a survey of the chimneys on Saba and so far he had come up with the following numbers; The Bottom 7, St. John's 12 and Windwardside 35. He had not got around to doing Hell's Gate as yet. He wondered if the young people knew why so many homes on Saba had chimneys. So I decided to take a look at the history of our buildings on Saba which are now one of the main tourist attractions. The chimneys were built with bricks sent here from the ruins on the bay on St. Eustatius. There were several Saban families who through intermarriage with prominent Statia white families at the time, had moved to Statia. The Hassell's (intermarried with the Temmens) and who owned the "Glass Bottle estate", the Every's intermarried with the Zeelig family owners of among other the "Schotzenhoek estate", the Johnson's intermarried with the Schmidt's who owned a number of estates and prime property. I think that the Hassells were the ones who started sending bricks from the old ruins on Statia with which to build ovens and chimneys on Saba. People who had traditionally had to cook in the yard could now cook inside. One old time house which is now the Harry L. Johnson museum has a traditional oven and kitchen with the

chimney still in tact. Many chimneys were lost or left behind. When my family dismantled their house "Behind-The-Ridge" the only thing they left behind was the chimney. Also when the kerosene stoves came into the picture many people tore down their old style kitchens and chimneys, so that one hundred years ago there were many more houses with chimneys than at present.

The first European settlers here built straw huts in the beginning. They gradually went over to more solid construction in wood. Although the slaves and the poorer classes of whites lived in many instances in thatched straw huts well into the 20th century. Especially after heavy hurricanes, some of which were category five, which caused much destruction, some of the whites lived in caves until they could get a better place of shelter. Some of these caves even acquired names of those who lived in them, such as "Markita's Cave", on the road in Giles Quarter, Jaykie Vlaun's Cave (my great-great-grandfather) on Hell's Gate and so on. When I referred to this fact an eccentric (to put it mildly) hotelier declared that I was running Saba like North Korea and that he was closing down his hotel. Never did close down, but later sold, and his name has been erased from Saba. Not even a cave carries his name.

In 1701 the French Roman Catholic Priest Father Labat (and half pirate himself) visited Saba. What he describes then of the homes has been written about through the centuries and is Saba's biggest calling card still and a tourism asset. He described the island as being small but clean and well cared for. He found the houses gay (different meaning back then), commodious, well painted and well furnished. Father Labat observed that the people lived in a 'grande union'. They ate often in one another's homes. Although there was no common slaughterhouse as on the larger islands, beasts were killed one after another as they were needed for consumption in the community. Without paying any money, everyone took what was needed for his family's use from the home of the person whose animal has been butchered and then repaid the amount when his own turn came. Three hundred year's later people still come to my house "putting off a bull". The only difference now is that you pay for your share of the meat.

Father J.F.A. Kistenmaker, visited Saba in 1843. He describes The Bottom (also called "De Valleij" by the Dutch. Never "de botte" as Dr.Hartog tried to make us believe. Just a story he made up himself.), as having fifty or sixty small wooden houses. The population was 1800 and most inhabitants were white; but they could be seen, wearing rough linen clothing, working in the fields in the same manner as the slaves."

The house was always a center point of community life on Saba. Ideally when a young man proposed to a girl he had his house, or at least a basic one-room structure, built and they would add on as funds permitted. Many a young Saban left Saba to earn money abroad with the specific goal to build a house for the sweetheart he left behind on Saba, as in the first half of the twentieth century Saba was in poor shape economically speaking yet better off in some ways than now. The cost of a small house in 1935 was about six hundred dollars. I remember as a boy that a two bedroom house would be built by a Master Carpenter and his helper in six weeks for one hundred and twenty dollars and a small one bedroom house for forty dollars. That was for the labour only of course and only hand tools were used.

Some of the Master Carpenters were “Bo Willy” Leverock and his son Cyrillus Leverock, Alphonsius “Conner” Hassell (he built my cousin Estelle Simmons’ house on Hell’s-Gate and several of the former old mansions on the Front street in Philipsburg.) There were many others of course. IN the twentieth century Mr. Bertin Chance (father of Leo Chance) gave lessons to Nederville Heyliger, James Dinzey and Lucian Lake of The Bottom. Also in Windwardside, people like Lambert Hassell and Lambert Johnson and so on.

In the manuscript of the life of Captain Ernest Alfred Johnson he tells us about his own house which is still in excellent condition on Booby Hill. In the chapter MY PROMISE FULFILLED, he writes: “I met the schooner “Mary Hassell”, Captain Ben Hassell of Saba. I decided that I was going home to get married and fulfill my promise, so I agreed with Captain Hassell to take out lumber to build my house and furniture. The “Mary Hassell” was at Greenpoint, New York, loading for Saba. We finished June 2nd (1906), sailed June 3rd for Saba, and arrived there June 13th, after a fine passage.

I was certainly glad to meet my little girl. I told her I had come to fulfill my promise, and I was going to build the “cage” first, and she agreed. On the 15th of June I was taken sick and came near to dying, but I came through all successfully.

July 14th I left Saba and went to St. Kitts and bought some lumber for framing, and arrived back on July 24th. The same day there came a severe hurricane which detained my undertaking in building the house, and I was taken sick again. This detained the building and the marriage.

I started to build the bungalow on November 7th. My girl’s grandmother died the same night, so I decided that as soon as time suited I was going to get married, and I chose December 19th for the wedding date. On the 19th day of December 1906, at 11 A.M., the church bells chimed and my promise was fulfilled.

On the 19th of January, 1907, the bungalow was finished and we moved into the little happy home. We lived together until May 10th and then I left to roam again on the same old route to New York.

I arrived in New York May 20th. On the same day I shipped on the four-master windjammer “Perry Setzer”, Captain Blake, as engineer, and lay in port discharging until July 3rd.”

Lime was used for cisterns, ovens and chimneys. Most likely sailors introduced the technique of burning lime and modified them to the local circumstances. It is known that on Saba sailors made some extra money by burning lime in a kiln, most likely in a field kiln, near Fort Bay (Goslinga, 1971). The quantity and quality was that good that it also was exported to other islands. A reddish soil called torus (trass) was added and used in the construction of cisterns, arches, oven walls etc. (Temminck Groll and Brugman, 1988).

My father Daniel Thomas Johnson used to burn lime at the Cove Bay. In the sugar islands molasses was added. Since molasses was not readily available on Saba the lime was burned with manchineel wood (a danger in itself). The wood contained oil which had the same effect as molasses. The lime was later

slackened with sea water and left to cure for some weeks or months before harvesting and putting to use.

The old stone ovens and the fine rock work around graves were in many cases built by a famous stonemason from St. Eustatius Mr. Richard van Putten. He and a sister had married people from Saba and lived “over the Peak” near Windwardside. The Gwendoly van Putten school on St. Eustatius is named after his daughter Miss Gathie. The stones would be cut and faced with hand tools near the sea and transported on head to where they would be used.

The construction wood as can be seen from Capt. Johnson’s story came from North, Central and South America. Especially the hard fustic wood for the uprights came from Cayenne. The wood was brought in by schooner and due to the lack of modern harbor facilities it had to be thrown overboard in the vicinity of the old pier. The wood destined for The Bottom, St. John’s and Windwardside was brought ashore and further transported by manpower. As a young boy I remember bringing lumber to build a new house in Windwardside. By that time the Jeep could reach John Zagers’ Ridge and we would carry the lumber on head from there. With a proper banana leaf “wad” of course to ease the weight on the head.

The wood for Hell’s Gate used to be tied behind a rowing boat manned by four oarsmen and thus transported at night on the water to the Cove Bay for Hell’s Gate owing to the lack of proper roads and transportation facilities. My great grandmother (Annie “Morton”) lost her fiancée when he drowned while transporting the lumber to build their intended house. After a period of grief she then married James Johnson. Formerly on Hell’s Gate the pretty girls with light brown skin and blond hair were known as “the breed of the Annie Morton’s” so that in a way she left a name behind.

Imports from the region came from where the Sabans did the most business with. On St. Thomas the imports were from A. H. Lockhart – General Provision and Commission merchant, on St. Kitts most imports were from J.W. Thurston & Co. Ltd. Dealers in Lumber, Shingles, Oils, Paints, Rope, Corn, Oil meal, Hardware etc. Also, S.L. Horsford’s retail department “The Emporium”. Also John Gumbs on St. Kitts was a big supplier of goods to Saba. He was married to two or three Leverock sisters from Saba (not at the same time, but close).

To give an idea of what a known house cost we take the case of Captain Randolph Dunkin’s house in The Bottom. The property was 2000m² bought from his father Capt. Ernest Vanterpool for \$200. - Dollars. The house was built at the end of 1939 early 1940 within 76 days for which Capt. Dunkin paid Josephus Lambert Hassell U.S.\$2.—per day (the same engineer who built the road “which could not be built”). In 1946 Randolph built a cistern (size 14’x7’x8’) for which the mason charged 100 guilders. In 1986 when interviewed Capt. Dunkin was not very enthusiastic of the skills of the present day carpenters; he called them “plywood carpenters” and “wood butchers...”

Not only the wood building techniques and the applied material as used in Sussex (England) and elsewhere in the South-eastern counties show similarities with the ones used in the traditional Saban cottage, but also the basic shape, the ground-plan, the roof and the rythmetical division of the openings in the walls. Wood was often used as the sole material for the entire building, in which many interesting passive cooling devices were incorporated. (Buisserit, 1980: 2-3).

Kenneth Bolles in his manuscript "Caribbean Interlude" detailing a years stay on Saba in 1930/1931 in the chapter "The Anslyn Roof" tells the following: "The first thing a Saban does when he returns to the island is to put his house in shape. Arthur (Anslyn), being no exception, started with the walks, filling in the cracks and concrete. The kitchen heart came next. Then I saw a pile of freshly cut sticks in the yard. These he used to fence off the chickens, making the front and sides of the yard available for cultivation.

"Miss Hopie "(mother of Arthur) kept finding things to do about the house and when I asked her when she expected to be caught up, she laughingly replied, "Never." The floors finished, next it would be the walls or the windows. One afternoon she became dissatisfied with the ceilings and early the next morning Austin (Maxwell) was up on a step ladder. Washing the paint in one of the bedrooms he noticed it was peeling, and that the wood underneath was soft. Getting down he went to the kitchen and reported. "Let's have a look," said Arthur, climbing the ladder. He took out his knife, pried into the boards, and found wood lice. For half an hour he worked, and Miss Hopie stood at the foot of the ladder, looking up anxiously. When Arthur remarked that one of the little creatures was bearing a burden on its head Austin's shiny teeth rippled against ebony, his round body shook, and at last, unable to restrain himself, he fell down, arms clasped tightly, and rolled on the floor. Indeed, for a while, Miss Hopie was the only one who took the wood lice seriously. She recalled everything she had heard about them, and, in her imagination, saw the house slowly being eaten away. Her eyes were worried, and the rest of the day she did not smile.

Later Arthur grew serious. The house that outside looked so comfortable, inside so clean and shiny, was insidiously threatened. He called in Herman (Hassell), a carpenter, very bulky and jovial. "Do you think it will cost a hundred dollars?" asked Miss Hopie anxiously. Herman, his red face smiling, his straw hat pushed back over his head, sounded the boards. The fourteen-inch planks were the roof; there was nothing above them but shingles. "Forty dollars will take care of it," he replied. The big planks, when they arrived from St. Thomas, were brought up from the bay by two black men – the stronger carrying two planks at a time. Herman planed them on three sides, and then he, Arthur and Carl climbed up on the roof and ripped off the shingles. In Saba there is no newspaper, yet news travels, and soon everyone knew the Anslyns were putting on a new roof."

On July 21st, 1986 Lt. Governor Wycliffe Smith wrote an open letter to the people of Saba which stated the following: We are sure that you have heard the phrase "Saba is Unique". Indeed Saba is unique in many ways. One of the ways we would like to bring to your attention is our SABA HOUSES.

The Saban style house attracts the eye of the visitor. Why? Because of their style and colours; red roofs and white sides. Besides its cultural and traditional value, painting our homes and buildings the same colours has also become a tourist attraction.

This is a tourist attraction which we all have in our own hands and which only we can promote by continuing to paint our houses in the traditional colours.

We are therefore asking all home owners, care takers, business owners, foundations and organizations when painting your dwelling or business place please observe the traditional colours namely red roofs and white sides and white and green or brown shutters. Don't let your house run

down. Do the necessary repairs on time and you will extend the life of your home. In this way you are not only keeping Saba attractive but you are also promoting a tourist attraction.”

That letter was written 24 years ago already and looking around Saba, the Sabans especially are still heeding the good advice which he gave them.

Literature consulted:

The Monuments of Saba; Dr.Ir. Frans H.Brugman.

Caribbean Interlude; Kenneth Bolles

Life and Adventures of Capt. E. A. Johnson

Saban Cottages; By Heleen Cornet.

Building up The Future from the Past; Henry E. Coomans et al.

Encyclopedie van de Nederlandse Antillen.