

Boat building on Saba

By; Will Johnson

So much has been written on the subject of boat building on Saba over the centuries and so we decided to do our own research to determine as to whether or not these reports are based on myth or reality.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote; "I should like to rise and go where the golden apples grow; where below another sky, Parrot islands anchored lie, and watched by cockatoos and goats, Lonely Crusoe's building boats." Perhaps he had the Saban boat builders in mind when he wrote this.

In former times Saba acquired quite a reputation among travel writers especially in the United States. Although many of these writers had never stepped foot on Saba they managed to fabricate all kinds of stories about our island and its people.

One of the articles which prompted me to do this article was written by the author Douglas C. Pyle in his book "Clean Sweet Wind (1998)". His research was based on a half day trip to the island in March 1970 and in talking to some people here and there. He writes: "Charles Stoddard, writing in 1895 in "Cruising among the Caribees," represents the earliest reference I could locate of Saban vessels being built and lowered into the sea. However, neither Stoddard nor the others did anything more exacting than view the island from the deck of a passing cruise ship; their accounts merely establish that the hearsay evidence of boatbuilding in Saba is of greater antiquity than I had come to suppose.



'As a matter of fact, the sole hard evidence ever found for the legend was Professor Doran's discovery of a single entry in the Tortola shipping registers, mentioning that in 1859 the schooner "Augusta" of sixty-six-foot length overall and forty-nine tons was built in Saba by Benjamin Horton and brought to Tortola to be registered. There were other vessels registered to a Saban owner and built elsewhere, but

of all the entries I surveyed throughout the islands, no other vessel was actually attributed to construction in Saba.

“I surmise that the folk history of boatbuilding in Saba developed in the following manner. Benjamin Horton, an unusually determined individual, against all advice and common sense built a schooner in The Bottom and lowered it, not over the cliffs but down the steep valley now followed by the roadway. With the passage of time and frequent retelling, this singular event became pluralized until finally whole fleets of vessels were popularly supposed to have been built and lowered over Saba’s cliffs into the foaming sea below. This, at least, is the version I favor.”



Sir Algernon Aspinall in his “Pocket Guide to the West Indies (1907)”, writes the following;

“Little more than a rock rising sheer out of the sea and very inaccessible, Saba was the last stronghold of the buccaneers. The men of the island are almost without exception sailors. They are also great – boat builders. The boats – are built in the high lands and slid into the sea when they are ready for launching.”

William Agnew Paton in “Down the Islands – (1887)”, write that; “The people of Saba are celebrated throughout the Caribbean Islands for the fishing boats they build in a crater – the oddest of places imaginable for a ship-yard. When the boats are ready to be launched, they are lowered down the overhanging precipice into the sea. There is no timber growing on the island, no beach from which to launch a boat when it is built, no harbor to shelter one when launched and yet these Dutch West Indians profit by their trade of boat-building, and cruise all about the Caribbean Archipelago in the staunch sea-worthy craft they construct in the hallow of the crater on the top of their mountain colony.”

Sir Frederick Treves in “The Cradle of The Deep” (May 1908) tells us:

“Living aloft in their volcano, in a summit city called Bottom, these simple Dutch people who speak English reach the extreme of the improbable in the nature of their staple industry. They do not make balloons or kites. They are not astronomers, nor are they engaged in extracting nitrogen from the atmosphere. They are of all things in the world, shipbuilders, and shipbuilders of such merit that their boats and small craft are famous all over the Windward Islands. Let it be noted that fishing smacks are not only built in a crater, but on an island which has neither beach, harbor, landing stage, nor safe anchoring ground, where no timber is produced, where no iron is found, and where cordage is not

made. The island has indeed, except in the matter of size, no more facilities for the development of the shipbuilding trade than has a rock lighthouse. The production of ships from craters is hardly less wonderful than the gathering of grapes from thorns or figs from thistles.



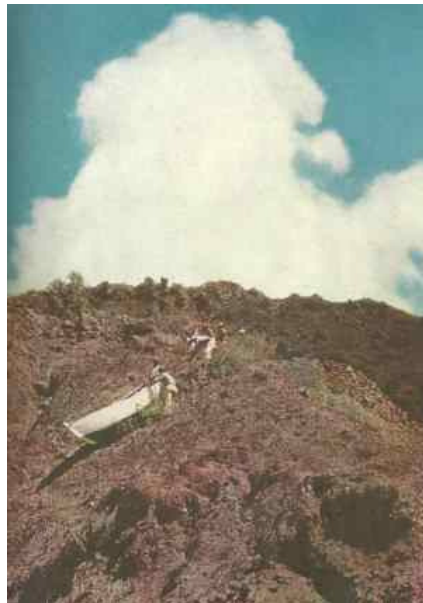
“When the Saba ship is finished it is lowered down the side of the cliff, and then has apparently to shift for itself. The women, no doubt, wave handkerchiefs from the rim of the crater as the craft takes to the sea, while the boys are told not to play with stones lest they should fall upon their father’s heads. After all the excitement of the launch is over, one can imagine the master-builder climbing up the Ladder to his crater home, as full of pride as his shortness of breath will allow.”

John W. Vandercook, in his book “Caribbee Cruise (1924) writes; “Happily for ones peace of mind, a Saba industry of the past has ceased. Saba used to export ships! Timbers in the dead crater, a thousand feet or more above sea level, were carpentered into fine, efficient little schooners. They were then hoisted to the edge of the precipice and lowered down by ropes.”

In the November 1940 issue of the National Geographic Magazine there is a long article on Saba written by Charles W. Herbert. He had visited Saba some years earlier and had made a film about the island. He writes: ‘Anyone who has heard of Saba remembers tales of early Sabans most widely broadcast is that fantastic story of shipbuilding. Almost without exception, when Saba is mentioned, they will say, “Oh yes! That is the place where they build schooners on top of the mountain and lower them over the cliff by ropes, down into the sea. If schooners were ever built in Saba, they were built on one of the narrow strips of shore close to the sea.

“Fortunately one had just been completed at Windward Side. We arranged to film the launching. The boat was built by a Johnson. He was just painting “Blue Bell” on her stern as we started shooting. From then on we had action aplenty as 20 strong men gripped the gunwale and headed for the sea two miles away and 1500 feet down. From Johnson’s yard they clambered over the rock wall into the street and started through the settlement. The news spread, and by the time they reached the center of the village both sides of the way were lined with onlookers. With a burst of strength, the men carried the boat for a few hundred yards and then took a breather. As they progressed, the crowd enlarged and followed. A

half mile out of town, they left the road and crossed a field strewn with rocks. Not far away they came to the top of a cliff which dropped down into a deep ravine, a short cut to the sea. Almost the whole village was on the sidelines now. Four stout hands raised a large flat rock, forming a human pile driver as a heavy anchoring post was set for rigging. A heavy rope was fastened to the stern of the boat and around the boat with two hitches. Easily the little craft slid over the top, down the cliff safely to the bottom 200 feet below. The men scrambled down the hillside, took hold again, and continued to the sea. By the time she was touching the beach below, the extra hands were down there waiting with shoes off and trousers rolled up to their thighs. With superhuman force they slid the boat into the water, manned the oars, and pulled for the open sea. No champagne was broken to send this craft on its way, but childish joy burst forth from these hardened men as they watched her take the swells."



And there was so much more written about the myth of boatbuilding on Saba that we can only quote from a very few writers on this subject. However in doing research for my book "Tales from My Grandmother's Pipe", I was able to determine that large schooners were indeed built on Saba. They were built on the Tent Bay as well as at the Well's Bay. Some were as big as 60 tons. There was a large quantity of white cedar and mahogany trees on the island. Even people from Anguilla would come here to get white cedar to build boats with. In order to launch the schooners and sloops the rollers would be greased with the juices of cactus and aloes. Some of the schooners and sloops built here were named the "White Wing", the "Talent", the "Surprise," the "Ethel" owned by Joe Simmons and the "Muriel" owned by John Simmons. One of the famous shipwrights of his day was Capt. Solomon (or Samuel) Simmons. The following declaration dated September 22nd, 1871, gives more information on one of the schooners built on Saba.

"We the undersigned John Simmons and Phoenix Simmons, ship-carpenters in this island of Saba, do hereby certify and declare that we were employed by His Honour Moses Leverock to assist at the building of the schooner "HARBINGER" in this island in the year 1861, and we further certify and declare that the Master carpenter who conducted the building of said schooner is now dead."

“We, the undersigned Moses Leverock, John William Leverock, and Moses Leverock Simmons, residing in this island of Saba, do hereby certify and declare: that the schooner named “Harbinger,” having one deck and two masts, measuring forty-eight sea tons and commanded by John William Leverock belongs partly to us in the following proportions; viz. Moses Leverock one half; John William Leverock one eighth; Moses Leverock Simmons one eighth; that the other two eighths belong to James Simmons and Ann Simmons; that we are Dutch burghers, natives of this island of Saba; that the administration of all that concerns said schooner “Harbinger”, is conducted in this island of Saba; and that neither by our free will nor consent shall our vessel ever be put on a war footing in opposition to the authorities of the State or of the Colonies. Saba 23rd December 1871.”

The “Harbinger” was sold in 1890 in Colombia and renamed the “Segunda Maria”. As late as 1930 she was seen in Curacao by Capt. Randolph Duncan, loading goods for Colombia. For a schooner to last that long it is a Grand testimony to the shipbuilding skills of Sabans back in the day.

Up until recent time’s boats were still being built in Windward Side and Hell’s Gate. Arthur Anslyn built one and sent it to Curacao. Leslie Johnson built several large fishing boats at Hell’s Gate one of which is pictured in a National Geographic Magazine with him and his family. In recent years the fishermen who go down to the sea to brave the rough waters do so in modern fishing craft which they purchase in the United States and Canada at prices their forefathers would never have imagined possible.

Let me suffice with ending this story by quoting from Frederick A. Ober who spent some ten days here on Saba around 1890. It is taken from his book “In the wake of Columbus”.

“The people who inhabit this half-submerged mountain take their lives in their hands oftener, I presume, than those of any other island in these seas. They dare the sirens of the sea, tempt fate, and run the risk of a watery grave, nearly every time they leave or return to their island home.”

On the other hand some became more cautious. Carlton Mitchell in “Caribbean Cruise” got the following answer when he asked a young man why he had left the sea to work in the Post office. The young man in return asked him: ‘ did you ever hear of anyone drowning in the Post Office?’ And so I guess after the captains left the island for Barbados, Bermuda, and the United States and so on, most people who remained here decided that a government job was safer and so our shipbuilding of the past would seem like a myth to the mindset of today.

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