

## The Church of England in Saba

By: Will Johnson

In June 2001, Ms. Ingeborg M. uit de Bos-van der Naaten, who was doing research on my ancestors in the National Archives in Holland, sent me a list of information which she had found. Among the list of documents she had consulted was one which stated that a meeting of “the English Church on Saba was held on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1763 to secure a salary to the Reverend Richard Davis for 3 years to be “Our Pastor”. A pledge was made to pay him 1250 pieces of 8 per annum.” In another note it states that “On October 5<sup>th</sup> of the same year, present at Vestry: Richard Davies.”

In 1777 the Rev. Kirkpatrick requested permission of Commander Johannes de Graaf to officially establish an Anglican Church on Saba. Permission was granted and thus the Anglican Church came into official existence, though from the aforementioned record, it was already in existence in 1763. Research indicates that the present Christ Church building in The Bottom was restored in 1777, after having been severely damaged by the great hurricane of 1772. Folklore has it that the doors of the Dutch Reformed Church on St. Eustatius were found close to my home in The Level on Saba in that ‘category five’ hurricane.

Although Dutch historians claimed that Saba was settled by the Dutch from St. Eustatius in 1640, there is reason to believe that the villages of Palmetto Point and Middle Island were already settled soon after 1629 by refugees from similar named villages in St. Kitts, after a large Spanish fleet captured that island. The Irish indentured servants, being Catholic, and allied to the Spanish, were allowed to leave and settle on other nearby islands. In 1665 a pirate fleet from Jamaica led by Edward and

Thomas Morgan (uncles of Sir Henry Morgan) captured St. Eustatius and Saba. They dispersed the 57 Dutch settlers and their families to plantations in the English islands and took the African slaves back to Jamaica as booty. There were over 200 Irish, Scots, English and French left, besides two Dutch families of ten people, who remained on Saba as well as 70 or 90 pirates who had mutinied. From 1672 to 1679 the English again occupied Saba. Already in 1659 in a petition to the Dutch West India Company, the inhabitants had requested a clergyman who had knowledge of the English language.

The few Dutch colonists who came from St. Eustatius around 1640 built themselves a small settlement on the South side of the island above Fort Bay. This settlement was destroyed by a landslide in 1651. After this the surviving colonists came to live in the area which they had previously farmed. This area known as "The Valley" later became known as the town of "The Bottom" as the English thought it was the bottom of the crater. At the entrance to The Bottom there was a small church, behind the present World War II monument. The hill we call "Paris Hill" is referred to in old property records as "Parish Hill".

In a bill-of-sale of January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1829 in the property bounds reference is made "to East old church place and the High Road." We have reason to believe that here was located the "Church of Christ" of the Presbyterians started by the renowned Reverend Hugh Knox. He was born in Northern Ireland of Scottish ancestry and migrated to the American colonies. Ordained in 1755 Knox decided to propagate the gospel and was sent to Saba. On Saba he married Mary Simmons daughter of Governor Peter Simmons and his wife Rebecca Correa. He moved to St. Croix in 1771 where he became the teacher of the great Alexander Hamilton and inspired him to go to the colonies in the North

which later became the United States of America. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1765 Reverend Knox made a now famous eulogy at his mother-in-laws funeral, a copy of which I have in my collection, and is probably one of the few great sermons preserved from that period in our West Indian history. Remarkably in 1792 a eulogy conducted for his young successor John Elsworth who died on November 22, 1791 at the age of 29 also survives and I also have a copy in my collection. The latter eulogy conducted in East Windsor Connecticut was dedicated to the people of Saba. It states that ;” After his return to the continent, he frequently expressed a cordial regard for you, as a people whom he sincerely loved, and whose salvation he ardently desired; and with whom had his health permitted, he would have chosen to have spent his days; and a grateful sense of those respectful attentions shown to him, and kindnesses received from you, and particularly from his Honor Governor(Thomas) DINZEY, and his worthy family, in whose family he lived, during his residence in the island.”

I mention this as although the Presbyterian Church did not survive they left an impressive record for such a small island and their members flowed into the growing community of the Church of England.

In 1791 when Dr. Thomas Coke of Methodist church fame visited Saba he wrote that there was a church but no preacher. Indeed during the first century of the Church’s life on Saba, it was unable to provide a resident pastor for the island, but the population remained actively Anglican.

When the Dutch historian M.D. Teenstra visited Saba on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1829 he wrote that the only religious instructor on the island was John Toland a “Presbyterian”. In that Teenstra was mistaken. He states also

that; “The Church building after the hurricane of 1772 has been completely rebuilt. In 1821 it was re-shingled. It is a square building, not very large, of which the solid walls are built of cut stone. The same building serves as Council Hall and school.”



Historic Christ Church in The Bottom built 1770.

John Toland was born on Saba. Dr. Thomas Coke in his history of the Methodist Church in the West Indies refers to a Toland as a Methodist missionary preacher in Tortola around 1790 to 1800. That could have been the father of our John Toland, as the Methodists were briefly active on Saba around that time and the name Toland is only related to John and his family on Saba. The Reverend John Toland was married to Ann Louisa Rodgers of Antigua. They had four daughters and a son

James Osborne Toland. James died May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1870 on Saba. One of the daughters, Susan Rebecca, married Richard Robinson Richardson of St. Martin on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1835 and another daughter Annie married Abraham Charleswell Simmons Vanterpool and died in childbirth in Virgin Gorda.

I have a record of passengers arriving in the United States at the port of Washington, North Carolina, on the schooner "Eli Hoyt" in 1837 stating that the Reverend John Toland and Mrs. Mary L. Toland both age 57 were passengers. He had been to North Carolina in 1836 and served for one year as pastor of the Episcopal Church in Bath. Their children (should be grandchildren) accompanying them in 1837 were, Master James Toland age 14, Miss Rachel L. Toland age 12 and Master Hugh Toland age 8 and travelling with them was Master Thomas C. Vanterpool, age 8 a son of their deceased daughter Annie. The Vanterpools had been resident in Tortola before Saba so that Dr. Coke's Toland could have been Hugh Toland, father of the Rev. John Toland. The Reverend died on Saba on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1863. We don't know much about the North Carolina connection but we do know that Rachel died there in 1838 and that Hugh remained in the United States and married there and ended up on Staten Island and has descendants in the United States.

The church was served by a visiting Anglican priest the Reverend Henry Warneford from Anguilla from 1861 to 1878. As he kept good records much is known from him about his service to Saba. In 1867 he writes that the population of Saba was 1411. The attendance at the Anglican Church School was 30 boys and 25 girls. In a letter of 31 December 1867 he says: "I have also to express my great satisfaction at the Congregations in the Islands of St. Barths and Saba. I spent the last

Sunday in the year on the latter island, on which occasion I had a full



Father Aldric Hassell, greeting Administrator/Commissioner Will Johnson, wife Lynne and son Teddy, Sept. 27th, 1977, observing 200 years of the Church of English being officially established on Saba.

assembly at both Morning and Evening services. Indeed I may say I had a Congregation all Sunday night, far into Monday morning – for on that night at 9 we experienced a fearful shock of earthquake and in a few minutes the Governor’s House (Moses Leverock) was filled by a terrified crowd, for whom, after some order was restored, I prayed, and implored God’s merciful protection, and administered from time to time words of consolation to those ready to faint with fear, imploring them to put their trust in God. On Monday morning, I proceeded to the Windwardside, and held service as usual in Capt. John Hassell’s hospitable house, to a large assembly of attentive and fear-stricken people (for the Mountains still quake). I made my discourse applicable to the occasion and received 6 new communicants.”

On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1878 the Holy Trinity Church in Windwardside was consecrated by the Right Reverend. William Waldron Jackson, Bishop of Antigua. According to canon law the Anglican community here falls under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Antigua.

In course of time, five Sabans have become Anglican clergy. These are: John W. Leverock, nephew of Governor Moses Leverock, Alvin Edward Simmons, both of the Bottom, Frank Hassell of St. Johns, Aldric Steeling Hassell of Windwardside, and Ivan Heyliger of The Bottom.

Saban Anglicans were also active in spreading the faith to other islands. The Anglican Church on Curacao was for a large part financed and built by Sabans, and also the church on St. Eustatus. Sabans would go there on weekends to help with the building and the priest on Saba still serves the Anglican community on that island. In 1977 the church issued a booklet with interesting historical facts which was written by Mr. Frank Hassell who along with his sisters Norma and Bertha are the pillars of Holy Trinity Church.

The Church of England had 1500 members on Saba in 1874. However, with the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church on Saba in 1860 the numbers declined. In 1877 there were 1458 Anglicans on Saba out of a total population of 2072. The Anglican Church has lost its dominant position over the years since then, however the church still carries on and the remaining members of the church are as dedicated to their church as those who in 1763 got together to pay a salary to the Reverend Richard Davis, and may God continue to bless their work on Saba.

“We love the place O god

Wherein Thine Honour dwells

The joy of Thine abode

All earthly joy excels.”