

Education on Saba in bygone years

By Will Johnson

The educational system as we know it today is quite different from what was available in former times. For a great part of its history since the island was settled by Europeans in the early part of the seventeenth century there were no schools at all.

In the year 1816 there was no public school on Saba when the Dutch took over the island from the English who had occupied it for some years. There were however some individuals who gave lessons to their own children and to the children of other family members and friends. When the historian M.D. Teenstra visited Saba in 1829 he observed that in the Anglican Church in The Bottom, that one of the members of the Council of Policy was also functioning as a schoolteacher and was giving lessons in the English language to about fifteen children. On June 1st 1836 the R.C. Priest Martinus Joannes Niewindt (born Amsterdam 17 May 1796- died Curacao 12 January 1860), who later became Bishop, visited Saba and said that few of the 1800 inhabitants could read or write. Niewindt could not communicate with the people as he was unable to speak English. In 1863 the Reverend Warneford of the Anglican community, reports that a Sunday and Day school would be established shortly. In 1857 in a letter we read that nearly all persons of Windwardside and The Valley (The Bottom) could read. In 1864 he writes; "I have much cause to be thankful for the good spirit evinced in this Island, and for the efforts which have been made to obtain from the Dutch Government an annual grant for the support of a resident minister and schoolmaster. Schools are all important here now, for the laboring class have newly received their freedom, and require to be instructed in the very first rudiments of Christianity. In 1867 he writes that the population of Saba was 1411 and that the attendance at the Anglican Church School was 30 boys and 25 girls. In 1948, the Rev'd. Francis W. Jenson, the then Rector saw the need for an Anglican Kindergarten. He at once contacted the Government, and was given immediate support. On January 5th 1948 the school opened with teacher Mrs. Ursula Dunkin who taught until 1968 and then had to leave to care for her sick mother and was replaced by Miss Esseline R. Simmons.

In a letter from Father J.C. Gast in 1854, a visiting Roman Catholic priest, he mentions that nearly all the white inhabitants in The Bottom and in the Windwardside could read and write. This sounds rather strange as in 1790 out of a population of 1400 there were only five (5) people on the island who themselves could barely read and write.

In Windwardside after 1844, Sarah Mardenborough gave religious lessons until 1873. She had converted to Catholicism. She taught the youth, took care of the church, helped the priests and took care of the ill. As a result she contracted leprosy but kept on giving instructions to the youth of Windwardside. She died on December 19th, 1903 at the age of 79 and is buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery in Windwardside. Much later in the village of Hell's Gate, Mary Jane Johnson also taught children there. According to research done by R.C. Priest, father G.J.M. Dahlhaus, in a chronological history of education on Saba, he stated that Father Gast wanted to start a Roman Catholic School in The Bottom. The Anglican Church of course had their own school there which was a continuation of the school which Mr. Teenstra had observed in 1829 already.

In 1890 there was no public school on Saba. However a teacher residing on Saba was given a grant by the colonial government to give free education to the poor. At that time he had some thirty pupils. In 1878 there was a school in The Bottom with 41 pupils and two schools in Windwardside with respectively 33 and 54 pupils. These were the Anglican schools and a private school affiliated with the Roman Catholic church and led by Mrs. Gertrude Johnson born Hassell. Of course instruction was limited and was conducted in the English language the native tongue of all the inhabitants of the island back then.

There was a school in Palmetto Point (Mary's Point) from 1919 to 1923. John H. Skerrit of Montserrat was the government teacher. Lt. Governor Van der Zee who visited the school in 1921 wrote that the school had 18 pupils, Because of costs the school was closed in February 1923.

Education back then was more geared to survival. The Navigation School of Capt. Freddie Simmons which existed from 1909 to 1922 provided lessons for teenage young men who aspired to a career at sea. The results of this school did Saba proud as close to 200 young men passed through this school and many of them went on to become famous captains especially in the merchant marine of the United States. The making of socks and gloves was an old home industry on Saba and was still being done in 1829. Socks were sold for fls.6.—per dozen and gloves for fls.8.—a dozen. These were made from cotton grown and spun on Saba. After the demise of this home industry, the people went over to the making of hats including high quality Panama hats. In 1857 the earliest mention of this was by the R.C. Priest Father J.C. Gast. He wrote that the plaiting of hats was the only general branch of home industry which is practiced here. The straw came from Cuba. As a result of the Spanish-American war in 1898 there was stagnation in the import of straw from that country. People then tried to import straw from Puerto Rico. After 1890 the Dominican nuns propagated the making of straw hats in Simpson bay on St. Martin and on Hell's Gate on Saba, and courses were given to all interested parties.

The late Mr. Volney Hassell who was blind from birth, in Saba Silhouettes gives us an idea of the importance of plaiting hats back then and the switch over to the drawn thread work. He lost his father in the eruption of Mt. Pelee in 1902. His father was mate on a schooner which was in the harbor at the time of the eruption. Volney describes two important home industries on Saba when he was a young orphan in a poverty stricken society.

“Ye see our hats? We got a nice press out there [Mammy] plait ‘em, she never sewed ‘em, only just plait it, ye see, with a pen knife. I don’t know in them times how the people got through, ye know, how ever they could ever get them entire strips as fine as that. She plait and she save up her money till she got to twenty – five dollars (Dutch dollars), and she drewed it and bought the press out of it, ye see. You know there used to be a woman here to learn ‘em how to plait ‘em from Holland. The Panama hat ,that is. We hired her our house there. She was there six months. We hired it for six dollars a month. Look, our old grandmother she would sit up at night. They’d strip the tire, you see. Well, I don’t know how they ever got them stripped, but they’d do it with a pen knife, you see, and strip ‘em fine. They’d make you a fine hat and a course one; one for we to have to wear on Sundays and then one, well, for the weekdays, for the working to carry the burdens on, you see. And she could sit there at night, and plait that without light, with eleven strands, we’ll say. And then she’d make we a fine one. You know anything

about Panama hats? Well, that was almost next to them, what they called the fine hats. And she could set there to the end of the table and sew 'em. And then you know what we'd do? We'd take 'em and put the plait on the table and take a cup or a glass or anything and rub it down like that, you see, till it come smooth, and then they'd take the sulphur and put it into a barrel, and skein up the plait just like you skeins up rope, and put it on a piece of tin inside the barrel like that. And now don't ask how white they'd come, but that would clearly take your breath, the sulphur. We never soaked it, we just put it o'er the barrel in the sulphur for it to draw it white you see. To draw it white, white, white, and they couldn't be no whiter, you see. And then you had to light the sulphur, don't you know, down in the barrel. The barrel never got burned. And after they was smoked, then they turned to sew them, you see.

"Well, then after then, well [Mammy] began with the Spanish work. And then in the late years she done plenty of the Spanish work, when she could get the chance, ye know, after she was done with all the work, and set up at night till ever so late and do the Spanish Work. Mammy was pretty old then. They'd send my sister Ruby in the States, the Spanish work, the drawn-thread work, and she'd sell it o'er there, and she'd send we the money like that. In them days that kept we up here, ye know."

The so called "Spanish Work" or Saban Lace was introduced to the island by Mrs. Gertrude Johnson born Hassell (1854-1939) a young lady who had been sent to a convent on Curacao to study to become a teacher. It became the leading home industry in the 20th century. In the First World War as many as 250 women were involved in the making of drawn thread work. The population then was just over two thousand. Continuous lessons were given through the generations to keep Saba lacework alive. Mr. Eric A. Eliason wrote a wonderful account of the history of Saba Lace in his book "The Fruit of Her Hands".

Dominican Nuns from Voorschoten on August 28th, 1905 opened a school in the "Upper town" in The Bottom in a small house belonging to Lovelet Hassell who had formerly given private lessons in this house. On October 1st, 1907 the school was recognized by the government and was eligible for a small subsidy. There were 40 students from The Bottom and 23 from elsewhere. In 1906 a new school was built at a cost of fls.5.000.—and inaugurated on August 16th, 1906. The two first nuns to come to Saba from St.Eustatius where they had been stationed were Sister Bertranda Genee and Sister Euphrosine van den Brink. In 1911 a new school was built in Windwardside. This building still exists. In 1905 there was a R.C. school run privately by Gertrude Johnson born Hassell (the one who had introduced the Spanish Work to the island) and her niece Peter Elenor Hassell. This school in Windwardside was taken over by sister Bertranda on October 1st, 1907. On January 1st, 1908 two more nuns were assigned to Saba. One of these nuns was Sister Winefrieda Graig. She was British by birth. She was born on 22 June 1869 in Birmingham, England. She died on March 6th, 1959. Her father was a merchant in Birmingham who sent his children to the continent to get a French education.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was also public school education in Windwardside. Where Captain Quarter's hotel was later established there was first a school and later a hospital. Later on in the building behind the Post office, there was a schoolroom. This later became the Public Library.

In 1910 the St. Joseph School was built and the "old school" in The Mountain was sold to Capt. Thomas Hassell. The new school was dedicated on June 22nd, 1911. Sister Euphrosine van den Brink was a

pioneer in the building of schools. Because of the bad economic situation on the island there was some year's as much as 62% absenteeism.

The Dominican nuns did much to further education on Saba. The last ones to leave the island in the mid nineteen seventies were Sister Agatha Jansen, Sister Bendicta Bisschop, and Sister Arcadia O'Connor and Sister Waltruda Jeurissen, the last two mentioned left already in 1974 and the first two mentioned left in 1977.

In Windwardside in 1935 a new school was built and in 1957 a new school was also built in The Bottom. I went to both of the old schools, which were wooden buildings, the old school in Windwardside, still standing, above the Rectory and the old school in The Bottom, former church, which was torn down to build the new concrete building. The building now used by the Department of Works, was used as a public school from around 1920 until 1973 when it was closed down because of the then small attendance. It was then decided to move the hospital on St. John's to The Bottom and to start a secondary school there. In 1983 work was started at the same location and the primary school was transferred to that location as well. The schools in The Bottom and in the Windwardside were closed down. The children are now carried by busses from all over the island to the schools on St. John's. The Bottom is now dominated by the Saba School of Medicine which was set up by Sabans, the Saba Government and Dr. David Frederick in 1988. It started out on a small scale in the old Roman Catholic school building. This building is now leased out by government and used as a hardware store and the one in Windwardside, built in 1955, is used as the Eugenius Johnson Center.

Of all the nuns I remember sister Arcadia the best. For the licks I got from her of course. She must have learned disciplinary tactics from the schools in Trinidad. V.S. Naipaul in "Miguel Street" in the account of his ram goat describes how the teacher soaked the tamarind stick used as a whip in water so that the lash would have more effect. Sister Arcadia would send one to cut a tamarind stick and then whipped you with it. She used as her threat "I am going to hit you a Peter Selie." Once she threw her shoe at me from behind the desk. I ducked and Alton Johnson took the torpedo full smack in the face. She was a native of St. Maarten. Her brother, William O'Connor's son Joseph Alphonse Constantine O'Connor was later my boss on St. Maarten. Those were the days and I think back on them fondly as I am writing this, even fondly of the "Peter Selie's" Sister Arcadia doled out. Her shoe did not always miss its mark I can assure you.

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Zuster Euphrosine van den Brink.



