

Harry L. Johnson

For some time now I have promised myself to do a small booklet on the life of the man for whom the museum was named after. However I take on so many projects that I must put off a booklet for now. Instead the readers of "Under the Sea Grape Tree" which is a wide audience will now get to know who he was.

Harry was born on Saba on November 19th, 1913. His parents were John William Johnson and Alida Johnson born Johnson. He was first baptized as an Anglican and on July 20th 1919 he was baptized as a Roman Catholic.

Harry had a real tough time as a boy. His father was lost off Cape Hatteras on January 29th, 1914 on the "Benjamin F. Poole" which four master schooner was lost while bound from Wilmington Delaware to Baltimore with eight in crew. It was a large schooner 202 feet in length, and built in Bath Maine in 1886. Many Sabans lost their lives at sea in former times. Harry never knew his father as he was just a baby when his father died.

Cape Hatteras especially took a lot of Saban lives. On December 21st 1902 the "Maggie M. Hart" was lost there with Edward C. Hassell and Alois Hassell being lost. In 1890 or thereabouts Capt. Peter Simmons and others from Saba were lost there, and in 1898 William Simmons Peterson was also lost there on a schooner.

Harry's mother died when he was only four years old. I remember him telling me that he thought it was all a big joke until he actually saw his mother being lowered into the grave. He describes his loss in the following poem.

IN LOVING MEMORY

At a Cross I often gaze,
Out amidst the evergreen;
Marking dear ones I've lost
In brilliant white can be seen.

In the old Church yard
Beneath the sod so hard,
A loving Mother and Friend,
Was placed in the end.

At the age of only four,
As bearers carried her through the door
Oblivious was I then
That I would never see her again.

Beneath this cross an epitaph is seen,
For ones who lived a life so clean,
Bearing eleven impressive words,
Who are now in peace with the Lord.

There was one who had no cross.

In a raging storm my father was lost,

Whose ending days was on the ocean,

Never a word from his lips to hear spoken.

Harry had three other brothers who all immigrated to the United States and remained there. I have an old postcard dated July 11th, 1921 and sent from Brooklyn New York by Harry's older brother Colbert. It reads: "Dear Little Harry,

"Just a few lines to say your dear brother arrived in New York the 9th and the damn old ship is tied up again so I don't know what we will do now. Write another little letter for your dear brother. Signed; Colbert Johnson." The postcard had a scene of Hamburg so he must have been there with the ship. I guess Colbert figured that Harry at age eight must have been exposed to bad words by then so that he could use the damn word without consideration as to who would be reading the postcard.

Little Harry was then raised by an old aunt until he was twelve and then she too died. When his aunt died he went to live with an uncle and he helped his uncle to do the farming. At the age of 13 he went to sea with Captain William Benjamin Hassell and sailed on the "Three Sisters". He sailed with Clarence Every and Johnny Hassall (one of Capt. Ben's sons). He was paid three dollars per month. He sailed to Barbados, also to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and also to South Africa. He sailed for four years and then he went to Bermuda. There he met Doris

Every whom he married on September 2nd, 1931 when he was still only seventeen. The poor guy had been knocked about so much in his early years that he needed someone permanent in his life. She worked for Mrs. Frith. Back then Saban women also emigrated in search of work to Bermuda and other places. Doris' sister Winnie had immigrated to Bermuda before her. Harry's first children Aileen and Milton were born on Bermuda. There in Bermuda he started painting as a hobby and also doing research into the navigational history of Saba. In 1937 he came down to St.Kitts with his family on the "Lady Drake". After a short while on Saba he went to Aruba to work for the LAGO OIL REFINERY. In Bermuda he had worked as a house painter and in a stone quarry. In Aruba he worked as a fireman for five or six years. Doris took in boarders from Saba. People like Jospehus Lambert Hassell and his brother Peter Anthony Hassell. In those days everyone was going to Aruba in search of work. Harry came back to Saba and did some farming. He joined the Police Force at the age of 31. His daughter Aileen remembers that Harry was going down to The Bottom on a horse to sign up for the police force when he met Osmar Ralph Simmons, also on a horse going down to The Bottom for the same purpose. They worked together in the police force on Saba and St.Maarten and remained life long friends. Harry worked for twenty years as a Policeman before retiring on April 1st, 1964. He was not only a policeman but at the same time served as Postmaster, and checked the rainfall for about eight years. At the age of fifty he retired and started to paint. He never went to art school. His first real painting he made at the age of 17. He gave the painting to Lady Grace Barnes on Bermuda. During his twenty years of service in the police force he made five paintings. After he retired he started to paint again. Two of his

paintings appeared in the Chicago Daily News. One was of a wedding procession, the other of a church. Yet another of his paintings was published in Clipper Magazine. He painted on hardboard and tiles with oil paint. He liked primitive art, as you will recognize in his paintings. He didn't like modern art because as he said "if I buy something and I have to ask what it is all about, it's no good. That's why I like primitive art."

After he retired he started a small museum in his yard in an old house which had belonged to Miss Hester Peterson who died in 1970 at the age of 104. Harry collected quite a number of artifacts and old photo's of Saba. He was an avid collector of sea stories. Saba is an island of a thousand sea stories. Harry contributed many columns to the local newspaper the "Saba Herald." Stories, about Saban captains and their association with the sea. He inspired me to carry on and to later publish "Tales from My Grandmother's Pipe", which was an accumulation of stories about Sabans and their association with the sea.

Before he died he expressed the wish to me on several occasions that he hoped one day there would be a museum on Saba. We fulfilled that part of his dream when the Harry L. Johnson Memorial Museum opened its doors on Sunday March 5th, 1978. The house and five thousand five hundred and fifty square meters of land belonged to the Peterson family. The house was built by Captain Allan Atlesthon Peterson around the year 1850. His family is said to have come to Saba from St. Barths. The Peterson family sold the house and extensive property in 1969 to two citizens of the United States, Robert Beebe and William H. Johnson for thirteen thousand dollars. On Wednesday June 1st, 1977 they in turn sold the property to a foundation which I had hurriedly established and named the Harry L. Johnson Memorial Foundation. I was able to buy the property for seventy five thousand

dollars of which twenty thousand had been donated to me by Mr. John Goodwin while the balance came from the Dutch Government with the approval of then Minister W.F. de Gaay Fortman who visited the property before it was purchased and agreed to give the necessary supplementary funds to the foundation so that they could purchase the property and establish a museum there.

Harry died of lung cancer in 1972 after suffering for quite a long time. He was a life long smoker as most people were back then and unaware of the danger smoking poses to ones health. Harry loved a good party and is remembered by friends for his love of music and his fascination with the weather. When a hurricane was just starting out from Africa, Harry would be out in hurricane gear and we would have hurricane parties when there were no prospects even of a small squall. I can hear him even now; "Boys let us fire one as that hurricane is sure going to hit us."

On the occasion of the opening of the museum his youngest daughter Mrs. Claire Hassell born Johnson made a speech from which we quote the following: "Every one of us at one time or another dreams of the things we would like to accomplish and my father's greatest dream, as you all know, was that Saba too would have a museum of its own. He did not have the facilities or the wealth to bring this about, but he did have the determination to make a beginning in one little room with all the old things from Saba's past which he could collect. Perhaps he never thought that his little beginning would grow into what we have today but he knew that mighty trees grow from tiny seeds, and if the seed is never planted, the tree will never grow.

“Since death must come to all of us, my father is not present today to see the tree which the seed he planted has produced, yet I feel that though he cannot be present with us today in body, he is here in spirit, and that his spirit rejoices even as I rejoice to see his dream come true. In his name today I want to thank the Island Government, the board of the Foundation, and all others who have made it possible for his dream to become a reality. Today the thanks of his children go to all of you in his name. May the museum become something we all will be proud of, and may it always be a tribute to his name and a benefit to our island.”

Many important people have visited the museum over the years and it has been a struggle to keep it staffed and maintained. Mrs. Sherry Peterson born Hassell has been the person in charge for many years and will be going into retirement soon and we thank her and all those foundation members who over the years have kept the dream alive of Saba having its own museum. Mr. Glen Holm continues to run the Foundation and to solicit funds for the cause. We honor the memory of Harry Johnson and thank all of those who have kept the museum going over the years.

Will Johnson



