

## The Simmons Fleet By; Will Johnson

The first Simmons to be recorded in the Leeward Islands was Peter and Charles Simmons in St. Thomas in 1658. This father and son were soon recorded as living on Saba. The Simmons family of Saba originated in the South of England. Some of them if not all had a Jewish background. Those with a Jewish background were usually spelled Simmonds, but many were also spelled the regular way.

The Simmons' played an important role in the history of Saba. They were Commanders, Island Secretaries, and Harbormasters (although technically Saba had no harbor as such) and they were active in the merchant marine. I understand from a now deceased cousin in New York that in his research one of Henry Morgan's lieutenants when he captured Panama City was a James Simmons. He probably ended up on Saba as well when pirates from Jamaica captured Saba and St. Eustatius in 1665.

On a list of creditors to the West India Company in 1686 there was a George Simmons and a John Simmons listed. In the population list of May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1699 there are two Charles Simmons' father and son, the same for John Simmons and James Simmons as well as a Moddyford Simmons and a George Simmons.

The Simmons' of prominence in former times mostly lived in The Bottom where they owned much of the land and houses at the time. Especially along the road leading to the Gap on both sides of the road belonged to the various Simmons captains. Through intermarriage among the other white families they were also related to the Beaks, the Vanterpools, and the Leverocks and to a lesser extent the Johnsons', the Hassells', Zeegers' and so on.

For this article I will highlight the life of only two of the many Simmons' who were well known captains. A young man from St. Eustatius recently told me that he had never known that Saba had so many captains. I told him that the Simmons family alone had provided enough captains to have commanded their own fleet if they had so wished. In World War I it was estimated that around 135 captains from Saba were serving in the United States merchant marine and on the Saban fleet of schooners at the time serving the rest of the Caribbean, out of Barbados and other ports. In a census taken in the year 1912, out of a total male population of 774, no less than 530 were listed as seamen.

For this article I will highlight the life of Captain Thomas Simmons. He was the son of Joseph Benjamin Simmons (Black Head Joe), born on Saba march 5<sup>th</sup>, 1866, died august 31<sup>st</sup>, 1934, and Margareth Jane Simmons ("Maggie Jane).

Maggie Jane was born in New York. Her mother was a Manning from Barbados and died at a young age in New York. Her father George brought her to Saba for his mother to raise her. As in so many cases back then he was lost in 1870 on a schooner in the North Atlantic. When Maggie Jane was an old woman her son Captain Tom took her back to New York where she died and is buried. She had ten children several of whom died at sea. In the back of the Anglican Church in The Bottom there is a plaque which reads as follows:

In loving memory of John Simmons, age 52 years. David W. Simmons, age 40 years, Richard R. Simmons, age 22 years, Isaac Simmons age 16 years. Lost at sea, September 1918. We cannot Lord, thy purpose see; but all is well that's done by thee.

John Simmons was captain of a Danish registered schooner from St. Thomas. The vessel and its crew were lost coming out of Miami. Richard 22 and Isaac 16 were sons of Maggie Jane.

Captain Tom as he was fondly called worked his way up from a cabin boy on schooners plying the West Indian trade to 'Commodore' of the Moore McCormick line. He went as far as second mate on schooners and then joined the American Hawaiian Line as Quarter Master. In 1917 he went over to the Munson Steamship Line as third officer on the passenger liner "Murio". He later became captain and was in command on the maiden voyages of the old 32000 ton "Argentina" as well as the new 22,000 ton luxury liner by the same name. The old "Argentina", under his command, was the first troop ship to enter the ports of Australia during World War II and to stand by for D-Day in England. He was Captain of various ocean liners such as the "Western World", the "American Legion", the "Southern Cross", and the "Pan America". He later became commodore of the Moore McCormick Line. He spent fifty-two years at sea and was awarded the highest decoration by Brazil to a foreigner.

The following article is taken from the Brazil Herald of February 24<sup>th</sup> 1963:  
**RETIRING COMMODORE SIMMONS RECEIVES BRAZILIAN DECORATION**  
Rio de Janeiro – Commodore Thomas N. Simmons, who arrives tomorrow in Rio on his last cruise aboard the Moore McCormack liner 'Argentina', yesterday was awarded the Cruzeiro do Sul by the Government of Brazil. He received Brazil's highest award given to citizens of foreign countries in ceremonies during the ship's stopover in Salvador, Bahia, from the hands of Bahia Governor Juracy Magalhaes. Commodore Simmons, friend and councilor to a myriad of international travelers, culminates 50 years on the sea on the SS. Argentina's current "Sea Safari" cruise. This 63 day trip is Commodore Simmons' last, as he has announced his retirement effective upon his return, April 17. And coincidentally another 50 years are celebrated in 1963 – the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moore McCormack Lines, founded in 1913 – one of America's foremost steamship owners and operators, whose fleet includes the two new passenger liners, "Argentina" and "Brazil", and 42 modern cargo liners.

The innate modesty of the Commodore camouflages a colorful career. To him all the flavor and excitement of the sea is not commonplace – far from it- but so much a part of his life that he accepts the unusual as the everyday, the crisis as the normal. The highlight of his career are people he knew and knows and loves; the Duke of Windsor, Clark Gable, Bing Crosby, corporate Presidents, Cardinals, Artists, Singers. Summing up, all are Tom Simmons' exciting moments. The Commodore was born on Saba Island in the West Indies, of Dutch forefathers of seafaring bent. Commodore Simmons' last trip takes him amidst friends in the Caribbean ports of Barbados, in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Thence he and the "Argentina" sail to South and East Africa, through the Suez, to the Mediterranean and homeward via Italy, Spain and Portugal. These are familiar friendly places to Tom Simmons, faces of friends whom he relishes visiting. At many of the ports, officials, old cronies, visiting traveling companions and the Simmons people are planning commemorative ceremonies marking the 50<sup>th</sup> and retirement year of service of Commodore Thomas N. Simmons. A Grandfather a dozen times over, Commodore Simmons enjoys his holidays at his home on Long Island. But the sea is part of him, and anyone can see from his "Argentina" that he is a man of the sea."

He was born in 1895. He met his wife Enid May Bruce in New York (she was born Montego Bay, Jamaica in 1902). She was a daughter of Captain Solomon "Butchy Coonks" Simmons of Saba and her mother was the daughter of the Scottish collector of Customs there. Only on his deathbed did Captain "Butchy Coonks" confess to his Saba family that he had a second family in Montego Bay. His son Captain Johnny Simmons went in search of the family and took the three girls to New York, two of which married Sabans. A son remained in Jamaica and lived to be a very old man.

The home which now belongs to Norman Winfield was the home in which the Commodore grew up in. His descendants regularly visit the island and the home known as "Maggie Jane's House." One of Commodore Tom's sisters (Elsie) was married to the well known Governor Xavier Krugers.

The other Simmons Captain I would like to highlight is Cameron Dudley Simmons. He was born on Saba and his wife was Edna Blanche Simmons born 1904 and she also a daughter of Captain Solomon "Butchy Coonks" Simmons.

He was a son of Captain Samuel Augustus Simmons and Mrs. Eva Simmons born Johnson. Captain Sammy was born on Saba and filled many functions in the Saba government administration at the time. His wife "Miss Eva" was born in Barbados. She was descended from a branch of the Johnson family who moved back and forth between Saba and Barbados. Whereas she was born on Barbados, her father William was born on Saba, and her grandfather also William was born on Barbados and so on.

Miss Eva and Captain Sammy also lost three sons at sea. One of them Captain Harold Simmons was lost with his entire family in the Gulf of Mexico. He was captain of a molasses tanker which broke in two in a storm. They were able to get into lifeboats, one of which with a David Johnson from Saba made it safely to shore. I have the report made after the disaster happened and the lifeboat carrying the Captain and his family was lost with all on board. Earlier with Captain Ralph Holm on board as a mate Captain Harold was shipwrecked on a coal boat which sank on route from Philadelphia to Boston. On that trip all were saved.

Another older brother, a third mate on a schooner was lost off Cape Hatteras. Captain Cameron Dudley Simmons was born on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1892 and died on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Dudley and his brother Samuel left Saba on a schooner sailing between the islands and New York. After sailing as mate on the schooner he then sailed with the American Hawaiian Line until he received his Master's license. He sailed as Master on tankers and freighters. Some of the vessels which he commanded were the S.S. Antietam, S.S. Bulkco, SS. E.J.Nicholas (tankers) S.S. Alamar, S.S.Cubore (freighters). Just prior to World War II, Captain Dudley took the S.S. Laranaga from Boston destined for Murmansk, but just east of Iceland their convoy was wolf packed. The ship received a hit, but retained watertight integrity and went into Reykjavik for repairs. Captain Simmons went ashore but when returning to the ship on a launch he was injured. He was hospitalized for approximately three months due to a severely injured foot. When the ship returned from Murmansk it put into Reykjavik for him. In July 1942 he assumed command of the S.S. William Wirt, launched with two other Liberty Ships on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July of that same year. The ship loaded in Newport News, Virginia and the first of August set sail for the United Kingdom, arriving in Avonmouth, England. After discharging cargo the ship was sent to Newport, Wales to await loading for the North African invasion in November. The William Wirt was the first ship to enter a North

African port in the invasion. On the next trip from Liverpool to Phillipeville, Algeria the ship was hit in an air attack, but made port and was able to discharge cargo. From Phillipeville the ship sailed to Gibraltar for repairs and returned to the United Kingdom where a survey found the ship not fit to continue carrying cargo, so it returned to the United States. For this he was awarded the Medal for Meritorious Service. After a short vacation Captain Simmons commanded another Liberty ship until sometime in the spring of 1944. He then became Captain of the SS Point Loma, a seagoing tugboat. He served on this tugboat until his death of a heart attack in January of 1945. I have a copy of the logbook describing how he died at sea. He ended his career as so many from Saba did back then. He was buried at sea in the vast Pacific Ocean.

These were Saba's glory days. These people immigrated not for welfare but to contribute to the countries where they emigrated to. In future articles I will highlight the lives of such captains of Industry as Ned Peterson who was the Chief Financial Officer of the Cargill company which employed 110,000 people. He was the only non family member of the MacMillan clan to have held such a high position in the 150 year old company. Also Howard Hassell of St. John's who worked on the atomic bomb, Prof. Eric Simmons (92) from whom only this past week I received a long letter, and Dr. Mozes Crossley a chemist. If you check his name on the internet they will tell you he is a famous United States scientist, though they do admit that he was born on Saba. Some of these people still have family on Saba who are proud to tell you of their family and what they were able to achieve with the challenges they faced and the limited resources Saba had to offer at the time. The question is, are we rising to the challenge now in our time of plenty?