

Simon Bolivar on Saba

By: Will Johnson

On January 2nd, 1816 General Simon Bolivar then residing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, wrote a letter to his friend Luis Brion, Admiral of the Venezuelan Navy.

Luis Brion was born on the island of Curacao on July 26th 1782 of a well to do Jewish family of Belgian origin. He spent his fortune to help Bolivar liberate the South American mainland from Spanish colonialism. He started the Navy of Gran Colombia consisting principally of vessels owned by him. The Cayes expeditions were made possible by Brion who also had business interests in Haiti at the time. It was also his business relations with Venezuela which put him in contact with Bolivar in the first place.

The letter from Bolivar among other things states: Quote: " I am writing to our friends under this date, telling them much the same that I am telling you concerning our common cause. If anything of importance I shall send word to you by a personal messenger. Meantime, I expect that you will do the same for me. I beg you in passing to get your forces together so that we may affect some useful enterprise on the Costa Firme. I have asked that the schooner intended for you be sent to the port where our refugees are, as you suggested."

Because of their pirate heritage and love of the sea, Sabans were known throughout the West Indies as fine sailors. Brion would have known of Saba and perhaps he had met Saban captains. Some of them could have even been captains of some of his schooners. In later years there were several Sabans who were captains of schooners owned by the Maduro's on Curacao and the Van Romondt's on St. Maarten.

What is known as Los Cayes (Aux Cayes) expedition started from Haiti on March 31st 1816 in an Easterly direction. Bolivar's route took him directly from Haiti to Saba. For unknown reasons the fleet stopped at Saba. Local folklore formerly had it that a number of Sabans joined the fleet and went to the battle of Los Frailes with the Venezuelan Navy. Could it be that Brion had an agreement with Bolivar to meet him on the little known island of Saba?

Hearst's International Cosmopolitan Magazine of April 1937 carried an article entitled:

"Saba Isle of Women."

Of the history of the island the article has the following to say: "The founders of the community kept no records, so its early history is obscure. Some say they were pirates marooned with their women by Sir Henry Morgan. (The proved to be correct as in 1665 pirates from Port Royal, Jamaica, under Thomas and Edward Morgan, uncles to Henry, captured Saba and St. Eustatius and left a garrison behind.), others believe they were refugees from the Monmouth rebellion in England. Even the origin of the name which is pronounced "Say-bah", is unknown. It may be the Old Dutch word for the Biblical land of Sheba. Or it may be a corruption of the French Sabot (Shoe), for throughout the early years of the community Sabans made most of the work shoes for the West Indies. (The Catholic Priest Labat who visited Saba in 1701 travelling with a pirate ship bought several pair of shoes made on Saba.) Then came a couple of centuries when Saban sloops and schooners were famed for their stout qualities, and for the hairy-

chedsted Saban men who used them to smuggle contraband to the rebellious American colonies of George 111 and who later carried forbidden arms to Bolivar. Now the boat builders are all gone.” (Cosmopolitan April 1937).

So in 1937 folklore had it that arms were smuggled to Bolivar by Sabans. In the First World War a Guyanese newspaper quoted Winston Churchill of accusing Saba captains of supplying U-2 boats with food and other supplies.

In 1929 shortly after Urbina invaded Curacao there appeared a steamer on the Saba Bank which seemed headed towards Saba. The people panicked and some started packing whatever little jewelry they had and headed into the mountains. One mentally disturbed old man set some rat traps along the road in Windward Side. He said that even if the Venezuelans captured Saba that at the very least he would give one of them a sore toe to carry back to Venezuela with him. The invasion did not come and after a few days the steamer pulled up anchor and disappeared.

Simon Jose Antonio de la Santisima Trinidad Bolivar was born on July 24th, 1783, in Caracas Venezuela.

In 1983 when Venezuela was commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Liberators birth, Roberto Palacios (a historian whose ancestor was a relative of Bolivar’s.), brought to the attention of Mr. Edsel “Papy” Jesurun the fact that Bolivar had once visited Saba.

In my library I have a two volume book in English, given out by the Banco de Venezuela in 1951. The book is entitled “Selected Writings of Bolivar.” On page 130 there is a supplemental map which shows the route of the Aux Cayes expedition at which time Bolivar stopped at Saba. At the time in interviewing older people about this matter Peter Anthony “Brother” Hassell, told me that when he was a boy he knew an old mentally unbalanced man who used to admonish all who wanted to listen that they should hide, or else the Venezuelans would come and get them. We speculate that his fear could have stemmed from the fact that the Sabans who had joined the Venezuelan fleet never returned and were lost to history. Captain Randolph Dunkin also said that he had been told as a boy that when Simon Bolivar had left Saba he had looked back, raised his hand, and shouted out “Adios Saba.” Venezuelan historians also came across letters from Bolivar written from Saba to the governors of the surrounding islands.

In 1983 to mark this event and the 200th anniversary of Bolivar’s birth, the Venezuelan government donated a bust of the Liberator to be placed at the discretion of the Saban Government. It was decided to place the bust on the grounds of the museum in Windwardside with Bolivar looking out to sea in the direction of Venezuela. The Venezuelan government at the time honoured me with a medal in the Order of Francisco de Miranda. Dr. Francois Moanac Ambassador for the Caribbean Region for the Republic of Venezuela was present as well as Dr. Luis Ochoa Teran, Consul General for the Republic of Venezuela in the Netherlands Antilles. Also Prime Minister Maria Liberia Peters and many other dignitaries of the Government of the Netherlands Antilles were present on Saba for the occasion. Here follows the speech which I made for the occasion: “I am deeply moved and profoundly grateful to the Government of Venezuela for the honour of receiving the ornaments and badge belonging to the Order of Francisco de Miranda, from the Ambassador Dr. Francois Moanack on behalf of Dr. Jaime Lusinchi, President of the

Republic of Venezuela. My sincerest gratitude is also extended to His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Luis Ochoa Teran, Venezuela's distinguished representative in Curacao as well as to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Isidro Morales Paul, for their roles in my attaining this high distinction.

The decoration in the Order of Francisco de Miranda was instituted in 1943 by the Republic of Venezuela to honour the memory of Francisco de Miranda, one of the Founding fathers and closest collaborators along with the Liberator Simon Bolivar, whose bust we have unveiled today, thus paying tribute and homage in this way to one of the greatest men the Latin American Continent has produced.

I would like to request the Ambassador for the Caribbean Region, Dr. Francois Moanack, as well as Ambassador Dr. Luis Ochoa Teran, Consul General in our sister island of Curacao to transmit the deepest appreciation of the Saban people, who are honoured and recognized by this extraordinary honour which has been bestowed upon me and which is treasured highly, also by my family who participate with me in this recognition.

I sincerely wish that the Almighty's abundant blessings will continue to shine on the Republic of Venezuela, its officials and its inhabitants and that the bonds of friendship, which have been accentuated today, will last forever.

May Saba and Venezuela always remain connected through our mutual admiration for Simon Bolivar, whose glorious memory we honour today."

At the time I was friends with Margarita Palacios who was the Executive Assistant of President Lusinchi. I was visiting Caracas at his invitation once and I took Peter Granger along. The protocol officer who received us at the airport dropped us off in a small dumpy hotel whereas I was supposed to stay at the Anauco Hilton. I decided to remain the night and even managed to round up a fellow Saban/Venezuelan Edward Hassell who came and visited me. In the morning via the St.Maarten tourism representative whom I had once befriended on Saba, Margarita was contacted and within the hour I was fetched by security personnel and taken to the Hilton. At the independence ceremonies of St.Kitts/Nevis, I was standing on the pier in Nevis with Mr. Ralph Berkel of St.Eustatius. In the distance I saw the high Venezuelan naval officers standing. Ralph said to me, "Will I think that woman with the Navy people is trying to get your attention". It was Margarita who after greeting us insisted that the very large Venezuelan Naval vessel take us back down to St.Kitts. By the time Prime Minister Don Martina came on board Ralph and I were having coffee with the Commander and playing dominoes. Don was surprised and I told him "Connections, Don, connections." And so it was at that time indeed. The last time I was in Chile to attend an ODCA meeting I asked Eduardo Fernandez "El Tigre" about her and he informed me that she is still around. I sent her a note of appreciation with "El Tigre." But of course the traditional parties in Venezuela in the era of Chavez no longer rate very high with the people. So the once all powerful Christian Democratic Party there is now only a shadow of its former self. I hope that the freedom I enjoyed as a local politician to meet and make friends with regional leaders will not be denied to the younger generation of politicians. I conducted my own foreign affairs, but under the Dutch it will be a different matter and we will have to adjust a bit. I keep telling the Dutch though that there must be room for the small islands to deal with their neighbours. The contact with Chavez is different of

course. Shortly after he became President, the Lt. Governor called me and told me that there were people downstairs who had come to see me and that he would send them up to the Court Hall. When I entered the room it was full of military brass from Venezuela. They informed me that President Chavez had sent them on a mission throughout the Caribbean to pay his respects to friends of Venezuela and that I was one of those friends. They parked up the big Man-O-War in the Fort Bay as if it was a rental car. They spent a few days here. Only when they played a football game and lost to a local team and it appeared in the papers all hell broke loose. Everyone in Holland and Curacao wanted to know how that Man-O-War had ended up on Saba without permission. The Lt. Governor was happy to inform them that they were here visiting Will. So what! And when Curacao could not find money to help us with medical care the following incident took place. I was on St.Eustatius enjoying my breakfast when Commissioner Lisa Hassell called me and informed me that we had no money in the chest and that we owed the St.Maarten Medical Center a whole pile of money and we had three emergencies to send to the hospital over there. I told her let me finish my breakfast and I will think up something. She said "I would like to see what you are going to think up this time." Long story short I went up to Oranjestad and called the radio stations on St.Maarten and suggested they ask me a question. I informed them that via Errol Cova on Curacao I would approach the Venezuelan Government to help me with funds to cover medical costs. I followed up with the official letter the same day I returned from Statia. In two days time the Venezuelan Consul on Curacao was headed to Saba. That is the time he had problems at the St.Maarten airport with the immigration. The Dutch realized that Venezuela was going to embarrass them, and it did not take long to get funding to pay off the hospital on St.Maarten. And so, when you see the bust of Simon Bolivar on the museum grounds in Windwardside you will know how it all came about.
