

Vice Commander Richard Johnson (1828 – 1830)

By; Will Johnson

I have noticed that Mr. Walter Hillenbrand admires the historian M.D. Teenstra. And so do I. Perhaps for different reasons though, than I do. The thing that I admire most about his book “De Nederlandsch West Indische Eilanden” is that he actually visited the islands which he wrote about.

Several Dutch historians of the twentieth century, while doing good work, based their research on documents either found in the archives in The Hague or in Willemstad. Some of them even brought forward theories which are not based on any fact whatsoever. And yet we look at them as the experts.

Dr. J. Hartog especially tried to square us out in a nice Dutch way as if all the people had descended from Dutch burghers. He also believed that all the place names had originally been Dutch.

In the nineteen sixties Mr. Sydney Lejuez and I used to write for the Windward Islands Opinion. Not much news back then, so we had to make news. In a foolish moment I said to Sydney once, “Man I could write a book just like anyone else.” The next weeks headline in The Opinion was “Will Johnson to write book.” No such intention, mind you. A few weeks later I received a registered letter from a Dr. Hartog on Aruba. Scared me to death. He wrote to tell me that he had copyright on his books and that if I quoted from his books that he would take me to court. Never mind that he had copied from everybody and his sister, and that his use of the Doctor title had been widely questioned. One of the things which I am sorry about is that I did not keep that letter, but believe me this is not a story which I made up.

Anyway Mr. M.D. Teenstra visited Saba on Friday the 13th, 1829 with a chartered sloop from St.Maarten owned by Captain Vlaun. All the way back then Friday fell on the 13th. You just can't get rid of those Fridays the 13th can you?

Teenstra wrote that the person in authority on Saba had the title of Vice Commander and was responsible to the Commander on Sint Eustatius. (Locally though, the person was referred to as the Governor). The present (1829) Vice Commander of Saba, Edward Beaks Jr., a native of the island, was recently suspended from his post. Mr. Beaks had been suspended on suspicion that he had owned and had put on a “war footing” a schooner involved in acts of piracy. He was an uncle of the notorious pirate Hiram Beaks who is credited with coining the phrase: “Dead men tell no tales.” Mr. Beaks was replaced by Mr. Richard Johnson, an old man of 72 years, who had never stepped on a boat, much less visited a foreign place, and had not even visited one of the neighbouring islands.

The Court of Policy (Raad van Policie) at that time consisted of: Mr. Richard Johnson, President, Mr. Thomas Dinzey Winfield, Schoolteacher, and Merchant Henry Johnson Hassell, Member, Henry Hassell, Member, Charles Simmons, Secretary, John Davis Marshall and Mozes Leverock vendue master.

The language of Saba was English and not one inhabitant could be found who could speak a word of Dutch. Teenstra also confirms that the first settlers consisted of emigrants from St.Eustatius and St.Kitts. Dutch, Scots and Irish some of who settled here in 1665. The latter would have been the ninety pirates who remained back in 1665. They had been part of the expedition by Edward and Thomas Morgan out

of Port Royal Jamaica. They captured Saba and Sint Eustatius. On his visit to Saba Teenstra was accompanied by Mr. A.D. Du Cloux, Commander of a detachment of soldiers stationed on Sint Maarten.

Teenstra describes his arrival at the Ladder Bay, the torturous climb up to The Bottom and the warm reception he received at the home of former Commander Edward Beaks.

After a night of heavy drinking and cigar smoking, the next morning he had to make the long climb up to the Windwardside to visit Vice Commander Richard Johnson. The party was welcomed outside the village by the Vice Commander and members of the Council Hassell and Winfield, and they first proceeded to the home of Mr. Hassell. Here they met the old Commander Edward Beaks Jr. father of the one by the same name accompanying them. Although he was 75 years of age and Matthew Winfield 64, both of them had left The Bottom on foot three hours ahead of Teenstra. They had not visited Windwardside in three years.

After visiting Hell's Gate they went to the home of Vice Commander Johnson whose wife was dressed like a Frisian farm wife, but two of their daughters present were dressed more plainly. Not one person in the entire household had ever visited any of the neighbouring islands, and receiving strangers was a novelty for them. The house is the one now owned by Mr. Peter Granger and Richard Johnson is buried in a private cemetery above the house now owned by Dennis Dowling.

Even though their residence was smaller and less luxurious than that of Mr. Beaks, the reception was most generous and Teenstra wrote that everyone tried to treat his party to the best. The table comprised twelve places but the food would have been sufficient for three times that amount of people. Teenstra describes the meat and fish dishes as well as the vegetables better tasting than anything similar in Europe. In the evening Teenstra writes that he left the generous and hospitable family and headed to The Bottom.

On Sunday Teenstra went to the top of the mountain with Henry Johnson Hassell. On Monday February the 16th accompanied by the prominent people of the island he went to the Ladder Bay where Vlaun's sloop was waiting to take him back to St.Maarten.

Teenstra was generous to us with his measurements. He described the island as having a circumference of fifteen English miles with 18.000 acres of land, while the mountain was 3330 feet high. Crispeen was 2480 feet and The Valley (The Bottom) 1680 feet. In 1829 there were 1200 people living on Saba; and the livestock consisted of 3 horses, five mules, 150 head of cattle, 300 sheep, 800 goats and 600 pigs (of which some of the pigs weighed more than 300 pounds each.)

In 1828 Richard Johnson then aged 71 was the oldest member of the Council. He was appointed as Vice Commander on December 20th, 1828 and started functioning on January 20th, 1829. He stepped down on May 5th, 1830. In his letter of resignation he stated that "due to advanced age and consequent debility and being far removed from his place of office, he was forced to resign. Henry Johnson Hassell was the second oldest member of the council and briefly succeeded Mr. Richard Johnson. On May 5th 1830 news was received on Saba that Mr. Thomas Dinzey Winfield, Member of the Council, had been

appointed to the post of Vice Commander. The title was changed after November 20th 1833 to Commander. Mr. Winfield died on June 10th 1836 and Mr. Edward Beaks was reappointed.

My ancestor Richard Johnson had obviously not read the poem by Locksley Hall, as I did, or else he might have at least ventured on a boat to Statia.

.....To wander far away,

On from island unto island, to the gateways of the day.

Larger constellations burning, mellow moons and happy skies,

Breadth of tropic shade and palms to cluster, knots of paradise.

'Droops the heavy blossomed bower, hangs the heavy fruited tree,

Summer isles of Eden lying in dark purple spheres of sea.'

Oh my. "Yes, to wander far away on from island unto island, to the gateways of the day."

In doing research on my great-great-grandfather to my surprise I found a document signed on January 1st 1850 by the very same Richard Johnson who in 1830 had declared himself "of advanced age and consequent debility." He would have been 93 years old in 1850. Who knows when he actually died? He may be still around somewhere signing documents.

The document reads as follows: "We the undersigned natives and residents, Burghers of this island Saba. Do hereby certify and declare that the land situated in Gallops Quarter called the Company's Land was left by the proprietors for the benefit of the inhabitants of this island and that we have never known it to be Kings Land or called as such, and the said land was sold at auction by order of His Excellency 7th June 1839. Signed: Richard Johnson, former Commander of the Island and Henry J. Hassell former Commander and present Senior Member of the Court. Signed in the presence of me Hercules Hassell, provisional secretary. Saba, 31 January 1850.

Richard Johnson's son Thomas, my great grandfather at the age of 64(on April 27th, 1868), married Ann Louisa Hassell aged 28 and fathered my grandmother Marie Elizabeth born May 1869, when he was 65 years old. His first wife Elenanor Markoe died in 1858. Thomas died on August 12th 1879 leaving three small children behind.

Because of that he laid out a shortened path of descent for me from Richard Johnson who was born on Saba in 1747. Richard is also the great-great-great-grandfather of the present Lt. Governor Jonathan Johnson and Commissioner Chris Johnson.

Though Saba has changed, if Richard could come back, the family could entertain him in similar fashion as he did for Teenstra back on February 14th, 1829. The more things change the more they remain the same. And by the way, nowadays I quoting Dr.J.Hartog straight without fear that he will take me to Court.
