

Commissioner/Act. Administrator John Godfrey Woods
By: Will Johnson

He was born on December 8th, 1909 son of Joseph Benjamin Woods (born 30.05.1877) and Anna Minta Warner (born 1879). He was a grandson of Christian Woods, Susanna Gordon, Peter James Warner and Elizabeth Horton. The latter was a daughter of David Horton and Nancy Horton. Susanna Gordon's parents were John Gordon and Catherine Hassell.

The family headed by Joseph Benjamin Woods ("Joe Ben") was an exceptional one. Besides John the other children in the family were: Cresilda Melrose born 18.08.1907, Eric Milburn born 14.12.1921 Alton Watty Woods born 08.02.1919 and Henry Swinton Woods born 17.01.1912. The latter was married to Doris Rebecca Woods. Henry lost his life on Aruba the night that German submarines attacked the LAGO oil refinery there. He died at the age of 32 on September 18th, 1944.

Cresilda Melrose the only daughter of Joe Ben's was the organist in the Anglican Christ Church for over fifty years.

Joe Ben was a skilled mason and did many jobs which can still be admired on Saba. Among them are the public cisterns on Hell's Gate next to the Roman Catholic Church. I remember my mother thanking God for Joe Ben as he had provided work on occasion to my grandfather James Horton Simmons. An irony indeed. Joe Ben's wife was a daughter of David Horton (died 12.09.1896 aged 95) and his wife Jane Linzey (born 1801). David in turn was a son of James Horton and Margaret (Nancy) Horton of Middle Island.

In Dr. Julia Cranes book: "Educated to Emigrate" she refers to a James Horton a "free black man". Here are notes which she took from the Central Archives in The Hague in The Netherlands:

" March 2nd, 1825, a bill-of-sale covering transfer of a piece of land in the area called Middle Island to James Horton a "free black man."

" November 16th, 1829 a bill-of-sale covering transfer of a girl named Maria to "James Horton free black man" her reputed father for the sum of Sixteen Joes or One hundred and Seventy six pieces of eight.' The former owner stated in the document that the sale was made for the girl 'with all her future progeny and increase for their freedom, in gratitude for her 'good and faithful services."

Obviously James Horton was buying freedom for his daughter Maria. Free black people were property owners long before slavery was abolished as can be seen in his acquisition of land in Middle Island. Also James Horton had legally acquired his name from James Horton Esq. who had come to Saba from the island of St. Eustatius. In those days it was forbidden by law for a former slave to take the name of a white inhabitant of the colony. There must have been a strong relationship between those two Hortons for James Horton Esq. to give permission for the use of his name by a former slave while the country had many years to go before slavery was officially ended on July 1st. 1863.

My impoverished grandfather was a great-grandson of James Horton Esq. Obviously there had been a master/slave connection between those two James Horton's of the early eighteenth hundreds. However if those memories remained they did not apply in any negative way in the relationship between Joe Ben himself a descendant of slaves who provided work to the impoverished descendant of the master. I can still hear my mother

saying "God Bless Joe Ben for giving my father work through the time or else we would have had it much harder than it already was."

Of all of Joe Ben's children only Henry had two children. The well known Ronnie Simmons of The Bottom is a grandson of Henry Woods and his wife Doris. She was also a Woods but from the family known as the "Red Woods" family.

Joe Ben's brother was Peter Woods who was the father of Ms. Edna Woods who helped me to gather some of this information so that I could write this article. Edna is in her eighties but has a wonderful memory. She has a relationship with my brother Guy and his family which is much closer than some families have among themselves.

John Godfrey Woods was married to URA Margaret Dunkin born 29.09.1909 whose mother was Mary Magdeline Dunkin and her father was Captain Ernest Hugh Toland Vanterpool. John and Ura did not have any children.

John used to tell me stories about growing up on Saba, working with his father and so on. From early in life he worked hard and he learned to appreciate how to hold on to a guilder.

I remember him telling me on more than one occasion that he was raising a cow and calf with the hope of getting enough money to go to Aruba in search of work with the oil refinery. In those days everyone on Saba was headed to Aruba in search of work.

One day when he thought that he had sale for the cow and calf he went down to the Ladder Road and the cow was standing at the edge of the cliff. He said he thought everything was lost and he called out to the cow:" Now mind yourself cow, don't go do anything stupid." I am sure he must have heard from Joe Ben of my grandfather James Horton Simmons' cow on Hell's Gate. She reached for an inviting tuft of guinea grass at the edge of the cliff. The rope to which she was tied broke and she fell to her death hundreds of feet below. He is credited with saying that he would have rather lost his wife than the cow because he could have gotten another wife but where was he to get another cow. You can see thus how important a cow was back then.

As luck would have it for our friend John his cow moved away from the edge of the cliff. He was able to sell mother and calf for the grand sum of thirty guilders and he headed off to Aruba.

He worked on Aruba for perhaps thirty years. He and his wife URA worked hard and saved their money. He had a house of his own on Aruba and his wife ran her own business.

He returned to Saba in the mid nineteen sixties. In 1967 when the three Windward Islands submitted combined lists of candidates there were no elections. He was asked to join the combined list as a candidate for the Democratic Party on behalf of then former Commissioner Matthew Levenstone.

In the 1969 election when I ran against Claude Wathey for Senator of the Windward Islands, people told me that John Woods was quiet and did not divulge too much about where he would vote. In November 1970 to the surprise of Mr. Wathey and the entire Antilles I released a document signed by John Woods, Peter Granger, Calvin Holm and others announcing that they had joined the recently established WIPM party. In 1971 months before the elections Eugenius Johnson became Administrator and Calvin Holm moved up and became a member of the Island Council. The WIPM party had a majority on the Island Council before the elections. We did not oust the DP Commissioners. The DP was not that generous to me after the elections. As party leader I was informed that I

could not assume office as the Lt. Governor of St.Maarten had been married to my sister. Even though she was deceased and he was remarried I was kept out of office as island Council Member and Commissioner for four years and had to run my party and the Government of Saba from the bleachers. Mr. Woods who was my number two candidate became Commissioner and Acting Administrator and remained faithful to me through those years of darkness when I was exiled from the council, arrested, jailed and so on. My father went to an early grave not knowing what was to become of me. But thanks to people like Mr. Woods and others who kept the faith we overcame without bitterness.

I used to help Mr. Woods to fill in his income tax documents. I remember sitting with him on the verandah of his Caribe Guesthouse in The Bottom. I decided to ask him to tell me the truth as to where he had voted in 1969. He laughed and replied: "Johnson, boy you hambung me. Why did you go and name your party URA?"

And then he went on to tell me the story of the love of his life. His wife was named URA.

She was a "high mulatto woman" as they would say in those days and was a good looking young woman. She had many suitors. He didn't say who but he told me that "Some of your family had tried to get her you know." But John won the day as she chose him over the rest of the young men. He told me that he had built Caribe Guesthouse exactly the way URA had planned it. Not that he needed such a big house as he was alone and could have lived by his sister Crissie or repaired the original house which was still on the property. He had purchased the lovely property from one of the old white Heyliger/Simmons' families.

He went ahead and built it anyway as a tribute to her. He told me that when she took ill on Aruba, so many ants suddenly congregated in his yard that he looked on it as a bad omen as he had never had a problem with ants. After her death he said the ants disappeared as suddenly as they had shown up. Nothing was the same after his wife's death and he decided to return to Saba. So he told me that when he saw the name of my party that in good conscience he could not betray his wife's memory by voting anywhere else but for URA. (You see how you does get vote sometime, eh?)

When we won the election in 1971 he and I as mentioned before were elected Commissioners. The late Calvin Holm entered the Island and Executive Council in my place. I returned to work at the airport post office on St.Maarten and led my party from there. We had seven of the fifteen seats on the Windward Islands Council and then Mr. Sdney Lejuez crossed the floor and joined the WIPM giving us a majority in the Island Council. You see how God does his work at times. Despite having to work from the bleachers we were able to accomplish a lot during the period from 1971 to 1975.

As leader of the party I worked closely with Mr. Woods who was the same age as my mother. Besides being Commissioner and Member of the Island Council he also served as Act. Administrator for those four years. In the latter capacity he depended on my advice, but moreso on that of my brother Eric who was head of the Finance Department and who worked on a daily basis with him. When doubts arose about signing something controversial he had that much respect for my brother Eric and I that he would say: "If you boys say it is O.K. to sign it then I'll do it." Happily the advice we gave him did not get him in the least of trouble.

The Public School was forced to be closed down during his term of office. This hurt his heart as he and his family were the pillars of the Anglican Church and some people

associated the public school with the Anglican Church. However local pressure on the Central Government to do something to stop the WIPM march, forced the then Minister of Education Ricardo Elhage to come to Saba. He threatened that an already scarecrow budget of Saba would be cut by the same amount it cost to keep the Public School open. My old friend Carl Anslyn organized a large demonstration but to no avail. The Central Government in its quest to make the WIPM look bad forced the closure of the school. I only bring this up as I know that Mr. Woods would never have closed the school if it had been left to him.

In 1975 he decided not to run and to make room for Peter Granger. He was 66 at the time and he decided to return to driving his taxi, running the airport bar, and managing his Caribe Guesthouse.

Mr. Woods was a hard worker all his life. One of the sad things to happen to him in his last years was the sudden loss of his brother Eric who had just retired and had joined him in the Guesthouse.

For some time before he died he was in The Henry Every Home for the Aged. A hard working man all his life he was confused. One day when I was passing by, he had jumped the wall and was trying to go home. I jumped out of my car and helped the nurse to convince him to go back to his room. He was not the John Woods I had known. However he gave me a look of recognition and told me " Johnson boy if you say so..." and with that he willingly went back to his room. I was very sad when I left him and shortly after that he passed away after suffering from loss of memory for awhile. He passed away on December 29th, 1990 at the age of 81. I went to the service but I did not do a eulogy which is surprising even to me.

He was buried in the Anglican cemetery in The Bottom. In paying tribute to him now I want to make up for the fact that I did not do the eulogy for him as I have done for so many friends and prominent people in the Windward Islands. He was not only a great Saban, great also in stature, but also great in ambition, in integrity, respect and loyalty. In short great in everything worth remembering him for.