OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE: A JOINT EFFORT

Saba's 19th century slave documents and villages

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year 2004 as International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. It marks the bicentenary of the proclamation of the first black state, Haiti, symbol of the struggle and resistance of slaves, which started on 23th of August 1791. It marks also the triumph of the principles of liberty, equality, dignity and the rights of the individual, and fraternal reunion of the peoples of Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe.

To contribute to this 200 year commemoration, a NAAM article on the historical artifacts as reminders of the slave history of Saba.

Four of the most precious historical artifacts in the Harry L. Johnson Museum in Windwardside are invoices for the 1829 sale on St. Eustatius of four slaves destined for Saba. It is known that St. Eustatius functioned as the major trading center and slave market in the region at that time.

The receipts for payment are made out to a Henry Hassell, Jr., who appears to be paying the money on behalf of four Sabans. It is unknown how he came to act as agent, whether he was the boat captain or perhaps resided on St. Eustatius, which had many resident Sabans at the time.

The invoices, all dated November 3, 1829, are written in English, on thin paper approximately 11.5 x 7.75 inches. There are two invoices per page. The paper is quite distressed around the edges and torn along fold lines, making it difficult to read some words. The ink is now a brown color, the handwriting legible, in old-fashioned script, with the wording of all four invoices almost identical.

The four slaves are identified as the boy Sambo, purchased for Peter Anthony Every for $250; Talamack, for Caspar Moses Leverock for $250; a woman Suffinner, for Henry Hassell for $44; and another woman Nan, for $24, with no purchaser mentioned.

The money is called "dollars, current money of this island" and it is assumed that US currency was involved. St. Eustatius is actually called "St. Eustatia." The invoices are signed by Margaret Seelig, as receiver of the money and the presumed owner or representing the owner. All invoices are witnessed by the signatures of A. H. Hassell and Peter J. Hassell, who signed with an X, noted "his mark."

According to Museum Curator Sherrie Peterson, the museum acquired the documents from the original Harry Luke Johnson collection.

Peterson related that Dutch museum officials visited Saba in April of 1997. They made an inventory of museum artifacts, including the slave documents. These were kept in the Johnson Museum safe since they were in bad condition and had been repaired with transparent adhesive tape.

The documents were allowed to go to Holland against the promise that they would be restored and returned. However, the documents were not returned within a reasonable time and inquires went unanswered.
Netherlands Antilles National Archeological and Anthropological Museum (NAAM) Director Ieteke Witteveen was told about the missing artifacts during an August 2001. In short order, Witteveen used her connections to locate the documents in Holland, where they were part of a slavery exhibition at the Amsterdam Maritime Museum. They were finally returned in late 2002, restored and mounted on acid-free board, as promised.

Villages
Historians note that Saba's history with slavery is quite different from neighboring islands with a plantation economy. Saba had few plantations (only two are documented) because of its rugged terrain and lack of flat land. Cow Pasture and Middle Island, now forsaken, were two slave villages near The Bottom. It is documented that Saban slaves worked alongside their owners in an equitable relationship.

There were slaves on Saba already in the 17th century. Historian J. Hartog notes that in 1665 Dutch residents and their slaves were deported when English pirates captured the island. The slave population was always fewer in number than the Europeans. In 1715, there were 336 whites and 176 slaves; by 1806 there were 700 whites and 500 slaves. At the beginning of the 19th century, one sugar plantation still operated. It was located near The Bottom, and employed 60 slaves, half of whom were children. The plantation produced just enough to supply island needs. From 1815 to 1915, the island was about two-thirds European and one-third African. This trend of an increasing proportion of African descendents has continued to today, with today's Sabans of African heritage just slightly in the majority.

Local historian Will Johnson has the original list of 708 slaves freed on Saba on July 1 1863, by declaration of Lt. Governor Moses Leverock. Leverock had only been installed in office a week before. The former slave owners immediately presented him with their demand for compensation, which was 200 guilders per slave. After endorsement by the Lt. Governor of St. Eustatius, who had authority over Saba, Leverock paid out a total of 146,000 guilders. Apparently, there was some difficulty in concluding this business since some owners and slaves were at sea at the time.

Today, most Sabans of African heritage are unable to trace their families back further than perhaps a neighboring island and several generations. Family names would have been taken from the slave owner, but occasionally minor variations were introduced.

Saban villages still vary in percentages of racial composition. Even “The Promised Land” in The Bottom, which was once all white, and “English Quarter” near Windwardside, once all black, have close neighbors of the opposite race. There has been an increase in interracial marriages. The island has become a crossroads for cultural exchanges because of tourism and the Medical School’s international student body and faculty. Currently, more than 80 nations are represented among the island population of about 1,500.

Photo caption:

Receipt of payment of the boy Samboy, sold for 250 dollars.

References:

Will Johnson, *Saban Lore, tales from my grandmother’s pipe*, 1989

Dr. J. Hartog, *History of Saba*, 1988.

Frame:
Text and picture: Suzanne Nielsen