

# History of Saba



Many Indian artifacts including pottery, shell tools, and carved stone tools have been recently discovered in the Spring Bay area. Remains of Indian foundations can also be found at Tent Bay. Today, most artifacts are stored in the city of Leiden, the Netherlands.



The Bottom was the first established village on Saba and remains the designated location for all civil services: government, hospital and police.



The original steps that Sabans used to access the island are known as The Ladder. Prior to the building of the Fort Bay harbour, goods were brought by foot to the rocky shore of the leeward coast. Sabans carried the cargo to the village by foot up the nearly vertical stairway, which consists of more than one thousand steep and narrow steps. The steps were hand-hewn from stone, and they were the only way to get from the sea to the island villages for many years.



Before Saba had a harbour, all cargo came ashore in small rowing boats. When seas were calm Fort Bay was the place to land, but during rough seas the Ladder Bay was used. In 1947 the first car arrived, the road, at that time under constructing was finished in 1958. It took nearly 15 years to build.



Before electricity arrived, street light were lit every night, except during full moon.



For many years Saba remained relatively isolated from the outside world and people created their own cottage industry to support the economy. With the men away at sea, women developed a number of handcrafts



(Saba lace or Spanish lace) which survive today as a Saba home-made product.



In the early days many houses had thatch roofs. These have since been replaced by wooden shingle, sinc or concrete, which are better able to withstand the storms during the hurricane season.



In 1887, the McNish Sulphur Mining Company began work here employing over 100 Sabans. However, the mining venture ended within a year. This old furnace is located on the bluff overlooking Green Island near the Sulfur Mine. It was used to burn sulfur during the mining efforts.



First plane lands on Saba in 1959

## 500.000 BC 1175 BC 1493 1640 1816 1909 1925 1947 1959 1963 1970 1972 1987 1992 1992 2002

### 500.000 BC

The island of Saba was formed as the top of a volcano that became active during the middle or late Pleistocene era. Saba is a dormant volcano, and has not erupted for about 5,000 years.

### 1175 BC

Hunters and gatherers, called Cibony, are considered to be the earliest settlers on Saba. They lived near Fort Bay, where recent radiocarbon samples show that the site is over 3,000 years old.

### 800 AD

The Arawak Indians migrated into the Caribbean basin from South America and built villages on Saba. They took shelter in caves near Spring Bay. Many Indian artifacts including pottery, shell tools, and carved stone tools have been recently discovered in this area. Remains of Indian foundations can also be found at

Tent Bay. Many findings attest to the fact that the aggressive Carib Indians were also on Saba during its early history. However, the Arawaks probably preceeded the Caribs and survived their onslaught.

### 1493

Christopher Columbus passed Saba on his second expedition to the New World. He mentioned that he had seen 'smoking volcanoes' during his voyages and it is very possible that he was referring to Saba or one of the neighbouring volcanic islands. Saba remained part of the Spanish Empire, until 1627 when French adventurers and later in 1629, English pirates started exploring all the Caribbean islands for settlement.

### 1640

The first European settlers were sent by the Dutch from the island of St. Eustatius to take up residence on Saba. After

Columbus first sighted Saba, the island fell under Spanish rule for almost 150 years, but colonisation was not attempted until the Dutch arrived. From that time onwards, the island frequently changed hands between the English, Spanish, French and Dutch. The Bottom was the first village established, and a zigzag path from the sea across boulders and cliffs led up from the sea to this so-called 'valley'.

### 1816

Although most Sabans are descendants of the English and Irish, it was Holland that finally took possession of Saba. During the early to mid-1800s, most of the male population went to sea and became highly skilled fishermen and seamen. They were gone for so long that Saba became known as the 'Island of Women'. Until well into the 20th Century, most men fished or sailed on Saban vessels all over the Caribbean. They brought much needed money to the local

economy. Others farmed plots of land on the mountain slopes, where conditions were suitable for agricultural activity. Families lived in small, thatched-roof houses. Women spent their days making straw hats and baking bread, while the children found numerous ways to create their own toys

### 1909

A navigation school was started by Frederick Simmons and lasted until 1922. The original building is still located in The Bottom. Seafaring was a very important way of life for Sabans. Since the size of the island is only 13 square kilometres (five square miles), the only means of growth has been the sea. Despite many tragedies, islanders still cling to their heritage of rewards reaped from the sea and often boast to those who visit Saba of the many captains who were born on the island. In the early days of

navigation, boats were built on Saba at Tent Bay and Wells Bay. Some weighed as much as 60 gross tons. Schooners were later purchased in the United States and sailed back to Saba to pursue the Caribbean trade. This trade proved to be very profitable, and owners of these vessels became very wealthy.

### 1920

The Government built three cisterns next to the Roman Catholic Church in the village of Hell's Gate to collect water for communal use. Obtaining drinking water had been a problem on the island as most people could not afford to build cisterns. They had to walk down treacherous mountain slopes to a fresh water spring at Spring Bay, which had been in use since the first settlers arrived. They would then have to climb back up to the village carrying huge tubs of water on their heads. Today, there is still no perennial water

on Saba and rainwater continues to be collected in cisterns.

### 1925

Donkeys were introduced on the island. The porters who had made a living carrying supplies were concerned that they would be deprived of their livelihood. The donkeys carried most of the loads from the sea up the trail to the settlements above. Everything from lumber and furniture to food and medicines had to be hauled up the steep trail in Fort Gut which was chosen as the best passageway from Fort Bay to The Bottom and became the main route of local commerce.

### 1943

A cement road from Fort Bay to The Bottom was completed. It was believed that a road could never be built on Saba because of the steep terrain. Josephus 'Lambée' Hassell took a

correspondence course in road building, and under his supervision Sabans built The Road with their own hands.

### 1947

The first motor vehicle arrived on Saba.

### 1959

The entire road suitable for motor vehicles was completed linking all the villages and the harbour.

### 1963

The Juancho E. Yrausquin airport was constructed and a regular

air-service from St.Maarten began. It was named after the Minister of Finance and Welfare, who had authorised the governmental financial assistance. Later, further construction of The Road connected the airport to the villages and harbour.

### 1970

Electricity became available throughout the day, although it actually had been on the island for almost a decade. Previously, street lighting was by use of oil lamps on ornamental lampposts. The lamplighter would replenish the paraffin oil and light the lamps at sunset except during a full moon

### 1972

The Leo A. Chance Pier was built at Fort Bay. The pier accommodates fishing boats, sailboats and small cruise ships.

### 1987

The Saba Conservation Foundation (SCF) was established. The SCF is a non-profit organisation with a mission to preserve and manage Saba's natural and cultural heritage. Committed to the belief that a stronger island economy will result from the sustainable use of Saba's rich and virtually unspoiled resources, the organisation meets the main expense of nature management. The Saba National Marine Park (SMP), which is administered by the SCF, was also established in 1987. Adventurous divers began the island's diving business, but the establishment of the SMP tremendously enhanced its development. The diving industry has become a major source of tourism, which in turn has led to an improved island economy. by the SCF, was also established in 1987. Adventurous divers began the island's diving business, but the establishment of the SMP

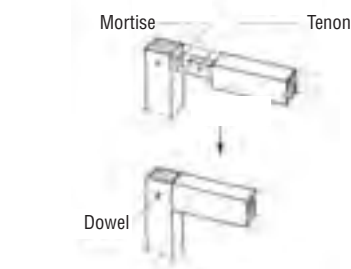
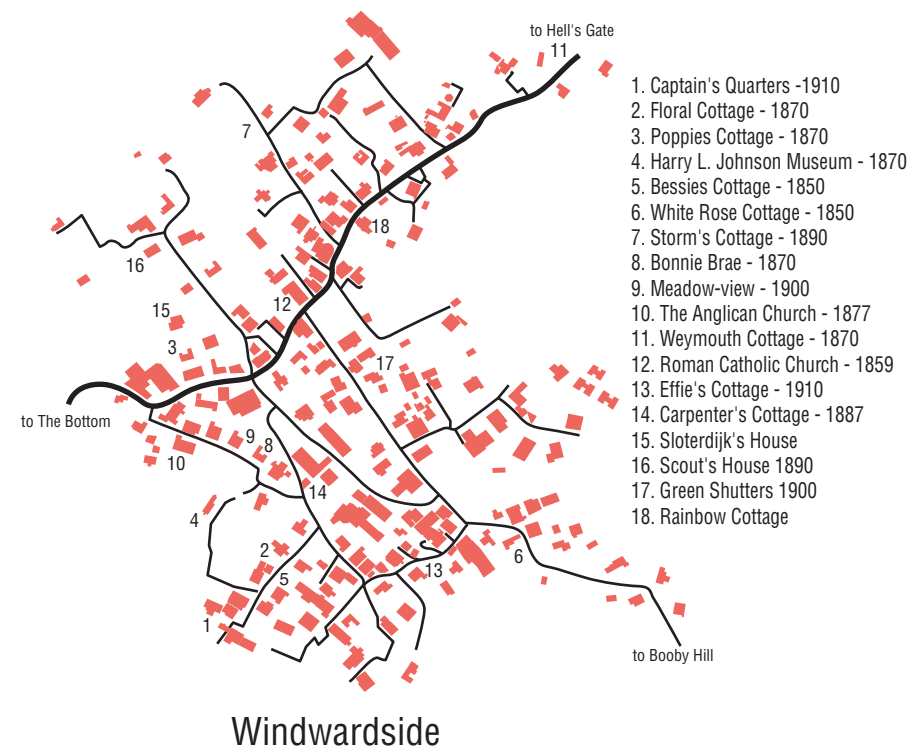
tremendously enhanced its development. The diving industry has become a major source of tourism, which in turn has led to an improved island economy.

### 1992

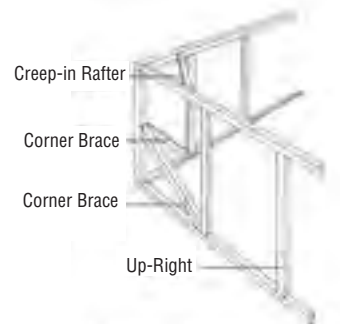
The Saba University School of Medicine was established as a joint project between the Island Government and a group of medical educators from the United States. It trains medical doctors and other health care professionals. The Saba University School of Medicine contributes to the island's economic growth and healthcare services.

### 2002

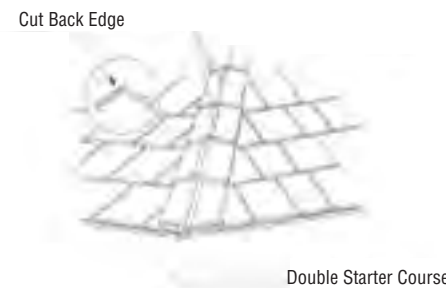
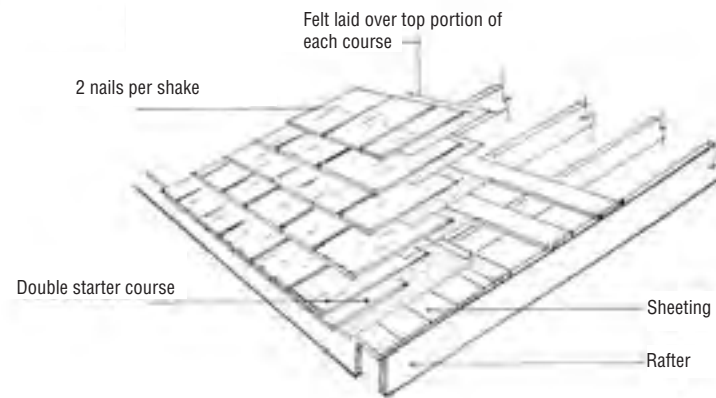
A committee has been established to formally request UNESCO to declare Saba a World Heritage Site.



Connected by means of mortise and tenon.



Corner braces and creep-in rafters



A leisurely walk through the villages of Saba is a great way to experience the island's cultural heritage. There are four aspects that set Saban architecture apart from other examples in the Caribbean: the small size of the original one-story cottage, the strict scheme by which windows and doors are placed, the colour code that is voluntarily adhered to, and the excellent condition in which the buildings have been kept.

The traditional Saban cottage is one story in height and made of timber-framed construction on a stone foundation. The exterior walls are covered with white rectangular wooden shingles. Sash-windows are provided with storm shutters that are generally painted green and white. Shingled roofs are painted red, but through the years many dwellings have replaced their original wooden shingles with galvanised roofing sheets. The typical 35 degree pitch of the roofs prevents leakage through the shingles. Also, the customary mortise and tenon joints form rigid connections between up-rights, roof beams, creep-in rafters, and corner-braces. These firm structural conjunctions withstand strong forces, including winds caused by the yearly tropical storms and hurricanes.

The building styles and features have been somewhat influenced by the degree of prosperity of the owner. Many men in Saban history took to the seafaring life. From their journeys, they brought home new materials and new ideas from faraway countries. The first European settlers who came to the Caribbean brought building methods from their home countries. On Saba, the predominant influence is that of the British. The similarities include wood building techniques, materials, shape, ground plan, and roof. English inspiration can still be seen through the present Saban architecture as well as heard through the English language that is spoken throughout the island.

In the old days, most Saban houses had a fire hearth equipped with a brick chimney. The wealthier people also had a brick oven. All cooking was done on wood fires until kerosene stoves and refrigerators were introduced in the late 1950s. Today, some of these old kitchens have still been preserved. In these cases, the roof is usually hipped on one side with a gable end on the side of the stone fireplace with its traditional chimney.

In the past, almost all building materials had to be imported because there was a low supply of local timber and wood was brought in by ship. Due to the lack of docking facilities, the lumber would be thrown overboard near Fort Bay, rowed ashore and carried up to the villages by donkey or manpower. Lumber for Hell's Gate was towed by rowboat all the way to Cove Bay where it was then carried up to the village. It is believed that the Hell's Gate houses may be more rot and insect resistant since the lumber was soaked in the salt water for almost half a day.

Small private graveyards are commonly found in the Saban gardens. The first European settlers adopted this tradition from the early Indian inhabitants that they met upon their arrival to the island.

There is no running water on Saba so residents must gather rainwater in stone cisterns. Some of the cisterns have a collecting basin while others are filled through roof gutters. Water conservation is extremely important on Saba and local people rely on the rainfall for a regular water supply. Saba has

changed over the years, but the different origins and cultural influences of the first settlers have made it what it is today. The cultural and architectural identity has been derived from a very mottled and diverse past with significant contributions originating from many other parts of the world.

A perfect example of the typical architectural style and attributes on Saba is found at the Harry L. Johnson museum in the Windwardside. The house was built in 1840 and is of sufficient size and scale for a small family. The original kitchen is still intact and was built with the carved stone hearth for cooking and baking. To the side of the house lies a large cistern for water gathering and just above that is the family graveyard. Some fine antiques are displayed inside the museum. This quaint cottage portrays many of the cultural influences that make Saba unique.

