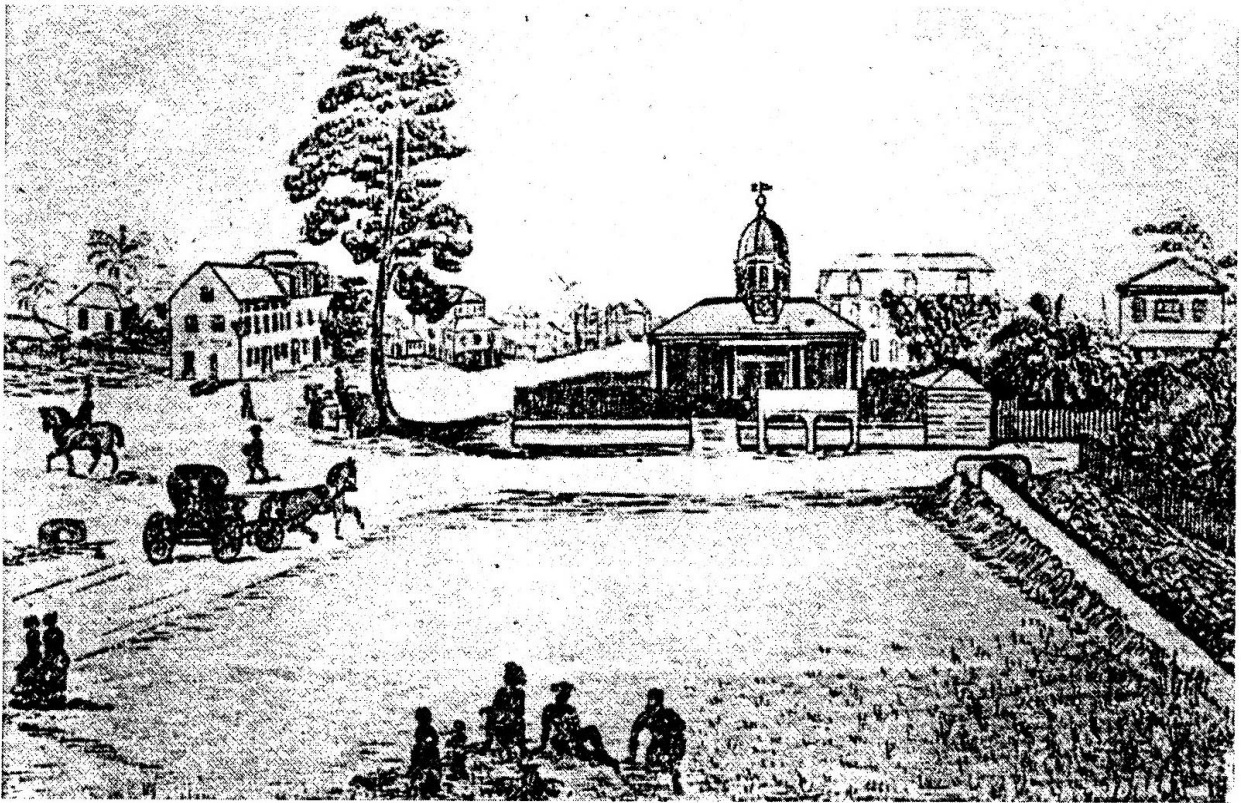


Chapter 3.13

JOHN SEMPLE

1754 - 1817



Gezicht op Stabroek, Demerara, omstreeks 1800^{31a)}

Pen en inkttekening naar een gravure van P.S. Peberdy

A view of Stabroek, Demarara colony, in 1800. Demarara colony had been the property of the Dutch West India Company, and in 1785 John Semple joined in the Dutch planters' protests to the Estates General about the company's failure to protect them in 1781 during the war with Britain. How lucky he was that he did not live on St. Eustatius, where many planters lost everything! Stabroek was renamed Georgetown in 1812, the name it is still known by to this day.

Chapter 3.13. John Semple

We know little about John Semple other than my father's assertion that he was a sugar planter in the West Indies and was (allegedly) a neighbour of William Moore in what was then known as Demarary Colony. We also know from Agnes M. B. Semple that he was a respected Liverpool merchant who became known as "*Honest John of Liverpool*" for his upright trading. His birthplace, how much of his life was spent in the West Indies and how much in Liverpool, or Glasgow for that matter, and where he died, remain mysteries.

I believe John Semple to have been born in Scotland in 1754, however this is speculative but is based on the known birth¹ of a John Bowie Semple in that year – we believe that John's initials were J.B., and no other J.B.Semple can be found at around that date. On the website of the Guyana Genealogical and Biographical Society reference can be found to a John Semple who married in Demarara on 4th March 1795; it is not known whether this is the same John Semple, although it seems very likely since the birth of Sarah Semple in Demarara in 1800 and the dates of birth of some of Robert Semple's children are also quoted correctly on the same website.

In 1780 during the American war of independence the Estates of Holland, the richest of the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic, without the knowledge of the Estates General, signed an agreement with the thirteen rebel American colonies that undermined an existing agreement with Britain, and in December that year, when this information came to light, the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war broke out. This subject, and the involvement of Abraham Heyliger in it, is described at length in Chapter 3.20.

In an attempt to stop arms supplies to the American rebels, Britain seized the Dutch Caribbean colonies. Firstly the islands of St. Eustatius, Saba and St. Maarten in February 1781, followed by mainland Essequibo-Demarara and Berbice. One result was an influx of British colonists from Barbados to the newly-British colonies of Essequibo-Demarara and Berbice. They were given land near the coast to develop into plantations for cotton, coffee and (mainly) sugar. We may speculate that this was how John Semple arrived in Demarara, but it has yet to be proved. It would, however, make him thirty one years old when we first find recorded evidence of him in a petition² to the Estates General dated 10th June 1785. Included among the list of planters in the Demarara River area is the name of John Semple. The petition was aimed at getting rid of the Dutch West India Company as the planters felt that the company had failed to look after their interests during the war of 1781-84. By the time a peace treaty with Britain was signed in 1784, the burghers of Amsterdam had got their way in the Estates General, the Dutch Republic had entered into an alliance with Louis XVI of France in 1783, severing the historic links with Britain and causing great humiliation for the Prince of Orange. Eventually the Prince's father-in-law, the King of Prussia, intervened with Prussian troops to restore the status of his daughter (William's wife) and that of the House of Orange, and the Dutch Republic staggered on.

The French revolution of 1789, however, caused further upheavals. In the Caribbean, the planters supported the revolution until it became clear that the revolutionaries planned to arm West Indian slaves to enable them to fight for their freedom – so they changed sides. Britain initially supported the revolution but after Louis XVI was guillotined in 1793, Britain declared war on France. The Dutch Republic, having signed alliances with France's *ancien regime* was invaded in 1795 by the

new French revolutionary regime. The Prince of Orange fled to London in a fishing boat urging all the Dutch colonies to put themselves under British protection and the Dutch Republic collapsed, becoming a French client state called the Batavian Republic. This led to Britain again seizing the Dutch Caribbean colonies in 1796, returning them to the Dutch in 1802. The mainland colonies of Essequibo-Demarara and Berbice were taken back by the British in 1803, becoming known as British Guiana in 1814.

The wars and changes of allegiance of the colonies, however, do not appear to have had much effect on the European planters who continued with “business as usual” and the next recorded reference to John Semple which I have found is nearly twenty years later in the “*Essequibo and Demarary Gazette*” of 8th September 1804 when it carried the following advertisement :-

“Drifted from the Stelling of MacInroy, Sandbach, McBean and Co. on the Night of 5 Inst., three logs determa (lightweight Central American wood), sawed into 1½ inch planks. Whoever has found the same, by returning them as above will be rewarded – Also Picked Up, opposite Walkenham Island, a small boat, her bottom painted white. Any person proving her to be their Property, and Rewarding the Negroes, will have her returned, by applying to John Semple, on Plantation Brothers, Great Courabanna. Demarary, 7th Sept. 1804.”

This small advertisement locates John Semple in Demarara colony in 1804, the proprietor of the Brothers plantation in Great Courabanna. Courabanna Creek can be located on satellite photographs; it is a tributary of the Demarara River approximately 15 miles south of the river’s mouth. Great Courabanna it is probably safe to assume is (or was) in the same area, i.e. immediately south and on the outskirts of the capital city, Stabroek. Confirmation that John Semple had been the proprietor of the Brothers plantation can be found in the records of a Parliamentary debate³ in 1824 concerning the Demarara slave rebellion of 1823, some years after John’s death:-

“On the next estate Mr. Smith baptised about 190, and all the Negroes on that estate stood by their master. Other instances might be given; but I cannot pass by the case of the plantation Brothers, many of the Negroes of which had attended chapel and been baptised and some of whom were communicants. They there defended the Whites and the estate, even at the risk of their lives. Mr. Semple, the former proprietor, had been a friend to instruction, and not only encouraged his Negroes to attend, but sent some of his carpenters to help build the chapel. When the manager returned home from his militia duty, he found not one absentee; and some of the principal men had been hurt in defending his property”.

In 1812 the city of Stabroek was renamed Georgetown (after George III) and the Essequibo and Demarary Royal Gazette published an acknowledgement on 1st May 1810 of the contributions received from local individuals to the fund for the construction of St. George’s Church in the city. Among the contributors was John Semple with a contribution of £110, a large sum of money in those days. Among many other names were the following, whose surnames occur repeatedly in the Semple family history: George Heyliger (£110), William McBean (£220). Other names appearing in the Essequibo and Demarara Gazette over several years in the early 1800s are Victor Heyliger, John Moore, and H. Hyndman. The Heyliger family became closely associated with the Semples in 1817 when John Semple’s eldest son Robert married Adriana Moore, the daughter of Adriana

Heyliger and William Moore. Whether the John Moore who contributed to the fund was any relation to William Moore is unknown and should probably be dismissed as a coincidence, Moore being not an uncommon name. Hyndman however is an unusual name; John Semple's eldest granddaughter, Adriana Johanna Semple, married a planter from Barbados called Henry Hyndman Jones after the family returned to Liverpool in 1830.

That John Semple died in 1817 we know from my father's work, although the origin of this information is unclear – there is no record of the death in the records of the Scottish Registrar-General so presumably he died either in England or overseas. After John's death his widow returned to Scotland (or continued to live there?) and was still alive in 1820 living at No. 2 Bath Street in Glasgow city centre.

John Semple and his wife (name unknown) had three children: the eldest was Robert (d.o.b. unknown), Sarah born in Demarara in 1800 and John born in Liverpool in 1807. We also know that Mrs. John Semple had a sister who lived in either Demarara or Berbice colony. Although my father believed that John Semple and William Moore were neighbours, no evidence for this has yet been found. It is clear that John Semple lived in mainland South America between at least 1785 and 1804. It can also be shown quite conclusively that William Moore lived on the island of St. Eustatius although no evidence has yet been found to show that the Semples ever lived there. There were other links, however, between St. Eustatius and the mainland colonies of Berbice and Essequibo-Demarara. While these colonies were under Dutch control it had been easy for Dutch settlers from the islands of the Lesser Antilles to obtain land grants on the mainland where large tracts of virgin land were available. One person who appears to have successfully established himself on mainland South America in this way was Johannes Heyliger who was born on St. Eustatius in 1713. He was a younger brother of Abraham Heyliger (1711–85). Johannes Heyliger owned sugar plantations in the Stabroek area known as Werk en Rust, La Penitence and Ruimveldt, names still in use to this day for districts of the city of Georgetown. In 1764 he was appointed the Governor of Berbice⁴.

Notes.

A. Guyana Genealogical and Biographical Society. Reference on the society's website to a John Semple who married in Demarary on 4th March 1795; it is not known whether this is the same John Semple but it seems likely. The year 1795 however implies that Robert Semple, assuming he was born after 1795, was at least eight years younger than his wife Adriana Moore who we know to have been born in 1787. Perhaps this (1795) was John Semple's second marriage?

B. Possible candidates for the identity of John Semple (source Scottish Registrar General):-

<u>d.o.b.</u>	<u>Parish</u>	<u>Father's Name</u>
6.9.1752	Kilbarchan	Hugh
6.1.1754	Lochwinnoch	John
5.11.1754	Avondale	John
17.4.1756	Avondale	Matthew
19.3.1759	Erskine	John

References

- ¹ Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church), www.familysearch.org
- ² Archief van de Secretarie van het Stadsbestur van Groningen 1594 – 1816 (archives of the Government Secretary of the City of Groningen).
- ³ The Missionary Smith: Substance of the Debate in the House of Commons by Parliament, Great Britain, London Missionary Society, House of Commons – Trials (Military Offences), 1824.
- ⁴ The Centenary History and Handbook of British Guiana by A.R.F. Webber.