

## **Origins: The Slave Nanny and Her Issue<sup>1</sup>**

Col Benjamin Gumbs was Deputy Governor of Anguilla during the French Invasion of 1798. As a Colonel in the local militia, he led the Anguillians in the holding off, at the Sandy Hill Fort, of the French invading forces from St Martin. Every school child is taught of the rout that ensued when the French militia was chased back to their landing ground at Rendezvous Bay. There, the invading forces re-embarked, only to be destroyed in the channel between St Martin and Anguilla by *HMS Lapwing* in the ensuing encounter. Col Gumbs' story of the 1798 battle for Anguilla, and a description of conditions in Anguilla in 1825 when he was still alive, can be read at page 225 of the well-known travel book of the time – *Six Months in the West Indies* by author HN Coleridge.

In 1825, the island Council of Anguilla, in existence since 1650, was dissolved. Government was henceforth provided from St Kitts as a result of the St Kitts statute called the Anguilla Act 1825. The arrangement between the two islands was that an Anguillian representative would be elected to the St Kitts legislature, called the Assembly. No law affecting Anguilla could be introduced into the St Kitts Assembly unless the Anguilla

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<sup>1</sup> The story of the descent of Chief Minister Sir Emile Gumbs from his forebear Deputy Governor Benjamin Gumbs through his slave Nanny, as constructed from conversations by the author with Sir Emile and a study of the deeds and wills in the High Court Registry

representative was present. This arrangement was to last until the Anguilla Revolution of 1967, when the Anguillians cast off the rule of St Kitts and declared themselves an independent republic. The British army intervened in 1969, to impose direct rule, and Anguilla regained her own separate legal and constitutional identity only in 1982 when St Kitts went into independence, leaving Anguilla a fully-fledged British Overseas Territory.

In 1825, the first elected representative from Anguilla to the St Kitts Assembly was Benjamin Gumbs-Hodge MD. Dr Gumbs-Hodge was a medical doctor, a native of St Marten and Anguilla, the son of Thomas Hodge and his wife Deborah, the sister of Col Benjamin Gumbs. Dr Gumbs-Hodge married his cousin, the third child of Col Gumbs, named Mary after her mother. Dr Gumbs-Hodge, from the evidence in the records, lived and worked in Anguilla during this period, and visited St Kitts from time to time to take his place in the Assembly. There is some indication that in later years he settled more permanently in St Kitts, where no doubt there was a greater demand for his professional services, and a better chance of earning a living.

In 1830, Col Benjamin Gumbs, now well into his eighties, executed his last will and testament. The will is preserved amongst the deeds and wills in the Anguilla Registry of Deeds. The year 1830 was in the closing

days of the era of slavery in the British West Indies. The old gentleman mentions the names of his slaves in his will, particularly the slave women who bore children for him. And, he gives the names of each of his slave children, as he provides for their freedom after his death, and leaves property to them and their mothers.

Col Gumbs leaves all his property to his various families. As a social commentary, this will is an invaluable document. Col Gumbs owned property at Upper Quarter Estate, Statia Valley, Roach's Estate, Flat Caps, and Dog Island. Some of his property he leaves to his wife and his children by her. The greater part of his property he divides among his families by various slave mothers. Each of these families is described in the same terms and with the same detail as that of his lawful family. There is no shred of shame or dissimulation in the bequests the old patriarch makes to his various children.

One of the slave women mentioned in the will was Nanny. We know nothing of Nanny except that she was alive and well in 1830. From her name we can deduce that in her youth she had helped look after the children in the main household. Nanny bore five children for Col Gumbs. They are Richard, Ann, Tabitha, Elizabeth, and Sara. They are all mentioned in the will.

Nanny's eldest child and only son, Richard, is mentioned in several of the Deeds from time to time

between the years 1825 and 1855. We can assume he was born sometime before 1800. By his wife Mary, Richard had two sons, Samuel and John. There is a suggestion that in their later years, Samuel and John lived with their mother Nanny in the Danish Virgin Islands. They appear to have engaged in the inter-island trading business. They also lived for a while in St Barths, an important French smuggling and trading entrepot, then as now.

Richard's eldest son, Samuel, was born in 1847 and died in 1932. In 1866 he married a poor white girl, Charlotte Maria Owen of North Hill. Charlotte bore him three children, Anna Eliza Rebecca Gumbs, Richard Benjamin Roberts Gumbs, and John Frederick Gumbs. In his later years, Samuel is found living at North Hill where he was engaged as a clerk in some small business. He was a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, and a letter writer for the neighbours around.

Samuel's last child, John Frederick Gumbs, a great grandchild of the slave Nanny, was born in 1874. In his youth he was a sailor, the captain of the *Schooner Harrington*, owned by one Shervington of The Quarter in Anguilla. He later made his money working as a boson on boats of the Harrison Line in the first decades of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> In 1896, John Frederick married Catherine

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<sup>2</sup> Oral information from Sir Emile Gumbs

Josephine Carney, the daughter of the St Kitts-born merchant and property owner, John Joseph Carney. John Frederick died in 1951, having served for many years as the Customs Officer of Sandy Ground.

John Frederick and Catherine had one child, Emile Johnson Gumbs. Emile Johnson was born in 1896, and lived and worked for most of his life in Kingston, Jamaica, where he died. In 1924 he married Inez Beatrice Carty. They had three children, John Eric, who emigrated as a young man to Ecuador; Esme, who married a US officer stationed at Coolidge, the US military air base in Antigua, and moved with him to the USA when he was transferred at the end of the Second World War; and Emile Rudolph Gumbs, who remained at home. When John Frederick died in Jamaica, his sons John Eric and Emile Rudolph brought his body back to Anguilla, and he is buried just inside the entrance of the old Anglican cemetery in Sandy Ground. His three children are the great great grandchildren of Nanny.

Emile Rudolph we all know. He took up the family tradition of sailing and trading throughout the islands. In later years he joined the revolutionary struggle against the St Kitts administration, and in time became Chief Minister of Anguilla. Queen Elizabeth knighted him in 1994 for services to Anguilla, shortly before he retired from public service. He lives quietly with his wife Lady Josephine

Gumbs in the house built by his grandfather John Frederick Gumbs on Carney land at Sandy Ground.

And so, Nanny's issue have closed the circle of the government of this little community. Sir Emile was not the first, nor will he be the last of the sons of the slaves and the slave owners in whose hands the destiny of Anguilla will lie in the years to come. We must reflect from time to time on who we are and where we have come from. It is in this way that we can choose best where we want to go in the future.

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