



## THE COURLANDER EXPERIENCE IN TOBAGO

**THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA:** A maritime nation on the Baltic sea with excellent ports, 64.589km<sup>2</sup> in area and a population of nearly 2.000.000 inhabitants. There are apx. 1.500.000 Latvians living in Latvia and the rest of the world. 2018 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Latvia.

**COURLANDERS:** Latvians from the province of Courland (Kurzeme). In the days of the Duchy of Courland and Semgallia, a “Courlander” could also be an inhabitant of the province of Semgallia. “Courlander” is a literal translation of the Latvian *kurzemnieks*. The academic word for anything pertaining to Courland is *Couronian*.

**THE DUCHY OF COURLAND AND SEMGALLIA:** A de facto independent nation formed in 1561 and existing until 1795, comprised of 2 modern day provinces of Latvia, and ruled by the German-Baltic dukes of Courland, although officially a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The flags of Courland consisted of a red and white 2 band flag and the red and black “crab” flag which originated in Tobago, as there are no crabs of this type in Latvia. As such, it can be considered the first flag of Tobago.

## CHRONOLOGY

1639 Sent by Duke Jacob, probably involuntarily, 212 Courlanders arrive in Tobago. Unprepared for tropical conditions, they eventually perish.

1642 (possibly 1640) Duke Jacob engages a Brazilian, capt. Cornelis Caroon (later, Caron) to lead a colony comprised basically of Dutch Zealanders, that probably establishes itself in the flat, southwestern portion of the island. Under attack by the Caribs, 70 remaining members of the original 310 colonists are evacuated to Pomeroy, Guyana, by the Arawaks. Some eventually return to Tobago, after the Duke sends more colonists in 1654. The name Crown Point is thought to be a corruption of the earlier Caron Point.

1654 A large frigate "The Coat of Arms of the Duchess of Courland" with a command of 25 men, 124 soldiers and 80 families arrives in Great Courland Bay on May 20, after a 6 month voyage from the port of Ventspils, Courland. Commander Mollens names the island New Courland (Jaunkurzeme), and constructs a fort at the present day Courlander monument site. (This should not be confused with the later English Fort James dating from 1766 – not 1666, as announced at the fort – and is located on Courland or James Point in the Plymouth Land's End area. Note that Duke Jacob was also called James in English documents.) The fort becomes the site of the first Lutheran church in the Americas. What was left of the fort in 1775 was still documented in a map, but whatever still remains of it is now under ground, and needs to be excavated. A warehouse/storage area was built lower down by the bank of the Great Courland River – remains were still surviving in 1976. A town called Jēkabpils/Jacobusstadt or the Town of Jacob grew quickly around the fort. First built were structures such as storage houses for the produce prepared for export. A path led to a Carib village of about 35 circular dwellings shaded by trees, and grouped around a central, circular plaza with a square meeting hall (today, downtown Plymouth).

Four months later, in September, a Dutch expedition financed by the merchant Lampsins brothers arrives in Tobago. The Courlanders allowed them to establish themselves on the other side of the island, in the actual Scarborough area. In 1655 a Courlander register indicates that the Dutch had accepted the Duke of Courland as their ruler and voluntarily paid him tributes.

1658 Sweden invades and occupies Courland. Duke Jacob is imprisoned, and ships can no longer be sent to Tobago.

1659 After holding out 14 months on their own, mutineers enslave Courlander Commander Holzbruch on Dec.11, and on Dec.15 illegally hand over the fort and colony to the Dutch, under terms that they be returned to Duke Jacob once he is freed. Five months later, in 1660, Duke Jacob did regain his freedom, but Tobago remained in the hands of the Dutch Lampsins merchant family.

1669 The Couronian ship "Island Traveller" reaches Great Courland Bay Feb.17, and the Couronian flag is raised once again in Fort Jacob. But the Dutch are still active on the island, and the ship eventually returns to Courland.

1680 After the ferocious naval battle of 1677 involving the Dutch and French in Rockly Bay where both sides basically annihilate themselves, leaving the Dutch town and fort Lampsinsberg totally destroyed, “The Swan” arrives from Courland in July, 1680 and Commander Robert Bennett builds a new fort by Black Rock on the point between Great Courland Bay and Little Courland/Stonehaven Bay. After a year, due to the difficult conditions, many Courlanders leave Tobago for Barbados, but some remain on the island under the command of Captain Hamelton.

1681 Probably in December, the new Commander Monck arrives with more Courlanders and builds a new fort on the point between Little Courland/Stonehaven Bay and Mt.Irvine Bay (Bay of Liepāja).

Duke Jacob dies in Courland after hearing the bells ringing in the New Year – Jan.1, 1682. Before his death, in 1680, Jacob signs an agreement with English Captain John Poyntz to colonize Tobago, later modified by Jacob’s son Frederic Casimir. In 1683 Poyntz prepares a brochure to promote Tobago which probably was the source for Daniel Defoe’s book, Robinson Crusoe. But no colonization takes place through Poyntz.

The Dukes of Courland propose democratic and autonomous forms of government for Tobago, in 1681 and also in 1698, guaranteeing the freedoms to congregate and to form societies, offering religious independence and free commerce. Tobago could have become the first colonial republic in the world with a parliament, also, a university.

1686 Departing from Ventspils, Courland, Jan.14, after 166 days of travel “Fortuna” reaches Tobago under command of Bartold Schmoll (from the port town of Liepāja, Courland). Schmoll has a new fort constructed on the hill, site of the current Mt.Irvine Hotel. Another ship follows in in 1687.

1693 A passing Danish ship stops in Tobago and documents a thriving, independent Couronian colony. The Courlanders show the Danes their ample stores of produce, ready for export to their homeland, and mention that the last boat from Courland arrived in August, 1688.

These Courlanders then disappear in the mists of history, it is assumed that they formed part of the future Tobago population. Surnames such as Birse (Grove), Sils (forested area), Wilks (Wilks = wolf in Latvian), Dibbens (Bottom) exist. Courlander or Kurlander is a popular Caribbean surname among the African population. Some years back, a Latvian in San Paulo met a sea captain from Tobago of apparently African descent who declared that he was a Courlander, and that an important family heirloom, blond pigtales from his great great....grandmother was passed along from generation to generation. He was also able to describe some popular Courlander pork dishes prepared in his family, and mentioned that at home they made *pastalas*, Latvian peasant footwear made of pliable leather.

1737 The last Duke of Courland of the Kettler dynasty dies, but Tobago is still recognized as a territory of the Duchy of Courland and Semgallia. (The new rivals over Tobago, the French and British, indicate that neither has claim to the island since it belongs to Courland.) The new Duke Ernest Johann Biron, designates Baron Ewald von Klopmann as

the new Governor of Tobago. After Duke Peter Biron's coronation in 1770, Klopmann writes a history of Tobago in French. (Ernest Johann may have been of Latvian origin, originating from the Birins family.)

1763            After the Treaty of Paris of Feb.10, 1763, the British send troops to Tobago and begin settling the island. On March 10, 1766, the first property to be sold by them is Courland Estate, personal property of the Dukes of Courland, to a James Simpson. Construction of Fort James in Plymouth begins that year as well.

1770            On November 11, the African slave Sandy organizes a dangerous revolt at Courland Estate. It is devastated, and the revolt spreads to the rest of the island and is smothered only with great difficulty.

Simultaneously, in Latvia, Latvian Courlanders and Latvians in other provinces revolt against their German and Russian lords.

1781            France again invades Tobago in 1781 and in accordance with the Treaty of Paris of 1783, the island remains in French hands. In 1793 the English retake the island, but in 1802, after the Treaty of Amiens, Tobago returns to France, however, the French shortly succumb to British attacks. On May 30, 1814, France formally cedes Tobago to the British. By this time, Courland had become a part of Russia (1795), to reemerge as a province of the Republic of Latvia in 1918.

1935            The sailboat "Laima" (Fortune) arrives in Tobago from Latvia. The seamen Aleksandrs Ozoliņš and Miķelis Plēšums receive a very warm reception from the islanders.

1957            The Latvian Courlander historian, Dr.Edgars Andersons (Edgar Anderson), first arrives in Tobago July 31 – August 15. His doctoral thesis on Courlander Activity in Africa and the Americas, arouses great interest. Meetings with later Prime Minister Eric Williams lead to a comprehensive lecture under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Subsequent historical and archeological expeditions in 1959 and 1960 led by Dr.Anderson, but involving local specialists (Carlton Ottley, Andrew Carr and many others), uncover not only Couronian but Carib, Arawak, Dutch, English and other settlements, also register 60 historical sites and 12 Amerindian settlements and uncover a great store of historical information. This research awakens local interest in Tobagonian heritage and is distributed by the international press.

As a result, Dr.Anderson suddenly receives a letter from Karl Biron, Prince of Courland, member of the surviving ducal family of Courland, thought to have no longer existed, but actually alive in Germany. Biron princes Ernest Johann, Michael and other family member visit the island on several occasions.

1974            Dr.Anderson organizes the 1.Latvian Courlander Gathering for Latvians interested in learning about their Tobago heritage. These are subsequently held every 2-3 years, and the next is planned for Dec.27, 2017 – Jan.5 2018.

1978            The Courlander Monument is inaugurated, designed by Jānis Mintiks, and built by the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the international Latvian community (Latvia was still occupied by the Soviets.) The Latvians contribute \$10,500 US and the TNT Government - \$35,000 US.

A large John's Eve (Midsummer Night Festival) is celebrated on the island. (John's Eve is one of the most important Latvian national festivals, and was celebrated on the island by the Courlanders in the 17<sup>th</sup> c.)

1980            It is decided that a Courlander Inn and Courlander Culture Center should be built on a plot of land donated by the THA, located between the Courlander Monument and St. David's Church. This project is enthusiastically supported by Carlton Ottley and Winston Borrell, among others. Los Angeles Latvian architect Stanislavs Borbals prepares a project of both buildings for this site in 1982 that is presented to ANR Robinson, who later declares that the Courland Bay site must be reserved for the Courlanders (The project was modified in 1989, when architect Borbals met once again with THA officials, Gerald MacFarlane, John Daniel, also rev. Kenneth Forrester; another posterior meeting during a future Courlander Gathering, was held between Guntars Gedulis and Orville London at the THA. Originally, the idea was that the Latvians would provide the plans and the TNT government would build. (Another plot of land in Black Rock behind Fort Bennett was at one point considered for an expanded project in 1985)

1982            A Courlander museum is organized and inaugurated by the Latvian international community in a building provided by the Mt. Irvine Tobago Trust. When the museum at Fort George is opened, this museum is closed, and the expositions transferred to the new one. But many of the items vanish.

1985            An exposition of maps, drawings and other historical materials is prepared by Dr. Anderson for a proposed visit of Queen Elizabeth October 14 - November 2, and exhibited permanently in the Turtle Beach Hotel 2<sup>nd</sup> floor Conference Area. After 2007, the material is removed, but has finally been located by the current hotel manager, Leslie Amedeé, who hopes to exhibit the material in a central location of the hotel.

1989            Dr. Anderson perishes in a car accident shortly before the 8. Latvian Courlander Gathering in July, but organization of the events is taken over by Latvian Courlander architect and composer-conductor Guntars Gedulis, who had been organizing the cultural programs for the gatherings and Dr. Anderson since 1976, also leading the Courlander Gathering Choir.

In July 1989, the Courlanders are included for the first time in the Tobago Heritage Festival (Courlander Landing Day – Plymouth), and Latvians from Latvia participate for the first time in the Gathering as well, including the musical group Mantojums and a folk dance group.

Aubrey Adams invites the Courlanders to participate in Carnival, as the Courlanders have their own version, called *Ķekatas*, celebrated at the end of each year.

1991 In the 9.Gathering, Latvian cultural groups perform for President Hassanali at his residence, establishing a tradition of Latvian cultural performances for the presidents of Trinidad and Tobago in addition to the regularly scheduled meetings.

2001 The President of Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga is invited by President ANR Robinson to attend his 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in December. President Vīķe-Freiberga spends two weeks visiting both islands, participating in local TV programs as well as meeting with Courlander friends and THA officials.

2007 A film about Latvia, Gambia and Tobago – Riga – Banjul – Scarborough – pursuing the dreams of Latvians, is shown during the 13.Latvian Courlander Gathering, as well as to the local populations in both islands. The conclusion is that the film should be shortened and prepared for school children, as this material is not available in local schools, where an anglicized version of Tobago history is taught, not including very much of 17<sup>th</sup> century Tobago history, if any.

2010 The Courland Bay Museum in Black Rock, established by members of the local population in order to promote the history of the area, is opened to the Latvians participating in the 14.Latvian Courlander Gathering and school children. In future years, visiting Latvians regularly bring material for exhibition in the museum, yet it is now too small to accommodate all the items.

2015 Representatives of culture and tourism from Tobago begin travel to Latvia to further ties between the two countries.

2017 In March, representatives from Latvia, the Ventspils Museum and Ventspils Town Council meet with the new Chief Secretary, Kelvin Charles, the Secretary for Tourism, Culture and Transportation, Councillor Nadine Stewart-Phillips and other THA officials with the aim of beginning the archaeological work at the Courlander Monument, originally approved by the curator of the Fort George Museum, Edward Hernandez.

Captain Uldis Ozolants arrives in Chaguaramas in his yacht after a 6000 nautical mile trip from Latvia begun in October 2015

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF LATVIA

Approximately 4.500 years ago or before, the Baltic peoples reach the shores of the Baltic sea, at one time occupying the area between the Baltic and Black seas. Today only 1.500.000 Latvians and about 3.500.00 Lithuanians remain in the world. (Estonians are of finno-ugric origin, related to the Finns)

13<sup>th</sup> century During the course of approximately 100 years, the Latvian kingdoms are conquered by the German Teutonic knights. The Kingdom of the Cours or Couronians at this time stretches South along the Baltic Sea to the Couronian Bay and modern day Kaliningrad/Konigsberg (Kaļālauči in Latvian) . Latvians eventually become serfs, living on manors owned by the new Baltic German aristocracy. Latvian and Estonian lands are united

by the Knights in a territory called Livonia. Rīga, founded in 1201, becomes a free and Hanseatic city.

1561 Livonia disintegrates. In 1562, the last Master of the Teutonic Order, Gotthard Kettler becomes the first Duke of Courland and Semigallia, a territory uniting two modern day provinces of Latvia. Duke Jacob, grandson of Gotthard (1610-1682) an intelligent, well travelled and enlightened ruler, regent from 1638 and Duke from 1642, ruling from his birthplace Kuldīga in Courland and Jelgava, Semgallia, builds his maritime nation into a prosperous country exporting items produced in Courland that have a high demand in other countries, among them, naval stores – ships, cloth for sails, rope, guns, cannons (said to be the best produced at that time) among others, required by the many warring European nations during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His fleet at times consisted of 30-40 well equipped vessels – warships and frigates with between 30-60 cannons each. A secondary source indicates that 17<sup>th</sup> c. Courland produced 59 warships with 1416 cannons, which is equal to 58% of the tonnage of the Spanish Armada and 37% of the British fleet in Cromwell's time. The Duke became ruler of Tobago, possessed territories in Gambia, Norway, Germany and France. There is a Courland Bay in Tasmania, Australia – did the Duke's ships reach that far? He married the equally wealthy Luise Charlotte of Brandenburg (Charlottetown!), from the German House of Hohenzollern.

1795 The Duchy ceases to exist, the German aristocracy handing over power to the Russian Czar. The Latvians now labor under a double yoke, their immediate German masters and the Russian government, a situation that changes only gradually during the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the period of enlightenment, as more and more Latvians become educated and independent.

1914 World War I breaks out, Latvian territory is invaded by the Germans and the nation becomes a Russo-Germanic battlefield.

1918 After the end of the war, on November 18, Latvian independence is declared, but the Latvians must continue fighting for their freedom against repeated German and Russian incursions until August 1920 and the elimination of the last (Russian Soviet) troops from the Country. Courland/Semgallia, Latgalia and the Midlands (Vidzeme) are finally united in the Republic of Latvia. In Rīga, August 11, Russia renounces all claims to Latvia and its people. The prewar population of Latvia was 2.5 million, postwar – only 1.5 million.

1920 The National Agrarian Reform of Sept. 16 nationalizes the Baltic German manors, and their lands are distributed to the Latvian people. 700 years of German occupation ends.

1921 Latvia is recognized *de iure* by the Allies and on Sept. 22 it is accepted by the League of Nations. The Latvians begin rebuilding a destroyed country. By 1937 Latvia has the highest index of students in Europe, highest consumption of milk and meat *per capita*, attains first place in public health insurance, has a very low crime rate and low unemployment.

1939                World War II begins, Latvian is invaded in 1940 by the Soviet forces, then in 1941 by the Germans, and in 1944, again by the Soviets. The country, once again, becomes a battlefield.

1944                10% of the Latvian population flees to Germany and Sweden to avoid deportation to Siberia, but hoping to return once the war concludes. This is not possible, and emigration to North and South America, other European nations and Australia occurs. Latvians organize exile communities with Latvian schools and churches, cultural and political organizations, and an international web is formed. The Soviets establish Soviet Latvia, oppress Latvian culture and ethnic values and impose Russian as the official language. In 1949 they deport many thousands of Latvians to the Siberian Gulag. Many never return.

1988                Peaceful protests against Soviet rule begin in the Baltics, in the Latvian capital of Rīga. On May 4 1990, Latvia formally declares its desire to become independent.

1991                Soviet troops invade Latvia for the last time August 18, but shortly must leave. Latvian independence is declared Aug 21, and Latvian flags rise in all parts of the nation. The second republic is born.