

19. Searching For Clues

Back to Mauritius

In April 2012, Robynne headed off to Mauritius with a list of places to go, people to see and information to find. While in Mauritius, Marie-France was so kind as to act as tour guide taking Robynne to the Lands and Property registry; the National Library to look for newspaper death notices; to the Coromandel Archives to look at shipping records; and to meet John Linko at the Anglican Archdiocese offices for Christian Missionary Society records because of our new found link to the first Bishop of Mauritius in the *Diocese of Mauritius* book. But yet again, even with all these visits no information was found. Not a thing. However John Linko was willing to continue the search in their records for us over time.

Uncle Nesam's Letter

The next day Robynne met with Abdool Cader Kalla in his home in Rose Hill and shared with him the letter that was given to us by my cousin Murray Moulton a couple of years earlier – the letter from Uncle Nesam Thomas to Auntie Becky Murray (nee James) back in 1948. The letter, as mentioned earlier (see Chapter 18), was difficult to read due to the handwriting, terminology and some of the references made. But, due to Mr Kalla's extensive historical knowledge regarding India, Ceylon and Mauritius in those times, he was able to read it clearly, break it down and find in it some very useful information about the background of Grandmother Miriam's family, the Thomases.

Uncle Nesam's letter was sent from Negombo in Ceylon on 12 February 1948. It reads:

My Dearest Rebecca,

I am writing as mail is closing for Australia tomorrow and to find out why you have not written for such a long time ... I met one Mr Murray yesterday who had just returned from Victoria and I made enquiries about you all. He seems to have read the name of Shadrach in the list of the preachers in the Methodist Church in Melbourne, last year and he told me that some of his friends live in Shepparton. Mr Murray is an Australian (tent missionary) they hold their meetings in private houses and in tents. There are 8 of them in Ceylon and they have succeeded in getting a few members to form their Mission. Whenever I meet an

Australian I always inquire if they are from Shepparton. A large number of Ceylon families have migrated to Perth to settle down there as new colonists. We hope they will succeed in their new adventure. A cousin of mine Rev R. Smith who came out from Mauritius on a visit to Ceylon was in England for 6 months doing deputation work for the S.P.G. Mission. He returned to Ceylon last week and sailed for Mauritius again to see his old mother. My brother Gamaliel who was in the army in India is now working as an assistant curate¹ in Bangalore where Ebenezer is. They are both keeping well. Ceylon has put her "Independence" and this week there are great rejoicings all over the island. The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester are here and 21 representatives from different parts of the world. I hear that I could travel in the 'Tourists' boat and the passage is cheaper. I do hope when I visit Australia if it is God's will and also your express wish I shall be able to do some preaching and tell the people in your country about missionary work in Mauritius and Ceylon. Although I did not send you all a message of fond wishes for the New year, you were all in our thoughts and prayers.

Affectionately Nesam

(Rev W.P. Thomas, Negombo, Ceylon).

This letter highlights the dedication and involvement that members of the Thomas family had with the SPG – the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, a 300-year-old Anglican Missionary organisation.

It refers to both Uncle Gami (Gamaliel) and another man named Ebenezer who were both missionaries in Bangalore at the time of the letter. From the letter it was clear that Uncle Nesam was keen to come to Australia to see the family and preach the gospel. My cousin Rhonda Dean (the daughter of Grampa's youngest child, Carey James Snr) told us earlier about three Indian visitors who stayed in her father's shed back in about 1950. She also mentioned an Uncle Ebenezer. Those three men could have been Uncle Nesam, Uncle Gami and Ebenezer (possibly another Uncle).

From this letter written in 1948, it certainly seems that Uncle Nesam knew the family pretty well, and had been writing to Aunty Becky for some time. It's also possible that it was the death of Grampa in Aunty Becky's home in January 1946 that caused her contact with Uncle Nesam to become more irregular, as noted by Uncle Nesam.

1 Curate: a person vested in the care or cure of souls in the parish.



Uncle Gamiliel Thomas with Aunty Priscilla Thomas and her siblings. I am not sure which person is Aunty Priscilla, however it is our belief she was the baby of the family.

Source: Courtesy of Aunty Priscilla Thomas. GBRN Collection.

Coromandel Archives

The Blue Books

The following day Robynne and Marie-France met Abdool Cader Kalla at the Coromandel Archives so that together they could search the government Blue Books. They found a full record of James Peersaib's working life where it was also noted that he was born in Madras India, and that as of 31 December 1884, he was 52 years of age.

The Pension

Blue Book government records also show that James Peesahib started receiving a pension in 1897. He would then have been 65 years old. What we knew at this point was:

- According to the *Diocese of Mauritius* book, in 1856 a person named Peersaib (no Christian name on record) was associated with Bishop Ryan, the first Anglican Bishop of Mauritius and Indian Missionary Society in Mauritius.
- According to the *Mauritius Almanac and Civil Service Register online*, James Peersaib was officially appointed on 1 February 1859 as Interpreter under the Stipendiary Magistrate Edward Henry Martindale at Wilhelms Plaines.
- James Peersaib's year of birth was approximately 1832 if he was 52 in 1884.

Grampa was born on 1 September 1859 at Moka. James Peersaib started work as an Interpreter on 1 February 1859. If James Peersaib was Grampa's father, he may have felt the need to get a paying job because his wife Miriam or Esther was pregnant with their first child.

Locating James Peersaib's work records was a great find but we were now left with the need to finally confirm that he *was* Grampa's father otherwise all the information we were finding about him was irrelevant.



Marie France Chelin-Goblet, Abdool Cader Kalla and Robynne at Coromandel Archives, Mauritius, 2012.

Source: GBRN Collection.

St Thomas Church Records

After leaving Coromandel Archives, Marie France rang Lisette – the lady from the St Thomas Church whom Robynne, Arlette and Mr Govinden had met with in 2010. They wanted to know whether Lisette had managed to uncover any family records in the search she had started two years earlier for us. It was arranged that Marie-France and Robynne would visit Lisette's home; it was very lucky they did.

Robynne: She invited us into her home and sat us down in a beautifully tiled and decorated outdoor entertaining area. She then immediately came out with a pile of record books clutched to her chest. She explained that after two years of searching she had been unable to uncover any record of Samson Peersahib Snr, or the boy Samson whose grave and headstone are clearly marked in the church cemetery. She went on to say that this was not uncommon in record keeping from that era. She did however open the book to a page that listed one:

Name: James 'alias' Pursaib

Date of Death: 5th March 1905.

Identification No: 132719.

Pursaib is yet another spelling for the name Peersahib. The different spellings are probably explained by the way in which the writer at the time may have heard the name pronounced and therefore how they chose to spell it.

Robynne: Alias? Could this mean that James is not his real name but merely a name he went by? Could his real name be Samson?

It seemed likely that James Pursaib, James Peersaib, and James Peersahib were all the same person. And, if James was his alias, and he was really called Samson, it seemed reasonable to assume that he was buried in the same grave as his son Samson who died in 1875, aged 13. And that is why our family know, without any doubt, that the grave at St Thomas Church in Beau Bassin, is the resting place of their grandfather and ours.

Sydney's daughter Lorna explained to Robynne that it is quite normal for another person to be buried in an existing grave after four years have passed, but they usually have two epitaphs present. This may well have been the case for Grandfather Samson's grave and the reason for attempting to alter the dates on the headstone rather than have two separate epitaphs. As suggested earlier, with two Samson Peersahibs being buried in the one grave, the name on the grave didn't need to be changed at all. But they did try to alter the dates to mark the death of the Elder Samson Peersahib – with little success.

Robynne: I left Mauritius very grateful to our family for answering my incessant questions. And grateful to Marie-France Chelin-Goblet and Mr Abdool Cader Kalla for taking the time to help me search for records about our ancestry in Mauritius. Unfortunately, I didn't get to meet Mr Govinden this trip, due to his work commitments, so I was not able to share with him all the information we had found at the Coromandel Archives about James Peersaib's work, pension or the link to Bishop Ryan and the Christian Missionary Society. But I soon would...

More Goodbyes

It was time for Robynne to say her goodbyes to our Mauritian family; this was not easy as a real bond had developed after three visits. After big hugs and French Mauritian kisses from Arlette, Sydney, his wife Joceyline and daughter Lorna, it was time to go. Robynne and Lorna had become like sisters, and Joceyline called Robynne her second daughter. Lorna gave Robynne a good supply of Mauritian spices to bring home, along with some of her favourite recipes. With Lorna's blessing we are happy to share a few of those recipes with you on the following pages. Enjoy!