

The St. Clair(e) Family

■ Biography

Joseph St. Clair was born in Barbados around 1876. He was the first member of the St. Clair(e) family in Bristol and is thought to have come from Barbados as a stowaway, but he was also in the Merchant Navy where he got a leg injury, apparently because he fell through a trapdoor into a ship's hold.



Joseph St. Clair

Photos courtesy of Dr Lindsay St. Claire

Once in Bristol, Joseph worked as a dentist on Bristol Bridge and also at fairs pulling teeth for a shilling, using his perfect white teeth as an advert for his profession. He was also a herbalist and lay preacher.

Family legend says that Joseph met his wife Mabel in Victoria Park. It is said that she had been in love with another man, but her parents would not let her marry him. Mabel was sitting crying when a handsome young Black man, Joseph, came along and asked, 'What's the matter pretty lady?' They were married in 1913. They had six children: Cleophus, Reuben, Vernon, Hayden (who died young), Raymond and the youngest, Naomi, who was known as Sissy. They were all born in Ashley Parade and spent their childhoods there.

Joseph is remembered as talented and self educated. He spoke Russian and other languages, and he passed on his love of learning to his sons, who used to memorise large chunks of Shakespeare and the Bible. He was also known for his tailoring skills. He made cricket whites for his sons Reuben and Raymond and would iron them while they were wearing them! Joseph was very smart; he wore spats and a bowler hat and was well spoken. His granddaughter remembers that he also had a watch and used to say, "It winds like silk."

Joseph was a lay preacher at Ivy Church and City Road Baptist Church. A large gathering of family, friends and officials of City Road Baptist Chapel attended his funeral in 1935. A newspaper article describes him as "beloved by sorrowing wife and children".

Joseph's second son, Reuben, joined the Home Guard during the war and was the first Black man to be a non-commissioned officer and to get promotion. Occasionally, during the blackout, there was no transport so he would march his platoon to Henbury from the centre to do their duty. Later, when he had children, he would play marching up and down with them. All of the St. Clair(e) brothers were tall and strong and would lift up cars in

the street to demonstrate their strength! After Joseph died, Mabel moved the family to Henleaze where her sons started their own upholstery business. Cleophus, the eldest, also had a remarkable voice and appeared on TV and the radio, although his trade was welding. Reuben had engineering skills and had worked at Brabey's in Long Ashton. After the war they all had a yard in Chock Lane, in Westbury-on-Trym. This was next door to the scrap yard that belonged to their sister Sissy's husband, Ernest Thatcher. Joseph St. Clair's sons stayed in the upholstery business all their lives, each retiring at 65. When Raymond, the youngest, retired, the business closed. The wage books show that they supported their mother Mabel from these funds. Their sister Sissy became a well known singer and she used the name Eve as a stage name.

Reuben married Ruth and had two children, Russell and Lindsay. Lindsay remembers she was happy at school and feels that having the same accent as the other children was an advantage. As her father, Reuben, was six feet tall and weighed seventeen stone, Lindsay was aware that her friends might find him intimidating so she would invite them in and say, "He won't hurt you", before punching him in the stomach and winding him.



Clockwise from bottom left: Lindsay; Reuben with his platoon, seated centre; Reuben in uniform; Naomi (also known as Eve or Sissy)

Photos courtesy of Dr Lindsay St. Claire

Lindsay St. Claire's message is:

“ We should decide what to achieve, for ourselves. Pretty much the same things that everyone wants and values. I think it's important not to let the media create our ambitions, limiting our expectations so the only ways to be so-called cool is through sport, music – or on the negative side, violence and drugs. ”

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■ Teachers' Background Notes

(Based on an interview with Dr. Lindsay St. Claire)

Joseph St. Clair was born in Barbados around 1876. He was the first member of the St. Clair(e) family in Bristol and is thought to have come from Barbados as a stowaway. However, he is known to have been in the Merchant Navy where he got a leg injury, apparently because he fell through a trapdoor into a ship's hold. His father, William Robert St. Clair, was a tailor in Barbados and his mother Mary's maiden name was Devonish. It is said that he had a brother who settled in Cardiff.

Once in Bristol, Joseph worked as a dentist on Bristol Bridge and also at fairs pulling teeth for a shilling, using his perfect white teeth as an advert for his profession. He was also a herbalist and lay preacher.

Family legend says that Joseph met his wife Mabel in Victoria Park. It is said that she had been in love with an orthodox Jewish man, but her parents would not let her marry him. Mabel was sitting crying when a handsome young Black man, Joseph, came along and asked, 'What's the matter pretty lady?' They were married in 1913 and their marriage certificate gives Joseph's age as 24 and Mabel's as 21, but he is thought to have been 16 years older and Mabel just 18 years old. They had six children: Cleophus (born 1914), Reuben (born 1916), Vernon, Hayden (who died young), Raymond and the youngest, Naomi, who was known as Sissy. They were all born in Ashley Parade and spent their childhoods there.

Joseph is remembered as multi-talented and highly educated, perhaps self-educated, and was strict with his children. He spoke Russian and other languages, and he passed on his love of learning to Reuben and Cleophus, who used to memorise large chunks of Shakespeare and the Bible. He was also known for his tailoring skills. He made cricket whites for his sons Reuben and Raymond and would iron them while they were wearing them! Joseph was very smart, he wore spats and a bowler hat and was well spoken. His granddaughter remembers that he also had a watch and used to say, "It winds like silk."

Joseph was a lay preacher at Ivy Church and City Road Baptist Church, and he belonged to City Road Baptist Cricket Club and his children attended their Sunday School. He also went to the Baptist Chapel in Broadmead before it was bombed. He was the first Black family to attend this church.

A large gathering of family, friends and officials of City Road Baptist Chapel attended his funeral, which took place in 1935. A newspaper article describes him as “beloved by sorrowing wife and children”.

Joseph’s second son, Reuben, joined the Home Guard during the war and was the first Black man to be a non-commissioned officer and to get promotion. He was in charge of guns when it was his night on duty. Occasionally, during the blackout, there was no transport so he would march his platoon to Henbury from the centre to do their duty. Later, when he had children, he would play marching up and down with them.

During the Second World War there was a murder in Bristol and the police frequently stopped Reuben and his brothers, even though it was clear they were not implicated. Vernon, their younger brother was missing for years because he was a prisoner-of-war. When he returned, he was very thin. Someone stopped him in the street to offer condolences for his death, thinking he was one of his brothers.

All the St. Clair(e) brothers were tall and strong and would lift up cars in the street to demonstrate their physical prowess! After Joseph died, Mabel moved the family from St. Werburgh’s to Henleaze where her sons started their own upholstery business. Cleophus, the eldest, had a remarkable voice and appeared on TV and the radio, although his trade was welding. Reuben had engineering skills and had worked at Brabey’s in Long Ashton. After the war they all had a yard in Chock Lane, in Westbury-on-Trym. This was next door to the scrap yard that belonged to their sister Sissy’s husband, Ernest Thatcher.

The business then moved to a large Georgian house, which was part of the site of a castle. For a short time one of the brothers, Raymond and his wife Betty, lived in the castle which was rented from the National Trust. It was there that Lindsay, Reuben’s daughter, would play with her cousins at the upholstery works and occasionally in the dungeon. There were secret passages and on the top floor, where old furniture was stored they played hide and seek. Betty thought it was haunted (she felt she heard rattling chains and the occasional moan), so they moved. The yellow van that collected and delivered furniture was nicknamed ‘The Yellow Peril’.

Joseph St. Clair’s sons stayed in the upholstery business all their lives, each retiring at 65. When Raymond, the youngest, retired, the business closed. The wage books show that they supported their mother Mabel from these funds. Their sister Sissy became a well known singer and she used the name Eve as a stage name.

Reuben married Ruth and had two children, Russell and Lindsay. The family valued music lessons and Reuben started to teach himself the piano. He made a special three-piece suite to sell in order to buy a piano. Reuben and Ruth made sacrifices for their children who both got scholarships, but Ruth told her children she was happy about these sacrifices and they weren't to feel grateful.

Lindsay remembers she was happy at school and feels that having the same accent as the other children was an advantage. As her father, Reuben, was six feet tall and weighed seventeen stone, Lindsay was aware that her friends might find him intimidating so she would invite them in and say, "He won't hurt you", before punching him in the stomach and winding him.

Lindsay St. Claire's message is: **"We should decide what to achieve, for ourselves. Pretty much the same things that everyone wants and values. I think it's important not to let the media create our ambitions, limiting our expectations so the only ways to be so-called cool is through sport, music – or on the negative side, violence and drugs."**

Part of the St. Clair(e) Family Tree

