

THE SOUTH AFRICAN VON ABO'S

AN INTRODUCTION

I was always interested in family history but was completely hooked when I read the opening paragraph of some old family papers of my mother's some years ago:-

The first we know of Toger Abo, or Toger von Abo, the great-great-grandfather of the Naesteds, Flemmers, and Edward Gillfillans and also of all members of the African family of von Abo's is in the year 1773, during the Danish revolution, when he was forced to leave the country for two years, not for any wrong doing, but for being loyal to the rightful King and Queen, namely Christian VII and Caroline Mathilda, sister of George III of England. Von Abo did not return to his country at the expiration of the two years but went into foreign service where he distinguished himself by his bravery and other excellent qualities, and became an Admiral.

Wow! This was a good opening – the exotic names [Toger Abo] revolution in Denmark, royalty, bravery, and an Admiral! Who could resist all of this and more?

Since then I have spent many years collecting information from sources in Denmark, Sweden, Holland and South Africa and truly it is a very interesting story, even if some of what followed in the family account proved to be slightly gilded in the retelling. I am nowhere near completing the writing of the story of the ABO/VON ABO family, but would like to share with readers the first part of what I have found.

I should say at the outset that Töger Abo (to give the name its Danish form) is indeed my direct ancestor, and as mentioned in the quote above, is also the ancestor of the South African von Abo's, Naesteds, Flemmers and Edward Gilfillans. This then is the first part of his story:-

According to the University of Copenhagen the meaning of the name Abo is either “dweller by a river” or a man from Aabo - the medieval name for the current Aabosysssel, where the present town of Aarhus stands. The direct line has been traced to Aarhus in 1585 and through the generations to Töger Abo and his son, the *stamvader* of the South African von Abos. The records show:-

JONAS HANSEN - born near Aabo about 1585. Obviously at that time Abo was not being used as surname, 'Hansen' denoting 'son of Hans'. Jonas Hansen was a tanner and became a citizen (burger) of Aarhus on 3rd April 1606.

His son was - **JOHANNES ABO** - born about 1615 and died before 1669, he was a merchant at Aarhus.

He had at least three children of which one was - **CHRISTIAN NICOLAI ABO** - born about 1647 at Aarhus he became a citizen (burger) of Bergen in present day Norway in 1678 in which year he married Anna Leem.

They had at least four children of which one was - **NIELS CHRISTIAN ABO** - c1674 - 1744, a customs officer at Molde in Sweden who married Birgitte Mechlenberg and they had at least 6 children of which one was Christian Nicolai Abo.

CHRISTIAN NICOLAI ABO 1717 - 1789

Christian Nicolai Abo born 1717 was the son of a judge's assistant and gaoler in Bergen in Norway. In 1745 he married Anna Erlandsdatter Fieldberg (1721 - 1812) who was the widow of the curate Lars Werloe. Whilst obviously the family was not of the nobility they would have been among a small minority of their time who were educated and employed on regular salaries and would I suppose have been considered the middle class of their time.

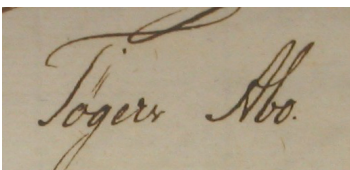
The later records of the arrest of Töger Abo show that he was one of 8 children and as Christian Nicolai spent his career with the Navy one has to assume that they were not wealthy and this is also referred to at the later inquiry of his son Töger. We know that in 1743 Christian Nicolai was employed as a "Monthly" Lieutenant on board the man-of-war "*Princess Louise*" and that in 1744 he was employed as an Enlistment Officer in the district of Bergen.

In 1755 he was promoted to First Lieutenant and transferred to Egersund. It was while based here that complaints were raised against him by the French Envoy in a dispute over some prizes that had been brought into the port of Egersund. The matter was investigated but there is no record of any wrong doing on Abo's part although he was subsequently transferred to Mandel, although this may have had nothing to do with the complaint that was raised. He remained with the Navy and by 1761 was on the man-of-war "*Fyen*".

1771 found him as Chief of the Enlistment in the district of Christiansend and 1778 the Enlistment Officer at Stavanger. He was to remain here for the rest of his life and in March 1789 he is recorded as the Chief of Enlistment and First Pilot in the district of Stavanger.

TÖGER ABO 1747 - 1806

I have used the name shown in Danish records, that is, without the "von" that appears in the South African records. There is no evidence of its use in any of the documents that I have seen and this includes copies of letters signed by Töger Abo himself. The addition of 'von' seems to have been adopted by his son Christian Johannes after he arrived in South Africa in 1820.



Pic: Signature of Töger Abo

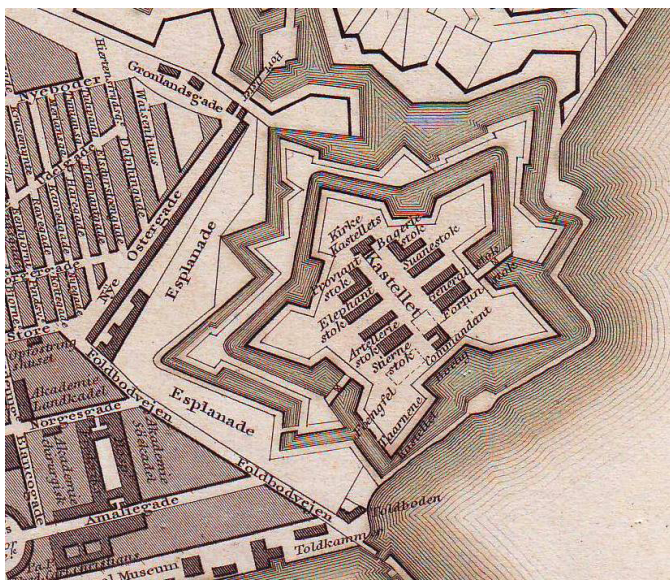
Töger Abo was born 16th February 1747 on the island of Stord in Norway and was baptised on 19th February of that year. He came from a long line of minor government functionaries and his father spent his life in the Danish Navy. There is no way of knowing how Töger subsequently came to be in Copenhagen where he became involved in the political and court upheavals of the time. These events, the so-called Danish Revolution, had a life long impact on his career and his life.

We know that in 1760 he enlisted as a volunteer cadet with the Danish Navy at the age of 13 and in 1763 he became a full cadet. It was at this time that fate played its part and he became friendly with (later Count) Enevold Brandt with whom he apparently learned fencing at the Naval Academy

Space doesn't allow me to go into the political intrigue of the court of King Christian VII as this in itself is a fascinating story which is well recorded in Danish and English history. King Christian VII was by all accounts a mentally unstable and incompetent King. He took a liking to Doctor Johann

Struensee, a brilliant German doctor who through skilful political manoeuvring effectively became Prime Minister of Denmark. Through a series of decrees changing the established political and social order Struensee made many enemies in the Danish Court. This together with the fact that he had an affair with Queen Caroline Mathilda led to the arrest of Struensee, Brandt and all of his supporters, including young Töger Abo – but here I am jumping ahead of the story!

In 1771 at the age of 23 Töger Abo was made “General Adjutant” under the patronage of Struensee who doubled his salary. The following year, after major upheaval and intrigue at Court, Struensee and his followers were arrested and imprisoned. Töger Abo spent 10 weeks in jail at the “Kastellet” at Copenhagen and his salary of 300 rixdollars or riksdalders was stopped.



Pic: Kastellet Copenhagen from 1830 map

He was brought before the Commission of Inquiry and questioned closely about his association with Count Brandt and with Count Struensee. The Commission was particularly interested to know why on some occasions when Töger went to see Brandt, Count Brandt’s servant had been sent from the room. Normally this servant was completely trusted with confidential information. Obviously the commission was of the view that Abo and Brandt were using these periods to plot against the Royal Court.

Abo explained to the Commission that he had sent the servant from the room because he was embarrassed to discuss his poor financial situation in front of a servant. He pointed out that the Commission was aware that his father was employed in the Navy at a low salary and that as one of 8 children they were not well off. The subsequent evidence of Count Brandt confirmed this evidence and Brandt went on to say that the young Töger Abo was not someone to whom he (Brandt) would have entrusted confidential information. He said also that his meetings with Abo were mainly about Abo’s financial situation and the benefit that could be gained by his association with Brandt.

It is difficult at this distance given the translation from German and Danish into English, to form a clear view of the young Töger Abo at this time. While some of the evidence appears to be uncomplimentary there is also a view that but for this unfortunate incident Töger Abo would have risen to the highest ranks of the Danish Navy at a very young age. It seems then that here was a young man without money or connections who was trying to improve his lot in the world. By backing the wrong horse he was to live with the stigma of his association with Brandt and Struensee for the rest of his life.

There was also evidence that in an effort to improve his position he had submitted an Application

for a very senior position at the Admiralty College. The Commission of Inquiry were highly critical and considered that he was being impertinent and reaching above his station in life. Töger Abo apologized to the Commission for this application. The Commission were obviously satisfied with their enquiries and on the 25th May 1772 the King signed the following order - translated from the Danish it says:-

“Second Lieutenant Abo is hereby acquitted of further charges with respect to his careless, thoughtless, culpable, behaviour and it is recommended and allowed that he go abroad for three years to take foreign service to qualify himself to Our service and to endeavour to acquire the right and proper ambition. He must within 4 weeks leave the capital. For the time he has been arrested he shall have his wage due to him as before, that is 300 rdl. pro anno.”

Christianborg Castle 25th May 1772

Signed Christian

One can imagine the relief of this young man, still only 22, as this acquittal was granted. His patrons Struensee and Brandt were not as fortunate. A month before Töger's acquittal was signed these two men had been brought in chains to a field just outside Copenhagen before a crowd of 50 000. Brandt was dealt with first in front of his friend Struensee. Their right hands were first chopped off, followed by their heads and the breaking of their bodies on the wheel. A gruesome spectacle indeed.

Töger had effectively been banished from Denmark for 3 years and been given the opportunity to regain the favour of the King. It was this turn of events that led to the “South African connection”. He joined the Dutch East India Company and during one of his calls at the Cape met Maria van der Spuy and this was of course the start of the South African Von Abo connection.

In 1774 there is a letter from the Danish Admiralty expressing its pleasure at a report that it had received from Abo describing his successful activities in the war against England in the defence of the Dutch colonies in the Far East. In effect the Admiralty said that he was doing well in his endeavours to win the grace of the King.

The voyages to the East could be very lucrative for officers and crew but were very taxing. He sailed as second mate with the ship “*Tempel*” on the 10th July 1776 and 190 days later they reached Cape Town, where they probably anchored with the winter fleet at Simon's Town. Sixteen days later they sailed for Bengal arriving there on the 25th October, 297 days after leaving Amsterdam. As it happened his brother Erland Nicolai Abo served as a sergeant on this voyage.

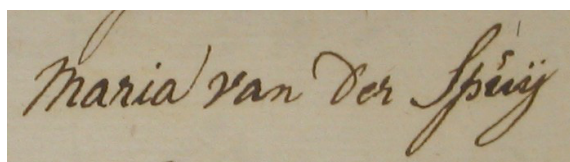
By 1777 he was back in Amsterdam from Bengal on board the “*Tempel*” after a trip totalling no less than 547 days. In a letter to Denmark he describes how the ship was nearly lost in the Bay of Biscay when it was struck by a terrible storm and the captain being unwell, Abo assumed command. The crew and other officers apparently had no other interest than in saving themselves. It was only through offering to pay extra wages that the crew was persuaded to work to save the ship. The Dutch shareholders had expressed their appreciation at Abo's actions in this case.

His brother Erland Nicolai stayed on in Bengal, returning to Amsterdam on the “*Ceres*” in 1779 after being away three and a half years.

In 1779, aged by now 32 and 7 years after leaving Denmark Töger wrote again to apply for an extension to his leave to make another trip to the East Indies as a Commanding Officer and to “bring

order to his affairs". Permission was granted and we can only assume that as Commanding Officer of this Dutch East Indiaman he was in a far better position to improve his financial situation than as a Danish Navy officer.

On 28th October 1780 he wrote that he was sailing past Texel, an island off the north western coast of Holland as commanding officer of the frigate "*Het Hof ter Linde*" with a crew of 330 men. He said that he intended to marry Maria van der Spuy on his arrival in Cape Town. She was the daughter of wealthy town councillor Johannes Cornelius van der Spuy and his wife Magdaleen de Waal. Permission for the marriage was granted by the Danish Navy and on the 5th March 1781 he wrote from Cape Town that he had married Maria on the 18th February 1781 – three days after his arrival in Cape Town. He had ordered his representative in Copenhagen to pay a deposit of 1000 rdl. into the *Enkekassen*, which was in fact a widows' pension fund and was a requirement of the time.



Pic: Signature of Maria van der Spuy

We don't know whether he then took Maria with him to the Far East but it was to be 6 years before their son Johannes Christian was born in Copenhagen, so it may be that Maria remained with her parents at the Cape. The records show that after Töger arrived in Batavia on the 31st May 1781 he only left again on the "*Voorschoten*" on the 11th December 1785 – finally reaching Amsterdam on the 21st August 1786.

He certainly seemed to have had a distinguished career in the East. In 1781 he was in Batavia where he wrote that he had been promoted to "Captain of the Indian Sea" and Commanding Officer of a man-of-war of 54 canon and a crew of 450. He hoped that this promotion would prepare the way for his promotion in Denmark. Four years later, by now aged 38, he was still in the Far East where there was an unfortunate incident when his ship the "*Dolfijn*" exploded and burnt to the waterline at the Straits of Malacca.

By 1786 he had returned to Amsterdam from the Far East and re-entered Danish naval service as a Captain Lieutenant. It is quite probable that after his extended service in the Far East he was a relatively wealthy man and had decided to settle back in Denmark. In 1787 his son Christian Johannes was baptised at the Holmens church in Copenhagen. It is interesting to look at the list of sponsors of the child, given the fact that the old family story says he was held by a princess at his baptism (and much more besides!). The list of sponsors gives a good idea of Töger and Maria Abo's position in Danish society. Certainly the sponsors were of the upper classes, among them: His Excellency '*Geheimeraad*' (*Privy Council*) Christian Brandt and '*Etatsraad*' (*State Council*) Knoph. There were other titled men, two admirals and sisters called Løwe – but no mention of a princess. In 1788 at the age of 41 Töger was Second in Command of the man-of-war "*Princess Louise Augusta*" and he had various commissions over the following years. In 1793 he requested permission to go to Norway for 2 or 3 months to sort out his financial affairs and this may have related to the death of his father Nicolai in 1789. It is recorded that in 1794 he owned his own frigate, the "*Friderichsdal*" which was carrying grain and hemp between Norway and Denmark.

He was aged 50 in 1797 when he applied to be relieved of his naval commission and requested two thirds of his salary as pension as he had developed consumption during his last command. The Navy agreed to this request and he was dismissed without salary to re-establish his health.

This was subsequently changed to a two thirds pension until his health had improved when he could re-enter the service.

From then on things went downhill for Töger. Charges being brought against him and his partner for the irregular delivery of timber from Holmen. These charges were withdrawn subsequently on payment of 5000 rdl. in compensation. His pension was 600 rdl. a year so the fine was a substantial amount of money. It seems that after this his finances never recovered. There is probably truth in the family legend that says that he invested all of his money in Danish government *obligations* that subsequently became valueless as the Danish economy collapsed.

In 1799, by now 52 he reported to the Navy that he was well and that he wanted to rejoin the service. This may of course have been for financial reasons, but the Navy did not accept his application on the basis that he was bankrupt. They also wanted to know how his debts would be settled. He told them his creditors would receive 80% which would be paid on 3rd March 1800. The Admiralty replied that it would wait before re-employing him as apparently his debts still had not been paid.

In 1801 he applied for permission to go to La Rochelle where his ship "*Haabet*" had been taken as a prize and was being dealt with in the prize court. Permission was granted but it seems that one problem was mounting on another over this period.

In January 1804 by now aged 57 he was officially put on pension of 600 rdl. a year as the Admiralty felt that he had been out of service for sea and land duties for too long. It confirmed that he had paid his debts but nevertheless he could not be accepted back in service.

In a desperate attempt to regain his fortune he went on one last merchant trip to the East. By now he was 59 and probably still had TB. He was an old man going on a young man's errand. The records show that he died the 27th November 1806 as captain of the merchant ship '*Orion*' on a return trip from Batavia. His place of burial is unknown. Family notes say that his supercargo a "dishonest man" stole the cargo leaving the widow destitute.

This is a sad story as here was a young man who had obviously showed tremendous promise. By making a wrong decision early in his life to back the wrong horse he found himself despite a long and adventurous life, a poor man having to take once more to the sea in his old age.

His wife Maria is recorded as living at various addresses until she subsequently died in poverty in 1814 at age 72 at the home of her son in law Michiel Naested a lawyer at Holbaek.

CHRISTIAN JOHANNES VON ABO

1787 - 1869



Christian Johannes von Abo (to use his South African name) the son of Töger Abo and Maria van der Spuy was baptised in Holmens church in Copenhagen on 3rd November 1787. Nothing is known of his childhood except the 1801 census records that show he was aged 13 and a pupil at a training institute at Vesterport. In 1810 he was a Lieutenant and married Louis Dorothea Naested of the wealthy Copenhagen Naested family at the Vor Frue Church in Copenhagen.

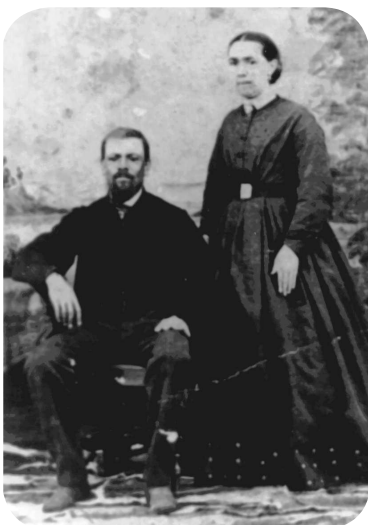
Because of the very poor economic conditions in Denmark Christian Johannes von Abo left for Cape Town in 1820. He had his mother's family contacts there and could use his Danish Navy navigation training. He was one of the first land surveyors to be registered in the Colony.

pic left: Christian Johannes Abo in Danish navy uniform



As far as we know he did not returned Denmark. In 1823 his wife Louis Dorothea died penniless aged 30 in Holbaek at the home of her brother the attorney Johannes Hendrik Naested. The couple had four children: Marie Sophie Frederikke 1811, Töger 1814, and Betty Camilla Augusta born 1816. The fourth child, Henriette Wilhelmine Louise born 1819, died that same year.

pic left: Betty Camilla Augusta



Töger (jnr.) followed his father to South Africa and became a successful trader and a Justice of the Peace in Cradock, Cape Province. He returned to Denmark in 1852 and persuaded his sister Betty, by then married to Dr Christian August Flemmer, to move to Cradock with their 7 children. In the same year, 1852, Töger married his cousin Methea Sophia Kjeldberg. She went with him to South Africa, but I believe she returned to Denmark at some point. Töger died childless in Cradock in 1879.

pic left: Töger Abo jnr. and his wife Methea Kjeldberg

Christian Johannes did not see his Danish children again until they moved to South Africa as adults. He had last seen his daughter Betty Camilla Augusta as a six month old baby. By the time she arrived at Port Elizabeth in 1853 she had married Dr. Christian August Flemmer and was the mother of 7 children!

Following the death of his wife in Denmark Christian Johannes von Abo married Maria Magdalena Jacoba van Buuren at Graaf Reinet in 1826. She was the daughter of Johannes Gerardus van Buuren of Haarlem and Elisabeth Josina Eksteen whose family can be traced back to Germany in 1609. Maria Magdalena Jacoba van Buuren had been born on the ship "Thomas" in 1805 and would have been 21 at the time of her marriage while Christian Johannes was by now 39.

This couple had 10 children, 7 of whom were born in Graaff Reinet. One child, Wilhelmina Johanna Von Abo born in 1833 married one of the well known land survey family - Frederick Hurling Hopley – in 1852. Their daughter Aletta Alida Hopley married the son of Betty Camilla Augusta Von Abo and Christian August Flemmer. He was Hans Christian Flemmer- and their son was my grandfather, Marius Toger Flemmer.

Christian Johannes von Abo worked as a land surveyor in the Cape Colony and surveyed farms and towns all over the Karoo. He died on the 9th November 1869 in Burgersdorp aged 82. His wife Magdalena died in 1881 age 76. I have not yet had a chance to complete my notes on this family and the many descendants who are all over South Africa and no doubt, the world. That task waits for another day.

Steve Herbert
Kalk Bay April 2016