



The repair team poses with Ambassador Amilcar Spencer Lopez, far right, outside the São Nicolau church.

Hands-On Diplomacy Gets Town Clock Ticking

By Don Johnson

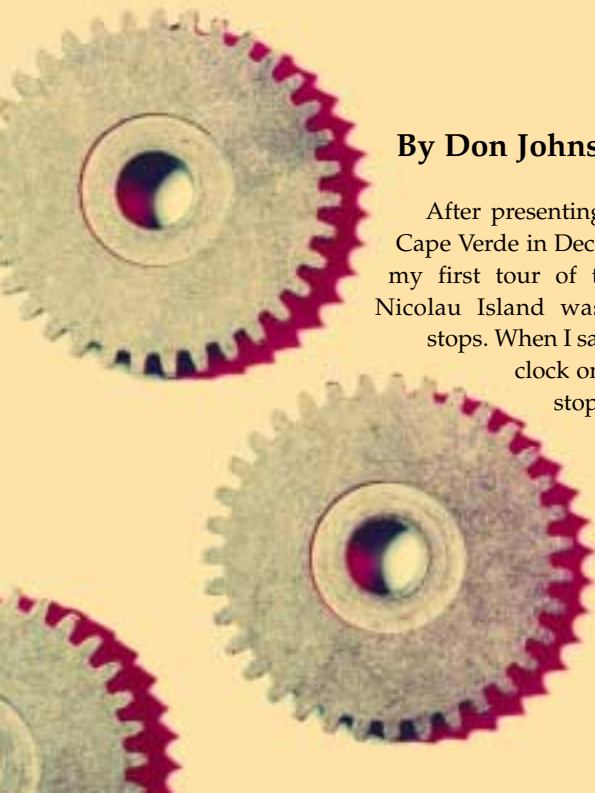
After presenting my credentials in Cape Verde in December 2002, I made my first tour of the islands. São Nicolau Island was among my first stops. When I saw the church tower clock on the main square, I stopped and stared.

You see, I happen to like clocks—collecting them, fixing them and listening to them. I've visited clocks in Beijing, Dublin, Vienna and clock

museums in the United States. I've even studied clocks at the School of Horology in Columbia, Pa.

I got permission to climb the clock tower to see the mechanism firsthand. Covered with dust, congealed grease and ancient oil, it was in a sad state of disrepair. The only clue about its origin was a dial with Kemp Bros. Bristol on it. My best guess was that the clock was about 100 years old. The local town's people said it hadn't worked for the past 20 years. I wondered whether I could contribute to getting it fixed.

Later, in the summer of 2003, Amilcar Spencer Lopes, Cape Verde's former ambassador to the United States and a São Nicolau native, informed me of a committee formed to raise funds for the church's restoration. I asked him about the tower clock. He said the plan was to leave the clock dial in place but to remove the broken mechanical movement and replace it with an electrical one. I urged him to give the old movement one more try.



That's because I'd heard that a Cape Verdean amateur clock-maker named Luis Saldanha had gotten the tower clock in Praia's city hall to work. We contacted him and asked if he would accompany us to Sao Nicolau to see if the tower clock could be saved—or better still—repaired. He agreed, and on July 27, a Sunday, we flew to São Nicolau.

We spent most of the next three days working in the clock tower. Answering the first question—whether the clock mechanism was salvageable—proved easy once we removed the clutter from the tower. Nothing was irretrievably damaged. We reported this to the parish priest and the restoration committee, and they authorized us to clean and repair the clock.

The following day, we spent 12 hours in the clock tower working on the mechanism. It was not lonely work. Besides the crowd in the town square below us, there was a steady flow of volunteers and local citizens eager to learn how things were going. The town's older citizens proved to be our most interested and dedicated supporters. After 20 years without the clock, they couldn't wait for us to get the job done.

We had our fair share of surprises. The first was a loose dial; half the wooden supports holding the dial to the tower wall had rotted away. We had to find pieces of mahogany to reinforce the dial before removing the hands and gears that drive the hands. Then we discovered that the floorboards supporting part of the mechanism were loose. That meant another detour while we installed triangular reinforcements. Finally, we discovered some scoring on the anchor that regulates the clock. That had to be fixed as well. And then there was the unglamorous job of scraping the pigeon guano off the bell.

That job fell to me—presumably on the theory that senior diplomats are skilled at coping with guano.

Credit for accomplishing the other tasks goes to Luis Saldanha. He was the person who solved the tough technical problems. But what amazed me was how we could send out word that we needed a drill, or heavy screws or a strong piece of mahogany and the São Nicolau volunteers would fan out around town and return with what we needed. We had real town-wide support from the moment we moved the first dusty pieces of wood in the clock tower.

Two days of work brought us to the moment when we were finally able to give the pendulum a push, set it ticking and wait—for nearly 30 minutes—so we could see if the mechanism would go through the first full strike sequence. Our

Detective Work Leads to Clock Manufacturer

The clock in Sao Nicolau offered very little in the way of clues about its date of manufacture. It did offer one vital piece of information. Kemp Bros. Bristol was stamped on an interior dial. I wanted to learn more about the company and the clock's date of manufacture.

A member, I contacted the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors in Columbia, Pa., for any records they might have. Remarkable as it may seem to the nonspecialist, there are books documenting the dates of business for clock manufacturers in the major watch and clock-making centers of the world. The association reported that the company had been founded in the late 19th century and they directed me to a web site about a tower clock made and installed by Kemp Bros. They even suggested the company might still be in business.

I contacted Greg Gardner at the U.S. Embassy in London and asked if he could look in a British commercial guide for a company called Kemp Brothers in Bristol. He got back to me with a name, address and phone number. I called the Bristol number from Cape Verde, startling the person at the other end. He confirmed that this was indeed Kemp Brothers Jewelers and that they were the successors of the Kemp. Bros. who had manufactured clocks in the late 19th century.

That was the good news. When I asked whether the company had any records about the clock in Sao Nicolau, I was told that all the company's records had been destroyed when their building was bombed during the blitz in World War II. They were delighted to know that one of their clocks was still running, but with no records prior to 1940 remaining, it was impossible to assign a more precise date for the manufacture of the clock. The hunt for a date of manufacture continues.



group of loyal volunteers joined us for the vigil. There was a lot of nervous looking at wrist-watches as the minutes ticked down, but loud cheers and applause when the bell rang again for the first time.

Naturally, getting a very old tower clock to work again was immensely satisfying. Even better, however, was when ordinary citizens of São Nicolau expressed their delight at hearing the bells sound in their town again. ■

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Luis Saldanha and Don Johnson at work on the clock.