

The Voortrekker Dorps of Natal

Historians have tended to gloss over the Voortrekker period of Natal history and for good reason. The main source of information for this period, the minutes of the Natal Volksraad, is written in Nederlands-Afrikaans and is frustratingly incomplete. The historian is thus confronted by missing data and this coupled with the unwritten assumption that virtually all traces of Voortrekker settlement have been erased, has resulted not only in superficial treatment but also in inaccuracies and inconsistencies with respect to the foundation and character of the Voortrekker dorps in present day Natal.

The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to demonstrate that geographical analysis can help overcome the problems posed by missing data, and, secondly, to suggest that such analysis yields urban conservation guidelines. The analysis proceeds on an assumption basic to cultural geography: each culture group moulds the physical landscape into a cultural landscape.¹ Townscapes or dorp images and plans should be seen then as part of the cultural baggage which is taken along by migrating groups.

In order to see the Voortrekker dorps of Natal in context, and to discern common elements which help to overcome some of the problems posed by missing data, it is instructive to outline the origin, early character, and pattern of the dorps established during Dutch rule of the Cape.

The Dutch-Afrikaner Dorp Family

The Afrikaner dorp was born during Dutch rule of the Cape as a result of the transplanting of Dutch town planning ideals and plans in South African soil. Dutch Cape Town soon took on the appearance of a typical Dutch canal town — even the main street was named after its counterpart in Amsterdam, the *Heeregracht*. Other street names were *Kerk* (Church), *Lange-markt* (Longmarket), *Loop* (Walk) and *Berg* (Mountain). In 1771 the French naturalist Bernardin de St. Pierre visited Cape Town and remarked:

the streets are very straight, some of them are watered with canals and most of them planted with oak trees . . . When a man has seen one Dutch town he has seen them all . . . (Colvin, 1912, pp. 272–278).

As late as 1832, some 26 years after the British had taken possession of the Cape, the town was still remarkably Dutch in appearance.

The Cape-Dutch *dorpe*, or nucleated agricultural communities, grew organically as a result of the congregational gathering for several days on the occasion of the ‘nagmaal’, or quarterly communion service. The embryonic dorp characteristically developed as a single row of houses located at the front of irrigated agricultural even. Commercial or defensive requisites thus had very little bearing on the choice of dorp sites.

Stellenbosch, Swellendam, Paarl and Tulbagh were all single street dorps during their embryonic period. William Burchell visited Tulbagh in 1811, and described the place as:

nothing more than a half score of neat white houses placed in a row . . . In front . . . and running under the shade of trees is a strong rill of

excellent water, led there, as well for the supply of the inhabitants, as for the irrigation of their gardens, which lie on a gentle declivity immediately below it (Burchell, Vol I, 1824, p. 128).

In the same year Burchell also visited Paarl and described it as consisting of “. . . between forty and fifty neat houses, placed at a considerable distance from each other, and forming a single street, about the middle of which stands the church . . .” (Burchell, Vol I, 1824, pp. 143–144).

The settlement of farmers in the eastern Cape Province resulted in the growth of two further dorps prior to the advent of British control in 1806: Graaff-Reinet and Uitenhage. In 1786 Governor van der Graaff authorised the establishment of a church and drostdy on the Sundays River, and in 1797 John Barrow described the place as:

an assemblage of mud huts placed at some distance from each other, in two lines, forming a kind of street . . . There is no butcher, no chandler, no grocer, no baker (Barrow, 1801, pp. 113–114).

In 1812 however Burchell noted:

It consists of one broad principal street, of detached houses, adjoining to each of which is a garden well planted with fruit trees and continually supplied with water. The church, a large handsome building, on the ground plan of a cross, stands on a spacious plain at the northern end of the main street, of which it forms the terminating object . . . Along the principal street a row of orange and lemon trees, at this time loaded with fruit formed a decoration as novel to an English eye, as it was in itself beautiful . . . (Burchell, Vol II, 1824, pp. 144–145).

By 1823, Graaff-Reinet had grown into a fully-fledged dorp consisting of irrigated erven measuring 15 by 40 Rhineland Roods,² or one morgen, and extending from street to street; and, houses built along the tree-lined streets.³

Uitenhage, which was laid out in 1804, also had many dorp characteristics, including irrigated erven of one morgen.

Such was the character of the dorps most familiar at the time of the Great Trek to the Voortrekkers, with one notable exception, Grahamstown, where Pieter Retief lived and built prior to leading one of the Voortrekker parties (*Figure a*).

Grahamstown is usually associated with the 1820 British settlers but it was an established single street dorp when they arrived. In 1812 Colonel Graham chose a site to serve as military headquarters but doubts soon arose about the suitability of the site from a strategic point of view, and because of its water supply. Graham, acting on the advice of a young ensign, Andries Stockenström, reluctantly ordered the headquarters to be transferred to the present site of Grahamstown. The establishment of the Albany District in 1814, with the Landdrost stationed in Grahamstown, stimulated demand for land in the vicinity of the fledgeling dorp, and Surveyor Knobel was given the task of laying out a town. In his report to the Governor, Knobel wrote:

I have thought necessary, previous to any measuring of the lots, to submit to you a sketch of this place as it now stands (Cory, Vol I, 1921, pp. 269–270).

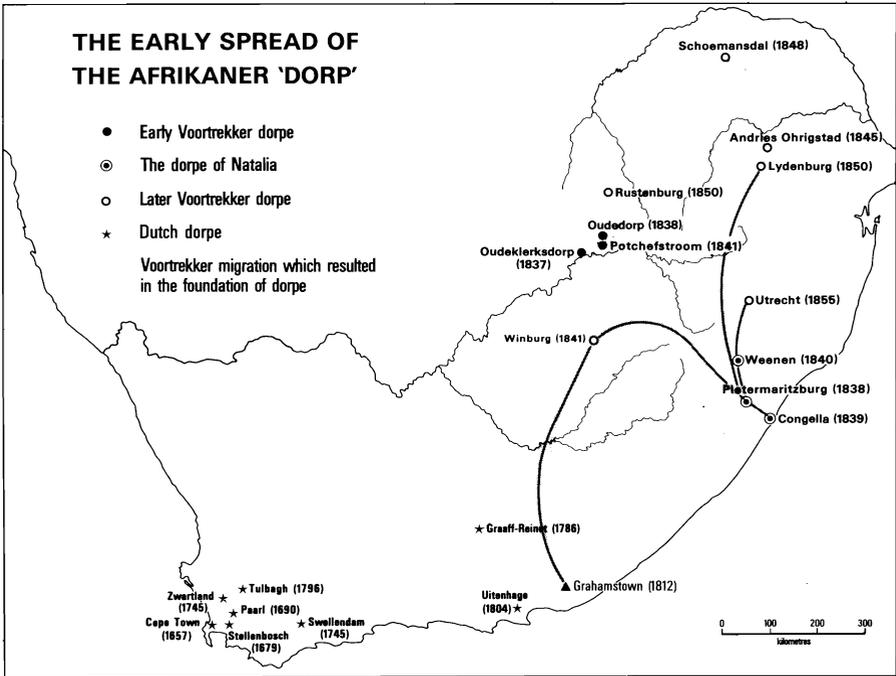


Figure a

Knobel's sketch plan contains the surveyor's suggestion of keeping the existing street which "... would give the Drostdy House a view of the whole street, and although a triangular space would be left open that space having the most elevated ground in its centre, might allow a very convenient situation for a church or any public building" (Cory, Vol I, 1921, pp. 270-271).

Knobel's plan was approved and the sale of erven, measuring '50 paces broad and 150 paces long' (Cory, Vol I, 1921, p. 269) took place in May 1815. Eleven erven were sold: five to military personnel, and the remainder to bearers of German and Dutch names — Pieter Retief bought two. Not only were Retief, Diety, and Pohl active in the building industry, they were also signatories to the 1820 town regulations. The twelfth article of these was clearly Dutch-inspired in that it promulgated a single building line:

The irregular way of Building tending to greatly disfigure the village everyone intending to build in future shall be bound to give notice to the Landdrost who will take care that the proper Line of the Street be pointed out according to which the Builder will be bound strictly to regulate himself in laying the foundation . . . being obliged to change the line he has Built on if it be found that he has deviated from that on which the other Houses stand (Unpublished regulations, Albany Museum).

This regulation, which is also to be found in Pietermaritzburg's original erven occupancy regulations, ran contrary to British notions of free standing houses, and was repeatedly violated after the influx of the 1820 settlers into Grahamstown.

An 1823 painting of Grahamstown provides one of the best early views of any South African townscape. The broad High Street running into the triangular open space where the cathedral now stands, the streetline row of buildings, already exhibiting contrasts between the flat-roofed or gabled-and-thatched Dutch buildings, and the hip and pitched-roofed English houses, as well as the long narrow erven given to cultivated fields and orchards, are all clearly shown. A fusion or blending of these two architectural traditions took place in Grahamstown, and this along with the town's dorp site, erven, street plan and church location combined to impart a truly South African character to the townscape. In many ways embryonic Grahamstown served as the prototype for the dorps established by the Retief party in Natal and beyond.

The Dorps of Natalia

In November 1837 the Retief party descended the Drakensberg into what is now Natal. They were followed in 1838 by the Maritz and Uys parties. Retief left the main body of his party in northern Natal while he led an advance party to the Bay of Natal and it is probable⁴ that Retief himself chose the site for the capital dorp, Pietermaritzburg, en route.

Pieter Mauritz Burg

In a January 1838 letter Andries Pretorius, who had just returned to the Cape after a fact-finding tour of Natal, wrote "Vierhondern waëns was op weg na die kañt waar die nuwe stad sou aangelê word — nml. in Natal — wat geleë sal wees aan 'n welgekose vallei, een dagreis van die Baai af"⁵ (Preller, 1937, p. 22). Only the Retief advance party had passed through the chosen area by the date of Pretorius's report, and the spur site chosen for the dorp was very similar to that of Grahamstown.

Piet Greyling, Retief's son-in-law, became the commandant of the laager which was formed on the present site of the dorp by July 1838. In his diary entry for 23rd October 1838 Erasmus Smit, the Voortrekker minister, recorded that the dorp recently laid out by Greyling had been named "Pieter Maritz Burg"⁶ (Schoon, 1972, p. 143). In the following month one Gideon Joubert visited Greyling's laager and noted the existence of a sizeable furrow which was used to irrigate cultivated erven (Jansen, 1938, p. 22). On the 31st March 1839 Pretorius, the Chief Commandant of the Republic of Natalia, informed the British Military Commandant at Port Natal that ". . .300 beautiful erven have already been given out, surveyed and partly planted"⁷ (Bird, Vol. I, 1965, p. 522).

As in the case of Grahamstown it seems likely that the dorp's erven were paced out, because although there is evidence that 450 by 150 Rhineland feet (463,5 by 154,5 English feet) was the Natalia Volksraad's standard erf size,⁸ none of Pietermaritzburg's erven blocks were found to be of those dimensions by the first English survey in 1845. Rather, erven depths ranged from 460 to 479 English feet. Despite these variations in erven sizes the dorp developed in a highly regulated manner.

Article 5 of the Erven Occupance Regulations, which were promulgated in February 1839, decreed that: De Woonhuizen zullen, naar aanwyzing van een daartoe gekwalificeerde persoon, in den front moeten worden gebouwd en in een gelyke linie⁹ (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958,

p. 295). This prescription of near-uniform street vistas can be traced back to Grahamstown and even to Holland, where Burke maintains that the “. . . tenet that the street should be regarded as a single architectural composition . . .” was widely adhered to in the making of Dutch townscapes (Burke, 1956, p. 71).

Although the original plan of Pietermaritzburg has been lost,¹⁰ a perusal of the Natal Volksraad minutes suggests that the plan (*Figure b*) closely resembles the original. The dorp was laid out on a spur of sloping land between the Umsindusi River and one of its tributaries, in such a way that water could be led in furrows from the tributary — soon to be appropriately named the Dorpsruut — down the long streets. Five cross streets demarcated rectangular blocks, each of which was subdivided into ten erven.¹¹

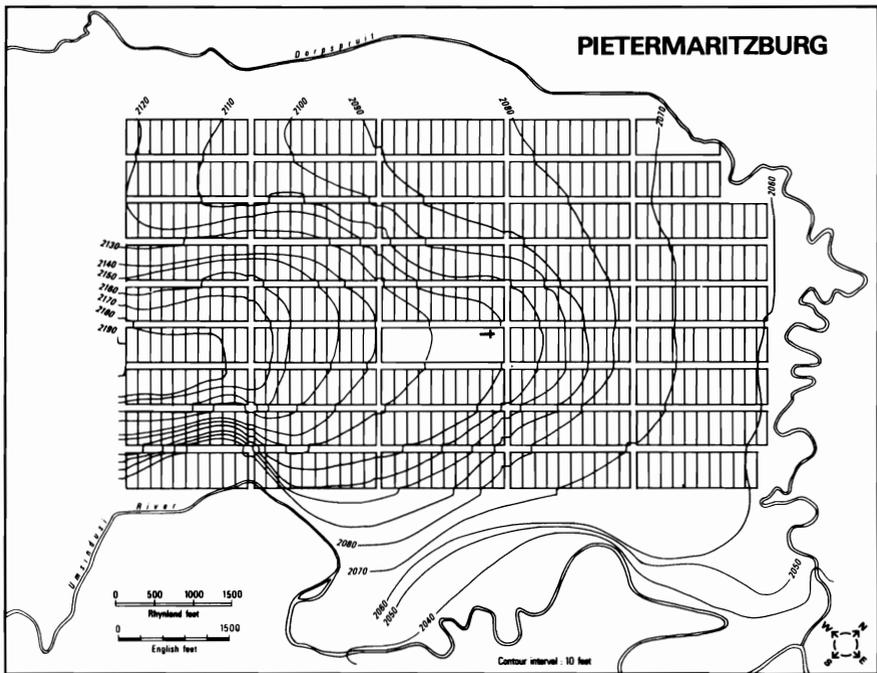


Figure b

Embryonic Pietermaritzburg was a worthy member of the Afrikaner dorp family, and in the 1860s John Shedden Dobie perceptively noted:

a stream of pure water is led in an open ditch or ‘sluit’ down the side of each of the streets which lie parallel with the ridge. . . This is quite a Dutch fashion. The streets are also lined on one side, sometimes on both sides, with trees (Hattersley, 1945, p. 15).

The names of Pietermaritzburg’s long streets included Kerk, Langmarkt, Loop and Berg which recall thoroughfares in Dutch Cape Town, and one can concur with Charles Barter who declared that “. . . the selection of the spot and the original design had been the work of no mean prentices of their craft . . .” (Barter, 1852, p. 22).

One other morphologic feature needs to be noted to complete this review of early Pietermaritzburg's layout and character. This is that the cemetery, as in other historic dorps, but unlike the juxtaposition of church and churchyard in British settler towns and villages, was located on the outskirts of the original dorp.¹²

Thus although Pietermaritzburg is renowned for its Victorian architecture, its setting, street plan, street names, and peripheral cemetery stamp it as a Voortrekker dorp.

Congella and Durban

In the vicinity of the Bay of Natal, the Voortrekkers clustered in three laagers somewhat removed from the small group of British traders at Port Natal. The Congella laager was the only one which progressed to the stage where it could be identified as a fledgeling dorp. By November 1839 the Volksraad was selling erven at Congella and in May 1842, Congella was described as ". . . a small village belonging to the Dutch" (Holden, 1963, p. 109). There are records of the Volksraad granting 450 by 150 feet erven at Congella (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 136), and the British Commissioner, Henry Cloete, produced the sketch plan. The further development of Congella was however stifled by the laying out of the town of Durban on the shores of the Bay and only a few kilometres away from Congella.

G.C. Cato, a British trader at the port, was apparently¹³ instructed by the Volksraad to ". . . lay out a seaport town anywhere from the Umbilo to the mouth of the Umgeni" (Goetzsche, 1966, p. 28). He chose a bayshore site and his plan consisted of beach erven measuring 100 by 500 to 700 English

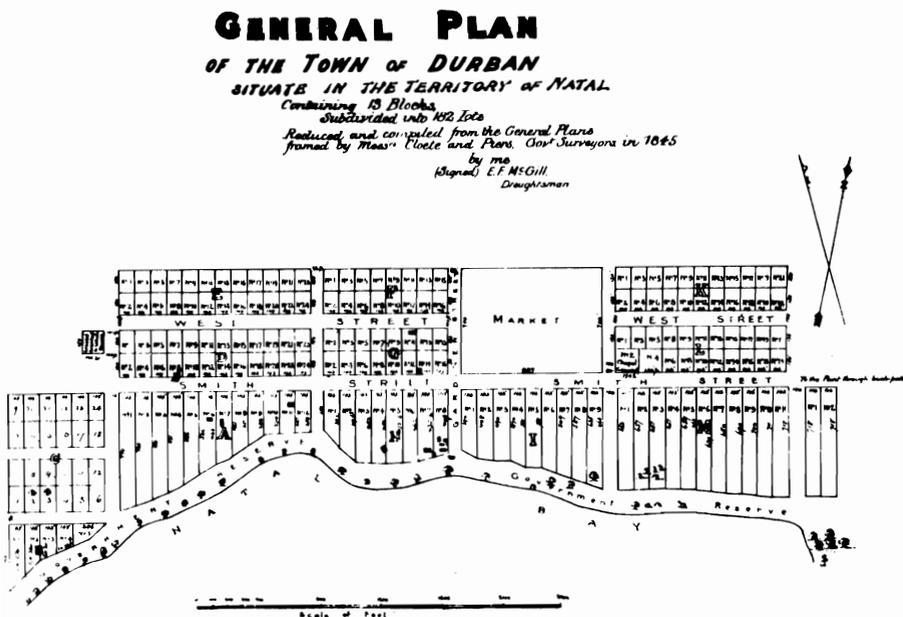


Figure c

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feet, and smaller erven which were supposed to measure 100 by 150 Rhine-land feet, or 103 by 154½ English feet. The first 'English Survey' plan, (Figure c) accepted 103 English feet as the width of an erf but set their length at 150 English feet, with one exception. The lot set aside for the Chapel should have measured 150 English feet square. However the English measure was used along the cross street and the Rhineland measure along Smith Street. The lot thus measured 150 by 154½ English feet (Russell, 1899, pp. 67-69).

Thus early Durban was a blend of Dutch and English townscape preferences, and this example of intercultural borrowing suggests that wherever these two culture groups came into contact in the making of towns, such borrowing produced truly South African places.

Weenen

According to Christopher (1976, p. 109) the dorp of Weenen was laid out alongside the Bushman's River in 1838. Russell selects 1839 as the year in which "a permanent camp or village" (Russell, 1911, p. 172) was formed, while Theal (1892, p. 398) puts the laying out in 1840. The minutes of the Natal Volksraad support Theal's date.

The establishment of a Bushman's River dorp was first proposed at the Volksraad meeting held on 2nd April 1840 (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 40). On the 5th June 1840 the Volksraad

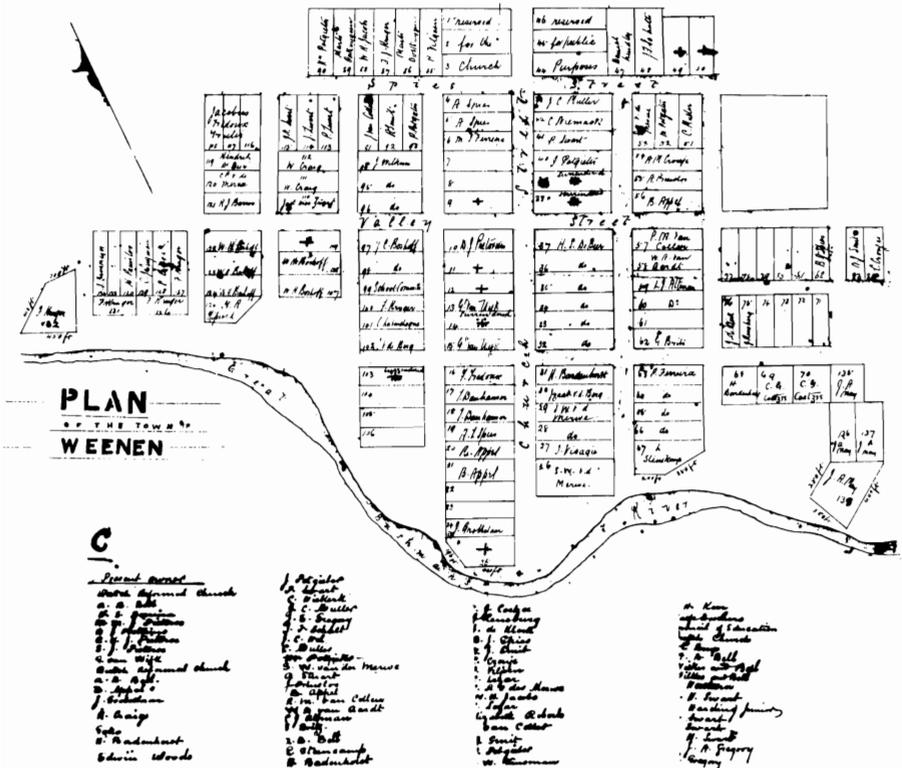


Figure d

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granted a compensation farm to C. Klopper, since his farm was to be used for the dorp, and a commission was appointed to inspect the site and draw up a plan for the 'aanstaande' (intended) dorp (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 45). At the meeting held on 13th August 1840 the dorp was named Weenen by acclamation (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 57). On the 7th April 1841 it was decided to make a further one hundred erven available, under the same regulations as the earlier grants at Weenen (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 87), but these regulations and the Volksraad plan have both been lost.

Commissioner Cloete's 1843 sketch plan (*Figure d*) is the earliest plan of Weenen, and although the floodplain site as well as the reservation of erven for a church at the top of Church Street are reminiscent of Graaff-Reinet, the 450 by 150 English feet erven stamp Weenen as a Retief party dorp.

John Moreland's 1853 sketch of Weenen suggests perhaps a dozen houses and this is corroborated by Mann's 1859 description:

this village consists of fourteen houses, scattered over a broad valley . . . There is an abundant and never-failing supply of water . . . There is a Dutch Reformed Church in the village, and a branch of the magistrate's office is still retained there; but the headquarters are now placed upon the drift of the Great Bushman's River. . . (Mann, 1859, pp. 125-126).

The movement of the magistrate to Estcourt and the Afrikaner trek away from Natal after British annexation, meant that Weenen was largely deserted and little has changed since that exodus. Consequently the dusty streets, the abandoned erven, the old furrows, the handful of early houses and some aged rows of oak, gum and jacaranda trees provide us with a unique glimpse of a voortrekker dorp in the making (*See below*).



Later Voortrekker Dorps

The Voortrekkers who left British-annexed Natal in the 1840s were responsible for the foundation of two more dorps: those from Pietermaritzburg played a leading role in the establishment of Lydenburg in the Transvaal; and those from Weenen founded Utrecht in what is now Northern Natal.

Both Lydenburg and Utrecht were laid out on sites¹⁴ which could be irrigated from a Dorpsrivier or Dorpspruit. Both contained street-to-street erven measuring 450 by 150 Rhineland feet, as well as a central Kerkplein and peripheral cemeteries. Utrecht's four long streets were named Bloem (Flower), Kerk, Voor (Canal) and Hoog (High) and two of the cross-streets were Loop (Walk) and Keerom (Turn around). In addition to these model Afrikaner dorp features Utrecht contained a number of cattle kraals and horse stables — some of which are still standing. Utrecht's 'dorpsgesig' or townscape, was further enriched by the use of sandstone as a building material. Utrecht impressed its first Minister as "een aantal, dicht bij elkander gelegen boerenplaatsen"¹⁵ (Lion Cachet, 1898, p. 356).

Conclusions and Suggestions

The Voortrekker dorps of Natal were worthy members of the Afrikaner dorp family. They were aesthetic as well as functional compositions, clearly reflecting their founders penchant for the rural way of life and orderly layouts. Natal is fortunate to have such a rich Voortrekker dorp legacy — none of the other provinces can boast an extant dorp, such as Weenen, a modified dorp, such as Utrecht, and an almost completely remade dorp in Pietermaritzburg. Natal's Voortrekker legacy is further enhanced by the setting of these dorps amidst an impressive array of 1850 British settler towns, such as Richmond and Estcourt, as well as colonial and mining towns. In short Natal possesses all of the ingredients which went into the making of South Africa's townscapes, but this townscape heritage needs to be enunciated, appreciated, and conserved. Not just for nostalgic reasons, but because as our towns become more and more alike we may yet need a few old towns for seed.

ROBERT F. HASWELL

NOTES

¹ This premise was first enunciated in English by the father of American cultural geography, Carl Sauer in his 1925 classic paper "The Morphology of Landscape", reprinted in Leighly, J. (Ed.) *Land and Life* (1963). Sauer's dictum that "a cultural landscape is fashioned out of a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the nature landscape the medium and the cultural landscape the result" (Leighly, 1963, p. 85), does however have antecedents in European cultural geography e.g. Friedrich Ratzel's "in der Landschaft prägt ein Volk sein Geistiges und seine Schicksale ein, wie in seine Städte and Häuser" Helmolt, H. (Ed.) *Kleine Schriften von Friedrich Ratzel* (1906, p. 128) which can be translated as: a people expresses itself through its landscape just as it does through its towns and houses; or, as De La Blache, the founder of modern French geography put it "at length (a region) becomes, as it were, a medal struck in the likeness of a people" (De La Blache, P.V., *Tableau de la géographie de la France*, 1903, p. 8).

² Thompson's plan (See: G. Thompson: Graaff-Reinet 1823 — Reproduced in Colburn, H. (Ed.) *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1967.) contains an interesting blemish: a scale line in Rhineland Yards — a unit not used in Rhineland measure. If Roods (12 Rhineland feet) are substituted on this scale line then the plan is scale correct. It appears therefore that Thompson was unfamiliar with the Rood and assumed that the abbreviation Rds. for Roods stood for Yds. or Yards.

- ³ Note that as a result of the erven extending from street to street, and because the occupants wanted their houses to face each other, rows of tête-a-tête houses occur only along alternate long streets. Certain streets were therefore only a row of trees, and appropriately named *Boomstraat* (a street of trees), whereas a street lined by houses, and therefore far more conducive to conversations, was a *Loopstraat* (a street to walk down).
- ⁴ The eminent Natal historian Hattersley noted "it is conceivable that the site had been selected by Retief himself" (Hattersley, A.F., *Pietermaritzburg Panorama*, 1938, p. 14), but did not elaborate or substantiate.
- ⁵ "Four hundred wagons were en route to the site where the new town will be laid out in Natal. The town is sited in a well-chosen valley one day's journey from the Bay."
- ⁶ Smit is the source for attributing the dorp's composite name to *Pieter Retief* and *Gerrit Maritz*. However the name used for several years in the minutes of the Volksraad is *Pieter Mauritz Burg* — three words, the first two of which were Retief's christian names. Initially then it appears as if the dorp was, not surprisingly in view of his leading role, named solely after Retief. In October 1843 *Pieter Mauritz Burg* became *Pietermaritzburg* in the Volksraad minutes. J.C. Voight in his *Fifty years of the History of the Republic in South Africa* (1795–1845) Vol. II, (1899) states that the name was changed in order to honour Maritz as well, which seems likely, but there is no reference to this at all in the Volksraad minutes.
- ⁷ *Pietermaritzburg* is thus the oldest Voortrekker dorp as although a settlement had begun to grow in the vicinity of Potchefstroom in 1838, a fully-fledged dorp was not laid out until 1841, and then a new site was used.
- ⁸ The minutes of the Volksraad meeting which laid down erven dimensions for Natal are indexed but missing. However in February 1842 the Volksraad responded favourably to a request for the laying out of a dorp alongside the Elands River, present day Orange Free State, and specified 450 by 150 Rhineland feet erven (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 141).
- ⁹ "Dwelling houses are to be built at the front of an erf and in a single line, as will be pointed out by a qualified person."
- ¹⁰ There is reference in the Volksraad minutes to the sending of the plan of *Pietermaritzburg* to Cape Town for lithographic purposes (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, pp. 210–211).
- ¹¹ The half block of five erven at the western or top end of *Pietermaritzburg* does not appear in *Figure b* as Article 1 of the dorp regulations specify that each original block contained ten erven.
- ¹² I cannot account for the separation of Dutch Reformed Churches from their cemeteries. In both early Cape Town and Stellenbosch coffins were placed in vaults within the wall which enclosed the church ground. In Tulbagh graves are to be found within the churchyard but this was not the case in the Voortrekker dorps. I suspect that the Dutch Reformed practice of not bringing corpses into the church, which must have a theological explanation, facilitated the separation of church and cemetery and this became the norm in South African towns.
- ¹³ The minutes of the Volksraad meetings of the 6th January through to 29th February 1840 have been lost, but the index suggests that developments at the Bay were discussed during these meetings (South African Archival Records, Natal No. 1, 1958, p. 30).
- ¹⁴ Both *Pietermaritzburg* and *Utrecht* were laid-out at the foot of escarpments which suggests that ecological conditions, probably veld types, influenced their general location, and irrigation potential their specific sites.
- ¹⁵ "A number of close neighbouring farms."

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