

The Umsindusi: A “Third Rate Stream”?

It was Charles Barter, chronicler of olden times in Natal, who used the term “third rate stream” to describe the “Little Bushman’s River”¹ (Barter, 1852) on his first approach to Pietermaritzburg from Port Natal. There are no doubt countless numbers of present-day residents of the capital who would leap to the defence of ‘their’ Umsindusi, a river which in no small way adds to the character of the city, yet it is less likely that many would exhibit the degree of enthusiasm for the river shown by the then Governor of Natal, Sir Henry McCallum on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of St. Anne’s College at Hilton in 1903. Referring to the disadvantages of their new location Sir Henry remarked that they “would lose that cheery sight, the beautiful, limpid pellucid river, the Umsindusi”. (Natal Diocesan Magazine, 1903).²

The Governor could scarcely have foreseen the turbid, chocolate-brown appearance of the polluted Umsindusi of today — a river in which water sports were recently temporarily banned because of the threat of cholera.

The Umsindusi continues to play an important role in the lives of city residents, not only as an undoubted scenic asset as it meanders by the heart of the city but more importantly as the source of the domestic water supply to the city. Indeed from its source in the Elandskop district (to the south-west of the city) the Umsindusi flows through increasingly densely populated peri-urban fragments of KwaZulu before it reaches Pietermaritzburg, and serves as water source for both man and beast, while the colour and polluted state of the river bear testimony to the growing pressures on the land flanking the river in those parts.

The purpose of this article, however is to focus attention on the role of the river in the life of Pietermaritzburg in the past, and to speculate on its future role. To this end it is that stretch of the Umsindusi where it flows by the city centre that comes under scrutiny.

Bridging the Umsindusi

The siting of the dorp of Pietermaritzburg by the Voortrekkers on the spur between the Umsindusi and the Dorpspruit required the visitors to the dorp (later city) travelling to and from Port Natal to cross the river in order to reach their destination. Ordinarily this would have posed few problems as there were drifts where the river could be forded. After heavy rains, however, the river could only be safely crossed by bridge and many early attempts to span the river ended in failure, to the embarrassment of city authorities.

The saga of bridging the Umsindusi (or Little Bushman’s River as it was at the time) began while Pietermaritzburg was still under the jurisdiction of

the Volksraad, with Willem Van Aardt's wooden bridge over the river in the vicinity of the present Victoria Bridge. Van Aardt's bridge, however, lasted only until 1844. As Hattersley (1938) recounts, when Martin West and his entourage reached Pietermaritzburg in 1845 they forded the river at the Camp Drift (a crossing south west of the dorp, below Fort Napier, and about three quarters of a kilometre below the confluence of the Umsindusi and the Slangspruit). The track from the Port forked about two kilometres from the river, the western fork leading to the Camp Drift and the other to the lower drift where Van Aardt had attempted to bridge what Barter disparagingly referred to as a third rate stream.

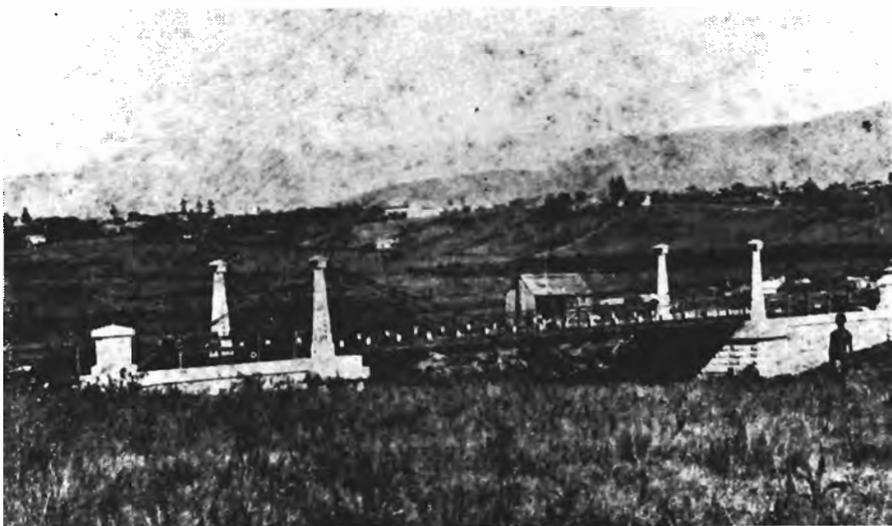
The next bridge of any substance was built as a result of the efforts of the Hon. Henry Cloete, Her Majesty's Commissioner, who opened a public subscription list in 1847 for the erection of a new bridge in line with the present Commercial Road. This construction of wood was named after Hippolyte Jargal, an enthusiastic local merchant who undertook to cover any shortfall in funds (Hattersley, 1951). Jargal's Bridge, though four feet higher than its predecessor, lasted barely eight months before being washed away in April, 1848. The same fate befell the next bridge, this time built from stone and timber on the instructions of the newly inaugurated Board of Municipal Commissioners³, although it lasted seven years before succumbing to the power of the swollen Umsindusi during the floods of April 1856. An eyewitness account of the floods and an interesting consequence of the washing away of the bridge is provided in the letters of a Dr W. Bleek, residing in the city at the time.

"It began raining on the Sunday (April 13th) and it rained almost constantly and heavily on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. No such rain had fallen since 1848. All the rivers were in flood, and the water reached very great heights, washing away nearly all the bridges, including the low bridge built of stone, near Maritzburg, over the Little Bushman's River, leading to the D'Urban main road. The bishop's rubber boat, which was tried for the first time, was used for communication between the two banks, as apart from swimming no-one could reach the other bank save by this boat. It takes six persons and is extremely practical. All the rest of the few existing boats in Natal and the ferries were swept away by the rain."⁴ (Spohr, 1965, p. 38).

It is not surprising, then, that the Council (Pietermaritzburg having achieved borough status in 1854) deliberated at length about the best type of bridge to replace that lost in April 1856 (and replaced by a temporary wooden structure upstream later in that year, anchored in position by two chains, according to Hattersley, 1938). The Minutes of the City Council (Natal Archives) for 1857 reveal that the dilemma of bridging the Umsindusi was the subject of debate on at least thirteen occasions.

The outcome of the debate was the ordering of an iron tension bridge some 100 feet long and 20 feet wide from the Iron Bridge Company of Pall Mall, London, to be delivered to Durban by ship. It is interesting to note that the deliberations over the bridge coincided with the decision to create a park on the southern bank of the Umsindusi, upstream of the site of the proposed bridge.⁵

A measure of the relief felt by the Council at having solved, it believed, an embarrassing problem for the city, was the proclamation of 22nd August



The original Victoria Bridge circa 1863 (looking upstream). Note the lack of trees and other vegetation in the Alexandra Park and the town lots stretching down to the river.

(Photograph: Natal Museum)

1858, the date on which Mayor W. Leathern laid the foundation stone of the first Victoria Bridge, as a school holiday marked by the holding of a “Victoria Fair” (Hattersley, 1938) in the new park.

The relief of the city authorities and travellers alike was to be relatively short-lived, however, as in 1866 the bridge collapsed ignominiously under the vibrations set up by a large herd of oxen driven over it. Undaunted, the authorities used the iron tension rods and masonry pillars two years later to construct a narrow footbridge linking Chapel Street to the park — at a site about 50 metres upstream of the present footbridge, replacing the earlier wooden structure erected by James Napoleon Wheeler⁶ to serve the park (officially opened in 1863).

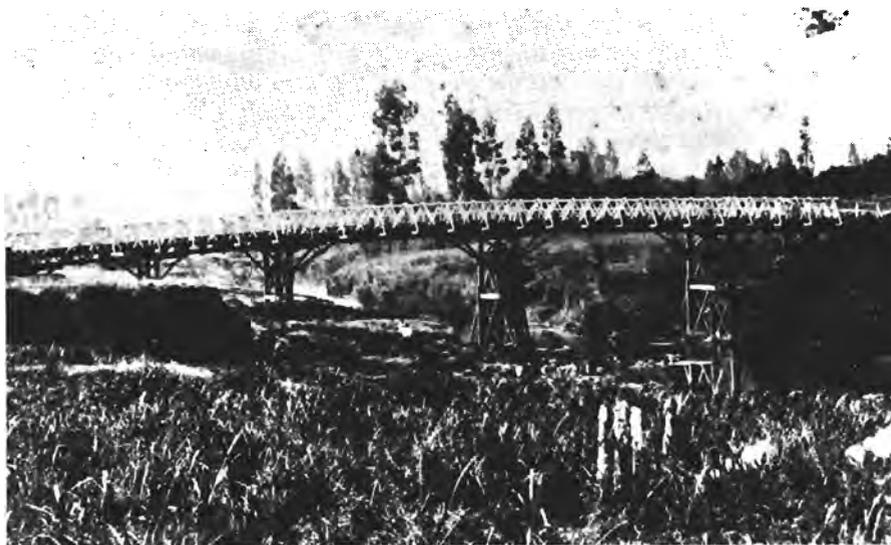
The original Victoria Bridge components were later moved once again (in 1900) to form the basis of the footbridge linking Commercial Road to the Alexandra Park, a well-known landmark. This bridge (recently renovated) was known originally as the Park Suspension Bridge, but since 1963 has been officially named the O’Brien Bridge. The McFarlane Footbridge was erected in 1899 to provide access to the park from Chapel Street.

The loss of the first Victoria Bridge in 1866 was not as serious a blow to the town as previous bridge collapses because in 1860 Scott’s Bridge (an elaborate yellow-wood construction) had been erected by a Mr Hodgson (Meineke, 1980) at McKenzie’s Drift at the foot of West Street. The Umsindusi was soon to re-assert itself, however, and in 1868 Scott’s Bridge was washed away! Until the second Scott’s Bridge and Victoria Bridge had been built and the river conquered at last, traffic into and out of Pietermaritzburg had to rely on the Camp Drift or Wheeler’s rickety, temporary wooden bridge built a short way upstream of the present Victoria Bridge.



The McFarlane Bridge and the Umsindusi, then and now *circa* 1906 and 1982.
(Photographs: Natal Museum and T. Wills)





Scott's Bridge, Umsindusi.

(Photograph: Natal Museum)

Though today's Umsindusi bridges seem capable of withstanding the river during its worst flooding, the river continues to exert an influence on traffic flows. A glance at a map of Pietermaritzburg's growing suburbs south of the Umsindusi will reveal how the road system is constrained by the limited number of bridges across the river, linking commuters to the commercial districts of the city.

The Umsindusi and Recreation

Notwithstanding Barter's disparaging remarks, and the undoubted problems the Umsindusi posed for the city fathers and travellers alike, the river and its (later) shady banks were an invaluable asset as far as recreation in the colonial capital was concerned.

The river was for many years the unofficial, tacitly accepted public swimming bath. Buchanan in her *Pioneer Days in Natal* (1934, p. 66) recalls how the boys of the town would hurry down from school to the river, disrobing as they went ("Their lack of raiment did not give offence, for there was no one to see them"). She adds that there was a favourite swimming pool below the Victoria Bridge near Scott's Mill (roughly opposite the present day Woodburn Rugby Stadium) while the stretch of river from the hospital grounds to the "big island"⁷ gave the opportunity for a good long swim.

A vivid account of the enjoyment provided by the Umsindusi is contained in the following extract from the unpublished memoirs of Robert James Mason:

"... once a year a gala was held on the Umsindusi River. You would be surprised at the sport we had there. A raft was fixed up in the river from which the competitors dived. There were the usual short distance races but we had one long race starting at the Alexandra Bridge,⁸ quite

a mile away, which was a very hard race on account of shallows & rapids. Then there was the greasy pole with a Yorkshire Ham as prize; a greasy pig was put into the river and the man who caught it had it as a prize. Another item of great fun was when half a dozen ducks were put into the river and had to be caught. The ducks entered into the spirit of the game right away and immediately a man put out his hand to grab one it dived and bobbed up a dozen yards away. I entered once for the fancy dress race as a Salvation Army lassie with a ribbon "Happy Eliza" around my poke bonnet. For this race we were lined up on the raft, but on the pistol shot to start I found that owing to my costume I could not dive but had to jump in; my skirts floated on the water and my body went down. I struck out for the winning post but before I reached it my clothes were dragging me down and I was very thankful to reach the other side. Although I did not gain a place I received a special prize for the best costume. The final and best event of the day was a horse race. The conditions were: the horses had to be mounted on taking off from the one bank, but on entering the water the rider had to dismount, and, holding the saddle with his right hand, had to keep the horse's head out of the water with his left. The race was a bit risky on account of some of the horses pawing badly with their front legs. The horses had to be mounted on emerging."

J.D. Holliday in his "*Dottings on Natal*" (1890 p. 22) commented:

"The Little Bushman's River affords capital bathing, in which all who can, swim, and those who can't endeavour to learn. This highly useful, healthy, and necessary colonial exercise, was so far encouraged by the Town Council, that they one evening opened their hearts to determine on the erection of a bathing-house; but the wind shifted a day or two afterwards, and instead of a bathing-house, a policeman was put on duty, to keep people from bathing at all, and to walk off with any bogtrotter's togery who happened to infringe these anti-hydropathic regulations."

The anti-hydropathic regulations he referred to came about, it would appear, because of the increasing popularity of the Alexandra Park and the consequently increased traffic over the Umsindusi bridges, which led to a spate of complaints to the Council about the presence of naked bathers! At a Pietermaritzburg City Council meeting on the 14th January, 1863 (Natal Archives) it was decided to instruct the police to bar swimmers from the river on Sundays (when the Park was particularly busy) — the previous understanding having been that bathers would desist from swimming within one hundred yards of any of the bridges. It was the same J.D. Holliday (above) who was responsible for the construction of Pietermaritzburg's first 'open air' swimming bath, near the Umsindusi and "just above Chapel St" (Buchanan, 1941). The bath, Buchanan recounts, was not a success despite the fact that bathing had been banned in the Umsindusi at the time of its construction.⁹ The present Alexandra Open Air Swimming Bath has enjoyed a far greater measure of success, positioned on the site of the Umsindusi bathing house.

To an evergrowing band of canoeing enthusiasts Pietermaritzburg and Alexandra Park in particular have become synonymous with the "Dusi", a muscle-pulling, bone-jarring canoe-cum-footrace between Pietermaritzburg

and Durban; a battle against river, hilly terrain, heat and sadly increasing pollution and risks of infection.¹⁰ Every year thousands of spectators line the river and bridges to watch hundreds of competitors jockey for position in the narrow course from the start (these days situated below the O'Brien Bridge, near the old "big island" referred to earlier). During the rest of the year, however, apart from a dedicated band of "Dusi" enthusiasts, boating is rarely seen on the river as it passes through the city. Indeed it is hard to imagine boating being possible below the Victoria Bridge weir.

At the turn of the century, however, and up to the 1930s boating on the river was a much touted attraction of the city. The *Natal Illustrated Guide* (for 1917/18) for example proclaimed: "To those interested in boating the river offers many opportunities . . . a boating stretch some three miles in length affords infinite opportunities for recreation and pleasure". The guide continues enthusiastically: "What the river lacks in majesty is made up by its charm. Here Nature runs riot, and the placid surface of the stream reflects the prolific growth of vegetation lining its banks. Every bend opens up an enchanting vista, while some of the reaches are Gems of Nature's Handiwork".

The guide concluded by noting that a "rustic tea-garden" had been opened for the boating enthusiasts. An undated 'boating map'¹¹ of the Umsindusi shows the tea-garden situated just below the confluence of the

Boating on the 'Dusi in bygone days.

(Photograph: Natal Society Library)





The Umsindusi as it flows through Alexandra Park; a familiar sight to residents and visitors alike. The former course of the river when a “big island” existed at this point can be seen on the opposite bank.

(Photograph: T. Wills)

river and the Dorpspruit, and linked to the town centre by a footbridge over the latter stream. The necessary depth of water for boating was provided in all but the driest seasons by the “Wigganthonpe Weir” (later “Musson’s Weir” — demolished in 1967) and efforts on the part of Boating Club members to keep the river clear (for which they were commended by Borough Engineer J.J. Niven in his report to the Council in 1912).

The ‘boating map’ shows the three mile course referred to in the *Natal Illustrated Guide*, marked at quarter mile intervals as the river meandered between Victoria Bridge and Wigganthonpe Weir. The names of the various bends and reaches on the river no doubt reflect much of the unwritten history of Pietermaritzburg at the time. What was the origin of the name “Party corner” (where the Merchiston Boys’ School playing fields are today)? “Horsehoe Bend”, “Gum Tree Bend”, “Scott’s Reach” and “Mason’s Reach” have all disappeared, victims of the seemingly inevitable malaise of ‘urban’ rivers — canalisation. The river now runs straight down a man-made uniformly sculpted channel, where once “Gems of Nature’s Handiwork” were there to behold.¹²

Undated Boating Map of the Umsindusi between Victoria Bridge and Wigganthonpe Mill.

(Natal Archives)

The Umsindusi as a source of power and water

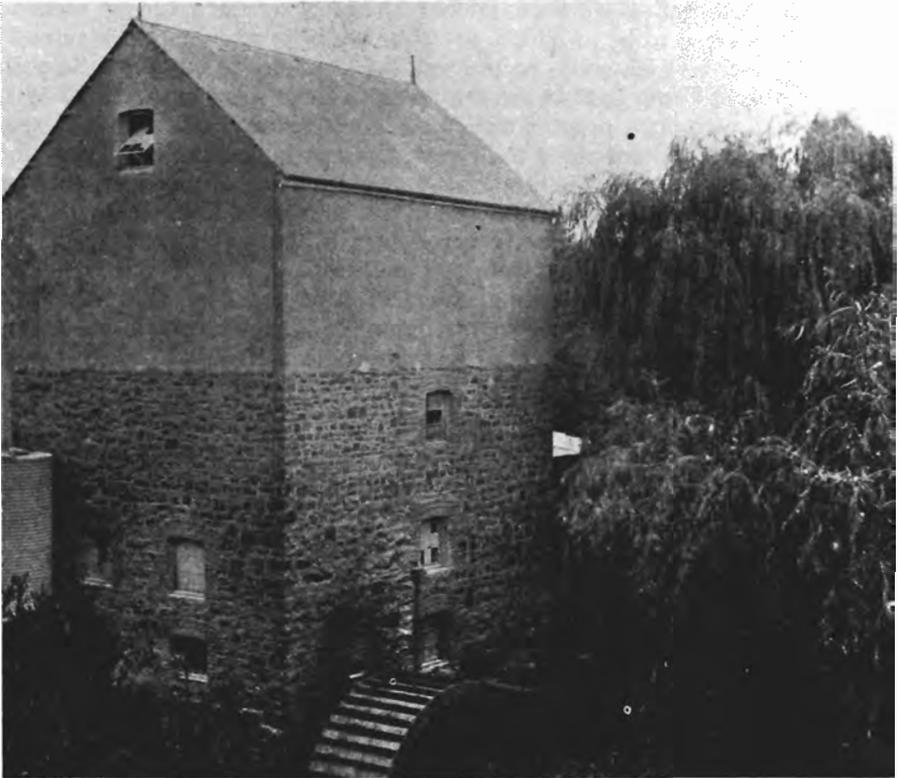
Future generations of citizens of Pietermaritzburg may wonder about the origins of the name ‘Mason’s Mill’, now applied generally to the industrial zone between the city centre and Imbali township. To many present residents of the city, however, the remains of the Mason’s Mill alongside the Umsindusi were a familiar sight when travelling between the city and Edendale, until road re-alignments obliterated this valuable relic of the time when a number of water-powered mills were kept busy processing the products of settler agriculture.

In order to ensure the grinding of maize at a fixed rate for all burghers, the Volksraad (Hattersley, 1938) made C. Visagie and one Tobias Smuts grants of land for the purpose of erecting mills. While Visagie’s land was within the dorp (on a site adjoining what were to become the grounds of Government House) and was thus powered by water drawn from the “sluite” or furrows lining the long streets in the dorp, Smuts’s land lay on the northern banks of the Umsindusi below the confluence of the river and the Dorpspruit. Smuts’s mill was acquired by J. Vanderplank soon after the British occupation of Natal and named by him “Milton” (according to Hattersley, 1938). The mill was also known as ‘Compton’s Mill’ or ‘Vanderplank’s Mill’.

In the late 1850s the majority of the commercial milling was done at the mill erected by Paul Anstie in 1854 and named the ‘Belvidere Mill’. This mill was located on the northern bank of the Umsindusi about three quarters of a kilometre downstream of the Victoria Bridge weir, from which point a millrace led water to the Belvidere (the millrace is clearly visible on the ‘boating map’ — the mill being situated where a tannery is shown on the map). That milling was not an occupation without commercial risks was confirmed by the closure of the Belvidere after barely two years, preceded by the disappearance of Anstie, who it is claimed, sailed from Cape Town “quite indifferent to whether the boat went to Mauritius or India or elsewhere” (Hattersley, 1940 p. 21). Anstie’s mill was subsequently known as Scott’s mill.

The provision of a domestic water supply would seem to be an obvious role for a river such as the Umsindusi to play, and indeed Henley Dam (situated about 18 km upstream) provides Pietermaritzburg with water, and the river and its tributaries, of course, serve many thousands of people living along their banks in the Zwartkops Location and Edendale areas. Until the permanent tapping of the Umsindusi at Henley, initiated at the turn of the century, the river played a minor role as far as water supply was concerned. The original source of water supply to the dorp as a whole was the Dorpspruit. A furrow led from this stream to the head of the Voortrekkers’ grid layout of ‘erven’ (plots) and streets, supplying water to ‘sluite’ lining the dorp’s long streets (eg. Church St., Longmarket St., Loop St., and so on) which in turn provided water for domestic use, for irrigating erven and even for driving water wheels at mills such as Visagie’s and Wilson’s (situated at the corner of Chapel St. and Loop St).¹³

In colonial times the fierce controversy over the benefits and shortcomings of the open furrow system and the, at times, erratic supply of water from the Dorpspruit, led to the introduction of a piped water system. The first ‘waterworks’ in the city were not situated on the Umsindusi, however, but



Mason's Mill, Umsindusi.

(From J.D. Keith Photograph album. University of Natal Library. Pmb.)

on the Dorpspruit in the Zwartkops Valley, and both the Town Bush and Chase Valley streams were tapped before the Umsindusi. This is not to say that private attempts were not made to use the waters of the Umsindusi. For example, in 1862 the Council was presented with a plan to lead water from the river at Plessislaer via furrows to the Alexandra Park vicinity, while by 1884 a group of enterprising residents calling themselves the Richmond Road Water Supply Company had won from the Council the right to draw water from the Umsindusi at Scott's Bridge for their properties along the present day College Road (Meineke and Summers, undated).

The Umsindusi and the future

Far from being a "third-rate steam" the Umsindusi has played an important part in the past development of the city and will continue to do so in the future, although growing demands upon the river's water make it unlikely that any observer in the near future will echo the words of Governor McCallum and praise the "pellucid" waters of the Umsindusi.

In conclusion, it is suggested that much more could be done to integrate the Umsindusi and its banks into Pietermaritzburg's park system. Despite

inevitable canalisation of even greater stretches of the river, if security against flooding is to be provided, the river banks provide a “green thread” through the city which could be utilized, for example, to build a cycle path stretching from Camp Drift in the southwest to Echo Road in the north-east. Such a path with appropriate connections, could provide safe and attractive access to schools dotted along the river’s flood plain and the city centre for cyclists and pedestrians. There are attractive stretches of the river, such as that immediately above the confluence of the Umsindusi and the Dorpspruit which are currently not readily accessible to the public and could be developed into “linear parks” with foot-paths and/or a cycle path system.¹⁴

Pietermaritzburg is a growing city and it is essential that whatever opportunities there are to improve the quality of life are grasped, and in this case the Umsindusi could once again become a focus of recreational activities in the city.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The invaluable assistance in gathering information on Pietermaritzburg’s Umsindusi bridges provided by Mr G. Summers (City Engineer’s Department) is gratefully acknowledged.

NOTES

- ¹ The spelling of ‘Umsindusi’ used in this article is widely used, although there are many variations. T.J.R. Botha (*Watername in Natal*, Naamkundereeks No. 8, HSRC, Pretoria, 1977) favours Msunduze for the seven rivers of the same name in Natal. H.C. Lugg (*Zulu Place Names in Natal* reprinted by “Daily News” Durban, 1968) gives emSumduze as the correct spelling for the river and the “one who pushes away” as the meaning. Yet another spelling (and meaning) is provided by the Rev. C. Pettman (*S.A. Place Names Past and Present*, Queenstown, 1931); i Sundusi (after the Zulu name for the plant *Phoenix reclinata*). What has not been established is when ‘Umsindusi’ replaced “Little Bushman’s River” as the generally acknowledged name for the river; certainly both terms were used well into the 1870s.
- ² In fairness to Barter the river would have looked less than impressive, particularly in winter, without the trees lining its banks planted during the 1860s, and without the weirs to dam it.
- ³ A painting of this bridge by John Sanderson is housed in the Local History Museum, Durban. The painting also provides an excellent view of the dorp/town beyond.
- ⁴ The rubber punt referred to belonged to Bishop Colenso (Gordon, 1982) and was apparently used by postmaster Mr Tatham, to transfer mail bags (stranded at Uys Doorns by flooding) across the river (Hattersley, 1938).
- ⁵ The decision to create Alexandra Park was taken by the Council on 21st September 1857.
- ⁶ James Napoleon Wheeler, a man of many talents, was appointed Assistant Town Clerk in 1859 and subsequently held a variety of other posts as well, e.g. Inspector of Public Works and Inspector of Meat.
- ⁷ The “big island” was located about one hundred metres below the present O’Brien Bridge, to the south of Kershaw Park. The river no longer bifurcates at that point although traces of the former course can still be detected.
- ⁸ Scott’s Bridge at the foot of West St. was at times known as Alexandra Bridge. e.g. on the 1906 Seccondanari Map of Pietermaritzburg (Natal Museum).
- ⁹ A photograph of this first pool is contained in J. and A. Verbeek *Victorian and Edwardian Natal*, Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1982.
- ¹⁰ The origins of this race, and descriptions of the Umsindusi en route are recounted by I. Player in *Men, Rivers and Canoes*, Simondium Pub., Cape Town, 1964.
- ¹¹ The “boating map” is undated and its origins are, to the writer’s knowledge, unknown. Strangely it does not show the clubhouse of the Pietermaritzburg Boating Club at the Umsindusi end of Retief St.
- ¹² The canalisation of the river has had the very beneficial side effect of creating areas of flat land over the former course of the river.
- ¹³ For further information on the Voortrekker dorps of Natal see Haswell, R.F. “The Voortrekker Dorps of Natal”, *Natalia* 10, 1980, pp. 23—33.

¹⁴ This article was completed while the writer was temporarily resident in Ottawa, Canada; a city where planning authorities have made the Rideau River and its compliment, the Rideau canal the focus of a magnificent system of parks and recreational “bikeways” — utilizing at times only a servitude of about thirty metres wide along the river and/or canal.

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