

Lieutenant Joseph Nourse

Early Natal Pioneer and Port Captain*

On a busy corner opposite Pietermaritzburg's City Hall stands an old iron cannon, its muzzle pointing defiantly skywards. A brass plate states:—

This gun was cast in Woolwich in 1812 and brought to Natal in 1842 by *H.M.S. Fawn* (Lieutenant Joseph Nourse) which accompanied *H.M.S. Southampton* conveying troops under Colonel Cloete for the relief of the British Forces at the Point under Command of Captain Smith, then besieged by the Boers. It was afterwards removed from the Point to Fort Napier and transferred to this position in 1901.

Who was this Lieutenant Joseph Nourse and how did he come to be in Port Natal in 1842?

Joseph was born in London in 1810 and was the third son of Henry Nourse, an influential London merchant who, as early as 1806, had established a trading house in Cape Town, and later promoted the 1820 Settler Scheme by addressing a Committee of the House of Commons in June 1819.

At the tender age of fourteen, Joseph entered the British Navy as a Volunteer First Class, a title given to young gentlemen on their way to becoming commissioned officers. He was privileged to begin his career in the *Victory* at Portsmouth. After a year in Nelson's famous ship he was fortunate to be sent to Simonstown in 1825, for by that time his parents resided in Cape Town so that young Joseph was able to see something of them.

One of the many ships in which he served was the *H.M.S. Helicon*. It was while Joseph was in this ship that he first visited Port Natal in 1826 where the first tiny trading settlement of Englishmen had been established in 1824. News had reached Cape Town that the brig *Mary*, commanded by Lieut. King, who had sailed to Port Natal in search of his friend Lieut. Farewell, had foundered on the treacherous sand-bar in 1825. The *Helicon* was sent to investigate.

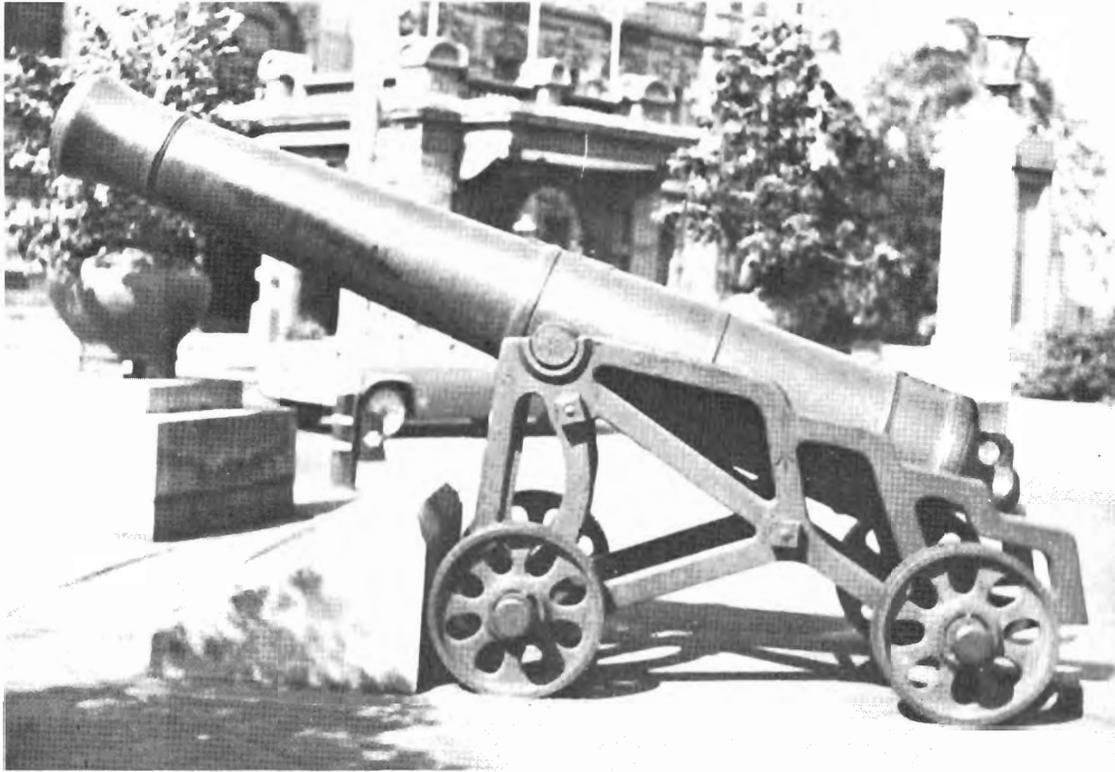
Joseph, then sixteen years old, tells us:—

I first visited Natal in 1826 as a Middy in the *H.M.S. Helicon*, a ten gun brig. News had been received of the wreck of the brig *Mary* so the *Helicon* was sent to see if she could render any assistance. On arrival I accompanied the First Lieut. in a boat to endeavour to communicate with the shore at the back of the Bluff, but our orders were that we were not to attempt to cross the bar, which, even in those days had a bad reputation. We got on the bar before we knew anything about it and were hurled over on the Bluff side — no one was drowned. It came on to blow in the evening and for eight days we were detained on shore as we could not venture to cross the bar. We found the crew of the *Mary* some distance up the Bluff Channel. They were engaged in building out of the timber of the wreck with green wood, the schooner in which they afterwards returned to Port Elizabeth.

*This article is written by a great-granddaughter of Joseph Nourse.



Joseph Nourse in the autumn of his adventurous life.



The 12 pounder gun, transferred from *H.M.S. Southampton* to *H.M.S. Fawn*, now stands on the corner of Church Street and Commercial Road, Pietermaritzburg. Known for years as the 'One o'clock gun', it was fired daily from Fort Napier except Sundays. This gun also announced the good news upon the arrival of the English mail from Durban.

When the gales abated they were able to rejoin the *Helicon* with which they had been able to communicate by signal once or twice whilst ashore.

Most of Joseph's early years in the British Navy and while he was on the Cape station were spent putting down the nefarious slave traffic along the East coast of Africa, at that time at its height. About 1840, Joseph was with an expedition sent to punish the Arabs of Mombasa who were the worst offenders. Their forts were shelled and a ship, laden with slaves, was captured. She was flat-bottomed and a larger vessel than usual, and was sent to Simonstown to be refitted as a gun-boat. She was named the *Fawn* and on 9th February, 1842, Joseph took command of her.

Because of the *Fawn's* flat bottom, she was able to pursue the Arab slavers up the rivers where the naval ships were unable to follow owing to the sand-bars which protected the river mouths. At least four slave ships were captured by the *Fawn* and their pitiful human merchandise, manacled together in pairs, was liberated.

In May 1842 the British garrison commanded by Captain Smith was besieged by the Boers in their encampment in Port Natal. Thanks to Dick King who rode 600 miles to Grahamstown to get reinforcements, the beleaguered British were saved.

An uneasy peace followed. Major Smith requested the Governor of the Cape, Sir George Napier, for the services of a gunboat. On 15th October, 1842, the *Fawn* arrived commanded by Lieut. Joseph Nourse. Being flat-bottomed she was able to sail across the perilous bar and into the Bay, 'a circumstance I rejoice at, the outer bay being an insecure and exposed roadstead', wrote Major Smith. 'She came into the Harbour and by exercising her guns, duly impressed interested parties that all hope of retaking the Bluff or Block House or of recovering Congella, was at an end'.

This second visit to Port Natal was a far more auspicious occasion for Nourse than the first! Later he wrote:—

I was in command of the ship *H.M.S. Fawn* — a brigatine which had been an old slaver. My ship came into harbour and remained in the Bay. The Headquarters of the English troops were encamped in the Durban Vlei. I was sent to Natal with the object of rendering what assistance I could. The only houses in Durban in those days were of wattle and daub. Those I remember belonged to George and Joseph Cato, the Rev. Archbell, Beningfield and a French naturalist, Delegorgue.

The *Fawn* remained at Port Natal for 22 months during which time Joseph was Port Captain. If ships anchored in the roadsteads, either Joseph or his second-in-command, Lieut. Lowe, a man as courageous, conscientious and resourceful as himself, crossed the Bar and boarded them, bringing ashore the long awaited mail and occasionally passengers. If ships needed to enter the harbour the *Fawn* was there to guide them over the difficult entrance. Between them, Joseph Nourse and Lieut. Lowe saved the lives of 36 people from drowning. Joseph himself was saved five times from a watery grave by Lieut. Lowe:—

During my stay I made a survey of the Bar and Harbour doing as best I could with the small boat at my disposal. I was five times upset on the Bar so have a lively recollection of it.

He made the first Admiralty Survey of Durban's Bay and the original is with the British Navy Hydrographic Department.

Crossing the Bar one day, the *Fawn* broke her back. She was not worth repairing so she was dismantled and ultimately broken up.

In the first newspaper in Natal, *De Natalier*, dated June 21st 1844 appeared the following:—

We regret to say that the Officers and Crew belonging to Her Majesty's Brig *Fawn* are going to leave this place for the Cape. The departure from Natal of such men as Lieutenant Nourse and his gallant Friend, Mr. Lowe, will be felt by everyone here but more especially by the Mercantile part of the community for these Gentlemen have always been ready and willing to render assistance to Ships and Boats crossing our dangerous Bar. We therefore consider the removal of such experienced and generous Officers as those of the *Fawn*, as a great loss and a cause of deep regret. We have heard and we sincerely wish that the report may be true, that the respectable inhabitants of the Bay intend to give a Public Dinner or some sort of entertainment to the Officers of the *Fawn* as a token of their gratitude. We think at all events that our Friends of Natal cannot do less, and they have our most hearty thanks for the intention. Should that dinner actually take place, Pietermaritzburg EXPECTS THAT IN spite of the Canting Preachers of Temperance, EVERYONE on that occasion WILL DO HIS DUTY.

The dinner did take place and no doubt everyone present did his duty nobly!

Joseph retired from the Navy in 1847 and took up farming near Adelaide in the Eastern Cape. There he met and married Anne Mary Norton, a widow with four sons. But his adventurous life was by no means over. After a severe drought in 1858 and continual harassment by marauding Kaffirs, Joseph began to think nostalgically of the lush, green pastures of Natal and decided to make the last great voyage of his life — this time by ox-wagon.

In May 1859 the family set out in three tent wagons, crossing the Orange River by punt, travelling through the Orange Free State, down the formidable Van Reenen's Pass into Natal. Joseph bought land near Greytown and named his farm *Greenwich*.

He spent his latter days in Pietermaritzburg where he lived to the ripe age of 95. He was affectionately known as 'the father of the Navy'. His sons became prominent men, the most outstanding being Henry Nourse, the mining magnate, a pioneer of Johannesburg and founder of the Nourse Mines.

After the break up of the *Fawn*, the 12 pounder gun stood for a time on duty at Durban's Point but was later transferred to Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg. Known as the 'One o'clock gun', it was fired daily except on Sundays. When the English mail arrived by native runners from Durban, it was fired to announce to the citizens of Pietermaritzburg the glad news, whereupon they hurried to the old Law Courts where the Post Office then was, to collect their letters and packages.

During the troubled times of the Zulu War in 1879 the gun was brought out to defend the city.

It has boomed across Durban's harbour and many thousands of times over the early town of Pietermaritzburg. Since 1901 its muzzle has been silent and it now keeps a lonely vigil as an historical monument.

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