

The pioneer Natal settler house

Our chief source of knowledge of the 19th century house in Natal must undoubtedly be the writings of Brian Kearney,¹ although others, like Marilyn Martin,² have touched upon certain aspects of its history. As it stands, though, it still lacks the definitive, comprehensive study which I believe is its due.

The main motivation for this article, in addition to making a modest contribution towards the above-mentioned study, is the realization that little seems to have been published on the early history of the Natal house; nothing comparable, for example, to the relevant chapters in Ronald Lewcock's well-known work on the early settler houses of the Eastern Cape.³ This lack was forcibly drawn to my attention recently when, in the process of supervising a dissertation on the domestic work of William Street-Wilson,⁴ it became very difficult to establish accurately what the possible local colonial antecedents of his work were prior to his arrival in Durban from England in 1887.

The focus of this study, then, will be the period 1850 to 1880, that is the first thirty years after the beginning of large-scale white immigration into the new colony. It will study both product, in this case distinct house types, and process, the evolution of these house forms. Emphasis will be on the typical rather than the unique, on the vernacular rather than the architect-designed building, although there was in any case probably very little of this during the period being dealt with.⁵ The underlying hypothesis will be that at any given period the great majority of popular housing of a particular region can be reduced to relatively few common types.

Before proceeding to the typology, a couple of generalizations. Firstly, with regard to the palette of materials available, it should be noted that this was probably greater than is generally realized. Very early buildings, prior to 1860, in the towns were in wattle and daub or sod, or inland, even shale⁶ and there are also a couple of references to felt-covered houses. Sun-dried brick was seen as a step up the ladder at the top of which was proper burnt brick or dressed stone, depending on the area.⁷ A great number of houses in Durban, and possibly elsewhere, were wood framed and wood clad, until 1872 when this method of building were forbidden by the by-laws.⁸ Prefabricated iron houses were imported from about 1850 but despite the attention they have received⁹ seem to have been a small minority. Locally-made wood and iron houses can be traced back to at least 1861 in Durban.¹⁰

The second point pertains to the detached kitchen, or 'cookhouse' as it was often called, i.e. a small structure separate from the dwelling itself. This was almost universal during the period being studied and, it seems, dates from the earliest years of settlement. George Russell mentions it in early Durban¹¹ and many other contemporary accounts confirm its use.¹² The 'kitchen' could be of the slightest form and construction but again, like the dwelling itself, there is evidence of a process of upgrading during the pioneer phase until it matched the house in form and structure (see cover picture). Obviously this type of kitchen was not confined to any particular house configuration nor was it found only in the rural situation, although there is some evidence that it had become 'semi-detached' in Durban by about 1880.¹³ This probably holds true for Pietermaritzburg as well.

Note should also be taken of the typical pioneering process. On the settlers' arrival on the usual piece of virgin land, a tent was pitched, although some lived in wagons or even, in one case, under an awning slung from four poles.¹⁴ A grass hut or two erected by the local indigenous population, suitably modified, was the next stage.¹⁵ These could remain in use for as much as a couple of years and be succeeded by a wattle and daub or unburnt brick house.¹⁶ The final product (for this period) would be a larger brick or stone house with wooden floors, ceilings, etc. That this process was typical has, however, been questioned by at least one authority on the parallel Australian pioneering experience.¹⁷

Probably the most prevalent early house type was that with the three-room core.¹⁸ This consisted of three rooms in a line of uniform width, 12ft to 14ft (3.6 to 4.2 metres) being the norm, while it could be as narrow as 10ft (3 metres) or as wide as 18ft (5.4 metres). The roof superstructure was the determining factor here, consisting of closely spaced (600mm) coupled rafters, these being the simplest elements capable of spanning the space. The roof was steep (45°), double-pitched and on the coast at least, almost always hipped. Simplicity was also the hallmark of the plan, with a central, slightly larger, living room flanked by two bedrooms. Outside entrance was into the central room and thence into the bedrooms. A fireplace could quite easily be placed on the centre-line of the main room, though this was generally for heating not cooking. Associated with this type was a verandah, usually about 2 metres wide, running round the house. Climatic and constructional reasons have been advanced for this, the need to both shade and shelter the generally fragile walls coalescing. The roofs of both the verandah and house were of thatch.

Although not quite the minimal dwelling, the popularity and longevity (it lasted well into the 1880s) of the three-room house lay in its ability to expand its accommodation very simply and therefore very cheaply. This was done by enclosing parts of the verandah to form extra rooms, albeit small ones. This could, of course, be done at the outset or later as the need arose. Nevertheless a certain pattern can be discerned. The first stage was the enclosure of the two ends of the front verandah to form small rooms which were usually entered from this space. Two similar rooms could also be added on to the back and, depending on the width of the house, either be joined or have a small residual piece of the verandah between them. One of the earliest examples of the former seems to have been in existence in Durban by 1845

(Fig. 1). Even this residual verandah space could be enclosed, thus producing a total of six rooms. A nine-room house would have been considered a fairly substantial dwelling in early Natal.



Fig. 1: Sketch of Cloete's Cottage, Durban, c. 1845.
Artist unknown (L.H.M. Durban)

Another known variant was to enclose the end verandah spaces, thus producing five rooms in a line.¹⁹ There are numerous references to this house type in contemporary newspaper advertisements. In the revised edition of 1873, Dr. Mann's *The Emigrant's Guide to the Colony of Natal*, makes specific reference to the verandah room house²⁰ and in describing two such model houses (Figs 2A, 2B) in great detail, including their materials and cost, implies that these should be the norm towards which new immigrants should aspire. The houses built by the Natal Land and Colonization Co. at their new coffee works at the Umgeni Village in Durban in late 1871 would seem to provide further proof that the three-room house was widespread. In looking at

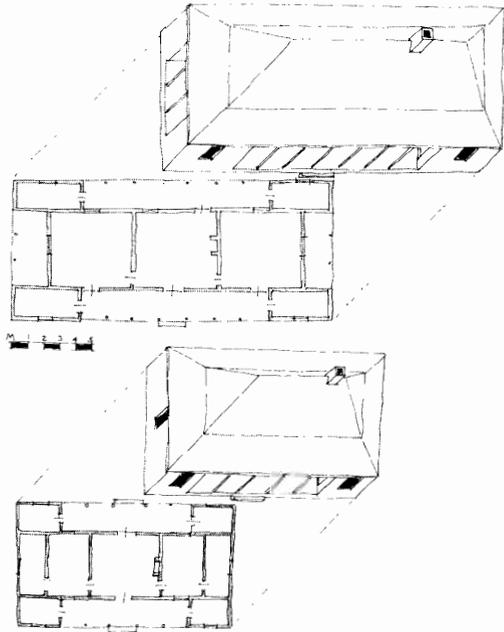


Fig.2: Axonometric projections and plans of model dwellings from Dr Mann's 'The Emigrants guide to the Colony of Natal' (The author)

the original plans²¹ it is obvious that a hierarchy is present which ranged from the simple three-room house of the engineer (Fig.3A) with its internal kitchen, through the labourer's house (Fig.3B) with the kitchen and pantry attached as a wing to the back verandah, up to the manager's house (Fig.3C) which not only had a larger 'core' and a complete suite of verandah rooms but also a kitchen wing. This latter almost certainly represents a good middle-class house of the period. All the houses had corrugated iron roofs and facebrick walls, the Umgeni Brickfields being just a few hundred metres away. These buildings were probably designed by the surveyor, Edmund Tatham²², who signed the drawings. Nevertheless their vernacular roots are plainly visible.

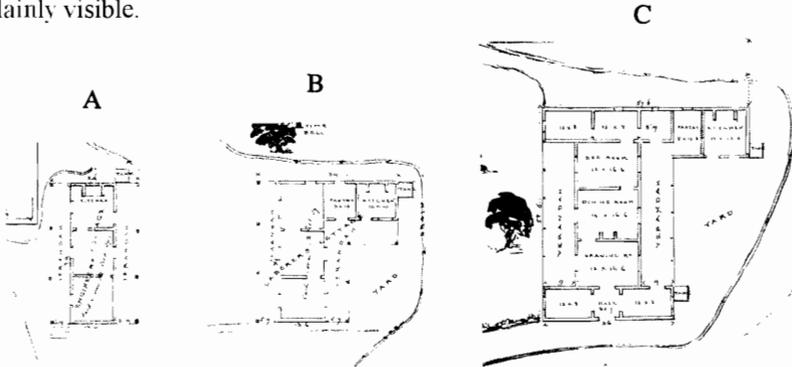


Fig.3: A: Plan of engineer's house. B: Plan of labourer's house. C: Plan of manager's house. Natal Coffee Works Umgeni Village (Architectural Library, University of Natal, Durban)

There was yet another variant of the three-room house, with verandahs only at the front and back, not extending right round the building. Usually such a house would also have side gables. The engineer's house (Fig.3A) is this variant in miniature. Normally, however, in this variant the major rooms were bigger and the walls higher than in the previous example, thus allowing a deeper verandah at the front and back, this in turn meaning that all or parts of the back verandah could be enclosed to form what is effectively a two-room-deep plan. Dick King's farmhouse at Isipingo was of this form²³ and the original core of Briar Ghyll (c.1863) on the northern townlands of Pietermaritzburg seems to have been very similar. As with the first variant it appears to have continued as a favoured rural house type well into the 1880s.

Though compact, cheap and capable of expansion and a certain amount of 'dressing up' (i.e. the addition of fashionable elements such as bay windows), the three-room house did present a problem which grew as the century progressed: it lacked privacy.²⁴ Entry was directly into the living room and in the most extensive plans outer rooms were only reached through inner bedrooms or somewhat inconveniently via the open verandah. This is almost certainly why it did not commend itself to architects, who, with their predominantly English training, would have sought to provide their clients with the requisite privacy, and certainly to order the internal spaces in a hierarchy of public and private, master and service rooms.²⁵

I have not been able to find any such house type planned *de novo* from the hands of an architect from about 1880 on.

Smaller in size was the two-room cottage. Such a building (Fig.4) was widespread in the British colonies in the early 19th century²⁶ and Lewcock identifies it early on in the Eastern Cape, that is about 1820²⁷. It is interesting to note that such a building seems to be implied in the rules for the initial settlement of D'Urban in 1835. This house, which was the basic structure required to be built to secure

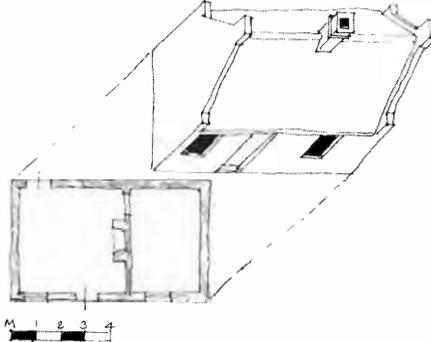


Fig. 4: Axonometric and plan of an Eastern Cape settler cottage
(The author after Lewcock)

possession of a town lot, was to be on 'European' lines, and had to be at least 24ft x 10ft (7.2 x 3 metres) and at least 8ft (2.4 metres) high. Although its plan is not stated, such a structure is too short for three rooms and too long for just one. In any case it is probably modelled on somewhat earlier precedent derived from the Eastern Cape, such as at Artificers' Square, Grahamstown where the minimum dimensions were given as 30ft x 15ft x 8ft (9 x 4.5x 2.4 metres).²⁸ In 1856 the new by-laws²⁹ in Pietermaritzburg prescribed a minimum dwelling which was to consist of two rooms, each not less than 10ft (3 metres) square. The house was to be at least 9ft (2.7 metres) high and was not to be constructed of the following materials; grass, sticks, reeds, poles, matting, wattle and daub, or clay. Evidently, basic as these requirements may seem to be, they were not passed without protest from two councillors who thought that they would drive some of the poorer people out of the town.³⁰

As a form of 'core' house the two-room cottage seems to have had a long life in both the villages and farms of Victorian Natal. One example, dating from around 1880, still exists in Harding and yet another from this period is the kernel of the farmhouse on the farm 'Norfolk' in the Biggarsberg.

If the evidence from Pietermaritzburg can be relied upon,³¹ the first major change to the cottage, for that is what it was, seems to have taken place in the early 1860s. Here a second range was added to the back of the building thus doubling the number of rooms. These seem to have been the same depth as those in the front. To accomplish this, three different roof forms were used; the first (Fig.5) was simply to duplicate the front roof to form an M-shape. This made sense with a heavy roof material like clay tiles but provided a potential waterproofing problem in the valley

gutter. A few examples still exist in Maritzburg. A second and simpler way (Fig.6) was to put the back range under a lean-to which was covered with sheets of corrugated iron, then coming into common use. This was probably the most usual form. A third way (Fig.7) was to place a double-pitched roof over both ranges. This obviously required a more complex roof structure, something approaching a truss. However, if a covering of iron sheeting was used and the 'truss' propped off the inner spine wall, a suitably lightweight supporting system could be contrived. The prohibition on thatch or even its repair in both cities (Durban and Pietermaritzburg) from the early 1860s must have accelerated this particular change. It is not suggested here that most cottages had the back range added afterwards, as many were built that way initially. Front verandahs were ubiquitous from very early on and back verandahs are often mentioned in house advertisements of the 1870s even on relatively small houses. The four-room compact house, i.e. that without a passage, remained the mainstay of the small urban, suburban and even rural working-class house well into the 1890s. It is even found in the pages of catalogues advertising prefabricated wood and iron buildings as late as 1910.³²

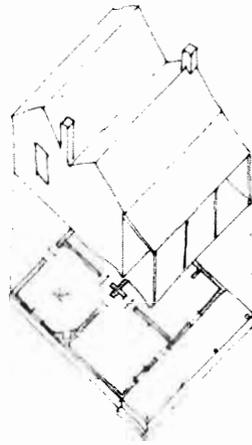


Fig. 5: Axonometric and plan of cottage with M-shaped roof, 6 Princess Street, Pietermaritzburg (The author)

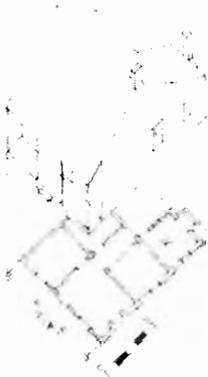


Fig. 6: Axonometric and plan showing lean-to roof across rear 270 Boom Street, Pietermaritzburg (The author)

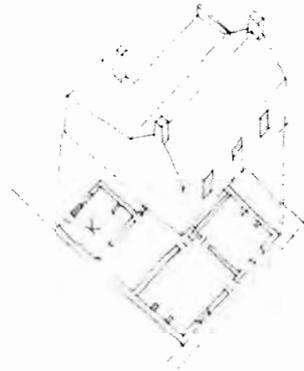


Fig. 7: Axonometric and plan showing double pitched roof over both rooms, 18 Shepstone Lane, Pietermaritzburg (The author)

The next major change, which probably happened in the early 1880s and thus is not that important to us here, was the addition on to the back of the house of a

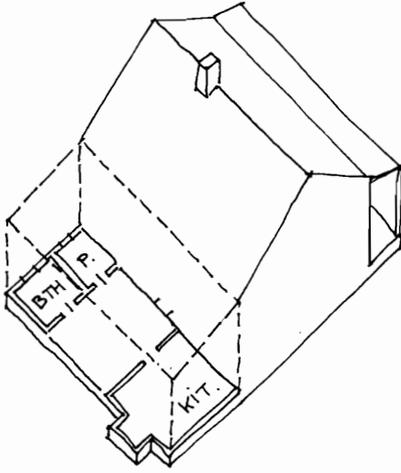


Fig. 8: Axonometric sketch illustrating a 'Natal back' (The author)

small, embryonic 'Natal Back'.³³ This, put briefly, is a deep verandah flanked on one side by a kitchen and on the other a pantry and in some cases a bathroom (Fig.8). Because of its utilitarian and basic nature the compact cottage was often the basis for later (c.1890–1900) architect-designed minimal houses.

The final house type to be considered here is the central passage house, especially in its four-room format. Such a house was symmetrical, with a passage which on larger houses could be as wide as 6ft (1.8 metres), running from front to back. This provided an entrance hall, a circulation space and possibly a breezeway, through the house. This would undoubtedly be considered a villa

plan, especially as the passage provided privacy to all the rooms. Such a house is described in 1852 in Durban³⁴ and through advertisements and existing examples it seems to have become fairly widespread by the late 1850s and early 1860s. The first example shown here, no. 136 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg (Fig.9) is well known and will serve to illustrate a variant which was quite common in the city, but of which I have failed to find the equivalent in Durban. This is the 1½-storey villa, the ½ storey because the additional accommodation, a couple of bedrooms, was completely within the roof volume, lit by dormer windows and reached by a form of step-ladder rather than a full set of stairs. The upper floor seems to have evolved principally to use the space generated by both the depth of the house and the steep minimum pitch (25°) needed to use flat clay tiles successfully. It is possible that this and other such buildings were designed by surveyors such as John Moreland who in fact had his own house near no.136 and which was described in a contemporary advertisement³⁵ as having entry hall, breakfast, dining and best bedroom on the ground floor with secondary bedrooms in the upper floor.

The plan of these houses seems to



Fig. 9: Axonometric and plan of 136 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, c. 1855 (The author)

have been restricted to about 7.5 metres (25ft) in depth with the consequence that the front rooms, the two principal ones, were often made about 15ft (5 metres) in depth and the back two 10ft (3 metres). The strong Georgian character of these buildings is clear and possibly because of this their popularity seems to have tapered off by the 1870s when a more romantic taste began to make itself felt.

The single-storeyed villa has a different history and although initially not very common it is clearly the antecedent of what I suppose most historians would consider to be the most characteristic 19th century Natal house type: the verandah house.

As well as the central passage and four-room plan, these early verandah houses also had a pyramidal or hipped roof with symmetrically placed chimneys (where there were any) and the wide enveloping verandah, this usually under a flattened pitch. The example shown, (Fig.10) no. 14 Bell Street, Howick, reputedly dates from the late 1850s and a very similar building once existed in Longmarket Street next to the Legislative Council Buildings. A description of 1862³⁶ of the farmhouse at Allendale (*sic*) near Pietermaritzburg describes what seems to have been another such building. It consisted of 7 rooms, 4 being large, and also had a 6ft (1.8 metre) passage running through it with a 40ft (12 metre) square loft above and a verandah all round. It was of brick with a tiled roof.

The farmhouse at Greenwood Park near Durban (Fig.11) which was probably built about 1866 shows yet another early example. A final example is that of House North at Northdene which Kearney dates to 1861.³⁷ This house is also interesting in that it had three rooms down one side, two on the other and a detached kitchen at the back.

The verandah house had become a clearly defined type by the 1860s and the role played by the early architect-surveyors in general and R.S. Upton in particular in the development of this has still to be deciphered. We know that Upton designed several villas on the Berea and elsewhere in the 1870s and probably some even earlier.³⁸

The full double storey house has not been mentioned so far. The reasons for this are quite simple: it was very rare in the towns and virtually unknown in the country prior to 1870. Even in its late Victorian heyday it probably did not constitute more than ten per cent of the houses in central Pietermaritzburg.³⁹

A good example of an early (1863) double storey house is that which constitutes the front part of Macrorie House in Loop Street, Pietermaritzburg. In 1867 it was

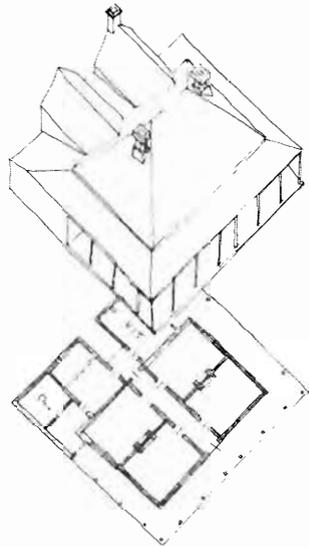


Fig. 10: Axonometric and plan of 14 Bell Street, Howick. c. 1860 (the author)

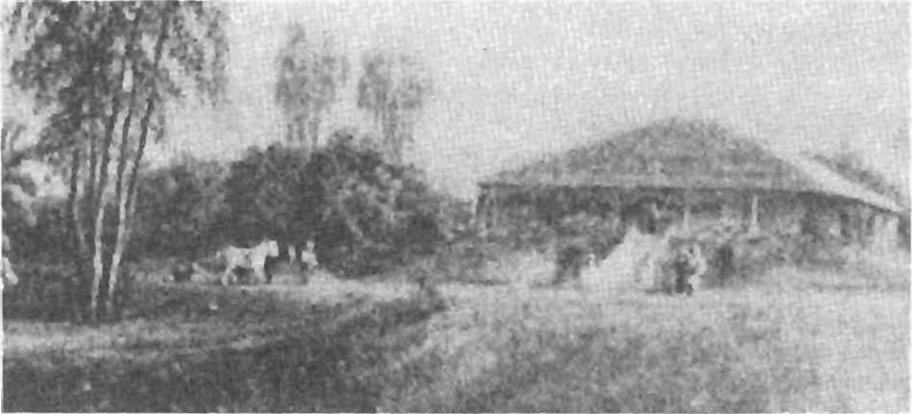


Fig. 11: View of Greenwood Park house in 1876.
(K.P. McIntosh, 'Some Old Natal Families')

described as 'the finest and best house in the city.' At the time, it comprised seven rooms plus kitchen and pantry.⁴⁰

The semi-detached house was known in Pietermaritzburg as early as 1857 and probably came into existence in Durban about then. The plans of these early ones (Fig. 12) do not really differ much from those of the freestanding houses. There were more elaborate, some double storeyed ones but these, as far as is known,⁴¹ are all post-1880 and mostly architect designed. Again in central Pietermaritzburg it is estimated that they constituted not more than four per cent of the domestic building stock in 1904.⁴² The terrace house although not unknown in the two cities was very rare,⁴³ not appearing until very late in the century. A possible further house type is that of an H-shape. Here a large, central room gave access to at least two rooms on either side. How widespread this plan was, though, has yet to be established.

So far the three major house types have been presented somewhat hermetically. The utility of this must be obvious when considering each as a more or less independent conceptual model, that is to say, the largely unconscious, culturally-conditioned

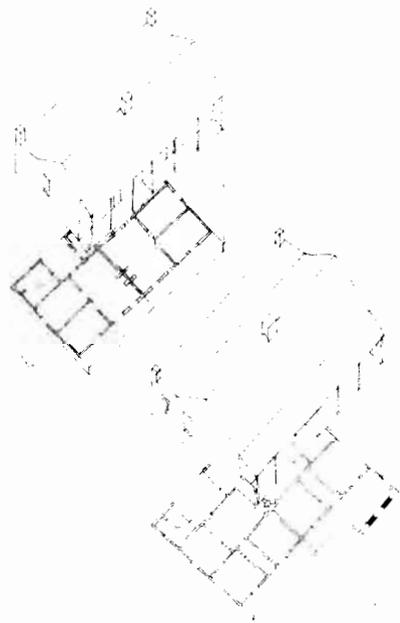


Fig. 12: Axonometrics and plans of
166/8 and 401/3 Boom Street,
Pietermaritzburg. (The author)

agreement among people as to what constitutes an appropriate house form. These are the configurations (plans), a form of mental template. Of course there were strong cross influences. References can be found to verandah rooms on what were obviously cottages and these were certainly also to be found on verandah houses (villas). It is also apparent that the central passage moved down into the cottage at least in part as early as the 1860s. Thus overall a fairly rich strain of hybridization is apparent, especially later in the century, this being possibly as a result of the increasing involvement of architects even at the lower levels of domestic architecture.

As to origins, that of the cottage has been alluded to, while the verandah house (villa) is I believe now well accepted as yet another colonial house type whose antecedents are still somewhat problematic;⁴⁴ but it clearly evolved outside Natal, the Indian bungalow being most often cited as its prototype. The three-room house remains a little obscure, in plan similar to that of small pioneer Boer dwellings described as being typical of the Orange Free State (by Anthony Trollope in the mid 1870s⁴⁵). However, that is all they appear to have in common. For example, the front and back verandahs are conspicuously absent from Boer houses until late in the century. It is certainly British in its espousal of the 'Cottage Ornée', the self-consciously picturesque dwelling inspired by English rural buildings. Perhaps this is Natal's most original contribution to what Brian Kearney has called the 'Bundu Style'.⁴⁶ With its dominant roof and 'open' configuration it was essentially a non-urban house type, and in addition it conforms to Professor Kearney's last criterion in that it has 'disappeared so effectively'. He was of course referring to the fact that being composed mainly of fragile organic materials, buildings in the Bundu Style had, in the normal course of events, a short life, leaving little trace of themselves. While accepting this observation, it should be noted that, with few exceptions, the pioneer houses were intended to be expendable.

NOTES

1. These are conveniently available in a collection entitled 'Thinking in Shadow' submitted by Brian Kearney for the degree of Doctor of Architecture at the University of Natal, 1992.
2. M. Martin, 'P.M. Dudgeon, his work in South Africa' (M.Arch., University of the Witwatersrand, 1980), unpublished dissertation.
3. R.B. Lewcock, *Early Nineteenth Century Architecture at the Cape* (Cape Town, 1963). See Chapters eight and nine.
4. J. Castle, 'The Domestic Work of W. Street-Wilson' (M.Arch., University of Natal, 1996), unpublished dissertation.
5. This is in some way dealt with by Kearney in his *Architecture in Natal 1824-1893* (Cape Town, 1973.)
6. There are numerous contemporary references to these materials. See G. Russell *The History of Old Durban* (Durban, 1899) p.91; and S.O'Byrne-Spencer, *British Settlers in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1992) vol.6, p.63.
7. Natal Colonial Government, *Emigration to Natal* (London, 1863) p.56
8. By-Law No. 69, Natal Government Gazette 19 Nov. 1878.
9. See G. Herbert, *Pioneers of Prefabrication* (Baltimore, 1978) chapter three in particular.
10. Advertisement in *The Natal Mercury*, 10 October 1861.
11. Russell, *Old Durban* p.99.
12. Killie Campbell Africana Collections, Letters of J. Ecroyd, 1850-1853, p.57.
13. W. Kermode, *Natal, a Field for Emigration* (London, 1882) p.100.
14. Spencer, *British Settlers in Natal*, vol.6, p.36.
15. R. Gordon, *Dear Louisa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1970), p.21.

16. This process is described by Jane Arbutnot (c.1850) in C Coulson's *Beaulieu-on-Illovo*, Richmond (Richmond, 1986), p.42.
17. M. Lewis, *Victorian Primitive* (Melbourne, 1977), p.67.
18. Professor Kearney maintains that the simplest early type was the 'single row of rooms' plan of which the original house at Cato Manor was a good example (Personal communication with the author). These often had verandahs.
19. House Binns, shown on p104 in Kearney's *Architecture in Natal*, is of this form.
20. R.J. Mann, *The Emigrant's Guide to the Colony of Natal* (London, 1873), p183-5. These are not described in the 1859 edition of the work.
21. In the drawing collection at the Architecture Library, University of Natal, Durban. No. 0D 120.
22. Tatham was also a director of the Natal Land and Colonization Company.
23. Undated sketch found at the Durban Local History Museum.
24. R. Kerr, *The Gentleman's House* (London, 1871, reprint 1972), p.67.
25. M. Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, (New Haven, 1979), p.28.
26. J. Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses* (Auckland, 1986), chapter titled 'Planning and Form'.
27. Lewcock, *Early Nineteenth Century Architecture*, p.191
28. R. & B. Reynolds, *Grahamstown, from Cottage to Villa*. (Cape Town, 1974), p.39.
29. Natal Government Gazette, 1 January 1856.
30. Quoted in Meineke and Summers, *One Hundred Years of Engineering*, (Pietermaritzburg, ND) p.93.
31. D. Radford, *The Maritzburg Cottage 1850-1910* (Durban, 1997).
32. Killie Campbell Africana Collections, H.V. Marsh, *Wood and Iron Buildings*, (Pietermaritzburg n.d. c.1910) Design No. 119.
33. This term was coined by Professor Kearney. The feature does seem to have a Natal origin but was not confined to Natal in the late 19th century.
34. E.W. Feilden, *My African Home* (London, 1887), p.12.
35. *The Natal Mercury*, July 1860.
36. *The Natal Witness*, April 1862.
37. Kearney, *Architecture in Natal*, pp.133, 134.
38. Provisional list of his work derived from *The Natal Mercury*, 1865-1883.
39. Radford, *The Maritzburg Cottage*. p.26.
40. Advertisement in *The Natal Mercury*, 6 July 1863.
41. From a brief survey of the historic drawings collection in the Architecture Library, University of Natal, Durban.
42. Radford, *The Maritzburg Cottage*, p.5.
43. The detailed area maps of Durban in 1893 show at most about a dozen.
44. B Kearney, 'Verandas', in *Building*, February 1989. Also D. Radford, 'A West Indian Origin for the Verandah House', *The South African Journal of Cultural and Art History*, vol.1, no.2, June 1987
45. A Trollope, *South Africa* (London, 1878), p.396.
46. B Kearney, 'Picturesque Architecture in Southern Africa', *Lantern*. Vol. XXV. No. 1, September 1976.

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