

Thomas Halstead

IN AN era when boys became men at an early age, Thomas Halstead was pre-eminent in Natal. He was the son of Richard Halstead of the 1820 settler Hayhurst party, and Thomas came to Natal with F. G. Farewell when he was yet in his early 'teens. Hunting buffalo for skins and elephants for their tusks, Halstead roamed the length and breadth of Natal and Zululand, and he was coincidentally on the beach at Port Natal when the also youthful Nathaniel Isaacs was shipwrecked there. Isaacs's first impression was that Halstead was a dullard, but events did not bear out this estimation and it would appear that Halstead had more commonsense than Isaacs was willing to credit him with. With Isaacs and John Cane, Halstead took part in Shaka's expedition against the rebellious followers of Chief Beje. Halstead was on a very good footing with the Zulus, and Dingane came to trust him possibly more than any of the other Europeans in Natal at the time.

In October 1837 Halstead was again on hand when Piet Retief arrived at the coast, and he and the Voortrekker became firm friends. After Retief's visit to Dingane, Halstead was engaged as interpreter to go with the Trekkers to Sikonyela, from whom stolen cattle had to be retrieved. Halstead apparently also acted on behalf of Dingane who wished to see that the agreement with the Trekkers was fully carried out. In due course Halstead reported to Dingane what had transpired, but Halstead nevertheless remained under some suspicion. It would appear that Halstead received prior information as to the intentions of Dingane in regard to the Trekker posse, but it seems as if Retief did not credit Halstead's tale. When the blow against the Trekkers fell, Halstead tried to remonstrate with Dingane, but his protestations were in vain, and he perished with the others. At the time of his death Halstead was not yet in his thirties but his role in the unfolding story of Natal was notwithstanding a significant one.

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