

The first public railway in South Africa: The Point to Durban railway of 1860

Railways are very much the product of 19th century innovation, with the harnessing of steam-power for a more efficient form of transportation with improved speed and carrying capacity for the movement of people, raw materials and processed goods. They served to facilitate the industrial revolution, accelerate development and extend frontiers (Cottrell, 1957). Fawcett (1953) highlights this in two sentences: ‘The railway revolutionised land transport. It became possible to organise the human and natural resources of far larger geographical bases.’

The world’s first public steam railway in Britain between Stockton and Darlington in 1825 was followed

by the rapid development of this mode of transport in Britain, Europe and all the continents. Egypt built Africa’s first railway, which opened in 1856 between Alexandria and Cairo. This was followed by the Point to Durban railway, which opened on 26 June 1860, and that between Cape Town and Wellington on 4 November 1863.

The first railway in South Africa, albeit not with steel rails and a steam locomotive, was also in Durban – the 1856-57 Bluff wooden railway. It was linked to harbour development and is described in an article in *Natalia* 26 (Hutson, 1997).

It is remarkable that, in 1860, a small town like Durban had the distinction of operating the first public steam railway in South Africa. The

population of Durban in 1863 was 4 313, which included 1 593 Africans and 153 Indians (Goetzsche, 1966). Few Africans were urbanised and the first indentured Indian labourers for the sugar farms were only to arrive on 17 November 1860. While there were primary schools in Natal, there was not yet a secondary school, the first opening in Pietermaritzburg in 1863 and in Durban in 1866.

The economy was somewhat limited to service industries such as blacksmithing, carpentry, wagon building, transport riding and inn-keeping. The sugar industry was still in its infancy, but it was expanding, with about 8 000 tons produced in 1860. By 1862 sugar became Natal's principal export (Brookes and Webb, 1967).

Transport by ox-wagon was expensive and slow, taking some three or more days from the port to Pietermaritzburg. Heydenrych and Martin (1992) mention that the cost of haulage per ton from Durban to Pietermaritzburg was higher than the freightage from England to Durban. Roads were exceptionally poor and the streets of Durban sandy tracks, making the railway an extremely desirable option for development.

The Natal Railway Company

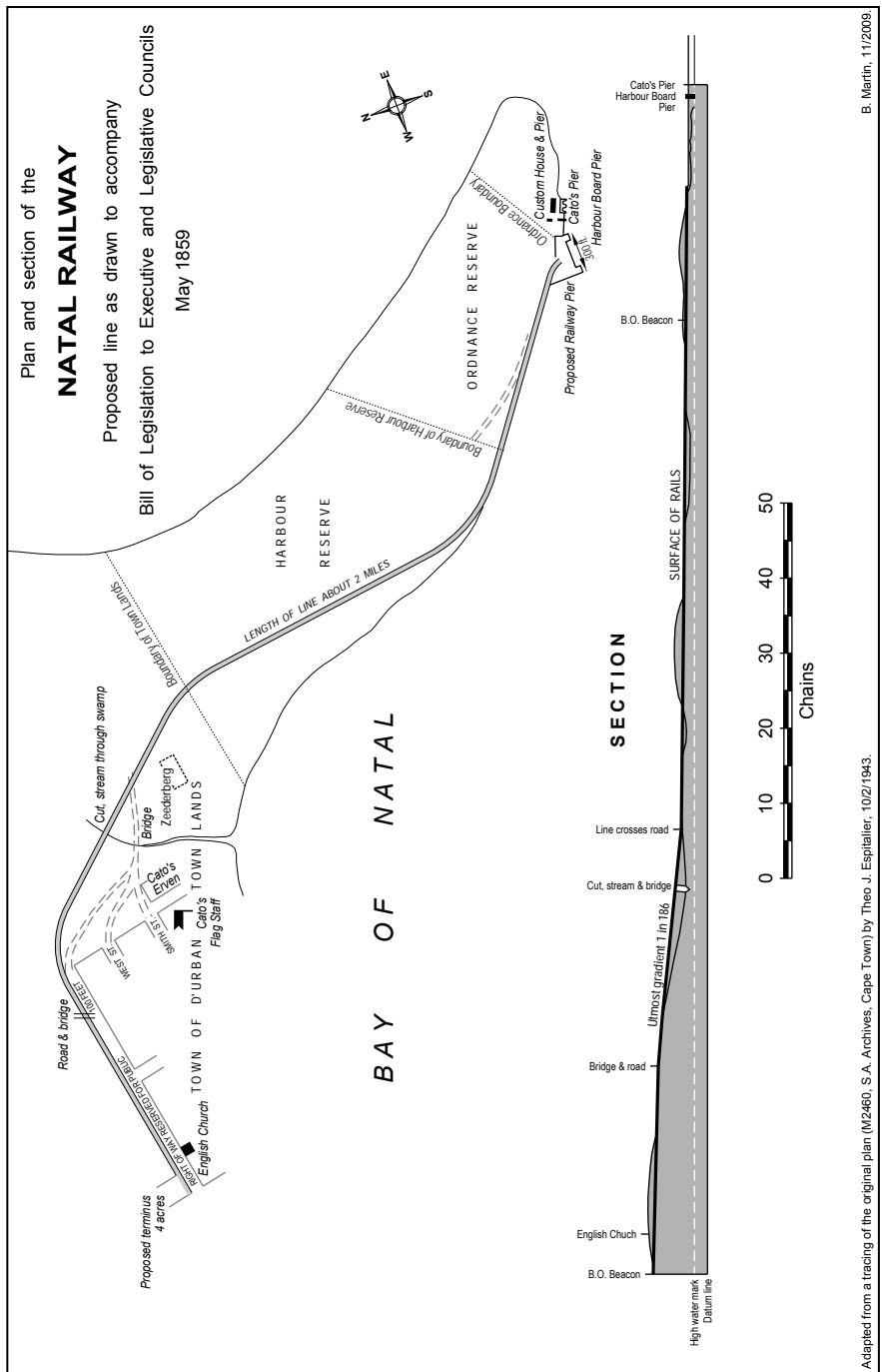
In January 1859 the Natal Railway Company was formed to build a three-kilometre railway from the harbour at the Point to the north of the Durban Market Square where the old Durban Station is located. The Natal Legislative Council passed a private law which granted the Company the sole right to provide railway transport for 14 years.

Early in 1860 work started on the building the 4ft 8½in gauge railway

with bull head rails mounted on 'potlid' sleepers. Russell (1899) mistakenly records that the gauge was 3ft 6in. From Point Road it followed what is now Kearsney Road, across Smith and West Streets and along the northern side of Pine Terrace. The Point Station was on the wharf built at a deeper part of the harbour where the present B and C Sheds are located. This is not to be confused with the later Natal Government Railways station, in Point Road, which opened in 1891 as a single storey building and with a second added by 1911. Passenger services to it from the central Durban Station ceased in 1927. It is currently used by the harbour authority.

Russell (1899) gives details of the rolling stock, which included, apart from two jib cranes, six four-wheeled freight trucks and one four-wheeled passenger carriage. This had one carpeted First Class compartment which seated up to 10 on cane seats and two Second Class compartments in varnished oak, which together seated 20 passengers.

Robert Legg of London is credited as being the builder of the 'Natal' locomotive, but MacDonald (2010) has evidence that it was manufactured by Carrett Marshall in Leeds. The 24 horse-powered locomotive with a 0-4-0 wheel arrangement was brought by the brig *Cadiz* on 13 May 1860 in broken-down form and assembled by Henry Jacobs, the Locomotive Superintendent, fitter and driver, in the engine shed at the Market Square Station. It was somewhat rustic, with no covered cab for the protection of the driver, who particularly felt the weather on the windy day of the opening ceremony. However, locomotives of this type were common



Adapted from a tracing of the original plan (M2460, S.A. Archives, Cape Town) by Theo J. Espialler, 10/2/1943. B. Martin, 11/2009.

in Europe and Britain at this time, for example those built for the London to Chatham and Dover Railway from 1862 until 1899 and which lasted until 1906 (Salmon, 1972).

The plaque on the 'Natal' locomotive displayed on the concourse of the present Durban Railway Station states: 'The first train in South Africa operated between the Point and Durban on 23 June 1860. This locomotive is a reconstruction of the original chassis and wheels which were recovered in the Umzimvubu River near Port St Johns.'

This first journey, as opposed to the Official Opening on 26 June, was a test run which took place on Saturday, 23 June 1860. Russell (1899) mentions that the train had five freight trucks containing 40 tons of sugar mill machinery, carried a few passengers and on the footplate were William Smerdon and Edmund Tatham, chairman and secretary respectively of the Natal Railway Company.

The first official steam train journey on 26 June 1860

A watercolour painting by Robert Tatham, Manager of the Natal Railway Company, of the official opening gives an interesting glimpse of this important occasion at the Market Square Station. On the left is the 'Natal' locomotive, described by Russell (1899) as 'blowing off steam in fretful impatience', waiting for driver Jacobs to connect to the only passenger coach for the important guests and, pictured on the right, a freight truck that Russell converted temporarily to provide additional passenger accommodation.

There is an interesting discrepancy in the way in which the 'Natal' locomotive was orientated. Russell

(1899) stated that it was assembled with its head to the Point and, as there was no turntable or turning triangle, it would have pulled this official train running forwards to the Point. Tatham's painting shows the locomotive facing the other way, which meant that it would have hauled it backwards. Russell, as the Station Agent at Market Square Station, would surely have known. Likewise, one would expect Tatham as the Manager of the Natal Railway Company to paint it correctly. Who was correct? Copies of all the images in my possession indicate that the locomotive ran backwards towards the Point.

In the background of the painting is the original St Paul's Anglican Church with only one other building visible, for this was the vast Market Square. There was no station building apart from a platform on which stood the official guests including the acting Lieutenant-Governor, Major Williamson, members of the Natal Legislative Council, the Mayor of Durban, Cllr W. Hartley, the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, Cllr J. Ackerman, Bishop Colenso and clergy, the Railway Directors and the Royal Durban Rangers. In the foreground of the painting on the left is the 85th Regiment and on the right is a group of onlookers, including intrigued African people. One is carrying firewood on her or his head.

George Russell was an avid commentator on life and happenings in Durban from 1850 to 1860 (Russell, 1899). He gave an account of the opening, extracts of which follow:

The inauguration took place at 11 o'clock by His Excellency, Major Williamson after the Rangers and the 85th Regiment presented arms, while

the band played the national anthem. Bishop Colenso invoked the Divine blessing on the enterprise while the wind snapped flag poles and damaged decorations, blew off hats and the all pervading sand made the scene both memorable and unpleasant. Everyone was thankful for the Chairman's bow to His Excellency who headed for the First Class Compartment in the coach and the rest of the guests seated themselves in the other compartments. They good-humouredly made the best of the circumstances. With a prolonged wailing shriek Jacobs turned on the steam, and the first train moved off amid the deafening and prolonged cheers of the assembled spectators. Gathering speed as he cleared the Engine House, he ran smartly down to the Point, which he reached in about five minutes.

Some 800 people were conveyed to the breezy Point on this memorable occasion. The trippers disported themselves on the nearby sand dunes, visiting the rudimentary structure called the Harbour Works and admiring the Waldensian which contributed a Royal Salute of 21 minute guns from her anchorage in the Bluff Channel. The state of the weather prevented a visit to the harbour tug Pioneer and the abandonment of the planned cruise. Others preferred lingering in the vicinity of the Railway Station listening to the occasional merry tunes of the band and the usual congratulatory and complimentary toasts which were offered following inaudible speeches amongst the rattling of the iron structure, the flapping of tarpaulins, the noise of the wind and waves and the arrival and departure of trains. A goodly number sought the friendly shelter of Barker's Anchor Tavern which was close to the beach near the present Natal Government Railways Point Station building.

The detail of A.H. Barrett's painting vividly captures the excitement of the event at the Point with the train arriving at the station. In the foreground are interested guests and spectators and an ox-wagon, while in the harbour are the *Waldensian* and the steam tug, the *Pioneer*.

The guests all returned to town without accident though with eyes smarting from the wind-blown sand. The extemporised carriage awning, flags and decorations and one or two of the triumphal arches across the line were blown away.

Russell notes the comments made, in Zulu, by the African spectators: 'Wow! (sic) but it is a strange beast. Its belly is full of fire and vapour; they feed it with water and wood logs. It is like a rhinoceros, but it blows smoke and sparks through its horn. Truly it is stronger than the elephant, for it pulls many wagon loads.' And 'Beyond doubt it is made by the witchcraft of the white men.'

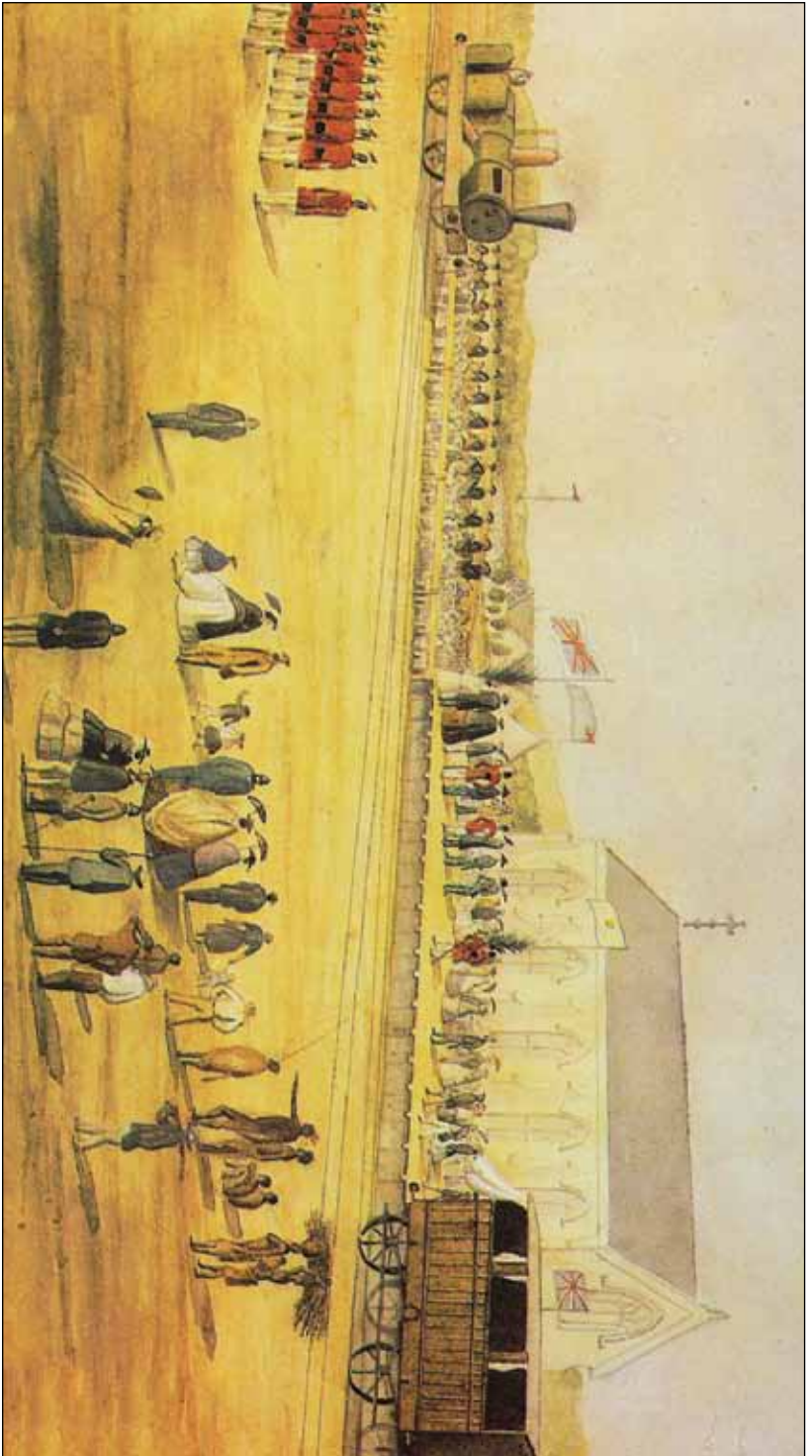
The day was concluded with a ball in the Masonic Hotel. The locomotive needed servicing after all the sand and grit blown by the strong wind that day.

The Natal Mercury editorial (Wilks, 1977) after the opening, prophetically stated: 'The march of the locomotive is the march of progress. Before the approach of the steam horse all retrogressive influences vanish and give way. Wherever the mighty engine secures a footing civilisation invariably follows and spreads.'

South Africa's first Royal Train

In September 1860 HRH Prince Alfred, the 16-year-old second son of Queen Victoria, and Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony, arrived in Durban from the Free State

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A watercolour painting by Robert Tatham, Manager of the Natal Railway Company, of the official opening gives an interesting glimpse of this important occasion at the Market Square Station. The painting now hangs in the Local History Museum, Durban.



The 1889 painting by A.H. Barrett shows the Point Station on the official opening of the first railway in South Africa from the Point to Durban. Source: Railway Society of Southern Africa.

and Pietermaritzburg. Russell (1899) highlights this visit in his memoirs. Early on 6 September the Prince, Governor Grey, Mayor A. McArthur and other dignitaries departed on South Africa's first Royal Train, which was no more than the Railway Company's passenger coach. It achieved the distinction of travelling, in Russell's words, 'at a racing pace that became truly alarming'. It reached the Point in two minutes and 40 seconds, a speed of 64 km an hour, the fastest journey that South African soil had yet seen. *The Natal Mercury* (Wilks, 1977) boasted that whatever festivities the 'Prince might get in Cape Town he wouldn't get another railway trip. This is a feature of his visit strictly Natalian.'

The extension to Umgeni

Although the service ran steadily for the next few years, by 1863 the Company was in financial difficulties, despite conveying 20 000 tons of imports and 5 000 tons of exports. In 1865 the Colonial Government decided to build and pay for a line to the Umgeni River quarry for the conveyance of stone for harbour works. The Natal Railway Company had a lease to operate this line which also included transporting general freight and passengers. The seven-kilometre extension to Umgeni opened on 25 January 1867, which brought the total length to the Point to 10 km. In 1869 the Company was beginning to show a profit, with increased exports, including sugar, and in 1872 it declared the first dividend.

By 1874 there was much lobbying for railways to Pietermaritzburg and along the coast as the Colony's roads were poor. As early as 1861 *The Natal Mercury* (Heydenrych and Martin, 1992) stated, 'There are probably

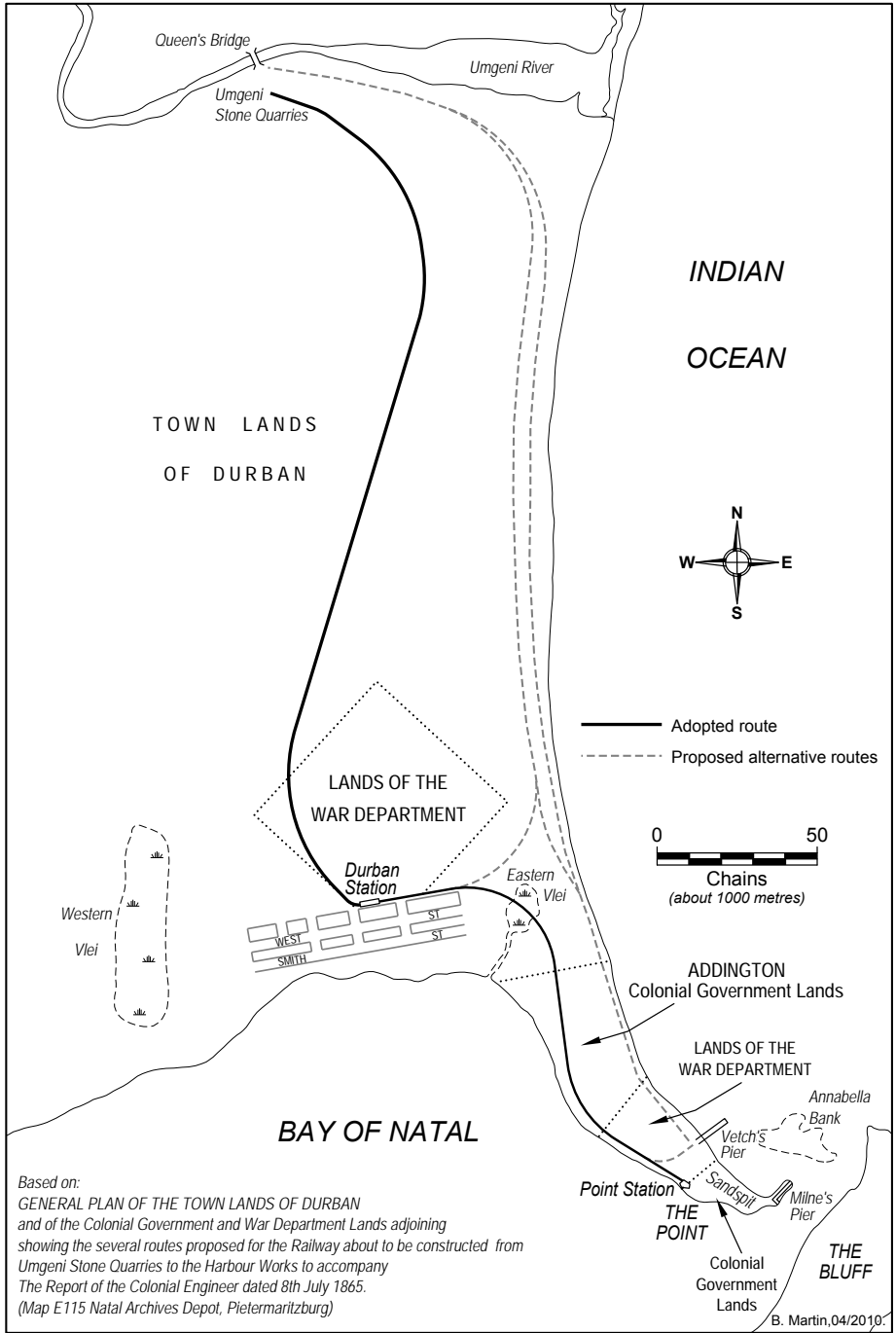
few parts of the world where traffic is dependent on such primitive methods as the South African colonies.' Farmers needed to get products to Durban and the port and there was also a need to connect to new coal mines in Northern Natal. The travelling public demanded faster, safer and a more comfortable means of travel.

On 1 January 1877 the Natal Government Railways took over the assets of the Natal Railway Company. Thus the 17-year operation of South Africa's first public steam railway by private enterprise became history.

From a small beginning to a large State enterprise

The year 2010 also marks the centenary of the unified railway system in South Africa with the creation of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910. The main line from Durban to Johannesburg is an important sector of this network.

The Natal Legislative Council passed the Natal Government Railways Act on 2 November 1875. This authorised the building of railways, initially from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, Verulam and Isipingo. Because of the rugged nature of the interior, the Natal and Cape authorities opted for the 3ft 6in gauge, which is generally known as the Cape gauge. This made the three Natal Railway Company locomotives redundant. The newest, the 'Perseverance', became a stationary engine working machinery at the Durban Railway Workshop and the 'Natal' locomotive was shipped to Port St Johns to work a sawmill upstream on the Umzimvubu River. Dennison (2009) reveals how this sawmill prepared timber for shipping to Durban for harbour construction. The locomotive



UMGENI EXTENSION 1867

was recovered from the Umzimvubu River, restored and plinthed on the old Durban Station on 26 June 1944, 84 years after it had drawn the first public train in South Africa.

Construction started in January 1877, converting the Point to Umgeni railway to 3ft 6in gauge. This line was continued up the North Coast to Verulam. The 4ft 8½in track was used for the last time on 11 May 1878. The route to the interior and South Coast was located between Pine Street and Commercial Road and along what is now Davis Lane and Alexandra Street to the present line at Dalbridge.

The main line inland reached Pietermaritzburg in 1880 and Ladysmith in 1886, the year when gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand and Johannesburg founded. This factor inspired the resolve to continue the line to this destination. By 1890 it had linked to the coalfields in Northern Natal, from which date much coal was railed to Durban for use and export.

In 1891 the railway reached Charlestown on the border and, once consent from the South African Republic was given, the Natal Government Railways built the railway as far as Heidelberg. The *Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorwegmaatschappij* constructed the remaining section, with the opening in Johannesburg on 14 December 1895. The increased traffic generated resulted in the Natal Government Railways beginning to show a profit.

Heydenrych (1985), in assessing the value of the Durban-to-Johannesburg railway, states that its completion was a major achievement for the Colony of Natal, despite the fact that 76% of the total colonial debt was for railway construction loans. The Colony secured

a large amount of the trade with the interior. The revenue and prosperity of Natal became dependent upon the dues from and railage of imported goods heading for Johannesburg. But it did little to improve the economic ills of the Colony or the growth of towns along its route. Of the freight conveyed by the Natal Government Railways in 1896, less than one tenth included Natal products. However, the Natal Government Railways was the largest employer of Africans and Indians in the Colony.

Heydenrych concludes by stating that as Natal's economy at this time depended very much on traffic generated by the Witwatersrand, it is understandable that it was called 'possibly the most parasitic in the Empire' by the historian C.W. de Kiewiet in his *A History of South Africa*.

In 1893 the railway route to the interior and the South Coast located between Pine Street and Commercial Road, was replaced with a deviation around the central city between Leopold and Alice Streets into the then new station complex at the old Market Square Station site.

After the Second Anglo-Boer War, the Central South African Railways operated, from 1902, the railways of the former South African and Free State republics but the Natal Government Railways continued to operate trains from Durban to Johannesburg.

The Centenary of the railways in South Africa

The establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 resulted in the amalgamation of former colonial Natal Government Railways, Cape Government Railways and Central South African Railways into the South

African Railways, presently known as Transnet Freight Rail.

From 1914 new deviations with improved gradients, tunnels and double track were constructed. Electric traction from Ladysmith to Chieveley was first introduced in 1924 and by 1964 the entire Durban to Johannesburg line was electrified. It also has double track, except for the 23 km stretch between Glenroy and Union Junction, and is fully computerised with central traffic control and bi-directional signalling. It has a daily capacity of 130 000 tonnes.

The first railway in South Africa from the Point to Durban lasted until 1936, when road traffic pressures at street crossings forced its closure. The last train ran on 2 May 1936. It was replaced with a new double-track electric railway into the harbour along the Esplanade.

The role and extent of the railway network at 24 000 km, before the closure of some lines, over the past 150 years has been impressive. This is confirmed by the building of the modern freight lines to Richards Bay, opening in 1975, for the export of coal and, in 1976, to Saldanha for the export of iron ore. The latest evidence is the new rapid transit urban passenger Gautrain to link Johannesburg, Pretoria and the O.R. Tambo Airport, which has reverted to the 4ft 8½in gauge. The first section opened between Sandton and the airport on 8 June 2010.

In conclusion, it is significant that South Africa's first three-kilometre Point-to-Durban railway was the beginning of the most important freight rail link of over 750 km to the country's economic heart in Johannesburg and Gauteng. Likewise, Durban has benefited to become the

busiest port in the country and in Africa with the largest container terminal in the Southern Hemisphere.

The proposed historical railway route in Durban

The Ethekwini Municipality, through the Architectural and Heritage Departments and iTRUMP, intends to mark the original route from the old Point Station to the West Street crossing and the old Durban Railway Station and also include the former route of the 1877 Natal Government Railways to the interior and the South Coast (Gammage, 2010). It is planned to demarcate the route with plaques and appropriate railway artefacts such as old locomotives and semaphore signals.

A plaque commemorating the opening, on 26 June 1860, of the Point to Durban railway will be placed at the old Point Railway Station, hopefully with a model of the 'Natal' locomotive. The centenary plaque of the unified railways in South Africa will be placed on the concourse of the Durban Station.

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