

*Previous homes of the Natal Society Library**

On 17th June, His Honour the Administrator of Natal opened the new Natal Society Library building, which now stands completed on Churchill Square, next door to the City Hall in Pietermaritzburg. During the weeks preceding the opening, a skilful removal operation was accomplished, and the complete library stock, gathered from no less than four buildings in the city, now rests at last in one commodious, functional building.

The Natal Society, which still controls the city's library, was founded on 9th May 1851. The inaugural meeting took place in the small, 'unpretending' Court-house which, with its thatched roof, was then to be found where the City Hall stands today.

It was a chilly night as the founding fathers made their way by lantern light to their historic meeting. The streets were covered with tall grass, although here and there a path about ten feet wide had been flattened by the passage of wagons. Syringa trees grew along the streets and around the Market Square (today, Churchill Square) where hyenas were still known to prowl in the overgrown grass. It may be added, to complete the picture, that in 1851, fear of the occasional visiting lion still caused panic in settler hearts, and even leopards were not unknown callers in the environs.

The purpose of founding the Natal Society was, basically, to attract more overseas people to settlement in Natal. The first resolution at the meeting stressed the need to collect full and accurate information on all aspects of Natal — its physical resources, its social conditions, and its potential. Such information, offered under the auspices of a society entirely without political aims or objectives, would, it was thought, command universal respect and confidence. When a constitution for the new society was drawn up in the following month, a casual paragraph, almost an afterthought, appeared right at the end saying that 'a library and museum, illustrative of the objects of the society, shall be formed as soon as practicable'. Already in the town was a library for recreational reading which had been struggling to survive since 1845.

However, notable donations of books came in almost immediately, and by July 1851 it was decided that the Natal Society should take over the existing library, then under J. D. Marquard's care at the school. The first home of the Natal Society Library was therefore to be found in a wing of the government school, on the corner of Longmarket and Chapel Streets. The site is now occupied by the Central Pharmacy.

From this place a move was soon made to rooms 'in the premises of the late Mr. Lamont', situated on erf 29 in Church Street. This building adjoined

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Otto Street and was, in fact, right opposite that part of the Market Square where the new library building now stands. Until recently, the building presently on this site was called the Market Inn. Here, in September 1851, the Librarian, George Challinor, gave notice that the new library and reading room were open to the public. A year later, Challinor was praised in the first annual report for his 'assiduity, attention and affability'. Perhaps it was this which emboldened him to ask the Council whether he could hope for any remuneration for his labours. In reply, the Natal Society Council praised his 'zeal and urbanity' and recorded regret that they could only offer a salary of £2 per month. Challinor resigned, and was replaced by Mr. Meek in January 1853. John Meek was then 76 years of age, but he continued at his post for another eight years; he might have stayed longer, but in view of the move to new premises, the Council thought that perhaps a younger librarian should be employed.

In January 1861, the Society moved to rooms over the Commercial and Agricultural Bank which were reached from the street by an outside staircase. Today, this site is occupied by part of Ireland's Department Store at 219 Church Street. Next door stood Pepworth's Manchester House (today, Fairlane Fashions) and beyond that, Ferreira's Auction market on the site of the present Standard Bank of S.A. Here the library stayed until January 1865, at which date Mr. J. W. Winter required his premises back.

And now approached the period of the first severe economic depression in Natal, which was to last for about five years. Briefly, there was a shortage of capital, two Natal banks became insolvent and agriculture was not thriving. The Natal Society suffered acutely. Homes four, five and six all proved to be very temporary, and few details about them are known. Early in 1865, the library moved to two rooms belonging to Mr. Pratt in premises known as 'Old Bank'. A year later, the Society had removed to Mr. Prouting's in Longmarket Street, but left there in September 1867 when Mr. Topham purchased premises in Timber Street and leased several rooms to the Society. Worsening economic conditions led to the withdrawal of the small annual government grant in 1870 and once again the Library's books were on the move.

The Natal Society's seventh home was to be on the corner of Chapel and Church Streets, on a site now occupied by the O.K. Bazaar but in those days it was called Griffin's Corner. It has been described as a dingy little building. Candles were still the sole means of illumination, although oil lamps were on the way.

The days of rented premises for the library were drawing to a close. By 1875 the Natal Society had moved to its eighth home at 18 Timber Street, paying a rental of £3 a month for a single room. These grim conditions, coupled with the return of prosperity to Natal, spurred the Society to the holding of a magnificent bazaar. Professor A. F. Hattersley has described this social event of 1876 as perhaps the most brilliant in the history of the colonial capital. With 2 000 guineas to jingle, land was purchased at erf 20 Longmarket Street (now known as 201 Longmarket Street) and in February 1878, the Natal Society opened its doors in premises built especially for the purpose of a library and museum. The Society was at last standing upon its own ground.

Part of this old building, erected so long ago, still exists on the corner

of Longmarket Street and Theatre Lane. The rear and narrower portion is the old section. Here books and museum specimens jostled for position on the shelves. Such was the advance of the Society's museum work (the name particularly remembered here is that of the curator from 1895 to 1903, F. W. FitzSimons) that in 1903 the specimens were removed to Loop Street to become the nucleus of the Natal Museum. But the library soon outgrew the new space, and in 1930 a double-storeyed addition to the front of the premises was made.

From 1950, the Natal Society became the recipient of more generous annual grants, and it became possible to build up stock as never before. As the main library building became filled with books and periodicals, so the Society found need for a huge storage building (the Weinronk Depository, in Commercial Road) and for two branches in the city centre — one to serve children, and another to house services for non-white readers and also the O'Brien book collection.

In 124 years of existence the Society has petitioned, repeatedly and monotonously, for land and buildings from the authorities. Had this article been interspersed with lists of such hopeless appeals it would have lost all shape. Suffice now to mention, with acclaim, the sole success. The Pietermaritzburg City Council have met the Natal Society's need for a worthy home with boldness and in full measure. A generous financial contribution was added by the Provincial authorities. The new building on Churchill Square is also a tribute to the determination of the Natal Society Council and its President. There are some people who are saying: "Yes . . . but . . . what about roads, sewers, housing problems and the bus service?" They may care to be reminded of the old saying:

If you have two pennies, spend one on bread that you may live,
and one on flowers, that you may have something to live for.

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