

The Incident of the BRAZILIA and the Rev. Pieter Ham

Pieter N. Ham, the son of Adrianus Pieter Ham and Johanna Reynders, was born in Amsterdam on 17 March 1807 and baptized by Dr. Hugenholst at the Groote Kerk on 12 April 1807. Pieter was first educated at the Latin school and later at the Athenaeum Illustre of that city, thereafter beginning his theological studies at the State University in Utrecht on 30 June 1828. According to a letter received by the general convocation of the Dutch Reformed Church the student tried to pass his examinations on 1 May 1833 but by unanimous vote was rejected for failing and not being considered competent. This did not deter the 26-year-old student from a career in divinity. On 7 May 1834 he again approached the provincial elders and deacons of the Church of the Guelderland Province and after being examined at Arnhem was accepted by majority vote for holy orders and was ordained by the Dutch Reformed Council. During this particular period there was in fact a surplus of Netherlands clergy and so the Rev. P. Ham received no immediate call to a fixed congregation but gave his assistance by relieving elderly and sick predikants in the Provinces.

About 1841 a society, The Commission for Supplying the Religious Needs of the Inhabitants of Natalia, was formed in Amsterdam and headed by a Jacob Swart, lecturer and examiner at the Naval College, with a committee of D.R.C. ministers. At the end of 1842 this church commission extended an invitation to young predikants for possible selection for overseas assignments. Through this arrangement they engaged the young licentiate Pieter N. Ham and a schoolmaster Mr. Martineau as pioneers to the emigrant republic of Natalia, this being in answer to a plea from the Trekker settlers of the first Boer republic in South Africa which had come into existence only in 1839 after the defeat of Dingaan and his Zulu warriors at Blood River on 16 December 1838, the Day of the Covenant.

With this idea in mind of going to Natalia the Rev. Pieter Ham and his wife accepted the call to distant Southern Africa and joined the schooner *Brazilia* at Rotterdam. Totally unaware of the political intrigue in which they were later to become involved, they sailed from the port on 8 February 1843 for their destination in the Indian Ocean.

To obtain the correct background to the circumstances it is necessary to turn our attention to the year 1841 when the society was formed. A small trading company had been established by some Amsterdam merchants under the partnership of George G. Ohrig of Klyn & Co. and Jacob Swart the naval lecturer, and pressure was exerted locally to encourage trade between the Netherlands and the emigrants in Natalia. However, there was little enthusiasm for the scheme. Nevertheless, the partners purchased a schooner *Brazilia* for the planned trips to Southern Africa. A Captain

Cornelius Reus was placed in command and a young ambitious merchant was given instructions to seek trade openings with the emigrant community in Natalia. His name was Johan Smellekamp, one ever to be associated with both the ship and the Republic of Natalia.

It would appear that the first voyage of the *Brazilia* was to Port Natal where the vessel arrived on 24 March 1842 on which date the senior officers including the passenger J. Smellekamp immediately reported to Mr. Wicht, the local Boer landdrost and specifically enquired if the English were yet in possession of the port or the colony, that is, the Republic of Natalia, it being clearly implied by the visitors that they were on the political errand of enabling the Boer settlers to seek the protection of the Royal House of William II of Orange, as well as the Netherlands government. Alternatively they would assist in the escape of the Trekker settlers from the British imperialists.

Captain Reus and the ship's party then went direct to Pietermaritzburg, capital of the republic, to consult the Volksraad, staying for eight days in the capital enjoying the festive atmosphere of bedecked streets displaying the tricolour of the Netherlands in honour of the visitors, since many believed this intervention of the Netherlands would guarantee the Trekkers' independence. The visitors returned to Port Natal for the auction of the trade cargo brought out by the *Brazilia*. Little, however, was disposed of as it was found unsuitable for local needs. Luckily Captain Reus decided to set sail for Batavia and left the port on 24 April 1842 which was a fortuitous decision because a British military force from Fort Peddie (Eastern Cape) under Captain Thomas Smith did in fact reach Port Natal on 5 May to haul down the Republican colours. Then followed the siege of Captain Smith's party and the episode of Dick King's ride to Grahams-town. It was this small military force with its reinforcements from the frigate *Southampton* in late June that was instrumental in persuading the Volksraad at Pietermaritzburg to surrender the Republic of Natalia to the British Crown on July 15, 1842.

From an international point of view, however, the implications of the visit in March of the *Brazilia* were of greater importance. From a report received at Downing Street, London, from the Governor of the Cape Colony concerning the visit of the *Brazilia*, it was obvious a discourtesy had been committed against the British Crown and swift action was taken in diplomatic circles. As a result an official apology was handed to the British representative at the Hague, Netherlands, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the House of Orange, Baron Kattendycke, stating that the government disclaimed sympathy with the emigrants in Natalia, even though many of the Boers were Dutch subjects. This formal action must be borne in mind together with the behind-the-scenes activities, which proved even more spectacular in that the British Foreign Office had become suspicious of French complicity and an official enquiry was instituted in October 1842. By December it was allegedly discovered through a minister at the Hague that in fact it was Johan Smellekamp who had been financed by French capitalists for the *Brazilia* venture to the Republic of Natalia in March. Consequently, in order to keep the Governor Sir George Napier fully acquainted with the situation as seen in Europe, a copy of the official apology by the Netherlands was sent by Lord Stanley, Secretary of State,

with other correspondence concerning the changing situation in Southern Africa. It will be recalled that Natal was proclaimed a British Colony, though still part of the Cape Colony, on 12 May 1843.

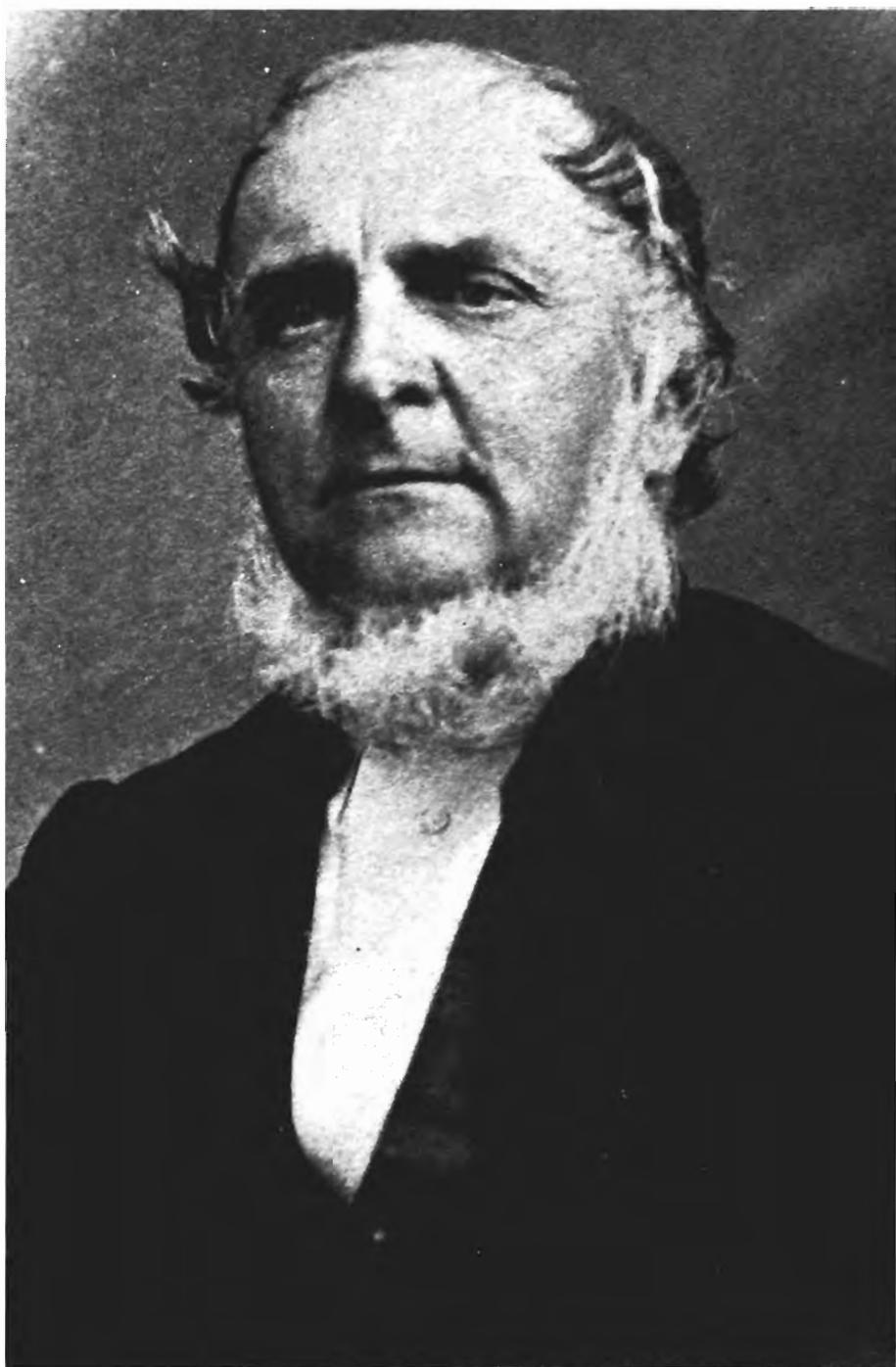
Quite unexpectedly on 8 May 1843 we find the schooner *Brazilia* under the command of Captain Reus arriving at Port Natal roadstead again. It is important to note that while the Rev. P. Ham and wife were listed as passengers they had been instructed to place themselves at the disposal of the Boer Republic of Natalia on arrival. In fact they were accompanied by none other than Mr. Johan Smellekamp as their chief director, with Mr. P. S. Kervel as assistant trader and schoolmaster Mr. Martineau. Whether the passengers were acquainted with the master's intrigue or not, the ship's manifest was clearly endorsed for destination Mauritius, not Port Natal.

In consequence, immediately the schooner arrived she was boarded for inspection by Lieut. Joseph Nourse, R.N. This officer with his armed crew was anchored in the roadstead aboard the small vessel *Fawn* which had arrived on 25 June 1842 and was to remain until June 1844. Nourse was suspicious of gun-running as the military and political situation was tense. On his discovering that the manifest failed to indicate Port Natal as the legitimate destination and no doubt having some idea of the *Brazilia's* previous visit the year before, he refused to allow any communication with either the British or Dutch people of the port or colony. Neither would he permit the Rev. P. Ham and his wife to disembark but ordered Captain Reus to set sail forthwith. Consequently the *Brazilia* sailed off on 9 May 1843 to make for the nearest alternative port not under British control.

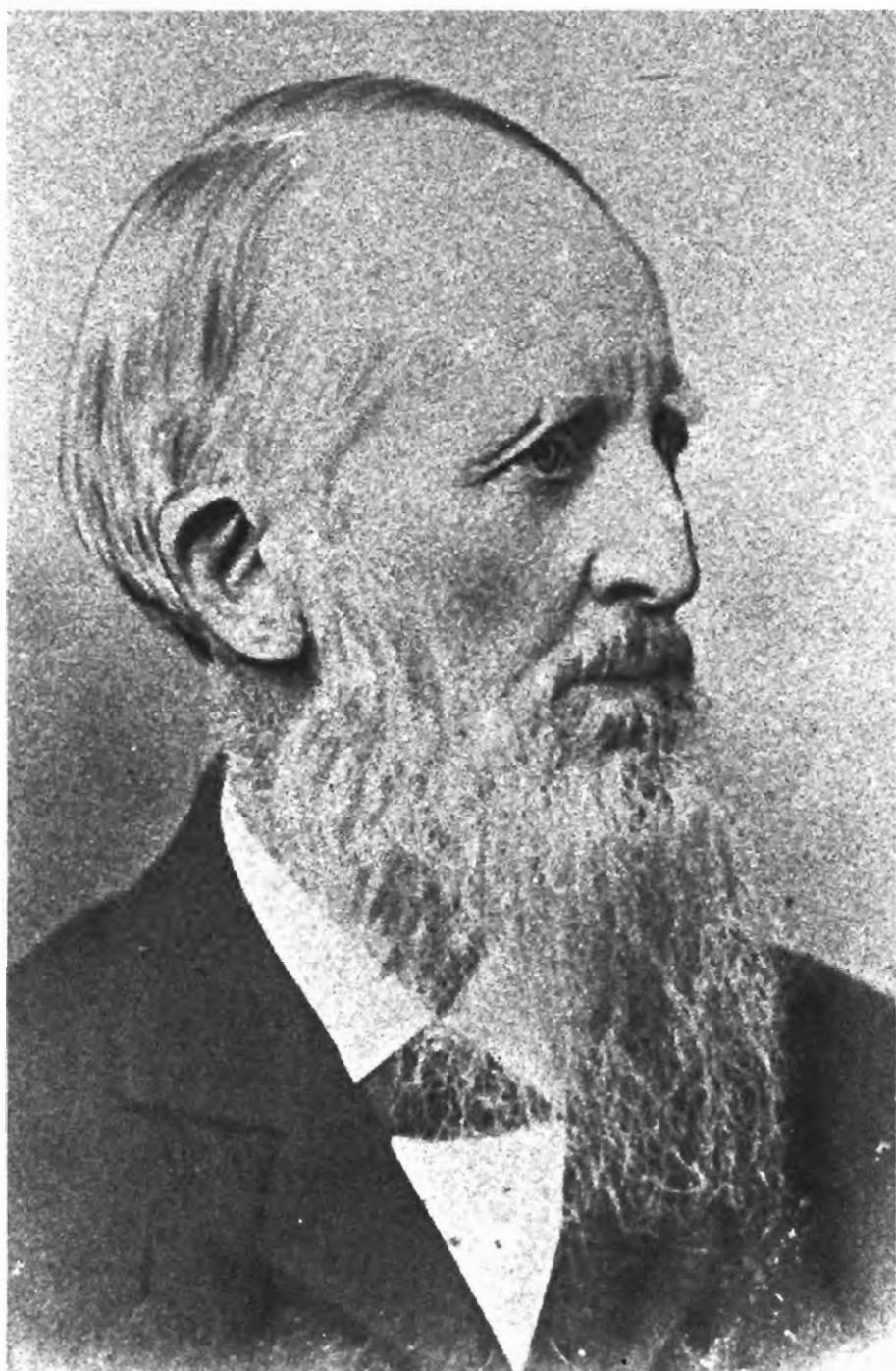
So they went to Delagoa Bay in Mocambique where the Rev. P. Ham and his wife landed, together with Mr. Smellekamp and their personal property including cases of religious literature sent by the Amsterdam commission for the Boers of Natalia. Mr. Martineau had died during the short voyage and so the schooner continued on its trip to Java. Whether it included a stop-over at Mauritius has not been verified. However, sometime during the following year the schooner did return to Delagoa Bay from Java where Mr. Smellekamp took passage back to Europe, later re-visiting South Africa to involve himself again in the affairs of the Dutch Trekker community.

The news of the British action in refusing the Rev. P. Ham permission to land at Port Natal whilst the *Brazilia* was actually there in May 1843 created extreme bitterness within the Boer communities but the basic result was that the unfortunate clergyman and his wife were now stranded at Delagoa Bay.

So in time the Boer community organised a small party of emigrant farmers to go by horse to Mocambique and we find Joachim Prinsloo, Gerrit R. C. Coetzee, and a youth Bezuidenhout leaving from Weenen in the latter part of the year 1843. Although they did in fact reach their destination their efforts were disastrous in that all the horses eventually died from disease and the men fell victims to malaria, Coetzee dying in Mocambique and Prinsloo succumbing 14 days after getting back to Weenen. Another attempt was made by a larger party of 50 Boers setting out from Winburg with waggons, oxen, and horses expressly to bring back the stranded minister from Delagoa Bay, but the route to the port in



Rev. Pieter Ham.



John Medley Wood, 'the Father of Natal Botany'.

Mocambique was through tsetse-fly infested regions and the men were forced to abandon their plan and return home.

In the interim tragedy had struck at Ham. He himself was afflicted with fever, coming close to death itself, and about the same time his wife gave birth to their first and only child which survived only a couple of weeks. Shortly afterwards the mother also succumbed to the dreaded fever. So the Rev. P. Ham was left in a terribly weak physical condition and a widower as well.

Fortunately, early in the New Year of 1844 a ship arrived at Delagoa Bay from Batavia and in view of the predikant's distressing position the captain reluctantly accepted him for the long voyage back to Europe. As it turned out, when the ship was sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, the captain was more or less obliged to call at Table Bay owing to sickness among his crew. So it was indeed fortunate for the Rev. P. Ham that he was enabled to land at Cape Town. Here he met an old school friend from Utrecht who took immediate care of the sick man. Thereafter Ham was befriended by the local community and persuaded to stay at the Cape and forget his past ordeals.

On recovering his health he resumed his religious calling and initially went to Paarl to offer his assistance. On 8 September 1844 he was enrolled by the D.R.C. of the Cape Colony as official assistant to the local congregation. His devotion to his duties and his tenacity of character were soon recognised, for on 26 February 1845 a formal recommendation was made by the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, Sir Peregrine Maitland, to the Secretary of State in England, Lord Stanley, in support of the application by the inhabitants of Franschoek (previously part of the Paarl circuit) for the appointment of a clergyman for the recently separated D.R.C. congregation. A new church building had just been completed but was without a resident predikant.

So it was, then, that the Rev. P. N. Ham became the first resident predikant of the Franschoek congregation, where he remained for 19 years from the date of his appointment on 14 September 1845 at a salary of £100 per annum. Shortly after this ecclesiastical appointment he seems to have found new purpose in life and married a young widow. The marriage took place at Wynberg in the Cape on 8 July 1846. The lady was Aletta Francina, born van Schoor in October 1815, and had been married in 1833 to a Scotsman of the landed gentry, Lieut. John Maitland of the 4th Madras Light Cavalry who died at Secunderabad in December 1835. The Rev. P. Ham and his wife Aletta were blessed with four children born during their stay at Franschoek.

Regrettably, differences developed between Ham and the local congregation. So on 9 May 1864 he decided to relinquish his post at Franschoek. For a short time the family lived at Stellenbosch where Ham took over the supervision of the Lutheran local community by whose members he was overwhelmed with kindness. However, his final call was to the Willowmore congregation where he and his family transferred in November 1865.

Here he made untiring efforts to spread his religious beliefs and convictions, concentrating on extensive 'huis-besoek' on foot and horseback in this widely scattered community. His rapidly declining physical condition

could not cope with the demands he was setting himself in the arduous Baviaans Kloof area. He arrived back at Willowmore completely exhausted and on the 19 September 1866 died, his age being 59 years. He left his wife Aletta with three surviving children. She herself passed away at Wynberg in 1884 in her 69th year.

Ham's life illustrates the hardships that were the inevitable accompaniment of pioneering in South Africa in the mid-19th century. His innocent involvement in the *Brazilia* affair was nearly a complete disaster and there is little doubt that he would have died at Delagoa Bay if the Dutch ship from Batavia had not arrived and given him a passage to the Cape. The story, then, is an interesting footnote in the early history of Natal.

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