

The Oldest Houses in Pietermaritzburg

The Voortrekker period of Pietermaritzburg's history is still characterised by more questions than answers. Who chose the site for the dorp? When and how was it laid out? Whom was it named after, and, the sole concern of this paper, how many, where and what type of buildings had been erected by 1843?

In addition to clarifying our picture of the built environment of embryonic Pietermaritzburg, this research identifies a number of Voortrekker abodes which are still standing.

The number, location and type of buildings extant in Pietermaritzburg at the time of British annexation has not been well documented, and not surprisingly, therefore, a number of conflicting opinions on the matter have been expressed.

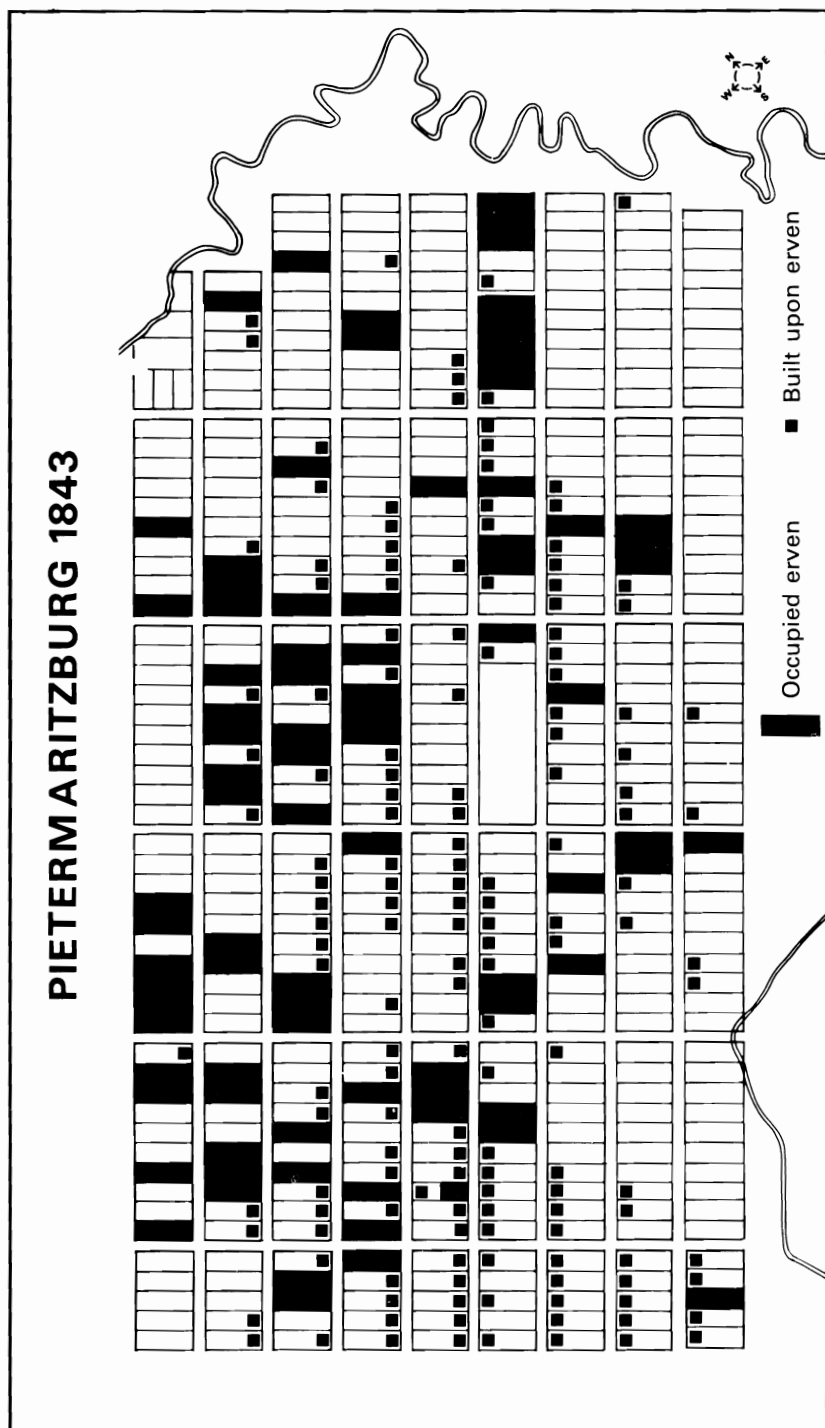
A correspondent to the *Grahamstown Journal* in 1844 asserted:

Were you here you would doubtless enquire about them (namely buildings springing up like mushrooms) and like mushrooms you would find they had withered away by a twelve hours sun if they ever existed. Be assured that the Buildings Report is all moonshine; for no buildings beyond the temporary hovels for present shelter, are in the course of erection at any place.

This adverse description was promptly refuted in the Pietermaritzburg newspaper, *De Natalier*:

In this part of the southern hemisphere there is no city, including Capetown, better situated or with a more regular layout than Pietermaritzburg. All the streets here are equally broad and run in parallel and straight lines. As far as the number of occupied or inhabitable houses (all built of stone or brick) is concerned, this number certainly exceeds the following inventory:

In the Burger Street	22 houses
Loop Street	28 houses
Longmarket Street	21 houses
Church Street	22 houses
Pietermaritz Street	16 houses
Berg Street	13 houses
Boom Street	7 houses
Greyling Street	3 houses
Total	132 houses



This number does not include the 11 new buildings which will probably be completed before the end of this month; and 30 temporary houses of wood erected by those who have not yet decided whether they will stay in the city or sell their property.

Well then — of these houses which are described by the shameless person as 'temporary hovels', at least half are favourably comparable to the houses in the old capital of Doctor Van Riebeeck as far as external appearance, solidity, and the arrangement of comfort inside the house are concerned. The houses of the following people are examples of this: Landsberg, Ohrtmann, Hansmeyer, Coqui, Boshof, Muller, Ripking, Poortman, Eick, Ferreira, Van der Merwe, Wolhuter, Botha, as well as 25 or 30 others.

Then one also has to consider the beautiful gardens behind these houses, which, for their neatness and the quality and the variation of their products, are a recommendation to their owners.

These, then, are the houses described by the mendacious person as 'mushrooms' . . .

(Translation: *De Natalier*, Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg)

The total of 162 houses (132 built of stone or brick plus 30 wooden structures enumerated by *De Natalier*), is corroborated¹ by Commissioner H. Cloete's 1843 Register of Erven Claimed in Pietermaritzburg (Table 1).

TABLE 1: A COMPARISON OF THE NUMBER OF HOUSES IN PIETERMARITZBURG LISTED BY H. CLOETE AND 'DIE NATALIER' RESPECTIVELY

STREET	CLOETE (1843)	'DE NATALIER' (1844)
Burger	24	22
Loop	26	28
Longmarket	25	21
Church	28	22
Pietermaritz	27	16
Berg	19	13
Boom	10	7
Greyling	2	3
	161	132

Cloete's report distinguished 'Built upon and Bona Fide occupied erven' from 'cultivated and occupied erven' without explanation, but he was probably distinguishing permanent from temporary houses. However, Cloete's report does not indicate the location of houses upon their respective erfs. Article 5 of the dorp regulations stipulated:

De woonhuizen zullen, naar aanwyging van een daartoe gekwalificeerd persoon, in den front moeten worden gebouwd en in eengelyke linie. (S.A. Archival Records, Natal No. 1, (1958) p. 295).

But which was the front of the erf? In dorps such as Graaff-Reinet rows of houses faced each other along every alternate longstreet, but this pattern was not followed in Pietermaritzburg. An 1851 sketch of the dorp, Plate 1, indicates rows of houses along Longmarket, Church and Pietermaritz Streets. This sketch along with slope considerations, viz. that the houses would be located at the higher end of the erfs, and Cloete's report were used



Plate 1: Pietermaritzburg from Fort Napier in 1851.

(Photograph: Natal Museum)

to compile Figure 1.² The double-storey house which stands on Erf 33 Boom Street, which has been accepted as 'The Oldest House in Town' and is a National Historical Monument, is notably absent in Figure 1. According to Cloete's report Erf 33 Boom Street was not 'Built Upon' although it had been enclosed and cultivated.³

The next step was to check Figure 1 in the field in order to answer the question: how many if any, of the 1843 houses have survived? Ten houses⁴, which occupy expected locations on erven 'Built Upon' in 1843, were identified in July 1983.⁵ Table 2 provides additional information on these ten dwellings.

Although each of these historic dwellings has been modified, their floor plan and construction materials point clearly to their historic character. They are all basically single storeyed rectangular plan cottages, with a loft, standing lengthwise to the street. Each of the dwellings contains thick walls — the smaller mudbrick wall cottages average 40 cms in thickness and the larger houses, whose walls were built with shale or burnt brick reach 60 cms in thickness.⁶ Yellow wood floor and ceiling boards, and in one instance a staircase, provide additional evidence. In terms then of architectural features, historical records and geographical location these dwellings are the oldest in Pietermaritzburg.

Six of these historic houses are worthy of conservation and restoration, and hence warrant further detail.

TABLE 2: *THE OLDEST HOUSES IN PIETERMARITZBURG*

STREET	ERF No.	PRESENT STREET NUMBER	LOT No.	ORIGINAL TITLE DEED
Burger	56	10 Burger Street	Rem Burpine	G. 384/1846 to J.J. Smit
Burger	81	241 Commercial Road	Rem 2781	G. 409/1846 to S.W. van der Merwe
Burger	1	10 Loop Street	Lot 2701	G. 329/1846 to P.H. Kritzinger
Loop	5	54 Longmarket Street	Sub 4 of 2605	G. 277/1846 to J.J. Viljoen
Loop	6	64/66 Longmarket Street	Rem 2606	G. 277/1846 to J.G. van Vuuren
Loop	41	420 Longmarket Street	Rem 2641	G. 313/1846 to C.F. Botha
Loop	42	428 Longmarket Street	Rem 2642	G. 314/1846 to H.A. Ripking
Berg	20	205 Berg Street	Rem 2220	G. 1846 to P.G. Pretorius
Berg	22	219 Berg Street	Rem 2222	G. 1846 to M.J. Fourie
Berg	42	417 Berg Street	Rem 2242	G. 1846 to F.J. Maritz



Plate 2: Oxenham's Bakery, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

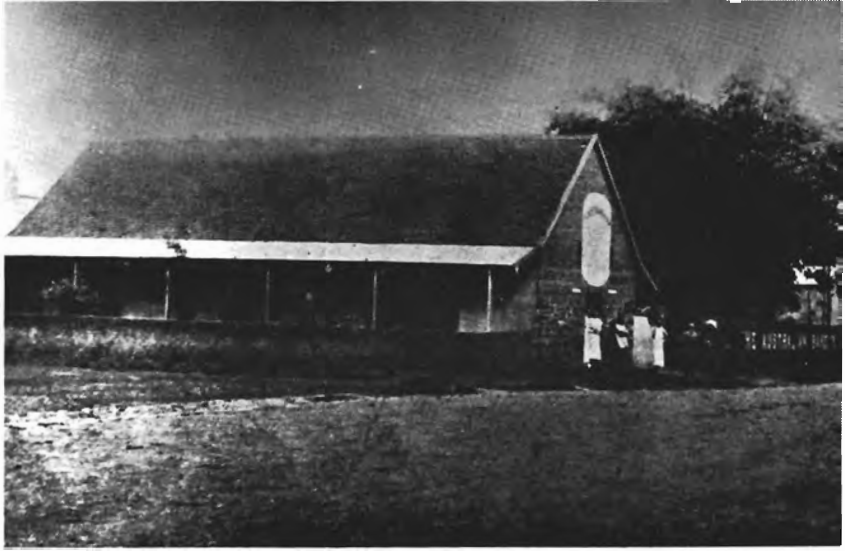


Plate 3: Oxenham's Bakery, 1896.

House van der Merwe (Old Oxenham's Bakery, 241 Commercial Road)

This house stands on Erf 81 Burger Street, which was built upon by 1843. The house was identified by *De Natalier* in 1844 as one of the best in the dorp, and the 1846 title deed shows the building in its present location. Although it has been substantially modified (Plate 2) the loft, yellow wood ceiling beams, walls and an 1896 photograph (Plate 3) all verify its longevity.



Plate 4: House Kritzing, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

House Kritzinger (10 Loop Street)

The erf on which this house stands was built upon by 1843, and according to Kearney (1967, p. 22) originally had end gables. As in the case of House van der Merwe this house has been 'Anglicised' by the addition of bay windows (Plate 4).



Plate 5: House Viljoen, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

House J.J. Viljoen (54 Longmarket Street)

This is probably the least altered early nineteenth century cottage in Pietermaritzburg (Plate 5). Mudbrick walls, an historic hearth, yellow wood floor and ceiling boards and its simple design make this house a good example of an ordinary house, and its restoration would therefore complement our preoccupation with monumental structures.



Plate 6: Houses van Vuuren, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

Houses J.G. van Vuuren (64, 66 Longmarket Street)

One of these two cottages (Plate 6) had been erected on this erf by 1843, but, because they are so similar in design and materials, it is not possible to determine which was built first. Number 64 may well be the last mudbrick, yellow wood and pan tile cottage in Pietermaritzburg.



Plate 7: House Botha, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

House Botha (420 Longmarket Street)

Erf 41 Loop Street was built upon by 1843, and an 1845 Title Deed indicates a house on the site of the existing house (Plate 7). In terms of documented evidence this is the oldest house in Pietermaritzburg. It was mentioned by *De Natalier* in 1844 as one of the better houses. Currently in a state of disrepair this house contains shale walls, pan tiles, a hayloft, yellow wood beams and wooden door frames.



Plate 8: House Ripking, 1983.

(Photograph: R.F. Haswell)

House Ripking (428 Longmarket Street)

This is another of the houses singled out as noteworthy by *De Natalier* in 1844. The erf had been built upon in 1843 (Plate 8). Apart from being more pretentious than the other houses which have been described in this paper, this house has added historical value by virtue of the fact that it was purchased by John Moreland, the Byrne Settler Agent, in 1859. It was described as 'one of the most English-like residences the city of Pietermaritzburg can boast of, not only in appearance but in the internal comfort and arrangements . . .' (Clark, 1969, p 283). The yellow wood staircase which leads to the loft is a gem in itself.

Conclusions

Much basic research concerning the early development of Pietermaritzburg still remains to be undertaken. This study claims only to have pointed the way. Pietermaritzburg is widely renowned for its late nineteenth century architecture. The conservation and restoration of the six early nineteenth century houses detailed herein would add considerably to the city's architectural record and reputation.

NOTES

- ¹ Hattersley (1938, 1951), Kearney (1967) and Gordon (1981) all accepted *De Natalier's* 1844 tally of houses without verification from Cloete's 1843 report.
- ² The location of Widow Retief's house and the Church of the Vow on Church Street lend further support to the locations proposed in Figure 1.
- ³ No dwelling is shown on Erf 33 Boom Street on the 1845 Town Plan of Pietermaritzburg drawn by Chas. Piers and P.L.G. Cloete, which is on display in the Natal Museum.
- ⁴ Although the Church of the Vow was originally a house it is not included in this tally of dwellings.
- ⁵ Since then the house at 417 Berg Street has been demolished.
- ⁶ Pistorius' brick and tile works, at the foot of Town Hill, began producing bricks in 1840, while shale was quarried at Ohrtmann's quarry to the east of the dorp.

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