

VOORTREKKER PIETER MAURITZ BURG

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Although the hegemony of the Voortrekkers in Natal was shortlived, their capital, Pieter Mauritz Burg, consisted of more than two hundred and fifty *erven* (stands) and contained more than one hundred and sixty houses by 1843, the date of the British annexation of Natal. Yet the Voortrekker period of Pietermaritzburg's development has received scant attention, and inaccurate conclusions have been drawn. No doubt the incompleteness of the pertinent archival material is partly the reason for this state of affairs, added to the fact that many of the records are written in *Nederlands-Afrikaans*, and hence are beyond the ken of unilingual English-speaking historians. Furthermore, conventional wisdom has it that the Voortrekker period is relatively unimportant because few relics have survived.

This paper attempts therefore to set the record straight by recreating as accurate a picture of the Voortrekker *dorp* (agrarian town) as written and artistic evidence will allow, and to identify extant Voortrekker relics: modern Pietermaritzburg emerges not just as the home of Victorian architecture, but as a repository of significant Voortrekker domestic architecture.

THE ARCHIVAL RECORD

In November 1837 the Retief party descended the Drakensberg into what is now Natal. Pieter Retief left the main body of his party in northern Natal while he led an advance party to the Bay of Natal. It is probable that Retief himself chose the site for the capital en route, because in a January 1837 letter Andries Pretorius, who had just returned to the Cape after a tour of Natal, wrote "Vierhonderd waens was op weg na die kant waar die nuwe stad sou aangelê word — n.m.l. in Natal — wat geleë sal wees aan 'n welgekose vallei, een dagreis van die Baai af."¹ Only the advance party led by Retief had passed through the area by the date of Pretorius's letter.

Piet Greyling, Retief's son-in-law, became commandant

of the laager which was formed on the present site of the *dorp* by July 1838. In his diary entry for 23rd October 1838 Erasmus Smit, the Voortrekker minister, recorded that the *dorp* had been named "Pieter Maritz Burg"² in honour of Pieter Retief and Gerrit Martiz.

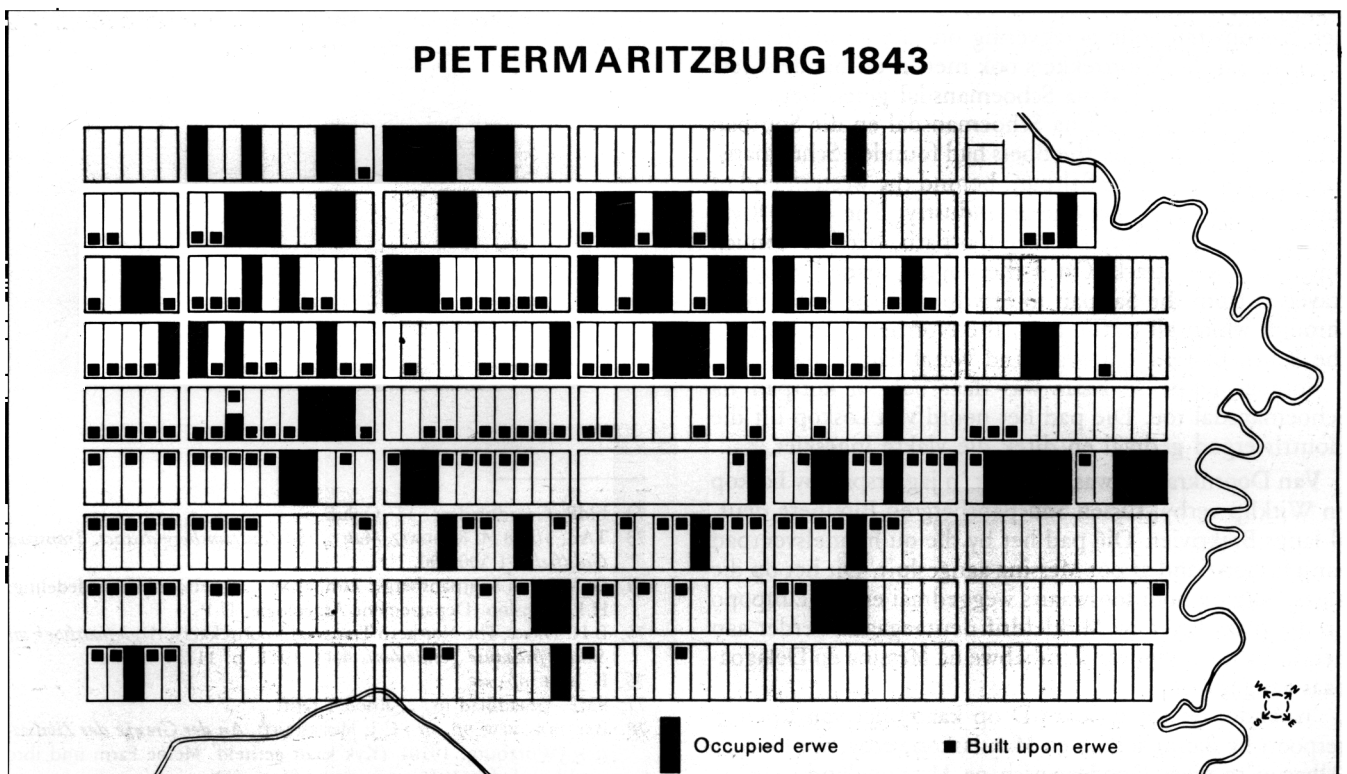
In the following month one Gideon Joubert visited Greyling's laager and noted the existence of a sizeable furrow which led water from the Dorpspruit to the cultivated *erven*.³

In February 1839 the Volksraad promulgated six regulations and instructions for *erf* occupants. The two most important from the *dorpsgesig* (town scape) point of view were Articles 4 and 5. Article 4 required *erven* to be planted within two months of purchase, and to be enclosed with a sod wall or wooden palisade. Article 5 stipulated: "De woonhuizen zullen naar aanwyzing van een daartoe gekwalificeerd persoon, in den front moeten worden gebouwd, en in een gelyke linie."⁴

The lines of houses and rows of *erven* meant that the fledgling *dorp* presented a picture of regularity and order-

1. G.S. PRELLER, *Andries Pretorius* (Johannesburg, 1937), p. 22.
2. H.F. SCHOON (ed.), *The diary of Erasmus Smit* (Cape Town, 1972), p. 143.
3. E.G. JANSEN, *Die Voortrekkers in Natal* (Cape Town, 1938), p. 22.
4. SOUTH AFRICA, STATE ARCHIVES, *South African archival records, Natal 1: Notule van die Natalse Volksraad . . . (1838-1845)* (Cape Town, [1958]), p. 295.

Figure The built environment of Pietermaritzburg in 1843 (Adapted from Cloete's Register)



liness. This broad scale regularity offset the fact that the *dorp's erven* varied considerably in size — the length of *erven* ranged from 460 to 479 English feet (140,2 to 146 meter). If Greyling had used a chain of Rhineland measure, the *erven* should have measured 450 Rhineland feet or 463,5 English feet (141,3 meter). It seems probable therefore that Greyling paced out the *erven*, and in somewhat of a hurry. It is also probable that the *erf* size of 50 by 150 paces owes its origin to Grahamstown, where Retief had been a leading citizen prior to the Great Trek. One hundred and fifty paces were simply the maximum length for an *erf* which could be fitted in on Grahamstown's site. But from this fortuitous origin 50 by 150 paces, or 150 by 450 feet (45,7 by 137,2 meter), became the standard *erf* size of the Retief party, and they left this imprint on Weenen, Utrecht and Lydenburg.

In March 1839 Andries Pretorius reported enthusiastically: "een groote, aangename, water ryk Dorp, Pieter Mauritz Burgh, begint dagelyks deszelfs hoofd boven de omliggende heuwels te verheffen — 300 fraaye erven zyn reeds opgemeten en gedeeltlyk beplant. Het dorp is gelegen aan die onderzyde van de Stinkhout Berg, op een distantie van 50 mylen van de Baai — heeft een schilderagtige ligging, en alle voordeelen van de natuur zoowel als plaatselyke ligging, maakt dezelve een der schoonste situaties waarvan ik geen voorbeeld in de kolonie (dit is die Kaapkolonie) weet".⁵

Pretorius's description has been discredited as a "pardonable exaggeration . . . to attract a further flow of emigration",⁶ and as "heeltemaal te vleiend".⁷ However, Commissioner Cloete's 1843 Register of Erven claimed at Pietermaritzburg indicates that more than 120 *erven* had in fact been granted by April 1839. If it is borne in mind that every adult male burgher could have claimed an *erf* in the *hoofstad*, Greyling would have had to lay out several hundred *erven*. A November 1840 letter which appeared in the newspaper *De Ware Afrikaan*, stated "Gy kunt u inderdaad niet verbeelden hoe snel deze Stad bebouwd wordt. Indien een aantal metzelaren alsook houtzaggers naar deze plaats kwam zonden zy een goed bestaan vinden".⁸ Pretorius's figure of 300 *erven* may therefore not be hyperbolic after all.

His reference to "Pieter Mauritz Burgh" casts doubt upon Smit's claim that the dorp was named after Retief and Maritz. The Volksraad Minutes, signed by J.S. Maritz, Gert Maritz's eldest brother, invariably used the name Pieter Maurits Burg from 1839 until October, 1843. According to Cachet "Mij werd verzekerd, dat men oorspronkelyk allen Pieter Maurits Retief wilde vernoemen, doch dat na den dood van Gert Maritz, Maurits in Maritz is overgegaan".⁹ However, neither Retief's birth nor his baptismal certificates contain a Christian name other than Pieter. According to Voight "in March 1839 Pietermaritzburg was established as a township, the old name of Pieter Mauritsberg being changed in order to do honour to the memory of Gerrit Maritz as well as that of Retief".¹⁰ There is no reference to a name change in the Volksraad Minutes, but these are incomplete. All that can safely be concluded at this stage is that the spelling of the *dorp's* name changed in October 1843.

Commissioner Cloete's 1843 "Register of Erven" distinguished between unoccupied, occupied, and built-upon *erven*. His tally of 161 buildings is corroborated by the 1844 listing of houses in the newspaper *De Natalier*. Thus although the original, or a Voortrekker plan, of the *dorp* does not appear to have survived, it is possible to reconstruct the 1843 plan (Figure 1). Pieter Mauritz Burg was " 'n egte boeredorp", in that agriculture rather than commerce — the hallmark of a town — was the dominant land use. Non-agricultural activities, such as Pistorius's brick and tile works

and Visagie's mill, were located on the *dorp's* perimeter, as was the cemetery. The peripheral location of the cemetery was normal for a *dorp*, but its extension to accommodate Catholic, Wesleyan, and Church of England plots meant that Pietermaritzburg did not have an adjacent church and churchyard, as is the norm in British settler towns.

The site chosen admirably met the prime requirement of all *dorps*: it was irrigable. A canal diverted water from the appropriately named Dorpspruit to the higher end of Kerkstraat, from where it was diverted into furrows which ran down each of the long streets. One can only concur that "many boers have an especial talent for. . . hydrostatics".¹¹

Apart from Pietermaritz (or was it also originally Pieter Mauritz?) and Greyling Streets, the rest of the names given to the long streets appear to have been selected from what may be termed the first generation of Afrikaner streetnames. Kerk, Berg, Loop and Langmark were common streetnames in all our historic *dorps*, and can be traced back to pre-English Cape Town. The Afrikaners clearly had a common image of what went into the making of a *dorp*, and Pieter Mauritz Burg was a model example of it. The cross streets were not named until September 1844.¹²

By 1843 the *dorp* did not yet have a Dutch Reformed Church. Cloete's Register states that the building of a parsonage on *erf* 34 Longmarket Street — the site of the Church of the Vow — was in progress. Being a parsonage it was subject to Article 5, and was thus built at street's edge facing Kerkstraat. Pieter Mauritz Burg had to wait until 1857 before a Dutch Reformed Church of fitting proportions was erected in a more central location within the large *kerkmarkplein* (church-market square).

THE ARTISTIC RECORD

Clearly the *dorp* was by 1843 a sizeable and built-up place. The earliest paintings and sketches of Pietermaritzburg post-date the arrival of British troops in August 1843, and the subsequent erection of Fort Napier. Nonetheless, the artistic material reinforces the archival record pertaining to the Voortrekker period, and in many instances transforms much of the written record into visual form.

5. *Graham's Town Journal*, 11.4.1839.
6. A.F. HATTERSLEY, *Pietermaritzburg panorama* (Pietermaritzburg, 1938), p. 19.
7. B.J. LIEBENBERG, *Andries Pretorius in Natal* (Pretoria, 1977), p. 51.
8. SOUTH AFRICA, STATE ARCHIVES, *op. cit.*, p. 354.
9. F. LION CACHET, *De worstelstrijd der Transvalers* (Pretoria, 1898), p. 210.
10. J.C. VOIGHT, *Fifty years of history of the Republic of South Africa (1795-1845)*, II (Cape Town, 1969), p. 129.
11. J. ROBINSON, *Notes on Natal: an old colonist's book for new settlers* (London, 1872), p. 182.
12. SOUTH AFRICA, STATE ARCHIVES, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

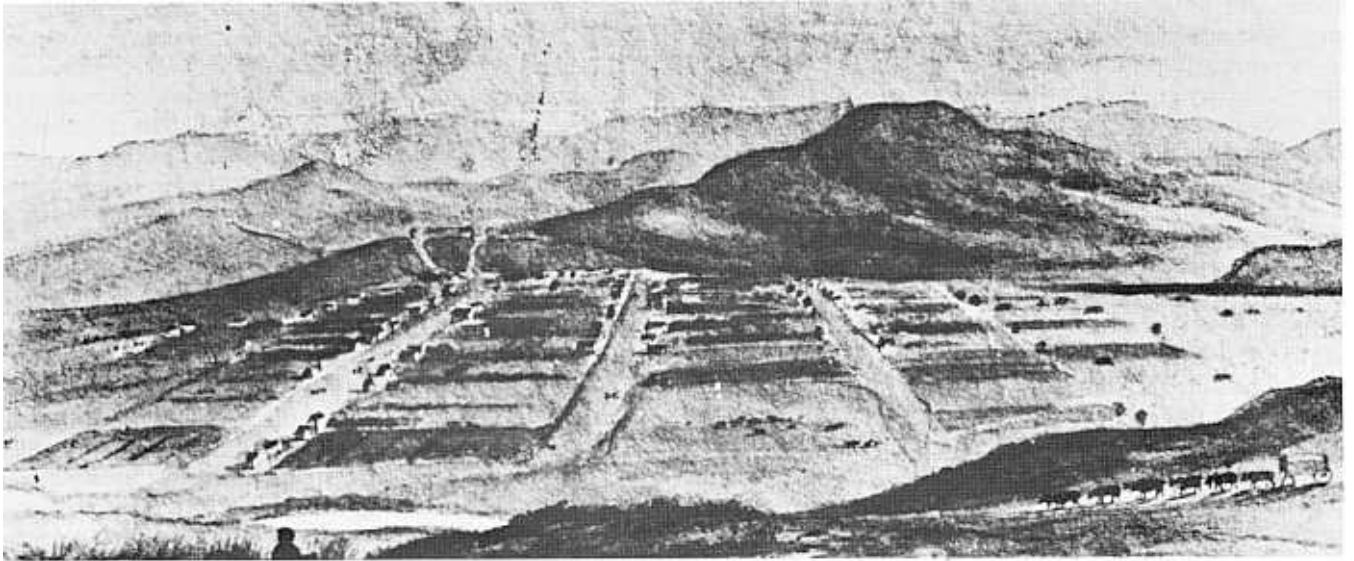


Plate 1: Pietermaritzburg circa 1844

PHOTOGRAPH: LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUM, DURBAN

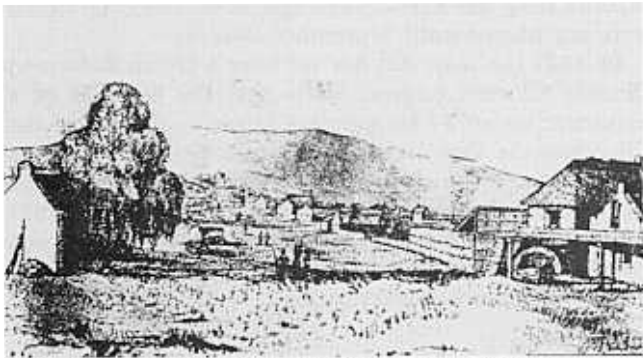


Plate 2: Upper Church Street, Pietermaritzburg, circa 1844

PHOTOGRAPH: NATAL MUSEUM, PIETERMARITZBURG

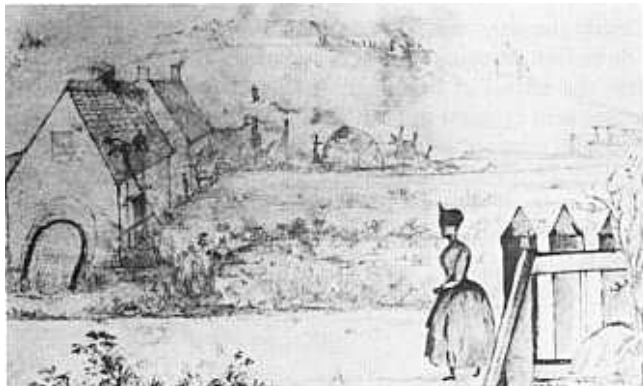


Plate 3: Upper Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, 1847

PHOTOGRAPH: LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUM, DURBAN

Plate 1 is a view of the *dorp* from the north-east. The rows of houses and *erven* stand out, as does the Dorpspruit in the foreground and Fort Napier in the background. Plate 2 provides a closer look, circa 1843, of upper Church Street with Visagie's Mill prominent. Plate 3 provides further detail. The location of Fort Napier on the hill in the background suggests that the pair of Voortrekker houses, one being thatched, faced onto upper Longmarket Street. Note the palisade as regulated in Article 4. Plate 4 is an 1851 view of Pietermaritzburg, looking down Longmarket Street from Fort Napier. The rows of houses, including several of the type shown in Plate 3, are in compliance with Article 5, whereas early British buildings, such as the rectangular school and the steep-pitched roof church in the central block stand out because they are 'out of place'.

In combination Cloete's Register and the artistic record suggested where houses had been built by 1843. The existing buildings on these historically built-upon *erven* were inspected in 1983, and eleven existing buildings appear to be of 1843 vintage. Thick walls of mudbrick or shale, hay lofts, yellow wood floors and/or ceilings and location at street's edge were all clues to Voortrekker origin. All the Voortrekker-period buildings have been altered, but an historic sketch and photograph enable us to compare the contemporary and nineteenth-century appearance of two of the houses.

Plate 4: Pietermaritzburg from Fort Napier, 1851

PHOTOGRAPH: NATAL MUSEUM, PIETERMARITZBURG





Plate 5: 428 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, 1850
 PHOTOGRAPH: LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUM, DURBAN



Plate 6: 428 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, 1984
 PHOTOGRAPH: R.F. HASWELL



Plate 7: Oxenham's Bakery, 1890
 PHOTOGRAPH: PRIVATE COLLECTION



Plate 8: Oxenham's Bakery, 1984
 PHOTOGRAPH: R.F. HASWELL



Plate 9: House in upper Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, 1890
 PHOTOGRAPH: NATAL MUSEUM, PIETERMARITZBURG



Plate 10: House in upper Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, 1984
 PHOTOGRAPH: R.F. HASWELL

Plates 5 and 6 are of the house which has stood since 1843 on *erf* 42 Loop Street. It was built for H.A. Ripking and sold to John Moreland, the Byrne Settler agent, in 1859. It must have been one of the more prestige and English-like houses in the *dorp*.

Plates 7 and 8 show the changing face of the house which has stood on *erf* 81 Burgher Street since 1843. It was probably built by the original *erf* claimant S.W. van der Merwe, but was later used as a bakery.

Plates 9 and 10 show that the Voortrekker house which has stood on *erf* 5 Loop Street since 1843 has been altered very little. In 1890 it was still shielded from the road by a typical stoep vine.

CONCLUSION

Those scholars who are concerned with the past or present appearance of places should regard artistic evidence as a primary source of information — especially if the archival record is incomplete.

Those buildings of the 1838-1843 period which still adorn the streets of Pietermaritzburg constitute a rich heritage. The Voortrekker abodes, however humble, complement the later Victorian townscape features for which Pietermaritzburg is renowned. Not only do they better convey a sense of the city's embryonic history, but they are more representative of the ordinary nineteenth-century houses, which constituted the bulk of the early city's buildings, than the later Victorian edifices. Yet none of these Voortrekker-period buildings is protected, and several could be demolished in the near future. ©