



CITY OF CAPE TOWN
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STAD KAAPSTAD

Stories of the South Peninsula

Historical research, stories and heritage tourism opportunities in
the South Peninsula



SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

The peninsula from Cape Point Nature Reserve

*Prepared for the City of Cape Town by C. Postlethwayt, M. Attwell & K. Dugmore Ström
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Making progress possible. Together.

Background

The primary objective of this project was to prepare a series of 'story packages' providing the content for historical interpretive stories of the 'far' South Peninsula. Stories cover the geographical area of Chapman's Peak southwards to include Imhoff, Ocean View, Masiphumelele, Kommetjie, Witsand, Misty Cliffs and Scarborough, Plateau Road, Cape Point, Smitswinkel Bay to Miller's Point, Boulders, Simon's Town, Red Hill, Glencairn and Fish Hoek to Muizenberg.

The purposes for which these stories are to be told are threefold, namely to support tourism development; to stimulate local interest; and to promote appropriate and sustainable protection of heritage resources through education, stimulation of interest and appropriate knowledge.

To this end, the linking of historical stories and tourism development requires an approach to story-telling that goes beyond the mere recording of historic events. The use of accessible language has been a focus. Moreover, it requires an approach that both recognises the iconic, picture-postcard image of parts of Cape Town (to which tourists are drawn initially), but extends it further to address the particular genius loci that is Cape Town's 'Deep South', in all its complexity and coloured by memory, ambivalences and contradictory experiences. We believe there is a need to balance the more conventional approach, which selects people or events deemed worthy of commemoration (for example, the Battle of Muizenberg) to tell the story of places, by interweaving popular memory and culture into these recordings (for example, the rich Muslim culture that existed in Simon's Town before the removal under the Group Areas Act).

Thus, these are stories, familiar and unfamiliar, that link intangible heritage with (largely) material forms and are about real-life characters and events that have shaped our past. The tone of these stories is conversational in order to engage local residents and tourists alike, and can be utilised in story-telling mode (by tour guides for example) or to fulfil on-site interpretive requirements.

Stories have been selected to balance historical themes from prehistory, through pre-colonial to colonial settlement, apartheid and democratic South Africa. The history of Cape Town's South Peninsula has been very ably and comprehensively recorded by many of its residents, and we wish to acknowledge and give thanks to all those cited as references.

Referencing

The stories are intended for popular consumption. Therefore, the traditionally detailed referencing that would be expected of historical research was not regarded as appropriate in this instance, although full accuracy in terms of content and referencing has been sought. All references utilised have been listed. In respect of images, reference sources have been provided, which are open-source as far as possible.

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Contact details

Email: heritage.management@capetown.gov.za

Web: www.capetown.gov.za/environment

Environmental & Heritage Management branch

Environmental Resource Management department

City of Cape Town

Good Hope Subcouncil Building

5th floor, 44 Wale Street

Cape Town, 8001

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5. Whaling in False Bay: Then and now

(C. Postlethwayte)

Travel writer Paul Theroux, in his *Dark Star Safari*, describes a train journey he took to Simon's Town one hot, windy Sunday morning. As the train pulls out of Fish Hoek, he saw a most peculiar sight from the window: close to the shore, an enormous flapping whale's tail; so near, a swimmer could have reached out to touch it. His fellow travellers casually ignored it as an everyday occurrence. There can be few other places in the world where whale-watching on your daily commute can be expected when the southern right come in to calve.



Whales sailing.

And people do like a close encounter with whales – many feel a deep reverence and awe for them. We respond to them more intensely than to many other animal species, and whale-watching has become a pilgrimage for many. False Bay is a whale-watching mecca, since it provides ideal calving conditions between June and November. The bay teems with these giant mammals, mating, calving and rearing their young, and giving spectacular displays of power and elegant water acrobatics. Several species of whale come into the bay, including Bryde's whale, the humpback whale (the one that 'sings') and the 'killer whale' or orca. By far the most common, however, is the southern right whale.

But for some time in Cape Town's past, hunting rather than observing whales was the order of the day. In fact, the southern right whale is so named because she was the 'right whale to catch' – she had an abundance of baleen and oil, moved slowly enough for the rowing

(rowing!) boats to approach, and her carcass floated. In the early 1800s, whaling was a way of life for many at the Cape, ranked as the third-highest income-earning industry (behind agriculture and wine-making) in the Cape Colony between 1820 and 1840. The meat was consumed and the blubber used to make candles, soap and as oil in lamps (including at the then newly constructed lighthouses at Cape Point and Roman Rock). The baleen was used in corsetry. The settlements along the Cape Peninsula's False Bay coastline used the enormous whalebones for fencing and as land survey beacons, since they were hardier than wood. Bones could also be used decoratively around the house as well as for furniture. The famous astronomer Sir John Herschel (who lived in Cape Town for some time to complete his survey of the southern skies, and whose writings on "that mystery of mysteries" – evolution – influenced Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* following the latter's visit to Herschel in Cape Town), on travelling between Simon's Town and Muizenberg in 1835, wrote in his diary that on the sand along the coast were "abundant Ribs, Jaws and vertebrae of whales, whitened ... by the weather. It is a desolate scene - Fish Hook (sic) Bay and the road between it and Kalk Bay is skirted with houses of the Whale fishers, and a terrific display of Skeleton shapes it exhibits - Ribs, Jaws etc. form great fences and Enclosures - nay houses Roofs, Walls etc."¹¹



Whale bones were used to mark boundaries before fences were erected.

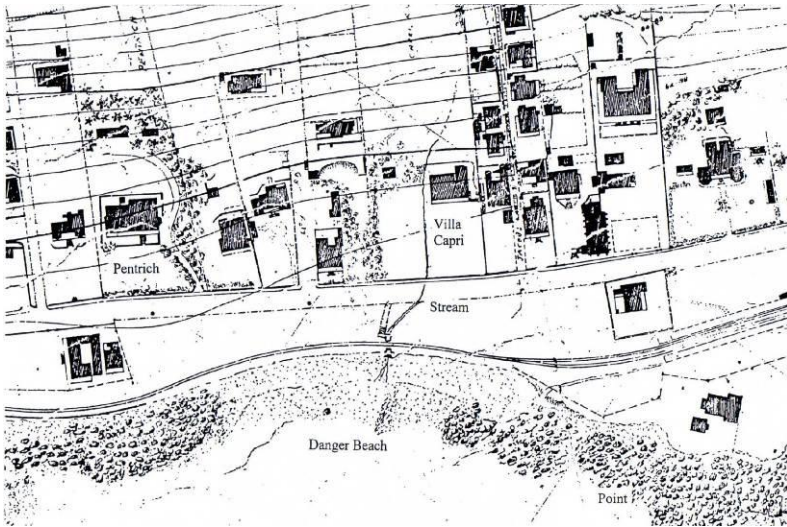
Whaling in False Bay began in 1806 and ended in 1935 when southern right whales received international protection from commercial whaling, by which time their numbers were terribly depleted. It was only as late as 1986, however, that South Africa supported an international moratorium on all commercial whaling, and finally fully protected all whales in South African waters under the Marine Living Resources Act of 1998.

The first whaling station was established at Seaforth in Simon's Town. However, the Navy complained bitterly that the smell of the boiling blubber would have a harmful effect on the health of the troops manning the batteries on either side, so it was moved to the less populated area of Kalk Bay. However, as Kalk Bay grew, especially after the arrival of the railway in 1883, so again did the outcry about the stench created from the decomposing carcasses. By 1902, whaling at Kalk Bay and St James ceased, and the whale carcasses were then dragged ashore along Muizenberg beach east of Sandvlei, where no residents could be offended. Whaling stations were also established at Miller's Point and Fish Hoek. The last

¹¹ Tredgold (1985) p 158.

whale taken in False Bay was in 1927, by which time the industry was in significant decline due to excessive whaling.

One can still find remnants of these activities in St James, where the historic Villa Capri at 86 Main Road was once a whaling station. Below it is a long stone-built cellar, running the full length of the house, which could accommodate a small whaling boat (which were long and narrow), while the back section has a raised platform with compartments along the back,



STUART-FINDLAY, D.

Elements of St James whaling. (E.W.Attridge map 1915)

which were presumably used as slave quarters, but could also have been used for storing barrels of oil and whaling equipment. There used to be a blubber pot on the grounds, and the corner posts of the fence were of whale bone. Pentrich (1 Pentrich Road) was the other whaling station. Whale carcasses were tied to the flat, sloping reef of rock called The Point alongside Danger beach, where the eye-bolts may still be visible.

At Miller's Point, the concrete foundations of the whale blubber cauldrons remain near the tidal pool (a braai has been built on top of it). In Fish Hoek, opposite Skeleton Rock on present-day Jager's Walk (also known as Cat Walk), one used to see the winch and eye-bolts used to haul the whale carcasses up onto the rocks, while the oldest building in the bay – 'Uitkyk' – above it was one of the whaling houses where blubber pots used to stand.



POSTLETHWAY, C.

Miller's Point remnants of the whale blubber cauldron.

Whaling was an extremely dangerous affair in those days. The men operated from small, narrow rowing boats, pointed at both ends, made from pine and built lightly for manoeuvrability and speed. Local whalers often obtained them from the whale-catcher sailing ships of New England on their return journey north once their hunting expeditions were



Painting "Uitkyk Oos" by renowned South African artist Tinus de Jong in the Fish Hoek library, donated by long-time owners of Uitkyk, the Mossop family.

over. They carried a crew of six – the harpooner, the helmsman and three or four oarsmen. The harpoon was attached to the boat by a long rope. Very often, the boats would be dragged over long distances by the harpooned whale. Once it was killed, it had to be left in the bay, as the boats were too small to drag the carcass back to the station. The crew noted the bearings and then returned to inform the heavier fishing vessels where to retrieve the carcass.

Abdullah Moses, who was born in Simon's Town in 1884, recalls vividly how all the youngsters in the community (including him) were lookouts: When a whale was spotted, they would light a smoke fire and guide the whaler to the whale: "When we saw that the boat was in position for striking, we would put the fire out and anxiously wait for the results. On a Saturday morning, a whale was sighted in Jaffer's Bay (Cole Point) ... The whale was duly harpooned by Mr Abdol Clark. The line was allowed to run free and then secured to the bollard in the whaler. The whale towed the boat towards the open sea and took its first stop for a rest at a point about where the dockyard lighthouse now stands. It then pulled out along the coast in one long haul to Miller's Point. All the people ran along the coast roads and paths following the whale hunt. I ran, and ran, and ran, following the chase as far as Miller's Point ... From Miller's Point, we watched the whale towing the boat out in the direction of Smitswinkel Bay. We could go no further, as the going after Miller's Point was too difficult and, besides, we were too tired. We later had news from the boat when they returned empty-handed, that the rope had to be cut as the whale was pulling them out to sea and they had no chance to come near to the whale to deal the death-blow with the lance."

KLOPPER, F.



Fig. 5.9: A whaling boat with crew at Boulders, of the sort used by the Auret's at Muizenberg. (Cape Argus Weekly Edition, 27/5/1903; SA Library).

Moses goes on to recount another episode near Roman Rock (Simon's Town) on a beautiful calm day, when a whale boat, manned by the same crew, harpooned a whale, which towed them out to sea again: "A calf was with the whale and every time the skipper tried to lance her, the calf was always in the way. The skipper then lost his head and stuck the calf with the lance. The calf sank to the bottom and the mother went to lift the calf.

When she saw that the calf was dead, she went to make a second attempt to lift, came up and gave a SCREAM. She jumped out of the water and charged the boat. All the crewmen could do was to reverse the boat and try to back away. The whale swung around and bit the bows and forward part of the boat clean off. The crew was thrown into the water and had to hang on until help came from a second boat ... two hours later. The whale continued its charge from the boat right out to sea and was not seen again."¹²

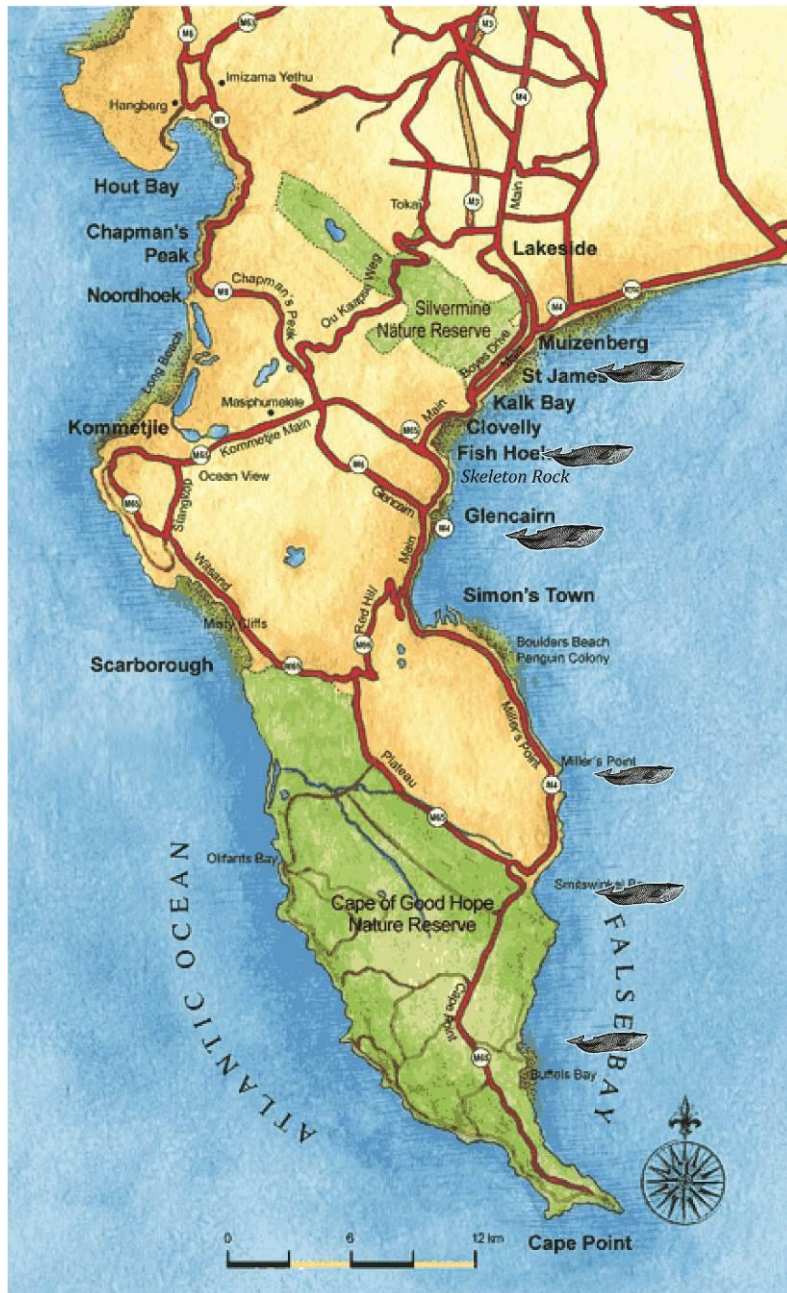


WALKER, M.

Skeleton Rock

¹² Brock, Brock & Willis (1975).

It is a wonder that the whales have returned to False Bay with this terrible history. But return they have, left in peace, and we now have the privilege of watching them at close range, although there is strict legislation as to how close to them one may approach (no closer than 300 m). Where once were whaling stations and blubber pots, are now whale-watching sites. At Miller's Point, for example, there are two deep pools, just to the north of the Point, where the whales are able to come in close to the shore and their huge sleek bodies can often be seen breaching. So, why not take that marvellously scenic train ride through Muizenberg, St James, Kalk Bay, Fish Hoek and through to Simon's Town, and perhaps you too will see the whales at play!



Whale-watching in False Bay, Base Plan.

Acknowledgements and disclaimer

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