



CITY OF CAPE TOWN  
ISIXEKO SASEKAPA  
STAD KAAPSTAD

# Stories of the South Peninsula

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**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  
June 2014*

## **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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## **6. An alliance with the sun: Randlords and diamond magnates**

**(M. Attwell)**

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Imperial architect Herbert Baker once wrote that in order to create successful architecture in South Africa, architects needed to “enter into an alliance with the sun”. The strong sunlight of the local environment, deep shadows, textured and moulded surfaces, and scenic landscapes carried with them challenges for the Cape architect. They also presented unique opportunities to design holiday homes of architectural value and interest along the narrow coastal strip from Muizenberg to St James, reflecting the interests of the day, using the textures and local materials of the vernacular, and adapting styles and craftsmanship to reflect the status of the owner.

Muizenberg, St James and Kalk Bay were favoured recreational destinations for the businessmen and parliamentarians of Cape Town. Their holiday homes and the homes and businesses of local fishermen and traders existed side by side for many years. The move by the wealthy to the South Peninsula to enjoy the bathing and relaxation opportunities increased with the extension of the rail line from Wynberg to Kalk Bay. From the 1880s, the sleepy settlements along the coastline grew as the successful local merchants and businessmen discovered the delightful opportunities of having a weekend home close to the sea. Some 50 years later, the coastline was known on the tourist map, with well-established hotels receiving visitors who arrived by mail ship.

The really wealthy holiday residents were the randlords and magnates of South Africa, international businessmen who had made fortunes in gold and diamond mining. Many had holiday homes in and around Muizenberg. In establishing their holiday homes here, they were following the example of the former Prime Minister of the Cape and a local imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes. Always a trendsetter, he had a cottage in Muizenberg, where he came on occasion to enjoy the breezes and relax.

Interestingly, the trend for homes along the South Peninsula coast gained further impetus after his death, and Muizenberg remained a popular choice. Some of the homes of the magnates no longer exist or were owned by them for a short time. Most of the holiday homes built by the randlords and diamond pioneers remain in private ownership, although fortunately, two are open to the public. They are Rhodes Cottage, which is now a museum, and the Casa Labia, a restaurant, cultural centre and art gallery. Who were the mining

magnates who followed Rhodes's example and built holiday homes at Muizenberg, and where are their holiday homes?

### **Vergenoeg, Royal Road, Muizenberg**

Vergenoeg means "far enough". When it was built for the diamond magnate, friend and confidant of Cecil Rhodes, Sir Alpheus Fuller Williams, it was an isolated place, built on the dunes beyond Muizenberg, near the estuary of the Sandvlei. It faced the sea of False Bay, allowing the family of Sir Alpheus and his guests complete privacy and relaxation. Today, it has lost none of its impact nor its sense of gazing out to sea, despite currently being surrounded by high walls and parking areas on the landward side.



*Vergenoeg, Royal Road, Muizenberg*

Vergenoeg dates back to 1903, when it was designed by Herbert Baker and Francis Masey for Alpheus Williams (1874-1953). It was close to Baker's own holiday home, which he called Sandhills, also at that time ensconced in the dunes. The design of the house followed Baker's Cape Revival ideas – a white-plastered twin-gabled building linked by a veranda.

Since Baker left Cape Town after the Anglo-Boer War, in 1902, it is likely that the inspiration for the house – the Cape-style, high, ornate gables with their plaster mouldings, and its powerful relationship with the sea – was Masey's. Baker and Kendall and, later, Baker, Kendall and Morris, retained a relationship with the Alpheus Williams family, making a series of additions and improvements over the years. Like many Baker and Masey houses, it is multi-gabled with the tall, ornamental gables and very tall chimneys in the English style – a curious and attractive mixing of styles best described as Cape Revival Arts and Crafts. Walls were plastered and white-washed, enhanced by moulded plasterwork, allowing a play of light and shadow – the "alliance with the sun" that Baker referred to.

Sir Alpheus Williams was a mining engineer – the son of Gardner Frederick Williams, an American mining engineer, who grew up in the mining camps of California and joined the De Beers Diamond Mining Company in Kimberley in 1887. He transferred his vast experience and knowledge of his career in gold mining to diamonds. His knowledge of the technical side of mining was of inestimable value to the success of De Beers at a crucial period in its existence.



*Alpheus Williams and his family on holiday, 1918.*



*Alpheus Fuller Williams as a mining executive at De Beers.*

Williams succeeded his father as manager of De Beers in 1905, where he remained until his retirement in 1931. Like his father, he was an innovative manager and mining technologist, and managed De Beers during a crucial period of growth.

Although based in Kimberley, he and his wife maintained the Vergenoeg house as a family holiday home for more than half a century. They entertained widely with groups of acquaintances, including politicians, visiting diplomats and statesmen. The architect James Morris remembers meeting General Jan Smuts at Vergenoeg. Alpheus Williams retained a lifelong affection for Vergenoeg, spending much of his retirement there, and also died there in 1953.

Private home: Not accessible to the public.

### **Sandhills, Beach Road, Muizenberg**

While not one of the mining magnates who lived at Muizenberg, Herbert Baker, from the architectural firm Baker and Masey, designed many of their homes and offices. Baker was an early confidant of Rhodes, and moved in the same circles as the mining men and financiers whose houses he designed and whose custom he sought. He also sought to translate many of Rhodes's ideas about architecture regionalism and nationalism into the buildings he designed – some, of course, at Muizenberg.

Baker had already undertaken a number of commissions for Rhodes by 1899, including the Prime Minister's residence at Groote Schuur. He relied on the prestige attached to his role as Rhodes's architect to advance his business. It was therefore probably inevitable that when Rhodes acquired a cottage at Muizenberg, Baker would follow. As at Vergenoeg, he designed a home for himself facing directly onto the beach amongst the dunes, and a short ride away from Rhodes's cottage.



Sandhills was a variant of the twin-gabled dwelling type linked by a veranda, which allowed protection from the harsh light of the Muizenberg sunshine. It was more modest than Vergenoeg, consisting of a single storey and set on a high sandstone plinth. The house was a design experiment, and not an entirely successful one at that. Baker designed it as a courtyard house with a central atrium – a new version of an “alliance with the sun” and, in this case, the wind as well. Baker had not fully considered the southeasters that blew fiercely at Muizenberg in the summer months. When the winds blew, the fine white sand from the dunes covered not only the veranda, but blew into the atrium, covering the floors. Baker retained the house, despite moving away from Cape Town, first to Johannesburg and then London. He returned with his family occasionally for holidays at Sandhills.

Sandhills is currently one of four contiguous houses in Beach Road designed by Baker's firm in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The other, similarly modest houses are called Rokeby, Crawford Lea and Swanbourne. Today, all four carefully restored and adapted buildings form part of the St Ledger Retirement Home.

The retirement home is not open to the public.



*Herbert Baker as a young man.*



*Sandhills today.*



## **Rust en Vrede, Main Road, Muizenberg**

Considered one of the gems of the Main Road strip at Muizenberg, Rust en Vrede is an impressive, high multi-gabled building linked by deep colonnades and verandas. More than any of the homes of the mining magnates, it is a statement of entering into an "alliance with the sun". The plastered surfaces, the textures, the moulded parapets and the deep shadows of the colonnades create an essay in sunlight and shade. There is an impressive side entrance also, with high, elongated gables.



*Rust en Vrede from Boyes Drive.*

Cecil Rhodes intended Rust en Vrede to be his new seaside home, and asked Baker to produce sketches to this end. The plan was for a multi-gabled house on a great stone plinth, where Rhodes could see the sea through "white columns" to the distant mountains in False Bay. However, by this time, Rhodes knew he was dying. By 1902, heart disease was ravaging his body, and his kidneys and lungs were beginning to fail. However, work proceeded, and at the time of his death, a lone sandstone wall for Rust en Vrede along the Main Road had been completed.

The grand house was completed in 1903, and was atypical of Rhodes's love of simplicity. "I like teak and white-wash," he told his architect, "make it big and simple".

The building project was taken over by his loyal friend Abe Bailey, and remained true to the original design. No expense was spared. In true Arts and Crafts style, every aspect of the house and garden was designed around a series of guiding principles and ideas. Landscape design, garden furniture, interior design, including wall hangings and custom-made furniture to fit the rooms, all received careful attention.

Abe Bailey was a local boy made good, born in Cradock in 1864. He moved to Barberton during the gold rush, moved by stories of great wealth and fabulous opportunities. He had a rocky start, but with bold investments and acquisition of farms rich in gold ore, he became one of the most successful of the mining magnates, and certainly one of the richest.

During his early gold mining years, he met Cecil Rhodes, whom he tried to persuade to get more involved in gold mining ventures. Rhodes oddly failed to capitalise on the emergent gold industry as Bailey did. Mentored by Rhodes, Bailey entered politics, taking over Rhodes's old Parliamentary seat of Barkley East.

By the 1890s, Bailey was one of the world's richest men, commuting between London and South Africa. He married into the British aristocracy and was active in international affairs.



*Sir Abe Bailey in retirement at Rust en Vrede. Bailey's Grave, Boyes Drive, above Rust en Vrede.*

He was a sportsman, enjoying a good game of cricket; an avid art collector, and collector of mainly Africana; a gambler; a farmer, and a lover of the countryside, both in England and South Africa. He never forgot his humble beginnings, and was a generous philanthropist. He retained a great love for the country that presented him with the enormous opportunities he had.

He also retained a great affection for Rust en Vrede, and entertained there frequently. One



*FISHER, R.*

*Gate and entrance to Rust en Vrede from Main Road, Muizenberg.*

of his guests was the crime writer Agatha Christie, who visited Cape Town in 1922, and wrote: "Lunch with Sir Abe Bailey at his house in Muizenberg. He is quite an old dear ... it is a very nice house – also originally built for Rhodes." Sir Abe Bailey died at Muizenberg and is buried beneath a simple, magnificent semi-circular memorial high above the house, with a panoramic view of False Bay.

Rust en Vrede is a private home and is not open to the public.

### **Casa Labia, Main Road, Muizenberg**

The Casa Labia's link with mining magnates is admittedly a tenuous one. However, since Ida Labia was one of the daughters of Joseph Benjamin (JB) Robinson, it gives us an opportunity to link the Casa Labia to the life and career of this gold mining magnate. JB Robinson was one of the more contentious of the mining magnates, and many of his decisions and actions were clouded by controversy, including his will.

On the discovery of diamonds in South Africa in 1867, JB Robinson moved to the Vaal River district, where, by purchasing the stones and, later on, buying diamond-bearing land in Kimberley, he made a fortune. Upon the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand district in 1886, he moved quickly and went into partnership with Alfred Beit – a long-time confidant and partner of Rhodes. Robinson had the foresight and good fortune to buy the Langlaagte and Randfontein farms, both of which were exceptionally rich in gold-bearing ore. His rather forceful business tactics came in for criticism, earning him the title of 'Old Buccaneer', and even in an industry of hard and driven men, he was considered with caution. Beit cut his ties with Robinson because of his concern over his business methods and ethics.



*Prince Natale Labia, Ida (Robinson) Labia and their sons.*



*Casa Labia today*

In 1890, Robinson established the Randfontein Gold Estate and became one of the richest magnates in South Africa. He left the Cape to live in London, but returned in 1917, settling at Hawthornden, Wynberg. His daughter, Ida, married Count Labia (later Prince Labia), Italian plenipotentiary to South Africa. Their descendants still own this stately and beautifully situated palazzo on Main Road, Muizenberg.

Casa Labia was built in 1929 on the death of JB Robinson – probably with the proceeds of Ida's inheritance – on the site of the old fort erected by the British after the Battle of Muizenberg. A house, also called 'The Fort', had been built on the site, but was later demolished to make way for Casa Labia, which was, confusingly, also sometimes called 'The Fort'.

Count Labia's family was from Venice. Casa Labia, designed by a local architect, Fred Glennie, was intended to reflect the Venetian origins of his family. The richly Italianate interior

fittings include original furniture, chandeliers and mirrors imported from Italy. The building also contains a fine art collection, containing portraits of the Labia family by leading South African artists. The high windows allow panoramic views across the bay, and the building and grounds are magnificently set against a steep mountain backdrop.

Apart from its official function as the Italian legation, Casa Labia was a family home, and the Labia family retained a deep affection for it. In 1985, the public-spirited Labia family donated the house to the National Department of Education for use as a museum and cultural centre. However, the bequest was not a success, as the conditions attached were not met, and the Labia family were forced to go to court to have the property returned.

In 2008, Count Luccio Labia (son of Count Natale Labia) regained ownership of the property, and the house was restored to its original glory, using many of the original fittings. After that, it opened its doors as a multi-functional cultural centre and restaurant. It remains a 'must visit' opportunity along the coastline.

Casa Labia is open to the public on Tuesdays to Sundays, from 10:00 to 16:00. Phone 021 788 6068.

### **Rhodes Cottage, Main Road, Muizenberg**



*Old before his time: Sketch of Rhodes by Mortimer Menpes. F.*

The most influential of the mining magnates and the one whose life has cast the longest shadow and had the greatest impact, Cecil John Rhodes had a very modest holiday home at Muizenberg – a small and elderly cottage with a corrugated iron roof and two dormer windows facing Main Road and overlooking the sea. Restored, it is now a museum.

Rhodes bought the cottage in 1899. It was where he went to escape and enjoy the cool sea breezes, particularly in the last month of his life. This mining magnate and founder of De Beers, imperial expansionist and politician, and one of the wealthiest men in the world finally died on 26 March 1902 in this humble beach cottage. His controversial legacy lives on. Nevertheless, this humble beach cottage is one of the first ports of call for visiting Rhodes scholars.





*Rhodes Cottage close to the time of the influential mining magnate's death. It was a simple cottage facing the sea. This picture still shows the original corrugated iron roof, which was replaced in 1904, as well as the dormer windows, which were also removed at that time.*



*Rhodes Cottage, Muizenberg. Postcard photograph circa 1904, taken after Rhodes's death and after the restoration of the cottage by Baker and Masey. Rust en Vrede – his intended seaside home – is in the background.*

February 1902 was particularly hot and Rhodes was already mortally ill. During the final weeks of his life, as his physical condition worsened, Rhodes was advised by his doctors to move away from the summer heat of his Rondebosch home to his beach cottage, where he could benefit from the cooler coastal conditions.

He hoped the winds would help him to breathe, but his lungs were failing. His friends and aides who accompanied him found it hard to watch him struggling for breath. His secretary,



*Rhodes Cottage Museum, as it looks today.*

Philip Jourdan, wrote: "It was most heartrending to see him sit on the edge of his bed with one limb resting on the floor and the other akimbo in front of him on the bed, at one moment gasping for breath, and another with his head sunk so low that his chin almost touched his chest." His friend (and leader of the Jameson Raid, which cost Rhodes the office of Prime Minister), Dr Leander Starr Jameson, arranged for ice to be placed in the ceiling to cool the house down. An additional window was knocked through the wall of his bedroom to allow for a continual flow of air.

Dr Jameson announced his death to the waiting crowds outside his house, stating that his last words were: "So little done, so much to do." While this was not strictly true, it contributed to the legend of the 'man of action'. (Rhodes had indeed said this, but his last spoken words were in fact "Turn me over, Jack", spoken to his aide, Jack Grimmer.)

The cottage remained the responsibility of the Rhodes Trust until 1932, when it was briefly transferred to the Government of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and subsequently transferred to the Cape Town municipality in 1937. It was declared a national monument in 1938. The Rhodes Cottage Museum was opened on 4 July 1953. The museum contains exhibits associated with Rhodes's life. It is now run by the Muizenberg Historical Society.

It is open to the public from Mondays to Saturdays, from 10:00 to 14:00. Phone 021 788 1816.



Map of the abovementioned homes of the randlords and diamond magnates in the Southern Peninsula.



## **Acknowledgements and disclaimer**

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 quoted as references. These stories are intended for popular consumption, and the traditionally detailed referencing that would be expected of historical research was therefore not regarded as appropriate for this purpose. However, all references utilised have been listed. However, in respect of those images that are not, the City of Cape Town will address image copyright issues as part of its implementation phase.

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