



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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## 8. The Battle of Muizenberg

(M. Attwell)

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A series of long defensive lines of enormous rocks and stones ascended the mountain slopes in a staggered formation at Muizenberg near Rust en Vrede, where the mountain runs down steeply to the sea. This area, known as the Pass at Muizenberg, played a significant role in the Battle of Muizenberg, which took place in 1795 and resulted in the transfer of the Cape from the Dutch East India Company to the British. Most of the defensive works have now gone. A significant exception is the upper breastworks below Boyes Drive, which remain.



*The site near Rust en Vrede on Main Road that is most closely associated with the Battle of Muizenberg. It was from here, mostly on the upper slopes of the mountain, the Cape troops chose to make their defensive stand. The site contains the remnants of a hastily constructed fort, and the upper slopes contain the better preserved remnants of the defensive breastworks.*

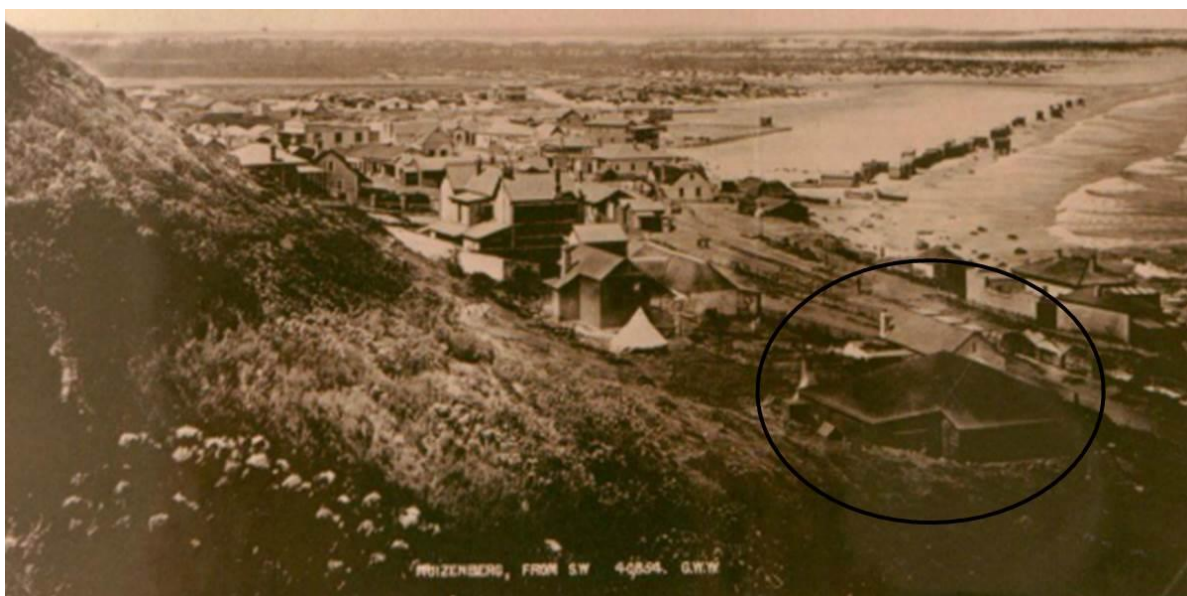




Archival photograph (September 1985) of the upper breastworks, remnants of the Battle of Muizenberg rebuilt by the British.

The defensive lines appear as staggered lines of rubble and stone, but the shape of a defensive position is clearly discernible. These ruins are regarded as being part of the Cape militia's defensive works for the Battle of Muizenberg, and a point at which they sought to resist the entry of the British troops to the peninsula in 1795.

The lines and fortifications were strengthened and rebuilt by the British immediately after the Battle of Muizenberg in response to perceived military threats from the Dutch, who had attempted to retake the lines at Muizenberg in September of that year. By 1796, the strengthened fortifications were complete. At the same time, work began on a fort built on the site of the present Casa Labia. Casa Labia was for a time known as 'The Fort' and, in fact, replaced an earlier house of the same name.



A photograph of Muizenberg in 1914, showing the first house known as 'The Fort' in front of the actual fort, which is circled. Both were later replaced by Casa Labia. The photograph above shows that the British fort remained a feature of the Muizenberg landscape until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A military map of the area from 1786 shows what existed at Muizenberg before the battle. Among the early structures at Muizenberg were the military barracks on the site of the present Muizenberg bowling green, where Dutch troops were quartered; the Posthuys, an extremely early Dutch East India Company building housing a company official; an adjacent building, and a munitions store that was built close to the shoreline on the rocks opposite. Prior to the Battle of Muizenberg, no structure existed on or near the site of Muizenberg Pass.

The Battle of Muizenberg, which took place between the invading British and the dying commercial empire of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape, was not a single pitched battle in the traditional sense, but a series of skirmishes, manoeuvres, retreats, rear-guard actions and advances. It involved, at least on the part of the Dutch, a failure to act timeously in the provision of cannon and other defensive mechanism, muddled action, and confused lines of communication. As a result, despite a commanding position at Muizenberg Pass, they lost the advantage in the battle, and the British entered the Cape from the Southern Peninsula after disembarking at Simon's Town and overcoming the fort at Kalk Bay.

It was also not fought entirely at Muizenberg, but played itself out along the coastal route to Wynberg, including skirmishes and attacks at Sandvlei, Steenberg and below Wynberg Hill.



*Military map of the Cape of Good Hope, 1786, which shows Sandvlei, the tracks along the coastal strip from Fish Hoek and Simon's Town, the Muizenberg barracks as a square structure, the Posthuys and adjacent structure, and no fortifications near the Muizenberg Pass. Interestingly, it also shows proposed fortifications on the south-eastern side of Muizenberg near Sandvlei, which were never built.*



However, the site at the Pass at Muizenberg is considered its epicentre, where intensive naval bombardment and contact took place – an event reinforced by the occasional discovery of cannon ball in the area, and visible damage to the mountain rock face caused by cannon fire. Muizenberg Pass was an easily defended area where advance on the part of the British forces from Simon's Town could be channelled and halted. It was the most crucial component, allowing the British entry to the Cape at its strongest and most easily defensible point. However, it was not enough to defend the Cape, for logistical reasons and on account of the military decisions made by the defending Dutch.

The Battle of Muizenberg marked a point at which the isolated Cape of Good Hope became a player in the international war strategy between Britain and France between 1793 and 1795, when the British occupied the Cape.

As early as 1785, the British government began laying plans for an invasion of the Cape for strategic and political reasons. At the time, Colonel William Dalrymple was sent to sniff out its defensive weaknesses. He noted that the settlement of Cape Town was well defended from the sea in Table Bay by virtue of its natural mountain defences, and it had batteries on its shoreline with guns facing seawards. He concluded that the best method of occupation was from the south with disembarkation at Simon's Town, which was extremely poorly defended, and with a march overland to the seat of government at the Castle. The only major

weakness was the narrow coastal strip – the 'Thermopylae of the Cape', or Muizenberg Pass, near the current Rust en Vrede.

France and England were at war, and the English began to consider the damage to its sea routes if the Cape fell to French control. When France invaded the Netherlands in 1794 and the Prince of Orange fled to his allies in England, the matter of the strategically positioned Cape (which was ruled by the Dutch East India Company) became urgent.

At the time of the battle, Muizenberg Pass to Simon's Town was defended by 300 men, including mercenaries, 120 artillerymen, 200 burghers who had been called up to assist, and 150 pandours, or 'coloured' militia.<sup>14</sup> Although outnumbered by the British troops, their position and the narrow pass gave or should have given them a decided advantage. In the end, the



"Kaart van der Situatie Tussen Baaij Fals en de Groote Wynberg". Detail of a map published in 1806 about the Battle of Muizenberg, showing the attack from ships in the bay and the movement of militia on either side of Sandvlei.

<sup>14</sup> Tredgold (1985) p 53.



Cape was easily taken. Simon's Town was open to the disembarking forces, who moved swiftly towards Muizenberg.

On 7 August 1795, the naval ships the HMS America, Stately, Rattlesnake and Echo, together with their supporting launches, set sail for Muizenberg. The HMS America directed cannon fire at the redoubt at Kalk Bay, which was quickly abandoned with the men retreating to the fort at Muizenberg. The ships began a rain of cannon fire lasting about 30 minutes on the defensive Dutch position at Muizenberg. The Cape military forces assembled at Muizenberg and responded with panic and confusion, allowing the British forces to advance on Cape Town with relative ease.

With reinforcements brought up from Cape Town on 8 August, the Dutch attempted to retake the area, but were repulsed and retreated to Sandvlei. Some burgher militia mounted their own attack, and were successful at first. Fitful skirmishes continued over a period of weeks, with the burghers acquitting themselves particularly well. The Dutch forces were however eventually driven back to Wynberg Hill. By the time more British forces arrived in September aboard the HMS Aniston, the Cape was clearly lost.

The Dutch failure to defend Muizenberg Pass contributed to the loss of the Cape. The irony of the Battle of Muizenberg was that the Dutch could probably have held Muizenberg had their military leaders, such as Colonels Robert Gordon and De Lille, had the will to fight.

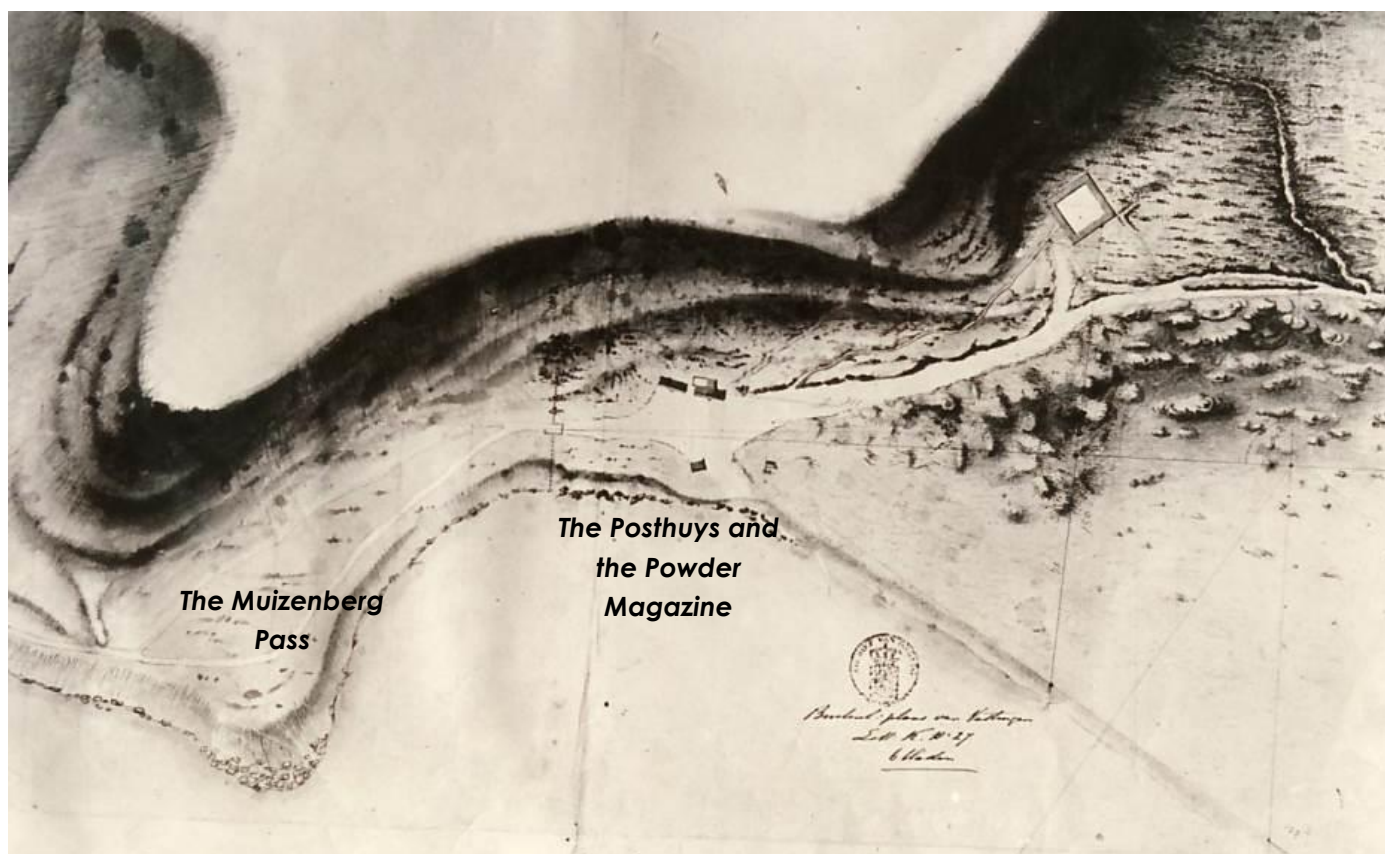
### **Muizenberg Pass**

Muizenberg Pass marked the narrow point at Muizenberg between the rock shoreline and the steep mountain slopes, with a narrow area defined for movement. This was where Louis Michel Thibault was ordered to fortify and control the access route at its narrowest point in order to allow a single entry at a time. A pre-battle map of 1786 shows the pass, and gives an indication of the strategic value in relation to the road where troops would be required to pass.

After delays and prevarications on the part of the government, Thibault had to work quickly. He erected embankments all the way up the mountain slopes, and a rough battery near Main Road in just three days, and only four days before the invasion, using black labour. Of their own volition, the Cape burghers erected a second entrenchment and high palisades. However, Thibault believed it was too little too late, and questioned the competence and attitude of Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon, the military commander at the Cape. He wrote: "I lamented to see a brave nation so well meaning commanded by a man whose integrity I mistrust."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Puyfontaine (1972) p 8.



Map of Muizenberg dated 1786, before the battle, showing that the Pass at Muizenberg was not defended at this time.

For the rapidly bankrupting Dutch East India Company at the Cape, cost had always been a consideration, and the lack of solid and well-placed defensive resources and cannons protecting Simon's Town and the False Bay coastline had serious consequences for the Dutch during the British invasion.

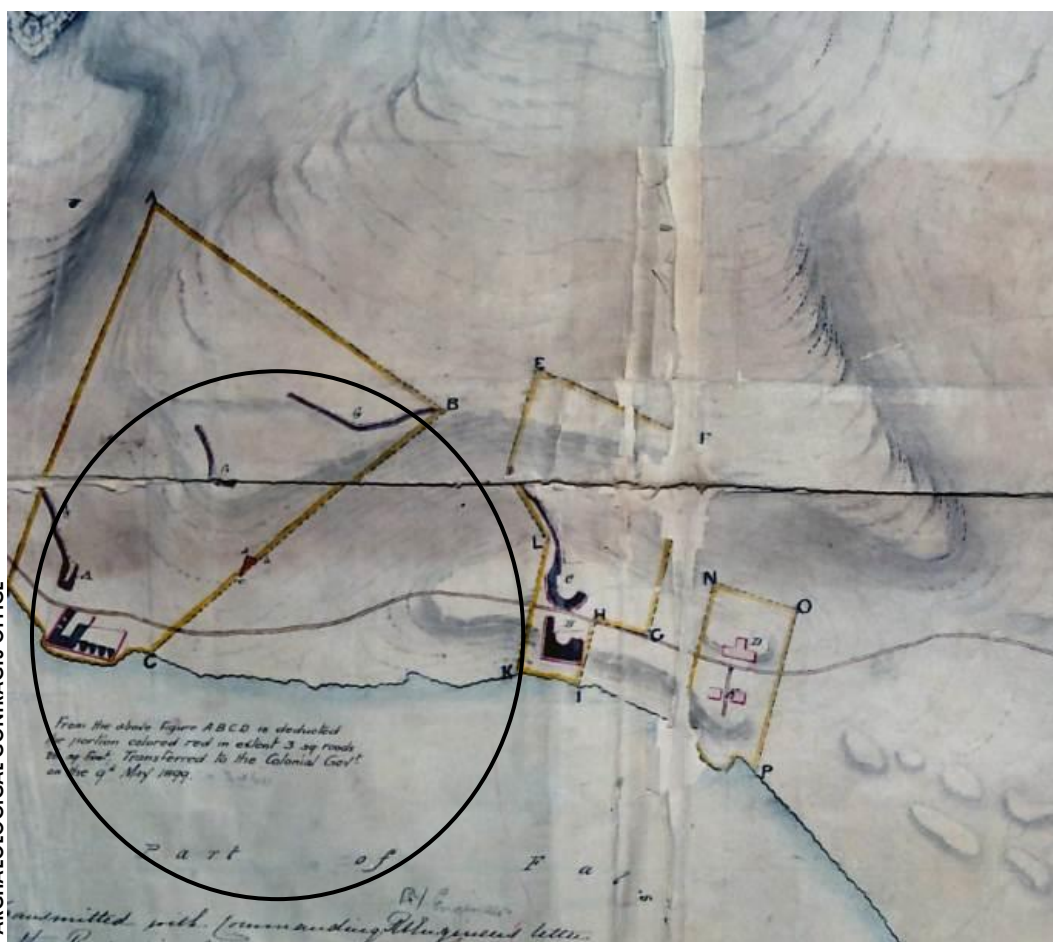
After the Battle of Muizenberg, the British – having realised the vulnerability of Muizenberg Pass from the sea (of which they had in fact benefited) – took steps to strengthen the fortifications at that point. Then Colonial Secretary John Barrow wrote in 1796 that “most of the works, batteries lines have undergone complete repair, with many improvements”, and announced that the pass was by then “impregnable”.<sup>16</sup>

A map of 1802 shows the extensive fortification erected by the British, and the “improvements” made at Muizenberg Pass.

The current ruins, near Rust en Vrede, are likely to be the remains of the early Dutch defensive works, strengthened and improved by the British after the battle. They can be seen close to the entrance to Rust en Vrede, where a storyboard has been erected. The area has been fenced with the assistance of the Muizenberg Historical Society.

The British fort, once on the site of Casa Labia, opposite Bailey's Cottage, has long since been demolished. The footprint of the barrack remains at Muizenberg, while the Posthuys has been restored and is sometimes open to the public.

<sup>16</sup> Tredgold (1985) p 55.



Survey diagram of 1844 based on a map of 1802, showing the British fortification around the Pass at Muizenberg. The gun emplacement at the site, which is now called Bailey's Cottage, faces out to sea. The defensive lines along the mountain slopes at Main Road were originally built by the Dutch very quickly at the time of the battle, and were later improved by the British, as this diagram shows. The breastworks marked G still remain

### Robert Jacob Gordon and Louis Michel Thibault

The Battle of Muizenberg also entailed a battle of wits and loyalties between two of the most competent and talented men at the Cape at the time. Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon was a Dutchman of Scottish descent with deep loyalties to the House of Orange; an explorer, linguist, botanist and military commander of the Cape forces. He was one of the finest and greatest of the early travellers at the Cape, and his writing, map preparation and accurate sketches were enough to secure his place in early exploration history.

The second was Louis Michel Thibault, a qualified, brilliant but argumentative architect from France, who occupied the position of military engineer. He was a subordinate of Colonel Gordon and questioned many of his decisions, particularly throughout the Battle of



Colonel Robert Gordon, 1743-1795.

Muizenberg. Gordon left little by way of explanation for his indecisive actions during the battle, but the acerbic and bitter notes and letters of Thibault remain and provide a lively and possibly one-sided explanation of what occurred, including Colonel Gordon's indecision and inaction.

There had been tensions between the two before. Thibault objected to Gordon's plans to fortify False Bay and Hout Bay, accusing him of being un-strategic and employing false economies.<sup>17</sup>

Thibault's notes on the conduct of the men during the battle are revealing. He pointed out that the day before the attack, on 6 August 1795, the officer in charge at Muizenberg, a Colonel De Lille, along with his men went on a drunken binge, despite knowing that the attack was imminent, and were thus ill equipped for what followed. Thibault stated – possibly unfairly – that the moment De Lille saw the cannon of the British, he fled, leaving the artillery and the civilian soldiers, the burgher guard, without “having fired a single shot”. The farmers or burghers who were assisting with military duty were obliged to retreat, but later rallied by themselves. Thibault notes that “fourteen men commanded by three courageous officers, Frederici, Marnitz and Meyer, took over the two 24-pounder and fired thirty shots at the British ships despite their fire, destroyed one vessel and killed three men”.<sup>18</sup>



*Gordon's sketch of the view from Wynberg military camp during the battle.*

De Lille was ordered to retake Muizenberg, but subsequently retreated a second time. Thibault notes pointedly that throughout the manoeuvres, Robert Gordon was at Wynberg Hill, away from the battle. Gordon's observations led him to believe that a column of 2 000 men was advancing. Thibault scornfully but incorrectly noted that “in fact, these British troops consisted of only about four hundred armed sailors” who were attacked and routed by the burghers, where they fled along the Sandvlei and where some floundered in the muddy waters. Burgher troops continued to harass British troops in the vicinity of Wynberg Hill.

Colonel Gordon appeared powerless to act, something to which the desperate burgher council strongly objected. He was ordered to return his men to battle. A further standoff between him and Thibault occurred, this time regarding the placement of cannon. Thibault thought the way that Gordon ordered the cannon to be placed meant they would sink into

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<sup>17</sup> Puyfontaine (1972) p 8.

<sup>18</sup> Puyfontaine.



the sand. The question remains: Why did Robert Gordon fail to provide military leadership at this crucial period in the history of the Cape? He was an able man and was considered the best military strategist at the Cape. Why was he so paralysed by indecision?

His potential weakness was that he was a true loyalist to the House of Orange. When the Prince of Orange sought the protection of the British, his loyalties between the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch government on the one hand and the House of Orange and Britain on the other must have been deeply dividing and conflicting. He hoped until the very last moment that the British forces had come to take the Cape in the name of William of Orange to protect it from the French. This may account for his indecision, but does unfortunately not excuse his actions as a military commander.

When the battle ended in September 1795, the capitulation to the British forces outside the Castle was led, rather aptly, by Gordon himself. The surrender was so unpopular that his soldiers attempted to assault him, leaving him publicly humiliated. The final straw for him was the knowledge that the British seized the Cape in the name of Britain, and not the House of Orange as he would have hoped. Robert Gordon committed suicide on the night of 21 October, a month after losing the Cape to the British. Whatever his faults as a military commander and his tormented loyalties during the Battle of Muizenberg, his loss to posterity was enormous and devastating. He had intended to write a book of his many travels, incorporating all descriptions, sketches and discoveries. Tragically, apart from his field notes, the book remained unwritten.



*The lower part of the fort first built by the Dutch and rebuilt by the British.*

As good military strategists, the British military interest centred largely and quite rightly on the Pass at Muizenberg, a narrow pass where the land sloped steeply to the rocky shoreline. It was a natural obstacle to military advance along the narrow route from Simon's Town.

The remains of the fort, the defensive rough stonework below Boyes Drive and the site of the Battle of Muizenberg are managed by the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society.



The British retook the Cape in 1806 in an engagement known as the Battle of Blaauwberg. One could argue that this battle was the only pitched battle at the Cape fought along the lines of battles in Europe at the time. British troops met determined resistance by the forces of the Batavian Republic led by General Janssens. The soldiers engaged in set formations according to battle tactics of the time. This was very different to the chaos at Muizenberg.



Map of the Pass at Muizenberg, site of the Battle of Muizenberg.



Map of the Pass at Muizenberg, site of the Battle of Muizenberg.

## **Acknowledgements and disclaimer**

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Acknowledgements: Mr Brian Martin, City of Cape Town

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