



Gateway to Africa



CITY OF CAPE TOWN | ISIXEKO SASEKAPA | STAD KAAPSTAD

THIS CITY WORKS FOR YOU

Thomas Bowler, 1860. Courtesy National Library of South Africa, Cape Town INIL 6536



On the 17th of September 1860, over 20,000 spectators assembled as Prince Alfred, the second son of Queen Victoria, pulled the latch on a specially designed cocopan. This tipped the first load of rocks into Table Bay and thus launched the construction of Cape Town Harbour and today's Victoria and Alfred Waterfront.

This event marked nothing less than the beginning of a new era in the history of Cape Town. Before this, Table Bay had been declared to be, 'in the winter months, the most dangerous loading and delivery port and anchorage in the world'. This came to be recognised as so much the case that following a particular destructive northwest gale in 1858, which drove more than 30 vessels ashore, Lloyds of London refused, henceforth, to insure any vessel that chose to winter in Table Bay.

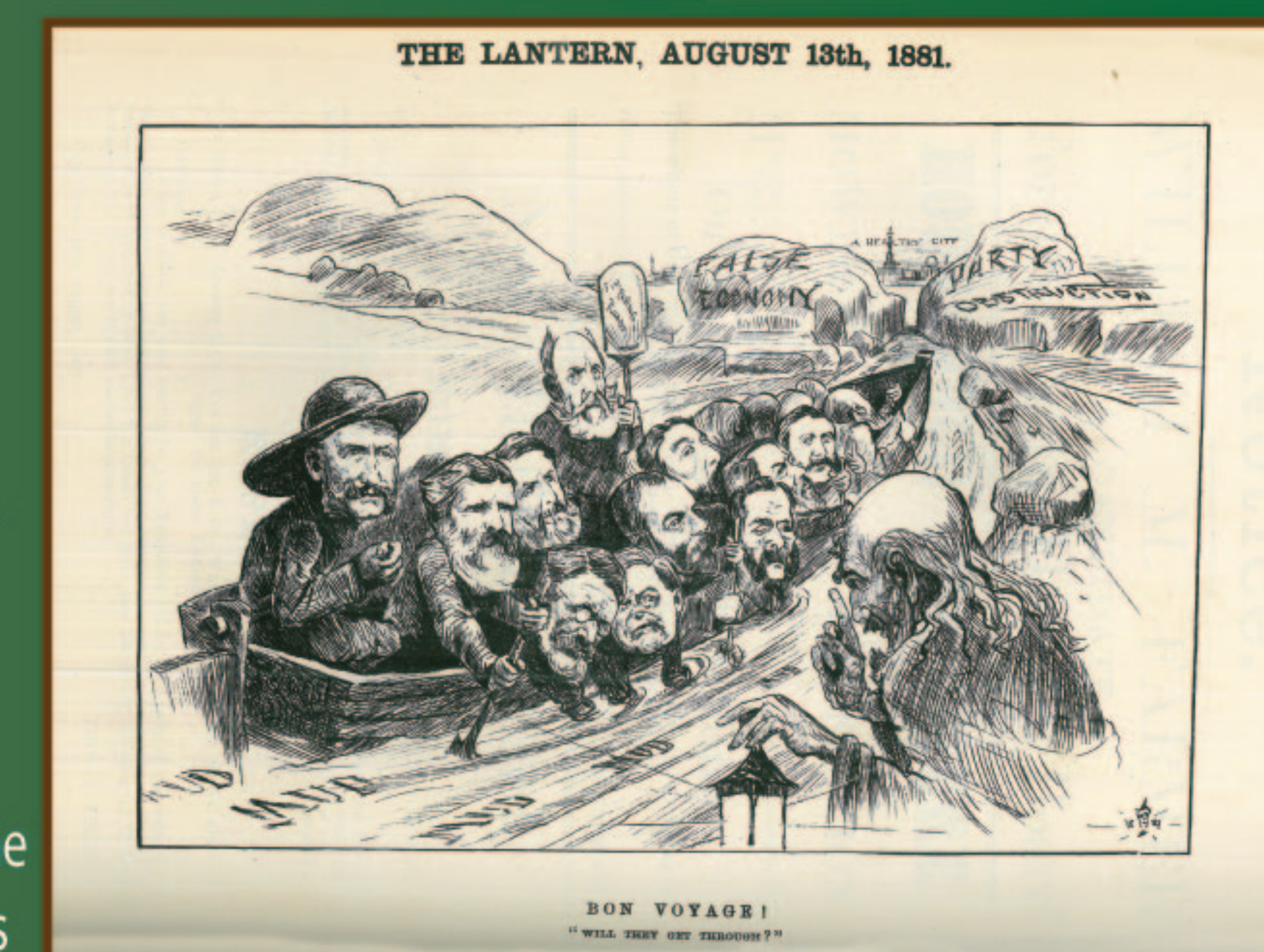
So it is easy to appreciate the mixed-emotions of relief, civic pride and commercial optimism that accompanied the opening of the 8½ acre (3.4 hectare) Alfred Dock and 4½ acre (1.7 hectare) Inner Basin protected by a breakwater already 1,860 feet (570 metres) long, in 1870. For the first time in Cape Town's two hundred year history ships could now tie up along more than 700 metres of quayage in the quiet of a protected harbour and transfer cargo both safely and efficiently.

The benefits this development afforded Cape Town became particularly evident following the 'mineral revolution' sparked off by the discovery of diamonds in Griqualand West in 1867 - followed by gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. By 1870 the rush of fortune seekers to the diamond fields was in full swing and Cape Town held the advantage of being the only port in South Africa that could provide modern harbour facilities for the largest ships of the day. No longer would this 'Tavern of the Sea' be a mere port of call focused on supplying the refreshment needs of passing ships. Within a generation it was transformed into the main point of entry and service centre to a rapidly developing sub-continent.

Growing investor confidence and unimagined revenue flowing to government coffers in the form of custom duties and tariffs, provided the funding needed to meet the demand for expanding harbour facilities and railway links to the hinterland. At the same time growing prosperity and development brought with it employment opportunities, which lured residents to Cape Town as never before. From less than 30,000 in 1860 the population rose to more than 100,000 by the end of the century and with this a collateral demand for housing and improved municipal services.

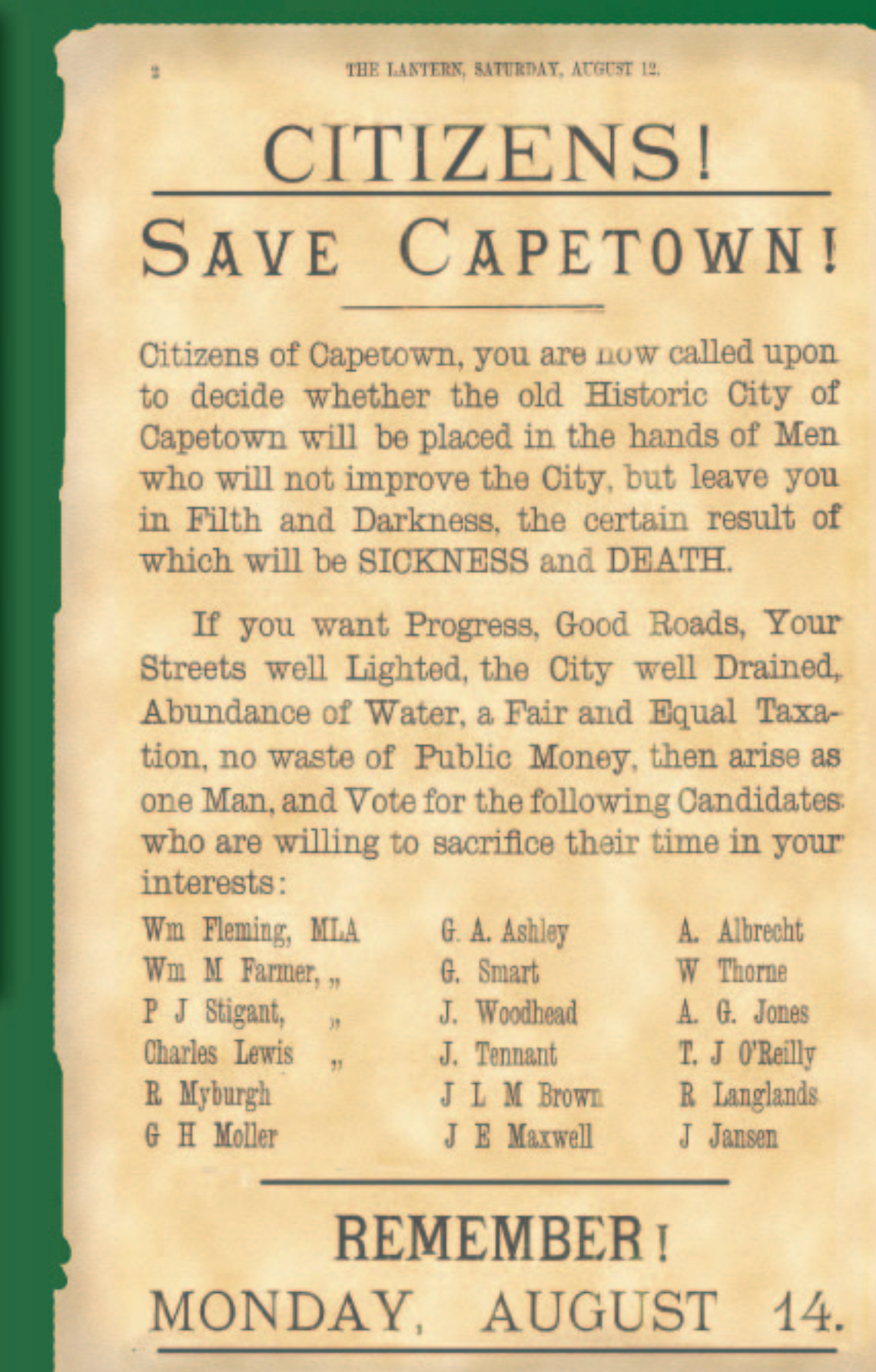
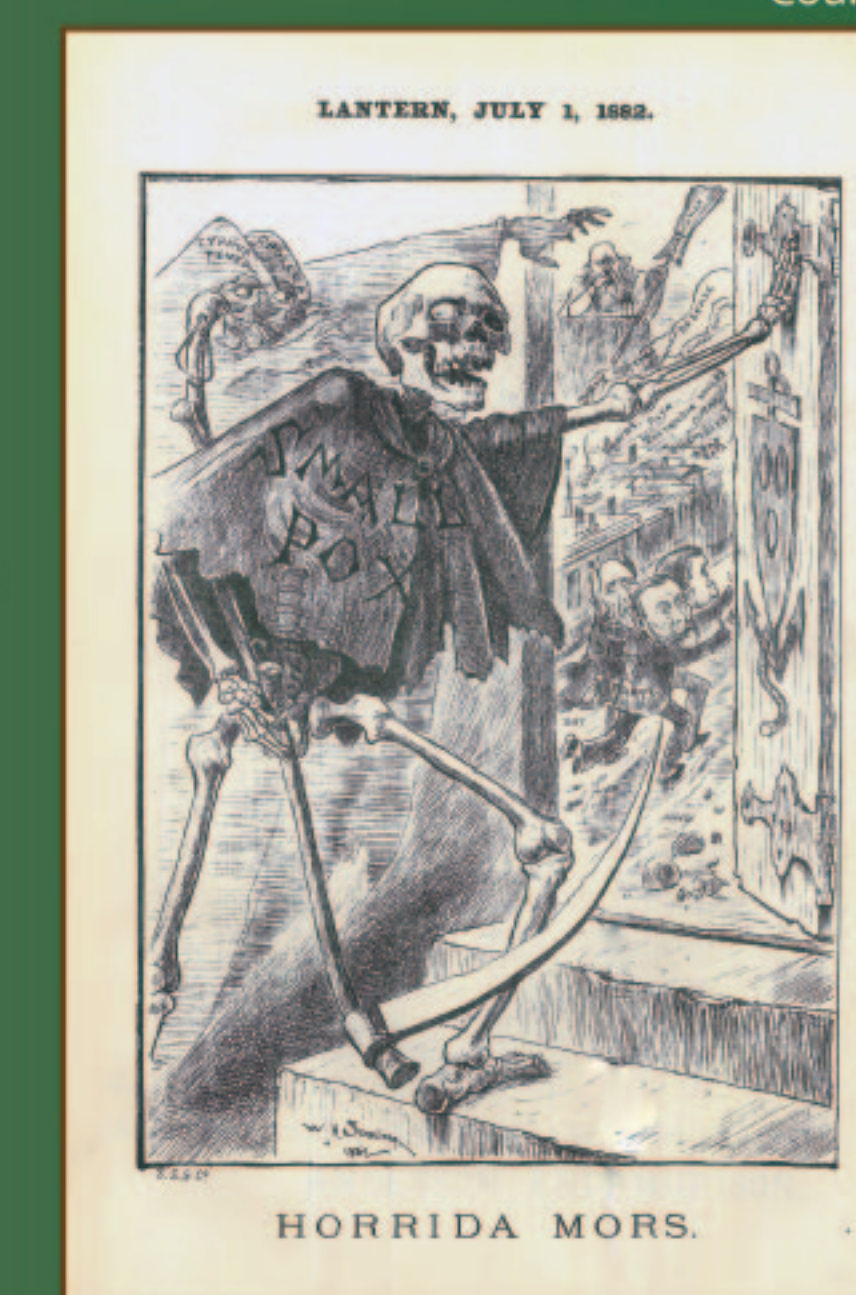
But while there was funding available for expanding commercial infrastructure, it was left primarily to the ratepayers of Cape Town to cover the cost of improving municipal services and for which there was much initial resistance.

This cartoon from the *The Lantern* portrays members of the Clean Party attempting to sail through the obstacles in the way of municipal improvements the year before the elections of August 14, 1882



Courtesy: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town

The situation grew drastic into the 1880s with the formation of what came to be known as the 'Dirty Party' (led primarily by wealthy landlords who opposed reform and the rise in rates and taxes civic improvements would place on them) and the 'Clean Party' made up of reformers wishing to have a well-functioning and healthy city - no matter the expense. While much public debate was played out in the newspapers of the day, nothing can be said to have furthered the platform of the Clean Party more than a smallpox epidemic which broke out in Cape Town only two months before the elections of 1882 and which the health authorities attributed the virulence of, to the unsanitary conditions that prevailed across the city.



Thus the Clean Party reformers swept to power and the course of Cape Town was set towards achieving an assured supply of potable water, improved storm-water drainage, refuse removal and a city-wide, water-bourne sewerage system. And so it can be said that with opportunities came challenges and that in seizing both - the modern city of Cape Town was born.