Prisoners of War

CITY OF CAPE TOWN ISIXEKO SASEKAPA STAD KAAPSTAD

THIS CITY WORKS FOR YOU

At the start of the South African or Anglo-Boer War, neither side was prepared for the inevitable prisoners of war which would come their way. Initially the British used troop ships lying idle in Simon's Bay to accommodate prisoners, such as the HMS Penelope.

HMS Penelope moored in Simon's Bay and to the right a view of the deck showing Boer prisoners, their guards and British sailors. *Courtesy: Simon's Town Museum*

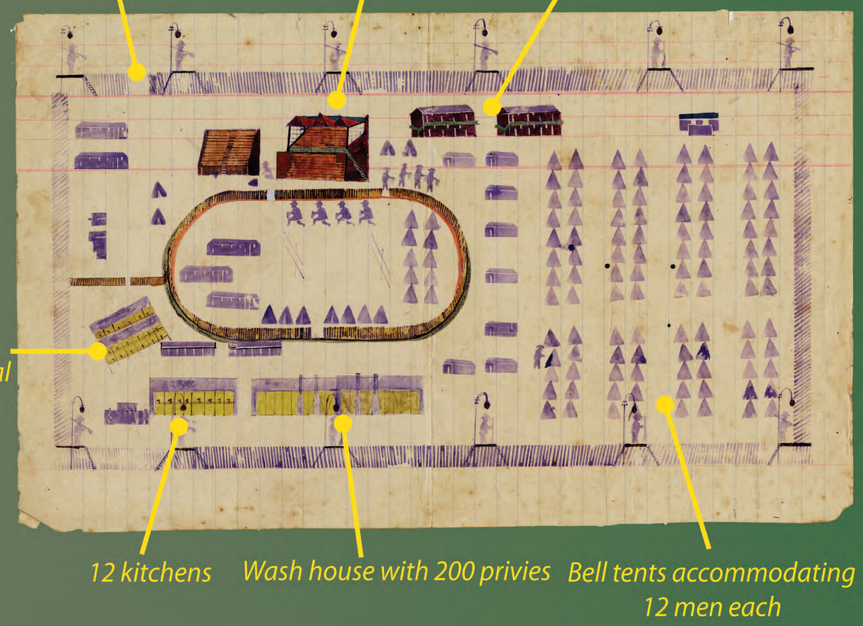
As the war continued these ships proved unhealthy and inadequate for the growing number of prisoners, particularly after the battle of Elandslaagte in October of 1898. Two tented camps were then hastily erected in Simon's Town - known as Seaforth Camp (South Camp) and Bellevue Camp, on the site of the present day golf course.

Seaforth Camp at Simon's Town and three African, *agterryers,* 'those who rode behind' or support troops. These men were often captured and interned with Boer forces. *Courtesy: Simon's Town Museum*

The situation for the British authorities grew serious in January 1900, when General P.A. (Piet) Cronjé and over 4000 of his men were captured at the battle of Paardeberg. To accommodate such numbers a new camp was established at the Green Point Cycle Track (21 March, 1900). As this camp grew to be the largest, the decision was taken to begin sending some of the more than 2000 prisoners, to overseas Commonwealth countries.

The arrival of Boer prisoners at Green Point under guard and Green Point Track Camp (below) c 1900.
Courtesy: Anglo-Boer War Museum, Pretoria

A sketch of Green Point Track Camp drawn by an unrecorded Boer prisoner c.1900



Relations were not always harmonious between prisoners. Some were willing to take the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown and were therefore known as the *hensoppers* 'hands uppers'. Others were prepared to resist to the 'bitter end' and therefore known as the *bittereinders*.

Defusing this situation was among the reasons a second camp was established on the Common in October 1900, primarily for the 'Bittereinders'.

Surrounded by a fence made from sheets of corrugated iron, the prisoners were left with only a view of the sky and hence this camp came to be known as 'Skyview Camp'.

Skyview Camp

Green Point Track Camp

Krupp and pom-pom guns captured at Paardeberg and displayed on Green Point Common as trophies of war in 1900.

The Pavilion or grandstand overlooking Green Point Track Camp where regular religious services were held.

The 'Fever Hospital' completed in 1900, as it appears today off Somerset Road. Boer prisoners who could not be treated in the field hospital at the camps were transferred here. Over 103 prisoners died in the 19 months the Green Point camps were in operation. More than 70% of the deaths were from enteric fever (typhoid) believed to have been contracted during the siege of Paardeberg and thus introduced to the camps on the Common and in Simon's Town by arriving prisoners.
Photo courtesy of Marthinus van Bart: Die Burger

One of the most tragic deaths due to typhoid was that of nursing sister, Mary Henrietta Kingsley. A remarkable woman already renowned as an African explorer and activist, Miss Kingsley was opposed to what she saw to be British imperialism and in protest, volunteered to nurse Boer prisoners. Known as the Emily Hobhouse of Simon's Town she contracted typhoid and died after serving as a nurse there for only two months. According to her wishes she was given a burial at sea.