Water to the Common

CITY OF CAPE TOWN | ISIXEKO SASEKAPA | STAD KAAPSTAD

THIS CITY WORKS FOR YOU

These depictions are from a series of the only known first-hand drawings of Khoekhoen herders rendered by an unrecorded eyewitness at the Cape around 1700.

Courtesy: National Library of South Africa: Cape Town

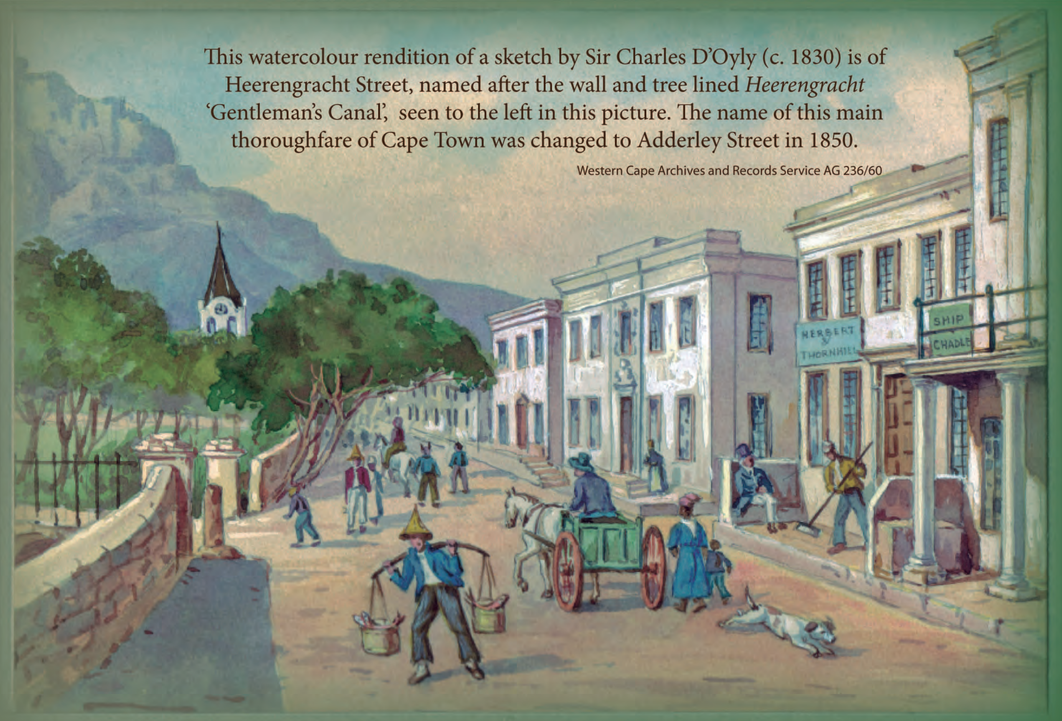
To the early Cape Herders or Khoekhoen

the Cape Peninsula was known as *Camissa*, 'the place of sweet water' and Table Mountain, *Hoerikwaggo*, 'the mountain of the sea'. Both names reflect appreciation on the part of these pastoral people of the life-giving relationship that exists between the Cape Peninsula and surrounding ocean.

Moisture-laden air rises and cools as it is drawn in from the sea and over the mountains of the peninsula - often condensing into cloud. On Table Mountain this creates the familiar 'Tablecloth,' - in fact a huge 'dew cloud' - from which more than twice as much water in the form of mist is deposited on the mountain than falls as rain each year.

Of particular importance is the fact that much of this precipitation takes place during the months of summer drought at the Cape. Percolating down through the highly fractured Table Mountain sandstone this input recharges the water-table with the result that springs and streams issue from the mountain year round.

When the Dutch East India Company (VOC) arrived to establish a refreshment station at the Cape in 1652, springs emerging from the front of Table Mountain flowed together to become a river that ran down the central axis of Table Valley and which the Dutch called the *Varse* or 'Fresh' River.

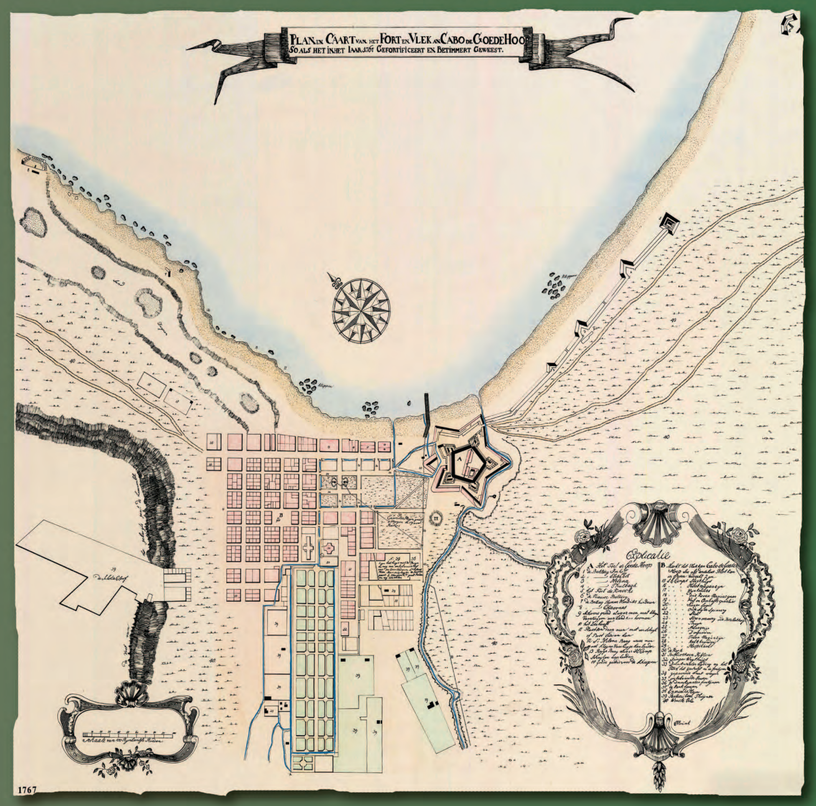


This watercolour rendition of a sketch by Sir Charles D'Oyly (c. 1830) is of Heerengracht Street, named after the wall and tree lined *Heerengracht* 'Gentleman's Canal', seen to the left in this picture. The name of this main thoroughfare of Cape Town was changed to Adderley Street in 1850.

Western Cape Archives and Records Service AG 236/60

This perennial source of water was a primary reason the VOC chose to establish their station here and soon directed the Fresh River, and springs that fed it, into a network of channels or *grachts* to supply the water needs of the fledgling settlement.

The locations of some of these early canals are identified today by such street names as Buitengracht, Keizergracht and Heerengracht and the alignment of which did much to determine the rectilinear street pattern and spatial development of early Cape Town.



On this plan of Cape Town by Brink (c.1767) one can see on the right the Capel *Sluit* or 'ditch' which carried stormwater from Platteklip Stream away from the city and down to fill the Castle moat. Approaching the Castle it is met by the *Winterstroom* which ran down from Devil's Peak and as the name suggests, normally only flowed during the rainy months of winter.

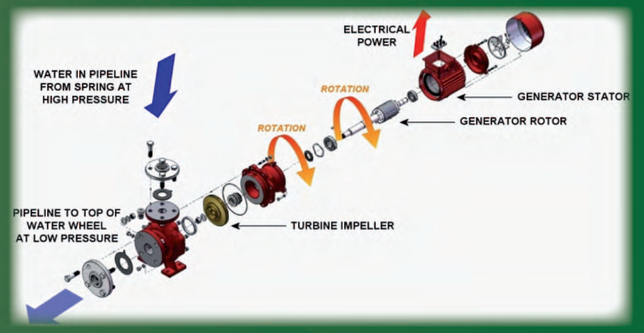
On the left can be seen streams that flowed down from Table Mountain and how these were directed into the grachts that supplied running water to the market gardens and households of early Cape Town.

The streams of Camissa no longer flow down from Table Mountain, along tree-lined grachts and through the bustling streets of Cape Town. Instead they travel underground - via the stormwater drains of the city - to the sea.

Today there is an exciting initiative underway to "Reclaim Camissa" and bring these waters back to the surface to create a series of water features across the city and cost-effectively irrigate public amenities such as the Company's Garden and Green Point Urban Park.

Before you is an example of this with the water you see being gravity-fed from the original *Stadsfontein* (City or Main Fountain) which rises on the slopes of Oranjezicht. As the name suggests, this was the 'main' source of water to Cape Town until the late 1800s and out from which more than 2.25 million litres still flow each day.

This photograph (c. 1900) is of the protective vault built over the Stadsfontein that can still be seen on the grounds of the historic Table Valley homestead, Oranjezicht.

Western Cape Archives and Records Service: Cape Town (E1971).

As water fills the buckets on one side of the water wheel the extra weight turns the wheel and drive shaft. Water driven mills such as this were widely used in the past to grind grain into flour and such things as spices. The same principle is applied today to drive turbines and generate hydro-electric power, as seen here on Green Point Common.