

OBSERVATORY COMMUNITY HERITAGE PROJECT



Discovering Observatory's History Together

Varschedrift a contested landscape

In February of 1657, Commander at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, began to establish individuals (recently released from Dutch East India Company service) as farmers along the banks of the Liesbeek River. The uneasy peace which had existed for the previous five years with the local Khoekhoen (known as the Goringhaiqua and Goringhaicona) now became strained to the breaking point and led to the first Khoe War (May 1659 - April 1660).

April 5th and 6th 1660 - *Peace was renewed today with the chief and overlords of the Kaapmans, with Harry (Autshumao) and with all the principal men and elders. They strongly insist that we had been appropriating more and more of their land, which had been theirs all these centuries, and on which they had been accustomed to let their cattle graze, etc. They asked if they would be allowed to do such a thing supposing they went to Holland, and they added "It would be of little consequence if you people stayed here at the fort, but you come right into the interior and select the best land for yourselves without even asking if we mind or whether it will cause us any inconvenience."*

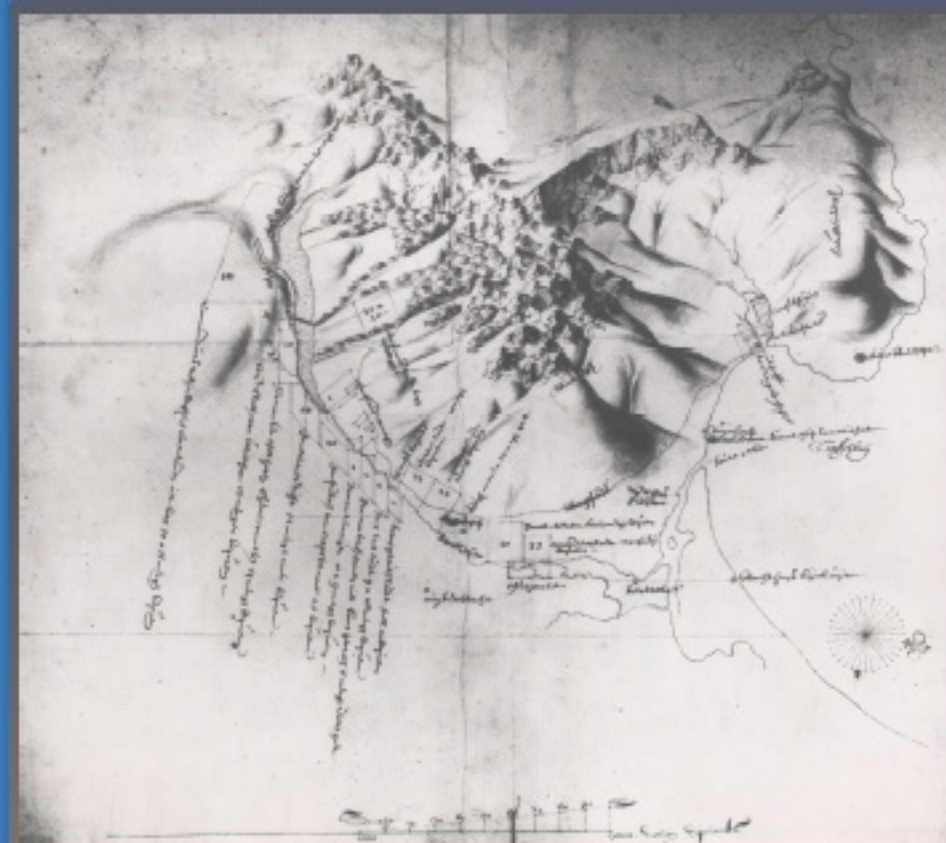
Van Riebeeck's Journal



Evidence in the form of stone-tool artefacts bear mute witness to the fact that lands adjoining the Liesbeek River were home to hunting and gathering people for what is believed to be more than a million years before the first overseas callers arrived.

Around 2000 years ago these people (known as the San) were joined by pastoralists (known as the Khoekhoen) who began to include the Cape Peninsula as part of their yearly cycle of migration as they sought out fresh grazing and assured sources of water for their large herds of sheep and cattle

The Khoekhoen pictured here show something of the differing views foreign callers had of the people of the Cape. Above is a picture drawn overseas from second hand accounts while below and to the right is found the work of an eye-witness resident at the Cape around 1700 and therefore, can be relied upon as more true to life.



Pieter Potter's General Plan of the Cape 1685 displaying 16 farms established along the Liesbeek River (Note in particular the farms number 40 and 33 in the area of Varschedrift)



Battle of Varschedrift which resulted in the death of Francisco d'Almeida, Viceroy of India

In 1500 a squadron of ships under the command of the Portuguese Viceroy of India, Francisco d'Almeida, called at Table Bay to take on water, firewood and hopefully establish trade for fresh meat with the local Khoekhoen herders. In this disagreement arose and several Portuguese returned to their ships having been beaten up by the Khoekhoen.

Deciding to teach the perpetrators a lesson, the viceroy proceeded with a reported 50 men to the Khoekhoen village at what we know today as Varschedrift. In their arrogance they took lances and swords but no projectiles - which would prove their undoing.

At first the Khoekhoen retreated with the result that the Portuguese were able to capture several children and a good number of cattle. They then proceeded with their spoils to the mouth of the Salt River where they had left their boats.

Unknown to them the sea had risen and those left in charge of the boats had moved them to the more sheltered mouth of the Fresh River (near the present day Grand Parade) about 5 km away.

Trained to answer the call of their owners the Khoekhoen broke away as the Portuguese retreated to the shore. The Khoekhoen then turned the cattle on their adversaries all the while throwing fire-hardened spears over the animals. By the time the retreating Portuguese reached their boats Francisco d'Almeida and no less than 60 of his officers and men lay dead along the shore of Table Bay.

Left in no doubt that the Khoekhoen were not to be tamed with these shores were avoided by the Portuguese and other foreign callers for nearly a century.

