SLAVERY AT THE CAPE

While few first-hand accounts of the lives of slaves have been handed down to us, significant elements of their varied cultures, along with physical evidence of their labour, ordeals and achievements are to be found infused into the culture and historical fabric of Cape Town and its environs. Indeed, when South Africa is referred to with pride today as the 'rainbow nation' it is good to remember that many of the people of the rainbow nation are descendents of slaves and thus share a common inheritance of displacement, bondage and exploitation. Slavery at the Cape was atypical. Generally slave-owning countries in the 18th and 19th centuries imported captives from East and West Africa. Here at the Cape, however, the more than 63,000 people brought to these shores in bondage between 1653 and 1806 came not only from Africa but also from as far afield as Madagascar, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia and China. This resulted in the Cape having the most culturally and ethnically diverse slave population in the modern history of slavery. Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, therefore, has had not only a profound influence on the evolution of South African society but forms an important thread in the comparative history of slavery worldwide.

The earliest people at the Cape

The area around Cape Town was inhabited by hunter-gatherers for many thousands of years. Then around 2000 years ago these people were joined by pastoralists, known as the Khoekhoen who migrated here seeking assured sources of water and grazing for their large herds of cattle and sheep. To early callers at the Cape these herders were known collectively as the 'Saldanhars' because it was believed they originated from the area of Saldanha Bay to the north. In fact, they represented a number of distinct clans – the Gorachouqua, the Goringhaiqua and the Goringhaicona. To the Khoekhoen this was *Camissa* – the place of sweet water – in reference to the perennial sources of water which flow from the mountains of the Peninsula.

Khoekhoen family and livestock by unknown 17th century artist (National Library of South Africa: Cape Town)

How slavery developed at the Cape of Good Hope

To ward off the dangers malnutrition posed to the health of crews and thus ships and cargos on the long sea voyage between Europe and the trading centres of the East – the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie*) or VOC, decided to establish a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope in 1651. The first Commander, Jan van Riebeeck and his small party of VOC employees arrived at Table Bay on the 6th of April, 1652. In this venture the VOC chose initially to employ contracted wage labourers from Europe rather than slaves as slaves represented a capital cost that the directors were not prepared to incur while the future of the settlement was still uncertain. As this undertaking proved to be far more difficult than first anticipated, the commander repeatedly petitioned the directors for slaves to do the 'dirtiest and heaviest work'. Van Riebeeck even suggested enslaving the local Khoekhoen. The directors, however, insisted that every effort be made to maintain friendly relations and encourage trade – particularly in livestock – on which the success of the settlement so much depended. Whether sanctioned by the VOC or not, slaves began to arrive at the Cape either discovered as stowaways, imported as personal slaves or presented as gifts by the captains of passing ships. The first of these was a young man called Abraham who arrived as a stowaway from Batavia (present day Jakarta, Indonesia) in 1653. Next came Maria van Bengalen, who Van Riebeeck arranged to have sent out from Batavia to work as a personal servant for his family.

Then in May 1654, Van Riebeeck received permission from the VOC authorities to dispatch a small vessel, the *Roode Vos*, to Madagascar for rice and other desperately needed foodstuffs and see whether or not any slaves might be acquired there. While this first attempt proved a failure, a second was made in July of the same year when the galliot, *Tulp*, sailed to Madagascar under the command of Frederick Verburgh. Here Verburgh was able to acquire three individuals – a woman named Eva and two children, one of them her own. A slave from Madagascar called Anthony also appears in the records around this time. Then came a small family consisting of Domingo and Angela from Bengal and their three children. Two Arab girls aged 10 and 12 (who came to be known as Cornelia and Lijsbeth) also arrived – presented as personal slaves to Maria van Riebeeck by the French Admiral De La Roche St Andre when he visited the Cape in March 1657. They were later claimed by the VOC and became Company slaves.

The first free burghers

The Cape settlement was not an immediate success, particularly with attempts to establish a grain supply. Van Riebeeck proposed to address agricultural and stock shortages by encouraging individuals to leave the Company's employ, accept grants of land along the valley of the Liesbeek river and take up farming. As a further incentive, the VOC also took action to provide slave labour for both the Company and these first 'free burghers'.

The origin of Cape slaves

The year 1658 saw the arrival of slaves in increasing numbers and the beginnings of an extended system of slave ownership at the Cape. In March the *Amersfoort* arrived from the Netherlands having captured a Portuguese slaver off the coast of Angola, bound for Brazil. Of the 500 slaves aboard, the Dutch took off 250 of the most 'promising individuals'. Only 174 survived this ordeal to reach the Cape and from where the greater number were sent on to Batavia. Some 75, mostly children, remained here. Of these, 43 were set to work in the fields and gardens or were assigned to various Company officials. Van Riebeeck in his journal entry of March 28th, 1658, bemoaned the fact that, 'the majority of the slaves are young boys and girls who will be of little use for the next four of five years'.

Slave at the Cape working as his master looks on (Iziko Slave Lodge Museum)

A few weeks later, on the 6th of May, the *Hasselt* arrived from Guinea in West Africa with 228 slaves surviving out of an original number of 271. Van Riebeeck would later describe them as 'very good-looking, strong and cheerful people'. From this group 80 were sent on to Batavia while the rest were sold to individuals at the Cape. In fact, this had been a secret poaching operation ordered by the VOC into the exclusive trading area of its sister company, the Dutch West India Company, which jealously guarded its trading interests. It also explains why, apart from isolated cases, slaves that arrived at the Cape after this time came from areas east of the Cape of Good Hope and generally in one of three ways.

1. Company-sponsored slave expeditions

The general policy of the VOC was to not purchase slaves from middlemen. Instead the Company preferred to arrange its own slaving expeditions and then profit from the sell of any captives in excess of its needs. Between Van Riebeeck's first exploratory mission in 1654 and the last in 1786, no less than 39 slaving expeditions were sent out from the Cape. The majority of these went to Madagascar. An example is the *Leidsman*, which was dispatched to Madagascar after 200 Company slaves succumbed to the smallpox epidemic of 1713. This expedition was regarded as particularly successful in that a greater proportion of men over women (136 to 43) was obtained.

Arrival of the slaver Leidsman, St Augustine Bay, Madagascar, 1715. From the original journal. (Cape Archives)

In 1724, the Dutch even attempted to establish a slaving outpost, Fort Lydsaamheit, at present-day Maputo. This resulted in such a high loss of life among Company employees deployed there and supplied such a disappointingly low number of slaves (280), that it was abandoned less than ten years later. After this, slaving missions resumed to the west coast of Madagascar, particularly the northwest port of Mazalagem Nova at Boina Bay and also slave ports along the east African coast from Mozambique to Zanzibar during the final years of Company-sponsored voyages (1776-86).

2. VOC fleets returning to Europe

Slaves also came to the Cape aboard VOC ships returning to Europe. From many far-flung outposts of the VOC these ships would gather each year at Batavia and Galle in Ceylon. From these gathering points they would then sail in the safety of convoy to the Cape. Returning aboard were Company officials and ships' officers who often took slaves to serve them on the voyage. Mindful that slavery was not allowed in Holland these owners expected to sell their slaves at the Cape where it was known they could command a high price.

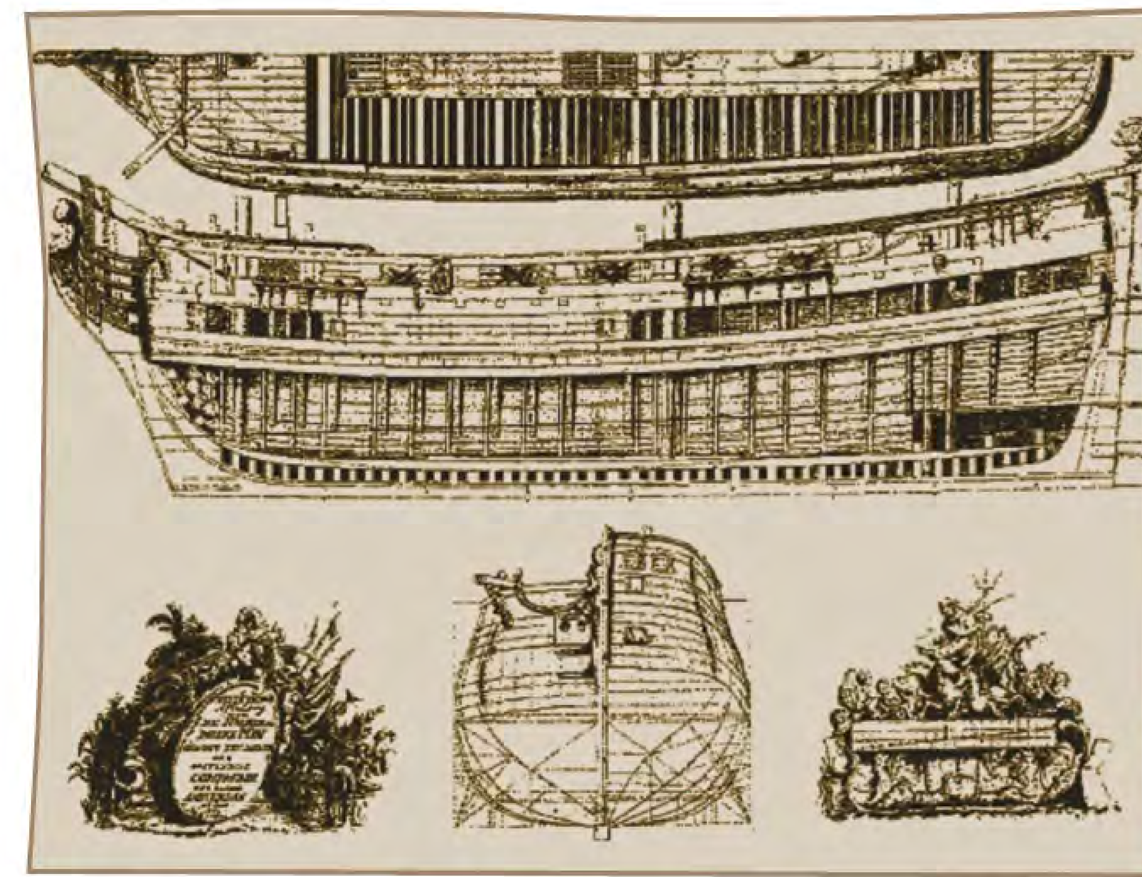
3. Foreign ships

There were also foreign ships engaged in the slave trade which regularly called at the Cape. While greater returns could be realized in the slave markets of the Americas, the captains of such ships often chose to sell their human cargoes here rather than risk the losses that could be expected on the lengthy Atlantic crossing. Mostly these slaves came from east Africa and Madagascar in the later years of the 18th century until 1808 when the oceanic slave trade was abolished throughout the British Empire.

The end result of these influences is that of the people brought in bondage to the Cape some 26% originated from regions of Africa, a further 26% came from the Indian subcontinent, 23% from the many islands of Indonesia and the East Indies and 25% from Madagascar alone.

Conditions on a slave ship: trauma of sea passage

Following their capture, slaves usually had to endure an arduous trek in chains to coastal slaving fortresses. Survivors were then likely to be forced into the dark holds of ships under the most inhumane and crowded conditions imaginable. It was not uncommon for a quarter of their number to die *en route* or soon after arrival, from weakness or illnesses contracted aboard ship. Captives, however, did not always resign themselves to this fate and where possible, attempted to claim back their freedom. In 1766, the slave lodge ship *Meermin* was returning to the Cape from Madagascar when the 140 intended slaves aboard managed to escape and take over the ship. In this uprising 30 out of the crew of 66 were killed. The Meermin then ran aground and was wrecked off Cape Agulhas. In the end 112 captives survived and upon recapture, were sent on to Cape Town to begin their lives in bondage far from the families, homes, language and customs they once knew.



The 450-ton 'hoeker' Meermin, built in 1759 and which was afterwards fitted out and employed at the Cape by the VOC as a slave ship. (Iziko Maritime Museum)

The work and life of slaves

From the 1650s to the 1830s the Cape was a slave-owning society. Early Cape Town can be said to have been built with slave labour. Very few records exist from which a clear picture of the lives of slaves can be drawn. Enough is known to conclude that slaves were the backbone of the early economy at the Cape and provided not only labour but also their skills as artisans. But whether artisan or labourer, slaves could not escape the reality of their subservient status and the ways their lives, personal aspirations and happiness remained subject to the whims of their masters.

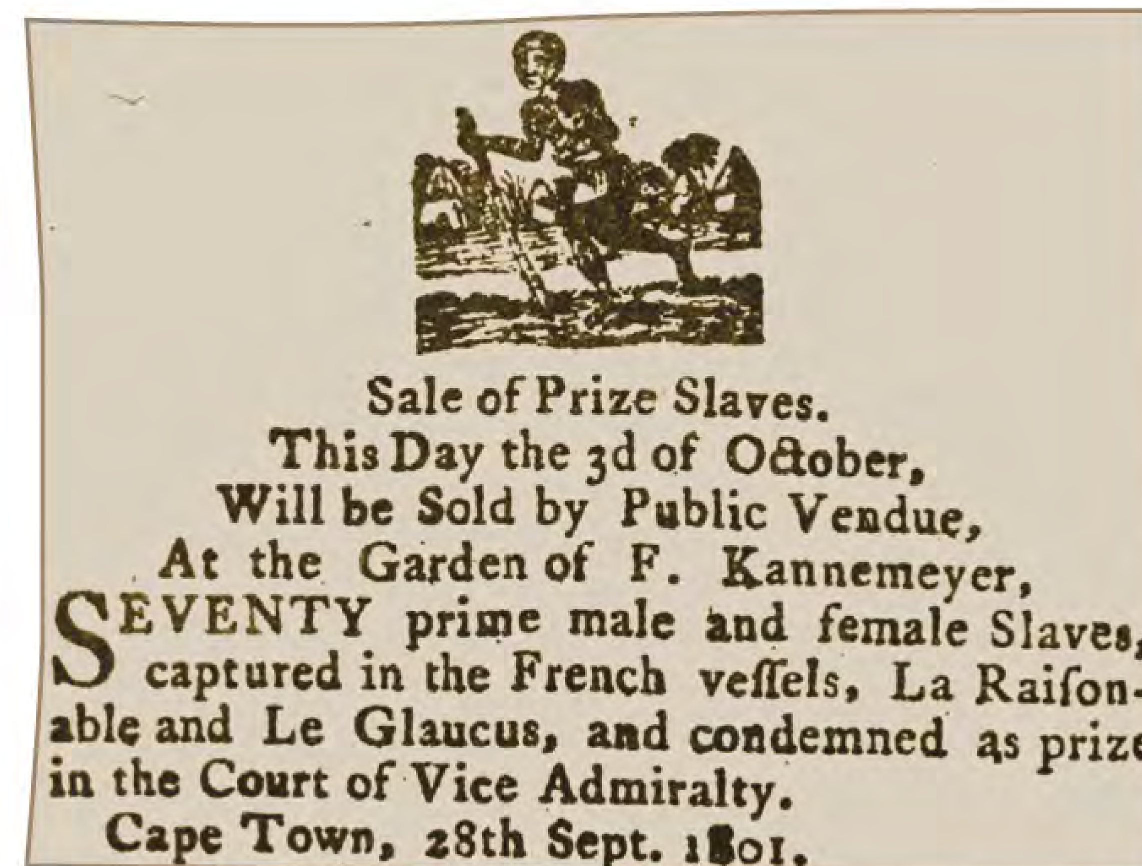
Household slave, believed to be August von Bengale, holding pipe while his owner, Hendrik Cloete of Groot Constantia, plays cards, c.1780. (Swellengrebel Collection, Hilversum)

Inhumane lodging

Company slaves were housed in the slave lodge alongside convicts, political prisoners, and even 'lunatics'. The eyewitness reports that exist describe conditions inside as overcrowded, foul and neglected. As for privately owned slaves – females engaged in domestic chores generally slept indoors in the kitchen while males were housed in outbuildings and often locked up at night to guard against escape or possible reprisal against their owners.

Slave owners

Throughout the VOC period there were essentially two categories of slave owners – the Company and private individuals. The latter included Company officials, free burghers, and also a group known as *vrije swarten* 'free blacks'. The number of slaves owned by free burghers surpassed those owned by the Company by 1690 – to more than ten to one by 1750 and over 30 to one by the end of Company rule in 1795.



Sale of Prize Slaves.
This Day the 3d of October,
Will be Sold by Public Vendue,
At the Garden of F. Kannemeyer,
SEVENTY prime male and female Slaves, captured in the French veſſels, La Raisonable and Le Glaucus, and condemned as prize in the Court of Vice Admiralty.
Cape Town, 28th Sept. 1801.

Slave auction notice which appeared in the Cape of Good Hope Gazette, 3 October 1801. (National Library of South Africa: Cape Town)

Slaves were traded or sold as any other property might be. These 'sales' can be compared to livestock auctions where buyers could check the fitness, strength and general value of the 'goods'. Many Company officials came to own personal slaves to serve in their households and although not technically allowed – to provide the labour required on private farms and other enterprises they engaged in on the side. These

slaves were generally not reported in censuses to keep the Company from learning of such private trading and dealings. Often slave artisans were hired out by their owners as a means of recouping the cost of purchase and their continued maintenance. In many instances slave women became concubines of their owners or were coerced into prostitution. Children from such forced unions became the property of the slave's owner even if their fathers were free men. It should also be noted that there was a growing number of 'free blacks' consisting of slaves who had in one way or another been manumitted by their owners or won their freedom through a meritorious act. One such ex-slave, Catharina Anthonis van Bengal, was the first to gain freedom in 1656, when she married Jan Woutersz, a VOC employee. Free blacks also came to include political exiles banned to the Cape by the VOC and convicts or *bandieten* who, having served out their time, chose to remain here. Many became extremely successful in business and in turn, some came to own slaves themselves.

Although technically 'free', such free blacks were subjected to an increasing degree of discrimination. With their own first-hand experience of slavery they could strongly identify with those still in bondage, even assisting at times with acts of resistance.

Loss of identity: 'slave names'

Slaves owned by the VOC often retained versions of their real names (Sao Balla, Revotes, Kehang, Indebet, Chemehaijre) while privately owned slaves were more likely to be given new names and consequently lost this connection to the people from whom they were taken. Some were given names after the place of their capture (van Bengalen, van Batavia, van Ceylon, van Balij, van Mallabar, van Maccassar), their place of birth (van de West Kus, van de Caab), figures in classical mythology (Cupido, Mars), biblical names (Herodus, Salomon) or names as arbitrary as the months of the year (February, October, September).

Labour: the 'dirtiest and heaviest work'

The settlement relied on slave labour in virtually every aspect of life, both public and private. Slaves did the 'dirtiest and heaviest work' called for on virtually all of the public works – digging canals, building fortifications and working the harbour. Slaves served as woodcutters and water carriers, bricklayers and lime-burners, masons and carpenters, fishermen and vegetable hawkers, porters and street sweepers. They were grooms and coachmen, butlers and valets, musicians, cooks, furniture makers, tailors, and builders – a rich tapestry of abilities and skills. In the farmlands far from authorities and any threat of reprimand – owners could demand long gruelling days in the fields and vineyards and inflict terrible punishments for resistance or indolence. Slave women were mostly employed as domestic workers: cooks, cleaners, nurses, wet-nurses and washerwomen.

Washerwomen, watercolour by De Meillon, c.1830 (Brenthurst Press)

Slaves' religious practice denied

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was the only religion recognised by the VOC and while accepting its duty to spread the message of Christianity to freemen and slaves alike, ran into a contradictory situation. The Dutch Reformed Synod of Dordt sat in the Netherlands in 1618 and addressed the question of rights bestowed on slaves through baptism. In 1621, the Synod declared that 'Baptized slaves should enjoy equal right of liberty with other Christians and ought never to be handed over again to the power of heathens by their Christian Masters either by sale or any other transfer of possession'. The hope of obtaining their freedom, if baptised, was an obvious incentive for slaves to become Christians. At the same time, however, it worked against them as slave owners were little encouraged to allow religious instruction if it could lead to possible manumission and thus the loss of their slaves. As far as slaves owned by the VOC – a provision was at least made by visiting Commissioner van Rheede in 1685 that children of Company slaves and white fathers be allowed to purchase their freedom after reaching adulthood, provided they were confirmed in the DRC and could speak Dutch.

Islamic school or madrasah at the Cape, early 1800s.
(National Library of South Africa: Cape Town)

Many slaves denied access to Christianity turned to Islam and were welcomed as converts. As early as 1694 political exiles under the leadership of Sheikh Yusef arrived at the Cape. Among the entourage of Sheikh Yusef were 12 Imams. Taking the many opportunities exile provided these revered religious leaders to profess their faith led to Islam being accepted by an estimated one third of the slaves at the Cape by the time of emancipation in 1834.

Slaves and the missionary societies

Missionary work in South Africa began with the Moravian Missionary Society in 1737 at Baviaanskloof (now called Genadendal) near Caledon, with displaced and homeless Khoekhoen. They were followed by others including the London Missionary Society (1795) and Netherlands Missionary Society (1797) which, inspired by the Evangelical movement, began the South African Missionary Society in 1799 for the purposes of converting the homeless to the Christian faith. The rise of the Evangelical Philanthropic Movement in England carried with it widespread revulsion for the continuing practice of slavery and finally resulted in the abolition of the oceanic slave trade in 1807. British authorities supported the work of missionary societies through grants of lands. Lord Charles Somerset, for example, granted the Groenekloof north of Cape Town to the Moravian Church as the site for a mission station in 1806 (known today as Mamre). With the full emancipation of the slaves in 1838, many slaves with no means of supporting themselves settled at mission stations.

A slave woman, believed to be nursing her mistress's child, while her own baby sits by, c.1798.
(Letters of Lady Anne Barnard)

Struggle for liberty

Resistance, uprising and escape for some

By the early 19th century slaves outnumbered free people at the Cape and fear of a possible slave uprising was pervasive. Any sign of insurrection was met with a swift and forceful response. Slaves nonetheless resisted their situation in both passive and violent ways. Some passive means included working slowly, playing dumb and engaging in petty theft. More overt ways included damage to property (often through arson), organised stealing, assault, poisoning, murder, suicide, and even armed revolt. In 1808 Louis van Mauritius and Abraham van de Caap led over 320 followers in a revolt and marched as far as Salt River before being turned back by the local militia. The ringleaders were captured and executed.

Some slaves formed runaway or *droster* communities hiding out in groups on Table Mountain and other isolated parts of the Cape Peninsula and surrounding hinterland. One group led by Leander van Bourgies escaped to Cape Hangklip in 1725 and gathered a following that grew to as many as 60 individuals. This group remained in existence until the emancipation of the slaves in 1834 by raiding surrounding farms, hunting and gathering and trading with slaves, free blacks and renegades. Many slaves escaped as far north as they could, moving beyond the reach of the local militia.

Crime and punishment

In response to slave resistance owners and the authorities employed both physical and psychological measures to preserve the master/slave relationship. The Company had the power of life and death over slaves. Close to the Castle was the place of execution originally called the *Justitie Plaats* (corner of Darling and Buitenkant Street) where brutal punishment was meted out. In the early days the customary penalty for what can be termed 'minor acts of defiance', was scourging. Slaves who absconded were commonly flogged and branded on one cheek. A second attempt at escape brought with it a flogging and branding on the other cheek, while a third could result in the nose and/or ears of the slave being lopped off. Hapless individuals maimed in this way became so common in later years that the authorities confined punishment to flogging and branding on the back. This was not out of concern for the slaves but 'in considering the abominableness… to those who see these mutilated persons'. Between 1680 and 1795 an average of one slave per month was publicly executed - often by being broken on the wheel, impaled, disembowelled or burnt at the stake for arson. The remains of those executed were left on display as a warning to others. At the beginning of the British occupation of the Cape in 1795, even the battle-hardened, Major-General Craig questioned the local Burgher Council over the greater severity of the punishments imposed on slaves over freemen and the use of torture in cases demanding the death penalty. To this the Council replied:

The Cape Hangman as sketched by Lady Anne Barnard, c.1798.
(Letters of Lady Anne Barnard)

'Experience has taught that gentle means are inadequate, even amongst free persons, to maintain law and order… consequently altho' strongly actuated by motives of humanity, and viewing the slave in the most favourable light, it becomes necessary to adopt severe measures to deter them from revolting against their masters and taking advantage of their superior strength'.

The following year, Governor Lord Macartney abolished the use of torture as part of the justice system at the Cape.

Emancipation

By 1806 the debate over the future of slavery in the British Empire was turning in favour of abolition. The oceanic slave trade was outlawed in 1807 (came into force in 1808) although in reality it was hard to implement such a decision. With British control over the Cape in 1806 also came ownership of the Company slaves and the decision on the part of the British colonial authority to divest itself of this responsibility in 1807. The remaining fit and young slaves were sold off while the old and infirm were retired to a new residence near the top of the Company's Garden.

At midnight on the 1st of December 1834, the Cape celebrated the formal end of slavery with church services including vigils held by slaves. Bonfires were lit on Table Mountain.

Slaves owners made predictions about anarchy and lawlessness. This never occurred and the slave population celebrated with religious ceremonies and went back to work as indentured apprentices. Celebrations and processions on New Year's Day each year still commemorate this legacy.

Ex-slave Katie Jacobs pictured here with some of her descendants in 1910. In her 96th year she could still recall events surrounding her manumission in 1834.(National Library of South Africa: Cape Town)

Tracing roots

The nearly two centuries of slavery at the Cape has often been referred to as the unwritten chapter in South African history. Many Capetonians, particularly of slave and indigenous ancestry, are striving to have this aspect of our history recognised and thus create a better understanding of how slavery influenced the development of South African society.

Picture taken in Elgin of this ex-slave, Jan Present, from Mozambique when reported to be 120 years old.
(Cape Times: 21 April 1916)

The UNESCO Slave Route Project seeks to better research and understand the nature and impact of slavery as a worldwide historic phenomenon. Cape Town's slave history is not only an important element of this story but has a unique contribution to make to this important global initiative.

Watercolour by De Meillon, c.1830. (Brenthurst Press

Access and safety

Parking

1) Clock Tower Precinct/ V&A Waterfront — 61
2) Next to St Andrews Church (Corner of Waterkant and Buitengracht) — 51
3) Castle of Good Hope (off Darling Street) — 14
4) Hof/Curtis Street. (off Orange and just below the Hof St. Reservoirs) — 44
5) Lower Cableway Station — 49

Toilets and refreshments

1) Clock Tower Precinct/ V&A Waterfront — 61
2) Next to St Andrews Church (Corner of Waterkant and Buitengracht) — 51
3) Martin Melck House/Gold Museum — 29
4) Castle of Good Hope — 14
5) District Six Museum — 17
6) Old Townhouse (Greenmarket Square) — 24
7) Company's Garden — 40
8) Lower Cableway Station — 49

General security and telephones

While most of the city is monitored by CCTV cameras as well as regular foot, bicycle and horse patrols, it is wise to take the usual precautions. In the event of an emergency public telephones can be found at:

1) Clock Tower Precinct/ V&A Waterfront — 61
2) Golden Acre — 9
3) Company's Garden — 40
4) Lower Cableway Station — 49

Acknowledgements

Produced by the Heritage Resources Section of the City of Cape Town
Researched, written, compiled and edited by Jim Hallinan.
Design & Layout: Alma Horn - Leaping Frog (www.leapingfrog.co.za).
Contributing authors: Dr. Antonia Malan and Melanie Attwell.
Cultural Sites Forum for the City of Cape Town.
H.C. De Meillon paintings: *Courtesy of Brenthurst Press.*

References

Boeseken A., 1977. *Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape, 1658-1700.* Tafelberg, Cape Town.

De Kock V., 1950. *Those in Bondage: An account of the life of the slave at the Cape in the days of the Dutch East India Company.* Allen and Unwin, London.

Elphick R. and Gilomee H., 1989. *The Shaping of South African Society 1652-1840.* 2nd edition. Maskew Miller, Longman, Cape Town.

Shell R., 1994. *Children of Bondage: A Social History of Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838.* Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg and Wesleyan University Press, Hanover and London.