

The Two Architects of the Settlement

by

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ONE of the greatest feats in organising ability took place during the early 19th Century when nearly 4,000 British, Welsh, Scottish, and a sprinkling of Irish Settlers, divided into about sixty parties, were successfully located on their different allotments of land in the district of Albany of the Cape of Good Hope, more commonly known then as the Zuure Veldt thus describing the sour quality of the grass in the Eastern Cape.

The full extent of this statement can only be appreciated when it is realised that it rested on the shoulders of two persons to work out this mammoth scheme of pinning the position of every location of the sixty parties in about five months time; and that these persons, Lieutenant-Colonel J. G. Cuyler (Landdrost at Uitenhage) and Mr. John Knobel (a Land-Surveyor at Cape Town who, in 1814 was sent to plan out the township of Grahamstown), had to keep in mind that in some parties there were more people than in others, ranging from 344 persons in Hezekiah Sephton's Party, 256 in Bailie's, to 24 in Thomas Pringle's Scottish Party, and that every male adult in a party was entitled to 100 acres of land; they had to ensure that each party was located near a river or stream with a sufficient all year round supply of water; and as it was the British Government's expressed desire that the district of Albany should become an agricultural area it was necessary to allocate to each party an even distribution of good and fertile land.

The first intimation of the intention of the British Government to encourage emigration to the Cape Colony was received by the Colony's Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, at the beginning of November, 1819. A month later the first emigration ships were due to sail for the Cape!

Crippling economic conditions prevailed in Britain in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, and increasingly heavy taxes caused great dissatisfaction amongst an already emaciated population. The emigration scheme, and the romantic Cape Colony thrown in as bait, with its promise of an abatement in taxes, roused the minds of a too sanguine people. Encouraged at the prospect of getting rid of the discontented, the British Government became a participant in the game of human happiness and sent forth her people on an adventure of wretchedness and disappointment. The Cape was totally ill-adapted for the reception of a mass of settlers; and as no previous arrangements had been discussed or made with Lord Charles Somerset, the news of this sudden invasion of 4,000 settlers, requiring aid and supplies of every kind, must have placed the Governor and his officials in an embarrassing position.

An official communication from Mr. C. Bird of the Colonial Office in Cape Town on the subject of the emigration scheme to the Colony was directed to Colonel Cuyler on November 12th, 1819. As this letter contains the urgent instructions of Lord Charles Somerset to Col. Cuyler and Mr. John Knobel, and elucidates the arduous duties laid upon them, it is necessary to quote from it, as well as to mention paragraphs, pertaining to their many duties, from two more letters from the Colonial Secretary to the Landdrost of Uitenhage.

"From your intimate knowledge of the frontier, you will almost anticipate his excellency's views for the settlement of the persons who may first arrive; and his excellency is sure that you will be aware that the old line of military posts now given up, between Graham's Town and the mouth of the Great Fish River, presents a country of great fertility and promise, and capable of maintaining, with industry, a large population. His excellency would wish to see the abandoned farms nearest to Graham's Town first occupied.

"It will be desirable, that, as soon as possible after your receipt of this, you instruct Mr. Knobel to take a minute survey of the un-occupied places in the immediate vicinity of the limits of the land attached to Graham's Town, and that in his report thereon, he not only specify the quantity of land calculated for garden ground, for the plough and pasture, but that he describe with accuracy the different springs, or other water, which such places may contain or command.

"Next after these, he should survey the Blue Krans, and any situations in that vicinity; from thence he should take the direction of Waayplaats to the lower Caffre Drift post . . . The mouth of the Great Fish River will next offer an eligible site. That when the line now chalked out is occupied, all that eligible ground shall next be filled, which intervenes between it and the mouth of the Bosjesmans River, including those fertile tracts which are watered by the Koure, Gasouga and Kareeka."⁽¹⁾

So much then, awaited Mr. Knobel's immediate attention. It is well to remember, too, that the area that had to be surveyed comprised between 6,000 to 8,000 square miles; that a thorough knowledge of the quality of the soil was required of Knobel as it had to be borne in mind that the settlers were to be encouraged in agricultural pursuits, rather than in the maintenance of large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep; that he was expected to know of every spring, river, or spruit in this vast area and whether these had a continuous water supply, or dependent on the rainy seasons.

The first duties of Col. Cuyler were set out as follows:

" . . . you are to provide the emigrants with the means of transporting them and their baggage to the places of their destination; the cost of which you will, in the first instance, defray from the district chest, keeping, however, a separate post thereof, in order that the amount may be subsequently refunded to you . . .

(1) State of The Cape of Good Hope, in 1822. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. Published 1823. Chapter X.

“With respect to any stores which may be embarked in the ships, with the emigrants, and which may be public property, you will cause such to be landed and stored at Algoa Bay, taking an inventory of them, wherein the state in which they are landed shall be expressed.”⁽²⁾

The second letter written by the Colonial Secretary to the Landdrost of Uitenhage, dated 25th February, 1820, states that Lord Charles Somerset was much at a loss with respect to the number of emigrants to be expected, but that he would send camp equipage for 1,500 persons to Algoa Bay; and that he had instructed the assistant commissary-general to be prepared to furnish rations for one month to 2,000 people. It was also highly desirable, so the letter continues, that the parties, as they arrived, should be taken without delay to the places allocated to them (according to the Surveyor's plan), and as this arrangement devolved upon Col. Cuyler, it was Somerset's "particular desire" that Cuyler should, in person, superintend the removal of the first parties from Algoa Bay to the final place of their locations. His Excellency also wished that Cuyler should ascertain, with as much accuracy as possible, what aid the district of Albany could give to the sudden influx of 4,000 people for six months. For this it was required that the Landdrost communicate with Mr. Robert Hart who was in charge of the Government Farm at Somerset.

A third letter, dated March 22nd, 1820, contains instructions to the effect that Cuyler had to receive all the camp equipage the moment the new settlers could dispense with it, in order that it could be used again by succeeding parties. Although the agent of transports at Algoa Bay, Lieut. Cole, was directed to land the gunpowder brought out by the settlers as soon as their baggage and stores were landed, and then to have it stored in the magazine at Fort Frederick, Cuyler, however, still had to take an accurate account of the many persons to whom this ammunition belonged; and Captain Evatt who was in charge of the Fort, was not to re-issue any proportion of the gunpowder without a written order from the Landdrost. As the Landdrost of Albany, Cuyler was expected to explain to the settlers the law to which they had now become liable, and should the necessity arise to enforce order; while the sale of any spirituous liquors among the settlers had to be prohibited "in the strongest manner, not only by itinerant sellers, but by any permanent canteens".

140 Years ago the district of Albany conjured up a scene so strange in its desolation that it is difficult to visualise it in its true perspective. The country was thinly peopled; the farms were big and, therefore, few, which made for a small farming community. Uitenhage and the military post at Grahamstown held but a handful of people. There were no constructed roads, only the thin tracks of an occasional wagon could be traced in the direction of Algoa Bay, Uitenhage, Somerset, or to the military post. Except for the quaint system of communication by Letter Carriers (Natives especially hired for their fast running abilities to carry letters or messages to their destination), an aspect

(2) State of The Cape of Good Hope, in 1822. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. Published 1823. Chapter X.

of 19th Century South African History, characteristic to South Africa only, which has never yet been given a deserving place in the complicated development of commercial and social communication in the country, inter-communications was more or less non-existent.

Acquainting oneself with the general raw scene of Albany in 1820, and studying the foregoing instructions as set out in the correspondence to Colonel Cuyler, it seems hardly possible that he and Mr. Knobel could have executed their tasks with so much competence. Everything was in readiness by the time the 1820 Settlers arrived, and Mr. H. E. Hockly states in his book *The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa* that "on 18th April (1820) the first move to the interior began, when 96 wagons set off with the two parties under J. Bailie and J. Carlisle from the "Chapman", and the five parties under G. Scott, C. Crause, T. Rowles, T. Owen and J. Mandy from the "Nautilus", these seven parties totalling roughly 500 persons". The exact number of wagons used in taking the settlers to their different locations is not known, but throughout the months of April, May, June and July numbers of parties set off from Algoa Bay on different routes to their locations. It is true that the deputy-landdrost at Grahamstown, Captain Henry Somerset, and a few field-cornets shared with Col. Cuyler the task of getting these wagons from the farmers and the military, and of accompanying and guiding the various groups of wagons to their final destination, but the great task of ORGANISATION was in the hands of Cuyler. Lord Charles Somerset had given him permission to call for support from the officer commanding on the frontier, but "you will feel, with his excellency, the delicacy of calling for such assistance, without the most imperative necessity" was the final instruction from the Colonial Secretary.

Under these circumstances then, it is with relief and pride that one learns that with only three Parties, those of C. Hyman, E. Ford and H. Sephton, difficulties arose connected with the allotment of land as all three Parties had to be removed from the locations to which they were originally taken and readjusted elsewhere. No further grievance from the settlers or from the authorities against Col. Cuyler, or Mr. Knobel, has been recorded.

Colonel Cuyler and Mr. Knobel had done their many duties well. Through their conscientiousness to their arduous tasks the destiny of the 1820 Settlers was shaped, and the history of this group of emigrants received its first spark on South African soil, which was to become interwoven and unseparable to the course of South African History.