

Archaeological Site Report	SiteNo	9/2/018/0042
	Site Name	St Stephen's Church, Riebeeck Square, Cape Town
	Date	
	Project	
	CaseNID	
	Coords	-33.921182, 18.417901

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Site Category: Building

SiteComments:

Archive Import History: The only building on Riebeeck Square is St. Stephen's Church, but it was, in fact, the first theatre or, as the Coloured people called it, the first "komediehuis" in South Africa. During the first British occupation of the Cape the public, and especially the garrison, lacked adequate entertainments. Consequently the British Governor Sir George Yonge, started in 1799 to build a theatre on what was then known as Boeren Plijn. According to Lady Anne Barnard "there is a new scheme with which the Governor is bitten, and which . . . will probably fall to the ground from its not being a well plan. 'Tis a theatre, all boxes, no pit, each box to cost £24 a year . . . Sir George . . . arranged the plan of this theatre, and brought forth the bantling scheme . . . "1 Two months later the work was in full swing and Lady Anne commented bitinglly, "The Governor is so bit th the idea . . . that he goes every day to the spot where they are digging the foundations, and sits there for hours with Mrs. Blake as I hear" The theatre was opened on 17th November 1800, and Lady Anne had to admit that it was a very fine building. At street level there was provision for a number of shops, workshops and even storerooms. Above these was the theatre itself. The walls were of Table Mountain sandstone, rough-dressed and bonded in clay, but the upper courses of the walls were of stone mixed with half-burnt bricks and plastered over. The exterior was distinguished by a low pitched roof, buttresses surmounted by urns, a row of oval windows and a covered colonnade of four columns reached by two gracious stairways. But for the stairways which were demolished in 1824, the building stands just as it was, but nothing remains of its "elegant" interior. The building soon proved to be ineffective as a theatre and fell into disuse. In 1838, when the four-year period of indenture of the slaves elapsed, Dr. Adamson of the Presbyterian Church hit upon the idea of using it as a school for freed slaves. The Rev. G. W. Stegmann of the Dutch Reformed Church supported him and soon it was used as a school during the week and as a Sunday School and a place of worship on Sundays. It is said the church, the only Dutch Reformed Church that bears the name of a Saint, was called after the first martyr because the dissatisfied slaves stoned it on a certain Sunday while a service was in progress. The ecclesiastical activities in the old building resulted in the establishment of a congregation, originally under the aegis of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1857, however, it was incorporated in the Dutch Reformed Church at its own request and became an independent congregation with representation in the Synod. The Dutch Reformed Church bought the building. For more than a century fruitful work has been done here. The little shops in the basement remained occupied and ensured a permanent income for the congregation. In 1936, after the years of depression, the building was in a fairly poor condition and there was talk of selling it for R14 000, but the danger was averted for the time being through the intervention of various cultural organisations with the support of the Historical Monuments Commission. Nevertheless, no one knew the dangers that threatened the old building better than did the Rev. P. 5. Latsky, the minister of the congregation : members were leaving the area for other parts of the city and the attractions of the site for business interests became almost irresistible. Cautiously he suggested to the Historical Monuments Commission that the building might be proclaimed as a monument, but the matter was allowed to drag on until 1949 when a firm who proposed to build a parking garage on the site, made an offer ten times the amount offered in 1936. For an impecunious and dwindling congregation there was hardly any choice. Once again every effort was necessary to save the building from being demolished. Fortunately, however, it was saved because the area proved too small for the project and the City Council refused to sacrifice an extra nine metres of Riebeeck Square. Nevertheless, the threat that the church might be demolished remained, and the position became even more

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complicated by the Group Areas Act in terms of which the area might possibly be zoned for occupation by the White group. The difficulties in the way of proclamation of the church as a monument seemed almost insurmountable ; it was only through persistence, tact and persuasion on the part of those who fought for its preservation and the sympathy and goodwill of the people concerned that the safety of the building was ensured after thirty years of strenuous effort. Proclaimed 1965 Visual Description: Colours: Site Features: Condition: Construction Date: 1800 Materials: Catalogue: Rennie, Vol 2, No: 048.01, Significance Category:

AdminComments:

Bibliography archive: f & c, 01.009, p 46

Damage Types: