

# PHASE 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE GENERAL POST OFFICE, CAPE TOWN

Prepared for

**Stocks and Stocks Properties**

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Prepared by

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Stocks and Stocks to undertake a Phase 1 Archaeological Assessment of the basement areas of the General Post Office building in central Cape Town. Although the GPO is positioned in a historically sensitive area, the finding of this study is that previous building activities had destroyed much of the archaeological potential of the area. In some areas however, the original deposits of the "Grand Parade" are intact. Further work to mitigate the destruction of archaeological material will involve monitoring the excavation of the basement areas by the developers. A detailed Phase 2 investigation is not required before the site is redeveloped.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Stocks and Stocks to conduct a Phase 1 archaeological assessment of the General Post Office. After a meeting and site visit at which the client was represented by Mr David o'Connor of Joint Venture Architects<sup>1</sup>, it was proposed that the Archaeology Contracts Office should subject the basement area of the GPO to a pattern of test excavations targeting the area under the GPO annex. The Annex was the most likely area for archaeological material to have occurred as this was close to the known sites of Wagenaar's Dam and Van Riebeeck's Fort. A map indicating the location of the building under investigation is presented in Figure 1.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before 1652 Table Bay was seasonally occupied by Khoi Khoi herders who would bring their herds of cattle and sheep to the area so that they could graze the summer grasses. Archaeological evidence has shown that these people had been visiting Cape Town for at least 1000 years before the colonial period. After the discovery of the Cape by Europeans during the 15th century, ships would anchor in Table Bay to obtain water and exchange mail with other vessels on the return route. Letters were placed under engraved postal stones for safe keeping until they could be collected by passing vessels on the return voyage. One such stone dating to 1620<sup>2</sup> was discovered on the site of the General Post Office when excavations for its foundations took place in the 1930's.

The earliest colonial period settlement in South Africa was established on what is today the western portion of the Grand Parade where the vendors' shops are. Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape in 1652 to establish a refreshment station to replenish shipping on the trade route to the east Indies. He was responsible for the construction of an earth fortification that not only housed the VOC garrison, but was the local administrative center. Portions of the moat of the fortification were exposed by G. Abrahams<sup>3</sup> (South African Cultural History Museum) and quantities of archaeological material were recovered.

The second commander at the Cape, Zacharias Wagenaar (Wagenaer, Wagner) was responsible for initiating two major engineering operations at the Cape - namely the building of a large "tank" on the edge of Table Bay in 1664 and laying down the foundations of the Castle of the Cape of Good Hope in 1666<sup>4</sup>. Ships calling at the Cape needed a continuous supply of water so a large dam was built on the nearby river. This river, which was one of three that flowed off the slopes of Table Mountain, ran into the sea at Roggebaai. Strand Street in Cape Town marks the approximate position of the beach in the 17th century. In 1975 substantial remains of Wagenaar's dam including some of the walling and a sluice were uncovered during the construction of the Golden Acre building. The finds were covered by a considerable depth of material including rubble from the old Cape Town Station which had

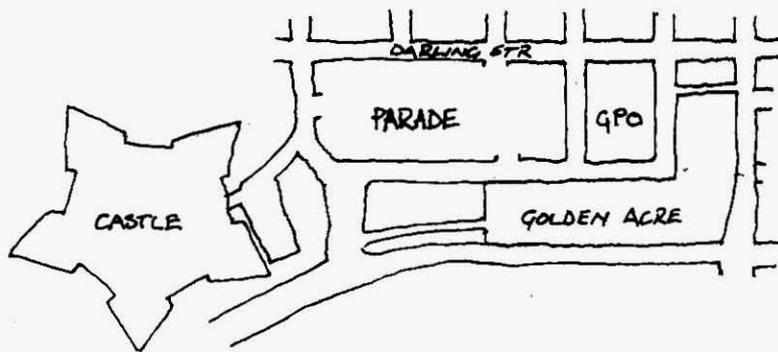
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<sup>1</sup> JVA Architects, Suite 808, 8th Floor, GPO Building, Plein Street, Cape Town 8001. Tel 4619328, Fax 4619469.

<sup>2</sup> Putzel, R.F. 1986. The Encyclopaedia of South African Post Offices. Vol 1. Cape Town: Citadel Press.

<sup>3</sup> Abrahams, G. 1993. The Grand Parade, Cape Town: archaeological excavations of the seventeenth century Fort de Goede Hoop. South African Archaeological Bulletin 48:3-15.

<sup>4</sup> Spohr, O.H. 1967 Z. Wagner, Second Commander of the Cape. Cape Town: A.A. Balkema.



**1**

Location of the GPO in central Cape Town



stood on the site. The early structures were excavated by members of the South African Museum and have in part, been preserved within the Golden Acre complex<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

The earliest archaeological material that could be located in the study area relates to the Prehistoric or Stone Age period. Material relating the Khoi Khoi of the Cape has been found below the foundations of Castle<sup>6</sup>. Historical and archaeological evidence has shown that Table Valley was extensively occupied by prehistoric people and traces of their existence may be found in a number of places in the city.

The GPO building stands in an area, which at the end of the 17th century was a stretch of land between Wagenaar's Dam and Van Riebeeck's old Fort - in others' words the center of the earliest colonial period settlement in South Africa (Figure 2). Before this time postal stones were left along the edges of Table Bay. Several have been found including one on the site of the GPO. Wagenaar's Dam, the end portion of which is visible under the Golden Acre<sup>7</sup>, probably extends under Castle Street which means that its southern end is likely to have rested in the vicinity of the Castle Street side of the General Post Office annex. As the underground topography of the area is uneven, together with the fact that the dam was built virtually on bedrock (probably exposed in the river valley), there was a possibility that further foundations of this structure may have existed under the basement of the GPO annex even though the basement itself is below street level.

It is not known what kind of structures existed (if any) on other parts of the GPO site during the 17th century. It is known that the moat of the Fort was used a domestic dump by the early Cape Town population. Human skeletal material has been found on the Parade while several more bodies were found during the excavation of the Post Office Tunnel during the 1960's<sup>8</sup>. Mr Emms of the Post Office Museum (retired) recovered a quantity of artefacts relating to the early colonial period from the Post Office Tunnel Excavation at the point where the tunnel passed close to the vicinity of the Old Fort on the parade<sup>9</sup>. The Snow municipal survey of 1862 shows that the Parade continued as far as Adderley Street<sup>10</sup>. The first known building that was erected on the site of the GPO was a Telegraph Office which took the form of a Pagoda<sup>11</sup>.

### 4. METHOD

At the time that the ACO was appointed to undertake the Phase 1 assessment, the demolition contractors had already begun to disassemble the Annex and had positioned heavy machinery on the top floor. The site foreman was concerned about the safety of the archaeological team working in the building during the demolition process so the decision was made to undertake the excavations during the night when the demolition teams were not active. For this reason the excavations had to be undertaken with some urgency. The goal of

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson, M.L. Personal Communication.

<sup>6</sup> Archaeology Contracts Office - Unpublished records.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, L.P. 1976. Photogrammetric survey of stone structure between gracht walls, Golden Acre site, Cape Town. South African Archaeological Bulletin 31:3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, A.G. Personal Communication.

<sup>9</sup> Woodward, C. 1974. Oriental Ceramics at the Cape of Good Hope. Cape Town: AA Balkema.

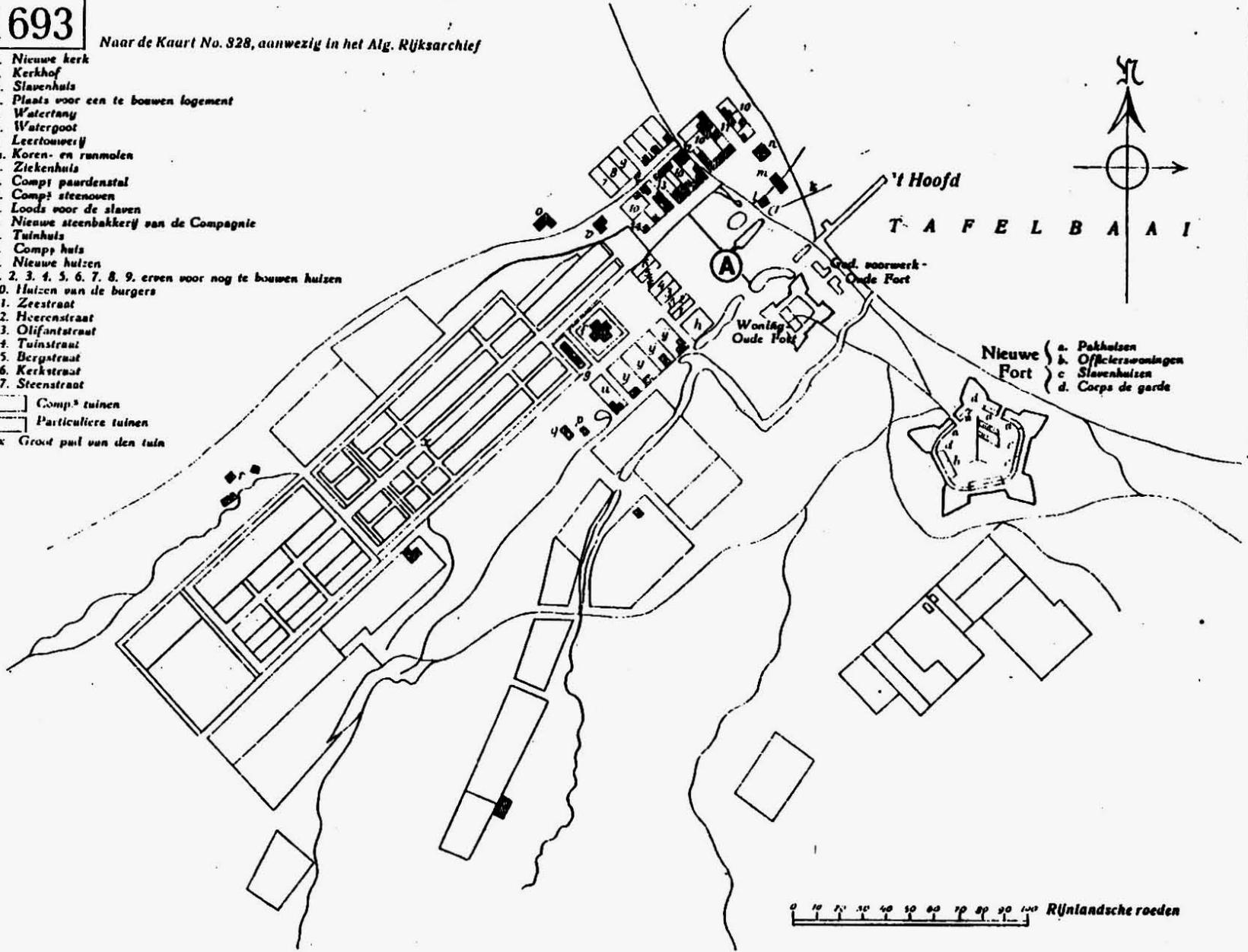
<sup>10</sup> Snow Municipal Survey. 1862. Cape Town City Council.

<sup>11</sup> Putzel, R.F. The Encyclopaedia of South African Post Offices and Postal Agencies. Vol 1. Cape Town: Citadel Press.

1693

Naar de Kaart No. 328, aanwezig in het Alg. Rijksarchief

- e. Nieuwe kerk
  - f. Kerkhof
  - g. Slavenhuis
  - h. Plaats voor een te bouwen logement
  - i. Watertang
  - k. Watergoot
  - l. Leertouweij
  - m. Koren- en rijnmolen
  - n. Ziekenhuis
  - o. Comp<sup>s</sup> paardenstal
  - p. Comp<sup>s</sup> steenoven
  - q. Loods voor de slaven
  - r. Nieuwe steenbakkerij van de Compagnie
  - u. Tuinhuis
  - v. Comp<sup>s</sup> huis
  - y. Nieuwe huizen
  - 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. erven voor nog te bouwen huizen
  - 10. Huizen van de burgers
  - 11. Zeestraat
  - 12. Heerenstraat
  - 13. Olifantstraat
  - 14. Tuinstraat
  - 15. Bergstraat
  - 16. Kerkstraat
  - 17. Steenstraat
- Comp<sup>s</sup> tuinen  
 Particuliere tuinen  
 x Groot pul van den tuin



2

Cape Town in 1693. "A" marks the location of the GPO. (after De Kolonien)

the Phase 1 programme was to open test pits to examine the underlying soils and deposits with a view to establishing the presence or absence of archaeological material.

4.1 Main Post Office: The basement of the main post office building is mostly at street level. Prior to the archaeological excavations a number of geotechnical excavations had been positioned in basement of the main building. These indicated that decomposed bedrock (blue Malmsbury Shale) was present immediately below the concrete floor which means that any substrate that may have contained archaeological material had been removed. It was then decided that test excavations should be concentrated under the annex of the GPO as this was closer to the known archaeological material that had been exposed at the Golden Acre site.

4.2 Post Office Annex: The basement of this area consists of three levels. The deepest level which takes up the eastern corner of the block services the Post Office Tunnel (which provided direct access to platform 22 of Cape Town Station). No testing was undertaken here as this area clearly penetrates bedrock. There is a further deep basement just north west of the center of the block that had been subject to geotechnical testing which showed that bedrock was directly under the concrete floor. Of most concern was the intermediary basement area (2000mm below street level) which had the potential to contain remnants of Wagenaar's Dam, and the upper basement, underneath which may exist portions of the original landscape and associated archaeological material. The intermediary basement and upper basement areas were selected for test excavation. The location of the areas selected for testing are indicated on Figure 3.

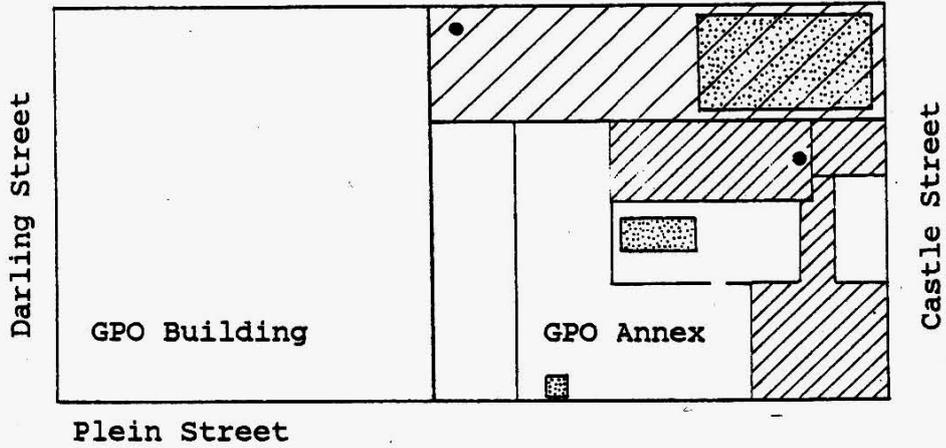
## 5. RESULTS

5.1 Intermediary basement: Seven test excavations were positioned in the intermediary basement adjacent to Parliament and Castle Streets. Removal of the concrete floor revealed a thin layer of compacted dark brown soil in all the test excavations. Below this lay decomposed fragments of Malmesbury shale and eventually bedrock. This indicates that virtually all the deposit in the intermediate basement area had been removed when the Post Office annex was built. No artefactual material was observed.

5.2 Upper basement - central area: Areas of the upper basement where it was possible to undertake archaeological excavations were limited as many of the areas were being actively used by the demolition contractors. A large room that was not being used at the time was selected for archaeological testing. Two test holes were positioned in this area. Removal of the concrete floor revealed a stratigraphic sequence that continued to a depth in test excavation 1 to 950 mm, and in test excavation 2, to 1200 mm. Six layers of deposit were visible (Figure 4). These consisted of sands and silts which contained very small quantities of artefactual material characteristic of the 18th century. The material included Dutch clay pipe stems, some fragments of oriental porcelain and some bottle glass. The material was sparse and cannot be described as being an in situ midden. An earlier land surface was located at a depth of 950 mm (test 1) and 1200 mm (test 2). This material, which was sterile consisted of ferruginous gravels followed by bedded clay.

5.3 Upper basement - Plein Street: much of this side of the building was being heavily used by the Demolition Contractors which limited the amount of space available for archaeological testing. An opportunity to make some observations was afforded when Stocks and Stocks staff opened up a large hole to test the depth of foundations. The stratigraphic sequence which was revealed was very similar to that in the interior of the building. The deposit

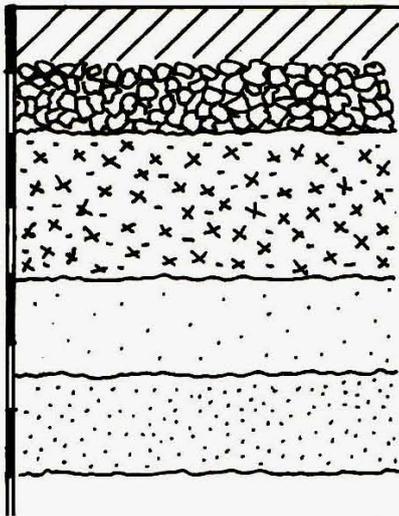
Parliament Street



-  Upper basement
-  Archaeological test areas
-  Intermediate basement
-  Deep basement
-  Geotechnical excavations



**3**



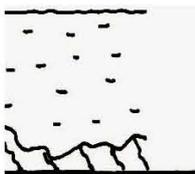
Concrete and hardcore

Yellow gritty deposit

Silty clay

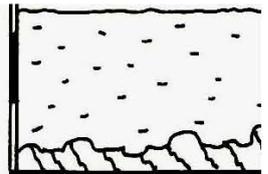
Red brown silts

Light brown silts



Fine brown silts

Basal ferruginous gravels



4

contained a larger quantity of artefacts characteristic of the 18th century Dutch period at the Cape. The artefactual material which consists of Dutch smoking pipe stems and bowls, fragments of oriental porcelain and bone is not associated with dense charcoal fragments (as would be the case in a kitchen midden context) but dispersed through the stratigraphic units.

The stratigraphic sequence represents the accumulation of deposit on the Parade. Some of this may be natural or a result of purposeful importation of soil to level or re-surface the area. This means that the context of the artefactual material is not clear. It may have been brought in with fill taken from other places, some of the material may have been dispersed from the vicinity of the fort, or it may be 18th century litter resulting from the general usage of the area by the people of Cape Town.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The construction of the GPO and annex has resulted in both the destruction and preservation of aspects of the past landscape. The intermediary and lower basement areas have been previously excavated to bedrock which means that it is most improbable that any historic material relating to Wagenaar's Dam has survived. Conversely, the original surface of the Parade has been preserved under those portions of the basement that have not been previously excavated below street level. The Parade deposits contain artefacts characteristic of the 18th century. These artefacts appear to have accumulated in the fill which makes up the various surfaces of the Parade. The context of the items is unclear. It is unlikely that structures of major historic importance will be negatively impacted with the planned renewed excavation of the GPO and annex basement. It is still possible however that human remains and postal stones may come to light during excavation of the basement.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. A full second phase of archaeological investigation is not necessary before redevelopment of the GPO building and annex takes place.
2. It would be desirable if an archaeologist is present to monitor the excavation of the sandy deposits that still exist under the upper levels of the basement. This is to ensure that sensitive material such as human remains, postal stones or any other significant artefacts are collected (the collection and care of human remains are governed by legislation at both provincial and national level).
3. It is most likely that parts of Wagenaar's Dam may lie under Castle Street and Parliament Street. This is provided that the area has not been badly disturbed by the laying of services. This fact must be brought into consideration if these areas are to be affected by the development.

## **8. PROFESSIONAL TEAM**

Report Preparation

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Excavation

We would like to thank Mr Kieth Steenkamp (Stocks and Stocks) and Mr Mike Gillard (Stocks and Stocks) for their assistance.