

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE
OLD JAIL SITE, ALSO KNOWN AS THE
CONSTITUTION HILL PROJECT,
JOHANNESBURG**



For:

SOUTH AFRICAN HERITAGE RESOURCES AGENCY

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SUMMARY

Excavation conducted and report prepared by the:

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Archaeological investigation of the old Jail site, also known as the Constitution Hill project, Johannesburg

The strategy up to this point was to archaeologically explore all the open spaces of the old jail complex. Although a number of test excavations were done, no remains of previous structures, features or objects of archaeological significance could be found.

Although it is known that pre-colonial Stone and Iron Age societies were living in the larger geographical area, no archaeological evidence could be found for their existence in the area under investigation.

Archival sources consulted during the preliminary study, in particular photographic evidence, indicated that a number of structures existed in the vicinity of the jail complex before its development. According to these sources, the structures all date to the recent past. As yet, no evidence for their existence could be found.

It is therefore recommended that

- When demolishing of any existing structure occurs, the archaeologist must be present to investigate any possible remains that might be uncovered.
- The team responsible for doing the historical research on the site, as well as the architect responsible for documenting of the current structures, must be on the lookout for any evidence that might be of help to the archaeologist in locating and identifying such structures.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In line with the Government's aim to establish heritage sites, monuments and museums that celebrate, reflect and give content to the new South African democracy, it has been proposed to develop and restore the site known as Constitution Hill, also known as the Old Jail, in Johannesburg. This project has been designated a Legacy Project by the Cabinet.

The National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria, was contracted by the South African

Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) to do an archaeological investigation of the site. The terms of reference for this was set out in a letter from SAHRA, dated 3 May 2000:

- To determine whether there is any remaining evidence of material culture associated with the historic use of the site;
- To establish the position of such material remains in relation to the built history of the site;
- To determine the significance of any such remains within the broader context of the history of the area;
- To provide an archaeological perspective within the context of the proposed development and restoration of the site.

It was determined that the resultant activities would have two phases:

- The pre-construction exploration of the site by means of test excavations in order to establish if there are any remains of previous features or structures in the area.
- Follow-up work that is to be done during the construction phase when the demolishing work was taking place.

2. THE SITE

The site that was investigated is located between Kotze street in the south and Sam Hancock street in the north and between Joubert street extension in the west and Hospital street extension in the east (Fig. 1).

The geology of the area consists of quartzite, with some shale patches occurring in places. The original vegetation used to be Bankenveld (Acocks 1975:99-100), a type of open savanna veld. This was an ecological niche that was intensely occupied by humans in the pre-colonial past (Horn 1996). It was, however, only due to the discovery of the extensive mineral wealth contained in the complex geology of the larger geographical area, that densification of human settlement, leading to urbanisation, started to take place, completely and irrevocably changing the environment.

The study area consists of high density suburban dwellings and has been so for the past hundred years. The site under consideration currently houses a complex of buildings, comprising of

- The Old Fort
- The Women's Prison

- The so-called “Native Gaol” or Sections 4 and 5
- The Awaiting Trail Prison

These buildings date variously from the late 1890s to the late 1920s, with a few smaller outbuildings conceivably somewhat later. The open spaces surrounding these buildings are largely covered with tarmac or cement. Only in a few cases can open ground be seen, being the remains of gardens containing trees and shrubs, largely of exotic origin.

As the complex is abandoned, and has been so for some time, most of the buildings are dilapidated and the open spaces totally neglected.