

## Proposed construction of a low perimeter wall around the La Motte Cemetery, Franschhoek

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### Background

On 31 July 2015, ACO Associates cc was approached by Malherbe-Rust Architects with view to undertaking a site visit to the 'burial ground' at the La Motte wine estate in Franschhoek in order to prepare a permit application to SAHRA as indicated by Heritage Western Cape in their Record of Decision.

Some historical research into this so-called burial ground has taken place in the past.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the accidental discovery in 1907, the farmer believed he had found the 'Huguenot' graveyard of Franschhoek and that he had unearthed the grave headstones of the initial French settlers. As such, the headstones were moved to a piece of land set aside to become a memorial place and it was laid out as a graveyard in regular rows where the headstones were matched with a footstone and a mound of soil was raised between the two and given a thin layer of whitewashed plaster. A historical pictures shows this set up (Fig. 1, taken from the HWC application). It needs to be stressed that no human remains are thought to be present under these 'graves'.

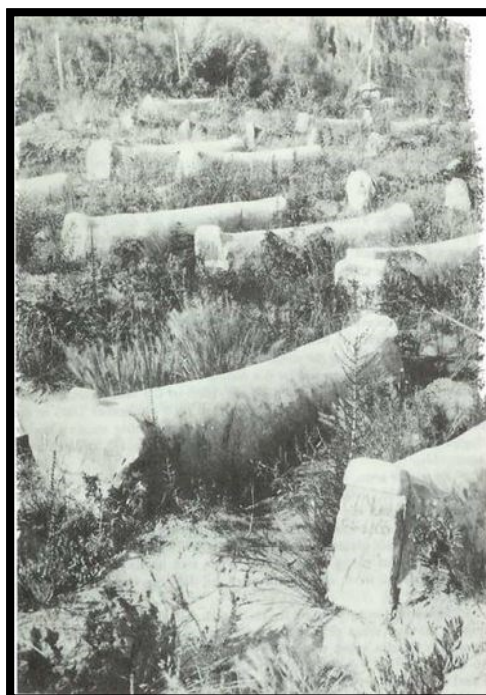


Figure 1

It would seem there was a church with graveyard servicing early Franschhoek in the Simondium area, but this was abandoned (demolished) around 1720 after a request to the Council of Policy for permission to build a new church was granted in 1716<sup>2</sup>. In 1759, the residents of Franschhoek requested from the Drakenstein Church Council permission to establish a graveyard in the town area, but no record could be found granting this. It is unclear if the La Motte grave stones were related to this graveyard (the earliest legible gravestones date to the 1760s) or if they rather formed part of a farm graveyard. Farm burials were only allowed at times when wet conditions prevented the deceased being

<sup>1</sup> This background is based largely on the Heritage report of March 2015 by A.-M. Fick and on the information collated by Prof. M. Burden in April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Council of Policy C35. p. 82-96 – 31 Feb 1716.

transported to the church graveyard, but a local formal graveyard (as petitioned for in 1759) would have alleviated logistical challenges in the wet season.

The graves were neglected (forgotten again?) until the headstones were ploughed up in 1907. A substantial effort was made to memorialise them, but then again, memories faded until the conditions became so unacceptable that the National Monuments Council in 1976 agreed to look after it and had it fenced and gated in cooperation with the then-current land owners.

At the moment, the memorial is dilapidated again, erosion is taking place and vegetation is starting to overgrown headstones. The current landowners propose to build a low, whitewashed wall along the perimeter of the memorial in order to stop the erosion and vegetation overgrowth and to mark it better in the landscape.

### **Site visit**

On 27 August 2015, Tim Hart and Liesbet Schietecatte of ACO Associates cc visited the site with Mr Chris Fick of Malherbe Rust Architects.

The site is recognisable as a 'graveyard' because of the cypress trees growing around it and because of the headstones. But the organisation of the headstones feels very artificial compared to other (historical, and more modern) informal and farm graveyards we have come across over the years. The alignment of the head and footstones is very regimental and uniform, and the 'graves' are sited very closely next to each other. (Fig. 2-3) The plastered soil mounds have disappeared and not all headstones are legible any more. Based on our experience, we would concur with the historical research that most likely there will be no human remains present under these 'graves'. An exception might be the two graves which are built in a different fashion: one has one line of stones put in the earth in a rough rectangular shape (Fig. 4), the other has a very formal stone and cement outline (Fig. 5). But these graves are not near the boundary of the site where the enclosing wall is proposed.

Currently the site is enclosed with barbed wire and galvanised steel rods. This is not in keeping with the historical buildings located on the same and adjacent erven.



*Figure 2*





Figure 3



Figure 3



Figure 5



## **Recommendations**

Based on the history of the site, our visual assessment and our experience over the years, we deem the chance of uncovering human remains during the limited excavation work need to put a low boundary wall in place around the 'grave yard' very slight. However, as one can never completely discount the possibility of encountering human remains anywhere on the landscape, we suggest that monitoring by an archaeologist is facilitated during excavation work, or at the least, that the crew get a very thorough briefing that all work is to be halted immediately as soon as there is even the slightest suspicion that human bone is present. In the latter case, an archaeologist needs to be notified immediately and the find will have to be assessed.

It is our finding that the construction of a low perimeter wall is an acceptable solution to solving issues of erosion and giving this collection of important historical objects (and possibly some graves) some status as is fitting of its context. It is recommended that SAHRA approve the proposed actions.