# The "wall of flesh" of the Conquered Territory: farmhouses and towns established in defence of the eastern boundary of the Orange Free State, beginning 1866

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To defend the sovereignty of the Conquered Territory along the eastern frontier of the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State (OFS) and Basutoland (Lesotho), the government of the former passed the Occupation Act, 1866, which provided for the establishment of three parallel rows of farms and, during the next year, three border towns. In both cases, applicants had to covenant to militia service and building within a stipulated time. As the towns were of strategic importance, unlike the Boer tradition of church-founded towns with parishioners settling around the place of worship, the brief given the surveyors was to lay out the towns to specific allotment criteria without any spatial provision for religious practices. This article aims to show that even under these circumstances the towns came to feature the familiar diagnostic characteristics of Boer-founded towns with the repertoire of inherited townscape traditions. To bed the argument, the morphology of Boer-founded towns as developed in history is briefly investigated with the implication that the amendments made to the border towns of the OFS were culturally driven. Until now, these planned towns and urban entities have received scant attention within the family of Boer-founded towns.
**Key words:** planned towns, acculturated Boer town planning, border towns and farmhouses, quartered blocks

**Die Verowerde Gebied se "muur van vlees": dorpe wat sedert 1866 ter verdediging van die oosgrens van die Oranje-Vrystaat gevestig is**
Die regering van die *Oranjevrijstaat* (OVS) het die *Occupatiewet* (Ordinansie 2 van 1866) aanvaar om hulle soewereiniteit oor die Verowerde Gebied langs die oosgrens met Basotholand (Lesotho) te verdedig. Die *Occupatiewet* het die vestiging van drie paralelle rye plase bepaal en ook drie grensdorpe die daaropvolgende jaar. In beide gevalle moes die aansoekers hulself verbind tot militêre diens en ook die oprig van 'n permanente struktuur binne 'n bepaalde tydperk. Die grensdorpe was van strategiese belang en daarom het die landmeters die opdrag gekry om die dorpe uit te lê volgens 'n bepaalde blok-uitleg, maar sonder enige riglyne vir die ruimtelike akkommodering van godsdienstige praktyke. Dit was bepaald anders as die boeretradisie van kerkdorpe waar 'n nedersetting rondom 'n plek van aanbidding ontstaan het. Die doelwit van hierdie artikel is om aan te toon dat selfs onder hierdie buitengewone omstandighede het die grensdorpe mettertyd die bekende tipiese karaktertrekke van boeredorpe begin vertoon met die volle repertoire van oorgeërfde dorpsbeeldtradisies. Om die argument te versterk sal die ontwikkeling van die morfologie van boeredorpe vlugtig beskou word. Die implikasie daarvan is dat die veranderings wat aan die grensdorpe aangebring was, kultuurgedrewe was. Tot op hede het hierdie beplande dorpe en geboude eenhede min aandag gekry binne die groepering van boeredorpe.
**Sleutelwoorde:** beplande dorpe, ge-akultureerde boeredorpbeplanning, grensdorpe en plaashuise, kwart-gedeelde blokke

This article concerns itself with the strategy conceived for the defence of the eastern boundary of the Boer republic of the Orange Free State (OFS), a source of constant dispute between settler farmers and the covetous Basotho across the Caledon. It is a study of planned farm settlement, and urban form on pre-determined town plans, in relation to the society that came to inhabit them, and will argue that by a process of acculturation the townscapes came to reflect the values and traditions of the family of Afrikaner *dorpe* (towns).

At the outset, the settlement strategy will be placed within the context of its time, and as a basis for the argument, explain the diagnostic features of *dorpe*. The purpose of this article is to contribute a variation to the study of the South African built form in history, a little known but particular settlement morphology, and to explore the extent, if any, to which these farmsteads and towns were designed for defence and subjected to inherited cultural traditions and townscapes.

## The Conquered Territory

To bring the Boers, who had left the Cape and trekked northward from 1835 onward, under the authority of Queen Victoria, British commander Sir Harry Smith proclaimed the Orange River Sovereignty (ORS) on 3 Feb 1848. This meant that the eastern, central region of South Africa between the Orange River and its largest tributary, Vaal, would henceforth be British.
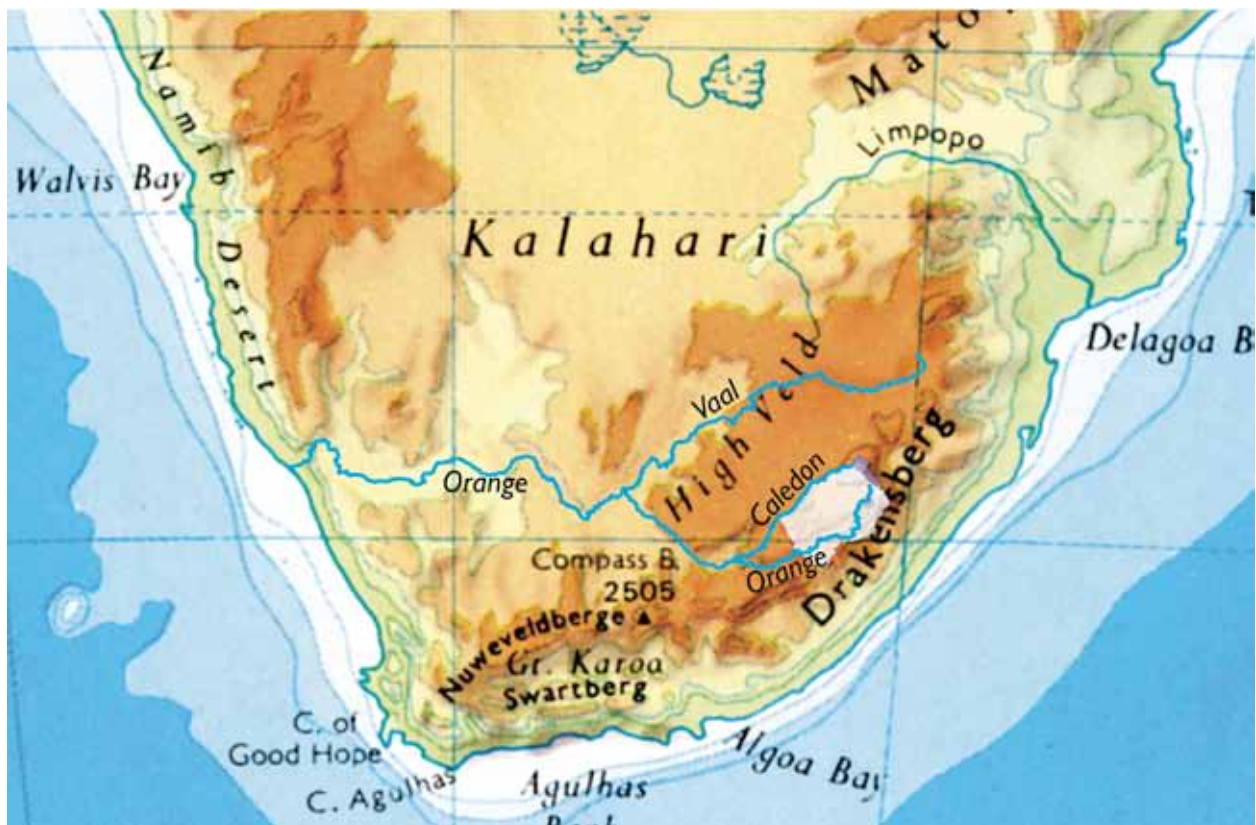


**Figure 1**
**The eastern central region of South Africa between the Orange River and its largest tributary, Vaal, was proclaimed the Orange River Sovereignty by the Britain in 1848, but it was only in 1866 that the next largest tributary, Caledon, was declared the eastern boundary of what had become the Boer republic of the Orange Free State**
**(source: Philip's New World Atlas, 1978).**

However, the Basotho nation, indigenous to the mountainous region east of the ORS did not accept the Caledon River, the next most important tributary of the Orange, as the frontier, primarily due to its exceptionally fertile valley. In consequence, Smith instructed the appointed British Resident in the ORS, Major Warden, to seek a redefinition in consultation with Moshoeshoe,

king of Basutoland (Lesotho since 1966). This lead to the proclamation of the Warden Line of 1849, but did not bring peace.

After suffering humiliating defeats to Moshoeshoe in 1851, 1852 and 1853, Britain abandoned the ORS, which, in terms of the Bloemfontein Convention of 23rd February 1854, henceforth became known as the Orange Free State (OFS). In this way the Boer republic (*Oranjevrijstaat*) received its independence unsolicited (*SESA* Vol 8, 346), but also inherited the border problem.

A protracted dispute resulted in three further wars (1858; 1865-66 and 1867-68) with the resignation of as many OFS presidents before, under President JH Brand (appointed Feb 1864), the delimitation was settled. However, the foundations had been laid during the 2nd Basotho War (May 1865-April 1866) when the northern commando under Boer Commandant-General JIJ Fick and the southern under Commandant Louw Wepener concluded successful military operations and in the process acquired considerable territory. This shifted the border eastward of the Warden Line to the Caledon River with a tangential extension in the vicinity of the future town of Wepener, south-eastward to the Orange. This arable stretch of land, which became known as the Conquered Territory, was ceded by Moshoeshoe in terms of the treaty of Thaba Bosiu on 3 April 1866 and was annexed by the OFS. The 3rd Basotho War (1867-68) resulted from the refusal of the vanquished to vacate the area.

**The Occupation Act (*Occupatiewet*) of 1866**

A prerequisite for peace and order was the settlement of the Conquered Territory**.** The proposals of a commission of the OFS *Volksraad* (legislative assembly) were adopted and the *Occupatiewet* (Occupation Act) passed into law in 1866. In terms of this ordinance three parallel rows of farms, each of 1500 morgen (approx. 1300 ha), stretching the entire border were to be surveyed. Farms would first be granted to citizens in active commando service during the 2nd Basotho War (1865-6) and the remainder would be sold by public auction.

The object of the occupation scheme was to form a bulwark of farmers to safeguard OFS territory against Basotho raids. Each farmer would be required to erect a house of at least 20x10 ft (6.1x3.05m) within six months of occupation; live in it; at all times be in possession of "one horse, saddle, bridle, rifle, 200 bullets, 5 lbs [2.27kg] of gunpowder and 500 percussion caps or flints" and be prepared to perform whatever civil or commando duty was considered necessary by a field cornet. In its turn, the government undertook to set aside a site for each field-cornetcy within which to build a fort (Eloff, 1979: 20).

However, the OFS government delayed implementation and the Basotho continued with border raids. Surveying had to contend with violent opposition and no troops were assigned to facilitate progress; under such circumstances farmers were unwilling to settle in the troubled region. Nevertheless, surveying of 605 farms was complete by 1869 (Eloff, 1979: 35) and the building of farmhouses could begin.
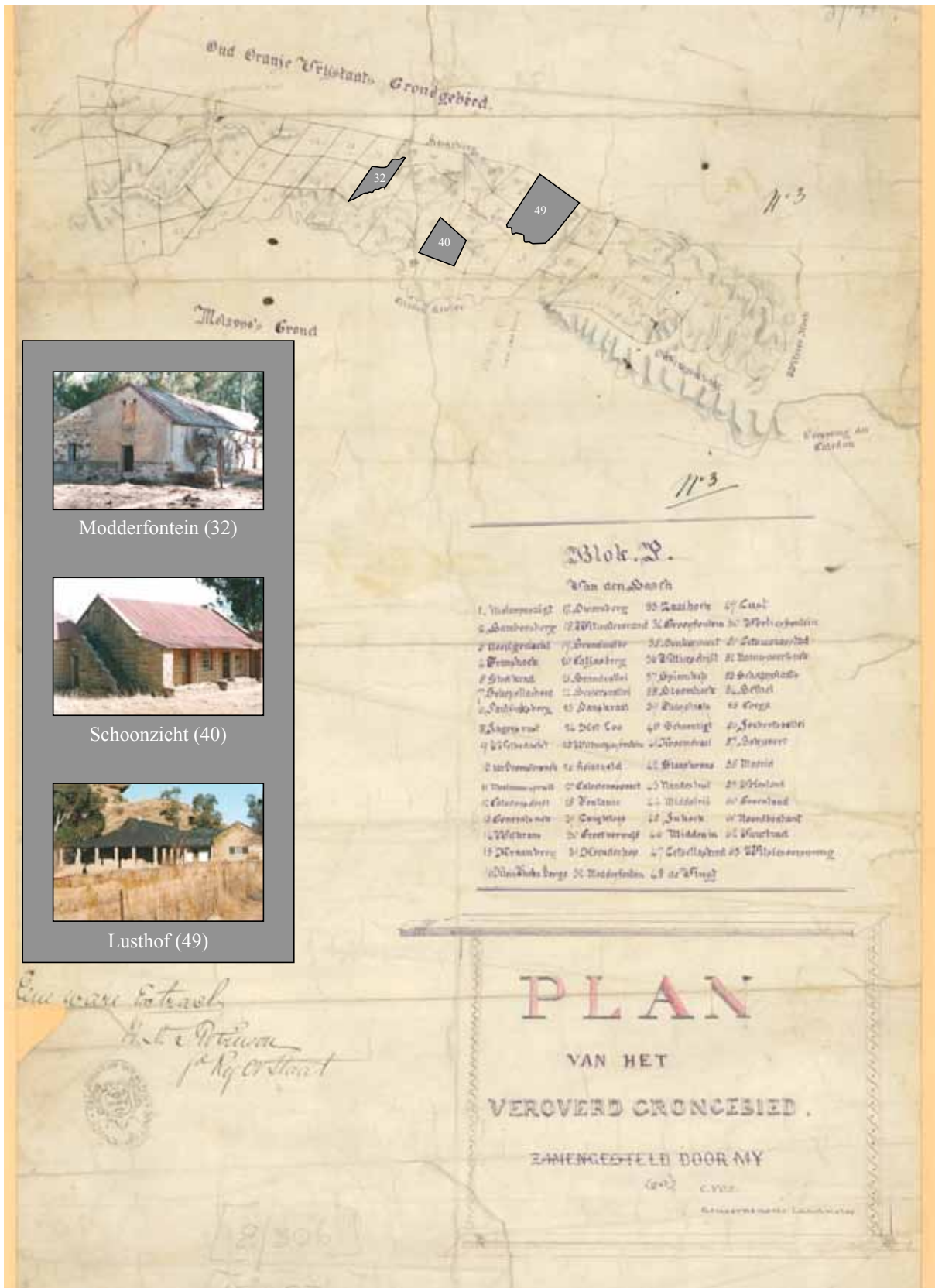
**Figure 2**
**Plan of a part of the Conquered Territory showing three parallel rows of farms up against the Caledon**
**River surveyed by C Vos, n.d.**
**(source: Free State Archives in Eloff: 1979, 28; edited by authors).**

195

## Characteristics of the farmhouses of the Conquered Territory

The earliest Boer settlers used sandstone as building material, but also followed the precedents set by the indigenous peoples and used either sod or wattle-and-daub techniques, of which vestiges remain in the earliest parts of Lusthof and the 'Big House' at Killarney. With the ongoing border skirmishes there was little incentive to commit to more permanent structures.
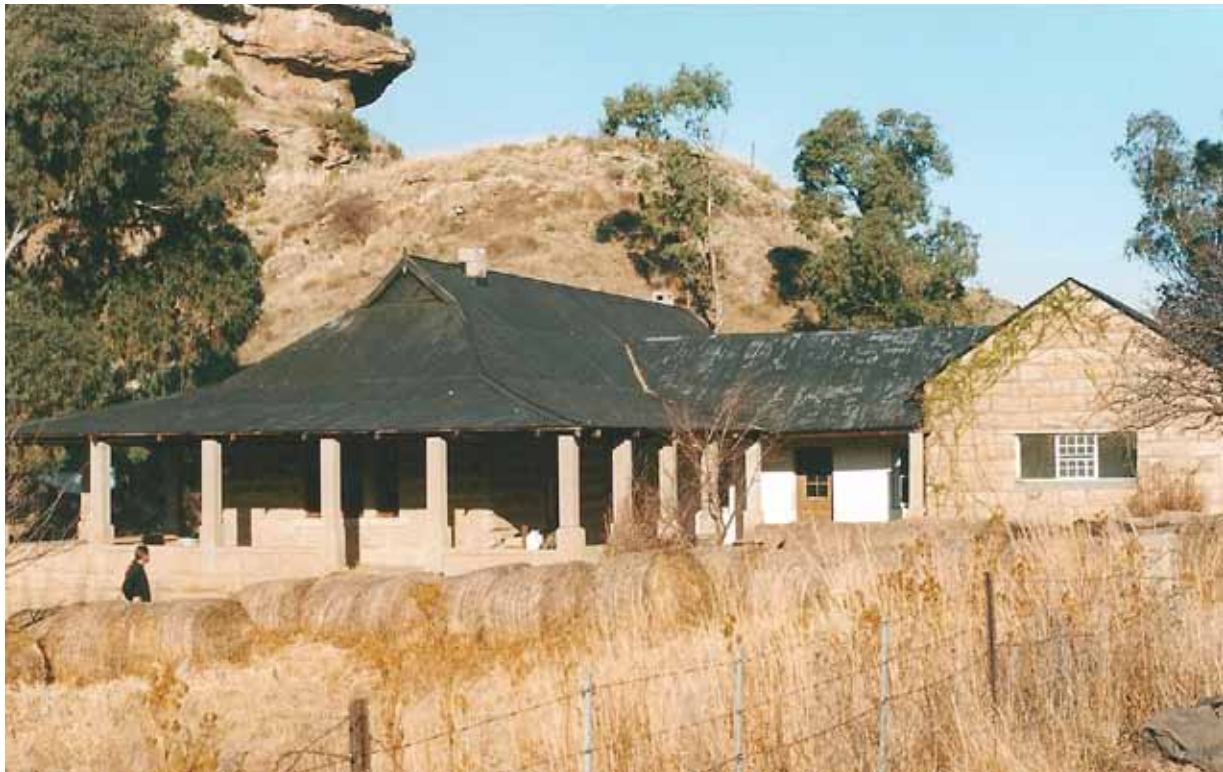


**Figure 3**
**The original cottage of Lusthof of 1875 lies wedged between the veranda house at left**
**and the extension at right**
**(source: Du Preez, 2012).**

Of the houses built by 1885, the habitable areas ranged from 37 to 119 sqm, well above the stipulated minimum 18.6 sqm. The original cottage on Lusthof had an area of 55 sq m while that by Venter on Modderfontein commenced with 52 sq. m. The last is interesting because of the three rooms of which one served as a horse stable replete with manger, perhaps a direct expression of the condition for settlement.

With the incorporation of the Occupied Territory into the OFS, and the simultaneous discovery of diamonds at Kimberley, a period of prosperity set in. Farmers now looked to the building materials readily available and engaged travelling contractors to quarry and erect houses of sandstone masonry, which became the distinguishing material for the exterior of the buildings, used as rubble or ashlar.

Yellowwood came to be employed for the ceilings, doors and window-frames and an elevated stoep gradually replaced the low paved entrance. An example hereof is extant at Tierhoek, built in 1876 by an itinerant Scottish stonemason. The second house at Schoonzicht (1883) was also built by a travelling stonemason.
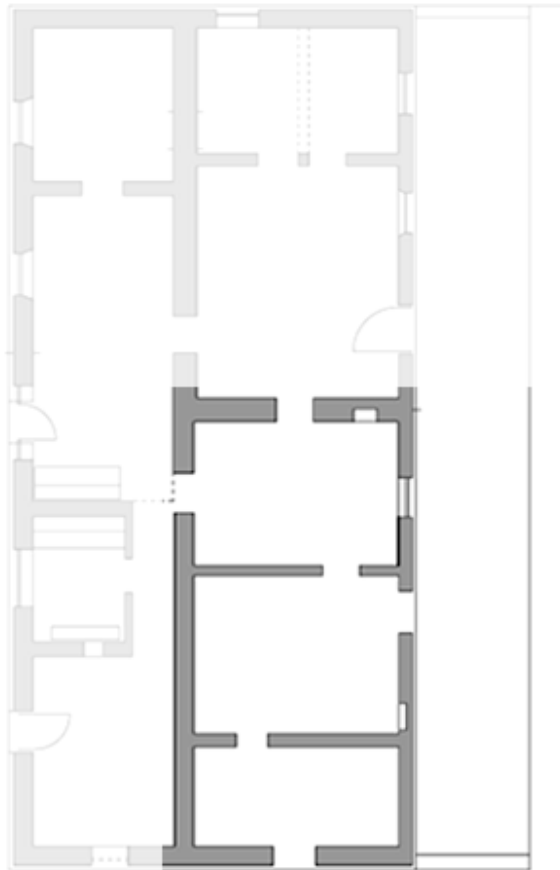
**Figure 4a**
**Plan of House Venter on Modderfontein farm with the original building**
**distinguished from the final development. The stable is the southern-most room.**



**Figure 4b**
**House Venter from south-east, with stable door visble in gable towards the south**
**and stoep on the eastern side**
**(source: Du Preez, 2012).**

**Figure 5**
**Sandstone masonry of Schoongezicht, 1883, replete with external staircase to the attic**
**(source: Du Preez, 2012).**

The latter is also the first example of a double banked plan, distinguished by the quality of its stonework and the external staircase giving access to the loft, for which storage purpose the ceilings had to be sturdy. Internal walls were built of sun-dried mud-blocks smeared with different mixtures of earth and additives as can still be seen at Modderfontein, or lime-washed plaster. All of the early houses had steeply-pitched thatched roofs and end-gables, but were without fireplaces or chimneys, a surprising discovery in the cold climate.

Once it became available, corrugated iron was used as the roofing material enabling a lower pitch while facilitating the development of covered *stoeps* as verandas. It was also then that *stoepkamers* and *rondawels* made their appearances.

**The establishment of three towns**

The OFS government realised that occupied farms would not, on their own, ensure an effective buffer against Basotho incursions. Thus the *Volksraad* session of the following year approved the establishment of three towns (Notulen: 1867, 140-142) on the eastern border of the Occupied Territory on farms previously undeveloped. Wepener near the junction of the tangential boundary line and the Caledon was the southern-most town some 6 km east of the river; Ladybrand in the centre of the Conquered Territory lies some 16 km west; and Ficksburg in the north occupies the western bank. All three sites were located at the foot of a mountain, well watered by streams.

Due to the haste, land surveyors were invited to tender for the survey and layouts of the towns by way of an advertisement placed in the *Gouvernements Courant* (government gazette) of 27 June 1867, and the same issue also contained an advertisement for applicants to occupy the towns. As with the farms, concessionaires in the towns would be required to keep a rifle and adequate

ammunition at all times, were obliged to enclose their assigned property with sods, stones or other appropriate fencing material within three months, and build a house thereon within six. Unlike the farmhouses, no minimum size was prescribed.
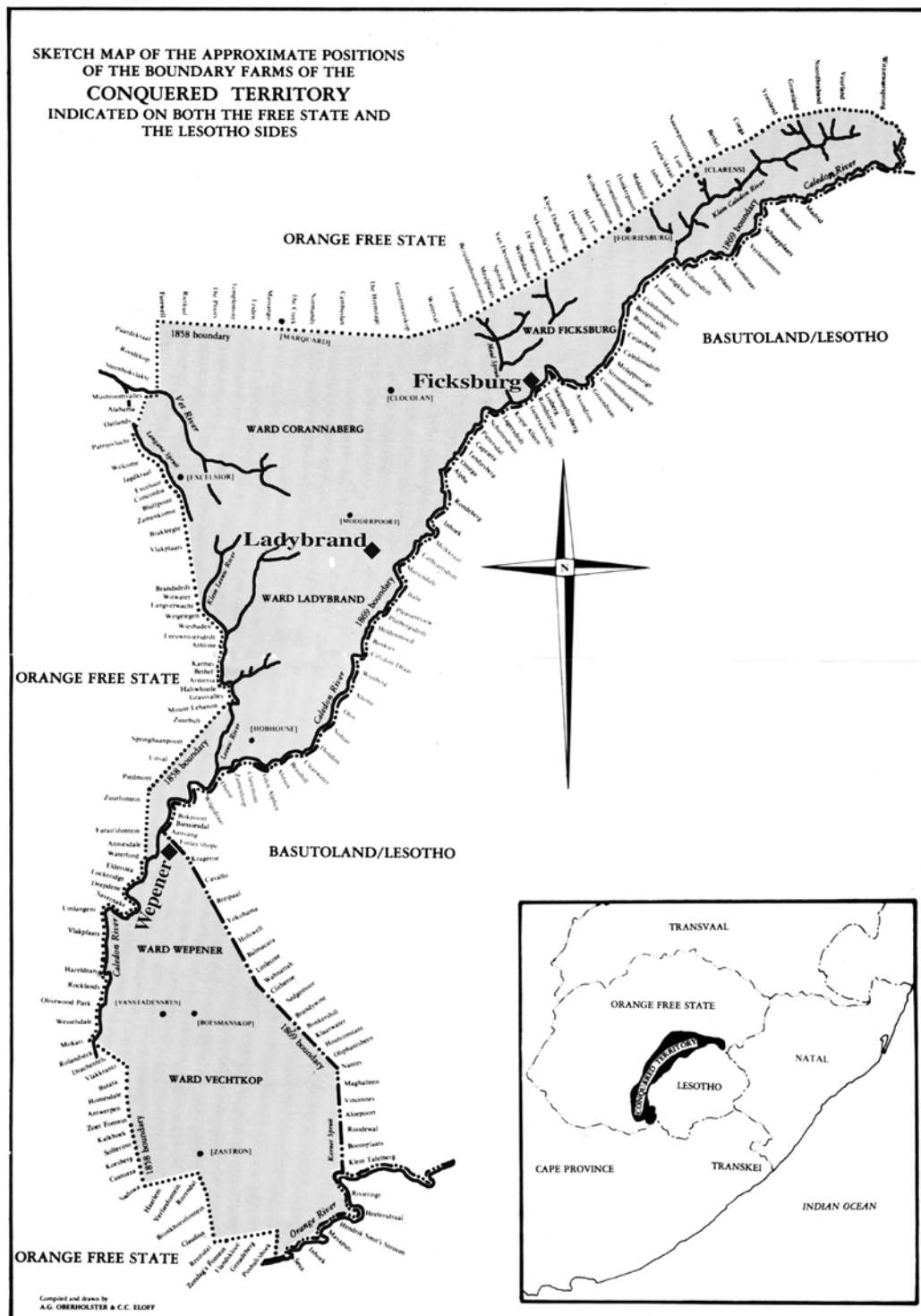


**Figure 6**
**The three planned towns of Wepener, Ladybrand and Ficksburg within the Conquered Territory. On the upper part of the map the Caledon River forms the eastern boundary; on the lower the western boundary (source: Eloff, 1979: 22-23; edited by authors).**

The conditions prevailing by mid-1867 were not conducive to the founding and settlement of towns (Eloff, 1979: 27) and their strategic positions scared off prospective residents. In fact, the outbreak of the 3rd Basotho war in July 1867 postponed both survey and allotment allocation. However, when the tide turned against the Basotho, Moshoeshoe reiterated his earlier request to have the kingdom declared a British protectorate, which was so proclaimed in March 1868. This ended the war and established the present boundaries (of Free State province), which, in terms of the delimitation arrangements of February 1869, saw the OFS cede a part of the Conquered Territory, east of the Caledon in a compromise.

The survey of the three towns could now begin with land surveyors G van der Bijl Aling, GAGP van den Bosch and KJ de Kok assigned Wepener, Ladybrand and Ficksburg respectively (Eloff, 1979: 26). The resolution for Ladybrand published in the *Notulen* of the *Volksraad* of 12 June 1867 served as the common brief for each surveyor, namely allotments of 300x150 feet (94.4574m x 47.2287m = 4461sqm) in blocks of four.

The survey of Ladybrand was completed in March 1868, although the first occupants arrived much later; Wepener by mid-1868, but only 35 of the 400 stands were occupied at the beginning of 1869 when with relative peace, settlement of the Conquered Territory could actually begin. During the *Volksraad* session of May 1870, barely one-and-a-half years later, President Brand announced that 60 houses had been erected in Wepener, an amazing influx, about 15 in Ladybrand, while in Ficksburg ten stands had been fenced off, six houses were complete and four under construction (Eloff, 1979: 35).


**The character of Boer-founded towns**

According to Haswell (1979:687), many Boer-founded towns grew around places of worship established by the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK, Dutch Reformed Church) because parishioners, widely dispersed on farms, needed to converge every quarter to attend the *nagmaal* (communion/eucharist) service over several days. The church building was often located on a *bult* (knoll) and placed on a large square for farmers to encamp and trade during the *nagmaal* weekend. In due course, those who could, acquired properties in close proximity to the church and built *tuishuise* (farmers' town-houses, cottages actually) for accommodation over the *nagmaal* weekend. The embryonic church towns consisted of a single street, lined on both sides by cottages, built like their Dutch precedents on the street boundaries in a continuous wall of development, leaving maximum space for a back garden. When the grid extensions were added to the plan, church and square retained their focal positions within the street system while cemeteries were placed on the edges of towns with graves aligned east-west.

Typically, Boer-founded towns were gridded and laid out on a spur site in such a way that the long streets could take best advantage of the slope for the irrigation of the rectangular *erven* (allotments), which usually stretched from street to street. Water was obtained from a river or spring, and was lead through the settlement by means of *leivore* (furrows or water leads) resulting in 'water' or 'wet' *erven*, as opposed to 'dry' *erven* unconnected to the system. Dry *erven* would be suitable for *tuishuise* or commercial use, but, points out Floyd, shops and businesses did not play an important part as the distant farmers were served by travelling pedlars (1960: 11); wet *erven* were specifically for the cultivation of vegetables and fruit. Haswell concludes that it is the agricultural rather than urban nature, which distinguished the *dorp* from a village or town (1979, 687).

**Figure 7**
**Piketberg, Western Cape, rendering by J Poortermans, 1857**
**(source: Lewcock, 1963: 397).**

Pietermaritzburg, the capital of KwaZulu-Natal, was founded by Voortrekkers in 1838. It too had a system of water leads which channelled water from Dorp Spruit (stream), a tributary of the Msunduze, to the *erven*, each sized 50x150 paces (150ft x 450ft or 45.7m x137.2m=6270sqm), arranged in series and stretching from street to street. Development was controlled by six regulations passed by the *Volksraad* of the Boer republic of Natalia, of which articles 4 and 5 were the most important from the *dorpsgesig* (townscape) point of view: that *erven* be planted within two months of purchase; enclosed with a side wall or wooden palisade; and that houses be built on the street boundary and in one continuous line. As a result, the fledgling *dorp* represented the "picture of regularity and orderliness", according to Haswell, a prime characteristic of Boer towns (1984: 19).



**Figure 8**
**Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, 1851. Buildings line the street boundaries on enclosed allotments**
**which stretch from street to street**
**(source: Haswell, 1984: 23).**

201

**The establishment of towns in the Orange Free State**

Almost all settlements of the first decade of the OFS republic were established by either a church or a mission, without the approval of the *Volksraad* (Moll, 1977: 23-28), and located demographically in the centre of larger farming communities, with water availability and firewood as important considerations. This resulted in a distribution of towns about "12 uren te paard afstands" (12 hours distant) (Moll, 1977:23) or 60km apart (Van Zyl, 1993: 83), while freehold ownership was offered from inception (Floyd, 1960: 37).

Town plans were of a grid-iron pattern with the blocks sub-divided into allotments backing onto each other, different from the rectangular ones stretching from street to street as Haswell identified in his diagnostic summary of the *dorp*. A common feature was the large church and market square, but some had only one of these squares. Whenever possible, town plans were so designed that the church became the dominant building and feature in the town. In fact, everything defers from the towering church building, usually the NGK, but sometimes one of the reformed 'sister' churches (Gereformeerde kerk or Hervormde kerk), often of later generations, that the marked contrast between houses and church can be termed medieval. Wherever possible, water leads were in place and trees would line the streets.

In keeping with the small population of English settlers, the buildings of Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian churches are diminutive in size, typically Gothic and often of stone. While the reformed churches had associated parsonages, significantly positioned and of stature, invariably other faith communities resorted to itinerant clergy serving a flock dispersed over a few towns. Where warranted, a school building would follow with state funds for teachers' salaries, the administration of the magistrate's court, justices of the peace and public works etc; which brought with them the residences of the officials.

**The character of the border towns of the Conquered Territory**

As the border towns were founded by the government and not by a church, the obvious distinction on the plans of Wepener and Ladybrand is the omission of any dedicated site for a church building let alone a church square. This is the British approach to town planning in South Africa (see Haswell: 1979 and 1984), and to be consistent, the market too was without a dedicated square. The gridiron plans of all three towns have uniform blocks quartered as corner allotments, an unusual division, and are without any larger block or square; only in Ficksburg were squares created within this geometry for the church and market.

Quartered blocks are to be found at Boshof (1854), Bethlehem (1860) and Reddersburg (1859) (see Smit, 1987), but one may ask what generated this geometry. Reddersburg was established for the settlement of a congregation of the Gereformeerde kerk as a "Kerkplaats...ten behoeve van de gemeente" (a church place for the purposes of its congregation) (Moll, 1977:25). Here the quartered allotments are almost square (27.5m x 30m = 825sqm), which at about 20% of those in the border towns is rather small, but may have been all a *tuishuis* needed, and is almost two-and-a-half times larger than the additional 'dry erven' at Wepener (18.89m x18.89m = 356.89qm). While no justification could be established for the quartering, the purpose of the large allotments prescribed for the border towns (94.4574m x 47.2287m = 4461sqm), can be deduced from the qualification given by the contemporary newspaper, *The Friend*, on the lots of Ladybrand "...this will furnish a good opportunity to poor people for getting a permanent residence, with the prospect of their being able to cultivate the greater part of their provender for

themselves" (13 March 1868; cited in Bosch, 1967:45). In other words, the distinction in size was determined by the use, with the larger allotments appropriate for self-supporting families in growing their own produce.

Though sited to benefit from mountain streams, each of the border towns had to grapple with challenges of water management. It is difficult to believe that a town characterised by marshy ground, lying almost at the Caledon and beneath the Jammerberg might have water supply problems, but that was the case at Wepener. Fortunately the site was also well endowed with natural springs and wells, which with the doubling of the population could be tapped not only for potable water, but also for a furrow to lead water across town with residents given their turns at diverting water to their respective properties (Oberholster: 1969, 47-49). But, it should be noted that the Sandspruit stream which transverses the town diagonally and could be deemed beneficent, subsequently ravaged and divided the town as experienced today.

Ladybrand built furrows for the leading of water which the *dorpsbestuur* (village management board), established in 1871, had to maintain, although a petition submitted in 1886 eventually provided for the proper levying of rates for meeting with this and other responsibilities (Bosch: 1967, 45 & 47). Ficksburg had no water leads, the surveyor simply labelled properties astride the streams as 'wet *erven*', a situation which led to considerable dissatisfaction as some were 'dry' or seasonal at best (Van Rhijn & Klopper, 1967: 29-32).

Unlike Pietermaritzburg, there was no prescription on the positioning of houses. In fact, houses would probably be at their securest if placed away from street boundaries in the centre of the allotment. While this freedom could significantly change the townscape, interestingly, historical photographs show many buildings opting to mark the street boundaries, not just for the exposure commercial buildings covet.


### *Wepener*

Named after Louw Wepener (1802-1965), Boer Commandant killed while storming Thaba Bosiu, and surveyed in 1867, the gridded plan of Wepener was laid out south of the Jammerberg mountain and west of a plateau, on a gently sloping site dissected by the Sandspruit (stream), a tributary of the Caledon. The long streets run down the site from east to west and all streets are 60 Cape feet wide (18.89m) without distinction. Due to the marshy ground, the first houses were built on the higher-lying land on the east.

The congregation was established in 1870 and consecrated its first church building only a year later. It was located on the highest part of town, yet interestingly, outside of the plan, in such a way that the church terminates the vista of what became named Church Street. Another 88 dry lots (18.89m x18.89m=356.89sq m), were added, wedged between the eastern end of town and the foot of the plateau, in a plan prepared by government surveyor C Vos, dated March 1875, eight years later. From their position relative to the church, the small sizes, and the fact that these were dry lots, one can only conclude that this addition was designated for *tuishuise*. This adds a familiarity with the way Boers built towns replete with a towering church, erected 1884, among the cottages.

**Figure 9**
**Wepener, 1945. The towering NGK church of 1882 to which all townhouses defer.**
**Sketch by P van Emmenis**
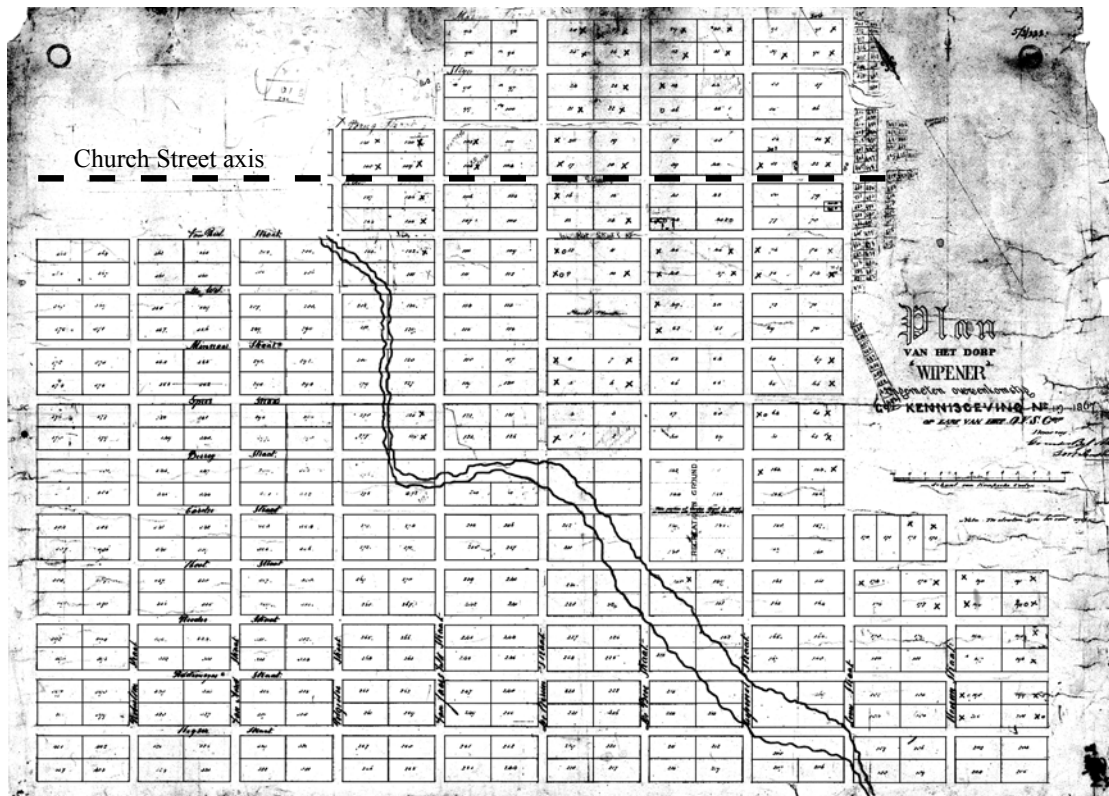**(source: Eloff, 1980: 45).**



**Figure 10**
**Wepener. The original town plan of 1867 consisting of quartered blocks to a gridded plan**
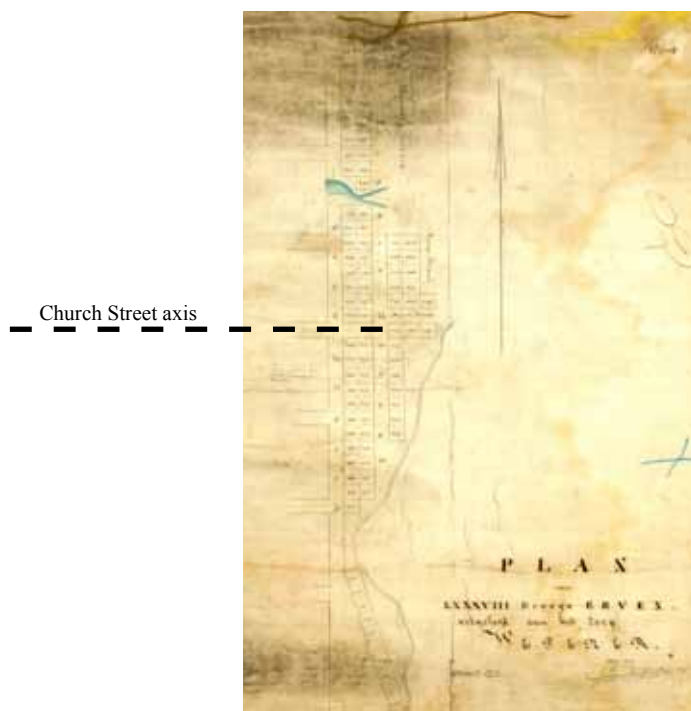**(source: Free State Archives; edited by authors).**

Church Street axis

**Figure 11**
**Wepener. Extension of 88 dry lots at the eastern or upper end of town.**
**Plan by land surveyor C .Vos dated March 1875**
**(source: Free State Archives; edited by the authors ).**

A centrally positioned block tangential to the north-south aligned commercial street became designated as the market square and probably sprouted a market hall like neighbouring towns did, before being subsumed for the town hall built 1928. The Anglican church of diminutive scale and style, occupies no landmark site but is situated along Church Street. While cemeteries were generally positioned on the edges of towns, and usually on lower lying land, in Wepener the cemetery is on the plateau east of town, a location no doubt also prompted to avoid the marshy ground.  The street names of Wepener remain unchanged

*Ladybrand*

Established in 1867, Ladybrand is located at the foot of Platberg, 16 km west of the Caledon, and allegedly named after Catharina Brand, the mother of the fourth OFS President who resolved the border issue.

Land surveyor KJ de Kok carried out the task of laying out the initial 200 blocks of quartered *erven* during February and March of 1868, under the protection of 150 men.  An apt description of the development was carried in *The Friend*: "The town of Lady-Brand will be situated on a little rise running from S.S.W. to N.N.E. The main street will go along the top of the rise, and on both sides of it the *erven* will be laid out. Two strong fountains, coming out of the Platberg…will supply the town with water.  These fountains issue from both sides of the rise, and will supply the *erven* on either side… The town and its commonage are sheltered by the Platberg on the S.E. through W. to N. and the country is open from N. through to E. and S.W…" (13 March 1868; cited in Bosch, 1967: 44).
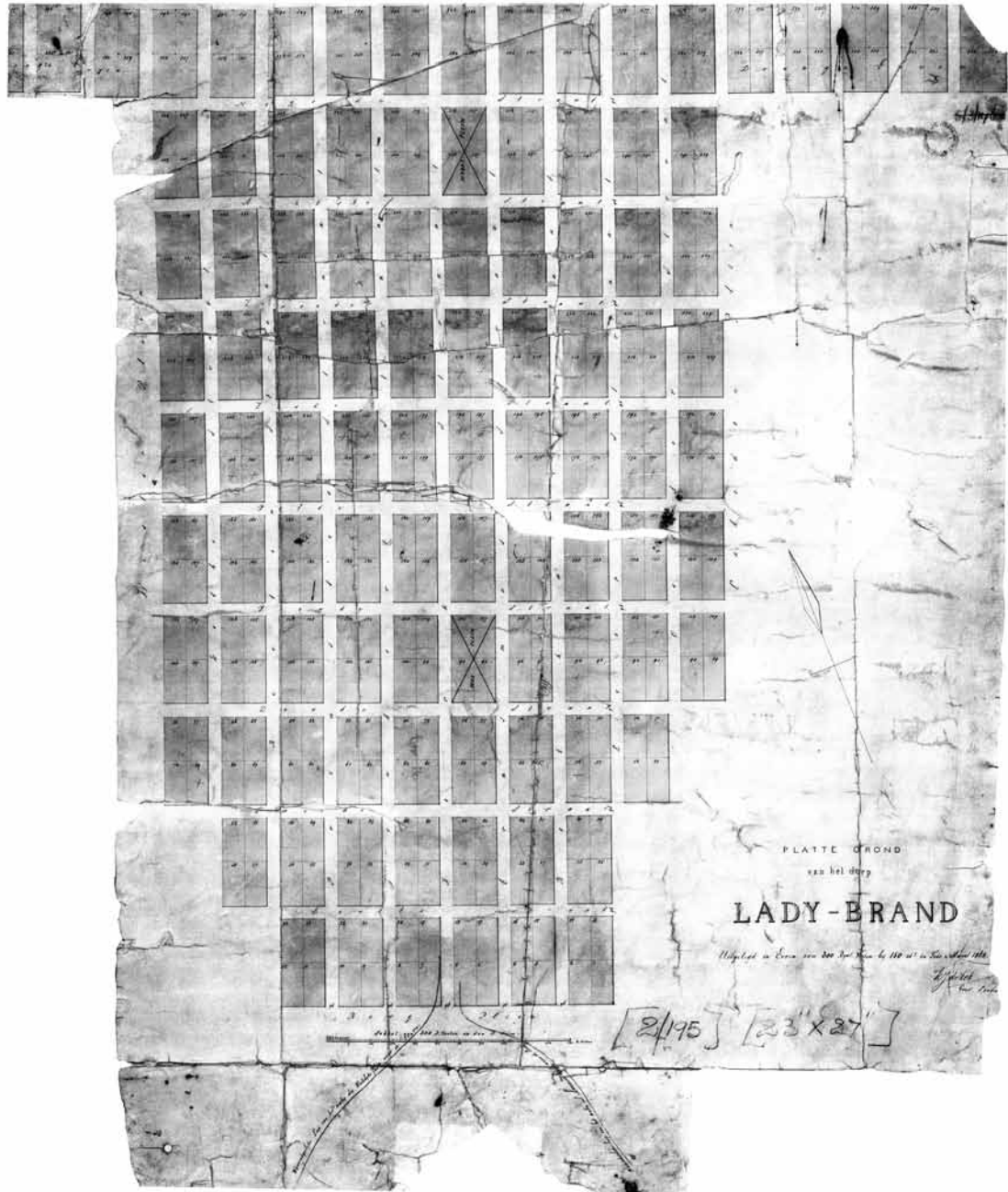
**Figure 12**
**Ladybrand, 1868. A gridded plan of quartered blocks along long streets running in a
north-easterly direction down the gentle slope at the foot of the Platberg mountain from whence
the two fountains originate
(source: Free State Archives).**

This is the description of an almost ideal spur site, perfectly orientated, protected from the elements and generously watered. The nine inclined long streets were given the names of pioneering families except for Church Street which marks the ridge of the spur, while the nine cross-streets are simply numbered 1-9. The flow of the streams could be contained in furrows as can be seen on the historical photograph of c.1870. This photograph also shows the enclosures of the quartered allotments and the positioning of many cottages, not in the centre of their sites, but on or near the street boundaries, as is the legacy of the Dutch town-making tradition.

**Figure 13**
**Ladybrand, c1871. Variously positioned on their enclosed allotments for defensive purposes,**
**a good number of buildings still coincide with the street boundary as per tradition.**
**Water is lead from the fountain in the centre foreground down the streets in furrows**
**to irrigate the allotments**
**(source: Eloff, 1980: 35).**

The original NGK church building was a cottage until in 1890 the permanent sandstone church was consecrated in the position it still occupies today, in the centre of a block consolidated as late as 1957 (Smit, 1987:139). Here the church effectively commands Church Square, the most important characteristic feature of Boer town planning. The cemetery lies on the east of town.

The police station, a fine work of OFS Republican sandstone architecture, is located on the block south-west and also diagonally opposite Church Square where it adds architectural definition to the Square. In due course the block on the north-west and diagonally opposite Church Square became assigned as market square. Following the precedent of many other OFS towns, in 1931 the town hall came to occupy this public space. The permanent school of 1904 was built at the top of town.
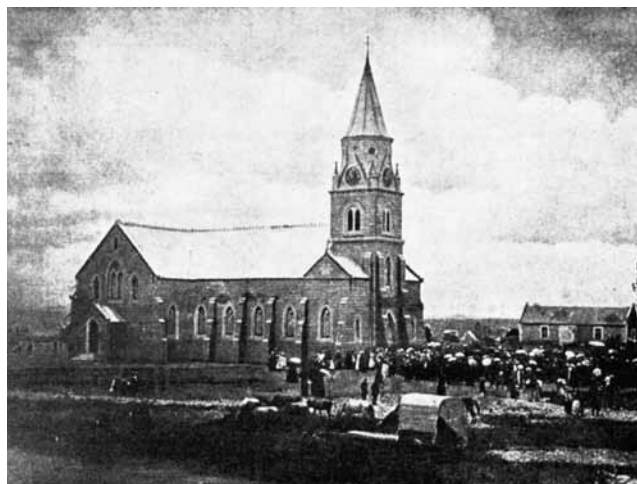


**Figure 14**
**Ladybrand, 1890. The consecration of the permanent NGK church on the centre of its block with the**
**original church at right**
**(source: Bosch, 1967: 126).**

207

Following the re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938, the main street entrance from the east, Derde Straat, which marks the southern boundary of Church Square, was renamed Piet Retief, while Tweede Straat was renamed Voortrekker, and Vierde Straat, marking the northern boundary was later renamed Dan Pienaar, in acknowledgment of the WW2 hero born in Ladybrand (1893-1942).

### *Ficksburg*

Named after the Commandant-General, the south-east to north-west aligned grid-iron plan of Ficksburg is laid out between the western banks of the Caledon and the foot of the majestic Imperani, with expansive views eastward to the Maluti mountains of Lesotho, often snow-capped. *The Friend* labelled Ficksburg the "best situated in the Conquered Territory" (10 March 1870; cited in Bosch, 1967: 30), a conclusion perhaps reached in ignorance of the severe cold experienced in winter.

Although the survey was commenced by Bosch in December 1867, progress was slow and he had to be protected by a large commando as "pegs were pulled out by the Basotho and used as firewood" (Bosch, 1967: 29-30), but the laying out of the 260 lots of both dry and wet *erven* along eleven long and nine cross-streets was completed in March 1868. Consistent with the other two towns, concessionaries were required to surround their allotments with walls of sod or stone to serve as a barricade against attack, and remains of such walls were reportedly still on existence a century later (*SESA*, Vol 4: 485).
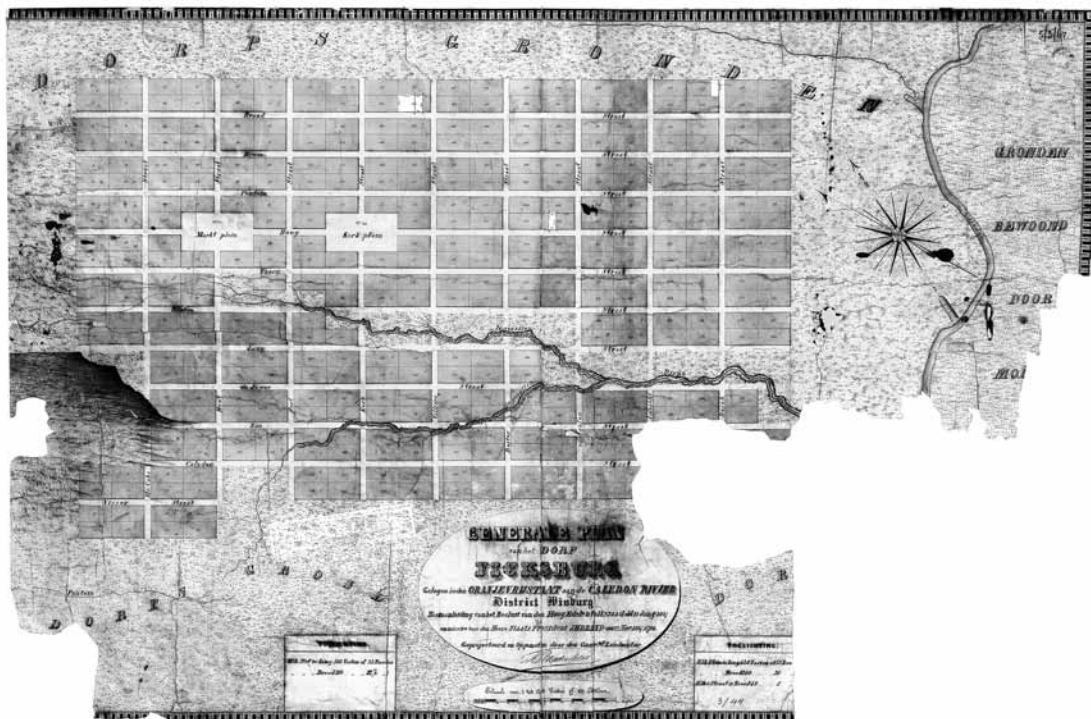


**Figure 15**
**Ficksburg, 1867. The gridded plan runs downhill from the foot of the Imperani mountain (left) to the Caledon River (right). All blocks are quartered but for those truncated to create a square each for the market and NGK church, aligned with the watershed.**
**(source: Free State Archives).**

**Figure 16**
**Ficksburg, late 19c. The large allotments enclosed as prescribed, with few buildings placed centrally while most follow the Cape and Dutch tradition of lining the streets (source: Sorour collection).**

Bosch made an exception by including in the gridded plan a dedicated square each for the church and market, shaped by notching an allotment from each of the four surrounding blocks, which rendered the squares 660x360 *voeten* (large), as noted on the town plan. Precedent for notching or truncating and resorting to fractional blocks exists at the Church Square in Graaff-Reinet, founded 1830, and also at nearby Harrismith.

The squares lie in tandem, but, interestingly, not on the ridge of the site and, somewhat unusual, Market Square occupies the more elevated position. Also interesting, the linking long street is named Hoog (High) Street, which is the name sometimes given the main street of English-founded towns in South Africa e.g. Grahamstown. Market Square intercepts the cross-street named Hout Straat, and Church Square, somewhat obviously, Church Street, and the two squares are separated by Fort Street. The cemetery was accommodated outside of the historic town plan, on the northern end of town, higher up and free of streams, at the end of Hout Straat.

While Market Square functioned as designated, the 'morning market', which had to wait until 1924 to be roofed, was restricted to the south-western side of the square, for the town fathers must have had in mind a more formal development. To give credence to this belief, the first building erected thereon was the magistrate's court (1892), which was located in the centre of the square and its northern front visually closes the vista of Hout Street, a conscious design decision. A few years later the town hall (1897) was built on the northern end of the square, aligned on the axis of Hoog Street, and a decade later the post office followed on the southern end (1907), separated from the courthouse by a service road. In time civic and governmental buildings filled the entire square and displaced the market.

The current NGK church building (1905-07) replaced the original of 1872. Interestingly, the later building occupies the north-western or upper half of the square as Church Street was allowed to cut across the square leaving the church uncomplemented by the usually generous spatial setting. Nevertheless, the NGK is the major landmark of Ficksburg, dominating the town

like a minor cathedral. It is distinguished by the asymmetrical western front which consists of a tower with clock and spire, and another truncated with domical roof and lantern. Integrated into a coherent architectural ensemble, the developments on Market and Church squares are the sole pieces of urban design in the three towns.



**Figure 17**
**Market Square, Ficksburg, c1930.  From right to left: Town Hall, Magistrate's Court with turret (1892, architect JE Vixseboxe), and Post office, NGK church on Church Square (1905-07, architect Walter Donaldson) and Commercial Hotel**
**(source: Sorour collection).**

As with the other two towns, in time the large allotments in especially the central and upper parts of Ficksburg were sub-divided, with more buildings built up to, very close to, or marking the street boundaries and directing their gables either parallel or towards the tree-lined streets. But, the free placing of houses in irregular positions within the large allotments and front gardens is an English townscape tradition (see Haswell 1979), as is the relatively small square given the NGK church and the scattering of diminutive church buildings for the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian faith communities, and to crown the argument, the gentlemen's club. Ficksburg is a townscape hybrid of the Boer and English traditions.

In the wake of the re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938, Hoog Straat, a veritable *decumanus* of a Roman town, was renamed Voortrekker, while the cross-street, Hout Straat, like a *cardo*, was renamed Piet Retief after the trekker leader.

**Conclusions: the "wall of flesh"**

While located on or near the border, none of the towns was fortified. There never were any encircling walls, towers or gates, let alone ramparts or bastions, and neither a garrison nor the fort proposed for each field-cornetcy ever materialised.

A study of 17 historical farmhouses in the Brandwater Basin, of which ten lie in the Conquered Territory (Du Preez 2012), revealed little in their designs and placing which could be ascribed to security or defence. From their settings, only three houses were found to have commanded the access roads and all three lie in secluded areas with a single, natural entrance.  But 11 of the 17 enjoyed a distant view, from which vantage point inhabitants could have had the benefit of time

in preparing for anyone oncoming.  The 'Big House' on Killarney is an exception but enjoys a commanding view from the stoep on the opposite side, over the border and into Lesotho.  Almost without exception, the *stoep* became an integral component of the farmhouse, usually with the long side facing the view. This means that with only two exceptions, all the houses utilised the prospect of their specific situations, which one can conclude played a more important role in the placing of the farmhouses than surveillance or orientation.

The settlement strategy for the Conquered Territory was initiated to hold the tract of country taken from the Basotho and to provide a concentration of settlers to prevent incursions including cattle rustling and raids. The essentially agricultural communities were not organised for resistance, but if integrated with the towns in cahoots with garrisons and forts, authority could be consolidated across the frontier, a strategy inaugural OFS President Hoffman appropriately termed "the wall of flesh" (cited in Eloff, 1979: 21). Fortunately this line of defence was never put to the test, and the development seems to have been a more theoretical or symbolic front of authority, than one with true power, not that the right to settlement in the exceptionally fertile valley was not without its own appeal.

What remains at issue is Boer acculturation of planned towns, as opposed to those which developed naturally around the nucleus of a church. Wepener, Ladybrand and Ficksburg were land built from scratch.  A common design brief with allotment size, quantity and block configuration; the challenge facing each land surveyor was the adaptation of the ensuing rectilinear plan to take best advantage of the slope of the given site for the facilitation of irrigation.  It was then up to the concessionaires to pick up where the surveyors left off, enclose their allotments and build their houses as covenanted, and complete the urban entity as they wished.

Wepener residents were first off the mark and saw no alternative but to place their church outside the grid where it could assume its customary position of prominence, on a square at the head of the street they named Church Street. Then the extension with smaller lots for the building of *tuishuise* materialised in the shadow of the church, in substantiation of Boer cultural traditions. Ladybrand ensured that a complete block was reserved for the church, while Ficksburg commenced with a provisional church and left the designated square fallow until affording the permanent church. Where *tuishuise* for the last two towns were accommodated could not be established, but densifying allotments would have been an obvious choice.

Like Boer *dorpe* generally, these border towns too were actually conceived as "nucleated agricultural settlements" (Haswell: 1983, 17). The quartered blocks are of a configuration different from most, but were designed for the settlement of people who would use their allotments for agrarian purposes, even if 70% the size of those in Pietermaritzburg. While the oblong allotments and the free positioning of houses thereon brought about a break with the inherited paradigm of recreating Dutch townscapes, the placing of ecclesiastical architecture in distinguishing positions with spires dominating the skyline, and the identification of a square each for the church and the market are primary diagnostic features of Boer townscapes. Early photographs reveal a density of development beginning to line the principal through streets, and market forces saw to the quartered blocks being variously sub-divided with houses built up to or very close to the street edges, which became tree-lined, another distinguishing feature of Boer-founded towns.  But, what gives these three towns a special place in the family of Boer-founded towns is their setting in a spectacular landscape of sandstone hills, which material was used for the construction of the buildings to provide a rooted built environment, and the relative softness of which the principal buildings exploited with carved embellishments.

Towns which have their *raison d'être* as components of a pattern of military defence can suffer obsolescence when the threat is over, unless a new basis for their continued existence can be found in an economic pattern of regional or local commercial or industrial activity, but these towns had good cause to grow. At a time when many South African villages and *dorpe* are facing an uncertain future, these three border towns are thriving, largely due to their location as transit and trading centres. While the condition and custodianship of their sandstone heritage leaves something to be desired, the towns have sound foundations to build upon, and their townscape character has thus far proved reasonably resilient to assimilation.

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