

**Our Voices are Left
with Our Bodies:**

*The Early Black History
of KwaNojoli*



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A drawing of a Xhosa woman and girl. It is by a Dutch soldier Johannes Schumacher, who accompanied the traveller Hendrik Swellengrebel near the Fish River in 1776. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Purchased with the support of the Fonds de Zuidroute. Rijksmuseum Fonds and the Johan Huizinga Fonds/ Rijksmuseum Fonds.

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Introduction

Changing the name to KwaNojoli from Somerset East (in 2024) has revealed how little is known about the black (Xhosa and brown) history of the area. Although the Xhosa name has been carried along by generations of people, research for the documentary on the name change¹ showed that very few people had tangible prior knowledge about Nojoli, after whom their town had been renamed.

Many had some inkling that she was a queen, more mythological than historical. Most said that when they were growing up, the mountain, the train from Cookhouse to KwaNojoli, or the moody mountain weather were called Nojoli. Again, depending on who you ask, the name of the mountain at whose foot the town is situated can be any of the following: Boschberg, Bosberg, Khelelela or Nojoli.

All this goes to the old fundamentals of historical recordings in our country. Does a story people tell themselves become history only when it is written? How do you verify oral collaborations of history? Or does history become history only when it is written?

This booklet aims to outline what is currently known about Nojoli, the person and legacy of the name. It also aims to record the early black history of the place, KwaNojoli, formerly known as Somerset East, and to explore some of the ways in which a living black history might be told.

The writer and principal researcher, the author Mphuthumi Ntabeni, drew both on his own extensive historical reading, and on oral interviews² of the people of the area.

¹A documentary film entitled *KwaNojoli: The Origins* and research for this booklet were commissioned by the Jakes Gerwel Foundation and made possible by a generous grant from the National Arts Council.

²See Acknowledgements.



He discovered uncertainties and anomalies, even in the published research, about this grandmother of Nkosi Ngqika who lived in the eighteenth and early parts of the nineteenth century. He also discovered some gaps and historical neglect emanating from the written genealogies of iinkosazana³ and iinkosi of amaXhosa. This is a reminder that within emerging black history, some histories are less privileged than others—the histories of ordinary black women have been suppressed. More suppressed still is the history of the KhoeSan people who first settled in the area even before the advent of amaXhosa. This asks us to look for missing voices in our histories, especially the hidden stories of our pathfinders, including the women and children who were often taken as spoils of war in brutal colonial wars and forced to work on farms.

³The words "nkosi" and "nkosazana" for "chief" and "chieftainess" will be used here to avoid controversial colonial condescending misuse of the word.

⁴Focusing on Nkosazana uNojoli, who entered the royal Xhosa line through marrying Nkosi uRharhabe, and on how she became associated with the rich pastureland at the foot of the Boschberg, gives opportunity to throw a stone into isivivane⁵ to give direction and a memorial point for the next generation to find their way.

But even in writing about Nojoli, we must take care not to compound the issue of hidden/suppressed or unhealthy historical silences. The focus on her could be seen to privilege the Xhosa inhabitants of the area over KhoeKhoe. This is not the intent.⁶ The project brief was simple: Find out who this Nojoli was, because the changing of the name Somerset East to KwaNojoli (the place of Nojoli) caused some fracas in this small historical town. How then can we use this history to mend the past and inform the future for better social cohesion in the town?

At the time of research, almost everything—not only the name “Somerset East” itself, but buildings, street names, anecdotes or informal histories on websites—in KwaNojoli still signifies the colonial and white Boer and settler history. There are very few physical remnants of black history, except in the townships of Mnandi and Aeroville. Very little of their earlier history has been captured in official publications.

⁴Elizabeth A Eldredge and Fred Morton (editors), *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labour on the Dutch Frontier*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994).

⁵Cairn to symbolise a memorial of spiritual and historical significance where people contribute to a collective memory and point to the way forward.

⁶This booklet does not have the space to trace the genealogies of Khoe nations that first settled in the area. Besides, this has already been done expertly by Patric Tariq Mellet in his book, *The Lie of 1652: A Decolonised History of Land*. (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2020).



Driving towards the colonial centre, the mountain still asserts its presence over the contemporary streets.

Preferring to align the foundation of the town with the colonial project may have given it more prestige in the eyes of promulgators of the “white men’s burden” of the era. It has meant no one has had to explain what happened to all the black people who were there before: doing that would reveal the genocidal effects of the 1812 Zuurveld clearance that prepared for the white settlement in the area.⁷

⁷For this history consult the paper, “Undoing Villainy: Eastern Cape Name Changes” by this author, Mphuthumi Ntabeni. (Forthcoming at the time of writing.)



The mountain at whose foot the town is situated has a range of names depending on who you ask: Boschberg, Bosberg, Khelelela or Nojoli: all of this bear traces of the past. Trying to unearth more of the history of Nkosazana UNojoli, the namesake of the town, has revealed gaps in our knowledge. This booklet tries to contribute to what is known, and point the way forward.

The name of Lord Charles Somerset's inept⁸ son, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Somerset and his wife Frances, is prominent all over the town. Other main culprits of the Cape Colony's colonial mischief, like Governors Grey and Cathcart, Bird, Bathurst, Hare, Van Riebeck (sic), and Glen Avon are fully represented in the street names of the town. The only black names were those of Ndimba and Zokufa Streets that for some reason or the other could not be totally suppressed. They survived even the apartheid erasure process. There have been some changes since 1994: KwaNojoli's main street, Charles Street, named after Lord Charles Somerset, was renamed KwaNojoli Street in 2023 after an extensive process of consultation.

⁸During several frontier wars, Somerset had humiliating encounters with Xhosa warriors of Nkosi Jongumsobomvu Maqoma whose forces once trapped him inside Fort Wiltshire for weeks. He could only escape by dressing as a woman, knowing full well that Xhosa warriors didn't kill women—not even in war.

While making the documentary we encountered the accompanying pain of suppressed generational traumas from land dispossession and forced removals. Current Councillor of the Blue Crane Route Local Municipality, Jonathan Martin, uses a powerful metaphor about encountering these names every day in his interview for the documentary. He asks: "If your house is filled with pictures of your abuser, why would you not remove the pictures in order to spare yourself having to relive the trauma?"⁹



A painting of the Bosberg in 1776 by Johannes Schumacher. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, purchased with the support of the Fonds de Zuidroute. Rijksmuseum Fonds and the Johan Huizinga Fonds/ Rijksmuseum Fonds.

⁹KwaNojoli: *The Origins* [documentary] commissioned by the Jakes Gerwel Foundation.

Nkosazana uNojoli and the Early History

Ask anyone why the Great Fish River is so named and they most probably will not know. However, ask a Xhosa person in particular, why that river is called iNxuba Yethemba, and they will tell you a story about how in ancient times, during the times of drought and impending famine, people would move to what they called “amadlelo,” the green oases for grazing. Most of these oases ran alongside the fertile banks of iNxuba, hence amaXhosa called it iNxuba Yethemba: The Fertile Valley of Hope.

AmaXhosa kings used to settle in these fertile valleys, or set up their Great Kraals that would be looked after by their entourage from their Great Houses. Their oral history tells us that Nojoli lived under the foot of Boschberg that Nkosi Rharhabe used as his Great Kraal, iDlelo. She was the daughter of the Thembu Nkosi Ndungwana, whom Rharhabe married when he was stationed eZeli, close to Nyathi (Buffalo) River during the middle of the 18th century.

“

The oral history of AmaXhosa kings tells us that Nojoli lived under the foot of Boschberg.

”

¹⁰Albert Kropf, *Das Volk der Xosa-Kaffern im östlichen Südafrika*. (Berlin: Berliner Evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, 1889), 5–11.

In the notes for his book, *The House of Phalo*, Jeff Peires directs us to Albert Kropf’s book, *Das Volk*¹⁰ for the story of Gwali, known also as Gando, one of the sons of Phalo: “The Xhosa claim to Somerset East is based on the story of Gwali, and the mountains overlooking the town are believed to be named after Rharhabe’s wife, Nojoli.”¹¹

There are some (acknowledged) errors in Peires’ Xhosa genealogy, but these have no fatal impact on the story of imiGwali he tells:

The reign of Tshiwo, father of Phalo, seems to have been a successful one, marked by the subjection of the Ngqosini clan and the creation of the Gqunukhwebe chiefdom. He died on a hunting trip in middle age and was survived by his brother, Mdange, and his son, Gwali, among others. Tshiwo’s acknowledged Great Wife had not yet borne him a son; and was sent back to her people. After Gwali had been ruling for some time, Mdange produced a child named Phalo whom he said was the son of Tshiwo. Gwali rejected the claim but was defeated by Mdange and fled to what is now Somerset East, where he was given land by the Khoi chief Hinsati. Mdange’s army followed him and defeated Hinsati, destroying his chiefdom and incorporating his people into the Xhosa as the Sukwini, Gqwashu and Nqarwane clans. When Phalo came of age, Mdange yielded the royal authority to him, and went to live west of the Kei, which he ruled in the name of the king.¹²

¹¹Jeff Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), 200, footnote 51 to Chapter 2.

¹²Peires, *House of Phalo*, 45–45. He states: “He states: It is quite clear from the clan-praises, that the Sukwini, Gqwashu and Nqarwane clans were formerly the Inqua. For example, ‘Chwama’, named in the tradition as Hinsati’s son, is today one of the praises of the Sukwini clan,” 200, footnote 51 to Chapter 2.

Nojoli became the great wife of Rharhabe (1722–1787) and mother of Mlawu, an elder son and heir to Rharhabe. Her grandson Nkosi Ngqika (1778–1829) resided on the banks of the Tyhume River, stretching to Qab’Imbola, the present-day town of Hogsback, during the middle parts of the 18th century, when the expansionist drive for land by the Boer trekkers began encroaching on the Xhosaland, east of the Cape.

Nojoli’s husband, Nkosi Rharhabe died in 1787, on the banks of Xuka (close to Dohne) River, during a skirmish with amaQwathi, a vigilant warriors of abaThembu nation. He had gone to them to correct a lobola insult for his daughter, Nkosazana uNtsusa.

Ntsusa, the warrior Nkosazana, was Nojoli’s first born with Rharhabe, and led the Qwathi army that defeated and killed her father Rharhabe. Mlawu, the legitimate heir to the throne of amaRharhabe, had died five years earlier from natural causes, not in a similar skirmish with abaThembu, as incorrectly stated by Soga.¹³ In this study we follow the version of events as narrated by Mqhayi and Peires.¹⁴ Ngqika, son of Mlawu, was next in line but still too young to assume the throne when his grandfather, Rharhabe, died. One of Rharhabe’s other sons with Nkosazana Nojoli, Ndlambe, assumed the regency.

The arrival of Boer trekkers in the eastern colony coincided with these monumental events within the Rharhabe nation. Because they stayed west of iNciba, they were the first of the Xhosa nation to encounter white settlers.



The fertile river valleys in the area surrounding what became Somerset East were the favoured pastures of the amaXhosa under Rharhabe in the late eighteenth century.

Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, in the obituary of the Reverend Edward Tsewu, outlined what he knew about the possession of the land:

Edward Tsewu is the son of Tsewu Mbilini, the great Jingqi councillor (Jingqi is the ox of Maqoma, son of Ngqika); he is related to Kamase of the Kwemta clan, who looked after Maqoma when he was in the initiation lodge. The Jingqi used to occupy the Alice district, from Gaga right up to the district of Fort Beaufort, Seymour, Adelaide and Bedford, up to the point where they share a boundary with the Dange at Somerset East in

¹³John Henderson Soga, *South-Eastern Bantu: Abe-Nguni, Aba-Mbo, Ama-Lala*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 473.

¹⁴Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and Biographical Writings*; edited by Jeff Opland. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), 20, 92, 286 and Jeff Peires, “He Wears Short Clothes! Rethinking Rharhabe (c.1715–c.1782)” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 2 (June 2012): 342-344.

the Nojoli mountains at Mpinto and Mnandi. Most of the Jingqi are located at Fort Beaufort.¹⁵

The pre-eminent recorder of Xhosa oral history, Mqhayi is naturally the main source about the life of Nkosazana uNojoli. Most of what he writes tallies with known historical facts.

In his compendious book, *Land Wars*, John Laband summarises this Xhosa settlement in the area of Boschberg mountains,¹⁶ commenting that the date of the first Xhosa settlement west of iNxuba (Fish) River has been hotly debated in South African history. In 1775 the Dutch governor of the Cape Colony, Baron Joachim van Plettenberg, and his Council of Policy in Cape Town defined the new eastern Kaapkolonie (Cape Colony). It drew a line from iNxuba up to its confluence with Little Fish along the soon-to-be-established towns of Cradock and Somerset East, forming a triangle towards Qhorha (Bushman's River) in the south to the sea. In the previous year (1774) the governor had granted settlement rights in the vicinity of Bruintjieshoogte (later known as Somerset East) to the Sneeuwberg Boers, like the Prinsloo family, whose patriarchal leader, William Prinsloo, turned out to be a lawless reprobate who created a volatile situation in the region, eventually leading to the first of nine Wars of Dispossession known as Frontier Wars. The governor signed the agreement with imiGwali Xhosa people, under Nkosi Khoba, the son of Titi. This is what was eventually formalised as the Plettenberg Treaty of 1778. Further complication came with the fact that imiGwali were a minor tribe among the Xhosas who dwelled there, which included amaNtinde, amaMbalu, imiDange and the greater Rharhabe nation under the then leadership of Nkosi Ndlambe.

To these other Xhosa people the treaty meant nothing. There were also KhoeSan remnants, most of whom had mixed with amaXhosa to form the nation of Ginuqua/amaGqunukhwebe.



This picture of "Pusega", daughter of the Gqunukhwebe chief Nkosi Khoba who signed the agreement with Von Plettenberg, was painted by Robert Jacob Gordon, a Dutch painter, who travelled on to Khoba's place at the Fish River immediately after visiting the Prinsloos at their farm at the foot of the Boschberg in December 1777. He describes the visit in his notes about his second journey in South Africa. The following year, he travelled with Von Plettenberg himself.

¹⁵Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe*, 400.

¹⁶John Laband, *The Land Wars: The Dispossession of the Khoisan and amaXhosa in the Cape Colony*. (Cape Town: Penguin, 2020), 75–77 and Chapter 6 (passim).

It has not been easy to piece together a story of Nojoli herself, but fortunately there are traces of her in records of her close family. Nkosazana Ntsusa, Nojoli's daughter, lived a long life. She gave a long interview to one of the missionaries who lived among amaNgqika, James Laing.¹⁷ Laing interviewed her on her kraal near Rabula, a land she was given by her father to independently reign over, which she returned to after she handed over the regency of the amaRharhabe to her nephew, Ndlambe. It was in these interviews she recounted years of her life, especially earlier ones when she was a warrior, much feared by not only her brothers, but the colonial government also. From Laing's journals we are able to deduce her death date to have been somewhere around 1837. Shell quotes another missionary description of Ntsusa. At a ripe age (Laing estimates her to be over 100) she is described as a "diminutive old-woman, her head set a little awry, by a great swelling of her neck."¹⁸ In most of her campaigns Nkosazana Ntsusa was with her favourite younger brother, Nkosi Nukwa¹⁹, who assumed the leadership of the branch of the people she led after she died.

In 1826, Colonel Henry Somerset made ill-informed raids to recover stolen cattle believed to have been in possession of Nkosi Nukwa's people. This gave him a taste of Nkosazana Ntsusa's fierce military prowess, even though she was in old age by then. Thomas Pringle, testifying before the Commission of Inquiry²⁰ into incident

described the frustration of the colonial power when he said Nkosi Nukwa was "under a female named Susa [Ntsusa]."²¹

You also get a picture of amaXhosa living in the areas during that epoch from the journals of Sir John Barrow.²² Barrow arrived in South Africa in 1795 fresh from China on British official business. As a newly appointed secretary to Governor Lord Macartney he travelled the length and breadth of Southern Africa, mapping it geographically and politically. Barrow was lucky enough to be given an audience with the young King Ngqika, Nojoli's grandson, during the latter part of the eighteenth century:

On our arrival at the residence of the King, his majesty, not having expected us till the following day, had gone to his grazing-village, ten or twelve miles to the northward; a messenger was immediately despatched after him. In the meantime, the King's mother and his queen, a pretty Kaffir girl about fifteen, with their female attendants, to the number of fifty or sixty, formed a circle round us on the ground, and did their best to entertain us with their good-humoured and lively conversation, which would have been more agreeable if directly conveyed, instead of through the medium of a Hottentot interpreter.²³

¹⁷This interview is transcribed by Sandra Rowoldt Shell in her edition of *Indoda Ebisithanda* ("The Man Who Loved Us"): *The Reverend James Laing among the amaXhosa, 1831–1836* (Cape Town: HiPSA, 2019), 15. HiPSA Series III: 1.

¹⁸John Ross in Glasgow Missionary Society, *Quarterly Paper* 6 (1830): 5, 13 quoted in Shell, *Indoda*, 127, fn. 66.

¹⁹Andries Stockenström first mentioned "Neuka" (i.e. Nukwa) citing a letter by Thomas Pringle to the Commissioners of Inquiry dated 12 January 1826 in *The Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenström ... sometime Lieutenant-Governor of the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope*; edited by Charles William Hutton. Volume 1. (Cape Town: J C Juta, 1887), 252–254.

²⁰Great Britain. Parliament. Commission of Eastern Inquiry, 1826–1827: Eastern Cape (Commissioners: John Thomas Bigge and William Colebrooke).

²¹WCARS, C.O. 287, Letter from Henry Somerset to Richard Plasket, Secretary to Government, 31 January 1826.

²²John Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the years 1797 and 1798*. Volume 1. (London: T Cadell Jun. & W Davies, 1801).

²³John Barrow, *An Auto-Biographical Memoir of Sir John Barrow, Bart., Late of the Admiralty Including Reflections, Observations, and Reminiscences at Home and Abroad, from Early Life to Advanced Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171.

Because young kings tended to be under the influence of their female powerful matriarchies these made a strong impression on Barrow. He tells us that everyone was taken up by the queens and princess of amaNgqika. The queen mother had a fun and bubbly personality and the young king a general good disposition:

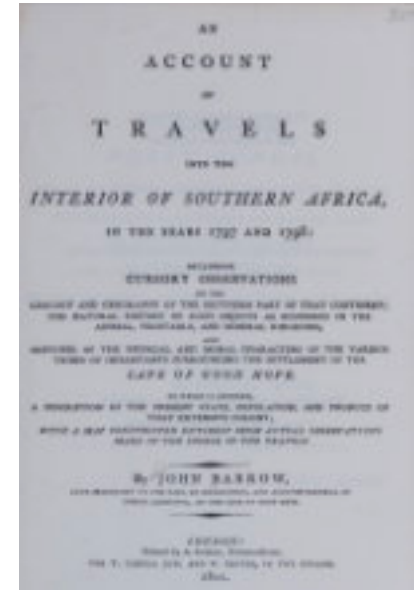
We were surprised to find so much good sense and prudence in so young a man, and a Kaffir. He was at this time under twenty years of age, of an elegant form and a graceful and manly deportment; his height about five feet ten inches; his countenance open, but marked with the habit of reflection; and he possessed, in a superior degree, a solid understanding and a clear head. To every question, he gave, without embarrassment or reserve, direct and unequivocal answers. His disposition appeared to be amiable. He seemed, indeed, to be adored by his subjects; the name of Gaika was in every mouth, and was seldom pronounced without symptoms of pleasure. He had one wife only, very young and very pretty, by whom he had a little girl called Jasa.²⁴



Yese, was in fact Ngqika's mother, Mlawu's wife, and not his daughter. She's the one who ended up a concubine of Coenraad de Buys,²⁵ whom some call one of the founders of the Afrikaner nation, others an outlaw. This was done to forge a closer relationship with the newly arrived white people, and to learn their ways. AmaXhosa called him Khula because of his tall stature.

A portrait of Nkosi Ngqika in a leopard skin, 1803, by Willem Paravinci de Capelli, aide-de-camp of Govenor Janssens. (Public domain)

Barrow was one of many travellers who visited the area before it was known as Somerset East. KwaNojoli was a popular stopover or destination for adventure travellers, armies, politicians and visitors in general to the emergent Cape Colony. One of the earliest was Swedish botanist Anders Sparrman, who visited the Cape during the early 1700s.



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²⁴Barrow, *Auto-Biographical Memoir*, 171-172.

²⁵Henry [Hinrich] Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa in the Years, 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*. (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1928). Van Riebeeck Society Series I: 10: 210, 296.

From Bruintjieshoogte to Somerset Farm

To orient yourself while reading the early travellers' accounts, you will need to look for reference to Bruintjieshoogte, both the mountainous area to the north-west, and the first white-owned loan farm in the area which lay at the foot of the Boschberg mountain.

This farm later became Somerset Farm and, later still, Somerset East. When Willem Prinsloo²⁶ petitioned the Dutch East India Company for the land, he was living beyond the furthest reach of the land the VOC laid claim to, just to the west of the headwaters of the Great Fish River. The grant of the farm to Prinsloo by Governor Joachim Van Plettenberg in 1774 pushed the land that the colony was claiming further east. Van Plettenberg formally established the Great Fish River in 1778 as the border between the Cape Colony and Xhosaland, a proclamation that was never accepted by all amaXhosa but signed with imiDange (near Cookhouse) as explained above.



Robert Jacob Gordon made this topographical drawing of Bruintjieshoogte, the Prinsloo's farm at the foot of the Boschberg, in 1777-8. At this point Willem Prinsloo had only lived on the land for just over two years. Note how the drawing's mere existence establishes his ownership through the historical or colonial record, and compare this with the erasure of Nkosazana uNojoli's name. Picture courtesy Rijksmuseum, Stock-farm of Willem Prinsloo, Bruintjies Hoogte.

²⁶This family is deeply embroiled in the history of the area—not only in the start of the First Frontier War, but also in the Slagtersnek rebellion. It was in this same area that Boer resistance to English control first culminated in the departure of farmers who chose to push deeper north and east looking for land. This was the beginning of what became known as the Great Trek.

The constant and violent expansion of the frontier eastwards, deeper and deeper into the land of amaXhosa over the next 100 years, followed by the settlement of the land by colonisers, is the backdrop to any history of this area, be it black or white. In 1795²⁷ the British took control of the Cape Colony. Soon after that, the area exploded into wars of dispossession that would last for nearly a century.

In January of 1806, the British Major of the 93rd Regiment of Foot, John Graham (1778–1821), won the Battle of Blaauwberg, which caused the Dutch Cape Colony to be annexed by the British Crown. Soon Colonel Graham was tasked to clear the Zuurveld (1811–1812) of all black natives.²⁸



The town grew with the arrival of the 1820 Settlers. There are still many beautiful original buildings in the old part of the town, directly under the mountain.

He established the scorched earth policy to accomplish his task. This was later followed by Somerset (1819–1820) with devastating effect of clearing the Xhosa, Khoer and San people west of the Great Fish River. The land so brutally seized by the British was settled first by mostly military settlers, soldiers, and those

supplying food and other support to the wars, and later—particularly with the arrival of the 1820 Settlers—by British farmers, townspeople and other civilians.

It is interesting that, almost as if he wished to subvert, or rather redress, history, Professor Jakes Gerwel, who grew up on a farm named Malvern, just outside KwaNojoli, chose to settle in Paulet Street, the first street laid out in Somerset East.



²⁷In 1795 the British seized control of the Cape Colony from the Dutch, fearing it would fall into the hands of France, then an ally of Holland. The Treaty of Amiens (1802) returned the Cape Colony to the Dutch. In 1806 the British reoccupied the Cape Colony with the Dutch only formally ceding sovereignty to the British in 1814 under the Convention of London.

²⁸Ben MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror: John Graham and the Cape Eastern Frontier* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).

Living history of KwaNojoli

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Beyond finding out more about Queen Nojoli’s own story, the new “institutional” name—some would say an old, or everyday name—has created an opportunity to dig more generally into the black history of the town Nojoli. This is something that would never have been achieved if the name had not been changed. The town of KwaNojoli falls under the Blue Crane Local Municipality. The Blue Crane is South Africa’s national bird and famous in this district. Naming the town Blue Crane, as some had suggested as an alternative neutral name, would have created the insufferable confusion of Makhanda the town that falls under Makana—a colonial corruption of the word Makhanda—local municipality.

This section highlights some of the topics that emerged out of the work done for this project. Each of them deserves more research.

Boschberg: Khelelela Manz'amnandi

The town lies at the foot of the imposing mountain of Boschberg, known in Xhosa as Intab'ka Nojoli. One of the documentary informants, Oom Boyce Pike, spoke of how, in bygone days, people would go to the mountain fountains to fetch water, pouring them from one pitcher to another, a process called "khelelela" in isiXhosa: you scoop water with a pitcher, pour it into that of the person behind you, who does the same until everyone's pitcher is full at the end:

It is a wonderful system to watch in practice, and [it is] almost always accompanied with a song, and makes the work easier and faster than everyone flocking [to] the fountainhead to fill their own pitch, thus causing time-delaying congestion. Khelelela is [a] more humane system that is based on the spirit of Ubuntu: You are a person through others.

The mountain's perennial fountains are what made the town an oasis in the middle of the Karoo. This is why amaDlelo (grazing fields) for cattle were located around these fountains, especially during winter season because the grass there was evergreen. These grazing fields were also high sought by Boer farmers who called it soetveld.²⁹ The KwaNojoli townships today are not where the black farmers were originally located.

During one of our visits at the museum we saw an exhibition of farm land forced removals by the apartheid regime to create space for white farms on their verdant land to create in the 1950s and 1960s what is now known as Clevedon Farms.

²⁹Sweet grasslands.

After the forceful removals, they were settled in a cosmopolitan area then called The Plots, ePlotsi. From there, people were again removed to settle in the current segregated areas according to race and ethnicity.

Abel Boyce Piki was the person who proposed renaming Somerset East. He was a key informant, an influential shaman, historian and poet who was on the museum board until 2024. Oom Boyce gave the researchers several tours of KwaNojoli, trying to give them a feel of the town. He died in September 2024.



“
In bygone days, people would go to the mountain to fetch water, pouring from one pitcher to another, a process called “khelelela” in isiXhosa.
”

The most populated township in the area is called Mnandi and is occupied mostly by black Africans. The Mnandi River (mostly dry during the non-rainy season) that runs through the town is a tributary of the iNxuba, i.e. the Great Fish River. Mnandi stems from “maz’amnandi,” meaning “tasteful waters”.



Black people were forcefully removed from the rich grazing lands directly under the well-watered mountain by the apartheid regime to create space for white farms on their verdant land. After the forceful removals, they were settled in a cosmopolitan area then called The Plots. The two townships in the area, populated mostly by black families, are Mnandi and Aeroville.

Washer women and hidden histories

In the past, the Khelelela fountains were also used by washerwomen. The KwaNojoli Museum has a photo exhibit that honours the last and now most famous washerwoman—an old brown lady, Ouma Dora Dotyi Jacobs, who was born in 1880 and died at the age of 103 in 1983. She used to walk the streets looking for dirty laundry to wash at the fountains. Her clientele, the display says, were mostly soldiers and farmers. This makes sense since the town was originally founded as an experimental agricultural establishment to feed troops and their horses on the Cape Colony’s border. Her life of labour is a reminder of the fate of other women, of both Khoe and Xhosa origin, who were forced into servitude through the dispossession of their land. Her grave, at the KwaNojoli Museum site, is probably the only one there of a black person.



This painting of Ma Dora Jacobs, a washerwoman, hangs at the museum. Born to Lettie and Tukani Makalima in 1880, she never went to school. She had memories of the rinderpest of 1896, and the flu epidemic of 1918.

The breadbasket

By the time the farm became a town it was obvious to all that the area was what Governor Somerset called a “breadbasket,” and amaXhosa called “idlelo.”

According to Mr Pike a certain man of the amaMpondomise Clan became extremely rich grinding mealies for both black and white farmers before his place was appropriated by the Union of 1910 South African government in the early 1900s. His place became known as KwaMgubo: where you grind corn into mealie-meal. And his surname, Ndima, is one of the street names today in KwaNojoli. It is probably the only Xhosa name that survived the brutal expropriation of land without compensation against black people.

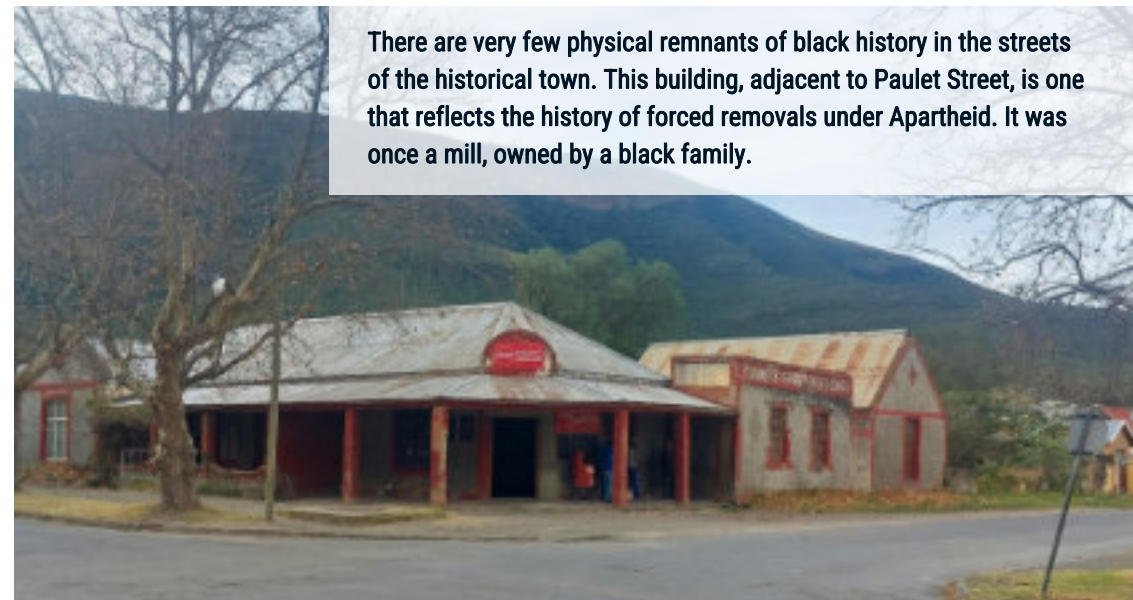
The earlier, and notorious, mill was that of Robert Hart, who formed part of the John Graham Zuurveld clearance of 1811–12 as an Adjutant Lieutenant. He was party to the group that killed Nkosi uChungwa of amaGqunukhwebe in cold blood at Qhoboka (Addo Forest). When he was summoned to testify in a case against Andries Stockenström, who was accused of indiscriminately shooting and killing at point blank a “bushboy” (KhoeSan boy) Hart said: “The orders on the frontier generally were to shoot all Kaffirs.”³⁰ His diary of the campaign is missing but is quoted extensively in Thomas Pringle’s *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*.³¹ For the sterling job he did in clearing the Zuurveld, Hart was granted land by Governor Lord Charles Somerset at the foot of Boschberg Mountain,

³⁰Ben MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror: John Graham and the Cape’s Eastern Frontier*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), 158.

³¹“... Caffers were shot indiscriminately, women as well as men, wherever found, and even though they offered no resistance.” Thomas Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*. (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), 95.

which he named Glen Avon after the river Avon in his home town. He became a pioneer of merino sheep farming and built a homestead and a commercial mill at the farm where he is also buried.

Generations later, the apartheid regime confiscated without compensation land and property in what it deemed were so-called Black Spots—an area in which Africans held land in freehold as in for example, Sophiatown (Johannesburg), South End (Port Elizabeth / Gqeberha), and Cato Manor (Durban). Several areas of black owned land in Somerset also fell under this description. From our interviews it became evident that many families who were forcefully removed from areas like The Plots (Eplotsi), and other Black Spots of Somerset East, are still aggrieved about their land and want it back. Apparently some took meagre sums of about R92,000 given as compensation by the Mandela government for land claims. Others refused the money on appeal. They are still waiting for the government to resolve these claims.



There are very few physical remnants of black history in the streets of the historical town. This building, adjacent to Paulet Street, is one that reflects the history of forced removals under Apartheid. It was once a mill, owned by a black family.

Black intellectuals

Almost all the first black intellectuals of the Eastern Cape, from Isaac Wauchope to John Tengo Jabavu and others, lived and worked in the town for a stint. The town also produced and was home to Benjamin Tyamzashe who founded a choir in Somerset East when he was a teacher there. Another intellectual and leader of note was Josiah Tshangana Gumede, who started his teaching career in the town. He was the founder of the Natal Native Congress and a founding member of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC—later the ANC). He became president of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1927. The renowned Xhosa politician and historical novelist, Dr Walter Benson Rubusana, was born here and stayed in Mnandi township. At the time it was slightly closer to the main town centre than its present situation established after the Group Areas Act of 1950.



Leader of a 1913 deputation to London to protest the Native Land Act, Dr Walter Benson Rubusana was the first black African elected as a member of the Cape Provincial Council, later becoming Vice-President of the ANC. Rubusana was born in 1858 at Mnandi, Somerset East. He undertook his secondary education at Lovedale. Like Josiah Tshangana Gumede, he was a founding member of the SANNC.

The arrival of the Wesleyan Methodist church missionaries in 1821 is what made the town the educational centre for the first black educated class. In 1828, the Wesleyans, in the person of the Reverend William Shaw, built the first church in town on the slopes

of Boschberg Mountain next to the first graveyard of the town. It was later converted into a beautiful Georgian building, serving as the Dutch Reformed Church, before it became Somerset East Museum in 1975. Reverend Tiyo Zisani Soga, who frequented the town, once entertained designs of settling there when he came back from Scotland. The first Presbyterian church in the town was built in Grey Street.

Finally, there is Dr Bantini “Totose” Norman Ngcipe, a young medical doctor tragically murdered by the apartheid regime in the Maseru massacre of 1982. There is a moving chapter on his life and struggles, including his Somerset East upbringing, in the book, *For the Fallen*, written by the Mkhonto Wesizwe veteran, Mzwakhe Ndllela, who is married to Lindi Msengana, the South African Ambassador in Athens at the time of writing.³²



The beautiful museum in KwaNojoli houses a display about some of the town's black intellectuals.

³²Mzwakhe Ndllela, *For the Fallen: Honouring the Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Liberation Struggle*. (Epsom Downs, Johannesburg: KMM Review Publishing Company, 2014), 2

Black soldiers in the First World War

Of all South African war memorials he has researched, Mputhumi Ntabeni has only seen one, in KwaNojoli, where a public memorial mentions the black people who died during the First World War. The names of those who were born in Somerset East and were among the ones who died in the tragic sinking of the ship *Mendi* between England and France are recorded in the war memorial on Nojoli Street.



The memorial to soldiers of all races who died in the First World War is on the left of the photo. The dry winter streets gives little sense of the verdant natural vegetation of this Eastern Cape Town.

Reverend Dyobha Isaac Wauchope, who led the Black Corps delegation on the sinking ship, the *SS Mendi*, also spent a few years teaching at Somerset East. Witnesses testified that the men formed ranks on deck as the ship was sinking and Reverend Dyobha spoke to them:

Be quiet and calm, my countrymen, for what is taking place is exactly what you came to do. You are going to die, but that is what you came to do. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers. Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basothos and all others, let us die like warriors. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries my brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais back in the kraals, our voices are left with our bodies.³³



³³See, for example, *The Heritage Portal* "Death by Drowning, the Tragedy of the *SS Mendi*" [online resource] <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/death-drowning-tragedy-ss-mendi>.

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