

Breaking the Pledge

The story of the Anti-convict Agitation and the role of the family in defying the pledge is told in several books, with the account by Peggy Heap (1970) the most accessible.

The Anti-Convict Agitation

In April 1849 the Privy Council in London decided make the Cape Colony another convict settlement, similar to those in Australia. Feelings at the Cape ran very high and an Anti-Convict Agitation was formed. At a meeting on 4 July 1849 a severe thunder storm broke loose but those who attended in the open square stayed in the drenching rain to show their support against what they saw as a degradation of the Colony. Artist Thomas Bowler produced a lithograph of the meeting showing the rain storm and smoke blowing horizontally from stacks.



Thomas Bowler: Public Protest Meeting. Cape Town. 4 July 1849

Source: Victor De Kock, p50.

The meeting stirred up feelings and the Anti-Convict Agitation organised a pledge not to employ any convicts and to turn their backs on anyone who helped the Government with aid to the criminals. Anyone who broke the pledge ran the risk of complete ostracism. He would be publicly cursed, people would throw mud and rocks at him, his image publicly burned and he would be banned from society.

During all of this in September 1849, the ship Neptune III with about 300 convicts on board dropped anchor at Simon's Town, the naval harbour on the Cape Peninsula. Church bells were rung to mobilise the populace against the "plague ship". The Government was forced to establish a bakery and butchery because the existing shops refused to deal. Regular vigilante type meetings were held and merchants had to defend themselves against accusations. Shops were boycotted on rumours and had to present meetings with referrals of their innocence, and if approved, were let back into the fold. (Kijkies in Onze Geschiedenis)

A merchant Benjamin Norden helped the convicts with supplies and suffered a boycott. He was pelted with stones in the Heerengracht (Cape Town's main street) on 15th October 1849 and became an invalid as result. The movement was described as the "Cape Inquisition" by Sammons. (DSAB)

The local Governor, Sir Harry Smith found himself in a difficult position. Privately he sympathised with the colonists, but his duty was to the Imperial Government in London. He responded to a

deputation with: *'I am proud to remember that today is the anniversary of Waterloo – and I would prefer to be killed by God Almighty than to ignore the commands of Her Majesty's Government and thus commit an act of rebellion.'*

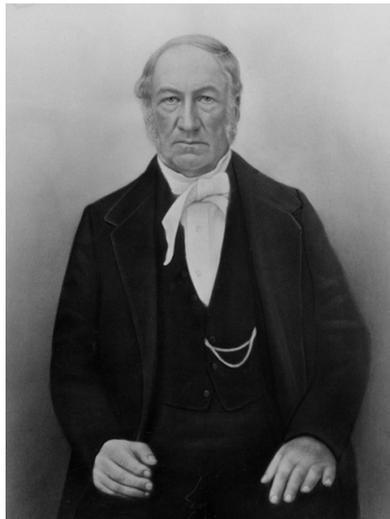
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Sir Harry Smith had to await orders from London (correspondence via sailing vessels took months each way) and in the meantime the Neptune desperately needed food. On 10 October, in the middle of the night the Attorney general and the Collector of Customs called on Colonel Robert Stanford to supply food from his farm *Gustrouw*, at the present day town of Gordons Bay. Although Stanford identified with the protest, he agreed in the belief that by *'his timely assistance open rebellion and civil war would be averted'*. He was assured that the assistance would be required for only a short time since Sir Harry Smith was *'almost daily in expectation of receiving replies to the despatches forwarded to Earl Grey (the Colonial Secretary)'*.

The family farm *Onverwacht* (perhaps already called *The Bush* by then) adjoined *Gustrouw* and Stanford asked for help. Peggy Heap tells that D.J. Morkel helped to supply the ship. This would have been Daniel Johannes (1822 – 1879), 27 at the time, and probably supported by his father Hendrik Johannes (1799 – 1859), 51 in 1849. Although it is not in any of the accounts I have read, I wonder whether the location of the farms *Gustrouw* and *Onverwacht* also played a role. Both farms bordered on the coast of False Bay, and the food could have been shipped by small boats directly from Gordons Bay or the Strand across the bay to Simon's Town. This would have by-passed attempts to blockade wagons on the land journey through the sandy Cape Flats and along the Peninsula border to Simon's Town.



Daniel Johannes Morkel
1822 - 1879



Hendrik Johannes Morkel
1799 - 1859

In London Lord Adderley pleaded the Cape Colony's case and the Imperial Government changed their mind and the Neptune was sent on its way to Tasmania. In gratitude, the main street of Cape Town, Heerengracht, was renamed Adderley Street.

The Family Ostracised

As threatened, all hell broke loose when the word got out that the pledge was broken and Stanford and the Morkel families were in disgrace and ostracised. The sanctions were indeed severe and relentless. According to Peggy Heap they were mercilessly attacked. *'Haystacks on their farms were burned down, banks refused to transact business with them, creditors pressed for payment, their servants deserted them, their children were expelled from school and subjected to every kind of insult and abuse. Even medical attention was refused resulting in the death of one of Colonel Stanford's children'*.

Stanford was a man *'broken in health and financially ruined'*. (Heap) Unable to pay his debts he was obliged to *'assign his estates'* and left the Colony. His properties, including *Gustrouw* was sold at public auction on 5 April 1855 to help pay his debts. Queen Victoria knighted Robert Stanford for his services and awarded him £5000 (a substantial sum in those days) as compensation.

Peggy Heap reported that it was said that a knighthood was also offered to Daniel Johannes but that he refused it. Or would it have been offered to his father, Hendrik Johannes, as owner of the farm?

I remember my own father repeating the story over dinner table that there could have been knighthood in the family, but that our ancestor declined to accept it. He had a direct oral history connection to the event. An elderly aunt who visited the farm regularly for summer holidays told my father how, as a young daughter, she accompanied her father to Stellenbosch in their carriage and that the locals threw stones and tomatoes and hurled abuse at them.

She was Esther Leonora Louw Morkel born on 1837 (thus about 12 at the time of running the blockade). She married a merchant H.C. De Jongh and she continued to take her vacations on the farm until her death in 1902. My father would then have been about 7 years old. Her story about the stone throwing in Stellenbosch and the rejected knighthood are the oldest items of oral family history that I heard directly.

The Neptune III

This part of our family history has some poignant relevance to us who have migrated to Australia more than a hundred years later.

The journey of the Neptune III in 1849 came towards the end of transportation of convicts to Australia. At that time about 10 to 20 ships, carrying around 200 to 300 convicts made the journey each year until 1853 (Bateson, 1974). According to Wikipedia, the third Earl Grey, colonial secretary intended to send a special class of convicts to the Cape. They were Irish peasants who had been driven to crime by the famine of 1845. Earl Grey sent a letter to the Governor at the Cape asking to ascertain the feelings of the colonists regarding this special category of convicts. Due to a misunderstanding the Neptune sailed with its cargo of convicts before the opinion of the colonists was received. The boat had 289 convicts on board, including the famous Irish rebel John Mitchell.

When the Neptune arrived in Simon's Bay on 19 September 1849, the Governor, Sir Harry Smith was forced by public opinion to keep the convicts on board, until he received orders from England for the ship to proceed to Tasmania. After five months at the Cape, the ship sailed and eventually arrived in Hobart on 5 April 1850.

The agitation did not fade away without further achievements, as it led to another movement to obtain free, representative government for the colony. The British government granted this concession, which had been previously promised by Lord Grey, and a constitution was established in 1854 of almost unprecedented liberality.

In January 1988, I met Bill Edgar of Doubleview WA, who had access to information about the convict ships that came to Australia. I told the story of our family's involvement with the Neptune at the Cape. Bill found the following:

"According to Charles Bateson the ship concerned would have been the Neptune III, built at Calcutta in 1814, a sailing ship of 644 ton.

The ship arrived at Hobart in 1850 with 282 male convict prisoners on board (after having embarked 300 ex England). The loss of 18 convict personnel is uncommonly high for that date so the interlude at the Cape you mentioned must have taken its toll, or did some take the opportunity to "do a bunk" ?

Laying in Simon's Bay for 5 months on a 35 year old ship which was nearing the end of its useful life would not have been a lot of fun. One presumes the convicts were battened down for much of the time. In a Cape summer similar to Perth's? Poor sods!" --- Bill Edgar

André T. Morkel

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Notes and Sources.

Heap, Peggy 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. Cape Town. A.A. Balkema. p54 – 55.

Unknown author and date. "*Kijkjes in onze Geschiedenis*" Chapter 38. *DIE BEWEGING TEEN DIE BANDIETE .1849*. My source, Mari Mostert, email 2001 apologised that the title page of the book (written in Dutch) was missing.

DSAB Vol I. p594. (Date unknown) My source, André van Rensburg, email 2002, assumed that I would know what "DSAB" is. I do not, but pass on the reference anyway.

Victor De Kock 1952. *Our Three Centuries*. Cape Town, Central Committee for the Van Riebeeck Festival. p50.

Charles Bateson, *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868*, 2nd ed. 1974.
| <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

Bill Edgar. Private communication.

A source I could not trace is

Hattersley, A.F. (Date unknown) *The Convicts Crisis and the Growth of Unity*. Source: André van Rensburg, email 2002