

## We Need a Town and a Church

Three Morkel brothers and their neighbour established the town of Somerset West and its first church in 1819.

For more than a hundred years the farmers in Hottentots Holland had to take a long and difficult road to reach the church, government offices and businesses in the closest town, Stellenbosch. The winding road of more than 20 kilometres skirted the *Helderberg* mountain, crossed several streams and valleys and went up and down the steep slopes of the hilly terrain. It was poorly maintained, rocky on the hills and muddy when crossing the rivers. The journey must have taken several hours each way. Today, with a straightened divided highway and modern cars, it takes about 15 minutes.

**Publieke Aanbesteding.**  
**D**e Voorstanders der aantebouwen Kerk op Hottentots Holland, nemen de vryheid het Algemeen te informeren, dat het Zyne Excellentie onzen Heer Gouverneur goedgunstig heeft be- haagd te permittieren, dat dit nieuw aanteleggen Dorp, den Naam zal mogen dragen van SOMERSET.—Verder zyn gemelde Voorstanders van voornemen om: op den 23 dezer, aan de minst- aannemende aantebesteden, het Bouwen van des Predikantshuis, met deszelfs twee Zydegebouwen, des Kosters- en Voorlezerswoning, waarvan de Plannen te zien, en de Conditien te lezen zyn, ten Huize van den Hr. G. H. M. LASSONP. in de Kaap- stad, en by de Voorstanders op Hottentots Holland. Ook kunnen meergemelde Voorstanders niet voor- by, het Algemeen te informeren, dat zy gelukkig zyn geslagen in den Verkoop der Erven, ten voor- deele van het Kerkenfonds, terwyl zy hierby ver- klaren, dat dit Fonds cenig en alleen zal gebruikt worden ter Opbouwing der Kerke, Pastorie, en vordere noodige Gebouwen; het geen na het vol- brengen hiervan moogt overig blyven, zal ten voor- deele der Kerk op Renten worden uitgezet, zon- der dat iemand der Voorstanders, direct of indi- rect, daarvan het minste personeele voordeel zal willen genieten.  
Hottentots Holland, 14 Aug. 1817.  
M. W. THEUNISSEN.  
P. H. MORKEL.  
D. J. MORKEL.  
W. MORKEL, Sr.

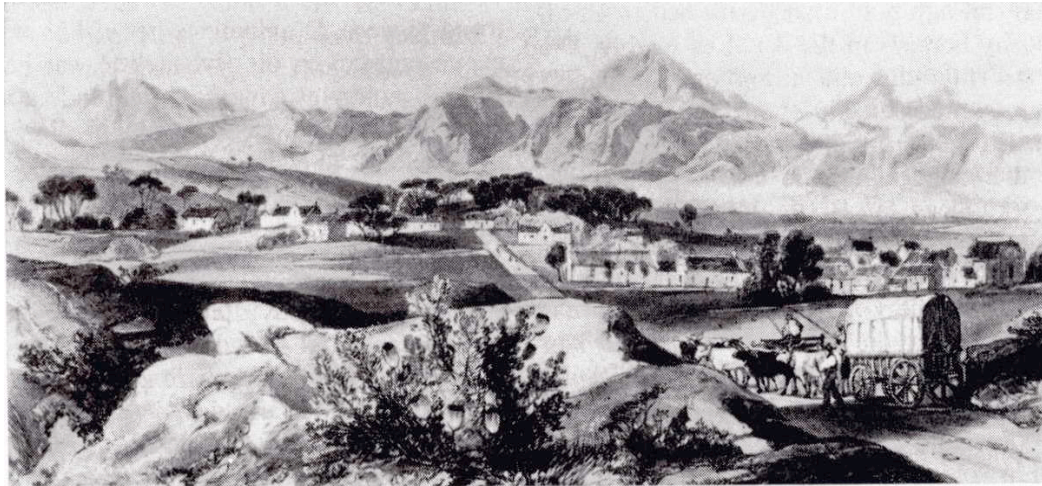
The Voorstanders announcing Somerset town and that the proceeds of selling erven would be used to build the church and pastorie (vicarage).

Source: Hopkins, (1, p39)

Marthinus Wilhelmus Theunissen, owner of *Vergelegen* and three Morkel brothers, Philip Hendrik of *Morgenster*, Willem of *Voorburg* and Daniel Johannes of *Onverwacht* set out to do something about this inconvenience. In doing so, they exhibited an admirable level of community leadership and entrepreneurship. They got Government permission, bought land, had it divided, sold *erven* (lots or blocks) and used the proceeds to build the church – all without personal gain. (1, 2)

There was an earlier attempt to found a town. Henry Alexander, the Colonial Secretary intended to divide part of his farm *Gustrouw/Fortuintjie* near present Gordons Bay into town blocks but did not proceed (1, p30).

Our *Voorstanders* (promoters) started the process with a February 1817 letter to the authorities from P.H. Morkel on their behalf for the allocation of 20 morgen at the foot of the pass over the Hottentots Holland mountains to establish a church. They would build the church from public subscriptions but would require, as with other churches in the Colony, that the Government would provide the *predikant* (parson).



Somerset West about 1849 by Angas. The Church is far right

Source: Hopkins (1, p61)

However, then the *Voorstanders* changed their minds and proceeded with a new plan. Instead of the foot of what later became Sir Lowry's pass, they located the town and church at its present location.

Hottentots Holland, 24 Jan. 1820.  
*Waarde Vrienden en Landgenoten,*  
**N**a veel werk en tegenspoed gehad te hebben, zonder de minste assistentie in 't opbouwen der Kerk alhier, zyn wy eindelyk zoo gelukkig geweest, dezelve te voltooien; en daar wy van intentie zyn, met behoorlyk consent de Kerk alhier door den Wel Eerw. Hr. M. Borchers op den 13 Febr. eerstkomende te laten inwyden, zoo noodigen wy U. tot het bywoonen dezer aangename plegugheid, overtuigd zynde van U aller gunstige denkwyze en milde hand over diergelyke Gestigten, kant U. die wy 't geluk mogen hebben van hier te zien, van eene guile, vriendelyke en gaatvrye behandeling hier in onze gansche omtrek verzekert zyn.  
 Heil en Achtung,  
 M. W. THEUNISSEN.  
 P. H. MORKEL.  
 W. MORKEL Sr.  
 D. J. MORKEL

Invitation to the inauguration of the church on 13 February 1820.

Source: Hopkins (1, p39)

In April 1817 M.W. Theunissen purchased a portion, 125 morgen 144 sq roods (3) of the farm *Cloetenburg* from D.G. Steyn for 26,000 guilders (3 guilders = 1 rixdollar). Early in June 1817 Theunissen on behalf of the *Voorstanders* wrote to the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset "that your Excellency will admit your Petitioners to call said village by the name of Somerset" (1, p32). Lord Somerset "was rapidly covering the map of the colony with the titles of his family" and agreed readily. (At a later stage another town with the Governor's name was established on the eastern border of the Colony. The name was thus adapted to current Somerset West.)

They also asked that a *predikant* be provided as soon as possible because they were already building the church.

The *erven* were sold successfully and building of the church and *pastorie* (parsonage) proceeded with M.W. Theunissen giving his time free as builder. This pattern, where the *Voorstanders* paid for items (including the church organ) out of their own funds to be reimbursed later from the proceeds of sale of *erven* and public donations, was continued throughout the construction period (1, p36 - 38). Building activities were delayed in September 1819 by a severe rainstorm accompanied by strong winds. Eventually the church was inaugurated on 13 February 1820. Building the Church cost 30,000 rixdollars and the *pastorie* 7,034 Rds.

The Church organ was special. Most of the older churches in the colony had to wait years (80 years in the case of Cape Town) before they could afford an organ. It was described as “a Church organ with Mahogany Gothic front case 13 feet high with guilt pipes in front, 10 stops and swell” (1, p40). It was ordered from England and cost 6,000 rixdollars and was installed in June 1819.

In 1822 Somerset was again devastated by a winter storm, and much damage being done to the Church. The north gable fell and pews and galleries were crushed to pieces. Parts of the unfinished parsonage suffered. Following an appeal by the *Landdrost* of Stellenbosch, the government made funds available for repairs (2, p101).

In spite of several appeals, the Government was unable to supply a *predikant*. Ds (Rev) Meent Borchers of Stellenbosch helped out as much as his duties allowed. Eventually Ds Johannes Spykers of Swellendam was appointed. Elder Daniel Johannes Morkel took an oxwagon over the perilous Hottentots Holland Kloof and further to distant Swellendam to fetch Ds Spyker and his household goods (2, p101).

As in all the other churches of the time, seating arrangements were highly ordered. The men paid a yearly fee for seats on benches against the walls. The centre area was initially open for the ladies who arrived each with a slave carrying their chairs and prayer books. Seating was strictly according to rank and status. This was a system bound to create conflict with endless arguments about who outranked whom. (The church at Stellenbosch experienced similar problems, with P.A. Myburgh of *Meerlust* writing a caustic letter to the *Kerkraad* about the slights to his wife with

Note of indebtedness signed by the Voorstanders for the church organ.

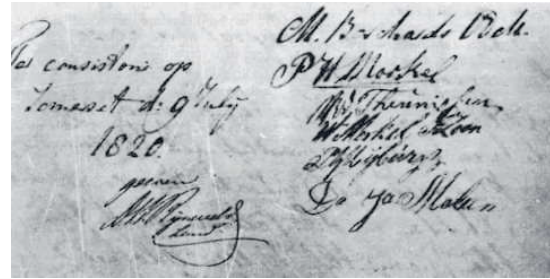
Source: Hopkins (1, p39)



The Church in the 1960s.

Source: Hopkins (1)

the seating arrangements). Later the church acquired chairs for the centre area but the disputes and angry letters continued. *Ou oom Flip Morkel* (Philip Hendrik) as the senior elder, was in charge of this difficult task and it was impossible to satisfy all. Some cases had to be referred to the *Landdrost* in Stellenbosch and even to the Chief Justice (Sir John Truter) of the Colony (1, p46). These conflicts are described in greater detail in Appendix 3.



Signatures to the minutes of the first meeting of Die Kerkraad (Church Council).

Source: Hopkins (1, p39)

As a child I attended a few functions in the old church which at that time was used as a community hall. We roamed the church yard and were discouraged from climbing on to the graves – it was told that if you touch a grave you will itch for a long time. A rumour probably started by a crafty parent.

The church was a fairly simple utilitarian building but amazingly large and well built considering that the settler population of the area was around 200 at the time. A tribute to the foresight of the *Voorstanders*.

**André T Morkel**

**March 2009, revised June 2014.**

#### Sources and Notes

1. H.C. Hopkins, 1969. *Die Ned. Geref. Gemeente Somerset-Wes*. Published by the Church of Somerset-West. pp 27 - 47.
2. Peggy Heap, 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. A.A. Balkema, Cape Town. pp 96 – 103
3. 1 morgen = 0.856 hectare. 600 square roods = 1 morgen.

#### Appendix 1.

Public Announcement (see clip above) – Translation, Author.

The *Voorstanders* of the Church being built in Hottentots Holland, take the liberty to announce that His Excellency, our Governor has graciously agreed that the newly established town will carry the name SOMERSET. Further the *Voorstanders* are intending on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month to commence with the building of houses for the *Predikant, Koster* and *Voorleser*. The plans can be sighted at the home of Mr. G.H. Maasdrorp and at the homes of the *Voorstanders* in Hottentots Holland. Further it can be announced that the *Voorstanders* have been fortunate to sell erven for the benefit of the Church funds while announcing hereby that these funds will be used solely for the building of the Church, the *pastorie* and associated buildings. Any funds which might remain after the buildings have been erected will be placed at interest for the benefit of the Church, without that the *Voorstanders*, directly or indirectly receive any benefit.

Hottentots Holland, 14 Aug, 1817.

M.W. THEUNISSEN  
P.H. MORKEL  
D.J. MORKEL  
W.MORKEL Sr.

## Appendix 2.

**Invitation to the Inauguration of the Church (see clip above)** – Translation, Author.  
(The flowery style of another era and language is difficult to translate)

Hottentots Holland, 24 Jan, 1820  
Honoured Friends and Fellow Citizens

After much work and many set-backs, without the least assistance in building the church here, we are at last fortunate to have completed the task. And, because we intend, with the proper consent of the Church, to have it inaugurated by the Reverend M Borchers on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February. Thus we need you to be present at this pleasant occasion, convinced of your kind thoughts and generous hands. We hope to see you here and you can be assured of a generous, friendly and hospitable welcome here.

Hail and Respect

M.W. THEUNISSEN  
P.H. MORKEL  
W. MORKEL, Sr.  
D.J. MORKEL

## Appendix 3.

**Problems with seating arrangements in the Church of Somerset West** (1, 45-47).

The history of the Church of Somerset West (6, p45 – 46) tells of constant problems with seating arrangements for wives. Men had seats along the walls, with the centre area reserved for the ladies. They arrived, each with a slave carrying a chair and *gesangboek* (hymnal), and were seated according to rank. This caused conflict and argument about who outranked whom. The annual meeting to decide seating arrangements (*Verzetting der Stoelen*) was exhausting and challenging. Philip Hendrik Morkel (1760 – 1831), as the senior and oldest Elder, had this responsibility and copped most of the complaints.

Months after the inauguration the widow of Paul Uri complained that she had to sit behind younger women whose husbands were of lower rank than her husband had been. In addition her daughters had to sit in the back row with schoolchildren. The *Landdrost* instructed the church council to consider this complaint carefully and to respect the rights particularly of widows. He also included a copy of the extensive regulations regarding chair arrangements of the Stellenbosch church.

Field Cornet H.R. De Vos, while “reluctant to complain” (*waarsch voor klachten*), appealed to *Landdrost* van Ryneveld. He could not allow that his wife be insulted (*in haar eer gekrenk*) when her chair was arbitrarily (*eygendunkelyk*) moved several times by Morkel. He could not agree to an informal arrangement (*minlike schikking*), and the issue had to be settled publicly. By placing the chair of his wife among people of lesser reputation, his whole family was insulted. The Church Council was unhappy over the tone of the letter (*ongepaste en beledigende uitdrukkingen*) and they went to Stellenbosch to put their side of the argument. M.W. Theunissen of Vergelegen wrote to “oom Morkel” urging him to take the case to the Chief Justice, Sir John Truter, to tell him about the lies spread by de Vos. The *Landdrost* eventually decided that the Church Council acted properly according to regulations and thus concluded the case.

In 1822 it was Koos Theunissen of *Vergelegen* (M.W.'s son) who complained that his wife's chair was placed lower than Hercules Morkel's wife. (The first wedding in the new church was between Hercules Morkel and Geertruida Woutrina de Vos, and they lived at *Welgelegen*, later renamed *Erinvale*, next to *Vergelegen*). Morkel explained that Hercules told him that he had been promoted to *wachtmeester* and his wife was entitled to her place.

In the same year Wouter de Vos of *Paardevallei* wrote to *Geachte Neef Morkel* to express his unhappiness that his daughter Geertruy's chair was set down below that of miss Teunis (sic – most likely Theunissen). Geertruy was married to Hercules Morkel, the son of Hercules and Helena Munnik.

At this time Hercules Morkel borrowed the penknife of Jacobus Pentz and scratched out Pentz's name on his (Pentz) bench and from then on he (Hercules) occupied that bench. The Church Council had to discipline him.

The Church Council listened patiently to the claims and grievances but could not satisfy everyone. Appeals were lodged to the *Landdrost*, but when that office was abolished in 1828, the problems were back with the Council. In 1829 the Synod decided to abolish preferential seating, except for appointed government and *kerkraad* officials.

#### **Uittreksels uit H.C. Hopkins, 1969. Die Ned. Geref. Gemeente Somerset-Wes. p48 – 49 gepubliseer deur Die N.G. Kerk van Somerset-Wes.**

Ook in hierdie gemeents het veral die jaarlikse *Verzetting der Stoelen* tot groot onenigheid en ontstigting gelei. Geduldig moes die kerkraad na elkeen se grieue luister en die besonderhede uitpluis. Soos in die ander gevalle moes oubaas Philip Morkel, wat as oudste ouderling adjunk-kerkmeester en daarom vir die rangskikking van die stoele verantwoordelik was, ook hier die spit afbyt.

Enkele maande na die kerkinwyding beweer die weduwee van Paul Uri dat daar voor haar vroue sit wat baie jonger (!) as sy was en wie se mans nie dieselfde rang beklee as wat haar man gehou het nie. Buitendien moet haar dogters almal in die agterste ry en saam met die skoolkinders sit. In die ry voor hul sit daar tot drie jonge-juffoue uit een gesin, sommige van wie weinige jare ouer is as wat haar dogters al lidmate is. Om die goeie reg van haar versoekte te toon, noem sy die magte wat wyle haar man tussen 1795 en sy koms na die Kaap in 1802, in die Hollandse militêre diens beklee het. Die landdros aan wie die klag gerig was, versoek die kerkraad toe om die saak te *redresseeren*, want *recht aan elk - en veral aan weduwees - te laten wedervaren al is die quaestie nog zoo klein*, bly tog almal se plig. Ook stuur hy aan hulle 'n afskrif van die uitvoerige voorskrifte vir die plasing van stoele in Stellenbosch se kerk.

Die volgende jaar (dws 1820) ontbrand daar 'n hewige stryd tussen veldkornet H.R. De Vos en die kerkraad. *Hoe warsch voor klachten* hy altyd was, kon die veldkornet dit nie verduur dat sy vrou so in haar eer gekrenk word deurdat haar stoel verskeie kere *eygendunkelyk* deur Morkel verskuif is nie. Hy hoop dus dat Van Ryneveld (landdros) hom nie langer sou laat onderdruk deur 'n raad, wat hulle op Somerset magte wil aanmatig wat hulle nie toekom nie. Vir 'n *minlyke skikking* was hy nie te vinde nie en die saak moes in die openbaar reggestel word. Deur sy vrou, *wiens braafheid in de Gemeente omme bekend is*, se stoel benede haar rang te plaas en byna onder 'n klas mense van 'n mindere *reputatie* as hare is, is sy hele familie verneder.

Hy was immers in 1804 al 'n offisier en jare lank het hy hom *met de meeste activiteit, en met ere* van sy veldkornetskap gekwy. Hierdie eerwaardige amp het seker nie ver agter die van heemraad gestaan nie. In die landdros se afwesigheid, verteenwoordig hy selfs namens hom die goewerment!

Aan die ander kant het die kerkraad swaar gevoel oor die *ongepaste en beleedigende uitdrukkings* in De Vos se skrywe aan die landdros en blykbaar op aandrang van Theunissen (Vergelegen) ry hulle Stellenbosch toe om hul kant van die saak aan Van Ryneveld te stel. Theunissen skryf aan *oom Morkel* dat die verregeaande affront teenoor hulle en die dames in die betrokke drie rye onmoontlik daar gelaat kan word. Hy moes die saak ook met die hoofregter sir John Truter – 'n man wat die Kerk se belange op sy hart gedra het – bespreek en hom vertel dat dit alles leuens was dat hulle buite hul magte opgetree het en *ook wat De Vos is geweest*. 'n Naskrif van die briefie lui: *Oom, seg aan Vransina dat zy myn de commees en glaaze na buyte sent van Neef De Kok, ook de 12 paar voervellen. Ik wag dar na!* Die landdros het die kerkraad uiteindelik in die gelyk gestel, omdat hul volkome ooreenkomstig die geldende regulasies gehandel het.

In 1822 is dit weer Koos Theunissen van Vergelegen wat kla dat sy vrou se stoel *onder* die van Herules Morkel- die gemeente se eerste bruidegom – se vrou geplaas was. Ter verduideliking sê die kerkmeester Morkel toe dat sy nefie hom laat verstaan het dat hy 'n wagmeester was, wat sy vrou op daardie plek aanspraak kon laat maak. Terselfdertyd skryf Wouter de Vos van Paardevlei egter aan *Geachte Neef Morkel* om sy ontevredenheid daaroor te kenne te gee dat sy dogter Geertruy – Hercules se vrou – se stoel *over de Stoel van Juffrouw Teunis na onder is gezet*. Hy was nie daarop teë dat daar vir die vrou van Willem Morkel plek ingeruim is nie, maar hoekom is almal se stoele dan nie afgeskuif soos dit tog in ander kerke die gebruik was nie? *Waarom moes Truitjie s'n dan alleen oover de ander heen na onder gezet worden, en dat van Juffrouw Teunis blyft staan?* Indien sy dogter langer op dié wyse *ge-afronteerd* word, vrees hy dat daar moeilikhede en onaangenaamhede gaan kom.

Ongeveer dieselfde tyd leen Hercules Morkel ook mooi-tjies eendag Jacobus Pentz se mes. Hy krap daarmee Pentz se naam op sy huurbank uit en sedertdien sit hy self daar! Sulke aanstootlike en berispelike gedrag kon die kerkraad nie deur die vingers sien nie en hul sou Hercules daaroor voor stok kry.

As die vrou van 'n certydse betaalmeester op 'n Britse skip, kon mev. J.S. Needham – Joseph Scarett Needham (1782 – 1854) was 'n bekende handelaar en herbergier – ook op 'n vernamer plek aanspraak maak as dié wat aan haar toegeken was. Haar man vra dus die kerkraad daarop dat hy sy reg by 'n hoër gesag kan gaan soek. Sy vennoot, die oujongkêrel John Evans, het weens *the present squabbles and your new regulations with regard to seats*, vir sy plek in die kerk bedank. Geen ware aanbieder kon volgens hom *Your Church* met die regte gesindheid van hart binnegaan nie.

Gelukkig is die netelige kwessie later aan die landdros as kerkmeester van sy distrik opgedra, maar toe die landdrosamp afgeskaf word, sit die Kerkrade weer met die turksy! Die Sinode van 1829 het toe darem minstens besluit dat *plaatsen van distinctie* in die plattelandse kerke voortaan slegs aan dienende *Regerings- en Kerkeradsleden* toegestaan moes word.