

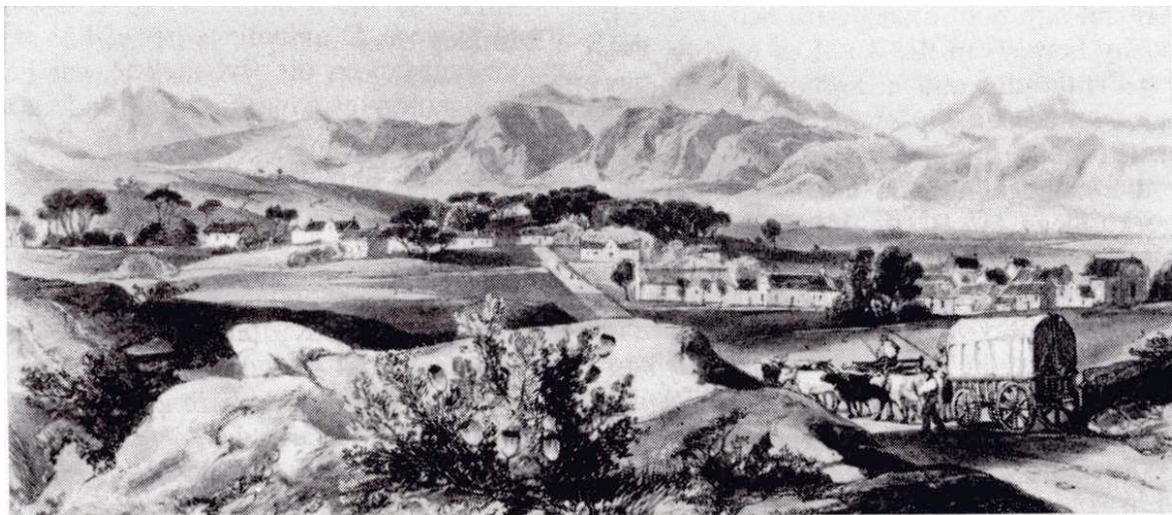
## We Need a Town and a Church

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.

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).



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

Source. Hopkins (1, p61)

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* (vicar). However, then the *Voorstanders* changed their minds and proceeded with a new plan.

Publieke Aanbesteding.

**D**e Voorstanders der aantebouwen Kerk op Hottentots Holland, nemen de vryheid het Algemeen te informeren, dat het Zyne Excellenzie onzen Heer Gouverneur goedgunstig heeft bejaagd 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 aanbesteden, het Bouwen van des Predikantshuis, met deszelfs twee Zydegebouwen, des Kosters- en Voorlezerswoning, waarvan de Plannen te zien, en de Conditie te lezen zyn, ten Huize van den Hr. G. H. MIASDORP, in de Kaapstad, en by de Voorstanders op Hottentots Holland. Ook kunnen meergemelde Voorstanders niet voorby, het Algemeen te informeren, dat zy gelukkig zyn geslagen in den Verkoop der Erven, ten voordeele van het Kerkenfonds, terwoyl zy hierby verklaren, dat dit Fonds cenig en alleen zal gebruikt worden ter Ophouwing der Kerke, Pastorie, en verdere noodige Gebouwen; het geen na het volbrengen hiervan moogt overig blyven, zal ten voordeele der Kerk op Renten worden uitgezet, zonder dat iemand der Voorstanders, direct of indirect, 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. Translated in Appendix 1. 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.

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 volkoomen; en daar wy van  
 intentie zyn, met behoorlyk consent de Kerk al-  
 hier door den Wel Eerw. Hr. M. Borchers op  
 den 13 Febr. eerstkomende te laten inwyden,  
 zoo noodigen wy Ul. tot het bywoonen dezer aan-  
 gename plegugheid, overtuigd zynde van U aller  
 gunstige denkwyze en milde hand over dier-  
 gelyke Gestigten, kunt Ul. die wy 't geluk mogen  
 hebben van hier te zien, van een gulle, vrien-  
 delyke 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

The erven were sold successfully and building of the church and *pastorie* (vicarage) 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

**Invitation to the inauguration of the church on 13 February 1820. Translated in Appendix 2**

*Source: Hopkins (1, p39)*

construction period (1, p36 - 38). Even with storm damage to the buildings, which caused a delay, the church was inaugurated on 13 February 1820.

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 6000 rixdollars and was installed in June 1819.

The first wedding in the new church was on 11 June 1820 between Hercules Morkel and Geertruida Woutrina de Vos. Hercules was the son of Hercules of *Welgelegen*, youngest brother of the three *Voorstander* Morkel brothers.

Early in 1820 the church employed a *voorleser* (clerk) who officiated in proceedings. He was Carel David Wentzel who had been a tutor or schoolmaster since 1809 for the Morkel families on *Morgenster* and *Onverwacht*. The church however lacked funds and with regret had to discharge him in October 1821.

As in other churches at the Cape, 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 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). In 1822 Koos Theunissen of *Vergelegen* complained that his wife's chair was placed lower than that of Hercules Morkel's wife. Philip Hendrik explained that his nephew had stated that he had been appointed *wachtmeester* and he was entitled to that place. In the church for his wife's chair. On a separate occasion Hercules Morkel borrowed a penknife from Jacobus Pentz and used it to scratch out Pentz's name on the church bench and appropriated it for his own use. He was duly disciplined by the *Kerkraad*. *Meer hieroor in die Bylae.*



**Note of indebtedness signed by the *Voorstanders* for the church organ.** Source: Hopkins (1, p39)

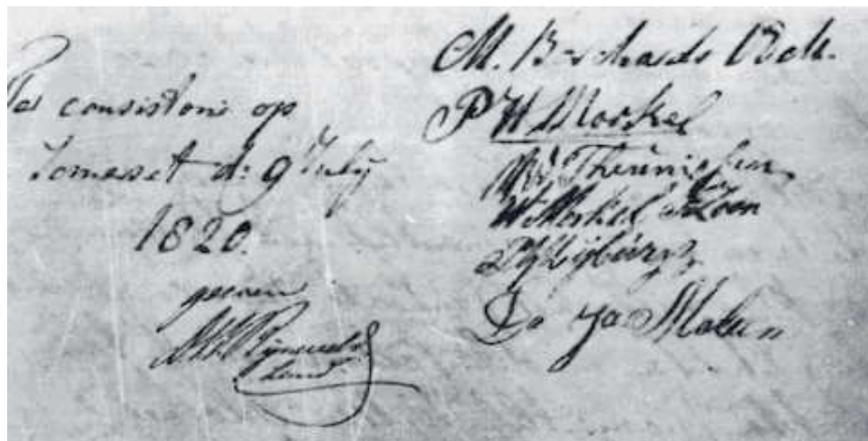
As a child I attended a few functions in the old church which at that time was used as a community hall. We roamed the church yard and were discouraged from climbing on to the graves – it was told that if you touch a grave you will itch for a long time. A rumour probably started by a crafty parent.

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*.



**The Old Church Somerset West**

*Source: Hopkins (1)*



**Signatures to the Minutes of the first meeting of Die Kerkraad**

*Source: Hopkins (1,p39)*

## 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. Maasdorp 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

## Bylae

**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 griewe luister en die besonderhede uitpluis. 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 turksvy.! 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.

Die volgende jaar ontbrand daar 'n hewige stryd tussen veldkornet H.R. De Vos en die kerkraad. 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. 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 schikking*' 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 gekwyd. 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 uitdrukkingen*' 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 verregaande affront teoor hulle en die dames in die betrokke drie rye onmoontlik dara gelaat kan word. Hy moes die saak ook met die hoofgetr sir John Truter – 'n man wat die Kerk se belange op sy hart gedra het – bespreek en hom vertel dat dit alles leuens was dta 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 commejes en glaaze na buyte sent van Neef De Kok, ook de 12 paar voervellen. Ik wag dar na!*' Die landdros het die kerkraad uiteiendelik in die gelyk gestel, omdat hul volkome ooreenkomstig die geldende regulasies gehandel het.

In 1822 is dit weer Koos Theunisen van *Vergelegen* wat kla dat sy vrou se stoel 'onder' die van Hercules Morkel - die gemeente se eerste bruidegom - se vrou was. Ter verduideliking sê 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.

Terselfde tyd skryf Wouter de Vos van *Paardevlei* egter aan '*Geachte Neef Morkel*' om sy ontevredenheid daarvoor te kenne te gee dat sy dogter Geertruy - Hercules se vrou - se stoel '*over de Stoel van Juffrouw Teunis na onder is gesetz*'. Hy is 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 is 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 die wyse '*ge-affronteerd*' word, vrees hy dat daar moeilikhede en onaangenaamheid gaan kom.

Ongeveer dieselfde tyd leen Hercules Morkel ook mooitjies eendag Jacobus Pentz se mes. Hy krap daarmee Pentz se naam op sy huurbank uit en sedertdien sit hyself daar! Sulke aanstootlike en berispelike gedrag kom die kerkraad nie deur die vingers sien nie en hulle sou Hercules daarvoor voor die stok kry.