

Traders, the AmaXhosa and the Colonists

By Margaret Snodgrass

In the early years of the eighteenth century, the Dutch were the first colonists to trade with the Xhosa. By 1752 there was a substantial trade in ivory and by 1770 a well-beaten wagon road into Xhosaland. Copper, iron and beads from the Colony were exchanged for cattle and ivory. The Dutch farmers (Boers) it seems were hunters of the elephants rather than ivory traders. A Boer would give a chief a present in exchange for permission to hunt in his territory. The chief in turn would provide guides to show the hunter where to find the elephants.

The Xhosa chiefs were far more interested in trading for cattle and the Boers would keep trade goods especially for the chiefs wishing to trade in cattle. It is obvious that disputes must have arisen and therefore the Dutch East India Company Government at the Cape, afraid that these trips might give rise to war, did try to prohibit this trade at times.

When the British took over the Cape in 1806, there were no immediate changes made to these arrangements. In 1807 and 1809 there were some efforts made to expel the Xhosa across the Great Fish River. In 1812 Governor John Cradock cleared the Zuurveld in an effort to enforce a communication barrier between the Xhosa and the colonists. The arrival of the Settlers of 1820 brought another dimension into the area and an attempt to reinforce the policy of 'no contact'. The settlers, however, soon realized the advantages of trading with the Xhosa and so this led to fullscale illegal trading in cattle and ivory.¹

On 22 April 1819 after the Battle of Grahamstown, Governor Lord Charles Somerset met Ngqika and other Xhosa chiefs on a 'mount' about 8 km along the road from present day Peddie to Alice. Here it was agreed that the area between the Keiskamma and Great Fish Rivers would become 'Neutral Territory'. It was agreed that the Keiskamma River and its upper reaches, the Tyumie River, would form the western boundary of Xhosa country, while the land between the Keiskamma and Fish Rivers was to remain a neutral zone or 'no man's land'.

The mount on which Somerset met the Xhosa had previously been known as '*Moerdelyke Kop*'. It overlooks the Fish River valley on the west and the Gwanga River and Buckkraal on the north east. It was later called 'Mount Somerset' to commemorate Governor Somerset's meeting with the Xhosa chiefs. Lord Charles recognized Ngqika (Gaika) as the paramount chief.

According to Jeff Peires, during the 1818-1819 Frontier War, contacts made between soldiers and the Xhosa were kept up after the war by discharged soldiers turned settlers, especially those living in the semi-military settlement of Fredericksburg near the Great Fish River.²

The Settler soldiers would warn the Xhosa of military patrols and the Xhosa would then move quickly back across the Keiskamma River. This trade was not conducted in a friendly manner but was purely an exchange of goods for profit and so there was always mistrust and suspicion on both sides.

Lord Charles Somerset went back to England on a year's leave shortly after declaring the area between the Great Fish and Keiskamma Rivers neutral territory. In his absence, acting Governor, Sir Rufane Donkin brought out the 1820 Settlers to help boost the numbers on the frontier. He tried to establish a semi-military type village in the area called Fredericksburg, but Lord Charles on his return disapproved of it and so the village was abandoned.

After Fredericksburg was abandoned, the 'Neutral Territory' became the scene of illegal hunting of big game and illegal trading between both the Settlers and the Xhosa from across the Fish River. In order to put a stop to this illicit trading, Lord Charles Somerset decided to establish regular fairs at Fort Willshire. This fort was named after Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Willshire of the 38th Regiment (hero of Grahamstown) and was once the most important fortification on the banks of the Keiskamma River. Fort Willshire was situated in a bend of the

¹ Peires, J; *The House of Phalo*, p.111

² *Ibid*; p. 112

Keiskamma River, about nine kilometres north of Breakfast Vlei on the road from present day Peddie, to Alice. Today it is marked only by scattered groups of ruins.

The fairs were held every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 8:00 to 18:00 during the summer months and from 9:00 to 16:00 in winter. Strict regulations were proclaimed to provide for the orderly conduct of the fair. Traders had to obtain special licenses before they were allowed to attend the fairs. No trade was allowed in cattle, firearms, ammunition, spirits, wine, beer or other liquors. The merchants were also forbidden to give away these commodities as presents to chiefs. Beads and buttons were allowed but each transaction had to have a 'useful' item such as iron pots, tinder boxes, blankets or cloth attached to it. The fact that the beads were imported from Italy and the other goods manufactured in Sheffield or Manchester may have led to this regulation.

The Xhosa resisted trading with the useful items but nevertheless attended the fairs in great numbers. During the first seven months 50,441 pounds of ivory, 16,500 pounds of gum, about 15,000 hides were traded in and 137 trading licenses issued. The Xhosa came from as far away as the Eastern side of the Kei and Thembuland. 'The competition between the Settler traders became so great that the cost of trade goods went up at the wholesale end while the selling prices went down.'³

In a few years the selling price of Xhosa cattle doubled. The Settlers then tried to manipulate the market regulations. The Xhosa were only allowed to cross the Keiskamma at 10:00 in the morning and stay until 16:00 in the afternoon. As time went on the big traders came to dominate the Settler end of the market. Ngqika also attended every trading day and used to exact a tribute from all ivory sales. Some of the Settler traders were reduced to bankruptcy by sudden changes in the bead market. Beads were no longer as sought after for cattle as trade penetrated the interior.



Fort Willshire c.1838 William Fehr Collection.

Settler traders soon spread inland as far as Mpondoland where they established regular trading stations and where they remained for months at a time. The big traders set up poor Settlers as their agents. This trading network soon eliminated the Xhosa traders as they had a more efficient wagon transport and control over the supply of goods. Once beads were being supplied all over the Nguni territory, their buying power for cattle was destroyed. The demand for beads dropped from £4,576 in 1825 to £287 in 1831. These were mainly replaced by a demand for British manufactured goods such as blankets or iron pots.

Many of the traders were of bad character and exploited or cheated the Xhosa systematically. There were some traders who kept on good terms with the local Xhosa chiefs, but many relied on firearms and threats of Colonial

³ ³ Peires, J; The house of Phalo, pps. 113-114

retribution. Over and above these institutions there was also the fact that the Xhosa were actually increasing their dependence on the Colony. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the most notable features of the Sixth Frontier War (1834-1835), was the widespread killing of traders. (Peires, J, p. 116). This war, generally, led to a great setback for frontier trade. Trade declined from over £30,000 in the early 1830s to well under £20,000.

After this war traders were strictly vetted and licensed by both Colonial and Xhosa authorities. The number of traders dropped from 100 to 30 and there was not a single resident trader left in the whole of Ndlambe territory.

References

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"Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it.
Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by
helplessly while everyone else repeats it."