From Fort Beaufort to Kwamaqoma - The Museum

A brief history of the old and the new

Margaret Snodgrass

In September 2025, members of the Lower Albany Historical Society and the Border Historical Society visited Fort Beaufort (now KwaMaqoma) and the newly renovated Fort Beaufort Museum -renamed KwaMaqoma Museum in May 2025.

Origins of the Word Museum

Etymology: From Latin word “museum”, Greek ‘mouseion’-a place devoted to the Muses- originally referring to a place for study and the Arts.

Who were the Muses?

Nine muses in Greek mythology- the divine goddesses of inspiration, arts and sciences. Believed to physically breathe creativity, wisdom and musical talent into the minds of poets, philosophers and artists.

Clio: Muse of history, often seen as depicted with a scroll or book.

The Purpose of a Museum

According to the International Council of Museums, ICOM, museums serve society by documenting and preserving evidence of humankind and the environment.

The 21st century museum, according to ICOM, focusses on being accessible and inclusive. It aims to represent diverse communities. Museums now also have served as spaces for **discussion** and **social change.**

Fort Beaufort

Why was it established?

Until 1854, the Colonial Office was the main policy-making body. The Colonial Office and the War Office were one department. Military matters, however, were given priority over colonial affairs. At the head of the two offices was the colonial secretary (Minister) of State for War and Colonies. This minister influenced the formation of colonial policy. The local governor had considerable freedom of action. He was ‘*the man on the spot’.*

The main period of conflict between the British army and the amaXhosa, was between the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and the Crimean War (1854).

Fort Beaufort was established in 1822 by Lieutenant-Colonel H M Scott of the 6th Regiment of Foot. Scott was instructed by Lord Charles Somerset, Governor of the Cape, to establish a military post, a blockhouse, at the strategic entrance to the Kat River Valley in the defensive horseshoe formed by the Kat and Brak Rivers. He named it Fort Beaufort after

Lord Charles Somerset's father, the Fifth Duke of Beaufort. It is the oldest town north of Grahamstown and east of the Great Fish River. Scott's headquarters were in Grahamstown.

The actual commanding officer of the post was Brevet Major Henry Rogers. He supervised the construction of the blockhouse on a level piece of ground between the Kat and Brak Rivers.

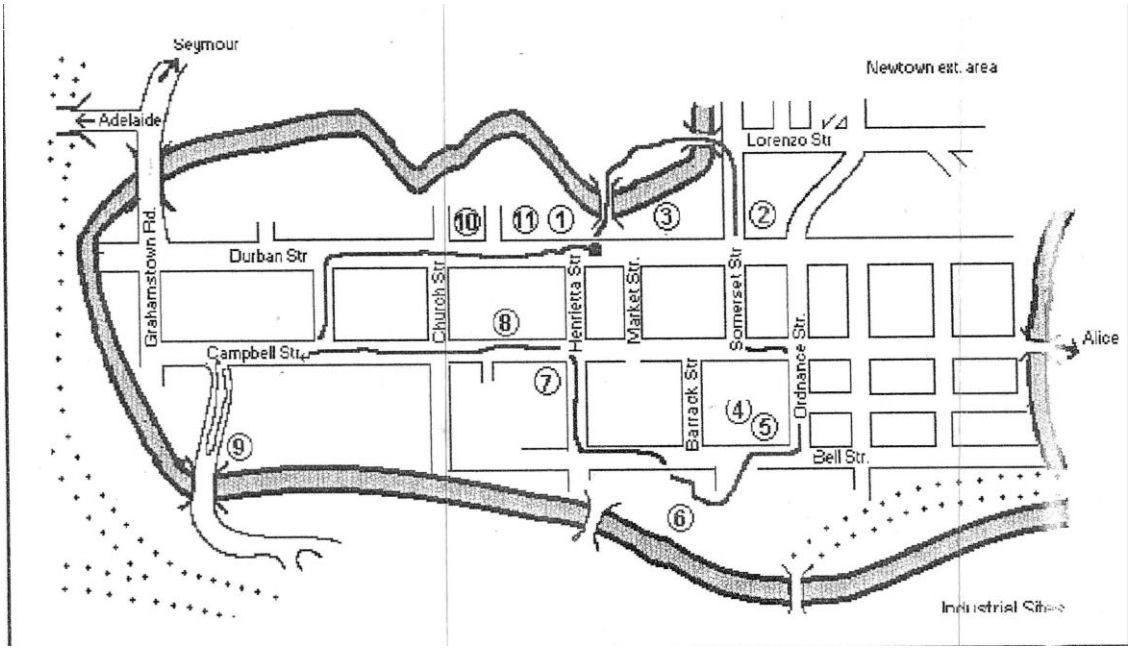


Figure 1: The Kat and Brak rivers form a perfect defence for the fort in Fort Beaufort

An interesting point to note is that both Scott and Rogers embarked for India in 1824 with their regiment. India, at that time, was known as the 'graveyard of the British army'. It lived up to its name for within five years of their arrival in the subcontinent both men were taken ill and died.

Fort Beaufort was linked by excellent roads to the rest of the fortifications built by the British during the nine Frontier Wars as defences against the amaXhosa.

One can trace the development of Fort Beaufort to the conflict between the Xhosa and the British. More than 2 000 British troops were posted there, and thirty-one different British regiments were received by Fort Beaufort. Some influential people connected to the fort were: Lord Charles Somerset, his son Lieutenant Colonel Henry 'Hawk Eye' Somerset, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, Sir Harry Smith, Xhosa chiefs Ngqika, Sandile, Hintsa and Maqoma, as well as the military artist Thomas Baines.

During this period the British army was opposed to change, mainly due to the influence of the Duke of Wellington. Therefore, the British army was ill-equipped to face the irregular nature of bush warfare against ably led, disciplined opponents, and the guerilla tactics of Maqoma.

After the 1834-35 war, Governor, Sir Benjamin D'Urban instructed that strong fortifications be erected at Fort Beaufort. The Martello Tower was one of the first of these fortifications.

Construction of the Martello Tower began in 1837, and it took six years to complete at an estimated cost of £1169. The Martello Tower in Fort Beaufort was one of two built more than 3.2 kms from the coast. Both the Tower and the fort were manned until 1869. Martello Towers were built to withstand tremendous battering from cannon balls, yet the Xhosa and Khoi never possessed or used such weapons! Apparently, the Duke of Wellington favoured Martello Towers as they were unique in that their height was greater than their base diameter. They were oblong structures strongly built of locally quarried or dressed stone and mortared with lime cement.

Originally Martello towers were used by the British for defence along the English shores after the French Revolutionary wars. The Fort Beaufort Martello is a replica of those (Figure 2). The tower is built of solid masonry, has a vaulted room as garrison accommodation and a platform on top on which a cannon is mounted which pivots through 360 degrees. This cannon is still there and has never been fired in anger.



Figure 2: The Martello Tower, 2025 [Photo: Theo van der Walt]



Figure 3: Officers' Quarters and Martello tower

There are several other national monuments in Fort Beaufort. The Officers Quarters were built in 1849 (Figure 3) and transferred to the Department of Health in 1893 when they became the official residence of the Superintendent of the Tower Psychiatric Hospital. In 1975 they became available for museum purposes and opened as the Military Museum in 1983. They are now used by the KwaMaqoma municipality.

It was only after 1869, when the Martello Tower and the fort were no longer manned, that the town developed a civilian character and finally received municipal status in 1883.

The iconic Victoria Bridge was built in 1837 on the road that was to connect Grahamstown to Fort Beaufort and Post Retief. The bridge is over the Kat River and was named for Queen Victoria. It took six years to complete. The road and the bridge building were carried out by the Royal Engineers under the general auspices of Major C J Selwyn. The road builder, Andrew Geddes Bain, supervised the operation. The labour used were mainly from the disbanded Cape Corps. This is probably South Africa's oldest bridge built over a river

and is still in use to normal traffic. A flood in 1846 destroyed the bridge's parapets and repair work was carried out fourteen years later. The original bridge cost £2,000. In 1874-76 reconstruction costs were £4,900.



Figure 4: Painting 1868 by R.S Cooper – post card

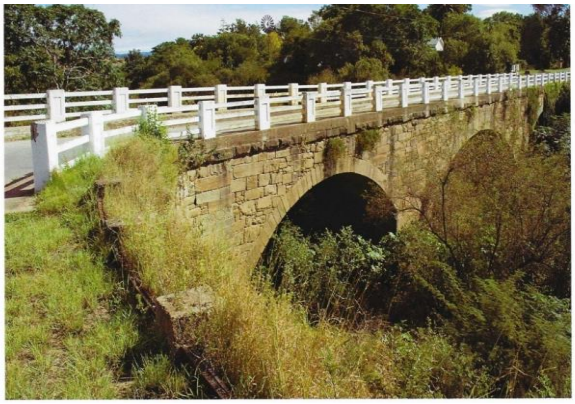


Figure 5: Victoria Bridge

The Fort Beaufort Museum

The Fort Beaufort Museum, which dates from 1830, was formerly the Officers' Mess and is situated in D'Urban street and did not form part of the original military fort (Figure 6). It has been preserved in its original state. At the entrance stand two cannons which are dated 1814 and probably formed part of the town's earliest defence. Over time, it has served as a social club and a school hostel. It was finally converted into a museum in 1938 and declared a national monument in 1980.



Figure 6: The Fort Beaufort Museum was situated in D'Urban street

The Fort Beaufort Museum attracted visitors from 'far and wide'. Included in its contents were an excellent fire-arms collection and collections dating back to the Frontier War period. It had two original Thomas Baines paintings and several works by Frederick l'ons, including one large painting of Fort Beaufort dated 1844. The museum library also housed a large and valuable collection of documents dating back to grants of land, issued to British settlers and signed by Lord Charles Somerset and had a large book collection.

The weapon's room had many fine exhibits of old firearms, including flintlock and percussion cap rifles, dating back to the period before and during the Frontier Wars. There was also a collection of old blacksmith's tools that had belonged to the last blacksmith in Fort Beaufort. The main emphasis was on the military history of the town.

When our historical society first visited the old museum in 2010, Dennis ‘Moose’ Janse van Rensburg was the curator. At that time the museum had seven rooms filled with displays of uniforms, household goods and weapons, Victorian and Xhosa domestic life, mostly obtained from donations made by families of early settlers. It also contained an excellent firearm and sword display. Moose produced a quarterly typewritten newsletter called the ‘Martello’, which gave news of the museum and its activities, as well as information taken from the many books and document collection kept in the museum.

In the November 1996 issue of the ‘Martello’, Moose printed an extract from the local newspaper *The Fort Beaufort Advocate*, dated Thursday, March 31, 1938, headed ‘Museum Matters’ in which the idea of establishing a museum in Fort Beaufort was first muted. This was followed in September 1938, by a statement that the old Military Mess House had been proclaimed a monument and that it had been handed over to the Municipality to repair and to use as a museum.

The Kwamaqoma Museum

In May 2025, the newly renovated Fort Beaufort museum was re-opened and renamed the KwaMaqoma Museum**.** The town of Fort Beaufort was renamed KwaMaqoma (Place of Maqoma) in 2023. Ms Asavela Maqubela is the director of the KwaMaqoma Museum.

According to Trevor Webster, the KwaMaqoma Museum displays symbols of three major forces. The two cannons in front of the officers’ mess represent British colonial conquest (the War of the Axe started here in 1846). Positioned between the cannons is the statue of Maqoma, the great guerilla fighter, famous as ‘*the leopard of Fordyce at the Waterkloof, he who died on the island in the white people’s land ‘.* This represents Xhosa resistance. And the Healdtown display within the museum represents missionary empowerment of alumni who became struggle fighters and along with Healdtown-educated Nelson Mandela as South Africa’s first democratic President, brought about democracy in 1994.



The statue of Maqoma was created by the artist Mzi Makhalima, who worked with Telile Kempele at Cementile Products, supervised by Peter Whitfield and donated to Trevor Webster .

Figure 7: The statue of Maqoma by Mzi Makhalima

The KwaMaqoma Museum still has displays of guns, swords and Xhosa weapons. They are now kept in a safe. The blacksmith tools are in the cellar.



Figure 8: Display of swords [photo Theo van der Walt]



Figure 9: Visitors from LAHS at the Healdtown display at the Museum

The Healdtown display at the Museum is an opportunity to see and describe many of the buildings, alumni and symbols and to capture the meaning and significance of the Institution.

The Institution's symbol is an eagle and motto from Isiah 40:31- '*they will rise with wings as of eagles'* The 1938 matric class shows the muti-racial staff and the confident, smart students wearing suits. The black elite were educated to become the leaders of the country. (Trevor Webster-notes for LAHS September 2025 outing to Fort Beaufort/ KwaMaqoma)

The buildings of Healdtown, which are approximately nine kilometres from town, are undergoing major renovation. Some of the original buildings are no longer recognisable. The Mfengu chiefs have applied for Healdtown to be declared a World Heritage Site.

Mandela's dormitory was turned into a museum and opened, in 2025. It used many of the photos from Trevor Webster's mother's, scrapbooks. She taught Mandela in 1937/38 at Healdtown.

The Fort Beaufort Museum and the last Curator, Dennis (Moose) Janse van Rensburg, concentrated on the military history of Fort Beaufort. In the commentary of *Border Bastion to Civic Centre,* The History of Fort Beaufort since 1816 DVD, mention is made of the change from 'fort to civic centre' and into the 'future'. Does the newly renovated former Fort Beaufort museum now the KwaMaqoma Museum represent that 'future' and comply with the ICOM definition of a 21st century museum?

REFERENCES

Border Bastion to Civic Centre (2008) *The History of Fort Beaufort since 1816.* DVD produced by the Fort Beaufort Camera Club

Information pamphlets. Katour Publicity Office at the Fort Beaufort Historical Museum

Martello, Newsletter of the Fort Beaufort Historical Museum. November 1996 No.85.

Webster, Trevor (2013). *Healdtown Under the Eagle's Wings*. The Legacy of an African Mission School. Methodist Publishing House, Salt River. Cape Town