Chapter 1

Establishing the Cedarberg

The Olifants River originates in the craggy heights of the Cape Fold Belt Mountains. It gathers momentum as it runs towards the coastal plain, accumulating water from the seasonal springs and streams that sparkle amid dusty brush. Now regulated by a dam near Clanwilliam, the river's flow played an important part in shaping plant and animal life in its vicinity. There is, understandably, evidence of concentrated human activity along the river in both precolonial and colonial eras. A perennial source of water and a remarkable feature in the landscape, the Olifants River was a reference point among Europeans from the earliest days of their penetration in the region. Consequently, the river valley and surrounding area were an important zone of interaction between settlers and indigenous hunting and herding populations in the eighteenth century.

The upper Olifants River valley and the surrounding Cedarberg Mountains were a crucible of frontier life. From the headwaters above present-day Tulbagh to the place where the river meets the sandy coastal plain near Heeren Logement, steep mountains with few natural passes separate the river from the Swartland and Sandveld to the west and the Bokkeveld to the east. Despite the rugged terrain, people moved regularly through the mountains, so any discussion of human settlement near the river must necessarily follow the links that people maintained to the coast and to the interior valleys.

Situating the Cedarberg

Fig. 1.1. The Western Cape

The Cedarberg region lies 250 kilometers north of Cape Town—about nine days' travel in an ox wagon during the mid-eighteenth century. The mountainous terrain of the Cape Fold Belt consists largely of shale and nutrient-poor soil. Rainfall is less than 40 millimeters per year; surface water is limited and scattered. Despite the aridity, the vegetation is diverse. Areas of Renosterveld, Nama Karoo, and Succulent Karoo biomes are interspersed among the predominant Fynbos, providing different densities and ranges of plants within a relatively contained space. People and animals need only climb partway up a mountainside to find a change of foliage. Cresting a pass can be enough to change not just vegetation but water availability as well.

Fig. 1.2. Cedarberg Plantscape

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Fynbos is mostly low, scrubby brush without grasses or trees. The biome has three major elements: Cape reeds replace the grasses typical in other ecosystems, local heaths known as erica compose the second major element, and Proteas round out the trio. Renosterveld, though less diverse than Fynbos, has abundant geophytes—plants that store their nutrients underground as bulbs, tubers, or corms. The irises, lilies, and orchids of the Renosterveld were an important seasonal food source for hunters in the region prior to colonial settlement. Renosterveld also supports grasses, though it is overgrazed easily. The Nama Karoo and Succulent Karoo biomes occur in the driest zones. Daisies, a major component of the Succulent Karoo, produce the spectacular spring wildflower displays that now draw significant numbers of tourists each year.

In general, the land has a relatively low carrying capacity. There are no large herds of ungulates and it is unlikely that they existed in the region in earlier eras because the existing resources would not support them, at least not year-round. The highly variable and seasonal availability of water restricts the range of larger herbivores and carnivores in the Cedarberg. Many plants flower and reproduce after the winter rains, so forage is abundant in spring.

The hunting and herding populations that inhabited the region prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers were mobile; Khoikhoi and San did not establish permanent settlements. The first colonial farmers to claim land in the Olifants River valley also built impermanent dwellings. Moreover, their homesteads were scattered and it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the first signs of a concentrated settlement began to appear at the place then known as Jan Dissels Vlei. Although the landscape does not conform to Victorian notions of romantic beauty, the nascent village inspired this description by a nineteenth-century English visitor:

"Set in surroundings of somewhat stark grandeur, the village was sited on a low rise in the tongue of land . . . Immediate to the east it is flanked by the Karooberg Mountain, 1,015', part of the Cedarberg range which rise majestically to form a mighty eastern bulwark and the source of many streams."
Regardless of the era or the reason for their interest in the Cedarberg, visitors and inhabitants of the region focused on water—in a semiarid place they had to. So the perennial Olifants River and the relative fecundity of its valley provided both habitat and battleground for the groups of people that resided there.

**Populating the Cedarberg**

Although not a lush environment, the Cedarberg has accommodated human settlement for at least 10,000 years. The region’s numerous rock art sites and Paleolithic remains have attracted intense archaeological investigation for over twenty years, shedding new light on the relationship between hunter-gatherers and pastoralists and on centuries of migrations.

San hunters and gatherers predated Khoikhoi herders at the Cape. People who subsisted predominantly by foraging used land and resources differently from pastoralists. Although archaeological, documentary, and ethnographic data is not conclusive, it strongly suggests that the indigenous populations of the Cape had a clear sense of territoriality and regular ranges through which different groups moved systematically. Communities gathered and dispersed in response to climatic and economic stimuli. Such movement among people engendered both cooperation and conflict. Open hostility and struggle for specific territory seems likely before the seventeenth century, but it appears as though the notions of individual land claims and land ownership arrived in the region with colonial settlers.

Cross Reference:
Read more about individual land ownership.
(chapter3.html#p13)

Europeans first arrived in the Olifants River valley in 1660. On that visit, Jan Danckaert saw herds of elephants, and so named the river for them. Europeans subsequently returned to the river valley on hunting expeditions, further exploratory treks in search of the Copper Mountains, or journeys to barter for cattle with Namaquas. The colony’s expansion began to affect the region full-time in 1725, when the Company issued the first grazing permit along the river. Stock farmers began regularly using the area from that point onward; by the late 1730s settlers began arable farming.

Colonial land claims under Dutch East India Company (referred to by its Dutch initials, VOC) rule rested on a two-tiered system of permanent grants (freehold property) and temporary permits (loan farms). Homesteads in outlying areas such as the Cedarberg were almost exclusively loan farms—annual permits granted by the VOC to free burghers. A loan farm gave a settler exclusive right to a fixed tract of land in exchange for annual rent. The permit was renewable indefinitely. *Burghers*, or free citizens, could build, farm, hunt, and graze on their
loan farms without restrictions. Although they technically could not sell the land, settlers could transfer the improvements, so in practice the grants conferred permanent, alienable property rights on the permit holders.\textsuperscript{17}

For the existing hunting and herding populations of the Cedarberg, the introduction of loan farms meant intensified competition for access to land and resources such as water, grazing, and game. More importantly, loan farms represented the advent of a new land tenure regime based on notions of private ownership that was intrinsically inimical to Khoisan seasonal migration.

The establishment of colonial farming also introduced a demand for agricultural labor to the region. Settlers brought with them both chattel slaves and the habit of indenturing captive Khoisan. Settler encroachment in the Cedarberg thus imported a two-tiered system of bonded labor in which the distinction between chattel slave and indentured Khoisan was not fixed. This permeable boundary meant that a porous conception of race and ethnicity prevailed in frontier regions during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{18}

Cross Reference:
A working definition of \textit{frontier}
(chapter2.html#p3)

Although social distinctions of race may have been flexible and unevenly applied on the frontier, the elaborate nomenclature developed in colonial society also pertained in the Cedarberg. From the settler perspective, there were distinctions among various classifications of people, free and bonded, Europeans and "others." The Company officials were at the top of the colonial hierarchy. Next were burghers. The VOC soldiers and sailors had few rights and limited opportunities, but the Company gave some men permission to work for wages among the burgher population. The occupations of these \textit{knechts} spanned a wide range, from overseer to teacher.\textsuperscript{19} The term \textit{free black} applied to individuals who were not of European origin, not indigenous, and not enslaved. Colonists referred to the indigenous population as \textit{Hottentots} (Khoikhoi) and Bushmen. They further differentiated between classifications of mixed-race individuals, labeling the descendants of European-Khoisan unions as \textit{Bastaards} and the children of Khoisan and slaves or free blacks as \textit{Bastaard-Hottentots}. Finally, slaves imported mostly from the Indian Ocean rounded out the population at the Cape in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{20} In spite of this elaborate social classification, on the frontier individuals had a greater choice in adopting social identity, as long as they wanted to live within colonial norms.

Khoisan response to this intrusion was uneven, consisting of various degrees of engagement, resistance, and flight. Toward the end of the late 1730s, violent resistance predominated, culminating in the fierce frontier war of 1739. Its conclusion effectively ended the possibility
of independent existence for local hunters and herders living near colonial settlements in the Land van Waveren (present-day Tulbagh) and regions to the north. Colonial commandos crushed concerted, armed Khoisan resistance and opened the frontier to more intensive settler use.\(^{21}\)

The end of orchestrated warfare was not, however, the end of violence, nor was it the beginning of uncontested colonial settlement in the Cedarberg. In fact, frontier inhabitants disputed the terms of labor relations, land tenure, and social control until well into the nineteenth century. Although the balance of power began to shift in favor of land-owning settlers in the 1740s, the terms of living in the Cedarberg—and in particular the terms of exercising authority—remained contested for nearly a century afterward.

**The Colonial Context**

> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the shifting frontier regions in South Africa differed from most other colonial frontiers in the world in an important aspect of administration. Europeans established a foothold at the southern tip of Africa not in the name of king and country, not for the glory of God, but rather in the direct pursuit of profit. The first European settlement at Table Bay was a commercial enterprise, established in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company to support its lucrative operations in the Indian Ocean.\(^{22}\) The VOC explicitly and self-consciously did not want to colonize the Cape, but rather sought to establish the barest infrastructure necessary to resupply the passing East Indiamen with fresh food, water, and sailors to replace hands who took ill or died on the perilous Atlantic and Indian Ocean passages that linked the Cape to the economically more important ports of Amsterdam and Batavia.\(^{23}\)

The officials making decisions for the VOC did not intend for the settlement at Table Bay to be an independent economic or political entity, although they did hope that the resupply efforts would become self-financing. Initially, the affairs of the Cape had no direct claim on the attention of the *Heren XVII*, the seventeen gentlemen who ruled the VOC. At first, the commander of the Cape reported both to the VOC governor in Batavia and to the *Heren XVII* in Amsterdam. In 1732 the unwieldy system was streamlined so that the Cape’s administrator, by then promoted to governor, reported directly to Amsterdam. Even so, the Cape’s pleas for more soldiers, more labor, and more funds often went unanswered, because in the commercial structure of the VOC, the needs of Java and the Spice Islands were always more important.\(^{24}\)
The Dutch East India Company was a private venture. Although it held a charter from the States-General that authorized monopoly trade and the exercise of sovereign rights—raising an army, negotiating treaties, and administering justice—the Company’s primary interests lay with its shareholders, not with the complicated politics of the Republic of the United Netherlands.25

The Company’s structure represented its diverse commercial origins and mirrored the decentralized structure of the Dutch Republic. Created in 1602 as the world’s first joint-stock company, the VOC was comprised of six member chambers, known as kamers, which were the legacy of the various smaller commercial organizations folded into the VOC. The six kamers—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Zeeland, Delft, Hoorn, and Enkuizen—each had representatives among the Heren XVII. The individuals appointed to serve among the 17 lords all came from the ruling classes of the member cities; the conservative decisions made by the Heren XVII reflect the patrician origins and commercial priorities of its members.26

The first Europeans at the Cape were all in the direct service of the VOC, employed as soldiers, sailors, or administrators. Soon after their arrival, the Company decided it would be more efficient (and less costly) to grant some of the VOC servants the status of free citizens (burghers) and offer them tracts of land. The farmers would then produce agricultural goods at their own cost and sell the product to the VOC—the only buyer in the market.27

The growing settlement at Table Bay consisted of Company officials, contracted VOC soldiers and sailors, Company slaves, burghers, the burghers’ slaves, and a small number of free blacks.28 A Company-appointed governor administered the Cape, advised by the Council of Policy, which consisted entirely of Company officials. The burghers had three seats on the Council of Justice, which decided criminal matters.29 The Company and the Council of Policy controlled appointments to the Council of the official Dutch Reformed Church, often filling the Church Council with Company administrators. The Church ministers themselves were employed by the VOC, which meant that the Company either controlled or strongly influenced most civic and social life at the Cape.30

As the free burghers began to seek land further and further from the settlement at Table Bay, the Company created a second tier of administration for the interior. The first landdrost, or magistrate, was appointed to serve in Stellenbosch in 1679. Members of the heemraad, or citizens’ advisory council, assisted the landdrost, a Company official. The heemraden were local residents, as were the veldkornets, burghers assigned responsibility for local districts.31 Thus, free farmers in outlying areas had more influence on government administration than did burghers living in or near the settlement at Table Bay.
Frontier residents, regardless of their status, were therefore distant bureaucratically as well as geographically from the colonial government that claimed to rule them. From the perspective of a slave, the exercise of state authority began with his or her master, who was legally permitted to mete out corporal punishment. The master was in turn subject to the authority of the veldkornet, the landdrost, and the heemraden. The landdrost reported to the fiscaal, the Company’s prosecutor, and the governor.

Cross Reference:
The judicial reach of the colonial state extended to the Cedarberg frontier.
(chapter8.html#p35)

This strict bureaucratic structure had consequences for frontier districts of the growing Cape colony. In some instances, the great distance from the seat of administrative power offered relative freedom for frontier residents seeking escape from rigid colonial social structures. In other cases, colonial justice penetrated to the outer reaches of colonial settlement. In still other circumstances, the rigid application of hierarchical and elitist Company policies led directly to settler rebellions.

The development of a sizeable settler community was anomalous in the VOC world, though not in the wider Dutch imperial experience. The sprawling East India Company linked three continents, two oceans, and identities beyond enumeration. In the context of a trading company run by elite married men, staffed primarily by bachelor soldiers and sailors, dependent on the labor of slaves, and striving for control of both indigenous populations and colonial settlements, it might seem surprising to locate a conversation about colonial identity with settler marriage and family networks at the Cape. It is, however, precisely in the relationships established and entrenched through matrimony that we can see evolving—but not rigid—class distinctions, changing attitudes about race, and the creation of a settler identity distinct from indigenous African communities (Khoikhoi, San, and Xhosa) as well as from other emerging colonial groups including free blacks and mixed-race communities such as Griqua and Bastaards.

Within and against the corporate structure and commercial goals of the VOC, settlers, Khoikhoi, and slaves used conflict, collaboration, and sex to work their way toward an uneasy equilibrium dominated by colonists. The components of this contest were laid bare on the frontier, where ultimately no one—no matter how physically distant—could avoid the ascendancy of social, political and economic structures conceived in Europe, shaped in Cape Town, and applied in the Cedarberg.
Notes

**Note 1:** See P.S. Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660–1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die Distrik Vanryhsdorp," *AYB* (1966) for the history of the lower Olifants River area. My thanks to Robert Ross for sharing his copy of Scholtz with me.


**Note 3:** The scientific family names of the plants are Restionaceae, Ericaceae, and Proteaceae.

**Note 4:** Renosterveld geophytes include Iridaceae, Asphodelaceae, Colchicaceae, Hyacinthaceae, Eriospermaceae, and Orchidaceae; van Rooyen and Steyn, 19.

**Note 5:** John Parkington, personal communication, July 1997.

**Note 6:** The daisies belong to the Asteraceae family.

**Note 7:** Present-day wildflower season tourism in August and September makes an important contribution to the local economy.

**Note 8:** The village at Jan Dissels Vlei was renamed Clanwilliam in 1814.


**Note 13:** Andrew B. Smith, "Competition, Conflict and Clientship: Khoi and San Relationships in the Western Cape," *Prehistoric Pastoralism in South Africa* (South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series 5 [June 1986]), 37.


**Note 15:** Scholtz, "Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier," 7–27.

**Note 16:** CA: RLR 6:58, Permit issued to Johannes Ras at Lange Vallei, 18 Oct. 1725.

Note 18: This argument was first championed by Martin Legassick, whose articulation was framed as a challenge to the then-prevailing orthodoxy among South African historians that racial biases were solidified on the frontier; "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography," in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, eds., *Society and Economy in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 44–79. This position was subsequently supported and eloquently elaborated by Robert Ross, whose work in this regard is cataloged by Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Eastern Cape Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41n35. I engage more fully in frontier historiography in Chapter 2.


Note 29: The burghers' frequent complaints about lack of representation were answered in 1785 when three more of the Council's 12 seats were set aside for burghers, giving them equal representation with Company officials in matters of justice.


Note 33: The Cape reported to Batavia only until 1732.

Note 34: This interpretation coincides with Guelke's dual frontier thesis articulated in "The Making of Two Frontier Communities." Nigel Penn, "Fugitives on the Cape Frontier, c.1680–1770," in Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth Century Cape Characters (Cape Town: David Philip 1999), 73–100.

Note 35: For example, consider the rebellion against Governor Simon van der Stell led by Adam Tas, see Margaret W. Spillhaus, The First South Africans and the Laws Which Governed Them, to Which is Appended the Diary of Adam Tas (Cape Town: Juta, 1949). Also consider the case of the fugitive Estienne Barbier; see Nigel Penn, "Estienne Barbier: An Eighteenth-Century Cape Social Bandit," in Rogues, Rebels and Runaways, 101–46. Finally, there is the classic example of the Cape Patriots' movement; see Coenraad Beyers, Die Kaapse Patriotte gedurende die laaste kwart van die agtiende eeu in die voortlewing van hul denkbeelde ( Pretoria: J.L, 1967).


Note 37: To compare the vastly different application of European customs by the VOC in Asia, see Jean Gelman Taylor, The Social World of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in Dutch Asia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). Also see Leonard Blussé, Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986).