

PIETER JACOB MARAIS' SEARCH FOR GOLD IN THE TRANSVAAL

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"Our man [driver of the wagon of the traders Churchill & Evans of Durban] informed us that gold had been found in the Transvaal, and strange to say, that the party who discovered it was put in Tronk [jail] until he had promised not to reveal it. Strange reward this!" Thus wrote Joseph Churchill in a letter to his sister on 28 March 1854. The traders' driver had just returned from Potchefstroom, then popularly known as Mooirivierdorp.¹

Pieter Jacob Marais — the "party who discovered" the gold — caused a brief sensation in the 1850s in the newly established Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR or Transvaal) when it was rumoured that he had discovered a reef. His diary makes no mention of a gold reef, but records that on 7 October 1853 he had panned "a few specs of gold in the River Crocodile."² This historic entry in Marais' diary proclaims him as the first person to discover and record the existence of gold in the Transvaal.

Marais, born in Paarl on 24 February 1827, was an adventurer, a born prospector, enterprising, intelligent and educated. At the age of 22 he set off by steamer from Cape Town on his wanderings. What is more, on that day (31 March 1849), he commenced writing a diary in which he recorded his journeys and adventures during the following sixteen years. When his boat docked in Liverpool a few weeks later, Marais heard rumours of the immensely rich gold finds in California. So he immediately set off for North America, and from there inevitably followed the gold rush to Australia. He returned to Cape Town in April 1853 without having

amassed a fortune. By then he was, however, a seasoned and experienced gold prospector. The gold bug had bitten him. His enquiring mind and interest in minerals took him to and fro across the countryside on prospecting trips. Eventually, with the thought of gold on his mind, he set out northwards on horseback for the wide open spaces — so recently claimed by the Trekkers — to the yet unprospected Transvaal beyond the Vaal River.³



Market Square, Mooirivierdorp (Potchefstroom), in the early 1850s when Marais visited the small village.

PHOTOGRAPH: AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG



Pieter Jacob Marais and his wife.

PHOTOGRAPH: TRANSVAAL ARCHIVES DEPOT, PRETORIA

EN ROUTE TO THE MAGALIESBERG

When Marais arrived in Potchefstroom in September 1853 it was a small village, still often referred to as Mooirivierdorp. The original 60 or so families had, a few years back (1841), been moved from the earlier unhealthy site Oude-dorp to higher ground on the west bank of the Mooi River.⁴ It is apparent from Marais' notes that one of the most helpful of the Potchefstroom residents who befriended the prospector was B.J. Liebenberg whom Marais had evidently taken into his confidence regarding his search for gold.⁵ Liebenberg owned a smallholding on a farm named Roodepoort,⁶ 50 kilometres away, which was later to become Ventersdorp. He obviously invited Marais to use that farm as a base while prospecting the Schoonspruit district.

Marais' trip along the valley of the Mooi River must have been slow and leisurely. A walking mount and a pack horse constituted an ideal method of transport for a prospector.

¹ D. CHILD, *A merchant family in early Natal* (Cape Town, 1979), p. 54.

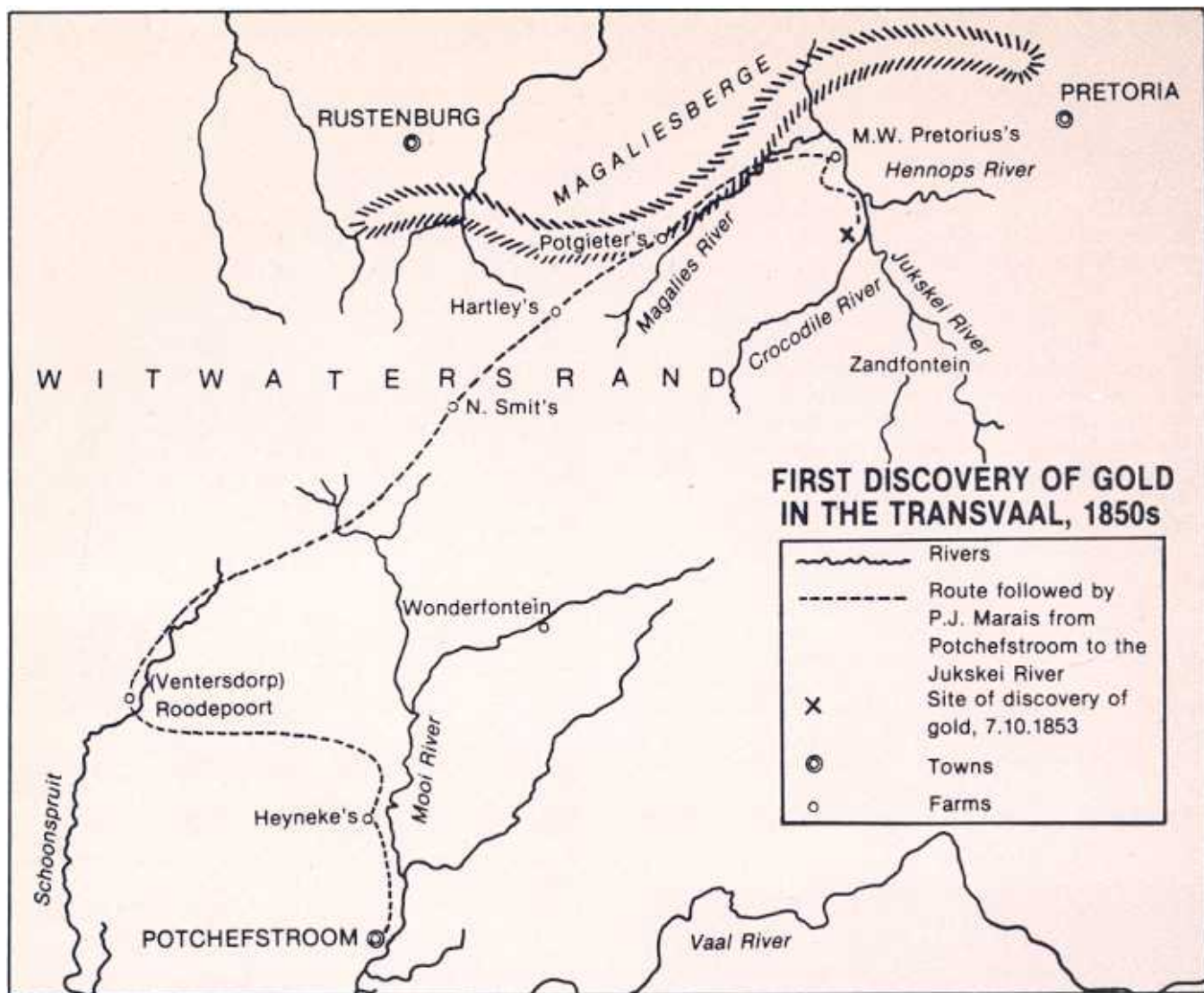
² G.S. PRELLER (ed.), *Argonauts of the Rand; story of the discovery of the Main Reef, with the Marais-diary (1849-65)* (Pretoria, 1935), p. 55.

³ *Dictionary of South African biography II* (Cape Town, 1972), p. 445.

⁴ G.E. JENKINS, *A century of history; the story of Potchefstroom* (Potchefstroom, 1939), pp. 7-8.

⁵ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56.

⁶ Registrar of Deeds, Pretoria (RDP), Farm registers: Roodepoort 191 IP.



FIRST DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN THE TRANSVAAL, 1850s

	Rivers
	Route followed by P.J. Marais from Potchefstroom to the Jukskei River
	Site of discovery of gold, 7.10.1853
	Towns
	Farms

His route took him from farm to farm along the west bank of the Mooi River. The notes in his diary are brief, merely a succession of names.

On 9 September 1853 he passed Heyneke and Koos Steyn, both well-known early residents of Potchefstroom who owned farms north of the town, beyond Oudedorp. The valley of the Mooi River, eroded into the surface of immensely thick layers of dolomite, is bounded on either side by low hills. Sinkholes and subterranean caves line the shallow bed of the river.⁷ It is strange that Marais does not comment on the numerous curious fissures in the dolomite from which emerge the streams that feed the Mooi River and Schoonspruit along which he prospected. He had no opportunity of knowing that he was in the vicinity of the future far west ultra-deep gold mines, the rich Blyvooruitzicht and Doornfontein reefs.⁸ Travelling over one of Heyneke's farms, probably Muiskraal, he proceeded to B.J. Liebenberg's farm — a plot on the property Roodepoort — in the valley of the Schoonspruit.⁹

Marais' diary discloses that his route followed mainly rivers and streams. He spent nine days panning the Schoonspruit for the signs of alluvial gold that would indicate the presence of a payable reef. But he found nothing in the vicinity of Roodepoort (Ventersdorp). On 3 October 1853 Marais left Liebenberg's property. Following the old track next to the upper Schoonspruit, past its 'eye' and across the next appropriately named farm Waterzoek (where the head of the

stream has disappeared beneath the dolomite), Pieter Jacob Marais approached the Witwatersrand proper.¹⁰ He traversed the wide plateau, a gently-undulating grassy plain, and arrived at Leliefontein, farm of the then well-known Nicolaas Jacobus Smit (Sr).¹¹

Bearing east, Marais crossed Dwarsfontein, farm of Alwyn Botha, on the "brow of the Hoogveld." This wide airy plateau was the westerly portion of the Witwatersrand which rises eventually to a maximum elevation of nearly 1 600 metres, with "a magnificent view of the Magaliesberg".¹² Ahead of Marais was the low ridge known as the Blaauwbank, home of Jozef de Beer, where in 1874 (20 years after Marais' trip) Henry Lewis discovered and mined the first of the Witwatersrand's gold-in-quartz reefs.¹³ It is possible

⁷ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55; L.C. KING, *South African scenery* (London, 1951), p. 112.

⁸ *Beerman's all mining yearbook* (Johannesburg, 1972), p. 88.

⁹ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; KING, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹¹ Smit had settled on Leliefontein and the adjoining farm, Klippan, in 1842. *Dictionary of South African biography* II, p. 670.

¹² J. SANDERSON, *Memoranda of a trading trip into the Orange River (Sovereignty) Free State and the country of the Transvaal Boers* (State Library reprint No. 91, Pretoria, 1981), p. 245.

¹³ E.L.P. STALS and J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad II* (Pretoria, 1978), p. 11.

that Marais was prospecting for alluvial gold only, as his trail led mainly along watercourses. The presence of gold in the prospecting pan would lead to more thorough exploration.

Marais therefore decided to proceed towards the Magaliesberg valley. He left the Highveld *en route* for Thorndale, the farm of Henry Hartley,¹⁴ and rode between a succession of hills each of which, with its escarpments and backslope, resembled "a series of waves running across the country".¹⁵ Beyond these foothills gleamed the winding reaches of the Magalies River, a sight which awakened the enthusiastic admiration of the aforementioned Joseph Churchill a few years later.¹⁶

"A FEW SPECS OF GOLD"

Marais would have heard about Henry Hartley while he was in Potchefstroom. Every traveller of that era who encountered Hartley remarked on his exceptional character and abilities. He was equally admired and accepted by the Boers and in the 1860s led the African explorer Karl Mauch to the gold-fields of Rhodesia.¹⁷ Hartley had probably heard current undocumented reports of gold in the Zoutpansberg and on the Highveld. So Marais would have sought and valued his advice.

North of Hartley's farm was the great Magaliesberg range. Trekkers whose names have gone down in history settled near Hartley on farms in the Magalies River valley. Hekpoort was the home of Commandant G.J. Kruger, while Nootgedacht and Doornspruit were the farms of the Potgieter family. The Trekker Hermanus Potgieter (Sr) had settled there in the early 1840s.¹⁸ Marais mentions his visit to the Potgieter homestead, from where he rode across the farm Broederstroom which belonged to H.P.N. and H.A. Pretorius, brothers of the famous Voortrekker, Andries Pretorius.¹⁹

On 3 October 1853 Marais arrived at Kalkheuvel, farm of the newly-appointed Commandant-General Marthinus Wessel Pretorius, and remained there for two days to report his progress. The Commandant-General's homestead was situated in a verdant, bush-covered valley between rugged dolomite hills, the most prominent of which is Rhenosterkop. The Crocodile River winds between the hills, entering the valley in a swiftly-flowing stream that has worn a deep, craggy bed in a kloof at the foot of Rhenosterkop.²⁰

When he departed, Marais probably avoided the dolomite-edged watercourse, returning to the main wagon track before continuing his way south to the Witwatersrand plateau. Once past the koppies, he returned to the banks of the Crocodile River and continued to prospect upstream. On 7 October 1853 Marais recorded: "*Arrived Koos Botha and Tobias de Vlaame [Vlaming]; found a few specs of gold in the River Crocodile.*"²¹ These two farmers, who lived in the vicinity, were the interested spectators and witnesses on this auspicious day when Marais panned the first gold to be found in the Transvaal. The significant fact is that he subsequently documented the record of its discovery. On the following day Marais reported: "Found some more gold in the Jukskei River".²²

With this information, and the aid of the Vlakfontein survey map,²³ it is possible to deduce that on these successive days Pieter Jacob Marais had panned gold in the river bed in the vicinity of the confluence of the Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers — rivers rising near the gold-bearing reefs on which Johannesburg would later be founded.²⁴ On the third day, 9 October 1853, Marais had journeyed upstream to Zandfontein, the farm of Piet Nel (and site of the present city of Sandton) where he found more alluvial gold.²⁵

EPILOGUE

A week later Marais returned to Potchefstroom. He was to make yet another trip across the Witwatersrand before reporting to the Volksraad on 1 December 1853. He subsequently had meetings with the Volksraad on 3 and 4 December. After careful consideration — and many forebodings — the Volksraad gave the prospector official permission to search for gold and other minerals in the ZAR, but only on condition that his findings be kept secret.²⁶

After concluding this agreement, Marais made a number of trips, the first by ox-wagon to the Zoutpansberg, in company with his friend B.J. Liebenberg. He returned to the Jukskei River, then Derdepoort, and in 1855 visited the new town of "Pretoriusdorp" (Pretoria). In a letter to the Volksraad on 7 April 1855 Marais pointed out that he had nothing to report. The Volksraad was not pleased with this news, perhaps because rumour had raised their expectations. There is no evidence that Marais had at any time acted in conflict with his agreement. He was, however, ordered to appear in person before the Volksraad in its session of September 1855.²⁷

Marais never received the order. Long before the session he had re-crossed the Transvaal border and returned to the Eastern Cape where he later married a widow, Margaretha Anna Jacoba Allen (née De Beer). His interest in mineral wealth appears to have waned. He retired to Dordrecht in 1857, opened a general dealer's store and settled down to married life. Ill health resulted in his early death in 1865.²⁸ Pieter Jacob Marais' search for gold had come to an end. But his name will undoubtedly live on in history ...

¹⁴ *Dictionary of South African biography III* (Cape Town, 1977), p. 376.

¹⁵ KING, *op. cit.*, p. 66; also pp. 266 and 269. An observant motorist following the same route today, cannot but marvel at the immensity and regularity of these "breakers".

¹⁶ Riding on horseback along the wagon road from Potchefstroom in 1856, Joseph Churchill wrote: "We rode through part of the fine valley of the 'Magaliesberg', thickly scattered over with Farm Houses about half an hour on horse back. It is the finest valley I have ever seen, and runs for more than 150 miles between two ranges of hills." CHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of South African biography III*, p. 377; F.O. BERNHARD (ed.), *Karl Mauch, African explorer* (Cape Town, 1971), p. 100.

¹⁸ RDP, Farm registers: Doornspruit 507 JQ; H.S. PRETORIUS, D.W. KRÜGER and C. BEYERS (eds.), *Voortrekker-argiefstukke, 1829-1849* (Pretoria, 1937), p. 268 n.

¹⁹ P.J. NIENABER, *Suid-Afrikaanse pleknaamwoordeboek I* (Johannesburg, 1963), p. 183. Broederstroom was another site of future mineral importance where, at the turn of the century, gold was discovered in the Daspoort Shale reef. See C.B. COETZEE (ed.), *Mineral resources of the Republic of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1967), p. 90.

²⁰ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55; J. COLLIER, *The purple and the gold* (Cape Town, 1965), p. 22. Information provided by the Pretorius family, Vlakplaats.

²¹ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55. (Emphasis by the editor).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ RDP, Farm registers: Vlakfontein 494 JQ.

²⁴ F.P.T. Struben's *Map of Johannesburg's roads and streams* (1886) is kept in the Africana Library, Johannesburg. It is appropriate that with Johannesburg's 'golden centenary' in 1986, a cairn was erected on a high riverside bank which overlooks the confluence of the Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers. It bears a bronze plaque of the National Monuments Council, which records and commemorates Pieter Jacob Marais' historic discovery.

²⁵ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55; RDP, Farm registers: Zandfontein 42 IR.

²⁶ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 55; *Dictionary of South African biography II*, p. 446.

²⁷ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 59; J.H. BREYTENBACH (ed.), *Notule van die Volksraad van die Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek III (1854-1858)* (Cape Town, 1951), pp. 65-66 and 288-289; *Dictionary of South African biography II*, p. 446.

²⁸ PRELLER, *op. cit.*, p. 59ff.; *Dictionary of South African biography II*, pp. 445-446.