

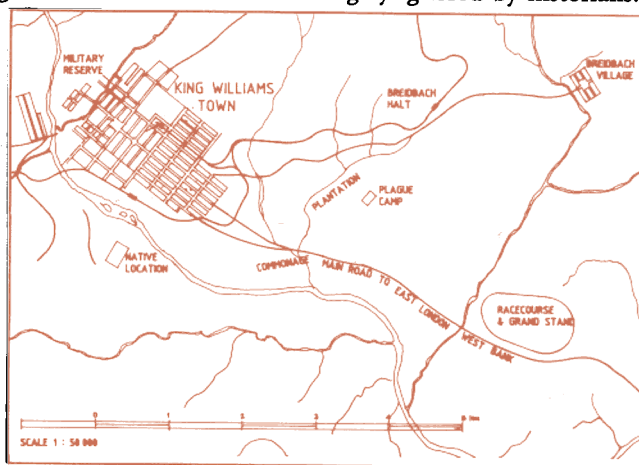
# Segregation and plague: King William's Town and the plague outbreaks of 1900-1907\*

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King William's Town

STUDIES IN CAPE TOWN and Port Elizabeth have revealed that the plague epidemic in South Africa had far reaching implications. The disease and its effects in Eastern Cape towns such as King William's Town have been largely ignored by historians.<sup>1</sup>

There were five distinct phases in the history of the plague in King William's Town. A disease that was presumed to be bubonic plague broke out in November 1900 among blacks living at Izinyoka near King William's Town. This is generally regarded as the first incidence of plague in the Cape Colony and is thus taken to be the first phase of the disease in King William's Town. The second involves the response of King William's Town to the plague outbreak in Cape Town in 1901 (although there were no cases of plague in humans in King William's Town at that time). This was followed by three separate outbreaks amongst humans in 1903, 1905 and 1907, with infection amongst rodents persisting in the intervening periods. The 1903 outbreak received the most coverage in the local press and elicited the greatest public response. There were 64 reported cases in King William's Town and its surrounding locations (excluding Izinyoka) between 1903 and 1907, with 32 deaths. (See Table 1.)



Map of King Williams town and surrounding environs.

MAP: COPIED FROM ORIGINAL BY C.P. VAN RENSBURG

## THE FIRST OUTBREAK — 1900

Plague came to southern Africa during the third pandemic in the late 19th century. The first recorded case was at Delagoa Bay in 1898. This was followed by a suspicious case at Middelburg in the Transvaal in 1899. Four cases then occurred on board a steamship that arrived in Cape Town with a large cargo of forage from South America. These cases were isolated and there was no infection. In November 1900 a suspicious disease broke out among blacks at Izinyoka near Izeli in the King William's Town district. It has never been conclusively shown that this outbreak was plague. Doctors who dealt with the patients were not in agreement about the diagnosis and the local blacks claimed that the symptoms from which the patients suffered were not new. The colonial medical authorities took prompt action when the cases were reported as they had for some time anticipated an appearance of plague in the Cape Colony. The outbreak was confined to one family.<sup>2</sup>

The Izinyoka outbreak is not important in itself. There were only twelve cases with four fatalities. What is important is the light it sheds on attitudes regarding plague, the sensitivity of the King William's Town Council regarding all issues relating to sanitation, as well as the relations between King William's Town and East London. When the Izinyoka cases were reported the Colonial Secretary informed Reuter's news agency that the suspicious disease was bubonic plague and reports to this effect were carried in various newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The King William's Town Council and the local newspaper, the *Cape Mercury*, believed that the diagnosis was premature.<sup>4</sup> An acrimonious debate ensued between the

*Cape Mercury* and the East London newspaper, the *Daily Dispatch*, culminating in a vitriolic editorial attack in the *Cape Mercury* of 22 November 1900 in which the *Daily Dispatch* was accused of attempting to 'damage King Williamstown (sic) by locating the outbreak of what is now accepted as Bubonic, but what was then doubtful, at King Williamstown.'<sup>5</sup> It was felt that the reports were merely rumours spread with the intention of ruining the good name of King William's Town.<sup>6</sup> This reaction can be partially attributed to the Victorian obsession with sanitation and the popular notion that plague was a disease associated with filth and unsanitary conditions.<sup>7</sup>

The provisions for sanitation and health in King William's Town fell far short of the ideal and criticisms emanating from East London were keenly felt.<sup>8</sup> The main reason for this reaction can be traced to the declining importance of King William's Town in relation to East London. It is in terms of the intense rivalry that developed between the two towns that the sensitivity of the mercantile class of King William's Town can best be understood.

<sup>1</sup> See for example C. Saunders, 'The creation of Ndabeni — urban segregation and African resistance in Cape Town', *Studies in the history of Cape Town*, Vol. 1 (Cape Town, 1979), pp. 132-166; E. van Heyningen, 'Cape Town and the plague of 1901', *Studies in the history of Cape Town*, Vol. II (Cape Town, 1981), pp. 66-107; M.W. Swanson, 'The sanitation syndrome: bubonic plague and urban native policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909', *Journal of African History* 18(3), 1977, pp. 387-410; A.J. Christopher, 'Formal segregation and population distribution in Port Elizabeth', *Contree* 24, 1988, p. 6 — a passing reference to plague in Port Elizabeth.

<sup>2</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 18.12.1900.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.11.1900; *Daily Dispatch*, 16.11.1900; *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 21.11.1900.

<sup>4</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 16.11.1900.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-22.11.1900; *Daily Dispatch*, 16-21.11.1900.

<sup>6</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 21.11.1900.

<sup>7</sup> The connection between filth and plague was expressed almost daily, e.g. *Cape Mercury*, 19, 21 and 22.11.1900.

<sup>8</sup> This is a recurrent theme in the *Daily Dispatch*.

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## PLAGUE PRECAUTIONS FOLLOWING THE OUTBREAK IN CAPE TOWN — 1901

Despite their reluctance to accept the diagnosis of the Izinyoka cases, the King William's Town authorities did institute some precautions. These were stepped up following the outbreak of plague in Cape Town. Plague prevention measures were directed at blacks who were thought to be the major threat. Blacks wearing the traditional red blankets were prevented from entering the town, and hut to hut inspections were instituted. As the Council was especially concerned about the danger posed by the large number of blacks who were returning from Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, visits were made to boarding houses to examine new arrivals in town.<sup>9</sup>

There is also evidence of a belief that plague could be transmitted by material objects that had in some way become infected. Fruit from western ports was fumigated and there was some concern about infection being carried in the mail.<sup>10</sup>

Immunization with Haffkine's Prophylactic was considered an important factor in plague prevention and everyone was urged to submit to the procedure. It was considered especially important that blacks be inoculated because of the unsanitary conditions in which they supposedly lived.<sup>11</sup> Despite attempts by the authorities to make it appear that precautions were being applied equally to blacks and whites it is clear that this was not so. Paul Xiniwe, a prominent black businessman in the town, noted the 'invidious distinctions on the basis of colour in the operation of plague precautions.' In a letter to the *Cape Mercury* he informed the paper's readers that local blacks had set up a committee to guard against such distinctions.<sup>12</sup> The effects of racial distinction were highlighted by J.T. Jabavu in a letter to the Mayor in which he expressed the opinion that blacks were opposing inoculation on the grounds that 'Europeans' were not being inoculated.<sup>13</sup>

Despite initial resistance, the inoculation campaign appears to have been successful.<sup>14</sup> Plague inoculation cards were issued that also served as travel permits. Despite popular incredulity, the public authorities did recognise the role of rats in the transmission of the disease.<sup>15</sup> Efforts were made to ensure that there were no rats in goods arriving by rail from East London.<sup>16</sup> A house to house inspection was instituted to ensure that the town was kept in a proper state of cleanliness.<sup>17</sup> The Council took some time to agree on a rat-destruction programme, and its efforts, when eventually started, were beset with problems.<sup>18</sup> The appointed rat-

catcher soon resigned, dissatisfied with the effects of his efforts. Poison laid in Fleet Ditch killed some stray cats and dogs but not a single rat.<sup>19</sup> An advertisement was placed, calling for the public to kill rats and hand them in at the Corporation deposit pits for a fee of 3d per rat.<sup>20</sup> Circulars were sent to businesses urging the destruction of rats.<sup>21</sup> Initially the public was slow to respond but the situation gradually improved and by the end of May over 9 000 rats had been killed.<sup>22</sup>

Regulations framed in terms of the Public Health Act empowered the authorities to isolate any person found to be suffering from plague or any person who was likely to be infected or carry infection.<sup>23</sup> Following the outbreak of plague in Cape Town the Borough Council was apparently authorised by the Commissioner of Public Works to construct a plague hospital and isolation camp at King William's Town.<sup>24</sup> The site was near Gillam's Drift on the Buffalo River, about two and a half miles out of town.<sup>25</sup> The camp was not used until the outbreak of plague in King William's Town in March 1903.

King William's Town whites do not appear to have taken the threat of plague seriously. The complacency was perhaps due to ignorance of the disease, compounded by the misguided and racist attitude that whites were more or less immune.<sup>26</sup> This was reinforced during the 1900 Izeli outbreak by the *Cape Mercury* in its assurances that there was no danger to 'Europeans' and the plague doctor's contention that in two years in India he knew of only one European who had died of bubonic plague.<sup>27</sup>

Some businesses were quick to see an opportunity to profit and advertisements appeared in the newspaper for items ranging from rat traps and poisons to disinfectants.<sup>28</sup> Home remedies and advice abounded with glib remarks appearing in the local press. The flippant reaction to plague is highlighted by a mother who chose to dress her child as a rat in a fancy dress competition.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 15.3.1901; Report of Council Meeting, 15.5.1901.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of Council Meeting, 20.3.1901; Corporation Notice No. 18 of 1901, 25.3.1901.

<sup>11</sup> W.J. Simpson, Lecture on plague (Cape Town, 1900), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 15.6.1901.

<sup>13</sup> Cape Archives Depot (CA), Cape Town, Archives of the Town Clerk, King William's Town, 3KWT 2/1/2/33: Jabavu — Dyer, 20.6.1901.

<sup>14</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 23.10.1901; CA, Colonial Office, CO 7266: fol. 32a, Bacteriological Institute — Accounting Officer, Colonial Secretary's Office, 7.11.1902.

<sup>15</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 15.5.1901.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.5.1901.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of Council Meeting, 20.3.1901.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of Council Meeting, 6.3.1901. CA, 3KWT 1/1/1/15: Minutes, 19.2.1901, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 25.5.1901.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Corporation Notice No. 15, 13.3.1901.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of Council Meeting, 20.3.1901.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of Council Meeting, 29.5.1901.

<sup>23</sup> Applied to King William's Town in terms of Government Notice, No. 313: *Government Gazette*, No. 8323, 29.5.1901.

<sup>24</sup> CA, Public Works Department, PWD 1/2/413: Fol. B536, Under Colonial Secretary — Secretary for Public Works, 3.10.1902.

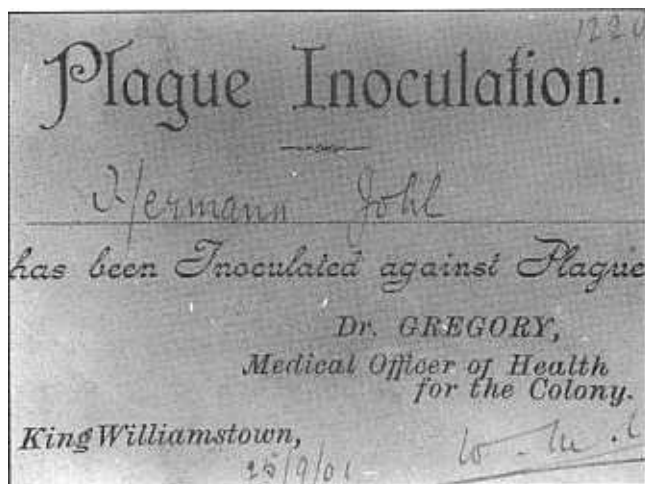
<sup>25</sup> Kaffrarian Museum, King William's Town, 'King William's Town, Plan Shewing Positions of Defences, c. 1901': *Cape Mercury*, 20.3.1901 and 9.6.1903; CA, Medical Officer of Health, MOH 199: Fol. B46a, Thornton — MOH, 18.5.1907.

<sup>26</sup> See for example *Cape Mercury*, 5 and 27.7.1901, 14.12.1901.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 and 22.11.1900.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.10.1901. Advertisements of this nature also appeared throughout the 1903 outbreak.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.8.1901.



A plague inoculation card which also served as a travel permit.

PHOTOGRAPH: KAFFRARIAN MUSEUM

## PLAGUE IN KING WILLIAM'S TOWN, 1903-1905

The first undisputed case of bubonic plague in King William's Town was discovered on 7 March 1903 when the body of a man who had died of plague was found at Tsolo Location. On the same day another man from Tsolo and two white men residing in Louisa Street were found to be suffering from the disease. All four men worked at the railway goods sheds where they apparently contracted the disease.<sup>30</sup> Plague had been rife among rats at the East London wharves since the middle of February. Infected rats had been conveyed to King William's Town in railway trucks and from there moved to the goods sheds.<sup>31</sup>

whites than in 1901 as the number of white cases in Cape Town had shown that there was no racial immunity. Many whites still resisted inoculation despite efforts by the authorities and the *Cape Mercury* to convince them of the benefits. These included preferential treatment given to inoculated persons who were contacts of plague patients. The Magistrate and his staff were inoculated as an example to the townspeople.<sup>36</sup> Although the public appeared to recognize the necessity of inoculation, many were put off by the unpleasant side-effects, often resulting in absence from work and consequent loss of a few days' wages.<sup>37</sup> Besides the inconvenience, many were not happy about the conditions in which the process was performed. Inoculations were initially



King Williams Town Plague Camp. Staff and patients in front of partially completed hut, 1903.

PHOTOGRAPH: KAFFRARIAN MUSEUM

The Council responded immediately, holding an emergency meeting that evening to plan steps to prevent the spread of the disease. The following day the three patients and fifteen contacts were removed to the camp which was surrounded by armed guards. The huts of the two black victims were burned with all their contents and the two houses in Louisa Street were quarantined. The Council engaged a male nurse and an assistant to attend to the patients and requested the colonial authorities to send an experienced plague doctor to King William's Town.<sup>32</sup>

Although the anti-plague measures followed a similar pattern to those introduced during 1900-1901, more drastic action was required now that plague had actually broken out in the town. Steps had to be taken to isolate and eradicate any foci of rat infection that could cause the disease to spread. A Plague Board was set up to co-ordinate all matters relating to plague in the town.<sup>33</sup> Precautions again centered on cleaning the town, as well as steps to control the distribution of rats from East London.<sup>34</sup> As in 1901 inoculation was regarded as an important preventive measure. Blacks and Asians were again prevented from moving between towns unless they had been inoculated.<sup>35</sup>

Far greater emphasis was placed on the inoculation of

carried out in the poultry shed at the showgrounds. Due to the difficulty in keeping the syringes aseptic the inoculations were later performed at the Public Buildings.<sup>38</sup> The popular reaction to plague is difficult to gauge as little evidence is available. Reports and letters in the *Cape Mercury*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.3.1903; CA, 3KWT 1/4/1/4: Sanitary Committee Minutes, 7.3.1903.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 11.3.1903; Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Colony* (Cape Town, 1903), p. xxix.

<sup>32</sup> CA, 3KWT 1/4/1/4: Sanitary Committee Minutes, 7.3.1903; 3KWT 1/1/1/15: Minutes, 9.3.1903, p. 319; *Cape Mercury*, 9.3.1903.

<sup>33</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Editorial, 12.3.1903; CA, MOH 17: fol. 70, MOH — Magistrate, 23.3.1903; MOH 17: fol. 70, Dick — Under Colonial Secretary, 4.4.1903; *Cape Mercury*, 9.4.1903.

<sup>34</sup> CA, CO 7268: fol. 32x, Memorandum from Colonial Secretary to House of Assembly, undated; CO 7268: fol. 32x, Under Colonial Secretary to East London Chamber of Commerce, 29.7.1903.

<sup>35</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 28.3.1903.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.1903.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Editorial, 19.3.1903; Van Heyningen, 'Cape Town and the plague of 1901', p. 101; *Cape Mercury*, Letters from 'A Contact', 11 and 13.6.1903.

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 27.3.1903; CA, MOH 18: fol. 73, Parry-Edwards — Gregory, 8.7.1903.

represent the views of only a small sector of the population of King William's Town. There is some evidence of panic arising from the lack of accurate information and the belief that the public was being kept in the dark regarding statistics and the workings of the Plague Board.<sup>39</sup> According to one correspondent, reports of a patient being taken to the camp were almost invariably followed by the report of that patient's death.<sup>40</sup> The doctor in charge of the camp reported that the town was in a state of panic over the bad treatment of patients and contacts.<sup>41</sup>

Conditions at the plague camp left much to be desired. There was insufficient accommodation for contacts who were housed in tents. There were not enough groundsheets and mattresses were placed on the muddy ground. The provision of food and bedding was inadequate. Furthermore, the contact camp was considered to be too close to the camp where patients were hospitalised.<sup>42</sup> The squalor and misery of the plague camp can only have been exacerbated by the isolation from family and friends.



Nurse in front of Plague Camp huts, 1903. The squalor and ramshackle nature of the wattle-and-daub buildings is clearly visible.

PHOTOGRAPH: KAFFRARIAN MUSEUM

It is difficult to determine the reaction of blacks to the plague and plague measures. While the views of educated blacks can be glimpsed through correspondence in the *Cape Mercury* and *Imvo*, most blacks were illiterate and their opinions remain undocumented. *Imvo* pointed out that as plague was not endemic to South Africa and affected all race groups, blacks for the most part were bewildered by the curtailment of their liberties and not those of other races.

The restrictions placed on traveling were seen as an unnecessary hindrance. An *Imvo* correspondent had been prevented from boarding a train at the King William's Town station, even though he had a first-class ticket, when whites had been allowed to proceed.<sup>43</sup> It later transpired that the man was J.T. Jabavu, founder of *Imvo* and an influential businessman and politician. Jabavu sent a telegram to a member of the Legislative Assembly in an attempt to secure freedom to unrestricted travel such as whites in the area enjoyed.<sup>44</sup> This telegram was passed on to the Colonial Secretary and the matter was subsequently raised in Parliament. It transpired that the regulations were intended for 'blanket Xhosa' and that exemption could be applied for by 'respectable Natives'.<sup>45</sup> Despite the decision of the colonial authorities to distinguish between illiterate 'blanket' blacks and 'decent, well-dressed Natives' when applying plague regulations, no special instructions had been issued and in practice the matter was left to the discretion of the local officials.<sup>46</sup> Jabavu did not object to the refusal of exemption but that it had to be applied for at all. He

expressed his regret that 'regulations for public safety could not be carried out without causing grievance among Natives' and added that 'if the laws are to be administered in this land of mixed populations it will be as well to apply them with due regard to common sense.'<sup>47</sup>

A letter from R. Montsayi reveals that restrictions on travel were still being applied to blacks in December 1903, long after plague had subsided in the area. There is no evidence of any reaction from the authorities to this letter and it is unclear when the restrictions were finally lifted.<sup>48</sup>

The traditional blacks living in the locations suffered most from the anti-plague regulations. Besides having their freedom of movement severely curtailed, their rights regarding property were disregarded. Although the *Cape Mercury* reported that there had been no opposition to the burning of the hut and body of the first victim, subsequent correspondence on behalf of the residents of Tsolo location indicates that they were far from satisfied with the actions taken.<sup>49</sup> Although the occupants of burned huts claimed compensation for destroyed personal possessions, there is no record of this being paid.<sup>50</sup> It seems likely that most never received compensation. The King William's Town Municipality and prominent business undertakings were unable to obtain full payment of claims for property destroyed by Plague Officials. It is therefore highly unlikely that illiterate blacks, without legal resources or prominent politicians to act on their behalf, would have been successful.<sup>51</sup> The practice of allowing some white contacts to remain under supervision in their homes, when all contacts of black victims were summarily removed to the plague camp, must have exacerbated the blacks' feelings that they were being unfairly treated.<sup>52</sup> Blacks showing symptoms of plague and those who had been in contact with victims often disappeared to avoid being sent to the plague camp and some walked long distances to avoid the inspections that were carried out at railway stations.<sup>53</sup>

## INCOMPETENCE OF THE TOWN COUNCIL

The public and official reactions to plague in King William's Town not only highlighted the association of the disease with overcrowding and filthy conditions, but revealed the local authorities' inability to cope with the problems confronting the town. Even by contemporary standards the provisions for public health were inadequate. There was no satisfactory

<sup>39</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 11.3.1903 and 10.6.1903.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.4.1903.

<sup>41</sup> CA, MOH 17: fol. 73, Parry-Edwards — MOH, 8.7.1903.

<sup>42</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 'Unfortunate Contacts', 12.5.1903.

<sup>43</sup> *Imvo*, 1.4.1903.

<sup>44</sup> CA, MOH 426: fol. U194, Under Colonial Secretary — MOH, 3.4.1903.

<sup>45</sup> CA, MOH 426: fol. U196, MOH — Magistrate, KWT, 15.7.1903; MOH 426: fol. U196, Magistrate, KWT — MOH, 16.7.1903.

<sup>46</sup> CA, MOH 426, fol. U194, Mitchell — Under Colonial Secretary, undated.

<sup>47</sup> *Imvo*, 1.4.1903.

<sup>48</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Letter from R. Montsayi, 19.12.1903.

<sup>49</sup> CA, 3KWT 2/1/2/60: Tintila and Dyosi — Town Clerk, 25.3.1903.

<sup>50</sup> CA, 3KWT 3/1/1/29: Town Clerk — Secretary of Plague Board, 6.4.1903.

<sup>51</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 27.5.1903 and 18.7.1903; CA, CO 7267: fol. 32s, and Correspondence between Under Colonial Secretary and merchants.

<sup>52</sup> See for example *Cape Mercury*, 11.4.1903, 26.5.1903, 3 and 10.6.1903.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.3.1903, 5.4.1905 and 5.5.1905.

provision for the removal of urine and slops that were often scattered near houses. The high number of deaths from diarrhoea, enteric fever and related diseases in 1900 can be partly attributed to the town's water which was often unfit for drinking.<sup>54</sup>

Some improvements in the general sanitation of the town did result from the systematic cleansing that followed the outbreak of plague in Cape Town.<sup>55</sup> Each successive plague outbreak heralded frantic but sporadic attempts at cleaning up the town, and alternated with the delusion that the town was in an impeccable condition. Some areas remained notoriously filthy despite the institution of plague prevention measures.

Although domestic refuse was removed weekly, there were no laws to enable the Council to compel traders to remove rubbish and stable refuse. The sanitary inspection staff was too small to cope with a town the size of King William's Town. Trade and stable refuse was sometimes allowed to accumulate for weeks and even months. The town dump was too close to the edge of town and gutters were not regularly cleaned.<sup>56</sup> Despite these obvious deficiencies, repeated reports of odour from drains and the continued abundance of rats in town, the Council seemed satisfied with the sanitary condition of the town.<sup>57</sup> Seen in context, however, the conditions in King William's Town appear to have been similar to those in other towns in the colony.<sup>58</sup>

The Council, which was responsible for public health and sanitation, was especially negligent regarding its own properties. Inspections carried out by government officials during the plague epidemic revealed that some council-owned properties were in an appalling state that was likely to promote contagion. Despite repeated appeals to the public to destroy rodents, the Council did little to put its own house in order. Buildings known as the Old Mule Train establishment, owned by the Council and used as police barracks, were in a condition which made them a suitable breeding ground for rats as early as 1901.<sup>59</sup> This area proved to be a major focus of plague rats in 1907.<sup>60</sup>

In August 1902 merchants in the Market Square complained that large numbers of rats from the Council's Market Building were causing damage to their goods.<sup>61</sup> In April 1903 the *Cape Mercury* reported that the building had been rat-infested for many months. The Council was reluctant to incur further expenditure in this regard as it had not been reimbursed by the government for the cost of the destruction of over 22 000 rats and mice between April and July 1901.<sup>62</sup> The mayor attempted to justify the Council's inaction with the rather lame excuse that 'it was not stated that they were bubonic rats'.<sup>63</sup> The Market Buildings were subsequently condemned by the Plague Officer and demolished as they proved to be the centre of a severe epizootic during the 1903 outbreak.

A controversy surrounding the resignation of the Sanitary Inspector during the 1907 outbreak again revealed the inability of the Council to come to grips with the problems of keeping the town clean. Following the revelation that plague had broken out in filthy, overcrowded and rat-infested premises, the Medical Officer of Health for the Colony sent a strongly worded letter to the municipality condemning its inaction.<sup>64</sup> The Sanitary Committee of the Town Council refused to accept responsibility for this dereliction of duty and instead insisted on the resignation of the Sanitary Inspector.<sup>65</sup> It seems, however, that the inspector had repeatedly reported unsanitary conditions and the Council had failed to act against slum landlords.<sup>66</sup> In effect the Sanitary Inspector was used as a scape-goat to deflect attention from the Council's culpability.<sup>67</sup>

## ATTEMPTS TO SEGREGATE THE TOWN

In terms of the numbers of cases and deaths the bubonic plague epidemic in South Africa, and particularly the outbreak in King William's Town, is not very significant. It is the role played by this disease in the initial stages of urban segregation that gives the plague epidemic its importance.

The problems relating to public health and overcrowding in slums that were related to class differences in industrial societies were perceived largely in terms of colour in the colonies.<sup>68</sup> It has been shown that during the plague in Cape Town revelations of the conditions in which urban blacks lived sharpened the racial prejudice of respectable whites.<sup>69</sup> The view that blacks were uncivilized, barbaric aliens with no real claim to be living in the towns was reinforced by these prejudices. Many of King William's Town's sanitary problems were attributed to the presence of blacks and Indians in the town. The Council's reaction to the plague outbreak fits into the wider pattern of urban segregation in South Africa at the turn of the century. In many cases the motivation for the establishment of locations outside urban areas was the argument that the presence of blacks posed a threat to the health of white urban populations. In Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth the advent of plague added urgency to earlier attempts to move blacks out of the cities and resulted in the founding of the Ndabeni, Klipspruit and New Brighton townships respectively.<sup>70</sup>

The generalization that locations attached to Eastern Cape towns were traditional rather than legally established settlements holds for the older locations in the King William's Town district, which were more like villages on the edges of town than the segregated locations that later developed. In 1900 there were three such locations, Brownlee Station, Tsolo and Bidlhi. The oldest, Brownlee, was squalid and densely populated. The population of these locations was predominantly black, mostly Xhosa and Mfengu, but also encompassed people of Khoi descent as well as 'coloureds' and some Indians.<sup>71</sup> Large numbers of 'non-whites' also resided in town. The response of the King William's Town Council to these people paralleled that of its counterparts in the larger urban centres. Some blacks who lived in town

<sup>54</sup> Cape of Good Hope, *Reports on the Public Health for the year 1900*, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 2.10.1901.

<sup>56</sup> CA, MOH 5: fol. 11, Lawless — Gregory, Report, c. 18.6.1904.

<sup>57</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 5 and 11.1.1905, 8.2.1905 and 1.5.1905.

<sup>58</sup> Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Colony, 1903*, pp. v-viii.

<sup>59</sup> CA, 3KWT 1/1/15: Minutes, p. 66, 2.4.1901.

<sup>60</sup> CA, MOH 199: fol. B46a, Thornton — Gregory, 25.6.1907.

<sup>61</sup> CA, 3KWT 1/1/15: Minutes, p. 255, 19.8.1902; *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 21.8.1902.

<sup>62</sup> CA, 3KWT 1/1/15: Minutes, p. 255, 19.8.1902; *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 21.8.1902.

<sup>63</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Editorial, 15.4.1903.

<sup>64</sup> CA, MOH 199: fol. B46a, MOH — Town Clerk, 18.5.1907.

<sup>65</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 4, 10 and 18.7.1907; CA, 3 KWT 1/4/1/6: Minutes of Sanitary Committee, 27.5.1907.

<sup>66</sup> *Minute of His Worship the Mayor, 1907*, Sanitary Inspector's Report, pp. 44-45.

<sup>67</sup> *Cape Mercury*, 31.5.1907 and 5.7.1907.

<sup>68</sup> Swanson, 'The sanitation syndrome', pp. 387-410.

<sup>69</sup> Van Heyningen, 'Cape Town and the plague of 1901', p. 94.

<sup>70</sup> Saunders, 'The Creation of Ndabeni', pp. 140-143; Swanson, 'The sanitation syndrome', pp. 388-400.

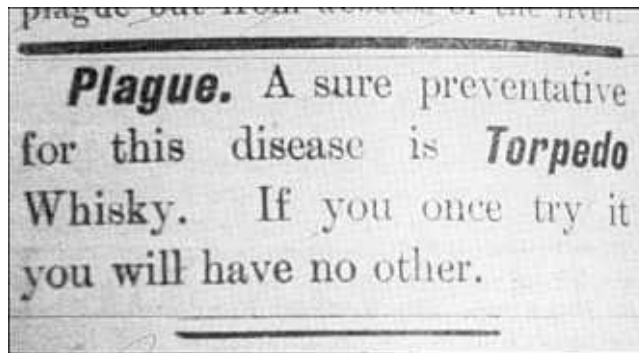
<sup>71</sup> *Report on the Public Health for the year 1900*, p. 69; *Minute of His Worship the Mayor, 1905-1907*, p. 26.

were educated enfranchised property owners and proprietors of their own businesses (such as Xiniwe and Jabavu). Most were impoverished tenants living in squalid conditions in overcrowded boarding houses and backyard shanties in the older parts of town.

As early as 1898 a petition was signed by the white citizens of King William's Town requesting the exclusion of blacks from town.<sup>72</sup> Overcrowding of blacks became a perennial topic in the *Cape Mercury* editorials, the proceedings of the Magistrates Courts and the Reports of the Sanitary Inspector and Health Committee. In his report for 1900 the District Surgeon advocated that blacks be forced to live in locations.<sup>73</sup> The Acting Resident Magistrate echoed the opinions of many the town's white inhabitants in his assertion that it was blacks 'with their filthy habits, who brought disease into the town.'<sup>74</sup>

Attempts were made to limit the number of blacks residing in town. Although there were by-laws prohibiting blacks from being in town at night, it seems that these were not enforced. In 1900 it was hoped that by-laws to prevent the building of shanties would alleviate the problem but little seems to have come of this.<sup>75</sup>

The authorities seized with alacrity the opportunity granted them by the outbreak of plague. Although it was clearly not the only factor involved, bubonic plague gave impetus to efforts to segregate the town. Attempts to separate the different races on the platform at the railway station and at the morning market were regarded as necessary precautionary measures against plague.<sup>76</sup> The Council, however, aimed at no less than the exclusion of blacks from town.



*Opportunistic advertising in the Natal Mercury of 18 April 1903.*

per hut) a maximum of 300 could be accommodated. As census figures were probably somewhat below the real figure the Council's efforts (in terms of its own aims) were hopelessly inadequate. Various attempts to obtain powers to remove blacks proved ineffective and the Council had to rely on powers provided by standard regulations proclaimed in terms of the Public Health Act.<sup>80</sup> Frequent surprise night inspections carried out to discover overcrowding, the prosecution of offenders and the erection of more huts at Ginsberg location to draw blacks from town did little to remedy the problem.

Although the Municipal Act of 1906 gave the Council legal sanction to deal with slum landlords and 'require all Natives, with certain stringent exceptions, to live in the locations,' the Council was still unsuccessful in its attempts to segregate the town.<sup>81</sup> In 1908 Dr A. John Gregory, Medical Officer of Health for the Colony, estimated that 1 630 blacks still lived in town and pointed out to the Town Clerk that in his opinion it was not possible to 'attain a high standard of sanitation in a town where large numbers of Natives are allowed to dwell side by side with Europeans'.<sup>82</sup>

The true significance of bubonic plague in King William's Town can be gauged in the context of the overall pattern of the development of urban segregation in South Africa. Although efforts to segregate the town were not immediately successful they ultimately achieved their aim. Ginsberg location was established as a direct response to the threat of bubonic plague in 1901 and continued efforts to segregate the town can be directly related to the fear that blacks posed a threat to the health of the town. Above all, the responses to plague revealed that attitudes to public health and black urbanization in a small country town such as King William's Town differed little from those prevalent in cities such as Port Elizabeth and Cape Town in the same period.



*Ginsberg Location, established in direct response to the plague scare in 1901.*  
PHOTOGRAPH: KAFFRARIAN MUSEUM

Lacking powers to prevent blacks sleeping in town the Council chose to adopt a policy of persuasion rather than coercion. Plans were drawn up to construct a new location where it would be '... so comfortable for the Natives ... and so cheap that I am quite sure in a very short time every Native will be glad to go to the location.' In addition, ownership of the huts in the new location afforded the Council a greater measure of control than it enjoyed in the other locations. The location was named after Councillor Ginsberg in recognition of the leading role taken by him in its establishment.<sup>77</sup>

The response of blacks was not enthusiastic. By the middle of December 1901 only eighteen of the huts had been let, with many applications from residents of the other locations being turned down. Instead of inducing blacks to leave town, the new location attracted rural blacks who wished to move closer to town.<sup>78</sup> Although all the huts were eventually let, and more were later built, the number of blacks in town did not diminish. According to the 1901 census there were 700 blacks living in town.<sup>79</sup> Assuming that the Council's huts in the new location were fully occupied (i.e. six persons

<sup>72</sup> *Minute of His Worship the Mayor, 1898*, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Report on the Public Health for the year 1900*, p. 69.

<sup>74</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Court Proceedings, 16.3.1903.

<sup>75</sup> *Minute of His Worship the Mayor, 1898*, p. 23; *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 5.12.1900.

<sup>76</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Meeting between Sanitary Committee and Medical Practitioners, 17.5.1901; CA, 3KWT 1/1/1/15: Minutes, p. 126.

<sup>77</sup> *Cape Mercury*, quoting F. Ginsberg, 17.5.1901; CA, 3KWT 1/1/1/15: Minutes, p. 68, 16.4.1901.

<sup>78</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Reports of Council Meetings, 30.10.1901 and 27.11.1901; *Cape Mercury*, 11.12.1901; *Cape Mercury*, Reports of Council Meetings, 13.11.1901 and 21.8.1902.

<sup>79</sup> *Cape Mercury*, Report of Council Meeting, 3.4.1902; *Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Colony, 1903*, p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> *Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Colony, 1904-1905*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>81</sup> CA, MOH 199: fol. B46a, Gregory — Colonial Secretary, 18.11.1907.

<sup>82</sup> CA, MOH 204: fol. L46c, MOH — Town Clerk, 21.11.1908.