

## **BICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION AT SEVEN FOUNTAINS**

**27 September 2020**

by Sue Gordon

If you have never driven to Seven Fountains from Port Alfred before, you could easily, as we did, take a wrong turn in following a sign to a farm of a similar name<sup>1</sup> - and then, after doubling back, overshoot the sudden turn-off from the N2. The hamlet of Seven Fountains lies just south west of Makhanda: running 10 minutes late, we rushed down an avenue of gum trees, past an old trading store, a scattering of old buildings and - in a cloud of dust -arrived at the Methodist Church.

On 27 September 2020, along with representatives of local farming families and well-wishers, we were drawn to this Church to celebrate perhaps the only public settler Bicentennial Commemoration that took place in 2020, the year of Covid pandemic and lockdown. The event had been planned and organised by Graham Dickason, a direct descendant of widower Robert Dickason of the 1820 Latham Party. Graham had

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<sup>1</sup> Seven Fountains Farm was built in 1717 by a Dutch settler, Jan Frederick Potgieter, and claims to be the oldest farm in the Eastern Cape. 300 years later it is a guesthouse and event venue. <https://www.afristay.com/p/30575>



Fountains (photo: Graham Dickason)

discovered the land of his forebears in 1971, whereupon he single-mindedly set about acquiring the very same property for himself. That decision led Graham, although based in Johannesburg and later Cape Town, to decades of involvement in the local community and the acquisition of Necton, an old Seven Fountains home that he renovated and named after his antecedant's home town Necton, Norfolk.

Left: The first Methodist Church at Seven

### The History

*'Seven Fountains' was originally a resting place for ox-wagons in the 18th century and came to be known as Zuurplaats by early Dutch settlers to the area. In 1820, abandoned loan-farms were re-allocated to newly arrived British Settlers.'*

[https://www.grahamstown.co.za/page/seven\\_fountains](https://www.grahamstown.co.za/page/seven_fountains)

Three settlers groups, a mix of English and Irish immigrants, relocated to this part of Albany in 1820, arriving in Algoa Bay on the *Sir George Osborne* on 30 September after they had been removed from an unhappy start in Clanwilliam. The Latham Party was allocated Zuurplaats (renamed Seven Fountains); Capt Thomas Butler's Party settled nearby at Melville Park, and Francis' Party settled at Birchwood Park.

'Acting Governor Sir Rufane Donkin had specifically ordered that each settler party had to have access to water: Butler's party of 27 Irish settlers on Melville Park/Yarrow, SE of Assegai Bush<sup>2</sup> had access to Nuwejaarsrivier; Scanlan had the Kap River, Francis had the Komga and Latham could access the springs. Zuurplaats was renamed Seven Fountains as there were seven men in Latham's Party. Some say there were seven fountains, but others deny this' (Dr Brian Rippon). (Graham Dickason, quoted in the South African Military History Society Eastern Cape [SAMHEC] Newsletter 181 October 2019.)

The focal point for the immigrant community became their Methodist Church, erected just before the War of 1834. 'Before that, Rev Shaw would ride on horseback from Salem to conduct services and elementary schooling classes... during the War, villagers sought shelter in the surrounding churchyard, but Seven Fountains was not attacked nor was it in subsequent confrontations.' (Dickason, G).

Rev H H Dugmore in his *Albany Settlers Reminiscences* described this area as having been "the rear-guard of the settlement" during the 6<sup>th</sup> Frontier War (1846-1847) and the

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<sup>2</sup> Assegai Bush was the assembly place of 1820 Settlers before they were allocated their allotments. On the Assegai River Farm, there is a stone Settler Monolith with bronze plaque marking the spot from where the wagons dispersed. It was presented by Ivan Mitford Barberton and unveiled by him on Settlers Day 4 September 1961 (Grocott's Mail).

8<sup>th</sup> Frontier War (1850-1853). The two villages of Salem and Seven Fountains are integrally inked in their history, and also strategically because of the Bushman's and Assegai Rivers. (Rautenbach's Drift was a key crossing on the Bushman's River.)

On 23 July 1844 Salem and Seven Fountains celebrated the founding of their village[s] with a sports day which was pronounced a great success.' (Fleur Way-Jones, SAMHEC Newsletter 181 October 2019)

A second church replaced the first one as the community grew. This larger building had to be demolished in the 1920s and the present church building was erected in 1929.

Right: the second Methodist Church, Seven Fountains, photo taken in the 1920s. (Photo: Graham Dickason)



### **The Commemoration**

Graham's choice of date for the commemorative service was just three days shy of exactly 200 years after the settlers arrived in Albany. We were there to represent both LAHS and my husband's Irish lineage, namely the descendants in South Africa of Capt Thomas Butler of the Dublin Militia, who came from Baltinglass, Wicklow.

Reverend R Burton led the proceedings, which followed strict Covid19 protocols in terms of duration and social distancing. In his short sermon he drew parallels between the anxiety and isolation of the settlers, and the not-dissimilar challenges we were all facing 200 years later. Graham presented a beautiful commemorative plaque for the church interior and he and Jimmy Emslie<sup>3</sup> jointly unveiled it.

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<sup>3</sup> Jimmy, Di and Haydn Emslie, active members of the current Church, are the last of their clan to farm at Seven Fountains. William Norman from Devonshire, a member of the Latham party, and his wife were founder residents of Seven Fountains. Their daughter Maria later married William Kenward Emslie, later the scion of the widespread Emslies.

The unexpected sense of shared history among the three descendant parties generated a spontaneous camaraderie. This continued afterwards, with photos outside the Church and celebratory snacks and drinks at Graham's home, Necton.



Left: Plaque inside church, designed and donated by Graham Dickason to commemorate the bicentennial of the settlement at Seven Fountains. (photo: Sue Gordon)

We later enjoyed visiting Graham's beautiful restoration of the Dickason graveyard nearby.

Right: Entrance to Necton, Seven Fountains (Photo: Sue Gordon)





Left: Congregants and descendants outside the Church  
(Photo: Sue Gordon)

Right: the renovated graveyard today. Robert Dickason's grave is slightly left of centre; in the background the writer reads the explanatory plaque  
(Photo: Neville Gordon)





Left: the Robert Dickason grave, as Graham found it in 1971 when he first explored his family's Seven Fountains legacy. (Photo: Graham Dickason)

Given both the long association of the Emslie family in the area and Graham's emotional investment in Seven Fountains – as well as his determination to honour its bicentennial - the occasion was remarkably affecting. We were glad to have been part of it.

#### **REFERENCES:**

Dickason, G. *Brochure for the Service of Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the Settlers of Seven Fountains, 2020.*

South African Military History East Cape (SAMEC) *Newsletter 181 October 2019*