

THE WAR OF THE AXE, the Seventh Frontier War

by Daphne McNeill

There were altogether nine Frontier Wars fought throughout a large part of the Eastern region of the Cape. The one referred to as the 'War of the Axe' is best known in Fort Beaufort and has become woven into the history of the town. In Durban Street stands an old block of flats, which during the 19th century was a store owned by Mr Charles Holliday, the town's mayor. This position carried a grand title in those days: 'Chairman of the Board of Civil Commissioners.'



There, in March 1846, a young black man named Kleintjie (of the kraal of Chief Tola), walked into the store in a semi-drunken state and attempted to steal an axe. He was instantly caught and arrested. The local authorities arranged to send him to Grahamstown to be tried. At 6:00 on 16 March, the party comprising Kleintjie and three other prisoners, handcuffed together in pairs and accompanied by four Khoi police guards, set off for Grahamstown.

Two hours later, Chief Tola arrived in Fort Beaufort and demanded Kleintjie's release. This request was refused by the Frontier Commissioner, Major Smith, who presumably told the chief that the prisoners had already left. By 11:00, the party of police and their charges had reached Dan's Hoogte where they rested at the side of the Kat River on the Mildenhalls' farm.

Left: Daphne McNeill at the grave of the 1846 victim, after relating the story of the event that precipitated 'The War of the Axe.' (Photo: Sue Gordon)

They were suddenly attacked by a group of 40 Xhosa warriors who rushed out of the surrounding dense bush. A terrific struggle ensued, in which the unfortunate man chained to Kleintjie was stabbed to death and his hand cut off in the attackers' hurry to release their man. His grave with a head stone which reads "Hottentot victim of the Axe War 1846" can still be seen at the spot where he died. During the struggle the police guards shot and killed one of the aggressors, afterwards identified as Kleintjie's brother, but the rest of the group escaped, taking with them Kleintjie and two captured firearms.

When word of this incident reached Fort Beaufort, patrols were instantly sent out in search of the murderers. Their spoor was followed to a kraal where the suspects returned the firearms, but refused to hand over either Kleintjie or the murderer of the Khoi victim, saying that the death of their comrade had fully atoned for the prisoner's death.

'The flames of hostilities were fanned with the predictable outcome being war.' Colonel John Hare, Andries Stockenström's successor as Lt-Governor of the Eastern Districts, had demanded the return of the prisoners. When Sandile refused to comply with the demand, Sir Peregrine Maitland and Hare decided that he and his people had shown sufficient evidence of aggressive intentions and that offensive operations should immediately be launched against them.

'There is no simple explanation as to why Maitland made war with the Xhosa in 1846. Many Eastern Cape settlers coveted the fertile lands which the western Xhosa occupied east of the Fish River, particularly those between the Fish and the Keiskamma Rivers, the so-called 'Ceded Territory'. In the ten years since the war of 1834-35, the Sixth Frontier War, accelerated commercialization of Eastern Cape agriculture, especially the growth of merino-sheep farming, had put pressures on the land on the frontier.' [Ross, Borders]

'The War of the Axe is an episode in a prolonged history of struggle between white settlers and black inhabitants on the Cape eastern frontier. There were no spectacular battles but rather skirmishes, cattle raids and an abortive attempt by British and colonial forces to engage the enemy or secure the persons of the Xhosa rulers.' [Cordeur and Saunders]

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