

# AN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF FORT DASPOORTRAND, PRETORIA\*

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution deals with the historical archaeological investigation of Fort Daspoortrand, one of the thirty military fortifications erected within the municipal boundaries of Pretoria between 1880 and 1902. It was built for the South African Republic (ZAR) as one of four forts designed to protect the capital against possible attack, following the Jameson raid of 1895/96. The western ammunition tunnel, storeroom and entrance were specifically investigated to help with drawing up a plan of the fort. For this purpose use was also made of archival photographs and measurements made on the site. Artefactual remains contemporary with the fort, such as metal buttons, building material, porcelain and glass fragments were found. However, there is scope for further archaeological investigation.

## INTRODUCTION

Thirty military fortifications are known to have been built within the municipal boundaries of Pretoria between 1880 and 1902. These include forts, redoubts, block houses, strongholds and ramparts and were identified through archival sources. Apart from three that have been preserved by the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the City Council of Pretoria, it was not known precisely how many had survived and what their present condition was. The study reported here forms part of a larger project (Van Vollenhoven 1992) which has, *inter alia*, established that only fifteen of the thirty fortifications have in fact survived. Most are in a bad state of repair.

One of these fortifications, Fort Daspoortrand, was partially investigated further in order to draw up a plan thereof as a first step for a future interpretation and reconstruction of the fort. Artefacts that were found can also be used for this purpose. This contribution deals only with the historical archaeological investigation of Fort Daspoortrand.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On 29 December 1895, Dr L.S. Jameson invaded the South African Republic (ZAR) in an attempt to overthrow the government of President S.J.P. Kruger. Although unsuccessful, it led to increased unrest amongst the so called "Uitlanders" on the Rand. This, as well as a number of other events, led the government of the ZAR to the realisation that the capital, Pretoria, had to be secured against any further possible attack by forces

inspired by Britain (Van Vollenhoven 1992:96-97). Consequently it was decided to fortify Pretoria in order to prevent the British from annexing it as they had done in 1877 (Van Vollenhoven 1992:39). A Former French artillery officer, L. Grunberg, was appointed to draw up a plan to fortify the town, which was approved by the government on 24 March 1896. Eight strategic positions around the town were to be fortified by means of rotating towers with guns thereon. In the end, however, the government decided not to construct towers, but rather to build forts as proposed by two German engineers O.A.A. Von Dewitz and H.C. Werner (Ploeger 1968:1-21). The reason for this decision was that the commander-general of the ZAR, P.J. Joubert, wanted a substantial garrison in each fort, which would be impossible in the towers (Van Vollenhoven 1992:98).

The original plan was further modified when, through lack of money, only four of the projected eight forts were actually built between 1896 and 1898 (Barnard 1968:51; Holzhausen 1956:22-23, 59) (Fig. 1). The other four were not even started. Of these, Forts Schanskop, Klapperkop and Wonderboompoort were built by the German engineers, Von Dewitz and Werner. Fort Klapperkop is situated on the eastern side of the Elandspoortrand, south of Pretoria, whilst Fort Schanskop is located on the western side of Elandspoortrand. These two forts would be able to defend the southern approaches from Johannesburg. Fort Wonderboompoort is located on the Magaliesberg, east of Wonderboompoort, *i.e.* north of the town, in order to prevent an attack from the north. These three forts built by the German engineers, show a similar plan form (Ploeger 1968:25) (Fig. 2).

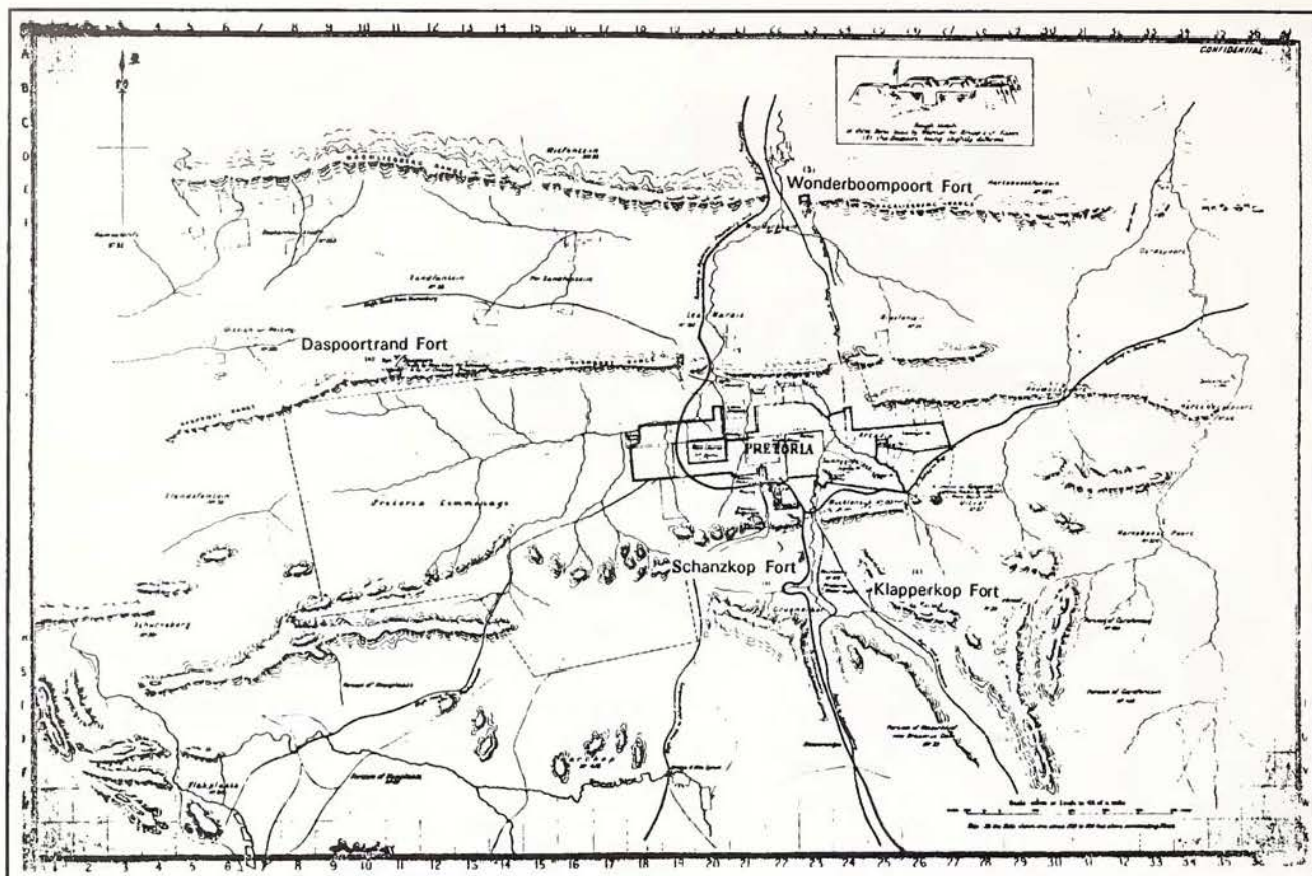


Fig. 1. Map of Pretoria (1899), showing the position of the four forts (Cape Archives, M 2/423).

Fort Daspoortrand was built west of Pretoria, on the Daspoortrand, with a good view over the surrounding territory (Fig. 1). It differs from the other three, having been built by Grunberg, thus in French style (Transvaal Archives KG 255 Cr 3928/99:17) (Fig. 2). Grunberg had complained to the commander-general of the ZAR, P.J. Joubert, about not getting the contract to build the forts and was in consequence awarded responsibility for this fort. (Ploeger 1968:35) (Fig. 3).

Unfortunately little is known about the arrangement and manning of the forts. This is probably due to the fact that commander-general L. Botha ordered all secret documents to be destroyed during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) (Transvaal Archives PWD 72 1092/03). However it is known that the forts at that time probably had the most advanced equipment of their kind in the world and that they contained electricity, telegraphic equipment and even telephones (Selby 1969:200).

The well known Creusot 155 mm guns (Long Toms) were imported from France to serve in the forts (Breytenbach 1969:86-87). Because of the course of the war, however, the forts were never fully manned and armed and the ZAR government decided instead to use these guns in the field against the British (Ploeger 1968:76). It was also decided not to defend Pretoria as the Boers changed their tactics to those of guerilla warfare, and to hand over the forts to the British military authority (Transvaal Archives W42/1). As a result of this decision on 1 June 1900, the British troops marched into

Pretoria on 5 June 1900. The forts were completely disarmed and left unoccupied until the British troops occupied them between 5 and 7 June 1900 (Wood 1960; Van Vollenhoven 1992:116).

During the war (1900-1902) the British manned the four forts (Ploeger 1968:85). Royal engineers erected a number of other fortifications around the perimeter of the town in order to prevent the Boers from re-capturing Pretoria (Holzhausen 1956:22-23, 59; Barnard 1968:51). Soon after the war (approximately 1904) the forts were dismantled and left to deteriorate. Subsequently Fort Klapperkop (1966) and Fort Schanskop (1978) were restored and maintained as military museums (Ploeger 1968:94; Military Museum Fort Klapperkop 1978:13) while Fort Wonderboompoort was handed over to the City Council of Pretoria by the government of the Union of South Africa to keep the ruin intact (Behrens n.d.:43-44). Fort Daspoortrand (or West Fort as the British renamed it), was left to deteriorate. This lack of attention given to Fort Daspoortrand, coupled with its uniqueness as the only French fort amongst the four Boer forts built for Pretoria's defence, made the present project particularly worthwhile (Van Vollenhoven:1992)

#### SITE DESCRIPTION

The fort is situated on top of the Daspoortrand, west of Pretoria (Fig. 1), on the farm Broekscheur 318 JR (2528 CA Pretoria) (25.43.54S; 28.04.24E).

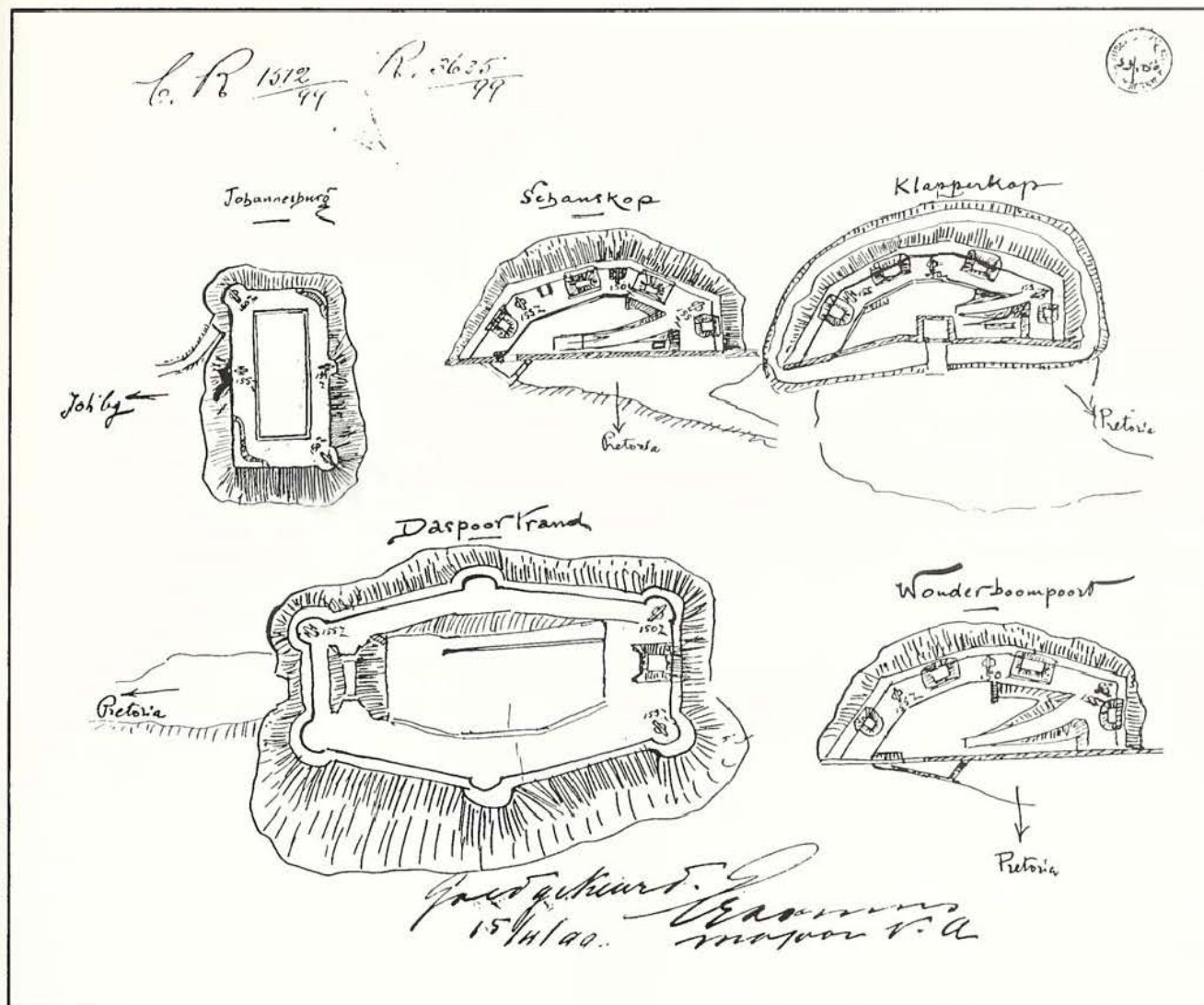


Fig. 2. Plan showing the difference in plan form between Fort Daspoortrand, the other three Pretoria forts and the Johannesburg fort (Transvaal Archives, S31750).



Fig. 3. Fort Daspoortrand under construction (T.E. Andrews Collection).

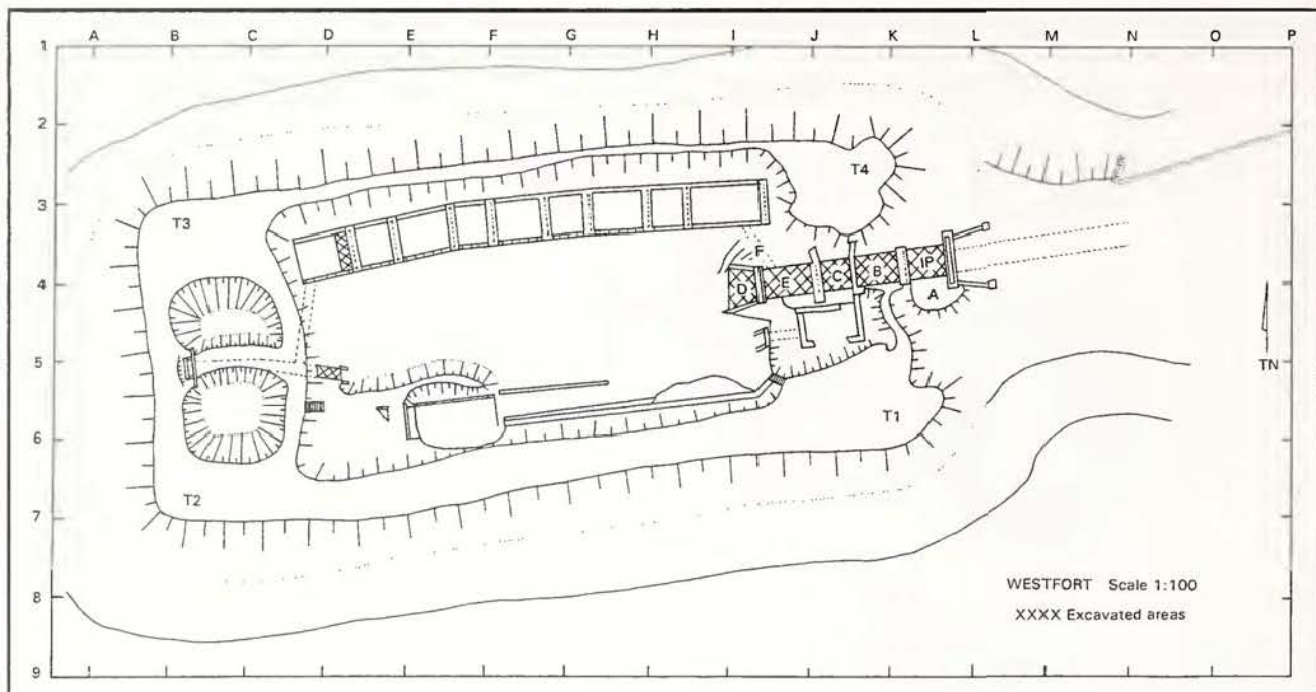
Fort Daspoortrand has an almost rectangular shape (Fig. 4). Concrete and bricks were used in its construction, and a natural rock outcrop was incorporated into the structure. The building was strengthened with sand against its walls and on the roof. The most striking

feature of the fort is its entrance which features two sets of steel doors and five arches (Fig. 5). It also contains three ammunition rooms, partly underground, connected by tunnels as well as two lifts, for supplying ammunition to the guns on the bastions of the fort. The functions of some of the rooms are still indicated above the doors in the original Dutch e.g. keuken (kitchen), telegraaf (telegraph) and machinen (machine) (Fig. 6). Apart from the roof having fallen in, the fort is reasonably well preserved. However erosion of the earthen walls and vandalism are threatening the structure (Fig. 7).

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

During the research, a plan of the fort was drawn up (Fig. 4). Rather than excavate particular blocks within the 10 m x 10 m grid the investigation was focussed on specific structures. The following were excavated:

- a. A test trench at the western ammunition tunnel.



#### 4. Plan of Fort Daspoortrand.

- b. A test trench in the storeroom (proviand).
- c. The entrance to the fort.

#### The western ammunition tunnel

No stratigraphy was discernable in the infill. It was clear that the tunnel was filled with red sand that had washed into it during the years of abandonment and only ten artefacts were recovered.

What was thought to have been a cement floor was reached at a depth of 0,70 m through the infill. Further investigation revealed the 'floor' to consist of two parallel rows of cement slabs, as in a driveway. The slabs had been laid against the two walls, thus leaving a stretch of ground in between.

#### The storeroom

The excavation revealed that no stratigraphy existed in the infill and only two artefacts were found. The soil in the room probably originates from the roof, which was covered with soil to make it bomb proof. Some of the may also have been washed into the room.

Huge pieces of cement (probably parts of the collapsed roof) were also found which made it difficult to determine the floor level of the room. However, this was later determined from the level of a drain found in the courtyard (see Fig. 4).

#### The entrance

There were two reasons for excavating the entrance to the fort. Firstly to find the original floor level and to uncover features of the entrance located below the present ground level. Secondly as a practical measure, as an open entrance would allow vehicles to move into the fort and thus be helpful for future research.

The visible architectural features of the entrance were



Fig. 5. The entrance to Fort Daspoortrand.



Fig. 6. The names of the casemates are still legible.

used to divide the area into eight different sections for excavation purposes (see Fig. 4). Again no stratigraphy was found in the infill, for the same reasons as mentioned above. In relation to the amount of infill removed few artefacts (fifty-eight) were recovered. Two huge steel



Fig. 7. The current state of Fort Daspoortrand.

doors give access to the entrance complex.

In the first section a 0,20 m thick layer of earth had to be removed to reach the approximated floor level which was estimated from a sump in the entrance complex. It is presumed that it was a earthen floor, similar to that of the other three forts (Transvaal Archives, F385; Cape Archives, Elliot collection 3502). Below this, on the eastern side of the entrance, a threshold was found. It consisted of a row of dressed stones with a steel bar across it. At the southern side a step, door and window, leading to a room (probably a guard room) were found. At the western side another threshold was located. This was made of cement, sided by iron bars, probably to tie horses.

The next section was sealed off from the first by a second pair of steel doors. A tunnel connecting the inner part of the entrance with the machine room was also found. As a result of the danger presented by large cement blocks which could collapse, the inner sections of the entrance were excavated by means of a back actor. As no stratigraphy existed this material could be removed as a single unit. It also led to quick results (South 1977:303). The loads of rubble were carefully monitored for artefacts.

### ARTEFACTS

Artefacts both contemporary with the fort and of more recent origin were recovered from all the excavated areas. Discussion focuses on the former.

#### Metal

The majority of artefacts found were items of metal. Most of these seem to have been contemporary with the fort's occupation ( $\pm$  1898-1902). The bulk of them were part of the building materials of the structure e.g. nails and screws. In addition, three buttons were found and were positively identified as buttons from British uniforms of the period (Van den Bos 1991). As these were ordinary trouser buttons no more information could be gained from them. Parts of the chassis of a small carriage were also found, perhaps relating to the moving of supplies of ammunition within the fort. An interesting metal bar covered in porcelain, which probably had something to do with the electrical equipment of the fort,

was also found. Quantities of wire were also recovered. No contemporary tin cans were found. The rubbish dump of Fort Daspoortrand has not yet been identified.

#### Building materials

Additional to those mentioned above, building materials included pieces of cement and bricks from the construction of the fort. An interesting find comprised pieces of pitch which had been used for waterproofing the roof.

#### Porcelain

A few pieces were found. Most of these formed part of the electrical network in the fort. Some fragments of household porcelain were found which were obviously of recent origin.

#### Glass

Although quite a number of glass sherds were found most of them were of recent manufacture. Some fragments of beer bottle glass were found to be contemporary with the fort's occupation during the turn of the century (Hogewind 1991).

### CONCLUSIONS

Some of the artefactual evidence at Fort Daspoortrand seems contemporary with its period of occupation (1898-1902). The only military artefacts that were found were the uniform buttons. More recent artefacts could have been discarded by people picnicking there and leaving their litter since 1902. This is still happening on the site.

Only three portions of the fort were excavated and more research is needed to determine differences (if any) in the Boer (1898-1900) and British (1900-1904) occupations of the structure. Further excavation might in addition, clarify whether artefacts from the various rooms reflect any activity-related differences and the extent to which such activities might be distinguished. It should always be kept in mind that Fort Daspoortrand was only occupied for a short period of time (1898-1904) and is unlikely to have accumulated a great deal of artefactual evidence.

Although the fort was only partially excavated a clear picture of its plan emerged. In addition, valuable information was obtained from archival photographs, some of them showing structures such as the underground water reservoir and two as yet unidentified rooms (Fig. 8). These latter require further archaeological investigation.

The question as to why the apparently strong roof collapsed has not been satisfactorily answered. A number of possible explanations were given to the writer during the research. None of these have yet been improved.

While the German built forts, Klapperkop, Schanskop and Wonderboompoort had been reserved, Fort Daspoortrand, the French built fort, had been left to the ravages of time. The present study has highlighted the uniqueness of this fort and has gone some way towards salvaging it from obscurity.



Fig. 8. Photograph, taken in 1913, of the western side of the fort. It shows a similar entrance to that of the water reservoir at Fort Klapperkop, as well as the entrances to two other rooms. (Transvaal Archives photograph 20910).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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