

## **BAMBOO SQUARE**

### **A DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVE OF THE 'INDIAN AND NATIVE CANTONMENT' AT THE POINT, 1873 TO 1903**

**Brian Kearney**

*University of Natal, Durban*

#### **A SETTLEMENT OF MARGINALISED PEOPLE**

The urban poor and their condition has not been a specially popular theme in local history. This is surprising given that they were in so many ways the direct result of other significant events and policies of nineteenth century Natal.<sup>1</sup> Apparent lack of documents from a group who would have been largely illiterate will have contributed to this. However, much research material exists in unusual sources waiting to be sifted for significant insights into the plight of the urbanising poor and their daily struggle for existence within the bureaucratic web of the Colony.<sup>2</sup>

Bamboo Square at the Point, Durban<sup>3</sup> was one nineteenth century settlement of marginalised people whose persistent attempts to establish

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<sup>1</sup> Including: the segregationist system of indirect Shepstonian rule; immigrant labour; the transformation of the indigenous peasantry from a pastoral and agricultural economy to an industrial-capitalist one; and, not least, war.

<sup>2</sup> Especially the records of the Sanitary Committee, the Inspector of Nuisances and the Borough Police, Department of the Durban Town Council. The records of the Natal Harbour Boards and the Natal Harbour Department are also useful sources. The Inspector of Nuisances acted officially for the Sanitary Committee from April 1875, and preceded the establishment of the Borough Department of Health and the Building Inspectorate.

<sup>3</sup> Bamboo Square was only one of a number of names given to the settlement. There is no clear evidence to indicate why it should have been so-called, other than the

themselves near places of wage employment sheds some light on life at the urban edge. Drawing from numerous documents both official and commercial, the saga of Bamboo Square is presented here as a descriptive narrative. The records of the settlement also include other issues, such as: early Natal approaches to racial segregation; problems of slums, sanitation and planning; self-help housing using a variety of resources both natural and industrial; the persistent efforts of local apostles of sanitation to improve the environmental health of Durban; and the seeds of municipal and government controls, policies and administrative techniques, which were to become powerful instruments at a future time.

The locality of this settlement was the Point, a narrow spit of land adjacent to the entrance into the Bay of Natal. Occupying a commanding position, with the Bay on one side and the Indian Ocean on the other, it had long been of military and strategic significance: the gateway for arrival; the centre of harbour and engineering activities; and a terrain fiercely contested between the Natal Colonial Government and the Durban Town Council. At the margin of the Borough, it provided topographical protection within the high sand dunes and coastal bush, and was close to work opportunities at the wharfs of the fledgling harbour and in the associated engineering projects, businesses and services. [III. 1] The narrative of events must also be seen within a context of the urbanisation of people of different origins, including Indian immigrants freed from indenture, and the arrival of St Helena, Amatonga and other workers in Durban. The context also includes the growing role of Victorian sanitation and police control, the implementation of Vagrancy Laws and Togg Regulations (1974)<sup>4</sup> an emerging municipal infrastructure to deal with 'nuisances',<sup>5</sup> and a struggle between the Natal Harbour Board and the Town Council of Durban for jurisdiction over the control and health of the area, as well as the conflict of traditional building techniques with 'modern' bye-laws.

The ethnic composition of the settlement appears to have passed through several different phases. The first Tonga inhabitants were joined by Indians moving from sugar plantations and from shack settlements

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prevalence of inhabitants from the east such as Indians, Chinese and Malays. It is also possible that the name derived from bamboo poles flying marriage flags. It was more commonly known in official circles as the Point Cantonment, a word with distinct associations with military settlements in India.

<sup>4</sup> D. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers' (Ph.D. Thesis: University of Warwick, 1979). Hemson provides a comprehensive discussion on the togt workers, barracks, the police and the municipality.

<sup>5</sup> Ordinance No 5 of 1847, Section 46 of the Colony of Natal enabled municipalities to 'abate nuisances'. While normally a nuisance would mean any kind of community annoyance, in Durban it came to be associated with the use of bushy areas as public toilets.

elsewhere around the town of Durban. They were joined by St Helenas, Chinese, Malays, Mauritians, and Africans from Moçambique and the East Coast. In the next phase the settlement was inhabited by tog workers who were probably predominantly Zulus and Pondos. In the last years of its existence Indians formed the dominant group, and both Hindus and Muslims were represented.<sup>6</sup>

Earliest reports of a settlement at the Point talk of an Amatonga village<sup>7</sup> where immigrant Tonga workers resided as labour for both the port functions and the various harbour works of Vetch and Patterson in the 1860's and 1870's. When some 36 Tongas were arrested for stoning the Port Captain's house in December 1873<sup>8</sup>, the Police reported: 'And within 50 yards of the [Police] Station are living above three hundred Amatongas of the lowest type who the moment the days work is finished proceed to ... drinking etc'.<sup>9</sup>

At an even earlier date in 1866 the Borough Police had noted the existence of at least seven other smaller locations of Indians and Blacks associated with their places of work. From this time on the Durban Town Council also began to express its concern about the rapid urbanisation which was taking place with the arrival of 'passenger' Indians and the movement from farms of Indian immigrants once freed of the conditions of indenture. By 1867 Councillor Tyzack was calling for the need for a separate 'Coolie' village<sup>10</sup>. Early reports focus attention on sanitation problems and especially the perceived evil of overcrowding.

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<sup>6</sup> DAR. [Durban Archives Repository] 3 DBN. 1/1/1/5. Durban Town Council minutes, 4 April 1901, for an application from local Muslims for permission to build a mosque.

<sup>7</sup> That such discreet villages existed in Durban in the 1860's is consistent with the town's early development where the town consisted of a cluster of separate nodes, a form which probably derived from the kraals of early frontiersmen and their adherents.

<sup>8</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/3/2. Durban Town Council, Police report, 16 December 1873. It is remarkable that these Tonga workers should have located themselves on this land, given that it neither belonged to the Natal Government nor the Town Council, but to a far-off landowner — the War Office in London.

<sup>9</sup> The report does not explain the actions of the Amatonga workers. After this episode during which the Point constable was injured while attempting to make arrests, the Police Superintendent urged that he should be armed.

<sup>10</sup> Natal Mercury, 14 March 1867.

**'Coolies in town'**

**Report Town Committee, Durban Town Council,**

**22 November 1870**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/7/1/1, Sanitary Committee Reports)**

The evil pointed at arises from overcrowding of dwellings, ordinary nuisances would come under the purview of the Bye Laws, but these do not touch this question. It is not a question as to the proper materials of Buildings but of the size of the rooms, the bedroom especially. This is a serious matter with these Indians whose habits generally are not conducive to health. The Council requires to be armed with fresh powers by a law to be passed, that may deal with it. No law would be sanctioned which proposed to exclude any class from the right to live and keep stores in Town. But overcrowding is an acknowledged evil in the case of both white and black and any remedy proposed must deal with both classes.

In his minute of 1872 the Mayor noted both the formulation of a new bye-law to outlaw wooden buildings in the Borough and the Council's concern for the prevention of 'crowded, ill-ventilated and badly constructed buildings by natives and coolies ... threatening the health of ... the community generally'.<sup>11</sup> One form of control could be through the use of squatting leases. But the process of establishing tighter controls, surveillance and the demolition of unsuitable structures only set in motion a chain of movements and upheavals of peoples, which would result in several more attempted settlements within, and eventually outside, the limits of the town.

**'Indians squatting on the townlands'**

**Report Townlands Committee, Durban Town Council,**

**2 March 1871**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/7/1/1)**

With reference to (coolies squatting on the Townlands) your Committee having gone over the ground occupied by the Coolies at the foot of the Berea, obtaining from the residents such information as they were willing to communicate and again comparing this with the statements of the Town Clerk and the various leases and documents in the Town Office, have to report their settled conviction that it is necessary some steps should be at once taken by the Council to bring the Coolies and Natives resident on the Townlands under some adequate surveillance not alone to secure from them their quota of payment to the Borough Revenue, but also as a means of having their names and abodes registered so that these people may become known and be traceable in case of necessity. The Land occupied by these people are mostly leases either in the hands of trustees in Insolvent Estates, or on which the arrears of rent are such as

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<sup>11</sup> DAR. Durban Mayor's Minutes, 1872.

to render the recovery more than doubtful, or else they are virtually abandoned to the Council, and it has come to the knowledge of your Committee that rent is being paid in many cases by subholders to various persons having a questionable right to collect same. Your Committee would recommend: First - That all leases abandoned to the Council be at once taken possession of and the leases cancelled. Second - On the land being so obtained squatting leases be granted by the Council of plots varying from one acre to three acres to Coolies for a period not exceeding 3 years, and at an annual rental not less than £2 per acre with power to sublet in plots not less than 1/4 of an acre (upon which only one residence shall be permitted) with the consent of the Council.

In 1874 the Durban Town Council acted to set up an alternative place for Indian occupation and house building. The site chosen on the Eastern Vlei was not far from the site of the corporation Indian Barracks.<sup>12</sup>

**'Indian Location on the Eastern Vlei'**  
**Special Committee Meeting, Durban Town Council,**  
**11 November 1874**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/7/1/2)**

Your Committee beg to report that they still adhere to the proposed site for this location, viz — the high land on the Eastern Vley by the Powder magazines or about the site of the land last used as a Race Course. That eighty lots be at first laid off of a size 20' by 50' as per rough sketch annexed, and submitted to public competition for the purpose of Indians only/ at an upset price of £2 per lot per annum payable in advance, the term of lease to be 5 years with power to transfer or sub-lease the whole lot but no portion thereof subject to the permission of the Council, it being a strict provision that on no account shall any of the lots be subdivided, and no more than one dwelling house be permitted to be erected on each lot.

This proposal would provide a form of control over housing density but fears continued to be expressed regarding the nature of the buildings. Only some two years previously the Gallwey Commission had commented favourably on the housing of Indians on coastal sugar farms.<sup>13</sup> '... In the majority of instances we found comfortable though rudely constructed houses (of wattle and daub with thatched roofs), remarkable cleanliness, good drainage...' The Commission also noted: 'In the neighbourhood of Durban there are many small locations of coolies who cultivate land and

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<sup>12</sup> Barracks for Indian municipal employees had been sited in this area from 1865. Later in the century the Magazine and Railway Barracks were to house many hundreds of Indian workers and their families.

<sup>13</sup> M.H. Gallwey, Report of the Coolie Commission, S.P. 1872, LC No 1, August 1872.

carry on a thriving trade in the sale of vegetables and tobacco. Some are employed as boatmen, and hold their shares in boats plying between the wharf and the shipping in the harbour. A considerable number are thriving well as fishermen, and enjoy almost a monopoly in the supply of fish.<sup>14</sup> Some years later the Wragg Commission of enquiry into the condition of the indentured Indians was to describe their dwellings:<sup>15</sup>

Grass huts were numerous on estates. Indians are quite content to live in them and choose them before every other kind of habitation. In them they find more privacy than in long ranges of rooms with slender partitions, and the greater warmth is much appreciated. This was well exemplified at the Corporation barracks at Durban, where we observed that good rooms had been vacated and that their late occupants had constructed grass huts and shanties wherein they were most contentedly living. If grass huts be erected with care and made impervious to rain, we find no objection to their use save on the score of insufficiency of ventilation and light: the latter, usually, is supplied by the open door.

The arrival of several hundred St Helena immigrants between 1873 and 1874<sup>16</sup> as part of the Hartley-Walker domestic servant scheme added another dimension to the Council housing and sanitation problem. But now the principle of separate locations could be extended to include all persons of colour. The Council decided to '... recognise the importance of encouraging the St Helena people acquiring property and building their own houses ... suggest that a block of lots be laid off north of Victoria Street to be offered on freehold at £40 each.'<sup>17</sup>

The Inspector of Nuisances, Henry Ellis, patronisingly saw benefit in a speculative solution which would raise the expectations and aspirations of urbanising people:

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<sup>14</sup> Both the Point and Salisbury Island came to be associated with fishing and the fish-drying industry. It is very likely that several inhabitants of Bamboo Square were fishermen.

<sup>15</sup> W. Wragg, Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-1887.

<sup>16</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 22 April 1873, 15 January 1874 and 28 April 1874. William Hartley and Capt Walker organised assisted passages for immigrants from St Helena to work in Natal as domestic servants. The scheme was not successful and many of those who came found employment elsewhere, many in fishing and at the docks.

<sup>17</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/6/1/1. Durban Town Council Sanitary Committee reports, 13 December 1875.

**'An opportunity of elevating the Indians'**  
**Report Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,**  
**26 May 1875**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/1)**

That there is now open to the Borough an opportunity of elevating the Indians whom the Colony have introduced, and inducing in them better and more cleanly habits — for, though there is little doubt that, if permitted, they will repeat at the Indian Village the miserable style of dwelling with which we are all familiar; still the present strait in which they find themselves will make them gladly accept, and readily pay for, better accommodation; and this once tested by them and found to their liking, they will not soon or willingly, return to their old ways. That a good, or at any rate a wholesome, block of buildings might be put up and let to them at a rate which, while it would be considerably below the extortionate charges now made upon them, would pay the landlords handsomely: and that if the public works at present in the course of construction by the Corporation prevent their paying attention to the subject, I have little doubt that there could be found private individuals, or an association of them, ready to undertake it on terms that you might see fit to make. ... That with your permission I will during one hour of the day — either before or after my own office hours, if you desire it — open a register and receive the names and particulars of persons seeking house-room: and make the results known of the same public: in hopes that reliable statistics may induce capital to flow into so good a channel.

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In the same year a new bye-law came into effect fixing the minimum size of residential lots at 3500 square feet.<sup>18</sup> In his enthusiastic endeavours to 'keep the town sweet and wholesome' the first Inspector of Nuisances, Ellis, declared several buildings unfit for human habitation and reported on 'Indians ejected' from a number of places.<sup>19</sup> Is it therefore surprising that the first reports of a substantial settlement of various cultural groups now appear from Bamboo Square in a locality not far from the town, certainly close to work sources at the Point, and outside the apparent jurisdiction of the Borough?

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<sup>18</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/7/1/2. Durban Town Council, Sanitary Committee reports, 12 October 1875.

<sup>19</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/1. Durban Town Council, Report of the Inspector of Nuisances, 26 May 1875.

**'Overcrowded squattings at the Point'**

**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,  
7 June 1876**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/1)**

That in consequence of complaints which reached me, of Indians and others located as squatters on land of Mr Lewis Wilson at the Point, I applied to the Resident Magistrate representing the danger the Borough ran of disease and fire. The Magistrate kindly forwarded the matter to the Colonial Secretary, and received in reply the report of the Colonial Engineer, that a proper quarter had been set aside for temporary use for these people, until a permanent one should be determined upon.

**'Coolie huts at the Point'**

**Report of the Superintendent of Police to Durban Town Council,  
19 September 1876**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/3/5)**

The very dangerous state of the Coolie huts and Kafir kraals at the Point. They are all made of straw or grass and as a rule one of these huts is burnt down about every fortnight. This is of little consequence even if the whole were set fire providing they do not set fire to public buildings near them.<sup>20</sup>

Now fire was added to the dangers of disease. Fires could easily break out in the grass-roofed huts. Thatch had been long prohibited from the town in one of the earliest building bye-laws.<sup>21</sup> Thus new immigrants were only repeating the same processes and building techniques which white settlers had developed in the 1840's and 1850's in erecting wattle and daub veranda houses with thatched roofs.<sup>22</sup> And since wooden buildings were also outlawed they would have no option but to resort to rebuilding in a technique which was fast achieving local popularity — wood and iron.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The superintendent also reported that there were 36 'Coolie huts' with 93 occupants and 19 'Kafir kraals' with 64 occupants in the valley east of Mr James' house. South of the house were 27 'Coolie huts' with 76 occupants and four 'Kafir kraals' with 17 occupants.

<sup>21</sup> B. T. Kearney, *Architecture in Natal, 1824-1893* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1973) 15.

<sup>22</sup> Some of these thatched buildings were still standing in the 1870's. On 27 September 1875, the Inspector of Nuisances reported on one such house owned by William Varney where the thatched roof had been repaired with iron. Both the municipality and the Natal Government Railways housed workers in wattle and daub buildings. Durban Town Council Sanitary Committee report, 8 November 1876. DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/6/1/1.

<sup>23</sup> Wood and iron was a building technique that combined a timber frame for walls and roofing with a covering of corrugated iron. The system was imported into Natal



Since the system was portable, at least in principle, there would be many advantages for those without security of tenure.

Following urgent representations from the Town Council to the colonial government, the Surveyor General, Sutherland, was drawn into the issue, and in August 1877 recommended the formalisation of the settlement with properly surveyed sites for the existing structures together with a series of conditions of occupation. It is significant that he also foresaw the need for sites for barracks and compounds for various commercial firms, such as shipping and stevedore agencies.

**'Native and Indian Cantonment at the Point: Conditions of Tenement, 23 November 1877'**  
**Correspondence, Surveyor General to Colonial Secretary**  
**(PAR. SGO. III/9/9)**

1. The Lessee to have the right to occupy the land for a period of twelve months from year to year commencing from the date upon which the rent and survey fees are paid. Rent to be paid at the rate of Ten shillings per annum for each lot measuring 26ft. by 34ft. more or less, paid in advance to the Resident Magistrate.
2. Any intention of the Lessee to give up the land must be intimated by him Three months beforehand, but he will have no right to claim a refund of the rent for the unexpired period of the year for which he has paid.
3. The Government reserve the right to assume possession of the land by giving three months notice at same time refunding each rent as may appertain to the unexpired portion of the year.
4. The Lessee to have the right to remove from the land any building he may erect thereon.
5. The building shall not be constructed of any materials less substantial than wood and iron.
6. The Lessee shall not sublet lots without the consent in writing of the Lessor.
7. No building erected on the land shall be licensed for Canteen or Public House purposes.

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from the 1860's, by 1880 was being produced locally and by 1904 it had become the most common form of domestic construction.

8. Survey fees at the rate of Five shillings per lot to be paid by the Lessee at the time the beacons are taken over by him.

From 1877 the Natal Harbour Boards became involved as the local government agents in the day to day administration of the settlement and proceeded with a proper survey.<sup>24</sup> Judging from the peculiar form of the plan of this layout it is likely that the survey incorporated the relative informality of the existing settlement. Since the Harbour Board held jurisdiction over the use of the Point land the move would assist in providing some form of order; facilitate rentals for leases; and give them control. But the problem of sanitation and nuisances persisted and obviously the Town Council was aggrieved at not effecting control over an area so close to its own lands. The Colonial Secretary's decision regarding 'nuisances' compounded the confusion over jurisdiction.

**'The Point Cantonment'**  
**Report Durban Town Council Meeting, 3 December 1878.**  
**Letter from the Colonial Secretary, 19 November 1878**  
**(Natal Mercury, 5 December 1878)**

Sir, — In reply to your letter of the 14th inst., I am directed by the Lieutenant-Governor to inform you that the cantonment at the back of the Point Police Station, is in the same category as any other land within the Borough of Durban, and the corporation authorities have the same right to demand that nuisance be abolished there, as they have<sup>25</sup> in any other place — I have the honour, B.H. Mitchell, Colonial Secretary.

Though we know little of the composition of the population or of the lives of the inhabitants of the earliest settlement, Capt. Anderson has provided us with a glimpse of the celebrations among the fishermen which followed successful fishing trips when '... a man might make £6 in favourable weather for a week's pay' and then ... 'on such occasions Bamboo Square was a lively place with dancing, singing and lots of beer.

<sup>24</sup> PAR.[Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository] NHD. I/2/2. Natal Harbour Board correspondence, 26 January 1882.

<sup>25</sup> The second Natal Harbour Board (1877–1881) had taken over several pieces of land originally demarcated as ordnance land and controlled by the War Department of the British Government. The third Board which existed from 1881 to 1894 was the most effective. Mitchell seems to have been confused about Bamboo Square's situation.

This sometimes ended in a drunken row.<sup>26</sup> But the demolitions continued with regularity and rebuilding sometimes occurred within 24 hours.<sup>27</sup>

**'Native Location, Point'**

**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,  
28 July 1879**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

With regard to this Location I am continually ordering the removal of freshly built small shantys — after December last the whole of the small confined huts were destroyed with the exception of 4 thatched ones on Mr Hitchins' ground which were allowed to remain until proper houses were built — these thatched huts are now done away with.

We can gauge some idea of the physical state of the settlement and particularly the buildings (though not necessarily all) by reference to a similar location on the Western Vlei.

**'An Examination of the Different Locations on the Western Vlei'**

**Report by the Medical Officer of Health, Julius Schulz, to the  
Durban Town Council, 16 February 1880**

**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

The houses were built Coolie fashion of tin-lining, of boxes and packing cases, of iron, corrugated and otherwise, of mud, reeds, thatch, sacks, and all and everything within reach, what would serve the purpose, all more or less in a state of dilapidation and decay. With few exceptions they were placed close together, and in a chaotic confusion, five six and more of them on so small an area, that there was no room for a yard left. A few new houses were being built of corrugated iron upon properly sawn timber frames, but even these were far short of the most necessary requirements such as windows, fireplaces etc. ... The absence of closets was seriously felt. Generally there was no attempt at any kind of a distinct place for the deposit of human excrements, the people squatting down on the ground anywhere and anyhow. The evidence of which we met frequently, in some instances close to the houses, so that the effluvia would be noticed inside of them. In a few instances a shallow hole, made in the ground surrounded by a few short sticks, hidden from view by an old sack or two, placed upon the sticks, served, if not as closet, as a deposit for excrements. In one place we found this close to the entrance of the house. ... This in connection with the open waterholes and the drainwater used for drinking, gives an important insight into the very miserable existence, which these people lead.

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell Collections, University of Natal. MS 1651, A. Anderson.

<sup>27</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2. Durban Town Council, Report of Inspector of Nuisances, 20 October 1879.

Some of the people ejected from these premises relocated south of the Umbilo, while others probably found refuge in Bamboo Square. A new Inspector of Nuisances, Thomas Petersen, had taken over from Ellis in September 1879.

**'Nuisance at Kaffir and Coolie Location, Point'**  
**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,**  
**1 May 1880**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

I yesterday visited the Kaffir and Coolie Location at the Point and find that the occupants there are again beginning to deposit all kinds of rubbish in the streets, if I may so call them, which in many places are overgrown with castor oil plants and weeds. On enquiry no one knows who deposited the rubbish. I think each occupant should be compelled to clear the street in front of his premises. I also find that in many instances the bush is used as a water closet and several little hovels have lately been added to the huts which ought to be put a stop to.

The most comprehensive report of the time belonged to the Superintendent of the Borough Police, Richard Alexander. Despite his humane care for the indigent, shown in the way he had provided shelter over twelve months for a destitute St Helena woman and her 8 children in the receiving room of the Police Station, his racial and sanitary attitudes were uncompromising.<sup>28</sup>

**'Report re Native Location, Harbour Works'**  
**Report by R. Alexander, Superintendent of Police, to the Mayor of**  
**Durban, 30 April 1880**  
**(Natal Government Gazette, 1 August 1880. Annexure 1 to the**  
**Port Commission Report.)**

I first examined on the 28th instant (April 1880) thoroughly the Indian and Native Locations situated in a bushy hollow between the sandhills of the Back-Beach and the high ground immediately at the back of the Point Police Station, near and under three large dwelling-houses occupied by Messrs. T.P. James, Charles Hitchins, and F. Shuter's families, and I find in this valley twenty-one square blocks of land laid out for occupation, fifteen of which are occupied. These blocks measure 130 x 68 feet, or 8,840 square feet, each block being subdivided into ten lots of 34 x 26 feet, or 880 square feet. A 30 feet street divides each block. I find 133 dwelling-houses or huts erected upon the occupied blocks, in which I find sleep some 580 souls, as follows: — 6 Europeans, 26 St Helenas, 10 Chinamen, 274 Indians and Malays, 269 Natives

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<sup>28</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/3/3. Durban Town Council, Police report, 18 September 1876.

of all tribes. 57 of the huts which the above dwell in are constructed of old pieces of tin etc. and in addition to being too small in most instances, none of them are proof against wind or rain. The Location is in a valley, and the buildings cover a space of about 224,000 feet, being 560 feet in length and 400 feet in breadth, having through it five cross-streets and two lengthways. The Sanitary state of this village is bad — indeed, could scarcely be worse, for the following reasons: 1. Being mostly in a bushy hollow and surrounded by hills and bushes, is all the more likely to retain the bad atmosphere rising from it. 2. The lots have been let to the present occupants without first clearing the streets of all bush, undergrowth, and rubbish, or even making the renter of each lot clear his own ground of the same nuisance. 3. There are no closets, except a small one for railway Coolies and four St Helena families, who have about one pail each. Messrs. Hitchins Bros. have also three pails for their 67 servants. The result is that 400 persons in this neighbourhood use the nearest bush to their dwellings, which they can easily find within a few feet. 4. No system or necessary Sanitary Laws have in any way been observed by anyone — either owner or renter. The result is all offal, slops, urine, rubbish, and excrement, are deposited around and about the houses and streets. 5. No water is obtainable near this village, except from a small well, sunk near the centre with a few empty casks, from which I find the whole of this population obtain water for household use by means of bucket and rope, each using his own pail (whether it is dirty or not) to draw water from the well: this well is open at the top ....

... The Social Condition of this neighbourhood can better be judged from the foregoing remarks as to the position you find the inhabitants in. They are composed of some of nearly every uncivilized race in the world — About 15 prostitutes of all colours. Cunning Chinamen. Drunken Portuguese Kafirs. Thieving and Grog-selling Coolies. Card-sharping Malays. The remainder (about 460) are hard-working fishermen, labourers, boatmen, and toggt kafirs. There are no licensed grog-shops in this location, nor do they require one. I beg to state here that I can manage the above amiable persons much better where they are than in any other place of the Borough or Town; therefore I do not complain of their residence in this respect ....

... I have this morning again inspected the places mentioned above and find no alteration made whatever; the places are as bad now as ever.

So of the 580 total number residing in the 'village' in 1880, 120 were sufficiently 'uncivilised' and problematic to the Police to have Alexander welcoming their locality and their separation from the Borough. And interesting, too, though probably not accidental, that the Point Police Station was sited on the corner of Point Road at the immediate place of entry and departure into the settlement.<sup>29</sup> A few years later and this would be

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<sup>29</sup> The Borough Police had a station at the Point by 1870, which was enlarged in 1876 and replaced with a new structure in 1879.

supported by the new Water Police Station across the road.<sup>30</sup> Alexander's survey [III.2] also noted that 116 of the 200 sites had been built on and he described 54 buildings as 'bad', 16 as 'fair' and the remaining 46 as 'good'. A number of those classified as bad were the property of prominent shipping agencies. Soon more problems would beset the entire community, law-abiding or not, though some efforts were being made on the part of the various authorities to improve conditions and in October 1880 water was laid on and 'a public latrine was provided with pails'.<sup>31</sup>

**'The Native Cantonment at the Point'**  
**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,**  
**5 July 1880**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

... is not quite free from overcrowding. There are also several small hovels unfit for human habitation which will be dealt with in due course of time. Several cases have already been tried by the resident magistrate and small fines inflicted. Fines sufficient to make them understand that the Borough Bye-Laws must be respected ...

**'Native Cantonment, Point'**  
**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,**  
**5 July 1880**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

I beg to forward herewith specified return of houses and hovels at the Point Coolie and Native Location taken in company with the Medical Officer whose report on same please receive herewith. All the proprietors at the cantonment have been served with notices requiring them to carry out the Building and Sanitary Bye Laws. But here a great difficulty presents itself namely that the lots as set out by the Government are only about 1/3 the size required by section 77 page 47, Borough Bye Laws. I think arrangements should be made with the Govt. to have the lots the size required by the above section.

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<sup>30</sup> The Water Police came into existence in 1881. *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal, 1881*, J1.

<sup>31</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2. Durban Town Council, Report of the Inspector of Nuisances, 5 November 1880.

**'Point Cantonment'**

**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,  
2 March 1881  
(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

The question of building on small pieces of land as laid out by the Government at the Native Cantonment, Point I would again beg leave to lay before the Council. New buildings have lately been erected without plans approved by the Council and no attempts are being made to remove the miserable hovels occupied as dwelling houses although notices have been issued. The time allowed to carry out such notices namely to pull down or close such hovels will be up on the 12th of March next. I am informed by Mr Jenkyns that applications have been made to him for larger pieces of land so as to comply with the 77th section of the Borough Bye Laws and that such applications have been forwarded by him to the Government but no answer has been received.

Now the residents of Bamboo Square were caught in a bureaucratic web: between the Natal Harbour Board on the one hand who owned the land, controlled the area, received the rentals, and had surveyed the settlement with sites too small to be acceptable to the Borough and on the other, a borough administration which could facilitate the approval of plans for buildings or wield the Borough Bye Laws and apply fines for their non-compliance. In the words of the Mayor's Minute of 1881: '... A hardship on the Natives and Indians whose plans to build on these lots cannot be approved.'<sup>32</sup>

**'Point, Native Cantonment'**

**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,  
4 April 1881  
(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/2)**

Improvements have lately been made in the sanitary condition of this village. The inhabitants have at last shown an inclination to comply with the Sanitary Bye Laws and are now at the request of his worship the Mayor being dealt leniently with. The co-operation of the Government is much wanted as regards sizes of pieces of land allotted to each tenant which is only about 1/4 of what is required.

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<sup>32</sup> DAR. Durban, Mayor's Minutes, 1881. The mayor at the time was Sir William Arbuckle.

By 1881 it was noted that some 52 buildings had been erected at the Indian Location on the Eastern Vici.<sup>33</sup> But the continued existence of Bamboo Square began to raise public concern among whites and at a public meeting called at the Alexandra Hotel at the Point on 11 July 1881, it was requested 'that the tin village at the back of the Alexandra Hotel be no longer suffered to exist in the present insalubrious spot to the prejudice of the health of the district'. At a meeting, three days later, Jonsson, the owner of the hotel demanded that, 'The Coolie shanties ought to be removed ... a number (of the residents) were employed at the Point, the remainder were refugees in no one's employment whatever. Many of them were simply prostitutes and thieves. In England labourers in shipping had to walk 4 to 5 miles to work, the Indians could do the same.'<sup>34</sup> Clearly a large number of residents did reside there as a result of having work in the neighbourhood of the docks.

**'Return showing number of Indians and Natives sleeping in the Cantonment at Point and how employed'**

**Report of the Superintendent of Water Police to the Natal Harbour Board, 22 November 1881  
(PAR. NHD. I/2/1, Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

	Indians		Natives		By whom employed
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
	63	40	23	-	Natal Government Railways
	33	14	23	-	James & Hitchens Bros.
	21	9	12	-	McEwan & Co.
	8	10	-	-	Independent
	3	-	-	-	T.N. Price
	-	-	26	-	J.H. Buchan
	-	-	31	-	Chiazzari & Co.
	-	-	45	3	toget (workers)
	-	-	6	-	Wade & Wilson
	-	-	13	-	Morrison & Co.
<b>Totals</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>3</b>	
		<b>203</b>		<b>182</b>	
				<b>385</b>	

<sup>33</sup> DAR. Durban Mayor's Minutes, 1881. The site of this location, close to the military magazines, was adjacent to the site of the Magazine Barracks.

<sup>34</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 14 July 1881.



Official policy now began to shift towards an alternative solution. If the constant bye-law infringements, notices and threats were of no real avail then the municipality could remove the group who they perceived to be their greatest problem — the togt workers. As early as 1871 the town council had built a wooden togt barracks at the west end of Victoria Street to house some 200 men.<sup>35</sup> A similar arrangement could thus be made at the Point where togt workers could be housed separately in a barracks and which could be paid for by the receipt of Togg licence finances. Though this took some time to achieve, these actions were the essential building blocks in the early development of the 'Durban system'.<sup>36</sup>

But the Natal Harbour Board also had it in mind to remove the entire settlement to another site and thereby bring it within a more ordered state and to increase the sizes of the sites to conform to the Municipal bye-laws. Edward Innes, the resident harbour engineer, described the proposed new beach site:

'... the area is sufficient to take all the Natives and Indians at present inhabiting the site known as Bamboo Square and allow of space for the corporation Togg Natives.'<sup>37</sup>

**'Indian and Native Cantonment at the Point'**

**Notice to tenants: correspondence Secretary of the Natal Harbour Board to Mayor of Durban, 31 January 1882  
(PAR. NHD. I/3/2)**

That all the tenants of the Indian and Native Cantonment do receive the three months notice provided by Clause 3 of the terms of tenancy, and that the Corporation be asked to expedite the construction of the Togg Barracks, and that notice be given to Landing Agents and others whose employees now occupy the Cantonment, that it concerns the employers of labour to provide suitable premises for their labourers.

**'Verbal notices served on tenants'**

**Superintendent of the Water Police to Secretary, Natal Harbour Board, 8 February 1882  
(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

I have the honour to inform you that verbal notices have been served on the the undermentioned parties this day and that such parties are the only persons as far

<sup>35</sup> DAR. Durban, Mayor's Minutes, 1873.

<sup>36</sup> An integral ingredient of the 'Durban System' was the control over the making and selling of beer.

<sup>37</sup> PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence, 31 March 1883.

as I can ascertain leasing ground in the Indian and Native Cantonment, Point — or squatting there. The Landing Agents one and all refuse to take verbal notice .

Barracks	James Hitchens Bros.			
"	H.J. Buchan			
"	Natal Govt. Railways			
"	McEwan & Co.			
"	Morrison & Co.			
House etc.	J. Bowers.	<i>St Helena</i>	J. Lightburn	<i>European</i>
"	Edgar Williams	<i>St Helena</i>	Moonsamy	<i>Indian</i>
"	Taylor	<i>European</i>	Suddren	<i>Indian</i>
"	A.J. Taylor	<i>European</i>	Jim	<i>Native</i>
"	S. Francis	<i>European</i>	Mahomet	<i>Indian</i>
"	Joe	<i>Indian</i>	Amod Assen	<i>Chinaman</i>
"	Bailie	<i>Indian</i>	Hulin Said	<i>Chinaman</i>
"	P. Tetail	<i>Chinaman</i>	Raddia	<i>Indian</i>
"	Ingose	<i>Native</i>	Erand & Co.	<i>Chinese</i>
"	Marian	<i>Indian</i>	Daniel St	<i>Helena</i>
"	Wade Wilson	<i>European</i>	Jas Hern	<i>St Helena"</i>
"	Pani	<i>Indian</i>	Antoni	<i>Portuguese</i>
"	W. Pearse	<i>European</i>	Rosay	<i>Native</i>

Numerous objections were received from tenants both large and small.

**'Objection to notice of removal'**

**James Hitchens Bros. to Chairman, Natal Harbour Board, 8 February 1882**

**(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

We have received from the Superintendent of Water Police a verbal notice of three months to remove our Coolie Barracks. We respectfully bring to the Board's notice, that we rented this ground from the Colonial Government in good faith, and erected buildings which have cost us some £ 500. We have always endeavoured to keep them as clean as possible when occupied by coolies, and the buildings have always been under the supervision of the Inspector of Nuisances.

**'Petition to notice of removal'**

**Colanthavaloo Pilly to Secretary, Natal Harbour Board, 10 February 1882**

**(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

Most Honoured Sir, I beg most respectfully to write these following few lines to your kind consideration. And begging to say that I a poor & obedient servant

'Colanthaloo Pilly' is suffering a great deal for want of the situation, which I dwell at present at Point. I have bought that building for 15 pounds cash from T. P. James at Point on the 20th day of July 1881. At the same time I have received a notice to break my building. But I applied by two times, about my condition and for keeping the house yet, for some years more. Yet I have not seen any reply for them except the notice of this time. During last year I was still and believed that there is no any objection for I have seen that there is no reply, and might be succeeded - I therefore bought several things of merchandise from some stores of white people at Durban and, so I was retailed or sold the things for the sum of £ 80 as den for the Indian people. I therefore humbly beg your honour to kindly allow me, to keep the building yet for some times more. If there be any objection of the rent for the ground, and of the building form, I obey to your honour's order to erect the building as your plan or to pay the rent of the ground yearly.

**'Petition to notice of removal'**

**Tekong, Storekeeper to Natal Harbour Board, 24 February 1882  
(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

In the year 1881 with due submission to the Corporation Borough Bye Laws I had erected a building which I used as a store and dwelling house up to the present time. I hear now that all the buildings at the Point Cantonment are to be pulled down as a policeman was round taking all the names of tenants who occupied houses there. I therefore humbly submit that you will please take into favourable consideration and consider my case as I have been put to a great deal of expense and trouble before and now to have to destroy my store and dwelling house, what am I to do in such a case, I will have no home, and the further trouble and expense of removing my goods from my present place of abode at the Point cantonment. I may further state for your kind consideration that during my stay at the Point cantonment, I conducted my house as well as my business in a very peaceful manner, and further never even as much committed a breach of one of the Corporation Borough Bye Laws during that time, and I beg that should I receive notice to remove from the Point Cantonment some remuneration may be allowed me for my trouble in erecting, pulling down and removing my goods from the Point Cantonment as it comes very hard upon me to be put to this trouble and very great expense ...

These objections caused the Harbour Board to once again inspect the settlement and they made two alternative proposals, which would provide on-going, and improved accommodation for both their own workers and those of employees and agents whom they considered important to the work of the port. Now too, the Superintendent of the recently formed Water Police became involved in the continuous surveillance of the togt workers.

**'The Indian and Native Cantonment'**  
**Report of the Encroachment Committee of the Natal Harbour**  
**Board, 16 February 1882**  
**(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

We devoted the greater part of the day to making a personal inspection of the locality and buildings. With regard to the Cantonment. We have made a thorough inspection of it, the result of which has been far from satisfactory, as shewing that the greater part of the buildings are utterly unfit for human habitation. There is no proper sanitary arrangement and the places are in a state of great disorder and uncleanness. To obviate the existing evils two courses suggest themselves to us.

1st. That the Board should undertake the erection of Barracks, capable of accommodating the number of Indians and Natives who are required to work at the Point, and to allow the employers of such labour, the use of these premises on payment of an appointed rent. If the Board sees its way to make the necessary expenditure for this purpose, we are of opinion that it would be the most satisfactory way of dealing with the matter. This scheme would be self-supporting. As far as we can ascertain, the employers of labour at the Point would be perfectly satisfied with such an arrangement.

2nd. That if the Board does not consider it desirable to make such an outlay, we recommend that a block of land be set apart for the purpose of being sub-divided into suitable allotments, and be offered for sale or lease by public competition, on condition that in the event of the land being used for the indicated purpose, plans of the buildings intended to be erected must first be submitted to the Board for approval. A further condition should be inserted in these leases, requiring the lessees to keep such premises in a clean and habitable condition and the occupants to be under proper surveillance. As soon as this land is leased we suggest that the parties owning the present premises should be compelled to remove the present buildings. We are of opinion that such a block could be laid out without interfering with several buildings which we examined & which we suggest, should not be disturbed. ... Pending the carrying out of either of the above suggested plans we recommend that the present buildings be allowed to remain, but that, in the meantime, better sanitary arrangements be enforced by the Board, upon the owners of the buildings, as we consider that the premises in the present state are highly dangerous to the health of the surrounding neighbourhood.

**'Report on togt workers'**  
**Superintendent, Water Police to Natal Harbour Board,**  
**23 June 1883**  
**(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

... I have the honour to report that at present there are from 50 to 60 Togg Natives who sleep at the Point. The average daily number employed about the

Point is 200. I estimate the number of Togh Kafirs likely to occupy the proposed Togh Barracks, for a period ranging over 5 years at not less than 350 to 400.<sup>38</sup>

The Superintendent of Water Police continued to inspect the village together with the Inspector of Nuisances and in '... many cases unsuitable buildings were removed upon sanitary grounds'. He also expected an imminent change — '... I understand the whole place will shortly be removed'.<sup>39</sup>

The *Natal Mercury* detailed some of the 'sanitary grounds' as '... rooms partitioned off with sacking etc. and verandas enclosed with the same material ... lean-to's constructed with boards, sacking etc.'<sup>40</sup> All of these issues once again came to a head at the fortnightly meeting of the Natal Harbour Board on 9 February 1884 when George Christopher Cato suggested that the Natal Harbour Board should '...turn out the fire engine and pump on them'. The Chairman, Harry Escombe, responded: '... It might seem a hardship on the people concerned, but perhaps the greater hardship was to allow them to live on in the manner they were doing, to the danger of their own health and to the health of the community.'<sup>41</sup>

By 1887 the village was still there, though a new site had been surveyed and many delays and bureaucratic prevarications had prevented the construction of the new Corporation Togh Barracks. Clearly this all had a marked effect on the general and further deterioration of the conditions of the settlement as few would be prepared to expend any efforts on improvements if the entire place was to be relocated.

**'A tour of inspection through Bamboo Square'**  
**Report of the Medical Officer of Health Report to Durban Town**  
**Council, 25 July 1887**  
**(PAR. NHD. I/2/1. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

According to your order I went with the Sanitary Inspector on a tour of Inspection through Bamboo Square at the Point & have the honour to report to you on the same as follows. The localities visited were all inhabited by coloured people, Natives, Indians, some belonging to European employers of labour at the Point & these are nearly buried in the shifting sand (51-56), or unwarrantably neglected (63-65). The great majority of the Indian places defy all moral and physical Laws of Society. A woman exists with two to three men in the same room (28,33,34,39) which is scarcely large enough for one man &

<sup>38</sup> Though Alexander of the Borough Police thought that the number would realistically be more like 700.

<sup>39</sup> PAR. NHD. I/2/2. Natal Harbour Board correspondence, 6 February 1884.

<sup>40</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 18 January 1884.

<sup>41</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 9 February 1884.

has neither window nor floor (28,33, 34). A closet is used as a kitchen (3,35), fish is being dried in the house into which the kitchen opens (29) and house means here an only room. Cooking is very frequently if not generally done in the house: a window is an unappreciated luxury, a chimney an unknown institution in Bamboo Square. This state of affairs is highly dangerous to the health of the inhabitants & the neighbours especially in a place like the Point, where zymotic diseases might easily be imported from seaward. I therefore recommend that:

1. All shanties and irregular erections visited by me be removed.
2. The regular buildings to be thoroughly cleaned and ventilated.
3. No cooking place be put up without a proper chimney.
4. Means be formed to remove the sand, where it partly buries a building & where this is impracticable such buildings be abandoned.

In conclusion I beg to remark, that the Harbour Board might be asked to protect the buildings in Bamboo Square from the molestations of the ever shifting sand by restoring the original vegetation to the shore. I have conferred on this important point with Mr Wood, the curator of the Botanical Gardens & beg to enclose his letter to me ...<sup>42</sup>

It may not have been easily noticeable to those residing or working at the Point, but the repeated attempts to control the sandbar at the entrance to the Bay and the Harbour, through the building of piers and dredging, were starting to be effective, and one specific result of the development of the North Pier and South Breakwater was the growth of the land area of the Point itself through reclamation. This gave rise to a very wide and sandy beach and now areas previously close to the sea were to be found at some distance. The vegetation had disappeared, but the Inspector of Nuisances had not.

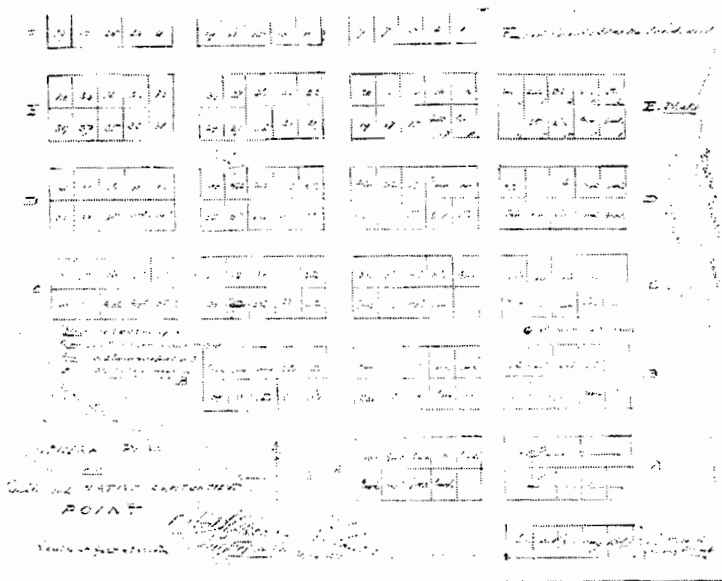
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<sup>42</sup> The numbers in brackets are the map references for the specific buildings mentioned.

**A reconstructed plan of portion of the Point, showing a part of the early Bamboo Square (centre left) as it existed in the early 1890's. Note the small shacks occupied by togt workers between the houses. (Author)**



**Superintendent Alexander's sketch plan of Bamboo Square and the condition of the properties at 27 June 1880. (Annexure to Report of Commission on the Present State of Port Natal, Natal Government Gazette, 10 August 1880)**

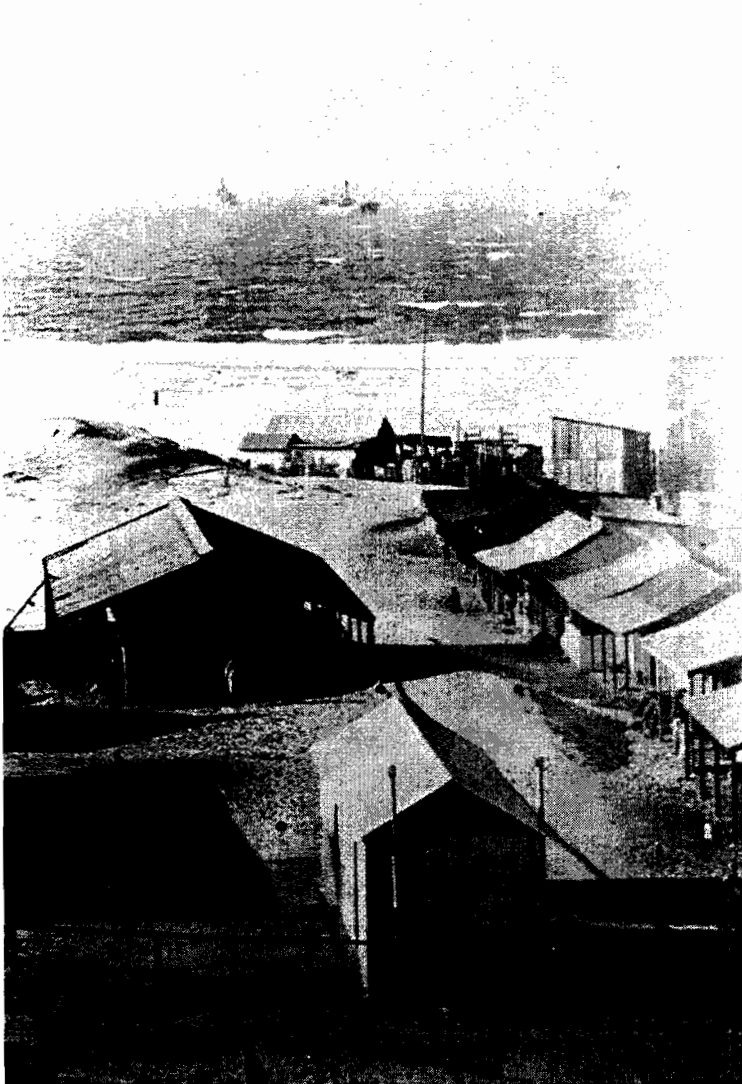


**The second Bamboo Square built close to the Point beach and adjacent to the first Bell Street Tugt Barracks. (Campbell Collections, University of Natal)**

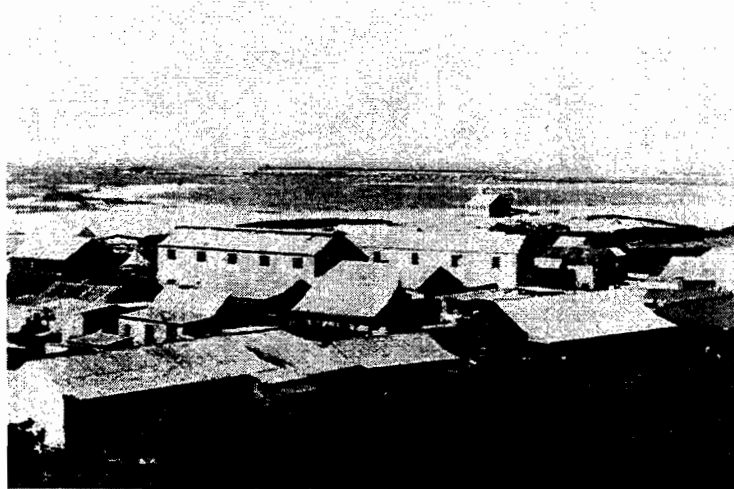




**A view of the Point after 1894 showing the Bamboo Square sewerage pumping station and chimney (upper right) surrounded by the remaining houses of the first Bamboo Square. The timeball is visible on a dune at the upper left. (Local History Museum)**



**Two views of Bamboo Square shortly before its demolition in 1903, which show the barracks erected by the municipality to provide temporary accommodation during rebuilding. (Local History Museum)**



**Bamboo Square, New Buildings'**  
**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,**  
**7 November 1887**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/3)**

That in consequence of the decision of the Council with reference to irregular erections inhabited at Bamboo Square, Point; notice was served on the different proprietors to carry out the alterations recommended, and twelve buildings have been put up, or altered as directed. The new buildings are fairly substantial, built on higher ground, have more space, and arranged in better order than formerly. Nearly the whole of the condemned erections have been removed. The Indian proprietors carried out the orders for the better construction of their dwellings promptly, but with the exception of the Union SS Company, the different firms at the Point having property there, have done little or nothing to carry out the necessary alterations, and their premises are as irregular and unsanitary as any which were in the locality. Unless the sand-drifts are planted with vegetation, the buildings recently erected will, in the course of a few years, share the same fate as those lately condemned. As the Sanitary Service done in this neighbourhood is very considerable, I beg to recommend the rating of the properties in this district in the future.

It is not likely that the tenants and others of their social situation would have had easy access to information concerning the future of the area, but the shipping companies were better informed, and despite their progressive public images, still dragged their heels at any kind of improvement, waiting for the reality of a firm alternative.

**'African Boating Company's application for a site in the Cantonment'**  
**Report by the Acting Resident Engineer, Crofts, to the Natal Harbour Board, 23 November 1887**  
**(PAR. NHD. 1/2/5. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

I beg to report that the lot adjoining the one at present occupied by the South African Boating Co. is the most suitable one for them to have. It is a larger piece than they ask for being 100 feet by 100 feet but I think it would be inadvisable to split up the lots as marked out, except in the case of individual applications from Indians for which purpose a lot might be set apart ...<sup>43</sup>

But even ordinary house dwellers needed some other options to the sandy cantonment.

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<sup>43</sup> In 1887 Charles Crofts was the assistant harbour engineer under Cathcart Methven. On Methven's dismissal in 1894 he became harbour engineer.

**'Application for site in Bamboo Square'**

**P. Allaman to Secretary, Natal Harbour Board, 24 October 1889  
(PAR. NHD. 1/2/5. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

I have the honour to apply for a site in the new cantonment to erect a dwelling house thereon — I have been living in the old Cantonment for several years but find it difficult to keep the sand from burying my house. I am willing to pay any rent the Board may charge if I can get a lot in the hollow behind the Barracks of the African Boating Co ...

## THE SECOND BAMBOO SQUARE

At some stage during this period residents of the original Bamboo Square spilled over into the newer area. Photographs illustrate small wood and iron houses situated very close to the Bell Street Togg Barracks, and suggest that they were constructed in the newly laid out Bamboo Square. [III.3] Is it possible that successive waves of urbanising poor consistently found this to be some kind of a refuge when events in the countryside or elsewhere in the town overtook them? Significant growth in shipping, trade and harbour works of the time would have encouraged a large increase in population as is borne out by the statistics.<sup>44</sup>

**'Overcrowding at the Point'**

**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to the Durban Town Council,  
4 June 1890  
(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/3)**

I beg to report that having made a house to house inspection of the Point Indian and Native Cantonment, Bamboo Square, hereby complain in terms of section 80 of the Borough Bye Laws, that some of the buildings or premises are so closely crowded with men, women or children, as to be unwholesome to the persons living therein, or to the neighbourhood.

The tabulated report ... describes the buildings, and rooms, and area, the number of persons, the total and average spaces; and also the number of persons which the Council is recommended to fix as being the number such building or premises shall accommodate. In the event of the number so fixed being exceeded at anytime, the occupier shall be held liable to the fines and penalties for a contravention of the Boro' Bye Laws. In limiting the number of persons as recommended, the conditions of surroundings have been considered, and authorities consulted with regard to space allowed in such places as the

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<sup>44</sup> B.J.T. Leverton, 'Government Finance and Political Development in Natal, 1843 to 1893' *Archives Year Book* 1 (1970).

Metropolitan and Dublin Lodging Houses, and the Poor Law Board of England  
....

Several of the parties mentioned in the report have been warned that their premises were overcrowded, and have failed to comply with the directions given. Some of the premises have insufficient window space, and other defects, which will be dealt with summarily under the Bye Laws.

The difficulty of dealing with the Indian population generally is well shown by the circumstances of this locality. Within the last two or three years, and in terms of the 81st section of the Boro' Bye Laws, the houses have been condemned, and the place almost entirely rebuilt, and the enforcement of the provisions of the 80th Section of the Boro' Bye Laws is now necessary to reduce the state of overcrowding existing. The railway Indian Barracks at Bamboo Square, accommodating about 13 families are insanitary and unwholesome. The rooms have a superficial space of about 85 feet are about 10 feet high, floor of sand, much below outside surface, no windows, louvre ventilation over doorway. Small enclosures are erected in front and concealing the doorway, generally used as kitchens. The places are perfectly dark at all times. The Barracks are the worst description of habitations at the Point, and are not fit for human habitations.

The sanitary reports of the period between 1890 and 1894 were relatively few and so we can surmise that the Sanitary Committee, under the apostle of local sanitation, Councillor Jameson, together with the Inspectors, had achieved some of their desired objectives.<sup>45</sup>

By 1884 miserable reports had begun to appear of the Point School,<sup>46</sup> which '... did not flourish'. In the following year the Rev. S.H. Stott made a formal application for a site for a mission school in the Indian and Native Cantonment. In 1885 the Wragg Commission found the existing school to be amongst the least commendable.<sup>47</sup> Thereafter it was reported on regularly. In 1889 there were 49 boys and 16 girls enrolled with an average attendance of 31. The young teacher, Sanichara, was a product of the Umgeni Board School and a year at the Durban Boys Model Primary School. A very small number of passes were recorded in reading, writing and arithmetic. By 1893, A.B. Paul had taken over as teacher and the numbers had dropped, '... the boys being much in demand for work on the wharf and aboard ship'.<sup>48</sup> By

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<sup>45</sup> The Bell Street Togh Barracks had been built in 1891 and, though it was not initially successful, it will have removed some of the attention away from Bamboo Square itself. Councillor R Jameson, the founder of a successful jam and chutney industry, was a town councillor from 1876 to 1904, and was the main driving force behind the Sanitary Committee of the council.

<sup>46</sup> *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal, 1884, U52.*

<sup>47</sup> W. Wragg, *Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-1887.*

<sup>48</sup> *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal, 1893, G54.*

1897 enrolment had reached 156 and thereafter fluctuated at around 100 pupils. Such large numbers created very cramped conditions, and it is therefore not surprising that a stream of teachers followed Paul. These included Viswasam who absconded with the school funds in 1899,<sup>49</sup> J.D. Roberts, and an unnamed teacher from Sydenham under whom the school briefly flourished. But the continued distraction of good wages offered at the nearby wharfs led to a very fluctuating enrolment, and by 1901 there was a threat by the education authorities to withdraw their grant.<sup>50</sup>

In 1893 the Town Council commenced work on a major water-borne sewage system for the town. The symbolic irony of the fate of the Bamboo Square settlement, which had been for so long embroiled in a sanitation controversy, was that at this stage its very centre should have been chosen by the Borough Engineer as the site for the sewerage outfall works. The low-lying nature of the site relative to the town gave it attractive engineering potential as a place for the construction of a large pumping station where the water-borne soil of the town could be directed, processed and the effluent pumped out by steam turbines along the North Pier to sea.<sup>51</sup> The construction works would require the removal by notice of 51 tenants. [III.4]

**'Petition of Thomas and 37 occupants of sites ...'  
Report of the Superintendent of Water Police to the Natal  
Harbour Board, 8 February 1894  
(PAR. NHD. 1/2/10. Natal Harbour Board correspondence)**

Secretary to Supt. Water Police ... In the meantime I have to ask you to report to the Board as to the character of the petitioners, and the way in which they are employed.

Supt. Water Police to Secretary ... There are 51 tenants, 38 of whom signed the petition to the Board. The way in which they are employed is shortly given as follows:

Harbour Board & Port Office	18
Employed by Landing agents	13
Storekeepers	9
N.G. Railway	2

<sup>49</sup> *Natal Government Gazette*, Harbour Works Reports, 20 June 1899.

<sup>50</sup> *Natal Government Gazette*, 12 November 1901.

<sup>51</sup> The surplus steam from this plant was used to generate Durban's first electric lighting system. Sewage effluent is still pumped from the Point around the Bluff and out to sea.

Dobies and Hawkers	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

Most of these people have held sites in the Cantonment for some years past, and they are very loathe to give up their sites. In the matter of character, the individuals themselves have given no cause for complaint, but they sublet their houses to all sorts of characters, several of their rooms are let to togt Kafirs and Kafir women, and it is these people who are at times rather troublesome, and they frequently figure at the police courts.

In his 1894 report, Superintendent Tatum gave a fair account of the settlement: 'This locality has been called some very harsh names, such as a den of infamy etc. I think that the people who called it such hard names, and who make so much noise about the place, know very little about it. I am unable to agree with these people, and so far as I have seen, it is certainly no worse than any other locality inhabited by a similar class of people.'<sup>52</sup>

From 1894 until 1898 there were few reports from the Water Police and the Inspector of Nuisances. By 1898, however, the latter had resorted to night inspections with the specific purpose of trapping 'dhobies sleeping in the same rooms where their customer's clothes or linen were kept or cleaned'.<sup>53</sup>

Some four years after the establishment of the sewerage pumping station the Durban Town Council achieved a major coup by persuading the Natal Government to include the whole of Bamboo Square, the site of the Togg Barracks and several other smaller pieces of land in the transaction which transferred the Addington lands to the Borough.<sup>54</sup> At least this terminated the uncertain period of confused and divided responsibilities and dual administration.

In 1901 in an unusually humane spirit the Council now authorised the raising and improving of the houses in Bamboo Square. Sand had been a problem from its commencement: from a sanitary point of view and as the settlement had encroached closer to the beach, so drifts and dunes regularly threatened the houses. Thus the municipality built two-storied wood and iron barracks close to the village, and began a process of removing the tenants house by house to these barracks while they reconstructed the framed wood and iron buildings on brick piers with suspended floors. [Ill. 5 and 6]

<sup>52</sup> *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal, 1894*, F42.

<sup>53</sup> DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/5/3. Durban Town Council, Report of the Inspector of Nuisances, 6 September 1898.

<sup>54</sup> W.P.M. Henderson, *Durban: Fifty Years of Municipal History* (1904) 177. The Addington Lands which bordered the Point to the north of Bell Street had been a bone of contention between the Town Council and the Colonial Government from the time of the inception of the Borough in 1854.

**'Report on Bamboo Square'**  
**(DAR. Durban Mayor's Minutes, 1901, 58)**

A select committee went over this location with me, the result of their deliberations being that the houses (where necessary) will be raised from the sand beds and improvements carried out generally in the back yards, and large temporary barracks erected on a site chosen to accommodate those families whose houses were being attended to. Up to date, some dozen houses have been raised, the ground hardened by a liberal disposal of ash, and a sand wall built along the sea front to stay the drift. The work of raising the houses is a slow process, especially as the inhabitants in most instances remain on the premises owing to the proposed barracks not having been erected.

## THE END OF BAMBOO SQUARE

But in the same year an ominous anxiety began to pervade local health and sanitary circles. Plague had come to South Africa and a real fear existed that it could break out in Durban at any time.<sup>55</sup>

**'Plague precautions'**  
**Report of the Inspector of Nuisances to Durban Town Council, 7**  
**March 1901**  
**(DAR. 3 DBN. 5/2/5/3)**

Efforts are being made to be prepared for the appearance of Plague, and special inspections of the Indian and Native quarters have been made, all Corporation Barracks are being limewashed, a circular letter distributed to employers of large numbers of Natives and Indians and a gang under the superintendance of a European employed at the Point Togh Barracks and Bamboo Square .... Taking the Point district in general, although not perfect, it has never been sanitarly good as at present, and if the latrine and sanitary conveniences at Bamboo Square, which has long since been promised, and which are urgently needed, were provided, Sanitation and health conditions would be materially advanced.

A case of plague was confirmed in Durban early in December 1902. Immediately a Plague Administration Committee was founded with wide-ranging powers. When on the 21 December 1902 it was reported that an Indian worker at the Bamboo Square sewerage works had died of the

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<sup>55</sup> This all appears to be somewhat contradictory in the light of subsequent decisions of the Town Council.

<sup>56</sup> Bubonic plague had broken out at the Cape in 1901. See DAR. Durban, Mayor's Minutes, 1901.



plague, this was sufficient to put an instant end to the settlement.<sup>57</sup> The following correspondence, however, makes it quite clear that the Durban Town Council had decided its fate at least one year prior to this.

**'The clearance of Bamboo Square'**  
**Correspondence between the Harbour Engineer, Health Officer**  
**for Colony and the Medical Officer of Health, Durban, 30**  
**December 1902 to 6 January 1903**  
**(PAR. NHD. II/1/45)**

**Crofts to Hill, 30 December 1902<sup>58</sup>**

Please say if all natives and Indians residing in Bamboo Square have been ordered to clear out. The attached application from Musthaffa is put up for your information. The only site that is available is the sea beach, but this during heavy winds and Spring tides is washed by the sea.

**Hill to Crofts, 1 January 1903**

I was not aware of any general order for the clearance of Bamboo Square, though I understood that some of the worst habitations were to be evacuated. Complete demolition would be highly desirable. I am making enquiries of the Borough Health Officer and will let you know further. The applicant, if his employees are to be turned out, must have a site, but of course it would be understood that the occupation is purely temporary & that the dwellings would be of the same character — I should recommend tents only. It would be a great assistance if you could let him have one. If he is washed out at spring tide that would be his picnic!

**Murison to Hill, 6 January 1903**

The Town Council 12 months ago served notice to quit to all owners and occupiers of dwellings in Bamboo Square to take effect on 31st Dec. 1902. The application which the Harbour Engineer is receiving will be from those parties. I hope that some supervision will be made regarding the construction and arrangements for such dwellings that a repetition of the conditions (per)taining in Bamboo Square will not occur. The expression 'temporary accommodation' is made to cover a multitude of sins in and around Durban.

**Hill to Crofts, 6 January 1903**

For your information. It would appear from this that the Medical Officer of Health intends to evacuate as many houses in Bamboo Square as he can, and, of

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<sup>57</sup> DAR. Durban, Mayor's Minutes, 1903. Between January and March 1903, 116 houses were demolished in Bamboo Square. The Minute also records that 295 other houses were demolished elsewhere in the town.

<sup>58</sup> Dr Ernest Hill had been appointed as the first Colonial Medical Officer of Health in 1902, see E. Hill, *Report of the Plague in Natal 1902-1903* (London, 1904).

course, there will be a considerable advantage in this, both from a general and special point of view, at the present moment. I should, however, strongly recommend that the condition of occupancy of any site which you may feel disposed to grant on the Back Beach should be that no person obtaining a site shall occupy it for more than three months, and that he shall not be permitted to erect any accommodation of any sort other than tents, and I would also advise that certain conditions be added on the point of general cleanliness of surroundings. You will observe the kindly interest which is taken by the Medical Officer of Health for the Borough in your business.

**'Temporary use of military buildings for Harbour Department workers'**

**Harbour Engineer to Ordnance Officer, Durban, 9 March 1903  
(PAR. NHD. 11/1/45)**

Owing to the Plague Administration Department having cleared out the whole of the tenants of Bamboo Square, amongst which were a number of Indian workmen belonging to this Department, we are exceedingly short of quarters, and I shall be glad to know from you whether you would be willing to allow the Harbour Department to temporarily occupy one of the wood and iron buildings put up on the Reclaimed Area near the Transvaal Cold Storage premises. I noticed yesterday that these buildings are not much occupied and it would be a great convenience to the Harbour Department if you could let us take one of them over.

**'Application to erect buildings on the beach'**

**Harbour Engineer to Secretary, Lands and Works, 27 March 1903  
(PAR. NHD. 11/2/79)**

You will see that their natives who are housed in tents are dissatisfied with their accommodation, the tents in which they are housed frequently being blown down owing to the difficulty of securing them properly in the loose sand. Messrs. Nicoll & Co. ask that they may be allowed to erect their old buildings on the site now occupied by the tents and to remove the tents to the Bluff on the reclaimed area near the old Lazaretto where they propose to keep a permanent gang for coaling vessels ... In regards to the old buildings being re-erected on the Beach, Dr Hill gave it as his opinion that no wood and iron buildings should be allowed there. I understand that Nicoll & Co.'s old building in Bamboo Square has been disinfected thoroughly and as it is unlined there would not I think be much danger of its becoming a harbour for rats. As soon as Bamboo Square has been levelled and is ready for buildings Messrs Nicoll & Co. undertake to put up permanent buildings in accordance with the Borough regulations.

After a tenuous existence stretching over more than thirty years the settlement of Bamboo Square thus ceased to exist. Most of the inhabitants thereafter moved to other edges of the borough such as Island View, South

Coast Junction, Clairwood and Stella Hill. Given the nature of its original land ownership, its concealed siting within the dunes of the Point and its proximity to resources of fish and work, it had been an extraordinary home for a generation of numerous persons who were not welcome in the town of Durban. For some, their lives were reflected in the squalor of buildings and an unsanitary environment. Certainly the specific ethnic origins of many of its inhabitants and their mixed racial composition provided an ideal focus for the energetic attentions of local authorities and their concerns for segregation, sanitation and the prevention of 'nuisances'.

Perhaps the one dimension of the story which exhibits a degree of extraordinary cunning was the way in which prominent commercial firms and even government agencies piggy-backed on the settlement to provide themselves with cheap accommodation for their own workers. However it is also possible that these actions established a sort of social and political cushion. In the drama that unfolded over these thirty years the colonial government and its local instrument, the Natal Harbour Board, also played roles at times contradictory and dualistic. Outright condemnation would not only have seriously harmed their relationships with a large number of shipping and labour companies but deprived themselves and the Natal Government Railways of a place for their own compounds and barracks. These institutions would continue well into the twentieth century, and eventually house many thousands of dockworkers.

## FURTHER DEMOLITIONS

Between 1903 and 1937 numerous new informal settlements were to spring up around Durban. Many were on land incorporated into the newly enlarged Borough in 1932, which was one specific reason for the extension of the borough boundaries. Even as late as 1935 and 1937 shacks and huts were demolished at the Point.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> DAR. Durban, Mayor's Minutes, 1935 and 1937.