

# Stellenbosch: A Short History, 1679 - 1979

Three Centuries of Growth

Following the discovery of the valley by Simon van der Stel in 1679 the village of Stellenbosch was founded in 1685. Buildings were traditionally constructed of available local materials and thatched roofs. The organic layout of the central core of Stellenbosch is an unusually successful town structure. Over centuries residents and visitors commented on the town and its surroundings. In the previous century, when cars became common, the town expanded vastly. The geographic expansion and rapid influx of people from diverse cultures present both challenges and dynamic opportunities.

## 1679: A new name on the map

It was on 8 November 1679 that Governor Simon van der Stel came upon a fertile valley, through which ran “a clear river... adorned with fine and lofty trees”. He and his party camped for the night on a little island in the Eerste River. He named the place Stellenbosch, commemorating his own name and the wealth of natural vegetation growing there. He straightway decided that this beautiful valley called for settlement and within a year there were already a number of farmers in the Colony of Stellenbosch.

## 1685: A seat of justice, a house of God and human dwellings

As early as 1683 there must have been a little school building, though the site is unknown. It was not until 1685 that the hamlet of Stellenbosch was formally demarcated in the instructions which Commissioner Baron van Rheeде tot Drakensteyn issued in consultation with Simon van der Stel. He indicates four sites, (a) The Seat of Justice (Drostdy) on the little island, where the Theological College now stands: (b) a House of God, surrounded by its churchyard – the area now bounded Plein, Andringa, Church and Van Ryneveld Streets: (c) plots for the village inhabitants between these two points; (d) a street running parallel to the river with grounds extending down to the water (Dorp Street). The Drostdy and the church were built immediately; the first plots were distributed in 1686 and very soon afterwards houses were being built at what is now the intersection of Church and Van Rhyneveld Streets. It was not until 1710 that the first plots on Dorp Street were appointed though in those days it was known simply as “the wagon road to the Cape”.

## 1710: The oldest picture of Stellenbosch

The little village of 17 to 18 houses is portrayed in a drawing done by a certain E.V. Stade in 1710 – a fortunate record, for in that very year a fire laid the whole village waste. The Drostdy was rebuilt forthwith on its old site, but the little church was dedicated on the site where the Moederkerk now stands. With the building of this church a new street was demarcated, Drostdy Street, originally known as “Beplante Plein” (square planted with trees.)

## 1776: Fifty years of limited growth

A drawing by J Schumacher dated 1776 shows that the village has grown very little in the preceding half century. Plein Street has become an avenue of oaks, Dorp Street has many more houses, the Braak is becoming defined to the east by means of Bird Street, then just a wagon track, and to the south the “new mill” (c. 1750). The year after the drawing was made the Company erected a Powder Magazine on the western boundary of the Braak and so this village green began to take shape.



## 1776-1817: Faster development

After 1776 growth was accelerated, but in 1803 a second great fire damaged or destroyed something like forty houses. Fortunately repair and re-erection soon took place. An alteration in building style becomes apparent in an attempt to reduce fire hazard by doing away with the thatched roofs, and in accordance with the fashion of the time many a one-time gabled house was given a second story (e.g. Grosvenor House).



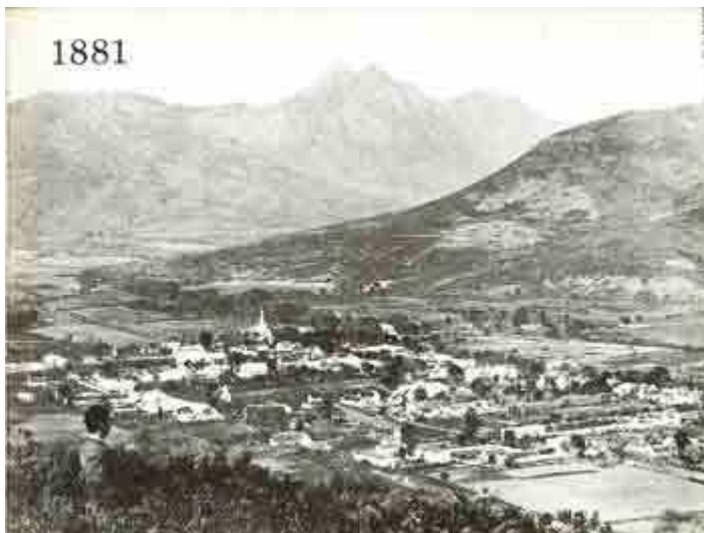
## 1817: The Herzog map, a valuable topographical document

Growth during the forty years 1776-1861 is clearly shown when we look at the detailed map made by the surveyor WF Hertzog. Houses have filled up many an empty block; the old churchyard abandoned since 1710 was sub-divided and offered as plots in 1783; the same happened to the garden of the parsonage bordered by Church, Bird, Dorp and Andringa Streets. The contours of the centre village were now established: they form roughly an oblong beside the Eerste River: Dorp Street and Alexander Street (if it were lengthened to join Van Ryneveld Street) from the two long sides, the two short sides being Drostdy and Market Streets. The Avenue ("Die Laan") with its oak trees is marked on the map and the Braak is already a well-defined village green framed in a double row of oaks. Van Ryneveld Street, also with its oaks, is shown running as far as where Victoria Road now crosses it.



## 1859: The Hager map – new development

In this year the Town Council had a new plan of Stellenbosch drawn up with the object of selling off more building sites. The old village has obviously grown very little: a few open sites of 1817 are now built upon in Dorp, Herte and Bird Streets, in which rows of semi-detached houses are soon to be seen. A few interesting buildings date from this period: the Neethling parsonage (1859) built as the vista-end of Dorp Street; Devonshire House (c. 1851); the Rhenish Church (1823, enlarged in 1840); St. Mary's Church (1852) and the Lutheran Churn (1853). All these buildings still stand, except the "Old Parsonage". The intention of the Town Council was to encourage settlement to develop away from the long stretch of fertile land along the banks of the Eerste River, out of the dry northern "plain" in the region of the present Du Toit Station. This plan did not really succeed; what did happen was the erection of long rows of semi-detached houses, so that the character of the streets here was quite unlike that of the old village with its huge gardens and shady trees. This area is at present being developed, except for the section of Van Ryneveld Street between Merriman Avenue and Banhoek Road, which has been restored to recreate a typical street scene.



## Back to the river bank

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the town began to revert to its old pattern of growth and to develop along the fertile land near the river, east of Drostdy Street, in the area between The Avenue and Van Riebeeck Street. In one direction this stretched towards Mostertsdrift and in the other down towards Stellenbosch Station. In this section of the town we still come across interesting examples of Victorian houses as well as those of the early years of this century.

## Further Developments

Further development is outside our terms of reference, suffice it to say that the valley Simon van der Stel saw stretching out before him in November, 1679, is now almost fully built up or has been proclaimed as townships. Stellenbosch is beginning to climb the surrounding hills and occupy the adjoining valleys – exemplifying the character of our time.