

A case study of four South African War (1899-1902) Black concentration camps

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Abstract

On 11 October 1899, the South African War commenced between the British Empire and the South African Republic and Orange Free State Republic. This conflict saw the targeting of civilians by all sides throughout the conflict and a harbinger of 20th century “Total War”, when civilians and their resources were harnessed to support military objectives. Set against the prior use of concentration camps in Cuba and the Philippines, the war was followed by a genocidal campaign undertaken by Imperial Germany against the Herero people in German South West Africa in 1906.

Although civilian internment in South Africa was not genocidal by design and purpose, it caused a high loss of life and lasting bitterness amongst Boer descendants. Black concentration camps, however, were far more lethal to their internees and designed along a completely different model. Their role was to coerce labour while supporting the British war effort in defeating the Republican forces. Through a work or starve policy, combined with withholding food, medical support and shelter, many perished from systemic neglect. Yet the memory of this experience of the black concentration camps has entered historical discourse only recently, in the last three decades.

The area of study, examined by this article, is those black concentration camps established during 1901 to 1902, at Klip River Station, Witkop, Meyerton and Vereeniging, in the former South African Republic (ZAR). Contemporary tangible evidence of these camps remains fleeting. However, this article identifies where these camps existed and how they were integrated into the British military’s counter-guerrilla warfare strategy. This in turn enables further research into these camps that may conclusively establish their historic locations.

Keywords

Vereeniging; Meyerton; Witkop; Klip River Station; Black concentration camps; South African War; Langkuil Location; Waldrift Location; Henley on Klip

Introduction

War commenced on 11 October 1899, when the Boer forces of the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State Republic invaded Natal Colony and the Cape Colony. They besieged the towns of Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking, shelling civilians trapped within these towns, their aim being to induce surrender. Yet by 15 February 1900, British forces lifted the sieges of Kimberley and again Ladysmith, on 27 February 1900. Their invasion of the Boer Republics followed. Bloemfontein fell on 13 March 1900.¹ On 31 May 1900, British troops entered Johannesburg and, on 5 June 1900, captured Pretoria.²

British military strategy hinged on capturing key towns, while consolidating its logistic routes around South Africa's railway network, as the railways connected the interior to the coastal supply ports; yet also represented their Achilles heel. Also essential, from the economic perspective, was reopening the Rand goldmines, the Kimberley diamond mines and coal mines at Vereeniging and Springs. Concomitant to these activities was mopping up remaining Boer resistance and defeating their forces.

The railway infrastructure, with its bridges, track, trains, and telegraph lines formed the primary target for the Boer forces. Hit-and-run attacks against convoys and the capturing of isolated British garrisons further enabled their resupply of munitions and weapons. For the Boers, their support and supply bases were provided by civilians residing on farms and in small towns, unoccupied by British troops.³

To defeat what was becoming an escalating guerrilla war, the British Field Marshal, Lord FS Roberts, implemented a counter-guerrilla warfare strategy. This hinged around retaliation against civilian property in areas where the commandos were active. Farms and towns were destroyed, livestock seized or killed and crops destroyed. During the final quarter of 1900, Boer and black

¹ Anglo Boer War Museum, "Introduction to the war: Second British offensive", (available at <https://www.wmbr.org.za/view.asp?pg=research&pgsub=intro1&pgsub1=5&head1=Introduction%20to%20the%20War>, as assessed on 22 April 2020).

² Anglo Boer War Museum, "Introduction to the war The mobile war begins", (available at <https://www.wmbr.org.za/view.asp?pg=research&pgsub=intro1&pgsub1=6&head1=Introduction%20to%20the%20War>, as assessed on 22 April 2020).

³ J Hattingh, "The British blockhouse system", F Pretorius, E Wessels, et.al., *Scorched earth* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2017), pp. 218-220.

civilians were interned into camps, hurriedly established near garrisoned towns and outposts positioned along the railway lines.⁴

In the area of study for this article, this was the civilian experience throughout the last half of 1900, intensifying throughout 1901.

Total War and concentration camps

In November 1900, Lord HH Kitchener succeeded Lord FS Roberts as Commander in Chief. Lord HH Kitchener realised that the key to winning the war was to gain dominance over the rural landscape. Consequently, Lord HH Kitchener applied a systematic scorched earth policy throughout the annexed Boer territories, using a military strategy similar to that deployed by General V Weyler during the Cuban War of 1868-1878, and again during the insurrection of 1895-1898, when General V Weyler applied the *Reconcentrado* system.⁵

Lord HH Kitchener's aim was to grind down the Boer forces through attrition and break their morale by destroying their homesteads, bankrupting the populace and interning their families and labourers. The records of the Military Governor, Pretoria, housed in the National Archives in Pretoria contains Army Circular 29, in which, Lord HH Kitchener spelled out his counter-guerrilla warfare strategy.

*“Of the various methods suggested for the accomplishment of this object, one that has been strongly recommended, and has lately been successfully tried on a small scale, is the removal of all men, women and children and natives from the districts which the enemy persistently occupies. This course has been pointed out...as the most effective method of limiting the endurance of the Guerrillas.”*⁶

Lord HH Kitchener applied three tactics to achieve his end.

- forced removals and land clearances and the associated destruction of all rural infrastructure.
- securing the railway network by constructing at least 8 000 fortifications known as blockhouses and then extending these to “fence” in the fighting terrain, thus contracting the Boer forces’ zones of influence. These military grids or cordons effectively parcelled up the fighting terrain.
- military operations, using superior numbers of troops, to engage and grind down the weakened Boer forces and through attrition, force their surrender or operational ineffectiveness.

⁴ JS Mohlamme, “African refugee camps in the Boer Republics”, F Pretorius, E Wessels, et al., *Scorched Earth* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2017), pp. 112-113.

⁵ B Nasson & AM Grundlingh, *The War at Home* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), pp. 11-12.

⁶ NA, Pretoria, Military Governor Pretoria (MGP), Vol. 258, Reference 21/12/1900: Army Circular 29, p. 17.

On 15 March 1901 Lord HH Kitchener further clarified his aims:

*“All natives living on farms should be collected and sent to the railway; if possible household natives should be permitted to accompany families or sent to the same station. Supplies found on the farms should be sent in with the natives to feed them until their arrival at the railway. Additional supplies should be taken by the supply officers and the remainder destroyed. All standing crops are to be destroyed either by turning cattle into them or by burning. All forage is to be destroyed.”*⁷

This Total War strategy shattered the rural economy, resulting in a humanitarian crisis. Captured civilians were interned in military managed camps inside the military controlled zones. Initially known as refugee camps, these camps later became known as concentration camps. At the time, the Boer camps were known as Burgher Refugee camps, and in the case of black civilians, Native Refugee Camps.⁸

On arrival at the camps, the military separated civilians according to their race into separate camps for established for Boer and black civilians. Between December 1900 and mid-1901, these Boer and black camps were often positioned 1.6 km apart. Archaeological surveys undertaken at Brandfort (1999), Kimberley (2001-2008) and Vryburg (2007) confirmed this spatial distance separation, as do archival documents relating to camps in other areas.⁹

British policy dictated that black civilians were not to be rationed nor provided with adequate medical support and materials with which to build shelters, the aim being, despite the humanitarian catastrophe, to reduce the financial cost of the war. This policy further sought to coerce black civilians to provide labour in exchange for food, in line with colonial military policy of the time. Namely, doing the bare minimum for enemy civilians who were to be managed (or mismanaged) along the basis of “let die”.¹⁰

⁷ Free State Archives (FSA), Bloemfontein, Lord HH Kitchener, Circular Memorandum 31, March 1901, p. 15.

⁸ JS Mohlamme, *African Refugee Camps in the Boer Republics...*, p. 112.

⁹ G Benneyworth, “Traces of Forced Labour: A History of Black Civilians in British concentration camps during the South African War, 1899–1902” (Ph.D, UWC, 2017), p. 23 (available at <http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/5466>, as accessed on 22 April 2020). See also, G Benneyworth, “Land, labour, war and displacement: A history of four black concentration camps in the South African War (1899 1902)”, *Historia* [online], 64(2), 2019, pp. 14-15. (available at http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0018-229X2019000200001&lng=en&nrm=iso, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2019/v64n2a1>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

¹⁰ R Chickering, “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept”, MF Boemke, R Chickering, S Forster, *Anticipating Total War: The American and German eExperiences 1871-1914*,

Black internees sought work from the British troops and administrators of the Boer camps. Latrine cleaning and other work was rewarded with tinned meat, or discarded scraps of food. Many men sought work in the mines or with the British forces. By early 1901, death from infectious diseases, exposure and malnutrition in the black camps increased. Those who had arrived with cash or cattle attempted to sustain themselves to avoid labour, yet this independence eroded with time.¹¹

The Native Refugee Department, 1901-1902

A key objective for the alliance between the British political, military and international capital was restoring economic activity through increasing gold, coal and diamond mining output. On 4 May 1901, the first gold mine reopened in Johannesburg.¹² During May 1901, the military and the Kimberley diamond mining industry finalised arrangements to increase diamond mining operations by coercing labour through the “no work no food” policy. Any internees, refusing to work or cooperate, were to starve.¹³ Similar discussions happened between the military and the owners of the Vereeniging coal mines, given that coal was crucial to operating the Rand gold mines and essential to fuel the towns, given the approaching Highveld winter.

Until May 1901, no formal bureaucracy existed which managed the black camps, in the period prior to the formation of the Native Refugee Department in that month. The entire operation from mid-1900 until mid-1901, until the formation of the Department, depended on where civilians were interned. In certain cases, they may have received a modicum of humanitarian support, dependent on which military officer or Resident Magistrate was in charge of the camp in which they were interned. For example, for camps in the Cape Colony, permission was granted to ration any refugee whom the Resident Magistrate was satisfied was destitute.¹⁴ In many instances, after having had their homes destroyed and their livestock seized, they were forcibly removed by

(Washington/Cambridge: German Historical Institute, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 13-28.

¹¹ G Benneyworth, “Land, labour, war and displacement: A history of four black concentration camps in the South African War (1899–1902)”, *Historia* [online], 64(2), 2019, pp. 5-6. (available at http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0018-229X2019000200001&lng=en&nrm=iso, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2019/v64n2a1>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

¹² HW Wilson, *After Pretoria: The guerrilla war* (London, The Amalgamated Press Ltd, 1902), Vol. 2, p. 629.

¹³ G Benneyworth, “Traces of forced Labour: A history of black civilians in British concentration camps during the South African War, 1899–1902” (Ph.D, UWC, 2017), pp. 25, 229 (available at <http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/5466>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

¹⁴ Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCA), Resident Magistrate Kimberley, Reference 1/KIM, 5/2/1/3/17: 8 February 1901.

the military and literally dropped next to the nearest railway garrison and left to fend for themselves. There were cases where mass starvation occurred, such as at Taung, where as many as 2 000 graves attest to this.¹⁵

In other instances, internees were allowed to retain their stock and thus able to sustain themselves, for example, at Vryburg. From December 1900 until May 1902, almost 3 000 internees at Vryburg were self-sustaining (never rationed) and only brought into the formal structure of the Native Refugee Department in May 1902, literally days before the war ended.¹⁶ This Vryburg example has bearing on the Witkop black concentration camp.

The Native Refugee Department fell under direct British military command, with Lord HH Kitchener as its ultimate head. The Department would control all black civilian refugees, its aim being to underwrite the British war effort, reduce the financial cost of the war and redirect labour to the British army and the mines. The women, children and elderly men inside these Departmental Camps would function as forced wartime agricultural labourers, as the camps were to grow crops for the military. Non-cooperation resulted in the immediate suspension of rations. These forced wartime labourers were to work or starve.¹⁷

The Native Refugee Department also functioned as a labour reserve for the British army.¹⁸ December 1901 saw over 6 000 workers directed to the army as labour, while 13 000 camp internees were employed by the military.¹⁹ Men working on the mines or with the British forces had the cost of feeding their families deducted from their salaries. These avenues of employment were an obvious choice; rations received and cash wages enabled food purchases with which to save their lives and those of their families. The rationale being that the camps were to cost little or nothing at all, while functioning on the basis of “let die”.²⁰

¹⁵ G Benneyworth, “Land, labour, war and displacement”, *Historia* [online], 64(2), 2019, p. 11. (available at http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0018-229X2019000200001&lng=en&nrm=iso, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2019/v64n2a1>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

¹⁶ Free State Provincial Archives Repository (FSA), Bloemfontein, Colonial Office (CO), Vol. 54, Reference 362/02: 1902.

¹⁷ B Nasson, “Black people and the camps”, B Nasson, AM Grundlingh, *The war at home* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), p. 176.

¹⁸ NA, Transvaal Administration Reports, Final Report, 1901., and NA, Superintendent Refugee Camps (SRC), Vol. 10, p. 3422, 1 July 1901.

¹⁹ FSA, Chief Staff Officer (CSO), Vol. 86, Reference 358/02: Colonel De Lotbiniere to Major HJ Goold-Adams, 1902.

²⁰ NA, MGP, Vol. 245, 27 May 1901.

By July 1901, the Transvaal camps were brought under Departmental control, which has direct bearing on the black camps in the area of study. By 1 August 1901, camps in the former Orange Free State Republic followed. The die was cast.

Military officers selected the camp sites, assisted by agricultural specialists. Boer farms already cleared of civilians, usually no further than 3.5 km from established military garrisons, on terrain favourable for natural drainage, near natural water supplies, and on fertile agricultural ground, formed the ideal sites. Under no circumstances was cultivation or settlement to occur within 1.5 km of the railway line, garrisons and blockhouses, as these required a clear field of rifle fire around themselves. "...The camps (were) formed along the Railway line, then considered sufficiently well blockhoused to assure a protected area for at least three kilometres on either side of the line."²¹

This has bearing when attempting to locate the historic terrain of former black concentration camps. The military used the above template, which was adjusted to fit local circumstances. In the case of the area between Vereeniging and Klip River Station, the railway does not pass through undulating landscape, forests, nor is it dominated by mountains or high hills. Therefore, the template, in the case of the site selection for the Meyerton, Witkop, Klip River Station and Vereeniging camps would have been based on their positioning in relation to the blockhouse system and the Meyerton and Vereeniging municipal areas.

Positioned alongside the railway lines, the camps in turn supported the blockhouses, making it difficult for the commandos to cross the railway and manoeuvre their forces. With thousands of hectares of land under cultivation, the camps reinforced the British military zones. Located on Boer farms, they also functioned as a morale breaker. From the commandos' perspective it appeared that their land was given over to black settlement.²²

Regarding fatalities inside the camps, differing numbers emerged over time. In 1913, the toll was calculated at 14 148.²³ Recent scholarly research, using only surviving archival records, calculates that during 1900 to 1903, covering the entirety of the existence of black concentration camps, approximately 20 000 deaths occurred due to medical neglect, exposure, infectious diseases and

²¹ FSA, Superintendent Native Affairs (SNA), Vol. 15, Report by the Native Refugee Department, ORC, Bloemfontein to the Deputy Administrator ORC, Bloemfontein, 18 January 1902.

²² G Bennetworth, "Traces of forced labour: A history of black civilians in British concentration camps during the South African War, 1899–1902" (Ph.D, UWC, 2017), p. 23 (available at <http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/5466>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

²³ JS Mohlamme, *African refugee camps in the Boer republics...*, p. 124.

malnutrition.²⁴ Other sources cite 20 000 deaths, yet refer only to the Native Refugee Department camps, formed after mid-1901, thus negating camp fatalities prior to the formation of the Department.²⁵

However, many of these archival records cited are incomplete or were destroyed immediately after the war. Additionally, this does not take into account the period prior to the formation of the Native Refugee Department in May 1901, when thousands of black civilians dropped along the railway line were left, in many cases, to starve. Consequently, the actual death toll prior to the formation of the Native Refugee Department from June 1900, and until the final camps closed, as late as 1903 in certain instances, was higher than all the sources claim. Total fatalities cannot conclusively be established.

Notes on the archives consulted

The documents quoted, when dealing with the black concentration camps in the area of study, were located during 2005, while undertaking a research project into the Kimberley black concentration camps, and black camps elsewhere in the country. These documents comprise what were termed during the war, Staff Diaries, compiled by the garrison commandants at Klip River Station, Witkop, Meyerton Station and Vereeniging. Some additional documents, located in other collections are also quoted. All terminology quoted is drawn directly from the historic records. With respect to distances, miles are converted to kilometres, except if used in original quotations.

December 1900-September 1901

This section offers a glimpse into military activities along the railway line between Klip River Station and Vereeniging, an aim being to identify the locality of the black concentration camps in this area. These camps were not isolated entities on the veld. They were integrated into the British military garrisons and blockhouses, their relationship symbiotic in the counter-guerrilla war campaign. Therefore, by locating the British positions using the written archive and any surviving features and, linking this to references about black civilians or scouts, it could be possible to locate the camps.

²⁴ J Van Zyl, R Constantine, T Pretorius, *An illustrated history of black South Africans in the Anglo Boer War. A forgotten history* (Bloemfontein, The War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2012), p. 10.

²⁵ H Giliomee & B Mbenge, *A new history of South Africa* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2007), pp. 214-221.

With respect to Henley on Klip, this village stands on the original farm Slangfontein, as does the suburb Golf Park, directly east of Meyerton railway station which, after the British occupation of the area during mid-1900, had a permanent British military garrison. Slangfontein farm was cleared of civilians immediately after Christmas Day 1900. It is notable that within a month after Lord HH Kitchener took command and, five days after issuing Army Circular 29 on 21 December 1900, Total War intensified in the area of study.

“In consequence of the renewed activity on the part of the enemy and of the fact that the Boer families in the Slangfontein District seemed to be in communication with and friendly disposed towards the enemy it was thought advisable to clear the Slangfontein District, a cluster of bases lying in the valley of the Klip River and capable of harbouring a considerable body of the enemy at dangerous proximity to this station and the clearance was effected on 26th and 27th December 1901. The inhabitants being dispatched to Vereeniging with their goods and livestock at the advice of the Assistant District Commissioner there.”²⁶

Boer activity was reported immediately outside Meyerton station on 29 December 1900. That night their forces raided a black settlement called Langkuil Location, which the Staff Diaries record being 2.2 km north-west of Meyerton.²⁷

“Natives from a neighbouring Kaffir location called Langkuil came to the bridge picket and reported that the enemy were looting their cattle. The picket fired at what appeared to be a covering party who returned the fire. It transpires that the enemy has taken 187 head of cattle, 975 goats and sheep and 17 horses; and mortally wounded a Native who attempted to bring information to this station (he died the next day).”²⁸

A sample of the June 1901 Staff Diaries pertaining to Klip River Station, Meyerton and Vereeniging indicates the land clearances under way, and additional securing and fortifying the railway line. Their entries reveal that, on numerous days of that month, many thousands of sheep and cattle herded into their garrisons. Sheep at Meyerton went to Klip River Station and then herded North to the Witwatersrand abattoirs.

Regarding Boer military activity during February 1901, the Meyerton garrison Commandant diarised that, “...for the greater part of the month the district has been clear of the enemy.”²⁹ Klip

²⁶ NA, FA Steytler Collection (FK), Vol. 1803, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton, 26 December 1900.

²⁷ This black settlement was situated on the farm Langkuil 363 IR, West of and adjacent to Meyerton in the Midvaal Local Municipality.

²⁸ NA, FK, Vol. 1803, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton, 29 December 1900.

²⁹ NA, FK, Vol. 1885, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton, February 1901.

River Station garrison also reported no Boer activity. This is telling, as Total War against civilians had consequently cleared large numbers of Boers from these districts. The Vereeniging Staff Diary differs, recording numerous skirmishes with casualties, attempts to derail trains and Boer forces attempting to manoeuvre across the railway. In all likelihood this was because that on 8 June 1901, the Staff Diary reported that the new blockhouses south of Meyerton were not ready. Thus a weak point in the line, which was in the Redan area, just North of Vereeniging.

The garrisons were thinly spread; for example on 13 August 1901, the Meyerton garrison numbered 66 men.³⁰ In the area of study, garrisons were positioned at Vereeniging, Meyerton, Witkop and Klip River Station, a weak point being Witkop. Garrisons would later occupy a blockhouse at Redan and other blockhouses along the line, including two stone and mortar blockhouses at Witkop replacing the entrenched position there.

British garrison at Witkop, 1900-1901

The entrenched garrison was on the highest topographical feature, enabling a line of sight towards Klip River Station. Height assisted in withstanding a direct attack or encirclement by superior Boer forces, possibly equipped with artillery. The risk of a night attack meant that the position had to afford a clear and unobstructed view of all approaches to it. A 360-degree clear field of fire was essential for survival. Consequently, natural cover for an attacking force was non-existent. Stores, munitions and rations were secured, within a heavily barricaded defensive perimeter, along with horses, mules and livestock. The railway line lay directly adjacent West of the position and the ground between, devoid of natural obstacles, enabling supplies to be offloaded easily and the terrain swept with rifle fire, if required.

Such a position, with its stores and munitions, could act as magnet for the Boer forces. Throughout the second half of 1900, Boer forces attacked numerous British railway garrisons and, in some cases such as at Rooiwal near Kroonstad, overran them, capturing and destroying large quantities of supplies and railway infrastructure, while inflicting numerous casualties.³¹

Given the above requirements, this position was on the ridge immediately east of the railway line overlooking a culvert directly north of the position.³² The fortified garrison was later replaced by

³⁰ NA, FK, Vol. 1816, Reference: Staff Diary, Brigadier General Cunningham, Lines of Communication Wolwehoek to Irene, February 1901.

³¹ Major General Sir F Maurice, *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902* (London, Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1906), Volume IV, pp. 129-132.

³² This culvert stands beneath the existing Vereeniging to Johannesburg railway line.

a blockhouse, identical to the surviving blockhouse 1.6 km to the North, adjacent to the Engen fuel stop, situated east and adjacent to the R59 Highway.³³

The February 1901 Staff Diary described the construction of this surviving blockhouse as being, "...the Blockhouse on the kopje N. of the post is progressing well."³⁴ In the late 1970s, light industry and buildings, were developed on the Witkop site and the blockhouse, which replaced its original garrison, demolished.

This February 1901 Staff Diary details activities at the Witkop fortified position. Troops included artillery, infantry, mounted infantry, a permanent medical doctor, native scouts, some stock, horses and mules. A wire entanglement surrounded the camp. Defences consisted of shallow trenches, built up with sandbags and earth, with loopholes for head cover from incoming fire. Boer movements were reported almost daily by "native scouts" and stock, for example 3 000 horses and sheep, herded in on 4 February 1901. On 7 February 1901, saddlery, horse shoes and clothing for the "native scouts" arrived.

The presence of "native scouts" is relevant to the position of the Witkop black concentration camp. These mounted scouts were black men originating from farms in the areas in which they operated. Their information gathered on Boer activities was fed into the military intelligence system. Knowing the landscape in which they operated and, in many cases the Boers they gathered information about, they were highly effective in counter-guerrilla warfare operations. Their families were under the protection of the military and living nearby; within the safety of the blockhouses, and may have provided labour in exchange for food.

On 10 February 1901, the Witkop commandant reported that he had, "...received confidential circular from intelligence, re sending scouts further out." However, this was difficult to implement, as reports received, indicated that the Boers killed and mutilated any black scouts that they captured. Nevertheless, he sent out two of his scouts named Andries and Charlie. These two scouts at Witkop were active in intelligence gathering. In the February 1901 Staff Diary, Brigadier General Cunningham again recorded that, based on these scouts' information, two days later the Witkop garrison artillery fired two shells at a black kraal, after Andries reported that Boers had entered the kraal. The garrison also heard the Howitzer at Meyerton open fire.

³³ The R59 is a provincial road route in South Africa that connects the town of Hertzogville with Alberton (south-east of Johannesburg) via Parys and Vereeniging.

³⁴ NA, FK, Vol. 1795, Reference: Staff Diary, Brigadier General Cunningham, Lines of Communication Pretoria to Wolwehoek, February 1901.

The average effective range of these artillery pieces was four to five kilometres. The fact that shells were fired at the kraal suggests it was unoccupied, its original inhabitants then living interned inside the Witkop black camp, probably 1.6 km east from the garrison, and under its protection.

On 7 June 1901, the Witkop garrison, consisting of nine soldiers with a 15 pounder artillery piece were brought into Klip River Station. They were moved, as the former post was now replaced by a blockhouse dependent on Klip River; the one that was demolished in the 1970s.³⁵

During July 1901, thousands of sheep, some in single herds of 7 000, and cattle passed through Klip River Station. On 7-8 July 1901, 59 black civilians arrived at Klip River Station from the east. All able bodied men were sent to the Army Labour Depot and the remainder into the "...location."

³⁶ This location was the nearby Klip River Station black concentration camp.

The land clearances and fortifying the line continued throughout September 1901. On 4 September 1901, the "...blockhouse by rail crossing 1 ½ miles south of this station finished and occupied and named Crossing Blockhouse."³⁷

In January 1902, the Klip River Station Commandant recorded, two incidents of Boer activity in the immediate vicinity of the two Witkop blockhouses and the Witkop Location. On 15 January 1902, at around 8.30pm, one of the Witkop blockhouses opened rifle fire on a party of Boers, but their fire went unreturned. The Klip River Station Commandant reported that this party of Boers appeared to have enquired of the, "...Natives about WITKOP where they could find cattle, hence the alarm. No 9 armoured train cleared up the situation."³⁸

Boer activity around the Witkop Location continued. The Klip River Station Commandant's January 1902 report recorded that on 23 January 1902, six Boers visited Witkop Location after dark. Again on 24 January 1902, the Witkop blockhouses reported that there were three Boers at this Location. The two blockhouses opened fire to which the Boers returned fire from a wood located east across the Klip River, approximately 550 metres away from the blockhouse at Witkop, the one demolished in the late 1970s.

³⁵ NA, FK, Vol. 1885, Reference: Staff Diary, Brigadier General Cunningham, June 1901.

³⁶ NA, FK, Vol. 1806, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Klip River Station garrison, July 1901.

³⁷ NA, FK, Vol. 1842, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Klip River Station garrison, August 1901.

³⁸ NA, FK, Vol. 1842, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Klip River Station garrison, January 1902.

The relevance of these incidents is that, at this stage of the war, black civilians in this area had all been cleared into black concentration camps. There were no civilians residing within rifle range from this blockhouse, unless they were part of a concentration camp or military labour camp. Therefore, these civilians resided in a settlement, described as a Location, in the nearby vicinity, by permission of the military.

Boer activity was also reported near Meyerton. On 19 January 1902, the Meyerton Commandant diarised that an

“...Armoured train called for here at two thirty this morning. 7 Boers had got into Waldrift location. Lt Ross sent down to investigate, was calling Witkop and Klip River for ½ hour from 2.30am but could not get through.”³⁹

This account indicates that prior to raiding the Waldrift Location the Boers cut the telephone lines. Of significance is that Waldrift Location is the only name uncovered to that date naming a black settlement near Meyerton, again in locality by permission of the military.

Witkop and Meyerton black concentration camps, 1901-1902

Witkop black concentration camp

This section examines the record for the Witkop and Meyerton black concentration camps. In the sample of archive documents, in addition to fixed landmarks such as blockhouses, railway points and rivers, sufficient information exists to comment.

During July 1901, the Department of Native Refugees brought the Transvaal camps under their control, including refugees at Klip River Station, Witkop, Meyerton and Vereeniging. In August 1901, the Staff Diaries reflect preparations underway to establishing the Klip River and Meyerton black concentration camps. On 11 August 1901, in Meyerton, “...Mr Gessant and Captain Van Zyl arrived from Klip River. Belong to Native Refugee Dept. and called re cultivating etc.”⁴⁰ They left for Vereeniging two days later.

As at September 1901, the first document indicating black concentration camps both in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony, where land was under cultivation, lists Klip River Station, Witkop, Meyerton and Vereeniging and includes a map.⁴¹

³⁹ NA, FK, Vol. 1842, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton garrison, January 1902.

⁴⁰ NA, FK, Vol. 1816, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton garrison, August 1901.

⁴¹ FSA, CO, Vol. 36, Reference 348/01: September 1901.

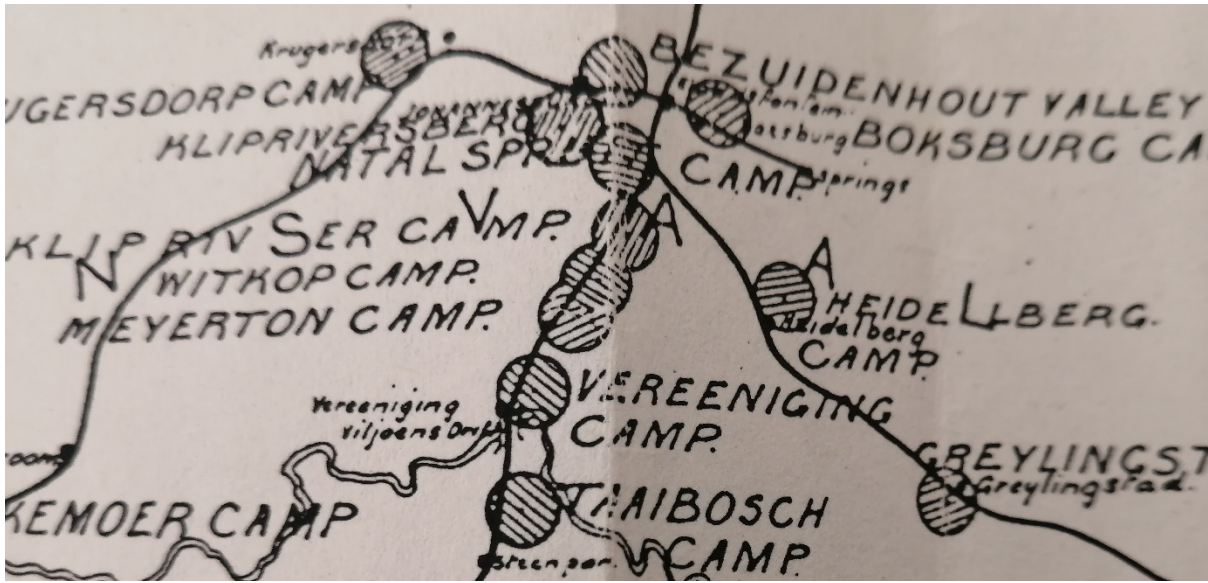


Image 2.

Name	No. of Natives	Families
Vereeniging	2 427	405
Meyerton	800	135
Witkop	150	25
Klip River Station	400	66

From October 1901, the Department compiled monthly statistical records, listing the camps' internee numbers, births, deaths, rationing and other information. Witkop disappeared from these monthly records and was never listed again.⁴² Vereeniging, Meyerton and Klip River Station remain listed until the camps closed after the war, posing questions. Did Witkop camp shut in October 1901, with its internees then moved to Meyerton or Klip River Station? Or did it remain where it was located then and, if so, does evidence exist of this?

The Witkop black concentration camp did not suddenly appear and then disappear during the month of September 1901. That month, when it was entered into the list of black concentration camps, black civilians already resided there, brought in and dropped by the military in that area, during the land clearances earlier in 1901. As was the pattern elsewhere, in the fighting zones across the Transvaal and Orange River colonies during 1901, able-bodied black men were coerced to work for the military and the mines. Their families exchanged labour with the garrisons in return for food. The civilians at Witkop provided labour to the nearby garrison.

⁴² NA, Secretary of Native Affairs, Vol. 58, Reference 2097/02: 30 October 1901.

When the nearby camps at Klip River Station and Meyerton formally opened, Witkop was brought onto the Department's books as a Camp. The hypothesis is that it was taken off the books in October 1901, yet was never relocated. Given that it comprised 25 families totalling 150 internees, all the able-bodied men were in cash employ, their wages deducted to feed their families. The civilians residing there, predominantly women and children and all former farm workers, were self-sufficient and providing labour. The women were growing vegetables along the fertile Klip River banks, all within the protective cordon of the Witkop blockhouse and the surviving blockhouse North of it.

There was no need for the military authorities to incur additional costs in rationing these civilians, similar to the case at Vryburg. Hence they disappear from the records of the Native Refugee Department. However, they did not disappear from the landscape. In January 1902, the Boer forces were in a dire state and raided black concentration camps for provisions. Known nearby raids occurred at Waldrift Location south of Meyerton and Taaibosch Camp south of Vereeniging.⁴³

The records show that during January 1902, at least three separate Boer parties attempted to raid the Witkop Camp. In one raid they enquired of the inhabitants where to obtain cattle. Armoured trains, equipped with artillery, machine guns and search lights patrolled the railway lines. In one such raid at Witkop Camp, an armoured train arrived and, "...cleared up the situation." The nomenclature presumably refers to it opening fire and driving off the Boer raiding party.

In two of these raids, the Witkop blockhouses opened fire, yet the third raid is the most telling. That of the Boer party returning fire at the Blockhouses from a closer position to that of the raiding group, from a wood 550 metres away, East across the Klip River. These Boers, firing from the wood, were a rear guard, screening the raiding party, a short distance away from themselves, and located further East.

Of the two blockhouses in the immediate Witkop vicinity, the surviving one is beyond effective rifle range from the Boer position in the wood. However, the blockhouse demolished in the 1970s, was well within rifle range from this Boer firing position, 550 metres away, across the Klip River. This indicates that the Witkop black concentration camp was positioned east of this blockhouse, across the river and, at most, 1.6 km from it.

That was the site of the Witkop black concentration camp.

⁴³ FSA, CO, Vol. 55, Reference 410/02: Report detailing defence of Taaibosch Camp against Boer attack.

Vereeniging and Meyerton black concentration camps

The Native Refugee Department monthly returns indicate from September 1901, until the closure of the Department after the war in 1902, black concentration camps existed at Vereeniging and Meyerton. Correspondence in the files of the Controller of Passports (the Pass Office) generated in Vereeniging and Johannesburg corroborates this. This correspondence, generated as the war was about to end and after peace was declared, deals with implementing the radius rule around Vereeniging and Meyerton, thus declaring the area within the radius as a labour district. Any black civilian entering the radius would have to be in possession of a pass. Although this correspondence is not about the black concentration camps in Meyerton and Vereeniging, it mentions them, thus offering evidence as to where they were situated, at that date.

On 30 April 1902, the Vereeniging Pass Officer described the Vereeniging black concentration camp thus. "...The natives at present living in the Xaba Location will be allowed to remain there as it is the site selected for a Location for this Township [Vereeniging] – but those below the Burgher Camp should be shifted to outside the gate of the Xaba Location."⁴⁴

On 29 July 1902, the Controller of Passports (Pass Officer) in Vereeniging wrote:

"The reason I propose including Meyerton was because there are 2 Refugee camps there – with about 3000 natives - who will probably not be all repatriated before the 1st Sept, when I understand that the Refugee Camp Dept. ends. There are another 3000 in the refugee camp here [Meyerton] – 1200 on the farms, and in the Township [illegible] and Meyerton, and on the farms around on my map, possibly 500 more natives – or roughly speaking in all about 8000. In the Vereeniging District alone there are only some 5000 – including the Refugee Camp."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ NA, SNA, Vol. 27, Reference NA 894/02: Vereeniging, 30 April 1902.

⁴⁵ NA, SNA, Vol. 27, Reference NA 894/02: Vereeniging, 29 July 1902.

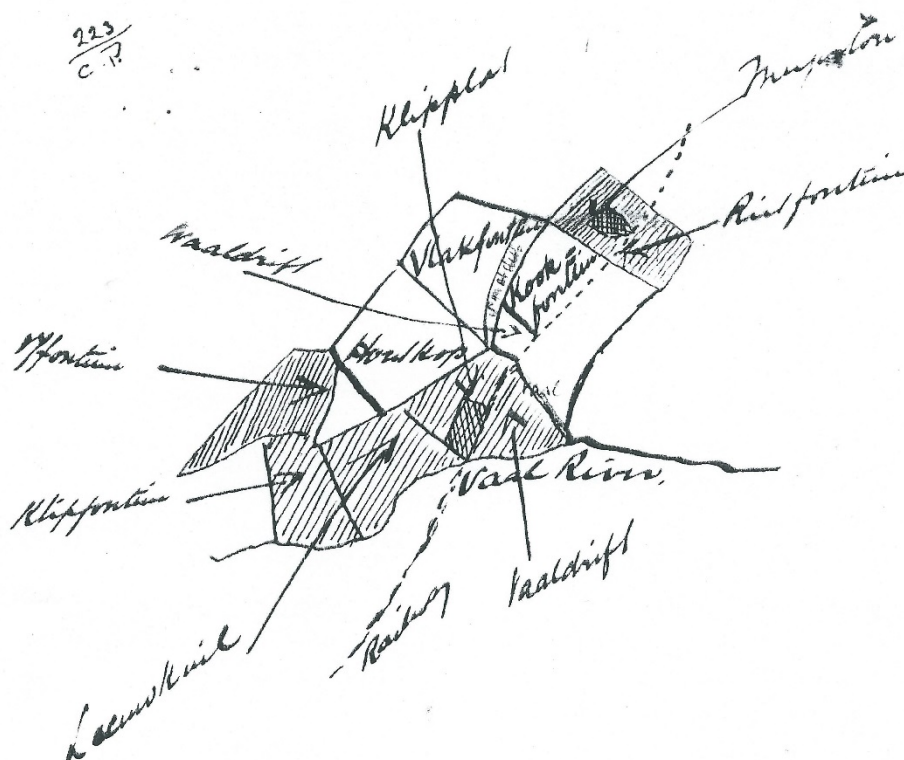


Image 2.

The nine farms used by the Department of Native Refugees as agricultural centres on which forced wartime labourers toiled in the Vereeniging black concentration camp were: Rietfontein, Vlakfontein, Kookfontein, Waaldrift, Houtkop, [illegible, see map] Vaaldrift, Leeuwkuil, and Klipfontein.

On 13 August 1902, correspondence between the Commandant's Office at Vereeniging and the Pass Office reveals:

*"I am of the opinion that the 10 mile radius is unnecessary. The Passport Regulations should certainly be enforced to (illegible) the mines in this Dist, as well as the natives in the Waldrift site which extends to over 4 miles but within 5 miles of the township. Meyerton for a radius of say 2 miles from the station should be proclaimed but there is no necessity to include the farms around for 10 miles."*⁴⁶

The Waldrift Location was raided by the Boers during January 1902.⁴⁷ Significantly, as by this stage of the war, there were no independent black settlements anywhere near the railway line,

⁴⁶ NA, SNA, Vol. 27, Reference NA 894/02: Vereeniging, 13 August 1902.

⁴⁷ NA, FK, Vol. 1842. Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton garrison, January 1902.

blockhouses and garrisons, which were not part of the black concentration camp system. Situated near the blockhouse at Redan, (demolished in the 1970s), Waldrift Location is one of the sites of the Vereeniging black concentration camp. It formed part of the complex of nine farms comprising this camp, spread out around Vereeniging, and bordering on the Meyerton district. Significant, as this is one of the identified living areas of this Native Refugee Departmental camp.

One of the two camps at Meyerton, the site where black civilians were interned, was Langkuil Location, 2.2 km north-west of Meyerton. At the close of December 1900, black civilians residing there were not yet cleared off the land, despite the British forces who, days before, had cleared all civilians from the adjacent Slangfontein farm to the East.⁴⁸ On the night of 29 December 1900, Boer forces looted livestock and horses from Langkuil Location. During the raid, Langkuil Location's inhabitants reported to a British picket guarding a bridge over the Langkuil Spruit, approximately 1 330 metres north of Meyerton railway station garrison.⁴⁹ The picket opened fire on a Boer party screening the raid, who returned fire.⁵⁰

As Langkuil Location was reported being 2 414 meters from Meyerton station, then it was approximately 1 082 meters north west of the bridge picket. The records consulted do not reveal if Langkuil Location was later moved by the British forces into a concentration camp at Meyerton, which makes such a later move unlikely. It is possible that its inhabitants were added to by refugees dropped by British forces during 1901, prior to the formation of the Department of Native Refugees. If so, then this site was one of the two black concentration camps at Meyerton.

Conclusion

The written archive, the surviving blockhouse near Witkop, and knowledge of the blockhouse positions at Witkop and Redan, enable an identification of the likely areas of the black concentration camps in question.

The material consulted does not narrow down the site of the Klip River Station black concentration camp. Should graves from this camp still exist, locating them would provide an

⁴⁸ This black settlement was located on Langkuil Farm 363.

⁴⁹ This Nederlansche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij (NZASM) bridge with its defending picket is located at Latitude 26°32'31.54"S, Longitude 28° 0'58.77"E. The bridge was built in approximately 1892. "NZASM Southern Line Bridge over the Langkuil Spruit" (available at <https://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes.php?bldgid=13039&countadd=1>, as accessed on 22 April 2020).

⁵⁰ NA, FK, Vol. 1803, Reference: Staff Diary, Commandant, Meyerton garrison, December 1900.

answer. One possibility is that the graves exist, yet are located in an area where one would not look for them, for example within state property, or areas unpleasant to search, such as sewage farms. Or their surface evidence has been destroyed since the war. Hence they remain unaccounted for.

The evidence for the Witkop black concentration camp indicates that it was between 900-1 800 metres east of, and across the Klip River from the Witkop blockhouse, which no longer exists.

The Vereeniging black concentration camp was called Xaba Location. The Pass Officer stated that the internees could remain there, as this was the site selected for a post war Location.⁵¹ They had been brought in by the British forces and were either civilians unable to labour on the farms nearby, or were families supported by the wages of their menfolk working on the mines, railways or with the military. The black civilians referred to as camped below the Burgher camp, resided in a labour camp, providing labour to the Vereeniging Boer concentration camp.

In 1902, the Meyerton black concentration camp occupied two separate sites. An interpretation of the archival evidence indicates that one of these was Waldrift Location, or possibly Langkuil Location. Tangible surface evidence, such as graves, would confirm this, assuming they survived the urban development in these areas during the 20th century.

In balancing up the evidence for these camps, the surviving written archive consulted does provide evidence. The records reflect that the camps were directly linked to the British counter-guerrilla warfare strategy, initially initiated by Lord FS Roberts, and later intensified by Lord HH Kitchener. They resulted from the application of Total War in the area under study, the resultant scorched earth policy and associated land clearances. The black civilians were first interned before the formation of the Native Refugee Department, and then taken on by the Department. The internees provided labour, in exchange for their survival. Tangible evidence of their existence and that of their burial sites may yet remain, for which further research to locate these is recommended.

⁵¹ NA, SNA, Vol. 27, Reference NA 894/02: Vereeniging, 30 April 1902.