



History 101

Jan Van Riebeeck

Van Riebeeck (21 April 1619 – 18 January 1677) was born in Culemborg, in the Netherlands, as the son of a surgeon. He grew up in Schiedam, where he married 19-year-old Maria de la Quellerie on 28 March 1649. She died in Malacca, now part of Malaysia, on 2 November 1664, at the age of 35. The couple had eight or nine children, most of whom did not survive infancy. Their son Abraham van Riebeeck, born at the Cape, later became Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies.

Joining the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1639, Van Riebeeck served in a number of posts, including that of an assistant surgeon in the Batavia in the East Indies. He was head of the VOC trading post in Tonkin, Indochina. In 1643, Riebeeck travelled with Jan van Elseracq to the VOC outpost at Dejima in Japan. Seven years later in 1650, he proposed selling hides of South African wild animals to Japan.

In 1651, he commanded the initial Dutch settlement in the future South Africa. He landed three ships at the future Cape Town on 6 April 1652 and fortified the site as a way-station for the VOC trade route between the Netherlands and the East Indies. The primary purpose of this way-station was to provide fresh provisions for the VOC fleets sailing between the Dutch Republic and Batavia, as deaths en route were very high. The *Walvisch* and the *Oliphant* arrived later in 1652, having had 130 burials at sea.

Van Riebeeck was Commander of the Cape from 1652 to 1662; he was charged with building a fort, with improving the natural anchorage at Table Bay, planting cereals, fruit and vegetables and obtaining livestock from the indigenous Khoi people. In the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town there are a few Wild Almond trees still surviving. The initial fort, named 'Fort of Good Hope', was made of mud, clay and timber, and had four corners or bastions. This fort was replaced by the Castle of Good Hope, built between 1666 and 1679 after van Riebeeck had left the Cape.

Van Riebeeck was joined at the Cape by a fellow Culemborger Roelof de Man (1634-1663) who arrived in January 1654. Roelof came as the colony bookkeeper and was later promoted to second-in-charge.

Van Riebeeck reported the first comet discovered from South Africa, C/1652 Y1, which was spotted on 17 December 1652.

In his time at the Cape, Van Riebeeck oversaw a sustained, systematic effort to establish an impressive range of useful plants in the novel conditions on the Cape Peninsula – in the process changing the natural environment forever. Some of these, including grapes, cereals, ground nuts, potatoes, apples and citrus, had an important and lasting influence on the societies and economies of the region. The daily diary entries kept throughout his time at the Cape (VOC policy) provided the basis for future exploration of the natural environment and its natural resources. Careful reading of his diaries indicate that some of his knowledge was learned from the indigenous peoples inhabiting the region. He died in Batavia (now renamed Jakarta) on Java in 1677.

