

WELGEMEEND – A FARMHOUSE IN THE CITY

Cape Town today is a vast city, stretching about thirty kilometers either way. But for two centuries it fitted snugly into “Table Valley”, the amphitheatre formed by Table Mountain, Lion’s Head and Devil’s Peak. In fact, there was enough land left, “above” the small city, at the foot of the mountain, for the establishment of a number of small farms. “Gardens”, they were called, but they were well watered and fertile and were highly desirable properties. They have since become engulfed by the Table Valley suburbs: Gardens, Oranjezicht and Tamboerskloof. But several of their old homesteads still survive. Perhaps the best known of them is Leeuwenhof, still doing good service as the official residence of the Premier of the Western Cape.

Welgemeend is another of these surviving Table Valley farmsteads. It is also the only one that is generally open for inspection by the public. For it is now in the grounds of the Jan van Riebeeck Hoërskool and houses the Boerneef Collection of South African art, which is discussed elsewhere in this brochure. As a property, it has been there for over three hundred years, from the time it was granted to Andries de Man in 1693, over four “morgen” (about four hectares) in extent. The name that it was given means “well-intentioned”. This could mean that it turned out less of an asset than it was meant to be. But this is unlikely, for the “garden”, though not large, had a natural spring on it (which is still there today) and was to prove an exceedingly successful farmlet.

On his death in 1696 De Man left Welgemeend to his widow, Elsje van Suurwaarden (after whom Elsie’s River was named, when she later settled at De Tygerbergen, now Altijdgedacht near Durbanville). By that time it already had “a dwelling and a barn” on it, and there is no reason to think that the original house does not form part of the present homestead, though it was probably much smaller and may have had a thatch roof then. For the following half-a-century the property passed through many different hands. When in 1719 one of these, Engela Breda, bought it, it included, beside the homestead with its one large and two smaller rooms, its kitchen and a cellar, and the property also included a winery, a slave house, a wagon house and a (cattle?) kraal – which, altogether, points to a fairly substantial complex.

The longest period of ownership by one family began when in 1772 the widow of owner Bartholomeus Bosch married Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr. For a full 172 years Welgemeend remained the home of the Hofmeyr family, several of whom carried the names Jan Hendrik and which included statesman “Onze Jan” (1845-1909) and cabinet minister J.H. Hofmeyr (1894-1948). It must have been during the Hofmeyr period that the homestead of Welgemeend gradually assumed its present appearance – but also that it was gradually reduced from a mini-farm to a generous suburban residence. In 1944 it was acquired by the Cape Education Department to become the Jan van Riebeeck Hoërskool, the main red-brick building of which now forms a somewhat unfortunate backdrop to the old homestead.

Precisely which parts of the homestead date from when will be hard to establish short of stripping the plaster off all its walls. That its fabric represents different periods is certain. What strikes us first is its “flat” roof, while so many traditional Cape buildings have steep thatched roofs, often with gables. It did not always look like this, and several pictorial representations – taken from a distance and not always very accurate – seem to show that it once did have a pitched roof, though without a gable. It also only occupied a section of the present, fairly extensive, groundplan – precisely where has not yet been established. Immediately on entering the house we see that it consists of two rows of rooms, the one behind the other. This is rare in Cape homesteads, where a thatch roof could not span more than one row of rooms. But a good look at the ceiling in the large “salon” at the back, with its magnificent, slightly sloping teak beams, suggests that this was built as a “lean-to” to the front, which would then have been the part that was thatched.

Let us, lastly, look at what the main façade and the main entrance to this lovely building

have to tell us. For those of us familiar with the doors and windows from the “Dutch” period, i.e. before c.1800, those of Welgemeend show subtle differences. The door is no longer of the “stable-door” variety, of which the upper half opens independently from the bottom, but it is vertically divided, each “leaf” with three panels. Its fanlight is oblong, with an elliptical tracery containing a flower-like motif, while the Dutch ones usually had straight glazing bars with panes much like those of the windows. The tall sash windows, too, are slightly different, for not only do their lower halves slide upwards, but their upper “sashes” can slide down while the Dutch-period ones had fixed upper parts resting on a fixed “transom”. All this points to a date not too long after the regime change, perhaps c.1805-10. This would point to the period of ownership of Stephanus Johannes Hofmeyr, 1789-1824, during which time the price of the property more than doubled. Stephanus’s father died in 1805 and may have left an inheritance enabling his son to enlarge and/or modernize the homestead. It is interesting to note that the total slave population in 1807 amounted to 42, of who 22 were adults.

Another striking feature is the narrow entrance passage. We know that most unchanged Cape Dutch homesteads are characterized by their wide-open and hospitable *voorhuis* in which, on entering, one finds oneself in the very heart of the house. English custom, with its emphasis on “privacy”, disapproved of this and gradually more and more homesteads – of English but also of Dutch owners – were built as or changed into entrance-passage homes. The 1805-10 appearance of the central part of the homestead therefore provides an fascinating insight into the changing tastes of the time. All the features described above were to become general practice during the English period, but here they occur very early on. The Hofmeyrs were clearly very keen to follow the new British dictates of fashion.

Was saw that it is likely that sections of the homestead go back to at least a century earlier. But with the rapid succession of subsequent owners, the house underwent several later changes, too. Also to be seen on the *stoep* is a fine example of a Victorian “French window”, a double, glazed door with tall louvred shutters dating from about 1880. In 1950 the building was subjected to some alterations that may today strike us as somewhat inappropriate, especially the section at the extreme right-hand end, once forming a separate building but now linked to the older part by means of a “fill-in” section. A large and equally inappropriate gable erected over this separate building in 1916 in honour of “Onze Jan” Hofmeyr has since been removed.

This, then, is a brief account of a unique Table Valley homestead, its long history fascinatingly reflected in its multi-layered architecture. And when, standing on the *stoep* and looking towards Table Bay down the slope across the garden, it is not difficult to imagine the view as it was until not all that long ago, with its fields and vineyards and, far below, the little City of Cape Town with dozens of sailing vessels anchored in the Bay.

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