

THE ATHENAEUM NEWLANDS

Some aspects of its story

by

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With a note on its present role

by

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PREFACE

The story of the Athenaeum presented here is an attempt to provide some historical background to a building that has come to play so large a part in the cultural life of Cape Town. What follows could not have been accomplished without the co-operation and assistance so willingly given by Miss Edith Bird and Miss Victoria Pilgram, granddaughter and daughter respectively of Mr Bernhard Pilgram. I am greatly indebted to them for making available family papers and impressions for inclusion.

Mr John Rennie was responsible for solving two major architectural problems and for this he deserves a special word of thanks.

I am also indebted to Mrs Duckham (Desiree Picton-Seymour), Mr Ernest Ford and to Dr A V Hall for their help, and to Mrs M J Vonk, the resident custodian of the Athenaeum whose request to the Historical Society of Cape Town for information on the history of the building initiated this exercise.

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Rondebosch

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THE ATHENAEUM

formerly La Rochelle, Newlands

Some aspects of its story

THE ATHENAEUM forms part of the estate Louwvliet granted by Old Cape Freeholds vol. 2 no. 334 on 20.4.1718. The history of this property goes back to 1660 when it was owned by Jan Pieters Louw, the founder of that family in South Africa.

During Louw's lifetime, constant clashes with neighbours concerning boundaries had taken place and, after his death, these were intensified to such an extent that the authorities ordered a resurvey to settle the dispute. This resurvey resulted in the above grant to his widow, Beatrix Weyman. The full story of this land between 1660 and 1822, when it came into the hands of Jacob Letterstedt through his marriage to Maria Barendina Dreyer, is to be found on pages 31 - 46 of *The Josephine Mill and its Owners* published by the Historical Society of Cape Town.

In 1841, by Transfer 157/24.10.1841, Letterstedt transferred 22 morgen 105 sq. rds. of the Mariendahl Estate, as he had renamed Louwvliet, to his step-son-in-law, Johannes Nicolaas Hamman and it was from this land, which he in turn named Klein Louwvliet, that the Athenaeum derived.

Hamman was married to Martha Maria Magdalena Dreyer, daughter of Mrs Letterstedt by her second of three husbands, Johan Frederick Dreyer (1765-1819) and he made his home on Louwvliet. But after his wife's death in 1852 he appears to have moved elsewhere. To have accommodated the family which comprised issue of the first marriages of both parents, together with their own eight children, all minors when their mother died, would have required a large house but no details of either style or siting, have been discovered.

In 1853 Hamman's Klein Louwvliet was put up for sale and very heavily subdivided. It is interesting to note that many of the smaller portions were sold to members of the Muslim community as the names Slamodien, Ziediek and Gamaldien suggest.

By 1857 two portions of Hamman's property, which had been sold to his wife's brother, Caspar Bekker Dreyer and to her step-brother, Hendrik Cornelis Dreyer, were united in the hands of the former. Ten years later Caspar went insolvent and by Transfer 191/18.4.1867, 2 morgen 175 sq.rds. 119 sq.ft. of land, which was later to become the Athenaeum, was sold from his insolvent estate to Jacob Isaac de Villiers. The transfer describes the land as 'now known as La Rochelle' and it is more than likely that De Villagers, whose family had close ties with La Rochelle in their native France, had adopted this for the property before it had been registered in his name, hence its insertion in the document.

This transfer to De Villagers mentions 'buildings' which are neither described nor shown on a diagram and in fact no building on this estate appears thus until well into the 19th Century when the present Athenaeum already existed. The form and style of its predecessor must therefore remain purely speculative.

De Villiers is something of an enigma; he does not appear anywhere in the almanacs/directories, nor is there a death notice to establish when and where he died or details of his family, if any. The transfer deeds mention that his father was 'D A' but this has not been investigated. That he owned La Rochelle for eight years is all that has been revealed and by Transfer 170/8.7.1875 he sold it 'with buildings thereon' to Bernhard Pilgram for £1450. Here, at Newlands, the Pilgram family of parents and eight daughters lived until 1889 when, on the night of 5 February that year, the house was destroyed by fire. The youngest daughter, Victoria, then aged 16 months today lives at Somerset West.

Since Pilgram features so largely in the Athenaeum story some biographical details seem appropriate. These have been supplied by his granddaughter Miss Edith Bird of Somerset West who was also responsible for the loan of plans and other documentary material. Born on 4.6.1845 at Barmen, Elberfeld, Germany, Pilgram died at Rondebosch aged 98½ on 15.1.1944. In 1872 he left Germany for England where he married Amy Marian Benison (1851-1928), daughter of Major Samuel Benison of the Enniskillen Dragoons and his wife Mary. December 1874 saw the Pilgrams and their first daughter arrive in Cape Town where Bernhard assumed the post of treasurer to the Rhenish Missionary Society with particular reference to their trading stations in the North West Cape. After six years he resigned and opened a store in Okiep but continued to live at Newlands. Between 1898 and 1905 he and his family were in England where he handled the London office of the Van Ryn Gold Mining Coy. Returning to South Africa, he set up

business as a merchant in Cape Town with wide and varied interests. He had been a founder member of the City Club in 1878 and in 1938, aged 93, was the only surviving such member. British naturalisation papers had been issued to him in 1887 and two years later he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for the Wynberg district and in 1889 was Chairman of the Claremont Municipality. He was a member of the South West African Concessions Committee from May to August 1920 and rendered valuable services to that body.

That Pilgram intended to rebuild the burnt La Rochelle is backed by family information and by a set of surviving plans which he commissioned the architect, Anthony de Witt, to draw for him. These four sheets, 'The Proposed Villa Residence at Newlands for Bernhard Pilgram Esq.', are dated 1889 and are typical De Witt in style. The outward appearance of the dwelling is very similar to the Loopuyt house in Milner Road Rondebosch, which is another example of the work of this architect.

The Pilgram plans show a basement and a house of two storeys comprising twenty rooms, four of which were for the staff; also two bathrooms, two separate WCs, kitchen, wine cellar, grocery store, vegetable store, dairy and scullery. The living rooms included a ball or billiard room, huge day nursery and a servant's hall. This grandiose conception was never put into operation for before Pilgram could do so fate decreed otherwise.

In 1890 the Union Bank, which had been established at the Cape for over forty years, failed. Pilgram had just been appointed to its board of directors but had not as yet attended a meeting. Possibly he might have escaped involvement but he made no attempt to avoid the responsibilities he felt he owed to the shareholders and he assigned his estate. La Rochelle was put up for sale by the trustees and purchased by Frederick Chapman Gibson and registered in his name by Transfer 1550/22.4.1891.

As has already been mentioned, there is no official diagram showing the form of the original La Rochelle, but two contemporary maps do give some idea of the house. The first is an undated map of unknown origin assigned to between 1873 and 1879 and this shows La Rochelle with Pilgram's name added, as an oblong dwelling with two entrances to the grounds, one from what was Station Road, Newlands and the other from Camp Ground Road. The second map of military origin (as is the first) and dated 1885 (Map. 1/1855, Cape Archives) shows what appears to be a slightly smaller La Rochelle in relation to the grounds but, as in the case of the earlier map the house is sited very close to Camp Ground Road. The driveway in the earlier map seems to suggest that the house faced Table Mountain. Unfortunately neither of these maps is suitable for reproduction.



BERNHARD PILGRAM (1845-1944)
taken at about the date that he owned La Rochelle (The Athenaeum).

One thing is certain about Pilgram's La Rochelle: it was a double-storey house. Two photographs taken shortly after the fire and in the possession of the family demonstrate this quite clearly and these pictures have played their part in solving a minor mystery concerning the house.

Preserved with the De Witt plans is a set of four diagrams, most professionally drawn by Pilgram himself, showing a more modest dwelling of two floors and ten living rooms. The family has always believed that these were prepared for the rebuilding of the burnt house and this contention is strengthened by the fact that 'existing walls and floors' are shown and that an attic-type double-storey was also indicated as existing and was obviously to be incorporated in the new building.

This belief has now been proved to be incorrect. The architectural expertise of Mr John Rennie who is ever ready to help when appealed to, has shown that the two photographs could not relate to the attic type double-storey appearing on Pilgram's plans but to a house of conventional double-storey height and with a completely different roof structure from what would have been possible in an attic. If further evidence were needed to discount the family belief that the plans were for La Rochelle, Mr Rennie also discovered that the paper used by Pilgram bears the watermark 1895, by which date Pilgram's successor had already replaced the burnt house. Pilgram was rehabilitated in 1895 and was busy establishing himself on the property that later became the Salesian School in Lansdowne Road, Claremont and the strong possibility exists that the plans were drawn to renovate and rebuild on this site.

The question of the rebuilding of La Rochelle must now be considered. All Pilgram's papers and ledgers were lost in the fire but he made an attempt to reconstruct these and they are in the hands of his family who have, most generously, made them available for this study. There is no amount entered for the rebuilding and indeed there would hardly have been time for this. De Witt's 'professional fees' were paid in 1890 and amounted to £116.1.6. and a further item in the same year is:

'cost of new foundations (Linder's) £150.15.0'.

This makes it more than likely that these had been laid before the bank disaster put an end to the completion of the dwelling. Whether these foundations followed De Witt's or an alternative plan will never be known and the few records of the Liesbeek/Claremont Municipality throw no light on how the next owner, Gibson, dealt with the situation for no papers relative to building matters have been preserved. A mere two years of valuation rolls for 1896 and 1897 are all that is available as source material.

The roll for 1896 reveals that the property in Camp Ground Road, Newlands, was owned and occupied by Gibson and was valued at £4000. In the same roll Ohlsson's Montebello was valued at £4250, Stellenburg at £4000, with Kelvin Grove at £6000. This last is followed by (£5000) so possibly the amount was considered too high.

The directories reveal that by 1893 La Rochelle was known as Lockerbie House which name it bore only during the Gibson period of ownership 1891-1903. That La Rochelle and Lockerbie House were one and the same property is clearly shown from the papers of Gibson's deceased estate (MOOC 13/1/997 etc.) namely that he owned no other property in Camp Ground Road and that Mrs Gibson remained in the house for two years after his death.

When all the available information is considered it seems evident that Gibson was responsible for the building of the house, possibly about 1893 when the new name appears for the first time and that what he built is the present Athenaeum, alterations and additions excepted. The architectural style is consistent with that of the last ten years of the nineteenth century and this is borne out by the existence of several very similar dwellings in the Cape Peninsula which are known to have been built about that date. Unfortunately the identity of the architect has not been established.

A section of a map of the Cape Peninsula, in the series M.2/49-2/61, in the Cape Archives and dated between 1897 and 1899 shows the second or Gibson's La Rochelle (Lockerbie House) as a square building as opposed to the more oblong shapes appearing in the two maps previously mentioned. This square corresponds reasonably closely to that of the present Athenaeum which too had outbuildings sited behind it towards the Camp Ground Road and which have now been demolished. The triangular piece of land in the right-hand corner of the La Rochelle property was added in 1886 to Pilgram's 1875 purchase and for this portion both he and Gibson paid quitrent. The remainder of the property was freehold land.

Frederick Chapman Gibson (1862-1901), who bought La Rochelle in 1891, came from London and married a South African girl, Margaret Wilhelmina Roos, who survived him by nearly thirty years. Their family of nine, which was almost complete when they moved to Newlands, must have filled the house to capacity. Here, at his Lockerbie House, he died on 18.2.1901 aged forty-nine years and was described as 'retired' (Death Notice 681/01, 117/289, MOOC 6/9/421).

A firm, Messrs Gibson Bros., features in the estate accounts (MOOC 13/ 1/997 no 118-24.7.1901). No such business has been found in the directories but a Gibson and Co., General Merchants, Church St., Cape Town appears for that year; but there is no certainty that it was connected with Gibson. Whatever his business, it had proved a success even if the rents from his many cottages in Mowbray were an additional source of income. Unfortunately no complete inventory of his estate has survived.

Two years after Gibson's death the Newlands property was sold from his estate to Thomas Arnoldus Johannes Louw (1845-1909). Under Louw's ownership the name reverted to La Rochelle and this it retained until it became the Athenaeum in the 1950s. Louw died while on a visit to Germany in 1909 and his widow, Magdalena Maria Smuts, sold it after six years to Charles Fischer Smuts by Transfer 4281/14.7. 1915. The Louws had no family; possibly Smuts was a relative of the widow.

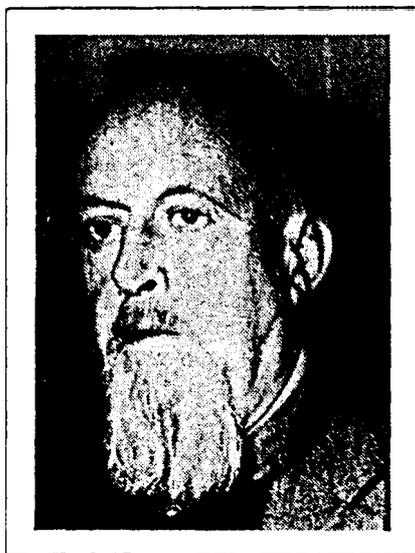
Four years later, by Transfer 14081/ 1.2.1919, Smuts disposed of it to Alfred John Williams, again a short term of ownership, and in 1924 Williams sold to the Western Province Cricket Club (Transfer 3204/16.4.1924). In 1926 the Cricket Club decided that it was no longer necessary to retain the property and Henry Hepburn Bright and his sister-in-law, Dorothea Frances Bleek, took over in equal shares. (Transfer 8667/2.9.1926).



MISS DOROTHEA BLEEK
The authority on Bushman language and art

Hepburn Bright was an erstwhile magistrate of Somerset West and Miss Dorothea Bleek was then the acknowledged authority on Bushman language and art. According to the *Dictionary of South African Biography* (Vol 1 pp80 – 82) her 'most productive years' were between 1923 and 1948, during most of which period she lived at La Rochelle.

In 1947, after the deaths of her brother-in-law, Hepburn Bright, and her sister, Wilhelmine Henriette (born Bleek), his wife, negotiations between Miss Bleek and Mr Ashley John Hilary Goodwin of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town resulted in the property being sold to Mr Goodwin at a price somewhat less than the estimated current market value. Miss Bleek was aware of the project to establish a trust to develop and preserve La Rochelle for cultural and limited social purposes. This was accomplished and the Athenaeum Trust came into being.



PROFESSOR A J H GOODWIN

It was his inspiration and initiative that brought about
the purchase of La Rochelle and the foundation of
The Athenaeum Trust

In 1948 the permanent members of the board of trustees were:

Dr LB. Goldschmidt
Mr. A.J.H. Goodwin
Professor E. Newbery
Professor T. Price
Professor F. Walker

Through strenuous efforts the purchase price was eventually raised and Goodwin sold the property to the Trust in 1953 by Transfer 13563/1.9.1953. Considerable land was disposed of to provide funds and there were deductions for roads and other purposes, with a result that today a property much reduced in area from the original La Rochelle now remains as the Athenaeum.