

Johannes Paulus Eksteen Versfeld

J.P.E Versfeld, known as John, was born in 1838 at Claassenbosch in what is now Constantia in the district of Wynberg. He was the eldest son of Willem (William) Ferdinand Versfeld and his wife Johanna Paulina (nee Eksteen) from Bergvliet.

John's mother died when he was just a toddler and his father married Elizabeth van Nierkerk and moved to the farm Slangkop in the Darling district.

John was left with his grandparents for a time and went to school in Wynberg. A long walk for a little boy!

Later he moved to Darling where his education continued. The Versfelds and the Duckitts shared governesses and teachers. His full sister Johanna Paulina (Hannie) was later to marry William Duckett. William Versfeld and his wife had a further four children.

John left school early to help his father on the farm but soon accepted a post as manager of a farm in the Caledon district belonging to an uncle.

When he left Slangkop all he owned were a suite and riding horse. At Caledon he met and fell in love with Mary Elizabeth Metcalf, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer.

John was a good looking young man cultured and well read, had a good singing voice, could recite poetry, loved dancing and was an excellent horseman. What impressed Mary most was the way he vaulted onto his horse!

They were married in 1863 when he was 24 and Mary 17. Little did she know that she would bear 15 children.

The young couple moved to the farm Preekstoel in the Malmesbury district. There Marianne and Johanna Paulina (Jo) were born.

When his uncle Johannes Eksteen's farm Dezehoek in the Piketberg district was for sale John was very interested but found the price too high.

In 1867 he bought the farm Langberg on the Piketberg Mountain from a Mr van Zyl, who had gone bankrupt, for R600.00. This was against everyone's' advice. The mountain was looked upon as unhealthy for animals.

John and Mary trekked from Preekstoel with their two little girls, a wagon and a team of mules, a cart, servants and a flock of Merino Sheep in the care of Daantjie Engelbrecht their faithful shepherd. They came up through Goedverwacht, a Moravian Mission farm below the southern side of the mountain.

There was a rudimentary house (with no glass in the windows) and they moved into that. The first night there a leopard took a sheep out of the kraal next to the house. From then on it was to be a continued battle with the leopards.

John had the Midas touch and prospered where others had failed. Two years later he bought the farm, Voorste Valley (Voorstevlei) and two years after that Moutons Valley (Moutonsvlei). It must be remembered that these were the original farms and very much larger than they are today. Langberg included farms like Achtervlei and the other farms around there and Voorstevlei included Heldervue, Pomona, Vergesig, etc. Moutonsvlei included Stawelklip, Seven Oaks, Sunnybrook, etc.

Versfeld bought Moutonsvlei from two brothers, Johannes and Theunis Smit who used it as a “veepos” and didn’t live on it. (“veepos” - a stock farm away from the main farm, used seasonally)

However it had been inhabited at one time in the past as there was simple dwelling and oaks gums and other trees planted. There was also an orchard of various fruit trees enclosed by a dog rose hedge. Presumably this was done by Mouton.

The family moved there in 1872. Moutonsvlei had good deep soil and water. John learned the art of growing and spinning the “Lucas” tobacco from the Lucas family on Tweefontein and had extensive tobacco “gardens” They also planted a great many oaks and some pear trees and vines.

He built a big house using mostly local materials and raised a large family. Of the fifteen children thirteen survived, two having died in childhood.

Arthur Ensor, the son of Johanna Paulina (Jo) also lived with them as his father had died. Arthur was to die on the battlefield in Flanders in 1917.

It was a large happy family with the addition of visitors and governesses and relatives. There were never less than 20 people for meals.

Dances were held with the band made up of workers on the farm, also poetry readings and song evenings.

The missionaries at Goedverwacht were often guests. John was a pillar of the Dutch Reformed Church in Piketberg and the children were all christened there.

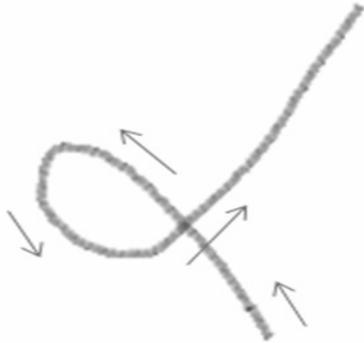
However John had one big problem and that was the journey to Piketberg. His produce was no longer a load or two of wool and the road through Goedverwacht was poor and a long way round. Trips to church and for social occasions involved going by cart to the edge of the mountain, outspanning and saddling the horses and then riding down a very steep path with servants carrying the babies to Dezehoek where another cart was kept. Inspanning again and continuing to Piketberg.

He had to find another way. Family legend has it that he noticed that the chain of his pocket watch had fallen in loops on his bedside table. “I’ve got it” he is said to have exclaimed.

In 1889 he started work on the pass with twenty labourers. He has chosen a spot where the slope was less steep and the rock more shale than sandstone and thus not so hard.

For three months he went up every day on his horse, Moscow to oversee the work leaving home at dawn and returning after dark, missing only one day – the day his son, Jack (John Paulus) was born. That day’s work had to be redone!

The loops were necessary to allow the wagon and team to take the corners on the level or a slight down grade. A team can only all pull if they are in a straight line. On the level or a slight downgrade the team pair can manage to pull the wagon around the corner.



This worked so well that a British Army engineer saw it during the Anglo Boer War and built a similar one in India.

The early cars used the pass and the first lorry went up in 1926.

The present Versfeld pass was built in the 1940's by the Divisional Council at a spot nearer the town, Piketberg.

Around this time John started farming with ostriches and also bought two farms below the mountain, a share in a dairy farm near Saldanha and a house in Wynberg.

At the height of all this John's strength and energy started to fail. He went to England for an operation in 1896. He died in London at the age of 58 and is buried Ealing.

Frank (Francis John) took over the management of the farm. Mary and the children spent most of the time in their house in Wynberg, the boys going on the train to Rondebosch and walking to Bishops much as boys do today.

Soon after the outbreak of the Anglo Boer war Mary took the unmarried daughters and the school going boys to England. She bought a house in Berkhamsted and put the boys to school there. The shooting team at the school were all South Africans!

As the boys left school they returned to South Africa. Walter was the only one who lived his whole life on the mountain. He bought a portion of Moutonsvlei and called it Stawelklip, and farmed there. His mother gave him a portion of land, Kersefontein, to build his house on.

Mary had also returned to South Africa and died in Piketberg in 1923.