

History

John Dunn (1833-1895)



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According to the documents that I have found, John Dunn was born in Port Alfred in 1834. His exact birth date has not been documented very accurately. His parents were Robert Newton Dunn and Ann Harold Biggar. John was the third of five children, one son and 4 daughters.

Robert came to South Africa with the Darniell Party on the good ship the 'DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH'. (Duke of Marlborough passenger list)

His mother Ann Harold Biggar came with her father and brothers on a ship called "Weymouth". Captian Alexander Biggar had his own party that commissioned the ship to find their fortunes in South Africa.

Both ships originally landed in Cape Town where most of the people settled. At that time the British had only colonised the Cape and had not ventured into the hinterland and over the years moved up the east coast toward Durban. Robert had registered as a merchant trader and came to South Africa to find his fortune. He used to be in the upholstering business and at the time the line of work was in decline. There is also some information that Robert came to S.A. to send back curios for the Safron Waldon Museum. I understand that Ann Harold Biggar and Robert Newton Dunn were

married in Grahamstown, after which, Robert was offered an opportunity to have shares in a trading company in Port Natal. This he accepted and the whole family moved.

John was born in Port Alfred enroute to Port Natal. His youth was spent out in the bush on the Berea and out skirts of Durban. Back in the day, the outer extent of Durban was Cato Ridge in the west, Sea View in the south and Battery Beach in the north.

Robert was reputed to be an excellent shot. In 1840's ammunition was not the most accessible commodity available. So hunting the game in the area meant that being a good shot would mean that no bullets were wasted. With his father being a great shot, John learnt to shoot at a very early age. By the age of sixteen John could hold his own with a rifle.

When John Dunn was in his early teens, his father died. The facts of his death were a little vague as very little documentation or information was available back then. Rumor has it that he

1. Was trampled to death by an elephant
2. Wandered off into the bush drunk and got lost and died in the night and
3. He died drunk on the side of the road in Congella Park.

Robert was first buried on the Point in Durban, but then some time later was exhumed and re-buried in the Durban Cemetery where his tombstone is still standing today together with his wife. She died a few years later.

After his father's death, John started to earn a living by working for transport riders and hunters. His love of hunting and his skill with a rifle took him across the Tugela River into Zululand on a regular basis. Before he was sixteen, he was employed to ride transport up to Potchestroem for a local Durban businessman. On his return to collect payment for completion of the job, payment was refused to him on the grounds that according to Roman Dutch Law, you were not allowed to be employed until you were sixteen and because he was under the age, they stated that he had worked illegally and was not due payment. This annoyed him immensely so he decided to leave the comforts of the colony in Port Natal and

head out and look for his fortunes elsewhere. He took Catherine Pierce with him, she was the daughter of his fathers assistant Frank Pierce. She was of Cape Malay decent. His ventures took him north towards Zululand. In the early years he did not venture north of the Tugela River, but stayed in the vicinity of the south bank, hunted for his keep as well as for the Zulus and the white settlers. Over the years he built up a fair reputation amongst the locals and folk in Port Natal of courage and of being very accurate with a rifle. He was found by General Wolmsley who took a liking to him and ended up providing him with an opportunity of education. Through all the years of living in Northern Natal, he became fluent in the language and was befriended by local people and settlers. He gained the respect of both the English and the Zulu alike. After he completed his education, Wolmsley offered him the position as the border agent. All this time John and Catherine lived on the south bank of the Tugela River.

In one skirmish, a zulu impi had stolen 200 head of cattle from local settlers, John took it upon himself to try to negotiate the return of the cattle from the leader of the impi. He settled the deal and ended up paying a sum to the Zulus but he succeeded in the negotiations for return of the cattle.

Cetshwayo had heard of this white man of great respect and courage, he summoned him to the kraal for a meeting. The Zulu chief offered him land and privilege of being his advisor when dealing with matters related to the British. This offer John accepted and settled down amongst the Zulus and proceeded to learn their culture and custom. He was allocated land near present-day Mtunzini. Again, Dunn's skill in arms no doubt stood him in good stead.

Over the years of being Cetshwayos advisor, he had manipulated and worked himself into a very decent position of power. With power came the privileges of wealth. In the African culture, a mans wealth is measured in the order of the number of cattle he owns, the number of wives he has and lastly the number of children he has. When he had moved into the realms of power he came into contact with very many clans within the vicinity of Northern Natal. On his travels to meet with these chiefs, often gifts were passed on as a sign of respect, their hospitality often included offering him a wife. Catherine Pierce did not like the fact that John was accepting wives from the Zulu chiefs; she strongly disapproved of the

situation but had to accept the situation none the less. Dunn built his home near the Ngoye Forest in Zululand. He provided Catharine with the main house as she was the number one wife. He had a few other residences that he used to frequent over time.

On 18 October 1872, King Mpande died at the age of 74 and Cetshwayo became king. Though Mpande and Cetshwayo had successfully resisted attempts by the Boers and the British to encroach on their territory, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 forced John Dunn to pick sides, and he sided with the British. This was not a choice he could make freely; he was dealt a hand that forced him to choose the British.

On 11 January 1879, British troops crossed the Tugela, near Fort Pearson, after the British had presented Cetshwayo with an ultimatum he could not accept. It is said that Dunn's skill at arms contributed greatly to British successes in the south. In the north the British, anticipating Cetshwayo's refusal of the ultimatum, had already crossed the river, only to be surprised and soundly defeated at the Battle of Isandlwana.

On 1 September 1879, Zululand was annexed and incorporated into Natal. Dunn was given the largest piece of land of all thirteen rulers in the subdivision of Zululand, and closest to Port Natal, where he served as a buffer zone between the British and the less-trusted rulers.

John Dunn died on 5 August 1895, having married 49 wives and fathered 117 children. In 1895 all Dunn's dependents were settled on a 40 km² reserve near the Tugela River known as Dunnsland. Today the Dunn family are still in dispute with squatters that inhabited the area some time in the late sixties early seventies.

The lack of documentation and lack of interest of the family to keep records has proven to make investigation very difficult. In the 1879 Zulu War, John left Mangete to move south of the Tugela River. On departing he had forgotten to take any of his documentation with him, he sent a servant back to try to recover them, but the servant returned with the wrong collection of documents. As a result all of this mistake, John Dunn's diaries and letters were destroyed in the fire that consumed his house so all information before 1879 was lost.

After all the years of not having information or contact with the Dunn family, I, on my last visit to South Africa called Pat Dunn and paid her a visit. Since then I have developed the John Dunn Foundation web site which I hope will make a change to the attitude of gathering information and sharing it with the rest of the family and the world more attractive.

Today, a few bits of furniture that John owned are located for viewing at the [Fort Eshowe Museum](#).