

The Hen and Chickens Rock: Symbolism, Significance, and the Struggle for Heritage Recognition

Jennifer Whittal (South Africa)

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SUMMARY

Historical research in surveying, cadastral systems, and land administration is often a solitary and under-supported endeavour. In the context of pressing global, regional, and local challenges, allocating limited resources to the study and recognition of historical contributions and artefacts can be difficult to justify — particularly when these histories are contested or linked to colonial administrations, systems, or individuals now viewed as part of a problematic past.

This paper examines the significance of what is, to our knowledge, the oldest surviving cadastral property beacon in Southern Africa: the Hen and Chickens Rock. Designated as a boundary beacon in 1657 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), this large boulder is part of a granite formation located near the summit of Wynberg Hill in Cape Town. It likely held cultural significance for the indigenous Khoenkhoen people prior to colonial land dispossession and continued to do so during the period when significant numbers of Khoenkhoen lived in the vicinity and served in the military. Its adoption as a cadastral marker imbues the boulder with layered meanings: as a symbol of early land administration at the Cape, of global science and astronomy, and of land dispossession.

The paper documents the process and content of an application to designate the area surrounding the Hen and Chickens Rock as a Western Cape Provincial Heritage Area. Although the application was ultimately rejected without explanation, the effort required a reconstruction of the boulder's intersectional history, an exploration of its contemporary significance, and a justification for its preservation. This reflection underscores the value of documenting and critically engaging with contested heritage in the context of land administration history.

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