RACIAL SEGREGATION IN EAST LONDON, 1836-1948

E.L. NEL

ABSTRACT

Urban racial segregation in East London has a distinctive heritage, making the city one of South Africa's most segregated in the pre-Union era. Segregation was initiated by the British military in the then colony of British Kaffraria, and was later enhanced by successive municipal councils. Municipal ordinances ensured exceptionally high levels of segregation in the city during the nineteenth century. The enforcement of Asian segregation in this era is noteworthy. Urban planning in the twentieth century resulted as much from local as national considerations and legislation. Segregation was a reality in East London prior to the passage of the Group Areas Act. The deteriorating social circumstances in the long-segregated African areas in particular receive special mention, as do government attempts to rectify the situation through the institution of state commissions.

Introduction

In common with other South African towns and cities, the Eastern Cape settlement of East London had a clearly ingrained pattern of racial segregation well before the passage of the 1950 Group Areas Act. In other Cape settlements, the emergence of segregation has been ascribed to either the exploitative interests of mining capital or to the designs of middle-class, predominantly mercantile-dominated administrations of the local states. In East London, however, racial segregation was initiated by military dictates and by its location in a troubled frontier zone. When the settlement was placed under civilian administration the local authority tried to perpetuate segregation. As was the case elsewhere in South Africa, the reason for doing so was fear of Asian commercial competition and the paranoia about sanitation.

This paper first addresses the nature of central state control in terms of military and government dictates in the then colony of British Kaffraria, which included East London. The next section focuses upon the attempts of the East London municipal Council to perpetuate and enhance urban racial segregation. The racial restrictions placed on Asian people in particular reflected growing local white prejudices and fears of commercial competition. By 1948 East London appeared to have attained near absolute measures of segregation.

British Kaffraria and Military Control, 1836-1872

The genesis of East London was in the era of the Eastern Cape Frontier Wars, a period marked by confrontation between the colonists and the Xhosa. The site of the future city was first temporarily garrisoned by British troops in 1836, following the outbreak of hostilities in the Sixth Frontier War. When peace was secured, the camp was broken. It was only in 1847, during the Seventh Frontier War, that the British military decided to establish a more permanent base. A site at the mouth of the Buffalo river was chosen and named Fort Glamorgan. Easing from the hostilities, the Colony of British Kaffraria was created in the same year, stretching from the Keiskamma to the Kei rivers (Fig. 1). East London's relationship to the Cape Colony and the Colony of British Kaffraria was tenuous until 1859 when it as formally incorporated into British Kaffraria. Until then East London was technically part of the Cape Colony, yet in reality it tended to be administered by the British Kaffrarian authorities based in King William's Town.

Racial segregation within the broader territory of which East London was part become an enshrined principle from the initiation of the Colony of British Kaffraria. The British were anxious to achieve tranquility in the region. In 1849, the Colonial Office issued a government notice obligating "Fingoes and other coloured natives" in the division of Victoria and British Kaffraria, to be situated in "locations of villages". Rural 'locations' emerged as clear elements of territorial control in the nineteenth century. In 1853, after the Eighth Frontier War, Governor Cathcart decreed that large sections of British Kaffraria should become Crown Tribal Reserves. The principle of territorial segregation of the races within the broader East London region had become a firmly established practice. The military philosophy of rural locations and the resultant racial separation was to find direct expression in the physical form of East London under military auspices.

FIGURE 1: East London and British Kaffraria, c. 1847-1866.

The direct control which the military authorities exerted over East London ensured that defence acquired precedence over all civil matters. It is apparent that prior to the British post being established, Xhosa people resided in the area known as the 'Old Kaffir Gardens' (Fig. 2). In January 1849, military authority over civil matters was introduced when the officer commanding Fort Glamorgan was appointed resident magistrate of the settlement. By 1849 numerous huts had also been erected in the vicinity of Fort Glamorgan. In December 1849, ostensibly for purposes of creating an open defensive field, all huts within a 3.2 km radius of the fort were torn down. This step is reminiscent of the maintenance of a 'field of fire', the Maidan, around Fort William in Calcutta. Over 60 Africans and their families resident in the vicinity of the fort were assembled into the town's first location under a headman whose appointment was sanctioned by the military. The site of this location appears to have been in the vicinity of the 'Old Kaffir Gardens'. Regulations pertaining to the occupancy of the location were promulgated simultaneously. These measures accorded with the request of the Chief Commissioner of British Kaffraria that all Africans in the district had to be centralized in
or near the kraal of Headman Magamo in an effort to create a single 'native village'.

Racial segregation in East London was achieved within two years of the settlement's establishment. Its origins were different from those which applied in other coastal towns. Significantly, although East London was regarded as part of the Cape Colony at that time, Africans were not regarded as citizens of the Cape Colony and were subject to the laws of British Kaffraria. In consequence, the enabling measures granted by the Cape Colonial government to certain Eastern Cape towns to establish locations in 1847 did not apply to East London. Instead, military notions of urban planning applied.

The Establishment of Municipal Control, 1873–1894

In 1873 East London acquired municipal status. For the first time civilian aspirations for the town were expressed through the white-controlled municipal Council. The growth of the town as a trade centre gave priority to mercantile interests in the development of the local state. Accordingly, racial segregation was maintained by the obsessive concern with public health and by fear of Asian commercial competition.

The persistence of prejudice, although being influenced by considerations of health and commercial rivalry, must also be viewed as a response to the tension and racial animosity which prevailed as a consequence of East London's frontier location. "Insecure minority control" meant that the erection of racial barriers was an inevitable and enduring tendency. The segregation that was designed to exclude unnecessary and undesirable people from the urban milieu was a logical extension of contemporary British urban social stratification. Notions of class- and racial-differentiation found clear expression in British colonial urban policy and planning. Structured segregation has also been associated with the rise of imperialism in the British Empire.
By 1873, following the shift of the locus of settlement in East London to the East Bank of the Buffalo River, additional African villages had emerged. In addition to a location sited near the ‘Old Kaffir Gardens’ on the West Bank, there were also locations such as the Seaside Location (Fig. 2) and the Wesleyan location (which was probably sited near the old East Bank location). There may also have been other locations, including one managed by the Church of England.14 Racial segregation at the urban level had become an accepted practice, as had control over Africans and their places of residence.

The East London Municipality received official sanction in 1877 from the Cape Colonial government to retain territorial segregation between whites and Africans. The number of locations, or localities, where huts could be erected by Africans was limited to two, one on either bank of the Buffalo River. The regulations decreed that these areas were for the exclusive occupancy of Africans, and obliged the residents to register with the location superintendent and pay a monthly site rental of one shilling. Africans were not permitted urban dwellers but could be manipulated and relocated at will: “tenure of such location is temporary and subject to withdrawal and to removal when deemed expedient by the commissioners”. The initiative to enshrine segregation in the civilian-controlled town, had come from local aspirations and not from the central state. Indeed, the regulations which were approved were framed and adopted by “the Resident Householders of the town”.15 In 1878, the Municipal authorities, no doubt seeking to implement the restrictions on the number of locations, abolished the Seaside location and consolidated all Africans on the East Bank of the Buffalo River at a new site in the vicinity of the old East Bank location.16

The location at the Old Kaffir Gardens was removed in 1886 and the new West Bank location opened in the same year.17 By 1888 the African populace sheltered in 206 huts at the old East Bank location and in 69 huts in the West Bank location. There was no evidence of African residence elsewhere in the urban area, excepting for domestic servants and labourers living at their workplaces.18 The following year the municipality decided to amalgamate all the scattered fragments of the East Bank location into a better organized and planned unit.19 This goal was achieved by 1890 when the new East Bank location was opened and the old East Bank and the Wesleyan locations were abandoned. It was the enshrined tradition of authoritarian control in East London which permitted the local state to exercise such absolute control over both residence and behaviour of the African people. In consequence, these people were never permitted to mingle residentially with the white residents to the same degree as happened in other South African cities. The conditions under which Africans lived in the segregated areas, although poor, appeared better than the norm in the Cape Colony. According to the Chief Medical Officer of the Cape, East London’s locations were the best in the Colony.20 Conditions degenerated markedly in subsequent years.

**Enhanced Municipal Control, 1895-1922**

The early measures designed to implement segregation in East London were insufficient to secure the degree of control which the Council wanted over Africans. Nor did the steps taken toward racial separation provide any legal control over the increasing number of Asians settling in the town. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, resentment towards Asians was considerable. In addition to prejudices based upon perceived health threats posed by these people, their trading practices were regarded with resentment and hostility. In the view of the Town Clerk, the Asian traders were “a serious menace”. The Council, he told the Prime Minister, wanted legislation to deal with the threat effectively.21 The supposed threat to the white residents was also grounded on the prevalence of plague in the country. The long-standing view was expressed by the town’s Medical Officer of Health: Asians were “the most undesirable class”, “filthy in their habits” and “a source of infection.”22

Whatever the exact causes of the local state’s objections to Asians, East London acquired the right to segregate Asians from 1895. The enabling East London Municipal Amendment Act,23 except for similar provisions pertaining to Kimberley, was unique in the Cape colony.24 Not only did this measure pre-empt the first legislative steps discriminating against the residence of Asians on a national level by several decades, but it also provided the means to crystallize a very rigid pattern of spatial differentiation.

The 1895 Act empowered the Municipality to allot portions of the municipality as locations for the residence of Africans and Asians, and to abolish locations.25 Measures to control and regulate the residence of Africans and Asians were provided, as were curfew regulations. Only those people possessing fixed property valued in excess of £75 were exempt from the provisions of the Act. This legislation represented a major step on the path towards the total segregation of all racial groups in East London.

The prevailing attitude of the Municipal authorities strongly reflected the ‘sanitation syndrome’. African segregation was already a reality and the 1895 Act served to enshrine existing measures of African segregation. The Council’s satisfaction with the Act was endorsed by the Town Clerk who, in 1900, commented on the “undesirability” of Africans living in the town. Their presence, he said, led to “the accumulation of filth and the generation of disease, besides being in other respects a great nuisance to the white populace”.26 Sentiments such as these were echoed in Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town in the same era.27

The provisions of the 1895 Act pertaining to Asians were welcomed by the Municipality which soon established an Asiatic area (presumably for owner-built accommodation) adjacent to the East Bank location.28 Nonetheless, the initial attempt to segregate Asian people was ineffective, since no members of that community resided in the Asian area by 1898. The Location Inspector was unable to induce their relocation as they preferred to pay rent elsewhere in the town rather than build in the designated area. The Municipality’s assumption that blacks should provide their own accommodation was modified in 1898 when a commitment to provide black municipal accommodation was made. By 1899 two lodging houses for Africans had been built as a result. The South African War and the attendant influx of
refugees of all races caused severe health and accommodation problems in East London. In consequence, the Municipality built two more lodging houses by 1902, including one for Asians. In 1903, after a large influx of Asians, the old 'Boer' refugee camp, comprising 21 nine-roomed 'huts', was converted into a new 'Asiatic location'. The motivation for ensuring Asian compliance with the principles of segregation stemmed from fears of plague in 1903, leading to the passage of additional regulations in that year.29

Initially, due to a serious accommodation crisis, the Asiatic location was a boon to the town. In 1903, according to the report of the Location Inspector, 404 of the 454 Asians in the town resided there. Nevertheless, their property holdings exempted many Asians from living in the Asiatic location.30 This consideration, coupled with a reluctance to reside there, meant that after the accommodation shortage had been eased by out-migration, never more than a small percentage of the Asian populace were located there at any one time. The sense of humiliation and resistance to legalized segregation experienced by these people was significant, as various petitions and complaints to the Municipality and the colonial government suggest.31 Moves to tighten regulations over the registration and control of Asians in 1913 provoked a stormy reaction. The people affected objected to the regulations which placed them "in a degrading and subordinate position".32

By 1906, the number of occupants in the designated Asian location had dropped to 178, declining further to 121 in 1907. In 1911 there were only 35 Asians in the location, compared to a total Asian population of 150 in the whole town. Asian out-migration had occurred and many Asians had the financial means to legally reside in the 'white' town. In contrast, because of their inferior circumstances, 48 Poor Whites were allowed to reside in vacant premises in the Asiatic location. This location was finally closed in 1934, temporarily ending legal attempts to enforce residential segregation against Asians.33 As subsequent events were to show, the Asian people of East London did not disperse through the city. Instead they tended to congregate, often as a result of prejudice, and non-statutory segregation emerged.

Asian economic competition with white tradesmen at times occasioned hostility. Resentment focussed, among other issues, upon Asian competition with whites in the field of market gardening.34 The degree of animosity which the white people felt against the Asians, and their desire to reapply segregation, was indicated by numerous public petitions.35 In 1911 the Town Clerk appealed to the Prime Minister to introduce national segregation measures against Asians.36 In 1913, the Village Management Board of Amalinda, adjacent to East London, attempted to prevent the continued sale of land in their area to Asians, but was unsuccessful.37 After the First World War these attitudes encouraged the informal and partial segregation of Asians into the racially-mixed area of North End. This was a district of urban decay and was East London's only significantly racially-mixed zone.38

East London was granted city status in 1914. According to the provisions of the relevant Cape Provincial ordinance, and that of 1912, the Council was permitted to retain the extensive powers which it had exercised over the residence and behaviour of Africans and Asians since 1895. These powers, though extensive, do not appear to have been fully utilized and were only revoked in 1951.39 It would seem that municipal councils after 1914 were either unaware of, or chose to ignore the extensive powers which they were entitled to use.

Whereas the Asian people managed to evade segregation measures to a limited degree, the African residents were less fortunate. The 1902 Cape Native Location Act which permitted the establishment of government locations in municipal areas was not extended to East London. Unlike in Cape Town where the Act was enforced,40 African segregation was already a reality in East London. In 1905, a new location was provided for Africans in the vicinity of Cambridge, an independent municipal area adjacent to East London.41 By 1909, excluding domestic servants and labourers housed on their employers' property and an unknown number of illegal residents, only four Africans and their families resided legally in the white areas of East London. They had obtained exemption from the 1895 Act in terms of Cape Colonial franchise regulations.42 As Mayoral Minutes for the first two decades of the twentieth century reveal, a concerted effort was made to root out illegal African occupancy in white areas. In 1920, in an attempt to enhance restrictions and control over Africans, plans to move all these people into a single, enlarged location upon the West Bank of the Buffalo River were investigated.43

In summary, East London stands out from many other South African cities and towns by virtue of the degree to which racial segregation of the African and Asian population was initiated in the pre-Union and pre-apartheid eras. This legacy pre-empted later national measures creating a highly segregated city prior to 1948.

The Formalization of Residential Segregation, 1923–1948

Prior to 1923 similar legislative controls applied to Africans and Asians within East London. Thereafter, de jure national legislation affected the residential behaviour of Africans, whereas more informal measures affected the Asians and increasingly the coloured people. The legislative distinction had a significantly different impact on Africans, on the one hand, and on coloureds and Asians on the other, and marked a distinct phase in the historical geography of the town.

African segregation

The prevailing attitude of the Council towards African people conformed to the notions expressed by the 1922 Transvaal Stallard Commission which regarded them as only temporary urban residents. As such they did not justify significant expenditure on location facilities as the 'Location Native Revenue Journal' for the era indicates.44 East London did not develop a consistent self-financing policy such as that developed in Durban. Instead the locations perpetually required cross-subsidization from the Municipal general rates fund. Despite the absence of a consistent financial policy for locations, segregation (as in Durban), was clearly a key form of social control.45 In keeping with Cape Town, economic
imperialism and white middle-class values held sway in Council policy determining municipal decisions and planning.\textsuperscript{46} An air of both paternalism and discrimination pervaded official Council policy toward the African residents of the city. In 1935, the Mayor expressed concern about the wisdom of “Anglicizing all the races with whom we come into contact”. His doubts that “European dress and food had any but a bad effect on the health of the natives” was an ironic indictment of a segregation policy which hoped to improve public health.\textsuperscript{47}

New African housing projects were initiated in both the East and the West Bank locations in 1923. Housing Act funds were utilized for the purpose. This action entrenched the principle of separate facilities and racially exclusive areas. Two years later, 181 rondavels for Africans had been built in the West Bank location and 168 houses in the East Bank location.\textsuperscript{48} This early zeal in building houses occurred prior to the obligatory provision of shelter for African communities in terms of the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act. Regrettably, such benevolent tendencies were not maintained. Increasingly, the lot of the segregated African people became one of great inequality, overcrowding, neglect, disease and social distress. Deteriorating conditions in the locations were identified by the 1914 Tuberculosis Commission. It was revealed that the Municipality was collecting considerable money from location residents in the form of rental and license fees. Instead of using this income to improve location conditions, the Municipality was using it to the benefit of white residential areas.\textsuperscript{49}

The accumulating neglect of the locations and their residents was remarkable. In 1916 the 9,500 residents of the East Bank location had access to only 11 water standpipes.\textsuperscript{50} Segregation had permitted the Municipality to absolve themselves from their responsibilities towards the African people. The racial isolation which existed permitted an attitude of indifference to prevail. East London was unable to resort to the ‘Durban System’ of a municipal beer monopoly in the locations from which it could generate profits for location improvement and administration. This was because only national government locations and not municipal locations in the Cape Province were permitted to operate beer monopolies in the early decades of this century.\textsuperscript{51} The removal of this potential source of income retarded improvements in East London’s locations. It was only in 1937 that the Municipality was permitted to embark upon a municipal beer monopoly system. The scheme was abandoned within a few months because unforeseen costs and technical difficulties.\textsuperscript{52}

The enactment of the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act did not have any immediate spatial ramifications in East London. Rather, the Act served to streamline control and administration of the locations. The formal requirement of the Act that Africans be segregated into separate locations had already been met in East London. There appeared to be no obvious Council opposition to the enforcement of the Act, and the administrative provisions were progressively adopted by the Municipality as and when they deemed them necessary. The Act’s stipulations of African segregation seem to have been met with disinterest by the Council who saw no urgency in applying the legislation’s spatial clauses in an urban area where African segregation was a fait accompli. The Council’s interest in the Act lay not in the geographic separation of Africans it permitted, but rather in the administrative improvements and the savings to white ratepayers which it offered. The 1923 Act allowed the Council to separate the location administration budget from that of the general municipal budget in order to curb what was regarded as excessive subsidization of the locations by white ratepayers. In addition, a Native Advisory Board was established.\textsuperscript{53} In 1931 the city’s two pre-existing locations at East Bank and West Bank were proclaimed formally in terms of the Act.\textsuperscript{54}

Location conditions did not improve following the implementation of the 1923 Act, and in the period from 1923 to 1950 the locations continually operated at a financial loss. No capital improvement projects of note were undertaken until the 1940s.\textsuperscript{55} The depression of the 1930s, and attendant social distress, encouraged African resentment and opposition. Local African resistance was mainly by the Independent Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, under the leadership of Clements Kadie.\textsuperscript{56} Yet African protests and unrest in the 1930s did not improve location conditions.

Between 1921 and 1936, the African populace of East London doubled from approximately 12,000 to over 24,000, placing a severe strain upon the limited available housing and generating severe overcrowding. In this period the number of municipal houses only increased by 80 units. Lodging houses remained constant at four and the number of private dwellings rose from 1,248 to 1,844.\textsuperscript{57} The burgeoning populace was forced into the overcrowded African locations resulting in a dramatic deterioration in living conditions and standards: some 20,000 people resided on 400 acres of land in the East Bank location.\textsuperscript{58} Disease and destitution was so rife in the locations that in the mid-1930s the mortality rate amongst African children under the age of three was as high as 45 per cent.\textsuperscript{59} The city’s problems were aggravated by a harsh and parsimonious municipal administration, by racialism and by the stagnant economy, itself strained by the responsibility of supporting the Ciskeian reserve, “probably the most impoverished rural region in South Africa”.\textsuperscript{60}

Although municipal tardiness with respect to African people in this era was commonplace in South Africa, the East London authorities were particularly callous. East London was unusual in the degree to which municipal building lagged behind need. Its locations were “handicapped by a bad inheritance of municipal indecision, inaction and neglect”.\textsuperscript{61} In 1937, in response to mounting criticism, the central government took the unprecedented step of calling a state commission to investigate the situation in East London’s African locations. The Thornton Commission found the East Bank location “a grave source of concern” and a looming public health problem. It noted that unless and until the vast schemes of urban replanning, rehousing and separately administering one half of the population of the city were tackled quickly, disaster was not far off.\textsuperscript{62} The Commission recommended the urgent redevelopment and improvement of existing houses and a massive building programme extending into the Amalinda area. Municipal attempts to follow this advice fell foul of the desires of the white residents in the Amalinda Village Management Board area.\textsuperscript{63}
In 1941, following the severely critical report of the Thornton Commission, the Duncan Village housing scheme was initiated adjacent to the East Bank location and near Amalinda. Thereafter, the East Bank location became known as Duncan Village. As a result of building delays occasioned by the Second World War, and a shortage of available revenue, the desired changes proceeded slowly. By 1945, 600 houses had been built in the Duncan Village scheme. The period 1946 to 1948 was stagnant, owing to a total absence of funds for African housing projects. Instead, the Council chose deliberately to concentrate on the housing needs of the white residents.64

Increasingly poor conditions in the West Bank location led to a plan for its removal in 1948, a decision which was only enforced several years later.65 Municipal aspirations for the area clearly reflect the white, middle-class, commercial inclinations of the local state. According to the Town Clerk, the location was on valuable land which could be utilized as an extension to the industrial area. Betraying a concern for appearance rather than welfare, he called it an eyesore, and noted with alarm that it could “be seen by the thousands of residents and visitors to the town”.66 The failure to implement improvements in the locations after 1946 was noted with concern by the central government. According to the Senior Government Inspector of Urban Locations, it was quite clear that the Council was not prepared to incur any financial burden over and above its legal obligations.67 He called for the urgent demolition and replanning of the entire Duncan Village location, as well as provision of a new site for an additional location.

In 1948 the Government launched a second inquiry in an attempt to alleviate distress among Africans in the locations. After conducting a detailed investigation, the Welsh Commission established that severe overcrowding prevailed and that there was no room for location expansion within the precincts of Duncan Village. The only viable solution was to rebuild the East Bank location/Duncan Village on site, and to provide for a spill-over scheme. The Commission indicted the Council for its inaction, noting that the repellant state of the locations resulted from over half a century of apathy among the White ratepayers. In addition, it recommended further racial subdivision of the urban area through the development of a new satellite location.68 This prompted municipal and state authorities to realize that the development of a new, wholly independent location was unavoidable. The future Homelands townships of Mdantsane was to result from this decision.69 Years of neglect, and the abandonment of the most destitute people in the segregated locations, prompted consideration of a new location. Having inherited from the pre-Union era a townscape characterized by African segregation, the Council virtually abnegated their social responsibilities. This caused living conditions to deteriorate to such a degree that state intervention became imperative. The decision to create Mdantsane in the apartheid era was reminiscent of previous steps taken to protect public health.

Coloured and Asian segregation

Prior to 1927 the coloured people in East London largely escaped all forms of racial residential segregation. In that year the Parkside municipal housing scheme was initiated for coloureds. Later, plots were set aside for home-ownership. Finance was provided by the National Housing Fund which stipulated that each race group had to be housed in separate areas.70 Although strict segregation was not enforced, the fact that the scheme was for the sole benefit of coloureds was indicative of attempts to segregate colourmen from both the white and African peoples. Newspaper reports in the 1930s indicated mounting Council opposition to coloured occupancy of the ‘white’ areas and its search for ways in which to segregate these people.71 Colourmen resided in an integrated fashion amongst whites and Africans in certain areas only, primarily in North End and the East Bank location.72 By 1931, 981 of the 17600 inhabitants of the African locations were coloureds.73 Three years later a measure of spatial control over the coloured group was exercised when the Provincial Secretary disallowed the alienation of land to it in the Wilsonia area of East London.74 Numerous letters in the press indicated the desire of many colourmen to acquire their own residential areas. By 1946, according to the findings of the Government’s Department of Social Welfare Commission, informal segregation ensured that the coloured populace, almost without exception, resided in either the Parkside estate, North End or the African locations.75

The legal status of colourmen changed little until the passage of the Group Areas Act in 1950, but their living conditions deteriorated markedly. According to the 1946 Social Welfare Commission, East London appeared ill-equipped to raise the standard of living of most of its inhabitants. There had been a serious lag in town planning, housing and institutional facilities over the past twenty years. As a result, the poor tended to congregate in the slum areas of the city. Except for the North End where some of the colourmen and most of the Asian people resided, de facto segregation between the various races in East London was already the norm prior to 1948. The 1946 Department of Social Welfare Commission found North End, in particular its south western part, to be particularly insanitary and congested.76 and was the first official body to recommend the disestablishment of the area. The North End area suffered from the absence of planning, encouraging slum development.77 In 1939 one City Councillor commenting upon North End reported that he had never in any British or South African slum seen such conditions: he equated it to a “certain dago area in New York.”78 The problems created in the first decades of the twentieth century in North End would demand eventual solution at a later stage, when the fate of the area became intertwined with the enactment of the Group Areas Act.

In East London the pre-Second World War era was marked by increasing racial hostility on the part of white residents towards blacks and Asians in particular. This racial animosity led at times to de facto territorial segregation of Asians. The city’s experience appears to have distinct parallels with trends in Durban.79 In August 1928, the Council ceased issuing trading licenses to Asians in an attempt to halt immigration, fearing that the city would emulate Durban in its “python coils of an Asiatic menace”.80 In addition, the Council strove to secure the emigration of the city’s Chinese traders, arguing in an illogical fashion that the Chinese should look after themselves: “there are 400 million of them in China, and they
could find employment for the 7 on the West Bank." 

Attempts to prevent the occasional Asian and coloured purchase of property in predominantly white areas outside North End were instituted in 1925. Following a petition by 181 white ratepayers to halt the sale of land to persons other than whites, the City Council passed a resolution to investigate the possibility of preventing racial intermingling. At this juncture nothing materialized, but in 1938 the City Council agreed, at the request of central government, to consider the practicality of accepting the Draft Segregation Ordinance. This had the same aims as the later Group Areas Act and is indicative of the degree to which apartheid planning was being formulated prior to 1948. Initially, the East London Council favoured this measure.

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East London's Racial Geography in 1948

By 1948 East London had become a markedly segregated city exhibiting high indices of segregation and dissimilarity (Table 1). Conceding the possibility of unreliable data, indications are that there was a very high degree of segregation amongst all race groups at an early juncture, prior to national segregation legislation (statistics for the coloured and Asian residents were combined owing to the paucity of information). Also apparent are the increasing degrees of dissimilarity between the various race groups through time, particularly in terms of the white-African measure. Although measures of dissimilarity between the various black groups are not very high, the measure between these groups (collectively indicated as Black) and whites are significant and have remained so for a considerable period of time. Significantly high measures of racial separation certainly preceded any form of national segregation in East London. The statistics for 1948 reflect the spatial dissimilarities which prevailed between the various racial groups prior to the implementation of the Group Areas Act. The spatial continuity of segregation between the pre-apartheid and the apartheid city epochs, as suggested by Davies and Christopher, is endorsed in this instance.

By 1948 the die of racial segregation had already been cast. Most of East London's residents, with the exception of those living in the racially mixed, inner-urban areas of North End were already living in segregated areas. Ten years later, prior to the passage of Group Areas zoning in East London, there was a total population of nearly 47,000 in the future white areas of the city, of whom only 600 or 3.1 per cent were black. These calculations excluded North End. Segregation was an established reality in the city prior to the passage of the Group Areas Act.

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Conclusion

The case study of pre-1948 East London reflects the degree of continuity which existed between the pre and the post-1948 South African city epochs and their resultant spatial manifestations. The roots of urban racial segregation in East London lie in the city's origin as a defensive outpost close to a troubled frontier. From the start of the settlement, the military and civil authorities in East London attempted to implement rigid racial segregation against the African residents. Attempts were made to apply the same measures against Asians, and later, to a lesser degree, against the coloured people. Developments in East London bear testimony to the important part played by the interests of the white local state and British colonial and military authorities in creating the 'segregated city' phenomenon. The significance of military planning, and the heritage of segregation which it left, makes East London a special case among South African cities.

The general acceptance of racial segregation by successive local councils ensured degrees of racial dissimilarity which were amongst the highest in pre-Union urban centres. The result was that the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act and the 1950 Group Areas Act merely had the effect of legalizing what was essentially a fait accompli in East London. These early attempts at racial residential segregation laid the foundations for the smooth transition from segregated city to the apartheid city form in subsequent years. Accumulating neglect of the black areas prior to 1948 made the harsh impress of apartheid inevitable. Events after 1948 witnessed Government attempts to end the situation of racial mixing in North End and the decision to relocate the entire African population to the Homeland location of Mdantsane. Government intervention in East London took on the added dimension of latter-day sanitation planning because of the degree to which the Municipality had neglected conditions in the black areas of the city.

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NOTES


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59 Minkley, op. cit.

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63 Watts and Agar-Hamilton, op. cit.

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E. Nel
Department of Geography
Rhodes University
Grahamstown
6140
SOUTH AFRICA