

# Gandhi and Pietermaritzburg

▲THE BIRTHPLACE OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE▲

On the night of 7 June 1893, a young Indian lawyer, Mohandas Gandhi, was thrown off a train at the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station. He had refused to move from a whites-only compartment. Gandhi later wrote:

“I was afraid for my very life. I entered the dark waiting-room. There was a white man in the room. I was afraid of him. What was my duty? I asked myself. Should I go back to India, or should I go forward with God as my helper, and face whatever was in store for me? I decided to stay and suffer. My active non-violence began from that date.”



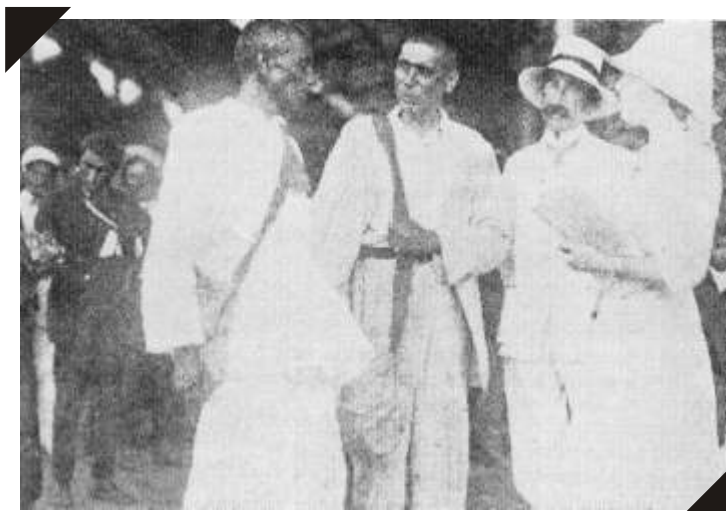
**T**he Pietermaritzburg Railway Station has remained largely unaltered since Gandhi's time, and several plaques in the main entrance hall commemorate an event which gave birth to the struggle for freedom in both South Africa and India.

Based on the original plans of the Railway Station, and the configuration of trains at that time, it has been possible to mark the approximate area of the platform, and the waiting room used by Gandhi on the fateful night.

On the following morning Gandhi sent a telegram of protest to the General Manager of the Natal Government Railways, but that document has not yet been found.



## The only known photograph of MK Gandhi in Pietermaritzburg



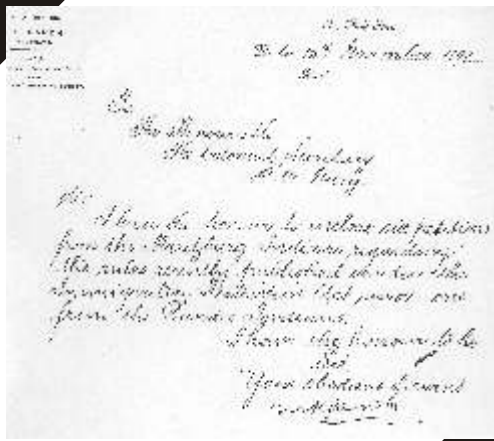
Left to right:  
MK Gandhi, H Kellenbasch,  
Mr Glask and Mrs M Polak,  
all leading figures in the  
Satyagraha Campaign. They  
are standing on the platform  
of the station in 1913, not far  
from where Gandhi was  
thrown from a train in 1893 -  
an event which transformed  
his life.

# Letters AND Petitions TO COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

In 1893, the Colony of Natal was granted responsible government, and shortly thereafter began to enact legislation which restricted Indian political and economic activities. In a letter he wrote on 18 June 1896, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir John Robinson, the Prime Minister of Natal stated:

*"Apart from all other considerations, however, the fact remains that the object of the Act (the Franchise Amendment Act) is to ensure that the control of the political destinies of Natal shall remain in the hands of men of European race."* Gandhi's response was to write letters of protest, present mass petitions and to form the Natal Indian Congress. These activities made him a thorn in the side of the Colonial Government. In an aside in 1898, the Attorney General of Natal wrote: *"Mr Gandhi is an able but discontented person, and is not as grateful as he might be for concessions to a class whose interests he so ably espouses."*

Left, top is a reproduction of the covering letter, and below, left, is one page of the six petitions, signed by "the Maritzburg Indians", and submitted by Gandhi to the Colonial Secretary. The Secretary's office was in the Colonial Buildings, which still stand in Church Street, Pietermaritzburg. The petitions were presented to the Assembly in the Natal Parliament, which is now the provincial legislature building in Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg.



# A

Another Pietermaritzburg building which has an association with Gandhi, is the City Hall. During November 1912, the Honourable Gopal Gokhale visited Natal, and was accompanied by Gandhi. They signed the Pietermaritzburg Mayor's Visitors Book thus:

7.11.12 V.K. Gokhale . . . . . Poona, India  
 M.K. Gandhi . . . . . Lawley Frivash

before addressing a meeting in the City Hall, the advertisement for which is reproduced below:

The Honourable Mr. G. K. GOKHALE, M.A., C.I.E.  
 Will arrive at Maritzburg at 3.37 p.m. (down Mail).

**TO-DAY, THURSDAY, 7th Inst**

The Hon. gentleman will be met and welcomed by the Mayor (Councillor Sanders) and Town Councillors of Maritzburg, in the name of the Citizens of Maritzburg.

**A RECEPTION**  
 WILL BE GIVEN IN THE  
**TOWN HALL, at 8 p.m.**

When the Chair will be taken by His Honour the Administrator (The Honourable G. J. SMYTH).

In pursuance of the Resolution passed at the Public Meeting of the Indian community held on the 15th August last, whereby it was resolved that all business should be suspended on the afternoon of the Hon. gentleman's arrival here, the Indian public of this town are requested to give effect to that Resolution, and observe the afternoon as half-holiday.

It is earnestly hoped that all citizens—Europeans and Indians—of this town will endeavour to be present on the reception.

The Hon. Mr. Gokhale will leave for Durban by a special train on the following day, (FRIDAY), at 2 p.m.

**LEO R. GOPAUL,**  
**N. B. NAIK,**  
 Joint Hon. Secretaries,  
 Reception Committee.

# R eports

The Natal Witness, on 8 November 1912, reported on Gokhale's arrival and the meeting.

The Indian community of Maritzburg turned out in force yesterday afternoon to meet the down mail conveying the Hon. Gopal Gokhale.

It was a clear case of 'best bib and tucker' for the occasion and the result was almost paralysing to the occidental eye. There was a bodyguard of young Indians in pink puggarees, a detachment with saffron headgear, and a variety of other able bodied colours to help matters out.

The Town Hall was thronged last evening when the Hon. Gopal Gokhale addressed a meeting, which included all the leading citizens of Maritzburg, and a great number of Indians.

Mr MK Gandhi said he had been a resident of South Africa for the past 18 years. The Ganges was a holy river, and, if its waters had flowed into the Unsindusi in the person of Mr Gokhale, then it was a proud day for the City. If Mr Gokhale had been an Englishman he would have been where Mr Asquith was today; if a Frenchman, then he would be President of a great Republic, if a South African - and born somewhere near the Transvaal (laughter) - he would have been where Gen. Botha was today. That was the spirit of veneration in which his fellow countrymen held Mr Gokhale (applause). He had not the slightest doubt but that his message - which was one of goodwill and peace - had already succeeded. Whether his mission towards helping the Indian would be successful still remained to be seen. It would rest a good deal with those in South Africa as to whether that devoutly-hoped for success of Mr Gandhi's visit would materialise. Entered into with a generous noble spirit his mission should be significantly successful (applause).

On 9 November 1912, the Natal Witness reported further:

## Gokhale later said:

"Gandhi is without doubt made of the stuff of which heroes and martyrs are made. Nay, more, he has in him the marvellous spiritual power to turn ordinary men around him into heroes and martyrs."



At an early hour yesterday, (Friday) the Hon. Gopal Gokhale was interviewing a multitude of deputations and visitors. At 10 o'clock there was a large gathering of Indians at the Indian High School, Willow Bridge. They were gathered to give the Indian view of the grievances to which it was desired to draw the visitors' attention. The spokesman were Ismail Bayat, the Rev Joseph, Mr Royappen, Mr Naik, Mr P Naidoo and MK Gandhi.

A lunch was arranged at the Camden Hotel . . . Among the company were His Honour The Administrator, The Mayor, Cr D Sanders, The Attorney-General, Mr C.W.F. Bird.

Mr MK Gandhi, in proposing 'Our European Friends' said he spoke as an Indian and on behalf of the Indians. He voiced their feelings when he said that they were doubly indebted to the Europeans who had so heartily assisted the Indians in welcoming and assisting their visitor, an illustrious son of India. Wherever Mr Gokhale had gone there had been a spirit of peace. He could only hope that that spirit would not vanish with his departure, but would continue and intensify, because there was not, after all, any reason why they should not all live together under the same flag in peace, amity and friendship (cheers).

CONFERRAL OF

# Posthumous Freedom

OF THE CITY OF PIETERMARITZBURG  
ON MAHATMA GANDHI

**On 25 April 1997, the Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi Transitional Local Council met on the platform of the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station, for the purpose of posthumously conferring Freedom of the City upon Mahatma Gandhi. President Nelson Mandela, who earlier that day had also received the Freedom of the City, presented the citation to Mr Gopalkrishana Gandhi, High Commissioner for India, and a grandson of the Mahatma.**

President Mandela said:

“Today we are righting a century-old wrong. This station, once one of the world’s most notorious symbols of discrimination, intolerance and oppression, today proclaims a message of dignity restored.

In contrast to that shameful day, Pietermaritzburg, and indeed South Africa, is sending a message of hope, affirming the noble values espoused by Gandhi. Your action adds force to the national drive to reconciliation, redress and reconstruction.

It is a great privilege for me personally to share in this tribute. Gandhi’s magnificent example of personal sacrifice and dedication in the face of oppression was one of his many legacies to our country and to the world. He showed us that it was necessary to brave

imprisonment if truth and justice were to triumph over evil. The values of tolerance, mutual respect and unity for which he stood and acted had a profound influence on our liberation movement, and on my own thinking. They inspire us today in our efforts of reconciliation and nation-building.”



## Mr Gopalkrishna Gandhi replied:

“Here in Pietermaritzburg today, here at this railway station the question may well be asked: Who was the man that was flung out; who was it that fell? Again, who was it that rose from his humiliation - somewhere here - on two very different feet? The question may be answered, thus: When Gandhi was evicted from the train, an Indian visiting South Africa fell; but when Gandhi rose an Indian South African rose. The Indian and the South African merged in him that instant he fell. Doubtless, with astonished disbelief. This must have turned, the very next instant, to fury. But in an alchemy that was uniquely his own, it turned also into something totally different, something creative, something redemptive, something that changed shock and fury into a transformational resolve. Gandhi fell with a railway ticket no one honoured; he rose with a testament none could ignore; he fell a passenger but rose a patriot; fell a barrister but rose a revolutionary; his legal brief became a political cause; his sense of human decency transformed itself into a passion for human justice. The personal died within him that moment and turned public; ‘mine’ became ‘thine’. In fact, Your Worship Mohandas Gandhi was not flung here, he was launched.

And so when Pietermaritzburg gives him today, the freedom of the municipality of Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi, it gives him the equivalent of a second birth certificate, a certificate that marks his political birth.

Your Worship, to receive an honour on behalf of the Mahatma would be for anyone, anywhere, an ego-shattering responsibility. It is particularly so for a natural descendant because the Mahatma, if anyone, belonged to all of humanity. But I do see him permitting a representative of India in South Africa to accept the freedom of Pietermaritzburg on his behalf. Not because he would want the world to be reminded of the occasion when he suffered discrimination. But because through this gesture South Africa is telling the world once again that racism belongs now to the past. It has gone like the train that steamed away from here that winter night, 103 years ago. But he would also accept this honour because it would enable us to remember that the larger world remains discriminatory, remains unequal. And that it calls for the unqualified completion of the revolution that began here.”





# The Unveiling

The Gandhi Statue in Church Street, Pietermaritzburg, was unveiled by Archbishop Desmond Tutu on 6 June 1993.

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*Compiled by Rob Haswell for the Gandhi Memorial Committee*