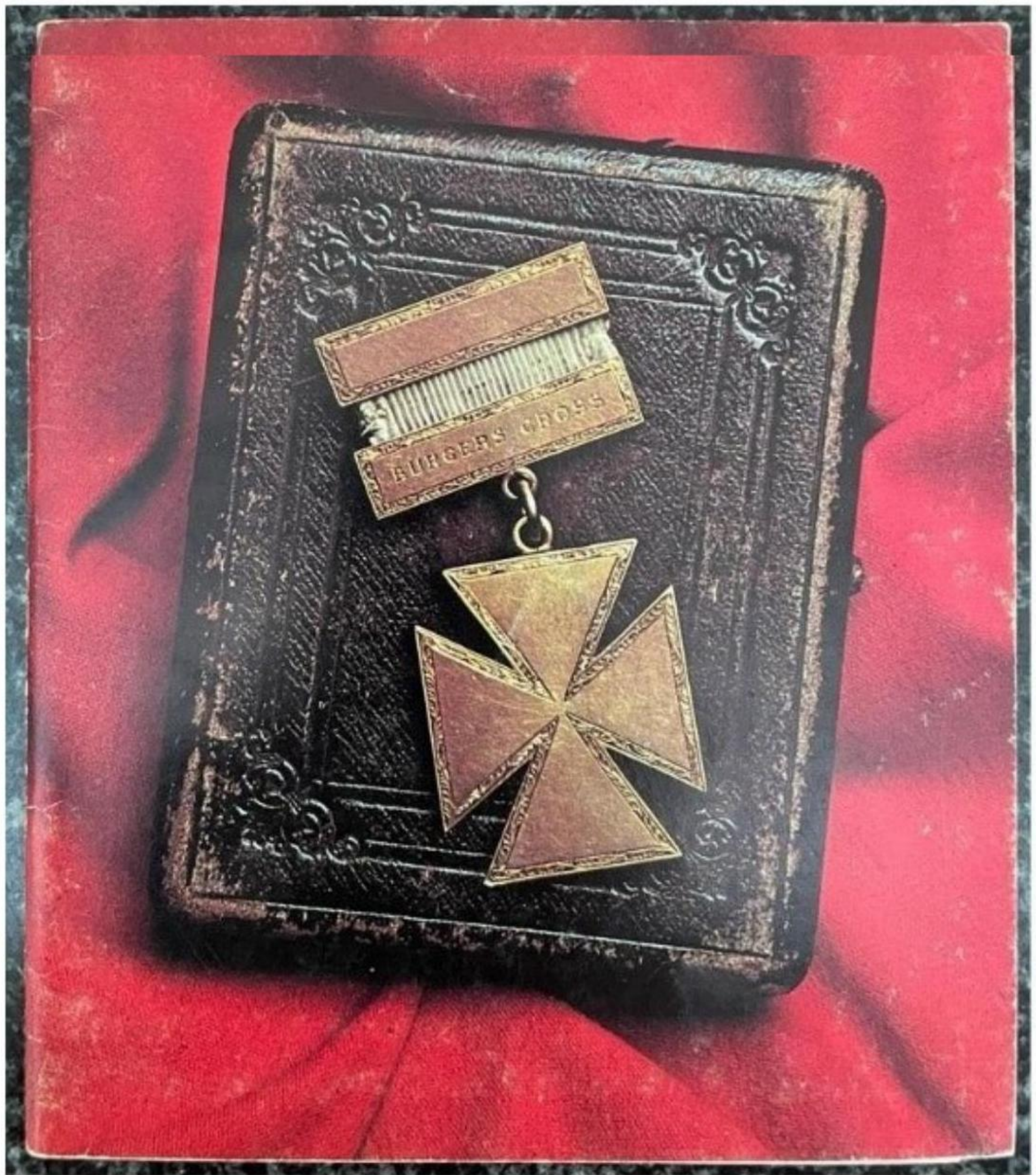


The Gold Burger's Cross of 1874

South Africa's First Presidential Award



Pierre H. Nortje

This booklet is dedicated to Thomas van der Spuy, a great benefactor to the Western Cape Numismatic Society.



Please note that the views and opinions expressed in this booklet, is that of the author alone, and not that of any other individual, organization or institution.

Cape Town: February 2024

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Introduction

Thomas Francois Burgers, the 4th president of the South African Republic from 1872 to 1877, will always be remembered by South African coin collectors as being the initiator of our first gold coin, the so-called Burgerspond. On the president's request, in 1874, Messrs Heaton & Sons of the Birmingham Mint in England, struck 837 of these coins.

For the following 18 years, no other coinage intended for circulation was struck for the Z.A.R. until 1892, when first in Berlin and then at the Pretoria Mint, a series of coins was produced carrying the effigy of Burgers' successor Paul Kruger.



Source: Wikimedia and Heritage Auctions

What is less known about President Burgers, is that he also initiated South Africa's first presidential award, the so-called Burgers Cross in the same year (1874) that the Burgersponds were issued. The Burgerspond and the Burgers Cross had something else in common, in that the gold they were struck from, originated from the same source, being the gold

deposits mined at Pilgrims Rest in the Eastern Transvaal, where gold was discovered only the year before in 1873.

According to *Hern's Handbook on the Medallions of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and the Anglo Boer War* (2008:2) a specimen was last sold in 1979 for the amount of R39 000, almost R1.4 million today. (This information however, is incorrect, as we will later see in this paper).

Unfortunately, very little has been written about the Burgers Cross and information about it is limited to say the least.

Matthy Esterhuysen, who wrote the standard work on the Burgerspond, also wrote two short articles on the Burgers Cross, the first appearing under the heading "*n Unieke Toekenning*" (an Unique Award) in *Bickels Coin & Medal News* of November 1967 and the second in 1970 published in a booklet by the South African Broadcast Corporation entitled "*Munte en die Mens*". (Coins and Man).

The following information regarding the three recipients of the cross are broadly based on these two articles with additional information added from other sources as indicated.

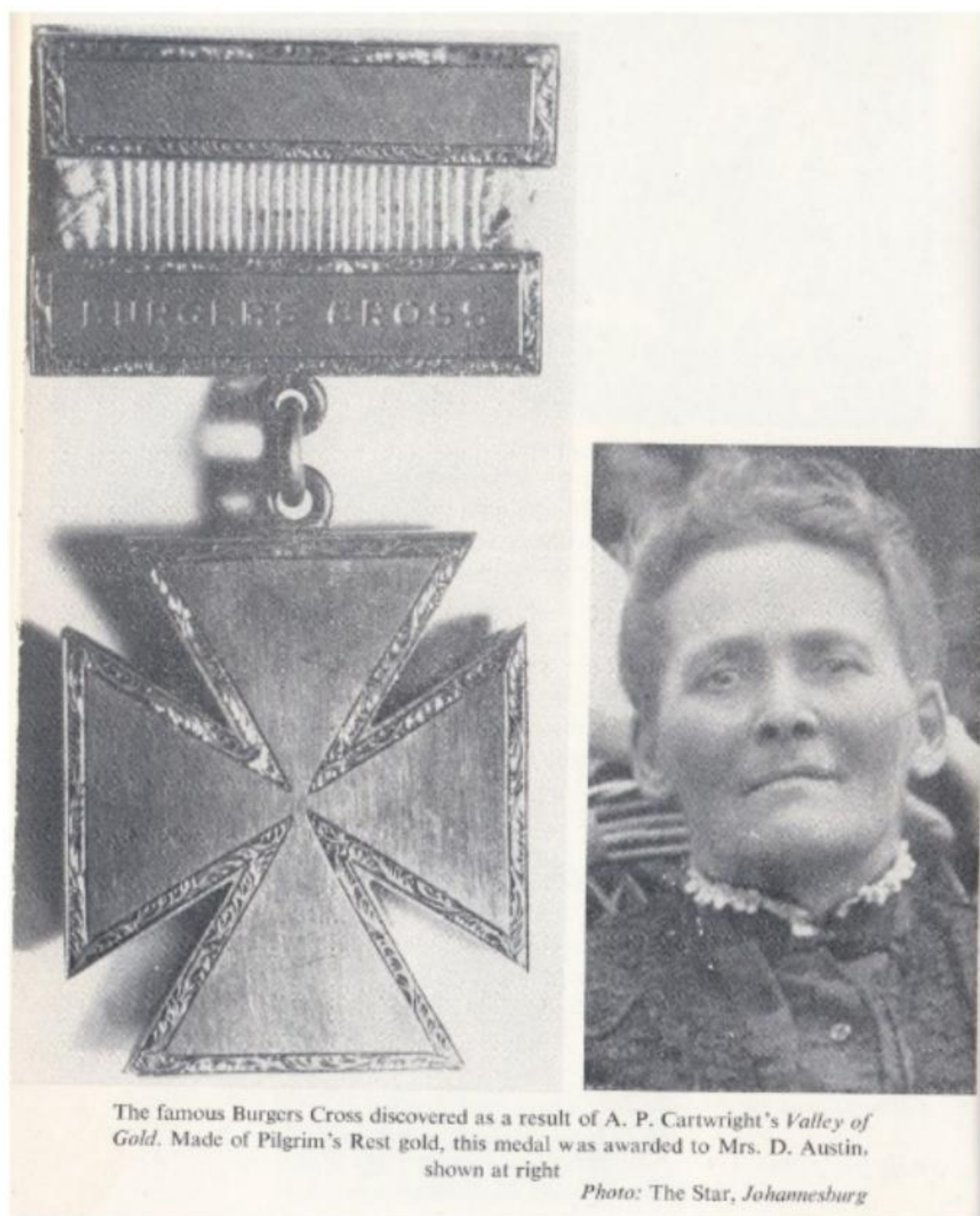
The Recipients of the Burgers Cross

After gold was discovered in the Eastern Transvaal in 1873, the area became known as the New Caledonia goldfields, later called Mac-Mac. Typhoid fever and malaria afflicted the diggers there and two women distinguished themselves in nursing the sick. Out of gratitude, the diggers made representations to president Burgers that acknowledgement be shown to the two women.

Maria Magdalena Petronella Austin (née Espach)

In August 1874, the president visited the gold fields at Mac-Mac and awarded crosses to Mrs. Maria Magdalena Petronella Austin (née Espach) and Mrs. Tom MacLachlan (née Shires) for their extraordinary work.

According to an article in *The Lowvelder / Die Laevelder* (22 August 2021) Maria Austin had seven children. One of her five daughters, Amy Lillian Marks, inherited the cross from her mother. Her son later sold it to the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service. According to Matthy Esterhuyse, one of Maria's daughters was of the opinion that her mother received the cross for nursing she did during the so-called Sekoekoenie war (May 1876 - February 1877). Esterhuyse says that the bar to the medal was probably added for her services during that war and she thus qualified twice for the award.



The pictures of the cross and Mrs. D. Austin on the left were published in *The Enchanted Door* by Denis Godfrey in 1963. The pictures on the right shows her with family members in her later years. She died in 1928 at the age of 77. Source: *Die Laevelder / The Lowvelder* newspaper.

The cross is accompanied by a hand-written letter by the president reading as follows ...

Pretoria
August 25th
1874

My dear Madam

In handing you over the accompanying “Burger’s Cross” as a token of sincere respect and acknowledgement on behalf of myself and the public at the Gold Fields for your kind and devoted services rendered to those who were in distress, I feel sure that I express the feeling of all when I say: May God reward you for your noble self-denial! Trusting you may be spared many years to enjoy the fruits of a noble work, ably performed.

I remain, My dear Madam
Your Obt. Servant,
Thos. Burgers
State President,
S.A. Republic.

Regarding the letter that accompanied the cross, in *Pretoria Geselsbrief* (June 2004) Rosa Swanepoel writes that according to an article in the Transvaal newspaper *Die Volkstem* of 19 September 1874, the cross was awarded to two women. Translated from Afrikaans to English the newspaper article follows

“They are Ms. McLachlan and ‘Jongej.’ Espag. In the letter accompanying the award, Pres. Burgers writes that it is awarded out of sincere gratitude for their kind and devoted self-sacrifice in the service of the sick of the goldfields. May they one day receive their reward in heaven. May the Burgers cross remind them of the cross in the lives of their fellow human beings that they so nobly help to lighten”.

As we have seen, one of Maria’s daughters was of the opinion that her mother received the cross for nursing she did during the so-called Sekoekoenie war. In a doctoral thesis by Charlotte Searle that we will refer to later in this paper, Mrs.

Austin's daughter, Mrs. Marks, believed that her mother received the award for services to the sick in the raids preceding the Sekukuni war.

In his book, *Valley of Gold* (1973) A.P. Cartwright also states that Austin received it for her war services while the 2nd recipient, Mrs. MacLachlan (see below) received it for nursing the diggers.

However, both the letter of president Burgers of 25 August 1874 and the newspaper article of 19 September 1874 omitted anything of war services and only mentions the sick of the goldfields. The fact of the matter is that the Sekoekoenie / Sekukuni war only started in 1876, and as the awards were made two years earlier in 1874, it was impossible for them to have been awarded for services during the war.

However, as Esterhuysen states, the 2nd bar was later added for Mrs. Austin's war services, but in the author's view, the medals were most probably issued with two bars from the start, the upper one to accommodate the pin for it to be worn as a brooch.

Mrs. Tom MacLachlan (née Shires)

Esterhuysen does not give her real name but calls her by her husband's name Tom, a Scottish gold prospector. Our research shows that her name was Anna Maria (Emma), whose mother was also Maria, after which the Maria Shires Falls near Sabie in the Mpumalanga province was named.

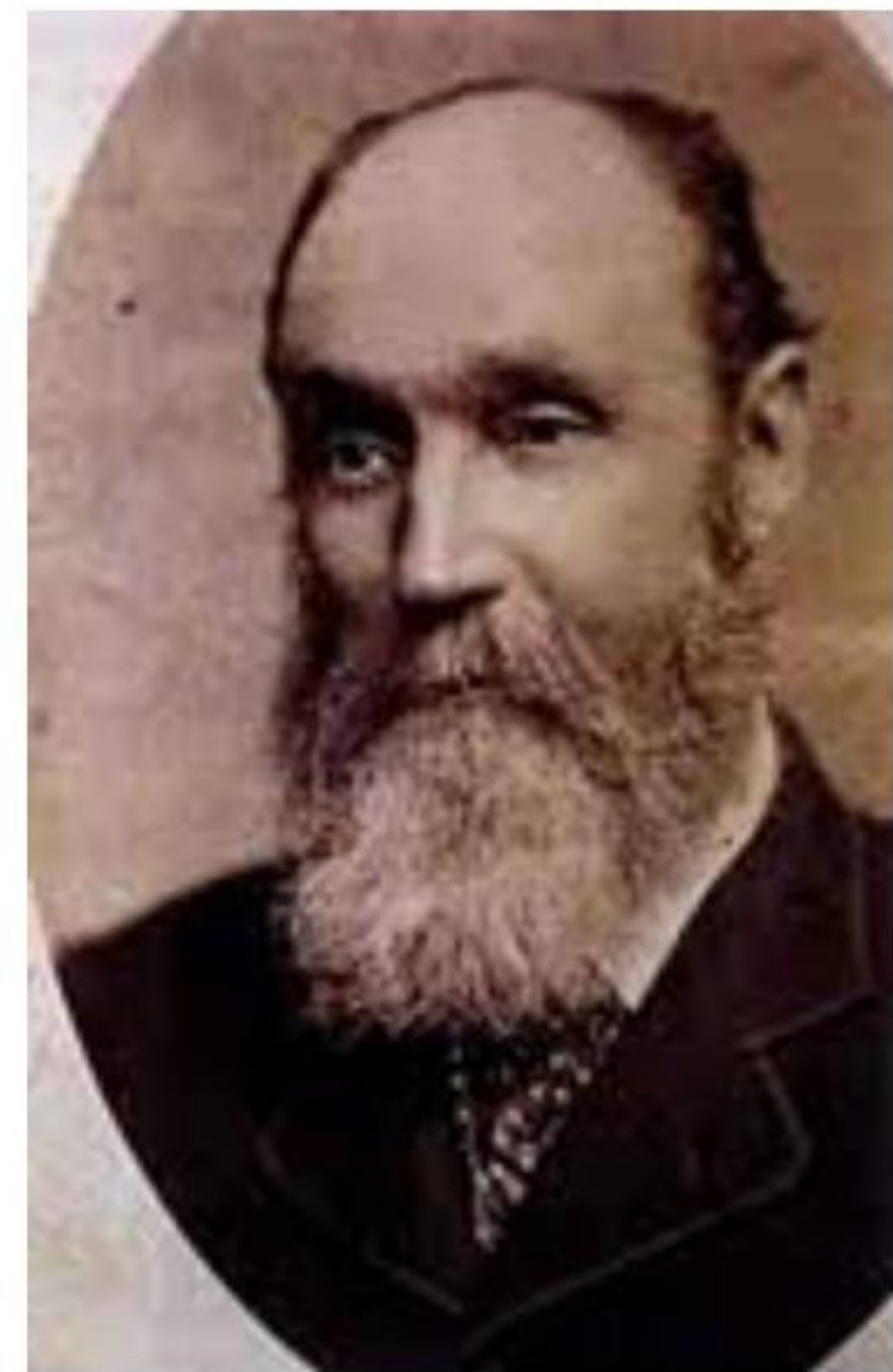
She writes that initially very little was known about Mrs. MacLachlan (also spelt McLachlan) but that she was able to make contact with her granddaughter, who formerly worked as a matron at the hospital in Leydsdorp. MacLachlan told Esterhuysen that her grandmother was Emma (née Shires) who had 3 sons and 3 daughters. The farm *Geelhoutboom* outside the town of Sabie, used to belong to the family. Matron MacLachlan saw the cross at her grandmother's house many years earlier, but when she died, the cross was not included

with her other jewelry.

As the daughter of Emma's oldest son William, and the only member of the family who was trained as a nurse, the cross was actually due to her. Nobody knows what happened to it, but the suspicion is that it was sold at a street sale during the Second World War for the benefit of the Red Cross organization. Our research could only locate one son of Emma, and his name was not William, but Arthur Ronald (1876-1939) who was a surgeon in Cape Town. He died in 1939 and was survived by his wife Margaret (née Braxendale) and three children, but their names are not recorded.

When President Burgers visited the Gold field broadly known as New Caledonia Gold Field, he noticed the number of diggers' names beginning with Mac's and Mc's. He named the diggings Macmac. The diggers loved the name, which has stuck right up to the present day.

In his book, *Valley of Gold* (1973) A.P. Cartwright writes "As far as I can discover, Mrs. Tom McLachlan, who lived in a stone house built for her by her husband, was first on the scene. She was certainly there in 1872, and helped to nurse many a fever-stricken traveler who had crossed the Lowveld from Mozambique only to collapse on the track that led up the mountainside to the diggings". Picture right: Thomas Flemming (Tom) MacLachlan. Source: Sabie.co.za

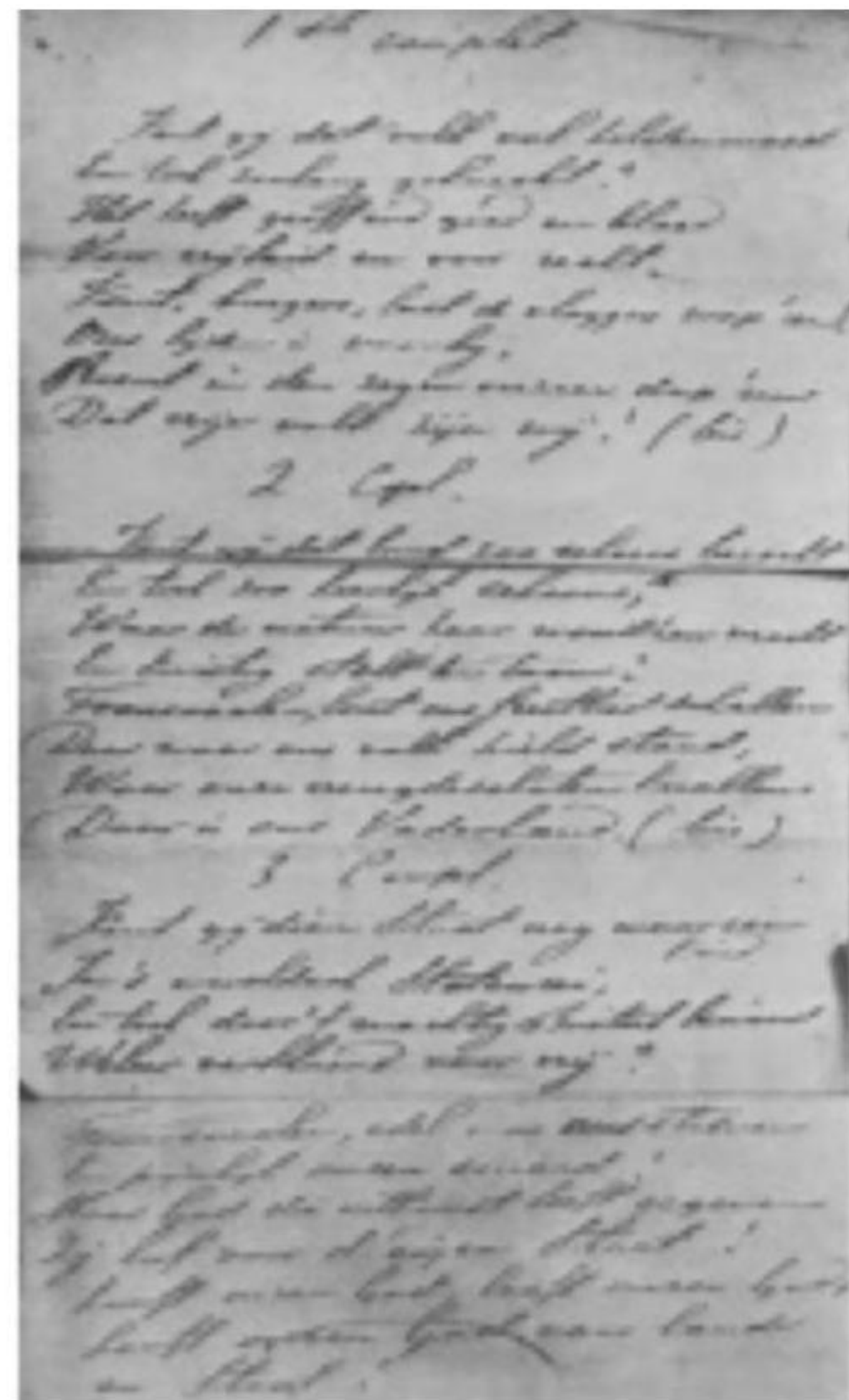


Catharina Felicia van Rees

Apparently, according to Esterhuyse, it was not President Burgers' intention to award the cross exclusively to nurses, because in 1877 the executive council awarded the "*Burgers Cross for Ladies*" to Catharina Felicia van Rees, the Dutch

poetess and composer of the Transvaal national anthem “*Kent Gij dat Volk*”. The song was adopted as the national anthem in 1876 and from correspondence it appears that the award was to be made to Van Rees.

President Burgers had been personal friends with her since his student days in Europe and wrote to her promising that he would see to it that she receive the cross, but that it would take some time as the gold had to be sent to Germany first to make the decoration. Whether she ever received the award cannot be said with certainty. However, her descendants, according to Esterhuyse, who have been able to be traced so far know nothing of the cross.

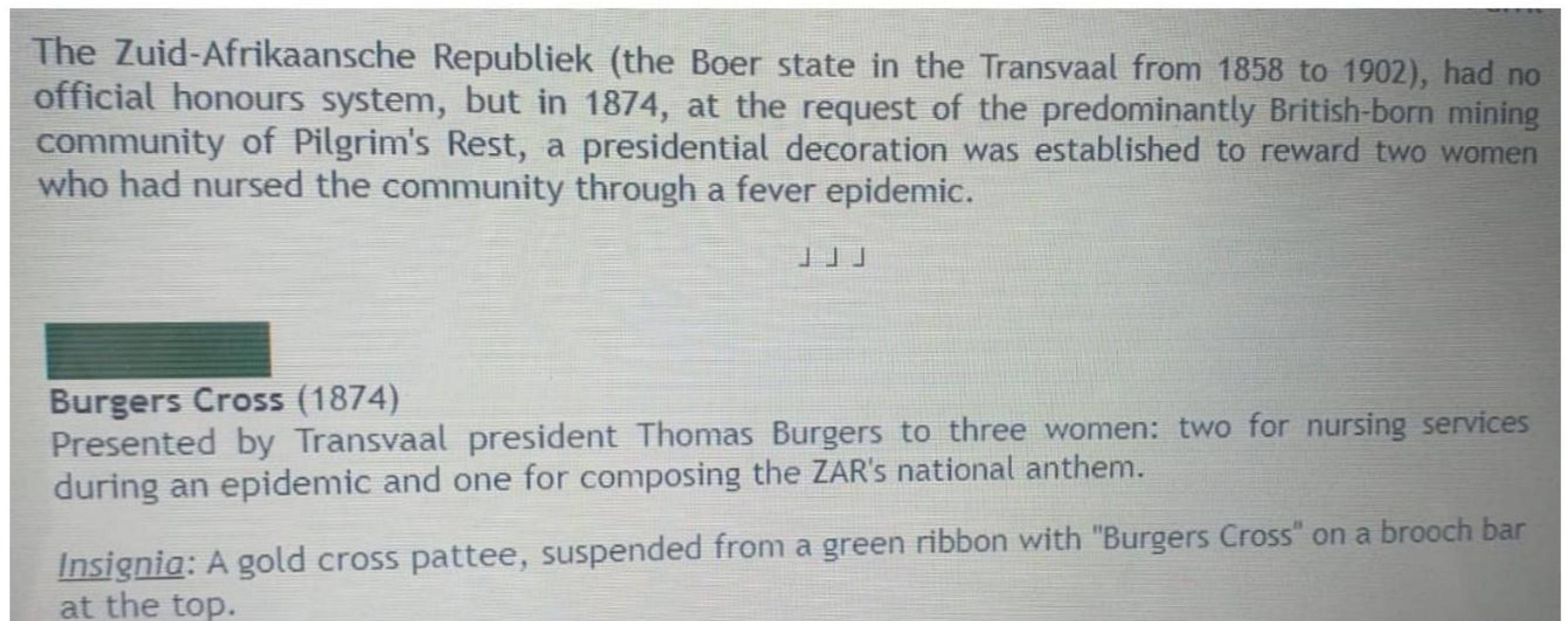


Catharina Felicia van Rees (1831-1915) and “*Kent Gij dat Volk*” in Van Rees’s own handwriting. Source: Die Nuwe Brandweg. Tydskrif vir Kuns en Lettere. Jaargang 1930

Arthur Radburn, a specialist on South African orders and medals had a website (archived since 2019) entitled *South African Medals Website* that was started in 2001. He writes

...”The burghers of the Boer republics regarded orders and decorations as unacceptably royalist, but the ZAR (Transvaal) had a short-lived presidential decoration in the 1870s”.

A link to the “decoration” is provided and a colour picture of the ribbon is shown. The green colour differs from the off-white, slightly yellow ribbon shown in the Hern catalogue, but this is most probably due to fading as its colour is indeed described as green in the Phoenix auction catalogue that we will discuss in the next section.



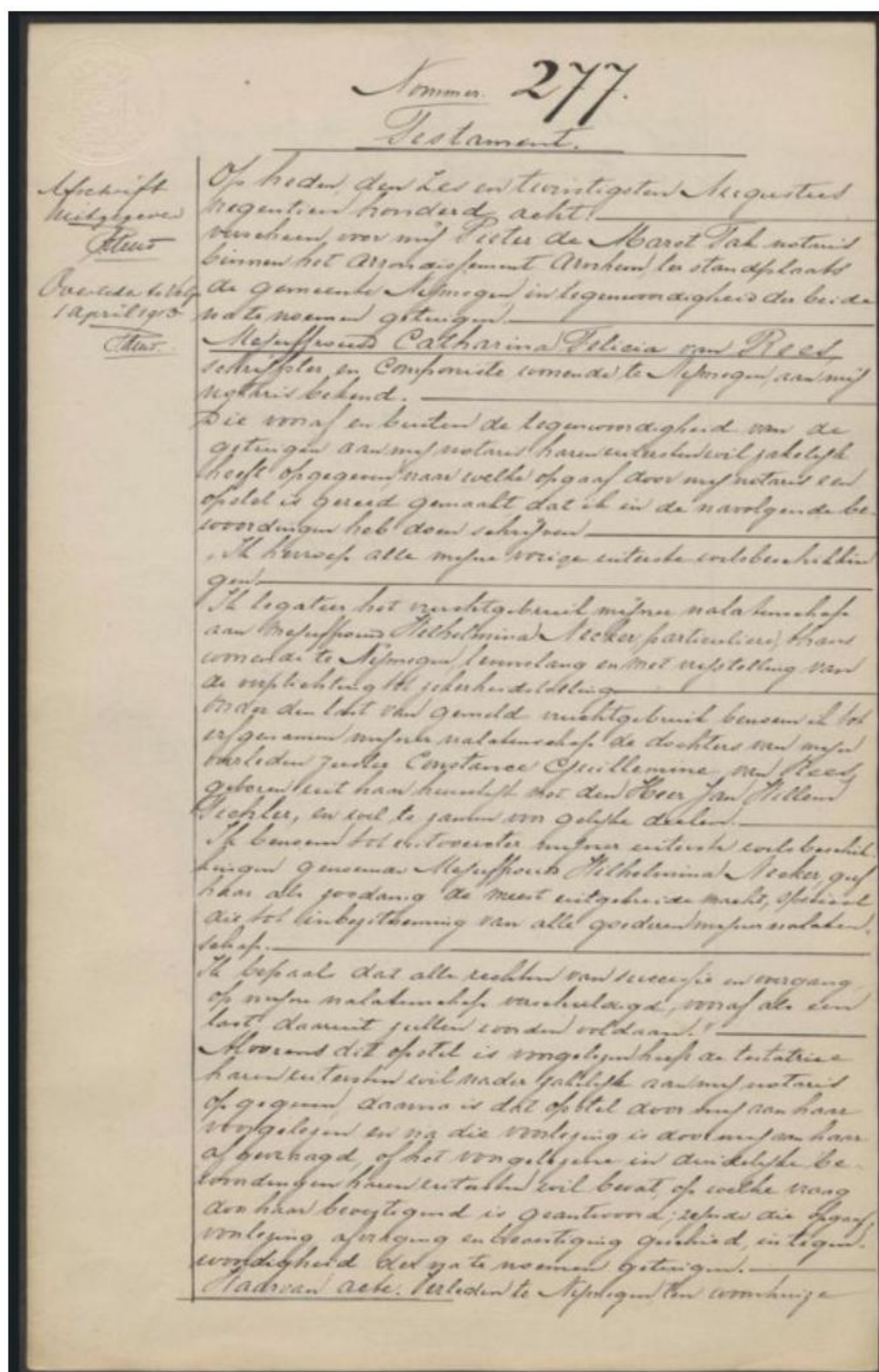
In an article by Lotte Jensen from the Radboud University in Nijmegen entitled “*Rees, Catharina Felicia van (1831-1915)*” published in the *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* in 2010, Jensen writes of President Burgers’ request to Van Rees to write the Transvaal anthem.

“*Tot beider teleurstelling werd in een Volksraadbesluit uit 1876 echter een ander lied tot het officiële Transvaalse volkslied uitgeroepen*”. (To both people's disappointment [Burgers and Van Rees], however, a different song was declared the official Transvaal national anthem in a Volksraad decision from 1876).

If this was indeed true, Van Rees would not have received the cross, but virtually all sources states her song was indeed chosen as the national anthem of the Transvaal (South African Republic). But as we have stated, there is no evidence that

she received it. Matthy Esterhuysen wrote that her descendants who have been able to be traced so far know nothing of the cross.

She however does not say who these descendants were, as Van Rees never married and had no children. However, we have been able to find a copy of her last will and testament of 1908 (She died in 1915).



The document reads with difficulty, but it seems her estate was divided between the daughters (or daughter) of her sister Constance Guillelmine van Rees who was married to Jan Willem Tichler. Old records show that they had at least one daughter born in 1855 when her mother was 41 years old.

Her name was Johanna Elisabeth Maria Tichler who died in 1925. Another name mentioned is Wilhelmina Stecker or Tecker of Nijmegen. It is not known if either of these two women had children but a thorough search should probably bring some results. We have however, not pursued this matter further.

Further Comments

From all the information we could gather, it seems that the only surviving copy of the Burgers Cross is the one that was awarded to Maria Austin (née Espach).

Matthy Esterhuysen noted in November 1967 that approximately two years earlier, the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Boom Street, Pretoria (currently named the Ditsong National Cultural History Museum) received a Burgers Cross as a donation from Professor Charlotte Searle.

She (Searle) had apparently been told 26 years earlier by a patient of hers of the existence of a cross presented to a South African nurse during the previous century. After many years of searching she eventually found the one awarded to Mrs. Austin and donated it to the museum.

We find this confusing in that it was noted that Maria Austin's grandson sold it to the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service after inheriting it from his mother.

Charlotte Searle was born in Uitenhage and educated at Riebeeck College. In 1964, Searle was the first nurse in South Africa to obtain a doctorate for her thesis *The History of the Development of Nursing in South Africa, 1652-1960*. Source: Nelson Mandela University. In her thesis, Searle refers to the Burgers Cross (pages 80 & 81) which was probably the main source of Esterhuysen's accounts of 1967 and 1970.

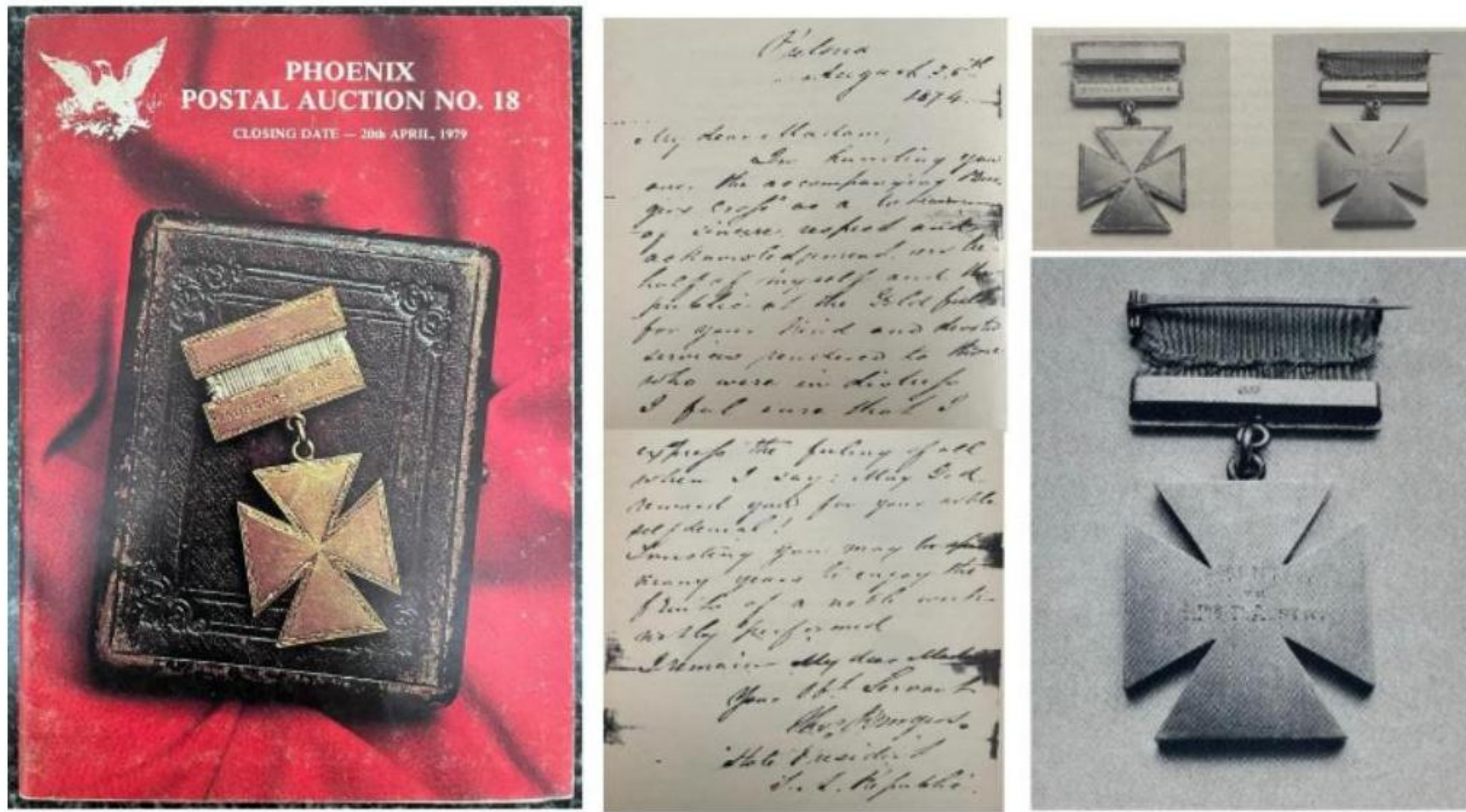


Just before publishing this paper, the author received news from Professor Francois Malan of the University of Pretoria regarding the 1979 sale, as recorded by Hern, of the Burgers Cross. The information shows that the cross was on three occasions that year offered for sale by Phoenix Postal Auctions of Johannesburg.

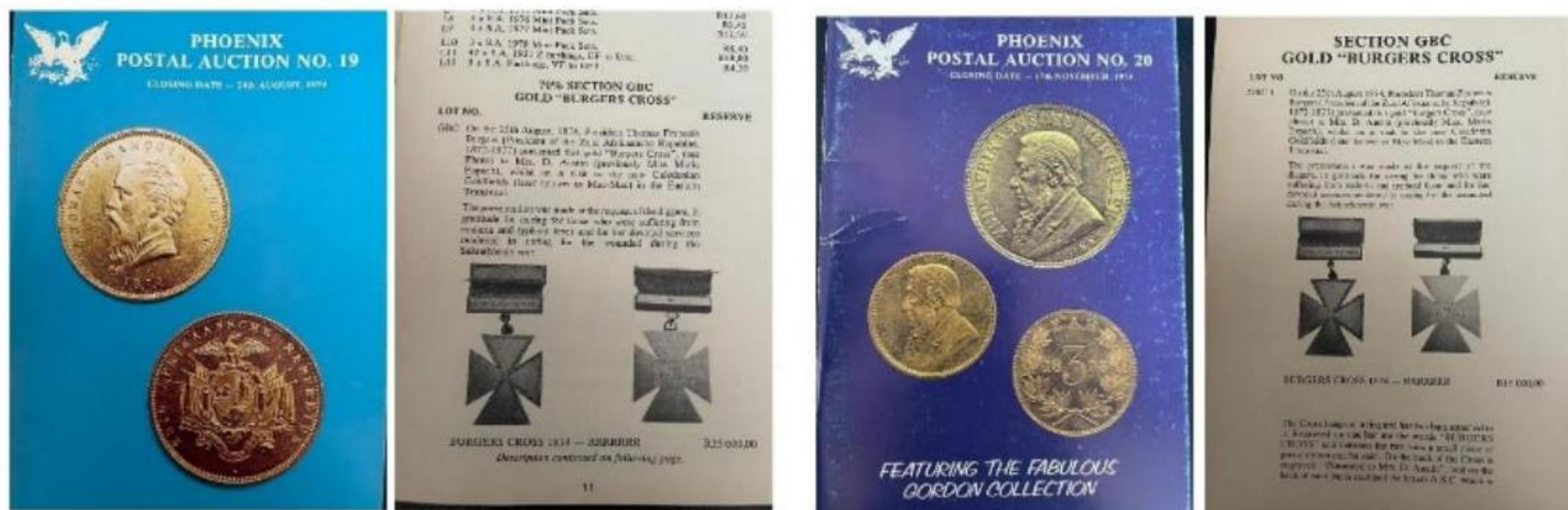
The first sale was on 20 April 1979 when it was offered for R39 000, then again on 24 August 1979 for the reduced amount of R25 000 and then again on 17 November 1979 for R15 000. Professor Malan says that he does not have all the auction results of the third sale so is not sure if the cross eventually sold. A few very important pieces of information were revealed and shown in the first auction catalogue of 20 April. Firstly, the front page shows the cross with its original box of issue. Secondly, it contains pictures of the original letter by President Burgers and thirdly, it shows the only known picture to exist of the reverse of the medal.

The catalogue states that the cross measures 46 mm x 38 mm and is 5 mm thick with a weight of 54.27 grams. The reverse of the medal is stamped "*Presented to Mrs. D Austin*" and both the bars are stamped with the makers-mark "A.S.C." (Her

initial “D” on the medal indicates her husband’s name which was David).



The following pictures are from the follow up sales.



Source: Francois Malan

As we have stated previously in this paper, the history of the sale of the Austin cross is confusing as: -

- Matthy Esterhuysen noted in November 1967 that approximately two years earlier, the *National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Boom Street, Pretoria* (currently named the *Ditsong National Cultural History Museum*) received a Burgers Cross as a donation from Professor Charlotte Searle.

- According to an article in *The Lowvelder / Die Laevelder* (22 August 2021) Maria Austin had seven children. One of her five daughters, Amy Lillian Marks, inherited the cross from her mother. Her son later sold it to the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service.
- In 1979 the cross was offered for sale by Phoenix Postal Auctions of Johannesburg

If Professor Charlotte Searle donated the cross to the museum in Pretoria in approximately 1965, how could Maria Austin's grandson have sold it to the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service thereafter, and who was its owner when it was put up for sale by Phoenix auctions in 1979?

According to a notice in the South African Digest (page 8) of 18 November 1983, a Burgers cross was at that stage in possession of the Transvaal Provincial Administration. Their source is given as the *Pretoria News* of 21 October 1983.

We have written to Julia Montlha, a curator for the Numismatics collection at the Ditsong National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, to ask if the cross is in their possession. She informed us on 12 December 2023 that she will check the item in question with the information provided and get back to us.

On 30 January 2024, she replied as follows...

“Unfortunately, we are unable to locate the record on our donation and acquisition database. I am currently searching the historical loss database and will inform you if it forms part of the objects stolen from the museum in the past years. However, will keep the reference information and will contact you if anything comes up”.

Later strikings

According to an article written by Louis-John Havemann on the website *mpumalanga happenings*, Mr. Victor Burger, an amateur jeweler, who is a descendant of the late President Francois Burgers, was commissioned by Rand Mine Properties in 1973 to use the last of the gold left over from the last production run at Pilgrims Rest to make a copy of the Burgers Cross as well as 60 miniatures.

The article says that the full sized replica was based on an original Burgers Cross, housed in the Museum of Man (?) in Pretoria. The replica was made of 14 carat gold and weighed between 30 and 40 grams. The size did not correspond to the weight and it was then discovered that the original crosses were hollow. (As we have mentioned earlier, the original cross measures 46 mm x 38 mm and is 5 mm thick with a weight of 54.27 grams).

The miniatures replicas each weighed 7 grams and measure 25 mm x 22 mm and all 60 were presented to various dignitaries and employees of Rand Mine Properties at the time of closure of the Pilgrims Rest Mine. (Note: It is uncertain what the "Museum of Man" in Pretoria is – it was probably the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria.)



Mr. Victor Burger (top left) with an example of the miniature cross he made. Just below his hand, in the lower right hand corner of the picture, is an enlarged black and white picture of

an original cross. Sources: mpumalanga happenings.co.za and Netwerk24



According to the website of the old 7th South African Infantry Battalion, there were at least two uses of the Burgers Cross in local heraldry, being the coat of arms of the now defunct Transvaal Department of Public Works in Pilgrim's Rest and the coat of arms (shoulder flash) of 7 SA Infantry Battalion, which was based in the area.



Matthy Esterhuyse mentions that the cross was probably made by hand as it is visible to the naked eye that it is not symmetrical. We will remember that president Burgers wrote to Catharina van Rees in 1877 telling her that the award to her

would take some time as the gold had to be sent to Germany first to make the decoration. Could this indicate that the two previous crosses were also made in Germany?

This would be considered strange, as if these two were “handmade” they were probably **not** manufactured by a skilled jeweler or silversmith of which Germany had plenty. We speculated that the two earlier crosses were locally manufactured by a person using the makers-mark of “ASC” and if a third cross was indeed made, it was probably manufactured in Germany. Of interest is that Esterhuysen wrote that the makers mark reads “ASG”. The picture of the reverse as depicted in the Phoenix sale is unfortunately not clear enough to identify the correct initials but we believe it to be “ASC” as stated in the catalogue.

We are not sure if there were local jewelers established in Pretoria as early as 1874, as the earliest firms we could find were both founded in 1877 being H.W. Brouwer in Pretorius street and Gottfried Lohner. It is of course possible that the crosses could have been made in other centres in South Africa but according to a long list of South African silversmiths established in the 1800s in South Africa (on the website 925-1000.com) none used either the makers mark “ASC” or “ASG”.

Conclusion

Until recently, we believed that two, maybe three Burgers Crosses were issued in the 1870s, of which one should still be in existence. However, from what we could gather, the cross awarded to Mrs. Austin was last recorded in 1983 when the *South African Digest* of 18 November 1983 stated that a cross was at that stage in possession of the Transvaal Provincial Administration (museum services). For the past 40 years, it seems it was never mentioned or recorded again and was probably lost in the interim years.

Here is our theory...

Through her doctoral research in the 1960s, Charlotte Searle located the Austin Cross and mediated its loan to the Transvaal museum services. In 1979, a family member recalled / reclaimed the cross and asked Phoenix Postal Auctions of Johannesburg to sell it. After at least two unsuccessful auctions, it was eventually sold to the Transvaal museum services in late 1979 or early 1980s and was still in their possession until at least November 1983.

The successor of the old National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Boom Street, Pretoria is currently named the Ditsong National Cultural History Museum where the cross should currently reside. (As we believe, should be the full size gold replica that was made in 1973 by a descendant of President Burgers, Mr. Victor Burger).

However, our inquiries to the museum revealed that they cannot locate this national treasure and it is our belief that it was most probably stolen and melted up for scrap gold. There were also two Burgersponde in the museum's collection in 1983 and these also seem to be missing and presumed stolen.

If indeed the case, this would be nothing new, as in last December (2023) centuries-old gold artefacts on loan from the same museum, were stolen from the Sanparks museum in the Kruger National Park. The artefacts include a necklace, bracelets and beads excavated from two graves at the Thulamela archaeological site in Kruger National Park, which was inhabited between the 13th and 17th centuries.