

RICHARD CHARLES O'NEIL



It was in the year 1818 that Richard Charles O'Neil travelled by sea from India to the Cape of Good Hope. Some years earlier he had, through his connection with the British Army, left his home in Belfast, Ireland for India, where he was stationed as an Officer in a British Regiment. This regiment was later transferred to the Cape of Good Hope and so it came about that Richard Charles O'Neil and his wife (whose maiden name was Quigley) found themselves bound for the Cape.

Whilst on this journey a son was born to Richard Charles O'Neil and his wife. This son was named John James O'Neil. The two older children of Richard Charles O'Neil, a boy – Patrick, and a girl – Bridget, did not accompany their parents to India or to the Cape of Good Hope, but remained in Ireland.

The regiment, to which O'Neil was attached, after remaining at the Cape for a period, was disbanded, and its members were given the option of either returning to their homes in Ireland and England or remaining in South Africa. Richard Charles O'Neil decided to remain at the Cape of Good Hope with his wife and small son, and this, according to records and information available, is the first O'Neil family to settle in South Africa.

Whilst O'Neil resided at the Cape, two further sons were born – Richard Charles, named after his Father – and Morris Peter Quigley. Shortly after the birth of the youngest son, O'Neil decided to go north with his wife and three sons. He pioneered into the interior – through the Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Natal, where he acquired farms adjoining Majuba Hill. In this district, he settled, and in due course, his two sons married colonial women, but Morris Peter Quigley, the youngest son, remained a bachelor.

In 1872, John James O'Neil, (who was born at sea and who had, by this time, a number of children, one of whom is the writer of this article) decided to go still further north, and ultimately after trekking through country which was teeming with game, including lions, leopards and jackals, he settled in the Eastern Transvaal.

One of the farms adjoining Majuba Hill in Natal was called Belfast and it was here that the death of Richard Charles O'Neil (the first O'Neil to settle in South Africa), and that of his wife occurred. In his will, Richard Charles O'Neil entailed the farm, Belfast in the male line.

The other farm which is of historical importance lies on the Natal side of Majuba Hill, and was named Mount Prospect. After the death of Richard Charles O'Neil Senior, the ownership of Mount Prospect was vested in his son, also Richard Charles, in whose house and in whose presence, the Peace Treaty of one of the South African wars was signed. (The war of 1880 - between the Transvaal Republic and the British Government).

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The President of the Transvaal Republic, (the late President Paul Kruger) and his executive, and the Governor of Natal (the late Sir Lionel Wood), together with his staff, were actually present in the farmhouse at Mount Prospect when peace was discussed and the Treaty signed. The writer who had trekked up into the Transvaal with his parents was then 13 years of age.

Meanwhile, John James O'Neil and his family had thoroughly established themselves in the Eastern Transvaal where several farms had been acquired by John James O'Neil. Of this marriage there were eight sons among whom were Richard Charles (named after the Grandfather who came from Belfast, Ireland, via India), Owen Rowe, Morris Peter Quigley (the writer of this article – and who was named after the previous O'Neil with the same name, i.e. his Uncle) and Patrick.

John James O'Neil, (who was born at sea), died on his farm, Klipfontein, in the Eastern Transvaal during 1880, but his sons, who had settled in the same area, remained in the district. As time went on, the district surrounding the O'Neil's farms grew more and more popular from an agricultural point of view, with the result that there was a steady increase in the number of families who settled in that area.

The eldest son of John James O'Neil was Richard Charles. Owing to the steady increase in the farming community in that district Richard Charles O'Neil, on the instigation of the surrounding settlers and farmers, approached the Government of the Transvaal Province with the view to obtain permission to form a township. This permission was granted and in 1889 the farm, Tweefontein, at that time owned by Richard Charles O'Neil, was surveyed and Richard Charles O'Neil asked to name the township. He decided to call the place Belfast in view of the fact that his Grandfather, the first O'Neil to settle in South Africa, was born in Belfast, Ireland.

During 1902, i.e. just after the Boer War, Belfast was declared a Municipality and Morris Peter Quigley O'Neil, a brother of Richard Charles O'Neil, the founder of Belfast, was nominated and accepted as the first Mayor. This position was however, declined by O'Neil to a certain Mr William Hanna, who became the first Mayor of the town.

The first Town Council consisted of Messers W. Hanna, M.P.Q.O'Neil, George Hall, P. Tingbergen and J. Vermooten.

Morris Peter Quigley O'Neil left Belfast during 1918 to take up residence on the Witwatersrand, whilst his elder brother, Richard Charles, remained in Belfast where he died during 1922.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'M.P.Q. O'Neil', with a horizontal line underneath.

Morris Peter Quigley O'Neil.