

APARTHEID OFFICES IN OBSERVATORY
THE BANTU ADMINISTRATION COMMISSIONER (CAPE PENINSULA)

Summary of an article by Lalou Meltzer in the *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, vol. 78, no. 1, June 2024

It is a surprise for many to learn that an apartheid administration and pass control office once existed in the residential southern suburb of Observatory in Cape Town. Its exact location has been lost in the mists of comparatively recent time. But Standard House, in which it was housed, remains today in lower Observatory, situated on the mountain side of Liesbeek Parkway—opposite the Amazon behemoth under construction on the banks of the Liesbeek River.

The Bantu Administration Commissioner (Cape Peninsula) in Standard House, Fir Street, Observatory operated from the early 1960s until the mid-1980s. Its function was to give force to the apartheid government's racist obsession with influx control, aimed at expelling black South Africans from living permanently in urban areas—most apparent through the mechanism of pass laws and, later, by forced resettlement in ethnic “homelands.”

The effect of influx control policies in the Western Cape was made more severe by its official characterisation as a Coloured Labour Preference area. The battery of laws destroyed people's economic lives and undermined the social fabric of family and community. They created a highly regulated source of cheap labour for the benefit of white South Africans while serving the expansion of local and international capital.

Often loosely referred to as the Department of Bantu Administration, Standard House included a court, holding cells and offices for the record keeping bureaucracy. It dealt with passes and work contracts, as well as matters such as marriages, births, divorces, work contracts and estates. Standard House was part of a control network including the Langa Pass Office and court (which probably handled the majority of pass cases), inspectors, the police and the courts generally.



A newly married couple outside the court in Observatory

The U-shaped building that housed the Bantu Administration Commissioner (BAC) in

Observatory originated as a United Tobacco Company construction of circa 1950. It was one of the buildings in the complex of UTC on the former Malta farm site. The farm once stretched from below the southern suburbs railway line to Fir Street and from Lower Collingwood Road to the former lower extension of St Michael's Road, and further on to Nelson Road. The Commissioner's arrival in Observatory in 1961 coincided with the Nationalist Party's increased centralisation and deepening regimentation of every aspect of urban black South Africans' lives. As part of this process, the Native Affairs Department's "previously diffident attitude to the local authorities began to change as the 1950s drew to a close."

The choice of a white area, Observatory, is interesting. In November 1961 Cape Town Council's Native Affairs Committee was informed that the BAC had taken a lease on Standard House in Observatory for a labour bureau, court and offices—entailing the transfer of staff from "hut" accommodation in Langa. Cape Town Councillors reacted shabbily, showing no shame in reporting Observatory residents' complaints about the resultant increased numbers of black men and women in the suburb.

The decision to move to Observatory's Standard House ultimately reflected the Nationalist Party's aim of usurping the Council's role in "Native Affairs"—peppering the term "Bantu" wherever they could. Moreover, it was an unspoken admission that staff and buildings had, and would become, an increasing target of resistance to apartheid and the pass system, evidenced most recently by the Pan African Congress's Sharpeville and Langa protests of 1960. The move would have been eased by the availability of the large, empty UTC building, as Franken, the Chief Commissioner, sitting cosily in Standard House, told the Councillors: "We have far better accommodation here—stores, waiting rooms, cells etc."

The BAC continued to be listed in Standard House until circa 1984/5 with factories mushrooming beyond it in Fir Street. Its demise in 1985 coincided with resurging defiance against apartheid and the resulting defeat of the Influx Control Laws and the Pass System in that year. But the Standard House building, astonishingly, remains today, though cleverly and quite handsomely homogenised and incorporated in to the Black River Office Park development. This has until now somehow been misunderstood or forgotten.



The building that once housed the Commissioner's offices, now part of the Black River Office complex

Remembering the Commissioner's offices in Observatory

Sindiwe Magona, author and poet, remarks of the dompas (pass book) the little black book

was the most important document in South Africa for an African. A more hated document was hard to find... Like an umbilical cord the pass office was the direct link between the government and the African. And the one-way force-feed was bitter and poisonous ... Notification of the arrival of a person's pass was sent "and the applicant fetched it from the Department of Bantu Administration, a more august body housed in the white suburb of Observatory."

A small number of people, particularly former Black Sash organisers, who fought on behalf of individuals and their families during apartheid, have recounted memories of the Observatory BAC building. For instance, Di Oliver, who volunteered in the Black Sash Advice Office in the early 1980s, recalls: All I remember about that wretched building and what happened there is that it was a big, imposing structure— possibly too big for its purpose, so probably an old government building used for another purpose which had fallen into disuse. Themba Fassie, who knew the building well, remembers "the never-ending queues to apply for one thing or another" and how people with incorrect dompas qualifications were "caught and brought back to the Obs offices to be given a lousy food parcel and issued with a train ticket to go back to their father's place of birth."

The meaning of Standard House site lies in this painful, relatively recent period of South African history. There is a more ancient significance attached to it too. Its siting, like that of the Amazon development opposite, was on the original pastoral lands of the indigenous Khoe people of the Cape. Here one of the first colonial farms, Uitwijk (later Malta), was established, forming an integral part of the fortified frontier system on the Liesbeek River, devised to expel the indigenous people from their summer lands of rivers and meadows. It was a place, therefore, of South Africa's first colonial frontier, a memorial status that continues to be denied by official South African heritage bodies and the law courts. The area, including the BAC building, is deserving of a heritage site declaration.