



Take a Historical Journey through Middelburg

Middelburg features more than 70 historic sites, each clearly identified by unique Blue Heritage Plaques. Every plaque features a distinct QR code, allowing you to access historical information about the heritage site using your phone, free of charge.

Middelburg as the Gateway to History and Heritage

Middelburg is renowned as a gateway to heritage history—a role deeply rooted in the town's origins and evolution. The concept of a gateway has been interwoven with Middelburg's identity since its earliest days.

In the 1860s, during the turbulent times between the Republic of Potchefstroom and the Republic of Lydenburg, Middelburg served as the travellers' gateway. When these republics united, and Pretoria emerged as the centre of the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republic, the need arose for a central point halfway between Pretoria and Lydenburg. Thus, Middelburg was established in 1864 as the gateway to the east, a role reflected by the hospitality offered to travellers through numerous hotels and boarding houses in the town.

During the gold rush to the eastern Lowveld, optimistic prospectors passed through this gateway in pursuit of fortune. The influx of these travellers made Middelburg a bustling centre, prompting special attention to law and order due to the crowds of visitors from far and wide.

The construction of the Oosterspoor railway further cemented Middelburg's status as a hub. The town became a crucial centre for the farming communities to the north and south, providing them with access to markets on the new Witwatersrand—a vital gateway for their agricultural produce.

In the era of the Anglo-Boer War, Middelburg once again played a pivotal role as a gateway. Initially, it provided refuge for Boers and women and children retreating before the advancing British forces as they prepared for the later guerrilla warfare. Later, it became the path through which British troops marched into the eastern Transvaal.



Church Street (Walter Sisulu Street) circa 1905

Town's History

Middelburg was established in 1864 as a centre for the Dutch Reformed Church. It developed from a small "Church Town" to a regional commercial and industrial hub for the area.

The question is often asked, when was Middelburg founded? However, there are a few important dates.

In 1860 Lydenburg (Masishing) is a separate Republic! The Volksraad of the Republic of Lydenburg decides on **25 October 1859** to establish a new town on the first or second hill between Klipspruit and the first branch of the Olifants River. This would have been on the farms Keerom and Klipfontein. On 29 March 1860 the Volksraad meets again and decides to name the newly established town Middelburg, probably because it was approximately halfway between Pretoria and Lydenburg. However, this position, north-east of the current town, was not suitable for the inhabitants and nothing came of the "first Middelburg". In 1860 the Republic of Lydenburg ceases to exist and merges to form the South African Republic. Nothing came of this town foundation!

On **28 January 1864**, the Dutch Reformed Church Lydenburg bought the farm Sterkfontein from Lodewyk de Jager Snr for £22:10:0 (approximately R500 at the 2026 exchange rate) and two water plots in the church town to be founded. (Water plots refer to plots with access to water from streams or later furrows.) With this, the Church bought the present-day Middelburg and this is the official founding date of the town. Abraham Benjamin Joubert and Nicolaas Petrus Prinsloo, elders of the Lydenburg congregation, played the main role in the founding of the town. Rev. Leon Cachet, consultant to the church and based in Utrecht, suggested the name Nazareth – which could have two meanings – the first a root sprouting from the arid soil or a strategic point on a hill. A third possibility was the Biblical town of Nazareth. What meaning Rev. Leon Cachet used for his recommendation is unknown. However, very little still happened after this decision.

The Church Council now negotiates with the government of the South African Republic, under President MW Pretorius, represented by the Magistrate of Lydenburg, about the new town. On 19 March 1866 the decision is taken that the new town will be a Church Town, that is to say a centre for the church and run by the church, with the name Nazareth. The Government undertakes to add more land to Sterkfontein and in return receives one third of the plots in the new town.



Painting by WH Coetzer of the Church Squire in Middelburg circa 1895

In 1866, the surveyor, Theodore Rooth, was appointed by the Church to survey the town and demarcate its boundaries. Rooth reported to the Church Council of Nazareth on 11 March 1867. This was followed by a number of regulations formulated by the Church Council of Nazareth on 27 March 1869 to govern the town. Among other

things, the regulations stipulated that the Church would sell plots, that the church square would remain the property of the church, and that only government buildings would be built there. The street names from the period are interesting. Boven Street is the southern boundary of the town – current Cowen Ntuli Street, Lang Street the current SADC Street, Middel Street the current Bhimy Damane Street, Mooi Street the current Dr Beyers Naude Street, and Dwars Street the current Lilian Ngoyi Street.

Nazareth District becomes Middelburg

It was not until 30 October 1871 that a resolution was passed by the Volksraad, now of the South African Republic, to approve Nazareth as a district and on **24 February 1872**, State President Thomas Francois Burgers proclaimed Nazareth as a district. On 24 August 1872, AB Joubert was appointed as the first Magistrate of Nazareth.

Joubert Street in Middelburg is named after AB Joubert.

However, the name Nazareth was never popular and after submissions, the Volksraad approved the name change to Middelburg on **23 October 1874**.

Although the farm for the current town site was already purchased in **1864**, and the name **Middelburg** was already taken for the Keerom site in **1860**, the current town of Middelburg's name was only approved in **1874**.

The town grew very slowly and in 1874 there were only seven houses in the town! This included Mathiam Coetzee a general agent and builder, Herman Sagtlieden a carpenter, Jeffreys a shopkeeper, Fisher a teacher and Andries du Toit a farmer.

By 1885 Wangeman visited Middelburg again and mentioned that it was now visibly flourishing with a large number of beautiful houses and gardens!

Heritage Routes




You can discover the town's rich history by following Heritage Routes that link these various historical sites together in a tour. Depending on the interest of the tourist and time available the following routes are available:

Yellow
Heritage
Route



A short self-guided walking tour through the centre part of town linking the heritage points in the town centre

Approximately 60 minutes

Blue Heritage Route		A self-drive half day tour linking sites on the wider area of town	Approximately 5 hours
Green Heritage Route		A half day self-drive tour to Anglo-Boer War heritage points in and around the town	Approximately 1 - day
Red Heritage Route		A two-hour self-guided cemetery walking tour through the Old Cemetery	2-3 hours

Blue Heritage Plaques indicate every heritage site along these routes.

You can download the maps by scanning the QR codes.

You might also consider these notable places:

Historical Churches

Many historic churches remain. The monumental Witkerk (White Church), in the centre of the town, is the oldest church in town, inaugurated in 1890. It contains a beautiful wood-carved pulpit, restored original lamps and historical pictures.



Witkerk (White Church) from 1890 in the centre of town

In Bimmy Dumane street the Methodist Church, previously called the Wesleyan Church, is the oldest original English church in town with the central part built in 1898.

The Catholic Church in Cowen Ntuli Street, built with the help of Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War, contains original artwork by the prisoners and three priceless sculptures by the well-known sculpture Eduardo Villa, who was initially a Prisoner of War but remained in South Africa, rising to fame.



Angle in Relief by Eduardo Villa in the St Joseph Catholic Church

The Jewish Synagogue in John Magagula Street built in 1914, although not a synagogue anymore, recalls Middelburg rich Jewish history and its influential Jewish residents.

The Muslim Mosque is a tribute to the rich Muslim history and Indian business entrepreneurs.

Railway Station and houses

The original Railway Station, opened in 1895 is worth a visit. The site has been renovated and features various historical artifacts connected to the railways. Original hewn stone houses build for the railway personnel is still standing around the station, although it is private residences.



Railway Station from 1895

Anglo-Boer War

Middelburg is rich with heritage points linked to both the Boer and the British history of the Anglo-Boer War. A Commemorative Hall, on the terrain of the Technical High School recalls the tragic history of the Concentration Camps in Middelburg where approximately 1381 mainly women and children died.



Concentration Camp Commemorative Hall (Chapel) on the site of the Concentration Camp

The Burger Monument in the centre of the town honour the members of the Middelburg Commando that lost their lives during the war.

The sites where the consecutive Concentration Camps stood is identifiable and the houses used for the first Camp is still standing opposite the Railway Station. A water well dug for a section of the camp is visible in Zuid Street.

At the southern entrance to the town a class 8A steam locomotive manufactured in 1901 is on display. This locomotive hauled trains for the Imperial Military Railways during the Anglo-Boer War, including possible trains to the Concentrations Camps. After the war it was utilised in the region and Northern Cape.

Historical Houses

Several late nineteenth-century homes remained in the town. The Trichard House in Walter Sisulu Street was the residence of Carolus Trichard, the son of the Great Trek leader Louis Trichard until his death in 1901. Opposite in OR Tambo street is one of the oldest remaining houses, well-preserved and built by White, a shop owner in town.



White's Residence in OR Tambo Street

Oregon Place build in 1926 is a hundred-year-old residence representing a typical residence of an affluent businessman from the early twentieth century.

A Heritage Plaque identifies each.

Cemeteries

Three main cemeteries contain the remains of well-known residents linked to the old Zuid-Afrikaanse Republic, the Anglo-Boer War, First and Second World War, the Bush War

as well as the development over more than 160 years of the town. Many distinguished graves feature Heritage Plaques, making visits easier and more educational. It reads like a who-is-who of the famous people of Middelburg! Several well-known Boer-war heroes, such as Jack Hindon and Henri Slegtkamp amongst others, are buried in the Old Cemetery.



Concentration Camp Cemetery in Mineralia

The British Military Cemetery represent graves of Imperial Soldiers who lost their lives in the Boer War and of disease during the occupation of the town by a Garrison after the War. The three Concentration Camp cemeteries contain the graves of the elderly and women and children that died in these camps between 1900 and 1902. The proportion of the victims of the black Concentration Camps are also buried in unmarked graves adjacent.



Unidentified black graves including graves of victims of the black Concentration Camp

The Concentration Camp Cemeteries and the British Military Cemetery contain several monuments, commemorating sacrifice during the war.

An area in the Old Cemetery is utilised as a Heroes Acre for many prominent leaders and residents of Middelburg's graves.

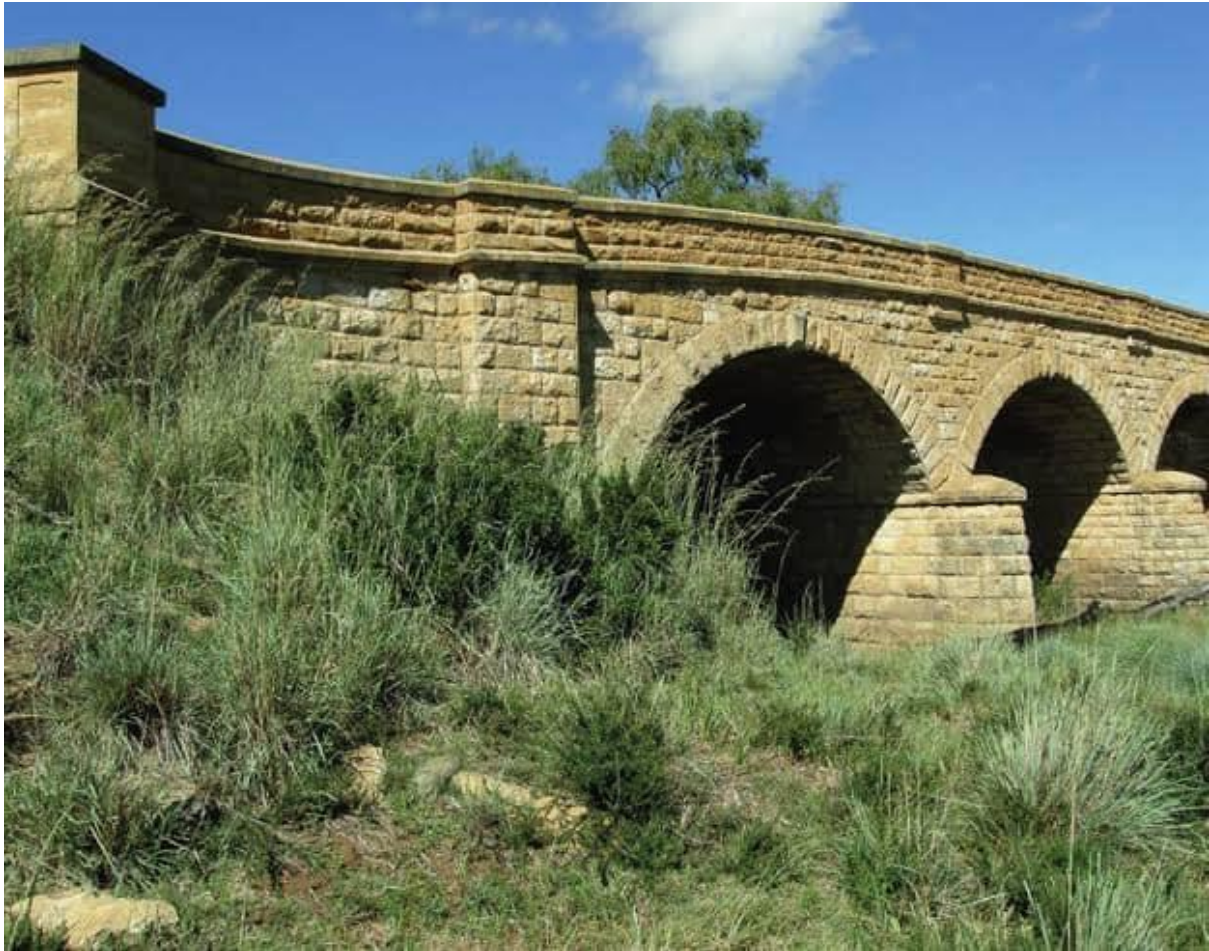


Middelburg Heroes Acre

A cenotaph, enroute to 4 SAI Infantry Battalion on the eastern side of town, commemorate the Middelburg residents that was killed in the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Bush War.

Historical Structures

Constructed in 1896, the Meijer Bridge on Meyer Street spans the Klein Olifants River and served as the primary route heading east toward Mozambique. It got a steel structure covered by stone.



Meijer Bridge from 1896 over the Klein Olifants River

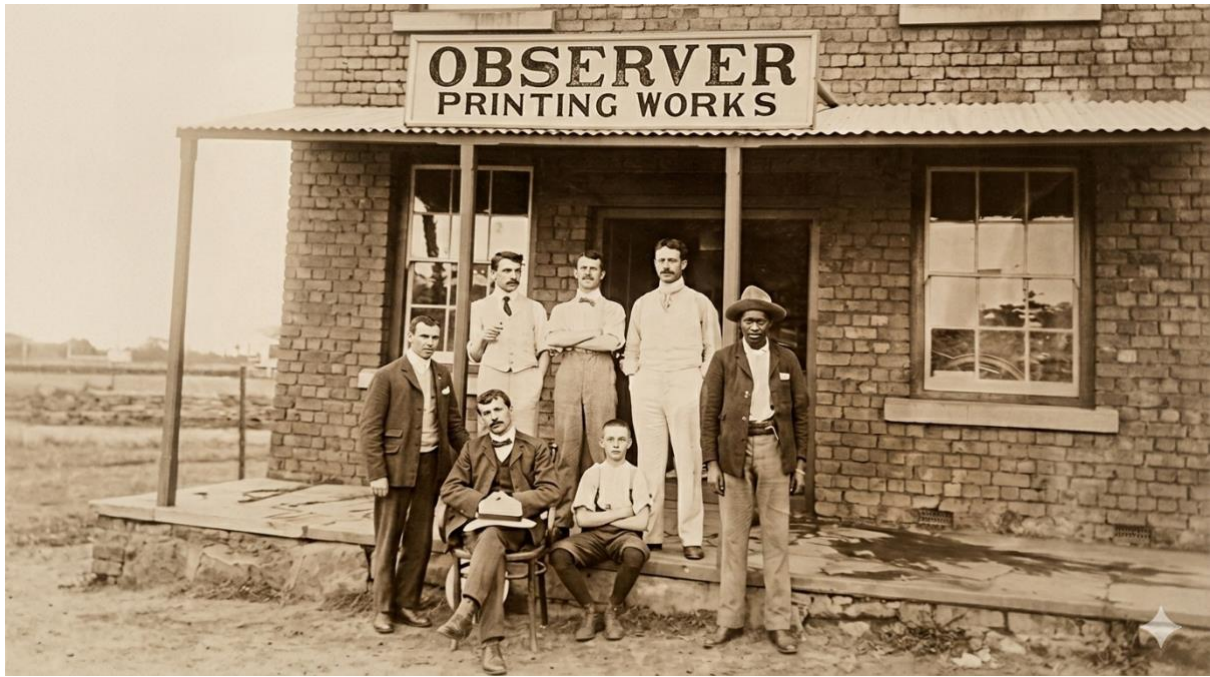
The Middelburg Highschool central building at the top of OR Tambo Street was opened in 1921 and still contain all the original wood, stone and brick work.

The current High Court building was built in 1908 as a Magistrate Court and Post Office for the town.

In 1905 Thomas Begbie established his foundry in Middelburg, giving rise to the steel industry in town and the current pinnacle Columbus Steel.

Printing History

The establishment of a community newspaper in Middelburg dates to 1903. The Middelburg Observer Archive houses these historical newspapers, and the adjacent Frewin Printing Museum demonstrate the printing techniques of a bygone era. It also commemorates Oscar Henry Frewin, the patron of the community press.



Original Printing Works of OH Frewin

With the help of numerous Heritage Plaques and linked Information Pages, as well as other sources of information, a large component of the rich heritage of Middelburg is unlocked. The cemeteries provide a chronological tour of those that created history.

Middelburg Heritage and Middelburg Tourism invite you to explore this time capsule!