

## **Potchefstroom, the city (part of the JB Marks Municipality) and the University**

Potchefstroom is an academic city in the North West Province of South Africa. It hosts the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University and is situated on the banks of the Mooirivier (Afrikaans for “pretty (or beautiful) river”), roughly 120 km (75 miles) west-southwest of Johannesburg and 45 km (28 miles) east-northeast of Klerksdorp. It was established in 1838 by the Voortrekkers (‘pioneers’).

### **Potchefstroom – zooming in – the archaeological history**

A satellite photograph of the environs of Potchefstroom reveals a circular structure where Potchefstroom is located on the perimeter. The centre of this circle is the place where, hundreds of millions of years ago a meteorite (according to geologists a structure almost too large to be called a meteorite) came too close to the earth and the earth’s gravity pulled it into a collision course. This collision had a profound effect on the geological history of the earth – the impact lesion is called an astrobleme, and this is the largest astrobleme on the surface of the planet. The meteorite penetrated the core of the planet to a depth of about 17 kilometres and the resultant boiling up of molten rock created the geological space now known as the Vredefort Dome. Erosion over millions of years smoothed down the rock formations, but geologists are able to point out fascinating formations and structures in the area – in fact so interesting that the area has been declared a World Heritage Site.

### **The name of the city: *Two different etymologies***

There are various origins that are claimed for the origin of the name Potchefstroom. Firstly it is said to come from ‘Potgieter’ + ‘Chef’ + ‘stroom’. This refers to the Voortrekker leader and founder of the town, Andries Hendrik Potgieter, with the “chef” being the Dutch word for the leader of the pioneers, and “stroom” (Stream) referring to the Mooi River. According to the South African writer Geoffrey Jenkins, however, the name can be attributed to the word ‘Potscherf’, meaning ‘pot shard’, either due to the cracks that appear in the soil of the Mooi River Valley during drought resembling a broken pot or actual pot shards found in the area.

## **And how did the town Potchefstroom come into being?**

The area around the Mooirivier was very suitable for establishing a town. There was strong water, enough firewood, good agricultural land and good grazing. White hunters and scouts visited the area to the north of the Vaal River before the Voortrekkers moved in. Some families belonging to the Potgieter Trek had already moved into the area in August of 1836, the year when the Great Trek from the Eastern Cape started, but because of conflict with the Ndebele they moved southwards again temporarily. Potgieter had visited Natal, but decided that the area was not suitable for his people and returned to the Free State. He sent out a commission to the north of the Vaal River to find a suitable space next to the Mooi River to establish a town. Potgieter was convinced that settling to the north of the Vaal River, far away from the British sphere of influence, would guarantee independence for the Voortrekkers. At the end of 1838 the Voortrekkers started to establish what would become Potchefstroom. This was initially done on what is now known as Oude Dorp, or Old Town, on the banks of the Mooi River, and about 12 kilometres north of the present-day Potchefstroom on what is now the Carletonville road.

The population of the town at first grew slowly, but by 1862 there were about 600 inhabitants, which grew swiftly to about 1200 by 1866. Quite a number of foreigners settled here, notably from England, Germany, Sweden and Holland. A location was established for black people to the south of town, but historical data about this would seem to be totally absent.

Like other Voortrekker towns, the town was laid out in a grid pattern, in a north-south, east-west configuration. There was at first only one long street (Kerk Street, now Walter Sisulu), but by 1880 there were four parallel streets, running north-south, and linked by smaller east-west streets. Trees were planted along the streets, and irrigation canals were dug. There were very stringent rules about using water from the canals, with a water bailiff who had to monitor this situation and report to the magistrate. In 1857 the first bridge that could accommodate wagons was built across the Mooi River – this is still known as Noordbrug (the North Bridge).

The city and the University are linked inextricably. Potchefstroom, like Grahamstown and Stellenbosch, derives much of its *raison d'être* and continuing existence to the

University, which is the largest employer in town (with about 6000 people employed on a permanent or temporary basis) and with a budget of about R4.5 billion. The student numbers are very high for South Africa – 65 000, making it the second biggest University in the country.

The Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education had a very modest beginning in 1869, in Burgersdorp in the north-eastern Cape, where it was started as a theological seminary for the Reformed Church. Following the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the University moved to Potchefstroom. In 2004 The Potchefstroom University merged with the University of the North-West in Mahikeng. It is now known as the North-West University, with campuses in Mahikeng, Potchefstroom and Vanderbijl Park. The University has developed a significant programme in terms of Research and Development, culminating in a wide range of patents, spin-off companies and other forms of commercialization of expertise.

The University has also in the context of the highly competitive nature of sport nowadays created a number of sports structures to enable the students to compete at a high level (apart from competing successfully at national and international levels, the University has yielded Commonwealth and Olympic champions). The infrastructure of the University led to its being appointed the home base for the Spanish soccer team during the 2010 World Cup.

To capacitate students in terms of communication, there are also radio stations and campus newspapers run by the students themselves. The University, having started out as an Afrikaans-medium University, has developed its language policy and now has a policy of functional multilingualism, and in order to promote access introduced some ten years ago academic interpreting services for students. This service is mainly available in Potchefstroom, with about 25-30% of all modules being interpreted into English from Afrikaans, but also from Afrikaans into Setswana for some education students from the Royal Bafokeng.

The University puts great store by the facilities that it builds and maintains these in excellent condition. The range of laboratories and other support structures is impressive – apart from a large number of residences (or dormitories) on the Campuses, there are a number of blocks containing classrooms and cultural venues

and facilities. Impressive new facilities have been built to accommodate research (cf. the new Engineering complex and Environmental Studies Group) and new buildings are going up to accommodate water research as well as pharmaceutical research. Specialized units include the CText human language technology laboratory.