

# The history of Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, Gauteng

See what ShowMe™  
can do for your business!

**Where am I?»** South Africa > South Africa > Gauteng > Johannesburg Metropole > Alexandra > The history of Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, Gauteng

The history of Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, Gauteng

Date: 10/11/2012 | Posted in [Alexandra](#) | [Arts & Culture](#) | [Gauteng](#) | [Johannesburg Metropole](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [South Africa](#)

**Reading the history of Alexandra Township (a name used by the apartheid government to describe a black settlement), one cannot but realise how easy it is for a human tragedy to occur – all it needs is the combination of a mass movement of poor rural families to the city; short sighted, inadequate, local government, and a misguided national government – to destroy the lives of ordinary citizens.**

Today, Alex, as the township is lovingly known by its residents, is gradually starting to overcome its past, over 100 years later. But to understand how difficult the road has been, let's get back to the beginning.

## Buying a farm

The story of Alex goes back to 1904, when Papenfus, a wealthy farmer, bought a number of farms, in the Alex area, one of which, Zandfontein, would become the township. Papenfus brought his wife, Alexandra, and his cook Hey Nxele Mbanjwa, with him and their first job was to build a mud hut, which acted as a donkey refreshment station for carts carrying Papenfus' milk from his farm to Johannesburg.

The Mbanjwas brought their five-year-old daughter Annie with them when they moved. Annie married Phumuza Twala and they had 10 children. Phumuza was a thatcher and thatched roofs in the white suburbs of Johannesburg.

People from the rural areas, lured by jobs opportunities at the expanding mines, settled near to the Mbanjwas, and by 1912 Papenfus started dividing the farm Zandfontein into plots, selling them to black families and giving them an opportunity to own land just before the 1913 Land Act took that right away from them.

Papenfus needed a name for the new township. The Mbanjwa's son, Twala recalls that Papenfus asked his grandparents what name was suitable. They replied: "Your wife, Alexandra, loves people." So it became Alexandra.

## Political woes



Shacks of Alexandra Township

In 1912, Alex was proclaimed a "native township" and by 1916 the Alexandra Health Committee was established to manage Alexandra, a settlement that now accommodated around 30 000 people. However, the Committee was not allowed to collect local taxes, nor was the Johannesburg City Council willing to take responsibility for an area that it claimed fell outside its jurisdiction, leading to a lack of resources and proper management. As it grew, with no tarred roads, rainwater drainage systems, street lighting or sewerage systems, accompanied by

haphazard shack settlement, it took on the appearance of a ghetto.

In 1948, the National Party was elected into government, and it brought into law a sweep of apartheid laws – Alexandra was put under the direct control of the then Department of Native Affairs.

It was decided that the influx of people into Alexandra had to be controlled, and in fact the population needed to be decreased, and finally, the provisions of the 1913 Land Act had to be implemented: freehold rights had to be taken away from those residents who owned their properties.

Part of the population reduction plan involved the forced removal of 5 000 squatters to Orlando in Soweto. But there were no homes for them in Soweto and they were dumped back in Alexandra, becoming the health committee's problem again, Alexandra being considered outside the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg City Council. The exercise was repeated again with 2 000 squatters. At this time Alex had a population of 60 000 residents.

## Civil Protests

The first bus boycott took place in 1940, because the city wanted to increase the four-penny fare to five pennies (one penny is around R1 in today's terms). The township came out in protest, and for six months residents walked to town, a distance of up to 15km, taking them up to two hours to walk the distance, home and back.

This persistence and resilience paid off – at the end of six months the penny increase was dropped. But the issue was raised again in 1942, 1943 and in 1957 in a movement called “Zikwelwa” (“we will not ride”).

The residents won the fourth bus boycott too, with the government passing a law that compelled employers to pick up part of the bill of increased transport, getting their workers to and from work.

## Bantu education

In 1957 the residents of Alex were in for another fight. In 1954 the government passed the Bantu Education Act, which stated that blacks now had to submit to an inferior system of education, preparing them for inferior status in South African society.

Mission and private schools, which had maintained high standards, had to now register with the Bantu Education Department, along with all public schools. Thousands of school children boycotted their schools in April 1954, in Alexandra and around the country. Sixteen teachers in Alex lost their jobs. Cultural clubs were formed and informal teaching took place in the open. This continued for two years in Alexandra, with numbers attending the classes slowly dwindling.

The government eventually ended the impasse with an ultimatum: no child would be allowed back into a classroom if they hadn't started attending school by the beginning of 1956. Parents, concerned for their children's education, relented, and their children and future generations were subjected for the next 40 years to the debasing and debilitating Bantu education.

## Forced Removals

Alex had been threatened with removals on and off for decades. It started back in 1942 with the North Eastern Protection League; according to urban specialist Pauline Morris in her 2000 paper Alexandra Township – A history, lessons for urban renewal and some challenges for planners.

The league pushed for the abolition of Alexandra. The city council, which didn't have jurisdiction over the township, approved of the idea but backed down when faced with the cost of relocation of the residents, proposing instead, the upgrading of Alex, and its incorporation into Johannesburg.

Alternative accommodation was offered to residents and some of them took up the offer, the first of many removals of people out of Alex. From 1948, through the issuing of permits and passes, further settlement of people in the township was controlled, at the same time as freehold property was expropriated. Police raided homes, checking on passes, and residents not in possession of the relevant documents were systemically moved out of Alexandra.

Morris says that the Alexandra population in 1948 was estimated at between 80 000 and 100 000, with plans to ideally bring the population down to 30 000. Between 1958 and 1973, some 56 000 people were removed from Alex and resettled in Soweto, and 15 000 removed to Tembisa on the East Rand.

The board started buying homes, demolishing some and renovating others, with a view to the government owning all land and houses in the township. Owners were compensated an amount of around R1 770, with the government buying 2 539 properties for an amount of R4.5-million by 1972. Not everyone who was compensated was moved from Alex, in the broader plan of maintaining a labour pool in the northern suburbs.



Hostels in Alexandra Township

After the Sharpeville killings of 1960, the government clamped down on opposition parties with a state of emergency and it was decided to remove Alexandra altogether and rebuild the area as a “hostel city”. Twenty-five hostels were to be built, each housing 2 500 people, for single men and women, and blacks living on white properties throughout the northern suburbs were to be moved into these hostels.

There was widespread resistance to the move, including from the Johannesburg City Council. All parties felt the cost and social dislocation

was not worth the enormous effort that would be needed. But construction went ahead and Madala men's hostel went up in 1971 and Nobuhle hostel in 1972. A women's hostel was completed in 1981, even after it was acknowledged that it wasn't feasible, the destruction of family life being the major stumbling block.



Reverend Buti

And this is where the Reverend Sam Buti steps onto the stage to play a major role in the eventual reprieve of Alex. He established the Residents' Interim Committee in 1974.

Alexandra Township had been under threat of demolition many times in its history. The marvel is that the township still exists. It should have been obliterated years ago, at the height of the apartheid period, when other "black spots" in the middle of white suburbs met their deaths under the bulldozers. But Alex alone survived – because of a friendship between a church minister and a cabinet minister which finally saved the township from demolition in 1979.

The church minister was the Reverend Sam Buti, who initiated and drove the Save Alex Campaign in the late 1970s, and the minister was Dr Piet Koornhof, Minister of Co-operation and Development in the apartheid government.

Their friendship came about because their fathers, both ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church in the Free State, were friends and their sons knew one another from those times. Buti spoke Afrikaans and when Koornhof was appointed minister, he approached him and said: "My mense praat van 'die erwe van ons vadere' en vra: Hoe moet ons verstaan?"

Translated, this refers to the land inherited from their fathers, meaning that the people of Alexandra failed to understand why this land was being taken away from them, a plea that Afrikaners could readily understand. It was the key to solving the problem. Shortly afterwards, Buti got a call containing a simple message: "Alexandra gaan bly [Alexandra will remain]."

Finally, in 1982, Alexandra was given the official status of a residential area and the then Alexandra liaison committee, led by Rev Buti, was instituted to run the township.

Buti's story subsequently takes on a sad irony. He got further involved in municipal politics. After fighting for Alex to be an independent municipality, he was voted on to the Alex council, and was eventually elected mayor of Alex. But Alexandrans felt he was siding with the apartheid government and betraying their interests. His house was bombed and razed to the ground. He was forced to give up his mayoral post, and got more involved in church matters. Today his reputation is fully restored, but the 1980s were a difficult time for him and his family.



1976 Riots in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg

The riots that started in Soweto in June 1976 quickly spread to other areas such as Alexandra, where 19 people were killed. As a consequence of these riots, evictions, forced removals and expropriation of black properties were stopped; urban blacks were no longer regarded as temporary residents and their permanent status was recognised.

### Attempts at infrastructure up-liftment

The township, was for decades referred to as the "dark city" because it had no electricity, and in fact, the first house to receive electricity was Buti's, in the early 1970s.

In 1980 a "Master Plan" for Alexandra was introduced, which aim was to transform Alexandra into a "Garden City" with a completely new layout. However, only a small part of this plan was actually ever implemented; the execution of the "Master Plan" was permanently stopped by the violent "Alex Six Days" uprising in February 1986, during which 40 people were killed. By May the council started collapsing and the councillors resigned, which saw the emergence of street committees and peoples' courts.

After the imposition of the nationwide state of emergency in June, the Defence Force moved in to keep the peace. In its place, the government then introduced the “**Urban Renewal Plan**” as part of its strategy during the state of emergency. However, this plan led to considerable demolitions, disruptions and displacement in the community as well as two treason trials involving 13 leaders of Alexandra.

This, combined with the considerable number of additional people moving into Alexandra during this time, led to a new area called the “East Bank” being built.

Because of the insufficient capacity and difficult maintenance of the newly built infrastructure, the situation quickly deteriorated and thus the “Urban Renewal Plan” was shelved in 1990. During the communal and political conflicts that took place in the 1991 – 1992 periods, many people were killed, injured or displaced.

In the early 1990s the township was wracked by violence in the run-up to the first democratic elections in 1994. Violence broke out between residents in the men's hostels and residents just south of the hostels, an area that became known as “Beirut”. In early 1992 some 60 people were killed and nearly 600 people were injured and around 10 000 people were displaced from their homes, according to Morris.

This led to several peace initiatives, which were greatly assisted by the first fully democratic South African elections in April 1994.

In 1998 another development plan was drawn up, and like its predecessors, planned to reduce Alex's population and divide the township into development zones. “Superblocks”, three-storey blocks, were to be built to house 3 000 people. Total cost was to be R3-billion.

The plan fizzled out. Meanwhile, an athlete's village was constructed in 1999 for the All Africa Games on the Far East Bank. Called “Tsutsumani”, it consisted of 1 700 freestanding, semi-detached and simplex units. These are now occupied by Alexandrans who have been on the housing waiting list and qualify in terms of certain criteria.



Housing projects completed in Alexander Township

In February 2001 President Thabo Mbeki announced the **Alexandra Renewal Project**, a presidential project that is to lift the township onto its feet. An amount of R1.3-billion was made available and over a period of seven years the township was to be upgraded.

This programme is a key component of the Government's approach to addressing urbanisation and housing challenges in South Africa and comprises the integrated development of an area addressing economic, social and physical challenges simultaneously.

It is a joint urban regeneration project between all three tiers of government, the private sector, NGO's and community-based organisations.

The Department of Housing extended the Alexandra Renewal Project to the end of the 2009/10 financial year. So far, R1,2 billion has been spent on this, and there are currently 26 infrastructure projects and 12 housing projects being implemented in Alexandra.

It seems fair to say that Alex is finally finding its feet.

Find out about Alex today and how you can see experience the vibrant African life. See [ShowMe Alexander](#).

Share

Add this to

