INTRODUCTION

During an ethnographic study in Oppermansgronde, the author was approached by several informants expressing the opinion that somebody should reassemble the information on Frederik and Adam Opperman. This paper is a result of these requests and is dedicated to the memory of these two men.

The conflicting and incomplete nature of the literature is reflected in the vagueness and inadequacy of some of the data. Although oral history did not yield much additional information, it revealed some of the people's own perceptions about their history. Unfortunately, only a few old people still survive who could be interviewed. Another limitation relates to the fact that the author is not a trained historian.

Brief outlines of the careers of Frederik Opperman and his son, Adam, are followed by a short discussion and tentative appraisal of their contribution towards the establishment of Oppermansgronde and the continuation of an identity specific to it.

FREDERIK SALOMO OPPERMAN

The slave

Particulars on Frederik Opperman's childhood are both scanty and conflicting. According to some sources, he was born on 27 August 1785 near Stellenbosch in the Cape while other reports indicate 1786 as the year of his birth.1 Not only is there uncertainty about when

Frederik was born, but also about where he was born. Several authors suggest that he may have been born in India and then came to South Africa as a slave. Kuschke also mentions the possibility that Frederik may have been an imported slave from the east coast of Africa, most likely from the island formerly known as Zanzibar. In a letter to the author the well-known South African genealogist, Dr. J.A. Heese, suggested that Frederik Opperman may have been a member of the Salmonse family from the vicinity of Swellendam in the Cape province.

Frederik was probably partly of European descent. He allegedly had either an Indian father and a French mother, or a French father and an Indian mother. Richter suggested that Frederik’s father was probably a slave as well, and that he grew up as a slave. Although Frederik later received religious instruction at Graaff-Reinet in the Karoo, he could not be baptized because he was still a slave. It is uncertain when and why Frederik moved to Graaff-Reinet.

The next reference to Frederik Opperman in the literature relates to a slave auction which took place at Graaff-Reinet on 5 July 1825. Due to financial difficulties his owner decided to give up farming, and subsequently sold Frederik and his four daughters to new owners. Because his owner decided to retain the services of Frederik’s wife, the couple were separated. After Frederik had paid his former owner the amount of 1200 rix-dollars, Frederik’s son, Petrus, who may have been born at Graaff-Reinet in 1823 (see discussion on Adam Opperman) was allowed to stay with his mother. Kuschke reports that Petrus accompanied his father. Frederik was allegedly sold for 3000 rix-dollars, a high price for a slave at the time.

Reports also differ about the surnames and places of residence of Frederik’s owners before and after the auction of 5 July 1825. Wangemann reports that Frederik was first owned by a farmer with the surname of Opperman at Graaff-Reinet, and that he took his owner’s surname as his own. He was then sold to a farmer in the district of Swellendam. His wife

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5. Richter, J., Adam Oppermann... p. 1.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
8. A.K., Frederick Oppermann: The True Story of a Cape slave, The Christian Express, 1 July, 1891, p. 101; see also the same magazine of 1 August, 1891, and 1 September, 1891. The initials A.K. probably refer to D.D. Stormont, a Church of Scotland Minister, who assisted with the editing of The Christian Express; see Wilson, F. & D. Petrot. ed., Outlook on a Century: South Africa 1870-1970, p. 709; see also pp. 41-49.
9. Richter, J., Adam Oppermann..., p. 2; Steinecke, O., Die Familie Oppermann und ihr Werk, p. 2.

* According to A.K.’s paper, Frederick Oppermann: The True Story of a Cape slave, The Christian Express, 1 August, 1891, p. 117, Frederik took this surname to conceal his true identity.
and children were also sold to a new owner in the same district. Kuschke states that Frederik was sold to a certain Opperman, a grape farmer in the vicinity of Drakenstein. According to another report he was bought by Wynand Pretorius, a cartwright of Cradock, who employed him as a blacksmith.

At first, his new owner allowed Frederik to visit his wife regularly. Such a trip on horseback took about twelve hours. His wife's owner then decided to move to another area. Frederik was refused permission by his owner to say goodbye to his wife. This incident, as well as the fact that Frederik had an argument with his owner and was locked up, finally made him decide to flee northwards. Before his escape, Frederik requested his owner to buy his wife, but his request was turned down. He then tried to join his wife's owner, but his owner refused to let him go. It took him four days on horseback to reach the Orange River.

Although personal reasons obviously influenced Frederik's decision to escape, they do not explain it adequately. The fact that groups of "Bastards" were landholders in the Graaff-Reinet district in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that, in the 1820's, they moved either to the Kat River Settlement or across the Orange to "Griqualand", may have induced Frederik to follow their example. In addition, the frontier also provided opportunities for non-whites to which they had no access in the capital. The lack of manumission may have been compensated partly, from the slave's point of view, by the opportunities for escape into the interior, of which they availed themselves from earliest times.

The majority of authors maintain that Petrus accompanied his father, but Richter alleges that he stayed with his mother. Frederik later returned to the Cape colony to fetch him. According to Kuschke, their first attempt to escape was unsuccessful, and resulted in Frederik's receiving twenty five cuts and being locked up. On their second attempt, they are reported to have joined a group of runaway slaves on their way to the Orange River.

Towards a new freedom
We don't know when and where Frederik Opperman crossed the Orange River to enter Transorangia. Details about his experiences after this event are mostly derived from a single source, and may be exaggerated in some cases.

18. Steinecke, op. cit., p. 3.
20. Ibid.
Allegedly, Frederik first came across Titus Afrikaner's Kora in the vicinity of the Riet River. Titus Afrikaner made him his servant, because Frederik was a skilled blacksmith who could attend to the Kora's rifles. Frederik learned the Kora language and later became Titus's personal armour-bearer. He also participated in a cattle raid against Mzilikazi, and sustained a spear wound whilst guarding the stolen cattle. After a period of six weeks and severe hardships, he arrived back at Titus Afrikaner's settlement.

Because of his skills, Frederik was unable to remain anonymous very long. Wynand Pretorius, one of his former owners, soon offered a reward of £50 plus a wagon for his capture. According to Kuschke, the amount offered was 400 rix-dollars or a wagon. While Frederik was on a certain Mr Krüger's farm, he was captured by a farmer, named Badenhorst, and his son. The next day he managed to escape by overpowering his captors. Kuschke relates it differently. According to him, Frederik and his son first went to Philippolis, where the former met his old friend Filip Krauts (Krotz, Crots), a teacher. Petrus was then left in Krauts's care and Frederik was captured by the Griqua and sent back to Beaufort West in the Karoo. He managed to escape along the way and, because he could not return to Philippolis, he joined Jan Bloem's Kora. Jan Blum's (Bloem's) father was from Thuringia. He died circa 1799. One of his sons, also called Jan Bloem, later became the nominal head of the Springbokke, a Kora group.

According to Ross, Frederik moved to Jan Bloem's Kora because there were too many Boers coming north with smuggled brandy and firearms who could have kidnapped him if he had remained with Titus Afrikaner.

Frederik became Jan Bloem's servant and armour-bearer, and probably participated in another cattle raid against Mzilikazi. Allegedly, the Kora only managed to return with a small booty of which nothing was given to Frederik. While looking for his straying horse, he was recaptured for a second time. The Griqua, who had an extradition agreement with the Colonial Government of the Cape, handed him over to Veldkornet Gideon Joubert. Once again, Frederik managed to escape from the stable where he was held captive for the night, and rejoined Jan Bloem's Kora. Kuschke reports that Frederik visited Philippolis to see his son, when he was recaptured by Veldkornet Joubert.

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27. Ibid.
29. A.K., Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 August, 1891, p. 117.
31. A.K., Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 August, 1891, p. 117.
34. Ross, op. cit., p. 93.
35. A.K., Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 August, 1891, p. 118.
36. Ibid.

* Mzilikazi C. 1800-9 September 1868. A warrior formerly under the Zulu leader Shaka. He left Natal C. 1816, and spread devastation amongst several groups in the interior. The Voortrekkers forced him to move across the Limpopo River to the present Zimbabwe, where he founded his new capital, Bulawayo.
After seven years, Frederik left Jan Bloem's Kora when a section of them moved northeast of the Vaal River. He then joined the Griqua of Adam Kok who granted him permission to stay along the Riet River, and allowed him to continue with his trade. He had to make himself a new pair of bellows from goats' skins and used a stone hammer because his previous set of tools had remained with Jan Bloem. Fortunately he could buy a pair of tongs. He was mostly paid in kind for his services.

According to Richter, Frederik became a temporary landowner (landholder?) near Bethany, a former Berlin Mission Station to the north of the present town of Edenburg in the southern Orange Free State, when the secretary of the Griqua government at Philippolis, Hendrik Hendrikse, granted him a *rekwest* for the farm Kraaifontein. Kuschke reports that the farm was called Kareefontein. According to the *Farm Register of Edenburg* housed in the Deeds Registry, Bloemfontein, there is a farm Kareefontein 59 (formerly 186, Bloemfontein) near Bethany. There is no farm with the name of Kraaifontein in the Edenburg district. Unfortunately, no mention is made in this register of Frederik Opperman's alleged ownership of Kareefontein. Reverend C. Wuras, the missionary at Bethany, contested all the land grants issued by Hendrikse because the land belonged to the Berlin Missionary Society, and subsequently called on Adam Kok who cancelled them. In September 1845, Major Henry Douglas Warden arbitrated the ongoing land dispute. Because he allocated Kareefontein to a new owner, Frederik was forced to leave the Bethany area.

Frederik returned to Philippolis. Adam Kok, who intended to settle his people and strengthen his position, granted Frederik the farm Doornhoek (locally also known as Doornfontein) in the present district of Jacobsdal, "... for only a few shillings of expense..." Frederik had a reasonably large herd at the time, and later bought the adjacent land from other Griqua at a very low price. According to Dyason there is no evidence that Frederik was married to a relative of Adam Kok, and that he obtained his land in this way. Relying on folk memory, elderly people in Oppermansgronde provide other explanations. Some informants asserted that Frederik was a son-in-law of Adam Kok, and that the latter gave him a farm. Another informant said that Frederik received money from his owner at the age of twenty one with which he bought the farms from the Griqua for £40. According to documents in the Deeds Registry, Bloemfontein, the farm Doornhoek, No. 128, district of Jacobsdal was registered on 12 July 1859 in the name of Frederik Opperman. The transferor was A. Kok. This farm was again transferred on 1 October 1867 from Frederik to his son Adam (see discussion on Adam Opperman). Particulars on some of the other farms comprising Oppermansgronde are as follows: The farm Poortjiesdam No. 125, district of Fauresmith was originally transferred on 9 November 1853 from A. Kok to Jan Pienaar, who sold it to Nicolaas Stephanus du Plessis. This deed of sale was registered on 4 July 1854.
Du Plessis in turn sold the farm to Adam Opperman. This last transaction was registered on 7 July 1860.48 The farm Jakkalsput No. 229, district of Fauresmith, was bought by Adam Opperman from I.J. Ludek. This deed of sale was registered on 25 April 1887.49

Although slavery finally came to an end in the former Cape Colony in 1838, Frederik allegedly decided to pay £150 to an agent of Pretorius (one of his previous white owners).50 According to another source, Frederik was visited by Pretorius’s son to whom he gave 2400 rix-dollars as well as eight horses to hand over to his father. Frederik received a wagon in return.51 To improve his financial position, Frederik, accompanied by whites and Kora, left on a hunting trip to the Transvaal. Judging from an early account, this trip was very successful: “They brought home three thousand three hundred pounds of ivory and many skins, enough to cover all debts and expenses, and buy more cattle.”52

After Frederik had established himself as a farmer, he returned to the Cape Colony to look for his relatives. He allegedly found them in the vicinity of Swellendam. At first, his four daughters did not accompany him back to Doornhoek because he could not provide them with a proper home. Three of them later did go to Doornhoek, and allegedly married white men.53 However, according to Kuschke only two married white men.54 These marriages were encouraged by substantial dowries provided by Frederik.55 Richter reports that Frederik did take his four daughters and his son, Petrus, back with him. His wife had already died.56

Frederik’s livestock increased considerably. In 1867 he is said to have owned 1 500 cows, 7 000 sheep and 240 horses. Wangemann, a former director of the Berlin Missionary Society, regarded him as one of the richest farmers and biggest landowners in the Orange Free State at that time.57 During Wangemann’s second visit to Oppermansgronde in October 1884, Frederik had a fruit garden on the farm Doornhoek. He also planted Acacia trees, and provided the missionary with a “Christmas tree” every year. While busy excavating a spring near his home, Frederik injured himself and had to use a walking stick afterwards. This spring is still used today. The drought of 1882-83 depleted his stock. He lost 450 from his herd of 850 cattle, as well as many sheep.58

Further personal particulars
Genealogical data on Frederik Opperman and his family is scanty and difficult to substantiate. Moreover, most of the information is provided by a single source.59

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48. Farm Register FAURES SMITH I-240: Folio 125.
49. Ibid., Folio 229.
50. A.K. Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 September, 1891, p. 141.
52. A.K., Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 September, 1891, p. 141.
53. Ibid.
55. Ross, op. cit., p. 93.
56. Richter, J., Adam Oppermann..., p. 5.
58. Wangemann, H.T., Ein zweites Reisejahr in Süd-Afrika, pp. 43-44.
Allegedly, Frederik's first marriage was to a slave girl, Christina Lemmetjies. This marriage apparently took place in 1810 while he was still in Drakenstein. The couple had five children; one boy, Petrus, who was born circa 1811 (see discussion on Adam Opperman) and four daughters, the youngest of which was Martha. Martha was born circa 1815. His wife died in 1823. Christina and Eva, Frederik's older daughters, both married in Cape Town. The former married Jan Arends while the latter married a certain Plaatjies. Mina, his third daughter, married Lourens Cornelissen, a white farmer from Cradock. Martha went to Swellendam where she had a daughter, Christina, by a Scotsman called Robinson, and a son, Dirk, by a local farmer, a certain Frederik or Petrus de Bus. She also had sons by Jan Smit, a “coloured” from Cape Town, and by another farmer, a certain Jacobs. She eventually joined her father in the Orange Free State, and married a German, Christian Rümelin (later corrupted to Remmelien). They had four children.  

Frederik's second wife was a Kora woman who apparently left him after a short while. He then married a farmer's daughter whose mother had been a slave. In 1884, he is known to have been married to Mietjie who was approximately forty years younger than himself.

Frederik was christened on 4 August 1867, and received the name Salomo. When Wangemann re-visited Oppermansgronde in 1884, Frederik's age was estimated at 98 years. He died at about 105 years of age on 3 November 1891, and was buried the next day in the cemetery near the church at Adamshoop. The cause of his death was indicated as lack of strength. Although his house on Doornhoek was partly destroyed by British soldiers during the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902), the repaired lower storey is still occupied by a member of the Opperman family.

To commemorate Frederik Salomo Opperman, a bust of him was unveiled on 16 December 1981 on the farm Doornhoek. After collecting enough money locally, the Salomo Frederik Gedenkkomitee of 13 members elected at a family gathering, commissioned a Bloemfontein artist, Daniëlla Geldenhuys to make a suitable bust. A program was specially printed for the occasion. The bust was unveiled by Mrs Wilhemina Dora Romain (born Opperman), presently the oldest living member of the Opperman family. The program included a brief review of Frederik's life. A number of local church and school choirs participated. Without exception, all speakers called the communal occupation rights to the land the community's greatest asset.

62. A.K. Frederick Oppermann(...), 1 September, 1891, p. 141.  
63. Wangemann, H.T., Ein zweites Reisejahr in Südafrika, p. 44.  
65. Wangemann, H.T., Ein zweites Reisejahr in Südafrika, p. 44.  
67. Jacobs, op. cit., p. 34.