

## Roodepoort: the rise and fall of the Gold Town

Roodepoort was established in 1886 after a number of discoveries of gold in the Witwatersrand area in the 1860s. In 1890 the railway which originally ran to the east of Johannesburg, was extended westwards to Krugersdorp with stations at Maraisburg, Florida and Roodepoort, areas that were incorporated when Roodepoort was declared a municipality in 1904.



The rapid growth of the gold mining industry in the area of Roodepoort in the last decade of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century and the establishment of the commercial area of the town, led to the influx of many Jewish immigrants. This establishment of the Jewish community makes it important for us to describe the history of the town as related to the discovery of gold in the area.



Headgear of the **Durban Deep mine at Roodepoort** established in 1897 which produced gold until 2001.

Small amounts of gold were discovered in the Transvaal in the 1850's but never resulted in the development of a substantial industry of mining for gold. The explorer and prospector, Jan Gerritt Bantjes, discovered a gold reef northwest to the present location of Johannesburg in 1884. Later that year the Struben brothers discovered the Confidence Reef near present day Roodepoort, but the main discovery was that of George Harrison, who discovered in 1886 the main Witwatersrand gold reef on the farm Langlaagte, which led to the establishment of the village of Johannesburg.

The area to the west of Johannesburg, which up to that time was one of scattered Boer farms, was declared to be one of public diggings. Many prospectors came to search for gold in the area and they established a number of small settlements. In 1886 Roodepoort was declared a village on the Roodepoort farm (so named because of the red color of the soil). Additional nearby villages, which came into being at about the same time, were Maraisburg, Florida and Hamburg. In 1890 the train line, which previously ran to the east of Johannesburg, was extended westwards to Krugersdorp with stations at Maraisburg, Florida and Roodepoort, leading to the rapid development of Roodepoort. The Main Reef Road connecting Roodepoort to Johannesburg was built some years later.



The Durban Deep Roodepoort mine was established in 1887, and production of gold from underground diggings was started in 1898. This mine was a major site of gold production for over 100 years until it was closed down in 2001.

### **The Jameson Raid**

An interesting historical event was the Jameson Raid, in December 1895. The discovery of gold had attracted many people to Johannesburg and the other towns of the area. At that time Transvaal was the South African Republic with Paul Kruger the President. The so-called foreign residents or "uitlanders" were not granted equal rights with the Boers. Cecil Rhodes, then the Premier in the Cape wanted to establish British Rule in the Transvaal.

Leander Starr Jameson, British Colonial Administrator a staunch colleague and supporter of Rhodes, put together a group of 500 British South Africa Company police with the intent of stimulating an insurrection by the uitlanders in the area of Johannesburg. The raid was a disastrous failure. The raiders were defeated by the Boers at Doornkop, to the southeast of Roodepoort, on January 2, 1896.



Africana Museum; Willie Martens – Boers firing at Jameson's Raiders

Following the Boer War (1899-1902), the Roodepoort-Maraisburg urban area including the villages Roodepoort, Maraisburg, Florida and Hamburg, was declared a municipality in 1904.

In 1963 the name of the municipality was changed to Roodepoort and in 1977 Roodepoort was declared a city and in the late 1990's was incorporated into the city of Johannesburg.



The railway line was discontinued at some stage. This is what the station looked like after a disastrous fire in 2020.

## **The Demise of Roodepoort station and town**

A journalist wrote in October 2020: The crown jewel of the line has been at the heartbeat of this town since the beginning of the gold rush. A beacon of industry and trade, the over 100-year-old hub is now a heartbreaking sight. Trash strewn across the station building, platforms hacked to pieces, and sawn-off cables scattered from end to end. When the first tracks were laid down in the 1890s, they brought an explosion of progress never seen before. Yet, at the end of Transport Month in 2020, the only movement is the dismantling of a once great station.

Since the closure of the Durban Deep mine in 2001, illegal miners have since attempted to extract ore containing gold from the diggings, resulting in criminal raids and a high murder rate.

### **There is still gold down there!**

The fact is that there are still millions of ounces of unmined gold believed to lie below the surface, fuelling a booming – but frequently deadly – informal and illicit industry .

Media reports suggest that [more than 300](#) informal miners – most of them illegal, and known locally as *zama zamas*, meaning “take a chance” in isiZulu – have been killed by collapsing mineshafts or, more frequently, in turf wars between rival syndicates. Many more are likely still unaccounted for underground.

In Durban Deep, a defunct Victorian-era goldmine on the western flank of Johannesburg, hundreds of poor migrants, mostly from Zimbabwe, have moved into the crumbling bungalows of former white mine employees.

The once leafy and affluent mine village, and its recently shuttered golf course, are increasingly enveloped by two warren-like informal settlements. Together, they account for about 40,000 inhabitants and epidemic levels of violent crime often associated with mining syndicates.

“Maybe 85% of people in this area are making a living from illegal mining,” says Fani, a middleman who resides in a dilapidated Durban Deep home and sells locally mined gold to pawnbrokers and jewellers from across the city, who will then launder it into the legal market for eventual export.

According to David van Wyk, a mining researcher at the Johannesburg-based Bench Marks Foundation, there is a dependency ratio of about eight to 10 people per illegal miner. “So that’s about 400,000 people who are dependent on small scale mining,” he says.

Read the article in the Guardian here [Roodepoort Informal Mining](#)