The Republic of Swellendam (by SJ du Toit)

The first republic in the country’s history, was declared at Swellendam during 1795. In those days, the Overberg was very thinly populated. The Dutch East India Company (DEIC) ruled the Cape and had outposts, commandos, and magistrates in various places. They agreed to buy the farmers’ grain at a fixed price for fifteen years.
When the DEIC introduced toll gates and taxes, farmers struggled, and to increase their distress, the DEIC grain stores were closed to farmers. The unsafe situation for farmers on the eastern border with the Xhosa tribes, as well as mismanagement and economic suppression by the DEIC, caused the pot to boil over.
While the court at Swellendam was in session on 17 June 1795, nine armed men appeared and ordered the heemraad (council) to leave the Drostdy court building. Officials were dismissed and DEIC rule rejected. An independent republic was declared with a National Assembly and Hermanus Steyn as president. It was a momentous event, but within no time, they were called on to assist in a battle against a British army attacking the Cape. The republicans refused initially, but a commando of 70 soon left for the Cape.
This first Republican commando left for Muizenberg in the Cape and fought well. It was however, an uneven fight which ended on 4 November 1795 when the British occupied the Cape. British rulers tried everything to appease the Swellendam people. No more taxes were imposed and after a short 4½ months the Swellendam Republic was ended.
It took quite a while until peace reigned in the Swellendam district. The two leaders of the revolt, Delport and Pisani were arrested and deported to Holland.