

The EARLY HISTORY of the ACT

Europeans first came to what would eventually be known as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in search of the Murrumbidgee River, arriving at the site of the future national capital on 8 December 1820. The river was not 'discovered' until a year later.

The first European settlement of the area, later known as the Limestone Plains (or 'Manarro', as it was called by local Aboriginal people), occurred when Joshua John Moore established a station at what is now Acton (site of the National Museum of Australia) in 1823. When he sought to purchase the land in December 1826, he referred to the location as 'Canbery', a name later used with various spellings for all the surrounding areas.

The local Aboriginal people were referred to by early white writers as the 'Kamberra', 'Kghambury', 'Nganbra' and 'Gnabra', all of which share some resemblance to 'Canberra' - the name of the capital announced at the Foundation Stone Ceremony by Lady Denman on 12 March 1913. There is little doubt that 'Canberra' is an anglicised version of the Aboriginal words, which is said to mean 'meeting place'.

Robert Campbell's station was the second to be established in the Canberra district. Campbell, a wealthy Scottish merchant, was promised a 4 000-acre (1 618 hectares) grant as compensation for the loss of one of his ships. A site was chosen at Pialligo, where Campbell eventually had a substantial residence erected, which he named Duntroon. Duntroon became an important grazing property and remained with the Campbell family until it was taken over by the Commonwealth in 1910 as the site of the Royal Military College. Blundells Cottage, built in the 1860s, is one of the few remaining stone worker's dwellings, part of the Duntroon estate.

Further settlement occurred near the Murrumbidgee River in 1834 on a property named Lanyon, after John Lanyon the joint owner. His partner James Wright ran sheep and cattle, relying mainly on convict labour. Financial difficulties forced Wright to sell Lanyon to Andrew Cunningham in 1848 and move to Cuppacumbalong across the Murrumbidgee River.

Andrew Cunningham erected a large, new residence at Lanyon and continued to develop the property, adding to it with the purchase of other grants, including Tuggeranong. His sons ran the two properties for many years. Many of the local Aboriginal people worked on the stations in the area. Today, Lanyon is still a working property. Both Lanyon and Tuggeranong Homesteads are open to the public.

Around this period, in the same area, William Farrer engaged in the experimental development of strains of rustproof wheat at Lambrigg station. Farrer made a singular contribution to the Australian wheat industry and is recognised worldwide. He and his wife are buried on a hill behind Lambrigg, their graves being marked by a monument.

Another station which contributed greatly to the development of the district was Yarralumla. Frederick Campbell (a relative of the Campbell family at Duntroon) purchased the property in 1881 and had a new residence built, which has since become Government House, residence of the Governor-General of Australia.

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The 1860s and 1870s witnessed a new wave of European settlement. The Robertson Land Act of 1861 allowed Crown land to be purchased in much smaller lots. This heralded a rush by poorer settlers to purchase small areas, where they often eked out an existence in difficult circumstances.

St John the Baptist Church has been at the centre of life in the district since the 1840s and was officially consecrated on 12 March 1845. A schoolhouse adjoining the Church was also open from the early 1840s. As settlement took place in the outlying areas, additional schools were founded and new villages were gazetted at Tharwa (near Lanyon) in 1862, and Hall in 1882. Both Tharwa and Hall retain their 'village' heritage to this day.

The first bridge in the district across the Murrumbidgee River was opened at Tharwa in 1895.

Opportunities for recreation and sport had been very limited in the early years of settlement but, as the population increased, woolshed dances, balls, concerts, athletic sports and cricket were organised. The best cricketer in the area in the 1850s-60s was an Aboriginal man, Johnny Taylor. By the 1870s itinerant entertainers and circuses began to visit the district.

By the turn of the century, the district which is now the Australian Capital Territory was an established wool and grain producing area, with some stations well known for breeding horses and cattle.

Lyall Gillespie

Further reading.

- Lyall Gillespie, *Canberra 1820–1913*, AGPS, 1991
- Lyall Gillespie, *Ginninderra Forerunner to Canberra*, Self Published, 1992
- Alan Fitzgerald, *Canberra in Two Centuries*, Clareville Press, 1987

Blundells Cottage:

Thursday and Saturday 10am to 11.30am and 12pm to 4pm (except public holidays)

Admission: Free

St John's Schoolhouse Museum Opening Hours:

10am – 12pm Wednesdays

2pm – 4pm Saturday and Sunday

