

# A STORY OF THE URBAN BEGINNINGS OF WAGGA WAGGA



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## Introduction

This study of urban beginnings in the town of Wagga Wagga, its context and effects on urban expansion began as a larger project to examine the land clearing and grazing practices undertaken by stations located in the Wagga Wagga district. Concurrent urban expansion of the village during the latter half of the nineteenth century was also to be explored.

It was hypothesized that the coming of the railway station to Wagga in the late 1870's was a substantial economic driver for the town's agricultural industry and urbanisation, hence the research would investigate the extent of land clearing and acquisition during that period. It was found however, a lack of pastoral records for the Wagga Wagga district during the time period, and the collected data suggested another possibility in urban development. An interesting story surrounding the genesis of the village became apparent over time and hence shifted into focus for the study. With this focus of urban development, the current paper has two aims: Firstly, to provide historical context by exploring the chronology of the village beginnings, from pastoral settlement and the genesis of the village up until the concretion of the township, and secondly; to explore possible relationships between initial settlers and land acquisition.

Such connections between early prominent figures, their land holdings and acquisition within the beginning urban system of Wagga Wagga appear to have been previously overlooked. Irvin's *Place of Many Crows* (1953), although sometimes criticized, pays particular attention to the genesis of village and refers to the first land sales that occurred within the village. Only limited relationships, however, between initial sales and early urban settlers are drawn.

Investigation of the chronology of settlement as well as connections in early urban settlers and land ownership suggest a story regarding squatter's in the Wagga Wagga district, but also that a squattocracy may have occurred at the urban level.

## Methodology

In order to investigate the connections between early residents and their land acquisition in the urban beginning, a review of existing records of the town's history was conducted in tandem with an historical mapping exercise over three periods from the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. The first map being the original 1849 survey conducted by surveyor Townshend, the second map used was from the early 1860's, and the third town map taken from

1915. The correspondence of maps with existing records allowed investigation of two avenues of urban beginnings. Firstly and less importantly, to analyse the physical direction of the town's expansion; by correlating the physical changes in maps with significant events recorded that may have affected growth and expansion. Secondly, to develop a historical context of prominent figures in early settlement and investigate their initial holdings, followed by their land acquisition over time. The names recorded on town sections and allotments in the town maps are indicative of the first people to freehold those particular portions of land from the crown. People that were indentified as prominent in the records may be correlated with their amount of crown land acquired, and vice versa; names that frequent as freeholders of land on the town map may be correlated with the existing records.

## Building the terms

The village beginnings of Wagga Wagga occurred within a context where colonial settlement was expanding rapidly. During this time, many developments and changes in land policy occurred to regulate such settlement, which ultimately formed the social hierarchies of early settlers. Because land policy played such an important role, it is pertinent to first establish a brief context to the term 'squattling' or 'squatters' and the evolution of it's connotation throughout periods in colonial Australia, before examining urban beginnings. In addition, an historical understanding of the concept 'squattocracy' is developed; as it was also underpinned by land policy and politics during Colonial settlement.

In the first stages of colonial settlement when land was first attempted to be restricted by the government, due to a number of reasons such as lack of policing and surveying resources, the term 'squatter' was use to derogate illegitimate occupiers of crown lands, for mainly pastoral purposes. These were mostly made of ticket-of-leave convicts or emancipists. By the 1820's the government had attempted to restrict settlement to area known as the Nineteen counties, however many entrepreneurs defied regulations and established squatting runs outside the boundaries. These 'squatters' were of a sharp social differentiation (McMichael, 1984 p. 90), varying from "gentlemen, worthy and excellent" to "old shepherds" (McMichael, 1984 p.90), and hence squatting was no longer negatively equated with man of ill fame. Because the rush for unoccupied land had become so wide spread, Governor Bourke legitimised squatting by imposing and annual 10-pound license fee for each squatter in 1836. Many of the squatters who occupied land prior to this became exceedingly wealthy, and hence the term transformed to denote an elevated class of gentlemen.

The term 'squattocracy' is a play on the word aristocracy, denoting an aura of control by wealthy landowners, of whom originally squatted on their land. The socio-economic elevation of squatters, and consequent emergence of a squattocracy was attributed to a number of factors. Other than accumulation of huge profits from grazing on their runs, squatters were also supported by a Wakesfieldian model adopted by the Government, whereby land revenue funded the immigration of convict laborers and hired servants to work on squatting

runs (La Croix, 1992). In addition, the establishment of magistracies in new settled areas were often allocated to local landowners. The beginnings of the village of Wagga Wagga occurred when both of these factors were in play, and hence the town was founded on the grounds of people with personal interests in land.

Traditionally the concept of squattocracy is associated with those whom own large amounts of land for grazing. The present study indicates, however, a new kind of squattocracy. The genesis and early settlement of the village was in essence founded by those with invested interests in land, and had intentions to take their land prior to legal title. A select few of residents within the village, particularly three of the town's publicans, seemed to have initially operated their business on unoccupied land, or took claim of unoccupied land at some point, and gained significant wealth and positions of power. As the town expanded, the more crown land they acquired. This regime of land acquisition and control occurred until the end of the 1850's, when the three publicans died on separate occasions from illness.

## **Establishment of law in landowners**

Essentially, the origins of the village of Wagga Wagga began as a result of three phases of European settlement in the area. The first phase being the establishment of squatting runs around the Murrumbidgee; second being the early phase of urban settlement, with building of Inn's, stores and blacksmiths on routes taken by travelers and local pastoralists; and the third being the consolidation of urban settlement with dissemination of magistracies in newly settled areas, so that stations and inns may be policed. The three coincide at various times.

The initial squatting runs established within the area were all at first illegal (Morris, 1999). By the time Governor Bourke imposed a £10 pound license for squatting runs, most of the landowners had already accumulated wealth, and paying for such a license was not of concern. These included the Thompson family who established the 'Eunonyhareenya' station in the North Wagga area. The Best Family occupied the 'Wogga Wogga' run on the south side of the Murrumbidgee. John Peter helped to establish two stations for his employer's son, George Macleay; the 'Tarcattah' and back station, 'Pulltop' (both became later known as Borambola station). Peter then went onto marry the widow Mary Bourke and acquire the 'Gumly Gumly' station. John Peter was known as a "land pirate and opportunist of the worst type" (Irvin, 1953, p.19); often ruthless when it came to land acquisition. By 1848 he owned nearly 20 squatting runs in the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan district (Morris, 1999).

As runs were established and settlement expanded, Magistracies were often assigned to "men of capital" and the "large landowning gentry" (McMichael, 1984), and for Wagga, this was no exception. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February, 1847, sixteen licensed pastoralists from the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee district requested a bench of magistrates in the area of Wagga Wagga, for protection

from 'evils' on their "thoroughfare to Melbourne and Adelaide" (Colonial Secretary- Letters from Magistrates 22/2/1847). This included those from the families mentioned above- Robert Holt Best of the 'Wogga Wogga' run, Charles and Frederick Anslow Tompson of the 'Eunonyhareenya' run, George Macleay of 'Borambola', and John Peter of the 'Gumly Gumly' run. Just after the New South Wales Government Gazette announced Wagga Wagga to be a place for holding petty session on 30 April 1847, George Macleay, his cousin William Macleay, later John Peter, and F.A. Tompson were appointed to the Bench of Magistrates\* (Morris, 1999; Government Gazette, 30/4/1847), William Macleay land interests were not primarily within the Wagga area, however he believed "this country was designed by a wise Providence for grazing purposes, and for none other has any right herein except squatters and their serfs" (The Argus, 4/01/1865).

The evolution of Wagga through the establishment of services such as public houses, inns or blacksmiths, created a service centre which could be predicted by Christaller's 'central-place theory' (Fujita, Krugman & Mori, 1999). The theory states that 'central places' or cities form hierarchies, and lower order cities are developed around them. The city at the top of hierarchy would provide a broader "range of products and lower order cities successively fewer products" Fujita et al., 1999, p.211). The initial businesses established in the Wagga area were only those that required a low population threshold (i.e. hotels, blacksmiths) for servicing local pastoralists and those traveling to other towns. It appears that those who initially invested in such businesses would thrive. In other terms, Goods or services that have higher thresholds (require higher populations to make the supply worthwhile) would mainly be available in larger cities, and in smaller cities, there would be mainly goods and services that only require a lower population.

## Development of an Urban Squattocracy

The first hotel, built in 1846, was known as the Wagga Wagga Inn, and was first licensed to Henry Collis on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, 1847 (Wagga Bench Book, 1847). Collis was a former employee's of John Peter at 'Gumly Gumly' Station, and only five months after obtaining the publican license, Collis quarreled with Peter, and sold the license to John Joseph ('Ginger') Roberts, in April 1848 (Wagga Wagga Bench Book, 1848; Best, 12/12/1905). Surveyor Townsend came to Wagga whilst Roberts was still the licensee:

[H]ere there is a local Courthouse and Lock-up on the south bank of the Murrumbidgee. An Inn, Store and Blacksmiths shop... It forms on

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\* An interesting urban example, and important part of the story is that after the court had been well established, F. A. Tompson made frequent trips from his residence in Gundagai. Because he had trouble with accommodation in Wagga Wagga, he requested to build a house in the town, and to have it remain even if it contravened the town plan (Swan, 1970). Hence his house 'Waterview' was built in early 1849, and remained illegally on crown land until 1859, when he finally purchased the land, two acres for £16 (Wagga Wagga Bench Book, 1859).

the South bank of the river a part of Mr Best's run. The Inn and stores are property of Mr. Roberts, an unlicensed occupier of Crown land (Letters to the Surveyor General, 18/9/1848)

Unfortunately, Roberts was also an employee of Peter and may have had disputes with Peter as well. In April 1849 the hotel was taken over by Mr. James Walsh, a carpenter and builder from Yass, who happened to be a friend of Peters (Morris, 1999). This was the only hotel in the Wagga Wagga region, until after the end of 1849 when the first lot of land was sold. Even after these sales, James Walsh continued his business and expanded his land ownership without legally purchasing the land on which he first operated.

The first official land sale for Wagga Wagga was conducted November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1849 (Sydney Morning Herald, 3/11/1849). The colonial treasurer, in Sydney, conducted the sale before the copy of a town survey arrived. Many people saw the location of the auction to be a disadvantage, as those without appropriate connections or money to pay agents would not be able to purchase land:

Many powerful reasons could be adduced to prove the impolicy of selling lands by auction some two or three hundred miles away, but the 'column of a correspondent won't admit it. (Sydney Morning Herald, 14/12/1849)

Ten allotments were advertised for sale in Fitzmaurice Street, South Wagga. 'Ginger' Roberts, the former publican for the Wagga Wagga Inn, bought five allotments in Fitzmaurice street in section 1 (block bounded by Gurwood, Fitzmaurice and Kincaid Street), allotments 1-5 of section 4 were bought by Samuel Dean Gordon, a Sydney Merchant, Christopher Tidyman, the second Blacksmith in the area, and Thomas Townsend, the Surveyor (Irvin, 1953). Of the eight North Wagga allotments offered for sale, only six were sold, at an average price of 5 pounds (Sydney Morning Herald, 26/11/1849). Robert Davidson, William Hendrie and William Brown purchased two allotments each (See Figure 1).

William Brown had intended to take this land, prior to the first sale. In fact, prior to being granted a license on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1849, two unsuccessful applications for a publican's license had been made in July and August by a William Brown of *North Wagga* (Wagga Wagga Court of Petty Sessions, 1849). Within three weeks of having the license granted the New Ferry Inn was up and running, and Brown was running a small punt on the Murrumbidgee (GH, December, 1849). It seems that only a few months later, William Brown had rebuilt the hotel on the opposite corner, as well as a more substantial punt, that "charged threepence for every person crossing or re-crossing the river" (Goulburn Herald, 31/05/1851). In less than six months of operation he advertised the hotel for sale, possibly due to the floods occurring in the area. Interestingly the advertisement offered the hotel for sale "with or without seven allotments of adjoining land" (Goulburn Herald, 27/4/1850), despite the fact the hotel itself was only on three allotments.

After the first land sale in 1849, sales were no longer conducted by the Colonial Treasurer in Sydney. Rather, F. A. Tompson, the Clerk of Petty Sessions took the

role of Crown Land agent, and dealt land at auctions (Wagga Wagga Bench Book) despite the fact he was still illegally occupying crown land.

Figure 1- First Sale of Town Allotments 22/11/1849



The next large land sale took place on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1850. Thirty-three allotments were sold in North and South Wagga, with note worthy buyers including James Walsh who purchased 4 allotments, 2 in South Wagga and 2 in North Wagga. 'Ginger' Roberts purchased 2 allotments in South Wagga, next to Robert Davidson who purchased two allotments and set up a store (Morris, 1999; Map of Wagga,

1915). Less than six months later, a publican license was issued to Thomas Fox, for the 'Squatters Inn' (Wagga Wagga Bench Book, 1849) which was situated on one of Roberts' allotments, next to Mr. Davidson's store (Gormly, 1921). According to Gormly (1921), the hotel was established in January, 1850, however this not probable considering Mr. Roberts purchased this land in July that year. There was no record found of the transaction between Mr. Fox and Mr. Roberts, and no deed was handed over to fox for this land, it may be assumed that Fox may have leased the land from Roberts.

Thomas Fox, like the other publicans, had an invested interest in land. His first purchase of crown land was in 1851, a suburban lot of 30 acres along Tarcutta Street. Philip Bentley had won this land at the auction however was unable to pay, so Thomas Fox purchased the land. According to Gormly, Fox owned all of the land along Kincaid Street until to the place where his Westhoe House stood in 1852. This was validated by the maps used in the project, indicating Thomas Fox to be the first freeholder of crown land for several allotments in sections 2, 32, 31 and 36 of Kincaid Street (Map of Wagga, 1915), however there was no record in the Bench Book found for many of these allotments. Within the first few years, the three publicans and the Clerk of Petty Sessions had well established their presence within the community; the publicans in particular were significant purchasers of land, up until their deaths at the end of the 1850's. Their land acquisition relative to the town's size is quite considerable (see Figure 2).

Thomas Fox accumulated an enormous amount of crown land in the town. He was the first freeholder of 36 allotments and 4 suburban lots between 30 and 40 acres, and had bought the Swan Inn, Royal Hotel, erected the Commercial Hotel, as well began operations for building a punt before he died in 1859. The large amount of land held in his name along Kincaid Street that was not found to be purchased in the Wagga Wagga Bench book, means that he could have quite possibly claimed it prior to obtaining legal title.

Brown purchased 7 town lots, and three Suburban allotments from the crown, as well as owning the Ferry Hotel at North Wagga and Royal Hotel at South Wagga, and the only punt operating within fifty miles. By the beginning of 1855, the punt was earning between 10 and 30 pounds a day. Brown's business ventures allowed him to retire with an "ample fortune" (Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 17/5/1871) before his death in 1855.

As well as the hotel he had acquired Walsh purchased 13 allotments of land from the crown (Wagga Wagga Bench Book) in the first five land sales between 1849 and 1851. James was granted the deed to this land in 1854, 2 years after he had already relocated his hotel to across the road (Wagga Wagga Bench Book; Gormly, 1921). Walsh was the first freeholder of 26 town allotments from the crown, of which four he occupied illegally for nearly five years, and records for the sale of five allotments could not be found within the bench book. A record of a suburban lot was also purchased according to the bench book but was not found on the map. In addition to owning the Wagga Inn, and operating a small punt, Walsh built the Swan Inn in North Wagga and leased it to Jacob Marks.

Figure 2: Crown land acquired by early figures, relative to town's approx. size 1858



- Fox
- Brown
- Walsh
- Tompson

According to the records, Fredrick Tompson had not invested a great deal in Crown Land. He did however maintain a large amount control in other ways. Other than being the first clerk of petty session and crown land agent, he also was the first post-master, and introduced the first banking facilities. During the 1850's Tompson was one half of a monopoly in the retail business, owning one of the two multi-purpose stores in Wagga, known as he Australian Warehouse, or F.A. Tompson & Co. Tompson held a wine and spirit license, and was also an auctioneer and general commission agent (Wagga Wagga Bench Book; Morris, 1990). Once the town became a municipality 1870, Tompson was appointed the Town Clerk at £100 per annum (Wagga Council Minute Book, 1870).

## Discussion

Thus far, the archival research has documented a pattern in urban development in Wagga Wagga which is not widely discussed in the literature. Those who came and provided retail and other services for new rural settlers in the district, effectively squatted on their initial allotments, or claimed land at some point. These 'urban squatters' gained financial benefits similar to those who had squatted at the rural level.

Like many of the squatters at the grazing level, land policy, legislation and timing may have significantly favoured the 'urban squatter'. Firstly, because the Wagga Wagga district was located beyond the policable area known as the 'nineteen counties', magistracy was assigned to those who initially squatted on land for grazing in the district. Hence, taking small amounts of land for business may not have been seen as worth policing, though the process effectively created the service centre to be subsequently known as Wagga Wagga.

Men who initially took large amounts of land for grazing were eventually caught up with by land policy, but at little inconvenience. The imposition of a £10 squatting license by the government came by the time most squatters of large land in the Wagga district had already accumulated large amounts of wealth, so legitimising their runs was not difficult. Similarly, the urban squatters of Wagga Wagga, eventually had to pay for their allotments- after they had already made considerable financial gains.

Although some links and differences between the rural and the urban squatting have been made, consolidation of the 'urban squattocracy' concept may need to be further investigated. A more definitive research would include the attainment of lands title deeds of urban allotments, so the total of urban land owned within particular periods of times may be examined. Using title deeds would also build a more accurate picture of control for the early urban squatter. In this regard F. A. Tompson may be of particular interest, as he owned several businesses on the main street of Wagga but, did not invest heavily in crown land.

There would also be value in investigating urban development within other townships in outer settled areas; the acquisition of land undertaken by early figures, their relationships with one another and the development of control during the genesis of urban systems. If a similar pattern occurs in other areas, the notion of squattocracy only at the grazing level may be genuinely challenged.

## Conclusion

It was exciting to find the possibility of an 'urban squattocracy' existing in the Wagga Wagga district; a new frame of thinking in Australian and local histories. To reiterate the point made early, understandings around the term 'squatting' have been transforming our understandings of Colonial Australian history. Given

the recent findings, it seems possible that the conception may evolve yet again. Notions of control during settlement periods in Australia may no longer be only associated with those owning larger amounts of land for grazing. Rather, they encompass the 'urban squatter', and their wealth and power developed from taking small amounts of land for low-population threshold businesses at the genesis of urban systems.

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