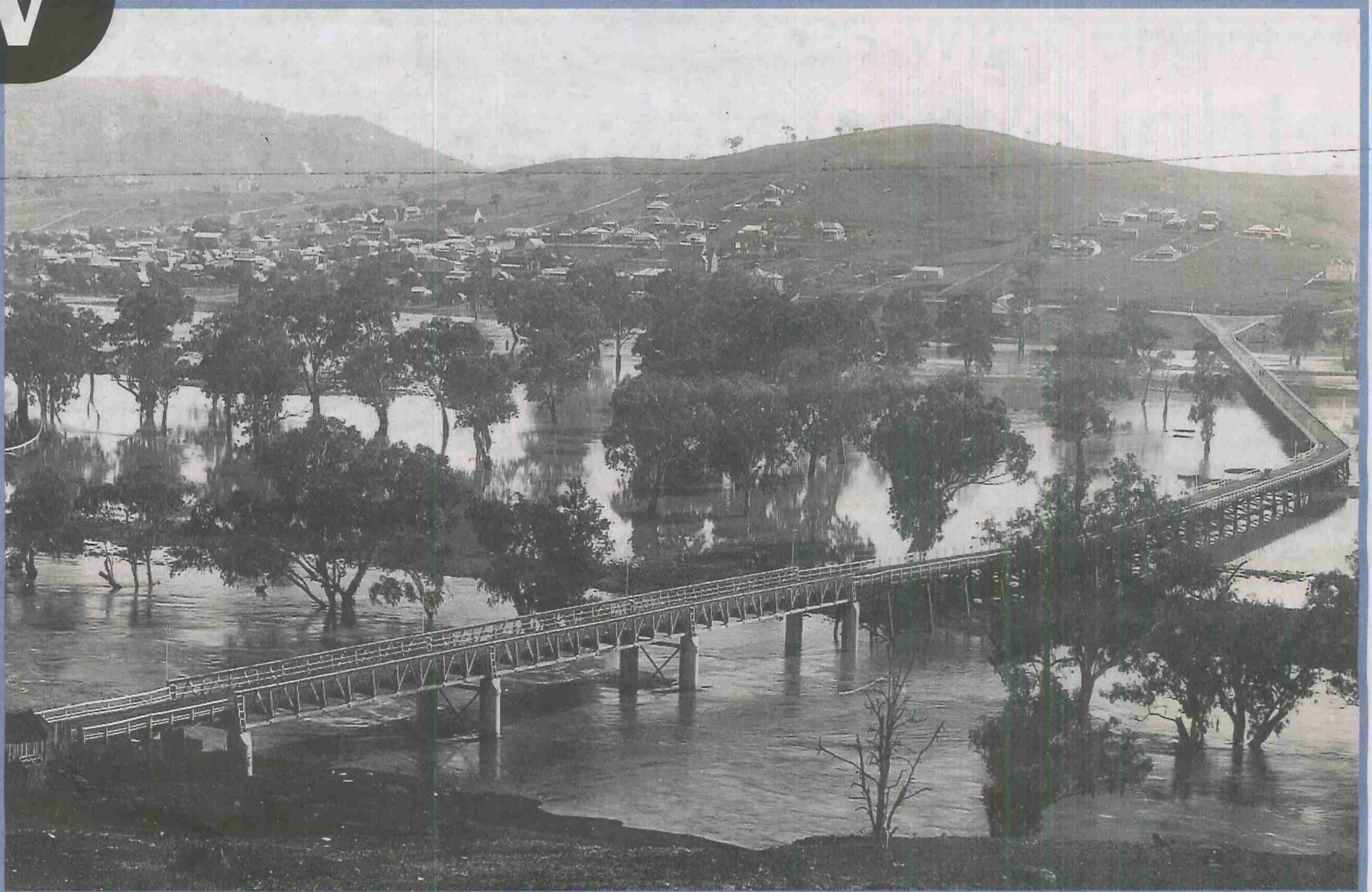


CSU Regional Archives Saturday openings  
The CSU Regional Archives is extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of every month. This initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the archives on weekdays during normal business hours. The next Saturday opening will occur on July 7, from 10am to 3pm.



Gundagai during the flood of 1896 clearly showing the floodplains where the original township was situated.

(CSU Regional Archives – RW98/25)

## what you need to know

■ The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building on South Campus of the university, access can be gained via College Avenue or Hely Avenue. Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with inquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straight-forward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour including copying and postage. For further information, phone 02 6925 3666, email [archive@csu.edu.au](mailto:archive@csu.edu.au), or visit our website at [www.csu.edu.au/research/archives](http://www.csu.edu.au/research/archives) for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.

# Gundagai's Great Flood

## at the archives

Wayne Doubleday



**J**une 24 and 25 marked the 160th anniversary of the Great Flood of 1852 which descended upon the Murrumbidgee River and in particular the township of Gundagai. To this day, the 1852 flood remains the worst flood in Australian history due to the loss of life which occurred at Gundagai.

The original settlement of Gundagai was officially gazetted in 1838 and a township soon began to develop on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River at a place that had been known as The Crossing. It seemed natural that a development would spring up at a location that was one of the main crossing places on the road between Sydney and Melbourne. This particular site had even been identified by Captain Charles Sturt on his explorations as a favourable place for crossing the Murrumbidgee.

Unfortunately, the growth, development and surveying of the fledgling village coincided with one of the worst droughts of the 19th century, which was particularly bad in 1838 to 1839. This meant that the first buildings were constructed along the banks of the river and the adjacent river flats. Allotments of land were sold and the plan for the township was laid out with inns, hotels, stores, schools and homes all being built on a tongue of land between the Murrumbidgee River and a tributary called Morley's Creek.

Despite dire warnings about building on the river flats and possible future floods from the local indigenous population, Gundagai began to thrive. The first real signs of trouble were in 1844 when a serious flood inundated most of the buildings in Gundagai to a level of about one metre. This experience was enough for many locals to petition governor Gipps for land on

higher ground to be released, however this request was denied. Understandably, the government was later subjected to severe criticism for this decision following the devastation of the 1852 flood.

By 1852 Gundagai had a population of about 250 people. The month of June had been incredibly wet, with almost three weeks of heavy rain. By the morning of Thursday, June 24 the township was isolated, and later in the afternoon the river flats were also under water. On Thursday night and during Friday the floods continued to rise as the waters from the upper catchment areas began to hit the township.

During Friday night (June 25) people were forced to clamber onto the roofs of the buildings to avoid being swept away. Others braved the raging waters and tried to swim to find the safety of a tree. The floods were flowing through the houses and buildings at a height of two metres.

One survivor who was obviously deeply traumatised by the ordeal later recounted, "Men, women and children never ceased screaming the whole time ... A lull would come for a few moments, we could hear the most heartrending shrieks from those who were on the tops of their houses, crying for help, but none could be given them ... We could now see a few poor creatures clinging on the trees calling for help; as the day drew on, their voices became more weak, their cries more faint; one after another dropped, and were swept away ... those shrieks are now in my ears – never shall I forget the horrors of that dreadful time ... the once happy and thriving town of Gundagai was now a desolate, wretched waste. The finding of dead bodies continued for eight or nine weeks."

Some survivors who were able to find safety in the branches of a tree on Thursday night remained there until Saturday afternoon, through two days and nights of bitter June temperatures. Two such survivors were the young Gormly brothers, James and Thomas (their parents and three other siblings perished). The former was to later become one of Wagga's most prominent citizens in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a politician and public figure.

When the Murrumbidgee River eventually peaked early in the morning of Saturday, June 26 it was 1.6km wide. The township had been

almost washed away with some reports saying only three buildings had been left standing. While estimates vary on the number of inhabitants drowned, it is believed that at least 89 people perished as a result of the flood. This accounts for at least 35 per cent of the population of Gundagai in 1852.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the calamity in the following manner. "Never within the memory of either black or white man has there been such a disastrous and fatal visitation in these unhappy districts ... One of the most fearful catastrophes which it has ever been our lot to record ... The village of Gundagai has been almost entirely destroyed."

As is often the case with devastating natural disasters, many stories of heroism came to the fore. In the Great Flood of 1852 at Gundagai, several young indigenous men distinguished themselves with acts of bravery that resulted in dozens of people being rescued from rooftops and trees. Some reports say that one of the Aboriginal men called "Yarri" singlehandedly saved 49 people by paddling out into the raging river in a small bark canoe. Fittingly there is a memorial to "Yarri" where he is buried at the Gundagai cemetery. Two other Aboriginal men, "Jacky Jacky" and "Long Jimmy" also helped save a large number of people stranded by the floods. For their bravery the men were presented with inscribed breastplates as a token of appreciation from the township.

Not surprisingly, after the destructive events of June 1852, Gundagai was rebuilt on the higher slopes above the Murrumbidgee River, as depicted in the photograph of the 1896 flood.

Compiled by Wayne Doubleday.

References: *Sydney Morning Herald* 05/07/1852, 06/07/1852, 07/07/1852, 08/07/1852, 10/07/1852, 03/03/1855; *The Argus* 08/10/1932; *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser* 24/07/1852; Australian Parliamentary Papers – NSW Legislative Council Votes & Proceedings, 1824-1855, Reel 8, pp. 239-249; *The Daily Advertiser*, 01/08/1998, pp. 16-17 & 07/07/2010; *NSW Government Gazette*, 09/10/1838, 22/11/1844, 22/10/1852; "Yarri – A Frontier Story", *Lateline Transcript*, ABC, Published 22/09/2003; [www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/content.php/636](http://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/content.php/636); [www.australianicons.com.au](http://www.australianicons.com.au); [www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/the-worst-floods-in-australian-history.htm](http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/the-worst-floods-in-australian-history.htm).