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Museum fact sheet 1: Aboriginal nations in the Paterson Valley

Paterson Historical Society acknowledges the Aboriginal people who have inhabited the east coast of Australia for thousands of years.

When the European occupation began in this area, the Paterson Valley was probably home to three Aboriginal groups: the Worimi (saltwater people); the Wonnarua (freshwater people who also occupied most of the mid and upper Hunter Valley); and the Gringai who were associated with the upper Paterson Valley and the Dungog region. These boundaries and affiliations are contested.¹

Sadly, in the lower Paterson Valley only one Aboriginal location name survives: 'Tocal' meaning bountiful, big or plentiful. The Paterson River around present-day Woodville was known as 'Yimmang' but unfortunately this name has disappeared.

European invasion and settlement of the Paterson Valley

There were four phases of European occupation of the Paterson River Valley, each with increasing impact on Aboriginal life and culture. The first phase involved minimal contact as Europeans explored the Hunter Valley, for example the 1801 survey of the Paterson River by Ensign Barrallier.²

In the second phase, starting in 1804, convict timber-cutters from the penal settlement at Newcastle were the main form of European contact with Aboriginal people in the Paterson area. The gangs operated along the Paterson River and established a camp at Old Banks, a few kilometres downstream from where Paterson Township now stands. They had little impact on areas available to Aborigines for hunting or materials but disrupted their communities through sexual relations and the introduction of European diseases.

The third phase involved settlement of a few Europeans on small blocks along the river at Patersons Plains (now the Woodville district). Given the low number of settlers and the small areas of land involved, this probably had little additional impact on the local Aboriginal people.

The fourth phase of European invasion and settlement of the Paterson Valley involved large-scale alienation of land from 1822 as individual settlers were granted up to several thousand acres each. By 1825 most of the prime alluvial land along the lower reaches of the Paterson River had been granted to European immigrants. This scale of settlement drastically reduced the hunting areas of the Aboriginal people, restricted their supply of game and materials, and further exposed them to European diseases against which they had little or no immunity. The disruption to Aboriginal communities was massive.

Conflict and accommodation

Throughout the phases of Indigenous/European contact there were varying degrees of conflict and accommodation, although conflict in the Lower Hunter was sporadic. In 1827 it was reported that 12 Aboriginal people were shot on a property just north of Paterson (although the landholder denied it).³ In unrelated incidents Aborigines killed a few Europeans in the district but Aborigines suffered far more at the hands of Europeans. Despite the sporadic violence, some of the intercultural exchanges involved cooperation, companionship and sharing of knowledge.

Decline in Aboriginal numbers

In the 1830s Aboriginal numbers in the Lower Hunter declined markedly, and mortalities in a smallpox epidemic from 1829 to 1831 may have exceeded 30 per cent of the Aboriginal population. After this epidemic Aborigines survived in numbers only in the Upper Hunter but not in the Lower Hunter area (which includes the Paterson River valley).

Further information available at Paterson Court House Museum

For those wishing to find out more about Aboriginal people in the Paterson Valley, Paterson Court House Museum has several publications for sale, or you can read them in our library:

Aborigines in the Paterson Gresford Districts: Effects of Settlement, by Boris Sokoloff, published by Paterson Historical Society in 2006.

Aboriginal Land Use at Tocal: The Wonnarua Story, by Jennifer Laffan and Cameron Archer, published by CB Alexander Foundation in 2004.

The Magic Valley: The Paterson Valley – then and now, by Cameron Archer, published by ACA Books in 2019.

Further reading available elsewhere

Attwood, Brian and SG Foster (eds). *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*. National Museum of Australia, 2003.

Connor, John. *The Australian Frontier Wars 1788-1838*. University of New South Wales Press, 2005 (first published 2002).

Dunn, Mark. *The Convict Valley – The Bloody Struggle on Australia's Early Frontier*. Allen & Unwin, 2020.

Gapps, Stephen. *The Sydney Wars – Conflict in the Early Colony 1788-1817*. Newsouth, 2018.

Griffiths, Billy. *Deep Time Dreaming – Uncovering Ancient Australia*. Black Inc., 2018.

Karskens, Grace. *People of the River – Lost Worlds of Early Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 2020.

Miller, J. *Koori: A Will to Win*. Angus and Robertson, 1985.

¹ Archer, Cameron. *The Magic Valley: The Paterson Valley – then and now*. ACA Books, 2019.

² Barrallier surveyed what we now call the Hunter and Williams Rivers in mid 1801 and returned to survey the Paterson River in November 1801, see: Macqueen, Andy. *The Life and Journeys of Barrallier 1773-1853*. Self published, 1993.

³ *Sydney Gazette*, 22 & 24 March 1827, 18 April 1827; *The Australian*, 3 March 1828.