

PARRAMATTA'S INDIGENOUS HERITAGE

Background

Indigenous Aboriginal people lived in the Sydney area for thousands of years before European settlement, relying on the bountiful supply of food from Parramatta River which runs east into Sydney Harbour. The long Aboriginal occupation and use of the Sydney area is amply supported by archaeological evidence. This implies that the Sydney region has been occupied by Aboriginal people for about 40,000 years.

During this period, the Sydney area was a vastly different environment to today. The coastline lay tens of kilometres further east, the Parramatta River (and Sydney Harbour) was a deep river valley winding its way out to the coast. Starting about 10,000 years ago the warmer temperatures at the end of the last ice age began to melt the polar ice sheets and raise water levels over the course of several thousand years. By about 6,000 years ago the waters had completely flooded over the old coastal plain and the Sydney environment that we are now familiar with was largely stabilised. The area stretching from the Blue Mountains to the coast was occupied by 'Dharug' Aborigines who shared similar languages.



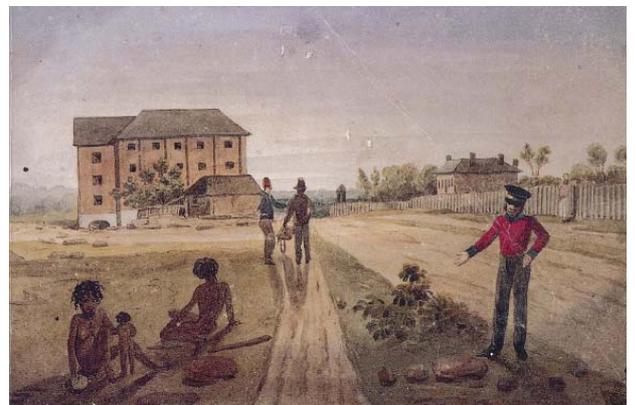
Parramatta viewed from the north

The Dharug were made up of many clans, including the Burramatugal who lived in the area now known as Parramatta. The name 'Parramatta' is thought to be derived from the Aboriginal word for 'place where the eels lie down' to breed. Like their neighbours, the Toongagal in Toongabbie and the Bidjigal in Rose Hill; the Burramatugal fashioned tools and spears for hunting native animals and collected wild berries and flora as a valuable source of vitamins.

The Burramatugal had a close relationship with the river, from which they caught fish, eels, and other food. Their stable bark canoes often carried a small fire in the middle, built on a mound of soil to allow them to cook their catch fresh. 'Firebrand farming' was also practised in the region.

Colonial disruption

Soon after Governor Arthur Phillip's arrival with the First Fleet (of convicts from England) in 1788, Rose Hill (now Parramatta) was developed as a farming settlement to feed the new English colony. At this time, Parramatta was heavily timbered with open Eucalypt forests. European settlement led to rapid exploitation of timber resources and land clearing for agriculture, which dramatically altered the landscape. The effect of European settlement was the immediate and tragic displacement of local Aborigines from the land they had lived off for some 40,000 years.



George Street, Parramatta c1825

Pemulwuy & the frontier conflict

Local Aboriginal groups led a resistance against the new settlers. The most prominent warrior was Pemulwuy. Once when he tried to spear a soldier in retaliation, he was shot in the head and body. Despite being held in chains in the hospital where he was sent to recover, he managed to escape. In retaliation, the British ordered that any groups of Dharug Aborigines be attacked, and a reward was placed on Pemulwuy's head. In 1802 he was shot and killed, and his head was sent to England.

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Co-existence and assimilation

Regional hostilities ended in 1816 and a new era of European and Aboriginal relations commenced. Devastated by dislocation and depopulation due to smallpox, neglect and violence against them, and with reduced access to traditional food resources Aboriginal groups became more dependent on Europeans to provide them with food, clothing and shelter.

In the early 1810s, government and religious attempts to 'civilise the natives' commenced in earnest. Governor Lachlan Macquarie pursued a policy of assimilation which aimed at encouraging Aborigines to abandon traditional culture and adopt European ways. Central to Macquarie's vision were plans to provide land and farming equipment to select Aborigines and to establish an Aboriginal school or native institution at Parramatta. The school was built on the corner of Macquarie and Marsden Streets and opened in January, 1815 (and remained open until the early 1820s)

From 1814, Parramatta became a meeting place for tribes from surrounding regions. An annual 'Native feast' was held by Governor Macquarie, behind St John's Church, to encourage Aboriginal people to leave their children at the Aboriginal school. The event appears to have been styled on native Indian tribal assemblies which took place in North America in the 18th century. Dwindling attendance in the late 1820s coupled with the Aboriginal practice of regularly bartering the clothes and blankets they received for rum, resulted in Governor Richard Bourke abolishing the event in April 1835.



'Annual meeting of the Native Tribes at Parramatta' c1826



Parramatta's regional symbol by Danny Eastwood

Integration

The process of integration had commenced in the 18th century and was well underway in the early 19th century. One method of integration was the taking in of aboriginal children, through a desire on the part of the Europeans to civilise the Aborigines, in order to save to the Christian faith or provide cheap labour. During the operation of the Native and Orphan schools, there were numerous requests for Aboriginal children from white Parramatta District residents.

Reserves and Missions

Aborigines not integrated into white society by the 1850s were further relegated to the fringes of society, with many being moved to Aboriginal reserves set up by the government or mission churches. It is likely that some of Parramatta's original inhabitants or their descendants came to live on the reserves west of Sydney such as those that were established in the 19th century at Plumpton, on the Hawkesbury near Windsor and in the Burragorang Valley. Conditions on these reserves were generally poor and restrictions were placed on the movement and activities of their inhabitants.

The Aboriginal community in Parramatta

The movement of Aboriginal families back into Parramatta after dislocation and dispersal appears to have had its origins in the reserves and missions set up by the government. Reserves at Sackville and Plumpton for example brought people of various descent groups together. As reserves and missions were wound up, people moved back into the wider community. Harris Park was an area in the Parramatta district where Aboriginal people moved to after the reserves closed.

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Reconciliation

While there were some early efforts made at reconciliation, Indigenous people were not given full citizenship rights in Australia until a referendum in the late 1960s. Parramatta City Council issued a formal apology to Indigenous people in 1997, becoming one of the first government bodies to do so. The Aboriginal flag now sits proudly beside the Australian flag in Council Chambers.

Aboriginal community and government interest has seen resurgence in Western Sydney's Aboriginal heritage in the 1980s and 1990s, which is reflected in the continuing work of Aboriginal traditional owner groups and Local Aboriginal Land Councils in Greater Western Sydney.

A recent high profile initiative, which helps to tell the Aboriginal history of Parramatta, has included the construction of a riverside walk on the banks of the Parramatta River. The walk features a winding concrete path snaking along the north bank of the Parramatta River from Charles Street ferry wharf to the historic Lennox Bridge. The rich and evocative designs tell the history of the region and its people from an Aboriginal perspective.



Parramatta
River walk



Scarred tree, Parramatta

There are other important examples of Aboriginal art in Parramatta including:

- A walk up Church Street from the Parramatta Heritage Centre reveals innovative 'rubbish bin' designs that have been painted by notable artists, including Indigenous illustrator, Elaine Russell.
- Close to Parramatta's City Centre is a unique Indigenous sculpture garden over a median strip in Camellia.
- A unique 'drive-by art gallery' to brighten up the industrial streetscape.
- From contemporary art to archaeological finds, Parramatta Regional Park is home to Aboriginal markings on trees which bear witness to the strong past Indigenous presence in the region.

Sources:

Parramatta City Council Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Study, Mary Dallas Consulting Archaeologist s 2003