

The Story of Canberra



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The Story of Canberra

Yesterday's Canberra

1820

Explorers Joseph Wild, James Vaughan and Charles Throsby Smith set out from 'Throsby Park' near Moss Vale and discovered the Limestone Plains, following the discovery of Lake George earlier that year. They crossed the stony range of hills beside Lake George and soon reached a point from which they saw what is now the site of Canberra. Next morning the party climbed Black Mountain and in the afternoon followed the Molonglo River upstream to its junction with the Queanbeyan River.

1821

Dr Charles Throsby, ex-naval surgeon turned grazier and explorer, set out from Lake George to search for the Murrumbidgee River which had been described by local Aborigines. Twenty-five miles from Lake George he found vast quantities of limestone, specimens of which he took with him.

Travelling south from the Molonglo River he discovered the Murrumbidgee, which ran strongly to the west Throsby returned to Lake George

'...happy to report that the country is perfectly sound, well-watered with extensive meadows of rich land on either side of the rivers, contains very fine limestone, slate, sandstone and granite fit for building, with sufficient timber for every useful purpose.'

Country of this description, which was the ideal of early pastoralists, did not have to wait long for settlement.

1824

Joshua John Moore took up the first land grant on the Limestone Plains, naming his property 'Canberry' after hearing local Aborigines using the word 'Kamberra' in their conversations. Slab huts were built on the ridge above a bend in the Molonglo River near the site of the present Royal Canberra Hospital.

first part

Two years later, Moore applied for more land.

'...The land I wish to purchase is situated at Canberry on the east bank of the river that waters the Limestone Plains above its junction with the Murrumbidgee, adjoining the grant of Mr Robert Campbell. My having had possession of that land upward of three years on which I have caused huts, stockyards etc to be built, and have enclosed about thirty acres, part of which is now under cultivation.'

The area covered by the name 'Canberry' was the basin at the foot of Black Mountain, now partly submerged by Lake Burley Griffin and partly occupied by the Australian National University, stretching back beyond Civic Centre to the foot of Mount Ainslie. Near the site of the original huts, Moore built a pleasant cottage looking over the wide valley towards Duntroon, which, after a varied career of over 100 years as a home stead, rectory and courthouse, was pulled down to make way for the hospital in 1941.

(Inscribed on a fountain in the hospital grounds are the words:

‘On this site Lieutenant J.J. Moore, the first settler in this district, built his residence about AD 1826. Some stones from it now form this fountain AD 1954.’)

second part

KAMBERRA - this Aboriginal word, spoken by tribes on the Limestone Plains, meant ‘a meeting place’ either of rivers or of tribes joining together to feast on Bogong Moths in mountains to the south.

1825

Robert Campbell, wealthy Sydney merchant, sent his overseer James Ainslie to collect 700 sheep from the government flocks at Bathurst and to go southward looking for suitable pasture. The land was to be compensation for the loss of his ship ‘Sydney’ wrecked while under charter to the government to bring food from India.

Aided by Aborigines, Ainslie reached the Limestone Plains and built huts on the slopes above the Molonglo River where the Royal Military College now stands. Campbell applied for and received his grant, naming it ‘Duntroon’ after the family castle in Scotland.

1833

In 1833, Campbell built a one storey stone home with wide verandahs and a large two-storeyed extension was added by his son George in 1862.

‘Duntroon House’ became the centre around which revolved the life of the many employees of the station-the manager, the servants, the stockmen, gardeners, carpenters, horsebreakers, shoemakers, masons, brick- makers, tailors and tenant farmers.

Beautiful gardens containing many fine trees were planted around the homestead, an intricate maze was set out, and an orchard, conservatory, vineyard and dairy farm were established. Duntroon was in fact, a self-contained community.

The house, consisting of twenty rooms with servants’ quarters, is a fine example of colonial architecture.

Today it houses the Officers’ Mess and the Commandant’s office of the Royal Military College. Guided tours of ‘Duntroon’ are available weekdays at 2.30pm from April to October inclusive.

1835

By this date the best land on the Limestone Plains was being rapidly occupied.

One outstanding property remains as an example of the solid gracious homes erected by the settlers as they made a success of their grazing ventures. It bears the name of one of the original land- owners, John Lanyon, a free settler who stayed only three years in Australia. With the brothers James and William Wright, he used convict labour to establish the pastoral industry in the valley of the Murrumbidgee River.

The cluster of early buildings in the courtyard of Lanyon Homestead bear witness to the self-sufficiency of the early settlers in what was then a remote area. Here are the dairy, workers’ barracks, storerooms, and kitchen built from stone and wood quarried and cut on the property. The turret of the ivy-covered kitchen holds a bell which was rung to call the shepherds and labourers to their work.

1848

In 1848 Lanyon was sold to Andrew Cunningham, a Scot who gave up a career in banking to try his hand at sheep-farming in Australia. His progressive methods proved successful; and in 1859 he built the older part of the existing homestead in a simple and elegant style, and here he and his wife Jane raised their eight children. In 1905 their third son, A J Cunningham, extended the house on the occasion of his marriage, and it acquired the form it has today.

The interior of the homestead is being painstakingly restored, and each section is being decorated and furnished in the style of the time when it was built. The garden with its fine trees, flower and vegetable beds provides a restful setting for the house and outbuildings.

(A visit to Lanyon is a pleasant experience. The homestead, courtyard, garden and the new Nolan Gallery nearby, can all be inspected Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays 10am-4pm).

1845

Saint John's Church of England was completed, becoming the centre of village life in the infant Canberra.

The site of St John's, on a hill overlooking the Molonglo River and part of 'Duntroon' was donated by the Campbell family together with \$2 000 towards building costs.

Materials were obtained locally, bluestone from near Mount Pleasant, sandstone from Black Mountain. Interior furnishings were of cedar and the roof of shingles.

The interior of St Johns today has many features of interest - there are memorials to early residents and the east window, above the altar, a memorial to Robert Campbell is one of the first stained-glass windows made in Australia.

Many pioneers of Canberra lie at rest in the graveyard. The oldest marked grave is the Guise family vault (1844) and there are seven descendants of the Campbell family in a special hedged enclosure.

Close by St John's Church stands Canberra's first and only school from the early 1840s until 1880 when a State school was opened at Acton.

The schoolmaster was also Parish Clerk and lived in rooms attached to the school. Enrolments varied from 23 pupils in 1859 to 49 in 1865.

Today the schoolhouse has been restored and, staffed by volunteers, it is open as a museum of school life in the Canberra of a hundred years ago. A visit is a memorable experience. Open Wednesday morning 10am - 12noon, Saturday and Sunday 2pm-4pm and by special arrangement for groups.

1858

Blundell's Farmhouse, today cared for by Canberra and District Historical Society, was built by the Campbells of 'Duntroon' as a home for their head ploughman.

The stone is the same as that used in St John's Church and Schoolhouse, locally quarried from Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie, its colours varying from the sunny gold of sandstone to a rock of contrasting darker reddish-purple colour.

It was built close to the ground at front, with steps at the rear where the land sloped away towards the nearby Molonglo River. The doorways were low and windows small. The roof was shingled and a narrow verandah added because of the warm Australian sunshine.

Ploughman William Ginn and his family were the first to live in the farmhouse, departing ten years later when they moved to their own selection.

George Blundell and his family were the second residents, moving in through the sixties and living there for fifty years, hence the naming of the farmhouse. Eight children were born and raised there in that period. Blundell worked for the Campbells as their bullock driver and his talents included leather-working and bee keeping. His wife Flora was the local midwife.

Visitors today can inspect the parlour, the main bedroom, the original kitchen, the girls' bedroom, the new kitchen, the shed and the garden, all featuring items of great interest, displayed as they would have been used last century.

(Blundell's Farmhouse is open every afternoon from 2.00pm-4.00pm as well as Wednesday mornings 10.00am- 12noon).

1860 - 1900

Transport and communications linking Canberra and Sydney gradually improved although a traveller in 1872 remarked that the road was very rough and in places there seemed to be no road at all only a dry watercourse. At first all goods had to be transported by bullock wagon.

Horse drays came in the fifties and wagons a few years later.

The railway reached Goulburn in 1869 and Yass in 1876. Queanbeyan was linked to Goulburn by a coach service. Post offices were established at Ginninderra, north of Black Mountain, in 1859, at Lanyon in 1860 and at Canberra, near the present Hotel Ainslie, in 1863.

The way of life changed gradually as farming and grazing techniques improved. Hand-tools were replaced by primitive machinery and, as paddocks were fenced, a small number of boundary-riders could do the work of a multitude of shepherds who led their flocks out to graze each day and returned them to the folds at night.

The best land was concentrated in the hands of a small number of wealthy families who added to their holdings by purchase and intermarriage. 'Yarralumla', today the official residence of the Governor- General, was purchased in 1881 by Frederick Campbell grandson of Robert Campbell of 'Duntroon', and it soon became one of the finest properties in New South Wales.

One great contribution to agriculture occurred in the Canberra area through the 1880s. William Farrer settled at 'Lambrigg' near Tharwa and for the next eleven years he carried out experiments to produce varieties of wheat resistant to drought and rust, suitable to the varying conditions of Australian farming - experiments that laid foundations of the modern Australian wheat industry.

However, by the end of the century life had changed only a little from the days of the pioneering settlers on the Limestone Plains.

So it remained until the arrival of surveyor Charles Scrivener with the first Commonwealth surveyors in 1909, heralding a new era: the development of Canberra national capital.

Australia's Capital City

1901

January 1 - 'Federation'- the Commonwealth of Australia was established, assented to by Queen Victoria signing the Constitution Act. A home for the national government must be established and the following conditions governed choice of site:

'The Seat of Government of the Commonwealth shall be determined by the Parliament and shall be within territory granted to, or acquired by the Commonwealth. It shall be within the State of New South Wales and be distant not less than one hundred miles from Sydney.

Such territory shall contain an area of not less than one hundred square miles granted to the Commonwealth without any payment.'

1902 1908

The search for a site for the national capital took place. Forty districts were proposed, 23 of these inspected and the choice narrowed to seven. Albury, Bombala, Lake George, Lyndhurst, Tumut, Dalgety and Yass-Canberra were all examined with regard to adequate water supply, climate and landform suitable for the building of a 'garden city' Finally in 1908 the Yass - Canberra area was selected as it best filled these requirements, and 2368 km² were set aside as the Australian Capital Territory, with access to the sea at Jervis Bay.

Charles Scrivener, Surveyor-General selected the most suitable area of the territory for construction of the city. He chose the broad flood-plain of the Molonglo River, 550 metres above sea-level with additional land to the north and south including two lines of hills on the north side rising 300 metres above the plain and low undulations adding attractive variety to the southern area.

1911

An intentional competition for a city plan was launched, attracting 137 entries. First prize was awarded to American landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin from Chicago whose plan established a city for a population of 25 000 which he expected in time would grow to 75 000.

Griffin's aim was to obtain unity by applying the natural advantages of the landform to the civic necessities. How well he combined the distant mountains, local hills, valleys and waterways can best be viewed from Mount Ainslie Lookout or Telecom Tower on Black Mountain.

Griffin's words make interesting reading:

...The site may be considered an irregular amphitheatre with Mount Ainslie at the north-east, flanked by Black Mountain and Mount Pleasant all forming the top galleries; with the slopes to the water, the auditorium - the waterway and flood-basin, the arena; with the southern slopes reflected in the basin, the terraced stage and setting of monumental Government structures sharply defined rising tier on tier to the culminating highest internal hill, Capital Hill; and with Mugga Mugga, Red Hill and the blue distant mountain ranges forming the back scene of the theatrical whole..."

Dominating Griffin's plan was a central artificial lake and a 'parliamentary triangle' in which the most important national buildings were to be placed. The surrounding

residential areas had a geometric street pattern, circular and radial in shape, all fitting well into the general topography.

1913

On 12 March, Canberra was formally named at the laying of a foundation stone on Capital Hill. Griffin arrived in October as Federal Director of Design and Construction - development of the city was ready to begin.

1914 - 1918

World War I, changes of government and lack of money slowed progress of the city but several major works were undertaken. In 1914 the railway was extended from Queanbeyan to the south-east corner of Canberra, a power station was built at Kingston, brick-works were opened at Yarralumla and in 1915 Cotter Dam was completed.

1920

Walter Burley Griffin left Canberra with the framework of the plan established on the ground, but disappointed at the lack of progress and frustrated by repeated efforts to change his city plan.

1921 - 1930

Under the guidance of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee construction progressed slowly. Road and sewerage layouts continued, tree planting was carried out, Parliament House constructed. Shops were built at Civic, Manuka and Kingston; offices, hostels and houses completed for 1100 public servants.

1930 - 1956

The years of the Depression, World War II and post-war shortages caused a lengthy period of stagnation in development, and only a small number of national projects were brought to fruition, including the Australian War Memorial (1941) and the Australian-American Memorial (1954).

Today's Canberra

1957

The Federal Government under Robert Menzies established the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) to create a capital city of which all Australians would be proud.

The Commission had a four-fold task: to complete the establishment of Canberra as seat of government; to develop it fully as the administrative centre; to create the buildings, avenues, lakes, parks and other features appropriate to Australia's national capital and to design living areas with high standard of amenities and attractive surroundings.

In its first twenty years, NCDC was responsible for a number of major projects. Russell Offices for the Department of Defence were built flanking the Australian American Memorial at the end of Kings Avenue. Kings Avenue Bridge (1962) and Commonwealth Avenue Bridge (1963) provided dignified crossings which allowed Lake Burley Griffin to be formed in 1963. Anzac Parade was developed in 1965 to commemorate the jubilee of the Gallipoli campaign, the Royal Australian Mint (1965), the National Library (1968), the National Botanic Gardens, the Carillon and Captain Cook Memorial Jet (1970). Between 1961 and 1965 new office blocks, retail stores, banks, theatres and law courts filled in most of the empty areas around Civic Centre.

Canberra was growing so rapidly because of the transfer of Public Service departments in the 1960s that new residential areas had to be developed, either by increasing the density of the existing city - areas and allowing a sprawl of suburbs to take place as in other Australian cities; or by planning new towns (satellite cities) adjacent to North and South Canberra.

1962

The first new town, Woden was begun 12 km south of Civic Centre and an adjoining valley, Weston Creek was later added to accommodate more than 60 000 people. Woden-Weston Creek today has its own town centre, a major employment area with around 8000 people currently engaged in government administration, retail and service trades activities.

1973

Tuggeranong, the third new town, was commenced south of Woden-Weston Creek in a series of valleys, ridges and hills intersected by the Murrumbidgee River. Rugged mountain ranges often snow-capped in winter, provide a dramatic backdrop to Tuggeranong, which will eventually have a population of around 100 000.

1975

Gungahlin, the fourth new town, north of Canberra City, was begun. So far only the Mitchell Industrial Estate has been developed, but eventually Gungahlin's population could grow to 85 000.

The four satellites are being built with many of the characteristics of independent cities with their own commercial employment and retail centres, each having the potential to develop its individual character. All are linked by a comprehensive

transportation system including roads, cycleways and an intertown public transport network and each accommodates some of the national capital functions of Canberra.

Capital City Functions

The most important functions of the national capital are associated with government. Australia now has a striking new Parliament House, undoubtedly one of the world's most impressive buildings.

It was opened by the Queen in May 1988 and superseded the temporary House (opened in 1927) which was simply too small to comfortably accommodate the Members, Senators and their staffs along with the press corps and administrative personnel.

The design for the new building by American firm Mitchell Giurgola in partnership with Australian-born architect Richard Thorp was selected in 1980 from 329 entrants in a world-wide competition.

Situated on Capital Hill, Canberra's focal point, the new building has been designed not to impose over the landscape but to merge into the profile of the hill itself.

The circular form of Capital Hill is suggested in two planes-along the majestic curved walls and over the gentle rise of the central roof, which is covered in lawn, recalling the original hilltop.

The flag mast is the pinnacle of the building, standing 81 metres above the roof and flies a huge Australian flag, about the size of a double-decker bus.

Government offices are dotted around the lake, in the city, Belconnen, Woden and Tuggeranong.

The Chief Justice and six other Justices dispense the law within the eye-catching High Court building.

More than sixty countries have established diplomatic missions in Canberra. Most are within close range of the parliamentary triangle in choice residential areas. Many of these chancelleries and residences are constructed in the architecture of their homeland and are a distinctive feature of Canberra.

A number of national institutions have been established in the capital - the National Library, the National Gallery, the National University, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, the Academy of Science and the National Science and Technology Centre to name but a few.

National organisations that require frequent contact with politicians and administrators have established their headquarters in Canberra. In one small area of Barton are the national headquarters of the three major political parties, the Institution of Engineers, the Chamber of Manufactures, the National Farmers' Federation and the National Press Club.

Canberra is the natural location for a number of national memorials. The Australian War Memorial stands majestically at the foot of Mount Ainslie overlooking a wide avenue of Anzac Parade. The Australian-American Memorial in the heart of the defence complex at Russell Hill commemorates the United States' contribution towards Australia's defence in World War II. The Captain Cook Memorial near Regatta Point marks the bicentenary of the discovery of Australia's east coast.

Eighty years ago Canberra did not exist. Today it is a beautiful city, befitting the capital of a young and prosperous Australia. The site of the city has been enhanced by the planting of more than twelve million trees, by the creation of its attractive lakes, by fine buildings and careful planning.

It is, as Walter Burley Griffin predicted, 'unlike any other city in the world'.