

Theme: Tocal's Aboriginal Heritage

Note: Tocal's thematic history has been prepared as part of the assessment of the site's heritage significance in the 2012 (draft) conservation management plan.

Australian heritage theme: 2. Peopling Australia

NSW heritage theme: Aboriginal cultures and interaction with other cultures

There were several Aboriginal nations in the Hunter Valley at the time of European arrival. The Awabakal people lived on the southern side of the Hunter River while the Wonnarua lived to the north west and the Worimi to the north east. The Paterson River probably formed the dividing line between the territories of the Wonnarua and Worimi people.

The Gringai clan of the Wonnarua Aboriginal people are thought to be the traditional owners of the land on which Tocal Homestead, campus and farm now stand, although this is not known with complete certainty. The name 'Tocal' is an Aboriginal word meaning 'plenty' or 'bountiful', reflecting the abundance of food and materials provided by Tocal's diverse landscapes that include rainforest, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands (Archer and Walsh, 2005). These landscapes are clearly evident today despite modification by European settlement and agriculture.

The stretch of the Paterson River that forms the eastern boundary of Tocal was called 'Yimmang' by the Wonnarua (Lang, 1837). The large lagoon immediately to the south west of Tocal Homestead was called 'Tyeli' (Knapp, 1834), and the creek that flows through Tocal, now known as Webbers Creek, was called 'Pumby Brook' (Dangar, 1828).

There were four phases of European/Indigenous contact on the frontier in the Paterson River Valley, and each subsequent phase had an increased impact on Aboriginal life and culture. The first phase involved minimal contact as Europeans sought to explore the Hunter Valley, a notable example of which is the 1801 survey of the Paterson River by Ensign Barrallier (Grimes, 1801; Macqueen, 1993).

In the second phase, beginning in 1804, gangs of convict timber-cutters from the penal settlement at Newcastle were the principal 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 near Tocal. This phase of contact had little impact on Aboriginal sources of food and materials but would have impacted on Aboriginal social fabric through inter-racial sexual relations, introduction of European diseases, and indiscriminate shootings.

The third phase, beginning in 1812, involved settlement of a few Europeans on the river near Tocal (Hunter, 1997). Although these farmers held their land at Governor Macquarie's 'pleasure', their holdings constituted small-scale, early European alienation of land in the area.

The fourth phase involved large-scale alienation of land in the Paterson Valley from 1822 as 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 has been granted to European immigrants. This scale of settlement drastically reduced the hunting areas of the Wonnarua and Worimi, restricted their supply of game and materials, and further exposed them to European diseases against which they had little or no immunity (NSW Legislative Council, 1846).

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 where Tocal is located.

Throughout the phases of Indigenous/European contact there were varying degrees of conflict and accommodation, although conflict in the Lower Hunter was sporadic rather than sustained. The intercultural exchanges were diverse, fluid and ambivalent—some involved violence but there was also cooperation, companionship and sharing of knowledge (Walsh, 2007).

Tocal's convicts (see convict theme) were frequently in contact with the Gringai people, as the hunting and living areas of the Gringai were the daily workplaces of the convicts. Convict shepherds working remotely from Tocal Homestead had unsupervised contact which presented dangers and opportunities for both parties (Walsh 2007).

Tocal's Aboriginal heritage consists of stone grinding grooves, scarred trees, Aboriginal place names, a glass shard used for cutting, and a ceremonial waddy found in one of the underground silos. One set of grooves on the banks of Webbers Creek are now under water at high tide, indicating a marked rise in water levels since their establishment and use.

All the principal elements of the pre-European landscape, such as wetlands, rainforest, woodlands, grasslands and paperbark forest, are still in evidence at Tocal today, albeit in a form significantly modified by European settlement and land use.

Chronology:

Unknown	Aboriginal people have inhabited the east coast for at least 17,000 years and probably earlier (Attenbrow, 2010);
1804	convict timber cutters began operating along the Paterson River;
1812	small-scale European settlement began near Tocal;
1822	large-scale European settlement of the Paterson district began;
1822	European occupation of Tocal began.

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