



Nurungi

Remembered

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE CONCORD HERITAGE SOCIETY

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MEETINGS

General Meetings

2nd Wednesday of month
at 7:30 pm in the
Concord Citizens' Centre
9 Wellbank Street, Concord

Executive Meetings

4th Wednesday of month
at 7:45 pm in the
Concord Citizens' Centre

Walker Estates Committee

1st Wednesday of month
Concord Citizens' Centre
Graham Packett, 9743-3007

Other Committees

As arranged
Watch the newsletter

Museum

Fred Stansfield, 9743-1866

Archives/Local History

Kate Skillman, 9706-7479

Heritage

Bob Jones, 8765-9347

Oral/Family History

Lola Sharp, 8753-0659

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**CONCORD
HERITAGE MUSEUM**
5 Wellbank Street

Open 2:00 - 4:00 pm
Wednesday & Saturday

No. 103

October 2004

The Parramatta River Murders

The Other Walker of Concord

On June 18, 1872, in Darlinghurst Gaol, two men were hanged for murder. This marked the end of their flourishing business, where they waylaid newly-arrived immigrants, lured them to remote reaches of the Parramatta River, killed them and robbed them of all their possessions.

The principal partner in one of Sydney's more gruesome murder cases which became one of the town's most talked-about mysteries was an ambitious gentleman by the name of George Robert Nichols, a robust, fine looking, Sydney born son of a well known and respected citizen. His grandfather was believed to have been Isaac Nichols, Sydney's first Post Master, while his father was a Cabinet Member in one of the earliest parliaments.

Nichols had travelled in Europe, was a good linguist, was married to a respectable, neighbourly woman, had two children and had worked as a clerk for the Sydney Meat Preserving Works. It was not generally known that he had served 18 months in Darlinghurst Gaol on two charges of larceny and forgery.

While in prison he had met and established a dubious relationship with another prisoner, Alfred Lister, a handsome, weak willed young man who, at just 20 years of age, was 16 years younger than Nichols. He had been born in England into a comfortable middle class family, was well educated but had developed "habits of dissipation and extravagance" and embezzled some funds before fleeing to Sydney.

His stretch in Darlinghurst had resulted from a little job of forgery and obtaining goods under false pretences. Released within two days of Nichols he obediently contacted the older man, who had got a job for him in the Meat Preserving Works.

Once out of gaol, Nichols gave all appearances of being a reformed man but, in February 1872, he conceived a plan he regarded as a better earner than pen pushing – taking the personal effects and little fortunes of newly arrived immigrants. The business was to operate on a large scale, with small profit margins compensated by a heavy turnover.

The method was simple. He would advertise in the name of a fictitious grazier named Norton for a book-keeper for a property vaguely described as "up country". When a suitable applicant was found – one who would not be missed – Nichols would pose as the mythical Norton's agent and take the immigrant to his new home somewhere up the Parramatta River. Then he would kill him.

The first advertisement appeared on March 4 and from the many replies, Nichols selected John Bridger, a former naval rating unpopular with his former sailors and with no family attachments.

On March 7 Nichols threw in his job at the Meat Works and convinced Lister to do the same. That afternoon, Lister hired a dinghy from Buckley's Boatshed on the upper reaches of the harbour towards the Parramatta River and rowed it to what was known as Grafton Wharf (now Darling Harbour). There, Nichols was waiting with Bridger whose sea chest of possessions was lodged at the Royal Standard Hotel to be picked up the next day.

Nichols had told Bridger that the Norton homestead was on the banks of the river. Any Sydney resident would have been suspicious since there were no stations so near Sydney, but being a new-chum, Bridger asked no questions. He and Lister hauled their way up river while Nichols handled the tiller but the weight of the two rowers forced the bow in the water and made the going heavy. Nichols suggested they put into shore and get a heavy stone to weigh down the stern.



Bulletin Board

13th October: To be advised

10th November: To be advised

8th December: Our Annual Christmas Barbecue at Rhodes Rotary Park (full details later)

When darkness fell and they had not arrived at the non-existent homestead, they pulled inshore up from Ryde and slept in the boat. Lister, who until this point had claimed he knew nothing of his colleague's plans, later said he was awakened at dawn by the report of a pistol and opened his eyes to see Nichols with a revolver in his hand and Bridger slumped in the bottom of the boat.

Nichols ordered Lister to tie a rope around the stone while he removed £6 14s (about \$13.40) from the dead man's pockets. He then tied the free end of the rope about the corpse's feet and heaved the heavy stone overboard and the body with it.

The trembling Lister was abused by Nichols for his cowardice and was gruffly ordered to row down towards Ryde where they went ashore for breakfast. There, Nichols revealed his scheme, saying that if Lister came in, he would make enough money "to return home respectable"; if he wouldn't he had "better look out". Lister agreed to assist in further murders.

Back in Sydney, Nichols hired a room in a house in Holt Street, Surry Hills, where both men took Bridger's sea chest from the Royal Standard. It contained mostly clothing, which Nichols shared out between them, as he did the £6 14s. It also contained a length of rope known to sailors as "thief yarn" and a weapon known as a "life preserver", both of which Nichols retained.

Nichols then selected his second victim, a plump, effeminate young English arrival called William Percy Walker. On March 13, Lister hired the same boat and brought it to the wharf where the steamer left for Parramatta. Walker's box of possessions was carried up to Blow's Hotel at the harbour end of King Street, to be picked up later, and the three men piled into the dinghy to head up river; this time by sail as the wind was favourable.

The wind died down when they entered the narrower part of the river and they began to row into the gloom of the evening, far beyond all human aid, into an unfrequented part of the harbour's reaches.

Again Nichols suggested going ashore for a heavy stone to balance the stern, again they were overtaken by darkness and as before, settled down to sleep in the boat.

Walker went to sleep suspecting

nothing. Lister, who maintained he took no active part in the actual murder, said he lay down in the boat pretending to sleep until a shot rang out and then saw Nichols battering Walker's head in with their first victim's "life preserver". He lay still, he said, too frightened to move while Nichols fastened the stone to the corpse with the thief yarn and threw the body overboard.

Meanwhile, the body of John Bridger had been found floating off Kissing Point up the river from the Gladesville Asylum, so badly swollen and disfigured that identification was impossible.

Walker's body was found a week later in Five Dock Bay in the same process of decomposition, but the clothes and a distinctive gold filling in one of the front teeth helped the son of the dandy's former landlady identify him. He also picked out George Nichols from a small selection of police illustrations as the man who had escorted Walker to the river for their journey up river.

Nichols was arrested trying to sell some of Walker's books, including a copy of "*The Christian Year*", a selection of sacred poems, while he was wearing clothing marked with the initials WPW. Lister was arrested outside a pawnshop in Haymarket with a receipt for Walker's gold watch, also bearing his initials.

The two boxes of the murdered men were found in the room in Holt Street. Among Walker's papers was a letter in Nichol's handwriting purporting to be signed by AT Norton, mentioning the advertisement of March 4, confirming Walker's appointment as book-keeper and giving Nichols authority to arrange for Walker's transportation.

At the inquests on March 25 and 28, two young immigrants swore they had also been in touch with Nichols about the same advertisement and had arranged appointments to meet him.

Nichols and Lister were charged with the wilful murder of Walker and committed for trial on May 20. The following day, the jury retired at 6.10 pm and 25 minutes later came back with their verdict of guilty. Three women fainted while Nichols slumped into an unconscious heap in the dock to be revived by Police officers. Lister turned white as death and shuddered violently, but the judge was unmoved and both men were sentenced to hang on June 18, 1872.

This accounts excerpted from "An Australian Murder Almanac - 150 years of chilling crime", published by Nationwide News, Suite 9A, 9th Floor, Canberra House, Cnr Marcus Clarke & Alinga Streets, Canberra. The story is an actual account of a real life crime committed during the early days of the New South Wales colony.

SOURCE: www.rodstone.com.au/History/Historical_Crime/historical_crime.htm

The Canal

By Richard Cunningham

Eastern Suburbs kids had their Bondi, the Northerners Manly, but for those of us growing up around Canada Bay in the 1950's the "ocean" was the Parramatta River. The beach? Well, you could try the Miller Street baths at Russell Lea, or the old fenced swimming area at the end of Burwood Road, Concord East.

Or, a place you could both swim AND make money: The Canal.

The Canal was the stormwater drain running through Concord's Massey Park Golf Course, into Exile Bay. I went back to have a look at it the other day. It's much cleaner now, thanks to rubbish nets and booms. But back in those days it was a rather murky affair, the bottom deep in oily ooze, rubbish, gasping, popeyed fish and the odd dead animal.

Nobody knew about dioxin or lead or PCG's or E-Coli counts then. Heck, I don't think the word "pollution" was even in common use. The Canal, to us kids, was just a tidal offshoot of the river, where we'd splash and romp and dive for balls lobbed in by hapless golfers aiming for the 5th green.

About half a dozen of us would work The Canal any Saturday afternoon, if the tide was right. Each had a strictly defined and jealously guarded sector, between Ian Parade and the old humpbacked wooden bridge that golfers used to cross the canal.

The moment a ball splashed down so would we, coming up spitting gutter soup and brightly declaring, "Here's yer ball, Mister!"

It wasn't a free public service. We expected a tip, and most golfers were happy to oblige. Sixpence of a shilling was about right, threepence a bit stingy, and two shillings . . . two shillings! You could practically retire on two shillings.

Lady golfers, I'm sorry to report, were routinely mean . . . or naive. Most didn't understand tipping at all, and would say, "Why, thank you young man", and reach, not for their purse, but for the 3-iron.

We'd glare at them over the parapet of the canal wall, and WILL the ball to go in the drink again. And if it did, well, often we simply just couldn't seem to find it.

On a good day an enterprising boy could make four shillings. Maybe a little more from ladies' balls sold to the golf course pro shop. Plenty for a Sunday matinee at the Concord Ritz or the Burwood Palatial, complete

with ice cream, a packet of crisps and a Choo-Choo Bar.

I remember once coming home to mum with perhaps eight shillings. "That's too much", she said. "Give some to your brother." The injustice!

When we weren't swimming in The Canal we went sailing in it. We made our own boats. All you needed as a sheet of corrugated roofing steel, a wooden fruit box, a couple of four-gallon drums, plus some nails and tar to plug the leaks.

You hammered the steel flat, nailed it around an end from the box to make the stern, and to a vertical wooden slat to make the bow. Attach the drums either side, like outriggers, and slap on the tar.

We'd paddle these rusty tin canoes up and down the canal, and the more daring kids would even take them out onto Exile Bay. It's a miracle no one drowned.

Or, you could abandon ship and explore in the other direction – up the stormwater drains that fed the canal.

A little kid could walk . . . or scramble on all fours . . . for what seemed like miles, up the network of underground

pipes, often surprising passers-by as we slid, rat-like, out of street drains or popped back down again.

The main route followed the chain of parks: Greenlees, Jessie Stewart Reserve, Rothwell, Queen Elizabeth and Goddard.

It occurred to me while writing this (a notion now confirmed by a visit to the library) that this must have been the course of the creek or river that originally drained Concord's Longbottom Farm and Stockade, a large area of swampy government land between Parramatta Road and the river.

In 1840 it became home to dozens of French Canadian convicts, who would be remembered in the naming of Exile Bay, France Bay and, of course, Canada Bay.

One map from 1890 even gives this rivulet a name – Saltwater Creek.

Drainage ditch or historic river remnant, The Canal was a kid's delight. Our swimming hole, our Seven Seas, our underground hideout, our dependable source of pocket money.

Those Bondi boys never knew what they were missing . . .

(The Canal was the winning story in last year's Seniors Week competition conducted by Canada Bay Council. We hope to bring you more of the stories in coming month.)

Memories

How about putting your memories down on paper - or contact our Oral History Chairperson - Lola Sharp - and talk to her about taping your story.

We don't really need a life history from you - although we won't dismiss it entirely. What we want are your memories - early childhood, games you played, school days, working days, family days, picnics, leisure activities, shopping, family outings - all those almost forgotten fun and interesting times that are now nothing but memories.

We need to preserve these for future generations. In this technological age the way we lived in the past is a mystery to most young people, but that doesn't mean they're not interested in learning about.

How about it? Let's hear from you!

Good Old Days

Harsh Taxes and Woeful Taxpayers

(by Eric F)

The taxpayer of today scowls over the printed demands of the relentless tax gatherer, and mutters something or other about "*the good old days*". No doubt our grandparents did the same thing, and their grandparents before them, especially those ancestors of ours who paid taxes in "*the good old days*" of the eighteenth century when the odious tax gatherers of England personally inspected the rooms of every house to ascertain the number of hearthstones, there being a tax levied on every fireplace in a house.

This obnoxious visit made the tax doubly odious until finally a revolting nation caused it to be abolished as a thing of intolerance.

But soon after this storm had blown over, a tax of two shillings was levied on every inhabited dwelling, and a house having 10 windows must pay an additional four shillings; while from those houses having 30 or more windows the State revenue gained 20 shillings. As the number of the windows of a house can be counted from the exterior of a dwelling the tax gatherer's annual visit was not so offen-

sive as in the days when he visited every fireplace.

The chief objection to this taxing of windows was its inequality. A house in a country town secured at a low rental might have more windows than a house in London for which a higher rent was paid. The inhabitant of the country home was likely to be a much poorer tenant than that of the latter, and yet he was forced to contribute more to the support of the State.

In those days the tenant of a house paid the tax. A Digger once asked in an English village why the windows of many of the old houses were so small. His English guide explained that in "*the good old days*" windows were also taxed according to their size, the larger the window the higher the tax.

The poor man and the miser were easily traced by their house windows, while the rich man who wished to make an outward show of his wealth told the story of his prosperity by looking out on the world through broad windowpanes.

It was natural that burdened taxpayers should ever be seeking a loophole to evade the oppressive demands of the gatherer of taxes.

An instance of this is responsible for

the present-day size of our house brick, which measures 9 x 4½ x 3 inches.

In the 18th century house bricks were taxed by quantity. In those days it was a much smaller article than the brick of today, but on its being taxed so much per thousand its dimensions were so enormously enlarged that the builder used hundreds instead of thousands of bricks in the erection of a moderate-sized house.

Finally a compromise was made by the outraged tax gatherers and the suffering taxpayer, when the brick was reduced to its present-day size.

Probably very few Australians are aware that even to this day certain olden-time taxes are still in force in England.

The employer of the coachman who adorns his livery with a cockade must pay an annual tax for this little piece of showiness, and he who would blazon a coat of arms on his carriage or motor car must also pay for this privilege.

And now as we tackle our taxation papers may we find a light solace in the fact that we live in the 20th and not the 19th century.

(This article was printed in an old newspaper dated 11th February, 1922)

Important Notice regarding Walker Estates Committee Meetings

If you attend these meetings please note that date and venue have been changed.

The Concord Bowling Club have been very good to us, staying open beyond their normal closing time but, in fairness to them, we have to be out by 9:00 p.m.

At the moment there are many important things to be discussed and this early finish time has left some things unfinished.

Also, with more people attending this meeting the board room at the Club was becoming a little crowded.

As a result we will now be meeting on the 1st Wednesday of the month in the Concord Senior Citizens' Centre at 7:30 p.m.

Please change your calendar now.

We also extend sincere thanks to the Concord Bowling Club for their assistance.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, 6th October

Why do We Say That?

TILT AT WINDMILLS: In Don Quixote, that classic of western literature, self-appointed knight errant Don Quixote mistakes an array of windmills for giants he must slay.

He charges the first windmill but his lance gets entangled and he is spun around and crashed to the ground.

Writer Miguel de Cervantes intended the adventures of his elderly knight to be a satire on chivalry, prevalent when he wrote the book in 1605.

The allusion to windmills has stayed with us as meaning an attack on imaginary or impractical foes.

CHEW THE FAT: This is what you do when you talk for a long time, particularly when you're grumbling about something.

Chew the fat is exactly what sailors did in the days when meat was preserved by salting - storing it in barrels of brine. Salted beef was one of the few staples that could last a long voyage. But salt curing made beef very tough and sailors had to chew endlessly before swallowing it.

HIS NAME IS MUD: John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated American President Abraham Lincoln in 1865, called at the home of Dr. Samuel Mudd while making his getaway.

Next day Dr. Mudd was arrested and found guilty of conspiring to murder

the President. He was sentenced to life imprisonment but it was later established Dr. Mudd knew nothing of Booth's crime and he was pardoned.

But that could not prevent usage of the expression "His name is mud" - referring to anyone considered disreputable or held in contempt.

PUT A SOCK IN IT: It's possible it means just what it says - to put a sock in someone's mouth to stop them talking.

But another explanation says it dates back to the days of wind-up gramophones. The sound came out of a horn and there was no volume control, so articles of clothing were used to stuff into the horn to regulate the sound.

From the Secretary's Desk

Annual Subscriptions: There are still a small number who had not paid their annual subscription. If you do not wish to re-join would you please let us know.

Group Visits to Yaralla: Please don't assume that we'll know you will turn up to help. We need to know, ahead of time, that we will have sufficient helpers.

Australian Garden History Tour: This October 17 visit will need 8 grounds guides and many, many helpers for the Devonshire teas.

This group will only be with us for about 2 hours so everything will have to be ready before they arrive at 9:30. Devonshire Teas helpers will be needed to be on hand no later than 8:00 a.m. so that the scones can all be prepared and ready.

If you are helping on this day - please let the Trish Harrington or Trish Skehan know NOW! Their phone numbers are on the front page. It's important.

Yaralla Open Day - 7th November: We also need all our helpers and guides on this day. Please let either of the Trishes know if you will be there.

Prospective Tour Guide: If you have indicated you wish to learn to be a tour guide for the Yaralla grounds the two dates above would be a good way to start. Come along and join one of our regulars and see how easy it is. We'll supply you with all the written information you will need.

Dates for your Diary . . .

- ☛ Wed. 22nd September - Executive Meeting.
- ☛ Wed. 6th October - Walker Estates Committee Meeting at Concord Senior Citizens Centre (Note change of date and venue)
- ☛ Wed. 13th October - General Meeting - speaker to be advised
- ☛ Sun. 17th October - Yaralla Tour - Australian Garden History Group
- ☛ Wed. 27th October - Executive Meeting
- ☛ Wed. 3rd November - Walker Estates Committee Meeting
- ☛ Sun. 7th November - Our special Open Day at Yaralla
- ☛ Wed. 10th November - General Meeting - speaker to be advised
- ☛ Wed. 24th November - Executive Meeting
- ☛ Wed. 8th December - Annual Christmas Barbecue