

Finding Bennelong? Surveying Solves a 200-Year-Old Mystery

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ABSTRACT

When the English First Fleet arrived in Sydney in January 1788, Woollarawarre Bennelong was about 25 years old. He went on to become a crucial informant and played a very important role in communications between the indigenous population and the early European settlers. In a report to City of Ryde Council's Heritage Advisory Committee in 2010, regarding the search for Bennelong's grave, Dr Peter Mitchell requested that Council's surveyors look at his findings and evidence to verify his conclusion as to where he placed the grave site. This paper outlines the surveyor's response. The starting point was a photograph taken around 1900. Dissection of information shown in this photograph led to identifying sites and markers. This was followed by intersecting sight lines and calculation of distances and ratios, finding the location in the present day and validation from circumstantial evidence and reasonable deduction using current photo images. What is the likely order of error? Sydney newspaper articles followed, with public awareness and interest being raised and some public verification eventuating.

KEYWORDS: *Bennelong, grave site, mystery, surveying.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Woollarawarre Bennelong was about 25 years old when the English First Fleet arrived in January 1788. Bennelong's life then changed forever. Phillip's instructions from King George III included "endeavour by every means possible to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections". Phillip tried, but by November 1789 he was in such despair over ever achieving native confidence by "fair means" that he ordered "two men should be taken by force". At the time of his capture, Bennelong was wiry and muscular, standing 170 cm tall (Figure 1). His skin was marked by smallpox (from which he had obviously recovered) and First Fleet officers described Bennelong as a merry fellow with a mischievous twinkle in his large dark eyes.

Bennelong soon became a valuable informant and go-between, willingly providing information about Aboriginal clans, customs and language. He learned to speak English and resided at Government House. In December 1792, Bennelong took the bold step of accompanying Governor Phillip on the long voyage back to England. Bennelong returned to Sydney Cove in September 1795, with Governor Hunter, and resumed an influential position among his people and the new settlers. Bennelong died on 3 January 1813 and was buried on the land of his friend James Squire, in an orchard at Kissing Point (now Putney) in Ryde.

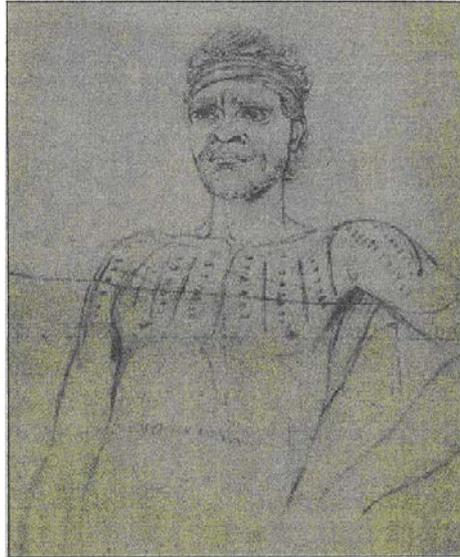


Figure 1: Drawn from another time... a sketch of Bennelong by William Westall, 1802.

2 SEARCHING FOR BENNELONG'S GRAVE SITE: MITCHELL'S REPORT

In 2010, the City of Ryde Council's Heritage Advisory Committee instigated a report in relation to Bennelong's grave site. Historian Dr Peter Mitchell was asked to determine where the grave site was located. He followed a paper trail, which pointed the way. In the absence of any maps that showed the grave site, there were two key pieces of information.

The first was a letter (reproduced below) written by Charles Cobham Watson to the Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and published on 8 July 1927. Watson was a great grandson of James Squire.

.....oOo.....

TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD

Sir, -- I was very much interested in Mr. Weirter's account of the aborigine Bennelong, which appeared in last Saturday's "Herald". I am the owner of a portion of the late Mr. Squire's old brewery property at Kissing Point, and in that property there is a black-fellow's grave. A very old resident of Kissing Point told me that the man had worked at the brewery, and had died and was buried there. Seeing that history tells us that Bennelong was buried at Kissing Point in Squire's grounds, and this grave being the only one known on the property, it seems to me that there can be no doubt that the grave is that of Bennelong.

I am, etc.,

C.C. Watson

Rydedale-road

West Ryde.

July 7

The second key piece of information was a small photograph, taken around 1900, that allegedly shows the grave (Figure 2). The Ryde Library catalogue entry for this photograph states that it is annotated on the back in pencil with the wording “Photographed about 1900. Remains of J. Squire’s orchard at Kissing Point, then in possession of Mr C.C. Watson and family...” Figure 3 illustrates the present day scene photographed from approximately the same spot.

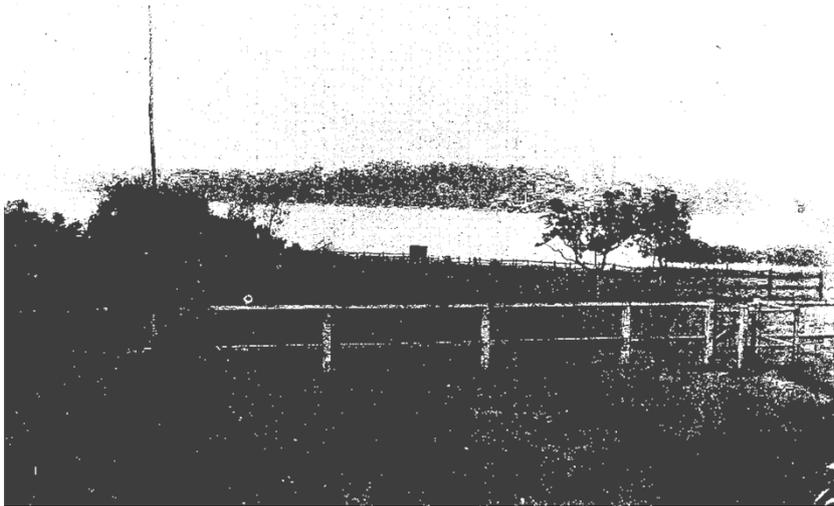


Figure 2: Photograph taken around 1900 and allegedly showing the grave site in the foreground.



Figure 3: Photograph taken in 2012 and showing the present day scene from approximately the same spot.

Dr. Mitchell concluded that the grave site was under a former tennis court, which is now the southern end of Hordern Avenue near to its junction with Watson Street (Figures 4 & 5). He further recommended that Council ask their survey team to verify the boundaries described in his report and to take steps to have the land identified as a local heritage item, with consideration for State Heritage listing (Mitchell, 2010).

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Figure 4: The advertising banner for the Cleves Estate subdivision of 1922 (DP 11471 – Adelbert Schleicher), showing Watson Street before the creation of Hordern Avenue.



Figure 5: Current land-use pattern showing the site of the former tennis court where Dr Mitchell concludes Bennelong is allegedly buried.

3 SURVEYOR'S REPORT TO THE RYDE HERITAGE COMMITTEE

The photograph in Dr Mitchell's report shows the "blackman's grave" circa 1900 (see Figure 2). Inspection of this photograph reveals many items of interest:

1. The grave itself.
2. Two close parallel lines of fencing.
3. Other fences running southwards towards the Parramatta River.
4. An area that appears to be a vacant paddock.
5. On the west of this area is a plantation row of low trees.
6. A built structure, at centre, in silhouette against the river.
7. A tall built structure on the opposite river bank.
8. Other built structures on the opposite shore and westwards upstream.
9. Mud flats running from the opposite shore and disclosing a bay behind.
10. The northern bank of the Parramatta River is not visible.

In dealing with the grave itself, it was enlightening to find that an enhancement of the photograph revealed some detail, i.e. what appears to be a roughly circular edging of stones with a placed timber stake. One thing that is evident is that the grounds appear to be well maintained, like a house garden. The parallel fencing clearly suggests the boundaries on either side of a road. The road is unformed and clear of any obstructions, and there appears to be little evidence of frequent traffic, i.e. it does not appear to have many nor frequent horse and cart users.

The line of road fencing closest to the camera is of a dressed timber post and rail (arris-type) construction. The type of fencing directly across the road is round and split timber post construction with probable strands of drawn wire (though not visible in the photograph). The fencing type on the street frontage of the vacant lot is three rail and mortised timber post construction. The fencing on the rear appears to be timber post and rail, but it is hard to determine if that fencing is three rail or two (Is there again a parallel row of fences indicating another road?). These different fence types tend to indicate separate ownerships of land or

separate parcels of land. Thus, the round fence post is at a lot corner. A conversation with Julie Watts, a granddaughter of the property owner after Watson, confirmed that the white painted arris fence surrounded the original homestead.

The plantation of trees is located in a row as evidenced by a visible line of tree trunks. These trees are similar in appearance and all undercut to a uniform height; note the Parramatta River is visible beneath the tree canopy. It is clear that these trees are on the brow of a rolling hill, which obscures the northern riverbank (no mangroves are visible nor can any beach be seen). This remnant row of trees can be seen in a 1930 aerial photograph but not in the 1943 aerial photograph mentioned below (see Figure 9). The built structure in the centre of the 1900 photograph has not been identified but is suggestive of a sign or billboard. Was this photograph taken as the result of a purchase of the property?

The opposite bank of the river has been identified as Rhodes and the tall built structure is a brick chimney stack, which was part of the timberyard site of McKenzie in 1906 (Figures 6 & 7). The stack was demolished in 1968 but appears in aerial photographs of 1928, 1930, 1943 and 1964.

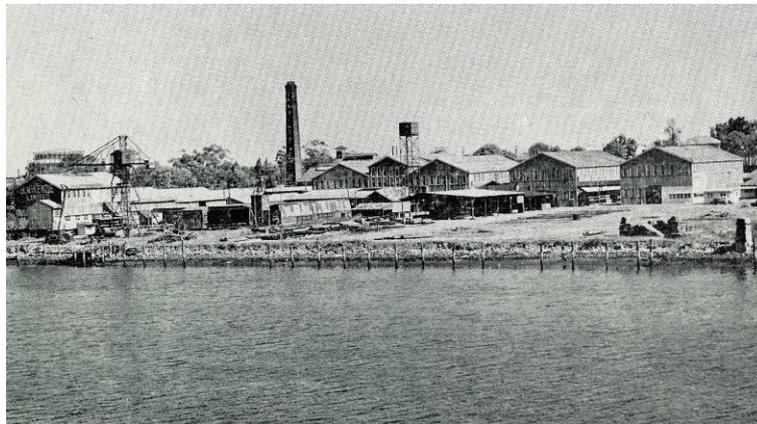


Figure 6: Undated photograph of McKenzie's timber yard at Rhodes showing brick chimney stack.



Figure 7: Looking over McKenzie's timber yard at Rhodes around 1928, showing the brick chimney stack adjacent to Concord Road.

Other built structures include the long wharf of the timberyard and scattered houses erected along the shoreline. The mud flats running from the southern shore of the Parramatta River are still visible today (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Recent photograph, taken in 2012, showing the Parramatta River mud flats at Rhodes.

The site of the chimney stack has been located on an aerial photograph of Ryde taken in 1943 and its position coordinated (Figure 9). The lot corner in Watson Street has also been re-established and coordinated from survey reference marks found (concrete blocks), which were placed for the creation of Hordern Avenue (DP 27410 in 1956).



Figure 9: Aerial photograph (taken in 1943) showing sight lines from the brick chimney stack and mud flats towards the grave site.

4 DISTANCE MEASUREMENTS WITHIN THE OLD PHOTOGRAPH

The spacing of fence posts and other known points of reference in the 1900 photograph were used to obtain distance measurements (Figure 10). Note that a sight line from the chimney stack at Rhodes through the round fence post (at the lot corner) in Watson Street passes directly adjacent to the grave site.

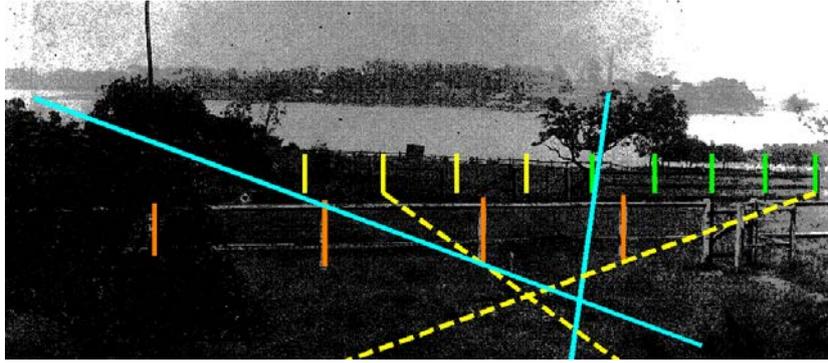


Figure 10: Diagram showing sight lines from the chimney and mud flats together with fence post positions along Watson Street.

Reconstruction of the fence post positions along the Watson Street frontage allows the site of the grave to be more accurately located. The arris fence and the mortised fence each display a regular spacing between posts, i.e. the measured dimensions between posts in the photograph show a uniform expansion or contraction. Research with a present-day heritage fencer revealed that the standard post spacing for a mortised fence was 2.4 m (8 feet) or 1.8 m (6 feet). Similar research with another heritage fencer revealed that some fence spacings were also 2.74 m (9 feet), e.g. at the Rouse Hill Heritage Centre where he had just completed some replica restoration work. Field verification by the sighting of remnant examples in Ryde supported a post spacing of about 2.6 m for the arris fencing.

Several combinations of these fence spacings were tested by drawing intersecting lines, with the overall circle of error being approximately 0.6 m. The resulting position was coordinated and is shown on an aerial photomap (Figure 11). Note that an estimation of the camera position (grey circle) falls short of the homestead.

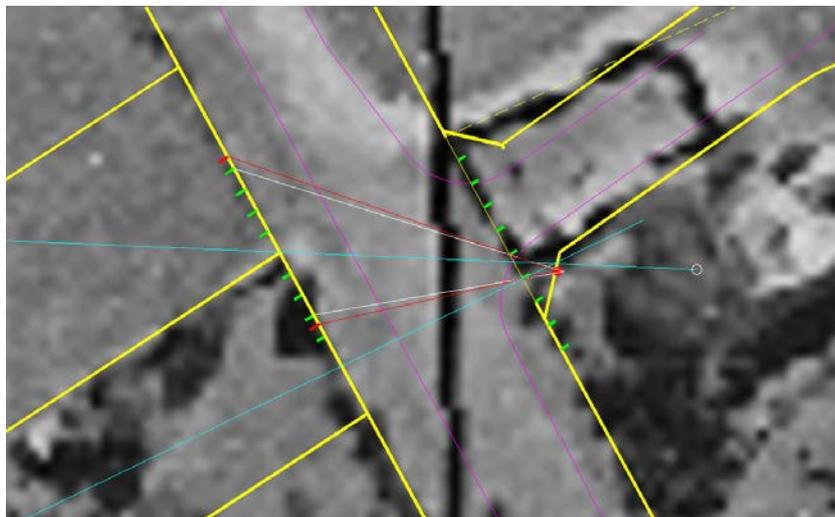


Figure 11: Diagram showing sight lines and construction lines through fence-post positions along Watson Street. The red dot indicates the final accepted position.

5 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

An underground sensing device has been used with results being inconclusive. Modern underground services that pass closest to the grave site are telecommunications and Sydney

Water. Sydney Water has a 100 mm cast iron cement lined water main, which runs along the northern side of Watson Street. This water main was constructed in 1934 up to house no. 25 (the homestead), extended in 1952 to house no. 29 (following subdivision) and again in 1957 following the subdivision and opening of Hordern Avenue. This main passes up to 4 m from the grave site. Underground telecommunication lines also run along the northern side of Watson Street but turn with the splay corner and continue into Hordern Avenue. These lie directly adjacent to the site and may have had an impact.

The City of Ryde Council has been working with the adjoining landowners, the Aboriginal Heritage Office, the Sydney Metropolitan Land Council and the NSW Heritage Office to decide what happens next (City of Ryde, 2011). The Sun Herald newspaper published several feature articles that have led to many public responses and interest (Duff, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2012). During 2013, the City of Ryde is planning a Bennelong exhibition (e.g. Smith, 2013).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Is the grave site really Bennelong's? Contemporary writings from the early 1800s leave several clues. On 3 January 1813, Bennelong died and was buried "among the orange trees in James Squire's orchard". On 12 August 1821, Nanbarr, "a black native of this colony", died at James Squire's orchard and "he lies interred in the same grave with Bennelong and his wife, in Mr. Squire's garden". In 1828, the Reverend Charles Wilton said "the garden of the late proprietor James Squire is celebrated for containing the remains of Bennelong" (Figures 12 & 13).

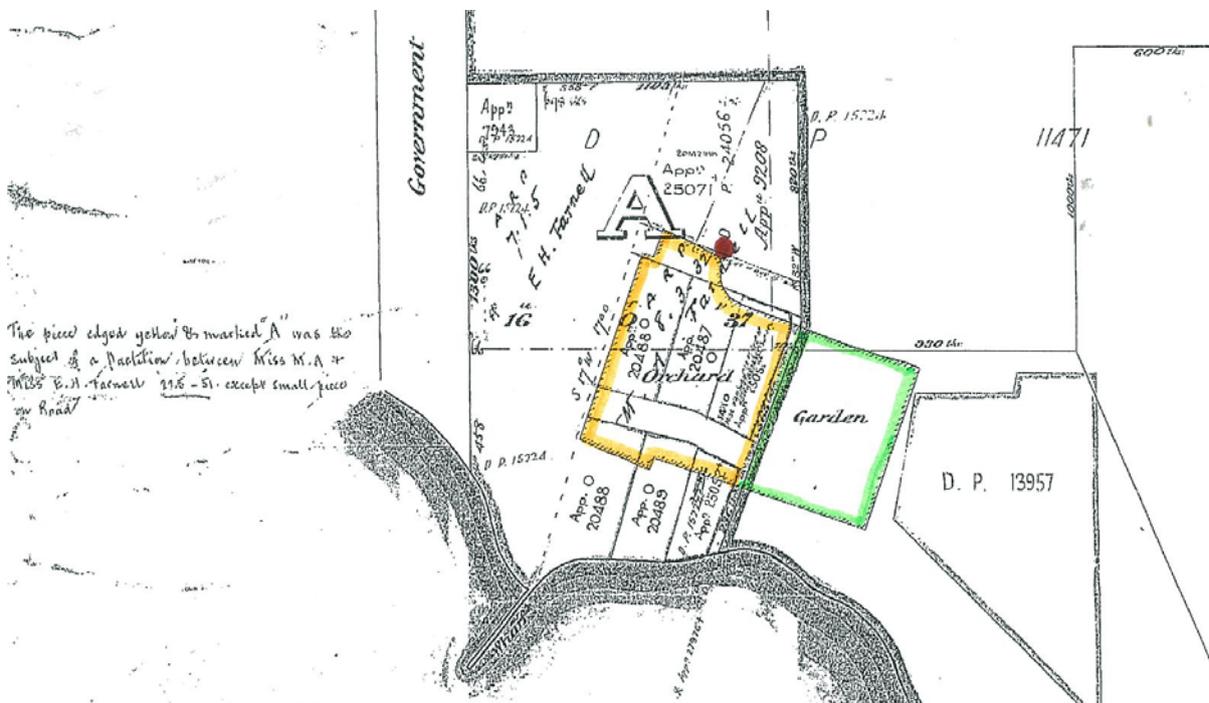


Figure 12: Part of DP 192080, from 1878, which was copied from the 1842 map shown in Figure 13. The red dot shows the grave site in relation to the orchard and garden of James Squire.

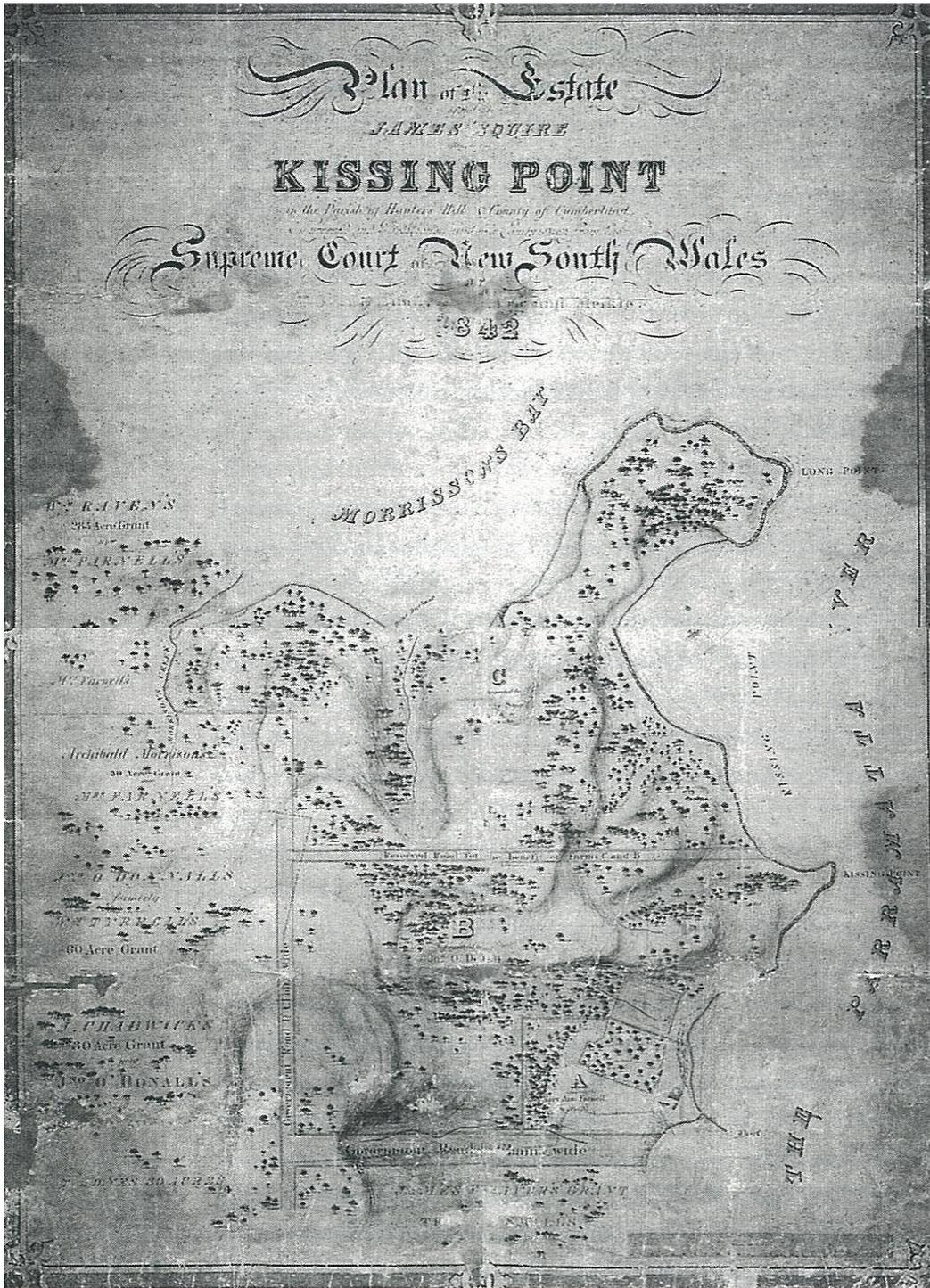


Figure 13: Supreme Court map of 1842, used to finalise the will of James Squire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must acknowledge historian Keith Smith for his valuable assistance in providing such a mass of information on the life of Bennelong and would like to add his quip upon hearing about the finding of the location of the grave site: "I have to say, it's the first time I've ever had a history book interrupted by breaking news."

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