

Surveyors and Place Naming in 19th Century New South Wales

Terry Kass

Historian and Heritage Consultant

terry@kasshistory.com.au

ABSTRACT

Place names are significant markers for wayfinding across the globe. They reference past events, significant people and significant memories. Surveyors had a key role in allocating place names in New South Wales in the 19th century. Tasked with measuring and defining portions for alienation across the colony of New South Wales, they were also responsible for collecting place names and suggesting suitable place names to the Surveyor-General. Nostalgia, personal attachment, friendship and professional flattery all contributed to names submitted to the head office in Sydney. Not every name put forward was accepted for various reasons. Yet, the personal preferences and careful tabulation of existing names fed into the final allocation of place names, which determine much of the cadastre and conceptual framework of today's place knowledge. This paper discusses this eventful period in history and highlights the contribution of surveyors to the place naming in use today.

KEYWORDS: *Surveyors, place names. history.*

1 INTRODUCTION

John Dunmore Lang penned the following complaint in the early 1820s, which sets the scene for conflicts regarding place names in the colony of New South Wales (NSW):

*“I like the native names, as Parramatta,
And Illawarra, and Woolloomooloo;
Nadowra, Woogarora, Bulkomatta,
Tomah, Toongabbie, Mittagong, Meroo;
Buckobble, Cumleroy, and Coolingatta,
The Warragumby, Bargo, Burradoo;
Cookbundoon, Carrabaiga, Wingecarribbee,
The Wollondilly, Yurumboon, Bungarribbee.
I hate your Goulburn Downs and Goulburn Plains,
And Goulburn River and the Goulburn Range,
And Mount Goulburn and Goulburn Vale! One's brains
Are turned into Goulburns! Vile scorbutic mangle
For immortality! Had I the reins
Of government for a fortnight, I would change
These Downing Street appellatives, and give
The country names that should deserve to live.”*

Places were named by various individuals, such as landowners, explorers, bureaucrats, and the general public. The choice of names reflected nostalgia, personal attachments, friendships or

professional flattery and also recorded place names of the original inhabitants, the Aborigines. Some historians have asserted that the imposition of European place names across indigenous lands was part of the process of 'taking possession'. Frankly, it was far more complicated than that.

Place names were assigned to:

- Geographical features.
- Towns and villages.
- Counties.
- Parishes.
- Localities.

Surveyors recorded place names in:

- Field books.
- Maps and plans.
- Official correspondence.
- Unofficial records such as diaries, personal publications as well as later books, articles and newspaper reports.

Government departments and agencies that were involved in place naming in the 19th century included the Postmaster General and the railways. This paper concentrates on surveyors, who were most directly involved with the naming of parishes, towns and, by implication, localities as well as streets within towns and villages. Discussing this eventful period in history, it highlights the contribution of surveyors to the place naming in use today.

2 CADASTRAL DIVISIONS

There are three levels of place naming of cadastral importance, i.e. within the legal framework that defines property ownership including boundaries, with which 19th century surveyors were most heavily involved. Cadastral divisions incorporate counties, parishes and towns or localities. The county was a major cadastral division of the colony of NSW, and today there are 141 counties in the state. Counties were officially named by bureaucrats. Most of them had been established by the 1850s with some minor additions afterwards.

Parishes are major subdivisions of counties, usually with an area of 25 square miles or in the range between 15 to 30 square miles, i.e. 65 km² or within the range of 39-78 km². There are 7,515 parishes in NSW, equating to about 50 parishes per county but of course there is a wide range (Figure 1).

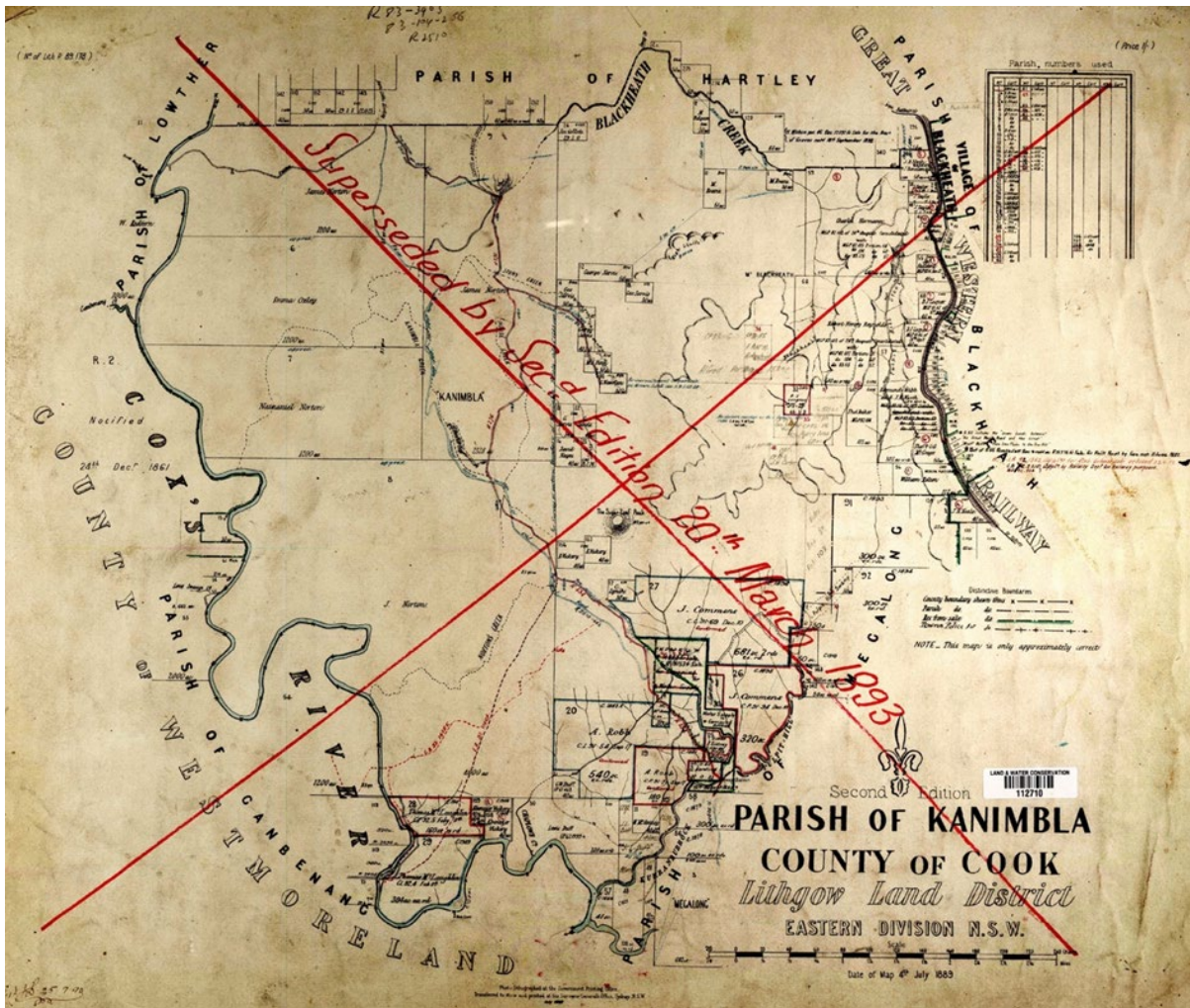


Figure 1: Parish Kanimbla, County Cook, 1889.

3 SURVEYING DIRECTIVES

Surveyor-General Sir Thomas L. Mitchell had directed that Aboriginal names should be used for geographical features and other places. Many parish names and even some later county names derived naturally from that directive. He further set his personal stamp on how those names were recorded. On 5 September 1829, he issued a circular directing how various syllables, consonants, diphthongs and vowels should be recorded to reduce the number of letters in each name in order to ensure there were no “*letters as superfluous as gum trees on the hills*” (NSW State Archives, 2025g). Additionally, this directive established the parameters for corrupting the recording of Aboriginal place names.

Regarding parishes, the 1864 Regulations for the Guidance of Licensed Surveyors noted that parishes are never proclaimed particularly during the early surveys but are proclaimed by sale of land in them or plans showing the boundaries finally adopted. “*Where euphonious Aboriginal names can be ascertained, it is desirable that they should be suggested by the surveyor for new parishes. It has been usual to call parishes within which towns are laid out by the name of the town; but this practice may be departed from in cases where localities are known by names which would prove suitable for parishes, while the towns have been called by some name foreign to the locality.*”

With their detailed knowledge, surveyors supplied sketch maps of potential boundaries and names for parishes in line with the directions. It became a general practice that as soon as portions were surveyed within a parish, whether previously given boundaries or not, that the parish was named. For instance, on 17 February 1863, Licensed Surveyor John W. Deering sent a sketch from Camp Urabedalla of the proposed Parish Nerrigundah, County Dampier to the Surveyor-General along with surveys made for portions sent on the same day. It was named after the village of Nerrigundah, in the Gulph Goldfield (NSW State Archives, 2025c).

District Surveyor Lewis Gordon submitted on 28 June 1864 “a skeleton tracing, with proposed boundaries (subject to future modification) ... [and] as well, names of 15 several parishes, some partially new and additional” in the County of Auckland (Figure 2). New parishes included Bredbendoura, Cobra, Coolangubra, Kanoonah, Kokoboreeka, Mataganah, Mokoreeka, Yuglamah and Yurrammie. Parishes where portions had already been measured included Bredbendoura, Bronte, Numbugga, Ooranook, Puen Buen and Werriberri (NSW State Archives, 2025d, 2025i).



Figure 2: New parishes County Auckland 1864 (NSW State Archives, 2025i).

This also applied for several of the older settled districts. On 27 November 1863, District Surveyor Edward Fisher asked Head Office if parishes had been formed in County Cook under his charge. Since parishes had not been established, he was asked to determine boundaries and names. As he was unfamiliar with the area, he assigned the task to Licensed Surveyor John F. Mann (Figure 3).

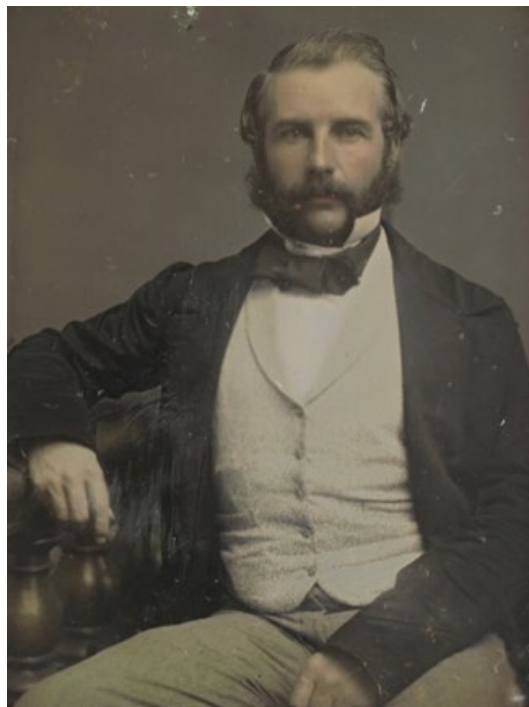


Figure 3: Licensed Surveyor John F. Mann, c. 1850s.

On 3 December 1863, Mann sent in a sketch with parish names and boundaries. Head Office did not regard the parish names of Rydal and Wallerawang as suitable since those places were not within the suggested parishes but in the adjoining parish of Lidsdale. Mann replied from Fish River Creek on 20 June 1864 that he would suggest Marangaroo and Cox as suitable alternate parish names since those streams “*take their rise in those parishes*”. Apart from Marangaroo and Cox, Mann named the parishes of Hartley, Kanimbla, Lett, Megalong and Mouin (with Mt Mouin within its boundaries) (NSW State Archives, 2025e 2025i).

Though licensed surveyors were often asked to suggest appropriate parish names, their advice was not always accepted. On 16 July 1867, Licensed Surveyor George Loder Dowe sent a tracing from ‘Camp Barraba’ proposed parish boundaries in his district with possible names for them using “*the name by which the locality is known*”. However, his sketch was returned with a copy of the county map with parish boundaries as proposed by James A.C. Willis, First Class Draftsman, that had previously been approved (NSW State Archives, 2025f). Licensed Surveyor Edmund Sanderson was informed on 2 July 1868 that his suggested parish names in County Wynyard had been altered. Ellerslie had become Nacka Nacka and Yaven Yaven had become Hillas (NSW State Archives, 2025h). When First Class Surveyor Thomas Evans suggested three parishes in County Beresford to be named Murrumbucka, Bundadara and Bullamang, only the first was accepted with the other two becoming Cosgrove and York (NSW State Archives, 2025b).

4 INSPIRATIONS FOR SOME PARISH NAMES

4.1 Nostalgia

Nostalgia informed place names for many parishes and towns in the original counties of the 19 counties. Parishes such as Castlereagh and Londonderry referred to places in Britain, whilst others such as St. John and St. Luke acknowledge Christian references. Yet even in the earliest county, the County of Cumberland around Sydney, parishes recorded Aboriginal names – Cabramatta, Maroota, Marramarra, Mulgoa, Narrabeen and Wattamolla (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Parish Cabramatta, County Cumberland, c. 1845 (NSW State Archives, 2025).

4.2 Personal Attachment

Personal place names suggested by surveyors often referred to colleagues or family. We are familiar with the way explorers and surveyors inscribed the names of governors, members of the British aristocracy and places in Britain across the NSW landscape. Frederick Goulburn was not the only official immortalised in place names. How many places can you name that include the name Macquarie, Victoria or George? We are less familiar with how surveyors inscribed the names of their family and friends across the landscape. District Surveyor William Albert Braylesford Greaves held land in the County of Gresham in the Parish Braylesford (Figure 5). The parish was named after his grandmother's maiden name. There are also two parishes named Greaves.

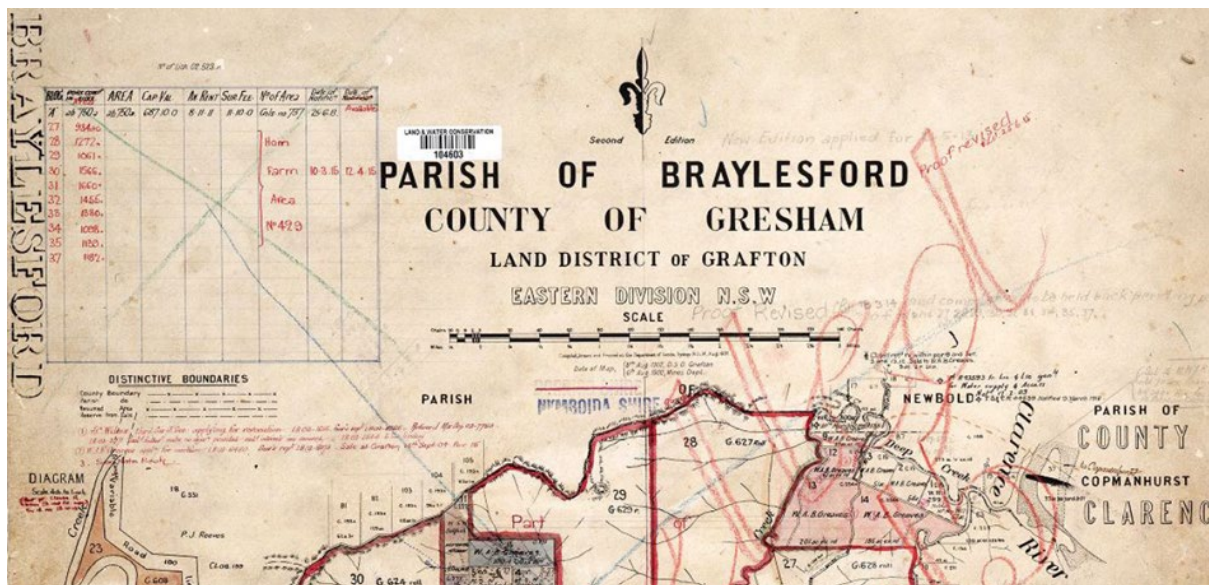


Figure 5: Parish Braylesford, County Gresham, 1903.

County Macquarie has the parishes of Ralfe named after James Ralfe, and Debenham after John Debenham, both surveyors. When Licensed Surveyor Robert Hamilton Mathews surveyed what became Portion 1 in an unnamed parish in County Benarba in May 1876, he sent in a sketch showing a proposed new parish to be called Hamilton, his mother's maiden name (NSW State Archives, 2025a).

There are several examples of how local notables such as landholders, residents, merchants and officials were immortalised in place names. The Parish Lynch in County Canbelego near Nyngan was named after Patrick Lynch, holder of Portion 1 in that parish (Figures 6 & 7). The Parish Caro, also in County Canbelego, was named after Nyngan storekeeper, Albert Caro (Figures 8 & 9). In 1890, Caro was described as a “*busy-looking, dark-complexioned, moustachioed gentleman*” (N.N., 1890).

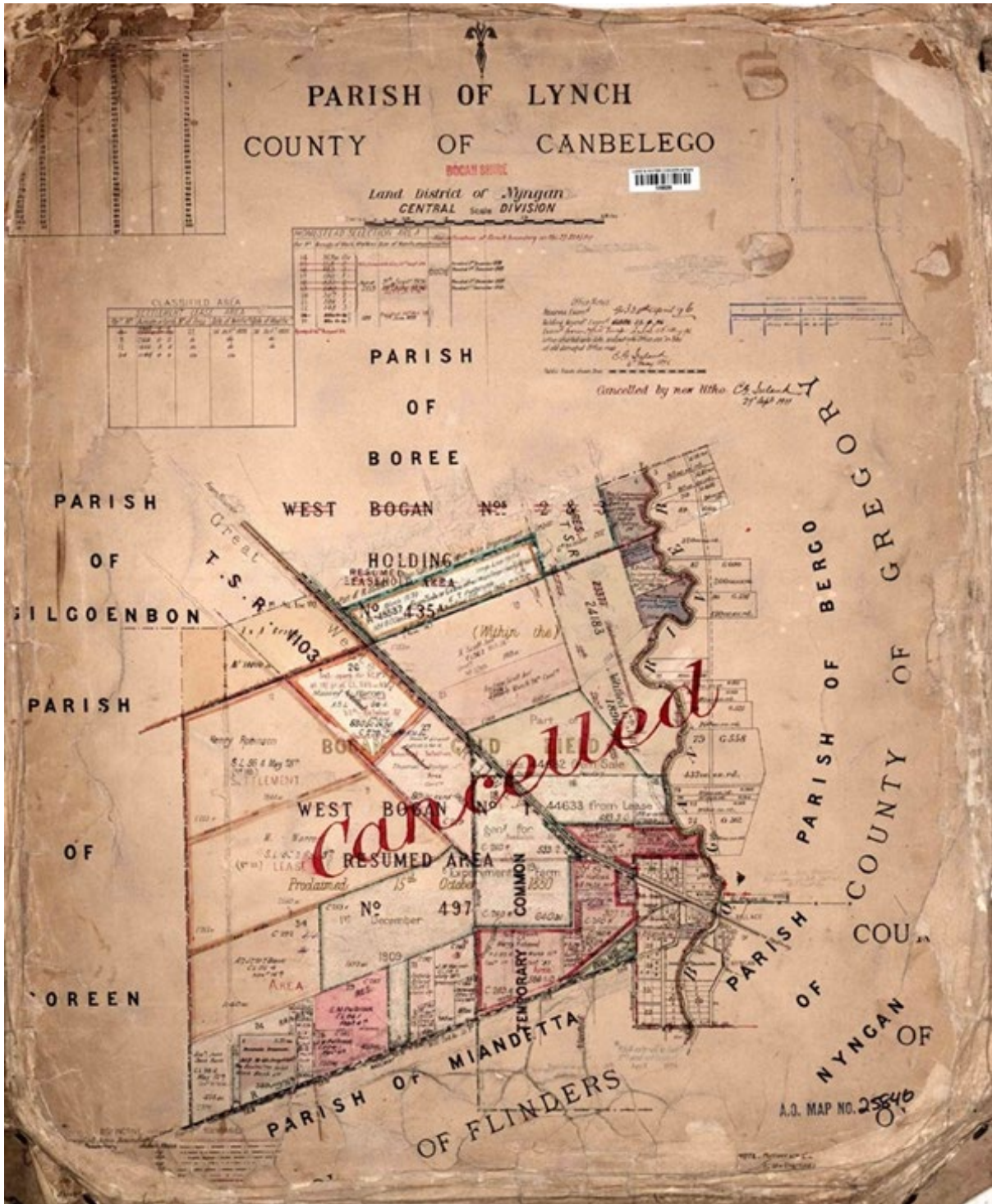


Figure 6: Parish Lynch, County Canbelego, 1896.

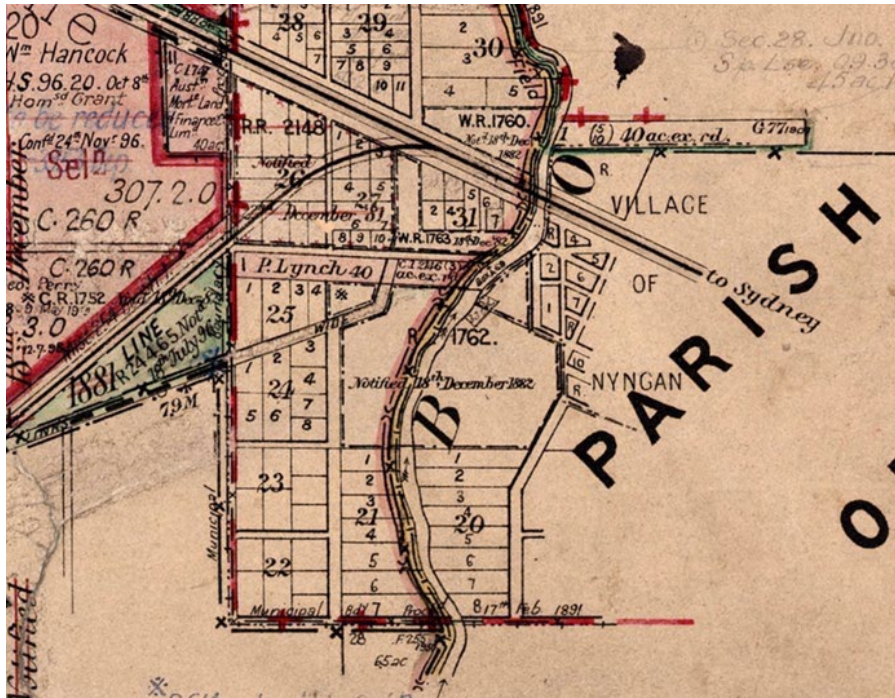


Figure 7: Parish Lynch, County Canbelego, 1896, showing Patrick Lynch, Portion 1.

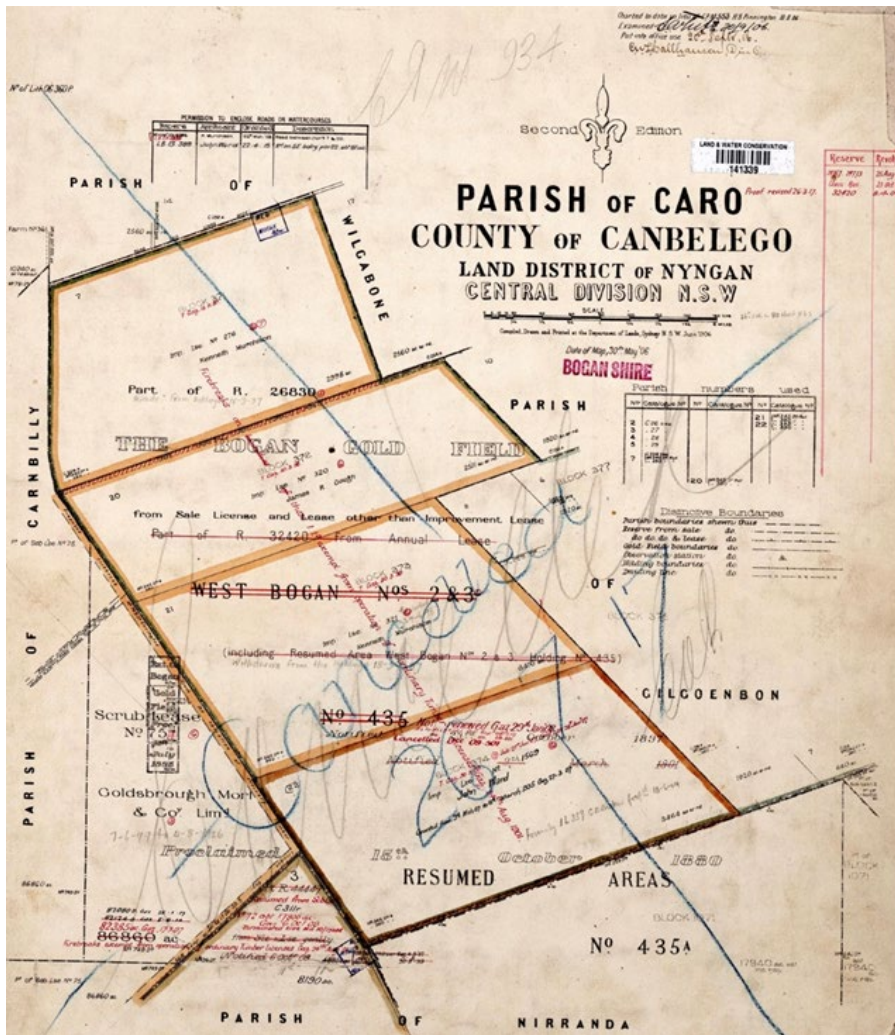


Figure 8: Parish Caro, County Canbelego, 1906.



Figure 9: Albert Caro's store, Nyngan, 1885.

4.3 Aboriginal / First Australian

Significantly, Aboriginal place names were frequently used following Sir Thomas L. Mitchell's directive. How the policy was applied in practice did not always have respectful outcomes. In his notes on Aborigines of 1884, Surveyor J.F. Mann wrote: "*The names of places and things are very expressive, and in most instances euphonious, though in many cases greatly distorted by European pronunciation.*" As an example he noted that the name Gabo Island was an Aboriginal attempt to pronounce Cape Howe. Similarly, Woolloomooloo was an attempt to pronounce windmill (Mann, 1884, p. 31).

In February 1900, when Licensed Surveyor Constantine Francis Bolton responded to a request from the Royal Anthropological Society about Aboriginal place names, he explained how 'official mutilation' corrupted the original names. He instanced how Illabo was simply 'Billabong South', with the first and last two letters deleted (State Library of NSW, 2025).

Aboriginal place names often became de facto place names when squatting runs used Aboriginal place names to confirm their identity. Licensed Surveyor Francis Benson William Woolrych, based in the Lachlan district, described that process as follows: "*The present names of many of the sheep and cattle stations or runs in the pastoral district of the Lachlan have been derived from the original names of the 'camping places' of the blacks [sic]. These names were always significant, they recalled to mind some scene, some simple occurrence or event, or characterised the peculiarity of some leading landmark and therefore indicated the exact locality. When the white settlers overran the country, they appropriated all the finest waterholes for their head stations, consequently these occupied what were at that time the chief camping grounds ... and therefore possessed of native names*" (Woolrych, 1890). The locality known as Demondrille is a relevant example. Originally, it was a squatting run, then a parish, a school, a post office, a railway station and finally the Shire of Demondrille (Figures 10 & 11).

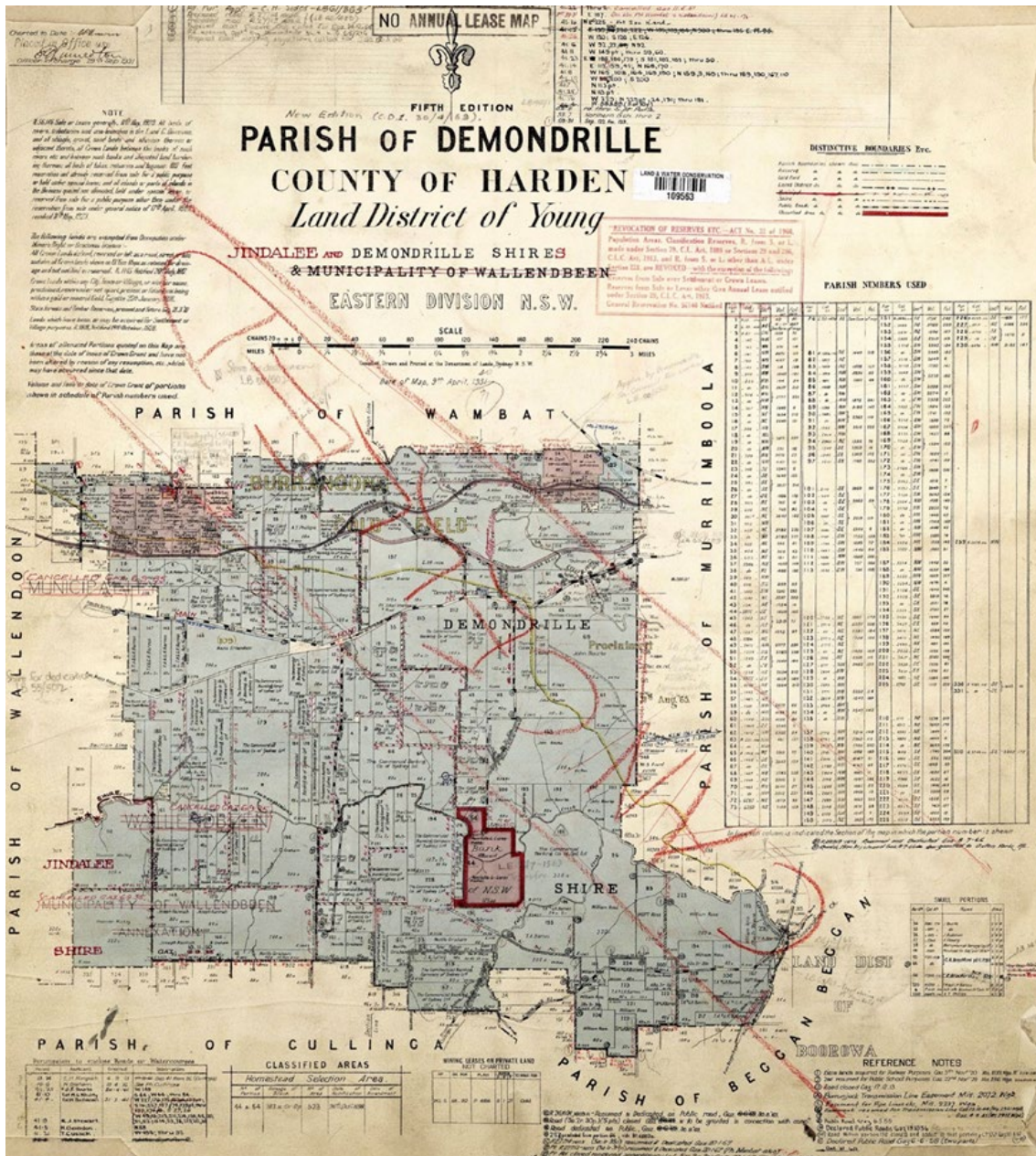


Figure 11: Parish Demondrille, County Harden, 1931.

Woolrych provided significant information about the origin of several place names in the Lachlan district, where he was surveyor in the late 1850s and early 1860s. A pertinent one is the Parish of Murrimboola, which mutated into a town name. According to Woolrych, the name came from the Aboriginal name for two canoe-shaped waterholes in the creek: Murrim = water and boolla = two. The name was later changed to Murrumburrah since there was postal confusion with the place on the coast named Merimbula (Woolrych, 1890, p. 68).

Regarding the nearby town of Binalong, Woolrych reported that the town was named after an Aboriginal chief who came from another part of the country. The Aboriginal name for the main waterhole was Bangalal. “Binalong was thought more euphonious than Bennalong by the gentry of the district who finally succeeded in converting the postal authorities to their own opinion and the name was changed...” (Woolrych, 1890, p. 68) (Figure 12).

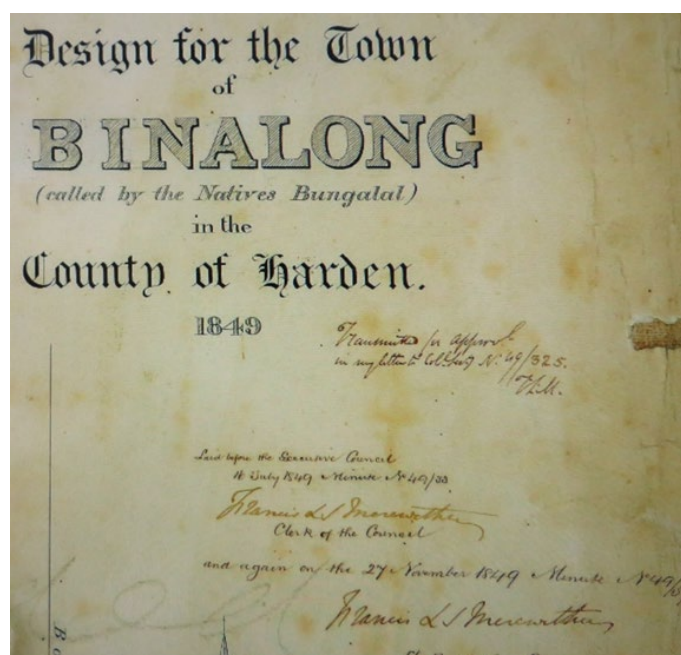


Figure 12: Title block for Binalong town plan, called Bungalal by the Natives (Crown Plan B.2.1337).

4.4 Towns

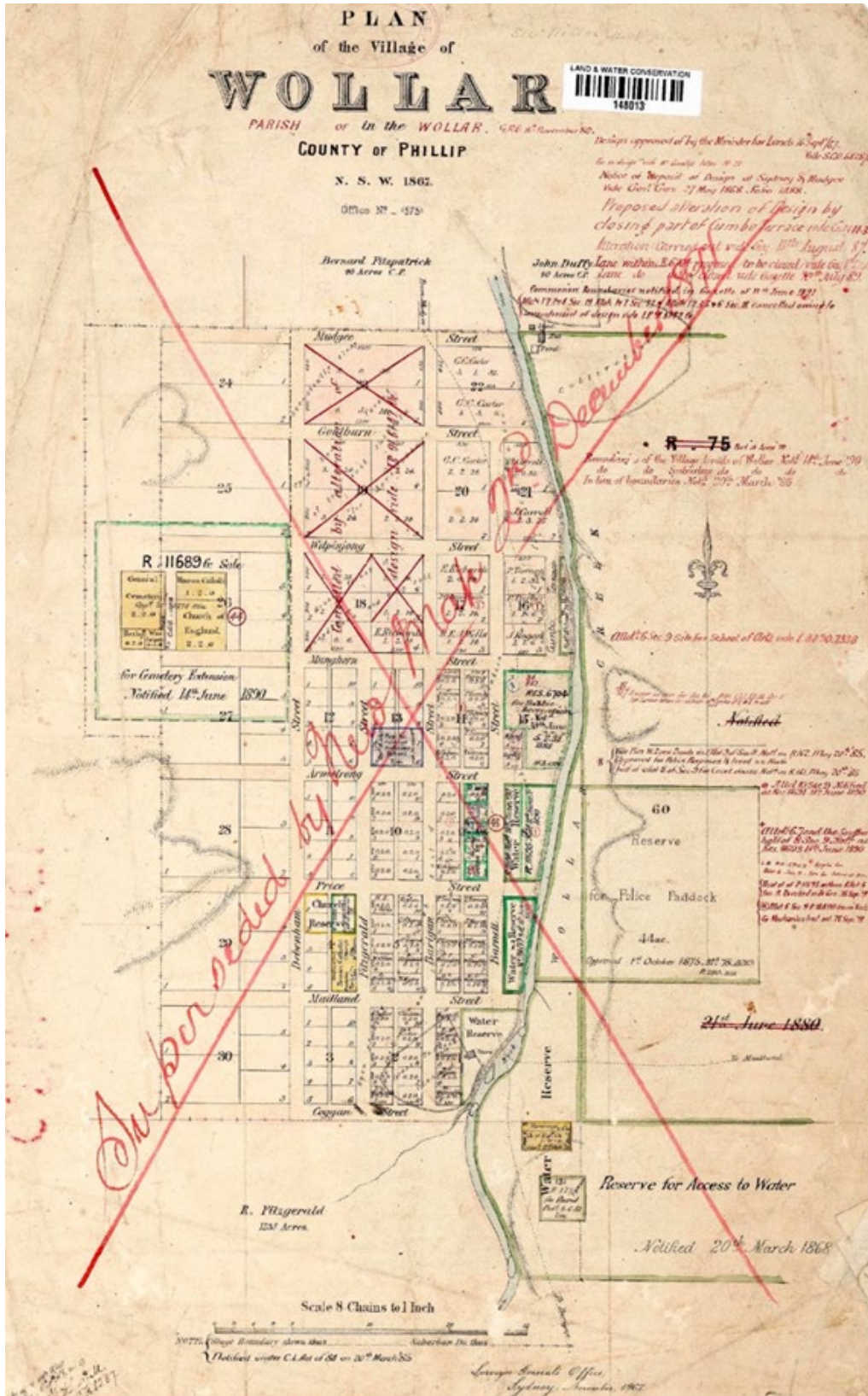
Every parish was given a village reserve following instructions from Britain in 1825 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1919). In carrying out the designs, licensed surveyors followed the guidelines laid down in the Survey Regulations. Villages were surveyed in response to demand or when the Surveyor-General saw the need. Most village reserves never matured into full grown villages but were surveyed whenever there appeared to be a need. Town names were often derived from the parish name or a local geographical landmark.

In the early 19th century, street and town layout were designed at Head Office, but after the death of Mitchell naming was usually in the hands of the local surveyor who laid out the town in consultation with his immediate superior, the District Surveyor.

The principles on which streets were named were outlined when Surveyor James Larmer sent in his plan of the village reserve at Kurraduckbidgee on 11 December 1841. The town is now called Larbert and consists of a cemetery with a few headstones and a man living in a caravan. The reply to Larmer's letter dated 17 January 1842 noted that regarding the "*design ... for names of streets it may be observed that the names of all the settlers and places thereabouts are already exhausted*" (NSW State Archives, 2025j). This confirmed a common practice which does not appear to have been formally regulated – that the names of local landholders, nearby landmarks and property names were used in naming streets in official towns.

As well as surveying and pegging out streets, licensed surveyors named them. Nearby property names and their owners, nearby localities and 'euphonious' Aboriginal place names were acknowledged in that process. Other inspirations also provided street names. When Licensed Surveyor James Loudon surveyed the village of Wollar in 1867, the street names acknowledged his colleagues (Figures 13 & 14). Fitzgerald Street was named after a nearby landholder. Maitland, Armstrong and Price Streets may have referred to fellow surveyors, but Debenham Street could have only referred to his colleague First Class Surveyor John Debenham. Barnett Street probably acknowledged the Colonial Architect (NSW State Archives, 2025n). In

December 1867, Licensed Surveyor George W. Commins carried out the preliminary survey of the site of the village of Oura in County Clarendon under contract (NSW State Archives, 2025m). The street names assigned referenced current and former Surveyors-General including McLean, Barney, Davidson, Adams and Mitchell.



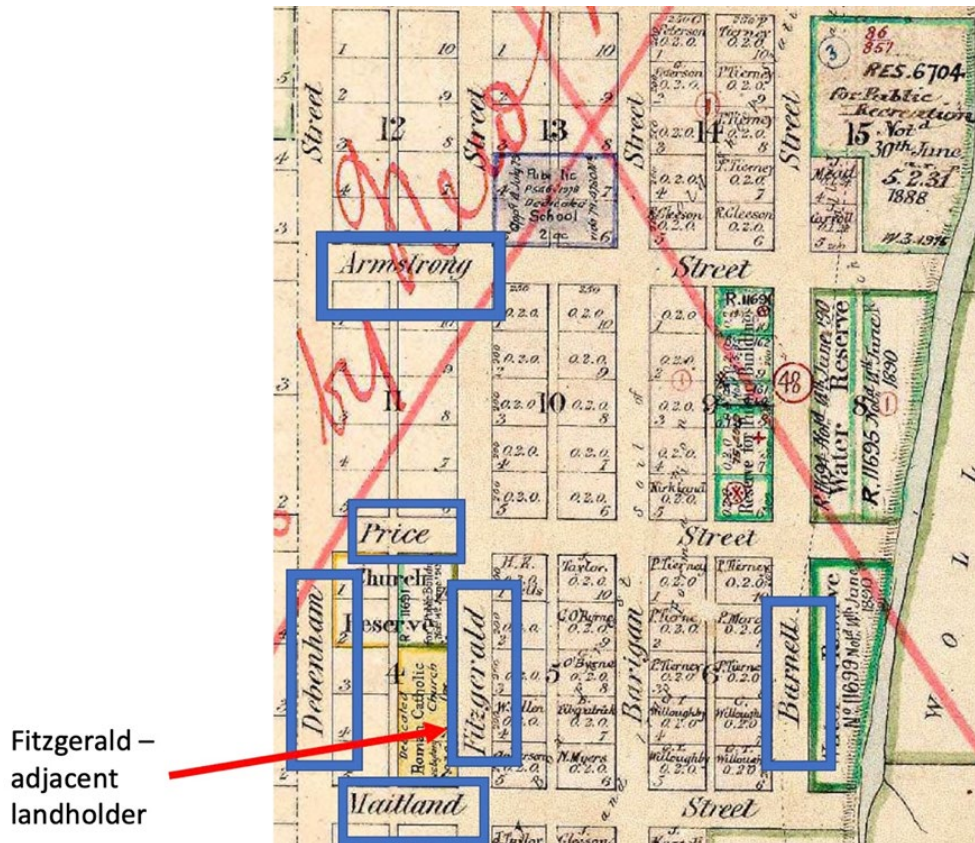


Figure 14: Village of Wollar, 1867, highlighting street names.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Place names are significant markers for wayfinding across the globe. They reference past events, significant people and significant memories. Surveyors had a key role assigning place names in the 19th century, particularly as they measured and divided new country. Nostalgia, personal attachment, friendship, professional flattery and careful tabulation of existing names all fed into the final allocation of place names, which determine much of the cadastre and conceptual framework of today’s place knowledge. This paper has discussed this eventful period in history and highlighted the contribution of surveyors to the place naming in use today. By the early 20th century, their role had been downgraded since they were no longer in a pivotal position to assign names. Railway stations and post offices started to replace parishes and town names as significant markers of places.

REFERENCES

- Commonwealth of Australia (1919) *Historical records of Australia*, Series 1, Volume 12, William Applegate Gullick, Government Printer, Sydney, p. 117 & 380.
- Mann J.F. (1884) *Notes on the Aborigines of Australia*, Sydney.
- N.N. (1890) *The Australian Star*, 21 April 1890, p. 3.
- NSW State Archives (2025a) NRS 8105, CS83/5282Cor, SANSW 10/20758.
- NSW State Archives (2025b) NRS 13738, SG67/215, SANSW 5/5819.

- NSW State Archives (2025c) NRS 13751, SG63/2363, SANSW 5/5635.
- NSW State Archives (2025d) NRS 13751, SG64/7764, SANSW 5/5677.
- NSW State Archives (2025e) NRS 13751, SG64/7745, SANSW 5/5677.
- NSW State Archives (2025f) NRS 13751, SG67/4404, SANSW 5/5827.
- NSW State Archives (2025g) NRS 13762, SANSW 4/6908, No. 29/260.
- NSW State Archives (2025h) NRS 13769, SANSW 4/1424, p. 79.
- NSW State Archives (2025i) NRS 13886, SB Vol 9 f 46 & 48.
- NSW State Archives (2025j) Letter 41/72, Surveyor-General, Letters from Surveyors, James Larmer, SRNSW 2/1551.
- NSW State Archives (2025k) Demondrille. No 171, SANSW 8/2400.
- NSW State Archives (2025l) State Archives Map 199.
- NSW State Archives (2025m) State Archives Map 4703.
- NSW State Archives (2025n) State Archives Map 6101 (originally W.1976).
- State Library of NSW (2025) Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia, Survey Forms, ML.MSS 7603, Box 4 Folder 5.
- Woolrych F.B.W. (1890) Native names of some of the runs etc in the Lachlan district, *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, 24, 63-70.