

Information Sheet No. 1



City of
Greater Geraldton
Regional Library



Heritage Services

Geraldton Regional Library

GERALDTON: ORIGINS OF A CITY

Instigation

Aborigines have been resident here for at least 40,000 years, when the area was about 100 kilometres inland, through to its present position as a seaside city. While accounts left by early European travelers and anthropologists differ in the name of the traditional owners [1] of Geraldton, these same sources generally agree that a large population of Aborigines were resident in the area now occupied by Geraldton, and in the surrounding hinterland. This was obviously a place of abundant resources, and it was these resources that eventually drew Europeans to this place and into conflict with Aboriginal people.

European interest in establishing a town on the Mid West coast of Western Australia was stimulated by the epic walk of George Grey and party through the region in April 1839. Grey's only view of Geraldton was the tip of Point Moore and the bays to the north and south. His detailed report about good pastures stimulated other Swan River colonists to make brief visits by ship. Marshall Waller Clifton didn't like what he saw in early 1840 and opted to establish his immigrants at Australind instead. The following year Captain Stokes of HMS Beagle reported the area to be very dry, enough to delay the establishment of a town at Champion Bay for several years.

Exploration by the Gregory brothers in 1846 reported good pastoral land and coal on the Upper Irwin River. Within months the colonial government sent Lieutenant Helpman, then commander of HMS Champion, to recover a more sizeable sample of the coal. He found good pasture in the hinterland of the future site of Geraldton, and on the lower Greenough and Irwin Rivers. Further confirmation of these pastures was made by Surveyor-General J S Roe's 1847 trip between Champion Bay and the Hutt River, as well as Dr von Sommer's trip to the Irwin coal.

By the late 1840's, Avon Valley stations were overstocked and the colony's economy was stagnant [2]. In search of a way forward two exploration parties were sent out. The first, led

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by J S Roe, travelled south-east of Perth. Augustus Gregory led the other northwards from Perth. Gregory's group confirmed yet again the pastoral potential of the Mid West coastal region and also discovered galena (lead ore) on the Murchison River. Governor Fitzgerald's subsequent visit to the galena site in December 1848 almost cost him his life in a confrontation with Aborigines south of the Bowes River. In spite of this, Fitzgerald must have seen enough to be confident that the region would be the next area of expansion for the British colony.

Preparation

In March 1849 the Government offered for sale a 640 acre parcel of land, Murchison No. 1 on the Murchison River, containing the galena deposit [3]. The newly formed Geraldine Mining Company purchased the lot at auction on 18 April and announced their intent to establish a mine [4]. By mid-year pastoral opportunities were firmly in the mind of both the Government and leading colonists who debated new land regulations in the press [5], including its effect on land at Champion Bay. By September 1849 the establishment of a town was gathering momentum. The editorial in the Inquirer [6] presumed that the town would be called 'Geraldine' and offered its support: *"We cannot see how the establishment of a town at Champion Bay can do otherwise than succeed"*.

As preparations gained momentum a series of articles attempted to divine the true potential of the Champion Bay hinterland for pastoral stations by comparing the reports of Grey in 1839 and Stokes in 1841 [7].

Naming the Town

The establishment at Champion Bay was to be achieved by sending a detachment of the 99th Regiment by sea on HMS Champion, while the mining party travelled overland. On 5 November 1849 the Colonial Secretary, acting for the Governor, requested that Surveyor-General Roe instruct Augustus Gregory on his duties at Champion Bay. The following day Roe appointed Gregory to lead the overland party, starting from Perth on 7 November 1849. Gregory was given detailed instructions, including the name to be given to the town:

"At Champion Bay, opportunity is to be taken in laying out 25 to 50 building lots of half an acre each, on the townsite of 1280 acres to be established there under the name of Geraldton, fit reserves being in the first instance made for public purposes, especially of a suitable space adjoining the best landing place, and of a good site for a public jetty. In laying out these lands you will doubtless bear in mind the necessity for a suitable arrangement of the intended streets in lines of communication, not to exceed 75 links in width, and of the best line for a main thoroughfare to the natural wharf at Port Grey. The town boundaries to be adjusted and laid out should circumstances permit" [8].



By Land and by Sea

The overland party delayed their departure until 8 November 1849. On that day the Colonial Secretary appointed Police Constable John Drummond to the land party to keep the peace with the Aborigines and learn as much as possible about them [9]. About this time anonymous newspaper correspondent "V" put the proposition that the parties heading for Champion Bay should have consulted with its Aboriginal owners [10]. He was, not surprisingly for the times, howled down by "Delta" and others in subsequent editions of the same newspaper [11]. The ship-based party, with faster means of transport, did not leave until 18 November 1849. Its military leader was Lt Elliot of the 99th Regiment. Five days before departure Elliot was appointed as a magistrate in order to be able to take depositions in the event of clashes between Europeans and Aborigines.

Arrival

Elliot's party arrived on 20 November 1849 and began bringing materials on shore that day. Whether a ceremonial claim over the district was proclaimed is not known, although on 21 November a flagstaff was erected (on the now-destroyed Flagstaff hill) and the Union Jack flag hoisted up the mast. The next day the overland party arrived at the Bay. On 26 and 27 November 1849 Augustus Gregory dug several water wells at the base of the large sand drift. The barracks were erected on 29 November 1849 from wooden panels carried in the hold of the Champion.

Much of the early work was also in support of parties travelling to the Murchison to establish the Geraldine mine. By 27 December 1849 the 99th Regiment had *"completed a stockade around the Barracks – Battery Hill – magazine and tents"* [12].

In January 1850 Gregory surveyed Point Moore and laid out the skeleton of the town of Geraldton, and most likely during the first three weeks of that month. It is clear that the surveyor, Augustus Gregory, was definitely making some surveys at the new barracks (on Champion Bay near the present yacht club) and at Point Moore on 7 and 8 January 1850. By 31 January 1850 he had returned to the Geraldine Mine. Unfortunately the relevant pages from Gregory's fieldbook are now missing [13]. The townsite plan Gregory produced of his survey [14] shows at least 30 lots of about 0.5 acres in area, but without references to his fieldbook (as was the practice of the time), nor dates of survey. He later reported to his superior Roe *"laid 40 1/2 acre allotments in the townsite of Geraldton. Placed marks for the public reserves"* [15]

Interestingly, Governor Fitzgerald waited until early 1850 to inform his colonial masters in England of Geraldton's commencement. There is the definite suggestion in Fitzgerald's letter that the purpose was to develop the lead deposit on the Murchison, without mention of pastoral pursuits [16].



And then...

Over the next 11 months Geraldton remained little more than a military outpost, with small groups of soldiers protecting the Geraldine Mine and a new guano mining venture at Shark Bay. In May 1850 it was reported that *"the soldiers had built a commodious dwelling for Lieut. Elliot"* [17]. The next stimulus for Geraldton was provided in the second half of 1850 by a group of Avon pastoralists taking up leases in the Geraldton hinterland. Two overland parties commenced the driving of stock to the Bay, leaving in early October, again led by the experienced Augustus Gregory [18]. The first party (the Burgeses) arrived at the Bay on Monday 11 November 1850 [19], and the other party (Logue and others) a day later [20].

The prompt surveying by Gregory was more expedient than required. Almost 18 months later the first lot, Lot No. 1, was purchased on 4 June 1851 [21]. It seems that in this early period Geraldton was little more than a military camp. Eliza Brown saw the town on 23 June 1851 and reported: *"...the barracks constructed of wood, one or two huts and Lieut. Elliot's cottage, all situated in the bend of the Bay are the only erections at present"* [22].

When the Pearson family arrived in Geraldton in late 1851 they found: *"...a pensioner barracks and a small wooden house; the late Doctor Foley having only a bush shed as a shelter for himself"* [23].

Wrestling with Dates

The survey date of January 1850 was arrived at by considering other sources that indirectly relate to Gregory's survey of Geraldton. Two of his letters also support January 1850 as the month of survey. On 12 December Gregory wrote to Surveyor-General Roe and stated that he was going to the Geraldine Mine soon, and intended *"...on returning to mark out the town allotments at Champion Bay, and complete the survey of the adjacent coast"* [24]. On 11 March Gregory again reports to Roe, this time from Perth. Gregory states,

"Since my last report of the progress of the surveys in that district, I have marked out 40 half acre allotments in the townsite of Geraldton and placed marks for the reserves required for public purposes. Having completed this survey as far as circumstances would admit, I proceeded to the section purchased by the Geraldine Mining Company..."[25]

The first letter suggests that the survey did not happen until after his return from the Geraldine Mine, which was on 29 December. He was busy the next two days making a plan of the Boat Harbour. The second letter refers to the survey having occurred since his last report but before going back to the Geraldine Mine. This 'last report' seems to have been the letter of 31 December 1849, received by Roe in Perth on 18 January 1850 [26]. We know Gregory was back at the Geraldine Mine on 31 January 1850. Furthermore, although his field book 20 [27] notes that he was taking bearings at Point Moore in February these measurements do not precede a visit to the Geraldine Mine, and are therefore probably not part of the town survey.

Written by Michael O'Connor



References

As a mark of respect to the ongoing Native Title process in the Geraldton area the differing names of the traditional owners are not discussed here.

1. Cameron, J M R (1981) *Ambition's fire : the pre-convict agricultural colonisation of Western Australia 1829-1850*. UWA Press, Nedlands.
2. *Inquirer* 14 March 1849.
3. *Perth Gazette* 24 April 1849.
4. *Inquirer* 18 July 1849.
5. *Inquirer* 12 Sept 1849.
6. *Inquirer* 10 Oct 1849.
7. *Index to surveyors letters forwarded, WAS 1849 CONS 5000 Item 19 No. 363, PROWA*
8. *Acc. 49 Vol. 27 No. 1078, PROWA*.
9. *Inquirer* 10 Oct 1849.
10. *Inquirer* 24 Oct 1849.
11. *CSO, Inward Correspondence, Acc. 36 Vol. 200 f.51-3 Helpman to CSO, 7 Jan 1850, PROWA*.
12. *Probably removed at the Survey Office in Perth to draw the plan, although Gregory himself was the draftsman*.
13. *Original town plans, WAS 235 CONS 3868 Item 141 (Plan 7E), dated 1850, PROWA*.
14. *Exploration Diaries IV, p248-9, 11 March 1850, Battye Library*.
15. *Fitzgerald to Earl Grey No. 10, 2 Feb 1850*.
16. *Inquirer* 22 May 1850.
17. *Inquirer* 2 Oct 1850.
18. *Inquirer* 25 Dec 1850.
19. *Logue Diaries Acc 429A, Battye Library*.
20. *Register of land grants and sales, WAS 2094 CONS 5000, Item 474, PROWA*.
21. *Inquirer* 10 Sept 1851.
22. *Geraldton Guardian* 17 Nov 1922.
23. *Exploration Diaries IV, pp236-40, Battye Library*.
24. *Exploration Diaries IV, pp248-9, Battye Library*.
25. *Survey Office Proceedings, WAS 1861 CONS 5000 Item 247, PROWA*.
26. *Surveyor fieldbooks, WAS 32 CONS 3401 GRE/21, PROWA*.
27. *Suba, T, Callow, B and Grundy, G (1997). City of Geraldton Municipal Inventory. City of Geraldton*.

*Taken from **Geraldton: 150 Years, 150 Lives**, published by the Local Studies Department of the Geraldton Regional Library in 2001. Copies are available from the Library, 37 Marine Terrace, Geraldton (PO Box 101, Geraldton 6531) for \$27.50 (plus \$5.50 postage and handling).*

