

Information Sheet



City of
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Regional Library



Heritage Services

Geraldton Regional Library

HISTORY OF MAHOMET'S FLATS

A Vital Water Source

Following the arrival of the overland party from Perth led by Augustus Gregory on the 22 November 1849, the immediate need for a reliable supply of fresh drinking water was quickly satisfied by soldiers who uncovered water at this site, after digging some three feet at the base of a large sand dune⁽¹⁾. As the settlement grew, many people came to depend on this water source, as other wells quickly became salty or evaporated during the long hot summer months. In 1906, a visiting engineer determined that an underground stream flowing south from the Chapman River and under the extensive dunes at Mahomet's Flats was the source of this water⁽²⁾. In 1917, as the town struggled to solve water-storage issues, further engineering studies confirmed that the Town of Geraldton had indeed been built over a large fresh water source and that this stream entered the sea at the tip of Point Moore⁽³⁾.

The Question of Mahomet

The origins of the naming of Mahomet's Flats have caused confusion over the years. Some researchers have thought that the Flats were named after the brothers Faiz and Tagh Mahomet, Camel Importers and Goods Carriers, who first arrived in Geraldton in 1892.

However, nearly twenty years prior, a Turkish gardener named Abdallah Mahomet was actually the first Mahomet to live in the area we now call Mahomet's Flats.

Jesse Hammond in his book "Western Pioneers" published in 1936, when listing the residents of Geraldton in 1877-78 states the following,



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“Last, but not least, Mahomet, a Turkish gardener. His garden was in the sand hills between Champion Bay and Grey’s Bay, and he was the first to grow tomatoes, water melons, flowers and vegetables for sale in Geraldton. He lived to a great age, and was supposed to have left a large sum of money hidden in the sand hills near his home” (pg. 96-97).

The earliest recording of Abdallah Mahomet in the Swan River colony is in 1845 when he was living in Northam and was employed as a labourer for the farmer J. T. Cooke. A personal notice in the Perth Gazette by Mahomet refers to his business dealing with a Chinese Perth business man named Hookam Chan, and other financial hardships which Mahomet had experienced in the colony from 1841⁽⁴⁾. By 1868, Mahomet had settled in Geraldton and was often spotted around the settlement carrying two baskets of vegetables for sale on the end of a long pole⁽⁵⁾. Unfortunately, Mahomet became known as a local drunkard and on the 6 August 1880, the West Australian newspaper reported the death of “Old Mahomet”, a well known early settler to the Geraldton district from “congestion of the lungs and a diseased heart”, at the age of 70 years. Mahomet was found dead in the sand dunes between his humble home and Geraldton, some two miles south of the township. His demise was documented at an inquest held at the Geraldton Courthouse, with Henry Kenny, Martin Murray and Walter John Brown called as key witnesses⁽⁶⁾.

It was reported that Mahomet had been gifted his 10 acres of land from the Government for the term of his natural life, and that he had cultivated in an unorthodox way. It was also reported that Mahomet had “a store of yellow boys” hidden away in some corner of his garden⁽⁷⁾.

The legend of the hidden treasure has sparked the imagination of many over the years. In 1899, T. Whitefoot Broadway wrote a fantastical article in the West Australian newspaper about a treasure cave at Mahomet’s Flat’s, in which the author supposedly discovered an underground cavern at Mahomet’s, full of riches and haunted by the old Afghan Mahomet himself!⁽⁸⁾ Stan Gratte recounts this urban legend and recalls his boyhood adventures hunting through the sand hills for Afghan gold.⁽⁹⁾

Some Chinese and Japanese market gardeners attempted to continue market gardening at the site following Mahomet’s passing. However, drifting sands created major obstacles and in 1894 the Japanese moved to Obanooka Farm at Glenfield⁽¹⁰⁾. Sometime before 1890, Jimmy D’Atta, a Chinese market gardener, built a large stone residence at Mahomet’s for his English wife Clara Martha Youard, which was known as “Canton Villa”. D’Atta later left Geraldton to move to Carnarvon⁽¹¹⁾. In 1912, Ghool Mahomet bought land owned by the Japanese gardener Mr Wadda and used this land as a garden before selling it in 1914⁽¹²⁾.



The brothers Faiz and Tagh Mahomet arrived much later in Geraldton and at a time when rapid developments in the Murchison goldfields meant there was very high demand for the carrying trade. In early June 1892, the ship *Bancoora* arrived at Champion Bay with 240 camels on board from Colombo, Ceylon. However, they were not able to be immediately landed due to Government regulations that decreed that all arriving camels should be inspected by a veterinary surgeon first, and there was no surgeon in Champion Bay at the time⁽¹³⁾. A second proclamation listed in the Government Gazette, 30 June 1892, overcame this problem, creating a temporary quarantine station at the locality known as Shenton's Paddock, for a period not to exceed three months⁽¹⁴⁾.

The arrival of the camels caused quite a stir in town, with fears for the safety of residents. Teamsters questioned the importing of "Asiatic labour" and pushed for the Camel Masters to pay taxes as the Teamsters were required to⁽¹⁵⁾. Camels were not allowed to be in the vicinity of the Greenough Road, Back Street, East Road and Marine Terrace, meaning they could not be paddocked at Mahomet's Flats. Instead, they were taken to an area east of town, approximately near the site of the old Greenough Shire Offices in Utakarra⁽¹⁶⁾.

An office was established in Fitzgerald Street near the Shamrock Hotel and by 1895 the Brothers had branches at Mullewa, Cue, Day Dawn and Coolgardie⁽¹⁷⁾.

Tragically, on a visit to Coolgardie in January 1896, Tagh was murdered whilst praying in the local mosque by his distant relation, Goulah. Goulah was reputedly an opium addict, and had been employed as the Brothers Office Manager in Coolgardie. For his crime, Goulah was hanged at Fremantle Prison on the 8 May 1896⁽¹⁸⁾.

Faiz remained in the Camel trade and became a prominent member of the Afghan community. His application for naturalisation later in 1896 was refused, despite him stating that he had worked 44 years under the British Government and his business had greatly contributed to the developing of the interior of the state.

In 1897, Faiz and Tagh Mahomet Camel Carrying Co. ceased operation in Geraldton and Cue, owing to the construction of the railway line to Mount Magnet which led to a decline in the carting trade. A run of financial bad luck further depleted business concerns. Faiz became a merchant in Perth and in 1904 substantially assisted fundraising efforts to build a mosque there. Faiz returned to India and died there in 1910⁽¹⁹⁾.

Abattoirs and Tanneries

Carl Anton Beringer, his wife Elizabeth and their young family arrived in Champion Bay from Sydney in 1875 and he soon set about establishing the Victoria District Tannery works on land directly under Olive Street and some 300 metres from the old



Greenough Road (now the Brand Highway). When Beringer applied to the Geraldton Municipal Council on 4 April 1876 for permission to establish a tannery, it was resolved that the works could not be established east of the proposed site of the Melbourne and Champion Bay Smelting Works⁽²⁰⁾. Initially Beringer entered into a partnership with Frederick Gibson but this was dissolved by mutual consent in August 1878⁽²¹⁾. Beringer's Tannery was established on land purchased from Maitland Brown, son of Thomas, who had taken over his father's properties⁽²²⁾. The Tannery site was located in a valley between the sweeping sand dunes, as were the cement and timber pits and the stables. The family house was built up on a nearby ridge, away from the pungent odours of the tannery⁽²³⁾.

Beringer used wattle bark harvested locally as a source of tannin to dress possum, goat, kangaroo, calf and bullock hides. Wind power was generated using an usually constructed four blade wind mill with leather coated blades⁽²⁴⁾. Following a visit in 1879, the editor of the *Victoria Express* described Beringer's process:

"We were particularly struck with a simple but effective contrivance as a labour saving machine, driven by a wind-mill for cutting the wattle bark, used for the tanning process...which by means of revolving knives cut bark ¼ inch thick...doing the work of five workmen". Victoria Express, 10/9/1879, p.2

Also located in this area were Wainwright's Tannery and an abattoir which was originally owned by the Browns, but taken over by Walter McKenzie Grant when he purchased Glengarry in 1886. This abattoir was a stone building located on an 18 acre block, numbered sub. 65, between Keane Street and the old quarries along the old Greenough Road and although the exact date of its building is not known, the first mention of this site is in 1860⁽²⁵⁾.

In the 1890s, Henry Pass leased sub. 65 from Grant. Henry Pass was a stockman from the North-West and a teamster on the Murchison Goldfields. Pass set up a butchers shop on Marine Terrace (later moving to Durlacher Street) and built up a sizeable business over many years. Although Pass continued to use the slaughterhouse facilities at sub. 65 for many years, he also built a new abattoir on the block numbered sub. 116, (between Zuytdorp Court and Batavia Place) - a well-watered site which was already well utilised by market gardeners⁽²⁶⁾. The new premises were very modern for the times, built from galvanised iron and including a cement floor, due to new health regulations. Pass's slaughterhouse at Mahomet's Flats remained in use until the late 1920s, when it was abandoned in favour of the new slaughterhouse built near the Waggrakine Siding in 1930⁽²⁷⁾.

In early years, Thomas Brown was also in the ownership of a 100 acre block that ran along the coast to Southgates. Wainwright's Tannery was believed to be established on this land and close to the Southgates turnoff⁽²⁸⁾. As late as the 1960s there were still ruins of the old tannery at this site. Wainwrights & Co. were a firm from London



which took over the business interests of Edward Shenton in 1887, including a large general merchandising store on Marine Terrace. In early October 1887, Governor Broome visited Geraldton and took time to comment on the quality of works produced by Wainwright's Tannery⁽²⁹⁾.

Unfortunately for Beringer, in the 1880s a disease which ran rampant through local wattle limited his bark supply and his business suffered significantly as a result. To improve matters, in 1893 Beringer bought out Wainwright's Tannery, along with a large amount of leather⁽³⁰⁾. However, an accident at the Tannery lifting heavy equipment left him with a severe back injury, leading to his untimely death in 1894. Tanning continued in the Beringer buildings through to the outbreak of World War I, firstly by two men, Davies and Watt, followed by wool scourer J. Harte⁽³¹⁾.

Beringer was a talented photographer and copies of his photos taken around Geraldton provide an excellent record of the past. Carl Beringer's headstone is located in Apex Park.

Henry Pass became a Justice of the Peace and a member of the Mullewa Roads Board, Geraldton Municipal Council, as well as establishing extensive farming interests at Mullewa. Following many years of service to the local community, Henry Pass died in Geraldton in 1939 at the age of 79 years⁽³²⁾.

“The Flats”

Stan Gratte makes the point that due to the undulating sandhills and a swampy valley, the original landscape at Mahomets actually only had one “Flat” area⁽³³⁾. This was situated between Batavia Place and Drenthe Place and was surrounded by a South African box thorn hedge to protect the market gardens from stock and kangaroos. References in the old rates books from the 1900s refer to the Flats in the singular and this is also how the area is noted on maps from the period.

Old maps of the area name streets such as Moore, Brown and Dunraven. However, these streets never existed beyond lines on paper and tracks through the sandhills.

With time the old stone tannery and abattoirs, evidence of the market gardens and yards, slowly disappeared under the shifting sands. In 1936, the Chief Protector of Aborigines (Mr A. O. Neville) met with the Geraldton Municipal Council to consider the Council's plans to use a reserve close to the old tannery site at Mahomet's as an Aborigines Camp⁽³⁴⁾. However, this was rejected in favour of a reserve running off Eastward Road towards the Greenough Road, which was high and dry, with plenty of shelter.

An Army Camp was set up during World War II where Durack now stands. The sand



dunes of Mahomets became a rifle and trench mortar range. Three pill boxes were built along the beach in case of enemy invasion, the largest being where Hadda Way is now located. A track at the end of Fitzgerald Street was known by locals as “the tank track” but apparently this was made by Bren Gun Carriers, not tanks⁽³⁵⁾. A high, barbed-wire fence ran all the way from the seaward edge of Mahomet’s to Bluff Point.

The last people to live on “The Flats” before redevelopment were a group of about 5 pensioners who lived in a run down camp just to the west of McAleer Drive. One of these pensioners was an old lady known as “Methylated Myrtle”⁽³⁶⁾.

Later Years

Lots 3012 and 3023, which form a significant component of the new Olive Street Redevelopment, were originally held in freehold ownership by the Green family. These were gifted to the Geraldton Town Council in 1961 following the passing of former Geraldton Mayor, Frank Green, MBE JP, in 1960, on the condition that they were developed as an open grassed area for sporting playing fields⁽³⁷⁾.

Frank Green landed in Fremantle in 1891 aged 16 years with his brother Thomas, and quickly found employment on railway construction work before he ventured to Geraldton. Excited by the prospects of the new Murchison Goldfields, Frank established a Carrier Company in 1895 and was reputed to be one of the first white men to take camels into the country from Mt Magnet to Lake Way and Lawlers⁽³⁸⁾. Frank’s brother Thomas married Ellen Isabella Lotti Cooper in 1894 in Geraldton. However, Thomas died in 1896 and so Frank took over the role of father to the two children of Thomas and Ellen, marrying Ellen in 1927 and fathering a further three children with Ellen. After Ellen died in 1942 he married Emily Stone in 1946⁽³⁹⁾.

In 1904, Green had begun working at the emporium store of R. Darling in Durlacher Street and in time, purchased this store and moved the premises to Marine Terrace near the old Post Office. Green’s became known as the “Big Store” and in the 1940’s was reputed to be one of the largest department stores outside of the Metropolitan area. Frank Green had a very active civic life, with many business interests, including ventures at Narra Tarra, playing a key role in burgeoning tomato industry, flour milling and export, roles with the Chamber of Commerce and the Geraldton Retail Traders Association⁽⁴⁰⁾. Frank Green passed away at the age of 84 on the 9 June 1960.

Finalising of ownership of land at Mahomet’s by the Council was an ongoing task which continued throughout the 1960s and on the 7 February 1970, the Geraldton Guardian reported that contouring work had begun. Bulldozers were brought in to shift more than 300,000 cubic yards of sand. Where the sand dunes once stood, the



first stage section consisting of 33 residential blocks and a service station were to be created⁽⁴¹⁾. The suburb of Mahomet's Flats was officially gazetted in 1972. At 10.30am on 11 January 1975, the Auction Sale of the First Stage Mahomet's Flats Residential Subdivision was held⁽⁴²⁾. The largest block in the subdivision (1165 m²) had a reserve price of \$2,000. The Second Stage Auction was held on 10 April 1976 with the highest price reached at \$6,600 for a duplex sized block⁽⁴³⁾. Further sales of residential unit sized blocks were reported in 1977 as very brisk, with 14 blocks sold in 70 minutes, many well above their reserve prices. Bidders paid a total of \$340,250 for the 14 prime multiunit blocks⁽⁴⁴⁾.

In more recent years, the unsuitability of the gifted land for recreational purposes was determined. The City then negotiated an agreement with both the Department for Regional Development and Lands and the Green family, in which Lots 3012 and 3023 would be acquired in freehold title by the City and partially developed for residential uses. This was on the basis that the net proceeds from the sale of newly created lots would help fund capital improvements to other "Recreation" Reserves throughout the City and particularly to assist in the creation of a Southern Districts Sporting Complex in the vicinity of Verita Road in the locality of Wandina⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Expressions of Interest for the Olive Street Residential Development, bounded by Willcock and McAleer Drives and Olive Street, were called for in November 2012, consisting of 70 lots of varying sizes⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Streets that Honour the Past

Some 163 years since Gregory and his party first discovered the precious fresh water supplies in the sand dunes at Mahomet's, modern residents of Geraldton seek to remember and honour the important connections key historical identities from the settlement have made with this locality.

Two of the newly named access roads in the subdivision, Beringer View and Tannery Way, honour the links with some of the town's first industries and the men who pioneered these – Carl Anton Beringer, Thomas Brown and Henry Pass. Yoxall Way is so named after the birth place in Staffordshire, England, of Mr Frank Green, Mayor of Geraldton from 1917-1919 and 1923-1925, who posthumously gifted a large parcel of this land to the community⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Written by Trudi Cornish, Coordinator Heritage Services, Geraldton Regional Library, 2013



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