

# *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand 30, Open*

Papers presented to the 30th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand held on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia, July 2-5, 2013.

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/conference/sahanz-2013/>

Tim O'Rourke, "Aboriginal Camps and 'Villages' in Southeast Queensland" in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 30, Open*, edited by Alexandra Brown and Andrew Leach (Gold Coast, Qld: SAHANZ, 2013), vol. 2, p 851-863.

ISBN-10: 0-9876055-0-X

ISBN-13: 978-0-9876055-0-4

# Aboriginal Camps and “Villages” in Southeast Queensland

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*In the early nineteenth century, European accounts of Southeast Queensland occasionally refer to larger Aboriginal camps as “villages”. Predominantly in coastal locations, the reported clusters of well-thatched domical structures had the appearance of permanent settlements. Elsewhere in the early contact period, and across geographically diverse regions of the continent, Aboriginal camps with certain morphological and architectural characteristics were labelled “villages” by European explorers and settlers. In the Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture, Paul Memmott’s entry on Aboriginal architecture includes a description of semi-permanent camps under the subheading “Village architecture.” This paper analyses the relatively sparse archival records of nineteenth century Aboriginal camps and settlement patterns along the coastal edge of Southeast Queensland. These data are compared with the settlement patterns of Aboriginal groups in northeastern Queensland, also characterized by semi-sedentary campsites, but where later and different contact histories yield a more comprehensive picture of the built environment. The available evidence suggests that the “villages” described in the archival records were most likely habitual campsites occupied according to seasonal, economic and socio-cultural patterns. Such sites occupy significant places in the history of Australian settlement, but there is scant direct evidence that, prior to contact, these camps represented permanent villages in the European sense. (Ethnographic or archaeological literature on Aboriginal societies widely refers to patterns of camps and campsites.) This paper seeks to add to the architectural histories of Southeast Queensland while suggesting the need to more carefully define the terminology of Aboriginal settlement in historical discourse.*



Mathew Flinders charted the coastline of Moreton Bay in 1799, making several observations of the Aboriginal people and their camps on the islands.<sup>1</sup> A quarter of a century later, the English established their own settlement at Redcliffe, on the mainland in the Bay, moving to North Quay on the Brisbane River a year later in 1825. During the nineteenth century, official reports, narratives and correspondence from the newly colonized district provide a fragmented and incomplete account of Aboriginal society, economy and cultural landscapes at the time of colonization.

From Port Macquarie to the new Moreton Bay settlement, the coastal zone was inhabited by relatively large populations of Aboriginal people with an economy dependent on the rich marine resources.<sup>2</sup> In the accounts of pre-colonial settlement of the coastal zone, the frequency of relatively large camps of bark-clad dwellings, which various reporters describe as “villages,” is particularly noteworthy.<sup>3</sup> This tendency toward semi-sedentary occupation of coastal sites has interested archaeologists, being useful to the interpretation of their data.<sup>4</sup>

In the recently published *Encyclopaedia of Australian architecture*, Paul Memmott’s entry on Aboriginal architecture includes a description of semi-permanent camps under the subheading “Village Architecture.”<sup>5</sup> This entry refers to historical evidence of semi-sedentary Aboriginal settlement patterns across various parts of Australia, examined in Memmott’s book on Aboriginal architecture (2007), and in particular the chapter on “The village architecture of the northeast rainforest.”<sup>6</sup> As the archival records of Southeast Queensland attest, this is not a novel use of the term to describe Aboriginal camps, nor is “village” unused in other disciplines concerned with Aboriginal studies.

This paper provides an overview of Aboriginal settlement patterns and architecture in the coastal zone of Southeast Queensland during early period of colonization. Comparing this region with other Aboriginal environments, the aim of the paper is to question interpretations of these historical data and, in particular, the origin, use and meanings the term “village” in relation to Aboriginal settlement. I argue that critical interpretation, as well as caution, is required when adopting language from nineteenth century sources to categorize cross-cultural built environments. Without this caution, the senses of the word becomes unclear, as does potentially our understanding of the past.

1. John Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay District 1770–1830* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972), 13–38.

2. Jay Hall, “Sitting on the Crop of the Bay: An historical and archaeological sketch of Aboriginal settlement and subsistence in Moreton Bay, southeast Queensland” in *Coastal Archaeology in Eastern Australia: Proceedings of the 1980 Valla Conference on Australian Prehistory*, ed. Sandra Bowdler (Canberra: Dept. of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, 1982), 79–95.

3. James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1843), 372–74.

4. Julia Coleman, “A New Look at the North Coast: Fish Traps and ‘Villages’” in *Coastal Archaeology in Eastern Australia*, ed. Bowdler, 1–10; Hall, “Sitting on the Crop of the Bay.”

5. Paul Memmott, “Aboriginal Architecture” in *The Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture*, ed. Philip Goad and Julie Willis (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2–3.

6. Paul Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 80–109.

Figure 1. A map of the Moreton Bay District prepared in 1906. Source: The Internet Map Archive, online at <http://tinyurl.com/kafvm6x> (accessed May 15, 2013).



### Research Methods and Interpretation

The methods used to reconstruct Aboriginal settlement patterns and dwellings in the pre-colonial and early contact era rely heavily on the relatively sparse and fragmented accounts of the European explorers, administrators and settlers. Aboriginal oral histories, obviously indispensable to a balanced interpretation of the past, are scarce, with the earlier data affected by the clarity and accuracy of the transcription. The earliest of the archival reports offer a clearer view of the pre-colonial cultural landscapes in Southeast Queensland because of pervasive changes to Aboriginal society and settlement patterns after 1825. Introduced diseases, racial conflict and mass murder, and removals radically changed Aboriginal demography, just as the relatively rapid spread of European settlement and resource exploitation affected Aboriginal socio-cultural and economic practices.

The scattered nineteenth century sources vary in their accuracy, bias and attention to detail—much of the data are buried in short newspaper articles. Comparison with twentieth century ethnographic data from other coastal regions and resource rich environments can clarify and inform interpretations that rely almost exclusively on the archival sources. (Archaeological evidence, relatively extensive along the coastal zone in Southeast Queensland, adds to the economic and demographic interpretation of Aboriginal settlement patterns).



In Moreton Bay, the colonial administration established small outposts at Amity from 1825 and Dunwich from 1827.<sup>7</sup> South of the Bay, Point Danger was occupied as a military post in 1828 but was vacated in 1829 due to “rupture with the natives.”<sup>8</sup> Much of the cross-cultural contact south of Brisbane was initiated by the cedar-getters who were working on the Richmond and Tweed Rivers in the 1840s. Cedar on the Nerang, Logan and Coomera Rivers also attracted the first whites to the Gold Coast hinterland.<sup>9</sup> These unregulated incursions resulted in interracial conflict, followed by severe reduction of the Aboriginal population between the Brisbane and the Tweed River, hence the paucity of ethno-historical data on the once numerous Aboriginal population of the Gold Coast district. Longhurst portrays a bleak view of the contact history and record of Aboriginal cultural landscapes of the Gold Coast, from the Nerang to the Tweed River:

Two Bora rings, a few words, bones and implements are all that today remain of what may have been one of the most concentrated aboriginal populations, given the small area involved, in Australia. Europeans have, in the space of little more than a century, destroyed the swamps, altered the course of rivers, built on the dunes and wallum plains, reconstructed the beaches, and consequently eradicated the wildlife which sustained the aborigine.<sup>10</sup>

7. John Steele, *Brisbane Town in Convict Days, 1824-1842* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 48, 92.

8. Robert Longhurst, “Settlement and Development of Queensland’s Gold Coast to 1889” in *Settlement of the Colony of Queensland* (Brisbane: Library Board of Queensland, 1978), 4; Steele, *Brisbane Town in Convict Days*, 100.

9. Longhurst, “Settlement and Development of Queensland’s Gold Coast.”

10. Robert Longhurst, “The Gold Coast: Its first Inhabitants,” *John Oxley Journal* 1, no. 2 (1980), 21.

### Landscapes and Aboriginal People of the Southeast Coast

The coastal zone between Moreton Bay and the Tweed River is part of Southern Coastal Lowlands Province (Noosa Heads to Tweed River), which receives an annual median rainfall of about 1400 mm.<sup>11</sup> The province is characterized by its wallum heathlands and woodlands growing on dune systems (wallum being a colloquial term derived from Kabi Kabi for *Banksia aemula*). The sandy soils also support different types of rainforest on beach ridges and dunes.<sup>12</sup> Diverse melaleuca forests and coastal swamps provided important economic resources for Aboriginal people. But the primary source of food was the sea and the intertidal zone.<sup>13</sup> The subsistence economy followed a seasonal calendar related to annual climatic patterns and corresponding resource availability, which was signaled by environmental indices.

11. P. Young and H.A. Dillewaard, “Southeast Queensland” in *The Conservation Status of Queensland’s Bioregional Ecosystems*, ed. Paul Sattler and Rebecca Williams (Brisbane: Environmental Protection Agency, 1999).

12. H.T. Clifford and R.L. Specht, *The Vegetation of North Stradbroke Island* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979).

13. Hall, “Sitting on the Crop of the Bay,” 85–6.

Archival records and archaeological research confirm a relatively high Aboriginal population density along the Southeast

14. Hall, "Sitting on the Crop of the Bay," 84.

Queensland coast—a demographic pattern that continued south to Port Macquarie. There was also linguistic and socio-cultural differentiation between coastal and inland groups.<sup>14</sup> In the 1840s, Land Commissioner and Aboriginal protector Simpson recorded interactions between the Aboriginal population and the settlers as they expanded their pastoral holdings:

The inhabitants of the Sea-coast are no doubt the most numerous, a distinct Tribe occupying every Island or Inlet of the Sea from the River Tweed to Wide Bay—they are probably not overrated at 3000—upon the whole their condition is superior to that of the Inland Blacks, having more ample means of existence in the abundance of fish on the Sea-coast—they are consequently less migratory in their habits ...<sup>15</sup>

15. Gerry Langevad, *The Simpson Letterbook* (St. Lucia: Anthropology Museum, University of Queensland, 1979), 13.

Coastal clans tended to occupy smaller estates than inland groups, with resource abundance permitting more sedentary occupation of economically strategic campsites within the estates. Nets, "formed of the most excellent twine, as fine as any fabricated in Europe,"<sup>16</sup> used for fish and dugong attracted praise, with Flinders relating this technology to his analysis of the camps and dwellings:

16. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay District*, 239.

The net also appearing to be a more certain source of food than the spear change of place will be less necessary. The encumbrance, too, of carrying large nets from one place to another will require more permanent residence; and hence it would naturally follow that their houses would be of better construction.<sup>17</sup>

17. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay District*, 35.

Archaeological studies of hunter-gather societies establish a correlation between material culture, technology and sedentarization, but the regular and varied forms of social and ceremonial interaction also influenced mobility across the region. The most renowned large-scale gatherings related to the harvest of bunya nuts in the ranges north of Brisbane.<sup>18</sup> The archival literature also records large congregations of disparate clans at coastal camps,<sup>19</sup> as well as the regular gatherings at ceremonial and fighting grounds.

18. Constance Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1983); Hilary Sullivan, "Aboriginal Gatherings in South-east Queensland," BA honours thesis, Australian National University.

19. Coleman, "A New Look at the North Coast"; A.K. Thomson (ed.), *Collected Works of Thomas Welsby: Volume one* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1967), 18, 128.

20. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 152.

## Encampments and "Villages" in Southeast Queensland

The cultural landscapes occupied by Aboriginal people at the time of colonization consisted of many interrelated parts, but in this



paper I make use of the archival records to examine campsites and attempt to analyze settlement patterns. In addition to campsites, the Aboriginal cultural landscapes included ceremonial sites, sacred sites (often identified by rock engravings and paintings), and walking paths. “Numerous were the beaten paths of the wild aborigine” according to Alan Cunningham, in his description of the landscape along the lower reaches of the Brisbane River in 1824.<sup>20</sup> The distribution of the numerous bora grounds or kippa-ring—double-ring earth structures consistent through the broader region and the north coast of New South Wales—hints at the intensity of ceremonial life, intergroup mobility and social contact.<sup>21</sup>

The archival evidence of Aboriginal settlement in Southeast Queensland begins with Flinders’ account of a camp on the southern end of Bribie Island:

Five or six huts, from twelve to fifteen feet in length [3.6 m to 4.7 m], were seen standing near each other. They resembled a covered arch-way, rounded at the far end. The roofs, roofs and the manner of securing them, were nearly the same as those which we had seen in Shoal Bay [mouth of the Clarence River] ...<sup>22</sup>

In 1823, three castaways (Pamphlett, Parsons and Finnegan) were fed and housed by the Aboriginal people while travelling for more than seven months in the Moreton Bay District. Shipwrecked on Moreton Island, their narratives give a glimpse of pre-contact settlement patterns around the Bay. At the northern end of Moreton Island, the castaways encountered at least five camps of between three and six huts along a distance of about ten kilometres.<sup>23</sup>

Several places on Stradbroke Island were clearly used as semi-permanent or habitual campsites. In the vicinity of Amity Point, the Aboriginal people placed the castaways “in a very large well-built hut by ourselves, and supplied us with fish, water, &c., very liberally.”<sup>24</sup> In 1843, Backhouse described a camp at Amity:

we walked to a native village, on the coast. It consisted of a number of huts, formed of arched sticks, and covered with tea-tree bark, so as to form weather-tight shelters, just high enough to allow the inmates to sit upright in them, and equal in comfort to the tilts, inhabited by the Gipsies, in England.<sup>25</sup>

21. Petrie, *Tom Petrie’s Reminiscences*, 49; John Steele, *Aboriginal Pathways in Southeast Queensland and the Richmond River* (St. Lucia: University of Press, 1982); L.P. Winterbottom, “Some Native Customs and Beliefs of the Jinibara and Neighbouring Tribes, on the Brisbane and Stanley River, Queensland” (manuscript), 1957, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, 79–80.

22. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 17–18.

23. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 59–60.

24. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 64.

25. Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, 372–73.

Although “village” suggests permanent occupation of a site, Backhouse goes on to describe the relationship between the seasonal calendar, mobility, campsites and architecture.

Many of the huts had shelters of leafy boughs placed so as to keep off the wind. We were informed that these people had several such villages on the Island; and that they resorted to one, or to another, according to the weather, the season of the year, and the contiguity of food. At present they are near the opening between Moreton and Stradbroke Islands, depending chiefly on the shoals of Mullet for food. A few weeks ago, they went further into the interior, collecting honey. At some seasons they resort to places producing wild fruits; and in wet weather, to elevated situations, contiguous to those parts of the coast, abounding with oysters. In these last situations, their huts are said to be large enough for a man to stand up in.<sup>26</sup>

26. Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, 373–74.

In November 1823, Oxley’s expedition to Moreton Bay anchored off Bribie Island, and Uniacke’s observations reinforce the relationship between campsites and mobility related to the subsistence economy:

The principal station of the tribe ... was about two miles higher up the Pumice-stone River ... than where the vessel [*The Mermaid*] lay; but as they depend principally on fish for their support, they have several huts at a distance of three or four miles from each other, to which they migrate to form time to time as the fish become scarce.<sup>27</sup>

27. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 94.

Figure 2: A dwelling on Stradbroke Island in the late 1900s. Source: John Oxley Library, Neg. No. 56356.



From these observations, and other fragmentary records, a generalized description of pre-colonial settlement patterns on the coast is possible, augmented by comparative data from different regions.<sup>28</sup> Clan estates tended to be relatively small, with one or more base camps that could support semi-sedentary occupation. Comparing the ethno-historical data with resource availability, Draper suggests that the more sedentary camps were inhabited across the wet season.<sup>29</sup> Archaeological evidence supports repeated and long-term occupation of these habitual campsites. A variety of more transient campsites related to the exploitation of particular seasonal resources. It was likely that dwellings were reused, although windbreaks could also be used comfortably throughout much of the year.<sup>30</sup>

28. Athol Chase and Peter Sutton, "Hunter-Gatherers in a Rich Environment: Aboriginal Coastal Exploitation in Cape York Peninsula" in *Ecological Biogeography of Australia*, ed. A. Keast (The Hague: Dr W. Junk BV Publishers, 1981), 1817–52.

29. Neale Draper, "A Model of Aboriginal Subsistence and Settlement in the Moreton Bay Regions of Southeast Queensland," BA honours thesis, University of Queensland, 1978.

30. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 24.

Amity Point on Stradbroke Island, for example, was recorded as a permanent campsite, occupied through much of the 1800s. Thomas Welsby, writing on his experiences in Moreton Bay between 1880 and the first decades of the twentieth century, described changes in Aboriginal demography on Stradbroke Island: "When first I knew it [Amity Point], it was a camping-ground of many blacks, of all ages and of shape, and history. Now, not a soul makes the place a home and the encroaching sea is fast taking away the signs of one-time habitation ...."<sup>31</sup>

31. Thomson, *Collected Works*, 128.

Colonization affected Aboriginal mobility and settlement patterns in different ways. In Brisbane in the 1840s and 1850s, pre-contact campsites were permanently occupied, often by large groups of Aboriginal people from different language groups. Camps at Victoria Park and Wooloongabba, for example, were clearly favoured campsites in pre-colonial times but their demography, permanence and morphology post-1825 did not necessarily represent the pre-contact past.<sup>32</sup> Similarly on the coast, relationship with the European settlements led to sedentary camps or permanent "villages" (town-camps in urban areas) on customary sites, such as Amity Point. Welsby writes of the many hundreds of Quandamooka people camping at various places along the coast between Amity and Dunwich, with a larger camp at Myora, which developed into a mission.<sup>33</sup>

32. "Local Intelligence, The Aborigines—Inquiry," *Moreton Bay Courier*, February 13, 1847, 2–3.

33. Thomson, *Collected Works*, 228.

Contextual and comparative evidence suggests that numerous factors caused the movement of groups and individuals. Movement of an entire camp on death of an individual—a pan-continental custom dependent on the status of the deceased—is evident in the region.<sup>34</sup> A transcription of dead/sick camp,

34. Archibald Meston, "Bribie Island," *Queenslander*, September 26, 1891, 607; Winterbottom, *Some Native Customs and Beliefs of the Jimibara*, 86.

Humpybong at Redcliffe was so named by Turrbal people because of the vacated huts of the first European settlement in the Bay.

Large gatherings of different clan and language group complicate the interpretation of the pre-colonial built environment, raising questions about the duration, composition and architecture of these camps. The spatial organization of camps at intergroup gatherings follows a pattern that is similar across the continent. In the vicinity of bora grounds, clans clustered in discrete camps in a spatial arrangement related to the direction of the group's estate.<sup>35</sup> In November 1823, the castaway Pamphlet visited the Redcliffe bora ground with a Bribie Island Aboriginal group, where

in a short time we arrived at a number of huts, which had been erected for the occasion. They were so numerous I could hardly count them; and each tribe (for there were many assembled to see the fight) appeared to have their huts distinct from the other .... The women of our party [eight or nine women, 12 men and 14 children] then immediately commenced building, and in less that two hours had finished five or six commodious huts, in which we all rested that night.<sup>36</sup>

35. Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences*, 44; Paul Memmott, "Sociospatial Structures of Australian Aboriginal Settlements," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (2002), 67–86.

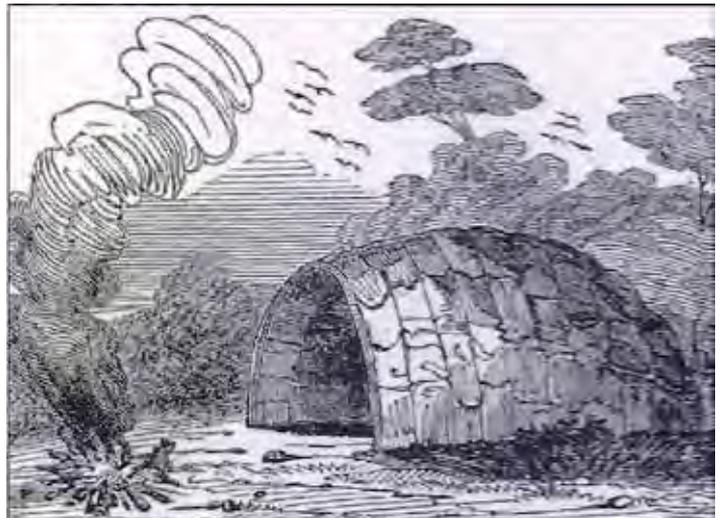
36. Steele, *Explorers of the Moreton Bay Region*, 78.

37. Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences*, 99; Walter Roth, "North Queensland Ethnography: Bulletin No. 16, Huts and Shelters," *Records of the Australian Museum* 8, no. 1 (1910), 55–66.

Figure 3. An Aboriginal hut on Stradbroke Island in 1843, based on observations by Backhouse. Source: Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, 374.

## Dwellings

Aboriginal groups along the coast of Southeast Queensland typically employed a repertoire of dwellings,<sup>37</sup> a characteristic of their built environment that was common across the continent.



Use of the different shelters generally followed seasonal patterns, although comparative studies of Aboriginal architecture suggest that a number of factors influenced the choice of dwelling.<sup>38</sup> In addition to climate, the duration of stay in a camp, the residential composition of the family unit, the availability of construction materials—not discounting individual and group preference—were potential determinants/influences on types of shelters.

38. Memmott, *Ganyah, Goondie and Wurley*; O'Rourke, "The Well-Crafted Mija: Traditional Aboriginal Building Skills and Knowledge in the Australian Wet Tropics," PhD diss. University of Queensland, 2012.

For Southeast Queensland, the archival records, which include a small number of drawings and photographs, permit only a reductive description of the repertoire that evidently varied in scale and form. Petrie identifies two types of dwellings, which varied in structure, form and scale and the number of occupants. The "usual kind" was the smaller of the two, built for four or five people.

Huts were never made very high; a man could not stand upright in them. However the second kind were much wider, and held about ten people. This time the foundation was formed of four long saplings bent over (not cracked) in the shape of hoops—with both ends stuck firmly in the ground. These hoops were crossed one over the other at equal distances; and so the openings in between were all alike, and were filled with sticks stuck in the ground at one end and tied to the hoops at the top, with the exception of one which was left for the doorway, and left only a tiny opening . . . . One mostly saw them on the coastline, the inland tribes always used the others.<sup>39</sup>

39. Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences*, 99.

Larger dwellings, based on a structure of sapling arches and invariably covered with melaleuca bark, were conspicuous in the early reports of the coastal zone. "The huts of these natives [Moreton Island] are of simple construction, yet comfortable enough, and perfectly waterproof—a framework of sticks in a dome-like form is covered with bark of the tea-tree (*Melaleuca*) and branches of trees."<sup>40</sup> The size of the larger huts appears to vary considerably, which tends to suggest greater formal variation than either Petrie or Roth describe.<sup>41</sup> Dimensions are rare in the archival data but the reports also refer to occupant numbers. In the Turrbal camp described by Flinders on the southern end of Bribie Island, the vaulted huts were between 3.6 and 4.7 metres long. Near to or at the same camp in November 1823, Uniacke wrote that:

40. John MacGillivray, *Narrative of the voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake, commanded by the late Captain Owen Stanley, R.N., F.R.S., &c., during the years 1846-1850: Including discoveries and surveys in New Guinea, the Louisiade Archipelago, etc.*, vol. 1 (London: T. & W. Boone, 1852), 49.

41. Roth, "North Queensland Ethnography."

Their huts are built of long slender wattles, both ends of which are stuck in the ground, so as to form an arch about three feet and a half or four feet high. These are strongly interwoven with rude-wicker-work, and the whole is covered with tea-tree (*melaleuca armillaris*) bark, in such a manner as to be quite impervious of to the rain; thus forming a commodious hut, capable of containing from ten to twelve people.

Allan Cunningham's journal entry in September 1824 describes the dwellings on Moreton Bay:

huts of very neat Construction & ample internal Capability were standing, which gave proof of their superior manner of building retreats from the weather over their Countrymen in the Mother Colony. Upon a curved framework of sapling wands, cross'd and secur'd at the several points of intersection by strips of Plageliana [*Flagellaria indica*], sheets of paper like bark of some Melaleuca were carefully laid in ample thickness to fully exclude the heaviest rains from the interior. These thatched roofs being externally secured by the stems of the Plageliana, whose suppleness is admirably adapted to all purposes where abrupt bends are required.<sup>42</sup>

42. Cited in Ian Evans, *The Queensland House: History and Conservation* (Mullumbimby, NSW: The Flannel Flower Press, 2001), 11.

The Moreton Bay dwellings were compared favourably with the Aboriginal shelters of Port Jackson, but as he sailed further up the east coast of the continent, Cunningham encountered more camps of well-made dwellings, which accommodated larger numbers of "natives," in camps that were also described as "villages."

### Sedentarization, Camps and "Villages"

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "village" as "a collection of dwelling-houses and other buildings, forming a centre of habitation in a country district; an inhabited place larger than a hamlet and smaller than a town, or having a simpler organization and administration than the latter." Writes Raymond Williams: "Even the idea of a village, which seems simple, shows in actual history, a wide variation: as to size and character, and internally in its variation between dispersed and nuclear settlements, in Britain as clearly as anywhere."<sup>43</sup>

43. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 1.



In the 1980s, two much-cited archaeology papers on the occupation of the east coast of Australia described Aboriginal camps as “villages,” based on a small number of observations in the historical record (some of which are referred to in this paper).<sup>44</sup> A more recent study of the Aboriginal dwellings and camps in the Wet Tropics Region collated a similar ethno-historical commentary, in which European reports of rainforest “villages” emphasized the permanent appearance of clusters of dwellings at campsites.<sup>45</sup> Aboriginal groups in the Wet Tropics appear to have been one of the most sedentary of Aboriginal societies, although the evidence never indicates permanent settlement—but certainly habitual use of particular sites.<sup>46</sup> Much like the archival records from southern Queensland, the majority of reports about the Wet Tropics describe the Aboriginal built environment in terms of camps or encampments, which is consistent with the language of anthropologists and linguists throughout the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

In recent authoritative historical literature on Aboriginal architecture and settlements,<sup>48</sup> the adoption of “village” to describe semi-sedentary camps is most likely an appropriation of the word from a relatively small number of nineteenth century sources. (This is certainly the case in the archaeological references where the quotation marks are retained.) In Australian architectural historiography, “village” is perhaps also useful in a figurative sense, revising long-held and stereotypical views of Aboriginal habitation as random and transient. But this usage is a subtle but significant shift in the interpretation of the pre-colonial built environments, which needs further clarification if it is to be a precise representation of the past. What combination of factors—scale, building type, morphology, duration—differentiates a hunter-gatherer village from a camp? The data on Moreton Bay presented in this paper are far from clear on these factors: similarly, for the more comprehensive evidence on the early contact history of the northeastern rainforest region.

Climate, ceremony, surpluses and sociality influenced the formation of camps of longer duration, and the continental records describe considerable variation in these determinants and the resulting camp morphology.<sup>49</sup> In the north, wet season camps were occupied for many months at a time, and, in the Moreton Bay District, the locations for semi-sedentary camps were strongly associated with marine resource abundance. Fragmented data show that semi-sedentary camps and intergroup gatherings were

44. Coleman, “A New Look at the North Coast”; Hall, “Sitting on the Crop of the Bay”.

45. O’Rourke, “The Well-Crafted Mija.”

46. See Heather Bult, “The Connection between the Gunditjmarra Aboriginal People and their Environment,” *PAPER Journal* 55–56 (2000): 1–18; Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley*, 191–95.

47. The translation of Aboriginal words for dwelling and camp is perhaps another reason to be cautious about using specific European terms to describe pre-colonial Aboriginal settlement types: for example, see Robert Dixon, *The Languages of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 105.

48. Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley*, 80–109; Memmott, “Aboriginal Architecture,” 2–3.

49. Nicholas Peterson, “Camp Site Location amongst Australian Hunter-Gatherers: Archaeological and Ethnographic Evidence for a Key Determinant,” *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 8, no. 3 (1973): 173–93; Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley*, 80–109.

50. Betty Meehan, Prue Gaffey, and Rhys Jones, *Fire to Steel: Aboriginal Exploitation of Pandanus and some Wider Implications*, in *Readings in Material Culture, Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, ed. Peter Lauer (St Lucia: Anthropology Museum, University of Queensland, 1979, 9), 73.

part of the repertoire of habitation for diverse Aboriginal groups across many parts of the continent. (In contrast, the duration of the evocatively named dinner camp could be measured in hours.<sup>50</sup>) At one end of the spectrum, camp and “village” might be used concurrently to describe a place of habitation, but at what point along the cline is the latter a more accurate description? This could be regarded as a semantic quibble but revision of key words can affect representations and perceptions of the past.

Across Southeast Queensland, an accurate reconstruction of Aboriginal settlement patterns is limited by the extent and quality of the historical data. Interpretations of the archival sources benefit from the study of both contextual data and comparative environments. We can conclude that habitual campsites were located in strategic places where larger, well-crafted dwellings tended to be built in response to the climate and prolonged occupation. Clarification of architectural terminology might make for more informed understanding of the built environments, but more importantly, knowledge of these significant places enriches the history of Australian landscapes.

