

Stannumville: suburb in the sand



Ron Rathbone History Prize 2022

STANNUMVILLE

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Cover photo: Stannumville, Bayside Council Library

Introduction

Many people are aware of the canvas and tin shacks that were erected by desperate people on the sandhills of La Perouse and Sans Souci during the throes of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Shanty towns such as these have a long history in Australia, particularly in pioneer and gold mining towns in Victoria and New South Wales during the Gold Rush. These makeshift settlements often housed men in country areas where both jobs and housing were in short supply and times were tough.

However, few will have heard of a New South Wales State Government scheme to house families in a purpose-built tent town during World War 1. Canvas Town, sometimes referred to as Calico Town or Tin Town, and later known as Stannumville, was built 3 ½ miles (5.6km) from Sydney, about a mile south of Daceyville. It was constructed just off the western side of Bunnerong Road, between Gardiner's Road and Maroubra Bay Road *'on a fine healthy site commanding views of La Perouse and Maroubra Bay which is not far distant.'* Oddly enough, it does not appear on maps of the period, which were either printed before its construction or after its demolition. This made its precise location subject to speculation until the discovery was made of a hand drawn addition to an existing Parish Map of Botany.^{1 2}

This work will examine the reasons why the government initiated the project, living conditions in the town, and the reasons for its demise.

Why Canvastown?

In the early part of the twentieth century housing for middle and low-income workers became a pressing issue for the NSW government. Newspaper reports in 1912 show that rents were increasing far more rapidly than a worker's rate of pay. The tightening of the money lending market made the situation even harder for both owner builders and rental property investors to finance projects.³

The New South Wales Legislative Assembly appointed a Select Committee to investigate the problem. One suggested solution was a government-built model town. Thus the Department of Works prepared plans for a new garden suburb at Daceyville. Although the prototypical town of Daceyville was completed before the Great War, the housing shortage continued to press low-income workers in the years immediately prior to the conflict. Daceyville offered several types of accommodation, charging rent of 14 shillings 6 pence and 16 shillings per week. It had been designed to offer working people a decent place to live at a modest rent, but it was still above the budget of the working class.

Justice Heydon conducted an Arbitration Court enquiry to establish the minimum wage in February 1914. He came to the conclusion that £2/ 8 s per week was sufficient for a family to live on, with the average lower-class worker in New South Wales paying rental of 12 shillings per week. Daceyville was therefore not really aimed at working class labourers such as the wool and tannery workmen who dwelt in Botany.^{4 5}

In an alternative solution in nearby Kensington, in 1912 the government proposed a scheme, offering cheap 20-year leasehold land plots for sale, on which a tenant would build their own house. Prospective buyers did not respond well to the idea. The uncertainty of a temporary use of the land, coupled with the sizable investment needed to build a house, proved too much for most people and consequently most plots failed to sell.⁶

The outbreak of World War I on the 28th July 1914 had serious consequences for a housing market already tightly squeezed. The Australian Worker newspaper reported to the Australian Workers Union members in August 1914 that some Broken Hill mines had closed, but they intended reopening by means of retaining some workers on a part-time basis. Similarly the Newcastle steelworks employees had been sacked, then reinstated part-time, while it was estimated that 80% of wharf labourers were now unemployed. This was most likely due to the reduction in shipping as Germany made sea travel a perilous affair. It was suggested that 15,000 men from New South Wales were out of work, either directly or indirectly due to the war.⁷

Things were about to get worse. Just five weeks into the war on 8 September 1914, the New South Wales Government Cabinet announced that in order to employ as many men as possible on the available finance, it would be necessary to adopt the half-time principle. While acknowledging that this would produce significant hardship, the government considered it better that many men had some work, rather than sacking half the workforce. Consequently, many full-time State Government employees, from the Public Works Department and the Water and Sewerage Board, were forced to go part-time. People were shocked to discover that this would commence immediately on the following Monday.⁸

People were travelling less by public transport as a result of the war. By the end of September the government allowed a 6 hour per week reduction in hours for selected tramways and railways workers, citing a reduction in fare income as the cause.⁹

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A standard working week was 48 hours. This may seem excessive to modern Australians, but the Eight-Hour Day campaign had resulted in only selected trades achieving eight hours work per day, six days per week. The Eight Hours Act was still in the future for Victoria and New South Wales, when it was finally legislated in 1916. Until that point, most people worked much longer hours. The modern idea of a five-day, 40 hour working week was not achieved until 1948.¹⁰

Under the new war-time rules, maximum employment in selected occupations reduced to 42 hours in both city and country areas. Bathurst railway depot achieved their goal by cancelling all Saturday work and increasing the lunchbreak from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. The workers' start and finish times would be unaltered. While today we might think that working a five-day week was an improvement, the resulting wages reduction would make life difficult for the rail labourers.^{11 12}

In a different cost-saving approach at Redfern, the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association were outraged to receive notice that the painters at Eveleigh railway workshop had been reclassified as assistant painters. Their wages would be reduced by a shilling per day with immediate effect.¹³ This was coupled with the Saturday closure of the rail workshops in October 1914.¹⁴

The Darling Harbour Goods Yards railway men were also working reduced hours. In a variation on a theme, although they were employed six days per week, they were forced to take unpaid double-length lunch breaks, and in other areas railway men would be rostered 1 ½ days less work per fortnight.¹⁵

Rail ballast was mined in the Western District of New South Wales 4.5 km North-West of Murrurundi at Ardglen Quarry. They announced they too would reduce to 42 hours per week and there was a worry that other quarries might follow suit.¹⁶

This was no doubt a severe blow to the men whose families were already living frugally. Numerous families would potentially become homeless because they did not earn enough to pay the rent. As so often happens in these circumstances, it was the waged labourers whose hours were reduced, and not the salaried managers.

The Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association's General secretary Claude Thompson questioned;

*'How can a man whose usual wage when working full time is £2/8/- per week, live, pay rent, educate and clothe his children, pay lodge fees, union fees, and the hundred and one expenses of keeping up a household on the wage of about 30/- a week?'*¹⁷

Hoyle, Minister for Railways, countered the argument by claiming that without the reduction in hours the railways would have needed to retrench 2,665 men.,¹⁸ while the Minister for Public Works, claimed that reducing his department's hours had meant they were able to employ retrenched employees from private companies in Broken Hill.¹⁹

The Minister for Public Works had not finished with cost-saving measures yet. At the end of 1914 he announced further reductions for the building trades within his department. They would be reduced from a 48-hour week to five 8-hour days. The Building Trades Employees Federation welcomed the move, as the industry was in a malaise and it was thought that this would provide more men with work.²⁰

Even prior to the reduction in working hours, wages were already below the minimum wage calculation that Justice Heydon had established in his 'Cost of living judgement'. Additionally, holiday

pay was abolished and workmen's compensation leave for injured workers was reduced to £1 per week.²¹

The consequent reduction in wages of up to 50%, placed public servants in a severe case of housing rental stress. Homeless civil servants were not a good look for a Labor government. The state government felt obliged to provide cost-effective housing for their workforce and a canvas town was seen as the answer. It's main appeal to parliament was that it would be swift to build and inexpensive. Moreover, the modest expenditure would be easily recouped through rental fees.

Rent would be cheap at one shilling per week. If residents wanted a tent with a floor they would pay 2 shillings for the first 30 weeks, followed by 1 shilling per week thereafter. Once the fees covered the £10 cost of the structure, the occupants would own it, although they would not own rights to the land on which it stood. It was estimated that it would take several years to pay it off, although the general consensus was that unprotected calico would only last a few months exposed to the weather. As usual with government projects the actual building costs blew out, with a revised estimate of £13/10s per 'house' rising to £15 when administrative costs were factored in.^{22 23}

The major disadvantage was that the accommodation would be considered substandard by many. Still, there were members of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council who considered that any roof over their constituents' heads was better than homelessness.²⁴ As Premier Holman himself said:

"Tents are not palaces, and no one pretends that they are, but the people who are occupying them have not come from palaces. They have come out of the wretched hovels which the landlordism of Sydney provided them in our back streets, and to which Mr. Henley and other spokesmen of landlordism would confine them during this time of crisis."

Stannumville was never intended to become a permanent accommodation solution. In response to criticism both in and out of parliament, Premier Holman stated unequivocally in November 1914 that it was an interim wartime measure.²⁵

One newspaper reporter lamented in 1915,

*'Among the impressions one takes away from Canvastown is the regret that such expedients are necessary in a land so bountifully blessed; that while the homeless are clamouring for roofs, and the hearts of many people are being broken for lack of the decent housing so necessary to the home-life of every community, so little really practical statesmanship is being shown to grip this vital problem in the right place. There is pleasure in the assurance that Canvastown is only for a time.'*²⁶

1914 Canvas Town construction

In the Mascot Council meeting of 29 September 1914, Alderman Courtenay drew attention to the government proposal that they might erect a so-called 'Canvas-Town' near Daceyville, a series of timber-framed canvas-walled houses, as a measure to alleviate the wartime housing problem. The Town Clerk was instructed to contact the State Government to acquire particulars of their intentions. ²⁷

The reply came the following month. In October 1914 the Director General of Public Works contacted Mascot Council with a more detailed plan. The aldermen's immediate thoughts were that if this was to proceed the 'houses' should not be solely for Works Department employees, but that all citizens in dire need should have access to the temporary accommodation.

Moreover they were concerned that the government might erect the tents then leave the council with the financial burden of providing sanitation services. They informed the Director General that the state government would have to pay the costs upfront of providing sanitation (dunny) pans and cover the ongoing costs of waste collection.

The council was not in a particularly secure financial position at this time. After a loan application for planned public works was rejected by the AMP Society and the Permanent Trustee Company, negotiations were underway between the council and the Commonwealth Bank. The additional costs of a new canvas town were therefore unacceptable to the aldermen.

It was debated whether to undergo a joint project with neighbouring Randwick Council. Then there was also the question of land ownership to consider. The council was not willing to offer the potential residents of this canvas town any rights to land ownership.

The council deliberations concluded that they should publish the proposal to gauge public opinion on the matter before proceeding further. ²⁸

Clearly the state government was not in a mood for consultation. The land had already been cleared and within a week the first houses were hastily erected by almost 100 labourers, ²⁹ after which the aldermen sent a deputation to inspect the result. Mayor Hicks, together with Aldermen Ingram, Hughes, and Thornton, accompanied the Overseer. What they found was dozens of poorly constructed, windowless, greyish tent houses ranged along the slopes of the Botany sandhills.



An official inspection of Calico Town. ³⁰

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Construction was flimsy, with studs, plates and rafters in 3"x 2" hardwood, and 3"x 1" collar ties and supports. This was covered by unbleached calico, a thinner and less durable fabric than the canvas which might be used for a camping tent. The two rooms each measured 8'x10' (2.4m x 3m), with a low 6' ceiling (1.8m). There were no floors. It was customary in country areas to tamp an earth floor in such circumstances, but the fledgling town was constructed on sandhills, so this was not an effective option. Neither was a sink, wash tub or laundry copper provided. If residents needed toilet facilities, there was one toilet pan for every 25 houses. One can only imagine the lengthy line-up for the toilet in the morning. ³¹

The aldermen were concerned about the potential spread of disease. They had previously expressed concern about sanitation, and after inspection they were convinced that the government had failed to provide adequate toilet pans or washing facilities.

They also worried about the social consequences of mixing different strata of society, which they described as 'herding all classes of the community in such a manner which would have a demoralising effect'.



A street in Calico town showing width of street separating houses.

³²

There were no streets, just a separation between rows of structures. In an era of gas lamp streetlights, there was no lighting, making it a dark and dangerous place to live, particularly for women and families. Many men in the outback lived in canvas towns in such conditions of privation, but the aldermen wondered whether their constituents' wives would agree to living there.

Despite the location of Canvas Town off Bunnerong Road, just over the boundary in the Botany Council area, Mascot felt that firm action was required by their own council. Alderman Courtenay was adamant they should take up the matter with their local member of the Legislative Assembly. Eventually it was decided that a public outcry might be more effective, and therefore the best approach would be for the Mayor to publicise the matter in the press. ³³

The first residents were preparing to move in during the last week of October 1914 when Mascot Mayor Thomas Henry Hicks wrote to the Sydney Morning Herald. As the newspaper was engaged in a vociferous campaign opposing the conditions of Calico Town, they willingly printed his letter. The Mayor described the lamentable living conditions, protesting that the state government had over-ridden the authority of the council to assess compliance with building regulations. ³⁴

The Honorary Secretary of the Daceyville Branch of the Political Labor League wrote to the council with concerns about the settlement, asking they forward the correspondence to Minister, which the council agreed to do. The aldermen were pleased that the Mayor's actions had raised public awareness and voted to continue their campaign. ³⁵

When he attended the Conference of the Local Government Clerks Association later that month Mayor Hicks brought the issue to their attention.³⁶ Regrettably, the Association discussion did not focus on the issues the Mayor was expecting. Rather than dwell on the usurpation of council decision-making, or the quality of accommodation offered, they were more concerned with the question of adult suffrage in the Local Government Amendment Bill.

Until 1941 the system was property-based franchise, allowing large property owners significant influence on the election of aldermen. A lodger's ability to vote was based on the value of the property they lodged in and their length of occupancy. The Minister for Works, Arthur Hill Griffith MLA (1861-1946), proposed extending the right to vote in council elections to all residents.

Since taxes were based on the value of property, most wealthy men believed that they should be the ones to decide how that money was spent by council. Canvas Town residents paid a pittance in rent to the state government; therefore they were deemed to have no claim to voting rights in local elections. Furthermore, the delegates alleged that Canvas Town residents were transient tenants in the suburb. If all adults living in the area were given the right to vote in council elections, they might exert undue influence on council, in opposition to the wishes of the long-term residents and businessmen. The delegates voted 126 to 24 against the notion of adult suffrage. The issue of living conditions at Canvas Town remained unresolved.³⁷

Wet weather delayed construction a couple of weeks, but the first stage of the project was predicted for completion by the end of October 1914.³⁸

One Sydney Morning Herald reporter disparagingly described the scene.

*'When last seen Canvas Town was still for the most part, in the elementary stages of construction and a drizzling rain added the final touch to the depressing appearance of the hillside, where the flapping calico walls or mere skeleton, of timber formed a picture between an execution ground and a fowl run.'*³⁹

A month later the Herald reporter was still not impressed:

*'Approaching the scene a stranger used to poultry farming would at the distance be inclined to exclaim, "What a magnificent poultry farm. Look at those beautiful hen houses, row after row of them, each built of fibro-cement, and covered with Ruberoid." Upon closer inspection he finds, however, that they are not hen houses, but human dwellings huddled together, and that the construction is not of fibro-cement, but of the most inflammable of all materials, calico.'*⁴⁰

He noted that although the site was sheltered from the Southerly winds off Botany Bay, it was unfortunately situated near a swamp which would breed mosquitos.

By the end of the year there was still no sewerage or garbage collection in the new 'suburb', but outdoor taps had finally been installed. Women had to carry buckets of water up the sandhill to their tent. Wastewater was thrown out of the tent door onto the grimy sand, a definite infection hazard. In the early days some women would wash their children in the lagoon, a reedy swamp at the bottom of the hill, but by November, if people wished to shower, they made their way to a large central tent where one shower bath was provided for every 24 residents.

Incredibly, the government intended to eventually expand this inadequate suburb to 500 dwellings, although at this point only 169 'houses' had been constructed, with a mere 17 tents occupied.⁴¹

Unsurprisingly, the press was appalled at these conditions, with numerous country newspapers reproducing the Sydney Morning Herald's scathing report.⁴²

After receiving much criticism about building standards, the Legislative Assembly Cabinet made the decision to construct timber floors in the dwellings, and to improve sanitation and bathing facilities for the luckless residents. They voted to send a committee to inspect Canvas Town to investigate further.⁴³

Not all the tented rooms were floored in timber. If there was a three-room tent, then two rooms would have flooring, but the childrens' bedroom might have a few boards placed under the beds for stabilisation on the sand. People made do by laying pieces of oiled cloth on the ground in a vain attempt to keep out the sand. The three roomed tents were renting at 2 shillings per week and the two rooms at 1s/6d.

The government and the newspapers reported that the residents were happy; '*General satisfaction is expressed by the tenants with the improvements, and the cheap, healthy conditions under which they live*'.⁴⁴

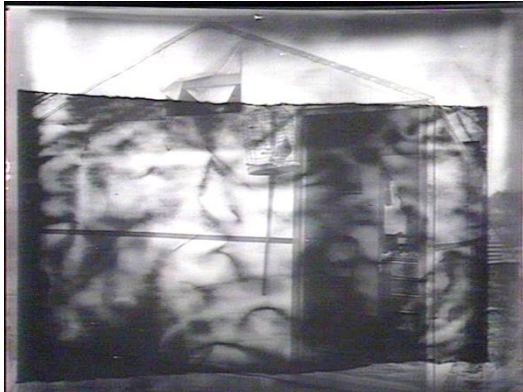
In the coming months, The Sun newspaper interviewed two thankful residents who had escaped the slums of inner city. Botany air was fresh and clean compared to the sooty air of Sydney, significantly improving their health. Their former two-room dwellings were in major disrepair, rat-infested, and leaked badly, and which must surely have adversely affected tenants health as they inhaled mould spores. Rent was exorbitant, and when one man lost hours and another was retrenched, the two families fell into rent arrears. One of the women had just given birth to her fifth child and was still recovering in bed when the landlady and her son threatened eviction. The landlords sold their belongings to recoup the rent, turning them out into the streets with young children and toddlers. If it wasn't for Calico Town, their plight would have left them homeless.⁴⁵

They were thankful they had a roof over their heads, but it seems unlikely they were overly comfortable.

In fact, as the first summer approached and the temperatures were rising, the residents complained of the stifling heat which was reflected from the sandy soils. Canvas becomes extremely hot during summer, and there was no ventilation other than opening the door. There were no trees or other vegetation on site to mitigate temperature. It was little consolation that the agents claimed that the roof was an insulator which did not absorb heat. It was constructed of Ruberoid, a waterproof roofing material composed of felt impregnated with bitumen. In contrast, the nights were chilly.⁴⁶

This matter came to court in February 1915 as the temperature hit 100° (38°C) in the shade. Tenant Francis Xavier Field cut the partition 'wall' between the living and sleeping area. The authorities were so out of touch with the plight of the residents that he was prosecuted for malicious damage to government property. Despite his plea for clemency and a clear explanation that his intent was not malicious but a desperate attempt at improving ventilation, the judge disgracefully found him guilty, fining him 10 shillings plus 9 shillings sixpence costs. He was so broke that he couldn't even afford a day off work to attend court and instead sent his mother with a handwritten letter to state his case, which makes the severity of the fine quite disgraceful. Still no official action was taken to improve ventilation.⁴⁷

There was also the issue of fire danger. The fireplace, for both warmth and cooking, was placed within 45cm of the calico walls. It was constructed of a few bricks at the base, topped with a chimney of galvanised iron salvaged from the demolition of a machinery shed in The Domain. Cooking was accomplished by placing pots on a series of iron bars laid across the top of the bricks, somewhat similar to an outdoor BBQ one might have found in a national park. It was badly designed, as large pots were wider than the grid and dangerously jugged over the edge. This was an accident waiting to happen, particularly for children. The danger of the calico catching fire, or hot ashes spilling onto timber floorboards, was also clearly apparent. Today it is a safety imperative that you never cook in a tent on a camping expedition. A tent will ignite and turn to ashes in a matter of seconds.⁴⁸



Interior of calico house.⁴⁹ Although the photo is indistinct, a birdcage can be seen hanging from the rafters, and there is an opening to a room. A thin sheet appears to have been hung in front of the entrance for privacy and protection.

As there was no electric light, residents used hurricane lamps at night. Lack of privacy, from being seen in silhouette through the flimsy walls, was the least of their worries. The flame is shielded by a bulbous glass chimney. It is not difficult to knock over the lamp,

breaking the glass, igniting the fabric tent walls and spilling the highly flammable kerosene fuel.

However, the Minister for Works, Arthur Griffith, dismissed fears, assuring residents that the calico had been coated in a fire-proof substance and there was sufficient width between the buildings to ensure that a fire would not spread between dwellings.^{50 51}

When it rained there was often leakage on the sides of the tents, so some were painted black or green while others were painted in a supposedly waterproof coating. Discomfort increased with the annoyance of swarms of flies and painful itchy bites from insects in the sand.

Despite the privations, some families considered the situation better than living in damp slum dwellings in the city, where they were harassed by landlords for late payment of rent.⁵²

Politicians such as Edward J. Kavanagh on the one hand asserted that it wasn't an ideal solution, "*No Government would want people to live in such places permanently,*" and on the other hand condescendingly maintained that it was not a privation but an improvement in living conditions for those whose husbands had been working in the country and living in rough railway camps:

*"Don't forget that the people who will be living out there will be mostly used to that sort of life-women who have been accustomed to rag-bag or galvanised iron shelters, following their husbands along the railway lines they worked on."*⁵³

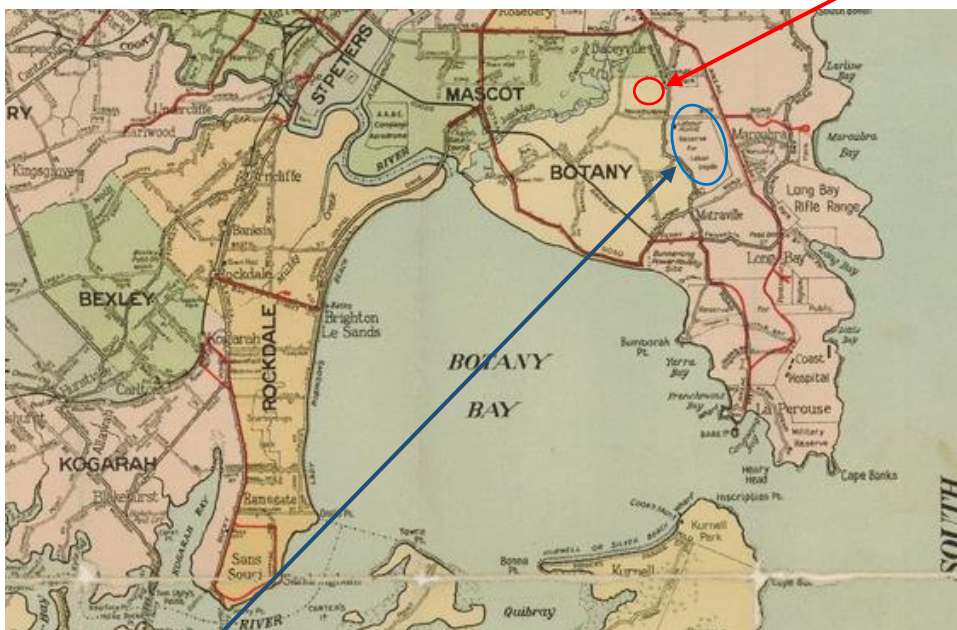
The government optimistically espoused the idea of cultivating the area into a 'garden suburb' by encouraging the residents to plant fruit and vegetable gardens. In this period most families would have grown at least a few basic vegetables at home. Often growing your own vegetable was the only way for a family to afford to eat, but this was hardly a great example of town planning. Vegetable gardens were surely wishful thinking on the part of the authorities, as the tents were erected on sandhills, hardly conducive for growing vegetables which need quality fertile soil to thrive.

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About 168 men were employed at the nearby Labour Depot on Bunnerong Road and Maroubra Roads. It was proposed to supply groceries to Stannumville from the depot, replacing the small vendors who initially delivered food to the settlement. Food prices had increased significantly due to the war, but the meat, milk, butter and eggs purchased by Canvas Town residents from the State Labour Camp were cheaper than regular retail.⁵⁴

The Labour Camp was a social welfare scheme for unemployed men at risk of homelessness. The government provided accommodation, food and clothing, access to a recreation hall and reading room. They were paid a small wage in exchange for farm labour. Once they were on their feet again, they were sent to new employment. The work consisted of tending pigs and poultry and growing vegetables and flowers. The government recouped costs by selling the produce at a competitive rate. Canvas Town residents, situated just across the road from the farm, were a ready target market for the produce.⁵⁵

Stannumville is located 1 mile south of Daceyville on the western side of Bunnerong Road, between Gardiners Road and Maroubra Bay Road, adjacent to the swamp.



The State Labour Depot is marked on the Botany Map. Photo: State Library of NSW.⁵⁶



**Rifle Club State Labour Farm,
Randwick.** ⁵⁷

At the end of the year, only a few of the tents were occupied by public servants, the Minister for Public Works announced that from January 1915 women with children could apply for residence if their husbands had gone to war.

The settlement was progressing well, with a caretaker onsite to administer the facility. A tin recreation hall was built near the lagoon, to be used by the children in the daytime and adults at night. Soon there would be a laundry facility where, for threepence an hour, women could rent a copper to boil the dirty linen, together with two tubs for rinsing. A man would be employed to prepare and stoke the wood fire under the coppers, but doing the weekly laundry would still be a heavy chore. ^{58 59}

Despite these modest improvements, facilities would need to be improved drastically over the next few months if the residents were to live comfortably.



View of Canvas Town, ⁶⁰

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Calico town from Bunnerong Road,
looking east.⁶¹

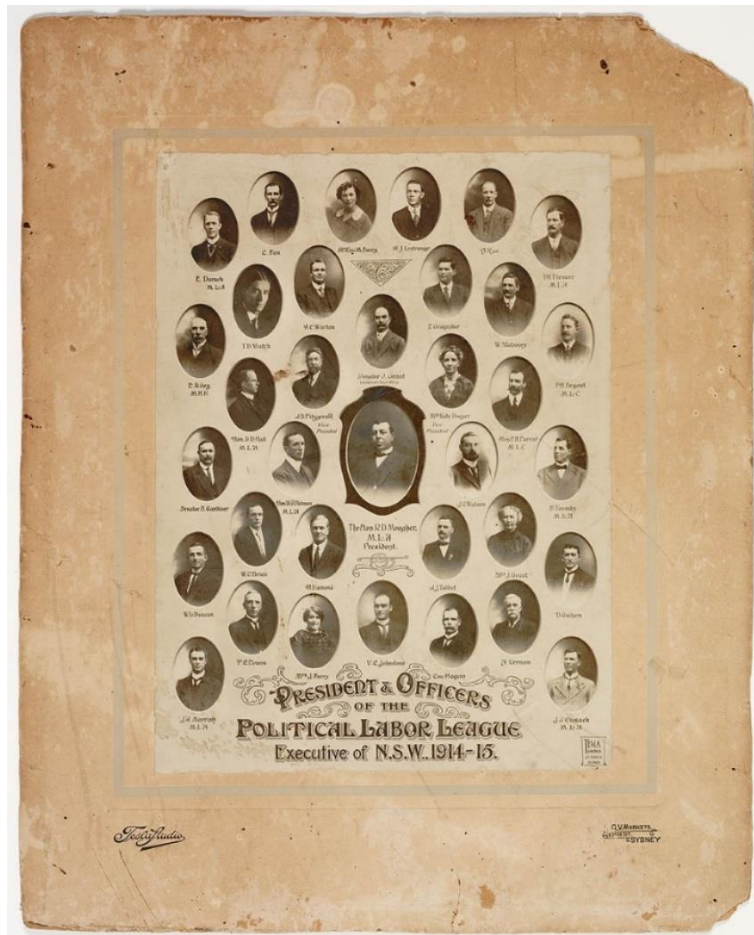


Calico town from Bunnerong Road,
looking east.⁶²

Stannumville Settlement Board

Originally called the Canvas Town Board of Management or the Canvas Town Board of Control, the Stannumville Settlement Board was established by the NSW Executive Council on 1st December 1914 to supervise operations and lobby on behalf of the residents. It featured two members of parliament, union leaders and several remarkable women.

The initial members were Chairman Frank Brennan (State Labor Bureau), Kate Dwyer, Mrs. M. Griffith, Mrs. Eva Mary Seery, Edward John Kavanagh M.L.C. (1871 - 1956) (Sydney Labor Council), Dan O'Sullivan (Railway Workers Union), Frederick Joseph Page, M.L.A., and Arthur Vernon (United Laborers Union).⁶³ J.J. Talbot (Political Labor League) joined the Board in June 1915.⁶⁴



President & officers of the Political Labor League Executive of N.S.W., 1914-15 / Tesla Studio, Q.V. Markets, George St., Sydney.

Eva Mary Seery (top row), Kate Dwyer (3rd row), J.J. Talbot (5th row)

Photo: NSW State Library⁶⁵

Workers' rights advocate Mrs Eva Mary Seery (nee Dempsey) was born in Yass in 1874.⁶⁶ The progressive Dempsey sisters Sophia and Eva boldly joined the Grenfell branch of the Labor League as 17 and 15-year-olds in 1889, as the only women in the branch. Denied the right to vote, they devoted their energies to fundraising, all the while developing a sense of how the Labor movement operated politically.

When Eva was finally granted a voice in political affairs in 1904 by giving a speech at the Waverley branch in Sydney, she rapidly progressed in her political career. Firstly joining the Women's Committee, she helped form the Surrey Hills League in 1906 and three years later was elected Secretary of the newly formed Labor Conference. She tirelessly canvassed for the party throughout suburban Sydney and country New South Wales in a voluntary capacity.

Eva Seery was President of the Domestic Workers Union. She vigorously campaigned for the eight-hour working day and women's right to stand for parliament. Eva eventually stood unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate.⁶⁷ Women Members of Parliament were permitted federally in 1902 (although an elected female member was not achieved until 1943). This did not occur in New South Wales until after World War 1 (the first woman was elected in 1931). With her impeccable Labor pedigree it is therefore no surprise that she was vitally interested in the Stannumville experiment.⁶⁸

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The other noteworthy woman on the Stannumville Board was Kate Dwyer. Kate was Secretary of the Women's Progressive Association, while her sister Annie Golding was President. Together they pressed for university reform, particularly opposing life tenure for the senate and promoting educational opportunities for women. Kate was in a unique position to further their aims when she was appointed to the Sydney University Senate in 1916. This was quite an achievement as she was not only Australia's first female university senator, but only the second in the entire British Empire.

Kate was active in the labour movement, campaigning for improved wages and conditions for women and juvenile factory workers, reasonable rent for low-income workers' housing, and the elimination of poverty among unskilled female workers. Her efforts were more than political rhetoric. She established a factory where women could be employed while learning a trade skill. Kate was elected President of the Political Labor League (PLL) Women's Organising Committee, Vice-President of the Political Labor Executive, and twice appointed delegate to their interstate conference.^{69 70}

A later board member was Mrs Rosalind Black (1866-1917), wife of the Chief Secretary George Black. Rosalind trained in obstetrics at St Margaret's Hospital then ran a business for six months. She held numerous committee and board positions on fundraising bodies for charities and hospitals. Despite health problems that resulted from a tram collision in 1909, Rosalind worked tirelessly for numerous causes, with a particular interest in hospitals. Her husband lovingly praised her to the press. *'She has been everything to me, mate and counsellor, champion and constant companion, critic and comforter, helper and heartened, best and truest friend.'*

Concerned for her health, prominent surgeons Sir Herbert Maitland and Dr Langloh P. Johnstone ordered her to cease her philanthropic activities in March 1916. Despite receiving treatment in Australia and England, her condition declined, and she died the following year.^{71 72}

Edward Kavanagh MLC was an obvious choice for the government delegate to the committee, as he was keenly interested in workers' rights. He had risen from working class occupations in the shipping industry and rag trade to become a well-respected union official. He assisted in the formation of the Presser's Union, was a delegate to the Clothing Trades' Council, and the Trades and Labor Council (TLC), where he joined the executive from 1900 until 1918. He was elected president of the TLC from 1905 until 1906. As a member of the Eight Hour Day committee he advocated for the right of workers to be employed for a maximum of eight hours per day. Edward was also a delegate to the Trade Union Anti-Conscription conference in 1916 and to the Federal Grand Council of Labor in 1915 and 1916.

After joining the Labor Party, he was elected as a Member of the NSW Legislative Council for a remarkable 22 years from 1912 to 1934 and became a member of the Australian Labor Party Central executive from 1907 until 1910. Between the wars Kavanagh briefly became Minister for Labor for three months.⁷³

Frederick Joseph Page (1858 - 1929) MLA was the member for Botany from 1907-1917. Perhaps at first glance he was not quite as obvious a choice as his colleague Kavanagh, as his service on parliamentary committees was primarily on the Refreshment Committee, but as the local Botany representative he would have the unique standing of a prominent local resident. Page was a Master Tanner who moved to Botany in 1887 taking over Garton's tannery in partnership with J. Colhoun. His initial foray into politics was as an Alderman and later Mayor of Botany 1898 – 1903.⁷⁴

1915 Tin Town

The Board of Control were under no illusion that the canvas settlement would exist merely for a couple of months. They realised that a long-term view was needed for town facilities. In January 1915 the Canvas Town Board of Control, representing the needs of the residents, applied to the Lord Mayor of Sydney Municipal Council, Alderman Richards, for electricity connection. They were not talking about power to individual structures, but simply the installation of five electric lights to illuminate the toilet block. It was thought that it would be relatively simple to run a power line 50 metres from the main supply line which passed along nearby Bunnerong Road. Naturally the residents would pay tax on the supply.

They were exceedingly unhappy with the reception they received. Mayor Richards decided that oil lamps were quite sufficient for their needs. If the Commissioners were prepared to pay the 'preposterous' (quoting Frank Brennan the Chairman) £60 cost of three or four electricity poles, then they would consider the request. The Commissioners had no money to be able to pay in advance and a loan repayment scheme was not offered by the council.^{75 76}

The Town Clerk, Thomas Huggins Nesbitt, clearly did not understand the request which the Mayor relayed to him. Nesbitt indignantly informed the newspapers and the Electric Light Committee that,

*'If it is intended that the City Council should light the separate premises occupied by the tenants at canvas town area, then it will be necessary for the Government to become responsible for and discharge the actual capital outlay incurred, also to become responsible for payments for the current supplied to the tenants; otherwise the Idea would be unreasonable and absolutely unapproachable so far as the City Council is concerned.'*⁷⁷

Besides which, he declared that the Botany Council should have made the request, not the Board of Control, as Canvas Town wasn't within the Sydney Council area.

When electric lights were finally installed, the settlement's street lighting operated by clockwork, switching on at dusk and off at dawn.

Canvas Town was now partially occupied by the wives and children of civil servants from the Public Works Department, Water and Sewerage Board, Harbor Trust, and Railways and Tramways. Many of the latter were themselves camped in tents beside remote country rail lines while their wives camped in Botany. The total occupation of Canvas Town was 132 people — 23 men, 28 women, 42 boys, and 38 girls – utilising less than a third of the available tents. Applications were invited from the families of soldiers in active overseas service, and women whose husbands were employed in the countryside by the Government Wheat Land Clearing Scheme.

Remarkably, in January 1915, the Railway Workers and General Labourers Association of NSW Conference praised the Canvas Town scheme. Possibly the Botany camp was far superior to the rough railway camps their members lived in when constructing rail lines.

'Although much hostile criticism has been levelled at the scheme, in its initial stages, it is satisfactory to know that the tenants are highly pleased with what has been done for them by the Government'. W. Rosser, Trades Hall address to Railway Workers Union Conference.⁷⁸

In contrast, at the annual meeting of the Master Builders Association, Chairman W. Williamson declared,

*'The "canvas town" experiment at Kensington he could only designate as one of the most disgraceful exhibitions of construction he had ever seen or ever expected to see.'*⁷⁹

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A year later at the Labor Conference of April 1916, the Railway Workers Union had changed its tune. There was much contention regarding the introduction of a bill to regulate rents to make housing affordable to the working class. Although the conference delegates voted against the Railway Union's position 29 to 23, the union's stance was articulated clearly.

'We disapprove of such temporary expedients as canvas towns, etc., and demand a measure to regulate the rents of workers' homes.'^{80 81}

Reports vary, but by the end of March the resident numbers rose to 70 families: a total population of 364, comprising 131 adults and 233 children.

The calico was not wearing well. During high winds it would tear from the timber framework. The Board of Control arranged to supply residents with timber and iron sheets to make improvements to their tents and convert the site from a Calico Town to a Tin Town. Where large families were accommodated in two tents, they would be amalgamated to form one dwelling. Although the occupants would be carrying out the work themselves, rather than labourers from the Public Works Department, the government had no intention of giving them building supplies for nothing. They would be paying additional rent until the materials were paid for.^{82 83}

Meanwhile, in January the Minister for Education, Mr. Carmichael, was in the process of considering the erection of a school on the site.⁸⁴ The Department of Public Instruction issued a notice in the Government Gazette in March 1915 that they intended to open a public school at Canvas Town.⁸⁵

By April fifty of the tents were still unoccupied, some due to faulty construction. Many residents had commenced renovations by adding a tin roof or walls, although the government announced that all tents would be re-constructed in tin in the near future. The conversion to tin was completed swiftly by early June. Two-room dwellings were placed side by side to form one 4-room home, with the promise of a verandah soon to come.⁸⁶ Unfortunately the improved conditions meant a substantial rise in rent to 4 shillings sixpence per week.⁸⁷

The women were reportedly relieved that the promised laundry facility was finally being erected. It was completed by mid-May, together with the installation of several electric lights.⁸⁸

There had been many accusations and counter arguments regarding the health of the site during the preceding year. The Botany Sanitary Inspector was not convinced that it was a clean environment, particularly when three cases of diphtheria were reported in one family. He informed the aldermen that conditions at Stannumville were in a 'very unsatisfactory state of affairs'. Council sent his report to the Housing Board but took no further action.⁸⁹

However, the disease would not be triggered by living in a tent per se. Although the individual families were living in cramped conditions, the tents were separated from other neighbouring family's tents by a fair distance, and it would be reasonably possible for a family to isolate from other families during outbreaks of illness.

Diphtheria is caused by a bacterium. The patient is highly contagious through coughing or sneezing near healthy people. Today it is prevented through vaccination and treated with antibiotics, but a vaccination had not yet been perfected and it would be more than three decades before antibiotics were widely available in Australia. In this period isolation was the best option available for sufferers of this potentially deadly respiratory disease. The outbreak seems to have remained confined to the one family, as no more reports appeared in the local newspapers.⁹⁰

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The spiritual welfare of the residents was well catered for. Three denominations were holding church services on site. Their educational needs would soon be catered for as at long last a schoolhouse was under construction at the top of the hill.⁹¹

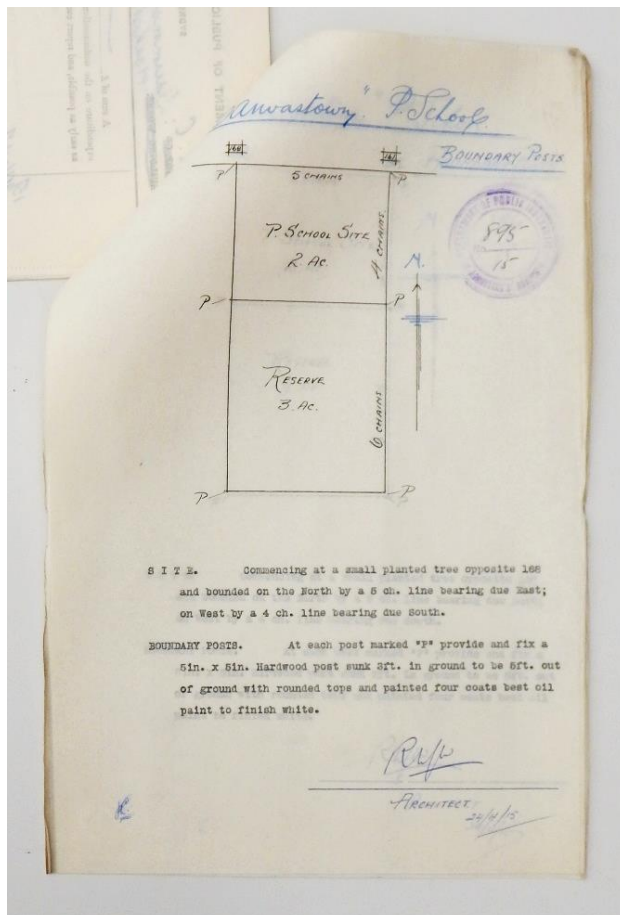
The Stannumville Settlement Board had hoped to persuade residents to create gardens, but surely it was simply too much hard work on sandy soils with no ready water supply and no spare money to invest in the luxury of a garden. It had now been in existence for 10 months, but the settlement was described by visitors as a 'desolate waste' due to the lack of fences or gardens. This was held in contrast to the garden suburb of Daceyville just up the road, where although there were no front fences, house proud residents cultivated lush lawns and springtime flowers, and vines draped around the shady porches. The contrast of tidy brick cottages with red tile roofs could not be in more contrast than the dull grey tin shacks of inaptly named Canvas Town.⁹²

Canvas Town School

The new residents had barely settled into their canvas houses when it became apparent that a school was needed. There were dozens of children and few options for their education. Local public schools were full to overflowing and not everyone could afford fees for the private Daceyville Catholic school. Not that Protestants in this era would have considered sending their children to a Catholic institution; sectarianism was rife.⁹³

In early January 1915 the Canvas Town Board of Management pressed the government for action on a school. They initially proposed using an existing on-site building, which was rejected by the Department of Instruction as completely unsuitable. This structure was the open recreation shed of galvanised iron 40 ft x 12 ft (12m x 3.6 m) with an 8 ft high (2.4m) Ruberoid roof. There was no ceiling, and more importantly, only three walls.⁹⁴

On 25th February 1915, the parents of Canvas Town formally applied to the Department of Public Instruction for the erection of a school. Their argument was that although Lilyvale School was situated a mere ¼ mile away, and Daceyville 1 ¼ miles from the settlement, the former was completely full and Daceyville had no further accommodation for children aged under ten. They pointed out that the population of the surrounding suburbs was expanding and the large number of children now living at Canvas Town warranted an additional facility be built on site.



Thirty-five families pledged to send their children to the new school if it was erected. Of the 160 children at Canvas Town, there were potentially 43 girls and 43 boys who would attend, ranging from 5 to 13 years old. Most parents had two or three school age children. The parents were no doubt pleased when they received notification on 4th March that their application was successful.

In early March the Architects Branch drew up a simple site plan. In view of the urgency of need and the limited budget available, it was not proposed to construct new buildings. An existing portable building would be moved and recycled from Drummoyne School. It would need to be temporarily sited at Chatswood before transportation to Botany. Some minor modification was required; the addition of lavatories, ceilings, and hat and cloak rooms.

Architect's plan for school site 1915. NSW State Archives and Records.

The order to urgently install a portable double classroom on the Canvas Town site was issued by the Department of Public Instruction, Architects Branch, within the week on 10th March 1915. An initial outlay was authorised for £177.

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The Department of Public Instruction applied to the Housing Board for dedication of a two-acre site for the school and a further three acres for a reserve. In other words, the Department of Public Instruction wanted to own the five-acre site. The request was rejected, as the Housing Board needed to retain use of the site for future housing subdivision development. The Housing Board were prepared to offer temporary permissive occupancy of the site and permit erection of the school buildings, and this compromise was readily accepted by the Department of Public Instruction.

A site was proposed by Grieves for the new school, in the northeast corner of the settlement, but after inspection by the Department of Public Instruction officials, it was decided that the location was too close to Daceyville Garden Suburb and they preferred that the Daceyville children attend the existing school in their area. The new facility would be created purely for the children of Canvas Town.

Lawford's revised position was situated adjacent to huts numbers 163 to 161, about 50m south of a line of scrubby tress along the ridge. The only available map of Stannumville shows both locations.

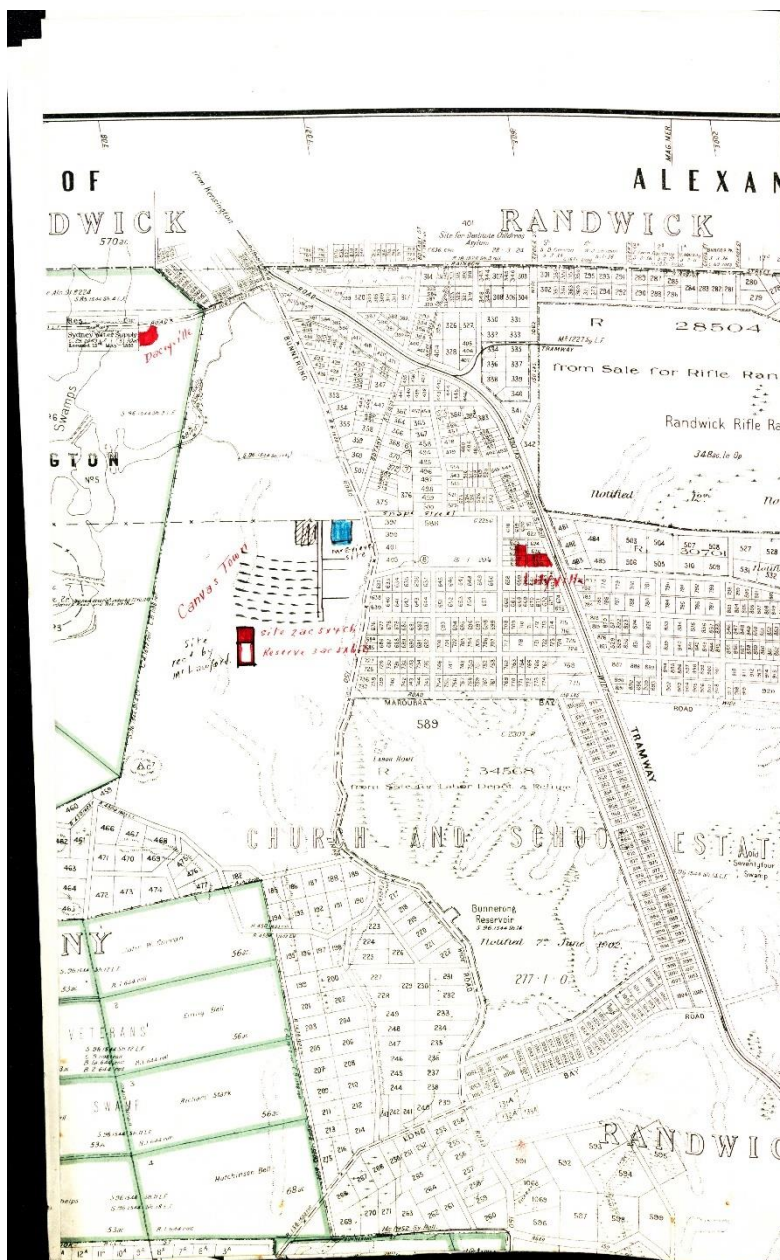


Photo: Parish Map of Botany, County of Cumberland, Metropolitan Land District Eastern Division of NSW, 3rd Edition. 10th April 1905 with 1915 hand drawn annotation showing the location of Canvas Town and its school. The map shows the rejected school site, initially proposed by Grieves, in blue, and the second successful Lawford site in red.

Map held by NSW State Archives and Records ⁹⁵

An enterprising resident named Joseph Preston applied to clear the scrub around the new school to ensure that snakes were not found in the vicinity, but he was refused. It was decided that the vegetation was needed to hold the sandy soil and prevent erosion, so he was only permitted to clear a three foot (one metre) wide path to the building in exchange for a small fee.

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The two schoolrooms were very simply furnished with student desks, a table and chair for each teacher, two cupboards for the storage of schoolbooks, two large blackboards screwed to the walls and 100 hat pegs in the cloakroom.

It was common in this period for students of multiple ages and grade levels to share a single teacher in the one classroom. The curriculum was arranged in classes 1 to 5, based around a set of graded reading material in the subjects of reading, writing, arithmetic, history and geography. Generally, it took more than a year to complete each grade.

There was no electric light. An appeal for electricity was refused in September 1915, as the Department of Public Instruction claimed they had no funds to facilitate its installation. Since classes were held during daylight hours this not considered a problem, although anyone hiring the building at night would need kerosene-fuelled hurricane lamps.

Facilities were basic. One should not think of sewerage toilets when describing the school lavatories. Toilets consisted of a large black metal tin, referred to as a sanitary pan, with a wooden toilet seat above it. The odour and germs would be controlled by the addition of creosote to the pan. The pans would be collected, emptied, and replaced weekly by the sanitary collector, at a cost of sixpence per pan for six pans.

Due to a delay in assembly caused by thefts of building materials from the site, construction was not completed until 8th June. The new Provisional School finally commenced 5th July 1915,⁹⁶ with seventy-three pupils in attendance. Provisional Schools were elementary schools which were established in areas where at least 15 children (but fewer than the 25 required for a public school) could be expected to attend. This classification of Canvas Town School is therefore a little surprising, because from the beginning 86 children were on the roll. It may be that because Canvas Town was considered a temporary settlement, a full Public School was not thought to be appropriate. In this school type the parents often had to meet many of the costs of the school. The teacher would frequently be unqualified or of the lowest classification.⁹⁷ They were therefore fortunate that a highly experienced teacher Edward Moran joined the school as Principal, together with an assistant teacher Mr Harrison.

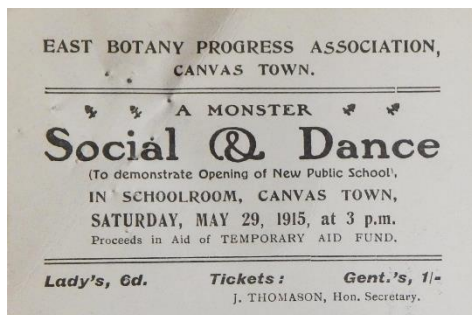
Having taught in Liverpool, Mount Kembla, Quaama (30km north of Bega) and Cudal (31km west of Orange) public schools for over three decades,^{98 99 100 101} Moran would have been used to small one-class schools, although when he moved from the rural Central West to suburban Sydney he was probably expecting a better quality of school facility than a temporary prefabricated and recycled structure.¹⁰² Principal Moran retired in 1932 after his final appointment to Plunkett St School.¹⁰³

Teachers had no control over where they were stationed or how long they stayed. Unlike today where principals hire and fire their staff, the centralised Department of Public Instruction moved teachers regularly. There would be a succession of teachers at the little canvas school over the next three years. Olive B Cropp was appointed a probationary assistant teacher to the fledgeling school in June 1916.¹⁰⁴ Presumably her probation was successful as later that month the existing teacher, Miss Gladys Reynolds, was transferred from Stannumville to Mosman Infants,¹⁰⁵ and Olive moved to Moorfields School in October that year. When her colleague Principal Moran moved from Stannumville school to Earlwood in October 1916, he was replaced by Walter Home from Abermain school.¹⁰⁶ Walter's appointment was brief, like the others before him. Principal Home moved to Oatley School the following year when the Stannumville school closed.¹⁰⁷

On the whole, school attendance was excellent, although the *Public Instruction Act* of 1880 only compelled parents to send children to school for a minimum of 70 days per six-month period from

the age of six.¹⁰⁸ Presumably, with little for the children to do other than play in the sandhills, and 228 children living in the settlement, the mothers were only too keen for their youngsters to attend school. Except for two children from one family who were leaving the area very soon, every eligible child was attending school. By the end of July, 82 pupils studied at Canvas Town, 20 at Daceyville Catholic School, 3 at Maroubra Public, 3 at Lilyvale Public, and 1 at Long Bay Public; totalling 109 students. Three more children were over school age (leaving age was 14 years) and the remaining toddlers were under six years old.

Now that the settlement had a new school building, the residents could see its potential as a multi-use site. The East Botany Progress Association asked whether they could use the building for a social occasion. They were given permission for an opening event, prior to installation of the furniture, but refused permission to do so once the furniture was installed. More investigation into this request revealed that in fact the association wanted to hold euchre parties and dances, to which admission would be charged. Although the entrance fees had been intended to raise funds for charity work, issuing 10-shilling relief vouchers for desperate families, at this point the Department of Public Instruction refused point blank to let any function take place.



Ticket for the charity social dance which never took place. NSW State Archives.

They were not the only people to see the possibilities. Since January that year the Salvation Army had been holding Sunday School for around 40 children, with 48 on the roll. The Anglicans and Catholics also held services on site, but it is remarkable that a minor denomination such as The Salvation Army attracted 47% of school aged children (21% of the total children). When they heard that the

canvas houses were to be pulled down and replaced with tin, the Army requested use of the school for religious meetings under the supervision of Ensign E. Trenwith. After receiving initial permission in May, a month later the Minister intervened. Notwithstanding the fact that general religious instruction had been permitted in government schools since the enactment of the 1880 Public Instruction Act, the Minister explained that under Regulation 4 of this Act, there was a general prohibition on using schools for church services or other sectarian purposes. The Church of England was also refused permission.

The Department of Public Instruction – who presumably understood the Act – was happy to give permission, but it seems that either Minister didn't know what he was talking about, or he considered the Salvation Army dogmatical. Additionally, he quotes the wrong section. Section 4 relates to ownership of land. Perhaps he meant section 7 which states:

*'7. In all schools under this Act the teaching shall be strictly non-sectarian but the words "secular instruction" shall be held to include general religious teaching as distinguished from dogmatical or polemical theology'.*¹⁰⁹

The Salvation Army did not give up easily. Despite an appeal by Salvation Army Divisional Headquarters, they were refused a second time. They had been using one of the canvas houses for services. Now they applied to the Canvas Town Settlement Board of Control to use one of the new dwellings which were under construction.

In contrast, when the Political Labor League of NSW applied in July to hold fortnightly Monday night meetings in the school they were approved, because it was not religious in nature.

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Many schools offered swimming lessons, but the considering that most of the men were out of work, the Stannumville parents were too poor to afford paying for a trip to a municipal or private pool. There was however a small lake formed by a depression in the ground, situated about 100 metres from the school, where children would often play. Most of the children couldn't swim and they were clearly at risk of drowning in the unsupervised pond, so Principal Moran held swimming lessons in the pond each Friday from 3.00-3.30pm. The water wasn't too murky, as it was fed by fresh mains water from a pipe. Although he didn't consider himself an expert in any way, Mr Moran was a good swimmer who felt confident he could perform a rescue if needed. He considered that there was little danger of drowning as the water was shallow, reaching was only up to the boys' shoulders. Hopefully this wouldn't be necessary, as Miss Reynolds the assistant teacher couldn't swim.

On the 24th August 1915, the school's name was altered to reflect the settlement's name change from Canvas Town to Stannumville.

As the composition of the Stannumville settlement changed and residents either found work or alternative accommodation, it was clear that neither the tin town or its' school would survive much longer. A report from Principal W.J. Horne dated 24th September 1917 stated that enrolment on 10th September was a mere 25, with 24 students in attendance. Chief inspector J. Dawson, requested a further report explaining why attendance was so low.

J Dennis' reply on 4th August 1917 put the nail in the coffin for the school,

'The school building is a temporary structure put up to meet a temporary need. The group of residents round the school has been broken up. Most have left and others are to leave soon. The distance from the Lilyvale School is less than three quarters of a mile. I recommend that the Stannumville Public School be closed.'

By the 15th of August 1917 Principal Horne reported that there were only 14 children left. Four families of eleven children had departed in the previous week. He was advised that the remaining residents had all received eviction notices from the Housing Board. Some government actions seem to take forever, but at other times they can be surprisingly swift, particularly when there is money to be saved. The recommendation to close the school was approved two days later.

Rebranding

The end of August 1915 heralded the near completion of the conversion from canvas dwellings to corrugated iron shacks at a cost of £1843, roughly £40 each. Now that the town was no longer constructed of calico, it seemed the term Canvas Town or Calico Town was no longer appropriate. The obvious choice of Tin Town didn't sound too salubrious. No doubt the latter term reeked of the poverty and rough and ready nature of numerous shanty towns across the country, particularly in gold mining areas and railway encampments.

"The canvas has all disappeared and is replaced with iron, so that the original name is a misnomer. It is further remarked that the present name is little calculated to carry any weight or consideration, and, it is understood, not approved of locally" - P. Board, under Secretary, The Director of Labour, Labour Bureau, 26th July 1915.

Suggested alternative names to Canvas Town included Ferrata or Ferratum – derived from the Latin for 'furnished or covered with iron'.¹¹⁰

Instead, a 'clever' public servant decided that the Latin word for tin, combined with the French for town might sound much better. The following month the Government Gazette and the Board of Control announced that the official name of the new settlement would henceforth be Stannumville.¹¹¹ The joke may have been lost on the general public, but the Catholic Press was not impressed with the chosen nomenclature, commenting that,

*'It suggests empty jam cylinders and the patchwork architecture which is produced from empty kerosene receptacles.'*¹¹²

An increased rental of 4 shillings 6 pence per week was charged. The government felt justified in the higher charges as the public sector workers had now resumed full-time employment.

Various sectors experienced a shortage of workers as men volunteered for the armed forces. However there was still unemployment and reduced hours in many industries as a direct result of the war. Shipping and coal exports were affected, meaning severe unemployment in the wharves and in all maritime job sectors. Shortages in flour and sugar affected food production and hospitality trades. The building industry was in a slump. With wartime restrictions and rationing, retail and clothing industries suffered. Working women, who already suffered discrimination from being paid less than men for the same job, were struggling with unemployment or part-time hours. Each of these problems translated to people in poverty, grappling with exorbitant rent and inflated food prices.¹¹³

Ironically, at the same time, although many families had been struggling with a reduction in wages for the last year, by this time unions were demanding a reduction in hours to a 44 hour 5 ½ day working week. They were also agitating for increased rates of pay to combat inflation. There would be much campaigning on the matter over the coming years.¹¹⁴

The state treasury was making a killing at 29% return on its Canvas/Tin Town investment. According to newspaper reports in 1916 the government claimed the residents were paying 3 shillings per week, significantly higher than the one or two shillings a week it originally charged. Other reports claim the charge was 4 shillings per week. If the actual charge differed from newspaper reports, it suggests either the reports were inaccurate, or the government was not really au fait with their own policies, either of which is feasible.¹¹⁵

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The houses were now doubled in size to 40'x 80' (12 metres x 24 metres). Finally electric light had been installed. There would not be electric appliances in this era. Refrigeration of foodstuffs would have been achieved with a wooden ice chest filled with dry ice, or more likely the cheaper traditional meat safe. This device was a wooden frame covered with burlap sacking. The sacking was kept moist by water dripping onto the top, producing a cooling evaporative effect. Housewives pointed out that it was difficult to keep meat fresh under these conditions.

When the tents were converted to tin shacks, the metal rooms provided more protection than canvas but would have exacerbated the ventilation situation; stiflingly hot in summer and freezing in winter.

By late October 1915 the little village boasted a population of 57 men, 62 women and 218 children. If the government figures of £40 construction costs per house are accurate and they only spent £1843, this indicates there were approximately 46 houses, although it is more likely that there were at least 62 houses (the number of women in the settlement) and possibly more. Either the total cost was more than stated or not all houses were yet refurbished in tin. Clearly if there were only 46 dwellings, the houses were crowded, with an average occupation rate of 7.3 persons each.

The Sunday Times perused the government NSW Government expenditure figures in August 1915, discovering that an additional £5271 had been spent on additional Canvas Town dwellings for soldier's families and later another £599 would be spent. The newspaper polemic listed a number of rorts and dubious overheads under the title 'Some Glaring Extravagances.' Premier Holman seems to have been hiding the true costs of his cheap housing policy from the public.¹¹⁶

1916 Winds of change

By June 1916 the government was considering whether or not to make Canvas Town a permanent housing solution or to close it. They were also discussing the desirability of developing new model suburbs along the lines of Daceyville, both in country areas and the city. Daceyville had originally been targeted at the working class, but wartime deprivation had made the suburb unaffordable to the average working man. Now the State government proposed to build model towns in Stockton, Broken Hill and Bulli.

Various newspapers misinterpreted the report of Premier Holman's statement, claiming that the government was proposing to build canvas towns in these areas. There were still numerous unofficial canvas towns throughout the country as the rent and housing crisis continued unabated, but Holman aimed to build model towns, not new canvas towns.¹¹⁷

Premier Holman admitted that the tin shacks of Stannumville were an 'eyesore,' and it was time to move forward with plans for the provision of reasonable priced housing. If Stannumville were to close it would be necessary to re-house the workers in a cost-effective manner. Nearby Daceyville had been developed as a model suburb, but the government wanted a cheaper scheme for the Stannumville residents. It was proposed that they would be relocated to a new model suburb in Maroubra Road. Although Daceyville was the inspiration, the government realised that they could not build to the same quality and still charge affordable rent. The houses would be humbler, and consequently the construction method would be cheaper.¹¹⁸

State Cabinet authorised Premier Holman to go ahead with construction of a new settlement on Maroubra Road. The houses would be of lesser quality than Daceyville and aimed at a target market of minimum-wage workers. The proposal was predicted to cost less than £20,000 and therefore it was unnecessary to gain approval from the Public Works Department at this stage of development.¹¹⁹

The following year the Voluntary Workers Association (VWA) proposed to build a model town at Maroubra, using student labour from schools offering manual training classes. They were hoping to build 500 houses for war widows and returned soldiers on government owned land, similar to their successful French's Forest project.¹²⁰

The government obliged by providing 40 acres of land, and the volunteers fund-raised and called for more volunteers to bring forth their dream of a new Garden City built of timber, bricks and tiles.¹²¹ The women of the Blue Gums group organised weekend working bees to infill swamps and clear land clearing on the scrubby sandfills in preparation for building works.¹²²

The VWA appointed a Board of Control which included John Sulman (President of the Town Planning Association), the Mayors of Randwick and Newtown, and several Members of the Legislative Assembly.¹²³ The foundation stone of the first cottage on Beauchamp Road was officially laid in May 1918 by His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales Walter Edward Davidson and Premier Holman. In contrast to the Canvas Town settlement, the building program was estimated to take two or three years, so it is unlikely that any of the Stannumville residents were ever housed there, as Holman had originally suggested in 1916.¹²⁴

1917 Demise

Once the tin sheeting was installed the government failed to invest any further in either Stannumville houses or facilities. When the Botany Health Inspector paid a visit to Stannumville mid-1917, what he found appalled him. He called for the closure of the site or at least better supervision of the facilities.

The huts were arranged in five rows over the sand dunes. Water was still only available from centralised communal taps - one between four huts. Women carried heavy buckets of water 10-20 metres from the faucets to their huts. The showers and toilets were up to 100 metres away from the huts, in four long tin sheds- two each for men and women.

One family of 2 adults and six children lived in three small rooms which opened onto a kitchen. The open fireplace lacked an oven. Two rooms were used as bedrooms and the third for storage. They were living in such dire poverty that they only had two beds for the entire family, and the bedding was composed of sacks and old clothing.

The gaps in the floorboards let in the whistling wind, dirt and sand. They paid 4 shillings sixpence per week for the substandard accommodation. A smaller family might rent a two-room shack for two shillings sixpence per week.

The childrens playground after school was the nearby swamp. The 60 cm deep pond was approximately 50 metres across and 50 metres long, Not only was there the danger of children drowning, but in the summer months mosquitos would be rife.¹²⁵

The reporter from the Evening News paid a visit. Dispiritingly, the landscape was not much changed from the early visits of the Sydney Morning Herald four years previously. After trudging down the road for around a kilometre from the nearest tram stop at Daceyville;

*‘Crossing Bunnerong-Road a full view of Stannumville was obtained. Canvas Town is best described as a collection of leaden eruptions on the bleached white slope of a sandhill. The huts -about 50 in number— are huddled together, and low, as though seeking to submerge their identity in the sand. The settlement does not boast of roadways or footpaths, while gardens are noticeable by their absence. Beyond the noise of several children playing about the damp sand, and a couple of spiral threads of smoke issuing from paint-less chimneys, there was no sign of life’.*¹²⁶

Stannumville had been in decline for some time. The media, trade unions, and Botany Council had heavily criticised the housing experiment since its inception. The Health Inspector would soon have his wish granted. The remaining twenty tenants had recently been notified that they had three months to find alternative accommodation, as the site would be closing, and the land auctioned.

The area was later subdivided for housing. No sign of Stannumville exists today and Botany residents would no doubt be surprised to learn their suburb was once composed of canvas. It is not quite clear what happened to the shacks, but it is possible that they were dismantled, and the timber and tin sold as second-hand building materials.

Conclusion

Stannumville was created in 1914 as a temporary solution to alleviate a severe affordable-housing crisis in time of war.

By late 1917 the situation that had created Stannumville had not been resolved. The population of Sydney increased from 830,560 persons in 1914 to 968,000 in 1917, yet the housing supply had not risen in proportion. 10,546 new houses were constructed in 1914, but this had decreased 51% to 5,401 three years later.

The housing shortage was set to continue for some years to come, with the high price of labour, scarcity of building supplies, inflation, high interest rates, concerns over the decisions of the Fair Rents Court and the ongoing effect of a war in Europe which not only claimed the lives of millions of Australians, but hampered investment and finance in Australia.

Canvas towns continued to spring up throughout the country wherever there was a housing shortage. And just over the horizon lurked the Great Depression, when people would once again be forced to create informal canvas towns, with or without government permission.¹²⁷

Was the experiment a failure? Certainly the government was roundly critiqued for its approach and the facilities were less than desirable. Unquestionably it would not have been a comfortable place to live, but many of its residents had suffered much worse from oppression by unscrupulous slum landlords in the city.

The ramifications of erecting a canvas town or tin town were poorly thought out and the construction inadequately planned by the Works Department. Perhaps more damning, they failed to invest in adequate improvements over time.

In contrast, there were many in the countryside whose ramshackle self-built shanty towns were far less salubrious and lacked even a tap, electricity or waste disposal. Some towns complained that Botany had been favoured with the creation of Canvas Town and that the government should replicate the scheme elsewhere.

It is one thing for those living in quality accommodation to complain about the quality of Stannumville's housing, when they have no personal worries about being evicted. On the other hand, despite the negative aspects of Stannumville, it could be argued that any roof over one's head is better than living destitute on the streets of Sydney with no roof. The scheme was never intended as a permanent solution to the housing shortage. It can therefore be considered a moderate success in its short-term aims.

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