
Finding Your Ancestors: Researching Aboriginal Family History in NSW

Paul Irish and Michael Bennett

“Family research and community research, in the historical context, is very important. Whilst governments sought to separate us, this sort of research can be used to bring us back together again.” – Dr Shayne Williams, La Perouse Aboriginal community 2020¹

Finding Your Ancestors is an ongoing project which aims to help Aboriginal people in New South Wales take their first steps into archival family history research. Most Aboriginal people are already keepers of family memories, pictures and documents, but may be less familiar with the wide range of other sources (both digital and hard copy) in libraries and archives that could potentially shed further light on their family and community histories. What are they? Where are they held? How can they be accessed? *Finding Your Ancestors* aims to encourage access to these records safely, mindful of the confronting content that many of them contain.

The project was conceived during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as many people were stuck inside their homes, tethered to the outside world largely via the internet. With the huge range of historical sources now available online, it seemed like a good opportunity to assist Aboriginal people to begin researching their family and community history. Historians Michael Bennett and Paul Irish partnered with the Royal Australian Historical Society and Aboriginal librarians, archivists and community researchers to develop resources to assist community members to embark on this journey.

The project was launched during family history month in August 2020. It features a project website which includes a series of introductory videos about doing Aboriginal family history research and some easy ways to access information (e.g. TROVE and Births, Deaths and Marriages) as well as links to further online resources. *Finding Your Ancestors* has also involved a series of weekly Zoom Q&A sessions for Aboriginal community members in August and September, hosted by Michael and Paul with special Aboriginal guest archivists and researchers. Encouraged by the level of interest in these sessions and resources, the project will continue in 2021, and as we plan the next steps, we reflect on why researching Aboriginal family history is so important.

PAUL: Over the past 15 years, I have been researching the Aboriginal history of the coastal part of Sydney, often

together with researchers from the La Perouse Aboriginal community. While I have been fascinated by the lives of individual people and have some knowledge of their genealogy, I have been more focussed on piecing together the bigger picture of the Aboriginal population of the area over time. In working closely with the descendants of many of the Aboriginal people who feature in this history though, it has become very clear to me that the history and genealogy of these ancestors are just as important, if not more so, than this broader story. This was highlighted for me during the creation of the 2016 NSW History Fellowship exhibition *This Is Where They Travelled: Historical Aboriginal Lives in Sydney*, which was developed and researched collaboratively with a team of researchers from the La Perouse Aboriginal community. As we researched, the personal connection researchers felt to their ancestors was clear, as it was by the response of extended families to their ancestors at the exhibition launch and in subsequent showings of the exhibition.

I can see how this research impacts people's lives in very direct ways. Often it can confirm information or identities passed down in the family, or perhaps clarify things that were unclear. For others, it is about reclaiming histories that were taken from them or their ancestors; recovering lost links. It can raise uncomfortable and traumatic realities from the past, and feature distressing racist and paternalistic language, so a big focus is on doing this research safely; being prepared for what might be found and how it might be presented. But this does not diminish the importance of Aboriginal families and communities reclaiming this information from the archive, and the impact it can have on undoing some of the damage of colonialism and government paternalism. As Dr Shayne Williams eloquently stated in the introductory video to the project:

“This sort of research is very important for us because our younger generations don't have to go through what we've gone through under the Aboriginal Protection Board and Welfare Board policies, which actually sought to separate Aboriginal people and also to make silent our histories. So this sort of research is important for bringing all that back together again.”²

The other thing I have become aware of in working with Aboriginal communities, is how comparatively

few Aboriginal people are familiar with the range of digitised and other archival sources that are available, let alone how to access them. Major state and national institutions have done excellent work in letting Aboriginal communities know about their archives, and many of them employ Aboriginal staff who have been instrumental in assisting many thousands of Aboriginal people to locate family history information. But this still requires someone to take the first step of getting started, and that can be quite daunting. Having seen the thrill of discovery when community members prize valuable information – or perhaps even a photo – out of the archives, motivates me to assist others to have the same experience, and hopefully *Finding Your Ancestors* will do just that.

MICHAEL: For almost 20 years I have conducted historical research for NSW native title claims, scouring the archives for evidence of traditional rights in land and cultural continuity for Aboriginal nations. An important part of the research is genealogy: claimants have to show descent from ancestors who were occupying the land when white people first arrived. In some cases, detailed research, using documentary sources and oral knowledge, can trace back an Aboriginal person's family more than eight generations to the early 19th century, showing the places they occupied and the cultural activities they participated in. There is evidence for ancestors raising families, participating in ceremonies, looking after country and negotiating a path through colonial society. Over the course of native title claims since the early 1990s, records about the lives of thousands of Aboriginal people and their family connections have been identified and recorded.

As research for the various claims progressed, interest in genealogical records also grew. Many claimants began to request copies of their personal family trees. Native Title Services Corporation (NTSCORP), the organisation I work for and which assists traditional groups to pursue claims, established a program in 2006 to prepare genealogies at the request of community members. It was a great opportunity to make research material more accessible and also to check the accuracy of our records. The program's popularity soon expanded as word spread among communities and by 2012, NTSCORP was completing almost 1,000 genealogies per year. But the number of requests grew beyond capacity and the decision was made to scale the program back as it was diverting resources from other necessary aspects of native title research. Nevertheless, community demand for genealogical information remained and personally, I was keen to take a different approach to promoting genealogical research within Aboriginal families.

What attracted me to *Finding Your Ancestors* was the

opportunity to change the game and help develop research skills in community members setting out on their own journey rather than relying on others, such as myself, to do the work for them. Having experienced the anticipation and thrill of making new connections, I appreciate that discoveries are more meaningful when it is your own family, particularly for Aboriginal people whose records were not always readily available. Many Aboriginal people have more than 30 years experience in tracing their ancestors. But for those just starting out, working with Paul, Shayne and RAHS was a great opportunity to bring those skills to a new generation, particularly those who are more comfortable in the digital realm.

The nature of research has changed in the 21st century. I spend more time in front of a computer rather than combing through dusty volumes at the library. Archives and libraries are digitising more material every year and although some sits behind a paywall, there is plenty to investigate at the click of a mouse, particularly for the beginner. *Finding Your Ancestors* aims to point people in the right direction, let them know about the diverse range of records available and help them to uncover new stories about their families and cultures.

We are looking forward to more *Finding Your Ancestors* activities in 2021. We will soon launch a new video on the project website about anthropologist Norman Tindale's Aboriginal genealogies held at the NSW State Library, which was filmed with indigenous librarians Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson. We will also continue our Zoom Aboriginal family history Q&A sessions in conjunction with Aboriginal curators and researchers once per month and – COVID permitting – hope to do one or two sessions in person with communities in NSW.

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References

¹ Introduction to Finding Your Ancestors (<https://youtu.be/umOK4b1jHuw>; accessed 7/1/2021)

² Introduction to Finding Your Ancestors (<https://youtu.be/umOK4b1jHuw>; accessed 7/1/2021)