

The White House

Clarrie Neal

Unlike the American White House, the White House of Riverstone was never the seat of Government, but it was nevertheless an historic landmark of the district. It is featured in Daphne Kingston's book of pencil sketches titled "Early Slab Buildings of the Sydney Region".

It was built with ironbark slab walls and ironbark floors in the front rooms, and dirt floors at the back. These ironbark timbers allowed the house to withstand the many floods that have passed through it over the years.

The White House was located on the southern bank of Eastern Creek, on Lytton Road, just opposite the end of Marsden Lane. We cannot be certain of when it was built or who built it, but certainly the Hanna family have a long relationship with it, beginning with Noble Hanna.

Noble was the fifth son of Noble and Elizabeth Hanna who migrated to Australia from Ireland in 1852. Noble was born at Waverley on the 30th June 1861 but became an orphan in 1865 when both his parents died. He was placed in an orphanage along with his brothers and sisters and remained there until he left to work with a chemist at Orange, NSW. Following this experience he left Orange and travelled around the countryside working as jackeroo.

He arrived in Riverstone in 1883 as a 21 year old, lived on Essex Farms and worked as a fellmonger at the nearby Woolwash. He also worked as the gravedigger at the nearby Riverstone cemetery. He married a Sarah Ann Fibbins on the 20th May 1891 and raised a family of eight children.

Noble's eldest son William kept a notebook diary that shows he (William) was born at Essex Farms on the 3rd December 1898 and that the family moved into the White House in June 1904. After being forced out of the house several times by floodwaters the family moved in September 1909 to a cottage on the corner of The Avenue and Marsden Lane where they lived the remainder of their lives, the family retaining ownership of the White House and its land.

Floodwaters have always caused problems to the occupants of the White House as it was always the first house in the area to be flooded. William's notebook diary shows that the 1956 flood reached 18 inches below the ridge capping and that the 1961 flood peaked just 12 inches (30 cm) from the top of the chimney.

However, articles in the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* seems to suggest that the Hanna family lived close to the creek prior to 1904. When the mailman Mr. Edward Simpson was drowned while crossing Eastern Creek in a flood, an article in the *Gazette* on the 29th March, 1890 stated -
"A man named Noble Hanna, residing near the creek, heard the screams of the bystanders near the bridge, and at once jumped into the creek, but could see no trace of the deceased. Mr. Hanna states that it was with great difficulty that he reached the shore on the other side."

Another *Gazette* article on the 26th March 1892 stated -
"... rain caused Eastern Creek to rise rapidly. At about 9 o'clock it broke over the bridge on the road leading to Marsden Park, completely stopping communication between that neighbourhood and Riverstone. Messrs Hartigan and Noble Hanna were obliged to remove; the latter left some fowls, which were swept away. Mr. J. H. Cragg was on the point of moving when the water stopped rising. "

Descendants of J.H. Cragg believe that the Woolwash in the 1890s employed some 30 workers and that Noble Hanna was a member of the little community that lived around the area. It is also believed that following an argument with J.H. Cragg, Noble Hanna was ordered off that land. Noble subsequently pulled down his house and re-erected it on the banks of Eastern Creek.

Since 1891 the electoral rolls show that Noble Hanna was living at Essex Farms or Riverstone and was working either as fellmonger or a labourer. Grandchildren Clive Hanna and Winsome Archard both remember Noble and Sarah as a warm and caring couple, with Noble being a good gardener and a man who loved to read and write.

When Noble passed away on the 2nd November 1947, his eldest son William became the owner so the White House remained in the Hanna family for some 60/70 years. During this period it was often unoccupied but it was also let for varying periods. Although the water and electricity were connected to the Riverstone area in the mid 1930s the White House was never supplied with either service. The property was sold to Jimmy Hunt and "Crash" Craddock in July 1960.

The White House was well known in the district as it marked that area of Eastern Creek that was the local swimming hole and many Riverstone lads learnt to swim here. Just opposite the White House there was a rope swing attached to a large tree that the boys used to swing out over the creek.

Bill Shaw and Geoff Binks are remembered as men who used to teach the boys how to swim there, with Geoff being such a strong swimmer he was often referred to as the 'Lifesaver'.

Nearby in a little cleared area in the bush was the site of the local two-up school, which was held every Sunday afternoon. Because two-up was illegal in those days the venue was often changed to prevent raids by the police.

A police raid on the two-up school would see a mass exodus from the area with players scattering in all directions through the bush with the police in pursuit. A favourite story of one these chases concerns Ernie Sullivan who realising he was going to be caught picked up a stick and started walking behind a cow, when challenged he said he was taking the cow home for milking. It proved to be a wise move because the officer who caught him let him go.

Another raid saw two young identities of the town take off and follow the creek towards Schofields, at the half-way mark they rested momentarily only to find they were still being pursued, so they ran all the way to Schofields station where they caught the train back to Riverstone. As the train neared the station they looked across and saw the other players being charged at the police station.

As a boy John Stacey recalled the day he was swimming at the creek when the two-up school was raided and remembers the police chasing Harold Johnston and Ronnie Brown up Marsden Lane. Being good runners they were too fast for the law and escaped, Harold in particular was a very good athlete and at the time was competing in athletic events in Sydney.

A half hour later the same day John said he and his mates went over to the ring to see if any loose coins had been left by the players in their haste to get away. While searching the area John was surprised to look up and find "Squarem" Elliott struggling to emerge from the nearby blackberry bush. He got this nickname because he never ever won or lost, he always finished square. Apparently "Squarem" decided the best place to hide was in this bush and crawled right in, it took him more than 30 minutes to get out, with blood everywhere from the many cuts and scratches he received.

In later years when the White House was unoccupied the two-up game was held there on a Friday night, the lighting being provided by candles and hurricane lamps.

One of the characters who lived in the White House during the 1940s and 50s was a part aboriginal known as 'Black' George. His real name was Roy McLean and he paid 5 shillings a week rent. George came to Riverstone from the Wagga area in the mid 1930s and after working on Crawley's property at Stony Crossing for a few years got a job at the meatworks in the skin shed as a wool classer, a profession he was highly regarded at.

Bobby Parkes recalls George coming over to his parents Jim and Emily's house in Marsden Street to get his meals. George always arrived as the family were seated around the table and would stand in the doorway looking at the children and say "Holey smokes, look at 'em, heads on 'em like white mice". This saying led to his other nickname of "Smokey".

A favourite story told about George is one evening after a long afternoon at the hotel he was walking across the paddock to the little bridge near his house, counting the loose change left in his pocket. George reckoned he had three shillings left, or as it was known in those days, three bob. As he approached the bridge the frogs were croaking quite loudly and George distinctly heard this croaking as "four'r bob" "four'r bob". George stopped in the middle of the bridge, took the money from his pocket and counted it again - three bob. As the frogs continued their chorus of "four'r bob" George looked at his money again and then threw it into the creek and said - "Here! Count it ya bloody self".

Another often told story was of the day when one of his neighbours, who was a notoriously slow driver, stopped his car and offered George a lift as he was walking along Garfield Road into Riverstone. George politely said "No thanks, I'm in a hurry" and continued on his walk.

George was killed when struck by a car as he was walking along Garfield Road near the football oval in the late 1950s

The house remained vacant for a short period until it was sold to Jimmy Hunt and John "Crash" Craddock in July 1960. Crash was quite a character and was well known at the local hotel where he would often produce from his pocket his mouth organ and play a tune for the boys. He is also remembered for his favourite saying as he walked out to the S.P. bookie to have a bet "Weight's right at Dubbo". It is believed that Crash received his nickname from the rock and roll singer of the 1950s. Jimmy Hunt lived in the house for a few years and after his death, Crash continued on living there on his own.

The following article appeared in the *Riverstone Guardian* c1980 –

"Crash" Craddock was born in 1902, when Australia was still very much a land of the pioneers. He was a ward of the State and raised on a farm at St. Albans, the family caring for two other State wards plus children of their own. Crash told the Guardian the State wards worked like slaves on the farm. When he was only five he was out early milking cows. He wore no shoes and froze going to school on the frosty ground.

At 14 years of age Crash told a visiting Inspector that he was unhappy. As a result, all three State wards were taken to the Albion Street shelter in Sydney. There Crash was happier, but missing the outdoors when a lady from Kempsey visited the Shelter looking for a boy who could milk cows. Crash grabbed the edge of her skirt and begged to be taken. So, Crash wound up on the North Coast milking dairy cattle until he was 18, then branched out on his own as a milker along on the Macleay River.

Five years later he travelled to the Nambucca River loved this life, camping out in a bark hut and getting paid once a month. He had 26 bullocks in his team, led by a big animal called "Nobby". There is today a team still working in the Dungog area.

In 1932 Crash came to Plumpton where he operated a farm for people at Burdekins Corner, he earned 25 shillings a week plus his keep. There he ploughed the fields and produced the corn, and was the only man on the farm who ever grew enough to fill the silo twice in one year. Later he went share farming at Richmond, then Wyong, but it did not work out.

In 1940 Crash moved into Creek Street, Riverstone, then lived in The Terraces in Garfield Road. Today he lives in the White House in Lytton Rd. The house is made of slab ironbark with ironbark floors. It was built in 1883 by Noble Hannah, the local gravedigger. Crash has lived in it for 21 years. He owns a herd of milking goats, a cat, a dog, an Australian pony, and an assortment of poultry. He has a deep affection for his little slab home and inside he has an assortment of odds and ends.

There is an ancient draught horse collar, horseshoes, a few bits, and he admits he daydreams of the years gone by and yearns to collect old farm implements. Already he is showing off his latest prized possession, an old plough. Crash told the Guardian this week a few of his friends have decided that when he dies they will establish a small museum at the White House.

Crash Craddock is one of Riverstone's colourful identities."

Crash Craddock's real name was John Henry Craddock. He died on the 1st August 1982 when he fell into his fire and was burned to death. He was 82 years of age and was buried in the Church of England part of Riverstone cemetery in Area 2, Row N12 in an unmarked grave.

The Madden family then lived in the house for a few years rearing their Shetland ponies. After they left it was unoccupied for a short period until a deliberately lit fire totally destroyed the house on the 7th June 1996.

All that remains standing are the two chimneys, plus the remnants of several old sheds on the property.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information supplied by Clive Hanna, Winsome Archard, Fay Brookes, John Stacey, Bill Mangold and Bobby Parkes, July 1999. Photos were provided by Clive, Winsome, and Fay.