

Tumble-Down Barn, Riverstone (1810-1912)

David Cragg June 1999

Foreword: *In this article, David Cragg, a descendant of one of the owners of the Tumbledown Barn provides an insight into life at the Tumbledown Barn. In the style of authors Hassall and Ryan, David spells the name as Tumble-Down.*

Editor

Tumble-Down Barn is an unlikely name for an early colonial dwelling (built 1810-1820), that survived for over one hundred years. The barn stood on a 150 acre grant, situated at the junction, niche or angle of South and Eastern Creeks, Riverstone. The barn faced Eastern Creek and was estimated to be approximately 2.5 miles from the site of Riverstone Meatworks. Having probably commenced its life as a rudimentary dwelling, it had by the turn of the century become a structure consisting of immensely long half tree slabs, at least one chimney made from sun-dried bricks, and a corrugated iron roof, with a water tank standing beside it.

The earliest family known to be associated with Tumble-Down Barn is McPhillamy. It is believed that a Robert McPhillamy was born to convict parents there in 1818. The McPhillamy's eventually settled in Bathurst, and became quite prominent in that area.

Another interesting early reference to Tumble-Down Barn involves an early colonial couple who had the distinction of being the parents of the first white male child born in Australia. Anthony Rope and Elizabeth Pully, arrived with the first fleet in 1788, and married 19 May 1788. Their first child, Robert Rope, was born in the Soldiers' Barracks, Wynyard Square, nine months and ten days after the arrival of the fleet in 1788. The Rope family, sometime shortly after 1818, went to reside at Tumble-Down Barn for a brief period, before moving onto William Faithfull's Estate on South Creek. Their grandson James T. Ryan (1818-1899) went on to become a Member of the Legislative Assembly for NSW, 1860-72.

The Reverend James Hassall, a grandson of Samuel Marsden, mentions Tumble-Down Barn in his memoirs, published in 1902. Hassall had frequented the farm as a child between 1835 and 1839. His uncle, Charles Marsden, owned the farm, and had also been granted 900 acres between Windsor Road and Eastern Creek. Two families from the "Highlands of Scotland" were employed at the dairy, operating at Tumble-Down Barn making cheese and butter during this time. Young James frequently found their speech difficult to understand. To visit Tumble-Down, James and his Uncle would make a 12 mile journey through scrub and along bush roads on ponies, camping in tents overnight so they could fish in South Creek. They often broke their journey to Tumble-Down three miles short of their destination to hunt Dingos for a couple of hours.

Many families came and went over a long period. Tumble-Down came into prominence again when a meat works was established at Riverstone in 1879 by Benjamin Richards. In 1934 it was stated in the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* that: *In 1885 a small wool-scouring plant was built in one of the paddocks near the works, where all the pieces of wool removed from the heads and legs of the sheep were treated.*

This may have been the Woolwash that was built quite close to Tumble-Down Barn. So near in fact was the Woolwash to the Barn that it was initially called Tumble-Down. It was estimated that only 2 miles lay between Riverstone Meat Works and the Woolwash. In 1883 a Joseph Henry Cragg came to live in Riverstone with his wife and children. They settled soon afterwards at Tumble-Down Barn and began operating a fellmongery called Tumble-Down wool-scouring works. Joseph Henry had previously operated a wool-scouring establishment in Breakwater, Geelong between 1873 and 1881.

The NSW Electoral Rolls between 1885 and 1894 show a Joseph Henry Craeig(sic) or Craig residing at South Creek. In the years following he was listed as living at Essex Farms. The wool-scouring venture at Riverstone was not deemed a successful one in the long run, as the water used in the scouring was not suitable for the production of good coloured wool. Pollution in South Creek was raised as an issue in 1884, with the numerous wool-scouring establishments on its banks receiving most of the initial blame. In a June 1884 journalistic investigation by the *Hawkesbury Chronicle*, it was concluded that the water: *...is contaminated by Riverstone Meat Works, and we believe, a large Fellmongering establishment at South Creek.*

The reference to a large fellmongery establishment may have been the Tumble-Down fellmongery, but it is difficult to tell. It is highly likely that Joseph Henry owed the majority of his business to the Riverstone Meat Works and respected Benjamin Richards greatly. In a meeting of the Riverstone Progress League held in August 1886, in the Cosmopolitan Hall, it was suggested by Misters Jackson and Woods that Mr Richards be written to regarding “the awful stench” coming from the Meat Works. Joseph Henry, who was chairing the meeting subsequently lost his temper at the suggestion of putting a motion so “disgracefully insulting” to Mr Richards and.... *leaping out of his chair, after the manner of a ‘Spring-heeled-Jack’, he turned a summersault over a tie-beam, landed on the secretary’s nut, and flooded the table with a deluge of ink – from which the scribe’s books were rescued, looking disgustingly black – he then declared the meeting adjourned.*

Floods were common events in Riverstone’s history and the land on which the Woolwash and Tumble-Down Barn stood was prone to the frequent flooding of both the Eastern and Southern Creeks. The flood of March 1890 saw: *All the low lying land about Eastern Creek is flooded Messrs J.H. Craig(sic), J. Court and others are flooded out. The traffic between here and Marsden Park is blocked, as the water is about 8 feet deep on the bridge.*

This did not deter Joseph Henry from moving about the area, as was reported a week later:

Mr. Joseph H. Craig(sic) of the woolwashing establishment on the South Creek, has purchased for his own use a grand boat which he landed here on Saturday morning by the goods train. The craft which is imported from Norway, is a substantial and well-finished one, and will carry sixteen passengers. Mr. Craig(sic) intends christening her 'Swan'.

During the flood he managed to carry 168 passengers in his boat to and from Marsden Park in one day. Despite the flood of 1890, a year later it was reported that the Woolwash was doing quite well:

Owing to the increase of mutton demanded in Sydney and the London market, and the number of skins to be dealt with, Mr. J.H. Craig(sic) has now 30 persons employed at his woolwashing establishment at South Creek. Joe will make things hum.

In that same year it was stated that there were a number of local wool-scouring establishments that were prepared to handle clips from the district's shearing sheds.

Whenever Eastern Creek rose in a substantial way the wool that had been laid out on the ground at the Woolwash had to be moved to higher ground to prevent it from being swept away. When the Creek was at a more regular level it was suggested in 1895 that people could row on it to within 70 yards of the Meatworks. Sometimes minor man-made 'floodings' at the Woolwash took place due to local youths plunging into Eastern Creek. Often they would meet on the banks of the Creek for a picnic, where they would gather ferns and play various outdoors games. Sometimes these games led to a 'fortunate' few being tossed into the water.

In April 1899 Joseph Henry Cragg announced that the *fellmongery known by the name Tumbledown* was now to be known as Jordon Mills. Along with the name change, he had installed, since January that year, a quantity of machinery and embarked on other major improvements. He had been obliged to "bring it up to the mark", and thus meet the wishes of the Board of Health. The Board had required that in the *future no washing will be done in the [Eastern] Creek, and the refuse water will be run off so that it will not reach that stream.*

A little community sprung up around the Woolwash and Tumble-Down Barn. Joseph Henry Cragg's daughter Adelaide Rachel who had married one of the employees, John Towers, in 1896, was a cook for the workers at the Woolwash. It has been said that Noble Hanna also lived and worked at the Woolwash or Essex Farms, but was ordered off the land after having an argument with Joseph Henry. He subsequently pulled down his house and re-erected it on the banks of Eastern Creek. It still stands today at the end of Marsden Lane, though in a very dilapidated condition. It is a very good example of the type of house that existed in the Woolwash community, around the last 1800s. Other names associated with the Woolwash during this period were Scholey, Hayes, Windred and Parkhill. Often stories of encounters with black snakes, mishaps in sulkies, fishing, picnicking and rowing near the Woolwash would find their way into the local paper.

As well as poor water quality in the Eastern and South Creeks the successive floods of 1890 and 1897 also contributed to its troubles, culminating in the flood of July 1900, where:

... *Riverstone was visited by a flood which, in my opinion, has done more damage than all the previous floods put together... The loss at Jordon Mills Woolscouring Works is very extensive, and damage has been great.*

One month later, in August, the effects of the flood seemed to have some effect on working conditions at Jordon Mills: *We are told that the wool-washers at Eastern Creek recently went on strike, and the staff is now an entirely new one. The genial Mr. Cragg is a straight goer and will stand no nonsense.*

Tumble-Down Barn's occupants had also suffered immensely from the floods. By 1897 Joseph Henry Cragg's family had entirely moved out of Tumble-Down Barn and into Redgate, on Farm Road, though his son Matthew Henry Cragg seemed to have resided at South Creek between 1895 and 1900. In 1897 Joseph Henry's son-in-law, John Towers, had moved into Tumble-Down Barn with his family, and had taken over the daily running of Jordon Mills. The Towers family was still living at the Barn in 1900 when the major flood of that year struck. The flood waters of South and Eastern Creeks compelled the whole family to take refuge in the top portion of the Barn until a boat was sent from Riverstone to rescue them. Eventually however, despite the constant flooding and unsuitable water supply, Joseph Henry Cragg was unable to secure the terms he desired from the Riverstone Meat Company, and ceased carrying on the fellmongery. John Towers continued to work as a fellmonger and lived at South Creek at least up until 1906. By 1912 he and his family were living in the Riverstone township, though John Towers continued working as a fellmonger.

The Tumble-Down Barn dwelling stood until about 1912 when the immensely long wooden slabs and other parts of the woodwork were pulled down. The half tree slabs were taken to Riverstone Works for the purpose of stabling horses. Today a lone, gnarled pepper tree, which stands in the middle of a paddock, marks the spot of Tumble-Down Barn. The tree, which was planted by John Towers, stands a couple of yards in front of where the water tank once stood. However nothing remains of the Woolwash itself.

Sources:

Ryan, James T., *Reminiscences of Australia*, George Robertson and Co., Sydney, 1894;
Hassall, Rev. James S., *In Old Australia*, R.S. Hews & Co., Sydney, 1902; *Hawkesbury Chronicle*;
Windsor and Richmond Gazette; Reeve Collection at the Society of Australian Genealogists;
NSW Electoral Rolls; Winsome Archard (nee Towers), Mervyn Towers and Rita Adams (nee Towers)