

# A First Nations History of Campbelltown



CAMPBELLTOWN

**First Nations people have been living and caring for their traditional lands for over 70,000 years, with some evidence suggesting a connection spanning up to 120,000 years.**





First Nations people have been living and caring for their traditional lands for over 70,000 years, with some evidence suggesting a connection spanning up to 120,000 years. They maintained a complex society grounded in what is often referred to as "The Dreamtime" and "The Dreaming." The Dreamtime describes the era when First Nations creators inhabited the Earth, shaping its landscapes, fauna, and flora, and establishing the foundational laws.

The Dreaming is the continuation of the life cycle, living under the law, and continues even today. As the world changes, the Dreaming continues. Underpinning and strengthening First Nations Peoples culture is the strong spiritual and physical connection that they have with the land also known as "Country".

Before the arrival of European settlers, it is estimated that there were between 500 and 700 distinct clans or nations of First Nations Peoples, each with its own languages and cultural practices. In the area now known as the Macarthur region, the Dharawal people are recognised as the Traditional Custodians. The Dharawal people historically managed and lived on lands stretching from Botany Bay to the Shoalhaven River and Nowra, and inland to Camden, with the lyrebird recognised as a traditional totem of the region.

The Dharawal people had established routes allowing them to move safely across their territory, including what is today known as Campbelltown, Liverpool, Camden, and Picton, reaching occasionally as far as Parramatta.

This mobility helped them manage and sustain natural resources over thousands of years. The Georges River and its tributaries provided essential resources such as water, food, and shelter. The surrounding environment, including streams, swamplands, and forest lands, offered an abundant supply of food from possums, lizards, kangaroos, and wallabies, as well as roots, berries, and seeds. Birds also contributed meat and eggs to their diet.

Along the Georges River, the erosion of sandstone formed rock overhangs that served as shelters. These shelters, particularly those facing north, captured sunlight, retaining warmth throughout the night. Many of these shelters were adorned with images and hand stencils using red ochre, white clay, or charcoal. Today, evidence of ancient tracks, camps, and significant sites can still be found across the region, marking the enduring presence and cultural heritage of the Dharawal people in Campbelltown.

## Initial Contact with Europeans

Shortly after Europeans landed in Sydney, several cattle strayed from their herds and wandered south, eventually being found in what is now known as the Macarthur region.

This area subsequently became known as the 'Cowpastures'. Local Dharawal people encountered these unfamiliar animals and depicted their unique characteristics on the walls of a sandstone shelter. Notably, the cattle were polled (dehorned) to prevent injury during their long sea voyage, a feature clearly illustrated by the artist in what is referred to as the 'Bull Cave'. The depiction of these hornless cattle indicates they were part of the original herd that went astray.

Other First Nations tribes described their initial encounters with cattle as terrifying, a sentiment reflected in the size of the depictions in Campbelltown, where the bulls dominate the rock shelter walls. Governor King noted that the First Nations people would climb trees to avoid the animals until they had passed.

As colonial settlement progressed, some Europeans developed a close rapport with the local First Nations community. Charles Throsby of Glenfield, for example, was often accompanied by Dharawal men during his explorations of the Southern Highlands, and he was vocal in his criticism of the European treatment of local First Nations people.

Explorers Hamilton Hume and his brother John embarked on several long journeys southward with a young First Nations friend named Duall, whose knowledge of the land made him an invaluable companion.

First Nations skills in land navigation and tracking proved crucial in solving the murder of Fred Fisher, a case that remains a local legend. Following Fred's disappearance and the eerie sighting of his ghost by John Farley, it was suggested that First Nations trackers assist in the investigation. Namut Gilbert, a tracker from Liverpool, was brought in to examine the marshy area. He tasted the water in the puddles and detected 'white fellow's fat there', leading the investigation team to probe the ground until they discovered Fred's body.

Despite these instances of cooperation and shared knowledge, interactions between settlers and First Nations people were not always peaceful, reflecting a complex and often troubled chapter in the nation's history.



The Bull Cave - Campbelltown



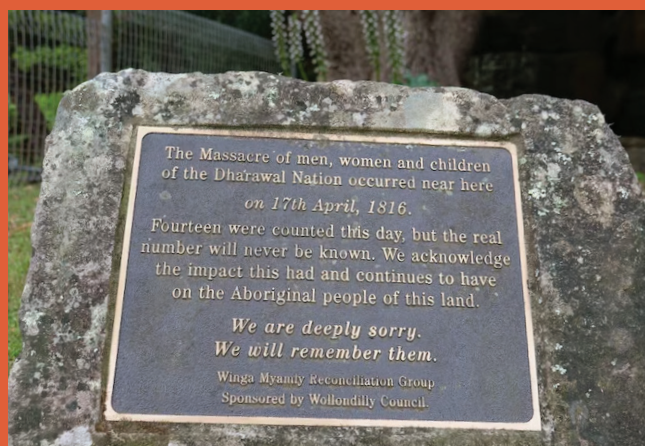
## The Appin Massacre

Relations between European settlers and First Nations people began to deteriorate in 1814, marked by a series of attacks and increasing acts of aggression across the region. This escalation led to mutual retaliations between the First Nations inhabitants and European settlers.

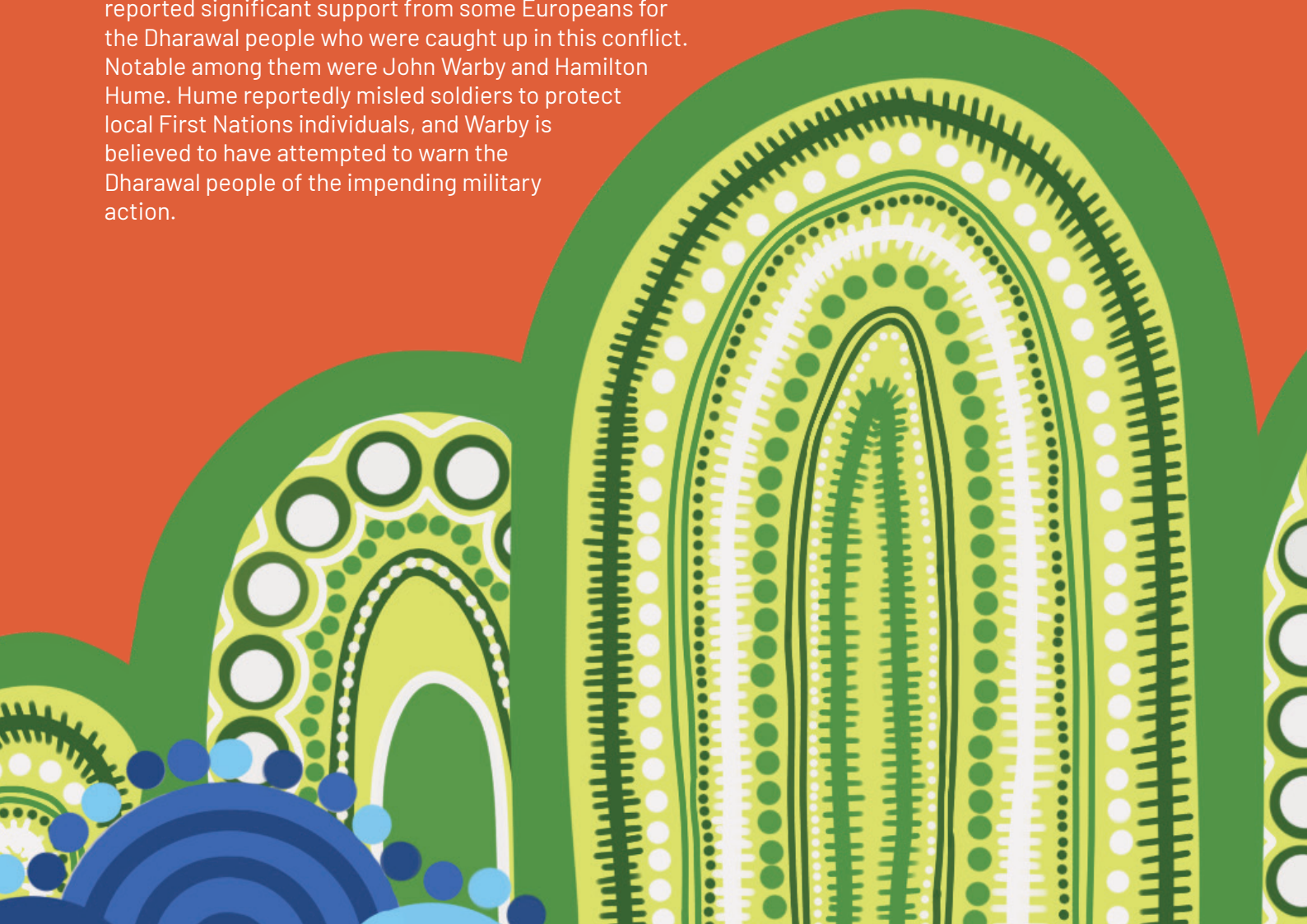
By April 1816, tensions reached a critical point. Governor Macquarie, citing the hostilities of the past two years, including recent attacks on settlers, ordered the military to apprehend all First Nations people in the southern districts. His directive failed to distinguish between those who were hostile and those who were peaceful. Charles Throsby of Glenfield, aware of the potential consequences of such indiscriminate military action, expressed his concerns about the fear and ignorance among Europeans possibly leading to random acts of violence. He defended a local First Nations man in the Sydney Gazette, arguing that any violent actions by First Nations people were retaliatory, provoked by the barbarities committed by the settlers.

In a specific order from April 1816, Macquarie directed Lieutenant Charles Dawes to target the First Nations people of the Cowpastures area. A military captain reported significant support from some Europeans for the Dharawal people who were caught up in this conflict. Notable among them were John Warby and Hamilton Hume. Hume reportedly misled soldiers to protect local First Nations individuals, and Warby is believed to have attempted to warn the Dharawal people of the impending military action.

On 17 April 1816, a devastating attack by soldiers resulted in a tragic loss of life among the local Dharawal community. This event is now remembered as the Appin Massacre. Each April, the Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group together with the local First Nations community hold a commemoration to honour those who lost their lives in this tragic event.



Memorial Monument



## The First Nations Community Today

In the present day, First Nations people residing in the Macarthur area hail from various First Nations communities. The community reflects a rich diversity, primarily comprising individuals from New South Wales (NSW) but also including members from other parts of Australia, including the Torres Strait Islands.

The First Nations community in Macarthur is characterised by its diversity, yet united by shared values of respect, family, and communal bonds. Presently, nearly 7000 First Nations individuals call the region home, sharing their unique knowledge and cultural practices with the broader community. Various First Nations organisations offer essential services to the community, while numerous groups focus on promoting wellbeing and cultural activities. Together, members of the First Nations community collaborate to harness community strengths and foster a vibrant, inclusive environment.



## The artist and her artwork



**Bio:** Tanika Saunders is a proud Gamilaroi woman, hailing from the town of Moree. With over 30 years of cherished memories rooted in Moree, Tanika has recently embarked on a new chapter in Campbelltown, where she has resided for the past 5 years.

A devoted mother of three, Tanika finds immense joy in sharing her cultural heritage with her children. Together, they embark on artistic endeavours, weaving stories of tradition and creativity through various mediums. With her eldest daughter now 14 years old, Tanika treasures the bond they share, particularly through their collaborative artworks.

Art is a cornerstone of Tanika's life, offering her a canvas to express the depth and richness of her Gamilaroi heritage. From vibrant paintings to intricate crafts, Tanika and her children find solace and connection in the act of creation. Through their art, they celebrate their roots and share the beauty of Indigenous culture with the world.

Title: Unity in Campbelltown

Description: "Unity in Campbelltown" is a vibrant and evocative portrayal of the natural beauty and community spirit that define the landscape of Campbelltown. The canvas is alive with lush greens, deep blues, and earthy tones, capturing the essence of the diverse ecosystems and flowing rivers that cradle the town.

At the forefront of the painting, winding like a river of history and culture, is the Lyrebird Track. Painted in intricate detail, it serves as a tribute to the Dharawal people, whose presence and heritage are deeply interwoven with the land. The track meanders through the canvas, symbolising the enduring connection between past and present.

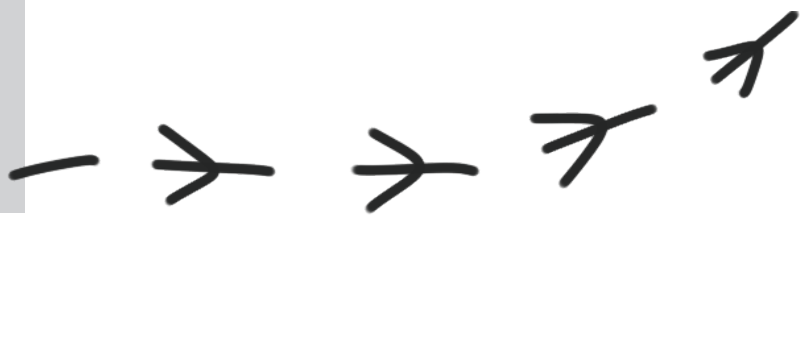
Surrounding the Lyrebird Track are clusters of small communities, depicted with warmth and intimacy.

Each dwelling is nestled among the trees, reflecting the harmony between human habitation and the natural environment. From humble cottages to modern homes, the diversity of architecture speaks to the rich tapestry of lives lived in Campbelltown.

Towards the centre of the artwork, the communities converge, their inhabitants gathered in unity.

Young and old, they stand together, their hands intertwined in solidarity. This focal point symbolises the power of community collaboration, emphasising the importance of collective effort in shaping a brighter future.

As light dances across the canvas, casting shadows and highlights, it breathes life into the scene, inviting the viewer to immerse themselves in the beauty and resilience of Campbelltown. "Unity in Campbelltown" is more than just an artwork; it is a celebration of the land, its people, and the unbreakable bonds that bind them together.



**We respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal people of the region,  
and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.**

This brochure was produced in consultation with the Tharawal  
Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Campbelltown Aboriginal  
Community Reference Group.



## **CAMPBELLTOWN**

**Campbelltown Visitors Information Centre**  
15 Old Menangle Road, Campbelltown NSW 2560  
Phone: 4645 4921  
Email: [info@macarthur.com.au](mailto:info@macarthur.com.au)  
Web: [www.macarthur.com.au](http://www.macarthur.com.au)