

*Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

# **Bulletin of Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.**

(Established March 1977)

Affiliated with Royal Australian Historical Society and  
Museum and Galleries Hunter Chapter



Mademoiselle Ilma de Murska

**Volume 30, Number 2**

**May 2023**

*The Aims of the Society are to  
Discover, Record, Preserve, Advise on and Teach the History of Maitland and the  
District*

## *Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

**Cover:** The photograph of Mademoiselle de Murska was sourced from Wikipedia.

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**Lecture meetings** are held on the first Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm as a forum for lectures, talks and presentations.

**Committee meetings** are held on the third Tuesday of even months from 5:30-7.00pm.

**General meetings** are held on the third Tuesday of odd months from 5:30-7.00pm.  
Members are invited to attend all monthly meetings.

Meetings are held at the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Street Maitland.

Membership fees : \$20 (single) and \$30 (double / family)

**The rooms are open between 11 and 3 on Wednesdays and Saturdays.**

**Patron:** Dr AC Archer AM

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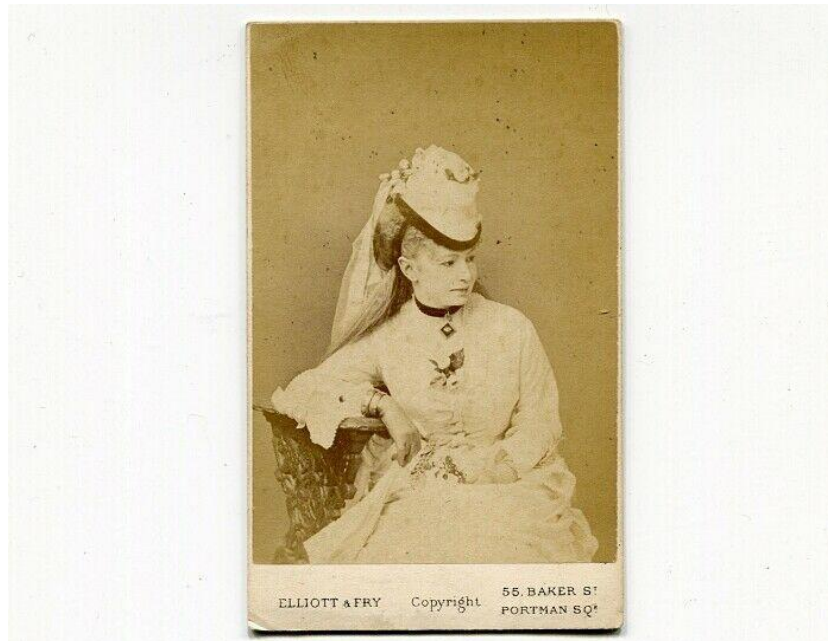
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**Editor's Notes:**

It should never be forgotten that early Maitland was a centre of culture. It wasn't all business and trade. For example, Mademoiselle Ilma de Murska, the great Hungarian opera singer, performed at the Olympic Theatre.



The story of the Olympic Theatre, and of some of the eminent people who performed there, may be found in Val Rudkin's book *Who? What? Where?: People of 19<sup>th</sup> Century High Street, Maitland*.

It is with sadness that I report the death this month of one-time member Peter Capp. Peter was of an eminent Colonial family which had "Windermere". Peter's interest in history was undoubtedly sparked by his ownership of that property. He was also a talented artist and art teacher and a kind gentleman.

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**The development of Maitland: how different decisions in the early years could have created a less flood-liaible town**

By Chas Keys

Human history is built on decisions which lead to actions. It follows that different decisions will create different actions — and different developmental paths and thus different histories will result. The history we have is based on only those of the myriad decision-making possibilities on offer at various times in the past that led to actions, so it is possible to imagine other, possibly quite different histories had different decisions been made and different actions undertaken in times gone by.

Take the history of Maitland, a town that has been much afflicted by flooding since its beginnings. Maitland's origins go back to the decision in 1818 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie (Figure 1) to settle a dozen mostly convict farmers at a place he called Wallis Plains above and below the confluence of Wallis Creek and the Hunter River. Little more than a decade later Wallis Plains had become a recognisable town with the new name of West Maitland. Soon, and for some decades from the 1840s, West Maitland was the largest and most important town in New South Wales after Sydney. It outstripped Parramatta and Windsor in size and significance, and Newcastle as well.

Macquarie visited the Hunter Valley three times during his tenure as Governor of New South Wales. In 1812 he ordered the settlement of four serving convicts and a free man next to the tributary Paterson River between the locations of today's Paterson and Woodville in an area called Patersons Plains. On revisiting in 1818 he pronounced himself satisfied with what the pioneers had achieved in carving productive farms out of the rainforest and, after a walk of a few miles to the Hunter River, he ordered that another settlement, again mainly convict, be established on the river's right bank on either side of Wallis Creek. In 1818-19 several people from the penal station at Newcastle took up small plots of land there as 'tenants at will', effectively tenants of the government. Late in 1821, shortly before the end of his term, Macquarie visited Wallis Plains again (Jervis, 1940, p 168).

Wallis Plains, like Patersons Plains, was part of Macquarie's effort to rehabilitate wrong-doers: the convicts were all repeat offenders. At the same time he was seeking to bolster food production to sustain the growing population of the colony.

Wallis Plains and Patersons Plains had fertile soil, a legacy of the fact that they were highly flood-labile. Wallis Plains also turned out to be sited on what was to become an important transport route – the route up the Hunter Valley and across the Great Divide to the Liverpool Plains, the lands along the Darling River and north into what would eventually become Queensland. From the early 1820s Wallis Plains was ideally situated to become the jumping-off point for settlement of the upper Hunter Valley and the vast territories beyond, and its location was what led to the tiny farming settlement becoming a town – and a town that was highly liable to flooding. Macquarie, of course, could not have known when he founded Wallis Plains that the area would develop into an important urban centre.

#### *Macquarie and the Hawkesbury*

What is curious about Macquarie's decision in 1818 is that for years he had been vehemently opposed to farmers building their dwellings on the floodplains of the Hawkesbury River and South Creek, on the edge of the Sydney Basin, yet he ordered the creation of Wallis Plains in which the farmers lived from the start on the floodplain. The Hawkesbury had been settled since 1794, well before Macquarie's time. Macquarie had visited the Hawkesbury in 1810, much aware of two major floods the previous year and others in earlier times: these floods had had devastating effects on the settlers and the food-producing economy of the colony. Lives had been lost, habitations, crops and livestock swept away and the Hawkesbury's viability as Sydney's food bowl placed in jeopardy.

Macquarie concluded that, in order to reduce the costs wrought by floods, the settlers' habitations should be separated from their farms which needed to exploit the rich alluvial floodplain soils. For several years, beginning in 1811, he exhorted the settlers to move their habitations to higher ground and commute daily to and from their holdings. This he did in official Government and General Orders in testy, even abusive terms, both cajoling and threatening the farmers and calling into question their attitudes and even their intelligence. He considered those who were living on the floodplains "wilfully and obstinately blind to their true Interests" and "undeserving of any future Indulgences". If they did not relocate their dwellings to higher ground, he threatened, they would not be given assistance when future floods struck. The resulting calamities would be considered their own fault (Macquarie, 1817).

Macquarie's edicts over the years were published in the Sydney Gazette and read out during church services on Sundays. Magistrates and churchmen were required to persuade people to comply. Everybody in the Hawkesbury would have known about Macquarie's orders (see, as one example of the instructions he issued, Figure 2).

The Governor did not confine himself to wordy, insulting, bullying edicts: he also created a solution to the problem of people living on their lowland farms. He declared five towns, later known as the 'Macquarie Towns' (Windsor, Richmond, Pitt Town, Wilberforce and Castlereagh) in which the floodplain farmers were to be granted small plots on which to erect houses. In a novel land tenure scheme, these plots were to be considered as parts of the lowland farms and not to be sold separately from them (Karskens, 2016). The establishment of the Macquarie towns has been called the first floodplain management policy in NSW (Clarke and Geary, 1988): it was designed to reduce the damage and costs wrought by floods by removing dwellings from the lowest-lying land.

As it happened, few Hawkesbury settlers obeyed Macquarie's orders. Indeed they had not followed Governor John Hunter's similar attempts during the mid-1790s to get them to move off the floodplains. Most retained what Macquarie called the "Infatuated Obstinacy" they held in their house-and-land holdings on the lowlands. But they had good reasons for not moving: the Macquarie towns were in most cases located far from their farm plots. The commuting trips which compliance with the orders would have entailed would have been long and unproductively time-consuming. Moreover, living at a distance from their farms would have meant that the farmers could not protect their crops and livestock from being ransacked by bushrangers or Aborigines.

The Hawkesbury was not Britain, where close supervision of farm plots was unnecessary and farmers lived in villages. In Britain they walked to and from their farms each day.

The farmers on the Hawkesbury feared floods, but they believed that the fertility of the floodplain soil was such that it would soon repay the losses of crops and livestock to inundation. They could also readily rebuild their slab-and-bark dwellings using locally available materials: losing a house to a flood was not the disaster that we today might think it was. Losing crops and livestock would have been considered more difficult setbacks to recover from.

Macquarie's insistence that the farmers' houses be of brick or weatherboard, with glazed windows, brick chimneys and shingled roofs, was also problematic. Few of the settlers could have afforded to build beyond slab and bark, wattle and daub.

Macquarie understood the problems that floods posed but his solution in the Hawkesbury was not well thought through. Indeed it was impracticable. Beyond that, the political ramifications of forcing his will upon the settlers made it virtually impossible for him to compel their compliance. The Governor was annoyed that so few settlers obeyed his orders, but apparently he saw no way of changing their minds. Too many of them, small farmers who were critical to the provision of the colony's food, opposed his plans. The Governor had vast powers in theory, but political realities ensured that those powers were not absolute. If enough people were in opposition to a particular policy, he would have to retreat.

#### *The situation at Wallis Plains*

Macquarie's visit to Wallis Plains in 1818 was brief. He would have understood that the area was a floodplain, and indeed much of it was flooded three times within two years of the first settlers' arrival (Keys, 2008, p 21). It is likely that all the holdings experienced inundation during these events, and in the very big flood of 1820 some of the settlers probably lost almost everything. On the plus side, the lots had good access to the river which would be the means of shipping surplus product to Newcastle or Sydney. As it happened the settlers appear to have recovered quickly from the floods, rebuilding their simple, basic habitations and resuming their farming activity.

A slightly different siting of Wallis Plains, and ensuring the settlers built their huts on higher, less flood-prone sites, might have been a means of alleviating the flood problem to some degree. In his decision to establish the settlement, Macquarie could have ignored the land above the confluence of Wallis Creek with the Hunter (Horseshoe Bend and the land in the vicinity of what became High St) and focused on the right bank of the creek and down the Hunter to today's Morpeth or below it. The chosen settlers could have been required, on pain of not being included in the project and thereby losing the comparative freedom it was to offer them, to construct their habitations on the higher ground of what is now East Maitland and Morpeth roughly above the lines of the present Melbourne St and Morpeth Rd.

The distances to their farms located along the river and the creek would have been much less than those that characterised Macquarie's plans for the Hawkesbury where the designated towns were a few miles from the holdings on the lower floodplains. Importantly there was ample fresh water in the shape of the lagoons on the floodplain including a quite large one just below today's alignment of Melbourne St.

Visiting the area in 1818, Macquarie quickly decided that Wallis Plains was an appropriate location for settlement. He may have been there only for minutes, and he could not have become genuinely familiar with the area. Seemingly he left James Wallis (the Commandant of the prison station at Newcastle) to deal with the details of founding the settlement including the selection of the settlers themselves and the rough defining of their holdings. One might speculate that Macquarie was a 'big picture' man,



interested in achieving a grand objective (the creation of a new, convict-based farming settlement) but little interested in the details of its implementation.

Surprisingly, the Governor while making his decision about Wallis Plains seems not to have considered the potential flood problem that had so exercised his thinking on the Hawkesbury not long before. He appears not to have thought further about the geographical separation of huts from farm holdings and how to achieve it. Probably he saw only the fertile floodplain, the luxuriant vegetation it supported and the Hunter River as a link to the outside world.

Given the dense vegetation and the fact that he was in the area only briefly, he may not have even noticed the higher ground of what is now East Maitland, on a ridge looking over the lowlands and perhaps suitable for the farmers' habitations. It was not far from the lower floodplains on which the settlers' holdings were to be sited.

#### *The consequences*

Macquarie's decision at Wallis Plains was inconsistent with his edicts directed at the settlers on the Hawkesbury. He must have understood that Wallis Plains was prone to periodic inundation, and it might legitimately have been expected given his policy prescription on the Hawkesbury that he would have appreciated that access to high land nearby was desirable for the settlers' dwellings. Yet he seems not to have considered this matter, surprisingly given his lengthy, insistent efforts to engage the Hawkesbury farmers on it and force them to relocate their huts. A contemporary observer might have thought that Macquarie would have wanted to manage his new project in a way that ensured that the flood problem was addressed more effectively at the second (Hunter) attempt than it had been on the Hawkesbury. Instead, it seems, he completely abandoned the policy he had formulated earlier.

Macquarie was not, of course, thinking of a town developing at Wallis Plains: his vision was limited to settling convicts on small farms. But within a decade there were unmistakable signs that the settlement was becoming distinctly urban in character. A wharf built in 1824 in the Horseshoe Bend meander attracted river craft and trade, farm products going out and all manner of needed manufactured items soon being brought in. A port emerged and grew as more wharves were constructed. Shops took root nearby and several inns provided accommodation for travellers moving up the Hunter Valley to their new grants of land (Turner, 1989, pp8-9). A loose, straggling town had formed by 1830.

Macquarie had realised by 1819 that the Hunter in general would have to be settled, but by the time his period as Governor ended late in 1821 he had not initiated the surveying of the valley necessary for the granting of estates to the 'men of means' who were to take them up from 1822. Wallis Plains became the gateway to these estates and to the land over the Great Dividing Range, a stopping point for people and livestock on the journey to the north-west. Rapid settlement created the demand for accommodation and other services that led to the emergence of the town of West Maitland at Wallis Plains.

Had the land between Wallis Creek and the site of today's Belmore Bridge not been part of Macquarie's Wallis Plains project, the wharf that heralded the development of the port would have been located further downstream at, say, the first of the then-existent Pitnacree meanders or indeed at Green Hills (later Morpeth). In either location it would have been accessible from East Maitland, with shops and inns developing near the settlers' dwellings.

Figure 3 shows the Wallis Plains holdings after they were surveyed in 1823 (Hunter, 2012, p21): wharves could have been built on the edges of the lots farmed by George Mitchell (2) and Patrick Riley (3) or downstream at Morpeth and linked by road to East Maitland. Under this scenario, the lots upstream of the Wallis Creek confluence with the Hunter might not have been developed at all and additional lots could have been allocated along Wallis Creek in the direction of Louth Park and below Raworth and below what eventually became the port town of Morpeth.

From all this it follows that the town, developing at what is now East Maitland or at Morpeth, would have been less liable to flooding than the town that grew at the Wallis Plains of Macquarie's decision: Melbourne St has been inundated less frequently and less deeply and catastrophically than has the eastern part of High St. Melbourne St was flooded in 1893 (Figure 4) and 1913, probably in 1930 and 1952 and definitely in 1955 when the floodwaters were a metre deep there. In this biggest-ever Maitland flood, the water reached Williams St.

High St in West Maitland, the town's original central business district, was flooded on well over a dozen occasions before the modern flood mitigation scheme was developed between the late 1950s and the 1970s. In the worst floods the water reached up to (and in 1955 beyond) the site of the Post Office. The many hundreds of houses that were built in Horseshoe Bend, along High St and on the very low-lying land to the south and into South Maitland were all prone to inundation. In the bigger floods, like the one that struck in 1893, floodwaters reached such levels that only the chimneys of some houses were visible (Ackermann, 1913).

A town whose houses were built largely on the hill above Melbourne St, or at Morpeth, would have been spared much of the cost and trauma of repeated flooding. Generations of Maitland people would have had easier lives, less filled with worry about floods and coping with their often disastrous consequences.

More can be said about the potential role of Morpeth in the story. In 1841 the Sydney Herald thundered that Morpeth, located at the head of navigation for sea-going vessels, should have been the place where the Hunter Valley's town developed. The government had made a "great blunder" in selling its strategically important site to Edward Charles Close (Figure 5) 20 years earlier. There was negotiation during the 1820s for the land on which Morpeth would take shape, but Close would have recognised the money he could make by having wharves built on the river adjacent to his land. He thought the government's offer insufficient, underestimating the potential of the site of Morpeth, and no agreement for him to sell was reached.



Had Macquarie looked towards the ridge between Rathluba and Morpeth in 1818 as the land on which the first settlers should build their houses, and had the government not alienated the site of Morpeth to Close in 1821, subsequent urban growth would have occurred on the ridge. The problems wrought by floods would have been confined largely to the farmlands. Commercial centres would have emerged at East Maitland and Morpeth, either of them becoming the main business focus of the entire Hunter Valley.

Once large-scale settlement of the Hunter began in the early 1820s after the arrival of Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane, Morpeth was the place of arrival for most newcomers. In addition to port-related functions, a wide range of commercial and service activities could have developed there. Swan St would have become what High St became at West Maitland, the jumping-off point for settlers heading to their holdings further up the valley.

There would also have been less need (or perhaps no need at all) for barge-like droghers to ply the shallow, winding river above Morpeth to the smaller port which developed in the Horseshoe Bend meander at the location of today's Maitland Regional Athletics Centre (Keys and Thomas, 2022). Double-handling in transshipment could have been avoided or considerably reduced.

Arguably, a more 'efficient' pattern of urban development would have emerged, with growth in housing, commerce and manufacturing occurring largely on land above the reach of floods. To a degree the community would have been spared the scourge of flooding and the costs it repeatedly imposed.

#### *Town-building processes in the nineteenth century*

Despite substantial costs in terms of losses of crops, livestock, machinery and fencing, farms derive considerable benefit from being on floodplains because of the soil-replenishing impacts of periodic flooding. Towns derive no such benefits: in them the impacts of inundation are to all intents and purposes wholly negative. It follows that towns located on floodplains will inevitably suffer from time to time unless expensive floodplain management measures are instituted.

Even when levees are constructed, their overtopping or failure is common in big floods. Inundation of the 'protected' areas results.

In West Maitland's case the costs of flooding were huge from the town's beginnings and, despite much embankment-building effort by the municipal council from the 1860s onwards, even floods that fell far short of extreme proportions broke through or overtopped the levees. The history of West Maitland makes it abundantly clear that it is preferable to build towns above floodplains than upon them, and that complete protection by means of building levees is to all intents and purposes impossible to achieve.

In nineteenth century NSW, many factors (including the dominance of river transport) combined to ensure that urban development occurred next to rivers. Once towns had

appeared, they became magnets for economic growth so long as opportunities for business investment (and consequently housing and infrastructural investment) continued to present themselves. This is the way of urban development: once a town is established it has a built-in capacity for growth so long as the reasons for its establishment remain or new reasons emerge. 'Inertia' – in physics the tendency for an existing state of affairs (including a growth trend) to continue unless an opposing force arises to change its direction – applies. Growth, once established at a location, generates further growth there. If fortunes change and decline sets in (as for example by loss of investment opportunities to a competing town or the working out of a mineral resource), it too can become cumulative.

East Maitland's exposure to flooding from Wallis Creek and the Hunter River is comparatively small and limited to its low-lying edges. This is also true of Morpeth. Had Macquarie learned from the failure of his Hawkesbury attempt to get farmers' houses off the most flood prone lowlands, noted the high land that existed just off the floodplains at what became East Maitland and Morpeth and built it into the arrangements that foreshadowed the original European settlement, the processes that led to the formation of a substantial town would have led to it developing between East Maitland and Morpeth. The consequence would have been much less costly flood experiences both financially and in terms of human comfort for those who were to live in the area. There would have been no town completely on the floodplain at West Maitland. All of the site of what became West Maitland is flood-labile.

Macquarie could not have been aware that his 1818 decision to establish a convict-based farm settlement would lead to later decisions and actions that would create a town which would inevitably be much assailed by floods. But that is what his decision was destined to produce once the Hunter and the lands beyond the Great Dividing Range were opened up for free settlement after his term as Governor came to an end.

There is some irony in the fact that a man who showed interest in what we today would call sustainable development, notably in the Hawkesbury, made a decision which would ever after test the sustainability of the town that grew on the site of his convict farming settlement of Wallis Plains. Floods were to cause pain to West Maitland for decades. They were and remain still the community's principal environmental scourge.

### *Conclusion*

Lachlan Macquarie's reputation is one of a social reformer, a man touched by the values of the Enlightenment (Karskens, 2020, p269) and thus a humanitarian in the context of his time. Hence his belief, strongly opposed by some of his contemporaries in the colony, that people who had broken the law could be rehabilitated and lead socially useful lives. In this, Macquarie was a radical reformer by the standards of the early nineteenth century, and Wallis Plains was an expression of his views on what today might be called 'social engineering'.

The man was also an innovative creator of public buildings and works of public infrastructure, and his declaration of the 'Macquarie Towns' in the Hawkesbury was an

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important example of his desire to shape the development of NSW in a positive way. He wanted to make the colony, and its economy, less vulnerable to the scourge of flooding. His initiative at Wallis Plains reveals a man who could make big, far-reaching decisions but who was perhaps little concerned about the details of putting them into effect. Wallis Plains provided an opportunity to better embed an objective he had long favoured in the Hawkesbury, but Macquarie did not take it.

The decision to found a settlement at Wallis Plains set in train processes that led to the formation of a town. Had Macquarie made the decision slightly differently in terms of the location of the settlement, and had he required the first settlers to build their habitations on higher ground, they would have been able without difficulty to walk the short distances to and from their floodplain holdings. The distances they would have had to traverse would have been much less than those which Macquarie's edicts on the Hawkesbury would have involved. Beyond that, the constabulary outpost at East Maitland, perhaps built further to the east, would have been able to provide some protection against Aborigines and bushrangers raiding the settlers' crops.

Under these circumstances, port facilities would not have developed on the Horseshoe Bend meander but downstream and the town would have grown at East Maitland and/or Morpeth rather than at West Maitland. Urban development would have unfolded quite differently.

Towns grow because of decisions people make about investment at particular locations. Different decisions would see towns develop at different locations, in different ways and to different degrees. It is a simple matter to discern alternative ways by which Maitland might have developed had different decisions been made early in its history. Importantly, a Maitland substantially less vulnerable to repeated, costly and sometimes deadly flooding could have evolved and much heartache could have been avoided.

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Figure 1: Lachlan Macquarie

(Sourced from Wikipedia)



## GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL ORDERS

*GOVERNMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY, WEDNESDAY, 5th MARCH, 1817.*

### CIVIL DEPARTMENT

**T**HE GOVERNOR's official Communications from the Interior within the last few Days have excited in HIS EXCELLENCY's Mind the most sincere Concern and Regret for the recent Calamities in which the unfortunate Settlers on the Banks of the Nepean and Hawkesbury have been once more involved, by the late dreadful Inundations of those Rivers.

WHILST it does not fall within the Reach of human Foresight or Precaution to be able to guard effectually against the baneful Recurrence of such awful Visitations, or to avoid being more or less involved therein, yet when the too fatal Experience of Years has shown the Sufferers the inevitable Consequences of their wilful and wayward Habit of placing their Residences and Stock-yards within the Reach of the Floods (as if putting at Defiance that impetuous Element which it is not for Man to contend with); and whilst it must still be had in Remembrance that many of the deplorable Losses which have been sustained within the last few Years at least, might have been in great Measure averted, had the Settlers paid due Consideration to their own Interests, and to the frequent Admonitions they had received, by removing their Residences from within the Flood Marks to the TOWNSHIPS assigned for them on the HIGHLANDS, it must be confessed that the Compassion excited by their Misfortunes is mingled with Sentiments of Astonishment and Surprise that any People could be found so totally insensible to their true Interests, as the Settlers have in this Instance proved themselves.

HIS EXCELLENCY, however, still cherishes the Hope that the Calamities which have befallen the Settlers will produce at least the good Effect of stimulating them to the highly expedient and indispensable Measure of proceeding to establish their FUTURE RESIDENCES in the TOWNSHIPS allotted for the Preservation of themselves, their Families, and their Property, and that they will, one and all, adopt the firm Resolution of forthwith erecting their Habitations on the High Lands, cheered with the animating Hope and fair Prospect of retrieving, at no very distant Day, their late Losses, and securing themselves from their further Recurrence.

THOSE who, notwithstanding, shall perversely neglect the present Admonition and Exhortation to their own Benefit, must be considered wilfully and obstinately blind to their true Interests, and undeserving any future Indulgencies, whilst, on the contrary, those who shall meet this severe Dispensation of PROVIDENCE with manly Fortitude and unbroken Spirit, may rest assured that their Exertions and Industry will not only merit, but obtain the favourable Consideration and Protection of this Government.

THESE ORDERS are to be read during the Time of DIVINE SERVICE at each of the CHURCHES and CHAPELS throughout the Colony, on the three next ensuing SUNDAYS.

LACHLAN MACQUARIE

Figure 2: Macquarie's proclamation to the settlers on the Nepean and Hawkesbury rivers, 1817





Figure 3: The holdings of Wallis Plains as surveyed in 1823, superimposed on the modern street layout. Note that the original holdings were never surveyed and had no official boundaries; their precise locations are unknown but at least one of the first settlers (Molly Morgan) farmed a holding on Horseshoe Bend from 1819. That holding was 'resumed' by the government to allow the port to develop in the Horseshoe Bend meander and Morgan was given another, larger plot straddling what became High St between about Hunter St and just south of Elgin St. Its western boundary was about 400 metres south of the site of today's Belmore Bridge.





Figure 4: Floodwaters in Melbourne St, East Maitland, near the intersection with Newcastle Rd in 1893 (George Thomas Chambers). The depth of the water was considerably greater in 1955 than is shown in this photograph.



Figure 5: Edward Charles Close of Morpeth  
(Sourced from Wikipedia)