The archaeology of Queensland’s ‘Secret War’
RESEARCHING THE QUEENSLAND NATIVE MOUNTED POLICE, 1849 TO 1904

A collaborative project between university researchers and local Aboriginal communities is investigating archaeological evidence relating to the Native Mounted Police, a force in colonial Queensland that employed Aboriginal people to track and kill other Aboriginal people. By Lynley Wallis, Heather Burke, Bryce Barker, Noeline Cole, Leanne Bateman, Uschi Artym, Tony Pagels and Elizabeth Hatte.

...always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor. Never the tyrant... Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor

The QUEENSLAND Native Mounted Police (NMP) was a paramilitary government force that operated during the mid-to-late 19th century, particularly in newly ‘settled’ districts. On occasion they undertook tasks such as escorting gold shipments, assisting exploration parties, establishing new trading routes and searching for missing persons. However, their main role was to respond to European requests for police assistance to ‘disperse’ (a euphemism for ‘kill’) Aboriginal people to facilitate European expansion.

The first detachment of NMP arrived on the Darling Downs in May 1849 (when Queensland was still part of New South Wales), under the command of the newly appointed Commandant of the NMP, Frederick Walker. This detachment comprised 14 Aboriginal men who had been recruited by Walker from the Murrumbidgee River district, and with whom Walker had worked previously. We do not know exactly how Walker, or subsequent recruiting officers, managed to convince Aboriginal men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. 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Despite suggestions that characterising these events as a ‘war’ is a recent development popularised by so-called ‘black arm-band’ historians, anyone who has ever worked with the descendants of survivors of this state-sanctioned violence will know that Aboriginal people have always referred to the events on the ‘frontier’ as a war. Archaeology has the potential to contribute new perspectives on this conflict, and speak directly to the silences through a different lens.

The archaeological footprint of NMP camps across Queensland provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and enduring nature of the NMP’s operations.

Archaeologists Miriri Lister and Lynley Walls have suggested elsewhere that the main material evidence for conflict on the Australian frontier – in Queensland at least – will not necessarily be found in the form of ‘massacre sites’. Relatively low population densities and highly dispersed Aboriginal camps meant that massacres such as those recorded elsewhere in the New World, in which large concentrations of bodies in a single location were recorded, are unlikely to be a feature in Australia, so much so that any such relics might be akin to looking for a ‘needle in a haystack’.

This is not because there were relatively few deaths on the frontier – historians have proven without doubt that many thousands of Aboriginal people were killed. Rather, the archaeological evidence that survives as testimony to these killings will be limited. The majority of such events were punitive expeditions and often involved killing small numbers of people in discrete locations, sometimes across large distances over multiple days. Afterwards the bodies were often burnt, or treated in other ways that reduced their chances of being incorporated into the archaeological record. Even if skeletal remains are found it can be challenging to prove that they were the victims of frontier violence, as many causes of death are due to soft tissue injuries that leave no marks on surviving bones.

Instead of focusing on massacres, archaeologist Bryce Barker suggested employing a social landscape approach to the frontier wars, in which all the elements of frontier interaction are examined to contextualise conflict in a more holistic way. Adopting this recommendation, our team of researchers, working in partnership with Aboriginal communities across Queensland, has recently commenced just such a project. Specifically, the project is geared towards identifying the most trolleable archaeological manifestations of the frontier wars: the camps from which the NMP led their patrols to disperse the Aboriginal peoples of Queensland.

Broadly speaking, the project is exploring what evidence there is for the lives of troopers, the organisation of domestic, workforce and disciplinary matters in the force, the expression of hierarchical relationships between Aboriginal troopers and European officers, the roles played by Indigenous women, and the connections between the NMP, local Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal transients and settlers.

Building on the seminal work of historian Jonathan Richards, our research has shown the existence of at least 196 NMP camps, 45 of which we, or someone else, physically visited and has confirmed to contain archaeological materials.

An important thing to note from the outset is that the Queensland Police Force was extremely frugal when it came to the NMP. Peculiarly in the early days of the force, if pastoralists wanted the NMP to patrol their runs, they themselves were required to provide the accommodation or bear the cost of building it. Much administrative correspondence was generated over the haggling that surrounded buying sheeting iron to roof huts to get the NMP through the torrential wet season in the north, and, even when lives were being lost due to illness from the effects of the environment, superiors were reluctant to spend more money than was absolutely necessary.

This, and the fact that the NMP camps were almost always anticipated to be short to medium term, meant that little effort was typically put into constructing them. The NMP used locally available building materials wherever possible, often constructing the buildings themselves, and most camps appear to have been substantially dismantled, and the materials reused elsewhere, when they were closed. Most of the buildings at NMP camps were made from timber, iron and bark, although the NMP camp on the Burke River near Boulia features stone buildings.

Taken together, this means that the physical evidence of NMP camps is routinely challenging to find, comprising mainly posts, fences, fireplaces and stone pathways. In fact, many of the sites are distinguished by an absence of any major structural remains, especially in the far north where timber does not survive well. At some of these sites the most obvious indication of a camp is simply the presence of large clearings in otherwise heavily wooded areas. The situation is often exacerbated by the remote, out-of-the-way locations of the sites and the fact that many were reused as stock camps after the NMP left, coupled with decades of vegetation growth that makes the surface difficult to see.

Materials from the archives listing details of Native Mounted Police troopers. Image Heather Burke

The remains of one of the stone buildings at the NMP camp on the Burke River, a short distance from Boulia in western Queensland. Image Andrew Schaefer

A photograph from about 1882 showing the buildings of the Lower Herbert River NMP camp. Reproduced with permission of Queensland State Library (negative no 155880)
Relocating these sites requires persistence, excavating detective work in the archives, and a willingness to sit down and drink a lot of cups of tea with locals to tease out their knowledge … and even then, without more than a pinch of luck thrown in, it’s sometimes an almost impossible task.

Archaeology has the potential to contribute new perspectives on this conflict, and speak directly to the silences and meanings. This dark or ‘difficult’ heritage is not just in the past – it continues to reverberate in the present and is far more complex, raw and exceedingly complex.

For more information on the complex issue of recruitment into the NMP, see archaelogyonthefrontier.com/2018/04/13/recruiting_part_1/.

In 2000 the team will also be launching a comprehensive database that will make the information collected from historical and archaeological sources readily available to the general public. There is no single story of the NMP; its history is as broad as the hundreds of officers and troopers who constituted it, and as deep as the personal choices, actions and reactions that generated decades of frontier violence. Through their blog and the database, the team aims to help people remember the NMP and understand their activities and their effects. By allowing people to access and access the evidence for themselves, everyone will be able to come to their own conclusions about what happened, why and how.

Aboriginal people have always referred to the events on the ‘frontier’ as a war.

The vast majority of that violence (though not all) took place beyond the physical borders of the NMP’s living quarters. The familiar, banal qualities of these camps — their rubbish dumps, remnant fireplaces, paths and fences — belie their nature as the central nodes in a web of violence that stretched across the state. The everyday, domestic role they served was crucial to the NMP; its history is as broad as the hundreds of officers and troopers who constituted it, and as deep as the personal choices, actions and reactions that generated decades of frontier violence. Through their blog and the database, the team aims to help people remember the NMP and understand their activities and their effects. By allowing people to access and access the evidence for themselves, everyone will be able to come to their own conclusions about what happened, why and how.

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2 John Parrett to Frederick Wheeler, undated, Records of the Colonial and Home Secretary’s Office: 1859–1895, QSA SA44/747 01/1712, M/film Z5602.

Lead author Lynley Walls is from the Nungurra Research Institute, University of Notre Dame, Brisbane Campus, WA. This article is an edited version of a paper that she gave on behalf of the research team at the Archaeology of War conference at the museum on 23 June 2018.

To learn more about the NMP or this project, the team has a blog that they post to every few weeks: archaelogyonthefrontier.com.

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