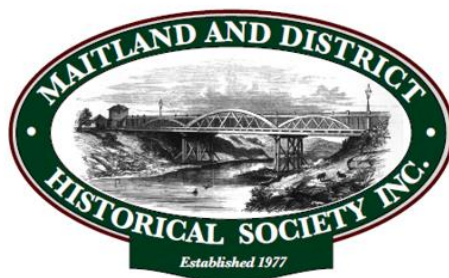


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## COVID-19 **NEWSLETTER** N<sup>o</sup> 54

31 August 2023

Hasn't *Jocko* caused a ruckus at Council?

A month or so ago the Deputy Mayor, Cllr Mitchell Griffin, brought forward a motion that *Jocko* should be placed on the Heritage Register and that an explanatory plaque be placed alongside telling his story. The debate that followed even suggested that a QR code might be included so the passing punter could bring the relevant info up on his or her phone; such are the peculiarities of modern technology.

To say it stirred up a hornet's nest is a gross understatement. The Labor councillors, voting as a bloc, opposed the idea, suggesting that Cllr Griffin's motive was cloistered and that his intention was to embolden opposition to the forthcoming Referendum concerning *The Voice*. Suffice to say the motion 'passed' with an instruction that Council officers come back to 'the Horseshoe' with a proposal .....

Well, Council officers did come back - with a proposal that consultants be engaged to make a 'recommendation' to the full Council on the desirability and or feasibility of *Jocko* being protected under the Heritage Act. I nearly forgot to mention, the cost of this suggested consultancy was estimated to be around \$20,000. Again, the motion was passed. Someone from somewhere and at a substantial cost, is going to research *Jocko's* story and bring that story back to Council.

We could probably have saved them the bother as the story of Maitland's *Black Boy*, our *Jocko*, is not a secret. In fact, and as a direct consequence of the kerfuffle created at Council and the interest of the media in that kerfuffle, members Chas Keys and Kevin Short had published in last Friday's Mercury, an abridged version of *Jocko's* tale.

So, what is *Jocko's* story .....

The aforementioned Society members, along with Treasurer Jennifer Buffier, have drafted the following for inclusion in the on-line series, [maitland – our place, our stories](#). Please be aware that this is only a 'draft' and is provided here to give members some background on who *Jocko* Graves was, what he did and how he came to Maitland:

The story of Jocko Graves, whose statue has adorned Maitland's High St for more than a century, is easily misunderstood. It is a story of heroism, not racism.

## Jocko Graves: Maitland's Little Black Boy

Kevin Short, Chas Keys and Jennifer Buffier

### Jocko's story

On a cold Christmas night in 1776 during the American War of Independence, General George Washington and his small army are about to cross the Delaware River at McConkey's Ferry in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The goal is the British garrison in the New Jersey town of Trenton. The Trenton garrison is well armed and fortified while Washington's men are near both mental and physical exhaustion.

Legend, or more accurately oral history, has it that among the 60 free African Americans who had joined Washington's cause was a man called Tom Graves. Graves had a 12-year-old son named Jocko who wanted to join the fight alongside his father, but he was of course too young. He decided to go anyway.



George Washington crossing the Delaware river.

As Washington was preparing to cross the Delaware he realised he would need to leave his horses. Young Jocko volunteered to hold the horses until Washington returned.

So cold was the night that the next morning young Jocko was found frozen to death, still holding the tethered horses. The story continues that his sacrifice and heroism restored the hope and valour of the troops, inspiring them to victory over the fortified Trenton garrison. Only four rebels died that night, two killed in battle and two who froze to death. The young Jocko was among the latter.

### The statue

After the War, and upon becoming the first President of the United States, Washington is reputed to have ordered that two sculptures be erected on his Mount Vernon (Virginia) estate. The first was a 'Dove of Peace', the second a young African-American boy named Jocko, stepping bravely forward to hold the horses.

It is from this story that the now controversial 'Lawn Jockey' statues evolved, our 'Little Black Boy' among them. His statue is 33 inches (about 84 centimetres) tall, hollow and of moulded (cast) iron. Similar statues are found in many places in the United States, and a few have appeared in Australia.

Jocko was brought to Maitland by Friend & Co, a Sydney ironmongery firm, and erected in front of the firm's High St premises in about 1870. When the company closed down, AD MacDonald bought the statue and in 1892 relocated it to the opposite (southern) side of High St in front of his Tobacconist and Newsagency.

On High St, Jocko had a practical purpose as a hitching post for horses. Today he is one of the few remaining cases of a hitching post, a reminder of the pre-mechanical days when horses and horse-drawn vehicles were the main means of getting about other than by walking. Since his arrival in Maitland, Jocko has graced the local streetscape except for when he was knocked over by cars and trucks and damaged. Repaired in 1971 by Ken Prior of an East Maitland ironmongery firm, he stands guard today on the corner of High St and Church St close to the site of McDonald's premises.

### **Jocko's place in Maitland life**

Jocko has witnessed much of Maitland's history, from before Federation, steam trams and Les Darcy to the World Wars, the 1955 flood and the making and re-making of the High St mall. He has been dressed in the colours of people's favourite sporting teams and racehorses, and it is said that returned soldiers from both World Wars made ritual pilgrimages to say hello to him. For them, perhaps, greeting the Little Black Boy was part of coming home to Maitland from the horrors of war.

Men going off to war, too, took note of him. One group of soldiers apparently approached him and a member made a speech hoping that they (the soldiers) would do their duty as well as Jocko had done his.

The evidence is that Jocko has been regarded with affection by generations of Maitland people. Over the decades he grew to be a part of Maitland and he developed a place in people's hearts.

In days gone by, the little 'Black Boy' was featured on many tourism brochures and pamphlets, Council letterheads and any number of company advertisements.

Souvenir spoons and postcards bearing his image were also produced. There was a time when anything to do with Maitland would have been thought incomplete without an image of the 'Little Black Boy'.

Today, though, Jocko's story seems not as well known as it once was. Lately, in fact, he has become a slightly forgotten figure.



## The controversy of today

Who Jocko was is misunderstood and often misrepresented. He was the son of an emancipated African-American slave who joined the fight for independence and freedom against the tyranny of British colonialism. Jocko is not a symbol of oppression but rather a symbol to inspire the oppressed to rise up and be heard. He is also a symbol of courage and devotion to duty.

Jocko's presence on High Street in a subservient role allows the casual observer to believe he represents inequality and racism. A debate in the Maitland City Council in mid-2023 shows how the notion of racism infected his story: the statue was referred to by one councillor as a "racist garden gnome", "provocative" and not helpful in terms of the maintenance of social cohesion in Maitland.

It was said that there is no evidence to validate the "myth" of Jocko Graves, and that may be true in terms of documented material. But not all truth is verifiable via the written word, and there are other means by which knowledge is transmitted down through the generations. The lack of written evidence does not mean that Jocko's story as passed down orally to today is untrue. Nor does the fact that the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Michigan has incorporated the Little Black Boy in a collection of racist artefacts mean that the statue is or represents a racist depiction.

We need to be careful here. 'Cancelling' the depiction of a black American boy who was born into and probably experienced the horrors of slavery cannot be allowed, because to do so will imply that no depiction of ex-slaves is permitted. Horrors involving the treatment of human beings by other human beings must be displayed as part of ensuring we understand and remember what they were. Indeed, this is part of trying to ensure they are not repeated.

It is one thing to cancel somebody who is known only for heinous activity — for example a slave trader — by removing his statue from a town square or his name from a national park — but entirely another to withdraw recognition from somebody who acted heroically. We should not get rid of Jocko merely because he was the son of an emancipated slave. Nor must we accept that in the statue he was playing a subservient role. It was a role of importance to a cause.

Similarly, to deny a story which is based on oral rather than written transmission runs the risk, if we are to be consistent, of denying Aboriginal song lines about creation, nature and history. All Aboriginal stories come from an oral tradition. Australia would be the poorer if the standard we adopted was to be based on a denialist approach to Aboriginal communication: we would in effect be saying that Aboriginal stories and Aboriginal history were without value. We would also be encouraging their loss.

A few years ago, there was a statue of Jocko in the Maitland City Council's administration building. In 2020, the council received a petition seeking the removal of the statue from High St along with a similar one located inside the Mutual Bank building: apparently more than 500 people signed it. In all likelihood, though, a genuine plebiscite would show that a majority of the residents of the City would support him staying exactly where he is.

In July, 2023, a motion that the Council look into the declaration of the statue as a heritage item under the Maitland Local Environment Plan was passed. The argument was put by a

bloc of four councillors that the statue is a symbol of racism and thus unworthy of heritage status, but nine councillors took a different view.

## A way forward

Perhaps it is time Council added a plaque or some signage to the statue to explain the story of Jocko, as passed down over the decades, so that he can be recognised in the community for the heroic role he might have played on the bank of the Delaware River in 1776. There is no racism involved in his story. The Little Black Boy is part of Maitland's history and nothing to be ashamed of or defensive about.

Jocko deserves to be understood and celebrated in the Maitland main street he has graced for a century and a half.



## References

Coleman, Chloe "Racist garden gnome' Jocko's status debated", Maitland Mercury, 28 July 2023 page 16

Short, Kevin 'A symbol to inspire the oppressed to be heard, Our Past, Maitland Mercury, 3 December 2021 page 11

'No Reins for Outstretched Hand', Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 19 August 1950

'Old Movie Bill Found in Status' Newcastle Sun, 11 August 1953

'Here It Is!' World News, 22 July 1954 page 4

*#High St Maitland -Little Black Boy statue*

### Captions:

*George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River*

*Maitland's Little Black Boy*

*Jocko undergoing repairs in 1971 (Athel D'Ombra Collection)*

*Jocko, fitted with a broom in front of McDonald's (Athel D'Ombra Collection)*

Well, there you have it.

The story of Jocko and of his attachment to Maitland.

## A cultural Hub for Maitland

The situation with the possible acquisition of the old Council administration building becoming a 'Cultural Hub' remains fluid. A group of interested organisations, ourselves included, met with the new General Manager Mr Jeff Smith recently. Whilst he obviously didn't commit himself or Council to anything, he did listen intently and promised to look objectively at what we are proposing.

On this score, there will be a visit to Bathurst in late October where a deputation representing councillors, council staff and interest groups will visit their new storage facility. Hopefully something positive will come from it?

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Our next Speaker Evening for Tuesday 5 September 2023 at 5.30 pm at the Society Rooms - 3 Cathedral Street, Maitland

### **Hunter Valley novelist Paula Beavan to speak at Maitland Historical Society function.**

The guest speaker at the Maitland and District Historical Society's next guest speaker evening will be Hunter Valley novelist Paula Beavan, whose talk is entitled **The local identities whose lives who inspired 'Daughter of the Hunter Valley'**. Paula's talk will begin at 5.30pm on Tuesday, 5 September in the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Place, Maitland.

**'Daughter of the Hunter Valley'** is the story of a Madeleine Barker-Trent, who finds herself having to choose between a new life in the Colony of New South Wales and returning to the safety and comfort of England. Alone in a strange new land and at a time when women of her class were cosseted and protected, Maddy defies society to make a new life in the Australian bush.

An avid reader from childhood, Paula J Beavan grew up on a small property in the Hunter Valley, riding horses, mustering cattle and listening to the tales of local farriers, cattlemen and farmers. Her love of the land and its history together with a curiosity about the challenges faced by the pioneering women of the region led her to seek out stories of the area's founding settlers.

Historical Society members and members of the general public are welcome to attend this talk. There is no need to book a seat, but the Society asks attendees for a \$5 donation to cover the costs of supper (sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, tea and coffee) before and after the talk.

Until next time .... Stay safe.

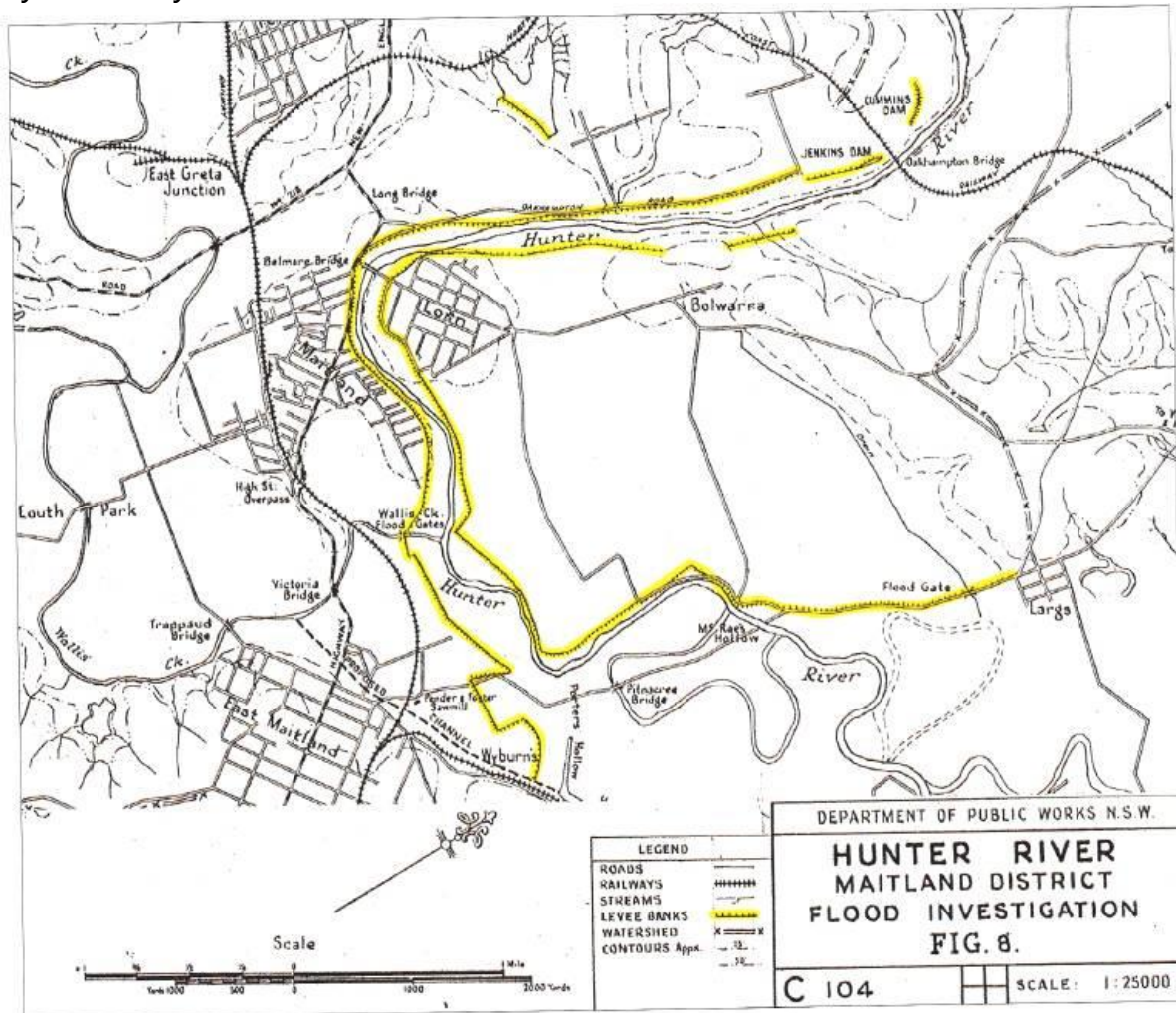


Kevin Short  
President



# Bolwarra farmers' hard yakka and their battle with embankments

By Chas Keys



## Bolwarra farmers' hard yakka and their battle with embankments

The building of embankments to keep floods off farmlands began in earnest on the lower Hunter during the 1870s, though some may have been constructed as early as the 1840s. Farmers banded together, forming 'embankment committees', and in due course there were more than 20 such committees between Oakhampton and Hexham. One was the Bolwarra Embankment Committee which existed under that name in 1888 but was probably founded more than 10 years before - perhaps as early as the 1860s.

By about 1889 the Bolwarra farmers had built an embankment (a levee, in today's language) along the left bank of the Hunter River from the hill at Bolwarra to the high ground of Largs. All of the Bolwarra Flats, including the site of the future suburb of Lorn, were enclosed. A 'tunnel' (drain) was also built to take water from rain falling within the 'protected' area through the downstream end of the bank and into the river near Largs. It had a trapdoor (a floodgate in today's terms) in it.

Eventually, the section of the embankment that protected the urban centre of Lorn was taken over by the Lorn Vigilance Committee. Lorn was subdivided from former

farmland in 1889 and built up over the following decades and the Vigilance Community would have been formed soon after the suburb began to develop.

The Bolwarra Embankment Committee represented a formalisation of community endeavour in seeking flood protection. The committee had an executive elected by members, it held regular meetings in Bolwarra Hall and school and levied members on a per-acre basis to obtain money to build and maintain embankments.

In 1930, the sum charged was five shillings per acre 'protected'. Like similar committees elsewhere in the lower Hunter Valley (including the one in Oakhampton across the river), Bolwarra's was not a statutory body, and the levies could not be enforced. This problem was solved in part by allowing members who were not financial to work off their contributions in what amounted to working bees. Men who had paid worked for wages, too, and were remunerated for horses and drays supplied.

The embankments were progressively strengthened by being raised and thickened. On being raised, the crests of the banks were 'ploughed down' to facilitate the bonding of the old soil with the new, and cracks that emerged on the tops and sides of the banks during dry periods were filled with loam.

Initially construction work was carried out with shovels and wheelbarrows to win and transport soil to the sites of the embankments. In due course, horses and tip drays were used and eventually, after World War II, bulldozers were employed and some of the work was done by contract. But for the majority of the life of the committee, the work was done by the local farmers using shovels, barrows, drays and horses.

Once, when part of the embankment was undermined during a flood and fell into the river, a 'ring levee' was built inland from the line of the original structure. Changes to the river's course, usually during floods, were always problematic.

## Devices used to find water





# How the Bolwarra Embankment Committee protected the Bolwarra flats

By Chas Keys  
August 28 2022



EMBANKMENTS: Bolwarra farmer the late Walter Worboys.

The Bolwarra Embankment Committee, created to keep floodwaters off the farms of the Bolwarra flats, achieved a high level of organisation during its century of active life.

Detailed financial records were kept showing which farmers had paid the levy, who owed money, hours worked by members and what insurance had been obtained.

Five 'section committees' were formed to monitor the banks between defined points and recommend to the main committee the work needed.

Breaches occurred during big floods, wandering cattle wore down the crests and rat-holes and rabbit and bandicoot burrows appeared in the banks.

Stocks of jute sandbags were held in farmers' sheds for use in blocking leaks or raising crests when floods occurred.

At such times members would patrol the banks, if necessary on a 24-hour basis and with kerosene lamps at night, to identify weak points at which failures might occur.

Real-time monitoring took up much of the time of members during floods. Afterwards, especially after severe events, there was always repair and improvement activity to be undertaken.

This is the case today as far as the modern levees and control banks are concerned.

On occasions, large numbers of men would work at the same time at a site, repairing or augmenting the banks.

There was also a heavy load on members of the executive in terms of meetings, letter writing and participating in deputations especially to council (and occasionally the government) from which help was sought.

The committee showed itself to be aware of the need to make its case to the wider community.

It appointed a publicity officer and organised media tours of the flats after floods to demonstrate the damage done to primary producers.

The farmers were clearly well attuned politically to the need to ensure their food-growing activities were understood.

From the first decade of the twentieth century and perhaps even earlier the committee sought external help, first from the local council (Bolwarra, later part of Lower Hunter and later again incorporated within the City of Maitland).

It also sought assistance from the state government. Lobbying by letter and deputation sought funding, but it also brought to council attention the committee's concerns when blockages like fences were erected across the former Largs meander (which had been cut off in 1890).

The lobbying brought some success, funding being made available and the council installing stonework to armour bends at which erosion and meander extension were most likely.

The Public Works Department contributed to mitigation works as well and from quite early times.

Periodically there were contributions from the community. These were administered by Maitland Flood Relief Committee after big floods and were reported in the *Maitland Mercury*.

Donors were named along with the amounts given. The need for the embankment committees was clearly appreciated in the community, and the committee worked hard to gain organisational and popular support.

## How to confuse a vegan

