

Nyungar resistance fighters Midgegooroo and Yagan (1829-1833)

Hamilton Hill Community Heritage Precinct (2015)

As Whadjuk Noongar communities resisted the settlement and occupation of the European Swan River Colony from 1829, they were involved in ongoing conflicts with settlers, who threatened their way of life.

The leader of the Beeliar tribe, Midgegooroo (c.1780-1833) and his people were custodians of a large area south of the Swan River: from the Indian Ocean in the west to the Canning River in the east and Mandurah in the south.

Traditional Owners have advised that the **Hamilton Hill Swamp** was the summer campground for Aboriginal leader, Midgegooroo, his son Yagan (c.1795 –1833) and their families. The swamp grounds would have flooded to over 1 metre deep making it an ideal spot for camping and hunting in the warm months due to the abundance of water and the wildlife it attracted.¹

Yagan was known by the Nyungar as Whadjuck boordier (landowner, patriot, warrior and defender of Nyungar boodjar, moort and katitjin).²

In 1933 *The West Australian* newspaper featured David Butchart's memories from 'old colonial days'. David came to Fremantle in 1852 and recalled Aboriginal people (the 'Fremantle-Mandurah tribe') gathering at the Hamilton Hill Swamp for corroborees:

Natives from hundreds of miles used to gather and they would keep up the celebrations for days.³

Hamilton Hill Swamp was also a ceremonial meeting ground of great significance, part of a larger interconnected ceremonial web winding through Hamilton Hill, Fremantle, and Manning Park in Spearwood. Traditional Owners said ceremonies would occur where the palm trees (currently standing in the western portion of the Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct up to Cardigan Street) are located.

Other ceremonial grounds included segregated men's and women's areas, with a women's ceremonial hill to the south of Rockingham Road. This hill is known to have red and white ochre pits used for painting women during ceremonies. An important bidi (track) also runs

1 Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, 2021, p 25. Terra Rosa Consulting add that 'In recounting the early Swan River Colony, Calder (1977: 35) reports that Midgegooroo's son Yagan was sighted around the Hamilton Hill Swamp precinct, which led to Aboriginal groups performing ceremonial dances in the Aboriginal resistance fighter's honour.' p 23

2 Len Collard, Sandra Harben and Rosemary van den Berg, 'Nidja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyininy: A Nyungar Interpretive History of the use of Boodjar (country) in the Vicinity of Murdoch University', Murdoch University 2004, p 17

3 'Old Colonial Days', David Butchart, *The West Australian*, 29 July 1933, p 4

from this women's ceremonial hill, through a small triangle of vegetation north to Clontarf Hill.⁴

Consultation revealed that Hamilton Hill Swamp is also associated with the Seven Sisters Dreaming (Marajinbanga Gurdjir Koodjal Djoorkaarn) which includes the limestone hills (Djidong) running along the Swan River and south along the coast. This Dreaming connects Cantonment Hill (Dwerdaweelardinup) and Clontarf Hill (to the north of the Swamp), and various other hills in the vicinity, which have since been razed for development.⁵

Several small military garrisons were established throughout the Swan River Colony by the end of 1831 and early documents, as well as oral histories, recall a series of attacks known as the 'first punishments' occurring in the early 1830s.⁶

In 1833, a proclamation was published in the *Perth Gazette* offering a reward of £30 for the capture 'dead or alive' of Yagan, and £20 of Midgegooroo.⁷ The proclamation declared Yagan, Midgegooroo and another leader, Munday, to be outlaws. Midgegooroo was captured and executed without trial in Perth on 22 May 1833. Yagan was killed in the Upper Swan, on 11 July 1833.⁸

Traditional Owners believe that one of these 'first punishment raids', led by Captain Irwin, who was searching for Aboriginal leader Yagan, took place at the Hamilton Hill Swamp and resulted in the killing of a large number of women and children.

There is no documented evidence of the massacre, however Traditional Owners like Geri Hayden recall her great, great grandmother, Granny Sarah Bennell (nee Isaac) telling her about the massacre taking place during a women's ceremony at Hamilton Swamp, with the story then passed down in oral tradition.⁹

4 Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, 2021, p 23.

5 Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, 2021, p 22.

6 Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, 2021, p 42; CT Stannage, *The People of Perth: A Social History of Western Australia's Capital City*, Perth City Council, 1981.

7 *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal* (4 May 1833) and *the Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*. Vol. 1, no. 18. pp. 69–72. Retrieved 7 March 2025 – via National Library of Australia. Wikipedia entry accessed 19 May 2025.

8 Munday was declared an outlaw along with Yagan and Midgegooroo, but was not captured and executed, later being forgiven by Irwin after he and Miago sued for a cessation in the widespread violence that settlers were perpetrating in 1833. Mary Blight correspondence 26 May 2025

9 Traditional Owner Geri Hayden recalls her great, great grandmother, Granny Sarah Bennell (nee Isaac) telling her about the massacre taking place during a women's ceremony at Hamilton Swamp, with the story then passed down in oral tradition. See Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, p 42.

These early raids eventually led to the Pinjarra Massacre in 1834 and were followed by massacres in York in 1836 and 1837, and around Vasse district/Busselton in 1837 and 1841.¹⁰

The area was described as a 'wilderness and native burial ground' in 1913, when bones of an Aboriginal man called Wee Waw, said to have been buried in 1862, were found there. The story recounted he had been buried in a traditional sitting position and covered lightly with dirt and leaves. However, he hadn't actually been dead, so a few hours later he awoke, left his grave and travelled to Mandurah to find his tribe. Upon seeing him return from the dead, the tribe were horrified and ostracised him. He worked as a shepherd around Hamilton Hill swamp until he died two years later, when the tribe broke all his bones and reburied him at the swamp.¹¹

In 2019 Fremantle Labor MP Simone McGurk identified the need for a study of the site and made funding available for the report by Terra Rosa Consulting: *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct* (2021). This confirmed that the Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct was a significant Aboriginal site, both prior to European occupation, and well into the late 19th century. It was also used as a campsite by Aboriginal people until the 1940s and 50s.



Caption: 'Aboriginal Heritage Site Plan.' Published in Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, 2021

10 Mary Blight correspondence 26 May 2025. <https://maryblight.com/2023/02/22/1829-onwards-colonial-violence-on-wadjuk-pibelman-and-wardandi-country-western-australia/>

11 Wee Waw, 'The Perverse, The Bogey of Fremantle Tribe, Two Graves for One Black Man. A Remarkable Story. E. H. Brewer,' *Daily News*, 27 May 1913, p 2

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the State Housing Department began building houses for Aboriginal people in the Coolbellup, Hamilton Hill, Hilton and Willagee locales. Many different Nyungar groups were given these houses to further the Western Australian government's move to integrate Nyungar and other Aborigines into the wider community and Nyungar and Aboriginal people from other areas began shifting from the old reserves in the wheat belt to houses in specific suburbs. Juat oral historian Margaret Gentle tells of her move to Beeliar boodjar or country: "All the people who lived at Allawah Grove got a house . . . all over the metropolitan area. Some got old houses or new houses. My children and I were given a new one. We lived in Murdoch Drive, Coolbellup." ¹²

A smoking and healing ceremony took place in 2019, demonstrating an ongoing connection to culture and country.

One of the major recommendations of the Terra Rosa report was that Traditional Owners and non-Aboriginal community members wished to highlight the Aboriginal and environmental significance of the Precinct and suggested that it be recognised through information and interpretative signage, native plants, cultural trails, place names, use of language and protection of intangible values.¹³



¹² 'Nidja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyininy: A Nyungar Interpretive History of the Use of Boodjar (Country) in the Vicinity of Murdoch University', p 45

<https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/991005541822107891>

¹³ Terra Rosa Consulting, *Early European and Aboriginal Heritage Study, Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct*, p 67

Caption: Kay Walley leading a guided walk at the Dixon Park site, June 2021, photo Christine Duckham

The idea that this Precinct should be saved from over-development and cared for by the community started in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was sustained local opposition to, and community campaigns against the Fremantle Eastern Bypass (FEB), first included in the Perth Metropolitan Regions Scheme in 1973. This FEB plan included a highway through Clontarf Hill.

The Transport Action Coalition (TRAC) was a group of local citizens opposed to the construction of a freight highway through the suburbs of White Gum Valley, Beaconsfield and Hamilton Hill. TRAC ran a highly visible community campaign to 'Ditch the Bypass'.

In 1997, 300 people walked the route of the FEB, culminating in a concert and blessing ceremony at Clontarf Hill. Father Donovan from Christ the King parish called for local people to stand up and fight for the hill and conducted a 'blessing of the hill', in the spirit of advocacy for the preservation of the hill as a place of natural heritage.¹⁴

The Gallop Labor Government, responding to the strong community campaign, acted to abolish the Eastern Bypass in 2003.

Friends of Clontarf Hill (established in 1992) then worked hard to revive the 10-hectare area which borders both the Cities of Fremantle and Cockburn, and have it recognised as a Parks and Recreation Reserve in the Metropolitan Region Scheme. They commissioned a research paper by Nandi Chinna exploring Clontarf Hill history, which showed it had significant Nyungar and ecological heritage value.¹⁵

The early European history of the site was also identified and valued, with Perth's first newspaper press set up in bush at the swamp by Charles McFaull, who published the *Fremantle Observer* and who also planted the state's first grapevines at the swamp in the 1830s. Local history researcher Joe Baker wrote:

In the mid 1880's, some of the Dixon brothers (James, Horace, Alfred and Henry), along with John Fielder and Alma Dunning, began to squat on and fence off the Hamilton Hill swamp. They eventually won legal possession after various courts

14 Nandi Chinna for Friends of Clontarf Hill, 'Clontarf Hill History,' 2015, p 43.

<http://hmcg.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Clontarf-Hill-Heritage-NOV-2016.pdf>

15 Chinna, 'Clontarf Hill History'. Dr. Nandi Chinna is a writer, poet, environmental activist and researcher based in Perth. She currently works as a consultant specialising in social and ecological histories. Her poetry book 'Swamp; Walking the Wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain' published in 2014 includes poetry of Dixon Reserve and Clontarf Hill.

ruled against Lucius Manning, who claimed ownership. The brothers used their land for market gardens, sheep, pigs and cows.¹⁶

This swamp land is partly now buried under a section of Dixon Reserve and the adjacent road reserve.¹⁷



Caption: Hamilton Hill Swamp (now Dixon Park), about 1951, courtesy Terry Baker, Cockburn Local History collection LH.1416.

The Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct has undergone several changes in use, developments and urbanisation. The infilled swamp (under Dixon Reserve) is now only visible following heavy rain. For many years local residents had asked the City of Cockburn to remove rubbish, dumped in the late 1960's, in bushland on Lot 51 Healy Road adjacent to Dixon Reserve. The City of Cockburn finally removed contaminated material in February 2016.¹⁸

16 From correspondence with Joe Baker 27 May 2025. In late 1885 Henry Septimus Dixon (and wife Jane) was awarded the 1886 lease rights (*The Herald*, Saturday 9 January 1886, p 11) to levy de-pasturing fees on people using reserve 671A (on the north and side sides of CSL10 - Robb's grant) by the Fremantle Municipal Council's Corporation. In March 1884 this land had been granted to the Town of Fremantle as endowment land (*Government Gazette*, 27 March 1884, p 142).

17 'A Dairyman's Trouble,' *Daily News*, 11 April 1905, p 3.

18 See Golder Associates, 'Preliminary Site Investigation of Dixon Reserve, Hamilton Hill, (for City of Cockburn), 2008.

The group realised that the adjacent Dixon Swamp, also called Dixon Park, was very significant.

In 2013 the precinct was placed on the City of Cockburn Local Government Inventory and registered as a Heritage Site (HCWA No. 24707).¹⁹

In 2015 a coalition of community groups proposed the development of a **Hamilton Hill Community Heritage Precinct**, encompassing Clontarf Hill reserve, the heritage listed Randwick Stables and the land bounded by Healy Road, Ommaney Street, Hurford Street, Leda Street, and Rockingham Road, including Dixon Swamp, now known as Dixon Park. The coalition argued that this space had significant pre-and post-colonial heritage and was a well-used, much-loved community open space and wildlife habitat that needed to be protected for the benefit of all the community and future generations.

Christine Duckham wrote in 'The case for preserving Hamilton Hill open space and surrounds as community open space in perpetuity':

The site also forms an important link in the ancient Aboriginal Bidi, which, from Fremantle, passed over the shoulder of Clontarf Hill, across the south side of Hamilton Hill Swamp, then branching east to Walliabup (Bibra Lake) and south along Hamilton Road to Lake Koojee and points south. This was also the first colonial road leading south-east out of Fremantle, south on Hamilton Road, then branching into the Rockingham Road and Dunnage's Track (to Jandakot) until 1880.²⁰

The community groups in the coalition are **Friends of Clontarf Hill, Hamilton Hill Action Group, Hamilton Hill Community Group Inc, Friends of Randwick Stables and Cockburn Community Wildlife Corridor**. They joined forces to advocate for the retention and preservation of the open space and tuart woodlands adjacent to Dixon Park. They argued against further housing development on the site and a large banner was spread on land next to 54 Rockingham Road, Hamilton Hill to draw attention to the campaign.

19 'Hamilton Hill Swamp Precinct,' City of Cockburn Local Government Inventory, 2021, pp 341-345.

20 Christine Duckham for Friends of Clontarf Hill, Hamilton Hill Action Group, Friends of Randwick Stables, Cockburn Community Wildlife Corridor Inc., 'The case for preserving Hamilton Hill Open Space and surrounds as Community Open Space in Perpetuity', 2015.



Caption: A large banner was spread on land next to 54 Rockingham Road, Hamilton Hill to draw attention to the campaign, 2015, photo Christine Duckham

The **Hamilton Hill Community Heritage Precinct group** continues to provide many hours of volunteering on community projects, such as revegetation, and keeping the area clean and weed-free.