

# Linking people to place and country

Accessing records relating to Aboriginal people at State Records NSW

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There has been growing recognition over the past years of the importance of Indigenous people accessing material held in archives — both in private and government collections. Both the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families made recommendations relating to Indigenous access to records.

In May 1996, the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) adopted a policy statement relating to *Archival Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. The statement made recognition that archives have the opportunity and responsibility to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make maximum use of archival holdings and services and to facilitate Aboriginal access to records of their own cultural heritage and historical experience. [<http://www.archivists.org.au/pubs/positionpapers/atsi.html>]

In December 1998, State Records NSW created a position for a cadet Aboriginal archivist as part of the ALIA/DEETYA Strategy which aimed to increase the number of Indigenous people working in the library and archives sector. I was employed in the position in March 1999 at which time I undertook post-graduate studies. After the cadetship I took up permanent employment in the Public Access section of State Records as Archivist — Aboriginal liaison. One of the main roles that I have at State Records is to assist Indigenous clients access records.

There is a wealth of information held at State Records relating to Aboriginal people. State Records published a guide to records in 1998 to assist Indigenous clients accessing records. *The Guide to NSW State Archives relating to Aboriginal people*, is available from State Records and on the website at <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au>. There are also a number of *Archives in Brief* available on the State Records website relating to Indigenous research.

For many Indigenous people archives can provide that vital piece of information, the link that connects people to place and country. Records created by the former Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards are some of the most valuable documents for people re-establishing family and community links. The records of the Board are important because its activities had a major impact on Aboriginal people in New South Wales, in particular members of the stolen generation who were removed from their families and communities. These documents can often be distressing for those people viewing them as often they depict individuals, families and communities in a way that is offensive, derogatory and sometimes racist because of the context in which they were created.

Families who are in the process of undertaking native title research and collecting genealogies can also use the State archives for research. Useful series include, for example, maps, school files, Surveyor General's and Colonial Secretary's correspondence, Government Gazette's and records of the Lands Department.

State Records conducts seminars and workshops relating to Indigenous issues and access to New South Wales State archives relating to Aboriginal people as part of the Public Access activities program. These workshops can be a great way for people to get ideas on how to get started with their research.

For many people research at archives can be a challenging and sometimes intimidating experience. One of the major challenges in archives exists in balancing the need for people to access information on their families with the need to protect the privacy of those people mentioned in the files.

Many of the records of the former Aborigines Protection and Welfare Board are closed to public access due to the sensitive information that is contained within them. Many of the records of the Board are incomplete due to destruction or loss. And many gaps exist within the records, for example, the correspondence files of the Welfare Board have only survived for the years 1949–1969.

To access material that is closed to public access researchers must first obtain permission from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. This requires researchers to complete an application for access form, as well as provide two forms of identification. If the researcher is wishing to view information on people other than themselves, permission must first be obtained from the eldest living relative. The researcher also needs to sign a form agreeing not to disclose or use any information they locate in the records which may cause pain or embarrassment to any other person.

In 2001, State Records is working on a project to consult with Aboriginal communities throughout New South Wales to identify services which best meet the needs of Indigenous researchers. This involves visits to a number of communities throughout New South Wales and a survey to assess our current products and services. The meetings will provide an opportunity for State Records to make contact with Aboriginal communities and discuss what kinds of improvements can be made in the future. The long-term purpose will be to provide public access to the State's archives in a way that reflects community diversity.

I am available to talk to clients about research needs at any time and can be contacted by phone on 02 827 5612 or e-mail: [Aboriginalliaison@records.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Aboriginalliaison@records.nsw.gov.au). ■

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