

# The archaeology of the ‘Secret War’: The material evidence of conflict on the Queensland frontier, 1849–1901

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## Abstract

Although the historical record relating to nineteenth century frontier conflict between Aboriginal groups and Europeans in Queensland has been clearly documented, there have been limited associated archaeological studies. As part of the Archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP) project, this paper canvasses the physical imprint of frontier conflict across Queensland between 1849 and the early 1900s, focusing specifically on the activities and camp sites of the NMP, the government-sanctioned paramilitary force tasked with policing Aboriginal people to protect settler livelihoods. At least 148 NMP camps of varying duration once existed, and historical and archaeological investigations of these demonstrate some consistent patterning amongst them, as well as idiosyncrasies depending on individual locations and circumstances. All camps were positioned with primary regard to the availability of water and forage. Owing to their intended temporary nature and the frugality of the government, the surviving structural footprints of camps are generally limited. Buildings were typically timber slab and bark constructions with few permanent foundations and surviving architectural features are therefore rare, limited to elements such as ant bed flooring, remnant house or yard posts, stone lines demarcating pathways, and stone fireplaces. Architectural forms of spatial confinement, such as lockups or palisades, were absent from the camps themselves. The most distinctive features of NMP camps, and what allows them to be distinguished from the myriad pastoral sites of similar ages, are their artefact assemblages, especially the combined presence of gilt uniform buttons with the Victoria Regina insignia, knapped bottle glass, and certain ammunition-related objects.

## Introduction

The historical primary source data on the Native Mounted Police (NMP) and their role in colonial Queensland is well documented, having been comprehensively explored by numerous historical scholars (e.g. Bottoms 2013; Evans et al. 1975; Loos 1982; Orsted-Jensen 2011; Reynolds 1981; Richards 2005, 2007, 2008; Skinner 1975). These sources outline the systematic use of a government-sanctioned paramilitary force to ‘subdue’ resistance to European incursions on Aboriginal land for a period of over 50 years, resulting in massacres, reprisals and extra-judicial executions. But what of the physical evidence of this well-documented frontier violence? Our project documented the existence of up to 173 NMP camps across Queensland and northern New South Wales, 148 of which could be considered reliable locations (i.e. they are documented in more than one source and were clearly associated with the NMP), and 147 of which could be plotted to at least a general area. Based on historical evidence, the survey and recording of 31 of these sites and the excavation of seven, this paper outlines a key archaeological signature of frontier conflict in Queensland. In doing so this paper is necessarily descriptive, focusing on the dominant material traces evident at camps and the economic and other imperatives that shaped their location, form, arrangement, and contents in order to outline the first comprehensive account in Australia of this site type.

## The Archaeology of Frontier Conflict in Australia

As a result of the so-called ‘culture wars’ (e.g. Attwood and Foster 2003; Manne 2003; Windschuttle 2002) much of the emphasis on frontier conflict in the Australian context has focused on ‘massacres’, with arguments revolving around their definition, scale and frequency (e.g. Curthoys and Docker 2001; Reynolds 2001; Ryan 2010, 2013; Ryan et al. 2020). Although there are many archival and newspaper accounts and a few official enquiries, as well as strong Aboriginal oral evidence about frontier violence, there have only been two archaeological field studies in which in situ human remains have been identified: one tentatively in the southeast Kimberley region (Smith et al. 2017), and the other in Queensland at Irvinebank on Cape York Peninsula (Genever et al. 1996) (a third study at the Woolgar goldfields in northwest Queensland did not locate any human remains [Moffat and Wallis 2005], while results from a study of the Rufus River massacre are confidential [Jeanette Hope, pers. comm., 2005]). In both cases the locations were identified by Aboriginal Traditional Owners and supported by historical accounts in which the remains were said to have been burnt by the perpetrators – a commonly recorded practice on the frontier (Richards 2001). Thus, either no bone or only small fragments of burnt bone were located in both instances, and it was impossible for the remains to be immediately identified to species level to confirm they were human. Smith et al.

(2017) applied a range of scientific techniques to the bone fragments, including X-ray diffraction, and macroscopic and microscopic examination by an anatomical pathologist and a zooarchaeologist to try and resolve the situation in the Kimberley study, concluding that:

although three bone fragments exhibited probable anthropomorphic characteristics, it was not possible to demonstrate beyond doubt that the bone fragments are from humans (Smith et al. 2017:266).

There is no question, given the strong oral and historical evidence relating to these locations, that these were massacre sites and indeed at the Irvinebank site a range of European items belonging to the NMP were recorded, including bullets and bullet casings from government issue Snider rifles. What these studies make abundantly clear, however, is the difficulty in identifying massacre sites from skeletal remains in the Australian archaeological record (cf. Litster and Wallis 2011).

Reliable accounts of how massacres were carried out are understandably scarce and mostly come from oral accounts from Traditional Owners, although some detailed records do exist in the context of official enquiries into specific massacre events. One of these was the Coniston Massacre in 1928 near Alice Springs, in which it was officially admitted that at least 31 Walpiri people of all ages and sexes were shot, but with independent missionary estimates of 70 and the Walpiri themselves claiming that at least 170 were killed (Wilson and O'Brien 2003). Although not in Queensland, the Coniston massacre is telling in how it informs us about the material evidence of such events more broadly. According to the official report, the killings did not take place at one location as a single event but, rather, over a period of six weeks at six different locations, in which between one and eight individuals were shot at any one time (Wilson and O'Brien 2003). In that case it is not clear what happened to the bodies; we know that elsewhere victims may have been traditionally interred once it was deemed safe for relatives and friends to return (Barker 2007; Litster and Wallis 2011) and, as discussed above, more often than not bodies were burnt by the perpetrators (e.g. Barber 1993; Elder 1988). For instance, the perpetrators of the Myall Creek massacre in New South Wales, which occurred on 10 June 1838, returned two days later and attempted (largely unsuccessfully) to do just that (Ryan 2018:24–26), as did the NMP troopers involved in the Irvinebank killings of 18 October 1884 (1885 Regina v Sambo, Sandy, Larry, Willie, Jimmey, Pituri and Carlo 20 January, in letter 85/989, QSA847145).

Relatively low population densities coupled with widely spread Aboriginal camps meant that massacres such as those recorded elsewhere in the world, in which large concentrations of bodies in a single location are recorded (see Green and Scott 2004 for a North American example), are unlikely to be a feature in the Australian context. The unique nature of Australian frontier violence and the problems with using massacre site locations as evidence of frontier conflict have previously been addressed by Barker (2007) and Litster and Wallis (2011). Barker (2007) in particular argued that the key to documenting frontier conflict in the Australian setting will be through exploring alternative datasets, preferably at a landscape scale. In this paper we do just that, specifically considering the archaeological evidence for the camps from which the NMP led their patrols to 'disperse' the Aboriginal peoples of Queensland and suggest that these are one such

dataset that can be examined at a landscape scale to provide alternative insights into frontier conflict.

## The Queensland Native Mounted Police

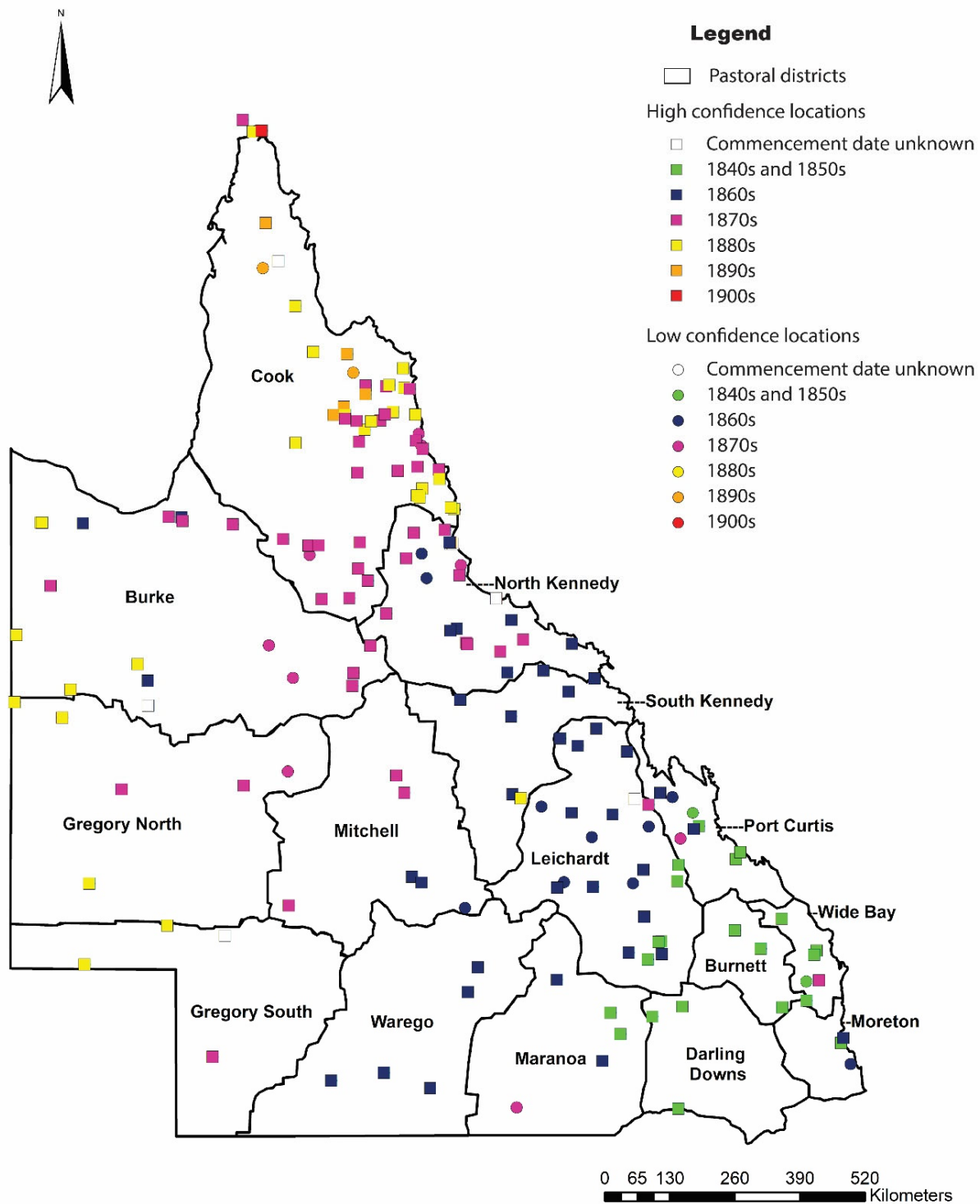
To some extent the complexity of any organisation that existed for more than 50 years, was the subject of several official enquiries and underwent at least two major organisational restructures, resists being generalised. The particulars of any given NMP detachment at any time and place are as much attributable to the individuals concerned (both within the NMP and outside it) and the specific historical context of local frontier relationships, as they are to the official rules and regulations that governed the force, its staff and its operations. Nonetheless, archaeological observations make it possible to draw at least some generalised conclusions about the nature of NMP life and the archaeological signatures left in its wake.

A typical NMP detachment consisted of at least one European officer under whom served a number of Aboriginal troopers, typically four to eight, usually recruited from areas outside those they were assigned to patrol (Burke et al. 2018). Structured initially along military lines, with rankings of First and Second Lieutenant, Sergeant and Cadet reporting to a Commandant, the NMP was remodelled along more civilian lines after 1865 to consist of Cadet Sub-Inspectors, Sub-Inspectors and Inspectors reporting to the Police Commissioner (Richards 2005:112–113).

The first NMP camps in the area that would subsequently become Queensland were established in the region of the Macintyre, Condamine and Maranoa Rivers in 1849 and spread rapidly north and west as Europeans ranged further afield in their untiring search for pastoral lands and mineral resources (Wallis et al. in press) (Figure 1 and Table 1). The constant movement of the 'frontier' resulted in a relatively large number of camps being established throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, with reliable references to 148 camps of varying duration having been identified in historical research.

## Geographical Location and Longevity of NMP Camps

The location of NMP camps tends to follow a predictable pattern. Sometimes prompted by the official establishment of new settlements (e.g. Port Curtis in 1855, Port Denison in 1861 and Cardwell in 1864), camps were often sited on pastoral runs whose lease-holders were at least receptive to the NMP's task, if not openly encouraging of it. Seventy-three NMP camps (49%) were located on pastoral properties, ensuring those runs had a highly visible police presence. In many such instances the squatter in question also provided materials for the barracks (e.g. at Oak Park in northwest Queensland, where pastoralist Edward Mytton provided his bullock driver and team to help haul in timber and bark for the buildings), if not the buildings themselves (e.g. Letter from Gordon Sandeman to Frederick Walker 17 June 1854, QSA86144), as well as rations. Lieutenant Francis Nicoll noted to the 1857 Select Committee that the camp at Wandai Gumbal (about 350 km west northwest of Brisbane and the second camp to be established), had 'cost the Government nothing; the squatters put it up themselves' (Legislative Assembly of New South Wales 1857). Bespoke but unofficial barracks were occasionally built by squatters to encourage the



**Figure 1. Movement of NMP camps over time by decade and pastoral district. Note that not all camps can be located with equal levels of certainty (Map: Wayne Beck using data from Burke and Wallis 2019).**

**Table 1. Pastoral districts, their opening dates, and numbers of NMP camps in opening and subsequent decades (only reliably documented camps are included).**

District	Gazettal Date	Number of NMP Camps Established in Opening Decade	Number of NMP Camps Established in Subsequent Decades
Moreton	1842	0	1 (1858)
Darling Downs	1843	2 (1849, 1851)	0
Wide Bay	1847	5 (1850, 1853, 1854, 1855, 1857)	0
Maranoa	1848	1 (1858)	2 (1859, 1861)
Burnett	1848	1 (1852)	0
Port Curtis	1854	6 (1853, 1854, 1856, 1859, 1862)	1 (1867)
Leichhardt	1854	20 (1854, 1856, 1858, 1860, 1861, 1862, 1864)	7 (1865, 1866, 1867, 1868, 1872, 1875, 1876)
South Kennedy	1858	6 (1863, 1867, 1868)	0
Mitchell	1859	2 (1866, 1869)	2 (1871, 1873)
North Kennedy	1863	13 (1861, 1862, 1864, 1865, 1867, 1868, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873)	5 (1874, 1889, 1882, 1896)
Warrego	1864	5 (1863, 1864, 1866, 1869, 1871)	0
Cook	1864	11 (1868, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1873, 1874)	35 (1875, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1879, 1882, 1883, 1885, 1886, 1888, 1890, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1894, 1895, 1898)
Burke	1865	8 (1866, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1874)	9 (1877, 1878, 1879, 1880, 1885, 1886, 1888)
Gregory South	1873	2 (1875, 1881)	0
Gregory North	1873	3 (1876, 1878, 1883)	1 (1887)
<b>Total</b>		<b>85</b>	<b>63</b>

NMP to visit their runs when out on patrol, such as at Widgee Widgee, where William Butler Tooth argued that,

the settlers, if they regarded their own interest, would build barracks for the troopers on their stations. I did it; I built a large place for the troopers, where they could come and stop a day or two, and then go on. They must be moving about to be effective. They will not sleep in a hut, if you build the barracks, they will put their saddles inside, and sleep out (Legislative Assembly of NSW 1858:28).

As the nineteenth century and technology progressed, camps were also established in association with the proclamation of new mineral fields and to protect various telegraph stations, the latter especially in Cape York Peninsula.

The choice of where a camp would be sited, however, was governed principally by the availability of a permanent water source and suitable grass for the NMP's considerable numbers of horses:

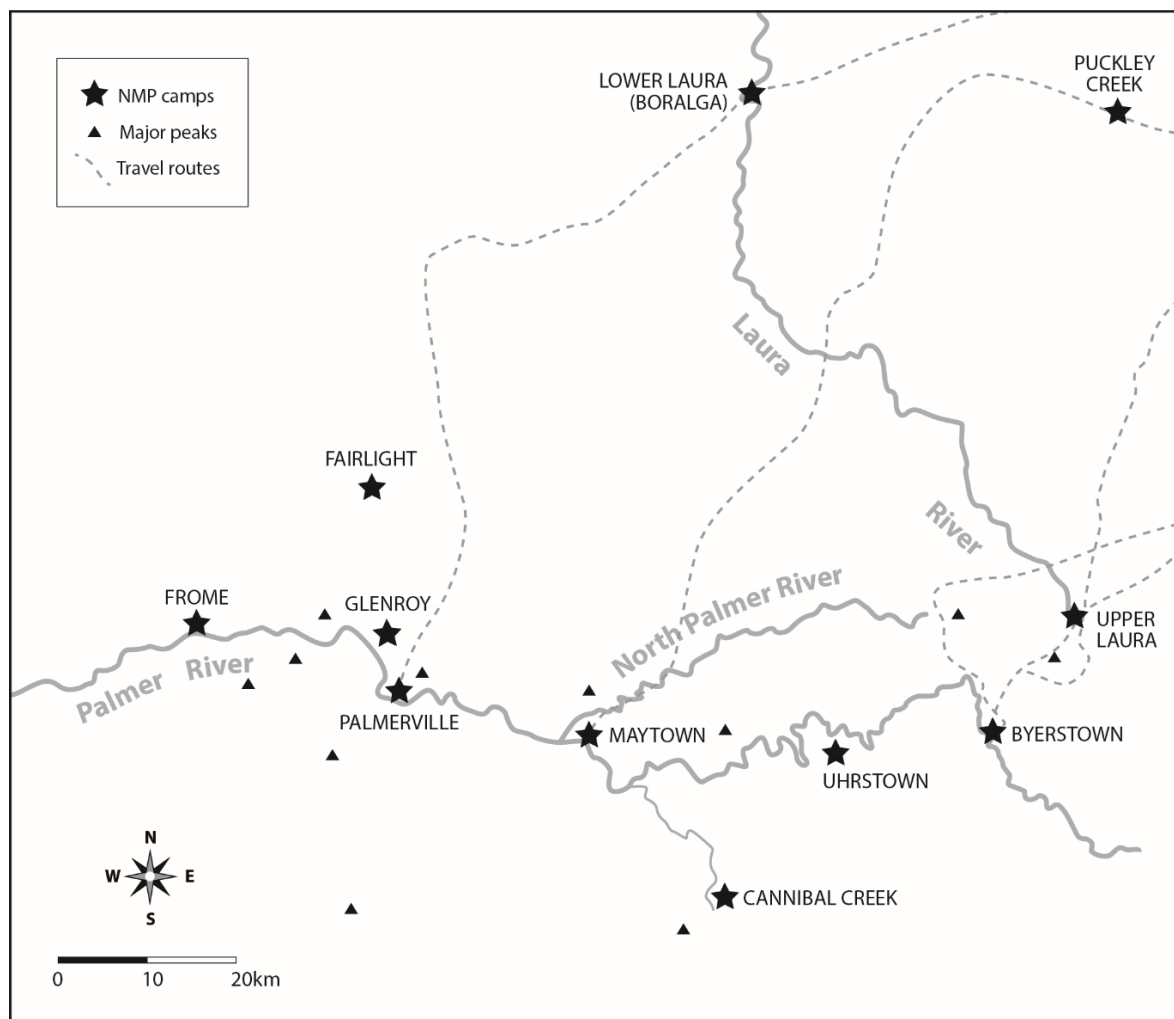
[Francis Nicoll] had also sent his best horses to the Dawson some months since, and he could not, under any emergency, effectually mount above five troopers; for it has been satisfactorily proved that two horses are indispensable to enable each man satisfactorily to perform his duty (*North Australian, Ipswich and General Advertiser* 8 September 1857:2).

The native police districts are excessively large—200 miles and even more in length and width. For each district one patrol party is thought to be sufficient, and this consists usually of one European officer with six boys, provided with arms and ammunition, besides 12 to 14 pack and saddle horses (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 October 1880:7).

The other point worth making here in relation to the general distribution of NMP camps is the density of camps per pastoral district. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the distribution of NMP camps across Queensland was uneven. For example, the Burnett Pastoral District had only one camp at its inception in the 1850s, and none in any of the decades

thereafter. In contrast, the Cook Pastoral District began with 11 camps, and added another 35 between the mid-1870s and the late 1890s. This reflects the nature of European occupation of different areas and the complex interplay of numerous factors focused around the differing demographics of Aboriginal and European populations and the speed and degree to which Aboriginal presence was controlled and effaced. On the expansive plains of western Queensland, where European interests were dominated by pastoralism, only a handful of camps were required, whereas on the Palmer Goldfield in southern Cape York Peninsula, a far smaller area, six camps were established over a period of 30 years no more than 20 km apart in order to cope first with the massive influx of Europeans in response to the discovery of gold in 1873, and then ongoing tensions that arose over the ensuing decades. The first NMP detachments on the Palmer were stationed at Palmerville (1873–1889), the first major population centre on the field. This was quickly followed by camps at Byerstown and Maytown (both in 1876), the other major townships established in the wake of new 'rushes'. The Byerstown camp closed the same year it was established, and while the camp at Maytown remained active until 1896, it was also used for both NMP and ordinary policing and therefore the precise cessation of NMP activity is uncertain. In the 1880s further NMP detachments were stationed at Uhrstown (1882–?) and Glenroy (1882–1887), followed in the 1890s by Frome (1898–1906) (Figure 2). Mining fields typically resulted in far larger numbers of transient settlers than did scantily populated pastoral runs, while well-watered regions rich in plant and animal resources supported higher Aboriginal population densities than did those with more limited resources. As such, the Palmer Goldfield was almost predestined to be a focus for NMP activity.

Such a pattern of repeatedly establishing NMP camps in the one area suggests three things. First, that the substantial infrastructure established on the Palmer Goldfield in the wake of mining, including various travel, carriage and postal routes and a telegraph line, provided convenient services to aid the



**Figure 2. Palmer River and surrounding NMP camps (Map: Heather Burke).**

NMP in their activities. In fact, mail and traffic routes were often established alongside NMP camps, since the NMP's successful operation required officers to be able to communicate effectively with headquarters, and for settlers in need of their services to be able to communicate swiftly with the authorities. Several NMP camps associated with the Palmer Goldfield were established along the major travel routes from Cooktown, including Puckley Creek (1874–1876), Upper Laura (1875–1881) and Lower Laura (aka Boralga) (1875–1894) (Figure 3).

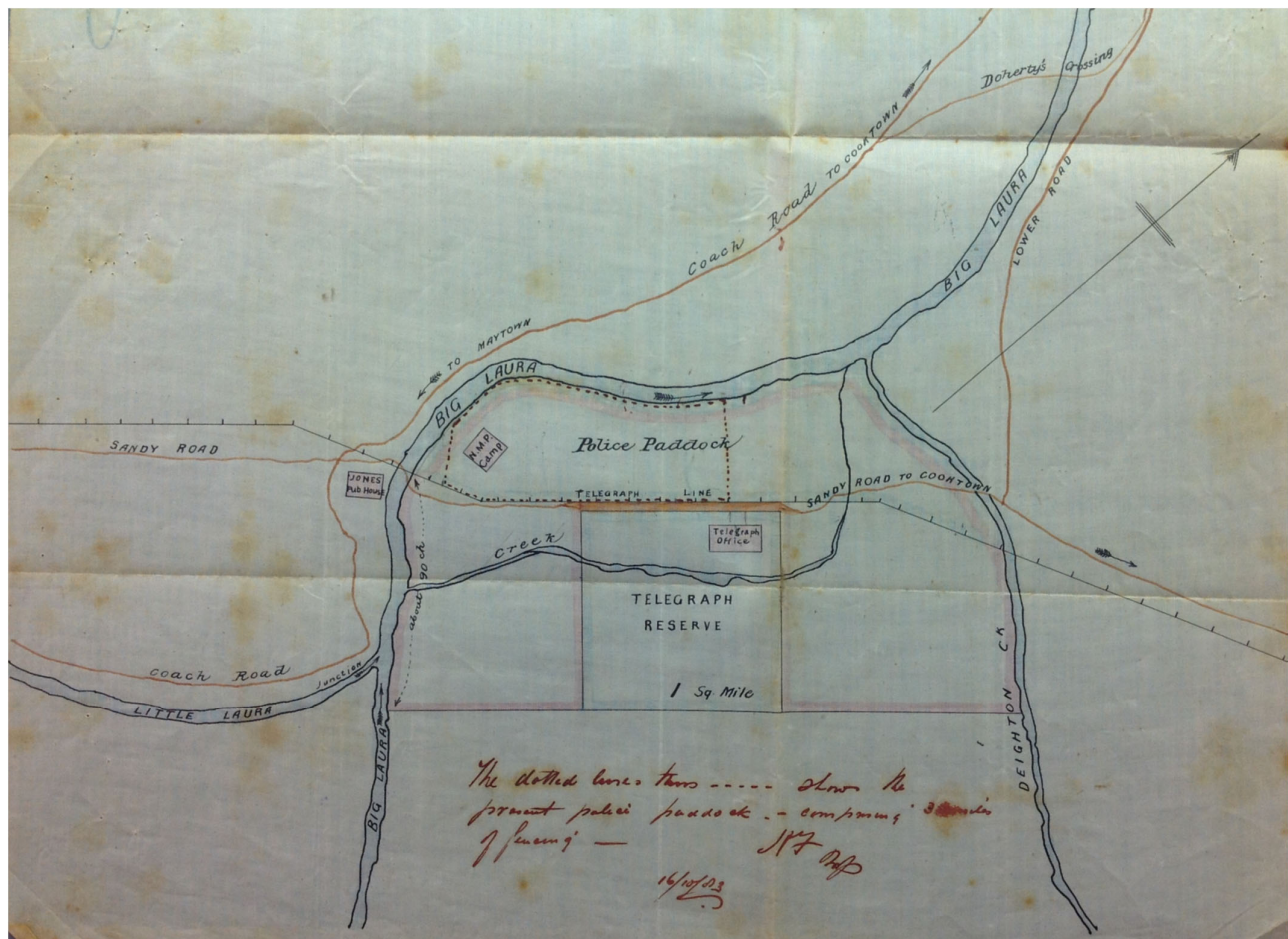
Second, that the Palmer Goldfield camps were strategically placed to patrol areas where large numbers of Europeans – and thus multiple conflict events – were occurring. All NMP camps needed to be strategically located at a larger scale in terms of being as central as possible to the area they had to patrol, although over time, as the focus of settlement shifted, they became less and less so until they were closed and a new camp was established further afield. The ebbs and flows of Europeans to the Palmer reflected the various mineral discoveries and subsequent rushes that took place, necessitating NMP camps associated with the gold rushes to Cannibal Creek (1886–1888) and Limestone (1875–?), and to a coal field that was expected to develop on the Little Kennedy River in the 1890s that led to the establishment of a camp at Fairlight (1892–1893). The camp at Frome,

however, was established as much to police western Cape York Peninsula as the Palmer:

The Police at Frome would also be in much closer touch with the blacks on the western waters of the Cape York Peninsula between the Mitchell River and Mapoon Mission Station, all of which is entirely blacks country now and entirely deserted by the whites—all other blacks should be by this time fairly civilized—the blacks on the Lynd and southern bank of the Mitchell River should give no trouble now as these blacks have been mostly absorbed by the mining townships near Chillagoe (Letter from James Lamond to Commissioner of Police, 20 September 1898, QSA290304).

Finally, the continued pattern of having to establish and re-establish camps on the Palmer also suggests long-term, continuous resistance by local Aboriginal people. The Palmer River and surrounds is a rugged landscape that is home to many different clan groups, all of whom could use the steeply dissected topography of the Great Dividing Range to their advantage, as they obviously did in the Cook District more generally. In contrast, the open plains of western Queensland made it easy for horse mounted troopers to cover large expanses of country in relatively short periods of time, while also affording Aboriginal people few secure physical refuges. The advantages conferred by horses in open country were





**Figure 3. Location of the Lower Laura NMP camp, illustrating the ‘classic’ position of a camp in the landscape, adjacent to permanent water, good pasture, and travel routes, and in proximity to a telegraph station (Source: QSA290072).**

often negated in more topographically rugged ranges, which in turn influenced the size of the district that a detachment could reasonably be expected to patrol effectively.

The longevity of any camp’s occupation therefore depended on a range of factors, including the degree of localised Aboriginal resistance, the scale and nature of European incursion and the suitability of the terrain for operations on horseback or, in the case of the Aboriginal population, their ability to seek refuge and elude pursuit. Of the 148 reliably documented NMP camps, the majority (50.6%,  $n=75$ ) were occupied for five years or less (sometimes only for a few months) and are best described as temporary. Thirty-three percent ( $n=49$ ) were occupied for between 5 and 10 years, with 18.25% ( $n=27$ ) operating for between 10 and 20 years. Only 2% ( $n=3$ ) existed for more than 20 years; these tended to be regional headquarters that often housed an Inspector who governed both NMP and general policing activities. In this respect, the majority of camps can only be described as ephemeral, although ephemerality had a number of other dimensions apart from length of occupation.

### Spatial Layout of NMP Camps

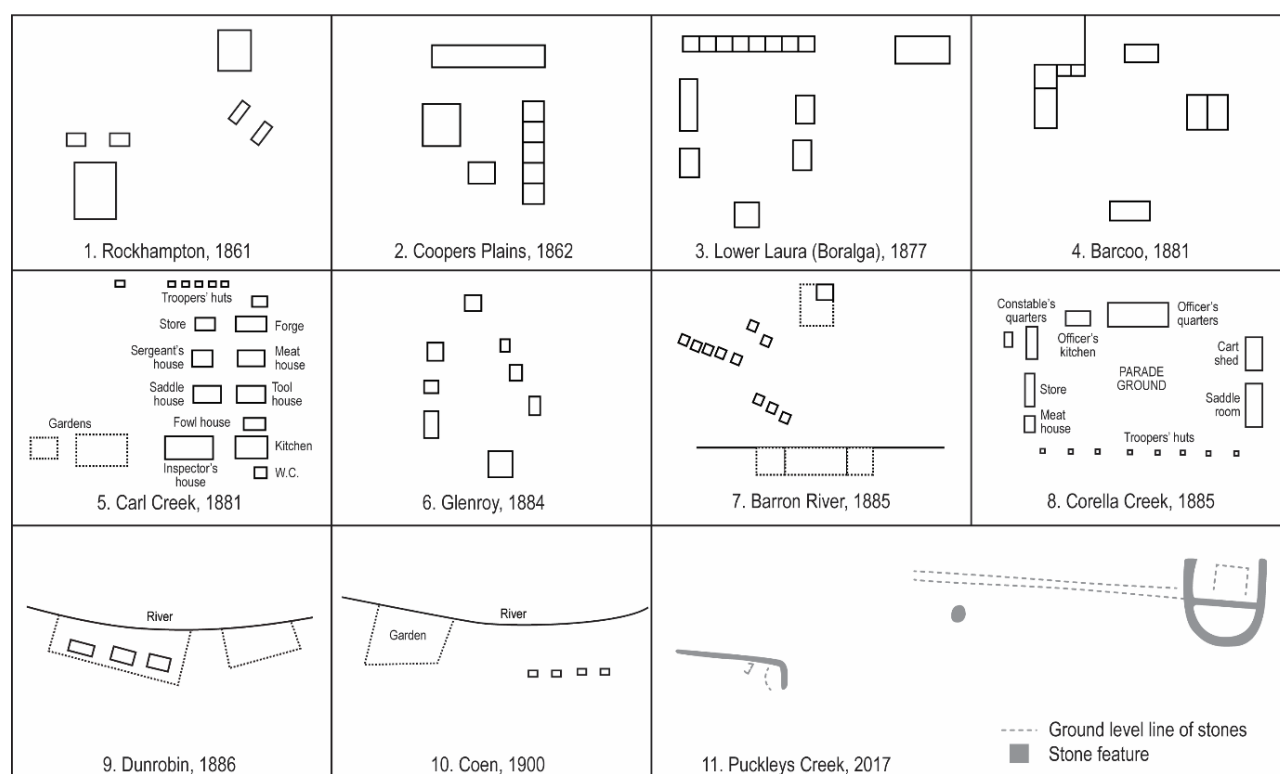
NMP camps consisted of both main camps, where detachments were based in a district, and numerous smaller flying patrol camps, the duration of occupation of which

generally varied from overnight to a few days or several weeks. Although their layouts varied, photographs, maps, plans and historical descriptions indicate that there were replicable ‘parts’ to an NMP camp. According to Henry Lamond, a ‘typical’ camp consisted of:

the administrative block. That would be the sub’s quarters, then considered palatial, now to be classed as a hovel. The camp-sergeant would have his quarters. There would be a store, a lock-up, a set of stock-yards, other necessary buildings, and the parade ground. The native quarters would be on the fringe of the parade ground. Some officers insisted on regularity of design: some let the boys and gins build to their own inclinations. All of them were systematically placed with methodical evenness (Lamond 1949:32).

While there are issues with Lamond as a reliable source (see Richards 2005:92–93), he was the son of a long-serving (over 35 years) NMP officer and was himself born in the Carl Creek NMP camp (located in the Gulf of Carpentaria). While he was later sent away to school, he spent most of his early years residing with his family in NMP camps, so may reasonably be expected to know something of the layout of such places.

Our systematic archival and archaeological research has demonstrated that the main camps consisted of, at the very least, an officer’s quarters, multiple troopers’ huts, a storeroom (for rations, equipment, saddlery and/or weapons) and a large horse paddock, with a blacksmith’s forge in those



SOURCES: 1. QSA COL/A24/62/30; 2. Private collection; 3. QSA A/44857; 4. QSA290277; 5. Slack 1998:82; 6. QSA290306; 7. QSA290311; 8. QSA290311; 9. QSA243588; 10. Private collection; 11. Archaeological site recording.

**Figure 4. Comparative layouts for NMP camps (Drawing: Heather Burke).**

stonier regions where it was necessary to shoe horses. Somewhat ironically for police camps, though perhaps not given the tendency of the NMP to ‘disperse’ Aboriginal people rather than arrest them, camps rarely had lock-ups and never external palisades. Many were fenced, although this was a feature mostly designed to keep horses within easy reach and squatters’ stock out of police pastures rather than to serve a defensive purpose.

A lack of precise uniformity in documented camp layouts may have been a reflection of the preferences of the individual officer-in-charge, or a result of phases of rebuilding over time for those camps with longer occupation spans. The few available maps of camp layouts suggest that there were three basic types:

- a classic military quadrangle with a central parade ground, like Corella Creek, Musgrave, Diamantina, Cooper’s Plains, Carl Creek, Barcoo, Glenroy, Lower Laura, Waterview and Upper Barron;
- an arrangement that placed buildings in parallel rows, such as at Carl Creek and Coen; and,
- ad hoc arrangements with no apparent formal layout, such as at Murray’s Lagoon and Dunrobin (see Figure 4).

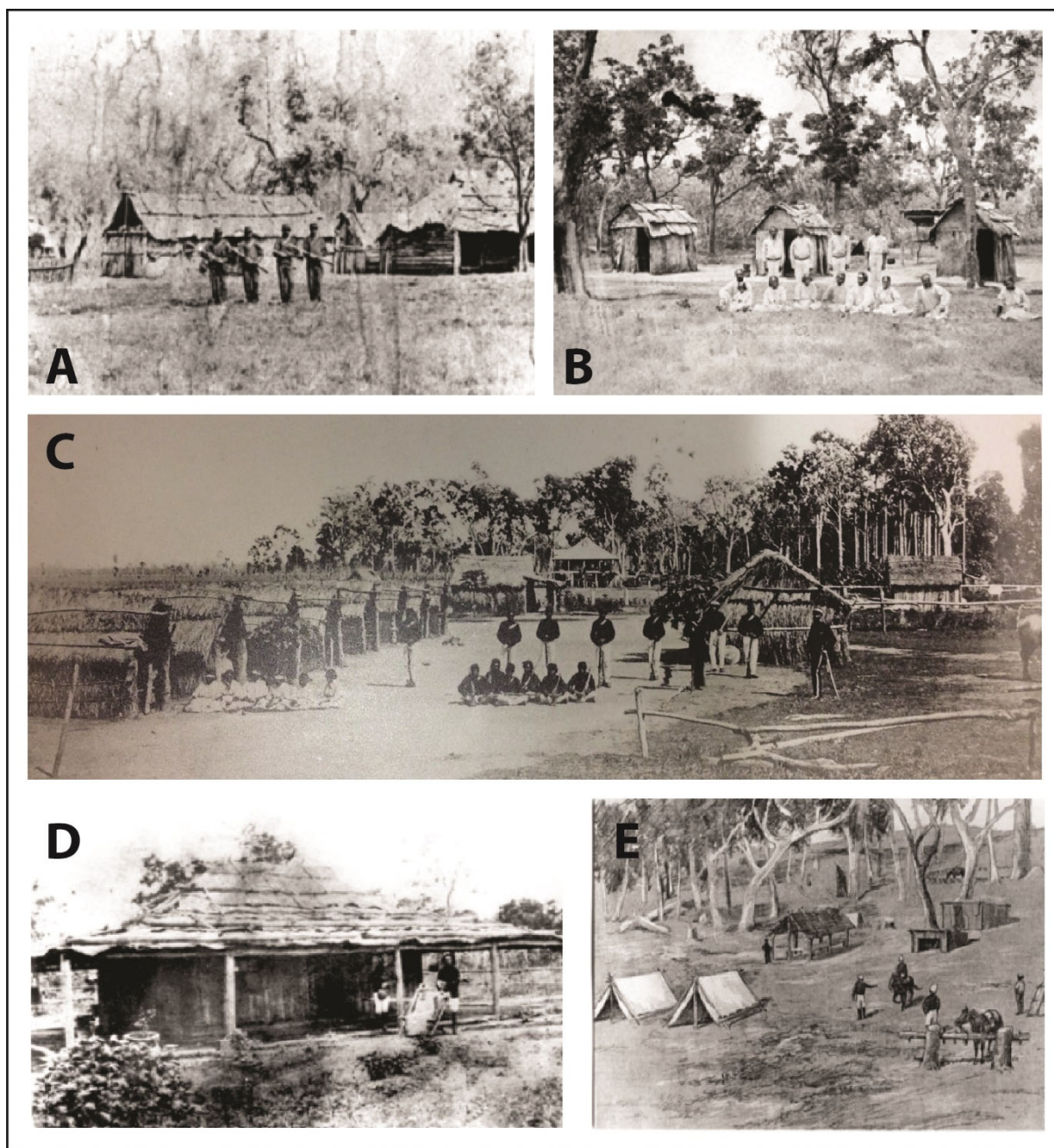
At least some regularity of appearance to the layout of camps is logical given the paramilitary origins of the NMP, the military backgrounds of many of the senior officers, the necessity to protect stores and arms, and their requirement to operate efficiently as part of a hierarchy.

From the few plans that are labelled, the senior officer’s (Lieutenant’s or Sub-Inspector’s) quarters seem to be located closest to the road or entrance point, with the constable’s (or sergeant’s) quarters close by and the troopers’ huts located furthest away. The photograph of the Herbert River camp in 1874 (Figure 5C) also speaks to the possible layout of structures to facilitate surveillance in some camps, presumably to maintain discipline and control over Aboriginal troopers. The hierarchical separation of staff with different ranks (and in the case of the NMP, of different cultural backgrounds) and the organisation of functions around a central parade ground are fairly standard features of military layouts, visible, for example, in nineteenth century forts in the western United States (e.g. Miller 2012).

Generally, camp layout seems to have placed the white officers at the opposite end of the camp to the troopers, with the buildings between them serving mixed utilitarian (e.g. saddlery, tool or cart storage) and domestic functions (e.g. rations, fowl house or meat house). A distinct spatial separation between officers and troopers is reflected in various descriptions of sites, such as the camp associated with the Musgrave Telegraph Station on Cape York Peninsula:

The officer in charge and his family occupy a mansion to themselves, which naturally holds the premier position. Then the campkeeper and his family occupy another house, very little inferior to his superior officer’s dwelling. Then usually considerably in the rear there are a line of huts, forming the abode of the many black trackers who form the chief element of strength in a Native Police detachment (*Queenslander* 24 October 1896).





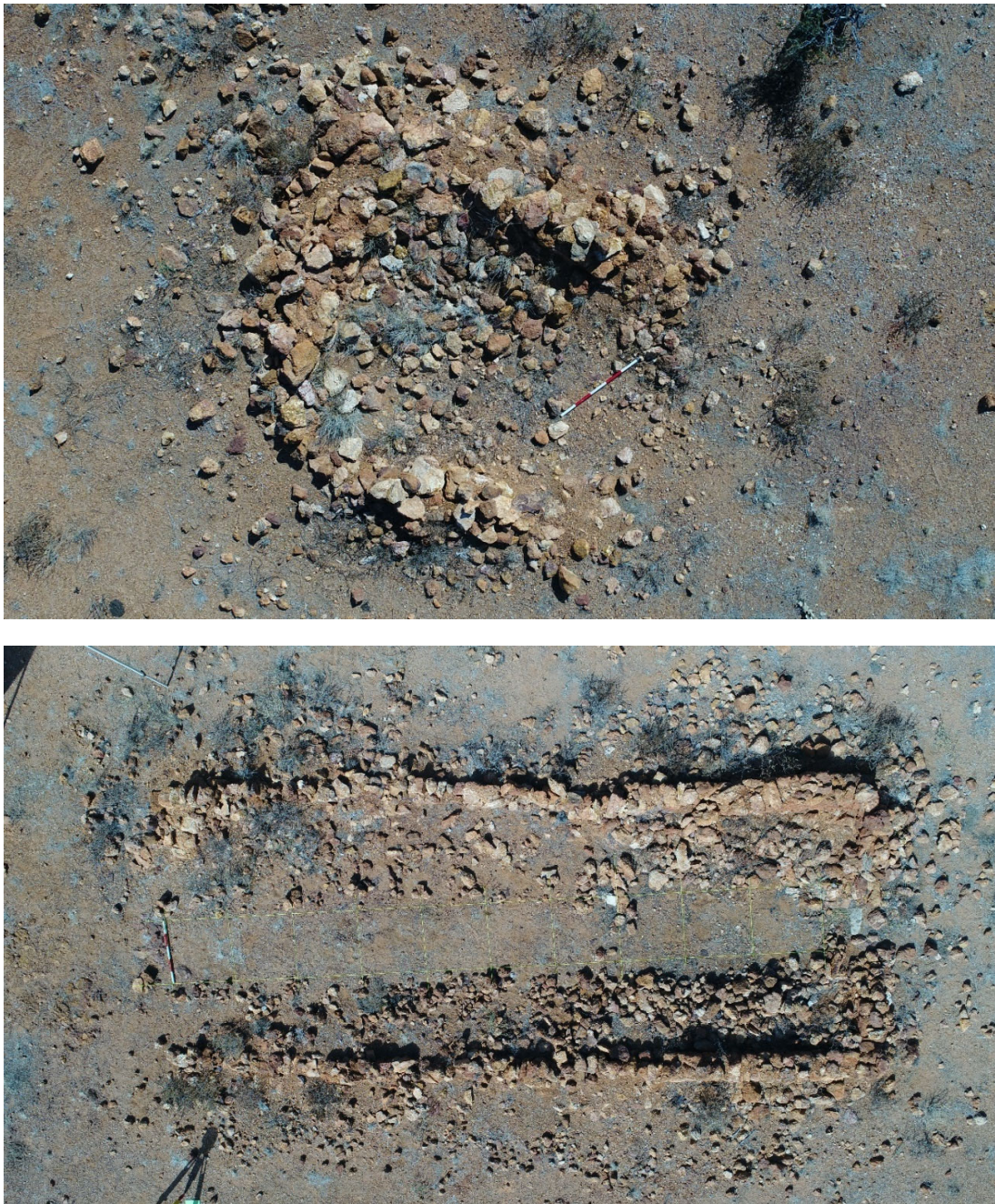
**Figure 5. Comparative building types. A=Mistake Creek NMP barracks, c.1880 (Queensland Police Museum 0637). B=Native Police troopers and their wives outside their bark huts at the Laura River NMP camp, c.1881 (Queensland Police Museum 3691). C=NMP barracks - Herbert River, 1874. The Sub-Inspector's quarters can be seen at centre rear and the troopers' huts on the left are thatched (State Library of Queensland 156880). D=Sub-Inspector Charles Marrett and his wife outside the officer's quarters, Lower Laura NMP camp, 1884 (Queensland Police Museum 0634). E=Tents at the Moreton NMP camp, 1890 (Queensland Police Museum 0059).**

Historical suggestions of a division between officers and troopers is also seen in excavations of several rubbish dumps at the Lower Laura camp. These have revealed quite different assemblages of artefacts (see below), which are interpreted as reflecting the delineation of camp spaces along cultural and hierarchical lines. Likewise, the distribution of flaked glass artefacts at the Mistake Creek camp in central Queensland is markedly different to that of other categories of remains, suggesting that troopers were occupying different parts of the site to officers.

### **Buildings at NMP Camps**

The NMP was always an extremely parsimonious operation, balancing the exigencies of a tight and sometimes contentious parliamentary budget (Richards 2005:175) with the need to pay, clothe, arm, feed and horse at least 100 men (and often their families) at multiple, widely separated camps at any given time. This created a climate of frugality around all of the NMP's activities. While some of the most short-lived camps consisted of little more than canvas tents, (Figure 5E)





**Figure 6. Aerial imagery of the two stone buildings at the Burke River NMP camp. Ranging pole in each image shows 20 cm increments (Photographs: Andrew Schaefer).**

easily moved and re-erected, even the longest used camps were little more than sets of expedient structures often erected by the officers and troopers themselves to save costs. Buildings were therefore dominated by locally available raw materials, primarily split slabs and bush timber, with roofs of bark, grass or palm thatching. Flooring was commonly made of compacted earth or ants' nest, at least in the far north at camps such as Lower Laura and Musgrave on Cape York Peninsula, and Oak Park near Hughenden (Lowe et al. 2018). From the 1880s onwards, mass production and cheaper transportation costs (facilitated in part by increasing railway services) made the construction of more substantial buildings possible, but even then NMP camps only occasionally made

use of weatherboard, proper foundations or raised wooden floors (e.g. at Normanby Diggings, Eight Mile near Cooktown, and Waterview, the latter of which is the house in the background in Figure 5C). Particularly in the tropical north, galvanised iron was increasingly used for roofing on the grounds that it was needed to protect stores in the wet season (e.g. at Lower Laura, QSA A/41364) and prevented officers and troopers from coming down with the 'fever' (e.g. at Cannibal Creek and Glenroy in 1883, QSA290325), though the high cost of iron meant that explicit permission had to be obtained from the Police Commissioner for its purchase, a process that often generated considerable correspondence as recorded in State Archive files.

Regardless of the materials used in construction, the most substantial building in any NMP camp was the senior officer's house (Figure 5D), usually consisting of at least two rooms, a verandah and a detached kitchen with stone fireplace, though often only the latter survives. The Sergeant's or Constable's quarters were slightly smaller, often only a single room, although both were clearly demarcated from the troopers' huts, which were very rudimentary, consisting of a single small room and almost wholly constructed of bark or grass attached to a wooden frame; only occasionally were they constructed from galvanised iron (Figure 5A, 5B, 5C). A description of buildings at Lower Laura at the end of its 21 year life span in 1894 noted substantial infrastructure, including quarters for the officer-in-charge consisting of six rooms and a kitchen built with slabs and galvanised iron roof, a constable's quarters consisting of two rooms and a kitchen with slabs and galvanised iron roof, an office with two spare rooms, a saddle and forage room, a shed used as a forge and for storing carts, and multiple trackers' quarters constructed of round bush timber with iron roofs. That the use of these more substantial building materials was a more recent addition is indicated by an 1884 photograph of Inspector Marrett's house at Lower Laura, which was constructed wholly of bush materials (Figure 5D).

The only examples known to depart from a bush timber tradition are two camps in western Queensland (Eyres Creek and Thargomindah), both of which had buildings constructed from adobe since there was limited timber available from which to split slabs, and the Burke River camp at Boulia, which is the only camp known to have had stone buildings (Figure 6), though archaeological survey of the latter site reveals it also had other less substantive, non-stone buildings.

Occasionally the NMP occupied existing pastoral complexes if the lease-holder had moved on (e.g. at Merri Merriwah near Ravenswood, or Fairlight and Kennedy on Cape York Peninsula), or made use of existing buildings in townships (e.g. at Cannibal Creek and Maytown on the Palmer River), thereby avoiding construction costs. Thrift was taken to extremes when a camp was formally closed, such that any reusable components, sometimes including slabs but particularly galvanised iron and occasionally entire structures, would be dismantled and taken to the new camp for reuse. For example, Inspector Hervey Fitzgerald recommended in 1894 that a ton of galvanised iron at Lower Laura be removed to Highbury on the Mitchell River, and that 'all rafters doors windows and sound slabs be removed also to 8 Mile', near Cooktown (Telegram from Hervey Fitzgerald to Commissioner of Police, 22 August 1894, QSA290072).

As they were usually located next to a large permanent water source, the sites of former NMP camps tended to be utilised long after the police had vacated, and thus can have an overlay of nineteenth and twentieth century artefactual material related to other uses, such as pastoral homesteads, stock camps, recreational camping and fishing. This and the NMP's habit of reusing structures and their components between camps often results in substantial above ground site disturbance.

To some extent, and somewhat paradoxically, this ephemerality creates a distinctive archaeological signature, setting NMP camps apart from other relatively short-lived sites of European occupation on the frontier. The northern Australian settlement of Port Essington, for example, a military outpost occupied for a decade from 1838–1849,

incorporated large-scale permanent architecture because it was intended to be a permanent settlement (Allen 2008). Similarly, in regard to the historical archaeology of abandoned Western Australian pastoral stations, Paterson (2006) observed that the degree of commitment to settlement could be seen in the permanency of structures; in that case, stone masonry for buildings and yards, well-planned arrangements of buildings and a remnant material culture, including large quantities of luxury ceramics, as well as items such as decorative cast iron lace, fireplaces faced with white and black marble and rooms decorated with painted tiles. NMP camps, however, were always intended to be temporary, even if they were eventually occupied for relatively long periods of time. This impermanence is reflected in their general lack of substantive architecture and the more mundane nature of their artefact assemblages (see below).

### Other Features of NMP Camps

Although at various sites wooden posts, either associated with fencing, yards or buildings, are extant, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether they date to the time of NMP occupation. In numerous cases, however, they match with historic plans showing the location of the police paddock (e.g. at Dunrobin) suggesting they indeed do, though it is possible that not all of the extant posts are original. At some sites the rectangular outline of compact ant bed floors are still visible at ground level, and the use of geophysical technology has enabled further subsurface floors to be discovered at other locations. At Lower Laura, for example, subsurface anomalies identified through the use of ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry (gradiometer) revealed compacted floors, cobbled paths and concentrations of discarded artefacts (Lowe et al. 2018) (Figure 7).

In locations where a source of stone was available, undressed stones were sometimes stacked into simple dry stone walling to produce single or low-coursed, linear, semi-circular or rectangular arrangements (Figure 8). Such features are commonly interpreted as the remains of fireplaces attached to the more significant buildings, such as the officers' quarters or kitchen/mess areas. More linear arrangements of surface stones, as seen at Puckley Creek, Oak Park and Dunrobin, are less obvious in their function, although they may have simply been constructed as the borders of paths or garden beds. One explanation for such features with no obvious secular function is that they may have been constructed purely as 'busy work' as part of the drilling of troopers and the maintenance of camp discipline and standards.

It is worth pointing out here that, in some instances, Aboriginal stone arrangements are also present at, or immediately adjacent to, NMP camps, such as at Mistake Creek, Burke River and possibly Puckley Creek. We are not suggesting that these were built by Aboriginal troopers, rather that their proximity is a by-product of the position of the NMP camps close to permanent water sources that would in some instances have been a focus for traditional Aboriginal social and ceremonial life. It is possible that the establishment of NMP camps in areas associated with ceremonial activity would have been further cause for Aboriginal distress about the police presence, and directly resulted in subsequent conflict with the NMP.



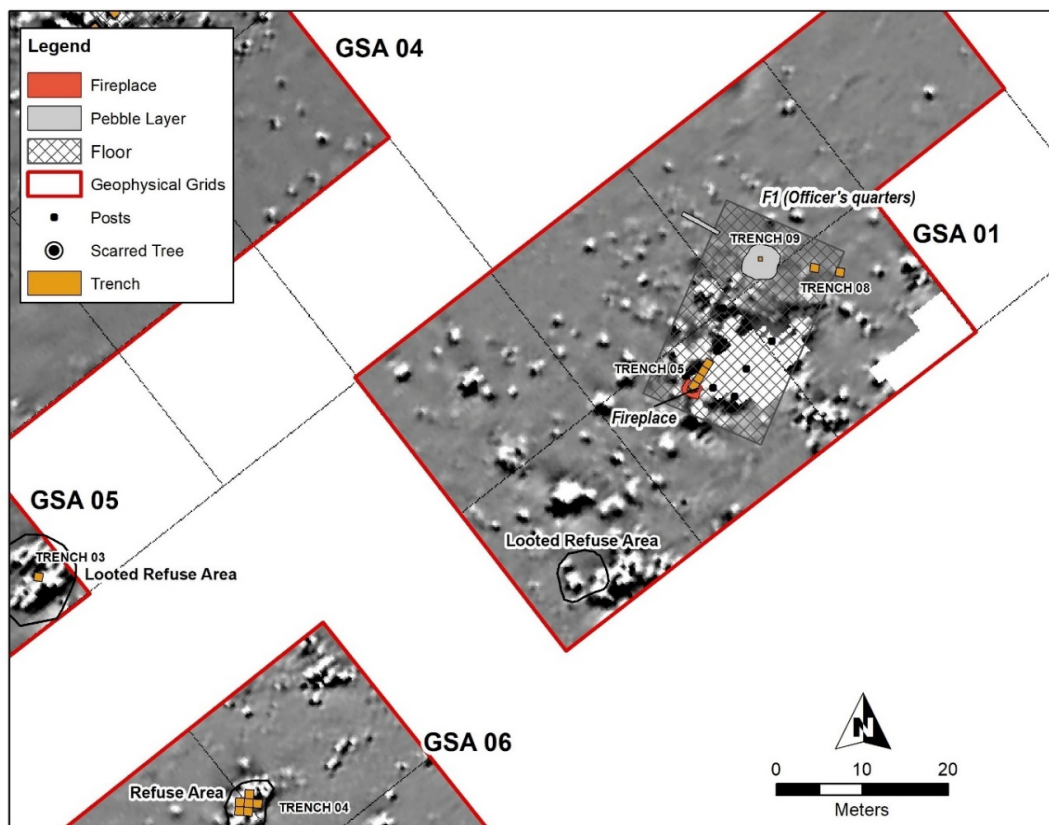


Figure 7. Results of geophysical investigation at Lower Laura NMP camp Cape York Peninsula (Image: Kelsey Lowe).

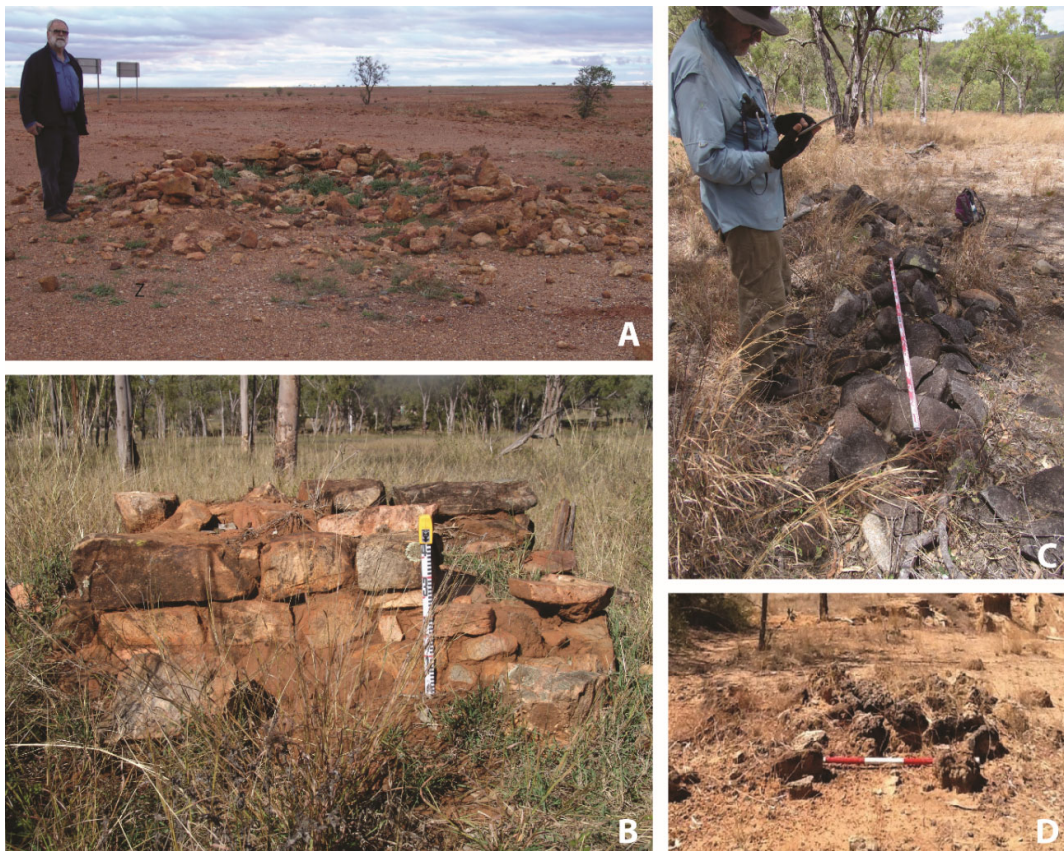


Figure 8: Stone structures and features at NMP camps. A=Bouliia. B=Oak Park. C=Puckley Creek. D=Highbury (Photographs: Lynley Wallis and Heather Burke).



**Figure 9. Selection of culturally modified trees at the Lower Laura NMP camp. ST18.01='Sugarbag' scar. ST18.02='woomera' scar. ST18.10=steel axe marked 'slab' scar (Photographs: Heather Burke).**

A less direct form of evidence of trooper activity is the relatively large number of culturally modified (aka 'scarred') trees in the immediate vicinity of some NMP camps (Cole et al. 2020). Although many of these modifications clearly relate to traditional Aboriginal activity, others take the form of large rectangular, blocky scars, where 'slabs' of wood and bark have been removed from living trees. The camp at Lower Laura provides excellent examples of such features (Figure 9). These scars differ from other forms of cultural modification in that they are rectangular in shape, with relatively straight square ends and were cut with steel axes. Although their precise purpose is uncertain, rectangular slabs of bark have been recorded as being used for construction at Aboriginal camps and pastoral runs in other areas of Queensland (Sumner 1974). However, they are unlikely to have been for large-scale building construction, since the process of manufacturing slabs typically required the entire tree to be cut down and split longitudinally along the grain using wedges and a maul (Archer 1987:67). Both Lower Laura and other sites, such as Wandai Gumbal, also have concentrations of more traditional forms of culturally modified trees with wood or bark removals of various sizes. Whether these are the result of the prolonged proximity of the Aboriginal troopers or the result of local Aboriginal activity, either before or after the site was an NMP camp, is difficult to ascertain. If it was local Aboriginal activity, then we would argue that it is more likely to have pre-dated rather than post-dated the NMP camp (see *Artefact Assemblages in NMP Camps* section below).

Another feature of NMP camps, often indirectly indicative of where buildings may have once stood, are open spaces in otherwise wooded areas, such as can be seen at the Musgrave and Lower Laura camps (Figure 10). Such spaces are the result of trees being cut down, presumably for timber and/or firewood, although in some cases it may have been to create an opening in which buildings could be constructed and enable access between buildings.

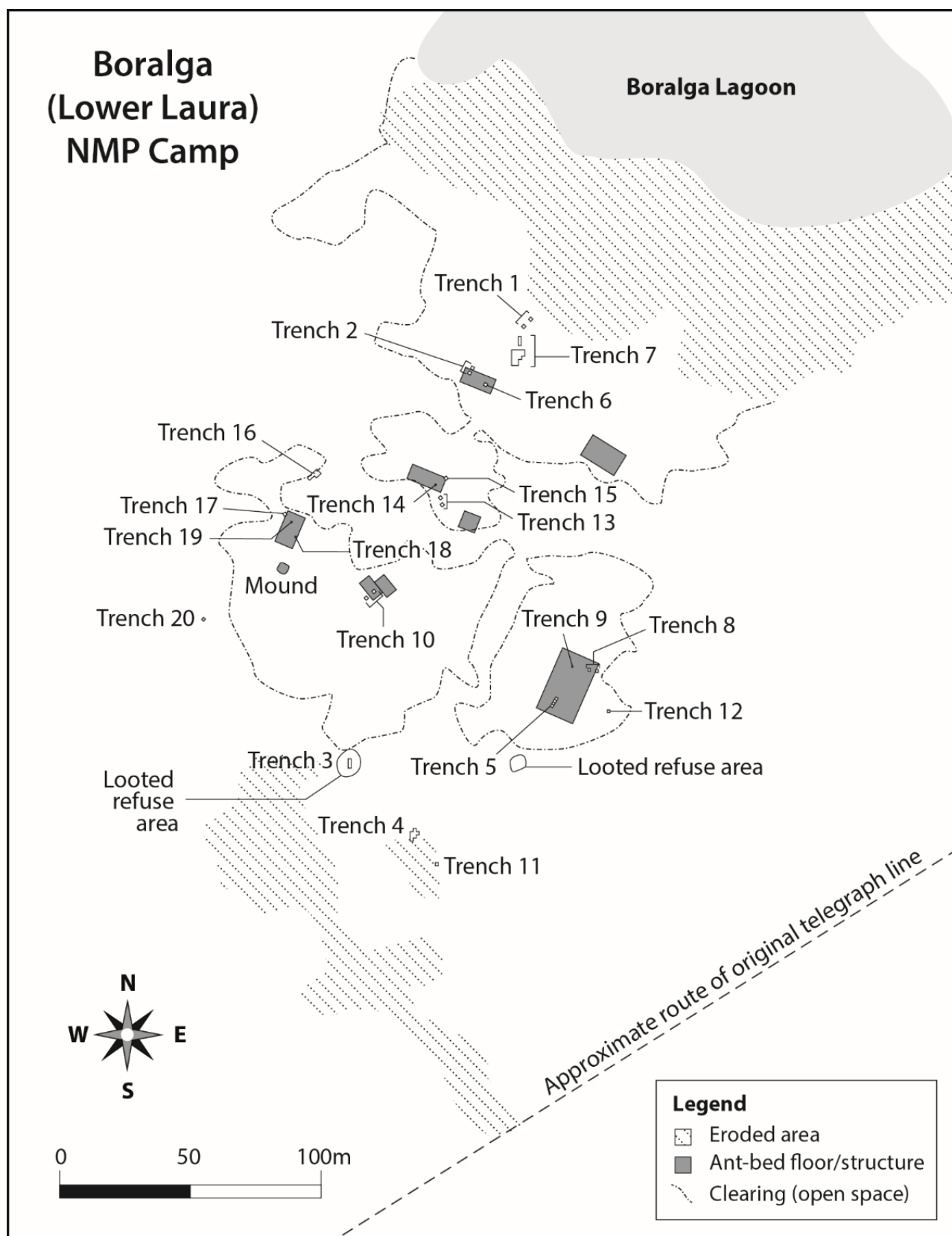
### **Artefact Assemblages in NMP Camps**

Discarded artefacts clearly relating to the period of NMP occupation are often associated with the features and buildings described above. Given the largely domestic nature of NMP camps, which often housed women and children as

well as officers and troopers, these sites include quantities of ordinary nineteenth century artefacts, especially bottle glass, ceramics and metal items such as horseshoes and nails, tin cans, wire, building nails and cast iron (Artym 2018; Bateman 2020). Along with these commonly found artefacts, items specific to the NMP are also usually present, especially in the form of arms, ammunition and the other accoutrements of policing activity.

Shell casings and bullets from a range of firearms are typical, but especially pertinent to the NMP are those belonging to breech-loading Snider rifles (Figure 11). Shell casings and bullets from Snider rifles provide strong evidence that a site was an NMP camp, especially in certain configurations. The Queensland Government's first purchase of 50 Snider artillery-length carbines for the police took place in 1870 (Robinson 1997:41,42), with further orders placed in 1872, 1873 and 1874 (Robinson 1997:44–47). Examples of these carbines are held at the Queensland Police Museum and the Queensland Museum. The then Police Commissioner, David Thompson Seymour, first requested Martini-Henry rifles for service use in 1873 and by the late 1880s these had replaced the Snider for all ordinary police (Commissioner of Police 1887:1084). Robinson (1997:59) identified the 1885 consignment as consisting of 100 carbines and by 1892 the number of Martini-Henrys in the hands of police had risen to 494 rifles and 306 carbines. Whether any of the Martini-Henry weapons were distributed to the NMP specifically is unclear, given a general lack of detailed documentation regarding the distribution of particular arms within the Police service. If they were, then this kind of ordnance is most likely to be found on NMP sites in northern and western Queensland where European incursion was later, as opposed to the southeast of the state. Round ball ordnance from muzzle-loading carbines, however, is more likely to be found on NMP sites in the south and southeast that pre-date the 1880s. While all of these weapons and their associated ammunition may have been used by people other than the NMP, Westley & Richards double barrel carbines were purchased specifically for the NMP in 1867 and were in use up until 1869 (Robinson 1997:35–38). The distinctive 20g pinfire cartridges used in these carbines and manufactured by Eley Brothers are therefore the best direct evidence of NMP presence. These casings with protruding pin have been located at the Barcoo, Eyres Creek, Yowah and Lower Laura NMP camps.





**Figure 10: Plan of the Lower Laura NMP camp showing the large clearings that are indicative of NMP activity within the otherwise wooded area (Map: Heather Burke).**



**Figure 11. Ammunition commonly associated with NMP camp sites (Photographs: Leanne Bateman, Heather Burke and Donald Kerr).**

Similarly, distinctive shanked, two-piece brass uniform buttons of the half-domed variety with a crown and/or the initials VR (standing for Victoria Regina) are regularly found, further attesting to a site having been occupied by the NMP (Figure 12). Other, much rarer, items directly attributable to the NMP include military-style belt buckles and artefacts relating to incarceration, such as handcuffs and leg irons.

A range of artefacts associated with Aboriginal people is also a feature of NMP camps. Glass artefacts are particularly common, typically flakes struck from the heavy, thick bases of bottles utilised as cores. When these are found exposed amongst the artefact palimpsest at the contemporary ground surface, such as at the Frome, Burke River and Mistake Creek camps, it is difficult to ascertain whether they were produced by the troopers themselves or by local Aboriginal people after the NMP had moved on. However, the NMP usually left an area after the local Aboriginal population had been decimated and most semblances of traditional lifeways severely interrupted. We do not deny the possibility that survivors may have, on occasion, sourced glass bottles (and other raw materials) from former NMP camps, but think it unlikely that any survivors would have been eager to spend their time at such locations knapping the procured glass.

Further, we know from excavated subsurface material clearly associated with the troopers' huts at the Lower Laura

camp that the troopers were knapping glass and carrying on a range of other traditional activities, such as hunting and eating traditional food animals. At the Craigie, Oak Park and Nigger\* Creek camps regular mention is made in the daily journals of the troopers and their wives hunting when not required for other duties (NMP Craigie Daily Journal 1878–1879, QSA86147; Oak Park Daily Journal 1879–1882, QSA86146; Herberton NM Police Nigger Creek Daily Journal 1884–1885, QSA86147), suggesting that the faunal remains resulting from troopers' meals will differ markedly from those consumed by European officers and their families. At the Lower Laura camp the identifiable animal remains from excavations at the troopers' huts consisted of a very small percentage of bovine (cow) and more native taxa (Bateman 2020; Bateman et al. 2017). Remains of native fauna included macropods, such as kangaroos and wallabies, snake, possum (most likely the common brush tail possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*) and bush rat (most likely *Rattus fuscipes*). In addition, several small fish and bird bones were recovered, along with freshwater mussel shell with evidence of burning. The mussel shell and fish most likely came from the nearby lagoon, which was a crucial water source. Similar remains were also recovered from excavations at the Burke River camp, along with numerous metal fish hooks (Artym 2018; Burke and Wallis 2019).



**Figure 12. Uniform buttons commonly associated with NMP camp sites (Photographs: Bryce Barker, Heather Burke and David Martinelli).**

## Conclusion

The contemporary archaeological footprint of NMP camps across Queensland provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and enduring nature of the NMP's operation. Although singularly any of the above features and/or artefacts might feasibly be attributed to other sources, in combination there can be little doubt that they represent the remains of an NMP camp. Taken as a whole these include the presence of artefacts specifically related to the NMP, such as police uniform buttons, bullets and shell casings from guns known to have been NMP issue, and features on the landscape, such as remnants of stone fireplaces, the choice of specific strategic locations relating to permanent water sources, and the presence of scarred trees and flaked bottle glass.

That at least 148 camps had to be maintained at various locations for a period of more than half a century provides clear evidence of the persistent and determined resistance of Aboriginal people to the theft of their land. Violence, oppression, conflict and retaliation operated in the gap between the advance of settlement and the creation of an effective structure of state administration (Finnane and Richards 2004), creating a unique space in which the NMP operated to quell Aboriginal resistance. None of the material evidence explored to date through our research speaks directly to this violence, the vast majority of which (though not all) took place beyond the physical borders of the NMP's living quarters. The familiar, quotidian qualities of these camps – their rubbish dumps, remnant fireplaces, paths and fence lines – bely their nature as the central nodes in a web of violence that stretched across the state. The banal, everyday domestic support they provided was crucial to the NMP being able to fulfil its duties, making the camps in essence the support structure for half-a-century of organised violence against Indigenous people.

The entwined punitive and domestic nature of NMP camps, combined with their role as the bureaucratic nodes of

the NMP's activities, make them places of extremely complex entangled meanings. The range of relationships between officers, Aboriginal troopers and local Aboriginal women, as well as a preference for married troopers by the end of the nineteenth century (Richards 2008:155–156), suggests that many Aboriginal people today can trace descent from members of the NMP. Many more are the survivors of massacres perpetrated by the NMP. All of these people are connected to the physicality of the camps in different ways and it is the emotional undertow of this complexity that provides the most poignant meanings for these sites in the present.

A brief look at the two statutory lists of heritage places for the state – the Queensland Heritage Register (QHR) and the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Database (ACHD) – suggests both a noticeable absence of the NMP from the current orthodox Queensland heritage 'story' and a split between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous meanings attached to these places. The QHR, which lists places with cultural heritage significance to the people of Queensland, contains only one site directly associated with the NMP – the first Rockhampton camp, although the site is actually listed for its later use as the Rockhampton Botanic Gardens – suggesting that these have not to date been considered relevant or meaningful to the non-Indigenous narrative of the state's development; yet without the NMP the state might arguably have failed. It is worth noting that the QHR specifically does not include places of Indigenous cultural heritage, 'unless the place has an overlap of Indigenous and non-Indigenous significance' (Queensland Government n.d.). Given this, the omission of NMP camps from this register as entries in their own right is notable. In contrast, the ACHD, which represents places of value specifically to Aboriginal people and contains more than 50,000 sites, has 12 entries related to NMP camps, seven of which are specific sites and five of which are general locales. Seven entries refer specifically to massacres of Aboriginal people associated with the NMP.

This disjunction between the corporate memory of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders suggests a split in the ways that the presence and consequences of the NMP are acknowledged in the present. The lack of recognition for NMP sites on the QHR may reflect an active desire to forget rather than remember on the part of non-Indigenous Queenslanders – still the principal beneficiaries of the NMP's actions – or it may simply be a consequence of benign neglect and an uncertainty about how such sites should be evaluated and interpreted. Aboriginal peoples' desires to publicly acknowledge the NMP as a devastating mechanism of European conquest, on the other hand, connect directly to their own family histories and the massacre survivors' tales that are told across Queensland, with which all archaeologists and anthropologists would be familiar. The work of the Archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police project, with its focus on both the materiality of the camps and the oral histories of troopers', officers' and massacre survivors' descendants, is intended to go some way towards illuminating, defining and bridging this gap.

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## Endnotes

\* The term 'Nigger' is used as it is a formal name of a former NMP camp. We recognise that use of this word is highly offensive and only retain it where absolutely necessary and in a historical context.

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