

# 'Currajong' tells the story of north Queensland

It is fascinating to find out who lived in an old house, and to discover their occupations and lifestyles, and their connections to the history of the region.

The history of 'Currajong' is particularly interesting, because it is linked to people who were associated with the major industries that contributed to the development of north Queensland—and the house gave its name to the present Townsville suburb of Currajong.

## 'Currajong' — the residence

Originally the house was on Fulham Road where the Mater Hospital now stands. Its removal to the present site was precipitated when the hospital expanded in 1978.

Moving a house from its original site is not recommended, but in this case there was no other way of retaining this wonderful old house.

In the year that 'Currajong' was built, Alfred was supervising the building of a new bank for the company in east Flinders Street; today we know it as the Bank Nightclub.

Alfred, aged only 18, came to Australia in 1868 with his sister Isabella. Before coming to north Queensland, he explored the prospects of pastoralism in southwest Queensland.

However, the burgeoning sugar industry in the north held more attractions. About 1870 he and Isabella founded Gairloch Plantation, near the present town of Ingham. It was one of the earliest sugar plantations in north Queensland.

Alfred, his brother Alexander Richard and his brother-in-law William Stewart (who married Isabella) owned



NATIONAL TRUST  
OF QUEENSLAND  
Townsville/NQ Branch

Heritage Centre  
5 Castling St, West End  
Townsville Q4810  
Ph (07) 4771 5873

Text:  
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde

Layout:  
Bruce C. Gibson-Wilde

Photos:  
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde  
and John Oxley Library

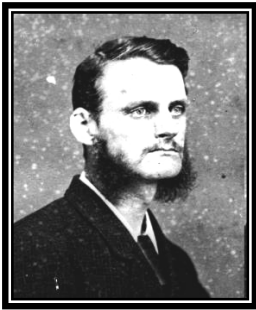
## Who built 'Currajong'?

The house was built in 1888, the year of the centenary of the first European settlement in Australia, for Alfred Peter Mackenzie (1850–1924) and his wife Helen, known as Nellie. Alfred was the Manager of the Australian Joint Stock Bank at Townsville.



'Currajong', 1930

the plantation. They were joined by their parents, the Reverend William Mackenzie and his wife Elizabeth, and other family members.



Alfred P. Mackenzie

The Governor of Queensland, Lord Normanby opened their mill at Gairloch in 1871. According to Dorothy Jones in *The Cardwell Story*, they introduced the first paddle-wheel steamer on the Herbert River, the *Kelpie*.

At first the plantation was a success. However, after only four crushings, the Mackenzies were in financial difficulties. Disease attacked their cane crops and sugar prices dropped. By 1876 the firm known as Mackenzie Brothers was insolvent. By 1882 most of the family had returned to Scotland.

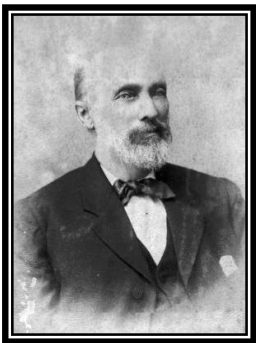


Helen A. Mackenzie

Only Alfred Peter Mackenzie, his brother James, and possibly Alexander, remained in Queensland. Alfred Peter joined the staff of the Australian Joint Stock Bank about 1877. He was working in the bank when he married Helen Ada Eliott on 14 December 1878.

We know that Alfred Peter built 'Currajong' because he purchased the land where the house stood, on 25 February 1886, unimproved. On 10 September 1887 he and his family were living in a house on Stanton Hill, as we know from a birth notice in the *Townsville Herald*, one of Townsville's newspapers at that time.

By 6 October 1888, however, Alfred Peter was writing to the Thuringowa Divisional Board (forerunner of Thuringowa City Council) asking that a few trees opposite his residence on Fulham Road might be spared, as the road was to be constructed.



Edward Hunt



Mary Hunt

So 'Currajong' must have been built between September 1887 and October 1888, most probably in early 1888.

The Mackenzies and their four children did not enjoy life at 'Currajong' for long. Alfred Peter was transferred to Toowoomba in May 1889. The house and land was sold in August 1890 to Edward Hunt for £1000 (\$2000).

### The Hunts

Edward Hunt (1841-1901) and his wife Mary moved in almost immediately. Hunt gave the house an association with both the mining and pastoral industries.

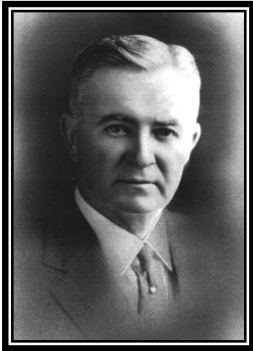
The son of a wheelwright from Iford, Hampshire, England, he completed his apprenticeship as a carpenter before coming to Australia in the 1870s. He was an early pioneer on both the Ravenswood and Charters Towers goldfields, before entering into partnership with Patrick O'Brien and, later, William Steele, as storekeepers on the Gilbert and Etheridge goldfields.

There in 1879 Hunt was held up by a bushranger, Jim the Native, a notorious horse thief. Janice Wegner in her book *The Etheridge* tells us that it was a bungled job. When Hunt refused to hand over the keys of the safe, Jim and his accomplice battered the safe so badly with an axe that, when they finally thought to search Hunt and found the key, it broke in the lock.

Hunt, O'Brien and Steele established stores at all of the mining camps on the Etheridge goldfields. It was said that, but for their

enterprise and for their readiness to assist others, the district would have been deserted.

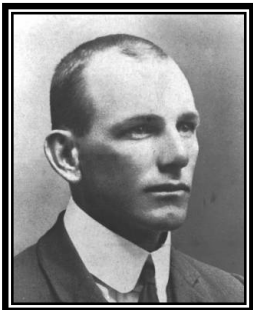
Their most famous enterprise was the Great Cumberland Mine near Georgetown, which they developed and sold to an English Company in 1886 for £186,000 (\$465,000), a very large sum in today's terms.



John J Fanning

After selling their stores and mining interests, the company invested in pastoral holdings in north Queensland, owning properties such as Carpentaria Downs, Forest Home, Huonfels, Baruta, The Oaks and Myall Downs.

Hunt also made large investments in Burns Philp & Co. Ltd, The Bank of North Queensland and other north Queensland enterprises. In fact, he made an important contribution to many developments in early north Queensland, before his death in 1901.



James Ferguson

After the death of her husband, Mrs Hunt continued to live in the house until her death in 1926. Of all 'Currajong' residents, she lived there for the longest time.

### The Fanning family

After Mrs Hunt died, John Joseph Fanning (1873-1931) bought the house in 1927. Fanning was born in Dublin, Ireland, and arrived with his parents in Bowen about 1883. He was a businessman who became north Queensland Manager of National Mutual Assurance Co.

With Fanning's ownership, 'Currajong' acquired an association with the business community of north Queensland, and also with the Rotary movement, the Show circuit in Queensland, and the export trade in horses to Asian countries.

He was one of the founders of the first Rotary Club in Townsville, and was also well known as an amateur jockey and show rider, and a good judge of horseflesh. He bred many famous horses; two of the best known were Smoker — shown 74 times and never beaten — and Sapper, which won jumping contests all over Queensland.

With James Simpson Love and others, Fanning was involved in the export of horses to India and other Asian countries as remounts for their armies. This was at the time when the horse was the main form of transport for armies everywhere, and horse exports were a small but important segment of Australia's trade with Asia.

Fanning and his wife Frances Mary, a daughter of a famous Townsville hotelier Tom Lowth, had ten children who lived with them at 'Currajong'. But they lived in the house for only three years, as their father was transferred to Brisbane in 1929.

### The Fergusons

In 1930 the house was sold to James and Jessie Ferguson.

Ferguson was involved with the pastoral industry; his wife was a granddaughter of one of the first pastoralists to settle in north Queensland, William Hann of Maryvale Station. So 'Currajong' was linked to the pioneering pastoral industry of the region.

The Fergusons lived in the house for eleven years until 1941 when they offered 'Currajong' to St Matthews Church, Rising Sun as a home for British evacuees. Unfortunately the children who were to come to 'Currajong' were on a ship that was

'Evacuees' was the name given to children who were evacuated from England to safer parts of the world after World War II broke out in Europe in 1939. Many were taken to the United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia



Wartime medical staff at 'Currajong', 1942

torpedoed, and it is thought that they perished.

Then on 7 December 1941 Japanese forces attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbour, intensifying the war in the Pacific zone.

The Japanese advanced rapidly southward through the Philippine Islands and into Vietnam, Malaysia, Burma, Singapore, Indonesia and New Guinea. Northern Australia was threatened as never before; it seemed that the Japanese might continue their southward advance into north Queensland.

### 'Currajong' in wartime

Townsville, the major city of north-eastern Australia, became a garrison city.

'Currajong', too, went into wartime service. Early in 1942 the house was requisitioned for use as a hospital for the Royal Australian Air Force (see Sheet 4, 'Currajong' at war). It was at the centre of a complex of large tents and small temporary huts that housed staff and patients not critically ill.

The house was decommissioned as a hospital in 1944 and handed back to

the Fergusons, but they never lived in it again. It was rented to a series of tenants.

### 'Currajong' becomes a monastery...

In September 1952 the Redemptorist Fathers of the Catholic Church purchased 'Currajong' and established Townsville's first monastery in the house. However, in 1953 they moved to a new monastery (now the site of Brooklea Lifestyle Village) on Ross River Road.

### ...then part of the Mater Hospital

In 1955 the house was taken over by the Sisters of Mercy who built the Mater Hospital beside it in 1962. The house became a convent for the sisters who ran the hospital. It was the extension of the hospital in 1978 that placed 'Currajong' in peril.

Because the house was of such historical merit, members of the Townsville Branch of National Trust of Queensland raised the funds to remove 'Currajong' to a new site where it still stands, and to restore it to its former glory. At the same time, a stain on the floor of the back verandah and part of the operating theatre roof were retained to remind us of the rich layers of cultural heritage demonstrated in the building.

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So we see that 'Currajong' has much to tell us of the pastoral, sugar and mining industries — the great industries that developed the north — as well as the commercial, business and ecclesiastical history, and of Townsville during World War II.