Pioneer Property Owners

Frederick and Walter Gaunt

When I began my search for the name appearing on the first *land grant Certificate of Title* of 1913, *"Fredrick Gaunt of Narrogin, Stonemason"*, I was almost convinced that he was a forgotten man who was no longer remembered. His name seemed nowhere to be found in historic newspapers or via Google searches. Eventually I found a contractor with the name of *"W. Gaunt"*, and when the town of Wagin started to enter my search results and he was also named as a stonemason from Wagin, I began to relax. Eventually I found both names listed side-by-side as *Stonemasons in Wagin* in the 1901 Post Office Directory (Wise's, 1901); by then I had also adopted the view that the spelling of his name ('Fredrick') was an error by the clerk – his name was spelled with an 'e', as 'Frederick,' on all other occasions I had found, even in *Family Notices* in newspapers. When I found the death notice of *Frederick Henry Gaunt* in the Perth papers (Daily News, 1921; West Australian, 1921a), I also learnt about the family connections: Walter was Fredrick's son; Walter was married to a *Matilda*, and he had six children with the names of Arthur, Florrie, Bertie, Mabel, Wallie and Freddie.

There are early hints of community participation by father Fredrick Gaunt and family in the town of Wagin: in September 1897 he's active in a meeting that proposes some *Vaudeville-style* entertainment in the tiny settlement, when *Concerts and a Ball* are proposed to defray debts owing by the newly built Agricultural Hall; there are two references to the debts of the Hall owed (Albany Advertiser, 1897). It's not surprising that Fredrick would support motions that assisted in paying for the Hall: together with his son Walter he had been the appointed builder of the Hall (Western Mail, 1928). In the same month it is *Mrs Gaunt*¹ who locates a lost 6-year old girl who has been missing in the bush after wandering off and surviving in distress; unlike her brother, who some years ago had been lost for five years until his remains were located, this little one survived "*On the cold ground, and I called mother all night, but she would not come.*" (Telegraph, 1897).

A 1928 news item indirectly confirms the work of the father-and-son team on the 1896 Wagin Agricultural Hall, which later also became the designated Town Hall; this building had been replaced with a new Town Hall:

Wagin has equipped itself with a new Town Hall. When the foundation stone of the old town hall, built in 1896, was displaced, an old tin was discovered containing copies of *"The West Australian"*, *"The Morning Herald"* and *"The Australian Advertiser"*, and a document stating that the foundation stone had been laid by Mrs. C. A. Piesse. The document's other particulars were: Contractors for stone work, Messrs. F. and W. Gaunt. Carpenters, Messrs. W. Pearson and B. Balaam. (Western Mail, 1928).

The Cuballing Agricultural Hall, also built by Fredrick Gaunt, is inaugurated in August 1900 with celebratory festivities that included a Banquet where *"50 ladies and gentlemen*

¹ The Mrs Gaunt here could be Elizabeth Abbott, Fredrick's wife; but it is also possible that this was the young Matilda Cowan, married to Fredrick's son Walter

were present". There were speeches and a toast to endorse *Sir John Forrest* in his campaign to get elected in the Federal electorate of Swan in the upcoming first-ever Federal election (West Australian, 1900b) in what is the newly Federated country Australia.

It seems that, at least in the early years, father and son Gaunt were a "*travelling team*", who were happy to relocate to towns where they found the work; in 1902 the newspapers reporting about the inauguration of the Fortune Street Baptist Church in Narrogin, report Walter as living in Katanning (Western Mail, 1902), but it seems that over time they became more attached to declaring their 'residential home base' as being in Wagin. The birth place for Walter's oldest son has been officially recorded as "*Lime Lake near Wagin*" (Australian War Memorial, 2019). In the first two decades of the 20th century, Walter was listed as a Stonemason, contractor or builder in Narrogin, in Wagin, or in Katanning; but his 'multi-listing' may also have been a clever business ploy: the 1905 Post Office Directory lists him as living on *Railway Street* in *North Fremantle* (Wise's, 1905).

Walter built the first (former) Baptist Church on Narrogin's Fortune Street: in February 1902 "the tender of Mr Gaunt was accepted for £202 to build the church and porch." (Pustkuchen, 1981, p. 180). Celebrations were reported when the Fortune Street church was inaugurated in September 1902 (Great Southern Herald, 1902; Western Mail, 1902). Then, in 1903, Walter had his tenders accepted to build a police station, court house and a lock-up in Narrogin (see Albany Advertiser, 1903a, 1903b; Great Southern Herald, 1903). That "building" of the court house was probably not a complete build, but extension work: the old court house, which Narrogin people now know as the *Courthouse Museum*, already existed as the local school; about the same time as Walter received his contract, the school was re-purposed as the local court, complete with some lock-up cells, built by Walter in 1903. However, there were issues around the Narrogin police station building that troubled the contract:

The much-agitated-for police station is at last to be built. Messrs Gaunt and Harris are the successful tenderers. The plans of the proposed quarters, however, invite adverse criticism. As portion only, is to be completed at present, the interior arrangements will prove extremely inconvenient to whoever lives in them. Only a dining room, bedroom and kitchen are allowed for the officer with a wife and three children. It is to be hoped that the authorities will remedy matters before it is too late (Great Southern Herald, 1903).

The work of Walter and Fredrick was already well-known in the district. In the year 1900 the Stonemason builders and contractors secured a contract to build an extension to the Katanning Agricultural Hall (the *'Mechanics Institute'*) and as the news report states, a *'reading room'* (West Australian, 1900a); and in 1901 there was a contract in Narrogin for an extension of the Narrogin Agricultural Hall (West Australian, 1901b). In the same year Walter had been successful in securing a contract to build the Woodanilling Agricultural Hall (West Australian, 1901a), and he also began the work on the Anglican Church in Wagin (Shire of Wagin, 2018). An article published in 1947 on the 50th year anniversary of the Wagin Anglican Church recalls the days:

Messrs C. A. Piesse and F. Piesse, members of the original Arthur River Committee, with Richard Gell and J. E. Cowcher were mainly responsible for the decision to

build the Wagin Church, and the block of land on which it now stands was given by Frederick Piesse. Local stone, gravel and sand were carted from the farms around and piled in great heaps to await the builder, Walter Gaunt, who had lived in the district for some years. On July 29th 1899, in the company of a large crowd of church people and others, Mrs. C. A. Piesse laid the foundation stone. The church was completed about eighteen months later (Wagin Argus, 1949).

Anyone who keenly read the report about the Narrogin Baptist Church inauguration in the Western Mail would have noted that Walter also built the Baptist Church in Katanning (Western Mail, 1902), and by 1908 Walter had also gained the contract to build the Baptist Church in Woodanilling (Great Southern Herald, 1908).

There is clear community involvement in Narrogin by Walter and Matilda Gaunt's young family. In a news report about the 1908 Agricultural Show the work of two Gaunt children is listed in the School section: in the Category under 14 years a "B. Gaunt" (Bertie?) gets a mention, and in the Category under 9 years an "M. Gaunt" (Mabel?) is mentioned (Narrogin Observer, 1908). And at the 1909 *Narrogin Harvest Festival* there's an "Miss F. Gaunt" (the young Florrie?) who plays the piano and/or the violin to entertain the assembled congregation (Great Southern Leader, 1909).

Arthur Gaunt

Walter's son Arthur deserves a special place here – for many reasons as outlined below.

During the investigations I learnt that he was part of the *Narrogin Brass Band*, so the optimistic report about a 1906 '*Baptist Revival Rally*' in Narrogin, where one '*Mr Gaunt*' happily plays "*Onward Christian Soldiers*" on the *Cornet* comes as no surprise (Narrogin Observer, 1906). From the reports it seems clear that he's talented and receives local acclaim. But perhaps he was conflicted about his *musician's identity*, because a in October 1907 he is mentioned in a published report of the Band's association meeting, noting correspondence from 'Mrs Gaunt', relating to suggestions made that he ought to return his



instrument if he doesn't really want to play in the band. Perhaps young Arthur (born Nov 1891, he would have been a sixteen-year old lad then) had not attended practice or had been absent from meetings without notice (see Great Southern Leader, 1907). However, before the end of October that year the Brass Band is in the paper again, with a report of a Cuballing performance where Arthur gets a special mention (Great Southern Leader, 1907), and before the year is out, his name is in the paper again, with a report of a *"Young Australians"* concert:

Master Arthur Gaunt then played the Cornet solo *"Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep"* with great expression, and received a well-merited round of applause (Narrogin Observer, 1907).

It came as quite a shock when I discovered Arthur's page – complete with photo and description – on the Virtual War Memorial website. The photo of young Private Arthur Gaunt is a beautiful shot which already gave away the features; then the accompanying text told me what I did not know nor expected (see Australian War Memorial, 2019):

"Son of Arthur Elijazh QUARTERMAIN (sic) and Matilda COWAN (of Aboriginal Descent)"

That Arthur was not the son of Walter Gaunt – yet he used the Gaunt surname – told me that Walter Gaunt had fully accepted Arthur as his oldest son; there are no references to the Gaunt family anywhere in WA newspapers, presumably dictated by father Walter (in e.g. published *Family Notices* announcing marriages, births or deaths) where Arthur is not listed as the oldest son of Walter and Matilda's family. And there were more implications: first, that Matilda Cowan had brought her first-born son Arthur – named after his father *Arthur Elijah Quartermaine* – with her into her marriage to Walter Gaunt; and second, that Matilda Cowan herself was of Aboriginal descent.

In marrying Matilda Cowan, Walter Gaunt had done a truly courageous thing, having married, in the racist British context of the relatively new *Swan River Colony*, someone from Australia's Indigenous population, who were, in terms of rights, equality and legal status, trampled upon and treated with judgmental disdain, and subjected to highly questionable policies – throughout the entire continent of Australia, that *penal colony* governed by misguided British Colonial arrogance of the highest order. It was time to take stock, so I set out to compose a family ancestry tree of the families Gaunt, Quartermaine and Cowan that had produced Matilda Cowan and Arthur Elijah Quartermaine (see the *Family Tree* chapter below). Then I needed to do some more reading: an extensive investigation by Lois Tilbrook, who as part of her inquiry, as a *'sharing knowledge tour'*, had also visited Narrogin with her *South West Aboriginal Studies* (SWAS) *display* in November 1978, was now becoming *essential reading*. Lois Tilbrook's display included no less than 34 family trees, showing the many inter-racial connections between settler families and Nyungar family groups in the south-west of Western Australia, and I had already spotted the Quartermaine family amongst them (Tilbrook, 1983).

My intermezzo by way of compiling a family tree also gave me the time to find that other *unavoidable* document. I needed to find that piece of paper that, shamefully so, lay at the heart of the marriage between Walter and Matilda: the *special permission* Walter needed from the *Colonial Secretary* of the *Swan River Colony*, before he could marry a woman of Aboriginal descent; because these were "*the lesser people*" in the eyes of the authorities, the "*not quite human*" people, brutally expressed in that act of "granting permission to marry", which Walter needed. It did not take me long to find it (see State Records Office, 1892).

Book reference (Aboriginal History WA, 2019, p. 47)

Both Arthur and Bertie served in WW1; there are suggestions that they were both at Gallipoli; they both survived. In the publication *"They served With Honour"* compiled by the WA Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Arthur and Bertie are both listed on the *Nominal Honour Roll* of those who served (Aboriginal Affairs, 2015). The *Virtual War Memorial* page for Arthur lists shows his photo and service details (Australian War Memorial, 2019).

Both boys survived the war theatre, and it appears that upon return they both settled in Perth. In the years following WW1 the venture name '*Gaunt Brothers*' ('*Gaunt Bros*') appears on the public record, suggesting a joint business venture by Arthur and Bertie – including a Bankruptcy Notification publicly listed in 1949, thirty years after they seemingly had begun their collaboration (Government Gazette, 1949). A news report in the West Australian from September 2021 describes a Bankruptcy Court hearing detailing a Gaunt Brothers contracting failure: their successful tender and construction of the *Maylands Public Hall*, a building that still stands today ², had caused them severe losses "due to a sudden and unforeseen increase in



Karrakatta Cemetery: In Loving Memory of Matilda, Loving Wife of W. Gaunt. Died 21st March 1919 Aged 47 Years. Erected by Family.

the prices of timber, bricks, railway freights, cement, and labour". Bertie, named as the contractor, and Arthur as the bricklayer, both lost personal financial investments in *Gaunt Brothers,* including Arthur's war gratuity and a block of land in Leederville (West Australian, 1921b).

The mother of the family, Matilda Cowan Gaunt, stands tall and proud on so many levels in the early history of Western Australia. She died, *too early*, at 47 years of age in March 1919. From the published *Notice* on May 22, it becomes clear that Walter Gaunt now lives in Perth:

The friends of Mr. Walter Gaunt of 405 William Street, Perth, are respectfully invited to follow the remains of his late dearly beloved wife Matilda to the place of interment, the Salvation Army Cemetery, Karrakatta. The Funeral is appointed to leave his place of residence ... at 3:15pm THIS (Saturday) AFTERNOON per road. Friends wishing to attend the Funeral may proceed by the 4 pm train leaving Perth (Daily News, 1919; West Australian, 1919).

Some time after Matilda's death, there is news around her name: The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reports about a Probate from Matilda Gaunt being granted to her surviving husband

² The Maylands Town Hall, in recent years the Maylands Public Library, is currently the home of the West Australian Youth Jazz Orchestra. See <u>https://creativemaylands.wordpress.com/projects/maylands-hall/</u>

Walter Gaunt. The amount of money involved is £270.=, a not inconsiderable sum in the year 1920 (Kalgoorlie Miner, 1920).

It was not the first time that Matilda Cowan's independent Estate and financial means had become public; in 1911, a newspaper reported about a court case, brought against Walter and Matilda Gaunt in the Narrogin Local Court over work performed. The plaintiffs won the case, and costs were awarded, also, *and specifically mentioned*, against the separate Estate of Matilda Gaunt (Great Southern Leader, 1911).

Matilda's first-born, Arthur Charles Cowan Gaunt, also died very young: just shy of his 40th birthday in November 1931. Just like his mother Matilda and step-grandfather Fredrick, he is buried at the Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth. The newspaper notice lists all family members:

On November 24, 1931, at his late residence, 1 Jubilee Street, South Perth: Arthur, dearly beloved husband of Rose Gaunt, fond father of Elaine, Jean, Allan, and Norman, loving son of Walter and late Matilda, and affectionate brother of Bert, Walter (York), Fred, Florrie (Mrs Edward Wilkins, York) and Mabel (Mrs William Benson, Victoria Park) (West Australian, 1931).

In December 1948 we see the surname Gaunt in the Perth papers again: Bert Gaunt's wife Dot (Martha Rowena) passes away (West Australian, 1948a), and from the many tributes in the *Family Notices* section over several days, we can learn how much loved Bert and Dot were. Here's the text of Bert's own family notice:

GAUNT, M. R. (Dot): On December 10, 1948, at her residence, 50 Merriwa street, Nedlands, Dot, dearly loved wife of Bert, devoted mother of Roy and Morine, mother-in-law of Joy, loving grandmother of Gary and Graeme; aged 53 years (West Australian, 1948b).

In the December 1948 *Family Notices* we also hear from Walter Gaunt: in the notice he names his new partner Dorothy Pollard, calling her *'Dorrie'*, and he mentions someone called *Shirley* ³; is she a new daughter? We also hear from Bert's brother Fred (living at 156 Fairway in Nedlands, and naming his partner Susan and four children) and Bert's sister Mabel, with a partner called Will, and naming her son Ben (West Australian, 1948a, 1948b).

Walter Gaunt died at the high age of 91 years, on January 20, 1962. Records at the Karrakatta Cemetery note his last place of residence as Victoria Park. This was where his oldest daughter Florrie lived; did she care for her father in his final days?

³ Karrakatta Cemetery records show a *Shirley Joy Gaunt* † 30 Mar 2010 Meadow Springs, Mandurah WA, at 83 years of age. This puts her birth in 1927 – the year Walter Gaunt married Dorothy Pollard.

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