

Camp Cove – the first landing place?

What evidence can be found to support the claim that Camp Cove was the first point where Europeans landed within Port Jackson, 21st January 1788?

In January 1927 a marble monument was erected at Camp Cove by the Royal Australian Historical Society in conjunction with Vaucluse Council to commemorate the beach as the first landing place of Governor Phillip in Port Jackson. There is, however, no thorough and authentic account of the events of 21st January 1788 with regard to the status of Camp Cove as the first landing place in Port Jackson of Governor Phillip, or to the possibility that Phillip and his exploratory party camped on the beach at Camp Cove - or anywhere else in Port Jackson.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding some argument for Manly as the first Port Jackson landing place, the beach at Camp Cove has come to be officially accepted as the point where Phillip and his men first came ashore after setting off from Botany Bay to seek a suitable location to establish the British settlement. On the 150th anniversary of the expedition in 1938, a ceremony was held at Camp Cove on January 21st by the R.A.H.S., and an address given by the Society's president, Mr K R Cramp. A report in the *RAHS Journal* includes the following :

*Captain Hunter informs us, Mr Cramp pointed out, that after they [the exploration party] entered Port Jackson they turned into its southern arm. They landed on this spot, which still retains the name – Camp Cove – given to it in 1788. That name appears on the earliest map of the harbour, and we are glad it has not suffered the oblivion that has been the fate of other of the original names ... On this spot Phillip had an early afternoon meal and gave the natives their first lesson in the process of cooking food in boiling water. He then proceeded to the North Harbour and spent the next two days investigating the various inlets ...*¹

A speech by the governor, Lord Wakehurst, which followed Mr Cramp's address noted that 'there was some authority for believing' that the first member of the expedition to set foot ashore in Sydney harbour was Mr J Winter, second officer of one of the first fleet vessels.²

The question of whether the expedition made camp at Camp Cove has been debated at length, most recently by Bruce Crosson of the Woollahra History and Heritage Society in his WHHS Brief "Camp Cove or not Camp Cove",³ which also discusses other aspects of the locality's history and naming.

The question of camping arises not only from the name of the Cove (charted by Captain Hunter in a survey undertaken within days of the First Fleet landing in Sydney Cove on 26th January) but also from one of several accounts of the initial expedition from Botany Bay to explore Port Jackson. This account is the journal of Jacob Nagle, a seaman in the exploration party, and states quite definitely that the party did make camp. His account reads :

¹ Connigrave, C Price "150th Anniversary Celebrations" *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* Vol. XXIV Part 1, (1938) p.79.

² Connigrave, C Price *op.cit.* pp. 81.

³ Crosson, Bruce "Camp Cove or not Camp Cove" *Woollahra History and Heritage Society Briefs* No 126. Syd, WHHS, 2000.

We arrived in the afternoon and run up Middle harbour to the westward and then a circular round to a bay on the north side which Governor Phillip called Manly Bay and surveyed round till we came to the S.W. branch. It coming on dark we landed on a beach on the south side and there pitched our tents for the night. This was called Camp Cove.⁴

This would seem indisputable evidence of the party having camped at Camp Cove, after first exploring other areas of the harbour. However, as it has been variously pointed out, Nagle's journal was written in the 1820s, more than thirty years after the event, and parts of his recall differ significantly with other accounts, notably that of Captain John Hunter, who wrote :

...we had not gone far in [from the entrance to the harbour], before we discovered a large branch extending to the southward; into it we went and soon found ourselves landlocked with a good depth of water...⁵

This would suggest that the southern shore of Port Jackson was the first area to be explored, not the western and northern areas as Nagle maintained. Presumably the claim that the party's first landing place in the harbour was Camp Cove would have been based on Hunter's account, and/or others consistent with it.

The account given by Phillip in his journal, and in a detailed letter of 15th May to Lord Sydney (Secretary of State) reproduced in the *Historical Records of New South Wales*, goes into no detail as to which parts of the harbour were explored in which order. The emphasis is on the discovery of a large and secure harbour and a cove (Sydney Cove) suitable for establishing settlement. Of the process of exploration Phillip writes only 'The different coves were examined with all possible expedition'⁶, and it is possible that the party split up in this effort, as he writes of taking three boats and a number of officers and men 'that by examining different parts of the port at the same time less time might be lost.'⁷

If we accept that Camp Cove was the first landing place in Port Jackson, then Phillip's account indicates that a meal was cooked on the shore. In his letter to Lord Sydney of 15th May he writes :

When I first went in the boats to Port Jackson the natives appeared armed near the place at which we landed and were very vociferous, but like the others [at Botany Bay] easily persuaded to accept what was offered them, and I persuaded one man, who appeared to be the chief or master of the family, to go with me to that part of the beach where the people were boiling their meat.⁸

This was clearly the account accepted by Mr Cramp of the R.A.H.S.

⁴ Nagle, Joseph quoted in "Camp Cove or not Camp Cove"/B Crosson *Woollahra History and Heritage Society Briefs* No 126. Syd, WHHS, 2000.

⁵ Hunter, John *An Historical journal of events at Sydney and at sea, 1787-1792*. [first pub'd 1793] Syd., A&R./RAHS, 1968, p.29.

⁶ Phillip, Arthur, Letter, Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, Sydney Cove, New South Wales, May 15th 1788] reproduced in *Historical records of New South Wales* Vol.I Part 2. – Phillip, 1783-1792 [*fac.*; orig pub'd 1892] Syd., Lansdowne Slattery, 1978 p.122.

⁷ *loc.cit.*

⁸ Phillip, A *op.cit* p. 129.

After describing this encounter further, Phillip goes on to refer to what is clearly a separate and presumably later incident when ‘the boats, in passing near a point of land in the harbour, were seen by a number of men and twenty of them waded into the water unarmed ...’ This place, Phillip continues, he subsequently named Manly Cove, adding that ‘the same people afterwards joined us where we dined’. The timeframe is unclear, except that in the passage quoted above he uses the word ‘first’: ‘when I *first* went in the boats to Port Jackson’. However, even by this usage he could be referring to his earliest actions within Port Jackson and thus identifying a first landing point in the harbour, or he could equally be referring to this first exploratory expedition as a whole.⁹

The fact that Camp Cove is one of the few specifically labelled landmarks on Hunter’s early chart of Port Jackson would suggest that the place had some significance for these early settlers aside from its usefulness as a marker in his instructions for incoming vessels : “... when you open any part of the sandy beach at Camp Cove, haul short for it...”¹⁰. However, this small party of men in unknown territory was far more likely to have slept on their boats, as they clearly did on other occasions (such as during the exploration of Broken Bay two months later¹¹) than to have set up a ‘camp’, as such, on the shore overnight.

Frustratingly, the most reliable accounts of this first exploratory excursion of the European settlers to Port Jackson are unfortunately the least explicit about the specific place within the harbour where the party first landed. No log was kept, and since none of the features and landmarks of the harbour yet bore names there was even less reason to be specific. It is also natural that the focus of these accounts became not the initial landing place in the harbour, but the place where settlement was established – Sydney Cove.

Nevertheless, the first recorded entry of Europeans into Sydney Harbour is a significant event in the history of this city, and on balance it would seem that we can be confident at least that the first landing place was a point close within the heads and on the southern shore of the harbour, and that the party cooked their first meal eaten in Port Jackson at that place, and engaged in their first conversation with the indigenous population of the district on that beach. On this basis the monument and plaque on Camp Cove was erected in 1927, and in more recent times, a twilight picnic has been held at Camp Cove on the 21st January every year since 1986 by the Woollahra History and Heritage Society.

***Information compiled from resources held
in the Woollahra Local History Collection***

⁹ Phillip, A *op. cit.* p. 129.

¹⁰ Phillip, Arthur *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay. [facs.; orig pub’d 1789; first facs. reprint 1968;] Richmond Vic., Hutchinson, 1982 p.143.*

¹¹ Phillip, Arthur [Letter, Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, Sydney Cove, New South Wales, May 15th 1788] reproduced in *Historical records of New South Wales Vol.I Part 2 ... p. 125* “We slept in the boat that night within a rocky point in the north-west part of the bay ... as the natives, tho’ very friendly, appeared to be numerous...”