

THE CASTLE HILL REBELLION & BATTLE OF VINEGAR HILL 1804

THE
HILLS
Sydney's Garden Shire



*'Re-enactment of the Battle of Vinegar Hill' part of a painting by Yolanda Seach
donated to Vinegar Hill Memorial Library.*

'Death or Liberty'

a brief history of The Castle Hill Rebellion & Battle of Vinegar Hill



'Convict uprising at Castle Hill, 1804', depicting the Battle of Vinegar Hill - image courtesy of The National Library of Australia

Before the Eureka Stockade and the Rum Rebellion there was the Castle Hill Rebellion that resulted in the Battle of Vinegar Hill – a culmination of conspiracies, mutinies, failed uprisings and betrayal. It is important to understand the historical value of the rebellion and what part it played in the very turbulent chapter of early European settlement in Australia.

Problems with general unrest among Irish convicts, accelerated in 1800 when hard-core political nonconformists were exiled to Australia following an uprising in 1798 in Ireland's Wexford County. That battle in Ireland was known as the Battle of Vinegar Hill.

Knowing that they may never be allowed to return home to Ireland, the newly arrived convicts began plotting a mass escape. There were several plots to escape between 1800-1803 but it was not until 4 March 1804 that a plan was brought into action.

However it was doomed from the start.

The day before the planned uprising, rebel leader Philip Cunningham, sent a messenger from the Castle Hill Government Farm with a note to alert hundreds of Irish convicts working along the Hawkesbury that the uprising was about to happen. The messenger was arrested and the message was not delivered.

The next evening, unaware of the messenger's arrest, Cunningham gave the order for the rebellion to begin. A bell was rung, a small hut set on fire as a beacon and more than 200 convicts poured out of their huts and took over the Farm. Their catch cry was 'Death or Liberty'.

They met very little resistance. Splitting his mob into three groups, Cunningham ordered them to spread out across the countryside, raid the homes of settlers to steal guns, ammunition and rally recruits. They were all to regroup near Parramatta but, by the time the rebels assembled on a hill outside Parramatta, the alarm had been raised.

The soldiers were called to arms along with the Parramatta Loyalists and all other able-bodied men and a messenger dispatched to Sydney to alert Major George Johnston of the NSW Corps. He arrived with his soldiers at Parramatta before dawn and met Governor King who issued a Proclamation of Martial Law.

Cunningham's problems were compounded when he lost one of his leaders and a third of his men in the darkness. Those who had assembled, along with new recruits, only possessed an inadequate collection of weapons. With no signal to confirm that the town was free of soldiers, he decided to head to the Hawkesbury for reinforcements, believing that the convicts there had also rebelled.

They set off along the Old Windsor Road to the Hawkesbury with Major Johnston and the military in pursuit. When nearing the site of modern-day Kellyville, and learning that the rebel force was less than a mile away, Johnston rode ahead with Trooper Anlezark under a flag of truce.

Unable to persuade the two remaining rebel leaders to surrender, Johnston broke the truce and arrested them. At this point, the infantry suddenly appeared and opened fire on the poorly armed rebels killing 15 rebels near modern-day Rouse Hill House.

The battle was followed by a day-long pursuit, leaving at least another 15 convicts dead. Cunningham was hung from the staircase of the Windsor granary store, the place he had boasted he would plunder. With their three principal leaders dead or taken prisoner, the rebels surrendered in great numbers.

Eight were tried and executed. The remaining leaders, Samuel Humes and William Johnston, were executed and hung in chains, a special mark of infamy. Seven received between 200-500 lashes and were exiled to the Coal River, Newcastle chain gang, along with 23 others. Another 34 were placed in irons.

The rebels were not bloodthirsty revolutionaries but ordinary men motivated by a single desire – to go home. The ideals of Liberty and Freedom, for which they fought and died, are as much a part of our Australian ethos today as they were in 1804. It is significant that the password for the 1854 Eureka Stockade in the Victorian goldfields was 'Vinegar Hill'.

To discover more about the Castle Hill Rebellion site located at Castle Hill Heritage Park, Heritage Park Drive, Castle Hill:

- Listen to how archaeologists unlocked the park's secrets <http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/external/hillsvoices/heritagepark01.htm>
- Take a virtual tour of the Park <http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/Council-Owned-Heritage-and-Places-to-Visit.html>
- Watch a movie re-enactment of the Rebellion http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/external/hillsvoices/DeathorLibertyMovie_colorbox.htm
- Read Castle Hill and its government farm 1801-1811 by Ralph Hawkins, Noelene Pullen and Pam Wilson, Hills District Historical Society 2011 LS 994.41 HAW and The Castle Hill Rebellion of 1804 by James Symes, Hills District Historical Society 1990 LS 994.41 SYM available in Hills Shire Library branches.



Profiles of those involved



Governor Philip Gidley King

Governor Philip Gidley King was the third governor of the colony, from 1800-1806. Following the Castle Hill Rebellion at the Government Farm on 4 March 1804 he announced the Proclamation of Martial Law after declaring a state of insurrection. In 1806 he retired as governor and returned to England.



Major George Johnston

Major George Johnston of the NSW Corps led the government troops and a group of civilians against the rebels in the Battle of Vinegar Hill at modern-day Rouse Hill. Johnston captured all the rebel leaders and later hanged Philip Cunningham as a mark of infamy. He was rewarded with a land grant at today's Annangrove.

NSW Corps, known as 'red coats' led by Major Johnston, consisted of 50 soldiers immobilised by Governor King to quell the uprising. After arriving in Parramatta at dawn on 5 March 1804, they pursued the rebels to Rouse Hill where they defeated them in the Battle of Vinegar Hill.

Loyalists were members of the Loyal Sydney Association and the Loyal Parramatta Association created by Governor Hunter in 1800 in response to an attempted rebellion. They were civilians and free settlers who in return for service were given free provisions, uniforms, arms and ammunition.

Reverend Samuel Marsden, a Parramatta magistrate and parson, was the first person of authority to learn of the rebel uprising. However, he took no action and chose not to be directly involved in the conflict. Rev. Marsden was known as the 'flogging parson' as he often sentenced convicted prisoners to receive the lash.



Reverend Samuel Marsden

Father James Dixon, a Roman Catholic priest, was exiled to the colony after the 1798 uprising in Wexford County, Ireland and conducted the first Catholic Mass in Australia on 15 May 1803. He rode with Major Johnston on 5 March in an attempt to negotiate a truce with the rebel leaders before the battle commenced but failed to alter their resolve.

Philip Cunningham, government stonemason, was convicted as a result of his role in the 1798 Irish uprising. He, and assistants Samuel Humes and William Johnston, planned and led the rebellion at Castle Hill Government Farm on 4 March telling the rebels to capture arms and then take Parramatta under siege. He was captured on 5 March and hung at Windsor.

Famous Sites in 1804

Wexford County Ireland In 1798 Irish rebels unsuccessfully rose against the English in an attempt to drive them from Wexford after their long occupation. The rebels were no match for the professional, disciplined and better equipped British army. Surviving rebels were executed or exiled to NSW to experience hard labour, heat, bushfires and floods at sites like the Government Farm Toongabbie (1791-1802).

Government Farm Castle Hill (1801-1811) was the site where Irish convicts, led by Cunningham, planned and carried out the uprising (on the evening of 4 March 1804) when the bell was rung, and a hut set on fire as a signal for the convicts to escape. Meeting with little resistance, the mob was split into 3 groups and ordered to raid homes of nearby settlers to steal weapons, rally recruits and assemble near Parramatta.

Parramatta was more important than Sydney at this time being the main home of the Governor and important military persons. The rebels planned to take the town and then travel to Sydney to capture a boat and sail home to Ireland. However, once the soldiers had assembled at Parramatta, rebel leader Philip Cunningham fled towards Windsor in search of reinforcements.

Rouse Hill of today was the site of the Battle of Vinegar Hill on 5 March 1804. Major Johnston and the military pursued the rebels from Parramatta until they were less than a mile away. Johnston then rode ahead with Trooper Anlezark and Father Dixon under a flag of truce but couldn't persuade the two rebel leaders to surrender. Johnston broke the truce and arrested them; the infantry opened fire on the poorly armed rebels killing 15, with an additional 15 dead by the end of the day.

Windsor was the town where the rebels expected to greatly increase their numbers. Following the Battle of Vinegar Hill, Philip Cunningham was hung at the Granary without trial. 8 rebel leaders were tried and executed: 3 at Parramatta, 4 at Castle Hill, 1 at Sydney.



The western view of Government Farm at Toongabbie, 1796. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales



'View of Castle Hill Government Farm' c1803, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

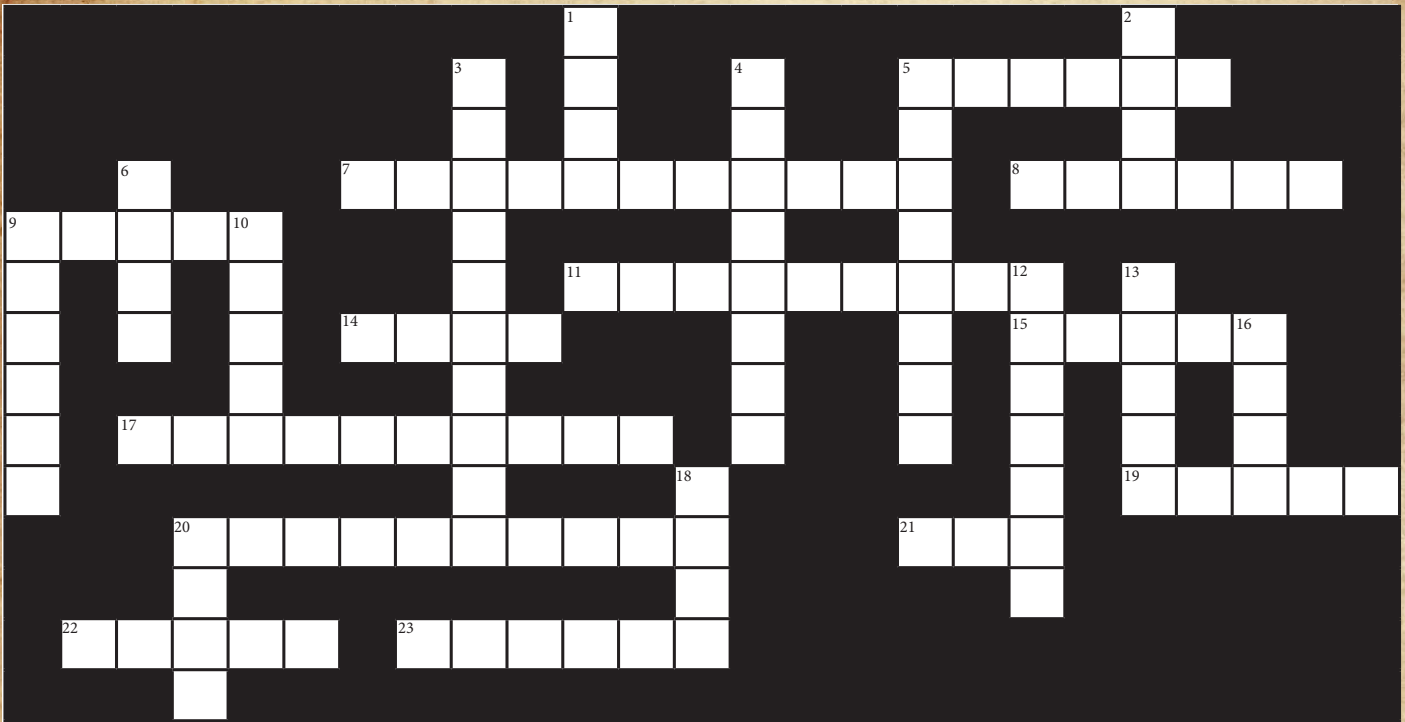


A view of Parramatta (G.W Evans), Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales



A view of Green Hills, Windsor (Lycett), Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Suggested Activities for Teachers



ACROSS

- 5. Place where ships were anchored (6)
- 7. Battle of _____ (7,4)
- 8. _____ of Vinegar Hill (6)
- 9. _____ or liberty (5)
- 11. Current day suburb of Battle location (5,4)
- 14. Firearms (4)
- 15. Rebels were mainly from Ireland (5)
- 17. Place of Rebellion (6,4)
- 19. Part of day rebellion occurred (5)
- 20. Place where Governor resided (10)
- 21. Rebels set this on fire (3)
- 22. Month of Rebellion and Battle (5)
- 23. Rev _____ Marsden (6)

DOWN

- 1. Governor _____ (4)
- 2. Convicts ate salted _____ (4)
- 3. Convict rebel leader's surname (10)
- 4. Major _____ (8)
- 5. They fought the rebels (8)
- 6. Convicts worked at the _____ (4)
- 9. Type of bread (6)
- 10. Assistant rebel leader's surname (5)
- 12. Death or _____ (7)
- 13. Father _____ (5)
- 16. Cunningham was _____ at Windsor (4)
- 18. Rebels planned to _____ to Ireland (4)
- 20. Government Farm site now a _____ (4)

How many words can you make from these crops which were grown at Government Farm?

wheat

barley

indian corn
