

My Favourite Genealogy Record and How I Found It

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My favourite genealogy record relates the story of one of Australia's greatest tragedies which occurred at Gundagai in New South Wales. It is testament to the difficulties faced by early settlers, including my great-great grandparents, in building new lives in a remote and unfamiliar country. The document came to my notice quite unexpectedly while I was still a novice in genealogy and its contents were quite a surprise. The document is an official "Letter and Return" to the NSW Legislative Council of the great flood of the Murrumbidgee River at Gundagai in June 1852. It was compiled by the then Commissioner of Crown Lands – Lachlan District, Edgar BECKHAM, and outlines the events that resulted in the deaths of at least 75 people, which still remains, even today, as the highest death toll from a flood in Australia's recorded history.¹

The story of its discovery began with my mother's desire to know more about her father's family. My grandfather, George Webb FORD, formerly a resident of Lithgow NSW had spent his childhood years further west in the town of Parkes. He was one of the eight children born to James Henry FORD and his wife, Gwen. Sadly for the family, James Henry would die at the age of 46 from diabetes. This tragedy meant that my grandfather had not known a great deal about his father's past. The first step to rectify this situation was made when my mother ordered her father's birth certificate from the NSW Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

My grandfather's birth certificate indicated that his father, James Henry FORD, had been born at Gundagai NSW. The next action was to find evidence of the birth of James Henry. I had begun to consult a keen genealogist friend on sources for information. She lent me *The Australian Vital Records Index* compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that she had obtained in New Zealand. A search of its data revealed the existence of christening details recorded in the Church of England parish of Yass NSW in the year 1852. It also gave the name of James' father and mother (Thomas and Catherine) with their marriage date. I subsequently ordered a copy of the baptism registration from the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The information it contained supported the details previously documented on my grandfather's birth certificate. James Henry had been born in Gundagai in March 1952.

My next goal was to obtain details of Thomas and Catherine FORD's marriage. Once again, my friend guided me in the right direction. The registers were on microfilm in the Orange Library as part of the NSW State Records Kit, which is where I discovered that Thomas FORD had married Catherine GUY in St James Church, Sydney on 5 March 1839 *with consent of the Governor*. Those words were a puzzle to me, so the next time I met up with my helpful friend I asked her for an explanation and duly learnt that one of them was a convict. During the course of our conversation I also mentioned that the Fords had lived in Gundagai. My friend elicited some unexpected news – her husband's ancestors had once lived there and she would lend me a folder of information about the town.

The collection contained papers which related to the Great Flood of Gundagai that had occurred in June 1852. There were newspaper reports of the flood, as well as the document that would become my favourite genealogy record – the Letter and Returns by Edgar BECKHAM. I was elated to see, in his *List of persons who have survived the flood, of 25th June, 1852*, the entry 'Mrs Ford, daughter and son.' BECKHAM's report also included a list of the 75 people who drowned in the flood and *An inventory of landed property, and goods and chattels, destroyed, damaged, or swept away, at Gundagai, by the flood of 25th June, 1852*. Thomas FORD was listed as having lost furniture, clothing and bedding to the value of £40. The letter documented the aftermath of the disaster.

The original settlement at Gundagai had been sited on the river flat on the northern bank of the Murrumbidgee and had a population of about 400 people by 1852. "Despite frequent warnings from the natives that *old man flood* would come down, the flat was chosen as the site of the township – a disastrous mistake as subsequent events were to show".² It was inevitable that a major flood would occur. After a period of drought, the area was inundated with heavy rain for nearly three weeks – "the winter of 1852 was the wettest known".³ The river gradually rose and on the night of 24th June, the water that had been accumulating upstream rushed

¹ *Australia's Worst Disasters: Floods*, John & Jennifer Barwick, Heinemann Library, Port Melbourne Vic, 1999. p8

² *Gundagai – A track winding back*, A C Butcher, 2002, p15

³ *The Bedside Book of Colonial Doings*, J H Heaton, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde NSW, 1984

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down the Murrumbidgee River valley and washed away the buildings on the flat. Those who had stayed in their homes had little chance of escape, although some were rescued by local Aborigines. Yarri and Jackey were two who were recognized for their bravery.⁴ Some swam to trees and were eventually rescued by other settlers. It was an horrendous situation, described graphically by Edgar BECKHAM: “*There were seventy two buildings in North Gundagai; forty eight are entirely swept away – eight so much injured as to be untenable – and thirteen of the remaining sixteen were under water. The whole village is now a perfect wreck, and it is impossible for any, but an eye witness, to imagine the fearful devastation committed by the flood.*” The FORD family survived because they had made the wise decision to live on the higher side of the river in South Gundagai.

This traumatic event would have had a great impact on my great-great grandmother. Even though she did not lose close family (her husband, Thomas, appears to have been away from home at the time), she must certainly have lost friends and neighbours. A letter of the time remains a poignant witness to the plight of the remaining residents. “Most of the survivors seem perfectly disheartened, know not what to do or where to begin ... and others seem as if all the energies of their nature were perfectly prostrated”⁵ but they were resilient people because many of them, like my great-great grandmother, had already experienced much adversity during their lifetime.

“Immigrant women’s lives and experiences have been largely overlooked or dismissed from the historical record”⁶ however, with the tabling of Edgar BECKHAM’s report in July 1852, my immigrant great-great grandmother’s experience had been entered for the second time into the chronicle of Australia’s history.

The Ireland of 1815, when Catherine was born, was a place of impoverishment for many of its citizens. Families survived on a diet of potatoes, often stunted by malnutrition, and susceptible to diseases such as typhus and dysentery.⁷ Life expectancy was short, and many children were orphaned or abandoned. Catherine GUY was one such child. I know this because when the sailing ship *Red Rover* dropped anchor in Sydney Harbour on 10 August 1832 she was listed among the passengers. Only 17, she was one of many young, female Irish immigrants who had come from foundling hospitals in Cork and Dublin in order to address the shortage of suitable domestic servants in the colony of NSW, although some colonists were looking to increase the supply of marriageable females. The *Red Rover* was the first ship whose passengers were all bounty immigrants – their way paid through the sale of crown land in the colony.⁸ Most of the girls gained positions within the Sydney area. Catherine was assigned to Mrs HEYWOOD at Parramatta as a child’s maid for £7 per week. These girls, however, would soon experience unwanted and unwarranted publicity.

The girls had been volunteered by workhouse authorities for emigration to NSW. The historian A J HAMMERTON, commenting on female emigration to Australia during the 1830s wrote: “Taken together, the experience of the first two shiploads of emigrants thus selected ... could, but need not necessarily, lead to abuses to the detriment of both the colonies and the women.” He said that “the *Red Rover*, which sailed from Ireland ... was an impressive success in providing New South Wales with suitable immigrants, most of whom were quickly engaged as domestic servants in Sydney. But the *Princess Royal* which sailed from London to Hobart Town ... was at best a qualified failure.” He made the point that “the experience of the latter ship attracted most attention and tended to obscure the value of the former”.⁹ It seems that “prejudice and selective memory had condemned all the young women with the bad reputation of a few. ‘Cargoes of juvenile prostitutes’ were how they were remembered. ‘Red Rovers’, after the name of the vessel carrying young women from a Cork foundling hospital in 1832, had become a term applied indiscriminately to prostitutes.

⁴ *The Watermen of Gundagai*, Brendan O’Keefe, Michael Pearson, Marcia McIntyre, The Old Gundagai Project Committee 2002

⁵ *Gundagai – A track winding back*, A C Butcher, 2002 p90

⁶ *Blue China – Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia*, Jan Gothard, Melbourne University Press 2001, p9

⁷ *The Irish Empire*, Patrick Bishop, Boxtree 1999, p64

⁸ *A Short History of Australia*, Manning Clark, Penguin Books Ringwood, Victoria 2001, p77

⁹ Hammerton, A J “Without Natural Protectors: Female Immigration to Australia, 1832-36”, *Historical Studies Vol 16 No 65 October 1975*

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Female Irish orphans were thus equated with prostitutes in the public mind”.¹⁰ Catherine appears to have decided not to share details of her origins, even to family, in order to avoid the stigma attached to such knowledge.

“Speculation is always part of the process of reconstructing emigrant stories”¹¹ and I have had to do that with Catherine’s early life in the colony. Her work in domestic service at Parramatta, though arduous, enabled her to meet her future husband, Thomas FORD, who was an English convict assigned on a district farm at Prospect. The two subsequently married in March 1839. Babies usually arrived early to most couples of the period. It seems, however, that Catherine’s ability to bear children had suffered from poor diet and sickness while she was a charity child within the work house. No evidence has been found to indicate that any children were born to them prior to 1852, however a young girl called Mary Ann (parentage unconfirmed) became a welcome daughter during the early years of their marriage.

Two months after their wedding, Thomas was granted a Ticket-of-Leave Passport, for a period of two years. He was employed by the then Superintendent of Convicts, Capt. McLEAN to drive cattle between Maitland and the Parish of St Vincent on the south coast. It is quite possible that Catherine accompanied him during these expeditions, cooking over the campfire, as they moved from place to place. Their whereabouts for the next few years remains a mystery, but after receiving his Certificate of Freedom, Thomas’ name appears, in 1847 and 1848, as licensee for the Woolpack Inn at Little Billybong, situated south of Tarcutta on the now Hume Highway. A map of the period also indicates another hotel – Ford’s Inn.¹² Catherine would have been kept busy working in the kitchen, laundry and garden providing meals and accommodation for the travellers using the road to Port Phillip (now Melbourne). Thomas also purchased a property near present-day Holbrook during this period, so Catherine probably had oversight of the hotels while he was away.

Thomas relinquished the hotel licence after a few years and they moved to South Gundagai. Catherine returned to a more routine domestic life in the new community, until the unexpected pregnancy and subsequent birth of her only son James Henry in March 1852. Her happiness was nearly destroyed by the waters of the Murrumbidgee River, however, despite this tragedy, the family remained in South Gundagai. Catherine would reside there for the next forty years, spending nearly twenty of those alone after her husband died in 1876. She would see a new town rebuilt on the higher northern banks of the river, and the opening in 1867 of Australia’s longest wooden bridge – The Prince Alfred Bridge – which enabled people to cross the river in safety, even during times of flood.

Catherine’s life in Gundagai, like most women, revolved around her family and friends. The deaths of Thomas and of Mary Ann’s three husbands were times of great sadness, however the weddings of Mary Ann and James, were times of celebration. She was midwife for the birth of James’ first child, Priscilla, in 1880, but the following year had to say farewell to the little girl when James left Gundagai with his wife’s family to work in copper mines near Cowra. Catherine remained in her home at South Gundagai until Mary Ann moved to Wagga Wagga following the death of her third husband. Catherine accompanied her, residing there until her own death in May 1903 aged 88. A district newspaper noted – “An old and respected resident, Mrs Catherine FORD, passed away at the residence of her daughter ... Previous to residing in Wagga, she had spent the greater part of her life at Gundagai, being located there prior to the flood of 1852, of which calamity she was one of the survivors.”¹³

The tragedy of the 1852 Gundagai flood, as revealed in Edgar BECKHAM’s Letter and Returns, led me to a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by settlers, like my great-great grandmother, in forging a new life in an unfamiliar and sometimes merciless environment, as well as an admiration for their fortitude and perseverance. It also led my mother and I to Gundagai for the 150th Anniversary of the Flood in June 2002

¹⁰ *Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans in Australia*, Trevor McLaughlin, The Genealogical Society of Victoria, Melbourne 1991, p5

¹¹ *Blue China – Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia*, Jan Gothard, Melbourne University Press 2001, pp4-5

¹² *Friday Mount – First Settlement at Holbrook and the South-Western Slopes of New South Wales*, Margaret Carnegie, The Hawthorn Press, Melbourne 1973, p188

¹³ *The Adelong & Tumut Express* Friday 29 May 1903

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which was an unforgettable and moving remembrance, in part made possible by Edgar BECKHAM's notations. The writings reveal a hidden narrative of Catherine FORD's life and as such have become my favourite genealogical record.

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