

ARTICLES

Permanence, Transience and Transformation in Traditional Aboriginal Dwellings in Southeastern Australia

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Abstract

This article discusses the historical and archaeological evidence for permanent First Nations dwellings, shelters and settlements in Southeast Australia, as well as the evidence for the use of temporary and transient shelters. It makes the case that western notions of permanence need to be reconsidered in the context of the Indigenous building tradition. It argues that permanent settlements and habitations were mostly found in specific areas and may not have been used by all First Nations people in the study area. Where permanent dwellings did exist in precolonial times, they were disrupted by colonisation and largely abandoned for more temporary shelters as colonists and pastoralists appropriated the most favourable locations and drove First Nations people from Country.

Introduction

This article examines some of the evidence for the traditional First Nations building tradition in Southeastern Australia (broadly, Victoria and South Australia east of the Murray), a geographic region encompassing around 40 First Nations Countries and a range of climatic zones. It discusses the idea of permanence in the context of the First Nations building tradition and settlement practices in precolonial times and considers how First Nations people responded to colonisation by adapting traditional building and settlement culture to new circumstances.

The article describes some early findings of research into traditional First Nations shelters and dwellings in Southeastern Australia as they existed in the early colonial period (roughly 1830 to 1850). The research project, undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis at Monash University, applies an architectural methodology to the study of the traditional

building culture and settlement patterns in precolonial times in this part of Australia.

The study of traditional building culture in Southeastern Australia has up until now largely been the domain of archaeologists, historians and amateur scholars. While some architectural studies and reconstructions of traditional dwellings have been undertaken by Professor Paul Memmott, Gunditjmara architect Rueben Berg and others, these mostly consider single structures or groups of structures at specific sites. As far as can be ascertained, no systematic architectural study of the First Nations building tradition in Southeastern Australia has yet been undertaken. This research project aims to redress that omission by mapping the historical observations and archaeological findings in relation to Country, terrain, climate and biome to reveal new, previously unknown, spatial dimensions about the Aboriginal building tradition in Southeast Australia. Further, in applying an architectural approach to the study of traditional shelter and dwelling types, the article argues it is possible to propose architecturally plausible reconstructions of a wide range of traditional First Nations shelters and dwellings in Southeastern Australia for the first time.

This research project has now amassed more than 150 examples of traditional Aboriginal shelters, buildings, camps, and settlements in Southeastern Australia. This material has been sourced largely from early colonial historical texts, sketches, paintings and, in a few cases, photographs. In some instances, the words of First Nations people in early colonial historical sources add to our understanding of this tradition. In other cases, modern archaeological research has provided the source material, sometimes supplementing the historical sources. Using these sources and research methods, the article provides some preliminary conclusions about the precolonial Indigenous building tradition in Southeastern Australia.

Background: *Dark Emu*

For many years the generally accepted view has been that First Nations people in Australia living a traditional lifestyle in precolonial and early colonial times did not build substantial or 'permanent' dwellings. However, this view has been challenged in recent years by a countervailing narrative, most notably by Bruce Pascoe in his 2014 book *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident*.¹ In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe draws on the journals and writings of nineteenth-century explorers and colonists, as

well as more recent scholarly work by Rupert Gerritsen, Paul Memmott, Bill Gammage and others, to argue the case for the existence of First Nations agriculture and aquaculture and also for substantial, permanent First Nations buildings and large villages in precolonial Australia.²

Dark Emu has generated considerable debate and discussion. In particular, Pascoe's case for a widespread Indigenous agricultural tradition has been critiqued by a number of commentators. Perhaps the most rigorous discussion of *Dark Emu* is to be found in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate* by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe, who take issue with a number of the claims made by Pascoe.³ The principal points of disagreement that Sutton and Walshe have with *Dark Emu* are that:

- Pascoe's case for a widespread Aboriginal agricultural tradition is flawed and, in some instances, misleading;
- Pascoe's claims in regard to traditional First Nations dwellings and settlements are selectively quoted and exaggerated;
- *Dark Emu* adopts a discredited 'social evolutionary' view of cultural progress and cultural hierarchy that places traditional First Nations society 'below' other more 'civilised' cultures. By attempting to place traditional First Nations society into such a framework, they argue, *Dark Emu* adopts those same (discredited) social evolutionary values.

This last point is curious and contestable: Bruce Pascoe is nothing if not a champion of traditional First Nations culture, so much so that he is occasionally at risk of romanticising it. On consideration, this criticism of *Dark Emu* is only reasonable *if* Pascoe is wrong with respect to First Nations agriculture and the existence of substantial First Nations buildings and settlements. However, if such things did actually exist in precolonial times, then pointing that fact out is merely establishing the truth of the matter, rather than buying into a view of cultural progress or societal hierarchy. If, on the other hand, Pascoe is wrong in this regard, the criticism of 'buying into' the social evolutionary mindset has merit.

If *Dark Emu* does, perhaps inadvertently, buy into a social evolutionary viewpoint, it is reasonable to ask why the book has resonated with the public enough to make it a best seller. Perhaps this is in part because the narrative of cultural progress, widespread in colonial times, is still deeply embedded in the community mindset? If it is 'objectively true' that farmers are not somehow intrinsically 'superior' to hunter-

gatherers, as many would maintain, it is not a view that is necessarily widely held amongst the general public. Nor, arguably, is it a point of view supported by Australian law. Pascoe makes the astute observation that 'the insistence on using the hunter-gatherer label is prejudicial to the rights of Aboriginal people to land'. *Terra nullius* was founded on the now contested understanding that Aboriginal people were not farmers and therefore did not (in European terms) have tenure over the land. It was only because Eddie Koiki Mabo and co-litigants were able to establish that they *farmed* (or gardened) the same land that their ancestors had always tended that the legal framework for enduring native title in Australia was finally established.⁴

In many respects, the present discussion around the existence of traditional First Nations agriculture echoes earlier critiques of Gerritsen's book, *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture*, by archaeologists including Harry Lourandos and Ian Gilligan.⁵ As an architect, I defer to the authority of the professionals in this matter, but at times it seems that the discussion concerning Indigenous agriculture boils down to one of degree or extent and also to one of semantics. The way that professional anthropologists define 'agriculture' does not necessarily align with how lay people might view it. Where Sutton and Walshe, for example, see limited and localised husbandry practices, and 'spiritual propagation', Pascoe sees, and argues for, a much more widespread agricultural tradition.

Intriguingly, *Dark Emu* has generated new avenues of archaeological research, which will further test some of these ideas.⁶ Clearly, the case is not yet closed, and it is to be expected that ideas about an Indigenous agricultural tradition (or lack thereof) will continue to evolve. If nothing else, as Sutton and Walshe acknowledge, Bruce Pascoe has elevated public discussion of traditional First Nations agriculture in Australia to a position of importance no one else has managed to achieve.

If many of Bruce Pascoe's statements in *Dark Emu* about an Indigenous agricultural tradition are hotly contested, he is on firmer ground regarding the precolonial building tradition and settlement pattern of First Nations people. Only one chapter of *Dark Emu*, on 'Population and Housing', is devoted to the precolonial building and architectural tradition, but it has received perhaps as much attention as the chapters on agriculture. In this chapter, Pascoe again draws on Gerritsen, Memmott and Gammage.⁷ But the main source of material is the writings of early colonial explorers like Thomas Mitchell, Granville

Stapylton and Charles Sturt, officials such as G.A. Robinson and William Thomas, and twentieth-century anthropologists like A.S. Kenyon, Walter Roth and Donald Thomson.⁸ From these sources, Pascoe enumerates a wide range of observations of First Nations houses and ‘villages’ in many different parts of the continent. Many of these accounts are borne out by my own research. Much of what *Dark Emu* has to say here is correct; there *are* accounts of large ‘huts’, ‘permanent villages’ and more in the colonial historical sources. Further, Pascoe qualifies his claims around sedentism, agriculture and the construction of permanent habitations: ‘This is not to say that every Aboriginal clan was engaged in agricultural production to the same extent and that all lived in the houses the explorers describe.’⁹

Pascoe argues that by ignoring and suppressing the historical evidence for traditional First Nations building culture, white Australia has been able to dismiss and discount Aboriginal connection to land. It is another point well made. However, many questions remain unanswered about the extent and distribution of shelter and dwelling types, their construction and design, and connections between sedentism and agriculture in precolonial times. This article attempts to unravel some of these issues.

Source Material

Little in the way of physical evidence of traditional Aboriginal building culture in Southeastern Australia has survived. We cannot visit a traditional Gunditjmara village as we might visit the Royal Exhibition Building or St Paul’s Cathedral. For first-hand evidence of the First Nations building tradition in the early colonial period, we are largely reliant on contemporary written and pictorial records. Such sources are rare, and some are problematic, unreliable, fragmentary, or simply lacking in detail. In most cases the voice of traditional First Nations people is missing or, at best, muted. While archaeology can be an important source of evidence, traditional First Nations building culture is not a major focus of archaeological research in Australia, and many possible sites remain unexamined.

Perhaps the biggest problem in relying largely on historical sources from the first decades of colonisation in Southeast Australia is that they are so few in number and so often limited in scope. While no doubt new sources will emerge over time, at present only a very limited ‘dataset’ is available. As with the source material for *Dark Emu*, the bulk of the

source material for my research to date lies in the writings of explorers like Mitchell, Stapylton and Sturt, together with those of Hamilton Hume and William Hovell. However, the single most important source is the journals of George Augustus Robinson, chief protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District (the Colony of Victoria after 1851) from 1839 to 1849. Robinson travelled extensively throughout Southeast Australia and recorded what he saw in his numerous journals, which have been edited and annotated by Ian D. Clarke and also by Gary Presland.¹⁰

Robinson worked as a builder both in England before emigrating to Australia and after his arrival in Hobart in 1824.¹¹ He had a nineteenth-century builder's ability to observe and draw buildings and other structures. His journals are replete with sketches of people, plants and animals, huts, shelters, weirs, oven mounds, baskets, and other aspects of traditional Indigenous life in the 1840s. As a source for information about the First Nations building tradition, his rare combination of written description and well-observed, but often tiny, sketches remains unmatched. Robinson's journals are in turn supplemented by the writings of pastoralists like James Dawson and Peter Beveridge, as well as other sources stemming from the work of colonial artists and photographers.¹²

In many cases the information provided by the sources is sufficient to allow 'speculative reconstructions'—architectural sketches of the dwellings and structures—to be attempted. These reconstructions are tentative but are based on sound construction and building principles and aim to be architecturally plausible. When new information, or new interpretations of the source material, has come to light, some of the reconstructions have been revised. They are therefore a work in progress. While the reconstructions are only speculative and preliminary, they provide a valuable tool for the visualisation, analysis and understanding of the built forms, materials and construction of traditional shelters and dwellings. An example of one, a 'loondthaal' from Wemba Wemba or Wati Wati Country near Swan Hill, based on written descriptions by Peter Beveridge probably dating from observations made in the 1840s or 50s,¹³ is shown in Figure 1.

All of the examples recorded have now been mapped onto a digital map of Southeastern Australia (Figure 2). The mapping is clearly limited by the available sources, which are neither systematic nor comprehensive. It provides only isolated points of data, which do not necessarily give a clear picture of what is happening in the rest of the territory. The mapping,



Figure 1. Loondthaals, Murray River 1840s, after Beveridge (Courtesy Peter Hogg, 2023)

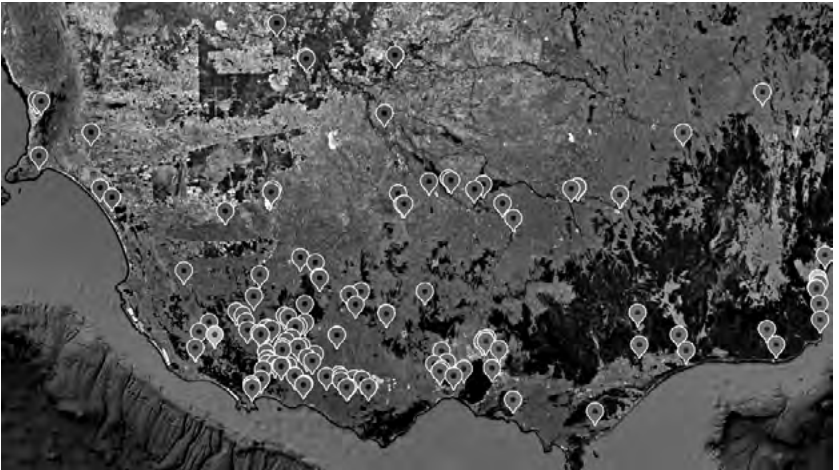


Figure 2. Sites mapped in Southeastern Australia (Source Google Earth/Hogg, 2023)

nonetheless, is a starting point and is already providing new insights into, and understandings of, the traditional building culture of the region.

Permanence?

Much of the recent public discussion concerning traditional Indigenous settlement and housing centres on ideas of permanence. However, Western concepts of permanence in relation to buildings are not always as straightforward as we may at first think. Few modern Australians are completely sedentary in their living arrangements. For example, many modern buildings, such as the beach house and the holiday unit, are only seasonally occupied. A building may therefore be permanent, in that it endures for many years, but inhabited for only a part of each year. The building is permanent, the occupation is not.

Equally an Indigenous camp site may have been 'permanent' in that it would be used on an ongoing seasonal basis over many years, but it may not necessarily have been occupied all year round. Some traditional First Nations campsites or settlements were returned to on a seasonal basis over many years, decades or even centuries, but the shelters used at these sites may have been rebuilt, in whole or in part, each time the site was reoccupied. The site was therefore permanent, or perennial, but the shelters that made it up were not, and nor was its occupation.

Even notionally permanent structures generally endure for only a limited span of time. Buildings that are not regularly repaired and maintained will decay over time. This was the case for traditional Aboriginal builders, particularly given the natural materials available to them: timber, sod, earth, clay, thatch, string, bark, stone. All, except for stone, are susceptible to fire, rain, wind and decay. In the normal course of events, little would remain of an abandoned shelter or dwelling after a few decades. On the other hand, stone structures, unless deliberately destroyed, can last for centuries. Thus, of the permanent dwellings that existed in the pre and early colonial periods, only those made in part of stone have left physical evidence that can be observed in the present day.

Historical observations are, for the most part, very limited in scope and duration. In most cases, nineteenth-century observers saw the structure or settlement at a specific moment in time, and not over the course of months or years. Near Tapoc (Mount Napier) in Western Victoria, on 10 May 1841, George Augustus Robinson recorded instances of apparently permanent dwellings in large settlements:

This place, prior to its occupation by white men, was a favorite resort and as this was the only permanent water supply, a village had been formed. I counted 13 large huts built in the form of a cupola [i.e. a dome]. When seen at a distance they have the appearance of mounds of earth. They are built of large sticks closely packed together and covered with turf, grass side inwards. There are several variations. Those like a cupola are sometimes double and have two entrances; others again are like a niech [half dome] ... The permanent huts are those in the form of cupola. Three of these huts had been occupied a day or two previous to my visit.¹⁴

Robinson states that the ‘permanent huts’ are in the form of a ‘cupola’ (i.e. a dome). However, his encounter with the village was brief: a visit that occurred on a single day, 10 May 1841, rather than an extended stay or over repeated visits. Robinson had not seen this village before and did not, so far as his journals record, visit it again. On what basis, therefore, does he say that the huts are permanent, rather than, for example, winter huts built for the season?

The question of permanency of occupation also needs consideration. In many sources, villages and camps encountered are often recorded as being recently abandoned or, in other accounts, only partly occupied, as in Robinson’s account above. Where observations were not carried out over a period of many months or years, statements about permanence, or the numbers of inhabitants, must therefore be treated with a degree of caution.

This problem is illustrated by the best-known example of a substantial traditional ‘permanent’ Aboriginal village in Southeastern Australia, which comes from the notebook of William Thomas, assistant protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District. Recorded in 1840, this gives an excellent written description, as well as a graphic depiction, of a Gunditjmara village. The apparently ‘permanent’ village, near Caramut, Western Victoria, witnessed by the ‘first settlers’ in the district, consisted of 20 or 30 beehive shaped huts on the banks of a creek:

These huts were about 6’ high or [a] little more, about 10’ in diameter an opening about 3’6” high for a door which they closed at night if they required with sheet of bark, an aperture at the top 8 or 9” to let out the smoke which in wet weather they covered with a sod. These buildings were all made of a circular form, closely worked and then covered with mud, they would bear the weight of a man on them without injury ...¹⁵

William Thomas did not personally observe this village. His account is allegedly based on information provided by one George Arabin, who claimed to have seen it ‘at first hand’.¹⁶ The fact that the description includes measures taken ‘in wet weather’ to weatherproof the huts suggests that the ‘village’ was observed over a period of time. Despite this, we have no way of knowing for how long the dwellings were occupied during each year, or whether they were only occupied seasonally.

The number of ongoing occupants of the Caramut village is also unclear. The fact that some of the huts were described as ‘capable of holding a dozen people’ suggests that the ‘20 or 30 huts,’ might, combined, hold between 240 and 360 residents. But not all of the huts were large enough to contain a dozen people, and there is no indication of how many huts were occupied at any given time. Nor is it clear how many people occupied each one: ‘a dozen people’ is a suggested maximum, not a head count. Multiplying the maximum number of possible inhabitants of each hut (twelve) by the number of huts (20 or 30) gives a maximum possible number of occupants but not the actual number of inhabitants at any one time. The actual peak number may have been much lower than the theoretical maximum and may have fluctuated over the course of each year.

Another major source of information about the traditional building culture in Western Victoria was James Dawson, who lived at ‘Kangatong’ in Gunditjmarra Country, north of Port Fairy, for twenty years from the mid-1840s. In the mid-1860s he moved to a property near Lake Bullen Merri in Djargurd Wurrung Country, near Camperdown.¹⁷ During this period, he observed traditional Aboriginal dwellings and settlements over a period of many years and got to know many Gunditjmarra and Djargurd Wurrung people well. Dawson described clusters of dwellings similar to those seen by Robinson and Thomas and is explicit about the level of permanence:

Habitation—*wuurns*—are of various kinds, and are constructed to suit the seasons. The principal one is the permanent family dwelling, which is made of strong limbs of trees stuck up in dome shape, high enough to allow a tall man to stand upright underneath them.¹⁸

Dawson observed that various kinds of *wuurn* were built to ‘suit the seasons,’ and that the principal *wuurn* was the ‘permanent family dwelling.’ From his writing it would seem that there was a common building

tradition across Gunditjmara and Djargurd Wurrung Country. This presumably also applied to other nearby Countries, for example those of the Girai Wurrung and Bungandidj people:

The family *wuurn* is sufficiently large to accommodate a dozen or more persons; and when the family is grown up the *wuurn* is partitioned off into apartments, each facing the fire on the centre. One of these is appropriated to the parents and children, one to the young unmarried women and widows, and one to the bachelors and widowers. While travelling or occupying temporary habitations, each of these parties must erect separate *wuurns*. When several families live together, each builds its *wuurn* facing one central fire. The fire is not much used for cooking, which is generally done outside. Thus, in what appears to be one dwelling, fifty or more persons can be accommodated, when, to use the words of the aborigines, they are “like bees in a hive”.¹⁹

Dawson’s account provides details of construction, layout and indications of the size of permanent *wuurns*, which, he wrote, were built by the menfolk, who ‘share[d] the labour’. The *wuurns* were large and adaptable since they could accommodate ‘a dozen or more persons’ and were big enough to be partitioned into ‘apartments’, each facing a central (internal) fire. There were separate apartments to accommodate parents and children, widows and unmarried women, and another for widowers and unmarried men. Dawson further described how, ‘when travelling’ or ‘occupying’ temporary habitations, the members of each family must build their own shelter. Since they were travelling or occupying temporary habitations for ‘a season’ they could not also be present at the principal, permanent habitation all year round, and must have made use of temporary shelters while on the move.

Dawson continued:

When it is necessary to abandon them [the *wuurns*] for a season in search of variety of food, or for visiting neighboring families and tribes, the doorway is closed with sheets of bark or bushes . . . They then depart, with the remark: “Muurtee bunna meen”—“close the door and pull away”.²⁰

The *wuurn* was only abandoned ‘for a season’, suggesting that it was occupied for most of the rest of each year. That the departing inhabitants of the *wuurn* ‘close[d] the door’ implied that they would return.

Permanent dwellings, like those described by Dawson and Robinson, were often made of perishable materials—timber, bark, thatch, netting, clay and earth sod—materials that would leave little trace after only a few years without maintenance. The changed fire regime that followed the cessation of cultural burning after colonisation²¹ would have contributed to the destruction of any remaining structures made of flammable materials. Those traditional buildings most likely to survive were made in part of stone, seemingly one of the preferred building materials in the volcanic landscapes of Western Victoria, where the ground is hard and difficult to dig and where trees are scarce. Stone does not appear to have been widely used in traditional buildings in other regions, as observed by Dawson:

In some parts of the country where it is easier to get stones than wood and bark for dwellings, the walls are built of flat stones, and roofed with limbs thatch. A stony point of land on the south side of a lake near Camperdown [Lake Bullen Merri?] is called “karm karm” which means “building of stones”, but no marks or remains are now to be seen indicating the former existence of a building there.²²

Near Lake Condah, also in the Western District, Robinson had observed in 1842 that the Gunditjmara people ‘had a sort of village, and some of their habitations were of stone. I passed several stone and wooded weirs for taking fish, also places for snaring birds; their dwellings are among rocky fragments and loose crags, thickly wooded and bounded by swamps.’²³

At Darlots Creek, on Gunditjmara Country in the Western District, the remains of a cluster of stone dwellings were investigated by Dr Heather Builth and others in the early 2000s.²⁴ Builth found the remains of small houses with internal dimensions of up to two and a half meters, some with multiple chambers and what appeared to be small stone storage structures nearby. Stone walls, about one metre high, formed the base, with a roof constructed of timber and covered with clay, thatch or bark for weatherproofing. Architect Paul Memmott has proposed plausible architectural reconstructions of the stone houses, based on Builth’s findings.²⁵ The remains described, and the proposed reconstructions, are largely consistent with a domed, conical or ‘beehive’ structure, similar to those in the Caramut village described by William Thomas.²⁶

At the ‘Kinghorn’ property near Wallacedale, south of Hamilton, again in Gunditjmara Country in the Western District, archaeologists Peter J.F. Coutts and D.C. Wittar documented 55 stone structures, interpreted as stone walled houses, which:

apparently consisted of low stone walls, were circular in shape, 3–5 m in diameter and roofed with bark. They had internal fireplaces and were said to have been erected in areas where timber was scarce. Mr. John Kinghorn (pers. comm.) recalls his grandfather describing decaying “bark and sapling” roofs of similar stone houses on the family property. There seems little doubt that this type of house was being built and occupied during the contact period.²⁷

A speculative reconstruction of a stone-walled dwelling, based on the Kinghorn example, is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Stone-walled Gunditjmara house, ‘Kinghorn’ property, Western Victoria, after Coutts and Wittar, 1977 (Courtesy Peter Hogg, 2023)

In Memmott's book *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley*, there is one account, and even a vague drawing, of stone huts supposedly built in the alpine regions of Victoria.²⁸ However, while stone was used as a building material in some locations, building in stone in Southeastern Australia appears to be the exception rather than a common practice, and was confined mostly to a few specific regions where stone was readily available and other building materials relatively scarce.

While permanency of structure or of occupation does not necessarily equate with building in stone, only stone structures are likely to survive to the present day, given the perishability of many traditional construction materials. Despite this, little remains. Many traditional First Nations stone structures were apparently demolished by colonists and livestock, with the stone being used to build the drystone walls and rural buildings common in the Western District.

The areas around the Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba, Yorta Yorta and Wadi Wadi Countries along the Murray River encompass another region where there are indications of the use of large multi-seasonal settlements and substantial dwellings in pre and early colonial times. An example of this is found at the Barapa Swamp in New South Wales, in the region between Echuca and Swan Hill. Here archaeologist Dr Colin Pardoe has documented more than 150 large mounds as sites for huts and houses, which he refers to as 'suburbs'. In addition to arguing that these were the best sites for living during the flood season, Pardoe associates the mounds with flood control, aquaculture, and the enhancement of the natural productivity of the river and wetlands.²⁹

At Barapa Swamp, dwellings were built on top of the mounds, raising them above the flood level. Pardoe notes that the Barapa people practised aquaculture and constructed civil engineering works, including dams, ponds and weirs to catch shoals of fish. Dwellings and 'suburbs' were arranged in clusters around fish and plant resources and consisted of small day camps or large thatched houses.³⁰ The mounds formed levees that held back the flood waters and provided breeding grounds for fish as well as promoting the growth of reeds and rushes (*Phragmites Australis* and *Typha* spp.), a rich source of starch that was one of the staple foods of the Barapa people.³¹ Fish, meat and plant foods were cooked in earth ovens, which over time formed mounds, thus further enlarging the levee system.

The flood control/water management system was further enhanced by the construction of additional weirs and dikes. Citing pastoralist Peter Beveridge, who lived on the Murray from the 1840s, Pardoe and Hutton state that village and mound sites were occupied for five months each year and were thus multi-seasonal settlements that were returned to at the same time each year.³²

In Ngarrindjeri Country, on the lower Murray lakes and the Coorong, there is also evidence of substantial, but not necessarily permanent, habitations. Archaeologist Rodger Luebbers notes that these varied in size and materiality across Ngarrindjeri Country, those on the Lower Murray lakes being larger, more substantial and more permanent than those built on the Coorong.³³ However, the colonial artist George French Angas, writing in 1847, specifically ruled out the use of permanent dwellings in Ngarrindjeri Country. He described substantial winter huts, but otherwise:

Their habitations are extremely rude and simple. In the summer time, a few green brushes broken off from a neighbouring tree, and stuck in the ground, constitute their only shelter from the wind. At other times they construct huts of the branches of trees, open on one side, and about four feet high, somewhat resembling a bee-hive. As permanent residences are unknown, they bestow but little labour on these frail habitations, which, when deserted, are soon scattered abroad by the winds of heaven.³⁴

Temporary Camps and Shelters

Dawson wrote that the permanent habitations of the Western District were abandoned 'for a season'. This means that, for at least part of each year, traditional Indigenous people in those areas did build and inhabit permanent dwellings but also built and made use of temporary shelters and encampments:

Temporary habitations are also dome-shaped, and are made of limbs, bark of gum trees, and grass, scarcely rain-proof, and are smaller, opener, and more carelessly erected than the permanent residences. They are only used in summer or for shelter while travelling, and have a large open side, with the fire in front, in fine warm weather, a few green bushes, placed half in a circle to windward of the fire, suffice for a temporary dwelling.³⁵

Dawson's description of temporary shelters aligns closely with Beveridge's depiction of *Loondthaals* on the Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee rivers, which he described as like three quarters of a beehive with one quarter missing (Figure 1).³⁶ This suggests similarities in the building tradition in the two regions, even though they are some hundreds of kilometres apart. The mapping confirms this distribution. Beveridge did not mention permanent dwellings, but both Dawson and Beveridge described the job of constructing the temporary shelters as falling to the women of the group.

Other temporary shelters took the form of lean-tos or skillions as well as bark 'vaults', as recorded at a wide variety of locations. For example, skillions and vaults were seen by Robinson in Yorta Yorta Country on the Ovens River in 1840, by Thomas in the Melbourne area in 1843 and in Woiwurrung Country in 1844 (but comprising groups from many different Countries), and by photographers Richard Daintree on the Yarra in Woiwurrung Country in 1859–62, and John Hunter Kerr at Fernihurst in Dja Dja Wurrung Country in 1853.³⁷ As indicated by Dawson above, some forms of shelter were very ephemeral: '[In] warm and mild weather each family merely puts a few boughs in a semicircular form round the fire, and this is done more with the view of preventing the fire from being blown about by the wind than for any shelter which they are supposed to afford'.³⁸

Traditional Aboriginal people also congregated in large seasonal gatherings at various locations, for example in the alpine regions for the annual Bogong moth harvest³⁹ and at the present site of the Melbourne Cricket Ground. At Lake Bolac, thousands of people gathered for up to two months at a time during the eel season, inhabiting a 'semi-permanent village extending for a distance of 35 kilometers along the river- bank'.⁴⁰ In recent decades this tradition has been revived and continues as the biannual Lake Bolac Eel Festival.

Some idea of the layout of these seasonal 'towns' has been provided in the sketches in William Thomas's notebook of a 'major gathering of the tribes', when more than 800 people converged at Melbourne in 1843/44 to attend the trial of two Indigenous men: 'I have often been struck with the exact position each tribe takes in a general assemblage of the tribes, precisely in position by the compass'.⁴¹

This observation from the mid-nineteenth century aligns with similarly exacting and complex camp layouts observed by Memmott

(and others) in relation to contemporary Indigenous communities in Central Australia and elsewhere.⁴² The degree of permanence might be best categorised by the length of occupation at each site, as follows:

- transitory camps: occupied for up to a week;
- temporary camps: occupied for a period of a week to six or seven weeks;
- seasonal settlements: occupied for at least one ‘season’ (normally 2 or 3 months);
- multi-seasonal/year-round settlements: occupation of a site over several months providing the opportunity to construct substantial, elaborate and *weatherproof* structures.⁴³

The Transforming *Wuurn*

Most early historical observers (for example, George Augustus Robinson and John Helder Wedge) encountered traditional Aboriginal shelters and dwellings, encampments and villages at a single point in time, giving a snapshot of such structures at that time, but not necessarily the whole picture for the whole of their life. Shelters and dwellings may have been progressively modified over time in response to changes in the weather or the needs of the occupants. The transformation of one type of shelter into another adds an extra dimension to questions of permanence.

Similar transformation of buildings is not unknown in western cultures, albeit usually over a longer time frame. For example, houses are sometimes renovated, modified and even largely rebuilt over their life time. In the inner city it is common to find Victorian houses built in the 1870s or 80s, which underwent major renovations in the 1970s or 80s and have been renovated again in the 2000s. The house as it exists now is both the same house and a different house: permanent, in that it has endured for many decades, and ephemeral, in that it has changed many times.

This malleability of form appears to have been taken even further in traditional Southeastern Australian cultures. In some cases, observations made over a period of weeks or months give a picture of temporary shelters modified to suit changing weather conditions. Charles Griffiths wrote in 1845 that basic shelters could be transformed by progressive changes into ‘permanent’, weatherproof winter houses by being continually added to and otherwise modified:

In the western and southern districts, however, (towards Port Fairy and Portland Bay,) they construct a kind of hut for the winter season, which is of a more durable character. This they do by heaping sods and clay on the top of the original mi-mi, they add a new piece to it at every shift of wind, so as still to make the entrance from the lee side, and by this means, when they remain in one place for any length of time, these earths [*sic*] reach to a considerable size: I have seen one fully fifteen feet long, and high enough for a man to stand upright in.⁴⁴

A proposed reconstruction of such a transformation can be seen below in Figure 4. This shows a series of steps in the transformation of an open half-dome, or 'Neiche' (as George Augustus Robinson would have called it), to a fully enclosed and weatherproof winter house. The starting and end points are based on descriptions in other sources of open and fully enclosed domes from Gunditjmarra Country. The steps in between are based on other historical accounts of what might be considered intermediate forms. The various iterations are each required to follow a structural and architectural logic. The position of the fire is speculative, but also consistent with observations. Whether there was a 'reverse' process in which the dwellings were progressively deconstructed in the warmer weather is not recorded.

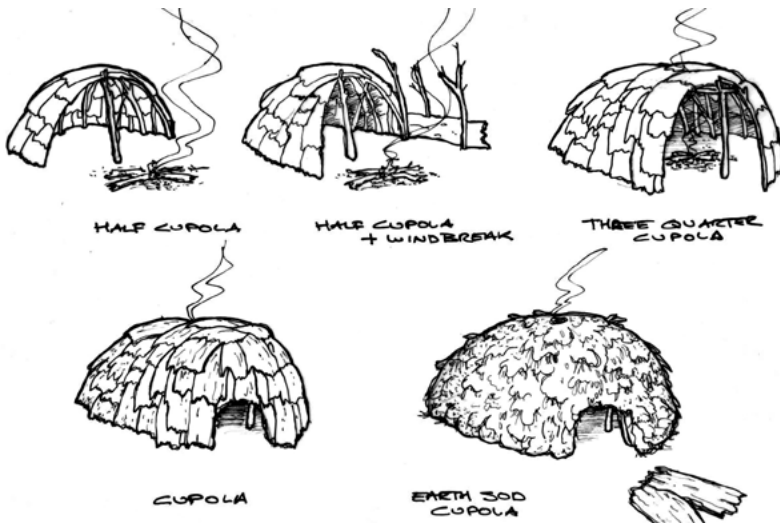


Figure 4. Speculative reconstruction of transforming wuurn: from half cupola to winter house, after Griffiths, 1845 (Courtesy Peter Hogg, 2023)

On Ngarrindjeri Country, including the Coorong and the Lower Murray lakes in South Australia, there are records of the frames of shelters and dwellings, and other building elements, being transported from one site to another, in which case the shelter/dwelling was both permanent and transient.⁴⁵ Also on Ngarrindjeri Country, the Reverend George Taplin in 1860 noted that open domes were left open during the day and in warm weather. But, at night or in bad weather, these same domes could be enclosed by a screen of animal skins, transforming them from open shelters to enclosed weatherproof ‘dwellings’.⁴⁶ Artist George French Angas drew a variety of domed hut types in Ngarrindjeri Country, showing the increment between the open and fully enclosed *wurley*.⁴⁷

Given this documented flexibility of type in a single structure, any attempt to establish a typological classification of shelters and dwellings must see them as part of a continuum, or as a process, rather than as a catalogue of fixed forms.

The End of Permanence

Dawson, writing in the 1870s, summed up several decades of observing traditional Aboriginal societies and their building and settlement culture at the very same time that all three were undergoing sustained disruption. Dawson was looking back to his early experiences in the Western District in the mid-1840s and 50s rather than describing the situation at the time of writing. By the 1870s, most First Nations people had been driven from Country and were increasingly being confined to town camps, reserves and missions, such as Framlingham (1861), Lake Tyers (1863) and Lake Condah (1867).⁴⁸

While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, it is only possible to study what there is evidence for. Clear and unambiguous records in colonial sources of permanent dwellings and large multi-seasonal villages are largely confirmed for the Western District of Victoria, but with indications that similar structures and settlements may have existed elsewhere. However, after about 1850, there are few dated and documented instances of the substantial, permanent habitations observed in early days and no mention at all of the villages and large settlements that had previously existed. They seem to have disappeared from the historical record, as indicated by the mapping of traditional shelters and dwellings after 1850 (Figure 4). Today there are no intact traditional First Nations villages remaining in Southeastern Australia at all.

The reason for this disappearance, after many centuries, was the impact of European colonisation from the mid-1830s. This decimated First Nations populations, displaced people from Country, and changed every aspect of their traditional culture, including the building and settlement traditions.

Various factors characterised this process. The role of frontier violence in disrupting traditional First Nations cultures and in killing many First Nations people has been well documented elsewhere.⁴⁹ The undermining of the traditional First Nations economy by the colonial usurpation of land for grazing and farming, leading directly to the dispossession and destitution of the traditional owners, was raised by Coutts in 1981 and has been given new weight by Pascoe.⁵⁰ As is now well documented, European diseases, in particular smallpox, had a major impact on Aboriginal populations even before the advent of colonisation of the Port Phillip District in the mid-1830s.⁵¹ Thus, what is seen and recorded by even the earliest colonial sources reflects a traditional First Nations building and settlement culture already altered by contact with the outside world.

Once colonial occupation commenced in earnest from 1834, the impact on traditional First Nations societies was compounded. The best sites for Aboriginal people to inhabit, those with access to permanent fresh water and sheltered from extremes of weather, were also the best sites for colonial occupation and exploitation. The best land for traditional prey animals such as kangaroos was also the best grazing land for sheep. Aboriginal people were often 'dispersed', that is forcibly driven from Country they had occupied for tens of thousands of years; at other times they were killed outright.

Permanent habitations and settlements seem to have been abandoned soon after the European occupation of a given area. Indigenous people who remained in established villages and camps were vulnerable to attack as the colonists would know where to find them. In some cases, traditional Aboriginal settlements were deliberately destroyed by early colonists as part of the process of 'dispersal' and 'extirpation'. For example, William Thomas recorded that: 'white people set fire to and demolished the aboriginal settlement ... while the Blacks were from their village, up the creek, seeking their daily fare'.⁵² And 'burning of mia-mias, killing of puppies, breaking of spears and bottles; bags, rugs, everything pitched into the fire'.⁵³

Driven from their established settlements and traditional lands, surviving Aboriginal people had little option but to move to town camps or retreat to mobile camps in remote areas, utilising temporary shelters that had previously been used mostly in the warmer seasons. The change from the warm, well-built and well-insulated dwellings described by Dawson, Robinson and Thomas to open, flimsy, and temporary shelters inevitably had negative health impacts, especially in winter.

During the actual ‘frontier wars’,⁵⁴ such as the so-called Eumerella Wars of the 1840s, these encampments could resemble defensive military positions. South of Gariwerd (the Grampians) in Gunditjmara Country in May 1841, George Augustus Robinson described the following:

The height I was upon jutted out into the valley of Corroit on which account it commanded this fine view. This seems to have been chosen by the natives for a lookout as their camp had been formed on this very spot. The mode of forming their camping ground was by scooping out a large hollow, 10 or 15 feet in diameter and three feet in depth. This could only serve as a fine weather camp and from its heights would be cool in wet weather. It would retain water. There were several of these hollows. Some were made under the lee of a small copse of bushes thus. From this point of this height they had a fine view of the valley of Corroit and other valleys connected with it. (There were six of these hollows.)⁵⁵

This ‘hollow bowl camp’ (Figure 5) would have provided, in effect, a 360-degree windbreak, while the siting of the bowls in the ‘lee of a copse’ would have afforded additional shelter from the prevailing wind. These camps can only have been a temporary stopping place as the bowls would have filled with water as soon as it rained. The location of the ‘lookout’, positioned on the high ground, as described by Robinson, suggests a defensive siting. A fire set below the rim of the bowl would have been much less visible than one set at ground level when viewed from the valley below, especially at night. The raised rim of the ‘bowl camp’ would have made the occupants much harder to see. The elevated position of the lookouts would also have given an excellent view of any armed parties of settlers approaching from the valley.

Where surviving dispossessed and displaced Aboriginal people drifted into life as fringe dwellers on the edge of the burgeoning colonial towns, they were often forced to subsist on charity, begging and prostitution. Again, they made use of temporary shelters, using blankets,

canvas and other items of European manufacture in place of traditional building materials. Their traditional economy destroyed, and mostly unable to find employment in the colonial economy, First Nations people were often left destitute in their own Country: semi-starved and weakened by the effects of alcohol, tobacco, inadequate European diets, and disease.



Figure 5: Speculative reconstruction of 'hollow bowl camp', Gunditjmara Country, after Robinson, 1841 (Courtesy Hogg, 2023)

Conclusion

Accounts of permanent and semi-permanent First Nations huts, houses and settlements in the colonial literature in Southeast Australia are largely confined to the very earliest period of contact between Europeans and Indigenous Australians, and to certain regions, notably western Victoria and possibly on the Murray. While permanent dwellings using stone were only built in some regions, it is these stone-walled structures that have left physical traces for modern archaeologists to document. Most 'permanent' traditional dwellings, and all temporary shelters, have left no lasting trace at all.

The building traditions and settlement patterns in Southeast Australia were disrupted by introduced disease from around 1800, and this disruption accelerated from the 1830s with colonial aggression, displacement and dispossession. In those Countries where permanent dwellings and large settlements did exist, they were swiftly abandoned by their First Nations occupants, now forced to use the more temporary shelters previously only inhabited in the warmer months. The historical record therefore tends to over-represent the use of temporary shelters and to under-report more permanent dwellings and settlements.

Whether it will ever be possible to obtain a full picture of the traditional building culture in Southeastern Australia prior to the impact of introduced diseases and colonisation is questionable. However, memory is surprisingly resistant and durable; it is possible that First Nations people retain more than the archival (and archaeological) sources can ever reveal. We may yet hope that, if the full story remains elusive, we will still be able to trace a more detailed outline of the traditional building culture of Southeastern Australia.

Notes

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- 21 Gammage, pp. 13, 62–3, 171.
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