

Wominjeka to the Merri Merri

While the creation of Melbourne as we know it is relatively recent, the Merri Creek has endured and today still flows from the northern reaches near Wallan towards its confluence with the Yarra River on the outskirts of the CBD.

Throughout time, Merri Creek has remained significant to the Wurundjeri who are the Traditional Custodians of the lands through which it flows and the “Merri Merri” or “very rocky” creek bears witness to many significant events and sites.

Wurundjeri are the Traditional Owners of the northern suburbs of Melbourne, through which the Merri Merri meanders. The Merri Merri plays a significant role in the history of the Wurundjeri, and was a source of food and shelter, a place of gathering and the site of historic treaty negotiations.

Food collection along the Merri

Food gathering was mainly women’s business with women responsible for 90% of food collected. Along the Merri Merri, Wurundjeri women would often use their kannan (digging stick) to dig up the roots or tubers of the murnong or yam daisy, as well as other native bush foods. The Merri Merri also supplied an abundance of other foodstuff such as duck, egg and fish, with the women wading into the water to search the stream beds for shellfish.

Tanderrum

The areas surrounding the Merri Merri have also been host to large gatherings of First Australians such as the 1843 Tanderrum where Wurundjeri hosted nearly 200 Kulin people. The Merri Merri was also host to the largest recorded meeting of Aboriginal people in Victoria, when in 1844 Wurundjeri hosted a gathering of tribes from all over central Victoria. An estimated 800 people journeyed to Wurundjeri land to witness ceremonies and traditions under Aboriginal law. These gatherings would have been amongst the last of the traditional tribal gatherings along the Merri Merri as the practising of traditional culture became outlawed by the recently arrived European settlers.

Treaty

It is the Wurundjeri clan, along with several others, that also bore witness to the only treaty ever agreed between First Australians and European Settlers. Near to where we are now (Merri Creek, Coburg), it is believed that in May 1835 John Batman and prominent elders signed “Batman’s Treaty” by the banks of a “lovely stream of water” for the purchase of land.

While significant in that this was the only attempt at treaty with Australia’s First Nations, it was also problematic given that the Elders of the day were unlikely to have understood European notions of land ownership and that the Wurundjeri interpretation was likely to have been of a treaty for safe passage and temporary use of land. Regardless, the treaty was declared null and void by the Governor of the time, Sir Richard Bourke, setting into motion the concept of “terra nullius” for the Port Phillip Region.



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Merri Creek Aboriginal School

The Merri Merri was home to one of the earliest Aboriginal schools in Victoria, run by ministers from the Collins Street Baptist Church. By being on country, Wurundjeri were comfortable with their children attending the Merri Creek Aboriginal School where subjects were divided by gender with boys undertaking classes in spelling, grammar, arithmetic, and carpentry and girls undertaking classes in needlework, cooking and other domestic activities. The school was run successfully for a number of years under the support and patronage of elder Uncle Billibellary, until he withdrew his support due to conflicts over the motives of the school and the teaching of European-based curriculum over the teaching of Aboriginal lore and ceremony. The passing of Uncle Billibellary shortly after the disagreements greatly affected the viability of the school because many students left both the school and the area for many years out of respect for Uncle Billibellary, contributing to its eventual closure.

The Merri Creek today

As was its role thousands of years ago, the Merri Merri continues to be a place for community to gather, and with the help of local community groups, provide a sustainable local food source. Some of these stories are told in the following points along the Women's Walk.

Community has an important role to play in ensuring it is a safe space for all and continuing its protection from environmental damage and destruction.

Help us to recognise the connection between the Merri Creek, local community and Wurundjeri, and what each of us can do to care for country.

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