

Women of Macquarie Harbour penal settlement

Little information is available on the women who lived at the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement. What information that does exist shows that the female population was composed of a handful of convicts, the wives of the military and civil officers, and perhaps surprisingly, the wives of a small number of convicts. The Reverend Scholfield recorded 14 women and 27 children in August 1828, the highest number known to reside on Sarah Island. In the last year of the settlement, several Aboriginal women were brought to the island by George Augustus Robinson during his 'conciliation' campaigns.

Women convicts were gradually moved to Hobart. A report of 1828 reveals only one female prisoner remained at the settlement, while a further 13 women, wives of the military and civilian officers lived with their husbands.

Abuse of women

Aboard the first transport to Macquarie Harbour was a

group of eight women convicts. These women were the first to occupy the penitentiary built on Grummet Island. A report of June 1822 makes obscure references to the 'unsoldierlike behaviour' of three soldiers that visited the women. The three men were court martialled.

Lempriere, the Commissariat Officer, in his 1839 narrative of the penal settlement, writes:

'The grossest immorality could not fail to reign in a place where there were no means of keeping the sexes apart...Numerous were the cases of immorality, but we will pass them over with the silent disgust they merit'.

Lempriere goes on to propose his own vision of a women's penal settlement:

'It should be situated on an island to prevent the possibility of escape.

The officers superior and subordinate should be married men. The women could be employed in

spinning and carding wool, making shirts and clothing for the convicts generally... even a little hoeing and digging would do them no harm'.

Work of the women convicts

Little information is available which might reveal the lives that these women led, other than the assignment of some convict women as servants to civil officers and their families. Women in these positions lived in outbuildings attached to the quarters in which they worked. One of the tasks assigned to the female convicts was the production of lime. Shells obtained from the entrance of the harbour were burned to produce the lime that was so desperately needed to fertilise the poor soils of the settlement.

Disobedience and resistance

One of the female convicts, Jane Davis, was sent to Macquarie Harbour with her husband, William. Both were guilty of receiving stolen sheep,

although it appears that Jane was the more guilty partner. Jane, who was born in Tasmania, was sentenced for 14 years. Punishment records show that Jane was punished at Macquarie Harbour for 'disobedience of orders and sending an improper message to Mr Barnes, the Assistant Surgeon'. Her punishment was to 'wash 40 prisoners' shirts weekly'. Both Jane and her husband were later sent to Maria Island.

Mary Ann Furze was transported for seven years. On arrival in Van Diemens Land she was assigned to a position of domestic servant. She absconded from this position for several months, an act which led to her being sent to Macquarie Harbour for the rest of her sentence. Like many convicts, Mary found herself in solitary confinement more than once for 'disobedience of orders' and 'neglect of duty'. On one occasion she was given seven days solitary confinement for 'Neglect of duty, using threatening language to the Dispenser of medicine and destroying the fresh water kept for hospital use'.

Sarah Simmonds was sent to Sarah Island and assigned as a servant to the last doctor of the settlement. After an affair with the Commandant's clerk, and being caught

visiting his quarters, she was deemed 'unsuitable' for the settlement and returned to Hobart.

The wives of the officers and military

While several soldiers and civil officers were accompanied to Sarah Island by their wives and children, there is no record of the officers being accompanied by their wives. The largest family of a civil officer was that of Thomas Cole, who lived with his wife on the island. Mrs Cole later found herself embroiled in a scandal over the smuggling of tobacco for one of the prisoners.

The Pilot, James Lucas, lived with a woman known as Margaret Keefe and four children at the entrance to Macquarie Harbour. Initially the couple lived together unmarried and were consequently shunned by the Commandant. When they were married, the Commandant did not attend the wedding.

Lempriere was also accompanied by his wife, Charlotte and two children. Together with Reverend Scholfield they set up a school for the prisoners. The Reverend Scholfield was similarly accompanied by his wife, Martha, who remained on the Island for the duration of her

husband's stay. Martha suffered a miscarriage shortly after arriving. The couple were to have no children.

It is likely that the arrival of these families and the role they played in introducing both education and religious services played a role in the transition of the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement from a place of despair to an organised and efficient industrial complex.

The wives of prisoners

A small number of well-behaved prisoners were allowed to have their wives with them on Sarah Island, where they lived in small huts. There appears to have been no more than two such women on the island at any one time. Not all the appeals of convicts to have their wives with them met with success, as the following response by Governor Arthur to one such petition demonstrates:

'Two worse characters there cannot be, and I will not approve of the Woman's being transported to the same place as her husband'.

Further reading

Brand, Ian (1984) *Sarah Island*. Regal Publications, Launceston.