



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Onyong's Grave Site

(Block 4 Section 27, Tharwa, Paddys River)

At its meeting of 4 June 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that Onyong's Grave Site was eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Onyong's Grave Site against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

Onyong¹ was a prominent Aboriginal man at the time that European's started to settle in the region where the ACT is now situated and there are a number of contemporary accounts in New South Wales (NSW) government records and in the historical accounts of early European settlers.

New South Wales government records referring to Onyong

Documents make reference to Onyong in 1834, 1841 and 1844. However, details of his tribal allegiance changes over time. In the 1834 return of Aboriginals taken at Janevale, a property in Tuggeranong (Colonial Secretary's Papers 1834, cited in Gillespie 1984) Onyong (Hong Hong) was described as Chief of the Namwich tribe. Onyong's probable age at the time of this report was given as 30, and it was stated that he had two wives and three children. His tribal territory was said to be the mountains beyond the Murrumbidgee (i.e. the Namadji Ranges), opposite the limestone plains. In the 1841 return at Queanbeyan (Colonial Secretary's Papers 1841, cited in Gillespie 1984) Onyong (Hong Gong) and Jimmy the Rover, another well known Aboriginal man, were described as members of the Hagen Hope tribe with their district or usual place of residence given as Murrumbidgee (Jimmy the Rover had previously been said to be chief of the Hagen Hope tribe in the 1834 return). In the 1844 return at Queanbeyan (Colonial Secretary's Papers 1844, cited in Gillespie 1984) he was described as "King Hong Gong", with a probable age of 36, two wives and from the district of Limestone.

Contemporary accounts of Onyong's life from early European settlers

Accounts from early European settlers in the region are sometimes inconsistent or contradictory, although all agree that he was a leader amongst the local community.

According to W. Davis Wright (1923), who was born at the property of Lanyon in 1843, Onyong (Hongkong) was chief of the Kamberra tribe at the time that European settlers first arrived in Queanbeyan. He states that, "It was not a very troublesome crowd, in fact –as related in the beginning of these notes – the old chief was the worst of the lot." In his childhood Wright played with the Aboriginal children at Lanyon, where he was born, and relates his encounters with Onyong as follows:

¹Current convention indicates that the name should be spelt Onyong, although alternate spellings derived from early settler reports and later descriptions include, Hongyong, Hong Kong, Hong Hong or Hong Gong. Onyong may be an abbreviation of the name of his birthplace Allianonyonga Creek, on the eastern side of Weereewaa, Lake George (Jackson-Nakano 2005: 35).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – Onyong’s Grave Site

In all our games, however, there was one sort of evil spirit hovering about, and for old Hongkong –the chief of the tribe- a hard-bitten old aboriginal, we -especially I- had a very healthy respect. I expected he was just the usual uncivilized (I prefer the word uncontaminated) type, but to the present day he is associated in my mind with old Giant Despair, or any fee-fo-fum character of my childhood’s literature.”

W. Davis Wright (cited in Gillespie 1984) also recounts a story told to him by Henry Hall of an encounter with Onyong on an occasion when Hall caught him spearing his cattle. According to this account:

For his audacity he [Onyong] carried away a shot through the leg which apparently did the trick, for never again were any cattle molested in the district.

Another story related by Wright (cited in Gillespie 1984) concerns an incident where it was claimed that Onyong ordered a gin to carry his spears, when shifting camp. The gin claimed she could not carry his spears because she had a piccaninny (child) and other items to carry. After she was again ask to carry the spears and refused it is said that Onyong took the child by the heels and knocked its head against a tree, then stating “Now carry the spears!”

Other accounts more clearly outline Onyong’s relationship with early settlers, it is claimed that he had a friendship with Garrett Cotter “who found him a faithful and intelligent servant” and that they travelled and worked together (Wright, cited in Gillespie 1984).

T. A. Murray was a settler at the property of Yarralumla, his diary from 1841 (*recounted in Wilson 2001*) provides a contemporary account of Onyong (Hongkong). While travelling by horseback, in the ranges up from Tumut, Murray and his fellow travellers encountered a group of Aboriginals armed for fighting. They told him of the murder of an Aboriginal man named Bondaroon, who had been a friend of Murray. Apparently Bondaroon had been travelling to meet Murray at his property at Yarralumla when he met a small group of Queanbeyan natives “led by a huge, much-feared warrior called Hongkong, who was known to most of the Aborigines in the southern highlands.” This group was also on their way to visit Murray, so they decided to travel together. When the group arrived at Uriarra the group made camp, however, Onyong left to sleep in a shepherd’s hut on Murray’s station. During the night a group of Aborigines from the Goulburn tribe, led by Mangamore, attacked the camp in an attempt to kill Onyong, which is when Bondaroon was killed.

Descriptions also highlight Onyong’s leadership role amongst the Aboriginal community. In a newspaper article, based on the accounts of John Blundell an early Canberra resident, W. P. Bluett (1927) recounts a story:

At the foot of Black Mountain, north of the Molonglo River, was the Kgamburry’s² favourite coroboree ground. John Blundell saw many of them. Here a clear open space under a tree would be selected. Old King Hongkong sat in state watching the enjoyment of his people, what time a couple of wives plied him with choice morsels of duck and goanna. A big active man, he carried himself as born to the purple. A bodyguard of eight or ten warriors stood behind him, each with a spear handy in case of accident.

The death of Onyong

According to Samuel Shumack (1977), a settler in the region born in 1850, it was said that Jimmy the Rover fatally injured Onyong (Hong Kong) in a fight at Lanyon. The fight apparently arose because Hong Kong had usurped Jimmy’s position as chief of the Pialligo tribe during his absence from the region over a period of two years. After the fight at Lanyon, which lasted an hour, Onyong was said to have fled to Cuppacumbalong where he later died.

Wright (1923) states that he witnessed the burial of Onyong in his youth and provides the only written account of this event:

After his death at Cuppercumberlong, the men of the tribe got together, tied him up in a complete ball, then cut him open between hip and rib, and through the orifice withdrew the old chap’s kidney fat, distributing it in small pieces to every gin in the camp, who stowed the treasure away in the net bags they always carried around their shoulders. His

² Also often used: Canberry, Ngambri, Kamberri, Caarnberra, Karnberra, Kemberry, Kgemberry (Jackson-Nakano 2005: 6).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – Onyong’s Grave Site

grave was on top of a rocky hill - about a quarter of a mile from Thurwa Bridge- and about five or six feet in depth. A tunnel about six feet in length was excavated and the body inserted, with his spears (broken in half), his shield, nulla nulla, boomerang, tomahawk, opossum rug, and other effects. Then the hole was filled in with stones and earth.

Wright also recalls that, “a number of years later a man named Smithie dug up the skull, and with questionable taste had it made into a sugar bowl, which I actually saw in use on his table.” Shumack (1977) relates a similar story, differing slightly in the details. In his version, a visitor to the district years after Onyong’s death opened the grave to remove his skull as a souvenir. It is related that, Jimmy the Rover set out to kill this man, who had despoiled a sacred burial ground, and the man promptly left the district. According to this account, Mr de Salis, with whom the man had been staying, received a letter some months later stating that the skull had been made into an ink stand.

While Onyong’s Grave site represents the only detailed historical account of an Aboriginal burial in the ACT area, several have been documented in Queanbeyan, including the burial of “Billy the Ram” near the Queanbeyan River (Queanbeyan Age 5 April 1862), and on the Queanbeyan showgrounds, reported to have been a Corroboree ground (Canberra Times, 30 September 1989).

DESCRIPTION

As detailed above, W. Davis Wright describes the location of Onyong’s burial as on the top of a rocky hill about a quarter of a mile from Tharwa bridge. However, the exact location of Onyong’s burial on the hill is no longer clear. Nonetheless, due to the importance of Onyong as a historical figure and the association of the hill with his burial, the hill as a whole is important to the Aboriginal people. Therefore the boundary of Block 4, Section 27, which includes this hill, shall be taken to be equivalent to the site boundary for the purposes of this registration.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – Onyong’s Grave Site

SITE PLAN

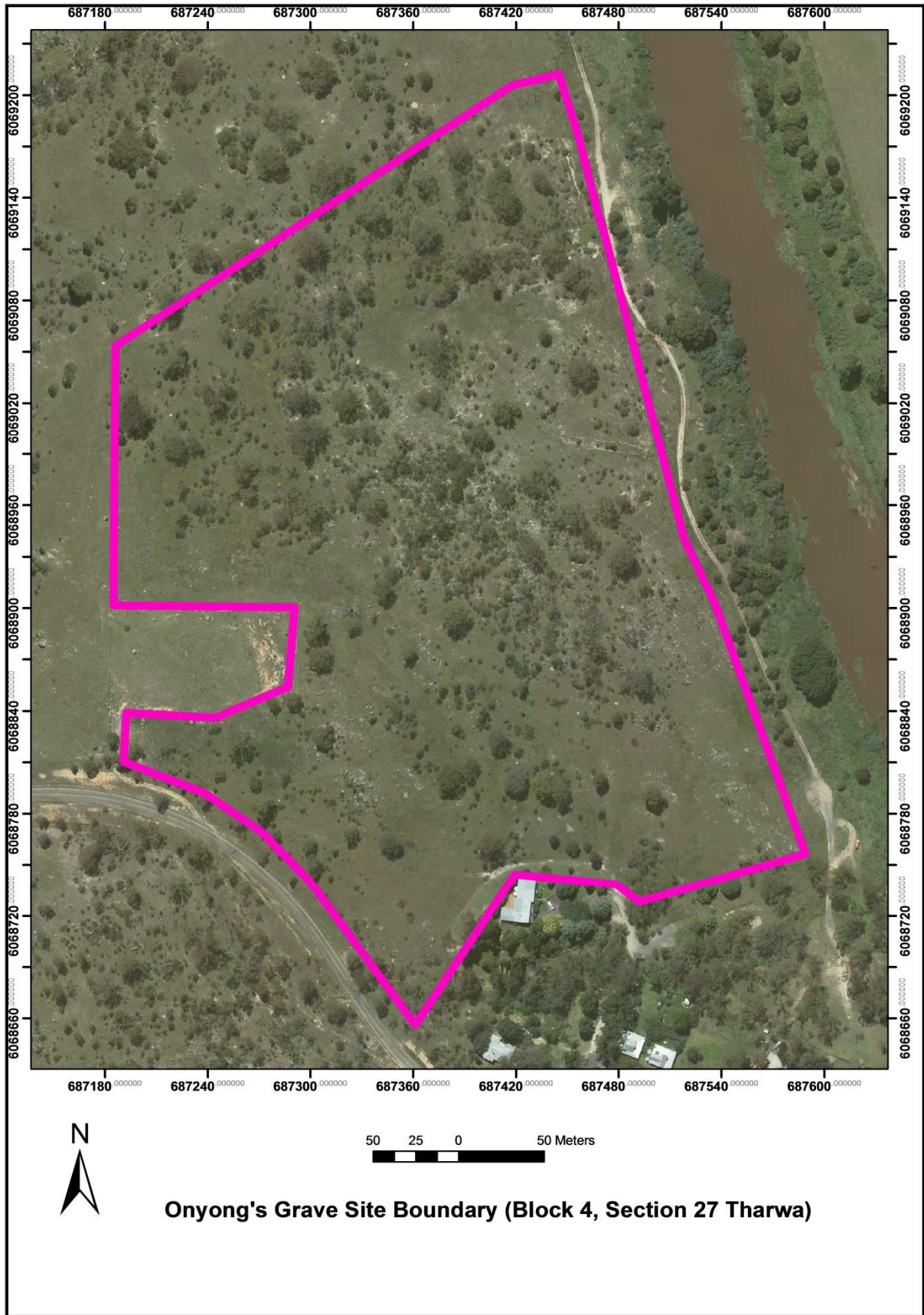


Image 1 Site Boundary Onyong’s Grave Site

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