



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

UNITY CUNNINGHAM'S HOUSE AND GARDEN

(Part Block 359 Paddys River)

At its meeting of 9 April 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that Unity Cunningham's House and Garden was not eligible for provisional registration. The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for Unity Cunningham's House and Garden against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

The Murrumbidgee River Corridor was a focus of activity for Aboriginal people well before Europeans arrived. The earliest known date for Aboriginal people in the region comes from Birrigai Rock Shelter which contains evidence of Aboriginal occupation from approximately 21,000 years ago. The area is known to be part of an Aboriginal pathway leading towards the mountains where people would gather seasonally to feast on Bogong moths. During this period groups from the coast, the lower Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers and all neighbouring regions in between would gather in the alpine regions south and southwest of the ACT to feast on the plentiful supply of Bogong moths as they aestivate over summer (Flood, 1996; Gale 1991; Kabaila, 2005). The nearby Tidbinbilla Range was culturally significant to Aboriginal people, and is said to be a variation of the Aboriginal word 'Jedbinbilla' which means place of initiation (Freeman and Collett et al. 1994, p. 7).

The first Europeans in the Canberra area were the early explorers who relied on their Aboriginal guides' prior knowledge. Charles Throsby and his team are credited with the first European discovery of the region around 1820 with further excursions by his team and others extending his recording of the area over the next few years. The Murrumbidgee River was located in 1821, and by the late 1820s, settlers had pushed south to the Tuggeranong area, some illegally grazing stock west of the Murrumbidgee, beyond the limits of the Nineteen Counties (Freeman and Collett et al. 1994, 8).

1837-1926: Squatters, Selectors, and Soldier Settlement Leases at Freshford Run

The history of Unity Cunningham's House and Garden has been extracted from the following volumes: *An Archaeological Survey and Heritage Assessment of Unity Cunningham's House and Garden, Lower Freshford ACT* (2001) by HLA Envirosciences, and *Mary Cunningham: an Australia Life* (2004) by Jennifer Horsfield.

Unity Cunningham's House and Garden lies within what was Colonel Thomas Hiah Macquoid's Freshford Run, established in 1837. Macquoid was Sheriff of the Supreme Court of NSW and in 1835 purchased two other existing grants opposite Freshford Run belonging to Peter Murdoch and John McClaren, thereafter establishing the two additional grants as Tuggeranong Run.

The 1840's depression hit established landholders in the area. Macquoid, who went insolvent with 2,792-10-3 (pounds) of the court's money, shot himself. By 1849 his son, Thomas had sold Freshford to Andrew Cunningham, who also purchased Tuggeranong Run after Thomas Macquoid's death in 1857.

By 1857, the Cunningham family held Lanyon, Tuggeranong, Freshford and Congwarrah Runs. At this date, there is no indication that the area of Unity Cunningham's House and Garden was used for anything more than sheep grazing.

Andrew Cunningham died in 1887, and afterwards the properties were jointly managed by sons Andrew (Andy) and

James (Jimmy): "The Cunningham brothers." After the introduction of the Robertson Land Acts 1861, local squatters responded in a variety of ways, and the Cunninghams used dummy selectors to illegally select land.

One dummy selector was Eusebio Ponsey, who made his first selection on Freshford Run on 9 February 1882, on Portion 89, for 220 acres on the west bank of the Murrumbidgee. He then selected a further 200 acres on 17 August 1882, Portion 90. Ponsey's house was probably located about 300m to the south of where Unity Cunningham's House would later be built, in the next creek valley (see Images 2 and 3). Unity Cunningham's House and Garden were later constructed (between 1929-1935) near the southern boundary of portion 90.

The Australian population during the colonial period included people who had journeyed from many corners of the world, often attracted by gold mining activities. Their various cultural skills, some better known than others, contributed to colonial settlement. Ponsey and friend Rupelto Rodrigues were Chilean shepherds who were builders in the Tuggeranong and Tidbinbilla areas and who likely instructed George Green and George Hatcliffe in pisé construction techniques. The latter two men also built numerous pisé dwellings in the area.

The portion plan surveyed by Surveyor Lester on 8 July 1883 shows Ponsey's house, a shed, and a fenced off area as a garden (see Image 3). The plan also shows that Lester reserved a road from Freshford to Yarralumla, which was probably the traditional track from the Freshford Homestead to Tuggeranong but would have been formalised by Lester once conditional purchases began in the area.

Ponsey made other selections but by 1887 with the residential requirements completed he had transferred his conditional purchases to the Cunninghams under the dummyming arrangement, and no longer resided at his house.

It seems clear that the Cunningham brothers either moved Ponsey's hut elsewhere or allowed it and the garden to degrade, as no evidence of the site is to be found in later maps and documents. No further settlement or improvements to the land are recorded as occurring in the area. Once Ponsey left, the land seems to have been used for grazing by the Cunningham brothers.

By Federation, James Cunningham, the survivor of the Cunningham brothers, insisted the Commonwealth acquire all Cunningham properties west of the Murrumbidgee, apparently on the grounds that they were all one integrated farming unit and would be uneconomic to manage if any smaller, to which the Commonwealth agreed and the land was sold on 30 June 1916. The Commonwealth also acquired Tuggeranong, where, at the time, a town was proposed, and at Pine Island, an arsenal as part of Commonwealth facilities.

However there were delays in construction of the arsenal, and Portions 89 and 90 (now Blocks 13A and 14A, respectively) were leased on an annual lease to Patrick Tiernan from 1917 to 1920, and in 1920 the land was subsequently leased for Soldier Settlement to J.E Cregan who ran sheep on it but lived at Naas. The Cregans were a well known family with strong ties to the Cunninghams. Inspection reports suggest the land was poorly managed, with Cregan only maintaining fences on the property, and Cregan may have had ill health by 1927.

1929-1935: Unity Cunningham

Unity Cunningham, daughter of James (Jimmy) and Mary Cunningham, born on 28 June 1901 (died on 21 April 1945), had Sir Robert Garran (one of the founders of Federation) as her godfather. The name Unity was a product of the fervour for Federation. Little published information exists about Unity Cunningham. She trained as a nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (Sydney) and acquired the land where her house and garden ruins are located in 1929; it was the last portion of Cunningham pastoral holdings in Cunningham family hands. She lived there but appears to have occasionally resided with Sir Robert Garran and his family. When Lady Garran died in 1936 she moved to Canberra and looked after Sir Robert until her own death in 1945. Unity Cunningham is reported to have been in ill health for much of her life.

In the absence of detailed evidence we can presume that the construction of the house and garden occurred immediately after Unity's purchase and that the buildings were in a partial state of survival until at least 1981 when an archaeological survey (Barz & Winston Gregson 1981) revealed some remaining evidence in the form of concrete and granite slabs.

Trying to place Unity Cunningham's cottage into some form of broader historical context is difficult. She was not

farming the land in a commercial sense. Unity's land was a comparatively small portion which had always been grazed as part of larger grazing runs. Even after it was sold and put up for Soldier Settlement leases the land was held as part of larger holdings, suggesting it was not highest quality grazing land to be viable as a small portion. There is no evidence for stockyards, formal orchard or vegetable garden, pig pens or dairy sheds.

Therefore she was different from other settlers along the Murrumbidgee in that she was not part of a large pastoral enterprise, such as was run by her father or other families in the area. Nor was she a selector or soldier settler running a small family based farm.

The nearest parallel to Unity Cunningham is Elizabeth McKeahnie, a spinster who lived at Blythburn on the Booroomba Station. Elizabeth McKeahnie lived alone and ran a small farm in the last half of the nineteenth century. In contrast to Unity Cunningham, Elizabeth McKeahnie did not live very far from Booroomba homestead where her parents and later her brother and his family lived.

Unity did not seek paid employment as a nurse after her graduation, and Sir Robert became an important figure in Unity's life:

When in 1927 my wife and I came to Canberra, Unity was living a rather isolated life in a cottage on a snippet of old Tuggeranong station, the other side of the Murrumbidgee River near Point Hut. She was soon promoted from god-daughter to our honorary daughter, with a room in our house which was always ready for her. She was guide, philosopher and friend to her numerous adventurous kinsfolk, and after my wife's death she added me to her responsibilities and looked after me like a daughter would (Garrahan, 1958, P. 287).

Perhaps the lonely cottage on the river seemed too desolate to her then and she gratefully sought out the company of the kindly and sociable Garrahan family, whose musical and literary interests and involvement in the political and cultural life of the new capital made for a rich and busy life. As nurse and companion to Sir Robert after the death of his wife in 1936, Unity spent time driving him in her car to games of golf, and at Christmas they travelled to a seaside home at Palm Beach, where Unity's niece, Sheila Davies, joined them from school in Melbourne.

During the Second World War, Unity worked at the Mt Stromlo Observatory as part of a large scientific and technical team producing lenses and other optical equipment for military purposes. Her training as a nurse would have given her the patience and steady hands for this work and she was one amongst a number of local women who were employed in a technical capacity. Professor Ben Gascoigne, who was appointed by the centre's director, Richard Woolley, remembers Unity with great affection as part of his team. She carried out meticulous work inserting lenses into the metal frames of binoculars in a special dust-free room. The professor's wife, the distinguished artist Rosalie Gascoigne, became good friends with Unity, who often came for lunch or a visit on her days off duty to the staff house at Mt Stromlo where the Gascoignes lived.

DESCRIPTION

The few remains of Unity Cunningham's House and Garden are in very poor condition. The site is located on the western side of Murrumbidgee River, on the southern slope of a small creek running eastward into the Murrumbidgee. The site of the house and garden was subject to archaeological surface investigation and mapping in 1981 (Barz and Winston-Gregson) and again in 2001 by the Canberra Archaeological Society (report by HLA Envirosciences). ACT Heritage inspected the site on 5 February 2015.

In 1981 the site was described as 'complicated', comprising six former buildings, a terraced garden, heavy tree plantings and a tennis court. Image 4 illustrates the site and the key to Image 4 is at Table 1. Where the 1981 features were re-found in 2015, these are noted in Images 5 and 6.

By 2001, little evidence for the six buildings, garden, and tennis court recorded in 1981 remained. The 2001 report concluded:

Because of the slope, and absence of platform, it's likely the house stood on piles or stumps, however, there are no obvious stumps or lines of postholes to mark the building foundations, and there is no clear evidence of any locations of chimneys. It's probable the house was removed or allowed to decay, as there is no evidence for walls, roofing, fenestration, and almost no complete bricks on site, the latter suggesting some scavenging.

About 20m away from the possible house site, there is a formed concrete square and a rectangular pattern of 12 posts, which likely supported a water tank, with the concrete being the base of a toilet.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION AND INTEGRITY

Some building remains were present in 2015, in the form of three rectangular concrete/granite slabs (Images 7 and 8), two piles of rock and granite (Image 9) and timber beams and brick fragments. A flattened area to the north east of the concrete and granite slabs indicated the location of the tennis court (Image 10). In addition, some rows of terraced garden were visible (see Image 11).

However, if there had been any formality to the original garden, it was no longer evidenced. The area indicated within the boundary of the House and Garden Features (see Image 1) contained thick cover of exotic tree and shrub species, some invasive, all in a state of suckering, seeding, and spreading (see Image 12). Species include:

- Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster lactea*)
- Elm (*Ulmus procera*)
- Briar rose (*Rosa rubiginosa*)
- Fig (*Ficus carica*)
- Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*)
- *Prunus nigra*
- Lombardy Poplar (*Populus nigra*)

IMAGES



Image 1. Unity Cunningham’s House and Garden, Nominated Boundary

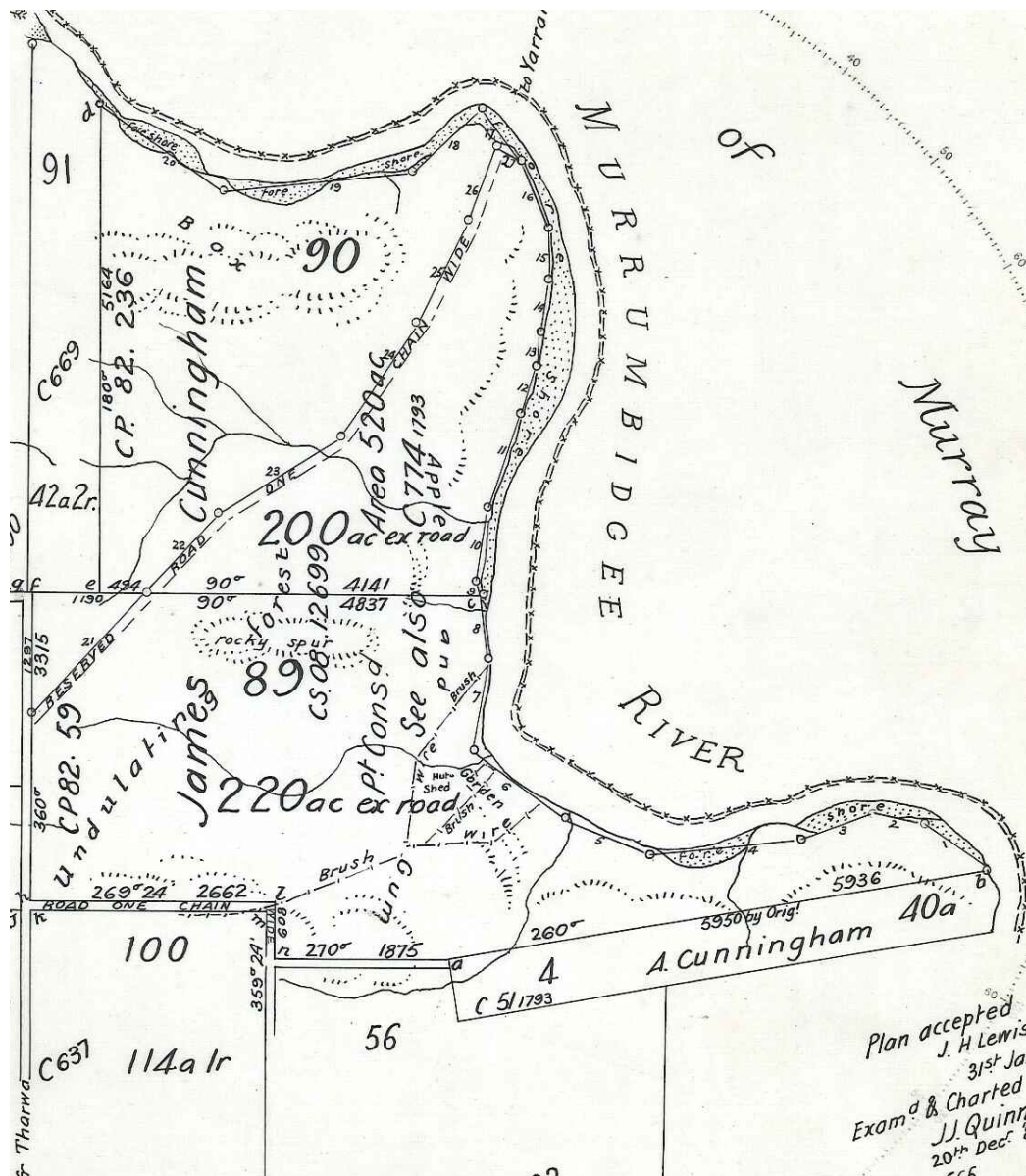


Image 3. Portion Plan 1911 for Portions 89 and 90, showing house and garden of Ponsey (ACT Office of the Surveyor General)

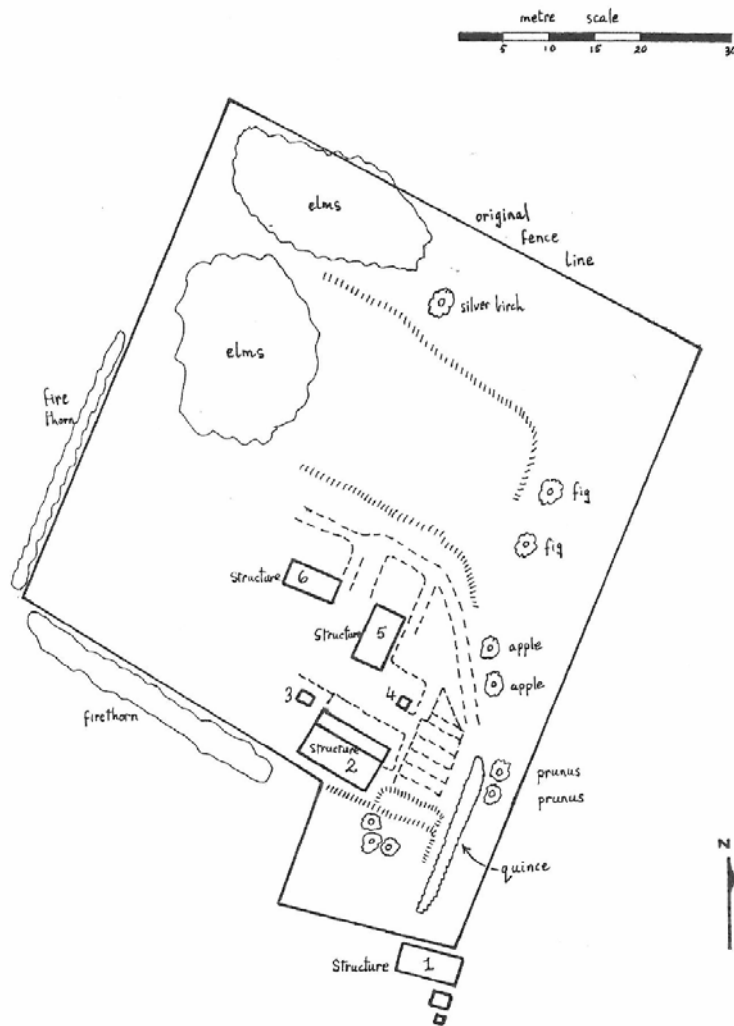


Image 4. 1981 Plan of site (after Barz and Winston-Gregson)

Feature Number	Description (1981 Barz and Winston-Gregson)
1	Shed, fenced off from garden
2	Dormitory (?) inset terrace with platform at rear, possible verandah at front
3	Concrete cistern cover with metal pipe projecting
4	Small granite and concrete structure
5	Hut site, cement mortared granite rubble heath, building outlined on soil
6	Hut site, soil platform and cement mortared rubble oven base with rendered concrete slab top (with Canberra Bricks)

Table 1. Key to features on Image 4 (after Barz and Winston-Gregson 1981)

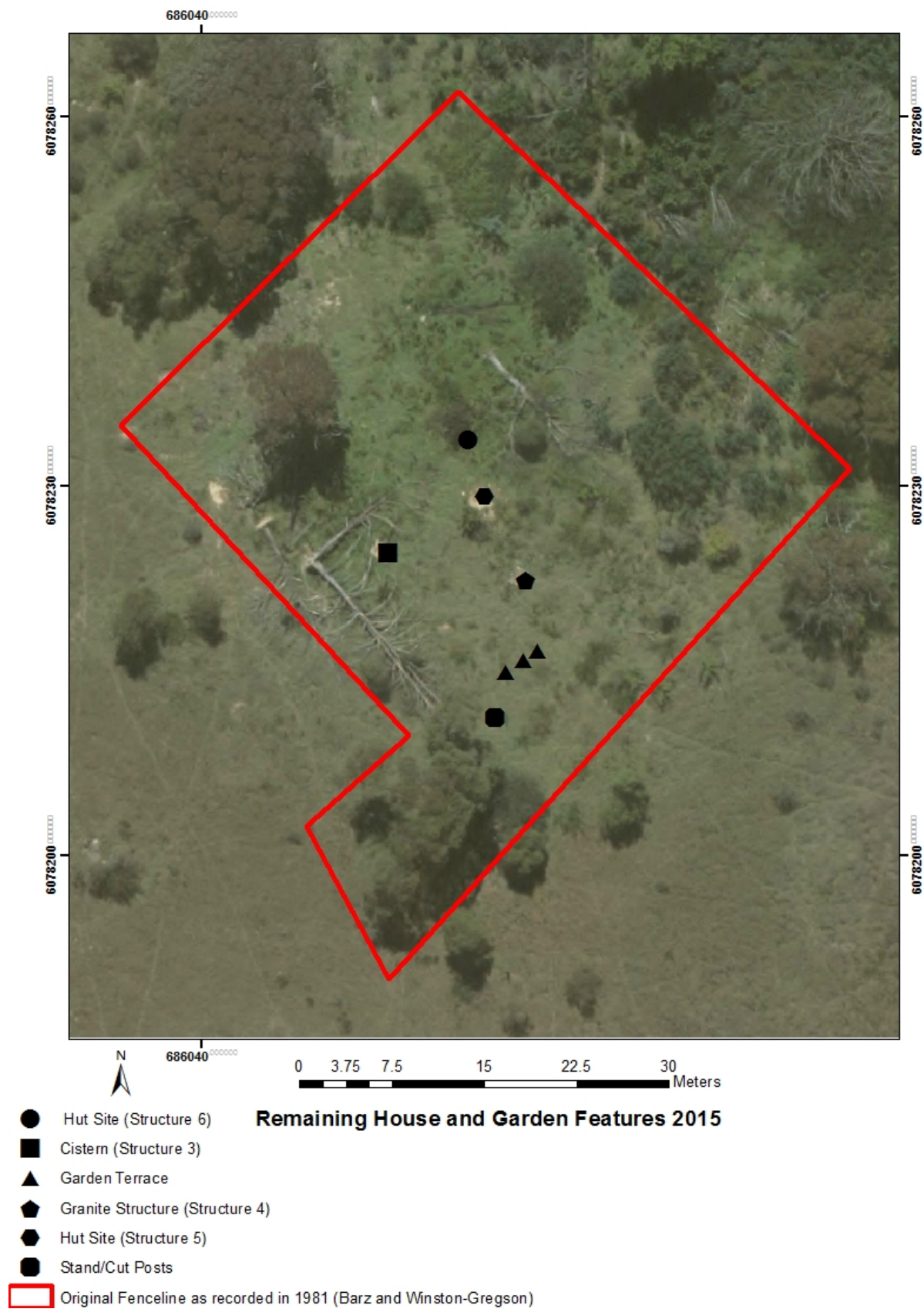


Image 5. Site plan of remaining house and garden features

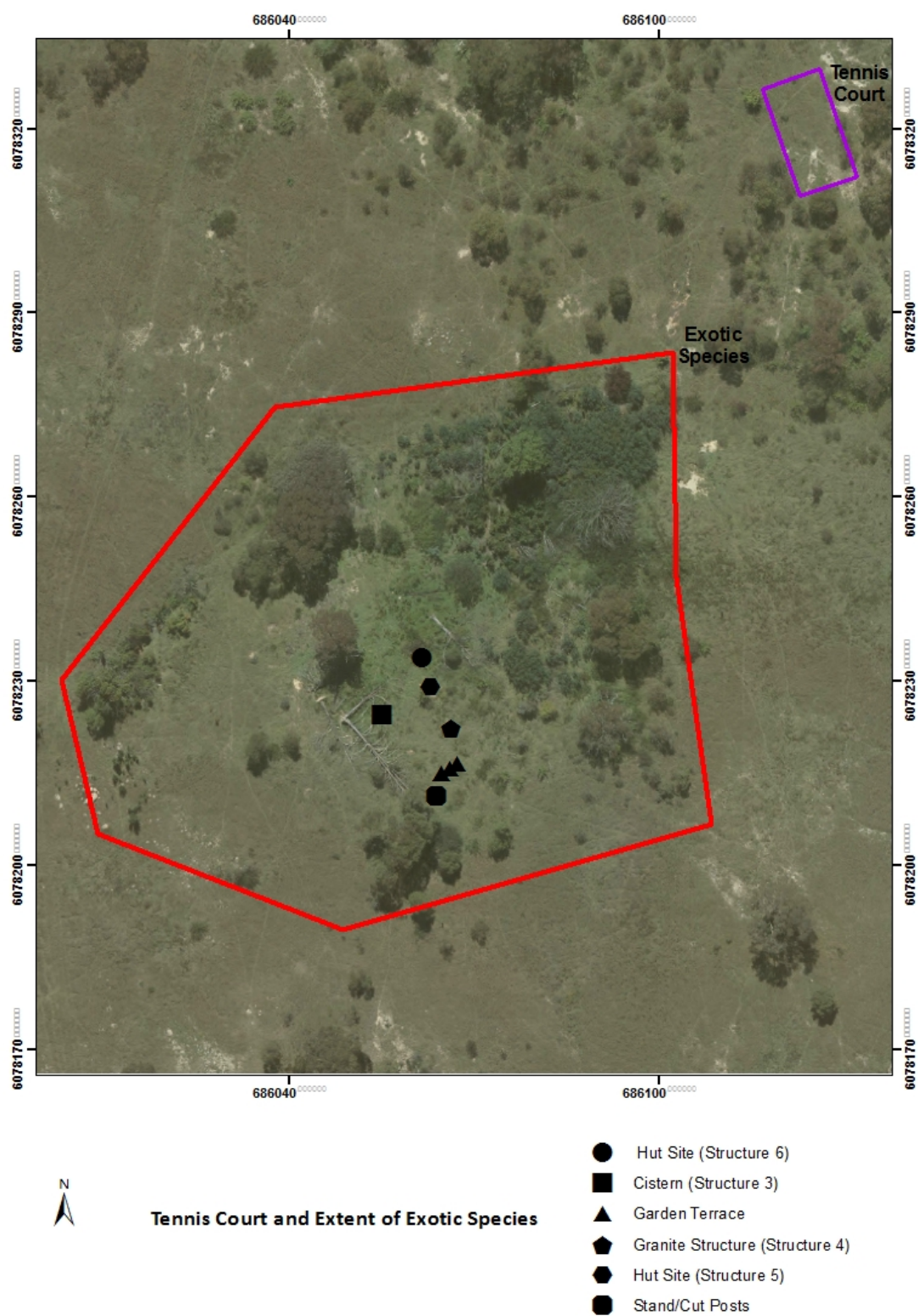


Image 6. Tennis court and primary extent of exotic species



Image 7. Feature 3: Concrete Cistern



Image 9. Feature 6: Mortared rubble oven base



Image 8. Feature 4: Granite and concrete structure



Image 10. Tennis court edge



Image 11. Terraced stone edge of garden



Image 12. Exotic tree species

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