

THE HISTORY OF YERONGA PART 6 COTTON FARMING

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The Yeronga area's regular flooding during the early colonial period impacted negatively on farm production of which cotton is a good example.¹

Growing cotton as a commercial enterprise may well have occurred from the earliest days of the penal colony with Captain Logan sending some cotton to the then Colonial Governor in Sydney in 1827 who gave it “*fulsome praise*”.² The first commercial harvest from the Yeronga area was undertaken in 1854. Seventy bails and eighteen bags of seed cotton were shipped from Yeronga all the way to Liverpool in the United Kingdom.

When Queensland became a separate state in 1859, the State Parliament at its first sitting proceeded to deal with the land issues with the passage of the *Alienation of the Crown Lands Bill* – the entire bill of course ignoring the rights of the original owners to the land by using the highly convenient but erroneous notion of *terra nullius*.

In speaking to the second reading of the bill, the Colonial Secretary referred to four principles underpinning the legislation with the third being the granting of a bonus for the encouragement of the cultivation of cotton.³ Cotton therefore was on the agenda from day one of the formation of the state of Queensland.

At this time, the population of the new state was about 30,000 according to the Register-General – again ignoring the thousands of indigenous people.⁴ It was also expected to be a commercial powerhouse of Australia as contemporary accounts records:

*The Colony, of which Sydney is the capital, is large and prosperous. It was as large as England, France and Germany; but in 1859, it had as much as ten times the area of Great Britain separated from it for the new colony of Queensland, which, if supplied with adequate and cheap labour, may become what it has been proclaimed, a future cotton-field for England.*⁵

World events now intervened with the American Civil War breaking out on the 12th April in 1861 and raging till the 9th April 1865. Strangely enough, this war had an immediate impact on Yeronga. The southern Confederate government attempted to force international diplomatic recognition of their Confederacy by starving Europe of cotton through a self-imposed embargo on cotton exports. Cotton was stored in warehouses and used to prop up Confederate war bonds sold in Europe.

Hundreds of textile factories shut down across Europe and thousands of people were thrown out of work particularly in major manufacturing cities such as Manchester. The British reacted negatively to this economic blackmail and ramped up cotton growing in their colonies such as Egypt and India. The various governments in Australia were encouraged by letters from the British government to do likewise. The immediate response of the two-year-old Queensland government was a mixture of sympathy and opportunism.

The impetus behind cotton can also be gauged from the fact that a then prominent person such as Albrecht Feez of Yeronga who had thrown his weight behind the movement by proposing at a public meeting in 1860 to establish a Cotton Growing Association in Brisbane that a bounty of one shilling per pound of clean cotton ready for shipment should be paid from a

Parliamentary appropriation.⁶ While Feez's proposition was not taken up in its entirety, the Queensland Parliament did legislate to provide incentives when in 1861, the Government published regulations allowing investors to take up blocks of 320 to 1,280 acres for a deposit of two shillings per acre. If they spent £5,000 on clearing and cultivation, the deposit was returned, and the land was granted free. With these incentives in place, the industry commenced in early 1862 with Yeronga in the lead. Extraordinarily, there even seems to have been a contract for Yeronga cotton with the northern Union Army who desperately needed cotton for their 'blue serge uniforms'.

However, in 1863 flooding occurred in February, March and April and December and in 1864 in January, February, March and April. Such floods seriously impacted on production and so with the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the collapse of that market which had given the real impetus to the industry, Yeronga's involvement in the cotton growing went into terminal decline.⁷

¹ Cf History of Yeronga Part 4.

² Ted Henzell. *Australian Agriculture: Its History and Challenges*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, 2007, p.210

³ *Record of the Proceedings of the Queensland Parliament*. Legislative Assembly 28th August 1860 extracted from the third party account as published in the Moreton Bay Courier of 30th August 1860, p.2.

⁴ *The Registrar-General's Second Annual Report* utilising the 1861 Census data as published in the *Brisbane Courier*, Saturday 17 May 1862, p. 3.

⁵ Frederick J Jobson. *Australia; with notes by the way on Egypt, Ceylon, Bombay and the Holy Land*. Hamilton, Adams, and Co., London, 1862

⁶ *The Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 6th October, 1860, p.3.

⁷ Scriven, E.G., "Yeronga: Early History", *Brisbane Courier*, 23 June 1923, p.20.