

Case Studies

Introduction

The case studies provide a closer examination of the complex local and personal implications of some of the policies, prejudices and politics mentioned in the [main timeline](#).

While some details are specific to the local situations, these chronologies illuminate disputes which occurred across the state in many schools. Issues such as Aboriginal peoples' access to public education, their experiences of segregated schools, racism, protests and later of combined education are explored here.

Chronology of Aboriginal children's education at Gulargambone 1891–1965

Introduction

This chronology investigates changes over time in Aboriginal children's education in Gulargambone, a town in central north-west NSW, on the Castlereagh River. The chronology provides a closer examination of the complex local and personal implications of some of the policies, prejudices and politics mentioned in the [timeline](#).

School files at [State Records](#) reveal the racism Aboriginal people encountered from the Aboriginal Protection Board (which some people dubbed the 'Persecution Board' (Bandler, 1983 p53), local councils and the Department of Public Instruction (later the Department of Education).

Non-Aboriginal parents lobbied Education Ministers and local parliamentarians, collected petitions and withdrew their children from school as strategies to force the exclusion of Aboriginal students from the town's public school. Segregated schooling continued well into the 1950s in Gulargambone.

When a separate school for Indigenous children was set up in 1899, several Indigenous parents took active steps to improve their children's learning environments. They appealed to authorities when they felt poor teaching and racism compromised their children's education.

Conflicts between organisations such as the APB and the Education Department, and within the Education Department, give some insight into how decisions were made and who influenced the decisions.

Since Aboriginal children were readmitted to Gulargambone Public School in the late 1950s, numerous changes have occurred, such as a shift from assimilationist education towards greater recognition and valuing of Aboriginal cultures shown through activities like attending the Croc Festival in 2006.

Missing from this case study are the key ingredients of oral histories of students, ex-students and staff of Gulargambone Aboriginal School. Oral memory is central to Indigenous culture and teaching, and can provide crucial information and alternative narratives to documents.

Chronology

3 Jan 1881

Application for a school at Gulargambone

Gulargambone residents applied to the Department of Public Instruction requesting a school be established in their town. The names of Thomas Carney and his children Elizabeth and Thomas appear in the application.

Despite Carney's support and interest in the school, Kearney, Sculthorpe and other non-Aboriginal residents on the list later lobbied for the exclusion of his children because they were Aboriginal.

(State Records NSW, Department of Education NRS 3829, School Files 1876-1979; [5/16179.3] Gulargambone School 1880-1919)

1881

Gulargambone Provisional Public School opened.

25 Feb 1885

The Minister for Education was petitioned by parents, including Thomas Carney, to improve the school buildings. It seems likely from his involvement in the petition that his children were attending the school with non-Aboriginal students. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16179.3])

9 Feb 1891

18 non-Aboriginal parents sent a petition to NSW Department of Public Instruction protesting against the attendance of four Aboriginal students at Gulargambone Provisional School:

‘...the children from the blacks camp are coming to this school. We respectfully request your taking steps to prevent their doing so in consequence of their filthy habits and appearance they are unfit to be among white children.’

(State Records NSW: Department of Education NRS 3829 School Files 1876-1979 [5/16180.2] Gulargambone Aboriginal School pre 1939, f333)

Signatures included those of the local butcher (Saunders), blacksmith (Simpson), tank sinkers (Law), farmers (Ferguson, Hurst, Strang, Stubbs), graziers (Sculthorpe, Marshall, O'Grady) and carpenters, plus the Kearneys, Townsends and Murrays.

19 Feb 1891

Departmental division over the response to the petition

The Department of Public Instruction Inspector for Dubbo region refuted the petitioner's claims:

‘I never saw anything untidy about the black children at Gulargambone or dirty. I think they cannot be legally hindered from attending the public school and would recommend that this petition be refused.’

(SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2],f334).

The Inspector was following the Department's emerging 'clean, clad and courteous' approach, where Aboriginal children were considered able to attend public schools if they were considered to be neat, clean, healthy and polite.

The Chief Inspector, while partly supportive of the petitioners, noted that there were no legal grounds for the exclusion of Indigenous children, so these children had the right to attend like any other students:

‘It is unexpected that children from Aborigines camps should be allowed to attend our schools. This largely signed petition indicates that there is good reason for this view. The law however does not confer the power to exclude them if they present themselves in a neat and clean condition.’ (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2],f334).

20 April 1891

Department of Public Instruction supported the exclusion of Aboriginal students

The NSW Minister for Education supported the exclusion of Aboriginal children and wanted Aboriginal people concentrated onto reserves:

‘There are 40-50 blacks in the town including 15 children. I think the blacks must be excluded from the school... We must work with the Aborigines Board to get these children and their parents located on a reserve.’ (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f324)

He bluntly acknowledged that racism was behind the campaign for exclusion of Aboriginal students noting that: ‘The question is one of race aversion arising out of racial habits not one of individual cleanliness.’

He asked the teacher to separate the Aboriginal children from the non-Aboriginal children within the school. (SRNSW: NRS 3829[5/16180.2]f325)

21 April 1891

Non-Aboriginal parents boycott the school

The teacher at Gulargambone Provisional School, Ernest Atkinson, advised the Department Public Instruction in a telegram that there were no grounds for excluding the children:

‘The Aboriginal children are clean and... free from disease therefore conscientiously speaking I could not exclude them from the school.’ SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f308)

2 May 1891

Teacher’s intervention

Ernest Atkinson wrote to the Chief Inspector stating that he had visited the non-Aboriginal parents and explained he would keep the children separated in class. They still refused to allow their children to attend school until the Aboriginal students were excluded.

Atkinson suggested excluding Aboriginal students until another school was built for them, so that the other students would return. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2]f312)

11 May 1891

No school fees collected

A memo to the Under-Secretary from the Department accountant noted no school fees were paid in March and April, as non-Aboriginal children left on account of four Aboriginal students attending. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16179.3])

22 May 1891

Gulargambone Reserve and segregated school proposed

The APB informed the Department of Public Instruction that they had applied for a reserve 'at that place where the Aborigines are now and have for a long time been located'.

The Gulargambone Reserve, an area of 70 acres by the Castlereagh River was declared in November 1892 (SRNSW, NRS 232, AWB, Register of Aboriginal Reserves 1861-1899, reel 2847).

The APB planned to build a school on the reserve and anticipated 15 students attending (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2]f313).



1895 [Parish Map](#) Gulargambone, (town), Department of Lands, 1st edition, 1 sheet, Image id [14804501](#)
The Reserve is visible in the lower portion of graphic. Properties of key petitioners against Aboriginal students' attendance at the public school are located close to the reserve.

1899

Another non-Aboriginal parent boycott

School-teacher Ernest Atkinson informed the Department that 40 non-Aboriginal children were absent from school because their parents opposed them attending school with Aboriginal students (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f295). This was the stated 'reason' on many of the absence cards signed by parents which are included in the file (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f279-280)

13 Feb 1899

Parental pressure and the teacher's dilemma

The teacher informed the Department that 'remarkably tidy and clean' Aboriginal children had attended the school as instructed by the Department of Public Education through Snr Constable Williams. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2]f293)

Aboriginal children attending the school included members of the Carney, Duncan

Webber, Sweeney, Fox, Fitzgerald and Milgate families. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f294)

The teacher, Ernest Atkinson, expressed his frustration that some of the non-Aboriginal parents who had excluded their children were exerting pressure on other parents. He stated they were:

‘trying their utmost to get others, the more sensible ones, to do likewise... their real intention is to force the Department into submitting to their stupid demands. I have endeavoured to reason with many of them pointing out that they cannot force such a step upon the authorities but they say ‘oh yes we can’. (SRNSW: NRS 3829, [5/16180.2] f293).

Atkinson asked the Department to visit and assess the situation arguing that if the Department took a strong stance the non-Aboriginal parents would comply and send their children back to the school.

He had kept the Aboriginal children separate, even in the playground and the parents still withdrew their children from school (SRNSW: NRS 3829[5/16180.2]f291). Atkinson was also worried about his report as a teacher and his career if the non-Aboriginal children failed to return to classes, as it would influence his chances of promotion.



Gulargambone Public School 1894.

State Records NSW, Department of Education NRS 15051, Department of Education Photographs, Gulargambone (16).

At this stage Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were attending school together. Lockley (1981, p25) lists some of the names of the Aboriginal students. In the back row, third from the left is Billy Carney and eighth from the left is Caroline Carney. The teacher on the far right is Ernest Atkinson.

14 February 1899

More letters and petitions from non-Aboriginal parents

Several non-Aboriginal people sent another series of letters and petitions to the Department of Public Instruction. They stated:

‘We the undersigned most respectfully request that they be at once removed from our school and drafted into a larger camp and a missionary sent to teach them which place is the only one suited for them.’ SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f287)

20 February 1899

Senior official visits, admits inequity, but supports exclusion

A Department of Public Instruction representative, George Hunt, visited the Gulargambone camp to assess the claims of the non-Aboriginal parents. He noted there were 15 children of school age in the camp who were neat and well-behaved who could go to school yet he still opposed their attendance at the public school. (SRNSW: NRS, 3829 [5/16180.2]f289)

His report indicated that he supported the idea of concentrating Aboriginal people in managed areas. He suggested the people be moved to Brewarrina or that a separate school be built.

‘The mothers and children should be made to live in some such centre and should be placed under the strictest supervision’.

There is no indication in the file that he asked the Aboriginal parents what they wanted for their children. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2]f288)

20 February 1899

Proposal to exclude students

The minutes of the meeting of non-Aboriginal parents and Inspector Hunt proposed that the Aboriginal children be suspended until a decision was made, and recommended that an Aboriginal school be established on the reserve. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2]f272-3)

24 February 1899

Mixed opinions on exclusion?

Ernest Atkinson sent a list of attendances to the Department, which showed that 31 parents had withdrawn their children, yet 41 children remained at school, and only three of them were also included in the list of Aboriginal students.

This suggests that opinion may have been divided among non-Aboriginal parents on segregation, or that they wanted their children at school regardless of who attended. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f284)

27 February 1899

Exclusion determined by Department and a proposal for a separate school

The Under-Secretary of the Department of Public Instruction received a recommendation from the department that:

‘The black children be permanently excluded and the offer of the residents to erect a building provided the Department provide teacher and materials be accepted.’ (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f298)

3 March 1899

APB protests exclusion

On discovering that the teacher had refused to admit 11 Aboriginal children, the local APB Secretary wrote to the Department of Public Instruction protesting against the exclusion of Aboriginal students from the public school. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f299)

7 March 1899

Support and opposition to attendance

The *Moree Gwydir Examiner* reported on the dispute over mixed schooling at Gulargambone, noting that Reverend Davis supported the attendance of 11 Aboriginal children who were eligible, but within a month they were refused entry. (Briggs-Smith, 2001-Appendix)

9 March 1899

NSW Parliament discusses the Gulargambone school dispute

The Education Minister's decision to exclude the Aboriginal students based on non-Aboriginal parents' protests was discussed in NSW Parliament. Mr Hogue, Minister for Education responded to questions about the Department's position:

'Where no objection was made by the residents to the admission to public schools of aboriginal children no action was taken by the Department. Special schools were provided for them in the various reserves.' (Dubbo Dispatch (1899) p.2)

July 1899

Gulargambone Aboriginal School established

The Aboriginal school opened on the reserve. (Lockley (1981), p101)

15 Sept 1899

Gulargambone camp school

Reverend R E Davies, a member of the Aboriginals Protection Association was appointed as a missionary for Aboriginal people of the area. Later Davis argued the case for Aboriginal students being able to access public education. (*Coonamble Independent*, 15 September 1899, p.8)

7 Dec 1899

A teachers support for Aboriginal students attendance at public school

Frances Lambert, teacher at Gulargambone Public claimed that a non-Aboriginal parent who alleged she had injured his daughter, was engaged in a vendetta:

'I am quite positive the case is one of sheer prejudice. Last February when the aborigines were attending this school I took a firm stand, and have endeavoured to do so since, in their favour. Now for this one act alone, Mr G being very bitter about that fact has vowed to punish me on the first occasion... I would like the department to understand how much prejudice one has to contend with, for having a little humanity.'

State Records NSW, Department of Education NRS 3829, School Files 1876-1979; [5/16179.3], Gulargambone School 1880-1919.

December 1899

Facilities provided by Aboriginal parents for the Aboriginal school

Gulargambone Aboriginal School was built, but the new school had no toilets. So the parents of the children attending the school built them. They also brought a water tank to the school so their children could have drinking water. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f268)

22 March 1900

Teacher requested better equipment

McCarthy, teacher, requested seats and heating for the Aboriginal school, suggesting that like many outback schools it was under-resourced. (SRNSW: NRS, 3829 [5/16180.2] (f261))

1907

Teacher at the Aboriginal school resigns

Chas Moody, member of the local APB, resigned as teacher at Gulargambone Aboriginal School, citing poor pay as his reason. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f236))

Teachers at Aboriginal schools were often not qualified and were not recognised for promotion and benefits like other Department of Education teachers.

21 May 1908

Coonamble Council agitation to remove Aboriginal camp

The Coonamble Shire Clerk described the Aboriginal camp in a letter to the APB as a 'bed of consumption' and argued for its removal, claiming it was a menace to the [non-Aboriginal] people of the village. No evidence to support his claims was given in his letter. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f6))

29 May 1908

Police asked to report on camp conditions

Constable Harris reported to the Police Superintendent that the camp was in good condition and clean, though some residents had a dry cough (phthisis), which had killed several members of the camp and was infectious. He commented negatively on the local APB's reaction. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f5))

27 June 1908

Pressure on police to relocate Aboriginal people

A request was sent to local police by the APB to find a site to 'relocate' Aboriginal people to. Constable Harris reported there were no crown lands in the area suitable for a camp, apart from where the people were living already. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f1))

The APB was beginning to 'concentrate' people onto big reserves at this time to make it cheaper for them to operate, easier to manage people and remove children to training institutions. It was also an attempt to break down Aboriginal cultural influences. (Goodall,1996, p122)

9 July 1908

Another teacher resigns claiming health issues

Mr Frost, teacher at Gulargambone Aboriginal School, was removed from his position after his mother appealed to the Department of Public Instruction. She claimed he was likely to contract consumption from Aboriginal students. The APB claimed reports of consumption were exaggerated. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f450))

26 Nov 1908

APB inspection of camp

G E Ardill (APB member) 'inspected' the Gulargambone camp following the reports of infectious illnesses in the camp. His report contains notes about who received rations, how much people earned, who they were living with, the condition of buildings and rubbish and sanitation. Ardill blamed the camp residents for conditions. His report shows no evidence that he considered the effects of poverty and prejudice on such living conditions.

The report showed how young girls were at risk of being sent away as domestics (foreshadowing the 1909 Aborigines Protection Act and the establishment of homes like the one at Cootamundra):

'... (15) living with her mother and in receipt of rations, and ... (almost white) about 15 years old, also there. The latter goes to the constable's residence and works at times. Both should be in situations.' (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f448-9)

Numerous families are mentioned as living on the reserve such as the Foxes, Lakes, Kinchelas, Smiths, Carneys, Webbers, Rutters, Foxes, Duncans, Nixons, Milgates, Hammonds, Fitzgeralds and Fullers, plus two older men, Bob Sawyer and Jimmy Hinton.

The visit appears to have been motivated by reserve consolidation policy as Ardill recommended 'considering the question of settling the whole of the Aborigines in the district on one reserve, if necessary under a manager'. He proposed Forked Mountain (Burra Bee Dee) or Redbank at Wingadee. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f449)

Ardill reported there was no teacher at the school, and that it had closed after the teacher Chas Moody resigned in 1907. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f 451)

1 April 1911

The kind of teacher considered suitable for the Aboriginal School

W E Black, Inspector of Schools, recommended that the departing teacher Miss Timbery, be replaced with a similar teacher 'trained in kindergarten methods and should be possessed of a missionary spirit'. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f355).

6 May 1912

A school inspection report

The School Inspectors report commented on the improvements Aboriginal parents had made to the school and noted there were 17 children enrolled between 5-13 years of age.

He complained that children left school early. He did not consider that parents might need their children to earn income for their families - an issue also faced by other working class people. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f222)

4 Nov 1912

Aboriginal School attendance declines as the APB relocates people

Teacher Marjory Holden wrote to the Inspector of Schools, to ask about the future of Gulargambone Aboriginal School. Many people had already been 'moved' away by

the APB to Burra Bee Dee/Forked Mountain (near Coonabarabran) and others had left (perhaps to avoid being forcibly moved). (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f193)

1911

Aboriginal parents discouraged from enrolling their children at the public school

An Aboriginal parent sought to enrol his children at the public school. The teacher J Ridley, on seeking the Department's advice was told that the parent should enrol their children at 'the Mission School'. (SRNSW, NRS 3829, [5/16179.3])

1912

Gulargambone Reserve and school closed

The Gulargambone reserve was closed by the APB and the Aboriginal school was dismantled. The APB moved people 100 km away to Burra Bee Dee or Forked Mountain, another of their reserves.

The APB later reported that three families were housed at Burra Bee Dee, but others were waiting on homes, suggesting conditions were difficult. (APB, (1913), p13)

1912

Families return to Gulargambone

Three months later many people walked back to Gulargambone and enrolled at the public school again. (Fletcher 1989b p122-3; 1989a p230). As it was not their choice to move in the first place it is not surprising that they returned to their own country.

Many of the returning families built homes along the Castlereagh River. (Sharpe, 2001, p6; Lockley, 1981, p35). Several families such as the Weldons, Reeds, Milgates, Webbers, Boneys, Duncans and Hammonds leased land from Ferguson. (Lockley, 1981, p35).

The 1913 census of the APB stated 99 people were living at Gulargambone. (APB, 1913)

18 April 1916

Aboriginal parents enrol their children at the public school

Fifteen Aboriginal pupils attended Gulargambone Public School and were taught by Mr Rush. APB member Robert Donaldson's Gulargambone inspection report indicates the tactics used by the APB to make Aboriginal children attend the school:

'The police officer be instructed to issue rations to all children on the Board's ground of school age and to stop the supply when they fail to attend regularly.'

SRNSW: NRS [3829 5/16179.3]



Gulargambone Public School 1916.
SRNSW: NRS 15051 (16)

The Aboriginal children appear to be in a separate line to the non-Aboriginal children.

10 Sept 1919

Third petition against Aboriginal children's attendance at public school

Another petition against Aboriginal children attending school was organised by non-Aboriginal families.

The petition clearly exposes numerous and often contradictory racist anxieties held by the petitioning parents who objected to having Aborigines in the same room as the white children.

They expressed concerns about the Aboriginal children being 'on a level footing' with their children, yet argued they had a different capacity to learn compared to 'white' children. The petition expressed fears of intermarriage: 'the cases of marriage or living together between blacks and whites is very undesirable yet a common school fosters this.'

(State Records NSW, Department of Education NRS 3829, School Files 1876-1979; [5/16180.1] Gulargambone 1919-1939. Also cited in Fletcher (1989b), p122-3)

1919

Aboriginal students excluded again

Aboriginal students were excluded again from the public school, and were taught in a small separate building from 1920. (Lockley, (1981) p36; p101)

October 1919

John Bates, Presbyterian Minister who organised the petition, thanked the Minister for Education for arranging the exclusion of Aboriginal students from the local school.

SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.1]

1921

Coverage of exclusion in the local press

A local newspaper article expressed non-Aboriginal anxieties about Aboriginal children attending the public school. The article indicates how some local people justified segregation in education to themselves:

'At Gulargambone for many years there has been a camp for Aborigines. For some time, however, this camp has been in a neglected state. The Aborigines Board, having apparently forgotten its existence. Kiddies of the camp attended the public school and overcrowded it. Thanks however to the Rev. H.J. Bates, son-in-law of Mr and Mrs T.C. McMillan, of Flodden Vale, Cobco, these conditions have been altered. (Dubbo Dispatch (1921) 10 Jun p3)

1923

Lessons taught at the school

Older girls were taught cooking, laundry, and cleaning three times a week, with a total of 28 students attending (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f374). The Aboriginal School curriculum (1916) focused on manual work and included less content than non-Aboriginal school curricula.

Activist Bill Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association (an Aboriginal political organisation which campaigned for Aboriginal people's rights) stayed at the Carney's Christmas camp, where APB policy on child removal was discussed and opposition strategies devised. (Horner, (1994), p20-1)



GULARGAMBONE ABOR. SCHOOL, c.1926
Mrs Mercer, teacher (School in Mummel Street,
Gulargambone)

Gulargambone Aboriginal School, about 1926.
SRNSW: NRS 15051 (16)

1929

Teacher claims infection outbreak at the school

Teacher Leonard Smith reported to Department Education 'an outbreak of infectious skin disease' among students but was unclear whether it was scabies or simply the very common skin condition, eczema. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f73).



GULARGAMBONE ABOR. SCH, 1931

Gulargambone Aboriginal School, 10 November 1931.

SRNSW: NRS 15051 (16)

Pupils of the school, with some parents and other relatives included. The man on the left is probably the teacher Leonard Smith.

29 February 1932

Protests by Aboriginal parents against racist and poor teaching

Thirteen Aboriginal parents sent a petition to the Secretary of the APB seeking the removal of the teacher Mrs Lillian Wilkins from the Aboriginal school:

‘We the undersigned protest against the incompetence etc of Mrs Wilkins the teacher of the Abo. School here on the grounds of: Incompetence, Deafness, Cruelty, Abusiveness.’ (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f112)

February 1932

Jack Kinchella complained to the APB about Wilkins’s teaching

Jack Kinchella explained in a letter to the local APB why the parents were sending the petition:

‘I beg a little of your valuable time on behalf of the coloured residents here in complaining of their school teacher Mrs Wilkins. She is very deaf and... she can’t hear them when reading or spelling. They may want to go out and she will order them to sit down or cane them. She also abuses them badly. Just before the xmas holidays she used the words to the children ‘you’re a dirty ignorant lot of black coons’. Tues 23rd she hit Marjory McEwen on the shoulder ‘bruised her that badly her mother was compelled to sit up until 4am with her.’

Kinchella reported that Wilkins had hit a student, Iris Lake, on the arm causing extensive bruising and had caned other children on the legs, arms and head. He argued the quality of teaching had declined and so had the children’s reading skills. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f113-114)

April 1932

School Inspectors report confirms parents’ opinion of teacher

The Inspectors report on Wilkins found her teaching unsatisfactory. He noted the difficulties in classroom communication due to her deafness, and claimed that she set tests that served little purpose. (SRNSW: NRS, 3829 [5/16180.2] (f139)

26 April 1932

APB supported Aboriginal parents' complaint about the teacher and sought her removal

The Secretary of the local APB reported numerous complaints he had heard during a reserve visit about Wilkins conduct to the Department:

‘...all the Aboriginal parents having children attending the school with the exception of one mother, complained to me that the teacher was not alone cruel to the children, but insulting to them when they complained to her’.

He confirmed Kinchella's story regarding 8-year-old Marjory McEwen, noting the girl was terrified of the teacher and afraid to speak at school. The teacher admitted hitting her, and other students because they were ‘mumbling in school’, yet she couldn't hear what the children were saying.

He noted that Wilkins ‘had to be transferred’ from Cummeragunga. (SRNSW: NRS, 3829 [5/16180.2] (f142).

April 1932

Lillian Wilkins defence of her teaching

Wilkins's numerous letters in her defence to the Department stated that she caned and punished students for talking at school. (SRNSW: NRS, [5/16180.2] (f135).

Wilkins claimed ‘several white folk here, headed up by two who call themselves missionaries have stirred up the dark people to discontent’. She claimed they were lying, and pleaded that exceptions be made for her as she was widowed with a sick young boy. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f119)

The medical check indicated Mrs Wilkins was deaf and she was encouraged to retire. She had been teaching in Aboriginal schools around the state since 1920. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f386)

May 1934

Students win prizes

Teacher at the Aboriginal School, Miss Herbert reported that children won prizes at the local show for their work. (SRNSW: NRS, [5/16180.2] f97).

The teacher noted that she had received ‘a great deal of opposition’ to bringing her school up to standard, though she did not explain who the opposition came from. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f100)

22 Sept 1936

Complaints from Aboriginal parents about a teacher

Complaints from parents about the teacher at the Aboriginal school, Leonard Smith, were sent to Department of Education, showing some Aboriginal parents' expectations of teachers.

Mrs McEwen stated that her son Reg was injured in an accident on school grounds but that the teacher did not send for her, though he sent for the parents of the other boys involved. She criticised the teacher's lack of supervision at lunchtime.

She had kept her son home from school as Smith had hit him on the legs and arms with a stick. She disputed the teacher's right to punish children physically arguing this was a parent's responsibility.

Mrs McEwen argued that he had 'a terrible set on my children and all the children went backwards in the lessons' compared to the previous teacher Miss Herbert. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f48-50))

17 Sept 1937

Aboriginal activists draw attention to the APB and Gulargambone conditions
Riverina-born activist Bill Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association (an Aboriginal political organisation which campaigned for Aboriginal people's rights) had toured the area and drew attention to the APB's destructive policies:

'Mr Ferguson, who stated that the white people had no idea as to the conditions under which the aboriginals lived, said that in his opinion the A.P. Board was not working in the best interests of the coloured people, and that in Gular the conditions were worse than any other town he had visited.' (Dubbo Dispatch, 17 September, 1937, p6)

In 1939 on behalf of the APA he lobbied for various citizens rights, including 'that proper schools be built on reserves and qualified teachers appointed'. (Horner, 1994, p87)
Tom Carney was involved in the Dubbo APA group as Treasurer. (Horner, 1994, p74)

Nov 1937

Illness reported by teacher

Teacher Leonard Smith had a skin infection and inferred that he became ill from contact with his students. SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] (f16)

1938

APA Pressure to move the Aboriginal school back onto the reserve

The APA made numerous conference resolutions, including that the APA continue to lobby for Gulargambone Aboriginal School to be relocated from its awkward location two miles from the reserve 'to its proper site on the Aboriginal Reserve'. (Horner, (1994), p91)

2 March 1939

Aboriginal parents protest against teacher

Letters were sent by parents to the Department of Education complaining of cruelty to students by the teacher Leonard Smith

'We the Aborigines residents of Gulargambone petition the AP Board to remove the teacher Mr Smith as we consider him unsuitable for the position for the reasons stated. He is insulting to our children and on the grounds of cruelty'
The signers were Mrs Baxter, Mrs McEwen, Mrs Darcy and Mrs Hammond. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f39).

24 May 1939

Teacher Leonard Smith's defence of his conduct

Leonard Smith's response to the allegations included dismissive comments from his diary about the women petitioners.

His letter reveals Aboriginal parents' resentment of the treatment of them, and how they responded to him. He included comments such as 'Parents waiting to protest against children washing at school.' (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f42)

His right to question people as to the whereabouts of their children was disputed by Mrs Baxter. She had told him one daughter was 'minding the babies' and the other was working, while on another occasion she refused to offer any explanation.

Mr Smith had written to the APB about Mrs Baxter's daughters' absence, recommending that her children be taken away if she didn't send them to school. He had previously been involved in her son being sent away. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f42-3)

Such incidents show the level of state interference in Aboriginal peoples' lives. Collaboration between the APB and education authorities contributed to attempts to 'manage' parents and students. They also show some of the pressing issues facing families, where childcare and the need to work could prove more urgent and important than school attendance.

April 1939

Request to increase the school's status

Teacher Leonard Smith requested that the Aboriginal school be upgraded from provisional to public, as 30 pupils were attending. (SRNSW: NRS 3829 [5/16180.2] f33)

26 February 1941

Wingadee Council intervention and school attendance

Leonard Smith informed the Inspector of Schools, Wellington, that primary school enrolments had dropped from 49 to 38 students. His explanation suggests a reason for some families leaving Gulargambone:

'The decrease is due to the moving of five families, which in my opinion is due to the action of the Wingadee Shire Council, at Coonamble, in December last in attempting to remove the self supporting Aborigines, from their homes to the Aborigines Reserve. This action was resented by the Aborigines concerned, resulting in their removal to other localities.'

State Records NSW, Department of Education NRS 3829, School Files 1876-1979; [14/7552]
Gulargambone Aboriginal post-1939

1940s

Gulargambone students attend public schools in other towns

Aboriginal students from Gulargambone start to attend Peak Hill Public School (Keed & McKeown, 1990, p135). Leonard Smith's comments above suggest that Wingadee Council's action in attempting to confine people to the reserve may have contributed to these families moving and enrolling at other schools.

18 February 1943

Aboriginal parents' request for resources for the school

Parents Mrs Milgate and Mrs Lake wrote to Mr Renshaw MLA, requesting a well at Gulargambone Aboriginal Public school so the children could learn to garden. Their efforts show some of the Aboriginal parents' active support for their children's education. (SRNSW: NRS 3829; [14/7552])

14 December 1944

Parents argue for resources for the Aboriginal school

Mrs Lake on behalf of the Aboriginal Gulargambone School P& C requested a windmill for the school so the gardening program could continue. She pointed out that the parents had already sunk a well for the school:

‘We have done the above mentioned work for the future welfare of our children and would feel very content if you would install a windmill and tank.’ (SRNSW: NRS 3829; [14/7552])

The District Inspector supported their case and pointed out the parents were contributing their labour free of charge, and that enrolment was expected to increase to 60 students. SRNSW: NRS 3829; [SR NSW, 14/7552].

In July 1946 the Education Department finally granted some funding towards the gardening project. (SRNSW: NRS 3829; [SR NSW, 14/7552])

1940s-1950s

Aboriginal people’s memories of the Gulargambone School

Kathleen Leonard attended Gulargambone Aboriginal School, after her family moved there in 1939. About 100 students attended. She enjoyed Geography and Sports classes. (Lockley 1981, p62)

Marge Millgate also recalled attending the school, when it was on Munnell St. The Millgate family were from the area, and the name appears in school records frequently. About 30 children attended the school at the time she was a student. She noted there were no opportunities for continuing her education, so she left school at 13 to work on local properties. (Lockley 1981, p62)

Aboriginal students were not allowed to ride on the school bus. They had to walk to school. (Sharpe 2001, p.7)

1953

Aboriginal activists take education issues in Gulargambone to the Department of Education

Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs and the Council for Aboriginal Rights took complaints about the substandard education Aboriginal students were receiving at Gulargambone to the Minister of Education in Sydney.

They proposed integrated education as a solution. (AWB c6178 box 2801, cited in Fletcher 1989a, p231)

13 Dec 1955

Governor-General’s visit and acceleration of integration

The Governor-General, Sir William Slim, was shocked at the existence of separate schooling in Gulargambone when he visited northern NSW. His comments influenced Inspector Meckiff to recommend that the Aboriginal School become an annex of the public school and that eventually Aboriginal children be merged into existing classes. (Fletcher 1989b, p223)

1958

Plans for Aboriginal attendance at the public school

The Catholic Church opened St Josephs convent school at Gulargambone. 55 non-Aboriginal and six Aboriginal Catholic students left the public school to attend St Josephs. (Fletcher (1989a) p232)

The Inspector recommended a merged public school after the public school numbers dropped. (Fletcher (1989b) p226).

March 1958

Aboriginal school closes: the move to assimilated education

The *Dawn* magazine, run by the AWB (former APB) reported on the closing of the school as a step towards assimilation (where Aboriginal students would be treated the same as non-Aboriginal students, but with no respect for cultural differences).

‘The Education Department has recently closed the Aboriginal School at Gulargambone and the pupils who formerly attended that school are now attending the Gulargambone Central School. Gulargambone was the last Aboriginal school situated in a town where there was also a school for white children. The only remaining aboriginal schools are those on Stations and Reserves. The closing of Gulargambone Aboriginal School is seen as a further step in the Board's policy of assimilating the aborigines into the white population.’ (*Dawn*, 1 March 1958, p10)

There were threats of a boycott by non-Aboriginal parents (which *Dawn* did not report) but Inspector Meckiff and Aboriginal parents resisted their pressure, forcing a grudging acceptance of Aboriginal children at the school. Aboriginal students were still treated differently in class and were separated from other students. (Fletcher 1989b, p233)

1959

Prejudice and school sports: the principal stands up for Aboriginal students

Gulargambone Bowling Club invited the non-Aboriginal students of Gulargambone Public to learn-to-swim classes at their new swimming pool.

The principal refused to participate in the program unless ALL of the students could attend. The club revised its decision and Aboriginal students were able to attend. (Fletcher 1989a, p234)

1965

Activist Charles Perkins speaks publicly about racism in Gulargambone

Freedom rides organiser Charles Perkins described Gulargambone as the most discriminatory place in NSW after visiting the town during the tour that drew media attention to country town racism. (Fletcher 1989a p261)

‘Chika Dickson recalled him in tears at the sight of the Gulargambone Reserve, built beside the open town sewer... the stink and the flies and the little kids there, the flies round the kids, you had to see it to believe it.’ (Read, 2001, p99)

The Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) group visited the reserve and spoke with several residents, including Mrs Baxter. (Curthoys (1965)

Conclusion

Various themes mentioned in the timeline can be seen in greater depth in this case study, including ongoing campaigns from non-Aboriginal residents for segregated schooling, and the efforts of local councils and the APB to confine people to reserves and then remove them.

The quality of teaching at Gulargambone Aboriginal School seems to have been variable with some teachers appearing to be genuinely interested in student welfare and learning, while others, known to be performing poorly, were only there as a result of being shuffled between Aboriginal schools. Parents' responses and active interest in children's safety and education are evident in their efforts to combat excessive corporal punishment and racism.

This case study suggests that one of the sources of ongoing problems in schooling is that generations of students have received sub-standard education.

Through the involvement of activists like Ferguson, Gibbs, Perkins and others, it is clear that struggles for equity in education were a significant part of broader struggles for social justice. Activists and parents regarded education as connected with issues of housing, income, opportunities, access to services and reducing government influence over Indigenous peoples' lives.

References

Archival

Curthoys, Ann (1965) Diary, in AIATSIS (2005) *Commemorating 40 Years of the Freedom Rides* .

State Records NSW, Sydney. Some access points have been set up around the state for remote users – check [State Records website](#) for details):

SRNSW, Department of Education, School files 1869-1979, NRS 3829 Gulargambone Aboriginal school 1876-1939, [5/16180.2]

SRNSW, Department of Education, School files 1869-1979, NRS 3829 Gulargambone Aboriginal school post 1939 [14/7552]

SRNSW, Department of Education, School files 1869-1979, NRS 3829 Gulargambone 1880-1919, [5/16179.3]

SRNSW, Department of Education, School files 1869-1979, NRS 3829 Gulargambone 1919-1939, [5/16180.1]

SRNSW, Aboriginal Welfare Board, NRS 232/8349 and 7/3640-4/2/8351, Register of Aboriginal Reserves 1875-1904, [Reel 2847]

SRNSW, AWB Photographs c1919-1966, NRS 30, #8417 '10 November 1931 Gulargambone Aboriginal school NSW', pupils with teacher and #8819 10 November 1931 – without teacher.

SRNSW, Department of Education, NRS 15051, Gulargambone School Photographs file

NSW Department of Lands

1895 [Parish Map](#) Gulargambone, (town), 1st edition, 1 sheet, Id 148045

1926 [Parish map](#), Gulargambone (town) 3rd edition, sheet 1, Id 148075.

Published

- Briggs-Smith, N. and W. McGregor (1997) *Winanga-li /to remember: family research*. Moree, Northern Regional Library and Information Service.
- Bandler, Faith (1983) *The Time was Ripe: the story of the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship 1956-1959*, Alternative Publishing Co. Sydney
- Fletcher, JJ, (1989a) *Clean, Clad and Courteous: a History of Aboriginal Education in NSW*, self-published, Sydney.
- Fletcher, JJ, (1989b) *Documents in the History of Aboriginal Education in NSW*, self published, Sydney.
- Goodall, Heather (1996) *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics 1788-1988*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin and Black Books *Invasion to Embassy*
- Horner, Jack (1994) *Bill Ferguson:Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom*, Canberra, Jack Horner. First published 1974 *As Vote Ferguson for Freedom*, by the Australian and NZ Book Co. Sydney.
- Legislative Assembly NSW/APB (1913) *Aborigines: Report of the Board for the Protection of, for the Year 1912*
(many of the reports are available online via AIATSIS website, as part of the Bringing them Home recommendations to make these more widely available. See the on line exhibition, *To Remove and Protect: Aboriginal Lives under Control* at: www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/protectors/nsw.html
- Lockley, T. (ed) (1981) *Celebrating One Hundred Years History of Gulargambone Central School*, Gulargambone Central School
- McKeown, Brian and Keed, Rita (1990), *A History of Peak Hill Central School 1890-1990: one Hundred Years of Education*, Brian McKeown. Peak Hill Public School
- Read, Peter, 2001 *Charles Perkins: a biography*, revised edition Ringwood, Harmondsworth Penguin
- Sharpe, Dale, (2001) 'The Aboriginal Community the Early Years' in *Gulargambone revisited: a collection of memories, facts and stories compiled by the University of the Third Age Group for the occasion of the Gulargambone Easter Reunion* University of the Third Age.

Newspaper and magazine articles

Some of the following articles are available on the website of the State Library of NSW. The State Library has a guide for researchers investigating [Indigenous Australian history](#)

The State Library website also contains the **InfoKoori Database** which has references to articles about Indigenous people from *The Koori Mail*, missionary publications, some regional newspapers and the magazine *Dawn*. Some entries contain the full text of the article.

The Dubbo Dispatch and Wellington Independent, 'Public School at Gulargambone', 14 March, 1899 p2

The Coonamble Independent, 29 September, 1899, p8

Dawn, 'Closing of Aboriginal School at Gulargambone', 1 March, 1958, p10

Moree Gwydir Examiner, 'Drawing the colour line: Black children and public schools', March 7, 1899

The Dubbo Dispatch, 'Gular Abos', 10 June, 1921, p3

The Dubbo Dispatch, 'Protection of Aborigines / Mr W. Ferguson's Tour', 17 September, 1937, p6