

THE JOHN NICHOLS FAMILY STORY.

Due to the circumstances, politics and society in Britain at the time leading up to the First Fleet there was massive unemployment, particularly in the ship building and cloth weaving cities of Britain and this led to a class of people that were unemployed and the outcasts of society. For many of these people their crime was simply being born at the wrong time and in the wrong place; they became the unclean, unloved and unwanted, with no home, no money, no welfare and once they were arrested they had no rights; absolutely no rights at all. Their sentence was to be transported to the other side of the world, to a place unknown, far away from their family and friends, with almost no chance of ever returning. Their penalty was that they could and would suffer all forms of degradation and cruelty at the hands of their masters and keepers alike. But it was these poor souls that had the strength and desire to survive and they went on to build the foundations of what would become the new Australia.

John Nichols had worked as a servant and porter's assistant with West and Thomas in London. On April 21, 1784 John was brought before the Old Bailey court for stealing a quantity of goods, which included, 57 razors, 12 pairs of scissors, 22 boxes of soap, a looking glass, ribbon, combs, human hair, powder and powder puffs to the value of fifteen pounds and sixpence. These were claimed to have been traced to his lodgings in Leominster in Herefordshire. John claimed that he purchased the goods from various places but as he could not produce receipts for these items he was deemed to have stolen them. John was convicted and sentenced to transportation to Africa for 7 years. During the trial it was claimed that John had a wife in Leominster. John would not admit to having a wife; either the wife did not exist or John was protecting her from the humiliation of being married to a convict. Whichever was the case John never heard from or saw his "wife" again. In the court when John made his mark on the court documents it was a cross, which may mean that he did not read or write at that time. If that was the case, what good were receipts to a person that could not read them? Furthermore, there was no wife present at John's lodgings and nor was John present when his employer made the inspection of the premises. He claimed to have found the "stolen" items and placed them in a box which he locked with a padlock and chain. This box was later presented to the constabulary as evidence in the case against John. Was this a case where John was set up? We will never know.

John's transportation destination was later changed to Botany Bay after an experimental transportation of convicts to Cape Coast Castle, West Africa failed. He then spent almost 3 years in the prison hulk ship "*Censor*" but then on the 24th February 1787 he and his 207 fellow convicts were loaded onto the "*Scarborough*" in Portsmouth. "*Scarborough*" was the second largest of the First Fleet ships, being 111 feet long and 30 feet wide. Because of delays the convicts spent 3 months below decks in irons. On Sunday the 13th May 1787 the eleven ships of the First Fleet departed on their historic voyage. Captain Phillip ordered that the convicts could be freed of their chains after they had put to sea.

The story is well known of the voyage and the arrival at Botany Bay and the final destination at Sydney Cove.

On the 24th March 1788 (only 2 months after their arrival) John married Mary Carroll, a former mantua maker, who had been convicted at the Old Bailey in 1786 for stealing goods to the value of fifteen shillings from a Mr. Charles Dobson. Now despite being married for 6 months, Mary was separated from John by the authorities and transported to Norfolk Island in October 1788 to attempt to relieve the plight of the acute food shortages in Sydney.

By the end of April 1791 John had completed his sentence and was one of the few ex-convicts who chose to take up the offer of a grant of land and become a settler. John was the third convict to be granted land in New South Wales. On the

18th July 1791 John and twelve others took possession of their allotments in Prospect Hill. Captain Tench visited on 5th December 1791 and described John as a former gardener who had 2 acres cultivated. Tench also commented that "all the settlers complained that they were frequently being robbed by runaway soldiers, convicts and natives". John had been the victim of runaway soldiers in August 1793 when they entered his house, holding him prisoner with a convict hedgehopper while they hid overnight. The original grants were spaced apart, which gave the criminals cover when carrying out their attacks. To counter this Governor Phillip decided to settle the vacant land, which gave John an extra 30 acres.

On the 26th July 1794 Mary Carroll returned from Norfolk Island to Sydney. There is no evidence to show that Mary and John got back together. In fact Mary received a land grant at Mulgrave Hill which is some distance away from Prospect. You could say that John was not having much success with his matrimonial life.

By 1798 John was only one of six original Prospect settlers remaining. At about this time he became a constable at Prospect as well as being a settler. The 1800 muster shows John as having 40 acres sown with wheat, 12 acres planted with maize, 110 sheep, 28 pigs and 1 horse.

Two years later he had 44 acres of wheat and maize sown or ready for planting. He owned a horse, 34 pigs but no sheep were recorded. A successful farmer with 16 bushels of wheat and 50 of maize in hand and he supported a woman, 1 child, 6 free men and 2 convicts. He received no support from government stores.

Ann Pugh arrived on the "*Earl Cornwallis*" on 12th June 1801 along with 297 other convicts. Ann had been tried on the 16th July 1799 at the Hereford summer assizes for stealing goods to the value of 2 pounds 12 shillings and 2 pence (£2/12/2). She was sentenced to 7 years transportation. Ann was either assigned or chosen by John and by 1802 she was living with him at Prospect. John and Ann's first child was John who was born about the middle of 1802. The 1802 muster shows John as supporting one woman and one child with no assistance from the government store. In March 1803 John was appointed as the chief constable of Prospect Hill. Ann, the second child of John and Ann, was born in May 1803 and was one of the first to be baptised in the New St John's Church at Parramatta. With the death of Mary Carroll on the 3rd April 1803 John was free to marry Ann. On the 25th August 1803 the Reverend John Marsden married John and Ann at St John's Church. John and Ann's 3rd child was born on 22nd July 1804 and was baptised at St John's Church on the 12th August 1804.

On the 11th May 1804 John Nichols, James Cleaver and William Kentwell were appointed as the trustees of the Prospect common. The common covered most of what is now Blacktown and was disposed of after the arrival of Governor Macquarie.

John and Ann went on to have 12 children.

The 1814 muster recorded that John was a land owner and his wife and 7 of their children were receiving no support from the government stores. John made a decision to move from the district in December 1814 but no records can be found as to who his allotment was sold to.

The 1819 muster lists John as a labourer, his fortunes appear to have changed quite dramatically since leaving Prospect. However in June he was granted 80 acres of land in the county of Cumberland Parish of St George.

Amelia Nichols, the 7th child of John and Ann, was born at Prospect on the 26 February 1811 and at the age of 16 Amelia was married to Charles Hughes who was born in Manchester England in 1798.

Now, Charles had been charged with "felonious assault on the king's highway" and was sentenced to death but this sentence was commuted to transportation for life. Charles arrived in Sydney on the "*Larkins*" on the 20th November 1817 at the age of 19. Charles story goes like this. A gentleman found that his watch was missing and so he called the constable and took him into an alley in London where he claimed that Charles had stolen his watch an hour before. Charles claimed that he had not been in that alley an hour before and when searched Charles did not have the gentleman's watch in his possession nor did he have anything that could have been traded for the watch. Never the less Charles was arrested and found guilty of the offence based upon the word of the gentleman.

Seventeen months after arriving in Sydney Charles was sent to the penal colony in Newcastle. The only lapse in Charles Hughes behaviour was that he and a John Davis were punished with 25 lashes for gambling. Charles was employed as an assistant pilot in Newcastle harbour under the control of William Eckford. He was involved in the pursuit of convict pirates who had escaped from the settlement on a cutter, the "*Eclipse*", in May 1825. He received a ticket of leave for the District of Newcastle in 1827 which allowed him to work on his own behalf and the 1828 census records his occupation as a fisherman.

However Charles returned to working as the assistant pilot taking over from William Cromarty when that man was injured and forced into retirement. In that capacity Charles rendered assistance to the crew of the "*Mary Jane*" when she got into trouble just north of the Newcastle harbour. Charles was granted a full pardon in 1834 for his bravery for saving the crew under very dangerous conditions. Charles became an innkeeper during the period of 1834 to 1851 with premises firstly in Newcastle, then Maitland and finally in Black Creek, now known as Branxton. Charles was able to provide the education, respectability and security his children needed to not only become a respected local businessmen but to be outstanding in the fields of local government, the public service and the police force. Charles died at Branxton on the 8th January 1869 at the age of 71.

Amelia lived for a further 15 years; she died on the 25th June 1884 aged 73 years. Charles and Amelia are buried together in Branxton cemetery where an impressive tombstone marks their last resting place.

Back to John Nichols: on the 24th December 1822 John died and after a burial service at St Phillips Church in Sydney he was buried at the Devonshire Street cemetery, which is the present site of Sydney's Central Railway Station. Ann was left to care for her 11 children, 6 of whom were younger than 12. Ann passed away on the 10th July 1849 at her home in Phillip Street Sydney. She is buried at St Stephens Churchyard in Camperdown.

These people were examples of how many convicts made a good life for themselves and their families. Ann became a good faithful wife and mother and she had supported and worked with her husband John all the way. John was a good husband and father and a successful farmer and he became a law enforcer as well. Charles saved the lives of others in extreme circumstances, he apprehended many escaped criminals and he became an innkeeper of some repute. Charles and Amelia gave their family an education which allowed them to become successful business people and pillars of society.