

SUPERINTENDENT KENNY

THE HULL RIVER ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT

ABRIDGED VERSION

By Ken Gray & Ken Campbell

Ken Campbell started researching this history after reading an article in 1960 about cyclones in Queensland. Constable J. M. Kenny was mentioned, and this rang a bell in a small part of his 14 year old brain not taken up by sport and girls. His Aunt, who he was staying with, told him a little of his mother's family, the Kennys, and his interest grew. In 1974, he took up the long search again, then joined forces with the Mission Beach Historical Society in 2021 to finish the story.

As he wrote the history, Ken recognized the Aboriginal injustices caused by government policies and institutions. He felt a little out of his depth on that subject, and Djiru Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy, generously wrote a foreword to help. A small part of Leonard's foreword is as follows:

I have spoken to several people who had family members incarcerated in the 'Hull River Aboriginal Settlement,' and these ancestors told us how they felt about being in that place. It was built on Djiru traditional land, close to the Hull River. Djiru people didn't have a say in that; they were never asked whether or not they wanted that establishment. We didn't have a say about who was brought here either; people from other tribes were taken to the Hull River. It was entirely alien to our culture to be made to live side by side with people from other tribes.

The so called, 'Hull River Mission' was never a mission in a religious way. It was not established to help Aboriginal people; it was a prison camp and 'inmates' were treated like dogs. Local Aboriginal people and some from far away, who were forcibly removed and transported in chains, were taken to this settlement and had to work hard. Either work or being punished! It was slavery. Many ran away.

Considering that there were once over 450 Djiru people living on their lands and now only 11 live here, Leonard did well to write a foreword about this and the Historical Society greatly appreciates it.

The Superintendent of the Hull River Aboriginal Settlement, John Kenny, built the place and ran it from 1914 until its destruction in 1918. This is the abridged story of John and the Settlement he ran.

Kenny's father was born in Tipperary, Ireland in 1840 and emigrated to Grafton, NSW in 1863. He married Catherine Brown, and they had a cattle farm at Ulmarra. John Kenny junior was born 11 December 1871, and two years later he had a sister, Sarah. Tragically, their mother drowned in a flood in 1879. Young John remained at the family farm until early adulthood, earning himself a good reputation as a horseman, handy in the bush, and with all the skills required to run a cattle property. He worked as a clerk, then at age 24, joined the Police Force in 1896 and was sent to Cooktown.

He was transferred to Highbury on Cape York for six months, gaining experience working with the Native Mounted Police, learning the different languages and habits of the Indigenous groups. His next posting was Officer-in-Charge of Eight Mile Police Station, near Cape Bedford in 1898. John Kenny senior was almost blind by then, so he and Sarah joined John at Eight Mile Creek. However, they found it too difficult in the climate so moved to Grafton, NSW.

Police patrols in the far north covered enormous areas and dealt with all sorts of strife. The Police had to be good bushmen, competent horsemen, and know the local languages and customs, but it was only possible with the help of the Aboriginal trackers who knew the languages and the country.

In 1899, Constable Kenny was tasked to apprehend a South Sea Islander who had deserted from the pearling fleet and may have witnessed a murder. Kenny was searching on horseback with four

Indigenous Troopers near Princess Charlotte Bay, when Cyclone *Mahina* arrived; the biggest cyclone to hit Queensland in European history. They were among the few to survive. Despite being a kilometre inland and camped on a 14 metre high ridge, the tidal surge roared through the camp. The waves left them struggling in waist deep water. Several horses were killed by flying timber. They swam 25 rivers in four days to make it back safely. The toll of Cyclone *Mahina* was over 100 vessels sunk and 307 known lives lost.

Policing the northern frontier also involved adjudicating disputes between the white farmers and the Indigenous settlements. Constable Kenny had to remove some people from properties and place them in nearby Hopevale Mission. He knew Nurse Mary Alwood in the Cooktown Hospital after many visits there and they were married in Cooktown May 1899. A son, Martin John Collin, known as Jack, was born the following year, and in 1902 a daughter, Kathleen Yolande, was born.

Cooktown in the peak of the Palmer River gold rush in the mid-1870s was the second largest city in Queensland after Brisbane and an important port. It was considerably reduced by 1900 yet remained a bustling town. John's father died in Grafton in 1904 and Constable Kenny was sent to Coen and promoted to Constable First Class. Mary's health was deteriorating and with an offer of stability and better pay, John left the Police to be Chief Engineer at a gold mine. Mary died in 1906 leaving him with two young children to care for.

In 1897, under the new *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, Aboriginal people became wards of the state. They were prevented from marrying without consent of the state, from maintaining their own finances and from drinking alcohol. A system of Aboriginal reserves and settlements was enacted and was controversial.

George Schwartz and John Kenny knew each other well, and John took up George's offer to be the Assistant Superintendent at the Hopevale Mission. This was a much better option than living in the mining camp with two young children. John Kenny, with his knowledge of the culture and languages of the local people and his engineering skills, was a good fit. John also managed one of the outlying Lutheran Mission stations at McIvor River.

During 1910, John married Ulmarra girl, Elizabeth Daley in Cooktown. A son, Victor Joseph was born in 1911. The family remained at the Cape Bedford Mission.

An Aboriginal Settlement was now planned at the Hull River and a 2,900 acre land reserve was selected. In January 1913, John Kenny, hearing about this planned Settlement wrote and asked to be considered for the Superintendent role. He won the appointment in February 1914.

John established the Settlement quickly. A wide path was cleared down to the beach where a motorboat was moored. 41 local Aboriginal people were 'recruited' to 'join' the settlement. Police rounded up more to occupy the new camp. By the end of 1915, the population was 400. Some inmates deserted and hid in the forest to avoid recapture. They found extreme difficulty living side by side with other tribes and being separated from their Traditional Lands. That was alien to their culture.

By 1916, the Settlement was exporting bananas south via a boat to Dunk Island. It was producing tons of pumpkin and sweet potato, pineapples, melons, yams, taro, cassava, tobacco, coffee, citrus, and coconuts so was becoming self-sufficient as planned.

The Aboriginal people in the Settlement provided dugong, fish, and turtle. A ketch was bought to ferry stores across to Dunk Island. Malaria and other diseases caused about 200 fatalities in 1917.

At the Settlement in 1918 were 200-300 Aboriginal people with John Kenny, Elizabeth, Kathleen aged 15, and Victor 6 years. Jack was away visiting friends at Cardwell. Others there were the Assistant Superintendent, John Hazeldeane and his wife, the Accountant Mr Tedman, and Mr J. Hamilton in charge of the boats.

The March 1918 *Innisfail* Cyclone is the second largest to cross the Queensland coast in European times. Later research suggests that the toll of Aboriginal people was higher than the three dead reported at the time. Almost all buildings were destroyed. A tidal surge swamped the beachside native village. John Kenny and his daughter Kathleen died. Elizabeth had fractures and a gaping wound to her right arm. It was three days before she was taken to the nearest hospital at Townsville.

The coastal trader, *Innisfail*, was anchored on the leese of Dunk Island after the cyclone and the crew loaned Banfield one of their two boats so he could check on the Settlement. He and Chris Wildsoet crossed once the sea had calmed a little, to assist the district's survivors.

Constable Dan O'Reagan of Cardwell Police, who was an old friend of John Kenny came from 50 kilometres along the beach, swimming swollen rivers to reach the Settlement. John, aged 46, and his daughter, Yolande Kathleen, 15 years, were buried on the hill in the centre of the property. Their graves were marked by two large trumpet shells and decorated with smaller seashells by Aboriginal girls. After the burial, Dan O'Reagan returned to Cardwell with the terrible news for Jack.

Elizabeth Kenny was in early pregnancy but recovered enough to return to her family in Coraki, NSW after three months in hospital. Eugenie Mary (Jeanie) was born at Coraki August 1918. Mrs Kenny had her right arm so badly damaged that she had to learn to write again, this time with her left hand.

Aboriginal people wouldn't go near the Settlement for a long time after. A Settlement was established on Palm Island and residents that had not fled were shipped there on large flat bottom punts.

Government officers recommended that the Kenny grave be fenced with wood or iron palings. Some Council officers agreed, and a reserve was created when the land was later subdivided, but in subsequent bungles the promised Kenny Memorial reserve was forgotten, despite several reminders.

Council moved to have the town named *Kenny*, but by 1967, the village, by common usage became known as *South Mission Beach*, and it was later gazetted as such. There was a small allotment set aside later by the Council for a *Mija Memorial*. This memorial and information board was provided by the Mission Beach Lions Club. There is a listing of the memorial on *Monument Australia*.

The *Mija Memorial* provides a permanent keeping place for the story of the settlement as told by First Nations people. It is also a memorial to the many Aboriginal people who died there during its four years of operation. Aboriginal family stories are recorded there.

John Kenny was well thought of by locals and government officials. An independent evaluation of the Settlement was published in the *Cairns Post* by a visitor in 1915. This was highly complementary of John Kenny's leadership. In 1917, a resident also wrote a glowing report of the progress that J. M. Kenny was making. Edmund Banfield also wrote a strongly positive article in 1918.

There can be no doubt as to the bravery of this man. When his wife, Elizabeth, in the height of the storm, asked if he was hurt, he had replied, *Only a little bit*. He died shortly after from his wounds yet did not want to alarm those around him.

One can only imagine the challenges that were faced by Superintendent John Kenny, his family and his Settlement's residents. The Aboriginal people had faced so much injustice during the 50 years following the invasion by alien people who ruthlessly dispossessed them of the land they had lived on for eternity. Then they were being carted off the land and placed in 'reserves' whether they liked it or not. Many were no longer living on their Traditional Lands; they had been totally severed from the thing that mattered most to them. Their culture was destroyed and their tribes and law systems were broken. Now the government was bringing Aboriginal people in from far and wide and mixing tribes without a thought of the consequences of that radical move. How it did not end far worse than it did is a testament to the Aboriginal people and the leadership of John Kenny.

Edmund Banfield had the last say on John Kenny with these words in his weekly newspaper column:

As he lived so did he die – without pain or moan – brave in the last, with lips expressing concern for his wife and bairns. John Martin Kenny was a man.

Elizabeth Kenny did not remarry and lived to the age of 79 years. She died in Evans Head, NSW and was buried in her hometown of Coraki, NSW.

Mrs Kenny's stepson, Jack took up sheep farming in NSW, served in World War II and was repatriated out as a Totally & Permanently Incapacitated (TPI) soldier. He raised a family in Sydney.

Victor Kenny stayed on at Coraki, NSW where he ran a successful small business for many years. He had a lot to do with the nearby Indigenous people at the Box Ridge settlement.

Eugenie (Jeanie) Kenny, Superintendent John Kenny's daughter, married Ray Campbell, a local Norco (NSW dairy farmer cooperative) Manager who was also a World War II veteran, raising a family on the North Coast of NSW. Eugenie died at only 40 years age and was buried in Coraki, NSW. She had six children and her son, Ken Campbell, John Kenny's grandson, wrote the full version of this history.



Author: Ken Campbell (above), full version; Ken Gray abridgement..

Editors: Ken Gray, Margaret Remilton and Diane Bull.



Images top to bottom, left to right: J. M. Kenny (Sydney circa 1890); Wedding J. M. Kenny and Mary Alwood, May 1899 Cooktown; Elizabeth Kenny (nee Daley) June 1910; Kenny family circa 1914, L to R: Victor, Elizabeth, Kathleen, John, dog and Jack; Large group at the Settlement 1916; Clearing looking towards the sea and Dunk Island circa 1915; *Mija* Memorial or Hull River Aboriginal Settlement Monument from Monument Australia, image by Ian Savage, 02 September 2016.

Published by Mission Beach Historical Society, Document AB05, Version 1.0. Web address: mbhs.com.au
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This is an abridged version of *Superintendent Kenny*. The full story with references is available on our web page as H023, also named *Superintendent Kenny*.

Acknowledgements: The Kenny photos are courtesy of Carmel and Yolande Collins. Newspaper articles referred to in this paper were sourced from *Trove* and without these the story would have been difficult to piece together.

Cover Image: South Mission Beach looking towards Dunk Island by Ken Campbell.