



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

**Family History Unit**

Freecall: 1800 352 553

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Email: [familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au](mailto:familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au)

## Family History Kit – Before you start – contents

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- Indigenous names
- Thinking about place
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## Stolen Generations

The Stolen Generations are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who, when they were children, were taken away from their families and communities as the result of past government policies. Children were removed by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be brought up in institutions, fostered out or adopted by white families.

The removal of Aboriginal children took place from the early days of British colonisation in Australia. It broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties and has left a lasting and intergenerational impact on the lives and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Government policies concerning Aboriginal people were implemented under different laws in the different states and territories of Australia. These laws meant nearly every aspect of the lives of Indigenous people was closely controlled by government: relationships and marriage, children, work, travel, wages, housing and land, and access to health care and education.

Records about the Stolen Generations and their families were kept by governments, as well as by churches, missions and other non-government agencies. Many records have been lost as the result of poor recordkeeping practices, fires, floods, and in some cases, due to deliberate destruction. Changes to the structure of government departments and within non-government organisations can also make it very difficult to trace records to assist with finding family connections.

## History of Link-Up

Family tracing and reunion services are available to members of the Stolen Generations throughout Australia via the national Link-Up program.

The first Link-Up service in Australia was established in 1980 in New South Wales. This was followed by Link-Ups in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Prior to 1997 other types services also operated to assist people who had been separated from their families to reconnect.



State or territory	Service	Established
New South Wales	Link-Up NSW	1980
Queensland	Link-Up QLD	1984
Northern Territory	Link-Up Services in the NT	1985
	Central Australian Aboriginal & Islander Child Care Agency	1992
Victoria	Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency	1993
Tasmania	Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre	1994
Western Australia	Yorganop Child Care Aboriginal Corp	1992–93
South Australia	Aboriginal Link-up Family Information Section, Dept. of Family and Community Services	1994–95

### The Bringing Them Home report

From 1995 to 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) undertook a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. The Commission's findings were published in 1997 in the Bringing Them Home Report. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

This report included 54 recommendations, a number of which related to records and family tracing. Recommendation 30a stated:

That the Council of Australian Governments ensure that Indigenous community-based family tracing and reunion services are funded in all regional centres with a significant Indigenous population and that existing Indigenous community-based services, for example health services, in smaller centres are funded to offer family tracing and reunion assistance and referral.

As a result of this recommendation the Australian Government funded a national network of family tracing and reunion services – the National Link-Up Program. Link-Ups in NSW, Queensland and the NT gained improved funding and new Link-Up Programs were established in other areas including South Australia, Central Australia and Western Australia.

## Role of Link-Up

Link-Up organisations around Australia provide family tracing and reunion services to members of the Stolen Generations and their families. These services include:

- researching family and personal records
- emotional support when accessing family and personal records
- finding family members
- assistance and support at family reunions
- support and counselling before, during and after family reunion.

Link-Up gives priority to first generation members of the Stolen Generations who have directly experienced removal or separation from family and community, especially those who are elderly or have urgent health concerns.

Link-Up also provides services to subsequent generations of family members who have been affected by intergenerational trauma related to removal, and to members of families and communities from whom children were removed.

## Link-Up locations

There are Link-Up organisations in most states and territories.

- New South Wales: [www.linkupnsw.org.au](http://www.linkupnsw.org.au)
- Northern Territory Stolen Generations: [www.ntsgac.org.au](http://www.ntsgac.org.au)
- Queensland: [www.link-upqld.org.au](http://www.link-upqld.org.au)
- South Australia – Nunkuwarrin Yunti: [nunku.org.au/our-services/social-emotional/link-up/](http://nunku.org.au/our-services/social-emotional/link-up/)
- Tasmania – no Link-Up services operate in Tasmania
- Victoria: [www.linkupvictoria.org.au](http://www.linkupvictoria.org.au)
- Western Australia – Kimberley Stolen Generation: [kimberleystolengeneration.com.au](http://kimberleystolengeneration.com.au)
- Western Australia – Yorgum Aboriginal Corporation: [www.yorgum.org.au](http://www.yorgum.org.au)
- Australian Capital Territory – contact New South Wales

See: Where to get help – Link-Up services for all contact information.

## AIATSIS Family History Unit and Link-Ups

The AIATSIS Family History Unit works closely with Link-Ups to help members of the Stolen Generations to find their families and to find out about their family history.

- In conjunction with Link-Ups, AIATSIS developed a Cert IV in Stolen Generations Family History Research and Case Management.
- AIATSIS also offers ongoing research support in family tracing.
- AIATSIS has memorandums of understanding with institutions located in Canberra and can assist Link-Ups to find and retrieve documents from the following institutions: ACT Heritage Library and ACT Territory Records, Australian War Memorial, National Archives of Australia, National Library of Australia, and the Noel Butlin Archives Centre.



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## Proof of Aboriginality

***Please note: AIATSIS cannot comment on, prove or provide confirmation of anyone's Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Heritage.***

Your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage is something that is personal to you. You do not need a letter of confirmation to identify as an Indigenous person. However, you may be asked to provide proof or confirmation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage when applying for Indigenous-specific services or programs such as:

- grants (such as Indigenous housing loans, research and study grants)
- university courses (with specific positions for Indigenous students)
- Centrelink and housing assistance (Indigenous-specific)
- employment (Indigenous identified positions)
- school programs for Indigenous students.

Government agencies and community organisations usually accept three 'working criteria' as confirmation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage:

- being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- being accepted as such by the community in which you live, or formerly lived.

All of these things must apply. The way you look or how you live are not requirements.

Government agencies, universities and schools will often supply you with their particular guidelines, and ask you to complete a form or provide a letter of 'Proof' or 'Confirmation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Heritage'.

## Why is it so involved?

Indigenous-specific services and programs are intended to address social, health and educational issues that Indigenous people face as the result of past removal policies and inadequate educational, employment and health services. Requesting proof of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage from applicants helps to make sure that this intention is honoured.



## How do I obtain proof of my Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage?

Doing your family history may help you obtain proof of your heritage. You might find a birth, death or marriage record that traces your family to a particular Aboriginal station or reserve. Or you might have oral history stories that can connect you to a particular area or person or photograph.

Gather as much information about your family history and heritage as possible.

Our online Finding Your Family resources may help you find evidence of your connection to your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestors.

### **Whatever your situation, contact a relevant Indigenous organisation for assistance.**

When you apply for proof of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage through an Indigenous organisation, they will probably ask you to explain your heritage to their committee or to provide documentation/information that confirms your heritage. For this reason it's useful to find out as much as you can about your family history before you contact them. This is particularly important if you or your ancestors have been displaced from your heritage.

A 'letter of confirmation' is usually obtained from an incorporated Indigenous organisation and must be stamped with their common seal.

## Who to contact

You may need to contact an organisation where your family is from – someone in the community might know or remember your family.

An Indigenous organisation in the area where you currently live may also be able to provide you with this confirmation.

For example, if you live in Canberra and your family is from the Canberra region, you should contact the Ngunnawal Land Council in Queanbeyan. If you live in Canberra but your family is from somewhere else, you should contact the land council in the area your family came from or were best known in.

To find the contact details of a land council or other Indigenous community organisation:

- search the Yellow Pages – type 'Aboriginal' in the 'Business type or name' box and add a place name, or in the print version look under 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Associations and Organisations'
- do a web search for 'Aboriginal' and the place name

- do a search for land councils and other Indigenous organisations in your area on the website of the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations <http://www.oric.gov.au/>
- search for local Aboriginal Health Services on the Australian Indigenous HealthInfonet website here - <https://healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/health-professionals/health-workers/map-of-aboriginal-and-islander-healthmedical-services/>
- contact an Indigenous Coordination Centre see listing here <http://www.atns.net.au/subcategory.asp?subcategoryID=112>



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## Understanding the challenges

Family history research projects can be complex, time-consuming and frustrating but also rewarding. Tracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family histories poses a unique set of challenges. Stories passed down through your family and interviews with family members are a key source of information but they may differ from information found in historical records.

You have to be the judge of what's more likely to be right or wrong.

## Finding your history

Researching your family history is like being a detective. You look for pieces of evidence to put together your family' story. This evidence comes in the form of different types of 'records'. Records are the many sheets of paper that officials, professionals or others create about us. Think of the records a doctor or a school might keep about you or your children and the forms and documents that government agencies like Centrelink keep about you. Records may not just be written documents. They can also be photographs, maps, genealogies, oral history and many other things.

### What records might have information?

Records about Indigenous people have been created by a range of organisations and individuals, such as welfare and protection boards, adoption agencies, education and health departments, police forces, churches, missionaries, anthropologists and other academic researchers. See Past caring a paper by Kim Katon (2002).

Many records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of complex recordkeeping systems maintained by governments, churches or other organisations.

Finding records with the information you want can be difficult, even when there are databases, guides, indexes and finding aids to help you. It can be even harder when these types of finding aids have not been developed.

### Family histories and life stories are a good source of information

Since the 1980s many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have recorded their life stories and those of their families and communities. These can be valuable starting points for researching your family and community. Native Title claims may also be a significant source for Indigenous family history researchers. Paperwork associated with these can be often be found online.



## Sometimes the records you want don't exist or can't be found

Unfortunately written evidence or information about family members may not exist because the records have been:

- lost with the passing of time
- destroyed because their value was not recognised, they were regarded as no longer useful or because they were embarrassing or legally dangerous for the people who created them
- never created in the first place – for example, a baby whose birth was not registered will not have a birth certificate.

## The content of historical records may upset you

You might find the content of records upsetting or offensive.

**Offensive.** Historical records reflect the perspectives and attitudes of the people who made them. Records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often reflect the biased and racist views of white officials, missionaries, station owners and others. They can contain material that is derogatory and use words and ideas you find offensive.

**Personal.** The records might contain very private and intimate information about you or your family members. They might contradict each other and present conflicting information. They might contain information that you know is wrong or that challenges what you have always believed about your family's past and present history.

**But is it true?** Information written down in an official-looking document seems to have a lot of weight (especially to other officials). But you can challenge the official sources and point out biases and inaccuracies. Understanding why records were created will help you to decide how much significance you are going to give to each record that you find.

## Getting support

Indigenous family history research can take you on a very emotional journey. It's a good idea to make sure that someone is with you for support, debriefing and a 'reality check', especially the first time you get access to sensitive records.

Sometimes you may need support because it is just not possible to find what you want to know about your ancestors. You might not be able to prove who your ancestors were. This can be very frustrating and disheartening.

**The bottom line – Make sure you have support!**



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## Indigenous names

Names are a real challenge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history research.

### **Many names may be used throughout a lifetime**

Your ancestor may have used or been known by many names throughout their life:

- a traditional name
- a kinship name
- a European first name and/or surname, sometimes the name of the pastoral station where they worked
- a nickname.

Their name may also have changed with marriage, partnerships, adoption or fostering.

It was common for people to use names that were different from the names they were given at birth. Even today family members might use a name that's different from the one listed on official documentation. For example, Vera Lillian at birth might have been known as Lillian (or Lily, Lilli, Lilly and Lillie) throughout life. Or a woman known as Mary Jane throughout her life might have been Janet May at birth.

Sometimes people chose to change their names and used different names in different circumstances.

But often names were changed by employers or missionaries or when a child was removed to a foster home or training institution.

Indigenous people who performed in rodeos or boxing tents may have been given 'stage names'.

In your family history research you are highly likely to find a range of different names for the same person. You will also probably find some unexpected variations in the spellings of names, especially in older documents.

### **Spelling mistakes**

You will find that some of the problems with names are caused by spelling mistakes. Until very late in the 19th century few people could read and write and names were often written down as they sounded. The result was a lot of errors.



Indigenous names were written down in different ways by different Europeans. For example, an English station manager and a German missionary would spell the same Indigenous name differently because they spoke different languages themselves and heard Indigenous languages through the filter of their own language.

Also common English given names were sometimes abbreviated. For example, Chas for Charles, Geo. for George and Wm for William. Search Wikipedia for a useful list of 'abbreviations for English given names'.

When you are looking for records about your ancestor, it is important to check every known name, nickname and every possible spelling variation you can imagine. When you take notes or compile your own family tree, write people's names out in full and record any variations.

## Key points to remember as you research your ancestors

- Sometimes the only recorded names we have for Aboriginal people, particularly from the 19th century, are nicknames or joke names given to them by Europeans – for example, 'Little Jack', 'Old Mary' and 'Billy Boy'.
- Old records sometimes include terms like 'native' or 'Aboriginal' or 'Aborigine' alongside the names of Aboriginal people. However be aware that the word 'native' was also used on official certificates, such as death certificates, to indicate that a non-Indigenous person was born in Australia rather than having immigrated from England or Europe.
- They may also include 'caste' terms like 'full blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'quadroon', 'octaroon' – derogatory categories used to indicate the 'amount' of Aboriginal heritage a person had etc.
- Many Aboriginal people were known by a single or common first name and no surname – for example, Nellie, Jenny and Lizzy for women, and Bobby, Jimmy and Charlie for men.
- Surnames were often assigned by European employers and Aboriginal people were sometimes given their employer's surname.
- Some surnames were derived from the names of rural properties or places of residence.
- Some Indigenous people adopted aliases to avoid control by police and government.
- Women often used the surname of their male partner or husband, and were known by many different surnames over their lifetime.
- Children often used the surname of a step-father.

- Names differ on documents because they were being recorded by different people. The spelling of names on early official documents such as birth, death and marriage certificates can vary depending on who was giving the information, who was writing the information down, and how neatly or accurately they recorded the names.

## Examples of name variations

### First name

Allen  
Ann  
Barney  
Beverly  
Bill  
Catherine  
Cecil  
Charlotte  
Christine  
Desree  
Dianne  
Doreen  
Dorothy  
Edward  
Elizabeth  
Ellen  
Ernest  
Florence  
Frances  
Francis  
Frederick  
Helen  
Jack  
James  
Jeffrey  
Jessie  
Joseph  
Joyce  
Judith  
Katherine  
Kathleen  
Lesley  
Lynette

### Name variants

Al, Alen, Alan, Allan  
Anne, Hannah,  
Herbert  
Bevely, Bev  
William, Billy, Will  
Cathy, Kate, Kay  
Cec  
Lottie, Tottie  
Christeen, Chris, Crissy, Chrissy, Christie  
Des  
Diane, Dianna, Diana, Di  
Dor  
Dolly, Dot, Dorrie  
Edie, Eddie  
Betty, Bess, Beth, Liz, Lizzie, Eliza, Tibby, Libby  
Nell, Nellie  
Ernist, Ern, Ernie, Erny  
Florrie, Florry, Flo  
Fanny, Fanno, Fran  
Frank  
Fred, Freddy  
Nell  
John  
Jim, Jimmy, Jimmie, Jas  
Jeff, Jefferey, Geoffrey, Geoff  
Jessica Jessy, Jes  
Joe, Jo, Joey  
Joy  
Judy  
Cathy, Kate, Kay  
Kathline, Kath  
Leslie, Les  
Lyn

Margaret  
Marjorie  
Mary  
Matilda  
Michael  
Nancy  
Neville  
Patricia  
Patrick  
Reginald  
Robert  
Ronald  
Stanley  
Steven  
Valerie

Maggie, Meg, Peg, Molly, Daisy  
Marjory, Marj  
Maisie  
Tilly, Mattie, Matie, Tilda, Mathilda  
Mick, Micky  
Agnes, Nance  
Nevil, Nevel, Nev  
Pat, Patty, Trish  
Pat, Paddy  
Reginal, Reg, Reggie  
Rob, Bob, Bobby  
Ron, Ronnie, Ronny  
Stan  
Stephen, Steve  
Valery, Val

**Family name**

Hurley  
Anderson  
Holden  
Hawkins  
Henry

**Alternative name**

Early  
Henderson  
Olden  
Orkins  
Enemy



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## Thinking about place

Place is central in uncovering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history. Knowing where your ancestors lived, worked and travelled is essential for locating relevant records. It also provides clues that help you solve research puzzles.

### **Start with what you already know about where your family lived**

Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Where did your parents meet? Were they married? If so, where? Where were they born and raised? What places do they mention when they are telling stories about their lives?

The most basic piece of information you need is the state or territory. You will need to know this to request birth, death and marriage certificates.. But beyond this, knowing the state or territory will help you locate other records, particularly those created by state, territory and colonial governments in their administration of Aboriginal affairs.

#### **Colonies, states and territories**

Before 1901 Australia's states were separate colonies, with their own governments, laws and policies. The colonies united at Federation and power was then shared between the new federal government and the state governments. The federal government was able to make laws about national matters, like defence, immigration and trade. The states (and later the territories) made other laws, including laws concerning Aboriginal people.

When you know where your family lived, you might also be able to get help from the relevant state and territory government Aboriginal family and community history unit.

Looking at the historical documents you find, keep an eye out for places. Take note of the town or suburb, and the street address if it's given. These details can lead to other sources and other records. Some documents will have names of pastoral stations or other properties.

### **Find out where your ancestors moved**

Did they move between towns and between colonies or states, particularly if they lived near a border? Indigenous Countries nearly always crossed European boundaries. People moved for lots of different reasons – for example, a woman might have moved to her husband's home when she married, or a couple might have moved to find work, or they might have been moved onto a reserve, station or mission. People also travelled to participate in ceremonies. Members of the Stolen Generations who were removed from their families as children were institutionalised, fostered and adopted far from their homes. For example, many children from the Northern Territory were sent to southern states.



If members of your family did move through several states or territories, you will need to search for records and other traces of your ancestors in all of these places.

## Explore the history of the places your ancestors lived

Learn as much as you can about the history of the places where your family lived. Was there an Aboriginal mission, reserve or station in the area? Were particular types of employment associated with the town? Was it a mining town or might your family members have worked on a pastoral property? Knowing this information can help you track down records.

## Language groups and places

Learn as much as you can about the people and language groups that lived in the places where your ancestors lived. Local Land Councils will have extensive information about the people and language groups in that area. Native Title claims are also an excellent source of information.

The AIATSIS map of Aboriginal Australia may help you to identify the language groups associated with particular places. See: [aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aboriginal-australia-map](http://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aboriginal-australia-map)

The AIATSIS Language Groups Thesaurus in Pathways is a comprehensive list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups. See: [www1.aiatsis.gov.au/index.asp](http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/index.asp)

## Create your own map

It can be very helpful to mark the places your ancestors lived on a map. This helps you see how far places were apart and think about how and why your ancestors moved, or were forced to move around. You can use a printed map or one that's online, like Google Maps. Local libraries often have historical maps, including maps of stations and properties. You can also find many maps through searching on the Maps section of [Trove](http://trove.nla.gov.au), a website created by the National Library of Australia. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/map>

## Try to visit

If you can, visit the places where your ancestors lived. The local library, historical society or family history society might have useful information – they often have copies of cemetery records and photographs not available elsewhere. Sometimes Area School libraries have local history information as well as local school records which can help place family members in an area at a certain time.

The local Aboriginal community organisation might be able to connect you with people who knew your family. You might also be able to track down the house your ancestors lived in, or a piece of land they occupied or owned. You might be able to see the places they worked, and get a feel for what their local community was like.



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## Researching one ancestor

The best approach to Indigenous family history research is to start with yourself and work backwards through the generations. However many people want to look for particular people in their family tree and to find out more about them.

This type of research will put you in the same position as a stranger doing research on your ancestors because it means that

- You will only have access to historical information that is publicly available.
- You may not be able to gain access to information where you have to prove your relationship to the person you are researching.

This is frustrating if the reason you want to do research on this person is to prove your relationship to them. This is a very common problem faced by members of the Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trying to find out about family members from whom they were separated.

## What information do you need?

Our experience at the Family History Unit is that people may already have one or more family names, the names of some places where the people they are researching lived, and perhaps information about when and where they died.

If you are in this situation:

- Write down everything you know about the person and try to be as specific as possible about names, dates and places.
- Think about all possible variations of the names and write these down.
- Ask anyone in your family who might have more information or might have photographs or documents. See Sources at home.
- Try to find out if the people lived on missions or reserves or had anything to do with government or church protection or welfare.

## Where do you start?

- Start by searching historical indexes of births, deaths and marriages [BDM]. There is more information about where to find BDM resources in the fact sheet: Sources-birth-death-marriage-records



- Try every possible spelling or name variation. Try very broad searches (just the last name) and scroll through all of the results. If you find something, it will give you a great starting point. If you don't, it suggests that your ancestor's birth, marriage or death was never registered. It might also mean that they used a different name, or the name was misspelled, or the records were lost or destroyed.
  - Do name and place searches in the following indexes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:
- AIATSIS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI)  
<http://aiatsis.gov.au/research/guides-and-resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-biographical-index/search-abi>
- AIATSIS Mura® catalogue <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/using-collection/search-collection>
- Centre for Indigenous Family History Studies (CIFHS) – this website draws together information from publicly available records held in the National Archives and various state archives throughout Australia. <http://www.cifhs.com/> You can do searches on this site by typing the phrase – site:cifhs and then your search terms, such as site:cfhs “angelina”
  - If you think there is a chance that one of the people you are researching might have done military service, search the National Archives of Australia RecordSearch database. For tips on how to do this go to <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/a-z/researching-war-service.aspx> For more information check out: Sources-military-service-records.
  - Explore Indigenous family history resources available for each state and territory (see Where to get help). These guides will give you many ideas and resources.
  - There are also other places to try. These are introduced in different sections of this Kit.

If your name searches don't find the exact people you are looking for, they may locate people with same surname in the same location. Depending on the timeframe and how common the name is, others with the same surname may be part of your extended family. These search results might also give you an idea of places that may be significant.

- You can also contact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history team in the relevant state or territory. Some of these teams sit within government departments and some work out of State Archives. See Where to get help – state or territory.

## Researching places rather than names

Sometimes the best way (or the only way) to find out more about an Indigenous ancestor is to do in-depth research on the places where they lived. Reading histories of places, or histories of people who lived in those places may lead you to information about your ancestor (or at least information about what their lives may have been like).

- The two AIATSIS search engines available on the AIATSIS website -ABI and Mura - will give you a list of material held in the AIATSIS collections about that place. Try and locate life stories of people in a certain place or the history of a family or mission in the area. You can then read about Indigenous people who may have lived at the same time and in the same place as the person you are looking for. If you are fortunate, people in your family might be mentioned in the book.
- A CIFHS search on place will enable you to see if any people are recorded at that place in the CIFHS collection. Remember you need to use the phrase “site:cifhs” and your search term in Google to conduct a search of the records on the site. If you find people at the same place and time, you can then try searching for their names in AIATSIS indexes.

### Other sources of information about places are:

- Google search on placename AND Aboriginal. (Type the word AND in capitals to get google to search for both words). You may find reports or community websites or blogs or other information about the Indigenous history of that place. You are also likely to find language and group names associated with that place.
- Many government bodies publish environmental reports on places that include a significant section on the Indigenous history. These histories will name Aboriginal organisations and individuals who contributed information to the report. For example the Western Sydney Airport Environmental Impact statement has a chapter and a Technical paper on Aboriginal Cultural Heritage which includes information about the Aboriginal organisations involved in consultations. <http://westernsydneyairport.gov.au/media-resources/resources/environmental-assessment/index.aspx>
- The AIATSIS Aboriginal Australia map is also a good source of information about the people and language groups associated with specific areas.

- Once you have a language/group name, you can search for Native Title Claims filed by that group. To do so you do a Google search on the name of the language group AND Native title claim: for example Ngadjuri AND native title claim. Alternatively you can search the by typing the language group name in the “Application Name” search box on the Native Title Register. <http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters/Pages/Search-Register-of-Native-Title-Claims.aspx>

Sometimes the information about a claim includes a list of claimants and their line of descent from original traditional owners. See: AIATSIS Pathways Thesaurus for information on languages and groups. <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/>

## Extend your search net to more general resources

- Search the National Library of Australia’s Trove newspaper database
- Search a genealogical database like Ancestry.com.au or FindMyPast. Both of these require paid subscriptions, but most State and Territory Libraries, local libraries, genealogical societies and and/or local family history groups allow free searching on subscription sites. You might also find information in historical Electoral Rolls which are held in State and Territory libraries.

## Get help from government record agencies

If you haven’t found information that is accessible to the public in the places listed above, you can also apply for access to records that have ‘access conditions’. Restrictions mean that you won’t be able to have access to some records unless you can prove your relationship to the person the records are about. Different groups of government records are restricted for varying lengths of time. These restriction periods also differ between state, territory and commonwealth records. The best way to navigate this often confusing and frustrating situation is to contact the government departments that assist Indigenous Australians to do family history research or contact the Aboriginal Access Team or other archival reference officers in the government archive where the records are held. (See ‘Where to get help’ for the state where your ancestor lived).

### Concerns about privacy and personal records – Access Conditions

It is a source of great frustration to many Indigenous family history researchers that they cannot get access to records they know must be there about their families. Mostly these are government records and mostly they are held by government record authorities such as archives and birth, death and marriage registries.

The record holders must balance the need to protect the privacy of the people records are about – they often contain very personal information – with the needs of the public to have access to information.

Depending on how long ago the records you are seeking were created, you may find that some records are already open access or might become so in a few years. For example with birth, death and marriage records, each year there is a new release of records that fall within the 30 (death), 75 (marriages), 100 (births) year limit. See Sources – birth, death and marriage records for more specific information about Access Conditions.



# AIATSIS

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## Past caring

*This paper by Kim Katon explains why it might be difficult to find records when doing Indigenous family history research.*

In looking beyond our usual professional preoccupations and in thinking about our place in the world as archivists and record keepers it is important to understand that Indigenous Australians have a relationship with records that is significantly different to the majority of other Australians. Considering this different relationship means considering what Indigenous people expect of archivists and other record keepers that other Australians may not.

The conference theme is based on past caring and our roles as mediators between society and records. Past caring therefore incorporates understanding the variety of barriers Indigenous people face in locating and accessing records that relate directly to themselves, their kin and community.

The first and most important aspect to consider is that generally Indigenous people are unaware of what records have been created about them, their families and communities, and the reasons behind their creation. Without this knowledge it is difficult to find a starting point in their search for their history. Therefore, Indigenous people must be informed about the records, the services available and their rights of access as this is one of the biggest barriers to Aboriginal people gaining control over their historical documents and thus their history. People who live in remote areas are often more disadvantaged by their geographical location.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Bringing Them Home Report acknowledged that "...most Aboriginal people do not know about the existence of records, their rights of access, how to go about the search or the availability of assistance" and that "... information about the availability of access to records should be widely communicated through Indigenous communities" (HREOC 1997:340). Further, an "... informed Aboriginal population will have much greater feelings of power over its own destiny" (Henrietta Fourmile in HEROC – 1997:354). Therefore, in looking outside the boundaries of our professions we need to look at, and rethink our history and our positions in relationship to Aboriginal people and existing historical records.

It is important to understand that records pertaining to Indigenous people were created by a range of agencies, for example, Protection and Welfare Boards, Adoption Agencies, Education and Health Departments, Police Forces, Churches, Missionaries, Anthropologists and a range of academics. They were created for a variety of reasons, for example, for the 'protection and care' of Aboriginal people, but most prominently they provided a means of regulating the lives of Aboriginal people. Agencies such as the Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards existed in all states at various times. Most often the Board's representation came through the police force

where police officers were appointed as 'Guardians of Aborigines', thus acting as both protector and prosecutor and in doing so greatly diminished the legal rights of Indigenous Australians. From this imposed relationship came a paper trail documenting a history of oppression.

If we are to appreciate and understand the value of such documentation we must understand and accept that Indigenous people have experienced a different and discriminatory history to mainstream Australian society - a history that has, for the most part, been kept secret. In many cases the secrecy has been achieved through the loss and destruction of records which has often been "... due to concerns their contents would embarrass the government" (HREOC Report 1997:326).

In our professions we are aware that records are owned by those who created them and stored in a variety of places, not only archives and libraries. For many Aboriginal people knowing where to look can be a frustrating barrier as well as going through the process of gaining permission from the owner. Just knowing which agency was involved can be an obstacle as most people searching for family information were children when these records were created. Indexes, guides, databases and finding aids have been produced that can assist people, but generally they are not designed for use by people unaccustomed to research and thus can be seen as yet another barrier.

The history of exclusion from educational institutions for Aboriginal people is yet another barrier when it comes to researching Aboriginal history. It must be remembered that in NSW the authority to exclude an Aboriginal child from school based solely on their Aboriginality remained in the NSW Teacher Handbook until 1972. The consequences of this educational disadvantage is very evident in the low levels of literacy many people experience today and creates a huge barrier when people know that someone else will have to read the documents to them if they are ever to know the contents. It is also sometimes the situation that "...the jargon is simply incomprehensible to many ..." (HREOC Report 1997:343).

This not only causes embarrassment in the initial stages of request for information, but also can cause great distress when a stranger reveals the contents. People have sometimes taken great lengths to put the past in the back of their minds. The emotional responses experienced as a result of the content of these documents vary from happiness to great distress. The records are often written in a very derogatory manner, contain very private and intimate information, have many errors, but can also hold the key to a person's identity. It also causes great distress when people are informed that although the information contained within the document may be incorrect, they can't change it, they can't destroy the document and they can't take it away with them. They also fear what future generations will think when they read these documents, knowing that they will not be alive to explain that they are not true or to explain the situation or event from their perspective. The interpretation of these records therefore raises yet another barrier.

Another issue to consider is that there are not enough Indigenous people employed in the areas where Aboriginal people will be searching. This is slowly changing but the change is far too slow. It is more often the case that Aboriginal people would rather have another Aboriginal person assist them in their research as experience has shown that often the non-Aboriginal archivist or librarian is unaware of the different history Aboriginal people have and therefore can offer no assistance with interpreting the records and as such can be seen as another barrier. More often than not, "Aboriginal people feel ill-at-ease and self-conscious when entering white institutions which emanate an entirely alien cultural presence. So much depends upon the person at the counter" (HREOC Report 1997:343), and hence The Bringing Them Home Report stated that "the role of Indigenous-controlled family tracing and reunion services is therefore critical" (HREOC 1997:339).

Many specialist Indigenous family research services do employ Indigenous staff, for example The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, State Records of New South Wales and State Library of New South Wales. However, agencies find it difficult to employ Aboriginal people because so few Indigenous people are suitably qualified. In addressing this situation HREOC Recommendation 28 states "That the Commonwealth and each State and Territory Government institute traineeships and scholarships for the training of Indigenous archivists, genealogists, historical researchers and counsellors" (HREOC 1997:352) as "Indigenous communities in Australia do not yet control and manage their own completed documentary history" (HREOC 1997:343). Link-Up goes further and "... recommends the establishment of an Aboriginal Archive where all of the departmental records pertaining to Aboriginal people will be consolidated under an Aboriginal-controlled administration with uniform and culturally appropriate access procedures" (HREOC 1997:353). This is supported by a recommendation from the Bringing Them Home Report which clearly states that "... in the longer term Indigenous communities should have an opportunity to manage their own historical documentation" (HREOC 1997:346).

Finally, past caring means understanding the barriers people face and accepting our role as mediators for a nation of Indigenous people who are still very untrusting of government and its agents. The memories of past government and church involvement in their lives are still very fresh. As mediators we can take the opportunity to develop trusting relationships for the future.

Kim Katon (October 2002)  
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