

History Bytes

BUNDABERG'S CONTROVERSIAL MAIN STREET



There are many versions of how Bundaberg's main street was named - from Walker's book to a series of letters written to the *Bundaberg Mail* in 1895 - each with a different explanation. Writers and historians have chosen which version they believe is correct, and confusion reigns to this day as to the 'correct' explanation of the meaning of Bourbon Street.

John Young Walker (1890) - History of Bundaberg :

Bourbon-street, the main thoroughfare and chief business resort, has no connection with the ex-Royal family of France, or with that variety of sugar-cane; but is from 'Boor-bung' a chain of waterholes between the town and Rubyanna. (p.14)

20 Jan, 1895 - Letter to the *Bundaberg Mail*:

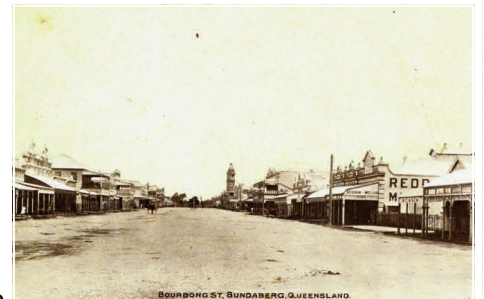
A correspondent writes: - As an old resident of the Wide Bay and Burnett Districts, I was much pleased to find one of your contributors in a recent issue declaiming against the 'g' in our main street. To old-fashioned folk the modern spelling has jarred on our nervous system severely. Someone of an imposing elevation of mind probably thought it did or ought to belong to the aboriginal dialect. As there is no such part of speech as 'bour' in native dialect, the 'bong' meaning dead renders the title silly and unintelligible.

The main street of Bundaberg was named Bourbon by the surveyor who laid the principal sections of the town out for a well-defined and perfectly understandable reason. The first cane planted at Rubyanna came from Bourbon, an island in the West Indies, and that plant bears its French imperial title even unto this day. Why the name borne on every title deed in Bourbon-street was ever locally altered to a meaningless farcicality is beyond the ken of people who have endeavoured the face the varied conditions of the colony for nearly half a century, long before we aspired to the proud distinction of being dubbed Queensland, which gave entry to those who, ignoring our past records, would box up a French imperial standard with an impossible aboriginal sentence. It is to be hoped that those who feel any pride in the town will in all cases drop the g in Bourbon-street - even as the Real Property Office is ever likely to do.

25 Jan, 1895 - Letter to the *Bundaberg Mail*:

Sir - I note in your issue of to-day a paragraph referring to the name of the principal street in your city; possibly I may throw a little light on the subject. As to whether the proper name is Bourbon or Bourbon I do not venture to offer an opinion, but I've heard it asserted that the name is a native or aboriginal one; if so, the name should be Bier-rabong - meaning plenty dead. In the early sixties I knew every inch of country between the Burnett and Kolan Rivers from the sea up to Gin Gin, as at that time my brothers and myself had the Colanne Station.

cont.



bun00383 Bourbon Street



bun00391 Bourbon Street



bun00534 Bourbon Street

Where North Bundaberg now is the blacks called Bierrabong: neither for love nor money could we ever get any blacks to go near the place. We knew it was on account of some superstition, but it was a mere chance that revealed the cause. Two or three of us were one day looking for ebony wood when we suddenly came on a heap of human bones, among which were 15 or 20 skulls. Now the scrub is all clear I can not hit the exact locality, but it could not have been very far from Waterview. At first we thought it was an old burying place of the blacks, but I afterwards learned from a black that it was the spot where the native police had come upon a large camp of blacks and *dispersed* them. Hence the name Bierrabong...

Trusting I've not wearied your readers, Yours, & c., N. Tooth, Maryborough, 18th Jan., 1895.

30 Jan, 1895 - Letter to the *Bundaberg Mail*:

Sir, - Although our town of Bundaberg is scarcely a quarter of a century old very few of its inhabitants seem to be certain as to the origin and correct name of its main street. I was well acquainted with the late Mr J. C. Thompson, licensed surveyor, who selected the site and named the town and principal streets of Bundaberg.

One day, in the early part of June 1873, soon after my arrival in the district, whilst coming up the river in a boat with Mr Thompson, who was then the owner of Rubyanna, our conversation turned on the name of Bundaberg and its streets. Bourbon-street, he said, he named after the sugar cane, which was then a favourite cane, and supposed to be rust-proof. It is only the last few years the g has been added, without any claim to the position whatever. -

Yours, &c., James Drinan, Electra, 23rd January, 1895.

Janette Nolan (1978) - Bundaberg - history & people

J.Y. Walker held that Thompson and Edwards in naming the streets euphonized local Aboriginal words, and that *Bourbon* originated in *boorbung* denoting the chain of waterholes which used to stretch between Rubyanna and the town...some believe that *Bourbung* is the phonetic spelling of the French *Bourbon*. This was the name given to one of the few varieties of cane grown before 1875...Thompson, with his plans for a sugar plantation and mill, may have decided that Bourbon was an auspicious name for one of Bundaberg's main streets.

(p. 86)

Neville Rackemann (1992) - Bundaberg - from Pioneers to Prosperity

The naming of Bundaberg's main streets was left to the surveyors. It was assistant surveyor Edwards who preferred Aboriginal names. The main thoroughfare was named Bourbon Street. Many people, especially senior citizens, are under the impression that up until the late 1930s the spelling had always been 'Bourbon'; this is incorrect...

Up until 1940 the (use) of 'Bourbung' and 'Bourbon' was near enough to equal. From 1941 on, I found no reference to 'Bourbon' Street. Regardless of the spelling of Bundaberg's main street, it is extremely doubtful whether it had anything to do with an old French royal family or a variety of sugarcane. In all probabilities the name is derived from an aboriginal word *boorbung*, the name for a chain of waterholes in the Rubyanna area. This is borne out by the fact that Robert Strathdee's selection in the vicinity of the lagoons was once recorded on a survey map as 'Boorbung'. (p.48)

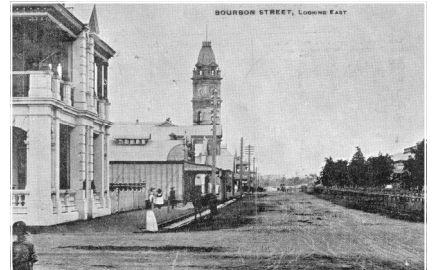
Sue Gammon
Bundaberg Library

References

Bundaberg Mail. January 20, 25 & 30, 1895.
Nolan, Janette. 1978. *Bundaberg: History & people*. UQ Press, St Lucia.
Rackemann, Neville. 1992. *Bundaberg - from Pioneers to Prosperity*. BCC, Bundaberg.
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bun00572 Bourbon Street



bun00882 Bourbon Street



bun00888 Bourbon Street



bun00899 Bourbon Street



bun00911 Bourbon Street

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