

# NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

## MINI NEWSLETTER No. 24

### The Second Battle of Vinegar Hill – The Castle Hill Rebellion

The **Castle Hill rebellion** of 1804 was a rebellion by convicts against the colonial authority of the British colony of New South Wales in the Castle Hill area, in Sydney. The rebellion culminated in a battle fought between convicts and the colonial forces of Australia on 5 March 1804 at Rouse Hill, dubbed the **Second Battle of Vinegar Hill** after the first Battle of Vinegar Hill which had taken place in 1798 in Ireland. It was the first major convict uprising in Australian history suppressed under martial law.

On 4 March 1804, according to the official accounts, 233 convicts led by Philip Cunningham (a veteran of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, as well as a mutiny on the convict transport ship *Anne*) escaped from a prison farm intent on "capturing ships to sail to Ireland". In response, martial law was quickly declared in the Colony of New South Wales. The mostly Irish rebels, having gathered reinforcements, were hunted by the colonial forces until they were caught on 5 March 1804 on a hillock nicknamed Vinegar Hill. While negotiating under a flag of truce, Cunningham was arrested. The troops then charged, and the rebellion was crushed. Nine of the rebel leaders were executed and hundreds were punished before martial law was finally revoked a week after the battle.

#### Rising

Many convicts in the Castle Hill area had been involved in the 1798 rebellions in Ireland and subsequently transported as exiles-without-trial to the Colony of New South Wales from late 1799. Phillip Cunningham, a veteran of the 1798 rebellion, and William Johnston, another Irish convict at Castle Hill, planned an uprising in which over 685 convicts at Castle Hill intended to meet with nearly 1,100 convicts from the Hawkesbury River area, rally at Constitution Hill, and march on Parramatta and then Sydney (Port Jackson) itself. According to Helen Mackay, their goal was to establish Irish rule in the colony and obtain ships for those that wanted to return to Ireland to help revive the failed Irish Rebellion of 1803.

On the evening of 4 March 1804, John Cavenah set fire to his hut at Castle Hill at 8:00 as the signal for the rebellion to begin. While this fire was not seen by the convicts at Green Hills, today's Windsor, on the Hawkesbury River, Cunningham activated the plan to gather weapons, ammunition, food and recruits from local supporters and the government farm at Castle Hill. With Cunningham leading, about 200 to 300 rebels broke into the Government Farm's buildings, taking firearms, ammunition, and other weapons. The constables and overseers were overpowered, and the rebels then went from farm to farm on their way to Constitution Hill at Parramatta, seizing more weapons and supplies including rum and spirits, and recruiting others to join their cause. Their move had been informed from the intelligence gathered a year previous when 12 convicts escaped from Castle Hill, seeking out friends and sympathisers in the surrounding districts. On capture each and every one had the same story – they were heading to China by crossing over the Blue Mountains.

#### Initial government response

When news of the uprising spread there was great panic amongst the colony of around 5,000 inhabitants with officials such as Samuel Marsden fleeing the area by boat, escorting Elizabeth Macarthur and her children, as an informer had advised that an attack would be made on the farm to draw troops away from Parramatta. In Sydney, following news from Parramatta, Governor Philip Gidley King set off alone for Parramatta to assume command, while Lieutenant Colonel William Paterson, the lieutenant governor, called out the guard. One hundred and forty men from HMS *Calcutta*, as well as the Sydney Loyal Association militia, took over guard duties, and a New South Wales Corps contingent of 56 personnel including Lieutenant William Davies and Quartermaster Sergeant Thomas Laycock were dispatched to march through the night to bolster the garrison at Parramatta. Meanwhile, the provost marshal, Thomas Smyth, was sent ahead to contact Major George Johnston at Annandale. The troops from Sydney arrived at 1:30 am, and after a quick inspection an advanced guard was sent to the west of the town. Johnston arrived at Government House in Parramatta about four hours later not long after King had declared martial law under the Mansfield doctrine of posse comitatus.

King's proclamation of martial law applied to a wide area extending from Castle Hill to the Hawkesbury and Nepean areas, and empowered citizens in the area to detain those who lacked the appropriate passes. A curfew had also been enacted and an amnesty declared, which gave those who were involved 24 hours to surrender.

On Johnston's arrival at Parramatta, King delivered his orders, in writing, to Johnston and then verbally to his small detachment. Johnston was to proceed to the western gate of the park around Government House, where the rebels had been seen a few hours earlier. If they were not there, he was ordered to exploit towards Toongabbie and Castle Hill to locate them and then await further orders. He was also empowered to fire upon anyone who did not obey his directions.

Shortly after 5:00 am, Johnston set out to locate the main rebel force. In addition to the troops he had brought with him, a number of civilians volunteered along with the 36 armed members of the Parramatta Loyal Association militia were also called out and took over defence of the town. Over 50 enrolled in a reserve militia combined with the NSW Corps to march out and confront the rebels. Johnston decided to advance in two columns, one which he led himself towards Toongabbie, and another under a subaltern, Davies, which was sent along the Castle Hill Road.

### **Rebels prepare**

Meanwhile, the rebels at Constitution Hill (Toongabbie) were having difficulties co-ordinating their force as several parties, including one of around 70 men under Samuel Humes, had lost their way in the night. Nevertheless, Cunningham and William Johnston commenced drilling their men, while a party unsuccessfully tried to enter Parramatta, where they were to set fire to a building to signal other conspirators to begin converging on Constitution Hill. Cunningham, being involved in two previous rebellions and the mutiny on the *Anne*, knew from experience that the most important element of a rebellion or uprising would be secrecy. However, there were two defections: an Irish convict overseer named Sloane, and Lewis Bulger. The commandant at Parramatta, Captain Edward Abbott, who had warning of the rebellion as it was happening, commenced defensive measures and sent a message to the governor in Sydney.



***George Johnston, who led the military response to the rebellion, as a lieutenant colonel in 1810.***

With their courier, John Griffen, having had second thoughts about passing on the instructions Cunningham had given him to pass on to Brian Furey and subsequently being arrested, the call out messages to Windsor, Parramatta and Sydney failed, and the uprising was confined to west of the Parramatta area. After fruitlessly waiting for a signal of a successful internal takeover of Parramatta, and the non-appearance of reinforcements, Cunningham was forced to withdraw from Parramatta to Toongabbie to re-assess his strategy. Having already declared his hand, and deprived of both surprise and facing a superior and well disciplined force of Red Coats and enthusiastic militia, the uprising under Cunningham had no recourse but to withdraw west towards the Hawkesbury hoping to pick up more recruits and meeting his missing forces on the way to add to his forces.

Knowing that going forward would only see more death and possible routing, they quickly moved westward hoping to join up with those now heading east from Green Hills (Windsor) to meet in the area of today's Rouse Hill and Kellyville, recruiting or impressing against their will a number of convicts along the way. (Those later giving evidence stated they were press-ganged into service in hope of lessening their punishment.) During this phase they obtained around a third of the entire colony's armaments. Their numbers had dwindled to several hundred, eventually reaching a total of 233 as reported in the Government controlled newspaper of the time. During the short period of the rebellion while at Constitution Hill, Cunningham

was elected "King of the Australian Empire", and his followers declared the area "New Ireland".

### **Battle**

Major Johnston's contingent, wearied by their night march, needed time to close with the retreating rebels, who were reported to number around 400, so he rode after them with a small mounted party to implement delaying tactics, while the rest of his party completed the 4 miles (6.4 km) march to Toongabbie. Initially, it was believed that the rebels were at Toongabbie, but on arrival Johnston was informed that they had moved on to Constitution Hill. A small party under a corporal was sent to outflank this position, while an assault force of around a dozen men advanced on the summit, only to find it abandoned, with the rebels having moved off towards the Hawkesbury, about 17 miles (27 km) away. As the morning progressed, the heat of the day threatened to stymie the efforts of the marching troops who were poorly equipped for the pursuit. Nevertheless, about 6 miles (9.7 km)

from Toongabbie, Johnston located the main rebel party of around 230 to 260 men near Rouse Hill, Johnston first sent his mounted trooper on to call the rebels to surrender and take the benefit of the Governor's amnesty for early surrender. This failing, he dispatched Roman Catholic priest Father James Dixon to appeal to them. Next he rode up himself, appealing to them, then got their agreement to hear Father Dixon again.

Meanwhile, the pursuing forces had closed up and Major Johnston with Trooper Thomas Anlezark, from the Governor's Body Guard of Light Horse, approached them again to parley, calling down the leaders Cunningham and William Johnston from the hill. Demanding their surrender, he received the response "Death or Liberty" from Cunningham, to which some were reported to have added "and a ship to take us home", although this was only once recorded some time later by Suttor.

With the NSW Corps and militia now formed up in firing lines behind him Major Johnston and Anlezark produced pistols duping, while under truce, the two leaders of the uprising, and escorting them back to the Red Coat's lines. Quartermaster Sergeant Thomas Laycock, on being given the order to engage, directed over fifteen minutes of musket fire, then charged cutting Cunningham down with his cutlass. The now leaderless rebels first tried to fire back, but then broke and dispersed.

During the battle (at least) fifteen rebels had fallen, according to official reports, Major Johnston prevented further bloodshed and killings by threatening his troops with his pistol tempering their enthusiasm. Several convicts were captured and an unknown number killed in the pursuit which went up to Windsor all day until late in the night, with new arrivals of soldiers from Sydney joining in the search for rebels. It is reported that gun shots could be heard up to a fortnight after such was the settling of old scores. On Wednesday, 7 March Governor King announced that those that surrendered before 10 March would receive leniency and following this large parties who lost their way in the night turned themselves in under the amnesty or made their way back to Castle Hill where a large party of about 70 under Samuel Humes were captured by a detachment of the Loyal Parramatta Association.



***A painting by an unknown artist is of the Battle of Vinegar Hill, where several hundred convicts broke out of Castle Hill prison farm to take on the British redcoats. Photo: National Library of Australia***

## Aftermath

According to the official records of the day, around 230 were eventually brought in over next few days and of the convicts directly engaged in the battle, 15 were killed, and 9 including the ringleaders Cunningham and Johnston were executed, with two, Johnson and Humes, subjected to gibbeting. Two men, John Burke and Bryan McCormack, were reprieved and detained at the Governor's pleasure, seven were whipped with 200 or 500 lashes then allotted to the Coal River chain gang, while 23 others, including Cavenah were sent to the Newcastle coal mines. Another 34 prisoners were placed in irons until they could be "disposed of". It is not known whether some, or all of them, were sent to the Coal River. Of the remaining rebels, some were put on good behaviour orders against a trip to Norfolk Island, while the majority were pardoned and allowed to return to their places of employment as having been coerced into the uprising.

Cunningham, badly wounded but still alive, was court martialled under the martial law and hanged at the Commissariat Store at Windsor, which he had bragged he would burn down. Initially, military officers were intent on hanging a token number of those captured having convened a military court at the Whipping Green but this was quickly stopped by Governor Gidley King fearful of the repercussions.

Martial law was eventually lifted on 10 March 1804, but this did not end the insurgency. Irish plots continued to develop, keeping the Government and its informers vigilant, with military call out rehearsals continuing over the next three years. Governor King remained convinced that the real inspirers of revolt had kept out of sight, and had some suspects sent to Norfolk Island as a preventive measure.

## Location

The battle site is believed to be to the east of the site of the Rouse Hill Estate, and it is likely that Richard Rouse, a staunch establishment figure, was subsequently given his grant at this site specifically to prevent it becoming a significant site for Irish convicts. "The Government Farm at Castle Hill", a plot of land around 60 hectares (150 acres), was added in March 1806 to the (now defunct) Register of the National Estate, as a special place of international and Australian significance. Residential development has significantly diminished the area of the prison town. Less than 20 hectares (49 acres) has remained undeveloped and conserved, as Castle Hill Heritage Park, established in 2004. There is a sculpture near the battle site at Castlebrook Cemetery commemorating the sacrifice. However, there is some debate as to where the battle actually occurred.

## Commemoration

The bicentenary of the rebellion was commemorated in 2004, with a variety of events. The re-enactment in 2004 was significant in that exact numbers were recruited to form the rebels, the militia and the military. The event

was held in close proximity to the original site on a similar landscape. The re-enactment was recorded by the ABC.

In addition, the battle has been depicted on screen. An Australian 1978 TV series, *Against the Wind*, included a dramatization over two episodes of the build-up to and ultimate defeat of the rebellion. A monument commemorating the battle was erected at Castlebrook Memorial Park, on Windsor Road, Rouse Hill. It was dedicated on 5 March 1988.



**Location of the battlefield within the modern**

**Sydney area**

***Edited from Wikipedia***