

Aboriginal Girls Home

1899 – 1906

Other Names: • Reserve for Aboriginal Girls

Details

The Aboriginal Girls Home was situated in a house at West End called Cranbrook, in the vicinity of Victoria and Kurilpa streets. It acted as a receiving depot for Aboriginal domestic servants from all over Queensland. Any single girl or woman travelling through Brisbane, visiting for medical attention or between domestic service stints was forced to stay there. It was governed by the provisions of the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*. Under the protection act, the Home was classified as a 'reserve' in 1904.

The 1897 Act and the subsequent amending Acts of 1901, 1927, 1928 and 1934 gave the Chief Protector of Aboriginals enormous control over the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Frankland, 1994). It was "the first comprehensive Aboriginal protection act in Queensland and, indeed, in Australia; it ushered in the long era of protection and segregation during which Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders lost their legal status as British citizens and became, in effect, wards of the state" (Henry Reynolds, quoted in Kidd, 1997).

Link Up Queensland writes that:

Many Aboriginal girls and young women forcibly removed were trained in domestic work as servants for whites. The home played a vital role in the forcible separation of Aboriginal girls and young women from their communities; their subsequent employment as domestic servants and the removal and separation of any children that the young women may have had to orphanages and children's homes (Link Up Queensland, 2018).

Kidd writes that the Aboriginal Girls Home operated to keep girls off the streets and out of disreputable hotels and boarding houses. The Home closely monitored the movements of "girls", even though many were legally immune from the 1897 Act, if they had commenced employment before the protection law was passed (p.55). Domestic service was the principal field of employment for Aboriginal females in Queensland during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Shirleene Robinson writes that "this type of labour was physically laborious, emotionally exhausting, and low-paying ... A substantial number of Aboriginal workers employed in this field were children". Robinson states that in the period from the passage of the 1897 protection act up to World War II, the majority of Aboriginal children employed as domestic servants were aged 12-14 (Robinson, 2003, p.162, p.164).

An article from 1900 described the Home:

The dormitory contains eight beds, and several of the inmates are accommodated with comfortable "shakedown" on the veranda. The dining-room, kitchen, and storeroom are kept clean and tidy. The other rooms are the matron's office, the matron's sleeping chamber, and a room for a black married couple. The

man is kept on the premises as a necessary precaution (Telegraph, 30 January 1900).

In 1899, the Home was under the jurisdiction of Frances Meston who was appointed Protector of Aborigines (Female). She was the wife of Archibald Meston, Queensland's Southern Protector of Aborigines. The Protectress supervised girls sent to work as domestics in and around Brisbane. An article in *The Truth* stated that for 3 years before the establishment of the Home, Mrs Meston had been "gratuitously" looking after Aboriginal women "passing through Brisbane or engaging in service" (*Truth*, 17 July 1904).

In January 1900, it was reported that Meston and the Home's matron, Mrs Vowles, had both tendered their resignations, because of differences with the Colonial Secretary about the management of the girls (*The Telegraph*, 30 January 1900). An article published years later suggested that the disagreement arose when Meston wanted to raise one of the women in service's wages (*Truth*, 17 July 1904).

The next Protectress was Mary Easter Frew. She reported 61 women at service under her protection in October 1902. At that time there were 7 women, 2 girls and 5 children living in the Home at West End. Frew was appointed Superintendent of the Home in March 1904.

Until 1904, Queensland had two positions for Aboriginal Protectors, one for the North and one for the South. In March 1904, Walter Roth, who had been the Northern Protector, was appointed Chief Protector for Queensland. According to Kidd, this administrative change was also accompanied by cost cutting measures. Archibald Meston, who had been the Southern Protector, objected to the new system.

Nor was Mr Meston a supporter of Mrs Frew. In 1901, Meston wrote to the Under Secretary, Home Office to inform them that the Aboriginal Girls Home, "under the present Matron, is regarded as a jail and she herself as a very unsympathetic jailer". See Archibald Meston to the Under Secretary, Home Office, 25 February 1901, in-letter 03291 of 1901, COL/145, Queensland State Archives.

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Kidd writes of a policy that would have affected women at the Aboriginal Girls Home, where all wages of female workers were paid to the local protector who would act as trustee of the individual accounts (Kidd, 1997, p.57).

Women under the control of the Aboriginal Girls Home and its superintendent Mrs Frew made complaints about the way their wages were being handled. An article in the *Truth* from October 1904 stated that the newspaper had been the recipient of many complaints from girls at the Home,

who seem to have plenty of nous, to the effect that the clothing provided for them by the protectress is not nearly of the value she claims for it, that in fact, she takes an unfair advantage of her position as the custodian of their banking accounts and that their hard earnings are made to disappear without there being much of a wardrobe supplied to compensate for the loss of them (Truth, 30 October 1904).

The *Truth* newspaper led a campaign against the Home, characterising it as a "farce representing a scandalous waste of public money", due to the fact that no women lived in the Home at all as they were all out at service – "It has merely become a place of call where half a dozen meet on Sunday" (*Truth*, 27 August 1905).

Following the complaints made by the women, there was a full government enquiry that determined that Frew had misappropriated funds belonging to Aboriginal workers. An Auditor-General's report tabled in August 1906 stated that Frew's accounts were "kept in a most unsatisfactory manner. No proper register of the amounts paid by the employers was kept" (*Brisbane Courier*, 2 August 1906).

In May 1906, it was reported that Frew had resigned. Mary McKeown was subsequently appointed as “Protector of Aboriginals and Superintendent of the Reserve for Aboriginals at South Brisbane” (*Brisbane Courier*, 7 June 1906).

Mr Roth resigned as Chief Protector in August 1906. He made a comment to the press about the difficulty of controlling Aboriginal young women once they were over the age of 16. He described women leaving the Aboriginal Girls Home as a particular problem, given that they “cannot be legally deported against her will, and for her own sake, to a home or to a reserve” (*The Register*, 10 August 1906).

The Aboriginal Girls Home closed sometime in late 1906.

Today, a set of concrete steps leading down to the river in Orleigh Park are surviving remnants of “Cranbrook”, the large timber house that was the location of the Aboriginal Girls Home. In 1998 a plaque was installed in the park recognising the land’s connection with the Stolen Generations (Brisbane City Council).

Gallery



Cranbrook House at West End

Description: This is a copy of a photo showing the building that was the location of the Aboriginal Girls Home from 1899-1906. It was published in [an article in the Brisbane Times](#) in 2016.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Chief Protector of Aboriginals Office, State Government of Queensland \(25 March 1904 - 12 October 1939\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, Queensland \(1897 - 1939\)](#)

Resources

- Aborigines Welfare Board of New South Wales, [Dawn and New Dawn 1952-1975: A magazine for the Aboriginal people of New South Wales](#), 2004
- [Home for Aboriginal Women](#), The Brisbane Courier, 20 January 1900
- West End Streaming, [Sam Watson talks about Cranbrook House and Sorry Day - 2016](#), 2020

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Records \(1880s - current\)](#)
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