

# Fantome Island Lazaret

1939 – 1973

## Details

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The Fantome Island Lazaret, in the Palm Island Group off the coast of Townsville, was established for the detention and treatment of non-European suffers from Hansen's Disease, more commonly known as leprosy. Run by the Queensland government, it opened in 1939 and closed in 1973.

[Taken from 'Fantome Island Lock Hospital and Lazaret Sites', Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, 2013]

The Fantome Island Lazaret (or leprosarium) was run by the State government and operated between 1939 and 1973. The State government policy for dealing with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander people who suffered from sexually transmitted infection (STI) and leprosy, was to isolate them from the rest of society. Aboriginal people were removed to Fantome Island under the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 that allowed the government to set up reserves to detain Aborigines.

By 21 September 1939, six of the twelve huts erected were occupied by Hansen's lepers from North Queensland. On 10 January 1940, 49 Aboriginal patients from Peel Island arrived on Fantome Island to join the 26 local patients already there.

The government Director-General of Health and Medical Services within Queensland's Department of Health and Home Affairs, Raphael Cilento, suggested using nuns from the nursing branch of a religious body to overcome the difficulty of finding staff willing to work with Hansen's disease or STI patients. On 1 March 1940 four nuns of the Order of Our Lady Help of Christians (OLHC) arrived on Fantome Island to assist with the medical treatment of patients. In December 1944, seven nuns of the Order of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) replaced the OLHC nuns on Fantome Island.

European staff accommodation was segregated from that of non-European staff and patients and unmarried male and female patients were housed separately.

Although the residents on the island endeavoured to be self-sufficient during the 1940s, external supplies of food were required. Many complaints related to the quality of food supplied to patients and staff were received by government health authorities. The lack of proper nutrition in conjunction with inferior medical treatment was thought to contribute to the high mortality rate on the island.

In September 1941 Fantome Island was divided into two reserves. The northern portion became a reserve for lepers; while the central and southern portions became a reserve for Aborigines suffering from venereal disease. The Fantome Island Lock Hospital closed on 31 August 1945 and 13 patients were transferred to the existing hospital on Palm Island.

The introduction in the 1940s of Sulphone drugs to treat Hansen's Disease reduced the number of deaths and led to an increase in the number of patients discharged. However, new patients were still sent to the island. In 1945 Joe Eggmolesse was diagnosed with leprosy at the age of seven. He was taken from his family under police escort and transported to Fantome Island where he was incarcerated for the next ten years.

The improvement in medical treatment did not extend to other areas in the lives of patients. During the 1950s criticism of the management of Fantome Island increased, with organisations such as the Australian Leprosy Campaign Committee and the Fantome Island Relatives and Friends Association lobbying the government for improved rights and conditions at the lazaret and calling for the end of isolation of patients.

Controversy surrounding the administration of the Fantome Island Lazaret continued throughout the 1960s and up until its closure on 3 August 1973. In mid-August 1973, the complex was burnt by the Health Department.

Remains of the Lock Hospital and Lazaret are still visible on the island.

## Gallery

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### Living Quarters on Fantome Island

**Description:** This is an image of the living quarters at the Fantome Island Lazaret. It shows many small shacks laid out in a cleared area of bush, with more shacks and possibly larger buildings visible in the background. The image was published with an article about the Lazaret in *Catholic Weekly* on 6 April 1950.

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### Fantome Island Trailer

**Description:** In 1945 seven year-old Joe Eggmolesse was diagnosed with Leprosy. He was taken from his family under police escort, transported by rail and sea over a thousand kilometres to Fantome Island where he was to be incarcerated for the next ten years.

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### Church and buildings on Fantome Island, North Queensland, 1961

**Description:** This is a photograph of buildings on Fantome Island. The photograph was taken from offshore, and shows a red and white church and several other single-storey buildings situated just back from the beach at Fantome island. This photo is part of a collection of photographs of North Queensland taken by Dr Ted Freeman and held by City of Townsville library.

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### Small cottages on concrete slabs on Fantome Island, Queensland

**Description:** This is a photograph of some of the resident cottages at Fantome Island. It shows five small wood-framed huts with tin sheet roofs and shuttered windows, approximately 2 by 3 meters in size. The huts are all built on concrete slabs, and surrounded by sand. There is a large hill in the background.

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## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Health and Home Affairs Department \(5 December 1935 - 26 September 1963\)](#)  
Date: 1939 - 1963
- [Health Department, State Government of Queensland \(26 September 1963 - 3 April 2012\)](#)  
Date: 1963 - 1973

#### Related Legislation

- [Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, Queensland \(1897 - 1939\)](#)  
Aboriginal people were moved to Fantome Island under the provisions of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act.
- [Health Act 1937, Queensland \(1937 - current\)](#)  
Fantome Island was declared a lazaret and patients suffering from leprosy were moved to the island under the provisions of the Health Act of 1937.
- [Leprosy Act 1892, Queensland \(1892 - 1937\)](#)  
The Leprosy Act provided for the treatment of lepers as well as their detention and isolation. It also allowed for the government to appoint any place to be a lazaret for the reception and medical treatment of lepers.

#### Related Organisations

- [Franciscan Missionaries of Mary \(1941 - current\)](#)
- [Peel Island Lazaret \(31 May 1907 - 5 August 1959\)](#)  
Non-European patients were moved from Peel Island to Fantome Island in 1940.
- [Fantome Island Lock Hospital \(1928 - 1945\)](#)  
Fantome Island Lazaret and the Fantome Island Lock Hospital were co-located on Fantome Island between 1939 and 1973

## Resources

- [At Fantome Island](#), Cairns Post, 13 February 1930
- [Coloured Lepers at Fantome Island](#), Courier Mail, 11 January 1940

## Records

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

### Records

- [Card Index of Leper Patients at Peel and Fantome Islands \(24 September 1923 - 8 August 1939\)](#)
  - [General Correspondence Files - Un-numbered, Palm Island Settlement correspondence \(3 June 1947 - c. 31 December 1981\)](#)
  - [Lazaret Patient Registers \(2 March 1892 - 27 September 1984\)](#)
  - [Special Batches \[Correspondence Files of the Colonial Secretary's Office and Health Departments\] \(1852 - 1975\)](#)
  - [Correspondence Files \[Offices of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals and Director of Native Affairs\] \(1901 - 1944\)](#)
  - [Correspondence - Alphanumeric Prefix - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1909 - 1992\)](#)
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