Cover images: A surveyor’s chain, with 66 one-foot links, typical of the technology used at the time of Federation (top), image courtesy of the National Capital Authority; Canberra map produced by Arthur L Lloyd and Walter Liberty Vernon in August/September 1906 (bottom), image courtesy of National Archives of Australia. See pp.23-24 in this booklet.
Canberra
Maps and Makers
Greg Wood

A publication of the Chief Minister’s Department, ACT Government – to commemorate the Centenary of Canberra, 1913–2013
A selection of the renderings that comprised the entry (#29 of 137) by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin in the 1911-12 international competition to design Australia's new capital city. Griffin biographer Alasdair McGregor describes the renderings as 'a beguilingly simple suite of drawings … a tour de force of graphic art …'
These days we take it for granted that Canberra is Australia’s capital. Could it ever have been otherwise? Could the city ever have been built somewhere else, to other than Walter Burley Griffin’s elegant design?

In fact, each of these steps, that in hindsight seems irresistible and obvious, was only decided after prolonged debate, the outcome of which was for so long uncertain. This booklet recounts the ‘Battle of the Sites’ and considers the decisions that shaped the location of the capital. It does so through the use of key maps, drawn over a century ago, which help to explain the considerations and introduce some of the impressive personalities who influenced the outcome.
A National Capital

Australia finally federated in 1901, the six separate colonies becoming States of one Australian nation, the culmination of a decade of subtle and complex negotiations over a constitution to determine the way the new Commonwealth would be governed. When the outcome was put to the vote it was close run: New South Wales unenthusiastic, initially at least; Queensland confused; Western Australia tardy to commit. The residents of one New South Wales country town, Queanbeyan, voted against Federation by 770 to 623.

Just where to locate the national capital was one question the negotiators approached with the utmost caution. No individual State was keen to see another’s capital become the national capital – for example, New South Wales did not want Melbourne to have that role, nor would the Victorians countenance Sydney. Parochial pride was a factor, as was the fear that another State’s concerns could excessively influence and preoccupy the national agenda. More tellingly, for this proud young nation the national capital would be a statement: of its newfound unity, aspirations, capacities and, in time, its achievements. At a practical level, the capital would be the meeting place for the Commonwealth Parliament and the site of the seat of government.

Initially, the draft Australian Constitution left it to the Federal Parliament, once elected, to decide the capital’s location. However, in 1899, late in the negotiations, the relevant provision was amended with the aim of enticing the less than enthusiastic New South Wales voters to support Federation. Under the revised formula, Section 125 of the Constitution, the national capital was to be in New South Wales but no closer than 100 miles to Sydney, and within a Federal Territory of not less than 100 square miles. Until the site was selected, and the capital built, the Parliament would meet in Melbourne. Some in New South Wales suspected that the cunning Victorians intended to make permanent that temporary arrangement. To thwart such a possibility, soon after the deal was finalised and even before the Commonwealth had actually come into being, New South Wales appointed Alexander Oliver, the President of the New South Wales Land Appeal Court, to begin a search for suitable sites. Besides the constitutional requirements of Section 125, when weighing the alternatives, Oliver had to consider both practicalities and aesthetics.
Why Maps?

A great deal of information about national capital site selection is only available from the maps drawn at the time, mainly because maps are the easiest way to show the location of a town, the distance between two places, the course of a river, or the direction of a road or a railway. Similarly, it is natural to use a map if you need to show a border (between countries or states) to define sovereignty or to indicate land ownership.

Understanding most maps does not require special expertise. However, maps do require a thoughtful and sceptical eye. Sometimes they depict exactly what’s there; surveyors and cartographers as professionals are committed to precision. However, sometimes maps convey an idea, something the mapmaker would like to see happen. Maps can be drawn to inform, advertise, persuade and change the way we think, even to deceive.

Questions arise. What was the person who drew the map wanting to tell us and why? Who commissioned the map, who drew it, based on what information, who signed it, who saw it, when and why?

To provide a more detached and informed basis for national capital site decisions in Australia, two Royal Commissions were established, one by the New South Wales Government, one by the Commonwealth. Besides the Royal Commissioners themselves, each Commission relied on the advice of numerous experts — architects, surveyors, engineers, meteorologists, cartographers and geologists — many illustrating their analysis through cartography.

There can be thousands of copies of a particular map, a street directory for example. Another map may be unique, tucked away in a library or archive, only one copy existing, or at least existing in a particular form, maybe with hand-drawn changes to an earlier printed version of that map. Certainly that is the case with some of the maps included here. Normal practice was to print and publish the maps and expert studies that were relevant to national capital site selection; the Commonwealth and the New South Wales Parliaments routinely did so. However, sometimes maps and plans were briefly displayed, then pigeon-holed, possibly because of disagreement between governments, possibly because they were costly to print. Left in manuscript, discounted and dismissed, they were quickly lost to sight and overlooked. Historically important, some of the maps that tell the Canberra story are very rare indeed, long-lost treasure: Maps 5, 6 and 7 (pp. 19–23) fall into that category. Equally, it is of concern for Canberra’s compelling story that much of the cartographic record seems to have been lost.

Usually, maps are the work of experts. One risk is that by concentrating on them we overlook the part played by the talented politicians of the era, the press and the public. All contributed significantly to the capital selection question, with ideas as well as influence and ultimately, in the case of the politicians, by their actual decisions.
What Shaped the Site Decision?

When it came to practicalities, Australia at the time of Federation was a different place to the one we know today. While most Australians lived in the State capitals or in large towns, the economy was still heavily rural-reliant, recovering from a banking crisis and an economic depression. New South Wales, yet again, was experiencing severe drought.

It was still a horse and buggy era, though cars were starting to appear. The New South Wales road system was rudimentary, with driving difficult and often hazardous. Rail and sea transport were the main ways of moving people and goods over a long distance. However, the efficiency of rail transport was compromised by each State’s obstinate decision to operate its respective rail system on a different rail-gauge; both passengers and freight alike needed to be unloaded and re-loaded at a State border. And of course there were no aircraft: the Wright brothers’ first flight would take place in the United States two years hence, in 1903.

Notwithstanding the improving rail and road networks, each town relied heavily on local suppliers for its fresh farm produce, milk, meat and vegetables, and for hay, firewood and building materials. The new capital would need to do likewise.

Only limited mechanical equipment was available for construction activity which depended on muscles, both of man and beast, plus explosives. There were no bulldozers or similar heavy earth moving equipment. ‘Traction engines’, to haul heavy loads, were starting to be used but they did great damage to the roads.

Electricity was mainly being used in factories, for tramways, and for some domestic and civic lighting but certainly not for the myriad number of uses we put it to today. It was only twenty years since Thomas Edison had developed a practical electric light globe. The transmission of electricity over long distances was not technically feasible (though it was a gleam in the engineer’s eye), so electrical power had to be generated near the consumer.

As he began his search, Alexander Oliver asked an expert panel to describe the features they saw as essential for the city site. They responded, in language that seems rather old fashioned today:

> From an architectural, sanitary, and engineering point of view, the … ideal site … should be a stretch of gently undulating country, the slopes of which [are] of sufficient fall for drainage purposes, and admitting of the construction of streets of easy grade. [It should be] contiguous to a river, out of the reach of floods and free from fogs. [It should have] … gently rising ground, containing a few depressions readily convertible into small lakes, and the site itself surrounded by commanding hills – preferably in the form of an amphitheatre, or rather semi amphitheatre … and present the artistic features essential for the development of a really beautiful city.

> The site should be within easy distance of an ample water supply, admitting of the creation and maintenance of the artificial lakes which should constitute a leading feature of its public gardens … In order that the sanitary conditions may be satisfactory, it is important that the subsoil should not be clay. … It would be advantageous for the city to have a north easterly aspect, and … be well sheltered.

Parliamentary and public discussion generated other requirements. Obviously the capital had to be readily accessible, particularly by rail. Many felt it was desirable that it have a cool climate. It needed productive farm land to supply food, plus local stone and timber for building. A significant concern at the time was for the capital to be safe from armed attack, particularly from naval bombardment. With an eye on the taxpayer’s wallet, it was desirable that the site be located on relatively inexpensive land; the more crown land the better because that would not require payment to existing landowners.

The need to ensure adequate water supplies trumped all other practical considerations. First, the future capital would require plentiful, pure water for day-to-day domestic and civic use, for households, gardens, parks, and so on. The second requirement was for ‘ornamental water’.
We usually associate the idea of Canberra’s ornamental lake with Walter Burley Griffin but, as the experts’ report shows, for many it was a given. The third consideration was water for power generation, a desirable though not essential attribute as there were other ways of generating electricity and the city’s electricity requirements were expected to increase steadily. If water was to be used for power generation, the limitations on transmitting electricity meant the source had to be close to the city. There was a trade-off between these different requirements. For example, the more water used for power generation, the less could be available for domestic and ornamental purposes and vice versa. The quality and quantity of any water leaving the capital was also crucial. It was essential that sewerage and stormwater drainage not contaminate an inland running river nor deplete, or pollute, the water supplies of communities downstream from the new city.

On top of all these considerations, the site had to be scenically attractive, and allow Australians to build a beautiful capital that they could showcase to the world.

**Commissioner Oliver’s Enquiry**

Numerous New South Wales communities responded to Commissioner Oliver’s call for expressions of interest. They formed local committees, collected data, produced pamphlets, made exaggerated and implausible claims, lobbied, cajoled, advertised, enticed. Each claimed their town or thereabouts was heaven-sent to become the capital. Their site was superior, readily accessible, had productive, fertile land, pure, plentiful water supplies and abundant building materials. Their site, uniquely, would deliver rich commercial pickings for Sydney. They wheeled out their senior citizens as visible proof that their town’s climate was invigorating, its clean water and healthy environment conducive to longevity.
Oliver’s ‘A’: One Hundred Miles to Sydney (Map 1)

Oliver whittled down the contenders and conducted public hearings on twenty-three sites, his final report analysing fourteen in detail. Quite a few were eliminated by the requirement that the capital could be no closer than one hundred miles to Sydney. Some excluded by this provision are shown on this map that accompanied his report. Not that the matter was totally straightforward. Exactly what did the wording mean? Did you measure one hundred miles from the centre of Sydney or from the outskirts; to the centre of the capital city site or to the border of the surrounding federal territory? Was the distance defined by a compass arc or by the distance along a winding highway? Some possibilities were in or out depending on the basis of measurement. Section 125 seemed straightforward until you uncovered its many ambiguities.

Within the one hundred-mile limit, and out of the running, were Newcastle, Wollongong, Parramatta and Windsor. Other towns spoken of as possibilities, but excluded by Section 125, were Moss Vale, Marulan and Rylstone. Bathurst and Goulburn were border-line, frustratingly complicating their chances.
Oliver’s ‘R’: a Federal Territory of One Hundred or One Thousand Square Miles? (Map 2)

Oliver’s report was also the first to wrestle with the other constitutional requirement, the one saying that the capital territory had to be within a Federal Territory with a minimum area of one hundred square miles. Would a larger area, even one thousand square miles for argument’s sake, make more sense?
Oliver’s ‘Queanbeyan’ federal capital site
Oliver thought so. His reason was that if the land in it was leased, a larger territory would provide the Commonwealth with a source of income to fund the capital. He illustrated the effect of a larger territory in other maps that accompanied his 1900 report, this one specifically in relation to a possible capital site around Yass. The larger territory he proposed covered places like Gundaroo, Sutton, Lake George and, in fact, all of what has since become the ACT north of the Molonglo River.3

A year later, when the Commonwealth Parliament convened, leading lights like the controversial King O’Malley took the rationale for a one thousand square mile federal territory one step further. Like Oliver, O’Malley had the view that a larger territory would ensure that the increase in land values, generated by building the capital, was captured for the Australian public rather than by those who held land near the capital. In addition, a larger area would dampen land speculation in the surrounding region, the judgement being that the nearest land outside federal control would be further away from the capital, making it less commercially useful and valuable.

A few years later the surveyor, Charles Scrivener, after whom Scrivener Dam is named, was among those arguing that the Federal Territory had to be large enough to ensure the Commonwealth controlled the catchments of the rivers that flowed through it, and particularly those that provided its supply of drinking water. Sovereignty over the catchments meant the Commonwealth alone could make decisions on water supplies without needing to consult the State government (see also Maps 5, 9, and 10 on pages 19, 26 and 27).

Oliver’s ‘Queanbeyan’ Federal Capital Site (Map 3)

In 1900, in the course of his enquiry, Oliver inspected a site then called ‘Queanbeyan’, but which encompassed much of what we today call ‘Canberra’. He was not impressed, despite the best endeavours of local Queanbeyan enthusiasts such as the famous surveyor-turned-wheat-breeder, William Farrer, newspaper editor and one time parliamentarian, John Gale, and large landholders like Frederick Campbell.
Oliver’s depiction of the Federal Territory and city site at ‘Queanbeyan’ is shown in this map, published with his 1900 report. This is Canberra’s cartographic ‘birth certificate’. Oliver proposed a Federal Territory shaped rather like a frying pan (outlined in red) which covers one hundred square miles. It includes many familiar place names: Tuggeranong, Narrabundah, Wanniassa, Jerrabomberra, Tharwa, Yarralumla, Mt Taylor, Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain. Close by, just outside the territory suggested, are places called Canberra, Pialligo, Weetangera, Googong and Burra. The proposed city site is the blue square, straddling the Molonglo River, roughly where the suburbs of Reid/Campbell and Barton/Kingston are now.

The site Oliver ultimately favoured was the southern New South Wales town of Bombala. This would be accessed from a federal port at Eden where, for example, an Australian Navy (when there was one) would be based. Oliver also gave high marks to the Yass site because it was conveniently near the Melbourne-to-Sydney railway line and hence more readily accessible for federal parliamentarians. He also liked Orange (Canobolas) mainly because of the high-quality agricultural land surrounding it and its food-growing potential. Come 1901 and Federation, Oliver’s thoughtful report was pigeon-holed. The new Commonwealth Parliament met first in Melbourne on 9 May 1901. The next ten years saw nine Prime Ministerships and five different Prime Ministers. Differences between protectionists and free traders were the delineating political divide, initially at least, and a decision on the location of the national capital was a low priority on the first Parliament’s agenda. Like the Commonwealth Parliament, the Federal bureaucracy was in its infancy, with only a few score working in the diverse Home Affairs portfolio, the Department responsible for bringing the national capital into existence. In the early 1900s the Commonwealth drew on State government expertise; when it came to site selection, which by definition was going to be somewhere within New South Wales, they heavily relied on New South Wales experts.

The most entertaining battles were between some of the Commonwealth Parliament’s stalwarts, who were keeping a close eye on their constituents’ interests. Former New South Wales Premier, future Prime Minister Sir George Reid, favoured sites around Orange and Lyndhurst which, by coincidence, just happened to be in his electorate. Another former New South Wales Premier, Sir William Lyne, represented the electorate of Hume, in southern New South Wales, which ran alongside the Murray River and encompassed possibilities like Tumut and Albury. Hardly detached, he regarded their claims as undeniable. As a capital contender, Albury had a creditable pedigree; decades earlier, the ‘Father of Federation’, Sir Henry Parkes, had proposed it, seeing the town as a symbolic statement of collaboration and compromise between New South Wales and Victoria.

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Another able and influential cabinet minister was Austin Chapman, whose electorate, Eden Monaro, extended from Queanbeyan south to the Victorian border, east to the coast. Chapman, whose career in Federal Parliament lasted twenty-four years, was variously Postmaster-General and Minister for Defence. He first championed Bombala, later switching his support to Dalgety. The site we now know as Canberra straddled his electorate and the adjacent electorate of Werriwa. With Chapman’s
efforts directed elsewhere, Canberra had his lukewarm endorsement at best. Canberra’s ultimate emergence as the capital site is all the more surprising, given the absence of a heavyweight local representative championing it in Parliament, and its earlier rejection by Alexander Oliver.

Sir John Forrest’s views carried weight, as did Sir John himself. He too graced the Home Affairs portfolio. In addition to being the first-ever Premier of Western Australia, his CV included being a noted explorer in Western Australia and that colony’s Surveyor-General. These credentials bolstered his authority. Forrest emerged as a strong supporter of Dalgety.

Reid, Lyne (Lynham), Chapman and Forrest all have Canberra suburbs named in their honour.

Parliamentary Tours 1902

In 1902, when they finally got around to considering the question of the capital, the Senate and House of Representatives organised two separate site inspection tours. Publicly, the press referred to them as a ‘picnic’. In reality they can’t have been: bumping for hundreds of miles, weeks on end, in horse-drawn drays, on dirt roads, must have been bruising, literally. Each community they visited was imprudently keen to promote its claims, often regaling the visitors with accounts of the extraordinary longevity achieved by local residents. In one town, Bombala, this prompted King O’Malley to say that he understood that to get a cemetery going in the town they had to import dead men from Sydney.

Kirkpatrick Enquiry

Deflated, exhausted and confused by the weeks of bone-jarring travel, and by the seemingly strong claims of many contenders, the Commonwealth Parliament commissioned another Royal Commission to seek more information and data. John Kirkpatrick, a Sydney architect, and three colleagues were asked to assess eight prospects: Albury, Armidale, Bathurst, Bombala, Lake George, Lyndhurst, Orange and Tumut. ‘Queanbeyan’ was not among those listed, Lake George the nearest site to Canberra.

Lake George

The idea that Lake George could provide a suitable capital site would puzzle those driving past the dry lakebed today. In fact it was dry for the first few years of the 1900s, but perhaps the visionary 1901 illustration by Charles Coulter...
of a magnificent fairy tale city around the lake influenced thinking. Whatever the inspiration, quite a few designs were developed to promote a Lake George site. Most included an embankment to constrain the lake as such, the level of which was then sustained by water fed through a tunnel from a dam on the Molonglo River. In some proposals, if the Molonglo supply proved insufficient, the Queanbeyan, even the Shoalhaven and Murrumbidgee Rivers would be dammed and their water piped to Lake George. It was a disruptive and expensive idea. Other variations, including one by a New South Wales surveyor, G H Sheaffe, would have linked the capital city at Lake George with Jervis Bay by railway. Kirkpatrick’s version had a foreshore capital city near Bungendore. More informative than the various maps is Charles Coulter’s ideas for a Lake George capital.

Kirkpatrick’s Conclusions

Kirkpatrick’s report cautiously avoided saying any one individual site had overwhelmingly compelling claims. Rather, he tiptoed through the political mine-field, rating the different possibilities against a set of criteria, his assessment implying that Albury had the best qualifications. As it happened, Albury was in the electorate of Sir William Lyne who, as Home Affairs Minister, had commissioned him to tackle the task.

Oliver’s favoured site, Bombala, received the lowest ranking. This provoked Oliver to respond with a dismissive counter report including the comment that, in Kirkpatrick’s view, even Lake George with its ‘horizon of salt ooze and cheerless aspect’ received a higher ranking than Bombala. Oliver then began another self-initiated tour of inspection, determined to come up with the ideal site. In failing health, travelling until six weeks before his death, he continued his quest as if haunted.

Albury, however, won over few New South Welsh parliamentarians, Lyne excepted. Taking a parochial approach they feared that a border location, closer to Melbourne than Sydney, would see the commercial spoils of capital construction gravitating south, meaning New South Wales would lose the benefits of having the capital within the State. When the Federal Parliament first voted in October 1903, the Senate voted for Bombala and the House of Representatives for Tumut. Parliament adjourned, the question unresolved.

Charles Scrivener and Dalgety (Map 4)

Belatedly a ninth site, Dalgety, was added to the coterie that Kirkpatrick was asked to judge. The town was in southern New South Wales, on the Snowy River and on the edge of the Australian Alps. Although Kirkpatrick reported without enthusiasm, the site attracted a growing band of supporters, among them Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, Home Affairs Minister Sir John Forrest and Colonel Percy Owen. Owen had recently become the first Director-General of Works in the Home Affairs Department and he would be heavily involved for the next twenty-five years, first in site selection and later in building Canberra.

In April 1904, three months after he took up his position, Owen accompanied Deakin, Forrest and Chapman on a tour of Dalgety and other southern Monaro sites. Two surveyors, Charles Scrivener and A H Chesterman, had been seconded from the New South Wales Government to provide assessments of them, additional to Kirkpatrick’s advice. Scrivener had formed a strong view in favour of Dalgety. Like Scrivener, Owen was impressed primarily because the Snowy offered an exceptional supply of clean water for domestic use. Owen, an engineer, wrote that:

... in the Snowy River [New South Wales] is possessed of a most valuable asset ... the value of water power for generating electricity and the transmission of power by electricity is well-known at the present day. The probability of development during the next 100 years is impossible to foretell. However, it may safely be said that the existence of such a power in the vicinity of a city and Territory would be an advantage of the utmost importance ...
However, aesthetically Dalgety left a lot to be desired. Owen noted that ‘...the immediate surrounds of Dalgety are dreary in the extreme excepting the river scenery’.¹⁰

In Charles Scrivener’s view, the Commonwealth Territory at Dalgety should extend over the river catchments. His alternative territory designs are illustrated in this map.¹¹ Rather provocatively, he included one that would have given the Commonwealth a territory that encompassed the whole catchment of the Snowy and Eucumbene Rivers, reaching as far as Mt Kosciuszko, some 1550 square miles in total.

Scrivener did so knowing an adverse reaction from his everyday employer, the New South Wales State Government, was guaranteed.

In August 1904, when another vote was taken, both the House of Representatives and the Senate supported Dalgety. The Premier of New South Wales, Sir Joseph Carruthers, reacted vehemently. Dalgety was too close to Melbourne, too far from Sydney. If coupled with a Federal port at Eden (the intent), it would draw maritime commerce away from Sydney. Also, Dalgety would require the State Government to make heavy outlays on new, probably unprofitable railways. A final overriding concern was the Commonwealth’s intention to secure 900 square miles for the Federal Territory, vastly more than the one hundred square miles minimum mentioned in the Constitution. Carruthers dug in his heels. Strident and passionate correspondence between the State and Commonwealth Governments flew back and forth. The net effect was a stand-off. In practice, if not in law, New South Wales support for the site of the seat of government was essential and it was not going to be forthcoming while Dalgety was the proposal and Carruthers the Premier.

As an olive branch, New South Wales then offered three alternatives to Dalgety: Yass, Tumut and Lyndhurst. The Commonwealth rejected all three. At this point the otherwise excellent histories become vague. Somehow, mysteriously, over the next two years Canberra emerges from nowhere.

Who gave Canberra a second chance? Some long overlooked maps and reports indicate what happened, slightly at the risk of over-compensating for past omissions.
Early 1906, on instructions from Premier Carruthers, the New South Wales Government again began to trawl for sites that better suited it – sites that were closer to Sydney, near to the existing railways, in well-watered country and distant from competing ports. The search was concentrated on the country between Gundagai and Goulburn. There is no evidence suggesting that New South Wales Cabinet ministers advocated specific possibilities. Certainly Carruthers himself had none in mind. His unpublished autobiography records him living in Goulburn for part of his childhood, holidaying near Lake George and Lake Bathurst. However, he is quoted in the press in 1907 as saying that ‘I have never visited Canberra and therefore do not know it and am not able to speak from personal knowledge’. His successor as Premier, Charles Wade, embraced Canberra but after, not before, it was clearly in contention.

It was left to the experts – architects, engineers and surveyors – working within the New South Wales Government to come up with suggestions. Those most closely involved were: Arthur Lloyd, Chief Surveyor of the Public Works Department; Walter Liberty Vernon, the highly regarded New South Wales Government Architect; William Hutchinson, a railway engineer; and Leslie (L A B) Wade. Wade was arguably the leading expert on water supply, water conservation, irrigation and sewerage schemes working within the New South Wales Public Works Department.

As mentioned earlier, water supplies were the make or break issue. As a relatively young man Wade had designed and built the Cataract Dam, then the largest concrete dam in the southern hemisphere and the major source of Sydney’s water supply. He had also been constructing Sydney’s sewer system. His dream was to develop the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, a project for which the Burrinjuck Dam was the crucial ingredient. That project alone would have ensured he was familiar with the Murrumbidgee’s catchment and with southern New South Wales. Wade also happened to be the brother of the man shortly to become New South Wales Premier, Charles Wade. Together, these experts authored a third, post-Oliver, post-Kirkpatrick spate of site analyses, reports, pamphlets, maps and charts.

Initially at least Canberra’s re-emergence as a serious possibility had nothing to do with the Commonwealth Government. Between the rejection of Dalgety in 1905 and the vote in the Federal Parliament late in 1908 that decided the capital should be at ‘Yass- Canberra’, not one report, analysis or other paper was commissioned by the Commonwealth. An indication of the way the Commonwealth kept its distance comes late in 1906. The relevant Minister, Lyttleton Groom, sent a note to Prime Minister Deakin suggesting that the Commonwealth initiate its own analysis of the Canberra site which was then starting to attract interest. A month elapsed before the minute was returned with a notation saying: ‘papers returned by the (Prime Minister’s) direction. The matter will doubtless be further considered at a later date.’ Prime Minister Alfred Deakin was still out of sorts with the New South Wales Government over Dalgety, and he was not going to imply that the Commonwealth was ready to canvass Canberra, or any other alternative. The one paper published by the Commonwealth was penned by Acting Prime Minister Sir John Forrest personally: in 1907, Forrest undertook a comparison between Dalgety and Canberra, finding firmly in favour of Dalgety.
Surveyor Lloyd’s Fourteen Suggestions (Map 5)

Initially the New South Wales experts – Wade specifically – reassessed the Lake George site. Lake George was again dry in 1906, as it had been on four previous recorded occasions. Wade investigated, expressed reservations, but did not eliminate it entirely.

Then a wide-ranging survey of the country from Gundagai to Goulburn was undertaken by Chief Surveyor of the Public Works Department, Arthur Lloyd. A map signed by Lloyd, dated 28 March 1906, records fourteen possible sites he surveyed, albeit briefly. The map gives credence to a comment of Charles Scrivener’s that capital sites ‘are as thick as fallen leaves in autumn’. Those fourteen sites were then further assessed either by Vernon or Wade.

Lloyd’s map gives prominence to a site that they called Mahkoolma, near Burrinjuck Dam, but his accompanying report makes clear that he personally favours city sites ‘J & K’. They coincide with today’s Belconnen and central Canberra:

Site ‘J’, is an ‘extensive area of fairly rolling, undulating country. Good elevation, fair soil, excellent drainage. The views surrounding this site are extensive and beautiful.’

Site ‘K’, has ‘extensive rolling, undulating country, well adapted for building upon. Extensive views, fair soil, good elevation and drainage. Exposed, probably bleak in winter. This country forms part of the original Federal City Site proposed for Queanbeyan’. 17

It was Vernon, the Government Architect, who strongly favoured Mahkoolma. He prepared an elaborate pamphlet with Art Nouveau cover and hand-painted Charles Coulter illustrations to promote its case; the original is now in the National Library. The Mahkoolma site was named after a derelict property in the area, and was adjacent to the proposed Burrinjuck Dam. Even when the dam’s primary purpose, irrigation, depleted the water level, an ‘ornamental vista’ was to be assured by increasing dam capacity. Wade too seems to have favoured Mahkoolma, perhaps predictably: it would have been a further reason justifying his Burrinjuck Dam plans. 18
Did Leslie Wade Name Canberra? (Map 6)

Two more maps, signed by Wade and dated 4 April 1906, a week after Lloyd’s map, show another stage in the thinking. They narrow the focus from the fourteen Lloyd sites to three. While it is not stated, adequacy of water supply almost certainly was the factor deciding which to keep and which to cut. Significantly, Wade highlights Lloyd’s K site and gives it the name of a New South Wales county ‘parish’, christening it ‘Canberra’. This map is the first official (which is to say governmental) document of any genre known to attach that particular name, ‘Canberra,’ to the proposed national capital site. If there are others, they have yet to emerge out of the depths of the archives.

It is not that the name ‘Canberra’ was not included on other maps previously; for many years it had been. ‘Canberra’ is constantly found on parish maps and was the name attached to the local church. In the eyes of local residents the place was almost, but not quite, a village. From the innumerable available options (and there were innumerable options), this document shows that someone, probably Wade, decided to call this proposed capital site ‘Canberra’. The name sticks until it is ultimately endorsed in 1913, when the Governor-General’s wife, Lady Denman, formally announces it as the capital’s name.

Carruthers forwarded these various reports and maps to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin on 30 May 1906. The Government printed the report texts but not the accompanying maps. Overall, at this stage, the New South Wales Government favoured Mahkoolma, but ultimately it was up to federal Members and Senators to decide for themselves.

Parliamentary Visit of August 1906: the Tide Turns

New South Wales invited federal parliamentarians to visit these and other sites, including Dalgety, at New South Wales expense. Thirty-three Commonwealth parliamentarians agreed to do so. The visits took place over two weekends in August 1906, with special trains laid on from Melbourne. The first trip was to inspect Mahkoolma and Canberra, the second Lake George and Dalgety.

The Daily Telegraph, of 13 August 1906, makes clear what happened:

Great events from little causes spring and the fact that a group of ten or twelve men were hard at work on Saturday morning on a muddy bush road, not far from Yass, in getting a trap out of the bog into which it had sunk to the axles, may have, in its way, an influence upon the destinies of Australia. For these men were Federal politicians, a section of the party of 33 members who left Melbourne on Friday
night to visit certain territories in New South Wales proposed for the Federal capital, and it was in the course of their journey to the new site, Mahkoolma, about 16 miles southwest of Bowning, the station just below Yass, on the main Southern Railway, that the members had their back blocks adventure. Some of them nearly fell into the Couradigibee [sic] Road, which is quite unformed, under rain, hilly, and in places like a morass from the recent rains. Hence, they reached Mahkoolma flustered, two hours late, and in a frame of mind which would not have encouraged them to a judicial inspection of the Territory. In fact, the majority of them had barely time to do much more than to eat their luncheon, look across the sloping plateau towards the enveloping range of timber covered hills, or at the dense array of dead trees which gave the rising ground behind them such a desperate appearance, examine certain plans prepared by the Works Department, and hunt for their rugs, to begin the return journey, in order that they might overcome the terrors of the Couradigibee Road before darkness set in. Had they climbed some of the hills, as Mr J C Watson and Mr Webster did, they would have obtained a much more extensive view, and, no doubt, returned with different impressions ...
Two days later, the mood changed. This time the Telegraph recorded that:

In a district of fine landscapes, Canberra is one of the most picturesque of spots, and presented a charming spectacle this morning under the sun from an uncluttered sky. It was a clear, frosty morning, such as can be enjoyed at these high altitudes, where a deep breath of the air is like a draft of champagne. Canberra, which lies below Mount Ainslie …'

And on it goes.

One Federal member impressed by Canberra was J C Watson, the first Labor Prime Minister of Australia. It was during his brief tenure in 1904 that legislation confirming Dalgety as the seat of government was passed which, as it was the sole legislative achievement of his ministry, might have caused him to be somewhat proprietorial. Not so. The day after this visit, 15 August 1906, Watson wrote a ‘confidential’ letter to New South Wales Premier Carruthers. His letter begins:

We saw the Canberra site, near Queanbeyan, on Monday, and a lot of the supporters of Dalgety were considerably shaken in their allegiance. The only point on which there was any doubt expressed was as to water supply. … I hope you will get an engineer to submit an urgent report after further inspection.
In response, Carruthers arranged for the second weekend trip to visit Canberra rather than to Lake George. Watson, personally convinced, became the leading advocate of Canberra in the House of Representatives, constantly working behind the scenes, pulling strings, advancing its claims. For example, he later encouraged Queanbeyan community enthusiasts like John Gale to counter Forrest’s 1907 paper favouring Dalgety, something Gale did very effectively in a pamphlet entitled Canberra or Dalgety Which? No individual can validly claim to be the ‘Father of Canberra’, but if anyone comes close, it is Watson. He was certainly the ‘godfather of Canberra’.

Again, as Watson had suggested, Leslie Wade and some of his colleagues were despatched to start assessing the Canberra site’s water supplies.

Lloyd and Vernon Advertise Canberra: September 1906 (Map 7)

With interest stimulated, and responding to Watson’s August 1906 suggestion, the New South Wales Government, again using its in-house expertise, started proving the feasibility of the Canberra site. Making this case, however, was challenging as the influential Bulletin magazine, possibly not without proprietary self-interest, ran a vigorous campaign in favour of Dalgety and the Snowy, disparaging Canberra and the Cotter.

A Vernon/Lloyd map was prepared immediately after the August 1906 parliamentary visit to depict the Canberra site. Put politely, it is an exercise in cartographic ‘spin’. Besides highlighting the proposed site by colouring it
a pretty pink, it implies there are bountiful water supplies by colouring the Cotter, Molonglo and Murrumbidgee Rivers in clear blue. In fact, the Canberra region west of the Murrumbidgee was largely unknown. Certainly the Cotter had not been expertly surveyed or accurately mapped. While the main features of the map are hand-coloured, on the printed base map underneath the Cotter is represented by dotted lines, its precise course then unknown. Similarly, there was no hard data available as to the flows of the Molonglo, Queanbeyan, Cotter and Gudgenby Rivers, the latter two the most likely sources of drinking water.22

Leslie Wade, with his colleague Stephen Weedon, made an initial assessment of water availability shortly after the 1906 parliamentary visit. With respect to the choice between the Gudgenby and the Cotter, Wade noted:

*Of the two I prefer the Cotter. The catchment area is rugged and uninhabited; the flow has not been known to fail in the dry seasons; the water carries a minimum quantity of silt in suspension ... The area of the catchment above the proposed point of storage is 110 square miles but, owing to the roughness and inaccessibility of the mountain ranges bordering the catchment no records of rain or snow fall have been taken ... Taking the catchment area with the character of the catchment, I am satisfied that the Cotter River will supply all requirements of a federal capital city, up to a quarter of a million inhabitants ... and ... this area presents possibilities as to a national park and the stream is especially suited to trout.*

De Burgh Checks Canberra’s Water Supplies (Map 8)

The previous three maps were left in manuscript and never published, casualties of the dispute between the Commonwealth and New South Wales over Dalgety. Finally, a Canberra map was published. The original, albeit somewhat damaged, is in the National Library. The printed version is dated 17 March 1908 and signed by Ernest de Burgh, a New South Wales Engineer (who worked with Leslie Wade) and by W Hanna, who was then Undersecretary of the New South Wales Public Works Department. It incorporates the work of Oliver, Lloyd, Hutchison (a New South Wales Railways engineer) and Davis, who inspected sites near Yass.24
This map incorporates Lloyd’s more easterly site, expands the Canberra site from its original configuration, and implies a Federal Territory could be enlarged to incorporate the Cotter catchment. Also included is the catchment of the Goodradigbee River, the most likely source of drinking water if a site near Yass were to be chosen, still a possibility. The map indicates alternative sites on the Cotter for dams, depending on whether the supply was pumped or supplied by gravitation (that is, allowed to flow down from a dam located well above the city). Also included is a possible site for a dam on the Murrumbidgee River to create an ornamental lake.

One implication of this map is that the New South Wales Government had decided to abandon its past insistence on a one hundred square mile territory, and acknowledge the possibility of federal control of the water catchment, a strongly stated preference of Scrivener regarding Dalgety. Like his brother Leslie Wade, Charles Wade, now Premier, had become a strong supporter of the Canberra site.

The pace then quickened. In October 1908, the House of Representatives, and subsequently the Senate, voted in favour of a national capital site in the Yass-Canberra region, knowing that almost certainly this meant Canberra.

When it came to water supply, the instruction, with which Scrivener would have been in total agreement, was that a Federal Capital Territory should ‘... include the catchment of the water supply for the capital. Such water supply must be of sufficient magnitude to place the question of volume at all seasons and purity beyond doubt’. Scrivener assessed six sites in the Yass-Canberra region: Mahkoolma, Yass, Gundaroo, Hall, Lake George and Canberra. He wrote that ‘of the sites in the Yass-Canberra area Canberra was the best’. By implication, he thought there were better sites elsewhere, presumably Dalgety.
Charles Scrivener’s Suggestions: a Federal Capital Territory for Canberra (Map 9)

In concept, Scrivener’s proposals for Canberra echo the ideas he earlier advocated for Dalgety. He argued that all the river catchments affecting the city site should be under Commonwealth Government control. His suggested Federal Territory was the shape of an extracted wisdom tooth, with the Cotter, Molonglo and Queanbeyan catchments under Commonwealth Government control, together with the town of Queanbeyan.

It seems that the earliest surviving depiction of Scrivener’s proposals is a map that was published in the Sydney Morning Herald on 13 March 1909. The copy of that newspaper extract is in the New South Wales State Archives, covered with red markings that highlight the areas of crown land that New South Wales, expecting the capital to be in the Yass-Canberra region, had agreed to exclude from possible ‘alienation’ (that is, not allowing any more crown land to pass into private hands). New South Wales officials on that copy suggest they did not anticipate that Scrivener would recommend the river catchments be within the Federal Territory.25

A second report by Scrivener, further analysing the site at Canberra, was completed in late May 1909. Its conclusions were less clear-cut, implying he had doubts that Canberra’s water supply was sufficiently abundant and cheap. An Advisory Board considered the two Scrivener reports and, overriding these doubts, recommended Canberra as the national capital site.
New South Wales and the Commonwealth Agree at Last ... (Map 10)

The next step was for the two Governments to negotiate: what territory was New South Wales prepared to transfer to the Commonwealth in response to Scrivener’s ambit claim?

The negotiated outcome is available from any map today. The New South Wales Government opposed the inclusion of the town of Queanbeyan, and the Queanbeyan and Molonglo River catchments within the Federal Territory. However, with those caveats, Premier Charles Wade’s government, unlike that of his predecessor, went to great lengths to reach an agreement.

The deal gave the Federal Government control of the Cotter, Gudgenby, Naas and Paddy’s River catchments, plus an extra hundred square miles thrown in for good measure, simply so that no-one in the Federal Parliament could make an issue of the fact that the Federal Territory was less than 900 square miles, the figure mentioned in the Commonwealth legislation agreeing to a ‘Yass-Canberra’ region site. The Commonwealth also secured riparian (water) rights, but not sovereignty, over the Queanbeyan and Molonglo Rivers. New South Wales undertook to ensure that the catchments of these rivers, seen mainly as a source of water for an ornamental lake at the city site, were not polluted.26

Another provision gave the Commonwealth the right to generate and transmit electrical power to Canberra from anywhere in New South Wales. Commonwealth officials, Percy Owen in particular, had not lost sight of the Snowy River’s potential for electricity generation, and hoped that, one day, long-distance electrical transmission may just be technically possible. It is worth noting that this provision was the origin of Commonwealth involvement in the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme.
... Or Do They?

The months ticked by. Another Commonwealth Government came to power, with yet another Home Affairs Minister, this time the irrepressible, opinionated King O’Malley. Inexplicably, the Commonwealth delayed assuming sovereignty over the agreed Federal Territory.

In part, the delay reflected the need to pass legislation to ensure the Commonwealth could legally administer the Territory, once it took control. More importantly, in the way of incoming governments, O’Malley thought his predecessors had botched the negotiations with New South Wales. Specifically, he still wanted the Molonglo and Queanbeyan Rivers, plus the town of Queanbeyan, within Federal Territory.

Late in December 1910 a meeting took place between the New South Wales Premier, James McGowen, King O’Malley, Billy Hughes and others. The Commonwealth account, never denied, was that an agreement was reached that met the Commonwealth’s request. New South Wales agreed to legislate to transfer sovereignty over the Molonglo and the Queanbeyan catchments and Queanbeyan to the Commonwealth, but only after the ‘second proclamation’ was issued. (This was the legal provision that would transfer the Federal Territory, as Deakin had negotiated it, to Commonwealth control). This occurred on 1 January 1911. However, New South Wales’ promised quid pro quo did not emerge: the New South Wales Government soon indicated it would not. Once the Federal Territory was in existence, an irreversible development, New South Wales had the whip hand. Heated correspondence went back and forth for years. It is not clear when it ended. But the ACT today retains the shape that Deakin and Charles Wade first negotiated.

Charles Scrivener and Canberra’s Contours: 1908, 1910 (Map 11) and 1914

Charles Scrivener, together with a team of surveyors, resumed surveying the Federal Territory before the Commonwealth took legal control. Together, they produced a large number of maps in this period. Over a five-year span, Scrivener prepared at least three major contour maps of the Canberra city site, of ever increasing detail and size.
The first, dated 9 June 1909, was included with the papers Scrivener submitted to Parliament with his analysis of the proposed Canberra capital site. Other documents submitted at the same time included his proposals for the Federal Capital Territory, for a Commonwealth railway linking Canberra to Jervis Bay, and another map explaining who currently owned land in the Federal Capital Territory, land that needed to be acquired to allow the city to be built and the Commonwealth to introduce its proposed leasehold system.

Scrivener’s 1909 contour map is odd in one respect: it is drawn slightly askew, north being approximately 30 degree to the vertical. It is not obvious why. Doing so allowed him to include a longer north-west to south-east axis and accommodate another possible city site, one he personally liked, called ‘Mugga Mugga’, south east of that actually chosen. Concern about Canberra’s exposure to high winds in winter permeated Scrivener’s reports and recommendations and his personal site preference reappeared in the so-called Departmental Plan of 1913, an alternative to Walter Burley Griffin’s design. But that’s another story.

Scrivener’s second contour map was produced in 1910. This one was circulated to the entrants in the national capital city design competition, which Walter Burley Griffin ultimately won. Contestants were required to draw their city designs on it.

Instinctively one assumes that a contour map must be a factual document, give and take the odd hillock. Yes and no. Scrivener wanted to ensure that the competition entrants considered a clean slate and so he excluded from this map (and hence from the awareness of contestants) all the existing structures other than St John’s Church and the adjacent cemetery. In doing so, he was implicitly saying that no existing buildings, homesteads, shearing sheds, cottages and roads were of sufficient significance that they should complicate the contestants’ thinking and the capital’s design. They were erased, initially cartographically, later physically, and with them much of this region’s earliest heritage.

In addition, however, Scrivener included a number of his personal ideas to guide competitors. He included a proposed railway line linking Queanbeyan and Canberra to Yass. He also annotated the countryside, roughly where the suburb of Reid is today, as being suitable for orchards, implying this was the desirable land usage. If a contestant had taken account of this annotation he may have ended up placing the city further north or south. This map, apparently neutral, was in fact influencing contestants both by exclusion and by inclusion.

Scrivener’s survey team also started to: delineate the Federal Territory/New South Wales boundaries on the ground; establish land ownership; survey railway lines to Yass, to Jervis Bay, and to connect Canberra to the existing Goulburn-Cooma railway at Bungendore; survey roads; and map the Cotter River for possible dam sites. The team later produced a third, yet larger, contour plan of Canberra dated 1914, which like military maps produced around the same time included the existing buildings, structures and roads in considerable detail.

At which point building the capital city at Canberra, to Walter Burley Griffin’s prize winning design, should have been underway in earnest. It wasn’t, but that’s yet another story.

The Emerging Capital

It took a decade before the Battle of the Sites ground to finality, uncertainty lingering still longer. Far from being preordained, Canberra was only chosen as the site for the national capital after numerous alternatives had been first considered. The cartographic record underlines the critical role played by the New South Wales Government, and individual officials working for it, in the choice of Canberra.

Ultimately this complex, contested process saw the selection of a site on which Australians were able to proudly construct their capital city, a city that does much to fulfil the highest aspirations of those first involved. Canberra, today, is a beautiful city, in a natural, uniquely Australian setting, embracing distinctive features, with a design worthy not only of the present but of all time. It has proven to be a worthy home for the Australian Parliament, a place where Australians readily choose to reflect both the heart and the achievements of our people.
Endnotes

With three exceptions – Maps 5, 6 and 7 – the maps listed below accompanied either Commonwealth or New South Wales Parliamentary Papers of which numerous copies were printed. Copies are therefore to be found in many collections.

These particular listings draw on the holdings of the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the National Archives of Australia (NAA). Most of the maps held by the NLA are included in their online digital listing and can be viewed over the internet.


2 Map 1: Plan Showing 100 Mile Radial Limit from City of Sydney “A”, published by the (NSW) Department of Lands, Sydney 1900, to accompany Commissioner Oliver’s Report, NLA Bib ID 500280.


4 Map 3: Sketch Map Showing Proposed Federal Territory and Capital Site at Queanbeyan, NLA Bib ID 2022797.

5 Protectionists and free traders held close to equal numbers in the first Commonwealth Parliament, the Labor Party holding the balance of power. Labor, with the support of Alfred Deakin’s Protectionists, briefly assumed office in 1904, only to lose it after five months in the constantly shifting and reconfiguring three-way split. Politics evolved into a more stable, two-party system from 1909, with the basic divide becoming Conservative/Liberal on one side, Labor on the other.

6 Charles Coulter, An Ideal Federal City, Lake George, Pictures Collection, NLA, Bib ID 1499474.


10 ibid, p.3.


12 J. H. Carruthers, unpublished autobiography. Copy held in the Manuscript Collection, NLA.

13 Sydney Morning Herald, 11 July 1907.

14 NAA, Series A100 Control 1908/9793.

15 Federal Capital: Proposed Sites, Minute by the Right Hon Sir John Forrest, CPP, 10 July 1907.

16 Map 5: A. L. Lloyd. Three copies only of this hand-coloured map are known, two in the NAA, one in the House of Representatives Archives. A hand-written annotation by Lloyd reads: ‘To accompany my report of 28 March 1906.’ See reference: NAA Series A100 Control 1908/9793.

17 Federal Capital Sites: Reports Respecting proposed Sites at Mahkoolma, Canberra and other sites in the Yass Lake George District, CPP, 15 June 1906.

18 Vernon’s personal copy of this brochure on Mahkoolma is in the Manuscript Collection, NLA. Coulter’s slightly differing copy is held by the NAA.


20 NSW State Archives, Premier’s Department Special Bundle 4/6257.


22 Map 7: Vernon/ Lloyd: Canberra: ‘... to Accompany our Report Dated 10 September 1906’, NAA references as for Map 5 above.


24 Map 8: De Burgh/ Hanna, ‘Plan showing a capital site at Canberra’, NSWLA, 28 October 1908. The map itself is dated 17 March 1908.

25 Map 9: Sydney Morning Herald, 13 March 1909. See also NSW Archives: Premier’s Department, Special Bundle 4/6258.

26 Map 10: Any standard map of the ACT suffices. This one was published in 1929.

27 Map 11: Detail from Charles Scrivener/Felix Broninowski’s 1910 contour map of Canberra: ‘Map of the Contour Survey of the Site of the Proposed Federal Capital of Australia’ (Sheet 2), NLA, Bib ID 20022797.
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- *The Community That Was* (pp.1,3,4-5,6,7,8,11,12,14,15,17,18,19,20,21,22 and 27);
- *Maps and Makers* (pp.3,6,9,10,11,12-13,15,18,22,25,27 and 28);
- *Crystal Palace to Golden Trowels* (pp.1,3,5,6,9,10,11,12,14,17,22,26,27 and 28);
- *Those Other Americans* (pp.3,5,6,9,10,11,13,14,15,16,17,19,20,25,26,27 and 28); and
- *Think of it! Dream of it!* (pp.1,3,4,4-5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,16,17,18-19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 28, 29 and 32-3).

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Greg Wood is a former senior public servant, international trade negotiator and diplomat. Building on a long-standing interest he has been researching Canberra history, concentrating on primary sources, the original documents, files and cartography generated by the site-selection debates and the early development of the national capital at Canberra. He has been publishing his findings in journal articles, delivered the Sir John Butters Oration to the Canberra Branch of the Institution of Engineers and was the curator of Far Sited: the Maps that Made Canberra, an exhibition at the National Library of Australia which opened in September 2009.

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