A River in Time - following the course of influences on Manning River history
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The Manning River is one of the great rivers of the NSW north coast. For untold thousands of years the river has provided food, water and transport to people who have occupied its riverbanks and floodplains.

Until the introduction of road and rail transport systems, the Manning River played an important role in the movement of people, produce and merchandise. Today, the location and structure of the towns and communities provides the most visible evidence of this history.

The geography of the river, the aspirations of the communities, corporate entities and government have all helped to shape the changing roles of the river and of the communities that line its picturesque banks.

The most dramatic change in the role of the Manning and of the layout of the communities along its banks, has been the virtual abandonment of the river. With the demise of coastal shipping, riverside services were no longer required. The towns turned from the river to the streets while the maritime architecture of the river, (wharves, warehouses, slipways), was demolished, reused or left to the processes of decay. State political decisions, particularly concerning transport networks, were also dominant in bringing about this change.

With the launch of a book on the history of shipping on this wonderful river, it is appropriate to examine the effect of these influences over the years and the role they have played in forming this ‘river in time’.

IMPACT OF EUROPEAN CULTURE
Early Influences

The landscape contains sustenance, accommodation and economic resources that have shaped both Aboriginal and European habitation. In general terms, people have always focused habitation and the harvesting of resources on the river and the surrounding floodplains.

However, for Aboriginal people of the Manning Valley, the coastal survey work of John Oxley in 1820, John Armstrong’s survey of the river the 1827 and the arrival of the European settlers marked the ever expanding influence of European control.

Giving a European name to the river itself symbolised the removal of Aboriginal sovereignty. For Aboriginal people, this experience was to be one of the ever increasing influences and controls from outside their established way of life which had its own social, economic, commercial and spiritual practices. They would be quickly dispossessed, not only of the river and its resources but of their ritual, religion and even their language.

The new order brought about immense changes to the valley and to its vegetation and wildlife. The landscape that had developed during those many thousands of years of Aboriginal custodianship altered rapidly and dramatically. The living areas and economic resources of Aboriginal clans were cleared, ploughed, grazed over and built upon.

Commercial Developments

Timber

The clearing of the land began in 1829 when the Australian Agricultural Company and others established an estate on the south bank of the river while other settlers were given land on the north side. (Birrell, 1987:67) Until 1833, cedar could not be cut from Crown Land but in the wake of the stockmen cedar cutters quickly made their way to the river. By the mid 1830’s the clearing of the great stands of cedar was well underway. At the time the only practical way to
transport the timber to Sydney was by sea and the seaways were also the key means of obtaining supplies and equipment. Thus the Manning River entered the coastal shipping era and began to see the arrival and departure of an ever increasing fleet of vessels that braved its hazardous and changing bar.

Cedar was the main timber being sought initially - 130 800 feet were exported to Sydney from the Manning river in 1834 (Birrell, 1987:67-68). However, ironbark, oak, blackbutt and flooded gum were also felled in quantity. Cedar began to become scarce by as early as 1850.

In the path of the timber cutters, (or sawyers), came timber merchants, labourers to prepare roads and bullock drivers to carry the logs to the river and waiting coastal trading ships. In the 1830s and 40s, hundreds of workers were employed in the timber trade of the Manning River. The cedar merchants had to be located near to the point of loading onto the ever increasing fleet of coast traders that carried the timber to Port Jackson. The timber merchants paid the sawyers for the timber and supplied them with provisions, including large quantities of alcohol (Carey 1993:11,12).

Agriculture
By the time the cedar stocks had been significantly depleted in the 1850s, the extent of cleared land had made possible the introduction of agricultural activities in the form of wheat, corn, tobacco, sugar cane and vegetables (Birrell, 1987:72). By the 1890s dairying had begun to take over and the coastal ships once again began to adapt to carrying new commodities including butter from the Lower Manning Co-operative Dairy Company’s factory at Scotts Creek (Ramsland, 1987:101).

Ship Building
The development of shipbuilding on the Manning River was associated not only with the local timber industry but with the general development of the New South Wales economy during the 1820’s and 1830’s. There were only eight resident shipowners in Sydney in 1825 but by 1832 commerce had increased to such an extent that the colonially owned fleet consisted of ninety-nine vessels. These were predominantly confined to trading along the New South Wales coast where agricultural communities (including timber getting) were continuing to spring up at or near the mouths of the coastal rivers (Bach 1982:77).

In many cases, boat building existed only while timber lasted on the adjacent property. The shipwrights moved on to a new area. In these instances, the slipways would have been extremely rudimentary, serving only to facilitate the launch of perhaps a single vessel. In other places, shipbuilding was undertaken over a longer period.

A variety of shipbuilding yards were established on the Manning River in the 1840s. Until the end of the 1870s the Manning River was the leading shipbuilding centre of all rivers north of Sydney (Ramsland, 1987:39). Unfortunately, it appears that no remains of this early shipbuilding industry have survived, or at least have been found to date (GTCCHR, 1990:26) – although perhaps their archaeological remains still exist along the river banks or on the river bed.

I will not go into detail about the shipbuilders as you will find all the information that you could wish for in the book that is being launched today. I will note though that the first ship built on the Manning by the Manning River’s most prominent builder, Alexander Newton, is associated with one of the great stories of open boat survival stories in NSW maritime history. The barque Rosetta Joseph was built by Moses Joseph in 1847 (Sydney Morning Herald, 11/9/1847). The construction team reflects the type of cooperation that was required in shipbuilding at that time with the construction said to have involved timber-getters, axemen, pit sawyers and shipwrights all working together to build the vessel (Ramsland, 1987:40). The vessel is said to have been made of the best materials and with very good sailing qualities. (Shipwreck Atlas of NSW, 1996:B16).

However, the drama in the Rosetta Joseph’s history was in 1850 when the vessel struck Elizabeth Reef (180km north of Norfolk Island) on a voyage from San Francisco to Sydney (NSW Maritime Heritage Online shipwreck database).
The barque left San Francisco on 15 October 1850 with 48 crew and passengers. The ship’s cargo gives some idea of the types of materials that were being imported from North America at that time. It included 100 cases of anchovies, 2 casks of ginger, a large quantity of cedar, 3 houses and 1 case of daguerreotype apparatus (an early camera). If the ship had not been lost on 1 December 1850, perhaps the early photographic record of Australia may have been more extensive then it is!

**Wreck?**

On the day following the wreck, all hands set to preparing the ship’s long boat, jolly boat and pinnace for what was to be a most testing open boat voyage. There were 28 in the long-boat, 14 in the pinnace and 5 in the jolly boat. They set sail and steered a course for Lord Howe Island on 3 December, leaving the *Rosetta Joseph* high and dry on Elizabeth Reef – where it survived for 8 years before being set on fire in order to retrieve copper bolts used in its construction (Watson, 1919:110).

At night time, the long-boat would take the smaller craft in tow to prevent them becoming separated in the dark. Three days later, they were greeted by cloudy skies and a north-west wind that increased to a raging gale. They were forced to throw overboard ‘… all spare clothes, wet blankets and some packages of gold dust!’

By 6 December much of the bread had been damaged and they were carried along on a strong current to the north-west. When winds finally became light, passengers took turns with the oars. One of the passengers, LH Green, comments that the passengers conducted themselves tolerably well, ‘with the exception of two or three old Port Arthur gents, who were anything but agreeable companions in a small boat’.

It was not until 10 December, 10 days after the start of their ordeal, that they sighted Port Macquarie and some hours later were safely ashore.

**THE RISE AND FALL OF COASTAL SHIPPING**

**The Sea as a Highway**

The principal function that developed for north coast rivers was their ability to carry produce from the hinterlands to the sea and hence to Sydney. At the same time they also enabled imports and produce to be transported to the hinterland. The whole purpose of this trade was essentially to serve the centralised commercial structure of Sydney.

Each of the rivers developed a port of greater or lesser importance. Where rivers were navigable beyond the immediate coastal fringe, a relatively small maritime community was established near the mouth of the river, eg Harrington on the Manning River, Stuarts Point on the Macleay River, Yamba on the Clarence River. These river mouth communities served the immediate needs of vessels that were arriving or departing. This was where the Department of Navigation based its pilot service. It is also where the Public Works Department invested considerable sums on port development projects, constructing breakwaters, training walls, lighthouses, lead marks, beacons and maintaining a navigable entrance through dredging programs. On each river, the main centre of commerce developed at a point that was central to the agricultural activity of the region. This centre was constrained by the need for access to a navigable part of the river as well as the need to minimise the distance that produce needed to be transported for loading onto river craft. Generally, the main centre of commerce for these rivers developed upstream from the river mouth, eg Taree on the Manning River, Kempsey on the Macleay River, Grafton on the Clarence River and Ballina on the Richmond River.

**Steamers on the River**

The replacement of sailing craft like the *Rosetta Joseph* with steamers and the increasing use of these on the northern rivers coincided with the increase in Australian economic activity of the 1850’s (Bach 1982:117).
At this time there was a growing exuberance over the speed of steam powered vessels in comparison to the inherent slowness of sailing and rowing craft on twisting, narrow reaches. Steam vessels were also less dependent on tides and winds when clearing the bar. This meant that scheduled departure and arrival times were more predictable and that ships would be ‘bar bound’ for shorter periods. The significance of the arrival of steamers was the expectation that increased speed and reliability would be associated with improved quality of produce delivered to the Sydney markets and, hence, a general increase in profitability.

By the 1850’s the Australasian Steam Navigation Company was focusing attention on the Hunter region and Sydney where the major shipping trade was to be found. In 1881, two rival north coast shipping companies, Nipper and See and the Clarence, Richmond and Macleay Rivers Steam Navigation Company merged. Nipper and See, which had been operating on the Manning, Nambucca, Hastings and Bellinger rivers while the Clarence, Richmond and Macleay Rivers Steam Navigation Company (CRMRSNC), had established its own wharves and warehouses on the remainder of the north coast rivers and became a considerable influence. The new company was the North Coast Steam Navigation Company and the name reflected the near monopoly that the company had on ports north of Newcastle. It developed a fleet of 29 ships by 1914, all of which were designed for the shallow bars of the northern rivers (Lorimer 1982:88).

Pilot Service
Entering or departing from any port is always one of the most perilous aspects of a sea voyage. In relation to New South Wales, there were few offshore perils. However the coast presented real difficulties related to the vagaries of weather, and shallow, unstable river bars that were constantly changing (Bach 1982:73). The majority of shipwreck sites are clustered around harbours of refuge. Some 40 vessels have been wrecked in or around the immediate approaches to the Manning River. In terms of volume of traffic, this does suggest that the Manning River presented a reasonably high level of danger. The number of losses is, of course, considerably less than around Port Jackson or Newcastle. Each of these have witnessed in excess of 300 wrecks (Heritage Office, shipwreck database:2002) but these centres served a far greater volume of shipping.

To help minimise the level of risk to shipping, the Department of Navigation established Pilot Services. The Pilot Station at the Manning River was established in 1861 at Harrington.

The Development of Road and Rail
For coastal shipping companies, the construction of north coast rail lines from the 1870s to WW1 and the steady development of the road network, were factors that saw the rapid collapse of the coastal shipping trade. The shipping companies contributed significantly to the war effort and had lost, without compensation, a number of their ships. Afterwards, there were severe confrontations between management and waterside unions and profitability plummeted.

The purpose of road and rail alternatives was not to link the Manning River to the other ports but to link the inland area with Sydney, either directly or via the nearest significant port on the north coast (Drew 1984:28). Generally, given the conscious development of a centralised system in New South Wales, the development of expensive ports to rival Port Jackson was not seen as politically attractive, except for ports in the immediate vicinity of Sydney and which added to that centre’s commercial capacity (Bach 1982:220).

The North Coast Steam Navigation Company had survived the depression of the 1930’s and continued operating through World War II. However, obtaining adequate loadings was becoming increasingly difficult right along the north coast. There was a brief improvement in 1951 but the following year saw a collapse in the shipment of timber and a total ban on overtime by the waterside workers. In the same year, dredging of the northern rivers ground to a halt and soon vessels could only operate in the lower reaches. By 1953 there was no improvement in the timber trade and the Government railways offered bulk loading contracts at 50% of the normal rates. This move was interpreted as a deliberate effort by the railways, and supported by State Cabinet, to eliminate competition from sea transport (Richards 1980:151-152).
A combination of government strategy, combined with continuing industrial disputes, resulted in the company going into voluntary liquidation in 1954. Items and records from the companies branch offices at the Manning and other northern ports, were taken to Sydney. The North Coast Steam Navigation Company's history came to a close. In 1959 the NSW Railways again undercut the freight-rate and the coastal trade came to an end (Richards 1980:154).

The arrival of rail in the region, in addition to the Pacific Highway, ensured that Taree and Wingham would continue to develop as regional centres but the only maritime activity in the river became confined largely to recreational boating. As shops rely heavily on passing trade, they had initially needed to be close to the riverside wharves in the days of the river trade but with the shutting down of the coastal trade the imperative was to be close to the main roads and rail. Shops moved from the river bank to take advantage of the constant flow of horses, vehicles and pedestrians in the streets of the town.

The days of the river as a commercial highway were at an end. The river communities lost their functional attachment to the interface between land and water, wharves deteriorated and disappeared, shipyards were be demolished, riverside warehouses were be pulled.

In the larger townships, the effect of business turning its back on the river to address the street is most marked. The riverside, once a focus of bustling port related activity, appears largely ignored. In spite of the river’s obvious visual appeal, even restaurants or cafes with river views are rare.

**Conclusion**

The prospect of road or rail services must have been appealing attractions to Government and companies with commercial concerns in the region.

Like the breakwater at Trial Bay, or the harbour at Coffs Harbour, projects to construct modern wharf facilities are enormously expensive, well in excess of returns that could reasonably be expected in either trade or tourism. Those efforts that were made on the coastal rivers were never sufficient to remove the fairly primitive conditions under which the coastal shipping companies were forced to operate. This did not assist their efficiency or profitability.

Government policies and economic trends, like the great depression of the 1930’s had a severe effect on the productivity of the region. Shipping companies, like the North Coast Steam Navigation Company, managed to survive by virtue of having entered the depression with well serviced, modern and seaworthy vessels (Richards 1980:120).

The major factor in the development of the various communities along the lower Manning River has been economic realities associated with commodities, their subsequent use or processing and transportation. These have been as relevant to Aboriginal communities prior to European contact as for subsequent activities such as grazing, the timber getting, farming, ship building, the coastal trade and tourism.

In turn, economic activity has considerable influence on political priorities. Political decisions can have a considerable impact on the economy of an area. For example, the decision to undermine the coastal trade was based on a belief that the State owned rail network would be a more efficient means for promoting economic activity and, of controlling Queensland’s access to trade with the northern communities in New South Wales.

The process of centralisation via non-maritime transport did not, of course, alter the basic activities of any region. Today in the Manning River region, commerce continues to be conducted, school, communication, police and other community services are still utilized. However, their relationship is no longer with the river. In this sense, the river is now something of an obstacle to transport rather than one of its vital components - a divider rather
than a linkage. It is valued for its beauty, but is no longer a significant source of employment or a pleasant means for getting to late night shopping in Taree or Wingham.

But this was a maritime centre with all its associated character and infrastructure. The ships have gone, the port has no trade. How do we retain the past associations of space and form that mark economic, political and social history of the Manning River? The State through heritage controls? The local government through Environmental Planning controls? The community through lobby groups, letters, articles, publications and sheer will power?

Most likely it will be all of the above but, in the words of one writer it is worth considering that, 'The remains of past shipping landscapes are endangered by the sea, and by their occupying valuable waterfront land.... The once prosperous coastal shipping and ship-building centres show how thoroughly all trace of past landscapes can be eliminated in later times (Jeans & Spearitt 1980:73).

Today a book is being launched that will help to ensure that those traces of the proud shipping heritage of the Manning River are kept alive not only in our current individual and collective conscience but in that of generations to come.