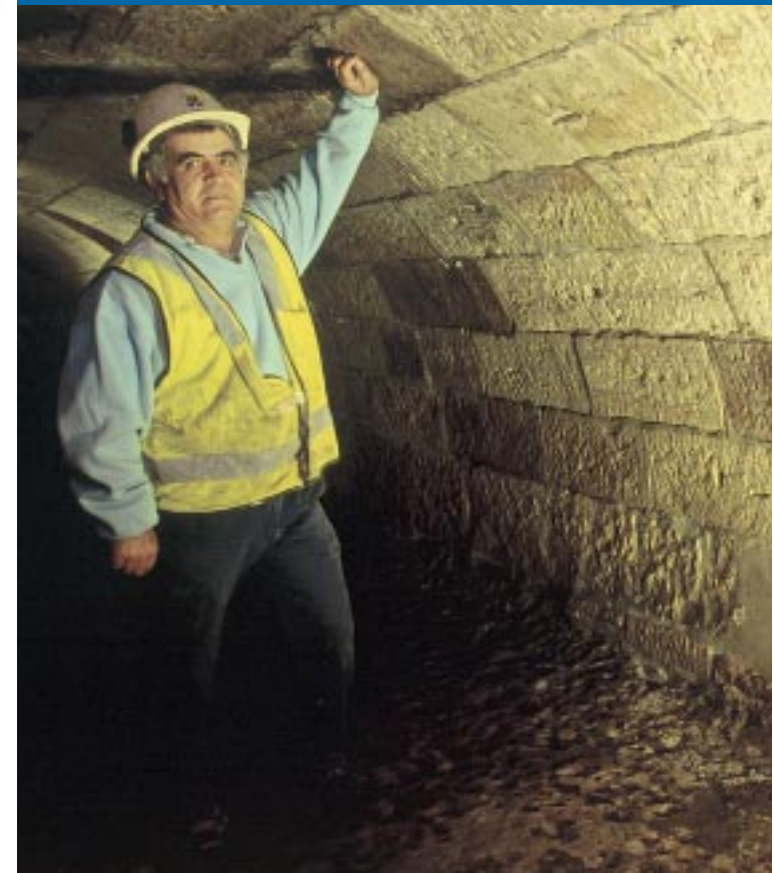
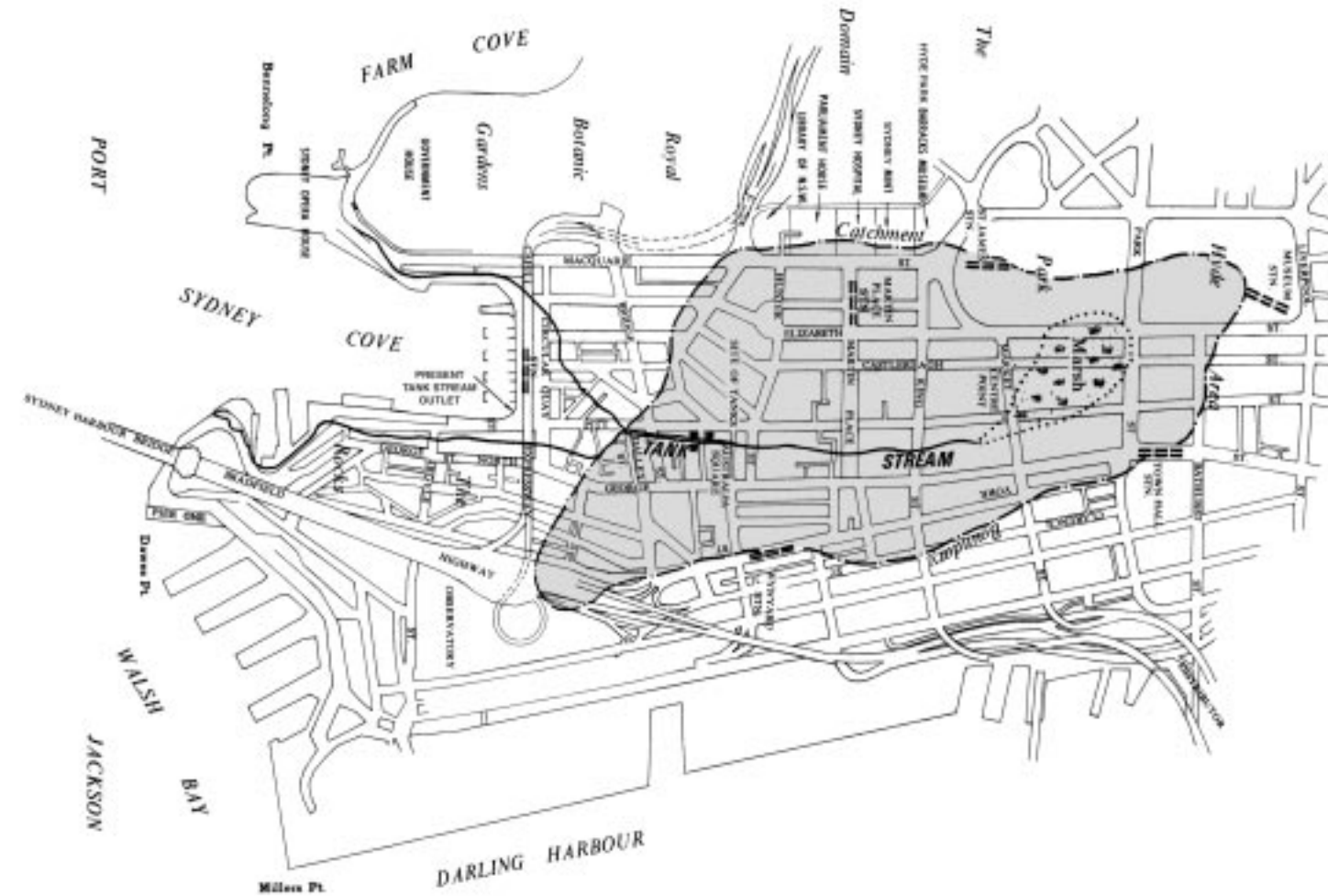


Tank Stream

Sydney's first water supply



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♻️ PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER AUGUST 04 SWC 320 THE TANK STREAM

Sydney
WATER



John Skinner Prout *The Tank Stream, Sydney, circa 1842*
pencil, watercolour, opaque white highlights, 25.5 x 37.5cm
Purchased 1913 Collection: Art Gallery of NSW
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie of AGNSW [accn# 1034]

When Captain Arthur Phillip sailed into Sydney Harbour in January 1788 searching for a site for his settlement, one of his primary requirements was a reliable fresh water supply. As he sailed around what is now Bennelong Point and the site of the Sydney Opera House, he saw a wide mouthed stream running into Sydney Harbour. At high tide the water was deep enough for schooners to come as far as present-day Bridge Street. Here on the banks of this stream he established the new colony, the new city and the beginnings of European Australia.

On exploring the stream, Phillip discovered its beginnings in a swampy area located between today's Hyde Park and the Sydney Town Hall. The course of the stream dropped about 30 metres through a series of waterfalls to Bridge Street where it met the salt water of the harbour. The total drainage area was about 82 hectares and its flow was supplemented by springs in what are now King and Spring Streets.

Phillip set up his fledgling settlement next to the stream. As the water source was for both humans and their livestock, maintaining the water quality was essential. Phillip declared the first catchment and environment protection act of the European occupation, when he created a green belt 15 metres wide either side of the stream in which polluting activities, cutting trees and grazing stock were prohibited.

The stream had a less evident but tangible role in dividing the settlement – the eastern being the domain of the government and administrative functions and the western (The Rocks) being where the convicts lived.

The regular rainfall patterns the settlers were accustomed to in Britain were not repeated in the new land. Within a year the colony had experienced flood and drought.

Phillip, becoming increasingly desperate for water, set his convicts to deepen the stream to create further storage and a more reliable supply. The sandstone was excavated in three or four places to create storage tanks. Each tank was five metres deep in the centre and held nearly 20,000 litres of water. One tank was dug adjoining what is now the corner of Pitt and Spring Streets, the other two in what is now Bond Street in the city.

These tanks gave the stream its name – the Tank Stream.

Governor Phillip returned to England in 1792 due to ill health and for a time the colony was run by the military. This period was the start of the decline of the Tank Stream as a source of drinking water.

Although famous for his decision to permit the use of rum as the major currency of the colony, commanding officer Major Grose also made a significant environmental decision when he allowed the military to build houses and pigsties within the green belt adjoining the stream, causing pollution and illness.

In wet weather the tanks would fill with sand and silt and in dry weather the Tank Stream would dwindle to a brook. As the population grew the quality of the water became as much of a problem as the quantity. As new Governors arrived they would each pass increasingly draconian but unsuccessful laws in an attempt to prevent pollution.

When Governor Hunt arrived in 1795 he tried to restore the water quality and imposed heavy fines for transgressions, however the situation declined once more. Governor King tried again in 1800 with even heavier penalties including demolition of offender's houses and floggings.

In 1827 John Busby started building a tunnel to bring drinking water from the Lachlan Swamps (now within Centennial Park) to Hyde Park. This was completed in 1837.

By 1828 all attempts to save the Tank Stream for drinking water were abandoned and it became an open sewer.

As the population of Sydney grew so did the incidence of water-borne disease. As part of the response to this problem, in 1858 the Tank Stream was diverted under Pitt Street and 150 metres



Sydney Cove. Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales.

of stone culvert was built over it from the Circular Quay end. About this time the bridge, which crossed the Tank Stream near Henrietta Street, was demolished.

The next part of the stream to be covered was from Bridge Street to Hunter Street, then Hunter to King Street resulting in the stream being buried beneath the growing city.

Today the Tank Stream still functions as a storm water drain, transporting storm water from the Central Business District to the harbour.

In recognition of the importance of the Tank Stream to the people of Sydney and New South Wales, it was protected by a Permanent Conservation Order in 1989 and was entered on the NSW State Heritage Register in 1999. The Tank Stream is recognised as being of national importance due to its association with the settlement of Australia by Europeans.

Sydney Water manages this stream as a significant part of its heritage although it is no longer part of the water supply.

View of Sydney Cove, August 1788. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

