

19. Liberty Square



Liberty Square was named by the Darwin Town Council in June 1919 to commemorate the 'Darwin Rebellion' of 17 December 1918. That rebellion, which culminated in a protest directed at Government House by hundreds of workers on this site, and the unrest leading to it, resulted in a 1919 Royal Commission into the Administration of the Northern Territory conducted by Justice Norman Kirkwood Ewing (1870-1928).

On the western side of Liberty Square is a memorial cairn at the place where the sub-sea cable from Banjowangie (Banyuwangi) Indonesia was joined with the Overland Telegraph Line to revolutionise communications in Australia on 20 November 1871.

Towards the eastern side is a plinth and plaque commemorating the scientific achievement of Pietro 'Commendatore' Baracchi who, in collaboration with colleagues in Singapore and Banjowangie, established true longitude of Port Darwin and other Australian colonial and New Zealand capital cities in 1883 in the grounds of the Port Darwin Post Office and Telegraphic Station (now Parliament House).

On the eastern side near the Supreme Court is a Banyan tree, which is valued by the community as a remnant of the original Darwin foreshore vegetation. It is over 200 years old and was the congregation point for Larrakia youths prior to ceremonies that took place under the nearby Tamarind tree.

Liberty Square was the site for the original Darwin Cenotaph, which is now located on the old Darwin Oval on the Esplanade.

History

Sub-sea Telegraph Cables

From the 1850s telegraph technology was very quickly taken up by the Australian colonies, building networks across their own territories, and then soon connecting to each other. By 1858 Adelaide and Melbourne were connected.

Telegraph as a technology revolutionised communication around the world and had massive flow-on effects across business, politics and the social sphere. Much of the early traffic within and between the Australian colonies was government correspondence, but soon businesses followed by the media vied for access. Suddenly businesses could respond to market forces almost immediately and newspapers competed to provide the most up-to-date news. Information that once took days or even weeks to reach places by steamship and road now came in minutes. With the successful installation of a trans-Atlantic cable in 1866, after some failed earlier efforts, the viability of undersea cables spanning huge ocean distances became a viable option.

There was considerable competition between the Australian colonies to provide the first telegraph system connecting Australia to the world. Aiming to keep the distance covered by the sea cable component to a minimum, the competition sought to identify the most viable northern point from which a sea cable would be launched. It is intriguing to note that famous expeditions that attempted to cross the continent and reach the northern coast were in no small part driven by this competition. The Burke and Wills expedition was driven by the Victorian Government's desire for a land route to a northern hub. Similarly, the John McDouall Stuart expeditions and even South Australia's possession of the Northern Territory was in part driven by its hope to establish and control a telegraph between the colonies and the world.

Port Darwin was established in 1869 and a year later the newly established British Australia Telegraph Company committed to building a line from Java to Port Darwin¹. Queensland wanted the Darwin line to reach Burketown, but heavy lobbying by the South Australian Government convinced the company in 1870 to select it as the preferred option. South Australia committed to build 2000 miles (over 3000 kilometres) of telegraph across a barely traversed and poorly understood continent in two years.

The Superintendent of Telegraphs, Charles Todd, was in charge and South Australia intended to honour its commitment by constructing the line simultaneously in three sections: the northern section from Port Darwin to Tennant Creek; the central section from Tennant Creek to Alberga Creek; and the southern section from Port Augusta to Alberga Creek. For a variety of reasons², the self-imposed deadline was not met and the South Australian Government was paying penalty fees for every day the project was overdue. The project was ultimately completed eight months late. Irrespective of the delay, it was a massive

¹ Powell, 1982; 86

² Wet season rains in the north, water shortages and conflict with Aboriginal people in the centre, termite damage to timber poles, contractor difficulties, etc.

engineering feat in its own right. A plaque on the Stuart Highway, 650km south of Darwin, dedicated in 1954, records the achievement:

The north and south parts of this epic overland telegraph line were finally joined about one mile west of this spot by RC Patterson, engineer, at 3.15pm on Thursday, August 22, 1872, thus making possible for the first time instantaneous telegraph communications between Australia and Great Britain.³

Meanwhile, as Traynor records:

On 26 October 1871, three British ships sailed into Port Darwin: cargo ships *Hibernia* and *Edinburgh* loaded with big reels of copper cable insulated with gutta-percha, and the passenger ship *Investigator* carrying engineers and electricians. The men retrieved a prefabricated hut from the hold of the *Edinburgh*, erected it onshore and dug a trench down to the low water mark. On the morning of Tuesday 7 November, they hauled a cable from the hold of the *Hibernia*, dragged it ashore and connected it to instruments inside the hut.

They promptly climbed back on board their ships and sailed north-west towards Java. When the cable ran out, its end was spliced to the one on board the *Edinburgh* and the ships resumed their journey. The cable was soon connected to a telegraph line running across the island of Java to Banjoewangi at its eastern end. On 20 November the commander of the three ships Captain Robert Halpin sent a message to William Bloomfield Douglas, the government resident in Port Darwin. It declared he was now connected to the rest of the world and finished with the words 'Advance Australia'⁴.

The project estimate was £120,000; the final cost was three times that amount⁵. As it happened, the sub-sea cable failed between June and October 1872, relieving the South Australian government of four months of penalty payments. Superintendent Todd, a meticulous planner, declared himself to have:

...the satisfaction of seeing the successful completion of a scheme I advanced 14 years ago.⁶

The vision to construct an overland telegraph across the continent to connect Australia with the world was greatly informed by British investment, British entrepreneurship and other projects that proved to be both technological and commercial successes. A major figure in the expansion of British subsea telegraphic systems was John Pender (1816-1896), an English businessman and some-time politician who invested heavily in telegraph technology, at one time owning 32 individual companies. This included having a major stake in the British-Australia company that built the subsea cable to Darwin and provided the service to the Australia's northern port. Pender made his fortune as a textile merchant trading cotton; the benefit of instant news of market movements may well have been his motivation for faster technology.

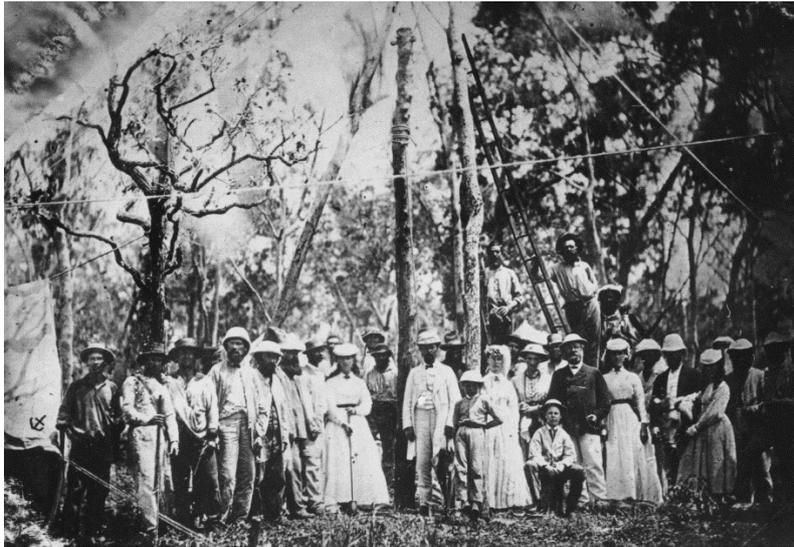
³ Traynor, 2016; 49.

⁴ Traynor, 2016; 48

⁵ Traynor, 2016; 50

⁶ Traynor, 2016; 50

Additional photographs



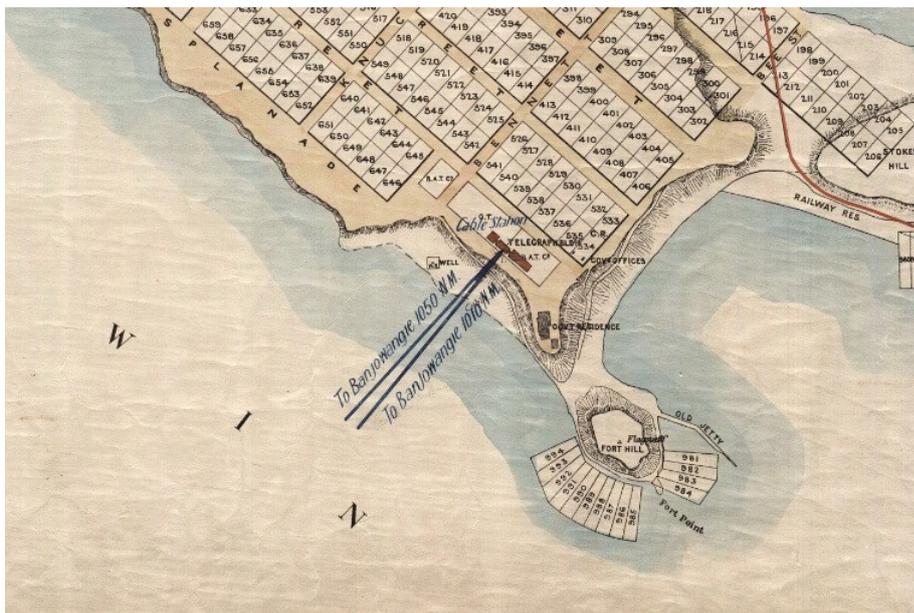
15 September 1870 – Planting the first telegraph pole, near Palmerston. Among those present were: Mr Palmer, Mr Burton, Dr Furnell, Dr Millner, D.D. Daly, Miss Douglas, Mr & Mrs William Trevett Dalwood, Willie Douglas, A.T. Childs, Captain & Mrs Douglas, F.W. Dalwood, Miss Douglas, W. McMinn, Miss B. Douglas, Mr James Darwent, J. McKinlay, Mr Grey, Mr E. Holthouse, Mr Davis, Mr Paquelin. Time: 3:00 pm. The photographer (Samuel Sweet) was the Master of the GULNARE which had brought the OT contractor Darwent and Dalwood and their men and materials to Darwin. Image: Peter Spillett Collection, Northern Territory Library.



*1871 – the Telegraph Fleet in Darwin Harbour.
L to R: Bengal, Gulnare, Hibernia, Investigator, Edinburgh.
Image: Samuel Sweet Collection, State Library of South Australia.*



Early 1870s – first Telegraph Station at Port Darwin.
Image: Andrew King Collection.



1904 – Plan indicating the cable's incoming point.
Image: Heritage Branch Collection.

Pietro Baracchi

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Pietro Baracchi and his Soujourn in Port Darwin

by Robyn Smith

On Saturday 24 July 1926, the Melbourne *Argus* reported the death of a popular Italian migrant and highly respected astronomer and meteorologist, Pietro Paolo Giovanni Ernesto Baracchi. The *Argus* noted that this news would be received:

...with profound regret not only by his wide circle of friends in Victoria, but throughout Australia and overseas...⁷

No doubt the sentiments of the *Argus* were so. What is not widely known is that he briefly visited Port Darwin in 1882-83 to undertake ground breaking scientific work.

Pietro 'Commendatore' Baracchi was born on 25 February 1851 in Florence, Italy. After undertaking a degree in Civil Engineering, he served as an Engineer in the Italian Army for a short time. In 1876, Baracchi and two friends, Carlo Catani and Ettore Checchi, sailed to New Zealand where they found no suitable work, so moved on to Australia where they all secured employment in the Victorian public service, Baracchi initially at the Melbourne Observatory and in 1877 with Catani and Checchi at the Department of Lands and Survey⁸.

In 1882, the difference in time, and therefore the ability to set true longitude, between Greenwich in the United Kingdom and the Australian colonies and New Zealand was 'broadly'⁹ accepted, but acknowledged to be 'erroneous'¹⁰. The erroneous data was the result of observations of the Transit of Venus in 1874 when:

...the longitudes of the observing stations [in Australia] could not be positively determined.¹¹

The December 1882 Transit of Venus would have provided a remedial opportunity, however, poor visibility at the station at Jimbour in Queensland rendered observation futile. A further remedial opportunity using chronometric (clock) beats over the sub-sea cable between Port Darwin and Singapore was suggested to the Australian colonies by the Hydrographical Department of the United States and the Transit Committee of the Royal Society of London. The suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm in the colonies.

Notwithstanding that America's battle for independence from England had been over for more than 100 years, there appeared to be residual rivalry and, after all, the Australian colonies were British colonies, so:

The proposal was that the longitude should be determined through the British rather than an American agency. There was a feeling amongst scientific men in England that it would not be right- that, in fact, it would be a discredit to the nation-to neglect the determination and allow the Americans to undertake the work.¹²

⁷ Melbourne *Argus*, 24 July 1926, p 31.

⁸ JL Perdix, 1979, 'Baracchi, Pietro Paolo Giovanni Ernesto (1851-1926)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 7, Melbourne University Press.

⁹ Meaning to within a fraction of a second

¹⁰ Brisbane *Courier*, Friday 29 December 1882.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Brisbane *Courier*, 13 September 1882.

I will return to this fascinating issue of cultural rivalry later.

At the request of the Government Astronomers of South Australia and New South Wales, Messrs Todd and Russell, who agreed to jointly fund the expedition with Victoria, Rob Ellery, the Victorian Government Astronomer, was charged with arranging the undertaking¹³. The total cost was expected to be under £1000¹⁴.

Captain Leonard Darwin, fourth of five sons of Charles Darwin¹⁵, was to have been the Royal Society of London's observer of the transit at Jimbour on 7 December 1882. As noted earlier, the attempt failed. It was then suggested that Darwin¹⁶ travel to Singapore to take part in the cable exercise.

Ellery selected Pietro Baracchi, 32, who was then working as a surveyor for the Crown Lands Department, to be the observer at Port Darwin. The Brisbane *Courier* reported Baracchi to be:

...an excellent observer, besides being a good mathematician.¹⁷

Before either Darwin or Baracchi departed for their respective destinations, they spent some time in Melbourne where:

...observations and experiments were made under Captain Darwin's direction as a preparation for the work about to be undertaken. Definite arrangements as to the mode of procedure were made and a series of observations conducted for the purpose of determining the personal equation of the two observers.¹⁸

In other words, they tested and timed their reflexes so that response times to cables sent and received between Port Darwin and Singapore via the connecting cable at Banjoewangie in Batavia¹⁹ could be factored in to calculations.

In the meantime, the Batavian Government expressed interest in determining the time difference between Batavia and Australia, and it prepared to dispatch an observer to Banjoewangie to work with an observer in Melbourne.

The objectives of the project were succinctly summarised by the Brisbane *Courier*:

The difference of longitude between Singapore and Greenwich having already been determined, the telegraphic signals exchanged by Captain Darwin and Mr Baracchi will show exactly the difference between Greenwich and Port Darwin. The difference between the longitude of Greenwich and that of Melbourne and the other Australian cities can then be readily ascertained by means of the telegraph...When the Port Darwin determination is completed, the longitudes of every Australian, Tasmanian and New Zealand station will have been fixed with all the accuracy possible.²⁰

¹³ Brisbane *Courier*, 29 December 1882.

¹⁴ Brisbane *Courier*, 13 September 1882.

¹⁵ Charles Darwin had two daughters and five sons.

¹⁶ There is folklore suggesting that Leonard Darwin was in Port Darwin for the setting of true longitude. That is not the case. FC Arden-Close and Hugh Robert Mill, 1943 'Major Leonard Darwin', in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol 101, No 4, pp 172-177, Blackwell Publishing.

¹⁷ Brisbane *Courier*, 29 December 1882.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Now Indonesia.

²⁰ Brisbane *Courier*, 29 December 1882.

By this time, the project was expected to cost £400, which was to be divided six ways: the three aforementioned colonies as well as Tasmania, New Zealand and Queensland.

Pietro Baracchi departed Melbourne on 9 December 1882 and travelled to Sydney, where he boarded the *Menmuir*. He was accompanied by 'an intelligent sailor as assistant'²¹ and arrived in Port Darwin on 30 December. In something of an understatement, the official report noted:

The time of year was unfavourable for the work, as it was the wet season...²²

That notwithstanding, Baracchi and his unnamed-intelligent-sailor-assistant completed their work by the end of February, having exchanged signals with Singapore and Banjoewangie. Leonard Darwin had been in Singapore since 2 February, and the observer in Bajoewangie was Captain Helb of the Netherlands India Staff.

Baracchi's work was undertaken in the Port Darwin Post and Telegraphic Office, a porcellanite building completed in 1887, where the submarine cable terminated and the overland telegraph began. The building was bombed beyond repair during the first WWII bombing raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942 and is now the site of Parliament House. In what is now known as Liberty Square, the expansive lawn area between Parliament House and the Supreme Court in Darwin, a plinth and plaque were dedicated by the Department of the Legislative Assembly on 2 March 2000, the 117th anniversary of the achievement.

The official report commends Baracchi's work:

Mr Baracchi left Port Darwin on his return to Melbourne on the 6th of March, having carried out the work of the expedition successfully and in a thoroughly satisfactory manner.²³

The report records that signals were exchanged between Port Darwin and Banjoewangie on 28 January and 1, 22 and 23 February 1883. Signals were exchanged between Port Darwin and Singapore on 9, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, 25 and 26 February 1883; between Port Darwin and Adelaide on 14, 15, 22, 23 and 26 February and on 2 March 1883; and between Port Darwin and Melbourne on 15, 23 and 26 February and 2 March 1883. The number of signals between each of the points was necessary to eliminate a phenomenon on the cable known as 'retardation of the electric current'.²⁴

To undertake the work, it was necessary for the cable to be free of all traffic:

These and other preliminaries will necessarily occupy some little time, but no avoidable delay will now take place in completing a work which has been too long postponed.²⁵

It is reasonable to assume that Baracchi and his unnamed-intelligent-sailor-assistant worked at night, when cable traffic was light or non-existent, and because the post office was quiet and they could work without disturbance. An additional bonus would have been that it was cooler than it would have been during the day. Further, it is reasonable to assume that no

²¹ There appeared to be no pressing need to name the man. Ellery, Todd and Russell (Government Astronomers for Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales respectively), *A Report on the Telegraphic Determination of Australian Longitudes via Singapore, Banjoewangie and Port Darwin*, May 1885, published 1886 by authority of John Ferres, Government Printer, Melbourne.

²² Ibid.

²³ Op cit.

²⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 13 September 1882.

²⁵ Ibid.

signals were exchanged on certain dates (for example, between 2 and 8 February 1883) because of technical problems such as flat batteries at one of the repeater stations at any point along the line.

From these signals, it was determined that:

The difference of longitude, Port Darwin-Singapore, determined by Captain Darwin and Mr Baracchi, is 1h 47m 57.48s, making the longitude of Port Darwin 8h 43m 22.49s E. of Greenwich.²⁶

Having arrived at this calculation, the differences of longitudes between Port Darwin and Adelaide, Adelaide and Melbourne and Melbourne and Sydney could be calculated. These determinations:

...were in part made during Mr Baracchi's stay at Port Darwin, and partly on subsequent occasions.²⁷

Further, the determinations meant that:

...we shall no longer have to rely on the moon, whose somewhat erratic course has been known to lead astronomers astray.²⁸

This masterful accomplishment was aptly described in Darwin's biography as a 'most valuable indirect result' of Leonard Darwin's trip to Australia to observe the 7 December 1882 Transit of Venus.

What is extraordinary, however, is that Darwin's trip to Jimbour was intended to be the lead project for determining precise longitude. This method would have used the Transit of Venus across the face of the moon to calculate longitude and 'real time'. Returning to the cultural rivalry between England and the United States, astronomers in the USA had established true longitudes (and exact times) as early as the mid-1850s and by 1866, with the advent of the transatlantic cable between Canada and Ireland, determined precise longitude in relation to Greenwich. This is exactly what Darwin would have been attempting to do—except he would have been doing so using 'old' science. What had been discovered in the United States was:

...one of the first major contributions of the American scientific community to worldwide astronomical practice.²⁹

It was and remains known as The American Method.³⁰ As noted earlier, however, 'scientific men' in England determined that to pursue this method 'would be a discredit to the nation'. It was only when the hitherto traditional method failed that the fallback position became the more scientifically advanced American Method.

Popularly known as 'Commendatore' Baracchi following conferral of the order of Knight Commander of the Crown of Italy by King Humbert in 1897, Baracchi's impressive

²⁶ Ellery, Todd & Russell, *A Report on the Telegraphic Determination of Australian Longitudes*, 1885. Note that the earth's magnetic variation has resulted in changes to this reading over time.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 4 December 1882.

²⁹ Trudy E Bell, 2001, 'The 'American Method': The 19th-Century Telegraphic Revolution in Finding Longitude', July 2001 conference paper, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (USA).

³⁰ Ibid.

achievements include working as an astronomer and meteorologist³¹ at the Melbourne Observatory, leading expeditions to observe solar eclipses at Bruny Island in Tasmania in 1910 and the Tongan archipelago in 1911, and leading a party of four others to establish Mt Stromlo as the observatory for the Yass-Canberra area in 1911.

Baracchi worked his way up the ladder at the Melbourne Observatory and, upon Ellery's retirement in 1895, the same year Baracchi was naturalised, he became Acting Government Astronomer. He was officially appointed to the position some five years later and retired in 1915.³²

Baracchi became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1884. He was a member of the Royal Society of Victoria from 1887, serving as its President in 1908-09 and as a Trustee from 1914-1922.³³ He was also a member of The Wallaby Club, a gentlemen's club established in 1894 by a Melbourne physician, a Dr Henry. Members had to be qualified men, and consisted of:

...artists, teachers, musicians, writers and thinking men of all kinds, men who had done something for their calling or for the community.³⁴

Baracchi became President of The Wallaby Club in 1904.

In 1886, he married Catherine (Kate) Petty, a woman of some wealth. They had one son, Guido. Kate Baracchi died in 1908³⁵. Guido Baracchi became an oft married political activist who was gaoled for three months in Melbourne in 1918³⁶.

Petro Baracchi died in St Ives Private Hospital in Melbourne on 23 July 1926, aged 75. He had cancer of the stomach. The *Argus* described him as:

...a man of particularly likeable disposition, with a genius for making friends...³⁷

Volpe noted that Baracchi was often referred to as the:

'Weather Prophet' especially during the period of the racing carnivals. Bookmakers, punters and the general public waiting in anticipation for the weather forecasts that would contribute to their successes or failures.³⁸

Commendatore Baracchi was undoubtedly a treasure of the Australian and international scientific community. His sojourn to and achievements in Port Darwin also make him a treasure of Northern Territory history.

³¹ The *Commendatore* considered 'popular meteorology' to be 'of little practical value except as an amusement, and of doubtful credit to science', according to his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. His adoring public did not see it the same way and he was regularly quoted and, indeed, headlined, in Melbourne papers on occasions such as heat waves, forecasts for test cricket matches, etc.

³² Ibid.

³³ Op cit.

³⁴ Volpe, 2005, *From Tuscany to Victoria*, p 99.

³⁵ Op cit.

³⁶ R Gollan, 'Baracchi, Guido Carlo Luigi (1887-1975)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

³⁷ Melbourne *Argus*, 24 July 1926.

³⁸ Volpe, 2005, *From Tuscany to Victoria*, p 93.

Additional photographs



*Portrait of Baracchi, Victorian Government Astronomer.
Image: Museums Victoria*



*Circa 1900 – Baracchi at the Melbourne Observatory.
Image: Museums Victoria*



Undated – Baracchi at the Melbourne Observatory.
Image: Museums Victoria

The Darwin Rebellion

[reproduced from *Wikipedia* with the permission of the lead author]

The Darwin rebellion of 17 December 1918 was the culmination of unrest in the [Australian Workers' Union](#) which had existed between 1911 and early 1919. Led by [Harold Nelson](#), up to 1000 [demonstrators](#) marched on [Government House](#) at Liberty Square in [Darwin, Northern Territory](#), Australia where they burnt an [effigy](#) of the [Administrator of the Northern Territory, John Gilruth](#), and demanded his resignation.

Their grievances were against the two main [Northern Territory](#) employers, [Vestey's Meatworks](#) and the [Commonwealth of Australia](#), and concerned [political representation](#), [unemployment](#), [taxation](#) and ongoing [industrial disputes](#) following the implementation of the [White Australia policy](#). Gilruth and his family left Darwin soon afterwards under the protection of [HMAS Encounter](#), while the Vestey company permanently closed its Darwin operations in 1920.

The event was described as the nearest thing to a revolution since the [Eureka Stockade](#) at Ballarat in 1854.

Background

From 1863 until 1911 Northern Territory residents were entitled to vote in both [South Australian](#) and from 1901, Commonwealth elections. This status had also enabled Territorians to qualify as South Australian voters in elections for both Houses of the [Commonwealth Parliament](#) after [Federation](#) in 1901.

On 1 January 1911 the transfer of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth government deprived Territorians of all political representation and voting rights. The Commonwealth Constitution did not allow for Federal electorates to cross state borders. This enabled national governments to avoid a hypothetical impasse where a thousand Territory voters might some day hold the balance of power in an evenly divided Commonwealth Parliament. Of the 4.5 million white Australians living on the continent, only 1,729 lived in the Northern Territory, along with about 1,300 [Chinese](#) and an unknown number of [Aborigines](#).

Following the transfer, the Northern Territory was run by an administrator appointed by the Commonwealth executive, a [public servant](#) answerable to the Commonwealth. In the years following Commonwealth Administration, Territorians became increasingly unhappy with unrepresentative government from southern Australia.^[8] The Northern Territory's few economic pursuits—[pearling](#), [pastoralism](#), and [mining](#)—were all run down. Expected Commonwealth-led development dissipated as Federal funding was diverted towards Australia's participation in [World War I](#). Consequently, conflict between labour unions and the Northern Territory administration began to grow.

Dr John Anderson Gilruth

Dr. John A. Gilruth arrived in Darwin in April 1912, after [Prime Minister Andrew Fisher](#) invited him to join a scientific mission to investigate the potential of the Northern Territory. He was later given the position of [Administrator of the Northern Territory](#). Gilruth's appointment sparked his enthusiasm for economic development of the Northern Territory by means of "mining, crop-growing and pastoralism". By 1913, the Gilruth administration was already becoming unpopular.

From the beginning, Gilruth's plans did not progress as planned. He did his best to promote mining and agriculture, including the development of a meatworks in Darwin by the [English](#) firm, [Vestey's](#). However, these attempts to achieve economic development proved disappointing. With the outbreak of [World War I](#) in August 1914, the Commonwealth government lost interest in development of the Northern Territory as Federal funds were diverted towards the war.

As a consequence, the weight of public frustration fell upon Gilruth. However, his own character and actions helped to bring about that result. Gilruth was described as "headstrong and domineering". His blunt, dynamic style of [leadership](#) was also seen as being arrogant, insensitive and "not fitted to rule a democratic people". He went to Darwin predisposed "to treat the Chinese with reserve, the Aborigines with heavy-handed [paternalism](#) and the white trade unionists with suspicion". Gilruth constantly clashed with trade unionists, employers, workers and even his own officers. With Gilruth hindered by the Commonwealth government, "which neither gave him the powers he needed to rule effectively nor evolved consistent policies for the region", a confrontation between his administration and the townspeople was inevitable.

The 1913 Strike

The construction of the [railway line](#) from Port Darwin to [Pine Creek](#) in the late 1880s required the immigration of Chinese labour. In December 1888, the South Australian Chinese Immigration Act came into effect, effectively putting a stop to the immigration

increase. Those Chinese workers already in Darwin had proved themselves reliable, hard-working and good citizens. After the decline of the [gold rush](#), the Chinese population competed for jobs with the [White](#) population. Not only did Asians compete successfully against Europeans for jobs that were scarce, but they also diversified into other profitable areas such as vegetable growing, cooking, tailoring and cleaning. Consequently, the retail trade was almost entirely in Chinese hands and their success was resented by Europeans.

Early Chinese influence in Darwin

Given the option, most employers preferred to employ Chinese workers, not necessarily because they were cheaper to employ, but because they were more reliable. The problem faced by unskilled European labourers in the Northern Territory was that no-one cared about their situation. "Local employers did not want them, the South Australian Government was indifferent to them, and since they were not unionized, their comrades in southern Australia ignored them."

On 9 January 1911, the [Fisher Labor Government](#) issued a Ministerial instruction to implement the [White Australia policy](#). With the threat of Chinese competition reduced, European workers were able to bargain for higher rates of pay. Needing an organisation to represent workers' interests, the Darwin [Australian Workers' Union](#) (AWU) came into existence in 1912. Gilruth was given a free hand to deal with the situation in Darwin and arrived in the midst of a long pay dispute involving wharf lumpers and shipping agents. AWU representatives met with Gilruth several times in 1912 and 1913, but little was resolved.

When the government lowered the wages of survey field hands in April 1913, the AWU conducted a secret ballot amongst its members, which overwhelmingly supported a general [strike](#) commencing 28 April. Although the Darwin strike was in itself insignificant, the threat of widespread national disruption if Chinese labour were used to keep the northern port operational, was significant. After weeks of strike action, the union reserves were empty of strike funds, the parent AWU in [Townsville](#) hostile to the whole event, the Federal government indifferent and a number of strikers back at work, it was evident that strike action was lost. In late May, AWU representatives met with Gilruth to negotiate their terms of surrender; the unionists were prepared to return to work as long as the strikers were reinstated to their former positions. Not content with his devastating victory, Gilruth refused, "wanting to eliminate all traces of unionism in the Northern Territory". Although the strike was called off in the first week of June, it shaped future industrial relations in the Northern Territory, as the "White Australia" policy and anti-Chinese feeling fuelled support for the Unions.

The Emergence of the Australian Workers Union

[Harold Nelson](#) moved to Darwin from [Pine Creek](#) in 1913 with his wife and five children. He quickly became the driving force and organiser for the [Australian Workers' Union](#) (AWU). Under his leadership, membership to the AWU rapidly grew reaching approximately 700 by 1915. Most members were employed in key infrastructure areas including occupations at the wharf, on the railway line, truck owners, and in the construction of the [Vesteys Meatworks](#) at Bullocky Point. Their catchcry quickly became '[no taxation without representation](#)'. Nelson's tactics were simple, he wanted to secure a strong membership base before using industrial muscle.

The Chinese were not allowed to join the unions and by late 1914, mainly through Nelson's swift and ruthless actions, Chinese workers had been excluded from all laboring work, except that of a domestic nature.^[16] Many Chinese had been employed at the wharf and as a result the AWU demanded and got higher wages for white workers. In 1914 and early 1915, through a campaign of boycotts and strikes, Nelson forced Vestey Brothers to raise wages for their construction workers and meatworks employees in Darwin. Further industrial affairs continued as the meatworks project progressed.

Nelson met with Gilruth in the second week of November 1914. Although there is no record of the first confrontation between the men, subsequent records indicate the meeting concluded in a significant victory for the AWU. At that time, carpenters united to join the AWU (and not their parent Carpenters and Joiners union). By late 1916, the AWU in Darwin had grown into a formidable body with little minority opposition.

Vesteys Meatworks

Gilruth had correctly envisaged that, for the foreseeable future, large-scale private enterprise in Darwin would be based on the mining, agriculture and cattle industries. The large British conglomerate, [Vestey Brothers](#), proposed setting up a meat processing plant in Darwin and work commenced on this in 1914. An analysis of the negotiations suggested that neither the government nor Vestey Brothers were fully confident of the success of the venture they were about to undertake. It also showed that Gilruth, as the middleman, was thoroughly influential in its outcome. It was largely through his efforts that Vestey Brothers finally consented to building a meatworks in Darwin.

Vestey's Meatworks began operation in 1917 on Bullocky Point (current site of the Darwin High School) in Darwin. Vesteys entry into the Northern Territory was by far the most promising development in the history of the region. However, due to the labour shortage, workers were able to obtain higher wages through regular [strikes](#). As a consequence, Vestey's could not make the meatworks profitable. Its temporary closure in 1917 significantly affected the already struggling Territory economy by putting hundreds of workers out of work. Additionally, a conspiracy was reportedly uncovered between the Government and Vestey's regarding the illegal takeover of a large pastoral property. Gilruth was alleged to have distributed significant bribes, and [H.E. Carey](#)—who was both Government Secretary and the Chief Clerk at the meatworks—was accused of [collusion](#).

It was widely thought that Vestey Brothers, with its experience in similar ventures elsewhere and access to substantial capital, would be able to develop large-scale cattle rearing in the Territory without significant government intervention. Cattle was the one commodity that Northern Australia produced in large numbers. It was thought that Gilruth and the Federal government fully supported Vestey's plans.

From the time of the meatworks establishment in 1914 until its permanent closure six years later in 1920, Vestey's had lost a great deal of money. The Darwin venture existed in a vacuum filled only by the emergent [Australian Workers' Union](#) (AWU) and by World War I. During that time, Gilruth came to matter less and less as the AWU gathered strength under the leadership of [Harold Nelson](#).

Palmerston District Council

The [Palmerston \(Darwin\) District Council](#) was established by proclamation in 1874, with representatives elected on a ratepayer franchise. On 4 February 1915 the [Minister for External Affairs, Hugh Mahon](#), decided to abolish the Council, thus depriving Territorians of their slight vestige of democratic government. He gave as his reasons that "the District Council had blocked the government at every move". The new council would be replaced by two representatives of the government and two elected by the ratepayers, with Carey as [Chairman](#). In effect, this gave Gilruth increased powers.

The abolition of the Palmerston District Council was a political error, but at first neither the Minister nor Gilruth saw it. The Council's importance, however, lay in the fact that it was "the only symbol of representative government and [democracy](#) in the Northern Territory", and was made up of a small but influential [middle class](#) of Darwin, such as shipping agents, mine owners, [landlords](#) and ranking public servants. These were the people whose support Gilruth needed, but instead the Minister's announcement further alienated Gilruth from the townspeople.

The Prime Minister was not concerned, as his colleagues were about the troubles in Darwin. He dismissed the matter, saying that it was "a healthy sign, showing that people are alive to their own interests". In the weeks that followed the announcement of the demise of the Palmerston District Council, support for the [AWU](#) organiser, [Harold Nelson](#), rapidly grew. In a time of rigid [social structure](#), it was evident that men of all classes united in the pursuit of a common aim behind Nelson. Ignoring growing discontent, Gilruth chose instead to distance himself even further, by moving to take over the hotels.

Nationalisation of Hotels

On 29 September 1915, an ordinance passed by the Federal Executive Council in [Melbourne](#) nationalised the supply of liquor in the northern part of the Territory. The legislation was ostensibly aimed at Chinese '[sly-groggers](#)' often accused of selling low quality liquor, but in effect was designed to curb consumption of alcohol in northern Australia and provide some revenue to the Federal budget. Known as the 'government-takeover', penalties were steep and costs of administration and auditing the hotels rose rapidly. There were also some adverse side-effects with the closure of several popular hotels and the appointment by Gilruth of a 'supervisor of hotels', at a high salary. As a result of the takeover, the price of beer and whisky rapidly increased. It was reported that the price of beer jumped by 30 per cent. Gilruth had also ordered the closure of the public bar in the popular [Victoria Hotel](#) and consequently, the hotel was losing profits.

In 1918, several station owners and businessmen abandoned the Territory, including the manager of the [State Liquor Department](#), because of Gilruth's policies. However, the mistake that helped finish Gilruth's career in the Territory, was trivial. As Darwinites prepared to celebrate the [end of the war](#), the women employed in the state hotels asked for a few hours off on Saturday, 14 November to join in the celebrations. The hotel boarders agreed to dine elsewhere and everybody presumed the matter was closed. However, Gilruth subsequently refused to concede leave for the women, who took the time off anyway. When they returned to work the next day, they found themselves locked out by order of the

Administrator. It was also reported that Gilruth refused permission for a ship to unload 700 cases of beer for the town's [Christmas](#) supplies.

On Saturday afternoon, 7 December, there was a meeting at Darwin Oval, attended by several hundred people, about ever-increasing alcohol prices and the reopening of the Victoria Hotel public bar. On 16 December, Nelson met with the Police Inspector and asked for permission to stage a peaceful protest march from [Parap](#) to Government House. The Police Inspector gave permission on the condition there would be no violence.

Rebellion

On the afternoon of 17 December 1918, stop-work meetings were held in Darwin and at the meatworks. About 1,000 men walked to Government House demanding "[no taxation without representation](#)", behind a car carrying an [effigy](#) of Gilruth tied to a stake. A deputation presented a motion to Gilruth that stated in part:

We, the citizens of Darwin here assembled ask that the Administrator address us regarding his administration of the Territory of the last five years. Failing to comply, that he be asked if he is willing to leave Darwin by the steamer and remain away until a public commission is granted on his administration. This meeting will guarantee him safe conduct to the steamer....

Gilruth initially refused to address the crowd other than making a statement that he was answerable to the Minister and would not and did not recognise the citizens of Darwin as having any authority over him. The crowd outside became tense and impatient. The crowd demanded that Gilruth appear before them to vindicate himself. Surprisingly, Gilruth complied but he was defiant, inviting the crowd to gaze upon him and stating if recalled by the Minister he would leave, but under no other circumstances would he leave his post.

As the crowd swelled, part of the picket fence around Government House collapsed and union leader Harold Nelson reportedly called out "over the fence, boys". The crowd advanced across the garden into Government House. For a few moments, Gilruth was roughly handled and abused as he attempted to flee into the residence. Windows were broken and the wire netting removed from the tennis court. Eventually, the crowd dispersed, but not before they carried Gilruth's effigy to the front gate of Government House, soaked it in [kerosene](#) and set it alight.

In a subsequent letter to the [Prime Minister](#), Gilruth stated that "he was perfectly aware that had he promised to reduce the price of beer (at the expense of the Australian taxpayer) the mob would have departed peacefully. However, though this would have been 'diplomatic,' to purchase peace at this price would have been condemned by the Minister and the Treasury".

The Government was alarmed, and within a week of the incident the lightly armed gunboat [HMAS Una](#) arrived to protect the Administrator. She anchored beneath Government House Cliff on Christmas Eve. Another public meeting was held in January 1919, and a telegram sent from the meeting to the acting Prime Minister which read:

We, the citizens of the Northern Territory, [beseechingly](#) implore you to recall the Administrator, Dr. Gilruth, in the interests of life and property, as his [autocratic](#) administration is fast reaching a grave crisis.

In the weeks that followed, Gilruth and his family were virtual prisoners within the residence. On 20 February 1919, Gilruth left Darwin by his own accord and boarded HMAS Encounter, a [cruiser](#) with eleven 6-inch guns and nine 12-pounder guns, still the Administrator, but now prepared to function from [Melbourne](#). His departure effectively ended what was to become known as the "Darwin Rebellion".

Aftermath

Wartime censorship prevented news of the storming of Government House in Darwin reaching the national press until the following Thursday afternoon. The news was received with great interest. The national press reacted in a predictable way, blaming a [Soviet](#) establishment in Darwin, to total [anarchy](#), to an uncaring federal government and Gilruth himself. The rebellion was described as the nearest thing to a revolution since the [Eureka Stockade](#) at [Ballarat](#) in 1854.

In November 1919, the [Hon. Norman Kirkwood Ewing](#) of the [Tasmanian Supreme Court](#) was appointed to Chair a [Royal Commission](#) on Northern Territory Administration. The outcome of the Royal Commission was the *Northern Territory Representation Act 1922* (Cth) which provided for one [Northern Territory member](#) of the [House of Representatives](#); the member had no voting rights, could not be chosen to be the Speaker or Chairman of Committees, and was not counted for quorum or majority determination purposes in the House.

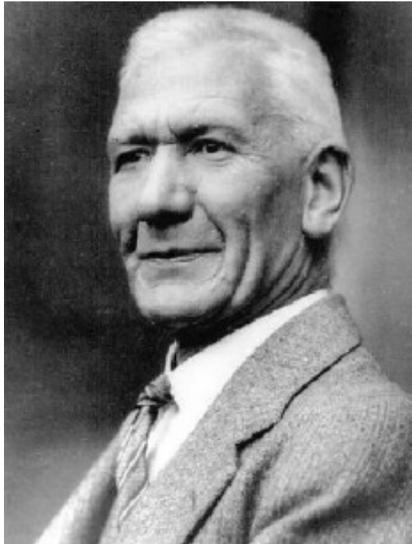
Gilruth never returned to the Northern Territory. In the 1920s, he advanced his career with the [Council for Scientific and Industrial Research](#) in Melbourne. In 1933 he was elected to the presidency and in 1936 to honorary membership of the [Australian Veterinary Association](#). Gilruth retired in 1935 and on 4 March 1937, he died of a [respiratory infection](#) at his home at [South Yarra](#), Melbourne, and was cremated.

Imprisoned at [Fannie Bay Gaoi](#) for his "no taxation without representation" campaign, Harold Nelson won the first Territory seat in the [House of Representatives in 1922](#) and held the seat until 1934. Nelson spent his time in parliament campaigning for greater expenditure and [self-government](#) for the Northern Territory, with little success. Following his defeat at the [1934 election](#), Nelson moved to [Alice Springs](#) to work as an agent. He died from unexpected [cardiac failure](#) in Alice Springs in 1947. He was survived by his wife and five children. One of these children, [Jock Nelson](#), also served as member for the Northern Territory and in 1973 became the first Territory-raised Administrator of the Northern Territory.

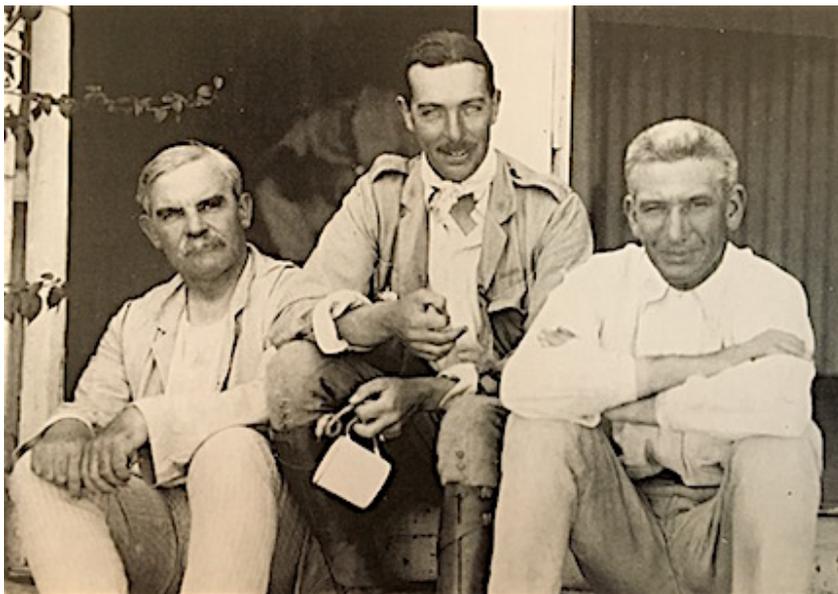
Legacy

- Liberty Square, the parcel of vacant land opposite [Government House](#), is named after the gathering site of the Darwin Rebellion. The Northern Territory [Electoral division of Nelson](#) is named after [Harold Nelson](#), as is Nelson Terrace in [Alice Springs](#).
- Gilruth Avenue in Darwin is named after [Dr. John Gilruth](#).
- Carey Street in Darwin is named after [H. E. Carey](#).
- Vestey's Beach in Darwin, one of the beaches which [Vestey's Meatworks](#) overlooked, is named after the meatworks.

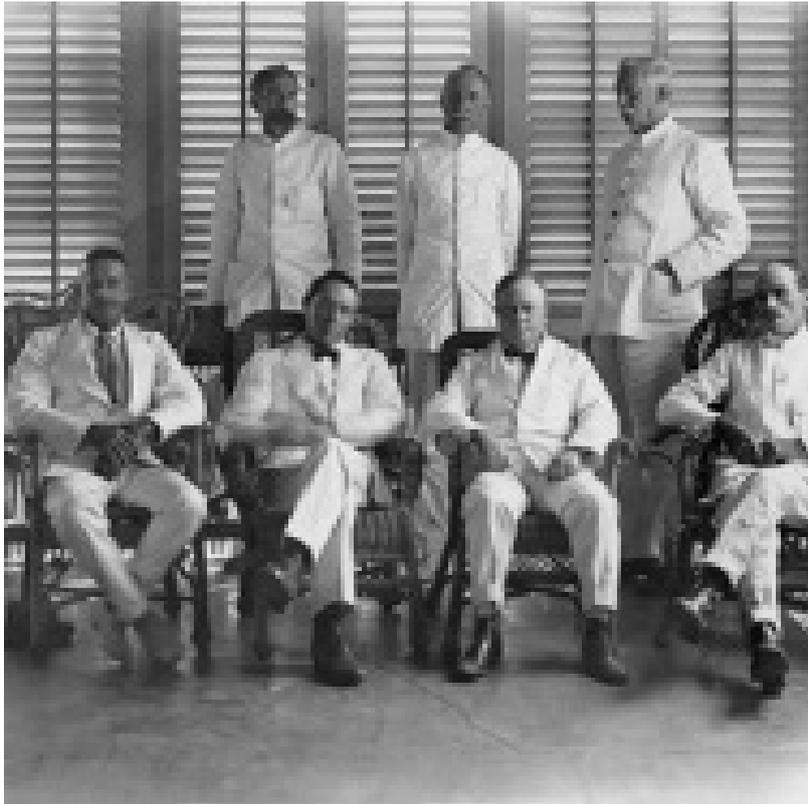
Additional photographs



*Circa 1930s – Dr John Anderson Gilruth.
Image: Northern Territory Library.*



*1912 – Minister Josiah Thomas, Sir Walter Barttelot, Dr Gilruth on the
occasion of a Federal parliamentary party from Melbourne visiting Darwin.
Image: State Library of South Australia.*



*1919 – Darwin Advisory Council. Harold Nelson (sitting, second from left) and H.E. Carey (sitting, third from left).
Image: State Library of South Australia.*



*1917 - Vestey's Meatworks under construction.
Image: Northern Territory Library.*



*Circa 1919 - Harold Nelson.
Image: National Library of Australia*



*1918 – The Darwin Rebellion. Speaker (Toupein – who moved the motion to name Liberty Square at a subsequent Town Council meeting) standing on a beer crate.
Image: Northern Territory Library.*



1918 – The Darwin Rebellion. Effigy at left hoisted above vehicle
Image: State Library of South Australia.

The Naming of Liberty Square

On 21 June 1919, the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* reported, on page 8:

"Liberty Square."

A resolution was passed by the Darwin Town Council at its recent meeting, on the motion of Cr. Toupein, seconded by Cr. Pearse to the effect the plot of ground in front of the Government Residency at Darwin, upon which the effigy of Dr. John Anderson Gilruth, M.R.C.V.S., was publicly burnt, following upon the great anti-Gilruth procession of industrialists on December 17th last, shall henceforth be known to posterity as "Liberty Square." By and by, when Darwin is blessed with a proper reticulation scheme, it may be possible to grow mango and tamarind trees and chilli bushes around the historic spot, and the products there-from these trees and bushes utilised at the State enterprise pickle, chutney, sauce, and pepper factory, and thus assist in adding zest and piquancy to the appetite of the O.B.U.-ist, and anyone else who may survive till then. The sweet pulp of the pod of the tamarind tree also possesses medicinal value as a laxative, and could be turned to good account in the initial stages of the State owned tamarind pill-making industry, and might be carried on in conjunction with the State-owned eucalyptus oil extraction bureau. There is already a chilli bush growing on the footpath near the Government Secretary's office in Mitchell Street, facing "Liberty Square," quite adjacent to the historic spot where the special constables made their last gallant stand on the memorable seventeenth of December, and, if the pods therefrom were commercially treated, and turned into cayenne pepper, besides evolving the possibility of a new State enterprise, it might, when judiciously mixed with the breakfast curry and rice, serve as a pleasing stimulant and substitute for bulk whisky until such time as State Hotels open for the day, and especially upon future occasions when further deeds of extreme daring and devotion to duty are called for.

Darwin Cenotaph

The Darwin Cenotaph was built in at Liberty Square in 1921 to commemorate the men who served in World War I. The Cenotaph remained there until 1970 when it was relocated to the Civic Centre and, in 1992, it was moved to Bicentennial Park on the site of what was Darwin Oval on the Esplanade.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02024.022

Circa 1934 — a service in Liberty Square in the middle of Darwin with civilians standing (most of the men with hats off) and men of 9 Heavy Battery RAA and 7 Fortress Company RAE of the Darwin Garrison lined up in the foreground. The building at right rear is Government House and the residence of the Administrator. Image: Australian War Memorial.



*The Cenotaph on The Esplanade.
Image: ABC News*

Banyan Tree

The Banyan Tree in State Square is valued by the community as a remnant of original Darwin foreshore vegetation. It is over 200 years old and was the congregation point for Larakia youths prior to ceremonies which took place under the nearby Tamarind tree. It will remain a focus for landscaping associated with State Square.



*The Banyan Tree on the western side of the Supreme Court in Liberty Square.
Image: Heritage Branch Collection.*

Botanical Notes

Family: *Moraceae*

Genus: *Ficus*

Species: *benghalensis*

Vernacular: Banyan Tree; Indian Banyan; Vada Tree

In the beginning of its life the Indian banyan is an epiphyte growing on another tree where some fig-eating bird deposited a seed. As it grows it starts to produce aerial roots from horizontal branches, which take root where they touch the ground. These "prop roots" will create a forest on their own. A Banyan can get 100 feet tall and, with its massive limbs supported by prop roots, spread over an area of several acres. This banyan has large, thick leathery leaves. Cultivar 'Krishnae' has leaves with an inrolled or funnel-like base. When young, the leaves are brown and hairy and as they mature they become glossy green with only traces of hair and obvious veins. The fruit or fig is orange to red as it matures and contains many very small seeds.

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