Dawes Point Battery Site, 1791-1932

Historically, Dawes Point has been the location of many of Sydney’s firsts. In addition to housing the colony’s first battery, in 1788 it housed Sydney’s first observatory. William Dawes a Lieutenant in the Royal Marines was selected by the British Astronomer Royal to establish an observatory in the new colony. The timber observatory built in 1788 was the first European dwelling to be built on Dawes Point.

Originally named Point Maskelyne in honour of the Astronomer Royal, Dr Nevil Maskelyne, the Point like many other precincts in the new colony, came to be known by the name of the person who inhabited it, and so the southern harbour peninsula came to be known as Dawes Point.

But, by 1791, the need for an observatory was superseded by the need to protect the fledgling colony from England’s enemies—initially the Spanish in 1790-91. By 1819 Governor Lachlan Macquarie ordered the convict and architect Francis Greenway, to construct a castellated fort at Dawes Point. Largely a stage-front, the fort was to appear threatening to vessels sailing into Sydney Harbour through the heads.

Upgraded throughout the 1800’s as new threats to Britain’s empire arose, Dawes Point was intended to be the first line of defence against the Spanish in 1790, Napoleon’s French troops in 1810, and the Russian Pacific Fleet during the 1850s Crimean War. Colonel George Barney was given the task of upgrading Sydney’s fortifications, completing the new works at Dawes Point in 1860.

By the end of the 1800s Sydney’s defences had been relocated to the entrance of Port Jackson and Dawes Point slipped into obscurity. Between 1901 and 1903 Dawes Point Battery served as the home of the Commandant of the newly formed Australian Military. The
Commandant, Major General Harry Finn commissioned a number of photographs of the site during his occupation there. In 1925 most of the fort was demolished to make way for the Harbour Bridge. The remaining buildings served as the headquarters for Dorman and Long, the British company building the Bridge. These buildings were demolished in 1932 and the whole area was landscaped to become a park.
Archaeological excavations in 1995, 1999 and 2000 have revealed extensive remains including two underground rooms for storing gunpowder. These remains have been incorporated into a redesign of the park to commemorate the sites long and diverse history.

Dawes Point Battery is important not only in the history of European settlement in Australia, but also in terms of the processes of European global expansion and colonialism. It was here too that some of the first communications were made with the Cadigal, the indigenous people who inhabited Sydney Harbour for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans.

Dawes Point Park: Timeline of significant events

Pre-European Settlement
Dawes Point is part of the territory of the Cadigal who call the point Tarra.

Jan 1788 First Fleet arrives in New South Wales.

By April 1788 Lieutenant William Dawes establishes Sydney’s first observatory on the point, naming it Point Maskelyne after the Astronomer Royal.

1788-91 Dawes lives on site at the observatory and the point becomes known as Dawes Point. He befriends a Cadigal woman, Patyegarang; they learned each other’s languages and Dawes’ diaries record what are in effect, the colony’s first attempts at conciliation.

1789 A powder magazine is built at Dawes Point housing the new Colony’s powder supplies.

1790 Nootka Sound Incident in Canada, between Spain & Britain. Britain plan a military attack on Canada to be launched from Sydney, with troops formed from Sydney’s convicts.

Oct 1790 Spain backs down and a diplomatic solution is obtained.
The British fleet never sailed, the convicts were never deployed to Nootka Sound and Spain agreed to allow the British to trade in the Pacific.

1791 Dawes leaves the colony and the observatory falls into disuse.

July 1791 Dawes Point is further utilised for military purposes, and the construction of a fort begins. A permanent gun battery is established.

1792-1803 William Dawes serves 3 terms as Governor of the freed-slave colony of Sierra Leone in Africa.

1800's Rise of Napoleon's French Empire. Britain becomes aware of potential French threats to New South Wales following the visit of a French "scientific" mission sent by Napoleon in 1802.

Sept 1800 The King of England seeks a report on the colony's defences. The report states that many parts of Dawes Point Battery fall to pieces when the guns are fired.

March 1801 It is reported to the King that the Dawes Point battery has been reconstructed and is "now capable of annoying any vessel with effect".

1804 A 'Loyal Association' comprised of free settlers and emancipists is formed. The Association is charged with the responsibility of exercising the cannon at the batteries every Saturday from 1-3pm.

26 Jan 1808 Overthrow of Governor William Bligh by John Macarthur & the New South Wales Corps. Salute fired from the Dawes Point guns in celebration.

1810 Napoleon orders the destruction of Sydney from Mauritius however a British fleet captures Mauritius before the orders could be carried out.
1819 Governor Lachlan Macquarie engages Francis Greenway to design a fort at Dawes Point that will appear as a castle to ships entering the harbour through the heads.

1819 Dawes Point Park was quarried for sandstone during the construction of the fort, removing evidence of Dawes occupation.

1850 Crimean War – Britain fear an invasion of the colony by the Russian Pacific Fleet. At Dawes Point a “Lower Battery” and subterranean powder magazines are added. Royal Artillery occupies the Battery, which becomes the command post for a series of fortifications built around the inner harbour, including Fort Denison.

1870 British troops officially withdrawn from Australia. Colonies to be defended by local volunteer militia.

1870s-80s Sydney’s defences moved 12kms east of Dawes Pt. to the mouth of Sydney Harbour

1901 Federation of Australia. Under the terms of Federation all defence sites were to pass to the newly formed Commonwealth. But, under advice from the Crown Solicitor, Dawes Point was exempt from the Federal Acquisition of Property Act. It was to be kept for the benefit of the people of NSW. Dawes Point was declared to be “the most historic spot in Sydney” and a vantage place for residents to view the harbour.

1906 Until this date, a cannon was fired daily at 1pm for the residents of Sydney to set their watches. Since then this has been done at Fort Denison.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge demolishes the Dawes Point Battery and two streets of housing for its southern approach. The battery's cannon are removed and temporarily installed at Taronga Zoo.</td>
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<td>1932-4</td>
<td>Dawes Point Park was created to landscape the area beneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge.</td>
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<td>1945</td>
<td>Sydney City Council approves the re-installation of the original battery cannon at Dawes Point in memory of the fortification.</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority is formed and charged with the responsibility of redeveloping The Rocks.</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>Sydney Cove Authority launches the Scheme for Redevelopment of Sydney Cove recording Dawes Point Reserve is a “site of historic interest”.</td>
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<td>May 1973</td>
<td>Sydney Cove Authority examines the feasibility of restoring the Dawes Point's five battery guns in their original setting.</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Royal Australian Artillery Historical Society call for the commemoration of Dawes Point with the cannon and landscaping to give some impression of the former fortifications.</td>
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24 Nov 2000  The Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning, the Hon. Andrew Refshauge, launches the re-vitalisation works for Dawes Point Park.

23 Nov 2001  Dawes Point Park works complete, Minister, Hon. Andrew Refshauge reopens the park to the public.