

## My brick wall and how I demolished it

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A genealogical brick wall is a daunting edifice that can suddenly appear in front of you on your journey towards finding your ancestral roots. It usually takes the form of a genealogical research problem to which you cannot seem to find any answers.

Some brick walls stand strong and defiant and bring a premature end to your ancestral research journey whilst other brick walls can be demolished brick by brick, information trickle by information trickle, over time.

My brick wall involved an English convict who had been transported to Australia on the Third Fleet ship *Albermarle* which arrived in Sydney Cove on 13 October 1791.<sup>1</sup> Official records at the time stated that his name was John WILLIAMS alias<sup>2</sup> William MILLER<sup>3</sup>. The brick wall that I faced and eventually demolished related to the identity of this man – was his birth name John WILLIAMS or William MILLER? This need for identity was very important to me as it would determine the family tree path that I would follow in future research on this person.

I first met up with the persona of John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER in 1994 when I was on the family history trail of Sarah MILLER who had been born at Sydney Cove in 1795<sup>4</sup>. Sarah's father was William MILLER and her mother Ann MARTIN<sup>5</sup>. Although I had gathered information regarding Ann MARTIN (a First Fleeter on the *Lady Penrhyn*), I found the going tough in terms of trying to establish the identity of William MILLER.

The first thing I did was to search the records for convicts with the name of William MILLER who had arrived on a convict transport in the colony of New South Wales between 1788 and 1795. This involved spending countless hours seeking information in the genealogical world of microfilms, microfiche, books and computers.

The search turned up three convicts bearing, in one form or another, the name of William MILLER, who had arrived in the colony prior to Sarah MILLER's birth in 1795. These three convicts were William MILLER from the *Britannia* 1791<sup>6</sup>, William MATTHEWS alias William MILLER from the *Royal Admiral* 1792<sup>7</sup> and John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER from the *Albermarle* 1791<sup>8</sup>.

Working my way through various indexes and books, I determined that *Royal Admiral* William MATTHEWS alias William MILLER should be eliminated from the list as he died late 1792.<sup>9</sup> This now left two 'William MILLER' convicts for further investigation as to being the father of Sarah MILLER.

During the research, I also came across a number of published books which, at first glance, seemed to provide robust evidence that one of these convicts, William MILLER from the *Britannia*, was, in fact, the partner of Ann MILLER and the father of Sarah MILLER.

The first book was the David Collins diary account of the English colony in New South Wales, edited by Brian FLETCHER and published in 1975, which contained supplementary reference footnote information about the various people mentioned in the book. Collins in his diary record for 19 June 1796 offered up a clue as to the identity of William MILLER as being a baker by trade when he stated that "*some thieves broke into the house of William Miller (a young man who on account of his good behaviour had been allowed to exercise the trade of a baker) and stole property amounting to fifty six pounds, mostly property not belonging to*

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<sup>1</sup> John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1791-1792*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p123

<sup>2</sup> The term alias used here has the meaning 'also known as' so references to the name John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER should be interpreted as John WILLIAMS also known as William MILLER

<sup>3</sup> State Records NSW, *Convict Arrivals, 1788-1842*, NRS 1150-54, 12188-89 [SR Fiche 621]

<sup>4</sup> John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1791-1792*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p59

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> State Records NSW, *Convict Arrivals, 1788-1842*, NRS 1150-54, 12188-89 [SR Fiche 622]

<sup>7</sup> State Records NSW, *Convict Arrivals, 1788-1842*, NRS 1150-54, 12188-89 [SR Fiche 623]

<sup>8</sup> State Records NSW, *Convict Arrivals, 1788-1842*, NRS 1150-54, 12188-89 [SR Fiche 621], op.cit

<sup>9</sup> John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1791-1792*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p354

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himself.”<sup>10</sup> In relation to the William MILLER, baker by trade, mentioned by Collins, the reference footnote in the Brian Fletcher edition of the book stated that “William Miller had been sentenced at Gainsborough on 5 October 1790 and arrived on the *Britannia* in October 1791 to serve a seven year sentence.”<sup>11</sup>

The second book was John Cobley’s account of *Sydney Cove 1795-1800, The Second Governor* where he stated that four men were “charged with breaking and entering the house of William Miller on 19 June [1796] and stealing goods belonging to Ann Martin.”<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, both Collins and Cobley were writing about the same incident that occurred on 19 June 1796. Collins in his account established that William MILLER was a baker by trade whilst Cobley established that Ann MARTIN was living with William MILLER at the time.

The third book was Volume 1 of the 1788-1820 Pioneer Association’s pioneer register which had an alphabetical entry for William MILLER which stated that he had arrived in Australia as a convict on the ship *Britannia* on 14 October 1791<sup>13</sup>. The entry went on to say that he married Ann MARTIN and they had a child called Sarah who was born on 4 September 1795<sup>14</sup>.

Being new to the world of family history research at the time, I could have simply accepted that William MILLER from the *Britannia* was the partner of Ann MARTIN, the father of Sarah MILLER and also the baker mentioned by Collins.

However, it was here that Demolish Brick Wall Rule 1 came into play – this being that you should always look to primary records, where possible, to test information that has been published. My research focus now shifted to the clue that Collins had offered up about the identity of William MILLER – that MILLER worked as a baker.

In the Muster records of 1800-1802 there are two William MILLERS listed as being in the colony. One is the convict from the *Britannia*<sup>15</sup> and the other is a baker who had been granted a pardon by Governor King<sup>16</sup>. This baker, who had been granted a pardon, had to be the convict John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER from the *Albemarle* as he was the only other William MILLER in the colony at the time. Furthermore, this convict was also the only William MILLER in the colony who had been given a life sentence<sup>17</sup> – a sentence which could only be cancelled by the grant of a pardon by the Governor<sup>18</sup>. On this evidence, the convict John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER was the baker pardoned by Governor King and the baker mentioned by Collins in his diary entry of 1796.

I now invoked Demolish Brick Wall Rule 2 – this being that to move forward in your research you sometimes need to look closer at the people who, at one time or another, were part of the daily life of your ‘brick wall’. Going down this path, I came across a very crucial piece of information that was further proof that the convict John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER was the William MILLER who had lived with Ann MARTIN and was the father of Sarah MILLER.

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David Collins, *An Account of the English colony in New South Wales, Vol 1*, editor Brian Fletcher, Reed in association with the Royal Historical Society, Sydney, 1975, p402

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p606

<sup>12</sup> John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1795-1800, The Second Governor*, op.cit. p80

<sup>13</sup> CJ Smee and JS Provis, *The 1788-1820 Pioneer Association’s Pioneer Register*, Second Edition, Vol 1, The Association, Sydney, 1981, entry is in alphabetical order with no page reference

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Carol J Baxter (editor) *Musters and lists, New South Wales and Norfolk Island, 1800-1802*, ABGR in association with the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney, 1988, p51

<sup>16</sup> .Baxter, *ibid*, p119

<sup>17</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) (Supplementary material Reference Number: s17901208-1)

<sup>18</sup> State Records NSW [www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/archives\\_in\\_brief\\_2\\_372.asp#Pardons](http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/archives_in_brief_2_372.asp#Pardons)

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Sarah MILLER was baptised on 17 April 1796 at St Phillips Church, Sydney. The baptismal record shows that William CREW and Mary CASSIDY's daughter, Ann, was also baptised on the same day at St Phillips Church<sup>19</sup>. The baptismal celebrations at the church would have been shared by William MILLER, Ann MARTIN, William CREW and Mary CASSIDY. To fully understand the meaning of this event, it is necessary to go back to Thursday 19 November 1789 when John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER and his partner in crime, William WILLIAMS alias William CREW, on horseback, held up and robbed the occupants of three coaches including that of a gentleman named Mr CAPPER on the roads of Hertfordshire, England. Later that afternoon, they were arrested at the Queens Head public house in Pinner and subsequently tried at the Old Bailey<sup>20</sup>.

Following their convictions on 9 December 1789, John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER and William WILLIAMS alias William CREW, were sentenced to death<sup>21</sup>. Their sentences of death were subsequently commuted to transportation to serve out life sentences<sup>22</sup>.

William WILLIAMS alias William CREW travelled to Sydney Cove on the same Third Fleet ship *Albermarle* as John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER. In December 1794, this William MILLER was given a land grant of 30 acres at the flats at Upper Port Jackson (Concord)<sup>23</sup>. His English partner in crime now known in the colony as William CREW was also granted 30 acres adjoining William MILLER's land.<sup>24</sup>

This strong link between John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER and William WILLIAMS alias CREW, in that they were partners in crime in England, were granted 30 acres of land adjoining each other at Concord and christened their daughters on the same day in 1796, was proof that the William MILLER who lived with Ann MARTIN was John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER from the Third Fleet ship *Albermarle*.

Although this was a breakthrough in terms of the family history of Sarah MILLER, there still remained a solid brick wall, in my mind, in terms of the identity of the convict John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER of the *Albermarle*. Why had he been tried at the Old Bailey in London under the name John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER? The brick wall regarding the identity of William MILLER was not to be demolished until May 2008. How did I finally demolish it? My wife, a librarian, one night after coming home from work, told me about the wonderful new database *British Newspapers 1600-1900*<sup>25</sup> that could be accessed remotely through the State Library of NSW website.

Demolish Brick Wall Rule 3 now came into operation – never give up in your quest for information, no matter how cold the trail may be! I logged onto the British Newspapers website through the State Library of NSW remote database portal and found a number of newspaper articles about the highway robberies committed on 19 November 1789 by John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER and William WILLIAMS alias William CREW.

The first newspaper report was from the *English Chronicle* or *Universal Evening Post* (London) Issue 1587 dated Thursday 19 November 1789 which stated that the two highwaymen who committed “*the robberies on Mr Capper and Mr Clark, on Thursday morning were brought before a magistrate at Edgware. Their name is Williams and they are brothers: they were employed by a linen draper.*”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John Cobley, *Sydney Cove 1795-1800, The Second Governor*, op.cit. p59

<sup>20</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) December 1789, trial of John Williams otherwise Miller and William Williams (t17891209-2)

<sup>21</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) (Supplementary material Reference Number: s17891209-1)

<sup>22</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) (Supplementary material Reference Number: s17891208-1)

<sup>23</sup> RR Ryan (editor) *Land Grants 1788-1809*, Griffin Press, 1981, p41

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *British Newspapers, 1600-1900*: Gale Group, a comprehensive digital archive providing access to historic newspapers published between 1600-1900 in the British Isles

<sup>26</sup> *English Chronicle or Universal Evening Post* (London), Thursday 19 November 1789, Issue 1587, Gale Document No Z2001363792 in *British Newspapers, 1600-1900*: Gale Group

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I looked again at the words on the screen, “*Their name is Williams and they are brothers*” – well how about that, William MILLER was in fact John WILLIAMS and William CREW, his partner in crime, was really his brother William WILLIAMS! What a breakthrough – it had taken so long to demolish this brick wall and I was finally there!

Or was I? I moved on to the next newspaper report, this being from the *English Chronicle or Universal Evening Post (London)* Issue 1588 dated Saturday 21 November 1789<sup>27</sup>. As I read this newspaper article, I realised that I had come across yet another surprise twist in my hunt for the real identity of John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER. The prisoners (John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER and William WILLIAMS alias William CREW) when brought before Sir Sampson Wright at the Public Office Bow Street apologised to him “*for having deceived the magistrate, before whom they were examined at Edgware, in telling him that their names were Williams, and that they were brothers; which they declared, they did only to prevent that unhappiness which they were sensible their parents would experience at knowing of their unfortunate situation*”<sup>28</sup>.

William MILLER and William CREW had lied to the Magistrate at Edgware about being brothers with the surname WILLIAMS! What next? Well, the newspaper report went on to say that they informed Sir Sampson Wright “*that they were cousins and that their real names were William Miller and William Crew*”<sup>29</sup>.

I suddenly felt a surge of genealogical adrenaline as my brick wall was finally demolished. It was clear now that John WILLIAMS alias William MILLER had been born with the name William MILLER and that he was, in fact, a blood relative of William CREW – being a cousin.

Although, at long last, I now know the real identity of William MILLER, there is a new brick wall that stands before me which will have to be demolished – where in England was William MILLER born? But that will be another story!

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<sup>27</sup> *English Chronicle or Universal Evening Post (London)*, Thursday 21 November 1789, Issue 1587, Gale Document No Z2001363802 in *British Newspapers, 1600-1900*: Gale Group

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*