

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE CITY OF SUVA

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

(written by Town Planner Albert Lee in 1974)

SUVA, as the administrative capital and largest urban center in Fiji owes its existence largely to the efforts of two Melbourne Merchants – William Ker Thomson and Samuel Renwick whose names are today commemorated in two City Streets – THOMSON STREET and RENWICK ROAD.

The land south of Nubukalou Creek along Victoria parade right up to Cakobau Road, forming part of what was later known as the Township of Suva, was purchased in 1859 from the BULI SUVA by two early settlers – Swanson and Pickering.

Later, the land came into the possession of the Polynesian Company.

The Company had originally proposed to set aside a portion of land on the north side of the harbor as the site of a town with frontage of about two and half miles.

The land sold by the Buli Suva was eventually acquired in the late seventies by Wiliam Ker Thomson and Samuel Renwick who were then trading under the name of James McEwan & Company in Suva.

Levuka had been the Seat of Civil Administration since 1876.

Thomson & Renwick as the holders of most of the Suva properties, sought the removal of the Capital from Levuka to Suva.

As an incentive, they offered Government, a title to every alternate lot in the subdivision of the town, a site for the Government Offices (the present Anglican Cathedral site) and a recreational reserve (Albert Park).

This arrangement was agreed to by the Government and in October 1880, the first land sales by auction of the Suva allotments took place under an ivi tree which used to stand on the frontage of the old WR Carpenter premises in Thomson Street (now renovated as part of the Morris Hedstrom Department Store).

The occasion is recorded on a stone monument erected in the Triangle.

The street pattern for the land south of Nubukalou Creek, which remains substantially unchanged to this day, except for the addition of a number of waterfront streets, was based on a design developed by a surveyor in the Royal Engineers, W. Stephens, serving under Colonel Pratt.

Based on this design, a master plan of the Township designated “Plan of Proposed Township of Suva – Viti Levu” was drawn up in June 1880 by E.W. Cross, a surveyor in the Civil Administration working under the direction of Crown Surveyor, J. Berry.

To ensure that buildings in the Township would be erected to this plan, an Ordinance (No. 4 of 1881) entitled “An Ordinance for Regulating the Alignments of Streets in the Town of Suva” was passed in April the following year, representing the first step taken towards planning control in Fiji.

The Ordinance provided that no buildings (public buildings excepted) could be erected along the frontages of certain streets listed in an attached schedule unless the Crown Surveyor was satisfied of their siting and had given a certificate to that effect.

The Schedule listed 9 Streets, which appeared to be more important formed commercial streets of that time: -

1. Victoria Parade
2. Thomson Street
3. Carnarvon Street
4. Margaret Street
5. Loftus Street
6. Gordon Street
7. Renwick Road
8. MacArthur Street
9. Pratt Street

The Suva Alignment Ordinance was in force until 1909 when it was repealed and replaced by the Municipal Institutions Ordinance.

Cross himself undertook the planning of an extension of the Town where the Stephens plan left off, embracing an area extending eastwards from Pender Street to Clarke Street – Duncan Road Area and entitled his plan “Plan Showing Extension of Suva Town”.

In 1885, a second extension of the Town north of Nubukalou Creek and west of Waimanu Road was undertaken by G.A. Woods, a surveyor employed by the Mortgage and Agency Company.

These two extensions were laid out with a certain though imperfect regard for the configuration of the land and most of the streets in the areas have been formed.

Very different is the case of the lands in the Toorak area, east of Waimanu Road which were laid out also in the Eighties by the Mortgage & Agency Company and Amy and Huon on the American grid-iron pattern without any regard for topographical considerations.

Many of the streets of this area remain unformed and have had to be re-planned. At the time that Cross drew up his Township Plan in 1880, there were in the Township not more than a dozen buildings in existence.

The largest of these appeared to be a hotel, understood to be the forerunner of the Suva Hotel, and destroyed by fire in 1889, sited where the present Morris Hedstrom Department Store is. Another important historical building was located at the corner of Victoria Parade and Loftus Street – a disused sugar mill established in 1873 by Brewer and Joske which gave the name of Naiqai (the crusher) to the area.

(A piece of the original mill equipment – a large cog wheel – may still be seen, set ornamentally into a boundary wall on the Housing Authority's property in Carnarvon Street). The original plan of the township envisaged the construction of a pier extending out from the mouth of Nubukalou Creek in a north-westerly direction, following the creek's line of flow.

Evidently this location was not practicable or convenient and on completion of the first major harbor work in Suva, the Queen's Wharf reclamation in 1881, the wharf was erected in the reclamation at a point more or less directly opposite Pier Street thus giving that street its name.

The reclamation later became the sites for the old Post Office (since demolished), the old Customs House, the old Produce Market, and the old Suva Yacht Club. Although the Queen's Wharf was demolished in 1921-22 on completion of the King's Wharf the north side of the creek, the old Customs House remained well into the 1950's, its location being considered very central by business interests in the Town.

The choice of the wharf site did not come about by accident. The site chosen gave easy road and trolley-line access to the general area of Thomson Street and Renwick Road where Thomson and Renwick had their main business interests. This area was one of the first in the town to have land titles issued, being shown as Section I of the title's maps.

In the 1880's the main waterfront street was Thomson Street. The general merchants and ship chandlers of the period had their premises fronting this street and Renwick Road. The larger business concern dominating the commercial scene at the turn of the century and well after were firms which have now gone out of business although their successors still exist – firms like Marks, Walter Horne, Brown & Joske and Sturt-Ogilvie.

They occupied the area between Thomson Street and Renwick Road as well as the opposite side of Renwick Road to where commercial developments were already spreading. The Cumming Street area north of Nubukalou was developed much later in the early 1900's.

The area being swampy, had first to be filled and road access established with the main business center by the building of the first bridge over the creek – the Thomson Street bridge. The northern bank of the Creek was the scene of considerable boat building activities by the Terry family which owned most of the land on the south side of Cumming Street.

The lands on the north side of Cumming Street running through to Marks Street and slightly beyond except for a small section owned by the Jacks family, were owned by the Marks who were actively developing the area, especially in the early 1920's, after the fire which destroyed most of Cumming Street in 1922.

The aftermath of the fire led to a re-organization of the Suva Fire Brigade and a revision of the Building Regulations to incorporate a section requiring the floors and walls of all buildings in what is now termed the “Inner Area” to be constructed entirely in stone, brick, or concrete. In the pre-World War I years from 1911-1913 reclamation work was carried out on the foreshore line north of the Creek for the new Kings Wharf and the old Public Works Department Depot.

In its new position, the presence of the wharf for some time, did not seem to have attracted any new large scale commercial development into the area, the notable exception being the large department store erected by the firm of Burns Philp in 1930. The position changed in 1949 and the early 1950's when Rodwell Road which Government had agreed to share construction costs with the Town Board as early as 1937 was finally straightened and reconstructed.

The reconstruction of the road enabled the new Municipal Market (completed in 1949) and the Suva Bus Station to be established in the area, with doubtful benefits as far as pedestrian and vehicular traffic are concerned. The Bus Station and large Department Store of WR Carpenters were erected in the 1950's. Traditionally in Suva, there has always been a tendency for the presence of a Wharf, Post Office, or Market to lead to a considerable increase in the volume of business activity in the surrounding area.

The three units mentioned appear to have set very definite trends in the pattern of business activity in the city. First, the Wharf, Post Office and Market were all together (off Pier Street), giving a tightly knit and highly compact business center in the Thomson Street/Pier Street/Renwick Road area. Next, the wharf got separated and went northward to Walu bay.

On its own, the move did not change materially the pattern of traffic and commercial developments in the area. But when the Market joined the Wharf in 1949, the position changed considerably with the unfortunate results already mentioned. Before it arrived the Wharf Area, the Market first went to Cumming Street and remained there for over 20 years, a move welcomed by the small shopkeepers and merchants in the area.

Cumming Street, with its boatbuilding sheds, yaqona shops, hot beer saloons and skittle alleys, had at first a reputation for a “back” waterfront street. Later, in the late 1920's it developed into a street lined largely with small retail shops, barber shops, cafes, tailoring and drapery shops and shops of the smaller general merchants. The tourist trade may be said to have originated from this street. The first “tourists” were Navy and Military Personnel stationed here from 1942 to 1946. The wares they bought from the Cumming Street shops were articles of tortoiseshell, filigree jewelry and ivory ware, the latter being specially imported from India. When they left, their places were taken by the real tourists who started arriving in earnest by sea in the 1950's.

The boom in the tourists trade really started in the 1960's when a large number of items of tourist goods were removed from the list of dutiable imports. A good number of the duty-free dealers in Cumming Street were originally sellers of curios and artifacts. At first, they regretted the establishment of a curio vendors section in the new Market but found that they were more than compensated for by the fact that the new Wharf location placed Cumming Street and its duty free shops squarely in the path of the tourists making their new way to the City Centre.

Although premises for duty free shops in the right area are at a premium and are difficult to secure, it is surprising that one area on the tourists' route has not been redeveloped for this purpose. This is the area on the east side of Waimanu Road immediately north of its junction with Cumming Street. Possibly this could be due to the wooden buildings in the area being very old and ancient, and the joint owners being reluctant to carry out re-development work in view of the very small sizes of the property holdings involved.

The commercial area of the city south of the Triangle, along Victoria Parade between Pratt Street and Gordon Street was, a decade or more before the 1950's, largely represented by a collection of old wooden buildings, the more notable of which were the Macdonald and Club Hotels the Calambeen Boarding House and the Universal (later renamed the Avalon) Theatre, which along with the Imperial Theatre opposite the Post Office were the earliest to be erected in Suva.

Also in the area were a number of jewellery dealers, photographers, tailors and drapers and a café business. During this period, the only concrete buildings in the area were the Tolo Building (which housed a jewellery and pharmacy business), a part of the present Bank of New Zealand building, a building known as the Black Cat Café which later became the Victoria Café and still later was structurally incorporated into the present Williams and Goslings Building.

Further south, the only buildings of note were the Fiji Times Office and Printery – an ancient dilapidated wooden building and the Fiji Trading Company Building, a more modern concrete structure put up by the Fiji Times proprietor, the Late Sir Alport Barker, about 1948. Still further south in Victoria Parade between MacArthur Street and Loftus Street the only concrete building during this period was the Shankar Singh Building which used to house the Sun Sing Laundry, erected on land once owned by the Anderson Estate.

Development of the commercial frontage of Victoria Parade on its landward side became very rapid in the 1950's being accelerated by the devastating hurricane which struck Suva in 1952. The hurricane which was really a blessing in disguise as far as redevelopment of the area was concerned, destroyed or damaged a large number of wooden buildings in the section of Victoria Parade between Pratt Street and Gordon Street. They included the two hotels, the Central Building and the Fiji Times Printery which all had to be rebuilt and redeveloped.

In quick succession modern concrete buildings were erected to replace the old wooden ones. They included the Garrick Estate Block, the Queensland Insurance Company's block of shops in Victoria Arcade and the new Club Hotel. This hotel site suffered from the effect of the first known earthquake in the Suva region (occurring one year after the hurricane), as well.

The original design was for a five-storey building. Work had proceeded to first floor level when the earthquake struck, causing the designers to revise their plans completely and reduce the number of storeys to two and eventually three. Apparently, although the foundations would have been satisfactory in normal circumstances, they had not been interconnected to resist seismic forces, and since the building had reached first storey level, it was too late to make alterations.

In Victoria Parade south of Gordon Street, the Late Sir Alport Barker replaced his dilapidated Fiji Times building with a large shopping block – the Sabrina Building. The Millett and Prasad

Buildings filled in the intervening gap as far as the Fiji Trading Company Building. Further south, the Bhura Building (1950s), Dahia Building (1953) and Central Trading Company Building (1956) were put up. Buildings erected by the proprietor of the "Golden Dragon" and the Housing Authority joined the old Whans Construction Company Building (Automotive Supplies) erected on the old Sugar Mill site.

So far, the development of the commercial areas in Victoria Parade only have been touched upon. The effect exercised by Government institutions in the Gladstone Road – Victoria Parade area in inducing commercial developments to move further south during the last thirty or forty years should not be forgotten, the Grand Pacific Hotel (then a purely residential hotel) being of little help in this regard. The original site given by Thomson and Renwick for Government Office was the land at the corner of MacArthur and Carnavon Streets on which the present Anglican Cathedral stands.

A number of wooden buildings were erected on this land for Government Offices. Evidently the site was not large enough for the purpose and a new site was chosen at the corner of Gladstone Road and Victoria Parade. The new Government Buildings however could not be erected until the period 1936-39, as the area was occupied by a number of concrete sedimentation tanks used in connection with the running of the Suva Sewerage System. When flotation tests by the Sewerage Consultants of that period indicated that the sewerage could be discharged direct to the outfall, the tanks were dismantled and removed.

The harbor foreshore line of the City Centre has changed considerably since the days of Thomson and Renwick. The older reclamations such as those for the Central Building (now CMLA Building) (late 1910's) the Regal theatre (1936-1939) Fire Station (Bhanabhai's Building) (1920's) have all been encircled by new reclamations to gain more waterfront land and the foreshore line has been shifted to Stinson Parade. Other waterfront sites reclaimed early this century, and which are now situated 9 to 10 chains from the sea include Cable & Wireless and the Town Hall (1900's) and Carnegie Library (1910's). A similar fate is likely to overtake the reclamations for the Boys' Grammar School (now Ministry of Finance EDP Section), Travelodge Hotel (1960's) and the Grand Pacific Hotel (1911-1913).

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(written by Mr. A. Lee and typed by Mrs. E. Cawanibuka, 30/8/74)

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