

Australia's first Surveyor General and Governor, Alt and Phillip - The First Settlers of German Origin!

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SUMMARY

When first attempting to research the history of the inaugural Surveyor-General of New South Wales I was not surprised about a plaque I saw dedicated on his grave which is located not far from my office in Parramatta at St John's Cemetery. Placed by the German Australian Centenary Committee in 1983 it acknowledges the German father of Baron Augustus Theodore Henry Alt, Jost Heinrich Alt of Hesse Kassel. However I was totally startled when I began similar study into the background of our first Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip, because his father was also a German man, Jakob Philipp¹, born in Frankfurt. Both sons of these two German fathers were born in London to mothers of British origin, but surprisingly not much is commonly known of either of these principal participants in the First Fleet.

Clearly there is more chronicled about Arthur Phillip than Augustus Alt, but the most intriguing feature about the lives of these two early Australian colonists is the uncanny similarities in their biographies. Both men travelled widely before their appointments to the First Fleet, such engagements occurring in 1786 and 1787 respectively; each was multilingual; both had surveying experience for the British Admiralty; their mothers were from Britain - one from England, one from Scotland; their fathers were German; each had two wives; with virtually the only difference being that one died in Australia and the other in England. This paper will endeavour to uncover more depth about their histories as well as demystifying some of the well-entrenched myths and clouded knowledge about their origins and subsequent activities. You will be made aware of the extent of the wide travels by them both before accepting their postings to the new settlement venture; of the contributions of each man to the growth of the fledgling outpost and finally to their passing.

One aspect of each man not in question is the German nationality of their fathers and the solid German connection with the original colonisation of Sydney and the later development of the continent of Australia which must be treasured fondly for its firm, capable and determined leadership.

1/ I have found no definitive proof that Arthur Phillip's father had the name Jakob Philipp when born in Frankfurt Germany before allegedly Anglicising his name to Jacob Phillip in England.

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1. INTRODUCTION

What a way to start researching two of the men who supervised the early establishment of the distant penal Colony of New South Wales deep in the southern ocean ! After reading this paper, or better still witnessing my illustrated presentation, you will probably be left wondering whether you are satisfied with the facts presented, but there is one issue about which no such ponderings will possess doubt, and that is that it is essential that more thorough and positive research be carried out to clarify as many of these clouded "details" as we are able, so that the factual accounts of the histories of both Augustus Alt and Arthur Phillip can be documented once and for all.

2. CONTROVERSY STILL REIGNS WILDLY

Over two hundred and eighteen years later, and we still cannot agree on the facts associated with two of the foremost Government superintendents entrusted with the duties of guiding our embryonic settlement into one of the most popular modern destinations on Earth ! Don't you just love history and the challenges it throws back at you !

Firstly, I find out that our first Governor, Arthur Phillip, had a German-born father, Jacob Phillip, who was born in Frankfurt, and that his mother was formerly married to Captain Herbert of the Royal Navy. Although I have not yet sourced primary material to substantiate a proposition that Jacob Phillip was originally christened Jakob Philipp, later to Anglicise this to his more often recorded English construction, there is no doubt that Arthur was the second son of this German man to his English mother, born Elizabeth Breach (or Breech), and most certainly not his stepson. Arthur was born in London on 11 October 1738.

Then I was thrown into the den of controversy with my attempt to compose a history on our first Surveyor-General, commonly known as Augustus Alt. Not only is his birth date in question, even his name has been brought under suspicion by various authors. Paul-Alan Johnson of Sydney, who I know very well, has carried out in depth study on this elusive figure of early Australian history, even to the point that he has travelled to Great Britain and Germany on a quest to unravel the most dubious biographies that have been put forward about this colonial surveyor. Paul says that Augustus Alt was christened Herman Theodore Augustus Alt being born in London on 26 August 1734, the third son of Jost Heinrich Alt of Kassel in Germany and Jeanetta Preston from Fife, Scotland. To add weight to the suggestion that Phillip's father modified his names when moving to England, Jost Heinrich converted himself into Just Henry in his new home. Could, in fact,

Herman have been varied by Alt to Henry ? Perhaps this would appear to be rather unlikely because he had an older brother, born in 1730, named Henry, but this man did die at a very early age in 1768, so maybe, just maybe, Augustus used this alleged change of Christian name from Herman to Henry in remembrance of his older brother ? He had another elder brother called Just (1732-1801) with one younger brother, William Gerrard (1736-c.1761) and three sisters, Maria Jeanetta, Henrietta Sophia and Christina Helena.

3. EARLY CAREERS AND TRAVELS

3.1 Augustus Alt

Although there is no record of his entry, Augustus was probably taught at Westminster School, the same institution attended by his two elder brothers in addition to his younger sibling William Gerrard, admitted into there in 1747/48. At the young age of twenty one he was appointed Ensign in the 8th or King's Regiment of Foot on 1 October 1755 in Liverpool. Under the command of Admiral Hawke and General Sir John Mordaunt he went to the coast of France with his regiment in 1757, then in 1760 they joined the allies in Germany under Prince Ferdinand, remaining there as aide-de-camp to several generals until peace was achieved. Spending two years in Scotland building roads, in 1764 he was sent to Montrose for instruction by Major Hume in the "Russian exercise". Helping to raise the Manchester Volunteers in 1777 he served with them during the siege of Gibraltar, being made assistant engineer to General Elliott. Political intrigue engulfed the raising of three battalions of Swiss chasseurs, destined for East India, for Colonel James Francis Erskine in Zurich and Berne in Switzerland, but Alt seems to have evaded apprehension during this incident. When the offshore African island of Madagascar was considered by the British Government for a penal colony at the behest of the self-proclaimed "king", the Polish adventurer Count Boniský (or Benyowsky), Augustus Alt signed up as an engineer. However, when this option was set aside in preference of Botany Bay, the direction of Alt's life was destined to change to another part of the southern hemisphere.

3.2 Arthur Phillip

After being educated at the Greenwich Hospital School for the son of seamen, he was apprenticed at the age of thirteen to the merchant navy, joining the Royal Navy at fifteen (15). Seeing action in 1756 in the Mediterranean Sea at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in the Battle of Minorca, he was promoted to Lieutenant in 1762. Placed on half pay when the Seven Years' War ended in 1763, he then concentrated on farming for the following fifteen years, returning to sea for the Portuguese navy at times between 1774 and 1778 during the Spanish-Portuguese War. Returning to the British navy during the American War of Independence in 1778, he gained his first command in 1779, the *Basilisk*, becoming a post Captain in 1781, and given command of the *Europe*. Back on

half pay again from May 1784, he had to have carried out a year of “survey work” for the British Admiralty during this period before his appointment as Commander of the First Fleet which was made on 12 October 1786, one day after his forty eighth birthday.



Figure 1. Portrait of Arthur Phillip

4. ACTIVITIES FOR THE FIRST SETTLEMENT

4.1 On the way to New South Wales

For this section of the story I can readily include both Alt and Phillip, as much of their activities were carried out together or complementary to each other. One proudly held belief by the surveyors of Australia is that “Baron” Alt was appointed to the post of Surveyor-General of New South Wales **BEFORE** Arthur Phillip was

enlisted as the Governor of the new colony. Unfortunately for we surveyors, there has been no date of appointment revealed for Alt by any historian, even though some state his date of commissioning as May 1787 (Australian Dictionary of Biography). As I do not have proof or otherwise of this date of engagement, I can only cast doubt on such a month being correct, because the First Fleet actually set sail on 12 May, and it is hard to comprehend that such a prestigious position would have been left undecided until less than two weeks before the departure of the flotilla ! Phillip sailed on the flagship *Sirius* while “Baron” Alt was aboard the *Prince of Wales*. It is interesting to note that Augustus Alt’s nephew, Matthew Bowles Alt, who was the son of his brother Just, travelled with Phillip on the *Sirius*.

Although he was often referred to as “Baron” Alt, there has been no official authentication produced that he, his father Jost or his eldest brother, had any rightful

claim to this heraldic title, other than as a nickname or personal regard for their own perceived aristocratic or elitist heritage. Another misconception of Alt was that “he did not do much” while he was in New South Wales as Surveyor-General, as I shall demonstrate to you with some primary source material from the journals of those present during the formative years of the First Settlement.

Phillip had many duties to exercise for the new settlement to survive in its untested environment, so he took little time in empowering his appointed entourage with the administration of the colony. With the Lieutenant-Governor and the Judge-Advocate already Justices of the Peace by virtue of their respective commissions, Phillip also took the measure to swear in his Surveyor-General, Alt, along with the Reverend Richard Johnson and Richard Atkins as Civil Magistrates by his authority as Governor. Alt’s duties as a sworn Justice of the Peace were “for the purpose of sitting once a week, or oftener (sic) as occasion might require, with the Judge-Advocate, to examine all offences committed by the convicts, and determine on and punish such as were not of sufficient importance for trial by the criminal court.” (Collins)

4.2 Sydney Planned

Not long after their arrival and their brief occupation of the Sydney Cove area Arthur Phillip showed his hand with surveying and cartographic experience by drafting one of the very first maps of the settlement in July 1788. Barton’s *History of New South Wales from the Records* states that: “In the natural course of events, the growth of the social organism with which Phillip was charged had so far advanced that the formation of a town had begun to occupy his attention. With the assistance of his Surveyor-General, Mr. Alt, an ex-Baron of Hesse Cassel, he designed a plan for the purpose, a copy of which he enclosed in his despatch. (see Figure two) His description of the infant city shows how deeply he was impressed with the conviction that it was destined to become prosperous as well as permanent; that the huts and thatch-roofed buildings of his day would soon give way to structures of a more durable kind; and that in place of a few wretched stragglers from the army of civilized life, the shores of Sydney Cove would in time be peopled with an energetic population of freemen, attracted by the prospect of independence in a new and beautiful country.” This very early map done after only 6 months of arriving shows the existing structures numbered – a small house building for the Governor, a nine (9) acre corn farm, Lieutenant Governor’s House, the wide principal street marked out, a number “5” indicating “ground intended for the Governor’s House, Main Guard and Criminal Court”; grounds intended for later buildings including the Church and storehouses; the hospital; the observatory at Longitude 151°19’30” and Latitude 33°52’30”, as well as some existing temporary barracks (see figure 2). This plan is even complete with the depth of soundings all around Sydney Cove by Captain Hunter in addition to the moorings of seven of the eleven vessels of the First Fleet, *Sirius* and *Supply* being named. A fresh water stream is shown passing alongside the nine acre farm

and the variation of True North to Magnetic North is shown as $7^{\circ}54'$ East on the north point. The “coast line” is said to have been charted by W. Dawes.

Upon arrival, the Governor and Surveyor-General must have formulated such a visionary plan for the future development of the new township of Sydney, as Watkin Tench relates in 1789:

“The plan of the town was drawn, and the ground on which it is hereafter to stand surveyed and marked out. To proceed on a narrow, confined scale in a country of the extensive limits we possess, would be unpardonable. Extent of empire demands grandeur of design. That this has been our view will readily be believed when I tell the reader that the principal street in our projected city will be, when completed agreeable to the plan laid down, 200 feet in breadth, and all the rest of a corresponding proportion. How far this will be accompanied with adequate despatch is another question, as the incredulous among us are sometimes hardy enough to declare that ten times our strength would not be able to finish it in as many years.”

From the ultimate outcome of the Sydney street pattern, it would seem that this idealistic proposal must have been overwhelmed by the demand for rapid occupation with piecemeal planning, culminating in the irregular and narrow carriageways servicing allotments of confined proportions which are present today.

With the pressing demand to make the port a working harbour, Alt's engineering experience was put to work almost immediately. Even though it is said that public works progressed slowly, the construction of a wharf was commenced on the east point of

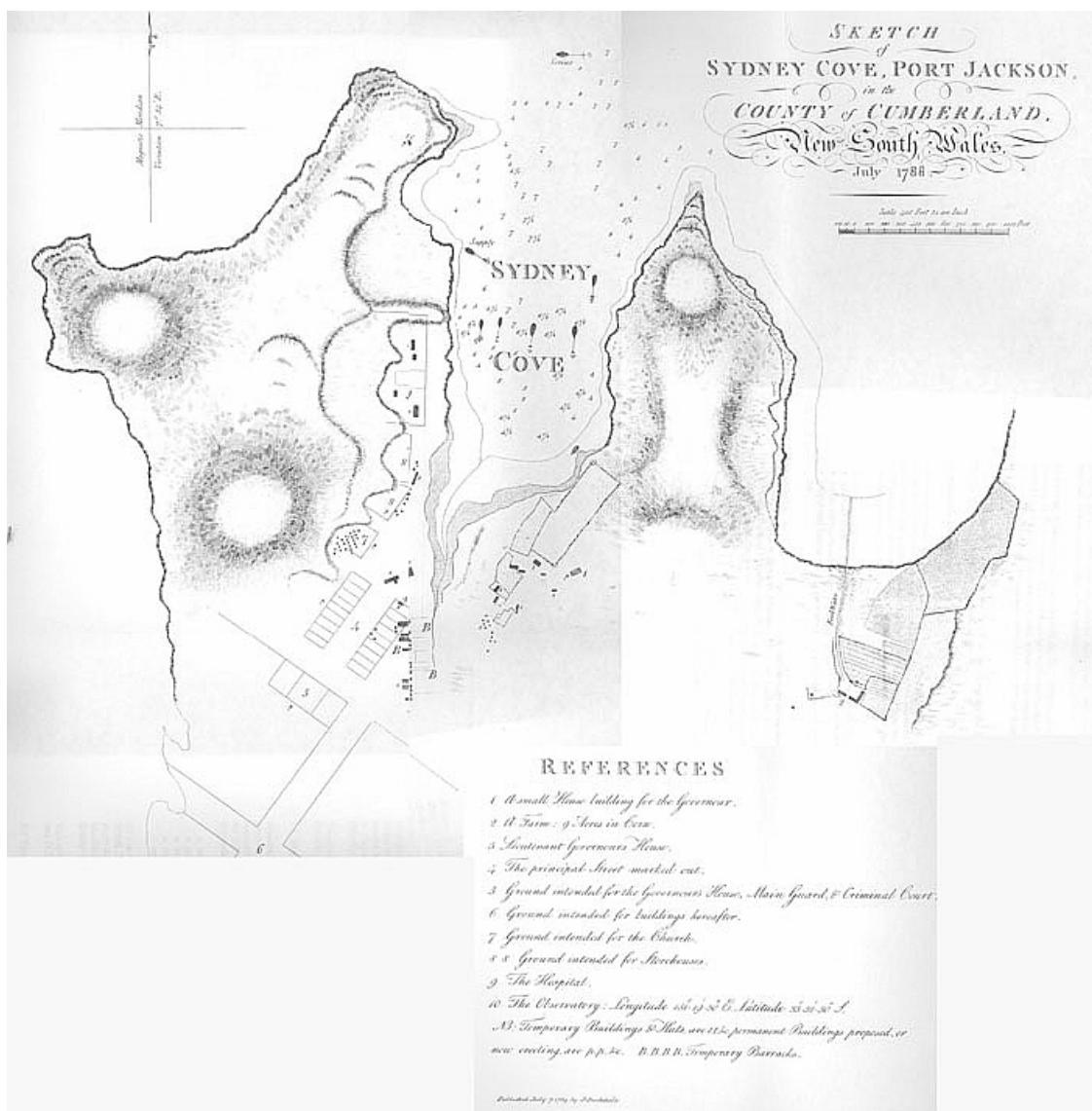


Figure Two. “A sketch of Sydney Cove, Port Jackson in the County of Cumberland, New South Wales, July 1788” by Arthur Phillip

Sydney Cove in March 1788 under his supervision, with some ordnance landing, consisting of two brass six-pounders on travelling carriages, two iron six-pounders, and an iron twelve-pounder. Other work undertaken which would have been most likely to involve Alt's oversight were the marking of the principal street of the new town, and a site chosen for the Government House on a hill overlooking Long Cove. William Dawes was an ordnance officer with surveying ability, and was obviously put under the charge of Alt for various functions, one being the supervision of the erection of a redoubt on the

east point. Other public works which would have been controlled by Alt were the building of a substantial storehouse measuring 100 by 25 feet, and the construction of wooden barracks for the privates of each company.

4.3 Parramatta Planned

In the journal of Surgeon-General John White we are given an eye witness account of the journey up the Parramatta River led by Arthur Phillip between 22 and 29 April 1788. Accompanied by Captain David Collins, Lieutenant Ball RN, Lieutenants Johnstone and Cresswell of the Marines and six privates, they left Hospital Wharf on the western side of Sydney Cove on Tuesday 22 April 1788 heading up river in a generally westerly direction. Travelling past where Rosehill Race Course is situated today Phillip arrived at a place a short distance upstream at which the hill had been eroded by the river in a semicircular shape with the river forming a billabong or lake-like formation in the widened area of the waterway. Thus Phillip gave this feature the name "The Crescent", and from the raised land above it thousands of acres of apparently arable land could be seen. My office in Harris Park is very close to Parramatta River in the section from Rosehill to Old Government House, adjacent to Phillip's "Crescent", which bears the stone footings of the original building erected there in 1790 as the first outer Sydney Governor's residence. On 12 May John Hunter and William Bradley were the first to visit, explore and map the newly discovered section of the river, while assistant surgeon Worgan noted the first description of what was to be identified only in 1961 as *Acacia parramatensis* or the delicate-leaved Parramatta Green Wattle ! Along with the commanding officer of the Marine Corps, Major Ross, Phillip took Augustus Alt to inspect this site to discuss its fortification and settlement, giving it the name Rose Hill after George Rose, secretary to the Treasury. This name was to be changed in a few years to Parramatta, just as it is today, with the smaller area surrounding the horse racing track still retaining the description Rosehill. This current name was given to the second oldest city in Australia in 1791 and it is derived from a local Aboriginal word meaning "place of many eels." The National Rugby League football first grade team for Parramatta is also called "The Eels".

On Sunday 2 November 1788, the Governor together with his Surveyor-General, Lieutenant John Johnstone, two non-commissioned officers and eight private marines journeyed to the "Crescent" to select a position and "mark out a redoubt and other necessary buildings". In the book "Parramatta – A Past Revealed", it is cited: "Phillip's European experience combined with Alt's military knowledge meant that a good site was chosen 'on the gentle ascent of the hill' on the east side, south of the river, for the site of his redoubt." This book also says that: "a town plan was conceived by Phillip and Alt whilst the surveying was entrusted to William Dawes, a young and competent naval lieutenant with a knowledge of surveying." Rose Hill became the first functional town plan in the colony including a design of "balance, charm and utility." According to Collins the town was not actually laid out until July 1790 stating that:

“There (Rose Hill) also the Governor, in the course of the month, laid down the lines for a regular town. The principal street was marked out to extend one mile, commencing near the landing-place and running in direction west to the foot of the rising ground named Rose Hill, on which his Excellency purposed to erect a small house for his own residence whenever he should visit that settlement. On each side of this street, whose width was to be 205 feet, huts were to be erected capable of containing ten persons each, and at the distance of sixty feet from each other, and garden ground for each hut was allotted in the rear.”

With a road running in a north-south orientation being crossed by this major road it was referred to as “a classic Renaissance design”, but, alas, once again this grandiose design of a main street 205 feet wide (initially called High Street) was replaced by what is known today as George Street at a width of 66 feet, which was verified by the Road Alignment Plan of 1855. This just happened to be the year of the death of our longest-serving Surveyor-General, Sir Thomas Mitchell, who had served in that position from 1828.

4.4 More Civil Works Undertaken

Because of the scarcity of water supply on the outlying farms, and anxiety about the dwindling stocks within the Tank Stream, Alt was given the assignment of deepening this vital source in January 1789. After completing the enlargement of the hewn-out tanks, near present day Pitt Street, the community was supplied with water until the year 1827, when the tunnel excavated under the direction of surveyor/engineer John Busby from the Lachlan Swamp was providing a temporary supply in advance of the completion of the construction of the major feeder. The larger tunnel meeting Sydney’s water needs was finished in 1837 and is commonly referred to as “Busby’s Bore”.

During February in 1791 three more public works were begun under Alt’s supervision – a new storehouse, and two brick houses on the east side of Sydney Cove, one for himself and the other for the chaplain Richard Johnson. In October of this same year Alt was sitting on the Board of Magistrates which examined the master of the convict transport *Queen* concerning abuses which had occurred on the voyage, but the following month he asked to be relieved as Surveyor-General due to ill health. Phillip granted this request, employing Lieutenant Dawes and David Burton to carry out the portion surveys of the settlers’ farms in abeyance for a replacement. Alt continued to hold his office, drew up surveyor’s returns and acted as a Magistrate. Despite his apparent poor health after 1791, Alt was still able to carry out a rather extensive survey in April 1794. Collins reports in his very comprehensive “An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales”:

“...that it appeared by a survey taken in the last month by Mr. Alt, that nine hundred and eighty-two acres had been cleared by them (viz. officers given permission to hold lands in the colony) since that permission had been received. Mr. Alt reported, that there had been cleared, since Governor Phillip’s departure in December 1792, two thousand nine hundred and sixty-two acres and one quarter, which, added to seventeen hundred and three acres and a half that were cleared at that time, made a total of four thousand six hundred and sixty-five acres and three quarters of cleared ground in this territory. It must be farther remarked in favour of the gentlemen holding ground, that in the short period of fifteen months, the officers, civil and military, had cleared more than half the whole quantity of ground that had been cleared by government and the settlers, from the establishment of the colony to the date of the governor’s departure. The works of government, however vigilantly attended to, always proceeded slowly, and never with that spirit and energy that are created by interest.”

As a further indicator to the resurgence of his physical condition during 1794, he also signed his only official manuscript plan entitled “A plan of the first farms on the Hawkesbury River”, which actually was not published until 1893 in the *Historical Records of New South Wales*, together with correspondence from Lieutenant-Governor Grose to England, nominating twenty two settlers who had taken up farms along the Hawkesbury River. (see Figure 3) It is not surprising that rural development had reached as far upstream as these land holdings, as systematic agricultural settlement was initiated in the years 1790 and 1791 with the laying out of the Rose Hill and Prospect Hill Farms, which were granted to prisoners who were pardoned on the condition that they not return to England.

Keeping law and order in the new colony and its distant outpost on Norfolk Island, along with feeding the population of both settlements, became the main concerns for Phillip during his short four year term as Governor of New South Wales. As an experienced farmer himself he encouraged those among the community who had skills in this area or were willing to learn how to farm. Unfortunately, one of his real early farmers, Henry Dodd, died early, in 1791, his grave located in St. John’s Cemetery at Parramatta being the oldest burial in situ with its original monument still in place on the Australian mainland. He selected good land for his settlers at Parramatta and Toongabbie, providing the colony’s first successful farmer, convict James Ruse, with a grant to set up a productive farm at Experiment Farm, Rose Hill (now Harris Park). During his tenure he alienated 3489 acres (1412 hectares) of land grants with only 49 acres (20 ha) being on Norfolk Island. Phillip named the Blue Mountains (from a distance), named the Carmarthen, Lansdowne and Richmond Hills, and even fitted in some time to make various explorations to inland areas radiating out from Sydney such as the Hawkesbury River flowing into Broken Bay between 11 and 16 April 1791, taking with the party two Aboriginals, Colbee the Cadigal and Boladeree, probably a Burramattagal.

Unknown to most Australians is the fact that Phillip was a very accomplished artist, penning some of the earliest sketches of wildlife and plants as well as scenes of the landscapes surrounding the bays and estuaries of the Sydney basin. His attitude to the Aborigines was charitable to the level that he would not tolerate abuse of them by any white settlers, and even when he was wounded in the shoulder on 7 September 1790 by an aboriginal named Willemereng at Manly Cove, with one of Bennelong's barbed spears, he ordered his men present not to retaliate. As our country's first leader he did succeed in establishing the cities of Sydney and Parramatta, combined with the distinction of being the one who named our eucalypts "gum trees" in 1788, but it is a strong likelihood that he will best be remembered for his choice of Sydney Harbour over Botany Bay for the First Settlement at Sydney Cove on 26th January 1788.

5. WINDING DOWN

Phillip left Sydney on 11 December 1792 on the *Atlantic* so that he could obtain medical attention for chronic pain in his side. He never returned to New South Wales, retired in 1805 from the British Navy, and was made an Admiral three months before his death on 31 August 1814. He is buried in the church of St. Nicholas at Bathampton.

In 1797 Alt gave half of his salary over to Charles Grimes, the man who had been performing the majority of surveys for Alt, who was finally invalided in 1801 when Grimes was appointed acting Surveyor-General. This is a strong indicator that Alt was physically incapable of performing the tasks of his office before he was finally pensioned off. A very important note is cited from the book "The Founders of Australia", by Mollie Gillen, which records that in a memorial written by Alt in April 1801 he states that his age was 67 years old. If he was born on 26 August then this makes his year of birth 1733, which does not agree with any of the authors of his history ! On his land grant of 100 acres (40 ha) at Ashfield, made on 20 February 1794, his house burnt down in 1798. During 1802 he was recorded as owning 100 acres (40 ha) at Bulanaming, then received a further grant of 280 acres (111 ha) near Ashfield on 6 September 1809. Dying at Parramatta on 9 January 1815 he is buried at St. John's Cemetery where his nephew erected a most impressive table monument which curiously puts his age at 84 years, making his year of birth 1730 !

6. CONCLUSION

The best thing that can be said about the existing histories of Augustus Alt is that they are unconvincing and inconsistent. It is very evident that not many of these works are based on primary sources, with the exception of Paul-Alan Johnson, who has taken the trouble to seek out information from Alt's descendants overseas. Thus there still remains many undecided questions about this enigmatic character of early Australian history which are worthy of further research, not the least of which are his real name and date of birth.

Clearly, the chronicles of Phillip are eminently more reliable and supported by contemporary reports of the period, but I still seek to clarify the real name of his father, Jacob Phillip or Jakob Philipp, with verification of the genealogy of each these men of German-Australian heritage the task of a future assignment. I welcome anyone who may have knowledge of any of these undetermined factors to contact me through any of the contacts shown at the end of this paper.

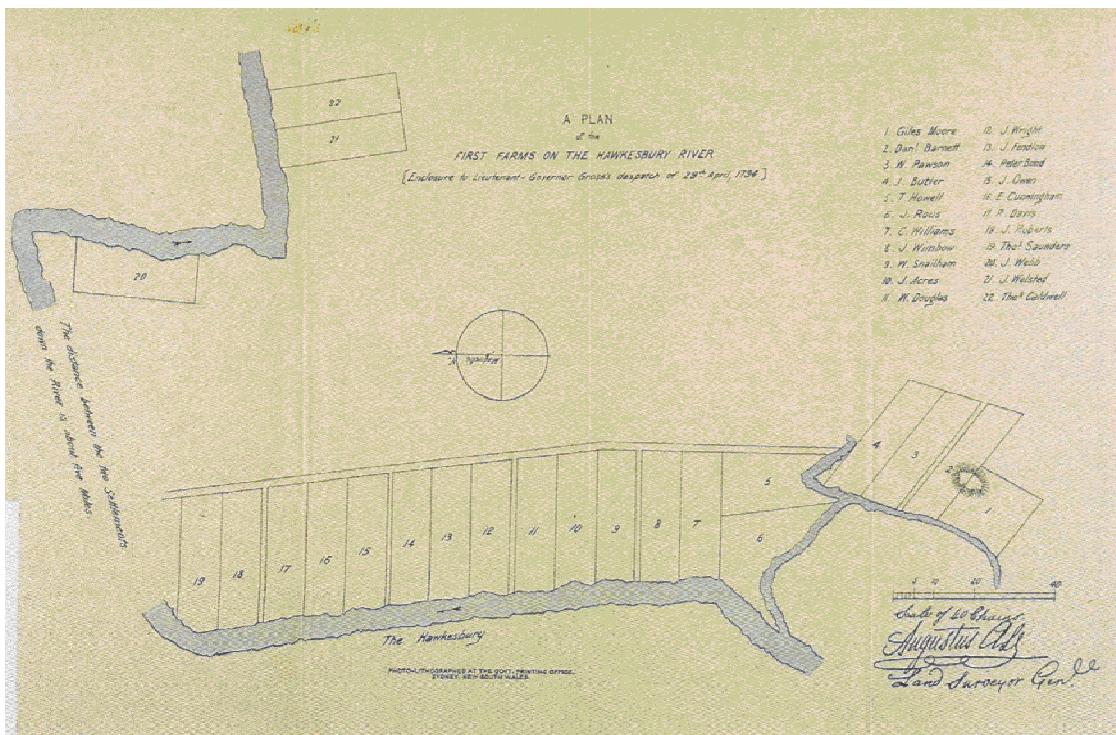


Figure 3 “A plan of the first farms on the Hawkesbury River” by Augustus Alt, 1794 (from *The Mapping of Terra Australis* by Robert Clancy)

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ADB stands for The Australian Dictionary of Biography

JRAHS stands for the Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society

APPRECIATION

In helping research, interpret and compose this paper and presentation I would like to extend my most special and sincere gratitude to my brother, Ian, Kerima-Gae Topp and Paul-Alan Johnson for their invaluable help.

DEDICATION

It would be my privilege and pride to dedicate this paper and presentation to all of those brave Germans who ventured here to this far off land who have made our country of Australia so great today.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

John Brock holds a Bach of Surveying (UNSW,1978), MA Egyptology (Mac. Uni.,2000) Registered Surveyor NSW (1981), Licensed Surveyor QLD (1990), Rose Atkins & Assoc., Blacktown (10 years), H. Ramsay & Co., Harris Park (3 years) surveying for 33 years, **Fellow** of ISA, former Vice Pres., committee, convenor of PR & History Subcommittees ISNSW, papers to Survey Congresses in Sydney, Cairns, Perth, Newcastle, Launceston, Queenstown, NZ, Brisbane, Little Rock. **Surveying History Seminars** in Sydney 1991, ‘94, ’96, and ’97, 2003 & 2005 (papers), Paper to the inaugural FIG Congress History Seminar Brighton U.K.1998, **2001** Las Vegas and Hawaii, USA, Port Moresby PNG, FIG Belgium **2002** BLM San Diego, FIG Washington, USA and Canada, **2003** ACSM Arizona, FIG Paris, RICS London, Hong Kong, **2004** FIG Athens, Jakarta, Auckland, NZ, **2005** FIG WW Cairo, Egypt, 8th SEASC Brunei, **2006** ALSA AGM-Jasper-Canada, ACSM Florida-USA, **Halloran Award 1996** for

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Shaping the Change

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