

House history: 44 Argyle Street, Millers Point

Question: There are already histories written about my house. It is in a heritage precinct and several conservation and heritage reports have been produced over the years. The trouble is that there seems to be too much information and sometimes the different reports contradict each other. They don't always provide what I'm looking for.

Answer: One way to make sense of the diverse information and reports which a heritage listed property generates is to start by creating a timeline. This will help you sort out your house history part of the story and show up any discrepancies that may need checking against original records. Timelines are a good way to begin putting together information for any house history and this might be all you want to do. Or, if you want to go further, a timeline can also be a first step in developing a more descriptive piece of historical writing.

Timeline

Following is a timeline for 44 Argyle Place, including some information for the adjoining houses that were part of the original grant.

1806 Suzanna Plaice, 56 years, convict, arrived in Sydney.

1807 Thomas Newman, a 'lifer' convicted of theft, arrived in Sydney.¹

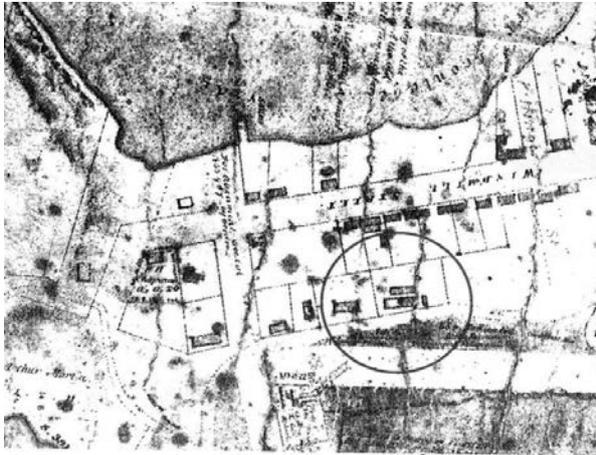
1821 About this time Thomas Newman occupied a house at the site of Argyle Place.² This was probably the year he built the house on the site of present day Wentworth Terrace, which includes 44 Argyle Place. This was a low-lying house built more to align with Windmill Street than with the more elevated Argyle Street.



Thomas Newman's House was built to face the harbour. Detail: Freemans Panorama Looking North from Observatory Hill, 1864. State Library of NSW Digital Order No. a260002.

1822 Suzanna Plaice was listed as Newman's wife in the official muster. Another Thomas Newman arrived, listed as 'the son of Thomas Newman, also living in Cockle Bay, Sydney'.³

1823 Harper's map shows buildings on the site in 1823.⁴ As there were two houses shown on this plan this possibly indicates the house next door to number 44 had been built.



Detail: Harper's 1823 map of Sydney, with houses on future Argyle Street ringed. State Records NSW, SZ 434.

1825 Thomas Plaice, Suzanna's son, arrived in Sydney.

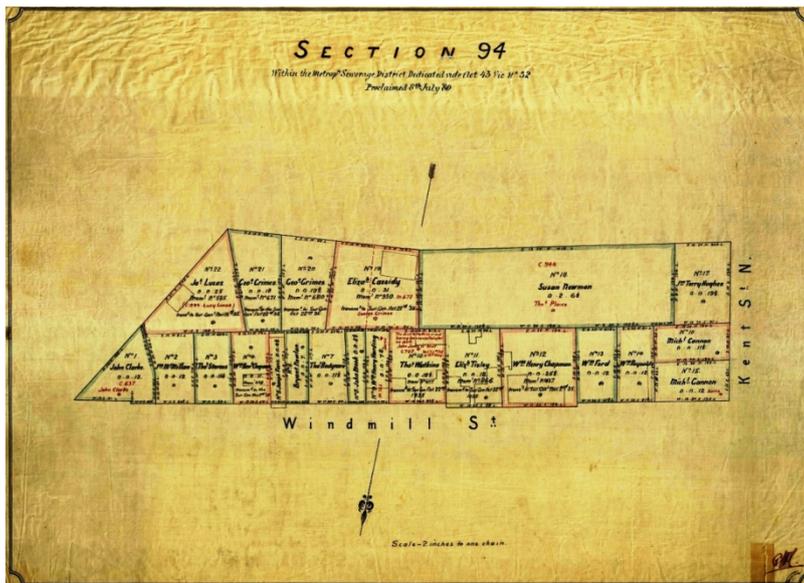
1826 According to the Commissioners Report Thomas and Suzanna Newman sold the property to Suzanna's son, Thomas Plaice. The couple were still living in the house Thomas Newman originally occupied in 1821.

On 13 December Thomas Newman advertised a 'newly finished house' –with 'three stories', 11 rooms, 'an excellent kitchen' in the 'sunk story', and a 'delightful view of Darling Harbour' from the rear.⁵ This advertisement refers to the current house standing next door to number 44, at 46-48 Argyle Place. An 1844 advertisement identified Newman as the builder of this house.⁶

1828 Census records state the Newmans (father and son) were bakers.⁷

1829 Because land throughout NSW had been granted without keeping a clear record of ownership, Governor Ralph Darling set up a commission to enquire into land ownership. 'Owners' then had to prove or argue their case for gaining title to land claims.

1833 City Section Survey Plans were created between 1830 and 1835 in order to record ownership, to assist the commission's deliberations. Allotment 18 in Section 94 was labelled as the land of Susan [sic] Newman.



[City Section Survey Plan of Section 94](#) (PDF 3.56 MB) with No.18 assigned to Susan Newman, 1833. These plans are online in the [Historical Atlas of Sydney](#), City of Sydney Archives.

1836 Death of Thomas Newman.

1841 The land attributed to Susan Newman on the 1833 City Survey Plan was contested and granted to Thomas Plaice by the Commissioners.⁸ This grant recorded that the eastern part of this land had been occupied by Thomas Newman from around 1821 and that he had purchased the western section in about 1825. It also recorded that in 1826, Thomas Newman and his wife Suzanna Newman née Plaice had sold it to her son, Thomas Plaice, with caveats allowing his parents to live in the house until their death. There was a house on the eastern part occupied by a Mr Elyard and there were several other buildings on the site including a ginger beer factory on the western part.⁹

1843 Death of Suzanna Newman née Plaice, aged 95 years. Thomas Plaice advertised the sale of the two residences Newman built – the house at 46-48 Argyle in April, and in December the one 'below the ground' where Suzanna had lived until her death. It was described as 'consisting of seven rooms with detached bakehouse, loft, and about three quarters of an acre of garden ground.'¹⁰ Sydney was in the grip of a major depression and neither place sold.

1844 Thomas Plaice re-advertised the older property for lease.¹¹ In April the large house was put up for auction. In September part of allotment 18, site of 24-34 Argyle Place was sold to the publican William Cole. Thomas Plaice retained 36-48 Argyle Street.

1845-46 Coles Buildings, a terrace of five houses built at 24-32 Argyle Place, appeared in the City Assessment book for Gipps ward. Cole also retained an older building on the original grant (number 22) and built himself a house at number 34.

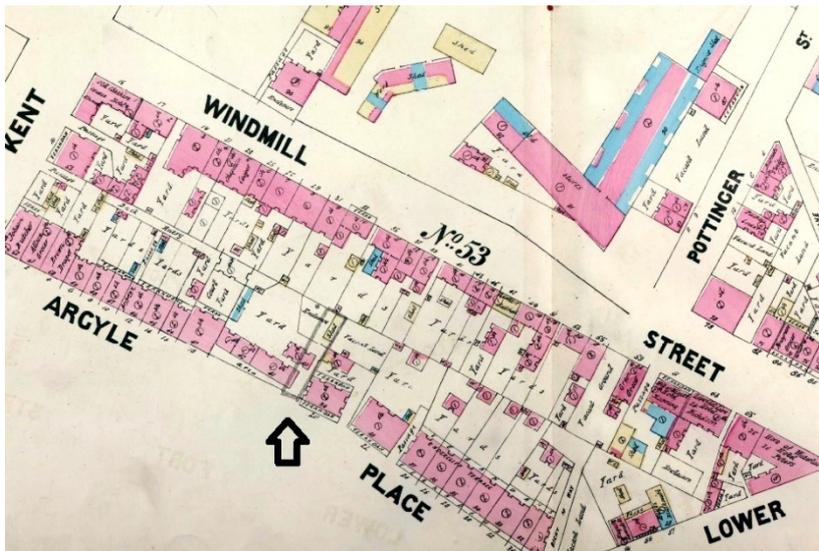
1853 Death of Thomas Plaice.

1856 Death of Mary Ann Plaice, widow of Thomas. The property at 46-48 passed to their daughter, Suzanna, and her husband James Vandervord, master mariner.

1862 Plaice's property at 40-44 up for sale: house, partially underground, and 3 cottages in the rear. The house built by Newman in about 1821 was freehold and 'the attention of capitalists is directed to the sale, as affording a first rate opportunity for investing to advantage'.¹² The property was purchased by James Vandervord.¹³ He then transferred the deeds to his wife, Suzanna, the daughter of Thomas.¹⁴



The two freestanding houses shown on this 1865 map remain today. Wentworth Terrace, including number 44, has been hatched over the long narrow original Newman house. Detail: [Block A2](#) (PDF 7.7MB), Trigonometrical Survey of Sydney, 1865. [Historical Atlas of Sydney](#), City of Sydney Archives.



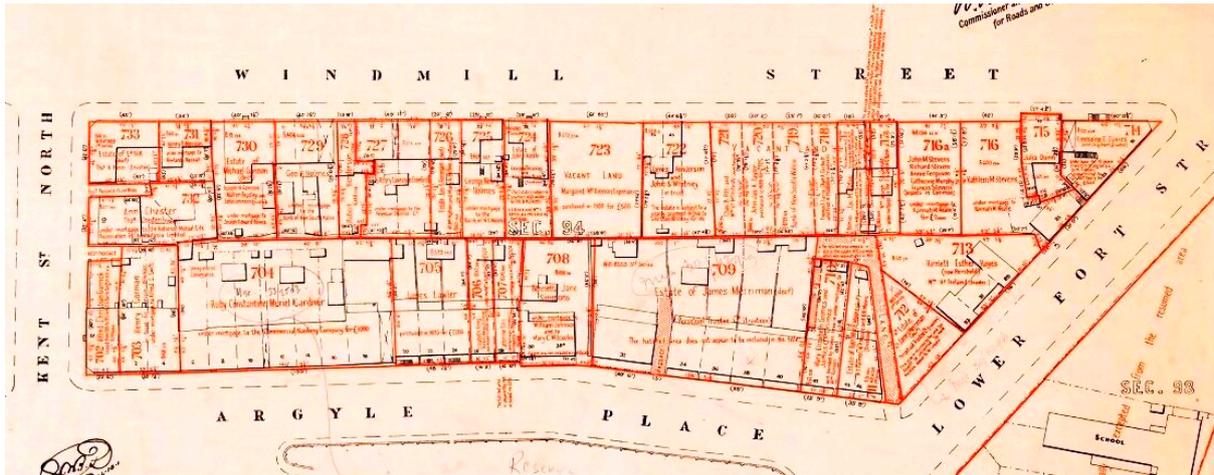
The location of the current 44 Argyle Place, outlined on a detail of Doves Plans of Sydney, 1880, [Block 37_53](#) (PDF 1.5MB), [Historical Atlas of Sydney](#), City of Sydney Archives.

1867 James Merriman is listed as the owner of Cole's buildings at 24-34 Argyle Place and was living in number 34. From 1867 to 1882 tenants resided in the old house below the ground, owned by the Vandervords. It was described as 'off Argyle' in the Assessment Books.

1880 James Vandervord died in October.¹⁵

1882 The house and other buildings at 40-44 Argyle Place were.

- 1883 James Merriman died in May. Suzanna Vandervord née Plaice sold her vacant land to her neighbour, the widow Ann Merriman.¹⁶
- 1886 In her will, Ann Merriman referred to the run of terraces at 40-44 Argyle Place as 'now being erected.' The will bequeathed these new houses to her sons, with number 44 going to her son George, a solicitor.¹⁷ No Merriman lived in these houses as they were built for lease.
- 1888 Architect James Merriman, son of William and grandson of James, possibly had a hand in designing Wentworth Terrace. The Merriman houses appeared in Sands Directory as numbers 3, 4 and 5 Wentworth Terrace – the ones at the western end of the run, now numbered 36, 38 and 40. Sands Directory of this year gave three occupier names:
- John Spofforth, a surgeon; C B Browning, a surveyor; and Charles Bros, a customs agent. In this year the last two houses, numbers 42 and 44 were completed.
- 1889 The listed tenant of number 44 in Sands Directory was Edmund J Playfair, a butcher.
- 1893 George Merriman died and the terraces were put on the market. The owner listed in the assessments was William Merriman.
- 1893/94 Catherine Ellis purchased number 44. Thomas Dawson is listed as the occupier in Sands Directory.
- 1895 Peter Ellis listed in Sands Directory as the resident.
- 1896 Catherine Ellis listed as owner and occupier in the Assessment Book for Gipps Ward. Peter Ellis listed as the occupier in Sands Directory.
- 1898 William Peter Ellis listed as the occupier in Sands Directory.
- 1900 NSW Government commenced resumption of properties in The Rocks, Millers Point and Darling Harbour.¹⁸
- 1901 From this date on the area was dramatically remodelled by the Sydney Harbour Trust . The whole site between Kent and Lower Fort, Argyle and Windmill Streets was intended for resumption, demolition and construction of tenements.¹⁹



Detail: Map of Resumption Area bounded by Argyle Place, Lower Fort Street, Windmill Street, and Kent Street North. State Records NSW 19348 Plan R.

- 1902 Catherine Ellis listed as owner and occupier in the Assessment book for Gipps Ward.
- 1903 Catherine Ellis listed as occupier in Sands Directory as a midwife.
- 1904 Catherine Ellis listed as occupier in Sands Directory as a midwife.
- 1905 Daniel Brown listed as occupier in Sands Directory. This change of occupancy probably coincided with the Government finalising resumptions in this area.
- 1906 Daniel Brown listed as occupier in Sands Directory.
- 1907 Oliver Martin listed as occupier in Assessment book for Gipps Ward. From now until 1939 he was the ratepayer.
- 1930s There was still talk of demolishing the Argyle Place houses. One newspaper correspondent described the houses as 'mostly sordid', but suggested the government could buy them and 'get a wise modern architect to plan out a scheme for little houses around the village green.' Dwellers would look after the green, at present 'a forlorn and neglected spot.'²⁰
- 1936 Maritime Services Board established, with similar landlord responsibilities as the previous authority, the Sydney Harbour Trust.
- 1950s Slate roof replaced by corrugated iron.²¹
- Argyle Place was mentioned by the newly formed planning body, the Cumberland County Council, as the 'finest area of townscape in Sydney.'
- 1958 Maritime Services Board painted exterior of Wentworth Terrace.
- 1980 Wentworth Terrace repainted - white iron lace work and 'a very pale stone colour for the render'.
- 1970s Numbers 16-22 Argyle Place were pulled down.
- 1982 Maritime Services Board handed ownership to Housing Commission between 1982 and 1986.

- 1985 Housing Commission began a program to upgrade housing in Millers Point.
- 1999 Millers Point Conservation Area which included Argyle Place was placed on the State Heritage Register.²²
- 2003 The whole of Millers Point placed on State Heritage Register.²³
- 2001 Department of Housing adopted conservation guidelines for all residential properties in the area.²⁴
- 2007 Some public housing, including number 44 became available for private investors on 99 year leases, with caveats to maintain the buildings' heritage integrity.
- 2012 Inspection of below floorboard areas of number 44 revealed archaeological remains of the old house.

Millers Point Conservation area included in City of Sydney Local Environment Plan.²⁵

The first houses

The land on which 44 Argyle Place stands was part of Allotment 18 Section 94, labelled on the 1835 survey plans as belonging to Susanna Newman. Why was it labelled this way if it had really been sold to her son Thomas Plaice in 1826? Did he come out to Sydney to help out his aging mother and her partner, Thomas Newman? Or did he come to help himself?

The history of early land grants in Sydney is littered with suspect claims and dirty deals as imposters and genuine claimants argued their cases before the commission that Governor Darling established resolve the tangled records of land granted during early settlement. Can we really believe Plaice's story given that he found it necessary to offer a £100 reward in 1841 for the mislaid deed of sale between himself and the Newmans in 1826?²⁶

ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD--
is offered by Mr. Thomas Plaice, of Argyle-
street, Sydney, to any person who will restore
to him, (or his Solicitors, undermentioned,) before the 21st June instant, a Deed of Sale,
belonging to the said Thomas Plaice, dated the
5th May, 1826, made between Thomas New-
man and Susannah his wife, the said Thomas
Plaice and Thomas Newman, junior, of land in
Sydney.

GOWLAND & WILLIAMS,
Solicitors,

Opposite the Post Office,
George-street, Sydney.

['Advertising', The Australian](#), 19 June 1841

One Hundred Pounds Reward.
THE above Reward is offered by Mr. Thomas Plaice, of Argyle-street, Sydney, to any person who will restore to him, or his Solicitors, undermentioned, before the 21st June instant, A DEED OF SALE belonging to the said Thomas Plaice, dated 5th May, 1826, made between Thomas Newman and Susannah his Wife, the said Thomas Plaice, and Thomas Newman, Jun., of Sydney.
GOWLAND AND WILLIAMS,
 Solicitors,
 Opposite the Post Office,
 George-st., Sydney.
 11,577

['Advertising', The Sydney Herald](#), 17 June 1841

Was his claim bogus, but made with the agreement of his parents in order to keep the land in the family? Was the fact that his parents lived on the property until they died an indication that Plaice took his filial duties seriously?

Plaice's unsuccessful attempt to sell the properties as soon as his mother died coincided with a major economic depression when prices were low and bidders few. It is possible Plaice was suffering financial difficulties.

Wentworth Terrace

The property of which 44 Argyle Street is part was purchased as vacant land by Ann Merriman in 1883. The Merrimans were an established local family, with various family members living in the area. Born in the colony to convict parents, James Merriman was one step closer to respectability than the earlier owners of the property on which number 44 stands. He was a shipowner and publican of the Whalers Arms and in 1873 and 1877-78 he served as the Mayor of Sydney. He accumulated considerable property, including much of Argyle Place. He was involved in the administration and beautification of various parks owned by the City and no doubt included the upgrade of the 'village green' at Argyle Place in this. He lived at number 34, where he died in 1883.

Wentworth Terrace was built in 1886-67, possibly designed or project managed or both by his grandson James Merriman, who had just finished a stint as a trainee architect at the City Council. He was then taken onto the staff and there are many official plans for city buildings signed with the initials of James Merriman.

James Merriman's uncle George Merriman was bequeathed 44 Argyle Place in the will of Ann Merriman. He played an active role in managing these rental properties until they were sold in 1893. It was listed in the Assessment Books along with all the other Merriman properties in Argyle Street as belonging to William Merriman.

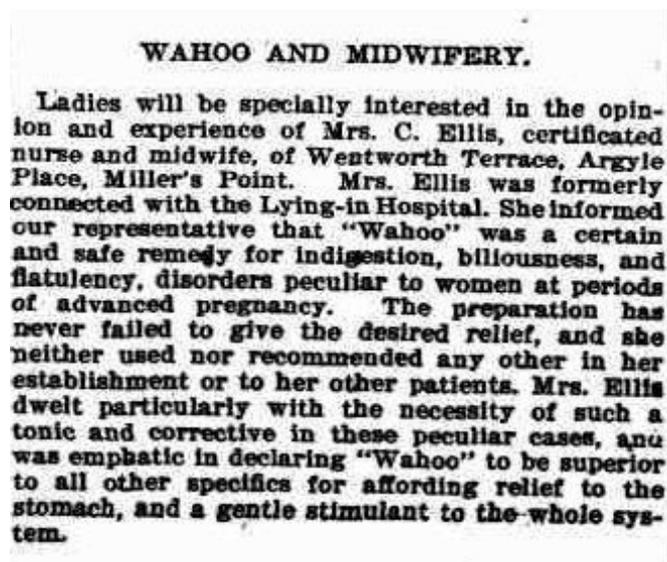
For several years from 1891 the house was tenanted by Edmund Playfair who was involved in the family butchering firm established by his father Thomas Playfair, which had operated in The Rocks since the 1860s. Like James Merriman senior, Thomas Playfair was also Mayor of Sydney (1885). This butchering establishment evolved into a major meat exporting

and small goods manufacturing firm with a factory located until the 1960s in what became Playfair Street, The Rocks.

Investment property often changes hands in times of economic contraction. Back in the 1840s Thomas Plaice was anxious to offload both houses on the site, and unsuccessful at doing so. Severe depression plagued 1893 and it seems that George Merriman, Member of Parliament and Sydney City Solicitor may have been struggling as a warrant was out for his arrest for 'alleged irregularities in handling the City funds.'²⁷ He died before the case was heard and Wentworth Terrace was promptly sold. Whether these two things were connected has not been established. Number 28 (now number 44) was purchased by Catherine Ellis who lived there with Peter Ellis.

Twentieth century developments

The Ellis's lived at number 28 until about 1904. Catherine Ellis was a registered nurse and midwife according to a medicinal promotion she did for a product named 'Wahoo' in 1897.



['Sentiments of Citizens', Evening News](#), 16 February 1897

From 1907 to 1939 the rates were paid by Oliver Martin, but it was his wife, known as Nurse Martin, who achieved local profile and who was routinely in the Sands Directories as the occupier. Like her predecessor, she carried on the work of local midwife, and because she was there for so long she has been mentioned in oral histories of the area.

By now it will be obvious that this property has been strongly associated with women. Early on there were Suzanna Newman, Thomas Plaice's daughter, also called Suzanna, and Ann Merriman, the widow of James. This feminine connection continued with the sale to Catherine Ellis in 1894, 'nurse and midwife'. Then, for many years from 1907 Nurse Martin lived there, delivering the babies of the area.

In 2007 Housing NSW commenced releasing properties in Millers Point onto the private market on long term leases, including 44 Argyle Place. Built as speculative rental property in the 1880s, and run down through decades of public housing occupancy, Millers Point

houses were now positioned as 'prestigious, heritage-listed...located in a stunning part of the city.'²⁸ The current occupants are only the second owners to occupy the property, an experience shared with Catherine Ellis.

How was this history found?

For a house in a locality like this, there will be a plethora of relevant material. The various listings on the [State Heritage Register](#) provide some overview history. Because this house is located in a heritage area, an initial search was made for historical publications and reports. There are at least two that report directly on this property:

- Robertson & Hindmarsh Pty Ltd, 'Wentworth Terrace, 36-44 Argyle Place, Millers Point', Conservation Management Plan, for NSW Department of Human Resources, Housing NSW, 2011. Michael Reymond, 'A brief History of 44 Argyle Place, Millers Point NSW', 2012. This provides detailed references to early grants and title searches.

Both of these studies provide detailed references to other works, to primary source material including some early grants and title searches and both of these studies contain much more material than could be summarised here.

The 'Conservation Management Guidelines for Housing NSW Millers Point', Government Architect's Office for NSW Housing, updated 2007, Vol.1, p.15, [available online](#) (PDF 7.5MB), contains a historical overview as well as conservation information for anyone with a heritage property in this area. The [City of Sydney Library catalogue](#) lists several heritage studies and CMPs for other properties in Argyle Place, and as they had a shared land history these may also provide additional relevant material. The [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#) has entries on some of the individuals involved in this story.

When the land was resumed by the government in 1900 it simply took over the rental of the house and administered its management. The underlying titles of the various pieces of land resumed were not altered, although during the 20th Century there have been many deposited plans, including one which consolidated the whole area from Argyle to Windmill, Kent to Lower Fort Street into one parcel of land for the Department of Housing in 1989.²⁹ Anyone wishing to follow the line of title should begin with the Deposited Plan 1155117, registered 4 April 2013 which includes 'our' house (Lot 15) and work backwards as indicated in the handbook.

City [Assessment Books](#) exist from the 1840s until the end of the 1940s and [Sands Directories](#) until 1933, and are [available online](#). The assessment records showed that until 1852 the street was called Argyle Street and after 1855 it became Argyle Place. Street numbers appeared from about 1855. By 1900 Wentworth Terrace was numbered 20-28. In 1938 these houses were renumbered 36-44.

Newspaper searches through [Trove](#) turned up early land transaction information and a few details concerning the nurses Ellis and Martin. The NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages filled in some gaps and can be [searched online](#).

Other sources

This part of Sydney is well served with photographs and maps. There have been several major oral history projects undertaken with Millers Point residents. Likely locations include the State Library of NSW and the City of Sydney Archives.

This property, like many others in the older parts of the City of Sydney was granted before property land titles were established, and like many early holdings, the title was not firmly established until much later, in 1841. Ancestry contains a number of State Records NSW databases including [New South Wales, Australia, Registers of Land Grants and Leases, 1792-1867](#).

There remains a gap in the story from the 1940s until the present decade when the house was leased on a 99 lease by its present occupants. The owner from the beginning of the 20th century was the government under the guise of the Rocks Resumption Board, the Maritime Services Board and the Department of Housing (various titles). [State Records NSW](#) holds the records of the Maritime Services Board. There may be correspondence and other records which may relate to this property in the State Records holdings. More recent records are held by the Housing NSW, Family & Community Services.

¹ Many of the sources cited in this timeline were sourced from Robertson and Hindmarsh Pty Ltd, 'Wentworth Terrace, 36-44 Argyle Place, Millers Point', Conservation Management Plan, July 2011. Various sources give conflicting dates of arrival for Newman. The 1828 Census claimed 1808, but the name of the ship (*Duke of Portland*) via www.convictrecords.com.au noted the ship's arrival date as August 1807.

² According to recollections provided to Land Commissioners Report, Town Grants, Vol 52, Case No. 944 re Lot 18, Sec 94, (1841) for Thomas Place: reel 1221, State Records NSW.

³ 'Shipping Intelligence', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 19 December 1825, p. 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2184878>.

⁴ [R&H, p. 22] This map is reproduced in various places, including Shirley Fitzgerald & Christopher Keating, *Millers Point: The Urban Village*, 2nd edn., Halstead Press, 2009, p.18.

⁵ 'Classified Advertising', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 13 December 1826, p. 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2187089>.

⁶ This was claimed in an advertisement for sale of this property in 'Advertising', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1844, p. 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12413844>.

⁷ 1828 NSW (Australia) Census, entry 213. available online at Ancestry.com.au

⁸ Town Grants, Vol 52, Folio 13.

⁹ Case No 944 re Lot 18, Sec 94, (1841) for Thomas Place: reel 1221, State Records NSW.

¹⁰ 'Advertising', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December 1843, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12423732>.

¹¹ 'Advertising', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January 1844, p. 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12411902>.

¹² 'Advertising', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 1862, p. 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13225050>.

¹³ Deed, 29 March 1862, Book 79, No 704.

¹⁴ Deed, 26 June 1867, Book 104, No 121.

¹⁵ There are many entries for Captain Vandervord in the Shipping News articles found via a search in Trove database. There is a probate package for him at State Records NSW, Series 3-6589.

¹⁶ Deed, 4 August 1883, Book 274, No. 991

¹⁷ State Records NSW, Probate Series 3 - 15296.

¹⁸ Resumption notification, *Govt Gazette*, 29 November 1900, No. 1203 Folio 10123.

¹⁹ Darling Harbour Resumption Maps, State Records NSW, 19348, plan R.

²⁰ 'A Quiet Corner', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1930, p. 19, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16679184>.

²¹ Until and including the 1948 Assessment Book records the roof as 'slate'.

- ²² State Heritage Register No 00884, *Govt. Gazette*, 2 April 1999, No. 27, p.1546.
- ²³ State Heritage Register No 01682, *Govt Gazette*, 28 November 2003, No 186, p. 10913.
- ²⁴ 'Conservation Management Guidelines, Housing NSW Properties Millers Point', Vol. 1 Oct, 2007. [Access online](#) (PDF 7.5MB).
- ²⁵ Local Environment Plan, City of Sydney, *Govt. Gazette*, 14 December 2012. There is a lengthy listing on the [State Heritage Register](#).
- ²⁶ 'Advertising', *The Australian*, 22 June 1841, p. 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article36851731>.
- ²⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1893, p. 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article28264760>.
- ²⁸ Press release, Housing NSW, 12 November 2007.
- ²⁹ Lot 33 DP 788672. Many of the DP's relate to pieces of the block which have been leased since the 1980s as the government commenced a program which is on-going of providing long leases over these properties.