



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

Pick Volume 3.2

Keevers, the Builders of Cuneens Bridge **Elizabeth A. Roberts**

The timber bridge across the north Arm of Wollombi Brook just north of the township of Wollombi is called Cuneens Bridge, named for the person who appears on the parish map as owning the land beside the bridge. However there is speculation as to when the bridge was built and by whom. One researcher claimed it was built in 1893, the date of the worst floods in Maitland. The RTA Bridges Card suggests 1896 but remains silent on the builders. Locals in the 1970s suggest the builder as Keevers and Keevers. The correct facts took some untangling for at this time, the Maitland Mercury was not reporting any news from Wollombi as a new newspaper, The Gosford and Wollombi Express, had been established. Rare copies of this paper remain before 1896 and none exist for the relevant dates.

In late January 1895, in a report from Paynes Crossing, the Maitland Mercury reported the flood in the Wollombi Valley has *“been the most destructive... through the district of Wollombi that anyone of the old inhabitants ever remembers”* it had *“totally destroyed the greater part of all the farmers crops”* and had done *“a great amount of damage by washing away roads and bridges.”* With the newspaper feud, the actual bridges washed away were not mentioned, but it appears one of the bridges washed away was the bridge just north of the village of Wollombi (1). In October 1895 the Government Gazette called for tenders to build a timber beam bridge over Wollombi Brook at Wollombi. It was later announced the successful tenders were R.J and A.J Keevers of West Maitland (2).

Robert James and Arthur John were elder sons of James Keevers who in later life listed his occupation as carpenter and is reputed to have trained two and possibly three of his sons in this trade before he died comparatively young in 1880

The order of the initials on the contract and the place of residence of the contractors is interesting. Robert James Keevers aged thirty-eight was the older brother already living in Newcastle where he had an established business and was reputed to have built many homes and bridges, while it was Arthur John aged thirty-five who lived in Maitland where he also had a building business. Without the contract it is impossible to prove, but it appears they may have combined the experience of one brother with the localness of the other to put together a winning tender.





Arthur John Keevers as an old man

Three and possibly four Keevers brothers worked on Cuneens Bridge. The youngest brother, William Thomas, who was only seven when his father dies and never obtained a trade, is also known to have worked on Cuneens Bridge. He certainly was living in Wollombi when in 1898 he married Ada Knight and the eldest four of his children were registered there. The other brother who may have worked on Cuneens Bridge was Alfred William as in 1899, as a thirty-nine year old, he joined the railways becoming an inspector of timber bridges (3).

Arthur John Keevers's obituary in 1947 said he was a well known builder and contractor and contained a long list of some of the structures he was connected with which included the Maitland Sale Yards, Glebe buildings, Scobie's chambers, Maitland Brewery towers and associated buildings, the tramway bridge along-side the Long Bridge, Rutherford racecourse stand, Heddon Greta racecourse buildings, Heddon Greta, Stanford, Merthyr and Pelaw Main coal boxes, the reconstruction of the Wallis Creek flood gates, and bridges and platforms on the first section of the main North Coast Railway Line, opened to Dungog in 1911. His obituary also revealed he was a cricketer and later cricket umpire of some local note (4). At least three of his five sons (James, Edward and Frank) followed him in his trade. (5)

The story of the establishment of the Stanford Merthyr No. 2 tells of family's involvement in the mining industry. A pioneering party consisting of James Keevers, forman; Frank Keevers, carpenter; and Alfred Martens, horse driver; left Stanford Merthyr No. 1 Colliery at 7am on Monday 23rd May 1921 with a flat-top 4-wheeled vehicle, loaded with materials for temporary buildings. Two old Stanford Merthyr Colliery pit-horses "Sovereign" and "Model" pulled the load. The party arrived at the proposed site at 5pm and pitched camp to an old dairy bails shed near the creek. (6)



Robert James Keevers died in 1929 aged 72, leaving a widow and four daughters. The Pallbearers at his funeral were members of the Free Gardeners Rosebud Lodge. His obituary recorded he had lived in Newcastle for sixty years and had followed the profession of carpenter. The Newcastle Timber Company sent flowers and members of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners of Australia were requested to attend his funeral (7).

Cuneens Bridge, although damaged in some floods has, with some timbers replaced, stood for 109 years. It appears that the Government who were not committed to accepting the lowest tender, let the contact to experienced bridge builders, and they in turn used this experience to obtain other contacts.



Cuneens Bridge built by the Keever brothers in 1895/6 with Patrick Cuneen's land grant in background. (Photo: E. Roberts)

References: Probate and NSW BDM indexes Webb, Elizabeth, The Keevers Story, privately published E. Webb, 1 James St, Glenray NSW 1989

1. Maitland Mercury 29 Jan 1895 page 2
2. Government Gazette 1895 page 5698, 9856
3. Webb, Elizabeth The Keevers Story; 1913 Electoral Roll
4. Maitland Mercury May 1947 died 17 May 1947
5. 1913 electoral roll for Maitland. <http://amol.org.au/newcastle/greta/stm2.html> 3 August 2005
6. <http://amol.org.au/newcastle/greta/stm2.html> 3 August 2005
7. Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate Saturday 17 August 1929 Tuesday 20 August 1929



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