

Construction of the Hume Dam, 1919-1936

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Even by world standards, damming the Murray was a massive undertaking. Officially, it took seventeen years from Governor-General Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson turning the first sod on November 28, 1919 until November 23, 1936, when Governor-General Lord Gowrie symbolically opened a valve to signify its completion. It matters little, but work began well before 1919 with the dam functional much earlier than 1936.

Countless images of construction exist. A few will be used in this series of articles to give people a layman's view of what began 100 years ago. The terms reservoir, dam, lake or weir will all been used in that time and seem likely to continue.

Part 1: The Concept

From the mid 1850's, colonial friction and intractable differences produced decades of delay in utilising the waters of the Murray. South Australia wanted a guaranteed flow for navigation and stable water supply, while the upstream colonies saw building water storage for irrigation as their priority.



PS Oscar and barge loaded with wool bales on the Darling River circa 1930. The river trade was an important consideration in planning infrastructure on the Murray.

To be fair, it was not the Government but private enterprise who plied the river system travelling huge distances with their paddle steamers and barges, bringing cargo to and from the inland.

Both Victoria, with tributaries including the Mitta, Ovens and Goulburn Rivers, and NSW with the Murrumbidgee, Edward and Darling etc were not prepared to have their water simply flow to the sea, thus allowing SA to use the inland waterways for trade. Despite a number of conferences and three Royal Commissions, little changed until after Federation.

In April 1902, a conference in Corowa, attended by all parties and Prime Minister Edmund Barton, was held. The outcome? An interstate Royal Commission was ordered to enquire into the conservation and distribution of the waters of the Murray and its tributaries for the purpose of irrigation, navigation and water supply. This in turn, led to a proposal for a Capital Works Program.

This entailed building weirs and locks on the Murray from Blanchetown in SA to Echuca and to Hay on the Murrumbidgee, a major storage on the Upper Murray and utilise Lake Victoria as a storage basin. On September 9, 1914, the Prime Minister and three Premiers established the River Murray Waters Agreement and the River Murray Commission (RMC). This entailed one member from each State with the Federal Appointee as Chairman.

The RMC had a brief to create and administer a scheme to construct a major storage on the upper Murray and 31 weirs and locks on the lower Murray and Murrumbidgee River. All decisions had to be unanimous. Responsibilities included acquisition of land and approval of all State projects, the cost of the works to be borne equally by the four Governments.

The States had responsibility to design and construct all works in their jurisdictions. This led to the River Murray Waters Act 1915.

Milawa Billa and Nurigong (or Noorengorong) were the aboriginal names of the Murray and Mitta rivers respectively.

The furthest river steamers managed to travel on the Murray Darling system was – Albury (Murray), Gundagai (Murrumbidgee) and Mungindi, on the Queensland border (Darling Barwon). Combined, this equates to approximately 6,700 km.

During the drought of 1842, the Murray at Albury became a chain of water holes. At the Mungabareena ford, it was possible to cross with dry feet.