

ALBURY – THE “FEDERAL CITY”

The notion that Albury should become Australia’s Federal capital had its origins in the 1850s. The member for Sydney, Henry Parkes, was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of November 8, 1856:

He was one of those who thought that if ever a Federal Government was called into existence, Albury was the very place where the sitting of that Government would be most likely, held, as there would in all probability be great jealousy between this colony and the adjacent colony of Victoria, with respect to a seat of Government, therefore Albury being the most central situation, and on the borders of both colonies, was the place most likely to be selected as the most central seat of a Federal Government.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28636101>

A great boost to Albury’s claims on the site was given in 1876 when the Governors of Victoria and NSW met in Albury. Sir Hercules Robinson, the Governor of NSW, made a much publicised speech about the need for “one Australian dominion.” In response to the Mayor’s welcome:

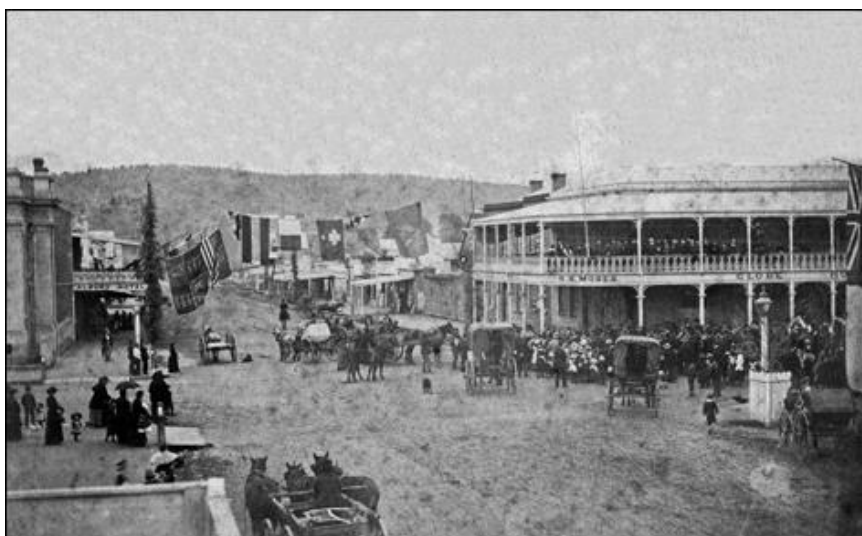
Sir Hercules Robinson asked why Albury was called “the Federal City,” and answered his own question by the ironical suggestion that it must be on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, in other words, that this “Federal City” is a monument of the failure of all attempts to secure for the inhabitants of the districts bordering on the Murray any of the advantages of federal union. But the subsequent remarks of his Excellency would rather justify the hope that this title may turn out to have been prophetic of the days to come, when the city of Albury may be the centre of a general rejoicing at the accomplishment of Australian Federation.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/70605568>

Whenever he came to Albury thereafter Parkes would be reminded of his prediction and Albury became known as the “Federal City.” In December 1889, he came to Albury, now as Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of NSW – the *Sydney Evening News* reported his speech which included:

“Enterprise was everywhere manifest, which indicated grounds of progress; and this was of Albury, of all towns, the most characteristic. Albury is most progressive, and in forty years when he counted back he expected to see the cathedral, opera house, and town hall in the Federal City.” (Loud and prolonged cheers.)

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*Sir Henry Parkes addresses citizens of Albury, December 1889
from the balcony of the Globe Hotel*

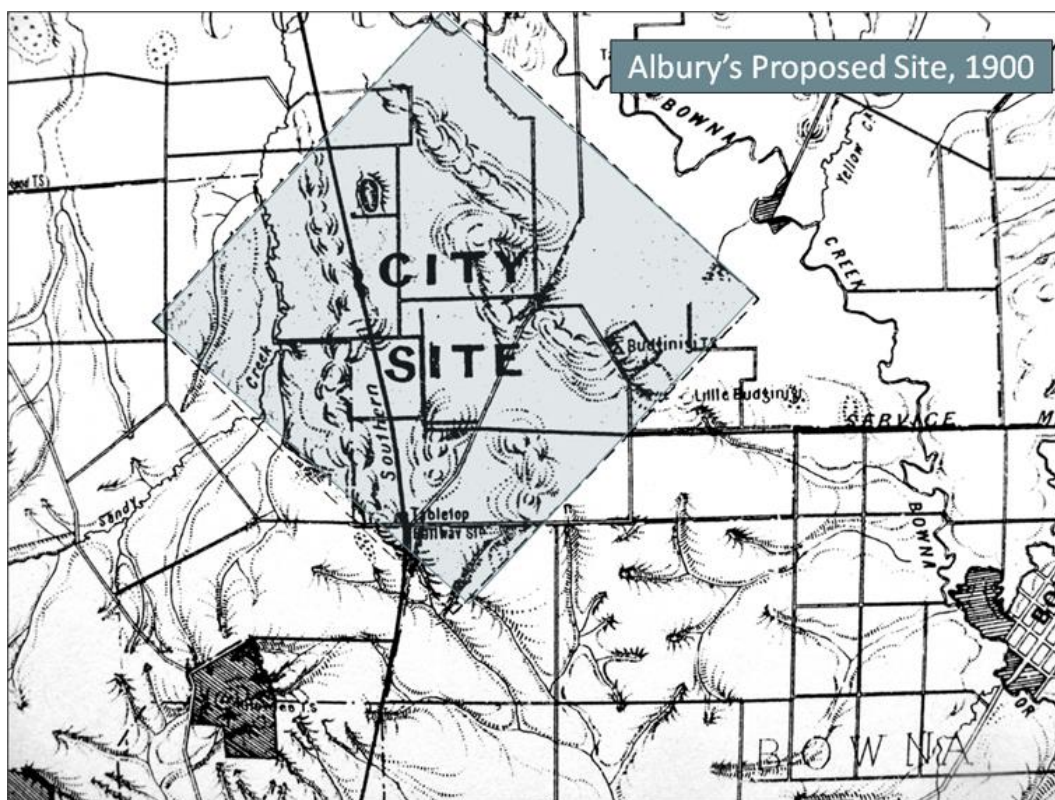
At a meeting to form a 'Federal Capital Association' in Albury in January 1891 "it was decided that the present was a most opportune time for bringing forcibly before the members who will form the Federal Conference, to be held in Sydney in March next, the many claims that Albury has to be chosen as the future Federal City." For a while though in the early 1890s the move to Federation lost momentum. Edmund Barton was a delegate to the March 1891 conference and it was he who kept the Federation movement alive.

There were many other contenders for the capital site, particularly as the movement towards federation grew stronger in the latter half of the 1890s. There were forty contenders: Albury, Armidale, Barber's Creek, Bathurst, Bellingen, Bemboka, Bombala-Eden, Bowna, Braidwood, Buckley Crossing, Carcoar, Cootamundra, Corowa, Delegate, Forest Reefs & Calvert, Glen Innes, Goulburn, Hay, Howlong, Inverell, Junee, Molong, Moss Vale, Mount Clarence, Murrumburrah, Nowra, Orange, Port Stephens, Queanbeyan, Rylstone, Tenterfield, Towrang, Tumbarumba, Tumut, Wagga Wagga, Wellington, Wentworth, Yass and Young.

October 1897 saw a public meeting held in Albury when a strong committee was appointed to take steps to impress on the Federal delegates the suitability of Albury as the site of the Federal capital. The meeting was reported in the *Albury Banner* of October 22, 1897:

A public meeting was held at the Council Chambers on Tuesday evening to consider the question of giving prominence to the claims of Albury for selection as the site of the Federal Capital. The Mayor occupied the chair, and amongst other leading citizens present were Messrs. G. Adams, G. A. Thompson, T. H. Griffith, Carew, J. Brann, Alderman Carkeek, Dr. W. C. Woods, Alderman Watson, Dr. A. Andrews, Alderman Ten Brink, Burnell, Roxburgh, Dr. Muller, Dr. O'Shaughnessy, Messrs. J. Maloney, J. Wilkinson, J R Chapman.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/99419163>



The first proposed Albury site was centred north of the Tabletop Railway Station.

In 1898 a referendum was held on the question of federation and there was a large majority voting for federation. After the referendum the Premiers agreed to site the capital in NSW as long as it was more than one hundred miles from Sydney. This brought forward many more challengers.

Federation Commissioner Alexander Oliver visited Albury to assess the site in October 1899. His report in October 1900 concluded that any of the three, Orange, Yass or Bombala-Eden would be suitable sites for the capital. Albury, he commented, “while technically and topographically within New South Wales, would be within the commercial sphere of influence of a border State to such a degree as to make the statutory direction as to location, in effect almost nugatory.” [nugatory = worthless; having no real value or use]

Albury remained in the running and a delegation of senators arrived in Albury on February 11, 1902 to inspect the town as one of the proposed sites for the new Australian Federal capital city. Unfortunately for Albury’s prospects, the weather was terrible, with a hot blustery wind and a dust haze over the town. The *Albury Banner* of February 28, 1902 reported an exchange between a local and one of the senators:

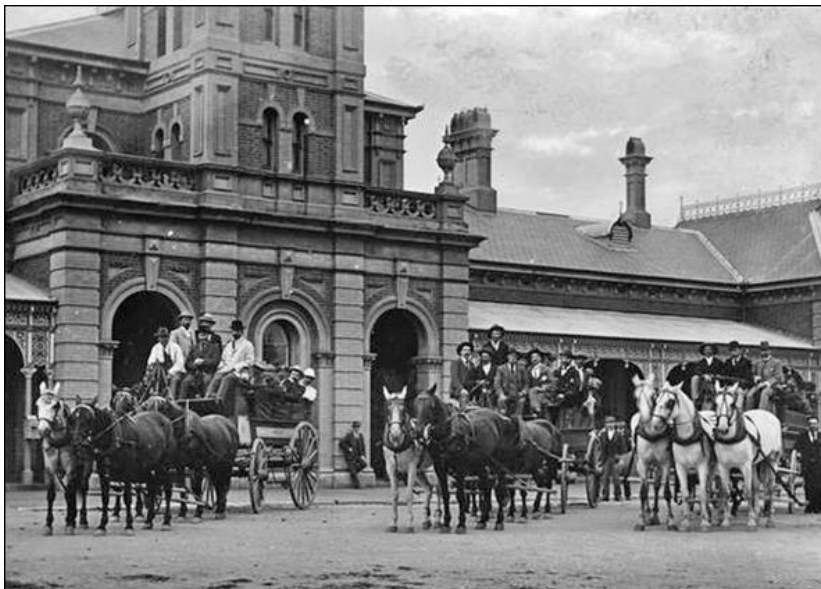
It was bad luck for the border city to be afflicted with its worst day on record just when the Senate was on the job seeking a site and spying out the land about the river-side city to judge of its suitability for the federal capital. The allegation that Albury was too hot has always been a sore point with Alburyites, and it looks as if a malicious fate had sent along a northerly buster and uncovered a fierce sun to affect the Senators with a disgust for Albury.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/100604946/10835777>

The views of one of the visitors, Senator J C Neild of NSW, was expressed in the *Evening News* of February 14, 1902:

It is decidedly a pretty town, and, with its surrounding circle of hills, its bright green vineyards and well-grown pines and poplars, which shelter many charming homes, presents pleasant features to eye. But with all these elements of the picturesque, Albury does not seem to “catch on” with the pilgrims. “Nice position for a Federal cemetery,” says one. “Hot as a stokehole,” says another; and, in view of the sirocco blowing from the west, and filling eyes, nose, ears, mouth, hair, and clothing with a surfeit of filth, and covering every object a hundred yards distant with a curtain of deep yellow dust, pilgrims maybe forgiven if they fail to recognise Albury as the Federal Mecca.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/113872448>



*Senators leaving Albury Railway Station, February 11, 1902
to begin their tour of inspection*

The *Border Post* on February 11, 1902 published a map of a new proposed site, centred on what we know in Albury now as “Five Ways”, the intersection of Mate street, Waugh Rd, Union Rd, Urana Rd and Wagga Rd (see below) The outlined area is 200 x 200 chains, so only 62.5 square miles, well under the preferred minimum area of 100 square miles.

At this stage in the process, some influential residents of the Albury district were becoming ambivalent about Albury being selected, a principal concern being land acquisition that would be required for establishment of a capital.

Another report was released in July 1903. This time Albury was rated higher. The Report listed the top contenders in this order: 1. Tumut; 2. Albury; 3. Lyndhurst; 4. Bathurst; 5. Lake George and Orange, equal; 6. Armidale; 7. Bombala.

Albury scored the highest grading for accessibility, topography and general suitability. The town scored poorly for climate and water supply.

Albury was still a contender as the Federal capital site right down to the final debate in 1908.

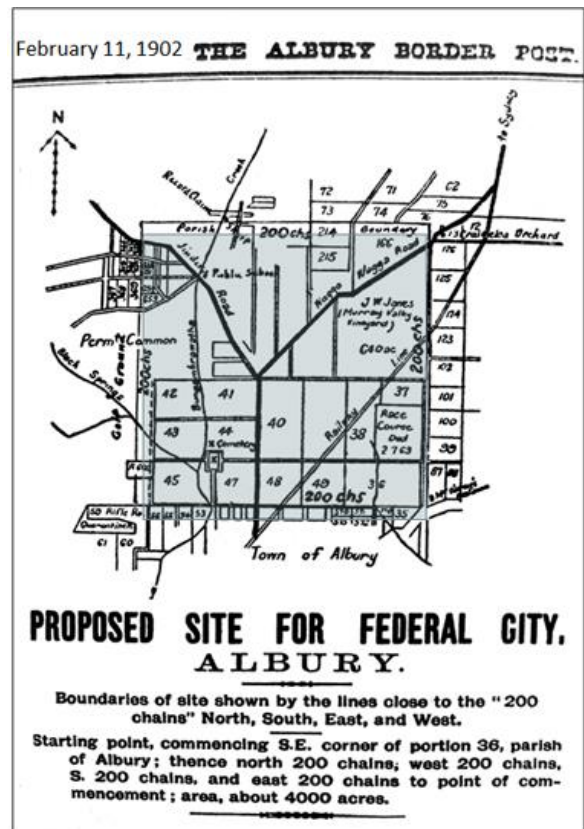
The table provides the results of each of the nine ballots. Lake George was the first to be eliminated followed by Albury and Orange. Note that Canberra was eliminated after round four but that still left the linked Yass-Canberra bid – perhaps the reason that Yass-Canberra was a stronger contender was because of access to the rail link at Yass.

An actual site for the capital in the area of Yass-Canberra was yet to be determined – the *Sydney Morning Herald* on October 13, 1908 commented that “given that the chosen area was a 2000 square mile area there is room in the area known as Yass-Canberra for half a dozen sites.” Note that the Australian Capital Territory finished up 910 square mile in area, more than 9 times the required minimum size.

Albury’s early enthusiasm as the “Federal City” had perhaps been a romantic notion. When specific factors to be considered for selection of a capital were formulated and seriously investigated, Albury’s bid began to lose momentum. The bid was buoyed by Victoria’s support for a capital straddling the border and relatively close to Melbourne. But clearly this was not enough to get Albury over the line. Recall also that an area of 100 square miles was preferred for a capital and the proposed Albury site was much smaller. For various reasons, when a ballot was taken, Albury was quickly eliminated.

The dream of Albury becoming Australia’s federal city was over.

There is a version of this article on Albury & District Historical Society’s YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDzIPypinJegksrO-l2ssVg>



	Ballot.								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Yass-Canberra ..	19	22	23	21	22	22	24	31	39
Dalgety	27	26	28	23	27	27	24	27	33
Tooma	3	3	5	7	9	9	13	14	—
Lyndhurst ..	6	8	7	8	8	8	11	—	—
Armidale ..	7	5	5	5	5	5	—	—	—
Tumut	4	4	3	2	1	—	—	—	—
Canberra ..	1	1	1	1	—	—	—	—	—
Bombala ..	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Albury	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Orange	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lake George ..	0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Albury Banner, October 16, 1908