

Celebrating an accomplishment by early Chinese Australia at Cairns

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On 24 January 2013 – auspicious during the twilight of the year of the Dragon – the gala unveiling of the Hap Wah Commemorative Plaque was joyfully witnessed by a gathering of some 140 people, at the Stockland Shopping Centre along Mulgrave Road south– one of the major shopping complexes in the Cairns region of north Queensland.

The Hap Wah Company was the first grower and producer of sugar at Cairns. The commemorative plaque honours the Hap Wah plantation (1878 –1886), its Pioneer sugar mill, its executive manager, Mr Andrew Leon, and the significance of the historic site, now home to Stockland Cairns.

In particular, it commemorates the anniversary of the first sugar crushing by the Hap Wah Company's mill.

Andrew Leon (c. 1840 -1920)

Andrew Leon, thought to have come originally from Zhongshan county, Guangdong, had some exposure to the agricultural practices of the Caribbean while visiting north America as a young man before migrating to Australia. Eventually, he arrived on the central coast of the colony of Queensland, where he married Mary Piggott – originally from Ireland – joined the Catholic faith and became a naturalised British subject. The couple had four children.

Andrew Leon's vision and enterprise are considered as critical to this story.

A cameo of the early history

The first Chinese residents arrived in November 1876 just days after the port of Cairns was declared. The settlement was developed to service the hinterland goldfields but by 1877 most businesses, banks and government offices relocated from Cairns to Smithfield and then eventually to the newly established Port Douglas. Where European settlers saw uncertainty, Chinese entrepreneurs saw opportunity. The latter settled at Cairns and the Hap Wah plantation was established.

The Hap Wah plantation was developed in the valleys of the Chinaman, Clarkes and Gordon Creeks, Cairns. Up to 200 Chinese workers, most from the hinterland goldfields, manually cleared the land and planted the crops. Some 400 acres were cultivated, mostly sugar cane, however maize and cotton were also planted. The first and only known export of cotton was a shipment of four tons to Hong Kong in 1882.

In 1882, the Pioneer mill was erected on Clarkes Creek near today's Stockland Shopping Centre. The mill was a semi-mechanised, open pan plant with hand-fed, stream-driven rollers. A vacuum pan was added later. The successful trial crushing that year was celebrated as a gala community event, and the mill was 'christened' by Andrew Leon's wife, Mary. Records indicate the Hap Wah Company – in its first year – exported 110 tons of sugar valued at more than £3,000, and subsequently produced up to 600 tons per year. In the Cairns' region, the Hambleton and Pyramid plantations joined the industry in 1883 and 1885 respectively.

In mid-1884, world sugar prices fell, severely affecting the Queensland sugar industry. By 1886, Hap Wah was no longer commercially viable and the land was sold to the mining magnate, Thomas Mills, for £15,000. The right to harvest the crop was sold to a group of Cairns businessmen and in 1887, the mill machinery was sold to the Noakes Bros' sugar plantation at Bundaberg.

Andrew Leon and Hap Wah's contribution were critical to the development of early Cairns. The sugar industry they helped to seed continues to this day.

The Hap Wah Commemorative Plaque project is a community history project partnered by the Cairns and District Chinese Association Inc, Cairns Historical Society, Cairns Regional Council, Chinese Heritage in Northern Australia Inc, Stockland Cairns, and Julia Volkmar as project coordinator. The project was strengthened and supported through the generosity and efforts of local residents and the project partners.

I gratefully acknowledge much of the detail contained this report have been drawn from the Hap Wah Coy brochure (2012) produced in conjunction with the Hap Wah Plaque project and with the assistance of the project coordinator.