4. **HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

Before devoting time and resources to a plaque, you need to be sure of the worth of a person or event being commemorated, and that a building or site is connected with the subject. Historical research underpins commemoration, and will feed into plaque inscriptions and associated materials such as tour guides and publicity.

It is crucial to get things right the first time. There will be little or no chance to correct a historical error or spelling mistake on a plaque once installed. It will last for a very long time, and may become accepted in the future as correct.

New sources for historical research, especially at the detailed local and family level, are constantly becoming available as digitization increases and makes primary records available online. Many local historical and family history societies also maintain increasingly comprehensive local archives and libraries. After the research phase, it is advisable to have all research and analyses checked or confirmed by a professional historian or archivist before committing information to a permanent plaque (see s2.2.3).

### 4.1 Investigating the worth of a project

Research will play a central role in deciding whether a particular nomination or proposal for a plaque reaches your criteria, and for measuring one proposal against another. Plaque criteria often require a subject to be important, or if not then at least deserving of recognition (that is, they are important but not widely-known). A subject’s level of significance also needs to be verified by good research.

It is useful to develop a standard set of ‘screens’ when looking at a proposal. Some useful sifting elements are listed below:

1. **Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB).** Published since 1966, and now available online, an entry in the ADB will be well researched and included references and sources that can be followed further. An ADB entry usually signifies a person is of national importance.

2. **Who's Who in Australia** has been published since 1906 (initially as *Johns's Notable Australians*). Older editions will include people now dead. Information is provided by the subjects, and may need further research to verify. Subjects may be of national and state significance.

3. **Published individual biographies** may convey a sense of why a person is important, and provide more sources and references. Biographies continue to be published for individuals for all levels of significance from global to family.

4. There are many specialized biographical dictionaries,
such as *The Founders of Australia* (1989), and the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* (1992), as well as some produced overseas with local entries, for example *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (1999).

5. There are numerous online biographical databases now available, such as *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online* (2007), *Biographical Database of Australia* (2013), *Edges of Empire Biographical Dictionary* (2016, convict women), *Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography* (2017) and online parliamentary biographies of current and former MPs, such as *NSW Parliament – Former Members*. Some of these operate on a subscription basis.

It is important to recognize that no matter how comprehensive their coverage, there may still be notable absences and gaps in such works. Nevertheless, they are a good starting point for research and understanding a proposed subject’s worthiness.

Local archives and libraries, many operated by historical or family history societies, will also help understand the worth of a proposal. People who have not been included in published or online works may still be significant in local or other contexts. Local collections may hold unpublished research or monographs, and local archivists and historians will often have a good ‘sense’ of local significance.

Occupational associations, such as medical colleges, veteran’s organisations, trade unions and professional associations may also hold similar materials about former members. However, privacy considerations may restrict how much of that information will be publicly accessible.

*Obituaries* published in local newspapers were once quite common, and are increasingly accessible through the National Library’s online database aggregator *Trove*. Although often written by close family or friends, obituaries will nevertheless provide an understanding of a person’s standing in their local community that may not otherwise be available. The New Zealand equivalent, *Papers Past*, may also be useful for finding obituaries.

---

4.2 Historical research into places for commemoration

Undertaking historical research will be a great attraction for many groups managing a commemorative plaque program. Locating the correct place for a plaque is essential. The success of such research will be critical to the acceptance and credibility of the plaques and the organizing group.
4.2.1 Tracing the general history of a place

Verifiable historical research is necessary to prove a connection between a subject and a place. Memories can be deceptive, and long-held beliefs may prove to be incorrect.

Generally, there are two ways to begin.

1. A building or site, and researching its history and identifying associated subjects, or
2. A subject, and identifying all places with which they were associated.

Whichever way you begin, the objective will be to connect a worthy subject and an authentic place to meet your criteria for a plaque.

4.2.2 Connecting a person or event and the place

It is important to establish a link between a person and a place, and then determine the significance of that link, which may be lengthy, but not necessarily.

Published biographies are not always accurate in terms of addresses, and will need verification. *Who’s Who* lists addresses supplied by their subjects.

Addresses are given on birth, death and marriage certificates, but these can be frustratingly vague and occasionally misleading. The indexes do not contain addresses. Full copies of certificates can be obtained from NSW Births, Deaths & Marriages, for a fee and with restrictions on more recent records. Births must be over 100 years ago, deaths 30 years and marriages 50 years.

Property addresses given in wills, especially for heritable properties, are usually accurate but wills will be restricted to property owners and are not always so useful for tenants or renters. Will Books (copies of original wills) from 1800 to 1952 are available online through private providers for a fee, as well as from State Archives for 1953-1984, as are Probate Packets 1817-1976 with additional information.

Directories and Almanacs will be especially useful, mainly for urban areas, although details and coverage expanded in the early 20th century. Listings are arranged by streets, allowing building occupiers to be traced over serial years.

However, listings are not always updated every year, and prior to the introduction of street numbers it can be difficult to identify gaps such as vacant lots.

Directories begin in 1839, and the main directory, *Sands*, spanning 1858-1933, has been digitized by the City of Sydney and is freely available online. The RAHS Library holds some original printed editions of *Sands* that are available for use.
Sands, 1858, Sydney street listings with street number, occupant and some occupations.

Sands 1933, listing of pastoral stations by owner and station name, with stock numbers.

Telephone books can also be useful in tracing connections between a person and a place, and are available for Sydney from 1889 and country exchanges from 1915. Some are available online through a private provider (for a fee), as well as the State Library, the RAHS Library, and some local libraries on CD Rom.

Electoral Rolls list persons entitled to vote and their residential address. Universal male suffrage dates from 1859 and universal suffrage from 1902. Property qualifications applied until 1893 in the Legislative Council. State Archives holds rolls from 1842-1863, the State Library from 1859 onwards, and online searches for other years can be made through private providers for a fee.

Rate assessment books, maintained by local councils, record property owners and sometimes occupiers (i.e. tenants) and their rateable property details. Coverage can be patchy with many registers destroyed or lost over the years. Local council libraries and local studies collections should be consulted for details of surviving books. The RAHS publication Local Government Local History (1990) lists rate books and records that were publicly accessible at that time.

Tenancy records: The Housing Commission of NSW came into existence in 1942, and State Archives holds tenancy files 1941-1986 and minutes of the Metropolitan Tenancy Applications Advisory Committee 1960-1963. These are not accessible online, and access may be subject to privacy considerations. State Archives also holds Sydney Harbour Trust rent
ledgers 1901-1935 as well as a card index of tenants and property files, both of which continue to 1970 in Maritime Services Board series. State Archives also holds some series for the Rent Control Office 1948-1973, including fair rent determinations predating 1948. These cover private rentals and protected tenancies.

**Records of Aboriginal people:** Although incomplete, the files and papers of the Aborigines Welfare Board 1883-1969 may be of assistance in identifying a connection between a person and a place. These records are sensitive, and State Archives Aboriginal Resources webpages outline the records available and their access conditions.

*Dawn: A Magazine for the Aboriginal People of NSW*, was published 1919-1975, and issues between 1952-1975 have been digitised and are available online through AIATSIS. Individuals, families and residences are identified.

**Soldier Settlement papers:** State Archives holds numerous records for soldier settlement schemes recording land allocations and transfers 1905-1958. Indexes are searchable online, and the files can be accessed at State Archives.

**Land Title** papers from the first alienation (i.e. grant to a private owner) and leases from the Crown in 1792 are now mainly held by State Archives. Some indexes are available online. State Archives website contains a good overview of the land records in its custody.

Records of subsequent land transactions, which will link later persons and land parcels, are now controlled by a private provider, NSW Land Registry Services. The Historical Land Records Viewer (HLRV) on the LRS website sets out extensive terms and conditions for use, and fees now apply for some access and copying.

**Official appointments** as Crown reserve trustees, public officials, executors of deceased estates and so on sometimes state an appointee’s personal address. They may also give an insight into the significance of an association between a person and place. Appointments were notified in the NSW Government Gazette, which can be searched through Trove. Coverage for NSW is 1832-2001, and for various Commonwealth gazettes 1901-2012. The Commonwealth of Australia Gazette (1901-1973) includes names, addresses, properties and other details of people considered enemy aliens in wartime whose businesses or properties were confiscated.

**Maps and plans** can be very helpful in connecting a person or event and a place, especially those at a scale showing individual buildings, property boundaries and grantees or occupiers names. They are useful to use in conjunction with directories and similar lists when they can be cross-referenced against each other.

**Parish maps** will identify original grantees (i.e. the first person to obtain the land from the Crown), and sometimes have names of subsequent owners, changes in property boundaries and rarely building outlines. Parish maps are useful for both town and country properties, although for many rural locations they will the principle maps available. Digitised parish maps are available online, now for a fee through the HLRV, or can be viewed for free at State Archives Kingswood and occasionally in other collections such as the National Library of Australia.
Parish map detail, showing original grantee name, size of property, portion number, and references to Lands Department files. Parish of Warroo, County of Murray, 1884, NLA Collections

Doves plan, 1880, Map 18, Block 43, detail from George Street and Little Essex Street, showing building occupiers and street numbers. Un-named occupiers can be identified using directory listings. Historical Atlas.

The Historical Atlas of Sydney, produced by the City of Sydney and available online for free, displays a series of historical maps of the city and suburbs that show in some detail building features and sometimes land owners or occupiers. Particularly useful are the Survey Plans of 1833, the Trigonometrical Survey of 1855-65, Doves plans of 1880, the Fire Underwriters Plans of 1917-1939, and the Civic Survey detail sheets of 1938-50, and 1949-72.

4.2.3 Current archives and guides for historical research

There are numerous published guides to historical sources that will be useful for plaque research.

Many local history or studies collections in council libraries produce ‘research the history of your house’ guides with more details about locally-available sources beyond those mentioned here. They may also contain collections of conservation management plans for historic places in their area that should contain very detailed histories of a building or site that can help establish connections.

Family history societies produce extensive works that will help connect people and places. The Society of Australian Genealogists Library holdings are comprehensive, including peer-reviewed studies prepared by family history diplomates.

Published local histories, while highly variable in quality and coverage, can be very helpful. The RAHS Library holds an extensive collection, as will local libraries. The RAHS Library also holds the largest collection in NSW of local historical society newsletters, journals and publications that contain much useful information, although not always indexed – time and patience will be required. The State Library, as a legal deposit library, also holds an extensive collection.

The Heritage Council of NSW maintains an online database that identifies all statutory heritage-listed sites in NSW. This is accessible online, for free, and many
entries will contain extensive information, histories and references. However, many items also have very little information and, unless the data sources are clearly cited, should be treated with some caution and thoroughly cross-checked.

Historic photos and other images can be useful for establishing links between subjects and places. The RAHS Library holds several large collections. The State Library has a large collection partly accessible online and partly accessible only at the Library. Local libraries often maintain comprehensive collections, as do local historical societies and local museums. However, labelling and cataloguing of images varies greatly, and the information in captions should be cross-checked wherever possible.

4.2.4 Renaming and other traps for the unwary
Street names, street numbers and building names are subject to changes, often quite substantial changes. Many streets have been renamed or subsumed within other streets, streets have been removed and their names given to new streets, the numbering in a street may have changed several times, and building names may change with every new occupant — especially commercial buildings.

Country road names are just as likely to be changeable, as are the names of towns and especially very small settlements like hamlets. Locality names can also ‘move’ over time. Sometimes a distinguishing ‘Old’ or ‘New’ qualifier to a place name provides a clue, but rarely are such moves as clear as Old Adaminaby and Adaminaby. The NSW Geographical Names Register may be of help.

Governor Macquarie established formal street names and numbers in Sydney in 1810. Sydney’s Streets: A Guide to Sydney Street Names (1995) and History of Sydney Streets online database (2012) provide details of street names, but also indicate the historical gaps in this area and the need for caution. There are very few published guides to street name changes, or to changes in street number patterns, or to the introduction of street numbers, but local history collections and local archives should be checked for any such guides.

Easy to confuse:
this gate post displays both a lot number and a street number, and an earlier and a current street name. Neither numbers nor names bear any obvious relationship to each other.

It is important not to confuse lot or portion numbers for street numbers. The former are cadastral property identifiers, the latter house identifiers, and will often be very different. In rural areas, where street numbering is not used, lot or portion numbers may once, or still, substitute for street numbers.

Property names, especially for large country and pastoral estates, may be more stable, but subdivisions for inheritance or development can result in names being moved.
House names were essential before street numbers, and retained in many instances after numbers were introduced. Unfortunately, many house names have been changed, lost or forgotten with little record made of the changes. Personal diaries or journals, or local newspapers, may occasionally record a name change and reasons for a change. Family notices in newspapers, searchable through Trove, can occasionally link a person’s birth, death or sometimes an anniversary such as a wedding anniversary to a named house.

Detailed research using directories and newspaper reports established this Blue Mountains house name in a 2013 real estate advertisement was original, and linked the place with the significant historical figure, Sir Charles Rosenthal.

Commercial building names, especially pub names, are subject to the same casual changes and easy forgetting. State Archives Publicans Licences Guide identifies various series 1788-1959 that may be useful for connecting pubs, their names and publicans, and for dating the period(s) in which a particular pub name was in use.

In all cases, cross-referencing with directories, phone books, electoral rolls, rate assessment books, detail maps and newspaper articles, as well as any available personal papers such as diaries or letters, will help identify changes and confirm the location of original names and numbers.

4.3 Verifying authenticity

Once a connection between a person or event and a place has been established, some other considerations will come into play, especially if a person lived or worked at several places. Some useful questions are:
1. Was the person productive at this address?
2. Did they produce any notable works there?
3. Were they happy there?
4. Who did they share the place with?
5. Did they have a connection with area as a whole?
6. Is the building easily visible from a public place?

Rather than stipulate a length of residence at a place, it is better to focus on whether their time there was significant.

Another question to ask is whether the person would generally recognise the building today, or has it been so altered that its connection is obscure? This emphasises the connection, and the plaque will also operate as a champion for the building’s conservation.

This can be a complex issue. A building in ruins may be better able to express a significant association than a building so altered that its subject would no longer recognise it. A plaque may prompt the conservation or preservation of a ruin, and so maintain a significant connection. Alterations may, at first glance appear extensive, but on closer inspection more fabric from a significant association may survive than first thought.
Then there is a question of where, in terms of design or architecture, is the most authentic place on the building for the plaque? Was there a particular room or area, such as a verandah, that is of particular significance? Have there been later additions to the building that need to be avoided?

If your scheme allows for plaques to be installed at sites where a connected building has been destroyed, potential locations for the plaque should be identified and justified.

In all cases, the connection and the place need to be authentic. Try to avoid selecting a building just because the current owner is enthusiastic. Although helpful in the short-term, the long-term credibility of your plaque program will rest upon the authenticity of places chosen for plaques.

4.4 Preparing historical reports
Generally, the research for a plaque project will need to be presented to a larger group such as a committee or council.

It will be useful to develop the report in two parts, the first dealing with the subject and the second with the place. It may be more efficient to consider the report on the subject, and the worth of the subject first, and decide at that point whether to proceed before engaging in the more detailed and probably longer exercise of identifying an associated place or places and preparing the place component of the report.

There may be several related outcomes from a historical report besides supporting (or otherwise) a particular plaque or scheme. These will include:

1. A reference for replacing a stolen or damaged plaque, or having to relocate a plaque
2. Information for media releases and briefings
3. Feed in to associated publications and promotional materials
4. Inform the design of historic walking and touring tracks
5. Inform other measures to increase the profile of your plaques

In any case, the report(s) will be the main record of the researcher's work and remain valuable long past the plaque installation. Reports also need to be properly archived, and made accessible (see section 6.4). If grant funding is involved in your project, you may also need to provide copies of the report(s) as part of the grant acquittal.

4.5 Assessing the value of the historical report
The final report(s) should have met a project or program's aims and answered all the relevant questions. These are likely to include:

1. The character of the proposed subject
2. The significance of their achievements or legacy
3. The nature of their association with the place
4. Their worthiness for commemoration
5. Whether there is an existing place appropriate for a plaque
6. The qualities and physical integrity of the proposed place
7. Whether the place has been physically altered or its identification changed (e.g. by re-naming) – especially to the point where the subject would no longer recognise it
8. If a place has been destroyed, whether a plaque can still be installed at the site.
9. A possible position and draft inscription for the plaque, including the accuracy of spelling and vital dates.