

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Technologies of territory: *Baker's Australian County Atlas* and the architecture of property

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Cultural warning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this article contains an image of people who have passed away.

Abstract

This article considers a curious document – *Baker's Australian County Atlas* – which contains carefully illustrated maps of each of the 19 counties in the colony of New South Wales in the mid-1840s. The analysis seeks to bridge the gap between high-level geographical studies of the British invasion of New South Wales and historical analysis of settler colonial property formation. We argue that the *Atlas* reveals the mechanics of territorial accumulation and Aboriginal dispossession in nineteenth-century New South Wales in their historical and material specificity, locating instances of ‘improvement’ – clearing, fencing and the construction of temporary and permanent buildings – at the centre of settler colonial land administration and sovereignty. The article demonstrates that the legal obligation to improve ultimately regulated colonial urbanization, enacting a process in which buildings and other structures functioned less as ends in themselves than as discrete operations within a more pervasive and abiding process of dispossession.

The State Library of New South Wales contains a curious document (Figure 1). *Baker's Australian County Atlas*, as this document is known, presents carefully illustrated maps of each of the 19 counties in the colony of New South Wales between 1843 and 1846 (Figure 2).¹ Drawn at a scale of approximately 1:250,000, the maps provide various types of information that together form a comprehensive overview of the state of settlement within the colony at the time. Major and minor roads connect townships, passing through properties and traversing long stretches of Crown land. Watercourses and topographical features intersect with a square cartographic grid that distorts to accommodate the cadastre map of each county (Figure 3). Property holders' names and acreage sizes are recorded against each parcel of land depicted, while solid red lines delineate police districts and fainter, dotted lines

¹W. Baker, *Baker's Australian County Atlas: Dedicated by the Publisher to Sir T.L. Mitchell ... Showing the Various Parishes, Townships, Grants, Purchases and Unlocated Lands* (Sydney, 1843–46).

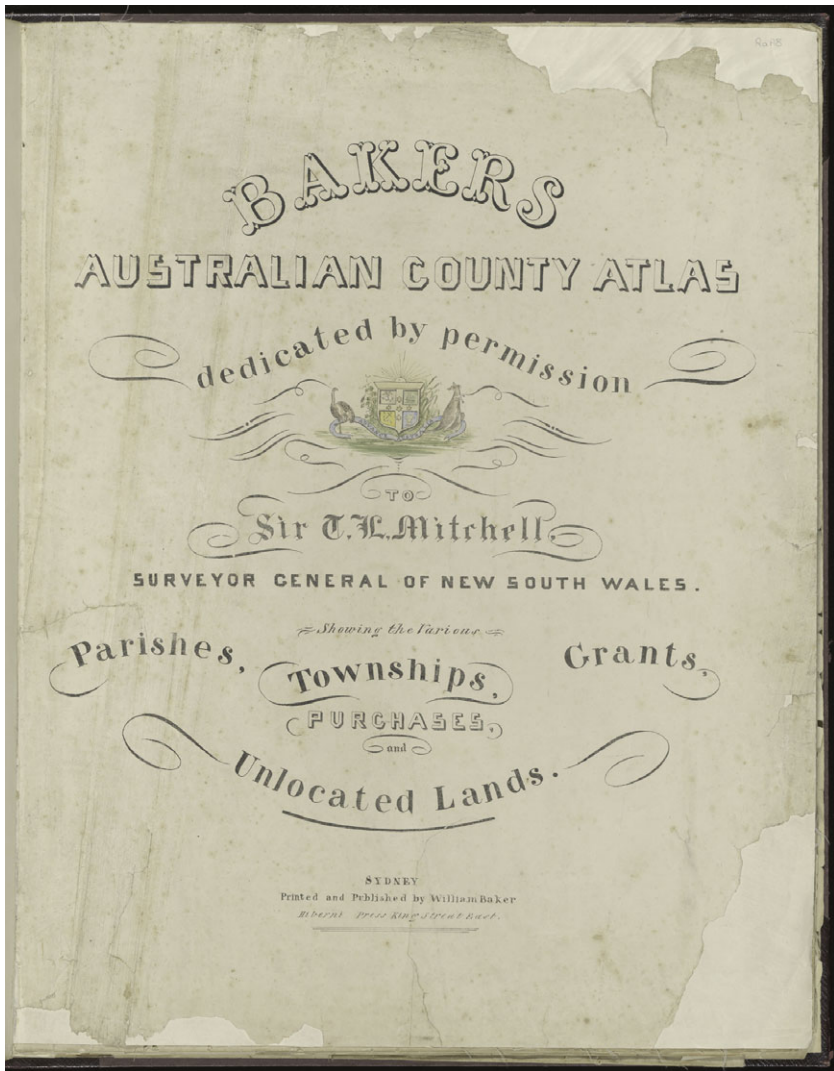


Figure 1. The cover page of *Baker's Australian County Atlas*, which documents the parishes, townships, grants, purchases and unallocated lands throughout the colony of New South Wales. Source: W. Baker, *Baker's Australian County Atlas: Dedicated by the Publisher to Sir T.L. Mitchell ... Showing the Various Parishes, Townships, Grants, Purchases and Unlocated Lands* (Sydney, 1843–46).

indicate parish boundaries. Town plans of important settlements are reproduced at the edges of the map for each county, occasionally accompanied by small vignettes depicting its identifying characteristics (Figure 4).

Not quite novel but also unlike anything that seems to have preceded it, *Baker's Atlas* raises questions regarding its provenance, intended audience and ultimate purpose, as well as the particular moment in the colony's development in which it was prepared and disseminated. Most importantly for our purposes in this article, however, the *Atlas* also discloses important information pertaining to Aboriginal

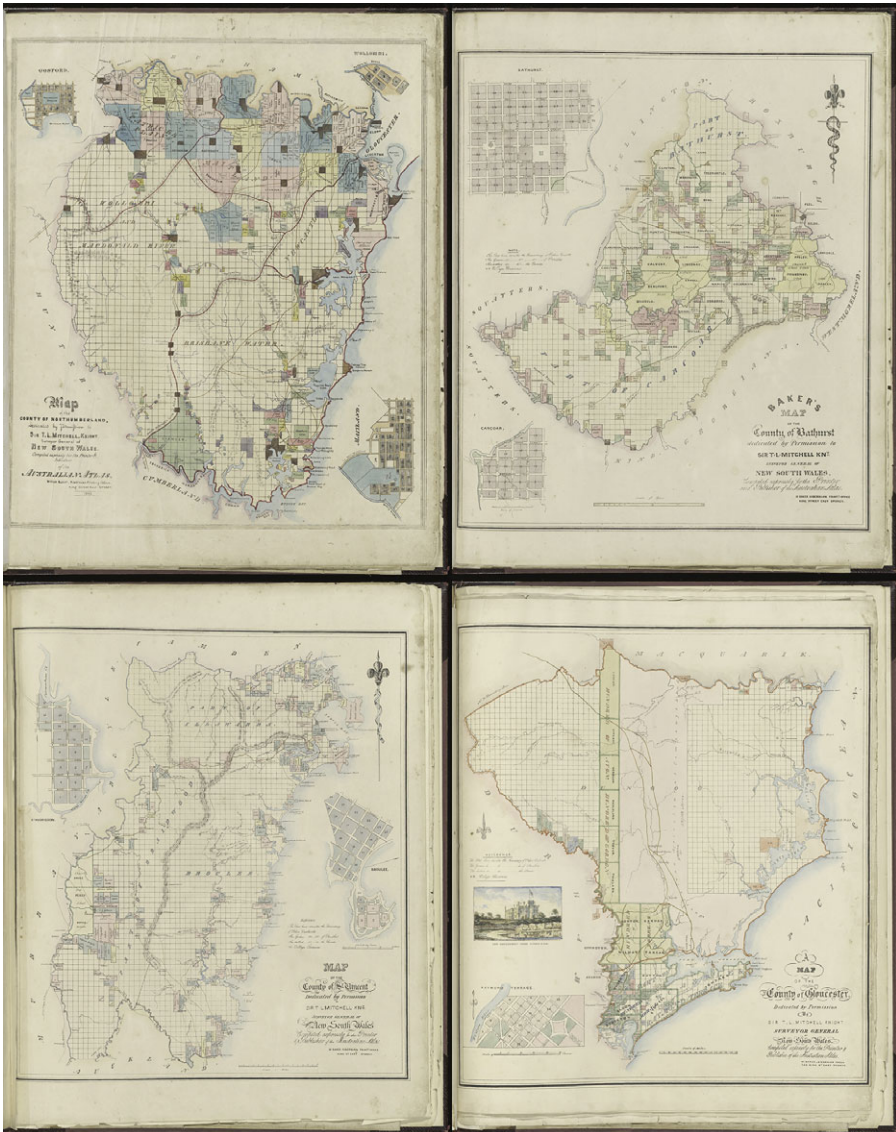


Figure 2. The format of the *Atlas*, illustrated by the Northumberland, Bathurst, St Vincent and Gloucester county maps. Source: W. Baker, *Baker's Australian County Atlas*.

dispossession in the colony of New South Wales in its material and processual specificity. Naturalized within the representational space of the document are the concerted efforts of a colonial state to entrench a very particular political economy, one based ideologically and strategically on the wholesale displacement and removal – if not elimination – of Aboriginal people from the land in order to extract the economic value latent within it.

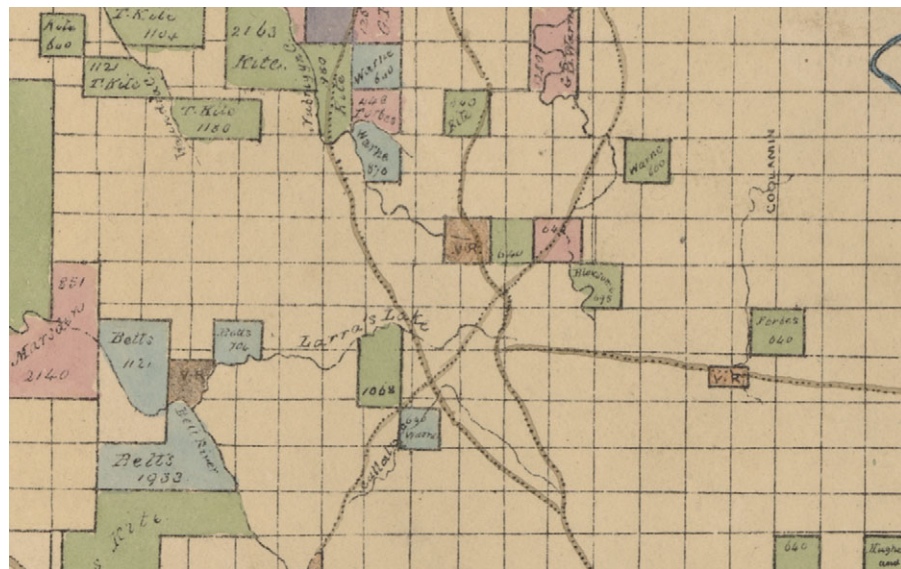


Figure 3. Roads, rivers, reserves and property holders' names shown in the map for the County of St Vincent.
Source: W. Baker, *Baker's Australian County Atlas*.

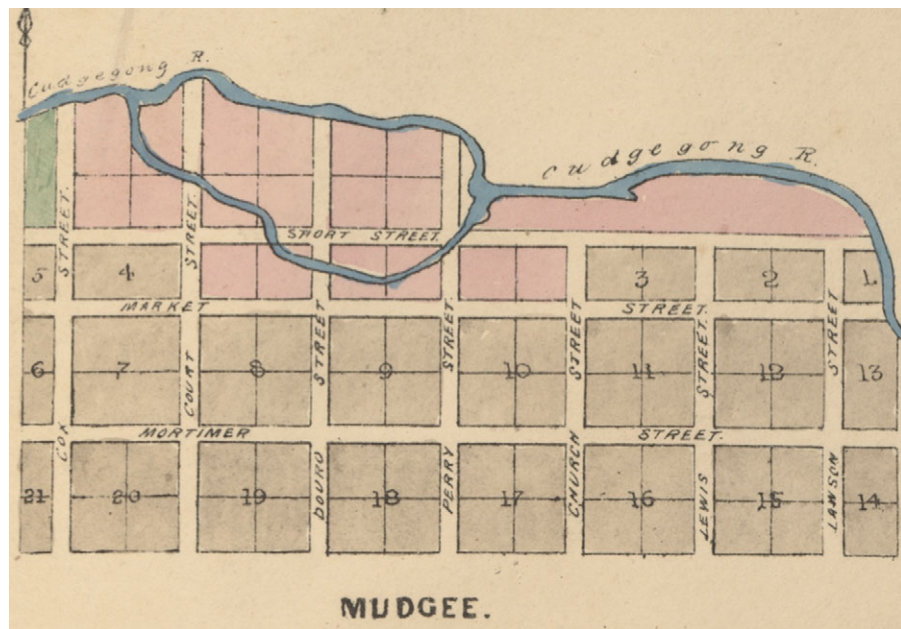


Figure 4. Map of Mudgee included in the margins of the map for the County of Wellington. *Source:* W. Baker, *Baker's Australian County Atlas*.

Foundational to the political authority and territorial jurisdiction claimed by the British Imperial Government in New South Wales were seventeenth-century ideas regarding property in land. In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook took possession of the

eastern Australian landmass on behalf of the Crown on the basis that it was wasteland belonging to no one. Although hundreds of culturally and linguistically diverse Aboriginal groups – numbering between 300,000 and 1.2 million people – had occupied and managed the Australian continent for approximately 65,000 years at the time of Cook's declaration, their appropriation of natural resources and management of land failed to meet British criteria of ownership.² This article bridges the gap between high-level geographical studies of the British invasion of New South Wales and historical analysis of settler colonial property formation. We join others in aiming to destabilize the self-evidence of private landed property in Australian urban discourse by examining the manifold techniques – legal, technical, aesthetic, spatial, material – that worked together to sanction and enact British land theft on a continental scale.³ We argue that the inherent visuality of *Baker's Atlas* sets it apart from other media in nineteenth-century New South Wales, revealing the shifting footprint of a settler colonial property regime and the urban and architectural forms it prescribed. In particular, we suggest that the compromise made in the *Atlas*, between topographic accuracy and cartographic abstraction, connects the multiple scales at which settler colonialism dispossessed – from the overall political space of the colony to the privately owned individual lot. If *Baker's Atlas* affords a rare view of how political and economic power was organized in mid-nineteenth-century New South Wales, it also elucidates the extent to which urbanization itself functioned to consolidate Britain's claim of sovereignty over Aboriginal land.⁴

Historians have had little to say about the role of the built environment in processes of Aboriginal dispossession and territorial governance in the Australian colonies. While important studies have focused on the buildings and town plans produced by architects and surveyors either employed by the colonial state or by companies and notable colonists,⁵ as well as the architecture and settlement patterns of Indigenous Australians,⁶ scant scholarship has considered the role of design and

²It is estimated that more than 500 different Indigenous groups managed discrete territories – often referred to as 'caring for Country' – throughout the continent in keeping with diverse cultural beliefs and complex social structures. This included forms of agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry, as well as traditions of architecture, design and construction ranging from individual shelters and houses to large, semi-permanent villages. Non-Indigenous Australians' insights into the extent of Indigenous transformations of Country have accelerated in recent years, following publications by Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe in particular. See A. Page and P. Memmott, *Design: Building Country* (London, 2021); B. Pascoe, *Dark Emu* (Broome, 2014); B. Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney, 2011).

³N. Blatman-Thomas and L. Porter, 'Placing property: theorizing the urban from settler colonial cities', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34 (2019), 30–45.

⁴This follows Henry Jones: 'Property and territory are both historically produced practices for ordering space. They operate from different ends of a sovereignty spectrum, but both make visible how political and economic power is ordered and organized. To understand the limits of these practices, it is necessary to understand their historic contingency': H. Jones, 'Property, territory, and colonialism: an international legal history of enclosure', *Legal Studies*, 39 (2019), 194.

⁵J. Willis and P. Goad (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* (Cambridge, 2012); R. Freestone, *Urban Nation: Australia's Planning Heritage* (Collingwood, 2010); H. Proudfoot, 'Town plans and their impact on the settlement process of Australia, 1788–1849', Macquarie University Ph.D. thesis, 1995; D. Watson and J. McKay, *Queensland Architects of the 19th Century: A Biographical Dictionary* (Brisbane, 1994).

⁶From a broad literature, see, in particular, P. Memmott, J. Ting, T. O'Rourke and M. Vellinga (eds.), *Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory* (London, 2023); R. Kerkhove, 'Aboriginal camps as urban foundations? Evidence from southern Queensland', *Aboriginal History*, 42 (2018), 141–72; T. O'Rourke, 'The well-crafted *mija*: traditional Aboriginal building

construction in the invasion, dispossession and commodification of Aboriginal land.⁷ This is despite an established and comprehensive body of transdisciplinary scholarship on the relationship between property, dispossession and urbanization throughout Britain's settler colonial empire generally,⁸ as well as recent shifts in historical understanding of dispossession in the Australian colonies specifically.⁹ In contrast, urban geographers, historians of planning and economic historians have undertaken robust analyses of the role colonial infrastructure and land administration practices played in dispossessing Aboriginal people of Country into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ Studies have interrogated the forms of

skills and knowledge in the Australian wet tropics', University of Queensland Ph.D. thesis, 2012; P. Memmott, 'Cultural change and tradition in the Indigenous architecture of Oceania', *Fabrications*, 16 (2011), 38–54; P. Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (Brisbane, 2007); C. Keys, 'Unearthing ethno-architectural types', *Transitions*, 54–55 (1997), 20–9; P. Memmott, 'Social structure and use of space amongst the Lardil', in N. Peterson and M. Langton (eds.), *Aborigines, Land and Land Rights* (Canberra, 1983), 33–65; D. Biernoff, 'Pre and post European designs of Aboriginal settlement: the case of the Nunggubuyu of eastern Arnhem Land', *Man-Environment Systems*, 4 (1974), 273–82; J.H. Downing, 'Traditional Aboriginal camp layout and town planning', *Aboriginal News*, 1 (1974), 4–9.

⁷Recent scholarship, including thematic conferences, reflects renewed interest among architectural and urban historians in understanding processes of dispossession in Australasia in their historical and material specificity. See, for example, M. Koehler and J. Ludewig, 'Banking on housing: credit foncier loans and the State Savings Bank of Victoria, 1890–1941', *Architectural Histories*, 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.11038>; A. Leach and J. Ludewig, 'Back to the land', *Cloud-Cuckoo-Land*, 44/45 (2024), 37–49; N. Etherington, 'The territory of public works: technology and governance in New South Wales, 1856–1890', University of Sydney Ph.D. thesis, 2024; S. Barber, 'Property values: the enclosure of Aotearoa New Zealand', *The Architectural Review* (2023), <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/keynote/property-values-the-enclosure-of-aotearoa-new-zealand> accessed 26 Aug. 2025; N. Etherington, 'The architecture of territory: the lands building and state expansion in New South Wales', *Fabrications*, 32 (2022), 423–7; N. Etherington and J. Ludewig, 'Reorientation: country, property, territory', *CIRCA: Journal of Architecture and Design*, 1 (2022), 14–25; J. Ludewig, 'Securing territory: grey architecture and the German missions of the Cape York Peninsula, 1886–1919', University of Sydney Ph.D. thesis, 2020. The 2024 Australasia Urban History and Planning History Conference, 'Real Estate Agency: Land, Housing and Finance in Urban and Planning History', represents the most recent attempt in the fields of urban and architectural history to formalize knowledge of how property was implicated in the process of settler colonization in the antipodean colonies.

⁸See R. Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, 2020); B. Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, 2018); C. Harris, 'How did colonialism dispossess? Comments from an edge of empire', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94 (2004), 165–82; A. Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Natives, Empires and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge, 2018); J.C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900* (Montreal, 2003).

⁹See the recent position paper by Anna Clark, 'What is history in a settler colonial society? Mapping the limits and possibilities of ethical historiography using an Australian case study', *History and Theory*, 63 (2024), 65–84.

¹⁰N. Blatman *et al.*, 'Rail relations: Aboriginal storywork and remaking Australia's settler-colonial infrastructure', *Geographical Research*, 65 (2025), 1–12; R. Scanlan, 'Settler space: a spatial history of nineteenth century Sydney', University of Sydney Ph.D. thesis, 2023; E. Benson *et al.*, 'Mapping the spatial politics of Australian settler colonialism', *Political Geography*, 102 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102855>; S. Jackson, L. Porter and L.C. Johnson (eds.), *Planning in Indigenous Australia: From Imperial Foundations to Postcolonial Futures* (London, 2018); L. Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* (London, 2010); A. Wells, *Constructing Capitalism: An Economic History of Eastern Australia* (Sydney, 1989).

Aboriginal resistance,¹¹ intensities of racial violence,¹² intra-imperial financial flows,¹³ patterns of commodity extraction¹⁴ and transimperial labour practices¹⁵ involved in expanding the settler colonial project in Australia, leading to new conceptions of the topographies of colonization and an emphasis on the ‘frontier’ as a space of violent contest and dispossession.¹⁶ Notwithstanding a long tradition of critical scholarship that has interrogated urbanization as a dynamic process of expansion and circulation – inexorably linking city to countryside and vice versa – urban histories of settler colonial contexts have tended to restrict their examination of ‘the urban’ to the metropole, overlooking the larger patterns of accumulation, development and governance that transcended the urban–rural dichotomy.¹⁷

An analysis of *Baker’s Atlas* provides an opportunity to better understand the intimate relationship between property, urbanization and dispossession in historically and materially specific terms. As we attempt to demonstrate, the publication of the *Atlas* was coeval with the rise of an abstract property market in New South Wales based on freehold land tenure. Libby Porter has argued that the private ownership of land created ‘the particular morphology of settled Australia’, fostering closer settlement and the design of townships as a ‘means of further entrenching patterns of urbanisation’.¹⁸ The *Atlas* documented this process and, in doing so, actively formalized the property market in New South Wales at a critical juncture in the colony’s development towards self-government. Widespread urbanization in turn necessitated greater regulation of how lands were being appropriated and occupied throughout the territory, leading to an ever-more explicit legal codification of ‘improvements’ within successive land acts over the nineteenth century. For the urban historian, the increased legal role played by improvements at the time *Baker’s Atlas* was produced

¹¹See, in particular, S. Gapps, *The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony, 1788–1817* (Sydney, 2018).

¹²L. Ryan et al., *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788–1930* (Newcastle, 2017–2022).

¹³C. Comyn, *The Financial Colonisation of Aotearoa* (Auckland, 2023); J. Lydon, ‘A secret longing for a trade in human flesh: the decline of British slavery and the making of the settler colonies’, *History Workshop Journal*, 90 (2020), 189–210.

¹⁴M. Ryan, ‘“Our land abounds in nature’s gifts”: commodity frontiers, Australian capitalism, and socio-ecological crisis’, University of Sydney Ph.D. thesis, 2023; K. Teaiwa, ‘Ruining Pacific islands: Australia’s phosphate imperialism’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 46 (2015), 374–91.

¹⁵V. Stead and J. Altman, *Labour Lines and Colonial Power: Indigenous and Pacific Islander Labour Mobility in Australia* (Canberra, 2019).

¹⁶Weaver, for example, argues that: ‘The conversion of frontiers into assets involved collisions between firmly held, insistent, widespread habits of thought and a staggering diversity of habitats that indigenous peoples used with varying intensities’: Weaver, *The Great Land Rush*, 87. Of most relevance to this article, however, is D. Rogers, A. Leach, J. Ludewig, A. Thorpe and L. Troy, ‘Mapping the frontiers of private property in New South Wales, Australia’, *Geographical Research*, 63 (2025), 236–48. Heather Goodall has also written on dispossession and the gradual process of Native Title recognition which includes the limited granting of land to Aboriginal people in the period considered in this article: H. Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972* (Sydney, 2008), 49–65. Earlier examples include H. Reynolds, *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* (Sydney, 1989).

¹⁷This tradition starts with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and includes the work of Henri Lefebvre, Richard E. Fogelson and David Harvey, among many others. The analysis presented in this article is aligned with this scholarship in its emphasis on the role of property, commodification and the built environment as central to the process of urbanization; however, we adopt a more empirical approach in an attempt to examine the historical contingency of these systems as established in the specific context of New South Wales.

¹⁸L. Porter, ‘Dispossession and *terra nullius*: planning’s formative terrain’, in Jackson, Porter and Johnson (eds.), *Planning in Indigenous Australia*, 66–7.

suggests a move away from how individual buildings and townships facilitated urbanization towards engaging the built environment more broadly as a medium for the ‘legalized’ theft of Indigenous land. As the historian Robert Nichols has argued, property is dispossession,¹⁹ raising broader questions of causality and materiality that have driven our analysis: How does the law engage the built environment in the creation of settler colonial real estate? How does the built environment instantiate and mediate the law? And to what extent does *Baker’s Atlas* reflect the colonial state’s reliance on the diffuse yet coherent process of urbanization to mete out Indigenous dispossession?

The discussion begins with an overview of the state’s attempts to govern land use and white occupation in New South Wales before considering the role of surveying and town planning in instituting a land market in the colony at the time *Baker’s Australian County Atlas* was published. The analysis then tracks the evolution of legislation aimed at regulating private property relations and the conditions of land alienation in New South Wales. The increasingly detailed definitions of improvement presented in this legislation relied on the built environment as a form of legal evidence for conferring private ownership of land and recognizing legal title. As the article concludes, the legal obligation to improve ultimately fixed the aspiring landowner to their property and regulated their manner of occupation, enacting a juridical and material process of dispossession that remains central to ongoing settler colonial urbanization in Australia.

Territory as technology

Understanding the purpose of *Baker’s Atlas* requires comprehending the specific and changing objectives of land administration in the territory of New South Wales in the course of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Prior to 1850, land policy in the colony can be broken into two main periods: an initial, largely haphazard, phase between 1788 and 1831, when land was generally obtained via grants or sold on a discretionary basis;²¹ and a second phase from 1831 to 1850, beginning with the introduction of the Ripon regulations, which established a minimum upset price for land sold to selectors at public auction.²² The Ripon regulations ended the period of land grants and inaugurated a comprehensive real estate paradigm in which land price was used as a means of shaping the political community of the colony in line with the principles of ‘systematic colonization’ popularized by Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Too high and the price of land could stifle economic development; too low and colonists would be incentivized to abandon their positions as wage labourers to work for themselves on their own properties, effectively robbing the colony of its already limited labour force.

¹⁹Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*, 4–13.

²⁰Our conceptualization of ‘territory as technology’ builds on the work of Stuart Elden, who writes ‘territory is more than merely land, and goes beyond terrain, but is a rendering of the emergent concept of “space” as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered and controlled’: S. Elden, ‘Land, terrain, territory’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 34 (2010), 810. Elsewhere, Elden describes territory as ‘a political technology, or perhaps better as a bundle of political technologies’: S. Elden *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago, 2013) 322–3.

²¹Concentrated on the Sydney basin, the Hunter Valley, the western side of the Blue Mountains and the Illawarra-Shoalhaven.

²²C.M.H. Clark (ed.), *Select Documents in Australian History, 1788–1850* (Sydney, 1955), 217.

An effective land price, however, was only one part of the problem when confronted with a territory as vast and disparately developed as New South Wales around 1830. Wakefield's concept of constraining the spread of occupation to artificially increase labour supply – known as 'restriction' – thus became central to the Ripon regulations and was given official form by Governor Darling with the introduction of the so-called Limits of Location in 1829.²³ Darling's order confined the settlement of New South Wales to 19 counties concentrated on the east coast, dividing the colony into 'two regions, the settled and the unsettled, and [giving] legal sanction to a meaningless line that was to affect the entire course of settlement for decades', according to the historian C.J. King.²⁴ In the same year, Darling issued regulations on the planning of towns (known subsequently as the Darling regulations) that pertained to the granting of urban allotments. Towns were divided into four classes, all of which are present in *Baker's Atlas*: Sydney, Sea Port Towns, Towns situated at the head of Navigable Waters and Inland Towns. These classes determined the rates for quit rents for grants. In addition, Darling detailed the dimensions of typical block sizes in the townships, protocols for the reservation of Crown land for civil infrastructure or public use, building setbacks for private dwellings, typical sill heights and a complex bookkeeping, approvals and revenue-collection system that vested the final right of refusal for any town plan or construction project in the governor.²⁵

The Limits of Location and the Darling regulations were therefore part of a multi-scalar effort to exert centralized control over the patterns of urbanization taking place in the colony. As Viscount Goderich (the Earl of Ripon) later opined to Governor Darling, however, these measures had come too late and the development of New South Wales would have been far more successful 'if the settlers, instead of spreading themselves over so great an extent of territory, had rather applied themselves to the more effectual improvement and cultivation of a narrower surface'. This was because, in keeping with the restriction principle, 'the result of the same labour would probably have been a greater amount of produce; and the cost of transporting it to market would have been a less heavy item in the total cost of production'.²⁶ This combination of density, concentration and biopolitical management effectively recoded land as abstract space and, according to Nichols, approached 'colonial expansion and land acquisition as a political technology' for managing population and economic growth in keeping with the new political economy of the early nineteenth century.²⁷

By the 1840s, the attitude of the government had shifted from 'restriction' to viewing the transformation of land into property as a source of wealth generation. In its report of inquiry into the 1842 Waste Lands Act, released a year before *Baker's Atlas* was first published, the Select Committee noted that in 'the great territory of

²³'Government order', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 17 Oct. 1829, 1. This order made official the Limits of Location, first set out in 1826, describing the northern, western, eastern and southern boundaries within which settlers would be permitted to select land.

²⁴C.J. King, 'The commencement of settlement (1788–1831)', *Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics*, 25 (1957), 40.

²⁵'Town planning in New South Wales', *Journal and Proceedings (Royal Australian Historical Society)*, 12 (1926), 232–5.

²⁶Goderich to Governor Darling, 9 Jan. 1831, quoted in Clark, *Select Documents in Australian History*, 224.

²⁷R. Nichols, 'Colonization and the recoding of land in classical political economy', in M. Goldman, N. Lee Peluso and W. Wolford (eds.), *The Social Lives of Land* (Ithaca, 2024), 37.

Australia, [there is] an important element of national wealth, lying, for the most part, dormant and unemployed', which, if colonists were further induced to purchase land, would see them 'spread over the face of the vast interior, forming farms, settlements, and townships – each a nucleus around which population would gradually condense'. 'Without permanent occupation,' the Committee concluded, 'without, in fact, *actual property in the soil*, men never apply themselves to the arts of settled industry, or study to develop the latent capabilities which a country may possess.'²⁸ Under the Ripon regulations and subsequent policies, then, the territorial structuring of the colony was designed to secure adequate labour for the ongoing development of New South Wales, while also instituting a land market that would strategically locate where and how colonial occupation would occur – an urban pattern based on an interconnected network of highly planned townships and rural properties that it seems *Baker's Atlas* intended to both document and facilitate. It was through the technology of cartography and the production of maps, specifically, that land policy, property formation and territorial knowledge ultimately intersected, driving the state's successive attempts to reduce land to paper as accurately as possible.²⁹

The cartographic abstraction of property

The process of translating colonial land policy into an organized territory had in fact commenced under Governor Darling's predecessor, Thomas Brisbane. In 1825, Brisbane received instructions to begin a survey of New South Wales for two purposes: the subdivision of the colony into counties, hundreds and parishes, which would in turn facilitate a 'general Valuation of the Land throughout the Colony'.³⁰ However, this survey was only commenced in 1828 by Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, shortly before his appointment as surveyor general and the introduction of the Limits of Location.³¹ Completed in 1834, Mitchell's *Nineteen Counties* map was a tour de force of topographic detail, displaying the intricacies of landform and waterways around which the county borders were arranged. Two years after its publication, Mitchell's assistant, Robert Dixon, published his own version of the map, drawn up independently from his own survey records, de-emphasizing topographic detail in favour of land holdings.³² From his experience in the Survey Office, Dixon must have been especially cognizant of the lack of detailed information available to investors and to settlers who were now being targeted by the colonial office through Wakefieldian immigration schemes and the standardization of land policy through

²⁸Report of Select Committee on the Act of Parliament Regulating Sale of Crown Lands, quoted in Clark, *Select Documents in Australian History*, 242–3. Emphasis added.

²⁹Jones, 'Property, territory, and colonialism', 190.

³⁰'Bathurst to Brisbane, 1 Jan. 1825', *Historical Records of Australia*, Ser. 1, ed. Frederick Watson (Sydney, 1917), vol. 11, 436.

³¹T. Kass, *Sails to Satellites: The Surveyors General of NSW (1786–2007)* (Bathurst, 2008), 86–7. In a memorandum dated 13 May 1828, Mitchell noted that the trigonometrical survey was underway. 'Darling to Huskisson', *Historical Records of Australia*, Ser. 1, vol. 14, 178.

³²L.R. Cranfield, 'Dixon, Robert (1800–1858)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dixon-robert-1981/text2403> accessed 15 Jul. 2025; J.F. Brock, 'A tale of two maps – NSW in the 1830's by Mitchell and Dixon: perfection, probity and piracy!', Paper presented at the 400 Years of Mapping Australia, Mapping Sciences Institute Conference, Darwin, August 2006.

the Ripon regulations.³³ Legal historian Isabella Alexander has analysed the ensuing conflict between Mitchell and Dixon through the lens of the evolution of copyright law in the nineteenth century. The ownership of maps was significant, she argues, as ‘the question of who was allowed to make the map is intimately linked to the more important matter of establishing the Crown’s authority to determine property rights’. Furthermore, ‘in colonial [New South Wales], where land ownership could not arise from possession or use – which was indeed constructed out of dispossession – trust in the accuracy of the map was key’.³⁴ The reputation of Mitchell’s map appears to have been important in lending credibility to *Baker’s Atlas*. A statement beneath each county map contained in the *Atlas* reads: ‘Dedicated by Permission to Sir T.L. Mitchell KNT Surveyor General of New South Wales’. For Baker, gaining Mitchell’s approval to partially reproduce his *Nineteen Counties* map not only implied the highest level of accuracy but also skirted the legal issues of piracy that had soured the relationship between Mitchell and Dixon.

Indeed, at first glance, *Baker’s Atlas* appears to be a continuation of the progression from Mitchell’s detailed topographic survey to the abstract cadastral map initiated by Dixon less than a decade prior (Figure 5). The details of the landscape have been further reduced, with hills and rivers now minor elements and property information foregrounded. In addition, each of the county maps is overlaid with a one-mile grid, further abstracting land into quantifiable space. However, this apparent trajectory belies the fact that the Survey Office maps upon which Baker relied in his production of the *Atlas* most likely preceded Mitchell’s complete *Nineteen Counties* map. Moreover, the grid found throughout the *Atlas* originated earlier still, prior to the county system, in Governor Brisbane’s 1822 implementation of rectangular survey for new settlements, which led to numerous disconnected regional grids

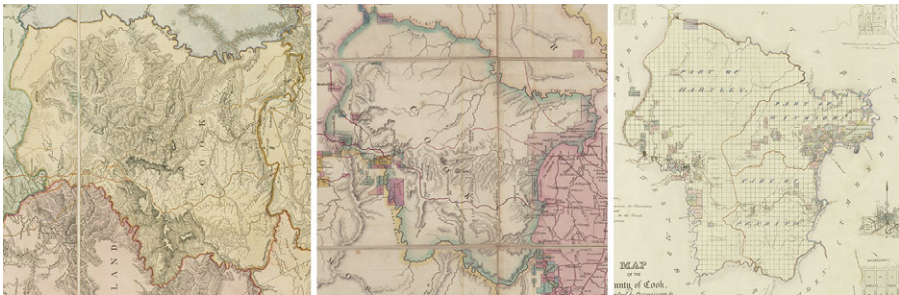


Figure 5. Comparison of the County of Cook as depicted in maps created by Thomas Mitchell (left), Robert Dixon (middle) and William Baker (right). Sources: T. Mitchell, *Map of the Nineteen Counties*, 1834, State Library of New South Wales; R. Dixon, *Map of the colony of New South Wales exhibiting the situation and extent of the appropriated lands*, 1837, Fergusen Rare Map Collection, National Library of Australia; W. Baker, *Baker’s Australian County Atlas*.

³³J.M. Drown argues that Dixon’s motives were deliberately commercial, in contrast with Mitchell’s more ‘philosophical’, scientific aims. Excluding topographic detail in favour of cadastral information was not only more attractive in terms of sales, it also reduced the time taken to produce the map. J.M. Drown, ‘An apparatus of empire: the construction of official geographic knowledge in the Survey Departments of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land, 1788–1836’, University of Sydney Ph.D. thesis, 2012, 179–80.

³⁴I. Alexander, ‘Cartography, empire and copyright law in colonial Australia’, *Law & History*, 5 (2018), 40–1.

being developed that were intended to regulate the granting of land in each county. These grids were originally laid out on the ground but gradually, as survey staff became stretched, were applied only to the maps.³⁵ The difficulty of distributing land according to an abstract grid in what was highly variable and often rugged terrain was not lost on Mitchell, and where the realities of the landscape contradicted the logic of the grid – along rivers, for example – property boundaries were adjusted to the land itself, ignoring the grid. ‘Within the “Limits of Location”,’ suggests geographer Dennis Jeans, ‘little care was taken in establishing the rectangular grid survey. Feature survey instead was made to serve as primary land survey, and the rectangular grid system was added as a means of allocating land.’³⁶ This perhaps explains why Baker adopted the gridded county maps in the *Atlas*: although they were almost obsolete by the time the *Atlas* was published, they demonstrated a logic of land allocation that was legible to investors unfamiliar with conditions in the colony.

The abstraction of space evident in the representational methods of *Baker’s Atlas* is also consistent with British territorial claims more broadly. Geographer Robert Sack argues that ‘from the territorial perspective, what stands out so starkly to modern eyes about the very beginning of the “Discoveries” is the abstract geometrical nature to the claims of sovereignty over area. These claims appear to be the natural precondition for clearing a place for community and authority and for molding further and more specific social organizations’.³⁷ The *Atlas* (re)enacts this abstract ‘clearing’ of Aboriginal land as supposedly empty space but does so specifically for the purpose of recording and potentially converting Crown territory into private title.³⁸ As James C. Scott similarly contends: ‘Land maps in general and cadastral maps in particular are designed to make the local situation legible to an outsider. For purely local purposes, a cadastral map was redundant.’³⁹ Baker’s deliberate exclusion of available topographic details therefore suggests he did not intend that the project would assist settlers with the localized challenges of improving land within the 19 counties. Moreover, the maps included in the *Atlas* were not confined to the Limits of Location alone: additional information was provided for Port Phillip (Melbourne), Gippsland, Moreton Bay (Brisbane), the squatting regions of northern New South Wales and New Zealand, reflecting the expansion of the colony in the period between the production of Dixon’s maps in the 1830s and the *Atlas* in the 1840s.⁴⁰ Despite the ambiguity of purpose and the abstraction of the land for ease of acquisition, it can therefore be seen from the maps in the *Atlas* that the creation of private property largely followed a logic derived from real environmental conditions: the occurrence of rivers and other sources of water; the creation of roads; and the difficulties of

³⁵D.N. Jeans, ‘The breakdown of Australia’s first rectangular grid survey’, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 4 (1966), 119–28. See also D.N. Jeans ‘The impress of central authority 1788–1850’, in J.M. Powell and M. Williams (eds.), *Australian Space, Australian Time: Geographical Perspectives* (Oxford, 1975), 6–7.

³⁶Jeans, ‘The breakdown of Australia’s first rectangular grid survey’, 128.

³⁷R.D. Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge, 1986), 127.

³⁸Henry Jones affirms this view, writing, ‘abstraction turns land into fungible property, commodifies it, but also renders the land vacant by radicalising the land holding of the indigenous people abstracted into savages’: Jones, ‘Property, territory, and colonialism’, 191.

³⁹J.C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 2020), 45.

⁴⁰However, only the Port Phillip map displayed the grid and property details, with the other maps representing expanding but not yet fully commodified territories.

strengthening confidence in the legality and inevitability of continuing urbanization and widespread land ownership in the colony.⁴⁴

The specific conditions of the New South Wales land market in the 1840s reveal yet another possible objective of *Baker's Atlas*. In the mid-to-late 1830s, speculation in landed property had become rife within the colony, fuelled by the easy availability of loans from local and British banks.⁴⁵ This availability of credit was an entirely new phenomenon in Australian land sales and can be considered the beginning of a real estate market in the Australian colonies.⁴⁶ Importantly, development around Port Phillip (Melbourne) increased rapidly in this period, further fuelling investment in land. In 1839, the minimum upset price for the alienation of Crown land was raised from 5s to 12s in order to restrict purchases within a highly speculative market.⁴⁷ However, as Burroughs notes, this increase probably only served to draw the attention of yet more investors towards available land in towns and cities where property values were higher, as well as to the Port Phillip district where quality grazing and agricultural land was still available for selection.⁴⁸ The inclusion of the inset town plans in the *Atlas* (Figure 4) – adhering to the planning controls outlined in the Darling regulations – not only served as a further development on Dixon's map in terms of promoting the commercial appeal of land in the colony, but was also indicative of the growing importance of townships for advancing a property regime in the first half of the century. As Jeans observes, 53 new towns and villages were planned in New South Wales between 1829 and 1842 alone, largely within the Limits of Location.⁴⁹

By the early 1840s, the property boom in New South Wales had given way to an economic depression ushered in by a severe drought in 1838–39, the drying up of British credit following the 1839 financial crisis and falling land prices. The effects of this depression were felt for a number of years and it was not until 1848 that Crown land sales began to recover.⁵⁰ It was precisely in this slump that Baker produced the *Atlas*, raising further questions as to the motivation for the project: if little land was changing hands due to the depression, then why sell maps depicting the distribution of land ownership and the location of available lots? One answer, we suggest, is that in the absence of an overheated, speculative land market during the 1840s, there was greater desire for increased information on the availability of land that could in fact be productively developed and cost-effectively improved by property-owning colonists.

The technology of territory

If the Limits of Location demarcated an overall pattern of urbanization in New South Wales, a pattern that *Baker's Atlas* allows us to see comprehensively, and the

⁴⁴Weaver, *The Great Land Rush*, 13.

⁴⁵P. Burroughs, *Britain and Australia: 1831–1855: A Study in Imperial Relations and Crown Lands Administration* (Oxford, 1967), 264.

⁴⁶A. Wells observes that a 'market' in land existed from the first land grants; however, in the period 1830–45, there is a pronounced shift towards 'partial' commodification combined with a rapid expansion of the land market. Wells, *Constructing Capitalism*, 30.

⁴⁷T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia: From the First Settlement in 1788 to the Establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901*, vol. I (Melbourne, 1969), 473–5.

⁴⁸Burroughs, *Britain and Australia*, 255–6.

⁴⁹D.N. Jeans, 'Town planning in New South Wales 1829–1842', *Australian Planning Institute Journal*, 3 (1965), 191.

⁵⁰Burroughs, *Britain and Australia*, 274.

mechanism of land price was used in an attempt to organize a property-owning and labouring class within that pattern, then it was the doctrine of improvement that served to connect these larger political economic objectives to the development of individual lots within the districts open for settlement. Improvement both underpinned the ideology of a productive, well-ordered society – leading back to racialized seventeenth-century labour theories of property – and was a key rationale in and justification for the violent dispossession of Indigenous people throughout the British empire more broadly, shaping attitudes towards the future as a domain for state intervention through planning.⁵¹ ‘In an embedded cultural sense,’ Weaver argues, ‘improvement meant humankind’s duty to tame wilderness, rescue wasteland – even more, to deliver itself from want and indolence.’⁵² Settler colonial urbanization was, in this sense, a process of ‘improving’ territory by increasing its productive capacity and, subsequently, its economic value. At the other end of the spectrum, the actual material practices of improvement – clearing, draining, tilling, planting, fencing, stocking, building – also mediated the state’s claims to authority and jurisdiction over land in specific locations (Figure 7). The *Atlas*’ representation of property formation in the colony as a series of nested grids spread across decreasing scales of occupation already implied this systematic progression of improvement, but through its methods



Figure 7. Cleared timber was typically repurposed in enclosing selections and for general construction purposes. Source: E.C. Close, *New South Wales Sketchbook: Sea Voyage, Sydney, Illawarra, Newcastle, Morpeth*, c.1817–1840, State Library of New South Wales.

⁵¹Porter, ‘Dispossession and *terra nullius*’, 55–71, provides a useful overview of the relationship between improvement, dispossession and planning.

⁵²Weaver, *The Great Land Rush*, 81.

of abstraction, the *Atlas* also obscured the concrete reality of these processes and the Aboriginal dispossession they ultimately enacted. In this section, we therefore consider the various forms of improvement presupposed in the *Atlas*.

Insofar as settler colonial urbanization depended on the reduction of land to paper, it also required the material reality on the ground to reflect what was depicted in the survey as closely as possible. This process centred on the individual parcel of land. The archaeologist Denis R. Byrne observes that in nineteenth-century New South Wales, 'wire fences made the cadastral grid a visible, tangible reality on the ground where, previously, it had existed for the most part only on paper and in the minds of white settlers'.⁵³ Advice provided to newly arrived colonists from 1831 reveals the confusing exercise of projecting the invisible cadastral grid onto the land itself:

It must be confessed that the difficulties attending the selection of a grant, in the present circumstances of the colony, are sufficiently discouraging; as, from the backwardness of the surveys, it is often a matter of no easy attainment to discriminate, by natural marks, a piece of land which may remain ungranted, from other portions in its neighbourhood, which may have been selected and may still remain unimproved; or from those portions of land which the surveyors may have marked off as eligible for future villages, or for church reserves; and which, in conformity with the King's instructions, are accordingly reserved for these purposes.⁵⁴

Moreover, following selection, the early process of enclosing and improving land through clearing and fencing did not exhaust or preclude Aboriginal occupation of Country, producing what Byrne describes as 'nervous landscapes' in which processes of urbanization were routinely confronted by Indigenous resistance and sabotage.⁵⁵ Writing about the Sydney region, the historian Stephen Gapps describes the 'irregular warfare ... conducted by [Aboriginal] forces – at times disparate, at others allied – against the colonists' expansion'.⁵⁶ Aboriginal raids frequently targeted colonial improvements: killing stock, destroying fences, burning timber dwellings and moving through the settled districts of the colony in what was understood by colonists at the time as an elaborate 'system of warfare'.⁵⁷ As Lisa Ford has suggested, governance in New South Wales up to the period in which *Baker's Atlas* was published adopted 'a hybrid system of personal jurisdiction overlaid with very flexible territorial claims over very modest areas' that were repeatedly exploited by Aboriginal resistance fighters.⁵⁸ Gapps likewise argues against the notion that Aboriginal attacks were only retributive and retaliatory, demonstrating instead that the patchy but constant conflict taking place throughout the colony was directed at limiting the expansion of white-occupied territory by targeting real estate in particular. Inasmuch as 'the cadastral grid worked', according to Byrne, 'to train Aboriginal bodies to function

⁵³D.R. Byrne, 'Nervous landscapes: race and space in Australia', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 3 (2003), 172.

⁵⁴'Advice to emigrants newly arrived in New South Wales', *Australian Almanack* (1831), 267.

⁵⁵Byrne, 'Nervous landscapes', 174.

⁵⁶Gapps, *The Sydney Wars*, 272.

⁵⁷J. Grant to Mrs Grant, Apr. 1805, quoted in Gapps, *The Sydney Wars*, 169.

⁵⁸L. Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia*. Harvard Historical Studies 166 (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 28–9.

within the geometry of the new economic order' of the colony, it also delineated the contested territory of colonial urbanization and Aboriginal sovereignty.⁵⁹

Having selected, located and commenced the improvement of their lot, the aspiring landowner entered an extended legal process of colonial property formation. The state prescribed the specific practices of improvement necessary for the recognition of legal title. This is a legal fact, or a series of legal facts, spanning the early phase of land grants to the so-called Robertson Act of 1861. Instructions to Governor Phillip in 1787 enabled him to grant land to emancipated convicts, 'provided that the person to whom the said land shall have been granted shall reside within the same and proceed to the cultivation and improvement thereof',⁶⁰ while alienation under the Ripon regulations required colonists to 'erect the necessary permanent Buildings ... to the value of Twenty Pounds sterling, within the stipulated period of two years' – a formula maintained in subsequent legislation.⁶¹ The colonial secretary was responsible for conducting 'the closest enquiry' of improvements 'to ascertain beyond all doubt' that they had 'been actually performed' in keeping with the surveys produced for each lot.⁶² In New South Wales, improvement was therefore advanced along two intersecting lines: at once a string of legal evidence spanning cadastres, title deeds, surveys and registries; and the construction of buildings and other interventions in the land through which processes of legal design organized a material reality that the law otherwise merely described.

As urbanization intensified in New South Wales and the colony's property regime continued to be rationalized, what the law in fact recognized as improvements also became more explicit: from 'the bona fide expenditure of capital' on permanent structures and routine cultivation 'to the amount of five times the estimated value of the Grant' in 1837,⁶³ to 'residing ... erecting any hut or building [on] ... [or] clearing, enclosing or cultivating' land in 1838,⁶⁴ through to 'any work or erection of a fixed character such as would render more beneficial the occupation and use of the said land and which shall have been constructed, erected, placed, made or maintained ... provided that such improvements have not at any time before been used for a like purpose'.⁶⁵ Later legislation became still more explicit, defining improvements as effectively any intervention that would increase the productive capacity and hence the economic value of land.

Handbooks published in light of these changing legal definitions performed the cultural work of naturalizing an evolving property regime. James Atkinson's *An Account of the State of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales* (1826), for example, provided the prospective colonist with an overview of the challenges and obligations attached to land selection and property ownership five years prior to the introduction of the Ripon regulations. This commenced with 'several methods of land clearing', from the most expensive practice of 'grubbing' trees up by the roots to the cheaper method of lopping them at the base and hiring labourers to remove and

⁵⁹Byrne, 'Nervous landscapes', 176.

⁶⁰Instructions to Governor Arthur Phillip', 25 Apr. 1787, 21, *Historical Records of Australia*, Ser. 1, vol. 1, 14.

⁶¹'Purchased town allotments', *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 6 Sep. 1837.

⁶²'Additional grants', *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 27 Jun. 1837.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴An Act to continue and amend an Act intituled 'An Act to restrain the unauthorized occupation of Crown Lands', 1838, 876.

⁶⁵S.3, An Act to declare and amend the Laws relating to Crown Lands, 1875, 29.

burn the dead wood.⁶⁶ The best plan, Atkinson advised, was to ‘clear the old forest entirely away’ before planting bushier shade trees for stock, taking care ‘not to destroy all the wood and leave the farm without firing, as has been the case with some over-zealous improvers’.⁶⁷ Advice followed on the ‘immense’ benefits of draining and irrigating cleared land in New South Wales, even though few colonists were ‘in possession of sufficient capital to attempt expensive improvements of this nature’.⁶⁸ Turning to fencing, Atkinson became emphatic, describing the enclosure of land as the ‘greatest and most important improvement that can be effected upon it ... since, without doubt, it is the foundation and basis of every other improvement to be afterwards expected’.⁶⁹ A cost-benefit analysis of three- versus four-railed fences accompanied Atkinson’s detailed description of the tools and techniques involved, including the process of selecting and harvesting wood and the technological sophistication and intensive labour involved in preparing timber posts and rails. The agricultural historian John Pickard has argued that, prior to the introduction of wire fencing in the 1850s, post and rail fences met all criteria for both urban and rural improvers: low cost, made from readily available material, stock- and kangaroo-proof and highly durable.⁷⁰ According to Atkinson, a well-constructed post and rail fence could be expected to last 20 years ‘and with a new set of posts, and a few new rails, may be again set up for a further term’.⁷¹ If access to wood, labour or capital proved too difficult or time-consuming, popular alternatives to the post-and-rail method included palisade, ditch and brush fences.⁷² The latter methods were also preferred in instances where security of tenure was less certain to avoid over-capitalizing on improvements.⁷³

Architectural production, too, was approached through the overlapping lenses of cost, materiality and legal obligation. ‘The time and expense bestowed upon setting up the requisite buildings,’ observed Atkinson, ‘are among the greatest drawbacks upon the success of a new Settler.’⁷⁴ The trade-off, as he saw it, was to first construct a suite of provisional buildings – bark and slab huts with earthen floors – that would enable the colonist to earn a profit from their selection as quickly as possible:

The capital that would be required to build a good house and offices at the first commencement of a Settler’s career, if invested in livestock, and employed in the cultivation and improvement of his land, would soon afford him the means of erecting those buildings out of the mere proceeds; whereas if sunk and

⁶⁶J. Atkinson, *An account of the state of agriculture & grazing in New South Wales: including observations on the soils and general appearance of the country, and some of its most useful natural productions; with an account of the various methods of clearing and improving lands, breeding and grazing live stock, erecting buildings, the system of employing convicts, and the expense of labour generally; the mode of applying for grants of land; with other information important to those who are about to emigrate to that country; the result of several years’ residence and practical experience in those matters in the colony* (London, 1826), 84–9.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁰J. Pickard, ‘Post and rail fences: derivation, development, and demise of rural technology in colonial Australia’, *Agricultural History*, 79 (2005), 29–31.

⁷¹Atkinson, *An account of the state of agriculture & grazing in New South Wales*, 93.

⁷²Pickard, ‘Post and rail fences’, 31.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁴Atkinson, *An account of the state of agriculture & grazing in New South Wales*, 94.

expended in that way first, unless his funds are large, he will stand a chance of wanting the means of supporting himself.⁷⁵

The ultimate objective was to establish a 'decent dwelling' without 'grandeur and ornament' yet able to deliver the 'comforts and conveniences of a good house'.⁷⁶ Atkinson advised that the colonist, once ready to move from their bark hut to a more sophisticated dwelling, 'will do well to sketch a plan of his proposed buildings, and to let everything he undertakes be part of this general plan; his improvements and buildings will then have an uniform and regular appearance, and much future trouble and labour will be saved'.⁷⁷ To assist, Atkinson provided a generic floorplan of a three-bedroom timber house with sitting room, kitchen and store room (Figure 8). The design was based on a stone foundation into which were rammed green timber posts harvested on site. Wall plates partitioned the building into its various rooms, which spilled out onto a large veranda running the full length of the front elevation. Weatherboards were preferred as external cladding, and the interior was to be plastered and lime-washed if possible. 'The expense,' assured Atkinson, 'will not exceed seventy or eighty pounds, when completed and shingled, and it may be executed by any man of common ingenuity, without the aid of either carpenters or bricklayers'.⁷⁸ However, even this more accomplished dwelling was not expected to last the colonist forever. Instead, 'as his surplus produce and means of maintaining labour accumulate', Atkinson advised, 'his first temporary buildings of wood, may be gradually replaced with more substantial and convenient edifices of brick or stone'.⁷⁹ By the late nineteenth century, earlier and less sophisticated dwellings could be found alongside newer, industrially produced buildings on the same parcels of land (Figure 9). The result of sustained improvement was therefore the means to achieving ownership and occupation of land on a permanent basis. Later handbooks reiterated Atkinson's advice, warning colonists against over-improving their selections while they were still meeting their obligations under the law, and covered topics such as site selection, mortgage finance, cultivation techniques, labour laws and construction methods for housing and agricultural facilities, as well as furniture and other household items.⁸⁰

Architectural production in nineteenth-century New South Wales was understood by colonists as a property-making practice, connecting the material transformation of the individual lot to the improvement of colonial territory more broadly. John Macarthur has argued that building handbooks worked to regulate order and civility in settler colonial contexts, emphasizing the importance of the domestic environment for social reproduction, morality and progress.⁸¹ By democratizing architectural knowledge, colonial populations – spread across sparsely governed areas – could self-regulate their form of living, in turn bolstering wider claims about

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁰See, for example, J.A. Ferguson, *Australian Settler's Guide, or Monthly Journal* (Unknown, 1835); P. Fletcher, *Hints to Newcomers* (Sydney, 1886), 49–51; W.M. Fleming, *How to Go on the Land in New South Wales* (Sydney, 1909).

⁸¹J. Macarthur, 'Colonies at home: Loudon's *Encyclopaedia*, and the architecture of forming the self', *arg: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 3 (1999), 245–58.

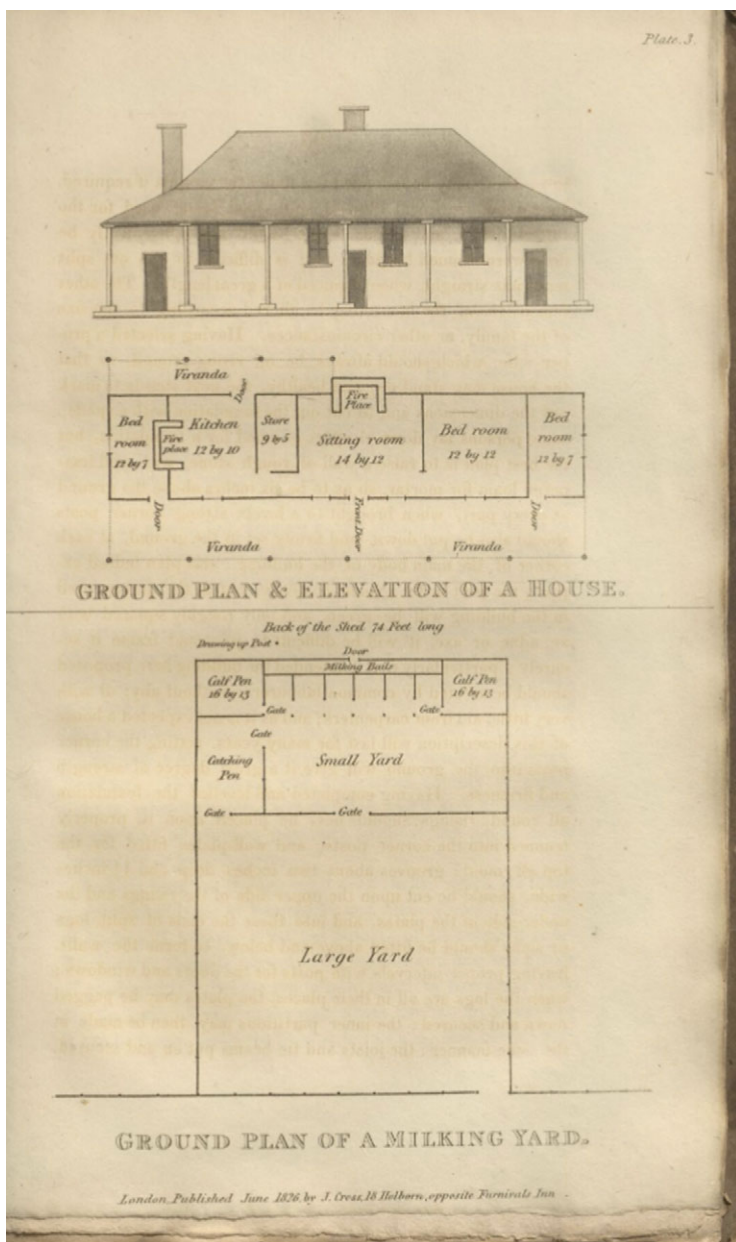


Figure 8. Plan and elevation of a rudimentary dwelling recommended for colonists of modest means in rural New South Wales. Source: J. Atkinson, *An account of the state of agriculture & grazing in New South Wales* (London, 1826).

the supremacy of European civilization used to justify British invasion and Indigenous dispossession. The well-constructed and efficiently planned home was thus a technology for improving both its inhabitants and the stolen land it occupied – and, by extension, the process of urbanization as a whole. The radical instrumentality of



Figure 9. Weatherboard house with white picket fence surrounded by earlier slab dwellings and post and rail fences in Trunkley, New South Wales, c.1870. *Source:* American & Australasian Photographic Company, ON 4/Box 51/no. 106, State Library of New South Wales.

the slab huts and other structures found throughout the open districts of New South Wales at the time *Baker's Atlas* was published can therefore be contrasted with the increasingly complex ways in which they addressed the objectives of colonial law and planning, a phenomenon that was also apparent in other Australian colonies in the early nineteenth century (Figure 10).⁸² Here, land took on multiple roles, as Nichols argues, 'functioning both as an active, productive agent, a commodity and a spatial horizon' for managing the distribution of populations under the conditions of colonial capitalism.⁸³

Baker's Atlas worked in conjunction with (and presupposed) the intensity of material transformation and 'improvement' outlined in the colonial handbooks authored by Atkinson and his contemporaries. Urbanization thus dispossessed across scales and between media, connecting land to paper to fence to dwelling. Importantly, the effects and reach of urbanization in nineteenth-century New South Wales are likely to have been uneven across different districts, in keeping with a property frontier that was always multi-sited and patchworked, rather than uniform and linear. Likewise, the improvement of the colony was not solely the outcome of white colonists' labour: pastoralists and farmers routinely relied on Aboriginal

⁸²S. Burke, 'Fences, furrows, ditches and settlement policy: rapid landscape change in the Swan River colony', *History Australia*, 4 (2007), 3.9.

⁸³Nichols, 'Colonization and the recoding of land in classical political economy', 46.



Figure 10. Typical timber slab hut initially erected by colonists in New South Wales as an ‘improvement’ to their selections. Source: R. Hoddle, ‘Pumpkin Cottage, Illawarra, the first family residence of Henry Osborn in New South Wales’, 1830, State Library of New South Wales.

labourers to improve their runs and lots in keeping with their legal obligations (Figure 11). The colonial record is replete with examples of construction projects undertaken by selector-colonists involving skilled Aboriginal labour – carpentry, plastering, pisé rendering, limewashing, fencing, roofing, etc. – for housing, schools, hospitals and churches.⁸⁴ Highly exploitative forms of remuneration, mistreatment and discontinuous work discouraged Indigenous Australians from engaging in regular ‘employment’ in the nineteenth-century construction industry, or the economy more broadly.⁸⁵ The role of Aboriginal labour in enabling colonists to meet the

⁸⁴See, for example, the report of Protector of Aborigines in South Australia Matthew Moorhouse from 1841 on the work of Aboriginal (likely Kaurna) labourers, quoted in Reynolds, *Dispossession*, 129.

⁸⁵For instance, in addition to a racial ‘prejudice so firmly rooted’ and ‘irregular demand for their labour’, George Grey identified ‘the very insufficient reward for the services they render’ as the major disincentives for Aboriginal people to seek employment as labourers on properties: ‘As an example of this kind, I will state the instance of a man who worked during the whole season, as hard and as well as any white man, at getting in the harvest for some settlers, and who only received bread, and sixpence a day, whilst the ordinary labourers would earn at least fifteen shillings. In many instances, they only receive a scanty allowance of food, so much so, that some settlers have told me that the natives left them because they had not enough to eat’. G. Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia*, vol. 2 (London, 1841), 24–5. As Stead and Altman have argued, the colonial reliance on Aboriginal labour, ‘and the capacity and willingness of Aboriginal people to enact agency through their mobility’, reveal the complex entanglements of race, labour and land within Australian coloniality. Stead and Altman, *Labour Lines and Colonial Power*, 2–3. At stake here is Aboriginal participation in the colonial economy, not the managed economies established on many mission stations and reserves where Aboriginal boys and men were frequently trained in carpentry and construction. See K. Harman, ‘“The art of cutting stone”: Aboriginal convict labour in



Figure 11. Scene depicting an Aboriginal man and child labouring on behalf of white selectors. Source: S.T. Gill, 'The Colonized', c.1860, State Library of New South Wales.

legal responsibilities of land ownership – that is, to improve their selections – requires further research.⁸⁶ Similarly, instances of Aboriginal land ownership and improvement *within* the colonial property system constitute a compelling yet understudied social history of property and race relations in the Australian colonies (Figure 12).⁸⁷

Baker's Atlas is merely one, albeit highly unusual, instrument introduced to advance settler colonial urbanization in nineteenth-century New South Wales.

nineteenth-century New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land', in N. Fijn, I. Keen, C. Lloyd and M. Pickering (eds.), *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II: Historical Entanglements and Current Enterprises* (Canberra, 2012), 119–34.

⁸⁶ Cathy Keys' work is a notable exception. For example, Cathy Keys, 'Preliminary notes on the transfer of Aboriginal architectural expertise on Australia's frontier', *Fabrications*, 25 (2015), 48–61.

⁸⁷ As Reynolds demonstrates: 'All over Australia Aborigines who had grown up since the arrival of the Europeans and become skilled in rural occupations attempted to gain access to land either communally or individually... Small numbers of Aboriginal families established successful farms in many parts of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century either on land leased or purchased outright. But they received little encouragement.' See H. Reynolds, *With the White People: The Crucial Role of Aborigines in the Exploration and Development of Australia* (Ringwood, 1990), 123–4.



Figure 12. Anonymous Aboriginal family standing in front of their house on their own selection near Tilba Tilba in southern New South Wales. *Source:* W.H. Corkhill, 'Aboriginal family outside their house', c.1900, National Library of Australia.

However, as the preceding discussion has attempted to demonstrate, the *Atlas* discloses important information about the place of improvements – and, therefore, architectural and urban forms more broadly – within the wider structuring of the colony as political territory. In this way, a history of *Baker's Atlas* reveals once again that dispossession is irreducible to a 'single event or legal doctrine' and must instead be traced between a matrix of colonizing practices that worked together to clarify and maintain the institution of landed property in the colony.⁸⁸ Improvement encompassed a series of such practices, the outcome and final instantiation of a scalar sequence of dispossession spanning the individual lot to the space of the colony as a whole, over which the state claimed sovereign authority. As a mode of representation that made connections across these scales, *Baker's Atlas* negotiated some of the ideological binaries inherent to the settler-colonial project in mid-century New South Wales: of state regulation of land, on the one hand, and a liberalism that advocated for an unobstructed land market, on the other. The regressive abstraction of existing surveys presented in the *Atlas* rendered the colony into what Nicholas Blomley calls an 'object of calculation', accelerating the conversion of land into a commodity for speculation, and superseding the Wakefieldian principles of systematic colonial expansion based on productive cultivation.⁸⁹ At the same time, however, the shift

⁸⁸ See S. Jackson, 'The colonial technologies and practices of Australian planning', in Jackson, Porter and Johnson (eds.), *Planning in Indigenous Australia*, 72–91.

⁸⁹ N. Blomley, 'Law, property, and the geography of violence: the frontier, the survey, and the grid', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93 (2003), 128. Blomley also uses this terminology in N. Blomley, 'The territorialization of property in land: space, power and practice', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 7 (2019), 241.



Figure 13. A portrait of settler colonial improvement in New England, New South Wales: conjugal family, house, outbuildings, road, dam, fence, livestock and felled trees. Source: C.H. Kerry, 'A Selector's Home – New England', c.1880, State Library of Victoria.

towards a real estate market in which land was valued in the abstract for its potential to yield capital gains was counterposed by the increasing legal codification of improvement across successive land acts. Where speculation threatened to destabilize the organized development of the colony, it also diminished the potential for transforming its so-called waste lands into economically productive territory. The legal obligation to improve ultimately fixed the aspiring landowner to their property and regulated their manner of occupation, relying on buildings and other structures less as ends in themselves than as discrete operations within a more pervasive and abiding process of dispossession through urbanization (Figure 13).

Competing interests. The authors declare none.