

Umbakumba Settlement

1938 – 1958

Other Names:

- Groote Eylandt Aboriginal Settlement
- Gray's Settlement
- Umba-Cumba

Details

Umbakumba Settlement was established by a private citizen, Fred H Gray, in 1938 on Groote Eylandt. It operated as a privately run Aboriginal Settlement. Dormitories and a school were established for children between 4 and 15 years of age and young unmarried girls. In 1958 Umbakumba Settlement was taken over by the Church Missionary Society and renamed Umbakumba Mission.

Umbakumba is an Aboriginal settlement on the north eastern side of Groote Eylandt on the banks of a lagoon known as Little Lagoon within Port Langdon. The location was named Umbakumba by Macassan traders from islands in the Indonesian Archipelago who came to Northern Australia in search of pearls and sea-cucumbers known as 'trepang'.

The settlement at Umbakumba was first established in 1938 by Mr Fred H. Gray, a pearl and trepang trader, who employed many Aboriginal people from the east coast of the island in his business. According to the correspondence of Fred Gray he began the settlement at the request of the Reverend Taylor, superintendent of the Church Missionary Society's (CMS) Groote Eylandt Mission at Emerald River. Gray states that in 1938 the Reverend Taylor became concerned about local Aboriginal people coming into contact with non-Aboriginal people working to establish a flying boat base at the north east of the island. Gray, having lived and worked in East Arnhem Land since 1932 and being on friendly terms with the local Aboriginal population, was requested to look to welfare of the Aboriginal people of eastern Groote Eylandt on behalf of the CMS. He set up the beginnings of a settlement at Umbakumba on the opposite side of Little Lagoon to the flying boat base, approximately 40 miles (64.4 km) from the CMS Mission at Emerald River on the western side of the island.

Gray's position on the island, while requested by Rev Taylor, was not endorsed by the CMS. When the support of the CMS was withdrawn Gray stated that he chose to continue with the work he had begun. In 1939 the Minister of the Interior gave him permission to stay on Groote Eylandt.

During World War II workers from Umbakumba assisted the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in extending the Airbase on the island. The settlement also helped to provide food for the Base.

On 23 July 1942 Gray was appointed as an Honorary Protector of Aborigines. In 1943 Gray stated that there were 49 children under the age of 10 at the settlement. He applied to the government for child endowment subsidies for each of these children. At the time, he ran a school for the children, doing the teaching himself.

In Feb 1943, in a letter to the Commonwealth Department of Social Services requesting access to child endowment payments for the children at the settlement, he stated:

This settlement is a self-supporting Station run by the Natives themselves without outside help other than my help and direction, also it is in no way connected with the C.M.S. Station at the southern end of the island forty miles away, although working with that Station in complete harmony and co-operation.

Gray went on to request government inspectors visit the Settlement. The NT Administrator agreed to send someone to inspect 'from time to time'. However, due to World War II and poor weather conditions, no inspectors were able to visit Umbakumba for some time.

In 1944 child endowment was granted and paid to Gray for each child at the Settlement. That same year Gray sent a letter, with photographs of the settlement, to the NT Administration asking to be supplied with permits that would allow him to employ a teacher and other assistants for the school and Settlement. He also requested that the boundaries between Umbakumba and the CMS Mission be formalised. In the letter he described parts of the settlement, including the dormitories for children:

I am enclosing a few photographs again, the one looking up the jetty shows the extensions round my house, to the right of the house are rooms for the staff, behind the rooms is the new kitchen, and behind the kitchen is a large dormitory for the girls, supervised by one native and his wife. Running from the kitchen is a room 126 feet long by 27 feet wide, which is a dining and recreation room and is also used as the moment for a dormitory for the young boys, I also use it for the school as you will see by the blackboard in the snap marked 2. The kitchen is at the far end, the stoves being under the iron roof. ... Meals are all served up in the dining room the men taking it in turns to act as mess-men ... All the floors are cement so easy to keep clean. The dining room and dormitories have been some of our greatest successes I think.

By January 1945 Gray wrote again to say he was considering quitting and handing the settlement over to the CMS if permits to employ staff were not forthcoming. However, after negotiations with the CMS and an agreement with the NT Government Gray changed his mind and elected to stay.

After the war the RAAF left the airbase and it was taken over once again by Civil Aviation. Commercial flying boat services, however, did not resume and in 1946 caretaking duties at the base fell to Gray and members of the settlement. Late in 1946 Gray married his long time fiancé, Marjorie Southwick, a teacher from England. She arrived at the settlement early in 1947 and took over teaching duties from Gray. The school, and possibly the dormitories were briefly moved to the abandoned Airbase but soon returned to Umbakumba as running two Settlements was too difficult.

In a statement from December 1947 Gray stated that for two years due to short supplies he was only able maintain the children at the Settlement and that the adults had 'gone bush' for much of that time. In the report Gray stated that there were 37 children attending school as well as a number of young married girls. At this time young girls, boys under the age of 16 and young unmarried girls were all separated in dormitories. Once boys reached the age of 16 they were moved into the single men's camp.

A Patrol Officer's report from 1948 explained the situation with young women on the Settlement:

Mr Gray buys the marriage rights of the girls from their father and prospective husband. The girls go into the dormitory from which they are married to single men on the Settlement. The young married couples are shepherded for a time living in portion of the Settlement building. The aim is to build cottages for the married couple. Two cottages have been built and are occupied.

By 1949 there were 120 children at the settlement, 70 boys and 50 girls. Additional teaching staff enabled classes to be divided by age. A late 1949 Patrol Officer's report on the settlement described what life was like for the

children at that time:

About 60 children attend School. Dressmaking, reading, writing, pencil and pastel drawing and singing seem the main items on the curriculum. Their singing is particularly melodious. The dormitories are fitted with cyclone beds, mattresses and blankets. The girls wear neat dresses and the boys nagas... After the evening meal most of the children voluntarily sit on the floor around the Gray dining table when they freely chatter and sing their many songs. As stated above the children have definite duties to perform when they are not at their lessons and these duties are supervised. Their natural playground is the beach which is only twenty yards from the residential quarters. They are thus under direct control of the staff for twenty four hours a day.

From 1950 the Settlement was subject to annual review by government inspectors in the same manner as the various Missions in the Northern Territory. In some reports and correspondence from that era the possibility of Umbakumba being taken over by the CMS was discussed.

In 1951 Gray borrowed £1,250 to purchase the buildings of the Airbase and use material from them to improve the Settlement. At that time there were 97 children at the Settlement, 51 of these, 27 boys and 24 girls, were living in the dormitories. In 1952 the staff at the Settlement included Mr and Mrs Gray and assistants Mr and Mrs Smith. The girls' dormitories continued to be supervised by a married Aboriginal couple.

From 1951/52 the Settlement began to receive an annual departmental subsidy of £1,800 from the government.

In 1952 the Senior Education Officer visited Umbakumba and recommended sending two Commonwealth teachers to take over from Mrs Gray. He stated that there were 28 boys and 22 girls living in the dormitories at the Settlement and that:

Although no compulsion exists, parents are encouraged to leave their children in the dormitories from the age of 4-5 years. The girls remain in the dormitories until they marry.

He was less impressed by the set up of the dormitories and school than previous Patrol Officers and stated that the Gray's residence, the school, the dining room, dormitories and the poultry run were all too close together with 'undesirable smells pervading the classroom'. He described the situation at the Settlement:

The Grays' residence is of concrete with a flat roof. The Smiths are living in a small cottage which had previously stood at the flying boat base. Mr. Gray has another similar cottage to be transferred to the settlement. The children's dormitory is to the rear and only a few feet away from the Gray's home. It is timber framed and the walls are of iron and concrete and the floor of concrete. The roof, in bad condition, was of paperbark. The whole building, which is L shaped, is perhaps 150 feet long and 27 feet wide. The boys' dormitory is at one end. The girls' at the other. Between these are the school and the dining hall for the whole camp. At the time of my visit alterations were being carried out. A separate room for the married couple supervising the girls was being built. A new roof is to be erected and both dormitories are to be remodelled. Showers will be included.

While he was complimentary of the Grays' commitment to the school he was also critical of the proximity of the school and dormitories:

Nevertheless, it is considered that the classroom should be somewhat apart from the centre of daily activity on the station. The erection of a school separate from the dormitories is very necessary. The majority of the children between 5 and 15 spend almost all their time in the dormitories or the immediate environs of the main buildings. Thus opportunities to learn the traditional crafts and lore of their people are severely restricted.

During 1953-54 a new two storey girls' dormitory was constructed. It was noted in a 1953 review report that unlike the Groote and Roper River Missions all classes in the school at Umbakumba were conducted in English.

By 1954 the Administration considered the CMS ready to take over the Umbakumba Settlement if Gray was to decide to leave or retire.

However, a report from the Acting Director of Native Affairs towards the end of 1954 recommended against any amalgamation of the Groote Eylandt Mission and Umbakumba, 'either by unified control; or movement of the natives.' The reasons given were partly to do with the differences between the populations at Umbakumba and the Mission, and also with the fact that Umbakumba was an economically successful self-sustaining community. Groote Eylandt Mission was considered to be the only CMS run institution where the economic development was seen as worthwhile. The Missions at Oenpelli and Roper River were considered failures in this regard.

In a 1955 report relations between the Mission and Umbakumba are noted as friendly, however, the CMS are said to regard Gray's settlement as not only being non-denominational but 'non-Christian'.

In May 1956 the Administrator sent a letter to Gray stating that it was government policy only to approve of Missions run by recognized 'Christian Missionary Organisations' which would exclude 'the establishment and conduct of Missions by private individuals as proprietary concerns.' Thus the government subsidy paid to the Settlement was withdrawn. Discussions over Fred Gray passing control of the Settlement to the CMS were renewed with some disagreement over how much Mr Gray should be paid for the work he had done at the Mission and whether or not he should be permitted to remain on Groote Eylandt at the former Air Base.

On the 17 February 1958 Fred Gray signed an agreement to transfer the settlement of Umbakumba to the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He resided at the Airbase until May and then moved to Darwin. He was paid £8,000 as payment for his services to Aboriginal Welfare at Umbakumba. After the CMS took control of the settlement in 1958 it was run as a mission and renamed Umbakumba Mission.

Gallery



Hospital at Umbakumba, Groote Eylandt

Description: The description of this image provided by Territory Stories reads: "Man and four women standing on a makeshift verandah shaded by corrugated iron roof and some cloth. Behind them doors lead to the interior and louvred shutters or window closings can be seen. The building is on stumps. The caption reads: "This building at Umbakumba was used as a hospital for several years. Sister Brooker slept there when there were inpatients."" This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate



Christmas party at Umbakumba Aboriginal Settlement on Groote Eylandt organised by the Assistant Superintendent Smith and Mrs Smith. Photo 16.

Description: This image shows children at Umbakumba Settlement on Groote Eylandt during a Christmas party.

More info

Chronology

- **Umbakumba Settlement (1938 – 1958)**
 - Umbakumba Mission (1958 - 1966)

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [Groote Eylandt Mission \(1921 - 1978\)](#)

Fred Gray began Umbakumba Settlement at the request of the Superintendent of Groote Eylandt Mission

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee \(1907 - 1989\)](#)

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