

Mud Island Lazaret

1889 – 1931

Other Names:

- Mud Island Leper Station
- Darwin Leper Station
- Darwin Lazaret
- Living Hell Lazaret
- Mud Island Lazarette

Details

Mud Island Lazaret was established by the NT Government on Mud Island, off Port Darwin in 1889 to quarantine people suffering from leprosy. Between 1920 and 1927 an average of 10 to 12 people, mainly Aboriginal and Chinese, were resident on the island. It is unclear whether this number included any children. However, in 1927 a NT Mission Station refused to send an 11 year old girl with leprosy to the lazaret. Mud Island Lazaret closed in 1931 when the new Channel Island Leprosarium was opened.

Mud Island was proclaimed as a place of quarantine for people suffering from the disease of leprosy by the Government Resident of the Northern Territory in 1889. The first instances of leprosy, also called Hanson's Disease, in Northern Australia were found amongst the Chinese population. Chinese people suffering from leprosy were isolated on Mud Island, Goat Island in the Adelaide River, or at the quarantine ground on Channel Island, until they could be sent back to China. Some remained in isolation until their deaths.

Mud Island was a small 'spit' of land that protruded from the tip of Middle Point, also known as Middle Arm, at the bottom of Port Darwin. It was not a true island as it was only cut off from the mainland at high tide. At low tide the island was accessible via a muddy stretch of mangroves.

Conditions on Mud Island were very poor. The Northern Territory Times and Gazette of 4 January 1907 quoted Doctor W Ramsey Smith's report on the Northern Territory:

The Leper Station at Port Darwin is unsuitable for any being of the human species.

The lazaret consisted of a single galvanised iron building with a veranda and a dirt floor. There was no fresh water supply apart from rain water tanks that were filled during the wet season. Treatment consisted of a weekly visit from a health officer.

In 1920 after the death of one of its inhabitants, only five people remained at the colony, four Chinese suffering from leprosy and one Aboriginal man who was the 'officer in charge'. It was reported that both the man who died and the officer in charge had attempted escape from the island and been captured and returned. Between 1920 and 1927 there was an average of 10 to 12 inmates on the island. Most were Aboriginal or Chinese and included both women and men. It is unclear whether any children were also isolated on Mud Island. By the mid 1920s papers had begun to refer to the Mud Island Leper Station as the 'Living Hell Lazaret'.

In 1925 the Secretary of the Home Territories Department visited the Northern Territory and the Mud Island Lazaret. In his report he recommended that:

The early removal of the Lazaret to a more suitable site is a matter of pressing necessity.

In 1927 the former Mayor of Darwin gave a damning description of the lazaret saying the station consisted of only one galvanised iron building with no floor, and that apart from the visit of a medical officer once a week there was no care given to the inmates, no supervision of the station and no segregation of the sexes. The Minister of Home and Territories, with assurances from the Government Resident, refuted some of these claims but admitted that the location was unsuitable for use as a leprosarium and that a new site was being sought.

The Reverend W. Eddy, secretary in Australasia to the 'Mission to the Lepers' institution, was quoted in various newspapers telling this story:

About twelve men and women were segregated at Darwin on a mud island away from all comfort and aid with no one to care for them or dress their wounds. At last in the extremity of their suffering and despair, nine of them escaped to the mainland, swimming through water infested with sharks and crocodiles. One died in the bush and four were recaptured, but the others probably are wandering among their fellows-a terrible menace to all people about them.

It was also reported that an 11 year old girl with leprosy was found to be residing at a NT Mission Station and was ordered to be sent to Mud Island. The Mission authorities refused to send the girl to the lazaret and obtained permission to isolate the girl at the mission. The fact that Government policy at the time was to send children with leprosy to the lazaret makes it very likely that some children were sent to Mud Island during the 42 years of its operation.

A letter from 1929 to the Director General of Health Canberra shows that a patient with leprosy was removed from Mud Island and permission was being sought to send them to the Peel Island Lazaret in Queensland. Dr Cook, the chief medical officer of North Australia stated that:

...conditions at the Darwin Lazarette did not permit of effective treatment and the patient was rapidly becoming worse.

Mud Island Lazaret closed in 1931 when the new Channel Island Leprosarium was opened.

By 2013 Middle Arm was known as Wickham Point and was the location of the Wickham Point Immigration Detention Centre.

Gallery



Mud Island Lazarette [altered from original title]

Description: An edited description reads: Mud Island Lazarette was about 6 miles from Port Darwin, across the harbour near mouth of Blackmore River.



Mud Island Lazarette [altered from original title]

Description: Station for people with leprosy, near Darwin. Situated on coast.



Mud Island Lazarette, Northern Territory [altered from original title]

Description: This image was taken on a survey trip undertaken in 1927 by Rev. J.A. Barber and Dr. George Simpson for the Flying Doctor Scheme.



Mud Island Lazaret [altered from original title]

Description: This image shows a child and adults standing outside a building. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate.

More info

Chronology

- **Mud Island Lazaret (1889 – 1931)**
 - Channel Island Leprosarium (1931 - 1955)
 - East Arm Leprosarium (1955 - 1982)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Office of the Administrator, Northern Territory \[I\], Australian Government \(1911 - 1927\)](#)
Date: 1911 - 1927
- [Office of the Government Resident, Central Australia, Australian Government \(1927 - 1931\)](#)
Date: 1927 - 1931
- [Office of the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, South Australian Government \(1892 - 1909\)](#)
Date: 1892 - 1909
- [Office of the Minister for the Northern Territory, South Australian Government \(1909 - 1911\)](#)
Date: 1909 - 1911
- [Office of the Minister of Education and of the Northern Territory, South Australian Government \(1889 - 1892\)](#)
Date: 1889 - 1892

Related Organisations

- [Roper River Mission \(1908 - 1988\)](#)
Residents of Roper River Mission suffering from leprosy were moved to the Mud Island Lazaret until 1931.
- [Oenpelli Mission \(1925 - 1975\)](#)
Children and others with leprosy were transferred away from the Oenpelli Mission to the Mud Island Lazaret
- [Department of Health, Australian Government \(1921 - 1987\)](#)
The Commonwealth Department of Health oversaw the management of leprosy in Australia.

Resources

- Kettle, Ellen, *Health Services in the Northern Territory - a History 1824-1970 Volume 1*, 1991

Records

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

Records

- [Leprosy, Transfer of Lepers from North Australia to the Peel Island Lazarette \(1929 - 1929\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/mud-island-lazaret/>