
John Webster and Newtown

by Patrick J. Murphy

Introduction

In nearly every written history of Newtown, John Webster, a local merchant, has been credited with providing a name for Newtown. It is reported John Webster operated a store from the early 1830s on King Street between the centre of Sydney and the Cook's River. He called it the 'New Town Store' to distinguish it from the older established settlements of Cook's River and Camperdown. It is generally described as being located on the corner of King and Eliza Streets. The various accounts generally have John Webster's wife as Eliza.

There were over a dozen men named John Webster who came to Australia between 1788 and the early 1830s. There is only one John Webster who could fit the story and on whom this article is based.

The object is to establish the facts from fiction and to confirm the source, if possible, for the name of 'Newtown', being just two miles from Sydney.

Formation of New Town

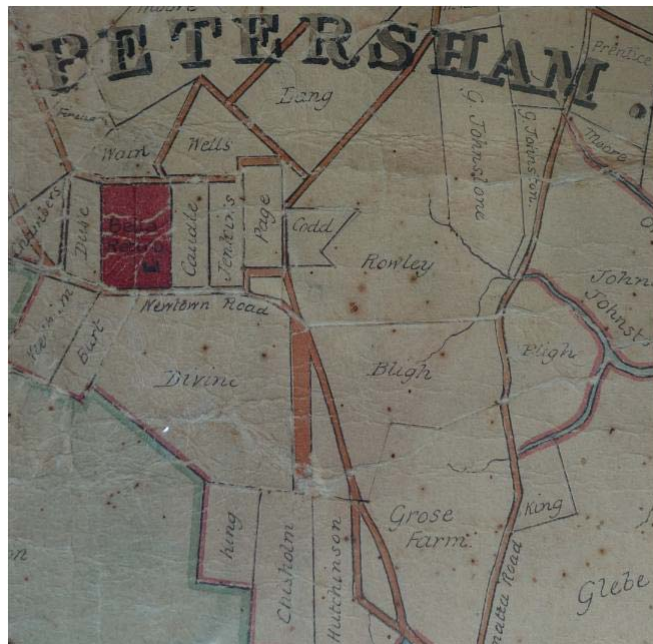
The name of 'New Town' appears to date from at least 1827. *The Sydney Gazette* on 7 September 1827 stated: 'New Town — There is a talk of our having a suburb of this name, as well as our neighbours, the Tasmanians'. *The Hobart Town Gazette* of 6 October 1827 repeated this news: 'A suburban village similar to our Newtown, it is said, will shortly be constructed in the confines of Sydney.'¹ The first subdivision of a large land holding in this area took place at Nicholas Devine's farm, known as 'Burren Farm' in 1833. Advertisements were placed by a Mr. Bodenham in 1830 selling lots from 5 to 7 acres.²

By 1832 the name appeared to be in general circulation: 'The neighbourhood about the spot known as 'Devine's Farm' has obtained the name of New Town.'³ *The Sydney Gazette* on 2 May 1833 stated 'The houses upon Devine's Farm, about two miles from Sydney, have so increased in numbers of late, that it is called New Town.'

Reports in August 1833 mention 'the pretty village of 'New Town' which is forming on the Cook's River Road'.⁴ Another advertisement for small building allotments was placed in 1835 by Mr A. Polack: '...a plan has been made out dividing it into 12 Building Allotments and it is equally desirable for the erection of a VILLA for a Professional Gentleman or

Professional'.⁵ This area was some distance to the south-east from the corner of King and Eliza, further down the Cook's River Road.

The next development of major land holdings in the Newtown area took place in the early 1840s of Thomas Rowley (Kingston Estate) and Sir Maurice Charles O'Connell (O'Connell Crescent and O'Connell Town). O'Connell Crescent was a sub-division of the O'Connell Estate, not a street.



Map showing land holdings around the Newtown Area c.1810.⁶

The Kingston Estate (Thomas Rowley), 'suitable for Villa residences', was auctioned by Mr Samuel Lyons in January 1841⁷, followed closely by O'Connell Crescent (Sir Maurice O'Connell) in June 1841 by Mr. Stubbs of 'Seventy-nine most important suburban allotments'.⁸ The O'Connell Crescent Estate was the location of the 'New Town Store' on the corner of Eliza and King Streets.

Early Years of John Webster

John Webster was born circa 1811 in Lancashire, England, and came to the notice of the law from an early age. He was charged in Lancashire in October 1828 with 'larceny having been before convicted'.⁹ John had stolen

30 shillings and was sentenced to 7 years transportation to the Colony of New South Wales. John is recorded as being able to read but not write and had the trade of Boot Closer – one who stitched the shoe uppers to the sole of a shoe.

The hulk *Euryalus*, moored at Chatham, was his home from 27 November 1828 until early June 1830. Here, he had a reputation as ‘a vagrant idle boy’ with his connections ‘not known, former course of life, bad’.¹⁰

John sailed from London on the *Lord Melville* on the 6 June 1830, some 20 months after sentencing. The journey took 138 days, arriving on the 21 October 1830. Upon arrival he was assigned to Leslie Duguid, a founding Director of The Commercial Banking Company of Sydney, who, at that time, was living at Bank Court, King-street, Sydney, before moving to ‘The Proffle’, Cooks River in July 1833.¹¹

John Webster, Shoemaker

John Webster married Margaret Cuddihy on the 12th February 1836. Their Convict Request for Permission to Marry states that he was ‘Free’, a ‘Shoemaker’, and living at ‘Newtown’.¹² There are no recorded marriages for a John Webster to an Eliza or Elizabeth nor are any children recorded to a John and Eliza or Elizabeth Webster.

A Certificate of Freedom was issued to John Webster on 3 June 1836 while he was still working for Leslie Duguid in the Cooks River area. His occupation was given as a ‘Shoemaker’.¹³

John Webster was well known in the area of the Cooks River up to at least 1836 and beyond, as he is referenced in the diary of Alexander Brodie Spark in March 1836:

11th Met John Webster whose heart was made glad by having received the governor’s permission to marry Margaret Cuddy. The Rev. Mr McGarvie has invited the couple to attend on him at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.

12th John’s long courtship is now at an end, and his fidelity rewarded by the possession of Margaret’s hand. Overtook the happy couple, with child to boot, trudging homeward to their cottage on the road side.¹⁴

A convict was not permitted to work other than for his master nor undertake a business venture until he obtained a Ticket of Leave. No Ticket of Leave has been found for John Webster even though he would have been entitled to apply for one after serving four years of his sentence. He was

granted his Certificate of Freedom on 3 June 1836. John Webster's request to marry stated he lived at Newtown, before he received his Certificate of Freedom, but he worked for Leslie Duguid at 'Proffle' some 4 miles away. This is a distance easily travelled each day to 'Proffle' to work and was known as a 'recreative walk'.

John Webster's residence and occupation 1830-1844

There are no references to John Webster between his assignment to Duguid in October 1830 and his Certificate of Freedom in 1836. The residential location of John Webster after 1836 was recorded variously as New Town, Newtown, O'Connell Town and Petersham.¹⁵

A.B. Spark's diary for January 1837 read '...9th Found John Webster, the Shoemaker, standing by the way side to communicate to me the gratifying intelligence that his wife had last night been bought to bed of a boy'. John Webster was held in such high esteem by A. B. Spark that, when Spark proposed marriage to Maria Radford on the 9 April 1840, Spark made 'John the Shoemaker, my Mercury'.¹⁶

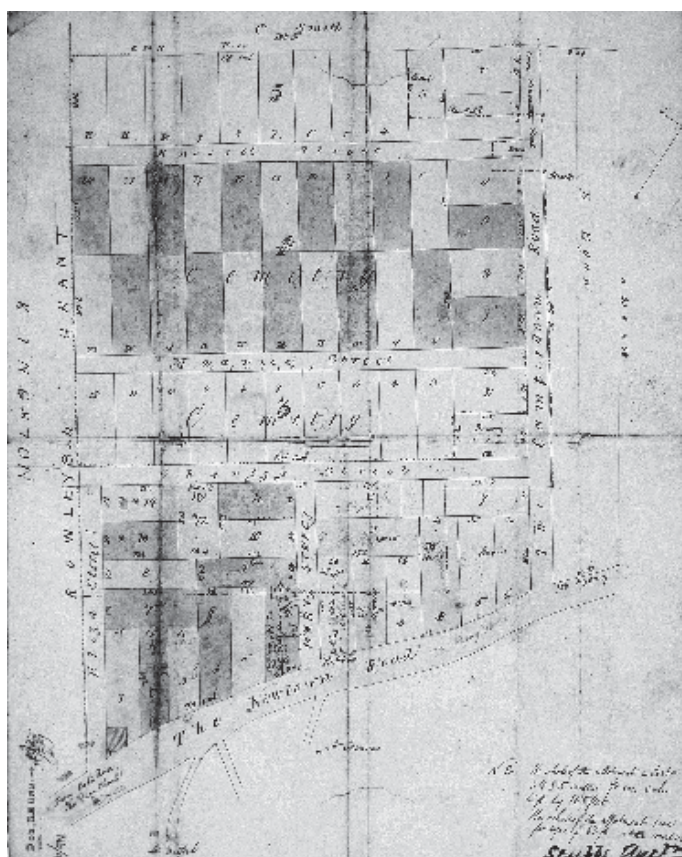
John Webster was only referred to as 'Webster, the shoemaker' or 'Mr Webster Boot and Shoe Maker' up to March 1848. After March 1848, his occupation on his children's baptisms was noted as 'Grocer'.

The 1841 Census taken on 2 March places John Webster in Petersham, Parish of Petersham in the County of Cumberland, District of Sydney. The parish of Petersham then encompassed the north side of King Street. John Webster was living in a furnished house made of wood and living with his wife Margaret, one son and two daughters. Generally the houses in Newtown were 'way out in the country then with a few houses scattered in the bush ... nothing but old slab huts with bark roofs. Primitive houses, primitive life'.¹⁷

John Webster's residence two years later, in 1843, was near the corner of Enmore and Camperdown Roads.¹⁸

Lot 1 of Section 1 of O'Connell Crescent Estate was on the corner of Eliza Street and Newtown Road, Newtown. Eliza Street was also known as Elizabeth Street on some land title documents. The earliest map circa 1841, shows a structure on the corner of this block²⁰. This lot was sold by Sir Maurice O'Connell in July 1842 to William Brady, Livery Stable Keeper, who then sold it to Charles Underwood in June 1843 for the sum of £82.²¹ It was not until 7 December 1844 that this land came into the hands of John Webster for the sum of £46.²² The land was subdivided and portions sold over the years but John Webster retained the corner position. This allotment

was passed to John's son, William Webster in 1876 'in consideration of mutual love and affection' before officially transferring to his wife Margaret in 1891 upon William's death in 1889.²³



Earliest Map of O'Connell Crescent c1841 showing structure on the corner of Eliza Street and Newtown Road¹⁹

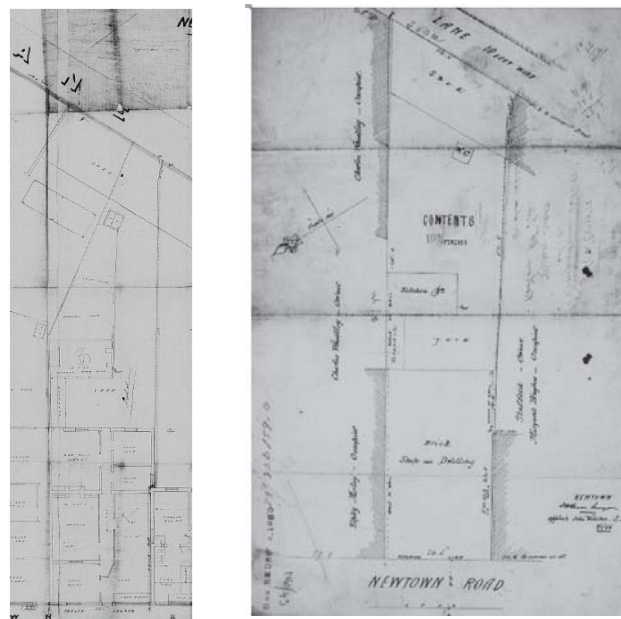
John Webster's shoemaking business was established in 1844 on the corner of Eliza Street and Newtown Road.

Grocery Store

The Webster Boot and Shoemaking business morphed into a grocery business in the late 1840s to early 1850s. The Webster grocery establishment was described in 1854 as being 'near the Newtown Bridge'.²⁴ It was reported John Webster held Newtown's first Post Office which opened in March

1854 and is verified by a land conveyance dated 29 July 1853 where his occupation was 'Post Master'.²⁵ John Webster named his store the 'Railway Store' in late 1855 to differentiate it from others and coinciding with the construction of the new railway through Newtown.²⁶

In order to build his hotel and obtain a wine and liquor licence, John Webster rented premises in which to conduct his grocery business from the late 1850s. He later bought Lot 3 of Walker's subdivision, part of Lot 6 of Camperdown Estate situated on the south east side of Newtown Road on the 6 June 1863 from the Estate of Moses Lemon, Storekeeper for the sum of £240.²⁷ The Grocery Store in 1870, east of the corner of Whateley Lane and King Street, was described as a 'shop and dwelling ... between Wheatley's Coach Factory and Pearce's Saddler's Shop ... having 24½ feet frontage to the Newtown Road, with a depth on one side of 107 feet, and 125 feet on the other, and 34 ½ feet frontage to a lane at the rear'.²⁸



Sketches showing 'J Webster Grocery and Drapery Store',
9 January 1866²⁹

John Webster placed an advertisement in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 14 May 1861 to let the J. Webster Grocery and Drapery Stores, 'one of the best situated premises in the whole district.' The grocery store was rented out but continued to be owned by John Webster until he sold the premises to William Thompson, a gasfitter of Newtown, on 15 May 1874.³⁰

Striking Gold

John Webster was one of the very early gold seekers to arrive by June 1851 at Ophir, west of Bathurst: 'Mr Webster, a storekeeper of Newtown, with a party of four, had worked twelve days, and got 1½ ozs'.³¹ In later years it was reported he had found a large nugget worth £600 on a property at Louisa Creek.³²

A possible insight into the mischievous character of John Webster may be found in November 1852 during the gold rush era. There was great excitement with a large number of visitors to Newtown with the following report:

On Friday last, two little girls resident in the immediate vicinity of the supposed gold field--one the daughter of Mr. Richards, the proprietor of the Newtown omnibus, and the other the child of Mr Webster, the owner of certain property adjacent to Mr. Cooper's, commenced digging in the watercourse before-mentioned, and in the presence of one or two gentlemen, took out a small portion of gold of a nuggetty [*sic*] description, which has since been fairly exhibited in town and at Newtown. ... The only persons who have as yet benefitted by the 'new diggings' are the cab and omnibus proprietors, and perhaps a few publicans in Newtown.³³

The existence of gold at Newtown proved 'as we expected, to be all fudge'.³⁴ Could John Webster, a grocer, have planted gold and then encouraged his daughter to find the gold, so he could benefit?

Daniel Webster Hotel

John Webster began as a hotel proprietor with a licence application for 'The Daniel Webster Hotel' in April 1861, on the corner of Eliza Street and Newtown Road, Newtown.³⁵

The nearby Railway Hotel had been owned by Thomas Nobbs since 1854. In 1861 Nobbs applied for, and was granted, a licence for the Masonic Hall Hotel, Newtown, and he let the licence for the Railway Hotel lapse. In July 1861 advertisements were referring to 'Mr Webster's Railway Hotel, Railway Bridge, Newtown' and 'Webster's Railway Hotel'.³⁶ It was not until January 1862 the reference was to 'Mr Webster, of the Daniel Webster Hotel'.³⁷ As Thomas Nobbs, the son, married John Webster's daughter Catherine in 1853, John Webster took advantage of the existing patronage and good reputation of the Nobbs family and that of the Railway Hotel, and maintained the Railway Hotel name for six months until established, before fully operating under the Daniel Webster Hotel.

The selection of the name Daniel Webster for his hotel was somewhat unusual. Daniel Webster was renowned as the author of the Webster's Dictionary. In later years John Webster claimed to be the 'youngest son of the late Daniel Webster of lexicographic fame'.³⁸ Another Daniel Webster was a renowned American statesman and senator from Massachusetts during the period leading up to the Civil War who died in October 1852. Was it an attempt to link himself with a notable person of the same surname? Probably, as he was 'respectable' by this time and was keen to eschew his convict heritage.

William Trick took a five year lease for the 'Daniel Webster' from 1 October 1861 for a yearly rental of £165.³⁹ Trick held the licence from 1861 to 1864. It was then held by James Woodward until 1867 when John Webster again took over the licence of the hotel.⁴⁰ John held the licence until his son William took it over in 1872 when the name changed to 'The Oxford Hotel'.⁴¹ Did John's son change the name of the hotel to avoid the false association with Daniel Webster, knowing it to be untrue? The name change probably also coincided with Daniel Webster fading from memories.

Freemason

Another insight into the character of John Webster is given with his involvement in the Lodge Newtown Kilwinning 378 Scottish Constitution of the Freemasons from 1861 to 1896.⁴² He was initiated as John Fletcher Webster, a middle name that seems incongruous given his past in England and his convict early life. Fletcher Webster was the son of the famous American Daniel Webster. Was it a further indication of a need for recognition?

Civil Contribution

Thomas Holt sold Lot 17 of Section 5 of the Kingston Estate (near the intersection of Australia and Bedford Streets) to John Webster in May 1857 on which was later built the Newtown School of Arts, later to be the Newtown Town Hall.⁴³ John Webster also owned and sold the land on which the Newtown Court House sits (Lots 9, 10 & 11 of Section 5, Kingston Estate).⁴⁴

An unusual entry in the *Empire* of 14 April 1864 recorded that John Webster donated 'two skulls of aborigines, of North Australia' to the Australian Museum.⁴⁵

John Webster was nominated to stand as a candidate in the first Newtown Council election held in February 1863 but he had not authorised

the nomination. He put himself forward again as an Alderman candidate for the O'Connell Ward in 1867 but was unsuccessful.⁴⁶

John Webster contributed monetarily to the Newtown Council which borrowed £500 from him in 1869⁴⁷ but did not repay the loan till 1876 despite repeated requests⁴⁸. The Newtown Fire Brigade was in financial trouble in September 1879 when they could not pay an outstanding amount owed on a fire engine of £71.9s.3d. 'Mr. John Webster, without solicitation, immediately signing and giving a blank cheque to his son, who is the foreman of the brigade, with instructions to fill it up with whatever the amount was demanded. ... After the christening of the engine on Saturday last, Mr. John Webster offered to forego the whole of his loan, but ... the brigade could not accept the kind offer'.⁴⁹ John Webster was also reported as donating a 'large and valuable oil painting' to the Free Library in 1872.⁵⁰

The Commercial Bank at Newtown was opened in 1883: 'On Saturday last, the bank having been completed, was formally opened by Mr. John Webster, an old and respected inhabitant of Newtown.'⁵¹ The article continues 'It is a somewhat remarkable circumstance that Mr. John Webster a half a century ago was present, and took a prominent part at the opening of the head office in Sydney, then under the management of Mr. Leslie Duguid.' Was this earlier reference another attempt to raise his profile within the community? Probably, as John Webster was a convict in 1834 when the bank opened in Sydney.

Death

John Webster's wife Margaret died on the 29th June 1876 aged 62 years.⁵² Just 4 months after Margaret's death, John married Mary Elizabeth Pardoe, 20 years younger, on the 12th October 1876 at St Luke's Church, Burwood, where he stated his father was a barrister.⁵³ No evidence has been found in England of such a man.

A number of articles have mentioned John Webster in his later years. One such article stated:

...The oldest resident.....he will not always 'come out of his shell' but if you catch him 'i' the vein', he can spin you some rare yarns about Newtown and Newtown notabilities, living and dead.⁵⁴

John Webster died on the 6th November 1896 at 'Elton', John Street, Marrickville at the noted age of 86 years. His death certificate gives his father as Daniel Webster. He left an estate in excess of £14,500.⁵⁵ He claimed he sired twelve children, twenty-two grandchildren, two great grandchildren but records exist for only eight children, all but one of whom

pre-deceased him.⁵⁶ They were Thomas born before 1836, Catherine 1836-1869, John 1837-1841, Mary Anne 1839-1866, Sarah 1842-1886, William 1848-1889, Rosanna 1850-1912 and Maria born 1852.

John Webster and Newtown

The earliest reporting of the connection of the name 'Newtown' with John Webster and his store used the word 'supposed'. This was in 1897, a year after John's death. The article continued 'Why Newtown should have been chosen it is impossible to say, unless upon the general principle that most Australian cities name their first suburbs in that way.'⁵⁷ The John Webster story has been repeated in nearly all publications as fact.

Interestingly, John Webster's involvement was not mentioned in a 1912 recount from the oldest resident which reads:

...there were a few houses out at St. Peters. We used to call St. Peters the new town, in those days, and as the place grew and houses sprang up between O'Connell Town and St. Peters, the name of Newtown embraced a wide area—and that's how we got the name, I suppose...⁵⁸

John Webster was in the Cooks River area from mid-1833, which conflicts with John's 1867 advertisement describing him as 'An old resident of thirty-eight years standing'.⁵⁹ John Webster would have considered himself in the Newtown area from 1833 as an 1843 advertisement was selling land at Newtown '...nearly adjoining the residence of Leslie Duguid, Esq.'⁶⁰

The land, including a building on the corner of Eliza Street and Newtown Road shown as early as c.1841, could have been where John Webster and his family lived before buying the property in 1844 – it could not have been the embryonic New Town.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the name of 'New Town' was in use as early as 1827. The suburb had its beginnings in the Devine Farm area along the Cook's River Road from at least 1832 before moving east to its present location during the 1840's with increased traffic along Enmore and Cooks River Roads (now King Street) and the development of the major land holdings of Thomas Rowley (Kingston Estate) and Sir Maurice Charles O'Connell (O'Connell Crescent and O'Connell Town). A town in this location was a natural fit.

John Webster had not arrived in the colony until 1830, as a convict. Given the many inconsistencies in the information given by John Webster throughout his life, his seeking of notoriety through spurious family connections and his love of ‘spinning rare yarns’, it is not possible to give credence or credibility to his originating the name for the Sydney suburb of ‘New Town’.

It is indisputable, however, that John Webster was present from the very foundations of the Sydney suburb of Newtown and played an important, and often monetary, role in its development. He was Newtown’s first post master. He was generous to the Newtown community and rose from convict to a freeholder and gentleman.

John Webster’s story and life entwines with Newtown in so many ways that John Webster and Newtown are synonymous.

NOTES:

1. *The Hobart Town Gazette*, 24 November 1832.
2. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 28 October 1830.
3. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 24 November 1832, p.2.
4. *The Australian*, 23 August 1833.
5. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 19 March 1835.
6. ??? Bligh’s Land Grant passed to Maurice O’Connell by marriage to William Bligh’s daughter.
7. *The Australian*, 2 January 1841.
8. *The Australian*, 12 June 1841.
9. *Ancestry*, ‘England & Wales Criminal Register, 1791-1892’, Lancashire 1828, p.412, John Webster.
10. *Ancestry*, ‘UK, Prison Hulk Registers and Letter books, 1802-1849’, p.241, No 835, John Webster.
11. *Leslie and Ann Duguid of the Proffle, St Peters* by Robert Stewart Cameron.
12. *Ancestry*, ‘NSW Register of Convicts to Marry 1826-1851’, p.250, John Webster and Margaret Cuddihy.
13. *Ancestry*, ‘NSW Certificates of Freedom’, 36/482, John Webster.
14. State Library of NSW, ‘Alexander Brodie Spark diary, 1 January 1836-22 September 1856’, MAV/FM4/1068.
15. Petersham, only noted in the 1841 Census.
16. SLNSW, ‘Alexander Brodie Spark diary’.
17. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1912, ‘Recollections of the oldest resident’.
18. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1843, p.1.
19. Mitchell Library, Plan of Rowley’s Grant Z/SP/N6 Card 40.
20. Mitchell Library Plan of Rowley’s Grant Z/SP/N6 Card 40.
21. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 7 Reg. 906.
22. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 7 Reg. 924.
23. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 163 Reg. 157.
24. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 December 1854.
25. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 28 Reg. 681, a conveyance of land sold by Webster at Singleton and described as ‘John Webster, Newtown near Sydney, Postmaster’.
26. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1855, p.8.
27. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 83 Reg. 446.
28. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 1870.
29. Mitchell Library Z/SP/N6 Cards 43 & 60.

30. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 27 Reg. 21.
31. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1851, p.3, 'A trip to the diggings'.
32. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1872, p.8, 'Advertisements'.
33. *Empire*, 9 November 1852.
34. *The Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 20 November 1852.
35. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 1861, p.2.
36. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July 1861, p.1, an advertisement states 'Mr Webster's Railway Hotel, Railway Bridge, Newtown'.
37. *Empire*, 20 January 1862, p.4, article refers to 'Mr Webster of the Daniel Webster Hotel'.
38. Morrison, W. F., *The Aldine Centennial History of Australia*, Volume II, The Aldine Publishing Company, Sydney, 1888.
39. NSW LPI, Book 74 Reg. 438.
40. NSW Government Gazette, 1867, p.1907.
41. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1872.
42. Correspondence from the The United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory to the author dated 2 December 2009.
43. NSW LPI, Conveyance dated 1 May 1857, Book 49 Reg. 85; Conveyance dated 13 December 1860 to Trustees for the Newtown School of Arts, Book 70 Reg. 651.
44. NSW LPI, Conveyance dated 1 May 1857, Book 49 Reg. 85; Conveyance dated 7 October 1881 to Minister of Justice, Book 232, Reg. 895.
45. *Empire*, 14 April 1864.
46. *Empire*, 6 February 1863, p.8; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1863, p.8; *Empire*, 2 February 1867, p.8.
47. Newtown Council Minutes, 16 November 1869.
48. NSW Land and Property Information, Book 160 Reg. 891.
49. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 1879.
50. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1872.
51. *Evening News*, 27 July 1883.
52. NSW Death 1876/3107, Death of Margaret Webster.
53. NSW Marriage 1876/1377, Marriage of John Webster and Mary Elizabeth Pardoe.
54. *Sydney Illustrated News*, 27 June 1889.
55. SRNSW: NRS 13660, Probate Packets, ????????, Last Will and Testament of John Webster, Late of Marrickville dated 18 November 1892.
56. W. Frederic Morrison, *The Aldine Centennial History of New South Wales*. Vol. II, 1888.
57. *Sunday Times*, 4 July 1897.
58. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1912, 'Recollections of the oldest resident'.
59. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1867.
60. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1843.