

The Wave Hill 'walk-off'

Background to the 'walk-off'

Wave Hill Station is located approximately 600 kilometres south of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Vestey's, a British pastoral company which ran the cattle station, employed local Aboriginal people, mostly Gurindji. Working and living conditions for Aboriginal people were very poor. The wages of Aboriginal workers generally were controlled and not equal to those paid to non-Aboriginal employees.

An attempt to introduce equal wages for Aboriginal workers was made in 1965, but in March 1966 the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decided to delay until 1968 the payment of award wages to male Aboriginal workers in the cattle industry.

In August 1966, Vincent Lingiari, a Gurindji spokesman, led a walk-off of 200 Aboriginal stockmen, house servants, and their families from Wave Hill as a protest against the work and pay conditions. The strike was part of a widespread campaign begun by workers on Brunette Downs Station and supported by non-Indigenous people, including unionists and the author Frank Hardy.

The protesters camped at Wattie Creek (Daguragu) and sought the return of some of their traditional lands to develop a cattle station. They petitioned the Governor-General in 1967, and leaders toured Australia to raise awareness about their cause. In 1972, Prime Minister Whitlam announced that funds would be made available for the purchase of properties that were not on reserves, and Lord Vestey offered to surrender 90 square kilometres to the Gurindji people.

Daguragu was acquired by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission and, on 16 August 1975 at Daguragu, Prime Minister Whitlam transferred leasehold title to the Gurindji, symbolically handing soil to Vincent Lingiari.

The Gurindji campaign was an important influence on the events leading to passing the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976*.

The Central Land Council applied on behalf of the Gurindji under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* for traditional land comprising the Daguragu pastoral lease and some adjacent un-alienated Crown land. In 1981 the Aboriginal Land Commissioner recommended that the land claim should be granted. The claim relating to the South West Corner was granted in 1985.

Records held relating to the Wave Hill 'walk-off'

The National Archives holds many records relating to the Wave Hill 'walk-off', including papers files, photographs and film. Most of the records are held in Canberra or Darwin. A selection of records is listed below.

You can identify more records by conducting searches using [RecordSearch](#). Use search terms such as 'wattie creek', 'wave hill', 'gurindji', and 'lingiari'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that records in the National Archives collection may include the names and images of Indigenous Australians, some of whom are now deceased.

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Representation by Commonwealth Council Amalgamated Engineering Union re the return of tribal land to Aborigines – Wave Hill/Limbunya area</u>	1967	A452, NT1967/5674
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek</u>	1968–69	A2354, 1970/678
<u>Petition by Gurindji people to Governor-General re Wave Hill pastoral land NT</u>	1968–70	A1734, NT1968/2509
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek – press cuttings</u>	1968	A2354, 1969/421 part 1
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek – press cuttings</u>	1968–71	A2354, 1969/421 part 2
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek</u>	1968–72	A2354, 1968/58 part 1
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek</u>	1968	A2354, 1968/58 part 2
<u>Gurindji – request for land – Wattie Creek</u>	1968–70	A2354, 1968/58 part 3
<u>Surrender of land from Wave Hill Station – Decision 1303(AA)</u>	1972	A5908, 850
<u>Aboriginal Affairs Committee – Cabinet decisions – gift of 35 square miles from Wave Hill lease – without submission</u>	1972	A5909, 1411/AA

Darwin

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Wave Hill – return of Aboriginals licences</u>	1939–53	F1, 1952/481
<u>Payment of wages to Aboriginals – Wave Hill</u>	1964–69	F1, 1968/773
<u>Maintenance of governments dependants – Wave Hill Station</u>	1965–73	F1, 1971/1920
<u>Cattle mustering venture – Aboriginal Co – Wave Hill /Wattie Creek – Muramulla Gurindji Co</u>	1970–73	F1, 1975/4091
<u>Accommodation and facilities – ex Wave Hill – employees and families (Wattie Creek)</u>	1971–72	F1, 1971/4492

Photographic records

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Vincent Lingiari and Donald Nangiari – two elders of the Gurindji tribe who visited capital cities in 1971 to campaign for Aboriginal land rights</u>	1971	A1200, L96542
<u>Mr Vincent Lingiari with Gurindji people at plaque ceremony marking the handing over of land at Wave Hill</u>	1975	A6135, K9/9/75/7
<u>Gough Whitlam and Vincent Lingiari at Wattie Creek, Northern Territory</u>	1975	A8598, AK6/5/80/11
<u>Aerial view of Wave Hill Station, Wattie Creek, Northern Territory</u>	1980	A8598, AK6/5/80/13
<u>View of Wave Hill Station, Wattie Creek, Northern Territory</u>	1980	A6135, K5/3/80/2

Other sources of information

Commonwealth Government Records about the Northern Territory, by Ted Ling, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2011.