

## South Sea Islanders

In August 1863, the schooner *Don Juan* arrived in Brisbane with the first South Sea Islanders to arrive in Australia, 67 men from the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), who were brought to work on a cotton plantation on the Logan River. Between 1863 and 1904 some 62,000 people were brought to Queensland and New South Wales from the Pacific Islands to work as labourers and domestic servants. Some were kidnapped ('blackbirded') or otherwise induced into long-term indentured service. Most were employed on sugar and cotton plantations, sheep and cattle farms and in the pearling and fishing industries.

Many lived in Australia for years or decades; acquiring land in their own right, having families and making Australia their home. Some stayed for the rest of their lives while others were returned to the islands following the *Pacific Islander Labourers Act 1901* (Cth), sometimes becoming separated from partners and children who remained in Australia.

Today their descendants are a distinct cultural group and are referred to as the Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community. Many have a shared South Sea Islander and Indigenous Australian heritage. Members of the ASSI community include activist Faith Bandler (best known for her role in the 1967 Referendum campaign) and Bonita Mabo, wife of Eddie Mabo, as well as footballers Mal Meninga and Gordon Tallis.

### **Pacific Islander Labourers Act 1901 (Cth)**

In its first year, the Federal Parliament produced a package of legislation which marked out the racial boundaries of the new nation. The Pacific Islander Labourers Act 1901 enabled the deportation of most Pacific Islanders in Australia from the end of 1906. At the time the bill was passed, 10,000 Pacific Islanders were living in Queensland and northern New South Wales. Pacific Islanders could still enter Australia until 31 March 1904, but only in limited numbers and under licence as indentured servants. They were only allowed to stay in Australia after 1906 if they were brought to Queensland before 1 September 1879, worked in ships' crews, or were granted certificates of exemption.

## Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901</u>	1901	A2863, 1901/16
<u>Copies of Correspondence on the Pacific Islanders Labourers Bill</u>	1901	A8, 1901/272/2

## Pacific Islander petitions

The Queensland government, missionaries and other humanitarian groups and the Islanders themselves raised concerns about the Act. In 1902 South Sea Islanders in Queensland wrote a petition to the King to protest against the enforced deportation. The petition was presented to the Governor of Queensland who forwarded copies to the Commonwealth government.

This was followed in 1906 by a petition to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, organised by the Pacific Islanders' Association and seeking reconsideration of mandatory deportation. The only relief achieved by the campaign by Islanders and others was an amendment to the Pacific Islander Labourers Act in late 1906 which liberalised the exemption categories.

The final deportation got under way in late 1906 and continued until mid-1908. While the official number of Islanders eventually allowed to remain was 1654, research indicates that the actual number was much higher, with around 2500 Pacific Islanders remaining in Australia.

The National Archives of Australia holds the original 1906 petition and other records dealing with 1902 and 1906 petitions.

## Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>The Kanaka [Pacific Islander] Petition to the King, 1902–1903</u>	1902–1903	A1, 1903/1694
<u>Pacific Islanders' Association. Petition.</u>	1906	A1, 1906/6324

## Other early 20th-century Pacific and South Sea Islander records

The National Archives holds a number of records relating to South Sea Islanders in Australia; their arrival, occupational conditions and deportation. Several records refer to calls upon the government to reconsider the deportation of South Sea Islanders. Of concern were issues such as the deportation of Islanders who had married into the Australian Indigenous community, the consequences of returning people to the wrong island and the dangers and adjustments that may confront them on their return.

## Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Gladstone and District – 'Lizzie Banquette' in Cleveland Bay with 120 Islanders from New Hebrides in November 1883 [photograph]</u>	1883	J2879, QTH230/63
<u>Immigration of Pacific Islanders into Commonwealth, 1899–1902</u>	1902	A8, 1902/19/97
<u>Queensland Government writing re Pacific Island Immigration and requesting monetary assistance in carrying out Polynesian Acts</u>	1902–1905	A1, 1904/9617
<u>Pacific Island Labourers Act – Letter of Protest from the UK Aborigines Protection Society over deportation of Kanakas [Pacific Islanders]</u>	1902	A9, A1902/53/5
<u>""Cognette" S S – 113 South Sea Islanders by September</u>	1902	A9, A1902/53/14
<u>Provision in the New Hebrides for the reception of South Sea Islanders deported from Australia</u>	1903	A1, 1903/3959
<u>Kanaka Repatriation. Correspondence with Rev Dr MacDonald, J G MacDonald and Rev Richard Kerr</u>	1906	A1, 1906/3763
<u>Kanakas. Government Agents being allowed to carry out instructions re landing</u>	1906–1907	A1, 1907/317
<u>Deportation of Kanakas [Pacific Islanders] at Geraldton, Queensland [now Innisfail]</u>	1906–1908	A1, 1908/2939
<u>Deportation Order for Pacific Islanders, 1907</u>	1907	A1, 1907/8941

You can also use the National Archives' [RecordSearch](#) database to locate additional records relating to the South Sea Islanders in Australia. Keyword searches for items using search terms such as Pacific Islander\*, South Sea Islander\* and Kanaka\* should identify relevant records.

## Further reading

- Australian South Sea Islander records at [Queensland State Archives](#)
- Australian South Sea Islanders Secretariat [website](#)
- Moore, Clive, 'Good-bye, Queensland, good-bye, White Australia; Good-bye Christians': [Australia's South Sea Islander Community and Deportation, 1901–1908](#), *The New Federalist*, no. 4, 2000, pp. 22–29.