

William Branson, baker and framework knitter of Whitwick, Leicestershire was a thirty-year-old widower when he and his housemate Samuel Scattergood (Scindian convict #1) decided to go out on New Year's Eve 1847 and slaughter a sheep. William's wife Elizabeth (nee Ireton) had died of consumption just four months earlier on 22 August, leaving William a single parent and sole carer of their six-year-old daughter Ann. It was likely a difficult time for William and his fortunes took a further turn for the worse when the remains of the stolen sheep were found in his house on 14 January 1848. He and Samuel had previous convictions so each received the sentence of 15 years' transportation. It is unknown what happened to William's daughter.

The friends arrived as convicts #1 and #3 aboard the Scindian, the first ship to transport convicts to the newly-designated 'Swan River Penal Colony' in Western Australia on 1 June 1850. William was part of a convict work party that had been sent by boat to the Upper Swan to work on the Guildford bridge in early January 1851. A report in the correspondence of Governor Charles Fitzgerald dated 8 January 1851 indicates that upon the boat's return to Rocky Bay the warder Mr Hillman was overpowered by four convicts who tied him hand and foot and left him on a rock on the shore at the bottom of a limestone cliff. William Branson refused to join their illegal venture so he also was tied up and left. The prisoners then absconded with the boat. William was given an early ticket-of-leave for acting with "great propriety" by remaining with and freeing the warder and within two months he was out and working for himself. His responsible action led to him being awarded a hefty remission on his sentence and he was granted a Free Pardon on 4 November the same year.

Once free, William made the most of his opportunities. He married young Irish lass Margaret Maria Mottram on 12 November 1851 just eight days after receiving his Pardon. Margaret was aged fifteen years at the time of their marriage and her parents Samuel and Catherine had been early settlers in the Swan River Colony, Samuel arriving as a Private in the 51st Regiment in July 1840. Some of Margaret's early years were spent on Rottneet Island where her father was a guard over Aboriginal men imprisoned there. William and Margaret's first three children, Thomas, Emma and William were born in Perth between 1854 and 1856, however, by the time of their daughter Mary Maud's birth, in 1861, the family had settled in New Norcia (Victoria Plains), about 145 kms north-east of Perth. Three more daughters, Harriett, Frances and Eliza were born between 1863 and 1868 before a son James was born in 1870. He survived only until June 1873 so when their final child, a son, was born in Bindoon on 12 July 1874, he too was named James.

Between 1852 and 1873 William is recorded as having employed six ticket-of-leave men as labourers. William himself worked as a farmer and a carter in New Norcia and by 1877 he was farming at 'Seven Mile Spring' (seven miles south of New Norcia) and 'Gillingarra'. He also worked on railway construction when the new Midland Railway Company rail-line was being developed through the mid-west region. The Midland Railway Company railway station for the New Norcia district was at Gillingarra.

In further evidence regarding William's life at this time, the Western Australian Times, dated Tuesday 17 October 1876 reported:

"IN THE SUPREME COURT. PATTON re BRANSON.

THE Sheriff will cause to be sold by Public Auction at Mr. J. Atkinson's Hotel, Bindoon on Monday the 23rd, inst. at 12 o'clock noon (unless the claim be previously satisfied,) the whole of the defendant's interest in the undermentioned Special Occupation Leases, situated close to Bindoon and described in the maps of the Survey Office Perth as No. 11-100 acres. Lease for 7 years from the 1st. April 1875, with growing crops of about 25 acres of wheat thereon about 60 acres if this allotment is fenced and a good supply of water, together with all buildings out-houses &c. No. 582-100 acres, lease expires on 30th December 1877; No. 732-100 acres, lease expires on 30 June 1878. ALSO, 1 Waggon, 1 Plough, Pigs and sundry other articles. M. S. SMITH, SHERIFF, Sheriff's Office, Perth, 14th October, 1876."

On 13 February 1877, their daughter Emma married widower John Robert Thompson and it was whilst visiting her older sister in Bindoon that ten-year-old Eliza met a terrible fate. The Inquirer and Commercial News of Wednesday 28 May 1879 reported:

"SAD DEATH AT NEW NORCIA MISSION. —

A little girl named Eliza Branson died at New Norcia on the 19th instant from the effects of severe burns caused by her frock catching fire. The unfortunate accident happened a few days previously, whilst the deceased was on a visit to her sister, Mrs. Thompson, at Bindoon."

Just six weeks after this devastating accident Emma gave birth to her first child, a son Alfred, on 9 July 1879. Her husband John 'Robert' Thompson was the son of John Robert Snr and Elizabeth Spice, early settlers in Western Australia who were living in Guildford at the time of John jnr's birth in 1840. His first wife Mary (nee Duffy) had died in 1874 leaving John with five young daughters, aged between 5 and 12 years. Emma Branson was twenty years old when they married and the couple went on to have ten children of their own between 1879 and 1900, four sons and six daughters.

Three years later, the untimely death of William's wife, 46-year-old Margaret Branson on 27 January 1882 and the possible reasons for her demise were reported in *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, on 15 February 1882:

"The weather here is excessively hot, and a good deal of sickness prevails. Two mothers of very large families — Mrs. W. Branson and Mrs. D. Elder — died recently, and were buried at New Norcia."

William Branson Jnr married his sister Emma's eldest step-daughter Elizabeth Jane Thompson on 21 April 1885 and the couple had five children. Sadly, Elizabeth may not have long survived childbirth as she died on 30 August 1891 and their youngest child daughter Jane Elizabeth lived for only 25 days. William died in Moora on 20 September 1940 aged 82 years. William's headstone in Moora Cemetery reads: "To the Memory of W. Branson, Died 20 Sept 1940 Aged 82 years, A Faithful Servant of the Early Pioneers of the District."

Elders son Thomas, married Eliza Walker in Newcastle (Toodyay) in 1882 and they had ten children between 1883 and 1909; William Thomas 'Will', Margaret 'Maggie', Albert Joseph, Ada Amelia, Maud Mary Bridget, Thomas Henry 'Tom', Lily May, Eliza 'Lila', Edith May 'Edie' and John Joseph 'Jack'. Thomas was a partner in his father William's farming and grazing concerns in the Victoria Plains district however their partnership was dissolved by mutual consent on 27 November 1883. Thomas and family moved to the goldfields by the time youngest son, Jack, was born at Golden Ridge on 16 July 1909. Thomas and Eliza's first-born child, William, named for his grandfather, died of shrapnel wounds received in action to the head and chest at Gallipoli on 16 June 1915, aged 31 years. He was buried in the Hillside Cemetery at Anzac Cove (AIF 16th Btn, Sern 1590). Thomas and Eliza took the news of their son's death hard, evident in a report in the *Norseman Times* in December of that year which saw both of them before the police court, and which indicated that Eliza in particular was drinking heavily. Thomas had showed up at the hearing the worse for liquor himself and the court requested that police keep an eye on both of them. On retirement, Thomas and Eliza moved to their final home at 11 Loton Avenue in Midland Junction. It was here that they both died one month apart in 1932, Thomas on 25 September 1932 and Eliza on 25 October.

Also living in the Midland Junction/Guildford area, Frances had married widower Joseph Pumphrey in New Norcia on 22 November 1888 and had three children. The pair separated in 1904 with Joseph taking custody of their eldest child Harriett 'Mary' Frances Pumphrey. Joseph had advertised in 1901 that he would not pay any debts incurred by Frances and it may be assumed that the two further children Frances had in 1901 (Aubrey) and 1903 (Cecilia) were fathered by Richard Alexander Gregg with whom she lived from that date. Richard's death notice in 1939 stated he was the dearly beloved husband of Frances and father of Aubrey and Celia and step-father of Mary. Frances died 18 May 1943 in Guildford aged 76 years.

The remaining children also married. Harriett wed Frederick William Anderson at New Norcia in 1890. They had 7 children, four daughters and three sons born and Harriett died 29 September 1938 in St John of God Hospital, Subiaco aged 65 years. Mary 'Maud' married John Traill in 1904 at St. Patrick's Church in Fremantle. The youngest child James married Emma Jane Galton in Perth in 1904 and they had two children. Their daughter Grace Josephine born in 1908 died in 1909. James died in Mount Hawthorn, Perth on 20 July 1956.

William Branson, although having amassed property and produced a large family, died alone in the Mt Eliza Old Men's Home on 11 May 1901 aged 84 years. He had outlived wife Margaret by almost twenty years.

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Sylvia Norton story on William Branson (in convict group files) Great-great granddaughter of William, descended from his first-born son Thomas.