GETTING IT TOGETHER
From Colonies to Federation
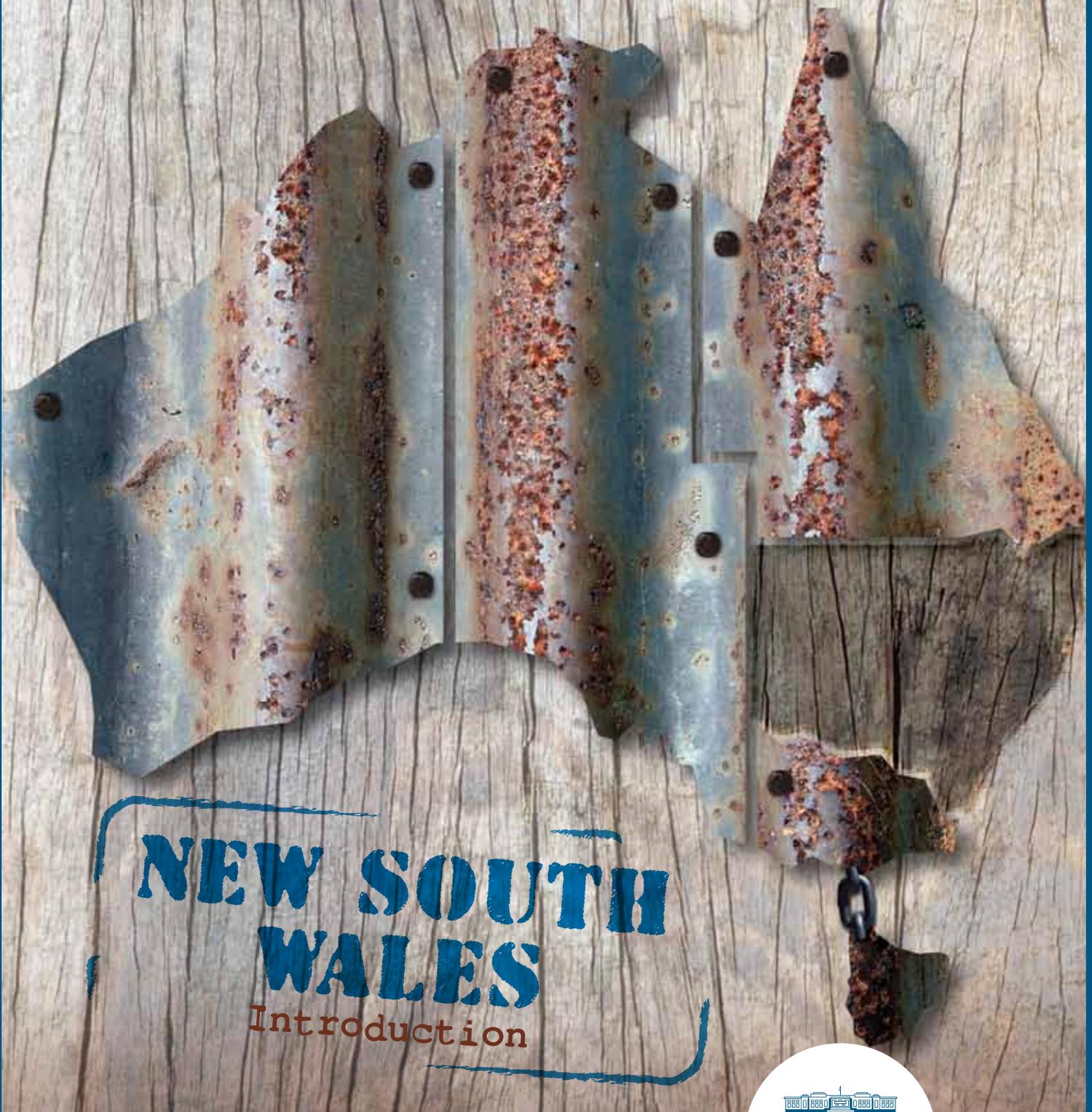
NEW SOUTH WALES
Introduction

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From Colonies to Federation
NEW SOUTH WALES

Captain Cook used the name New South Wales when he claimed the east of Australia for Britain in 1770. In 1788, the colony's first Governor, Arthur Philip, arrived with the First Fleet to establish a convict settlement.

For more than 30 years, New South Wales was the only colony in Australia. Its borders originally included the areas that are now Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. These became separate colonies between the 1820s and 1850s; Western Australia was established in this period as well. Australia remained as six separate colonies until Federation in 1901.

New South Wales did not only have changing borders in the 1800s; the nature of the population and the way the colony was governed changed, too. Britain ruled the colony through a Governor until the 1840s. But, there was an increasing number of free settlers – ex-convicts and people born in the colony – who wanted to end the transportation of convicts, and by 1840, their campaign was successful. The population of free settlers wanted to create a different form of government similar to that of Britain: a parliament elected by voters to make laws and help govern the colony. In 1855, New South Wales became the first Australian colony to achieve self-government when it was granted its own constitution and parliament. Henry Parkes, Edmund Barton and George Reid were all elected to the New South Wales Parliament. These men would later play important roles in New South Wales' move to Federation.

Other important changes in New South Wales by the mid-1800s related to the economy. The wool industry generated great wealth for the colony and for the major landholders or 'squatters' who occupied most of rural New South Wales. In the 1850s, gold was discovered. This increased the colony's wealth and importance in trade, and attracted large numbers of new free settlers. These developments made New South Wales not only the oldest colony in Australia, but also the wealthiest and most populated.

However, there were also times of economic hardship for the colony and its people, especially in the 1890s. An economic depression and drought affected all of the eastern colonies in that decade. The effects of hard economic times, including high levels of unemployment, were felt in city and country alike.

At this time, the idea of the separate colonies coming together to form one nation in the British Empire was vigorously debated in all six colonies. The idea behind Federation was that nationhood would make the whole country stronger and have benefits for all colonies. The colonies would all be subject to the same federal laws and they would all be represented in the Federal Parliament, to have a say in running the nation. They would all have increased opportunities for interstate trade, and be protected by a federal defence force. The people would be Australians, an independent and free people within the British Empire.

For Federation to become a reality, it had to be supported by New South Wales, the oldest and most populous of all the colonies. Before making a decision about Federation, each colony also had to consider its own special interests and circumstances. In New South Wales, as in the other colonies, not everyone was convinced that they would be better off under a federal system. In 1898, New South Wales held a vote, called a referendum, on the Constitution Bill to decide for or against accepting a proposed Australian Constitution uniting them with the other colonies. The first referendum failed as the quota of 80,000 'yes' votes was not reached. It was only in a second referendum, held in 1899 after Premier George Reid secretly negotiated some changes to the Constitution, that a majority voted 'yes'. This was also when most of the other colonies had their referendums on Federation – all recording majority 'yes' votes.

On Commonwealth Day, 1 January 1901, all six colonies became States of the new Australian nation. All of the former colonies welcomed Federation with special celebrations and ceremonies – and no State did so with more pride and excitement than New South Wales.

Your tasks

For you to investigate

There are three themes for you to investigate. Each has information and activities to help you dig deeper into the story of New South Wales' journey from colony to Federation.

People and Places

Investigate aspects of life in New South Wales in the years before Federation, especially the 1890s when there were many changes taking place in the colony.

Road to Federation

Investigate issues influencing opinions on Federation, why there were different points of view in New South Wales, and the colony's final vote.

Celebrations and Futures

Investigate how New South Wales celebrated Federation when it began, and how being part of the Australian Commonwealth continues to be celebrated today.