

# 3

## **The Making of a Capital: A Social History of Suva, 1870–1882<sup>1</sup>**

Robert Nicole

As Paul Geraghty has shown in this collection, Suva has a long history that goes back beyond the nineteenth century into the times of pre-European contact. Max Quanchi's chapter examines the manner by which Suva lands were acquired by the Polynesian Company. In the next two (twin) chapters, the baton is passed onwards to explore the process by which the capital of Fiji was transferred from Levuka to Suva over a period of roughly 20 years between 1870 and 1890. These dates are necessarily approximate because it is impossible to identify clear starting and end points for this transition.

This period is packed with almost countless stories. In selecting those that need telling, two criteria were applied. The first was to identify stories that reflected the imperial and colonial nature of the project. The second was to identify stories that those of us who call Suva 'home' might find most compelling – the stories that might give us the best sense of 'when', 'how', and 'why' this city became our capital.

---

1 Acknowledgement: I thank the former director of the National Archives of Fiji (Opeta Alefaio) and his staff for allowing me the use of the documents necessary to produce this chapter. I am also grateful to Olivier, Jacques and Eugenia Nicole, and to Aaron and Cilla Hegarty for opening their homes to me while I worked on it.

Special emphasis is also given to the stories of the numerous, though often anonymous, people who participated in the formation of the new capital. Their actions and voices help to frame the central argument of this study: that the transfer of the capital to Suva was not merely an administrative enterprise conducted by those in power,<sup>2</sup> but one that was layered upon the land, resources, labour and bodies of many others.

## I. Early British Interest

When the British Colonel William Smythe visited Fiji in 1860, he judged that Suva was the ‘best adapted in Fiji for a white settlement’. From the outset therefore, it seems that the eyes of the empire were set on Suva. In his report, Smythe added that the area was:

... rich, level, and well-watered. The harbour is, perhaps, the best in the group; it is easy of access, can be entered and quitted with all the prevailing winds, and has communication within the reef with a great extent of coast.<sup>3</sup>

He had been sent by the Queen to lead a special commission of inquiry into an offer of cession that Ratu Cakobau and some Fijian chiefs had made in 1858. His brief was to assess the desirability and viability of the archipelago as a potential colony.

In contrast to Suva, Smythe reported that Levuka, then the principal town of European settlement, was disgraced by constant scenes of drunkenness and rioting. The town had begun as a humble settlement for bêche-de-mer traders in the early 1840s. These traders lived under the protection of Ratu Cakobau and his vassal chief on the island of Ovalau, the Tui Levuka. Levuka had a reasonably good harbour. However, as transport technology changed and larger trans-continental steamships came into operation to service the route between Australia and North America, the shoals and reefs of the Lomaiviti Group in the centre of archipelago became too dangerous to navigate.

---

2 Readers who are interested in the early business and administrative histories of Suva can consult Henry Scott, ‘The development of Suva’, *Transactions and Proceedings of Fiji Society of Science and Industry* 2, no. 1 (1940): 15–20; RA Derrick, ‘The removal of the capital to Suva’, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Fiji Society of Science and Industry* (1953): 203–9; and Albert J Schütz, *Suva: A history and guide* (Sydney: Pacific Publications, 1978).

3 See Smythe Report in Berthold Seemann, *Viti: An account of a government mission to the Vitian or Fijian Islands* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1973), 430.

The captains of these large vessels preferred to anchor off Galoa on the southernmost island of Kadavu before sailing onwards to their distant destinations. Disembarking passengers would then endure the long and uncomfortable voyage from Kadavu to Levuka in the small sailing boats that plied the group. The other problem, as Smythe noted, was that the hills rose so abruptly from the beach that all settlement was 'shut in', and the livelihood of its residents was thus overly dependent on other places in the group.<sup>4</sup>

Smythe's positive opinion of Suva was enthusiastically endorsed by the British/German naturalist Berthold Seemann. While his primary role was to report on botanical matters, Seemann was expected, like most other such travelling scientists, to record everything that could be of value and strategic advantage to the British Empire. Seemann noted that everyone in Fiji was convinced that Suva would become the capital. This conviction had seen the value of land around the harbour rise considerably so that lots not 'worth more than a few pence' a few years before were now selling at £20 an acre.<sup>5</sup> He considered that the peninsula, then known as 'Suva Point', was a land speculator's dream with numerous favourable conditions:

There is a good harbour, with mud bottom, deep water right alongside of the shore, sheltered by a reef, and having a wide passage for the largest vessels to beat out. When once inside the passage there is clear sea-room, no outlying shoals or reefs. Suva commands the most extensive agricultural district in Fiji, through which run fine rivers (the Navua and Wai Levu or Rewa) navigable for boats for many miles inland ... Suva Point is a gently undulated country, free from swamps, and about three miles wide or thereabout at the base ... The point itself is open to the prevailing winds; it is thinly timbered with bread-fruit, cocoa-nut, dawa, and other trees of no great growth, and thus requires but little clearing.<sup>6</sup>

Like many imperialists of the time, Seemann was confident in the inevitability of British annexation. However, to his great disappointment Smythe recommended against it and Cakobau's offer was declined. Smythe contended that the offer did not represent the wishes of the

---

4 Smythe Report in Seemann, *Viti*, 430.

5 Seemann, *Viti*, 70.

6 Seemann, *Viti*, 70–71.

people of Fiji and that the potential of the group for British interests was insufficient. As the excitement of a British takeover waned, interest in Suva lost momentum.

## II. The *Kai* Suva and the Sale of Their Land

One of the constraints for large-scale settlement in Suva was that the land was owned and occupied by the indigenous population. The history of Suva took an unexpected turn in 1868 when almost all the land was sold by Cakobau to the Polynesian Company to pay the American debt.<sup>7</sup> A crucial factor in the sale is that the people of Suva were then leaderless and the transaction took place without input from the Roko Tui Suva, the traditional head of the people of Suva. Ratu Ravulo, the previous Tui Suva, had died a few years earlier and his son, Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya (also spelt Ratu Ambrose, Abrosa or Avorosa), was still a child. He was brought up in Bau and was in his late teens when he returned to Suva in the late 1860s.

When he was installed as Roko Tui Suva, Ratu Aporosa combined in his one person both temporal and spiritual power. This gave him considerable mana among his people. His mother Adi Elenoa Mila was a sister of Cakobau and his father was a grandson of Ratu Tānoa – Cakobau's father. Hence, from his maternal and paternal side Ratu Aporosa had strong genealogical connections to Fiji's most powerful chiefdom – Bau. He was thus considered by European observers as 'a thorough aristocrat'.<sup>8</sup> His credentials as a chief of the highest order were further enhanced when he married Adi Kelera, a daughter of the Vunivalu of Rewa, another one of Fiji's most powerful kingdoms. As such, he was destined to become a central figure in the process by which Suva became the capital.

In spite of his eminent pedigree, Ratu Aporosa was, in 1870, chief to a people who had just been dispossessed of their land. All that remained were about 300 acres of native reserve around the existing villages of Suva (also known as Naiqasiqasi) and Samabula. The Suva reserve encompassed roughly what is now known as the Domain, an area that included the land between the current Cakobau Road, Queen Elizabeth Drive and Ratu Sukuna Road.

7 See Max Quanchi's chapter in this volume for more detail.

8 AB Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles* (London: Robert Hales and Company, 1937), 56.

When they arrived to take possession of their lands in 1870, the settlers of the *Alhambra* were largely oblivious to the great sacrifice that the people of Suva had made. As Brewster later attested:

we did not then recognize the honour and rectitude of the people of Suva, whose lands we seized upon like a lot of cuckoos ... [I]n after years ... I came to understand the Fijians' attachment to their ancestral soil, and what a wrench it was for the Suva people to part with theirs, but they had accepted the sacred tambua of their overlord, the Vunivalu of Bau, which kept them steady and loyal to their promise to him.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the loss of their patrimonies, the people of Suva were generally welcoming of the new settlers. Both Ratu Aporosa and his sister Adi Sālote were on hand on 4 September 1870 to help carry the passengers of the *Alhambra* and their belongings to the shore even at the risk of breaking the Sunday tabu. Both were deemed 'good-looking' and thought to be 19 and 14 years old, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Ratu Aporosa spoke fluent English, courtesy of an extended period he had spent on board the visiting American ship *Kearsage* whose name he had tattooed on his arm. Adi Sālote was described as 'a very fine specimen of a pretty Fijian belle'.<sup>11</sup>

Their house was built almost on the beach in front of what is now Thurston Gardens.<sup>12</sup> A few metres away was the bright structure of the 'native church', which in those days was the only building visible to travellers as they entered the harbour. By 1860, most of the inhabitants of Suva had converted to Christianity, including those scattered in outlying villages who had come to settle at Draiba, on the periphery of the Suva village.<sup>13</sup> All around the church stood the houses of the village, tucked away in groves of coconut, breadfruit and *ivi* trees.<sup>14</sup> As there were no roads, it was peaceful and quiet, the sheltered waters between the shore and the protecting reefs being the only highways.<sup>15</sup> Yet, all was not well in Suva, and Brewster noted that the village community was 'small and feeble', having not yet fully recovered from the devastating consequences of the 1843 war.<sup>16</sup>

9 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 114.

10 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 82.

11 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 82.

12 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 38.

13 Colman Wall, 'Historical notes on Suva', ed. Paul Geraghty, *Domodomo* 10, no. 2 (1996): 38.

14 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 81.

15 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 25, 74.

16 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 57.

### III. Violence on the Plantations: The Death of Ratu Se

Initially, relations between the *Alhambra* immigrants and Suva villagers were friendly. The large European families caused some astonishment among indigenous onlookers. Fijians tended to have small families and after the birth of a child, women expected to be left alone for up to four years. Few husbands dared to interfere with this custom as the wrath of his wife's relatives could be quite unforgiving.<sup>17</sup> The new immigrants lived in rather rough conditions. They all resided in Fijian *bure* made of bamboo, reeds and thatch. These were normally cool, clean and comfortable though some resembled 'disembowelled haystacks'.<sup>18</sup> The men walked around in bare feet and wore little more than a shirt, a pair of duck trousers and a Tokelau hat. Wasting little time to establish their farms, they began raising horses, cattle, pigs, poultry and goats.<sup>19</sup> It was when they began clearing the land for cotton and then sugar that the first tensions emerged.

Converting land into large profitable plantations required labour and a management team to oversee the labourers and administer punishment when misbehaviour or unsatisfactory work were deemed to have occurred. Planters rarely administered violence directly. They normally delegated this task to managers and overseers, some of whom were recruited from as far as the West Indies.<sup>20</sup> Labourers were initially recruited in small gangs from various parts of Fiji. Their immediate tasks were to clear hundreds of acres of bush needed for planting. Their terms usually lasted a month, after which they returned home.

The commercialisation of land was accompanied by a quick deterioration of relations between management and labour. Tensions were first manifested by the numerous labourers who absconded. Planters were greatly inconvenienced by these absences. Each runaway meant lost revenue and additional costs to find a replacement. They responded by tightening security and escalating coercion. Numerous 'petty disputes' soon broke out.<sup>21</sup> The Suva planters organised themselves into an association and began pressing the government for measures that would ensure the more

---

17 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 127.

18 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 36.

19 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 74.

20 Cakobau Government Records (CGR), 854/10/1873, National Archives of Fiji (NAF).

21 CGR 240/10/1872.

effective control and punishment of disobedient workers. In May 1872, they petitioned the chief secretary of the Cakobau Government to erect a police court in Suva and by September they also wanted a constable and a lock-up.<sup>22</sup>

The desertions were often interpreted as symptoms of a natural laziness among indigenous Fijians. However, this stereotype is misplaced. Fijian labourers were widely recruited through the 1860s because they were keen to experience the novelty of working on European-owned plantations. Their reluctance to work coincides with the larger and more exploitative commercial plantations of the 1870s. Moreover, the new labour laws of the Cakobau Government created a framework that allowed planters to legally compel their labourers to work under oppressive conditions. When Fijian labourers walked off their jobs therefore, it was not because they were indolent. They were rejecting an economic and legal system that exploited their labour and no longer fulfilled their curiosity to experience plantation life. To make up for the shortfall of labour, planters began to source labourers from Kiribati (then known as Tokalau or Line Islanders), Vanuatu (then New Hebrides) and Solomon Islands. These labourers were easier to control, having no means of escaping to their home villages and little hope of surviving on their own if they fled into the hills outside Suva.

The deteriorating relations on Suva plantations came to a head in early November 1872 when a major disturbance broke out on the premises of the Suva Sugar Plantation Company owned by Joske and Brewer. The thousand-acre plantation had a southern boundary adjacent to the Suva village native reserve, frontage onto the Suva Harbour (now central Suva) and boundaries eastwards all the way to Laucala Bay. About a third of the land had been purchased from the local traders (Swanston and Hennings), while the rest had been bought from the Polynesian Company. Brewer and Joske had recently switched from cotton to sugar and were employing labour mainly from the Macuata coast and from Santo Island, Vanuatu.<sup>23</sup>

The overseers had been in conflict for some time with a group of about 60 labourers from Macuata. As tensions escalated, the plantation management started carrying firearms and resorted to extreme violence to discipline the workers. Although unarmed, the labourers responded

---

<sup>22</sup> CGR 240/10/1872 and 634/10/1872.

<sup>23</sup> CGR 854/10/1873.

with their own threats of violence and on the morning of 10 November, they resolved to stop work altogether and refused to come out of their *bure*. The manager, Lester Smith, went in with the whip at which point the labourers all ran outside in what seemed like a premeditated move. When Smith followed them out, they pounced on him. He attempted to shoot them in the resulting scuffle but missed. He was rescued when the overseers and other armed reinforcements came to his aid and surrounded the area. Being in a precarious position the unarmed Macuata labourers ran back into the *bure*. However, in a moment of panic a few of them, including their chief Ratu Se, attempted an escape. They were shot in the act. Ratu Se was shot twice in the back and left unattended to bleed to death. He died the next day. At least one other Macuata man was seriously wounded. The affray ended a few minutes later when the ringleaders of the strike were handcuffed and taken away.<sup>24</sup>

The death by shooting of Ratu Se caused quite a stir. Four of the men involved were charged and put on trial in February 1873 on various charges including manslaughter and shooting with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. The trial was held in one of Brewer's houses, there being no court building in Suva yet, and was presided over by the chief justice. In its case against Smith, the prosecution accused him of aggravated assault against Maiyaca, one of the Macuata labourers. They contended that he had been 'driving natives about like a herd of cattle' and that his use of force had been excessive.<sup>25</sup> When his banned 'cat o' nine' whip with its 10 double-knotted lashes was exhibited in court for all to see, it caused quite a sensation and much indignation that such an implement was used on a Fiji plantation. The prosecution also alleged that Smith had attempted to shoot Maiyaca and that he had inflicted a severe wound to his head with the butt of his revolver. However, in spite of all the evidence, the jury returned a not guilty verdict.<sup>26</sup>

The other four men deliberately conspired to conceal the identity of those who had shot and killed Ratu Se. Expressing his frustration with the case, the prosecutor decried the behaviour of these men for while they claimed to be 'people of Christian parentage and boasting of civilization' they were all guilty of the inhuman neglect of a wounded man. They had all seen him, ignored him and gone home without attending to him. One of the

<sup>24</sup> *Fiji Times*, 23 November 1872.

<sup>25</sup> *Fiji Times*, 17 February 1873.

<sup>26</sup> *Fiji Times*, 17 February 1873.



accused, Constable Edward Hicks, was singled out for special criticism because as an officer of the peace he had been quick to arrest a Macuata labourer even as Ratu Se lay dying on the ground. Charles Augustus Huon was also berated:

... strange to say, when put upon oath, [he] knew nothing, saw nobody, and seemed to hear nothing, although actually joining in the fray. He saw nothing, he heard nothing, he knew nothing, although the most intelligent of the lot.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of being the only arms-bearing persons present during the clash, none of the men were found guilty. By contrast, Maiyaca and a fellow labourer (Tabuaciri) were found guilty of aggravated assault and common assault for which they respectively received sentences of six and three months imprisonment with hard labour. The chief justice concluded that an attempt had been made to conceal the truth and he regretted the effects of the case on the reputation of Suva.<sup>28</sup> Yet, his complicity in letting the conspirators go free while punishing the labourers signalled that the justice system worked more favourably for white men than for others and that different rules applied to employers and employees on plantations in the use and abuse of violence.

## IV. Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya

Interestingly, the planters and some officials identified the Tui Suva, Ratu Aporosa, as one of the main instigators of the trouble. In a letter to the chief secretary, the deputy warden (mayor) of Suva pleaded that if Ratu Aporosa was not removed from the district at once, it would be ‘utterly impossible to prevent further disturbances’.<sup>29</sup> Ratu Aporosa knew Ratu Se and was one of the witnesses called to identify the body when it was exhumed for a post-mortem. Being domiciled next door to the plantation, Ratu Aporosa had extensive contact with the gangs of labourers who came to work in Suva and could exercise significant influence over them.

This was not lost on the planters, 30 of whom signed a petition in which he was accused not only of causing labourers to be discontented but also of actively encouraging villagers in Suva, Lami and Samabula to disrupt

<sup>27</sup> *Fiji Times*, 17 February 1873.

<sup>28</sup> *Fiji Times*, 17 February 1873.

<sup>29</sup> CGR 756/10/1872.

and boycott plantations.<sup>30</sup> The petition suggests that while he and his people may have lost their lands, Ratu Aporosa retained considerable influence over the chiefs, people and resources west of Suva including Lami, Veisari and Naikorokoro up to the boundary with the province of Namosi. He also exerted power over labourers from other parts of Fiji who came to work in Suva.

His motives for inciting labourers to rebel and for disrupting the smooth functioning of plantation operations are difficult to establish. Was he resentful of the manner by which the Suva lands had been alienated? Did he hope to regain ownership of Suva lands if the plantations failed and their owners left? Was he an early champion of the proletariat, capable of discerning worker exploitation and engineering and organising protests?

Upon investigation, government officials found that, unlike other major chiefs around the country, Ratu Aporosa was not employed by the government. The 'Roko Tui' title he held by descent was a customary one and therefore different from that which was held by the Roko Tui (or lieutenant-governors) on the government's payroll. He therefore had little incentive to participate in the implementation of the new order that Cakobau and his European allies were putting in place. Indeed, he had refused to contribute to the *solu vakavanua*, one of the means by which the government raised taxes from the indigenous population. He was not afraid to use 'a good deal of rebellious and insolent talk' against government officials and planters, and thought that as chief of Suva 'he should do as he chose in the district'.<sup>31</sup>

The government was divided about how to handle the renegade chief. Robert Swanston, the minister of native affairs, did not consider him worthy to hold any appointment of trust or honour. He accused Ratu Aporosa of taking money from his people to spend it on gin. In any case, he wrote, there was no money to pay him.<sup>32</sup> Other officials thought that if Ratu Aporosa was appointed to a government position, it might help to neutralise his antagonistic behaviour. Ratu Napolioni, the Roko Tui of the Rewa province – of which Suva was an important district – advised that it was 'absolutely necessary' that the young chief be appointed *buli* (district administrator) of Suva. It should be a trial and if he misbehaved

30 CGR 952/41-42/1872.

31 CGR 1140/41-42/1873.

32 CGR 1140/41-42/1873.

he could then easily be *sivoed* or dismissed.<sup>33</sup> Walter Carew, the secretary of the Rewa province, agreed and advised Swanston that Europeans in the district were much more to blame than the young chief. He favoured Ratu Aporosa's appointment as *buli* and proposed that he be given a stern warning that any further rebellion or bad behaviour would meet with instant dismissal.<sup>34</sup> When approached, Ratu Aporosa responded that he was *malumalumu e na cakacaka*, or not contracted to work for the government but that he would make his best efforts if he was appointed and paid.<sup>35</sup> Swanston begrudgingly approved the appointment and, from the early months of 1873, Ratu Aporosa was integrated into the government as the *buli* of Suva.

## V. The Demise of the Cakobau Government

Ratu Aporosa's tenure of the bulship was short-lived. Through 1872 and 1873 the viability of the Cakobau Government had become increasingly precarious. It could not collect sufficient revenue to fund itself and its attempts at raising a loan in Australia failed because of its poor reputation among Sydney capitalists.<sup>36</sup> The government's lack of legitimacy was also visible in large parts of the country, not the least among the tribes of Colo in the interior of Viti Levu, who resented Cakobau and his government's claims over them for he had never conquered them. They also held him responsible for the manner by which they were being gradually dispossessed of their best lands by planters. To bring about the submission of these tribes, Cakobau embarked on the Nadawarau campaign. Although he was victorious, the campaign was an additional cost the government could ill afford. The expense was partly offset by the money the government recuperated from planters in the fees they paid to hire the thousands of Colo prisoners but other problems threatened the complete collapse of the government.

Among them was the riotous behaviour of many European settlers who had become disgruntled by the failure of the cotton industry. With their dreams shattered and their fortunes in tatters, they became

33 CGR 1140/41-42/1873. See Arthur Capell's *A new Fijian dictionary* (Sydney: Australasian Medical Publishing Co., 1941) for the translation of 'sivo'.

34 CGR 1185/41-42/1873.

35 CGR 1140/41-42/1873.

36 David Routledge, 'Pre-Cession government in Fiji' (PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 1965), 104.

‘vociferous oppositionists’,<sup>37</sup> formed a Ku Klux Klan, and vowed to bring the government down by any means necessary. In September of 1873, the situation in Levuka was so dire and the government’s regime of law and order so seriously eroded that the country seemed on the brink of civil war.

In Suva, large numbers of labourers continued to abscond. Planters sent renewed requests for the government to establish a police post to deter desertion. They also asked for a proper building to incarcerate those absconders who were recaptured.<sup>38</sup> Some settlers no longer respected the law nor the magistrates who were supposed to administer it, or even the Fijian police whose role was to enforce it. To make matters worse for the government, even the older and more supportive settlers now believed that the only viable option to regain ‘a properly ordered society’ was British annexation.

The question of ceding Fiji to Great Britain was also on the minds of Cakobau and his chief secretary, JB Thurston. On 13 January of 1873, Thurston sent a cable to London to gauge whether Her Majesty’s Government would consider a new offer of cession. The wording of the question did not formally offer cession but it encouraged the British Government to dispatch the Goodenough and Layard Commission to Fiji to assess the desirability of acquiring Fiji as a colony. British appetite for colonies in the early 1870s was vastly different from that which had prevailed when Smythe had visited. Fiji was now part of a world in which European competition for territories and resources was more aggressive. Goodenough and Layard were both enthusiastic imperialists and Goodenough was particularly forceful in pressing the Cakobau Government and the chiefs to sign a formal and unconditional offer of cession. The chiefs assented and, on 10 October 1874, Fiji formally became a colony of Great Britain.<sup>39</sup> The ultimate decision to move Fiji’s capital was now removed from one government and placed in the hands of another.

37 Routledge, ‘Pre-Cession government in Fiji’, vii.

38 See CGR 69/10/1873 and 868/10/1873.

39 Annexation occurred for a variety of complex internal and external reasons all of which cannot be discussed in detail here. (See RA Derrick, *A history of Fiji: Volume one* (Suva: Printing and Stationery Department, 1946); Routledge, ‘Pre-Cession government in Fiji’; David Routledge, *Matanitu: The struggle for power in early Fiji* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1985); Deryck Scarr, *Fiji: A short history* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984); William Sutherland, *Beyond the politics of race: An alternative history of Fiji to 1992* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1992); Jane Samson, *Imperial benevolence: Making British authority in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), doi.org/10.1515/9780824862947.

## VI. The Search for a New Capital

Through this period, Levuka was a hive of activity and retained centre stage in the political and economic life of the country. Since the days of general drunkenness and rioting of the early 1870s, its thriving community of about 700 residents had developed a new pride in what were deemed 'symbols of respectability' such as the performances of the Levuka Repertory, the debating circles, the minstrel choirs, the secluded bathing pool for ladies, the annual regatta to celebrate the new year, cricket matches and billiard matches with visiting champions from the colonies.<sup>40</sup> However, the town continued to suffer from the absence of a proper supply of water, unacceptable sanitary arrangements, an unflattering beach and the absence of a proper bridge to cross Totogo Creek. Levuka was also expensive for business. For instance, the cost of Melanesian labourers in Levuka was estimated to be 65 per cent greater than in Suva.<sup>41</sup>

These lingering issues reignited discussions about moving the capital. In early 1875, Sir Hercules Robinson, the acting governor of Fiji, received a letter from Lord Carnarvon, the secretary of state for colonies, specifying that the capital should not be moved except if 'very strong reasons' such as an unfavourable medical assessment, recommended it.<sup>42</sup> There were many strong reasons to move the capital and Carnarvon's letter acted as a cue for the official process of inquiry to begin.

Signs that Suva was being prepared for a substantial transformation were soon visible. The port of Suva was surveyed and beacons and lights were placed at the entrance of the harbour. Nukulau Island was earmarked as a possible quarantine station.<sup>43</sup> The magistrate for the southern region of Viti Levu was removed from Rewa and brought to Suva.<sup>44</sup> More ominously, a few days after arriving to take up his new role as governor of the colony, Sir Arthur Gordon sent a dispatch to Carnarvon in which he wrote that he could not recommend Levuka as the site of the future capital.<sup>45</sup> In December 1875 he travelled to Suva on a scoping trip to establish for himself the suitability of the area as the new capital. Back then, the

40 Routledge, 'Pre-Cession government in Fiji', 58.

41 Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) 74/1877: all CSO records are found in the National Archives of Fiji (NAF).

42 See CSO 1627/1876.

43 CSO 580/1875.

44 Fiji Provisional Government Records (PGR), 302/1875, NAF.

45 Despatch 34, Gordon to Carnarvon, 22 July 1875, CO 83/6, Public Records Office (PRO).

proposed site around Nabukalou Creek was home to just four or five houses including a wooden church and the defunct Joske and Brewer's sugar mill, whose operational lifespan had been less than three years.<sup>46</sup>

As Gordon scaled up to the top of the hills behind the small settlement, a full view of the peninsula and its back country would have appeared before his eyes. Facing east, he would have discerned the contours of the Rewa Basin, the agricultural heartland of Viti Levu. Hidden from his gaze behind the hills to the north were the large plantations of the Upper Rewa and Waimanu rivers and the alluvial flats of Naitāsiri. For all their value to the Fijian economy, these agricultural districts lacked one key ingredient: a port. Most of the produce farmed up river for export had to be transported at great cost down the length of the river and then across the seas to Levuka where it was loaded onto sailing ships and exported. As he turned to face west, Gordon would have contemplated the key to this problem: Suva Harbour, in all its magnificence.

In his plans to make the colony profitable, Gordon was interested in developing Fiji's fruit trade, particularly banana. However, the sailing ships that docked in Levuka could not deliver this produce fast enough to the Australasian markets to avoid rotting. Steamships were the key. He approached the Australian Steam Navigation Company with a subsidy if it would send one of its steamers to Suva. The scheme was an instant success and within months the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand began to ferry bananas and other fruits to Auckland.<sup>47</sup>

Suva had been designated as a Port of Entry in 1872 but now, as a colonial port, it played a key role in consolidating British domination of maritime traffic in this part of the world. While Suva offered much in settlement and plantation potential, its prospects as a port for all the agricultural products of the Rewa Basin were more important. And yet for this port to become useful Gordon knew that one last obstacle remained: getting the produce from the Rewa Basin to Suva. A road would need to be built.

Gordon saw enough to satisfy him. Within a month he sent Colonel FE Pratt and Dr William MacGregor to investigate the viability of making Suva the new capital of Fiji. Pratt was the surveyor-general and became one of the principal architects of the new town. MacGregor was the colony's

46 CF Gordon Cumming, *At home in Fiji* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), 71, 308.

47 John Gorrie, 'Fiji as it is', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* 14 (1882-3): 162-63.

chief medical officer and was required to ascertain the sanitary condition of the proposed site. The two men walked the width and breadth of the peninsula, venturing as far inland as the waterfall at the base of Tamavua River and as far west as Veisari. They reported on everything including geology, hydrology, topography, vegetation, timber supply, waterways and drainage, shoreline, anchorage, potential for reclamation, potential road construction to Rewa and the best location to lay the streets of the new town.<sup>48</sup> The report on Suva was sent to London alongside a companion report also authored by Pratt that dismissed the suitability of Levuka. A minute by Carnarvon summed up official attitude in the following terms: 'Levuka is condemned already ...'<sup>49</sup>

Gordon now had the unenviable task of notifying the Levuka residents. When he revealed that Suva, Savusavu and Nadi were being considered as potential sites for a new capital,<sup>50</sup> the Levuka residents responded instantly with a petition pleading that the capital not be moved. They argued that the central location of Levuka in the group, its flourishing businesses and the high cost of relocation should be sufficient to retain the status quo.<sup>51</sup>

Not to be outdone, the residents of Rewa and Suva responded with a counter-petition. Led by Paul Joske, they outlined several reasons why Levuka must no longer be the capital. Draining water after high tide was a daily problem and the constant humidity was not good for the health of residents. Further, Levuka did not have enough space to cater for the expanding needs of a colonial capital. Sites to build businesses were 'practically' unobtainable. This had pushed prices so high that property and land were now unaffordable. The unsheltered harbour was vulnerable to winds and therefore unsafe for the large trans-Pacific steamers. To make matters worse, Ovalau was poor in soil quality and could not grow sufficient food for a developing and thriving capital.<sup>52</sup>

48 Despatch 12, Gordon to Carnarvon, 25 January 1876, CO 83/9, PRO.

49 Despatch 78, Gordon to Carnarvon, 12 April 1876, CO 83/9, PRO.

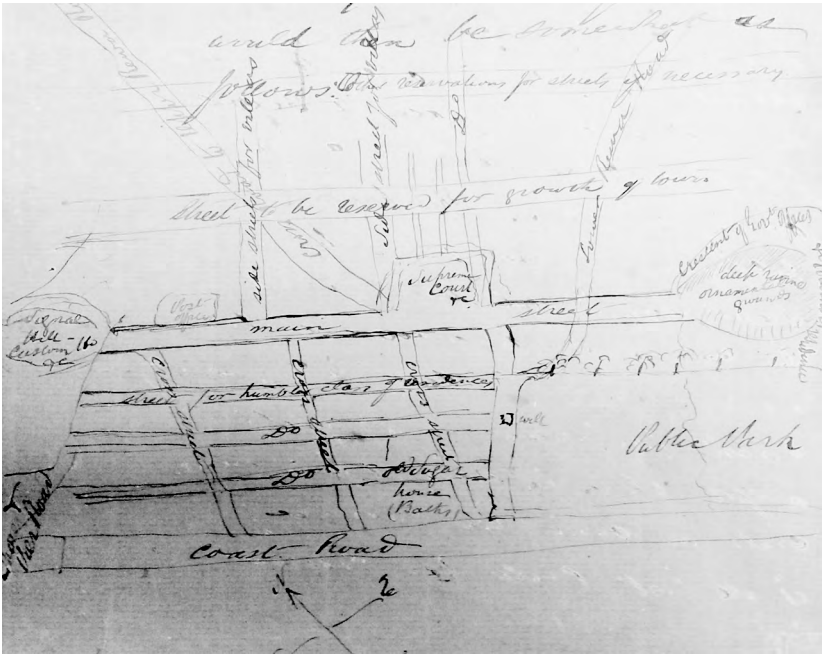
50 *New Zealand Times*, 11 January 1877; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

51 CSO 1627/1876.

52 CSO 942/1877.







**Figure 3.2: Sketch of the proposed Suva township, 1879.**

Source: John Gorrie to Colonial Secretary, CSO 2190/1879, Miscellaneous Papers, NAF.

The acquisition of land was more complicated. Early maps of the proposed township indicate that it was planned to span the area from the southern bank of the Nabukalou Creek to the boundary with the Native Reserve, now Cakobau Road.<sup>56</sup>

This block (larger shaded area on the map) had recently fallen into the hands of the two Melbourne merchants, William Thomson and Samuel Renwick. They had shrewdly speculated that Suva was bound to become the capital and, consequently, that the value of its lands would rise considerably. They were now in possession of the most valuable piece of real estate in the colony and destined to make handsome profits. They approached Gordon with an offer to surrender a block of land within the area now bordered by Gordon, MacArthur, Carnarvon and Kimberly streets where the new Government Buildings could be erected. They also gifted the government a title to every alternate lot in the rest of the area.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See CSO 1562/1878 and 278/1879.

<sup>57</sup> Schütz, *Suva: A history and guide*, 14.

A sketch drawn in 1879 by John Gorrie, the chief justice of Fiji, suggests how the administrators envisaged the development of the new capital. It shows the planned roads to the Upper and Lower Rewa regions, the site for the government offices, the Supreme Court and Governor's Residence, areas reserved for the outward growth of the town, women's baths, a road to the proposed pier and areas reserved for the 'humbler class of residents'.



**Figure 3.3: Town of Suva and adjoining lands, Viti Levu, Fiji, 1885.**

Source: Commissioner of Lands to Colonial Secretary, 14 April 1885, CSO 1030/1885, NAF.

Beyond the proposed township area lay large tracts of land owned by a handful of planters. Among the largest were the Irish brothers Thomas and Frederick Armstrong of the Hill Plantation whose land encompassed so much of Nasēsē and Muanikau that the peninsula was often referred to as Armstrong Point.<sup>58</sup> The Joskes owned the land east of the Tamavua River and ran Bayview Plantation. Huon owned most parts of Toorak and sections of Veiuto. Meanwhile large areas in Muanikau, Lacuala Bay, Raiwai, Flagstaff and Walu Bay belonged to Renwick and Thompson. Cuthbert and Richards owned parts of Raiwaqa and Vatuawaqa, and Williams owned most of Vatuwaqa and parts of Samabula. While some of these lands were used for farming, many of them lay idle, their proprietors waiting for profitable opportunities to sell them.

All property owners were wealthy Europeans, the only ones who had sufficient purchasing power to buy land and build on it. Yet, it would be erroneous to assume that Suva was a European town. Indigenous Fijians, Melanesians and Part-Europeans were a vital part of the fledgling township for they possessed a valuable commodity that Suva and its European residents desperately needed: the capacity to work.

The governing ideas about race at this time dictated that no self-respecting colonist would engage in manual labour. Colonised ‘coloured’ labour was therefore much sought after, though very poorly paid. These workers needed places to stay. From the outset therefore, and regardless of how much some of its residents desired it to be, Suva could never be a homogenous ‘white’ town. This paradox is well captured in the following passage, loaded as it is with the prejudices of the time:

As for the blacks, they are numerous enough – almost too much so; although if they would but work, we couldn’t have too many of them. In fact, we have to go recruiting labor from the Solomons and the New Hebrides ...<sup>59</sup>

Labourers were put to work on a variety of public works projects. An impression of the range of these projects can be gauged from a report compiled by Gorrie after visiting Suva in 1879. His opening remarks related to the mangrove swamp that lay along both sides of Nabukalou Creek and in proximity of the hotel he was staying at. The odour rising from the swamp, he wrote, ‘was enough to kill a horse’.<sup>60</sup> He recommended it filled.

58 Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 127.

59 *Evening Star*, 23 September 1881; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

60 CSO 2190/1879.

Several other matters were concerning. The hotels were dirty, objectionable and a concern for public health. Also, Suva did not have a proper landing place for boats, and arriving passengers had to walk on mud flats before reaching the shore. He suggested that part of the shallow offshore area on the southern side of Nabukalou Creek (now Dominion House and Fiji Visitors Bureau) be reclaimed and a pier built that would extend up to the deep sea.<sup>61</sup> He also noted that in the area between the recently removed mill<sup>62</sup> and the native reserve lay a space that was unhealthy for habitation because it was too damp and suggested it be set aside as a public park (now Albert Park).

On the matter of the native reserves, Gorrie proposed that a commission be convened to look into it. Once this was done, he thought the government should advertise in Australia and the United Kingdom to invite prospective settlers. It is difficult to establish whether this commission ever came into existence but we know that Gordon and his administration wanted the villagers living on Suva's native reserves to be evacuated and relocated elsewhere (see below). The large yellow shaded areas on the map (Figure 3.3) indicate that, aside from the Suva village, additional reserves existed for the people of Samabula and one possibly for villagers at Vatuwaqa. Clearly though, Gorrie was one of many officials who believed that while indigenous people and their lands ought to be protected, the long-term welfare of Suva and the rest of the colony lay in the hands of European settlers and should be prioritised.

A year after his report, 92 Suva allotments were sold at a public auction under an *ivi* tree by Nabukalou Creek.<sup>63</sup> The auction was advertised in all the major Australian and New Zealand cities and when it took place on 22 November 1880, the *Fiji Argus* described it as 'spirited throughout'.<sup>64</sup> The government earned approximately £4,000 from the auction, well short of the £12,000 it might have anticipated.<sup>65</sup>

61 CSO 2190/1879.

62 It appears that the sugar mill was removed by the Royal Engineers to an area in the Waimanu region in Upper Rewa in 1877. (See *New Zealand Herald*, 8 November 1877, [paperspast.govt.nz](http://paperspast.govt.nz).)

63 This was not, as is often erroneously believed, the same tree that stood on the corner of Renwick and Scott Streets before it was destroyed by Cyclone Winston in 2016 (see Brewster, *King of the Cannibal Isles*, 129). The tree was cut down soon after the 1880 auction to make way for a hotel.

64 6 December 1880; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

65 *New Zealand Herald*, 25 September 1880; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

But undeniably, as the *Argus* report pointed out, the big winners were ‘local capitalists’ whose purchasing power allowed them to instantly secure for themselves the best and most valuable real estate in Fiji.<sup>66</sup> Needless to say, the interests of communities and individuals further down the social and economic ladder were never considered in these transactions and the rules of the game were thus, from the very beginning, skewed in favour of wealthy individuals and their families.

## VIII. The First Road: Suva to Waimanu

The last major item in Gorrie’s report was about roads. Foremost among them was the road that should link the large agricultural districts of the Rewa Basin with the port of Suva. This road had long been in the making. As early as April 1873, the Rewa planters had approached the Cakobau Government with a request to build a road between the Upper Rewa and Suva.<sup>67</sup> As plausible as their argument was, the money to build the road back then was simply non-existent.

In 1876, Suva’s first major infrastructure development, the road to Waimanu and the Upper Rewa – the Waimanu Road – was ready to begin. Progress was slow because labour was exceedingly difficult to obtain. Thanks to its defeat of the chiefs and people of Navosa in that same year, the government had a large pool of prisoners at its disposal, many of whom were put to work on the Waimanu Road. Several ni-Vanuatu labourers were also recruited to work on the project.

As there were no motorised vehicles yet (the first cars were imported into Fiji in the 1910s), the road was built for horse-drawn carts carrying people and cargo to and from the Upper Rewa. In the first instance, the labourers cleared the timber and bush over a width of 30 feet for a distance of one and a half miles towards Tacirua. They then worked with pick handles to make the road on the cleared stretch. Some of the labourers also helped with surveying and road marking, or as messengers, cooks and carriers.<sup>68</sup>

---

66 6 December 1880.

67 CGR 246/33/1873.

68 See CSO 607/1876, 629/1876 and 1657/1876.

From 1876, the building of the road sputtered along so that two years later, about two and a half miles of the stretch had been completed. The Colo prisoners worked under the supervision of armed Royal Engineers and Fijian sentries. The mountaineers often complained about the oppressive nature of the work. Their desire to free themselves from bondage can be gauged from a serious incident that took place in the first few days of 1877. In a premeditated plan, a group of 30 Colo prisoners suddenly threw down their tools and ran into the bushes. Four were immediately shot and killed while two or three others were recaptured soon after. Most, however, fled into the mountains where, one would assume, they sought to evade the long arm of the Colonial Government for as long as they could.<sup>69</sup>

Plagued by the shortage of labour and yet determined to link Suva to Rewa, the government faced a dilemma. Should it prioritise the Waimanu Road or develop the main streets of the new capital? This dilemma is well reflected in a letter from John Berry, the surveyor-general, to the colonial secretary:

If it is intended that the streets and roads in and around the site for the proposed township should be commenced at once, and it is desired that the prisoners should be quartered there, I should propose that a gaol large enough to contain about 50 prisoners should be built in the neighbourhood of one of the wells which have been sunk on the old sugar plantation. If the works on the capital are not ready to start, then the gaol should be built at Tamavua, so that the prisoners confined there may continue to build the Waimanu Road.<sup>70</sup>

In 1878, four miles of the middle stretch of the Waimanu Road remained untouched. In most of the completed sections the roadway was at least 16 feet wide making it possible for wheeled traffic to travel through. However, because the middle part was unfinished and impracticable, as Berry explained, it destroyed 'the utility of the whole'.<sup>71</sup> In November of that year, the government received yet another petition from the European residents of Rewa and Suva to improve communication links

---

69 *Auckland Star*, 25 January 1877 and *New Zealand Herald*, 26 January 1877; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

70 CSO 168/1878.

71 CSO 1569/1878.

between the port and the agricultural districts. Berry proposed that, with little expense, a bridle track could be completed to cover that distance so that both horses and footmen could get through.

Without sufficient labour, however, there was little that the surveyor-general or the government could do. Most available prisoners were assigned to other pressing public works projects around the colony, mostly in Taveuni and Levuka. Bringing them to Suva would hamper the completion of those projects. Other prisoners stationed in the Suva area were tied up cutting large trees. This had been instructed by the government for the government buildings and other infrastructural developments in and around the township. To work around the shortage of labour, Berry recommended that the chiefs of Suva, Rewa and Waimanu be approached and urged to contribute men from their villages to build the road.<sup>72</sup>

Gorrie agreed that Fijian villagers should be assigned to work on the roads. For the Waimanu Road, he proposed that the mountaineers of Naitāsiri and Wainimala, as well as villagers from Namosi, Serua and from Sawani and Colo-i-Suva should make the roads as part of *lala* – the non-remunerated tax that all villagers traditionally owed their chiefs.<sup>73</sup> Gorrie proposed further that the new Lower Rewa Road should be completed by the people of Rewa, Bau and Tailevu.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly, the government was availing itself of the cheap labour and resources of people in districts that surrounded Suva to finance the development of the township. This ‘free’ labour represented a massive saving for the cash-strapped government. However, these villagers had little if any connection with the road and would have been perplexed about why they were to build it when it was clearly intended to meet the interests of European planters.

## IX. The *Leonidas* Labourers

The extent to which these villagers actually participated in the construction of the roads is difficult to establish. However, in one of the turning points of Suva and Fiji’s history, almost 500 indentured labourers arrived from

72 CSO 1569/1878.

73 CSO 2190/1879.

74 CSO 2190/1879.



India on 14 May 1879 on board the ship *Leonidas*. The initial resistance of many planters to employ them meant that the government now had a significant supply of cheap labour to use on its own projects including the development of the Suva township.

By November, many of these labourers could be seen with shovels, picks, hammers and hoes in hand, gradually transforming Suva from a rural outback into an urban grid. They were put to work on the pier, the coastal road from Nabukalou Creek to the native reserve (i.e. Victoria Parade), the Waimanu Road, embanking the sides of the Nabukalou Creek, and filling the swamp on both sides of the creek.<sup>75</sup> The treatment of these indentured labourers was appalling from the beginning. They were accommodated in 'lines' but these buildings were overcrowded and flimsy, and when the hurricane of December 1879 struck, they were completely destroyed. Toilets were scant and no provisions were made for labourers to shelter in the shade when the sun was at its hottest.<sup>76</sup>

Much of the food they ate came in the form of rations of yam and taro. These were grown especially for them by villagers in various parts of the country.<sup>77</sup> This arrangement intimates that while villagers were not directly involved in the construction of the new town, many of them were indirectly implicated in the project because their labour and lands formed an integral part of the production of food and taxes that were necessary for the development of the town.

Most of the *Leonidas* labourers worked on Victoria Parade, Suva's main thoroughfare. At the end of 1881, they had completed approximately 1 kilometre of the road with a width of 16 metres across the whole length. The work was difficult and required the road to be raised more than a metre especially at the northern end near Nabukalou Creek. Some portions of the foreshore also had to be reclaimed. In two places, the workers had to cut through hills. The amount of earth removed in forming the road was estimated at over 20,000 cubic metres, a great part of which had to be transported more than half a mile away.<sup>78</sup>

---

75 CSO 1707/1879.

76 CSO 2167/1879.

77 CSO 855/1882.

78 CSO 2228/1881.



When the photographer and travel writer Gerard Ansdell visited in 1881, Suva had already been systematically laid out in blocks and streets. He commented that Victoria Parade extended:

... along the sea beach for upwards of a mile, and can be carried along almost *ad infinitum*; here the large stores are being built, and, as the roadway is well 'metalled' with coral, and planted with fine foliage and flowering trees throughout its entire length, it is no doubt, in a few years' time, it is destined to become the fashionable promenade of Fiji.<sup>79</sup>

And yet, this favourable description masks a more unpleasant reality. Progress had in fact been slow partly because of the nature of the work, but also because of the frequency of sickness among the labourers, and the many disputes that arose from their discontent with the conditions of employment.<sup>80</sup>

## X. The Shaping of the Town

Other projects were also underway, including the search for a suitable location for a cemetery. Finding a good burial ground was more difficult than anticipated. Dr Bolton Corney, the colony's chief medical officer, complained that he could not find even half a dozen acres of land with a sufficient depth of arable soil, except within the native reserve or at too great a distance from the township. An area on the abandoned Armstrong plantation at Nasēsē looked promising but the idea was abandoned when soapstone was found 5 feet below the soil. It would have required excessive labour to dig the graves.<sup>81</sup>

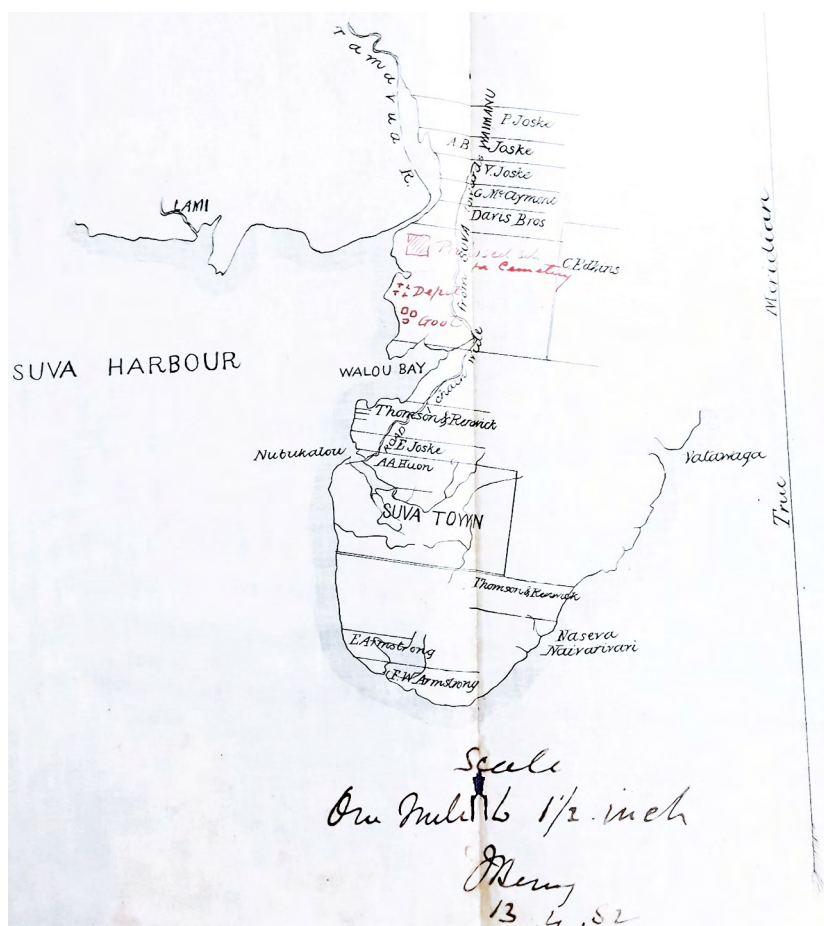
It took three more years of searching before an appropriate site was found. They settled on an 8-acre area at Nabuli near the Tamavua River, a short distance from the Melanesian Immigrant Depot and the newly built Suva prison. The site was deemed close enough to the township and was conveniently free of excess water and land crabs. The recently completed jetty by the labour depot made it possible for the public to access the burial grounds by road and by sea.<sup>82</sup>

79 Gerrard Ansdell, *A trip to the highlands of Viti Levu: Being a description of a series of photographic views taken in the Fiji Islands during the dry season of 1881* (London: H. Blair Ansdell, 1882), 6–7.

80 CSO 2228/1881.

81 CSO 1562/1878.

82 CSO 984/1882 and 1287/1882; see map in Figure 3.4.



**Figure 3.4: Bolton Corney report on the selection of a suitable site for a permanent public burial ground in Suva, 1882.**

Source: Chief Medical Officer to Colonial Secretary, 9 April 1882, CSO 1287/1882, NAF.

In the early 1880s, correspondents aptly wrote that Suva was still ‘very much in embryo as a town’. There were four hotels and half a dozen stores, a tobacconist, a chemist and a hairdresser, but neither a tailor nor a shoemaker. Some of them were owned by leading Levuka businessmen who had transitioned to Suva. New houses were springing up everywhere and the town was thought to be sprouting like ‘a digging township did in the good old days’.<sup>83</sup>

83 *Evening Star*, 23 September 1881 and *New Zealand Herald*, 19 September 1881; see paperspast.natlib.govt.nz.

The new settlement also attracted the interest of the church and preparations were made to have missionaries stationed in the town in anticipation of 'a considerable migration of the white population' to Suva.<sup>84</sup> The mission boards of the main Christian denominations of Australasia were quick to respond and worshippers soon flocked to the Saint Andrews Presbyterian Church (1883), the Wesleyan Jubilee Church (1885) and the Holy Trinity Anglican Church (1886).

Several public buildings were also in various stages of completion.<sup>85</sup> These included the hospital with its segregated wards on the heights behind Walu Bay (now St Giles Hospital), the prison (see Figure 3.4) with its segregated cell blocks, the government buildings and court house, the police quarters with separate barracks for European and Fijian policemen, a bank and the first frames on Nukulau Island where a quarantine station was being prepared specifically for indentured labourers from India. At Gordon's direction, his official residence had been built in 1878 of 'native and European materials', but he never occupied it. In 1881, however, plans were made to build a new Government House on the native reserve.<sup>86</sup>

On the educational front, a school was under consideration. Numbering close to 300 at the end of 1881, the European population lobbied the government to open a school to educate their children.<sup>87</sup> It took a further two years and more petitions before the government called for tenders to build the Suva Public school.<sup>88</sup> It was finally constructed on the site of the old Suva village cemetery. Whether the people of Suva were consulted about this use of their former burial grounds is yet to be determined.

Meanwhile, the residents had established a mechanics institute similar to that which thrived in Levuka.<sup>89</sup> This was a business-funded adult educational organisation that hosted a library and held seminars and lectures for European men. Aside from its educational benefits, it gave these men an air of respectability and helped avoid the temptations of disruptive diversions such as gambling and drinking, which might create

84 Methodist Mission in Fiji, Minutes of the Fiji District for 1881, F4 A. NAF.

85 CSO 2209/1881.

86 See CSO 142/1882, and *New Zealand Herald*, 16 July 1881; [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

87 CSO 979/1881.

88 See CSO 582/1883, 1136/1883 and 1207/1883.

89 *New Zealand Herald*, 19 September 1881.

disorder or worse, intimate interaction with other ethnicities. Regattas and cricket matches were other forms of entertainment that residents could look forward to.<sup>90</sup>

As Suva's European residents organised their town in their image, their Levuka counterparts looked on with dismay as the prospects of their own town declined. They made a last-gasp attempt to petition the Queen, again pleading that the government could ill afford the relocation. The British Government had approved a substantial loan of £130,000 to Fiji, £80,000 of which would pay for the Cakobau Government's liabilities and the remainder for development purposes within the colony. Half (£25,000) was earmarked for public works in Suva including roads, quays, drainage and water supply.<sup>91</sup> The administration was also considering further loans from private banks.<sup>92</sup> The consensus in Levuka was that these loans were unnecessary and would 'cause the Colony to retrograde from its present hopeful position'.<sup>93</sup> They calculated the cost to Levuka at £50,000 in lost revenue. As had happened in 1876, this petition was immediately followed by a counter-petition from Suva residents in which they again pointed to Levuka's numerous shortcomings and Suva's many advantages.<sup>94</sup>

Early in 1881, amid 'much wailing and gnashing of teeth', the residents of Levuka received the news from the new governor, William Des Voeux (1880–1885), that their petition had been declined. Efforts were immediately made to send a delegation of 'prominent colonists' to London and again 'forcibly represent to the Imperial Government the injustice and injury which will be done to Levuka and the colony by the removal of the capital to Suva'.<sup>95</sup> In its columns, the *Fiji Times* was particularly damning of the decision. It accused Gordon of discourtesy and railed that his decision would cause a very dire fiscal situation and allow his successor almost no room to manoeuvre.<sup>96</sup>

90 See *New Zealand Herald*, 28 February 1882 and 7 December 1882; [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

91 *Otago Daily Times*, 6 March 1878; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

92 See CSO 1113/1882 for a £15,000 loan for public works from the Bank of New Zealand.

93 See CSO 1287/1880 and 1674/1880.

94 CSO 1287/1880, 1446/1880, and 1309/1880.

95 *Samoa Times and South Sea Gazette*, 16 April 1881; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

96 Among others, see the editorials in the *Fiji Times* of 5 February 1881, 12 February 1881, 19 March 1881 and 27 April 1881.

Amid all the uproar in Levuka was a chorus of enthusiastic support from voices that sung Suva's praises. Its port as well as its rich and ample back country were especially complimented as in this letter from a Mr James Duncan:

The town has a gentle rise, and room for hundreds of houses, and will make a grand city. Government House, when finished, will have a splendid view seaward, embracing many islands, besides a full sweep of the bay. It has been said that the late Governor (Sir Arthur Gordon) did wrong in making Suva the capital. I know both places well, and can truthfully say that Suva is the best for shipping property, and will make by far the finest city. The buildings are going up fast ...<sup>97</sup>

For all their natural beauty, Suva and its surroundings were about to suffer a most brutal assault on their natural environment. In a warning about the enormous stress that the environment was put under, Major Harding wrote in February 1881 that large numbers of logs of all sizes were being felled by villagers in the neighbourhood of Suva for sale to private persons. The *sagali*, a species of mangrove, was particularly sought after because its wood was hard and durable and ideal for all structures including roads and bridges. Harding could see that stocks in the margins of the streams were being severely depleted and ecosystems were coming under severe strain, and he called for regulations.<sup>98</sup>

One major contributor to the depletion of trees was the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) Company whose new mill at Nausori required vast quantities of wood to fuel its crushing and other machines. This wood was sourced from large swathes of *dogo*, *tiri* and mountain timber in the Rewa and Naitāsiri regions.<sup>99</sup> But the government was an even larger and hungrier consumer of wood. It needed timber for all infrastructural developments including the wharf, roads and all buildings. To meet this need, it instructed the chiefs and villagers in the greater Suva district and beyond to cut logs as their tax requirement.<sup>100</sup> The shortfall in local supply was met by fleets of timber vessels from Australia, New Zealand and America.<sup>101</sup>

97 *Evening Star*, 28 July 1882; paperspast.natlib.govt.nz.

98 CSO 397/1881.

99 CSO 1683/1880.

100 CSO 2011/1881.

101 See *New Zealand Herald*, 16 July 1881; paperspast.natlib.govt.nz.

## XI. The Removal of Suva Village

While colonial officials, businessmen and labourers busied themselves with the structure and form of the township, the villagers of Suva continued to live a relatively confined existence on their reserve. In 1875 they had fought a monumental battle to survive the measles pandemic, which killed a third of indigenous Fijians. As *buli* of Suva, Ratu Aporosa played a leading role in the management of that crisis, ensuring that proper sanitation was observed and that the bodies of the dead were buried well outside village boundaries.<sup>102</sup>

As the pandemic subsided, life slowly returned to normal. The new 'normal' of colonial life required villagers to plant and weed their village plantations. Some were meant to feed the villagers while others were intended to produce tax in kind, mainly taro, yam and cotton, to pay for the expenses of the colonial administration. Chiefs in the wider Suva district were instructed to supervise these plantations and ensure that tax targets were met. The early experiments were disastrous. The stipendiary magistrate for Suva, PS Friend, wrote that these tax plantations were 'a complete failure'. He punished the chiefs of Veisari, Muaivuso and the new *buli* of Suva, Mosese Rokotalau, with one week imprisonment for neglecting their duties.<sup>103</sup> Ratu Aporosa had been replaced, presumably for disciplinary reasons.

One of the principal objections that Friend raised in his report was that so much of the physical work on the plantations was left to women and girls. Overburdened with their own work, he decried that wives weeded all their husbands' taro, via and yam gardens. On the larger cotton plantations, men also left their share of the work almost entirely to their wives. He recommended that women of all ages be prohibited from weeding the plantations.<sup>104</sup>

After his dismissal from government, Ratu Aporosa turned to the timber trade. His operation went as far as the border of the Namosi province where, in January 1881, he became embroiled in a dispute with the Tui Namosi over who owned the forest reserves at Naqara. Commenting on

---

102 CGR 329/43/1875.

103 CSO 576/1877.

104 CSO 144/1877.

the dispute, Friend warned that if the title to the land was not resolved quickly, 'a serious quarrel if nothing worse will be the result between the two chiefs'.<sup>105</sup>

He operated as a private contractor supplying wood both to private individuals and to the government. Because he was directing villagers to cut wood for him, he was in direct competition with the new *buli* whose instructions were to ensure that villagers were cutting logs to fulfil their tax quota. The two men had been at loggerheads before, mainly because Ratu Aporosa thought Rokotalau was inferior in rank and ability. In customary terms, Rokotalau was one of Ratu Aporosa's subordinates but he held the senior government position. As an old hand on Fijian politics, David Wilkinson explained: 'The relative positions of Avorosa and the Buli Suva are very anomalous and has often been the cause of a great deal of heart-burning and trouble.'<sup>106</sup>

Ratu Aporosa was not bound by government directives in the way that Rokotalau was. His spirit of independence must have surprised colonial officials, accustomed as they were to the normal acquiescence of iTaukei chiefs. This independent spirit won the Tui Suva much favour among the town's most powerful businessmen. Indeed, in April 1879, he travelled to Melbourne and visited the city at the invitation of McEwen and Co., the company representing the interests of Thomson and Renwick.<sup>107</sup> The precise nature of Ratu Aporosa's relationship with the two businessmen is yet to be established.

He was certainly well known among Suva's European community. Several men rented from him at Suva village and fed his craving for alcohol. Bringing this matter to the colonial secretary's attention, Friend wrote:

I would again bring under your notice the undesirability of Europeans living in native towns. The effect cannot possibly be good but cause a great deal of harm. Suva has now several tenants some of whom I am afraid are not very good characters. If this be permitted natives will be allowed to get as much spirits as they like. In fact the policeman reported to me that an English lodger of Ambrose's was seen to take a bottle of gin to the house and next morning several persons remarked that Ambrose and Ratu Joni were under the influence of drink.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> CSO 375/1881.

<sup>106</sup> CSO 787/1879.

<sup>107</sup> *The Western Star*, 3 May 1879; see [trove.nla.gov.au](http://trove.nla.gov.au).

<sup>108</sup> CSO 858/1881.

Wilkinson also pointed out that Ratu Aporosa had become disenchanted with the government ostensibly because of the way its officials treated him. He had been overlooked for government appointment and even done time in prison as punishment for a disturbance he had caused during the annual meeting of the Council of Chiefs in Rewa in December 1877.<sup>109</sup> Wilkinson suggested that because Rokotalau had repeatedly begged to be allowed to resign, the government ought to appoint Ratu Aporosa as the *buli* and give him one more trial. In spite of resistance from some senior officials who continued to regard Ratu Aporosa as ‘a confirmed drunk’,<sup>110</sup> Wilkinson’s recommendation was adopted.

The government needed Ratu Aporosa on its side because it wanted Suva’s native reserve. Hirokazu Miyazaki’s anthropological work on Suvavou (2004) contains a valuable section that examines the move from Suva to Suvavou. He points out that, according to Gordon’s land policy, no Fijian land could be lawfully alienated. Furthermore, land that had been sold but not occupied by European buyers was deemed to be native land and was returned to the original owners. In Suva, several lots that the Polynesian Company and Renwick and Thomson had sold to Australian clients fell in the category of lands that were never formally occupied. Under the existing policy, they should have been returned to the people of Suva. However, the Gordon and Des Voeux administrations did not return the Suva lands to their original owners and kept them instead for the Crown.<sup>111</sup>

How then, did the government convince the people of Suva to leave their village and move to Suvavou? Clearly, without the Tui Suva’s consent the village could not have been moved. The precise nature of the agreement between him and Gordon remains a mystery. A dispatch from William Des Voeux suggests that the arrangement involved an annual rent of £200, an amount that:

109 See CSO 215/1878 and 223/1878.

110 CSO 787/1879.

111 See Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The method of hope: Anthropology, philosophy, and Fijian knowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 40, and Frances Steel, *Oceania under steam: Sea transport and the cultures of colonialism, c. 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 173.



in the opinion of the Commissioner of Native Affairs is the least that will satisfy the Natives of the Suva peninsula, who in accordance with an arrangement made by Sir Arthur Gordon are to vacate these lands and to move the site of their original town.<sup>112</sup>

Writing in 1907 about the absence of any formal documents, Governor im Thurn noted that no report on the arrangement had been sent to the secretary of state for colonies. He lamented that:

Somewhere about 1882, we by arrangement with the then native occupants took over the land on which Government House stands and a good deal else – but, as I have said, I don't know what else ... no title to the land or agreement with the Natives is in existence; ... Government has therefore still no title beyond what it may have acquired by the acquiescence of the natives in our possession of the land and by their acceptance of rent since 1882.<sup>113</sup>

With the absence of any formal deed, the government's view of its right to the land has most often rested on the fact that the people of Suva accepted the annual sum of £200 since 1882. This has been taken to mean that they agreed to the arrangement. This was the position taken by Arthur Mahaffy, the acting colonial secretary in 1907, when confronted with another petition from the people of Suvavou for evidence that they had 'surrendered' their right to Suva land to the government. However, his minute indicated his own frustration that the government did not have any documentary proof to substantiate its claims to the land.<sup>114</sup>

By April 1881, the government had taken possession of the land with the intention of building the new Government House on it.<sup>115</sup> Six years later, the Crown and Native Lands Ordinance of 1888 was enacted to plug any outstanding loopholes that might have remained in the Crown's acquisition of Suva lands in the area between the Tamavua and Samabula rivers.<sup>116</sup> With this ordinance the attorney-general, Francis Winter, thought the government had attained absolute proprietorship of Suva lands and that the annual £200 should be regarded as an 'annuity' and not as 'quit rent'.<sup>117</sup>

112 Despatch 2, 6 January 1882, cited in Thurn to Colonial Secretary, 16 September 1907, CSO 4469/1907; also cited in Miyazaki, *The method of hope*, 48.

113 CSO 4469/1907; also cited in Miyazaki, *The method of hope*, 47–48.

114 CSO 4469/1907; also cited in Miyazaki, *The method of hope*, 48.

115 CSO 858/1881.

116 CSO 2908/1887.

117 CSO 2908/1887.

As per the agreement, the villagers moved across the bay to Suvavou ('New Suva') by the coast next to Lami village. In the absence of formal documents, one can assume that Lami was chosen because they were the *bati* (warriors) of Suva, and had a traditional obligation to provide for the Tui Suva.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, the relocation was not as smooth as might be expected. A mere 10 years later, Suvavou was used as a prime example about the dangers of taking people off their lands. 'Look at Suvavou,' one critic wrote, 'they were taken off their lands and now are quarrelling with their neighbours.'<sup>119</sup>

No sooner had the Suva villagers packed their belongings to move across the bay than *vulagi* or wanderers mainly from Kadavu, Ba and Nadi moved into the deserted village and reoccupied it. They were joined by a few more from Rewa, Tailevu and Naitāsiri who were in Suva to sell their produce.<sup>120</sup> The superintendent of police, Frederick Craigie Halkett, suggested that the government find land in the town centre to accommodate these people but, fearing an influx of other 'vagabonds', the government declined the proposition. The *vulagi* were cast out and the area kept under surveillance day and night by the police to avoid any further such squatting.<sup>121</sup>

Asked to comment on the matter, Ratu Aporosa confirmed that the people of Suva had completed their move to Suvavou around August and September 1882 and that since then, their plantations on the native reserve had been raided and the produce stolen. They did not know any of the *vulagi* who had moved into the village since it had been vacated. He verified that 21 houses had been built and occupied in Suvavou. However, he urged the government to expedite the erection of the remaining 19 houses that had been promised, as several homes in the new village were heavily overcrowded.<sup>122</sup>

---

118 CSO 3221/1893.

119 *Report of the commission appointed to inquire into the decrease of the native population* (Suva: Government Printer, 1893), 91.

120 CSO 1495/1882.

121 CSO 1406/1882 and 1495/1882.

122 CSO 1336/1882, 1406/1882 and 1495/1882.

Suva  
N<sup>o</sup>. 20/1882

Ki na tabacakacaka i taukui au sa  
taura na nomudou vola ena bogi kau  
sa vilika sian kau sa sega ni kila ni sa  
basu edua na vale ia kau sa gai vaka  
Sogoni va na kai Suva. Au sa tarozi  
va oei sa basu vale vei kemudou era  
sagpi takuna vei au e segai  
Edua tale kuitou pa mai vula rua e  
Suva vou ia ka sa oso tuga ku Suva ena  
tamata oi ra na vulagi i kuitou sega ni  
kila ka basuka na vale se kiva na sa  
oso oso tuga na vei vale ka fovea na gau  
na ogo  
E dua tale ena rukuni mitou vei vale  
sa sega na gawa tu ogo kuitou sa vei oso i  
tuga e na vei vale e dua na vale ka lue  
tini cara tiko na lueva  
Ka tukuni me va sagavulu na vale kei  
sa gawa eso ka sega ni rewa eso sa vinaka  
me bau vaka tolo taki me mai tara  
tale na kena vo sa voga elini kaciwa  
Edua tale na ka ena rukuni mitou tate  
kuitou sa tiko ni Suva sa buta ko ce  
keci Saoti noqe tukutuku  
Au sa loloma ani veiko  
Bei Arbrasa J  
Buli Suva.

**Figure 3.5: Letter from Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya to the Native Commissioner, 20 November 1882.**

Source: CSO 1406/1882, NAF.

Turning the *vulagi* back to the streets of Suva only worsened the housing crisis. Most of the hundreds of casual labourers who flocked into Suva to meet the labour demand earned between £4 and £6 per annum and could ill afford to rent a place.<sup>123</sup> By 1883, conditions of squalor were appearing on the sea side of Victoria Parade.<sup>124</sup> Several complaints were lodged with the government about the ‘inconvenience and annoyance’ caused by the great number of people without shelter who each night sought refuge in doorways and verandahs of the stores and banks on the beach.<sup>125</sup> On any given night, their kits of vegetables, boxes, mats, tins, bottles, bundles, cooking utensils and other paraphernalia endlessly encumbered the walkways.

In its response, the government was most preoccupied by questions of security. Because *vulagi* used tobacco and firesticks (matches) so freely, they were thought to be ‘a grave source of danger to the security of the town’.<sup>126</sup> Criminal activity also seemed on the rise:

There can be no doubt that much of the petty crime complained of and which remains undetected is committed by these strangers, who must often be driven to severe straits for food and shelter, and who in their independent search for these, fall into the way of temptation.<sup>127</sup>

Yet, the government also knew that the trade carried on by this floating population was quite considerable and growing quickly. The police continued to be critical of the ‘most comfortless and pitiable’ existence of these people, especially in stormy weather, and advocated that a piece of land with a few good sheds and a secure fence be set aside for them.<sup>128</sup> However, other officials warned that such provisions would encourage ‘vagabondage’ and give them false hopes.<sup>129</sup> Public money being in such short supply, they argued that ‘the natives themselves should put up houses for their own accommodation’.<sup>130</sup>

123 *Evening Star*, 23 Sept 1881; paperspast.natlib.govt.nz.

124 CSO 3297/1883.

125 CSO 3297/1883; see also 2903/1884 and 2174/1886.

126 CSO 3297/1883.

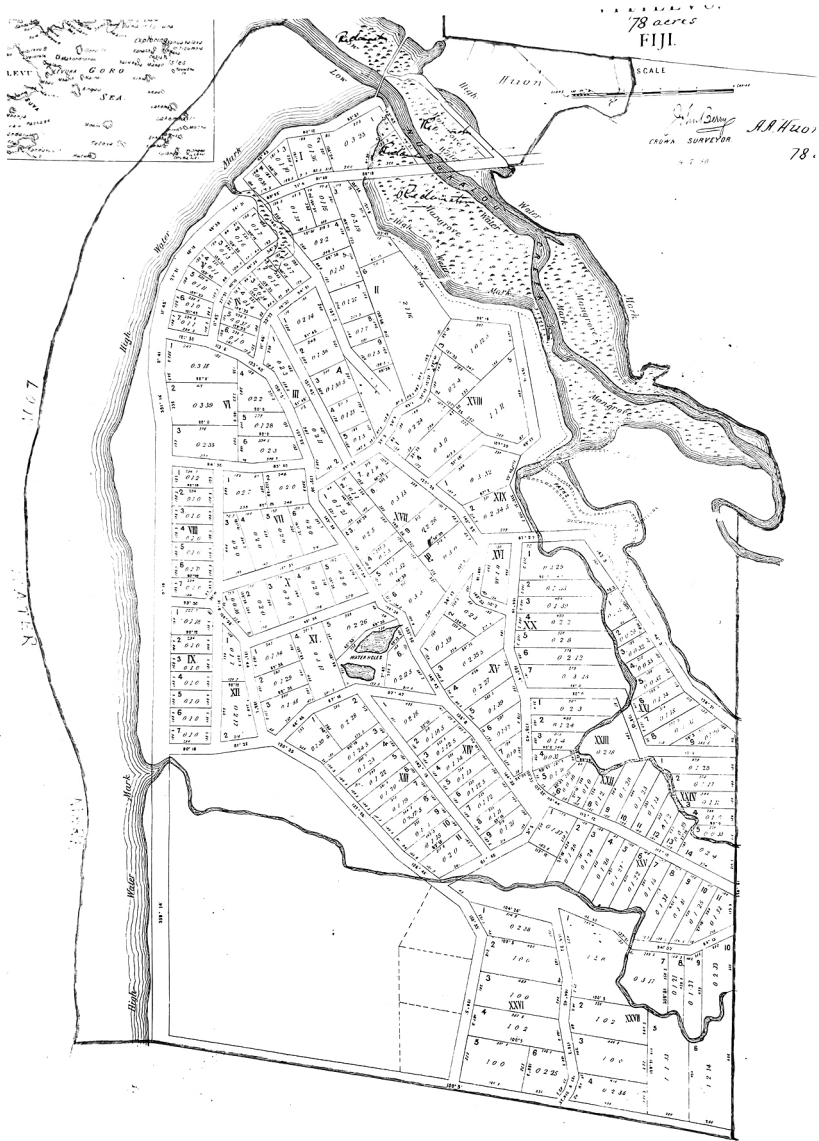
127 CSO 3297/1883.

128 See CSO 866/1880 and 2903/1884.

129 CSO 3297/1883.

130 See CSO 2174/1886.

### 3. THE MAKING OF A CAPITAL



**Figure 3.6: Map of Suva showing township lots, 1882.**

Source CSO 2123/1882, 2259/1882, NAF.

In the midst of this housing crisis, the government released more town lots for sale. After an initial release of 160 lots in 1881<sup>131</sup> another set was released in 1882.<sup>132</sup> The extent to which these lots had been surveyed can be gauged from the map in Figure 3.6 from 1882. While they appear plentiful, none were affordable to ordinary Fijians, whether indigenous or other. From the perspective of the colonised, therefore, the housing crisis persisted.

The next chapter is a companion chapter in the sense that it discusses the evolution of the issues and challenges that Suva and its people encountered in the decade after 1882 when the last remaining government officials left Levuka to move to Suva, completing the final act in the transfer of the capital. It also provides some concluding remarks of the broader significance of this 20-year period for late nineteenth-century Fijian history.

---

131 See *Royal Fiji Gazette*, 6 June 1881.

132 See *Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 1882; see [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

This text is taken from *Suva Stories: A History of the Capital of Fiji*,  
edited by Nicholas Halter, published 2022, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.03)