

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

(A quote by Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana)

These words are inscribed on a plaque at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.



**John Potaski's story
Australia's first Polish settler**



John Potaski was born in Belarus. In the late 1790s he arrived in London seeking asylum as a refugee fleeing conflict in eastern Europe. Joseph and Irish Catherine Sullivan were married in London where then their son Joseph was born.



According to the historians and the Potaskis'-their family opposed Russian rule and actively supported Polish Lithuania military engineer Tadeusz Kosciuszko, Polish hero, and leader of the 1793 Kosciuszko Uprising against Russian occupation. One member of the Potaski's family was executed by the Russians as a rebel leader and many were forced to flee their homeland.

London was a multi-cultural city with a fast-rising population of refugees and economic migrants escaping war and conflict in Europe.

As the central London population increased so did overcrowding, unemployment, poverty, and petty crime.

Poverty likely led to the crime committed by John Potaski and John O'Brien who were both convicted of stealing a small hair shawl from a London shop, found guilty and sentenced to 7-years transportation to Van Diemen's Land.

John Potaski's wife Catherine and son Joseph were permitted to accompany John on the voyage to the new colony along with several other convicts, military, and settler families.

In 1806 daughter Eleanora was born and the Potaski family moved to Catherine's 30-acre grant at Kangaroo Point, Warrane and set to work clearing and cultivating their land.

In 1811 daughter Hannah was born and by 1816 Warrane farm was well established with Surveyor G.

W. Evans noting John Potaski's ability to produce high yield, quality crops in his early report.

The Potaskis' leased additional properties in Clarence district including Geilstown Farm where reputedly the first farmhouse in Van Diemen's Land was erected in 1810, owned by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Geils, Commandant of Hobart 1812-13.

The Potaski's grew high yielding corn crops, more than required by the Government for 12 months' supply to the colony, kept cows and sheep, grew wheat, established orchards, and grew apples, peaches, and grapes. The

family's resilience and hard work paid off and their success no doubt improved their lives and community standing considerably.

In November 1819, a 16-year-old Catherina was in an intimate relationship with convict Robert Hunter and their son William Potaski was born in August 1820. There was no father's name listed on baby William's birth record.

21 September 1820 a masked gang of five commit a robbery at Thrupp's home 'Restdown', armed with a blunderbuss and pistol they threatened Thrupp's servants. Desk drawers and documents were ransacked, and Joe Potaski took documents from Mrs. Thrupp who had them hidden in her bodice, Joeread them, burnt some and placed others in his pocket as the gang took items of value including, jewellery, food, alcohol, clothing, a compass, and spy glass. Hunter and Graney were the only ones recognised and named by witnesses, Graney led authorities to the hiding places of the stolen goods and dobed in the other three men including Joseph Potaski, they were all arrested and thrown in Hobart Town gaol.

On 3rd February 1821 Sydney Supreme Court sentenced to deaths Joseph Potaski 20, Robert Hunter 25, Edward Brady 20, and James Flinn aka Foy. The fifth man Graney escaped the gallows after providing evidence against the others. The condemned men were taken back to Hobart Town Gaol to await their execution.

Wooden Gallows were erected at top Macquarie Street on the road to Cascades where on the 28th of April 1821 Joseph Potaski, Robert Hunter, James Flinn and Edward Brady were all hanged.

On 10th of July 1822 John Potaski was charged with having stolen property in his possession, namely sheep on his farmland in Warrane that did not belong to him.

Around this time John Potaski sold his family farm and land in Warrane, originally his wife Catherine's land grant, to former convict William Maum, an Irish Catholic Political prisoner, a fascinating man who taught Greek and Latin.

Catherina gave birth to another son in February 1823 naming him Joseph McDonnell. The father was former convict Edward McDonnell.

Two weeks after baby Joseph's birth Catherina's 3-year-old son William Potaski died.

In late June 1824 Catherina and Edward McDonnell were married at St. Virgil's Catholic Church in Hobart Town. Catherina and Edward went on to have 9 children, all born in Tasmania.



English: Catherine McDonald (nee Potaski) daughter of convict Joseph Potaski. Catherine was the first European born and baptised in Tasmania. Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.

Just three months after Catherina and Edward's marriage Catherina's father John Potaski passed away in late August 1824. He was 59 years old.

Catherina and Edward with their children and widowed mother Catherine Potaski (nee Sullivan) moved to Lara and then Geelong joining her elder daughter Mary who married William Stynes in Tasmania than moving to Victoria near to the Stynes extended family already settled in the area.

Catherina's sister Hannah stayed in Tasmania, married, and widowed twice with several children. She settled on the Northwest coast and had many descendants across Tasmania and beyond.

Catherina and Edward had over 50 grandchildren, hundreds of great grandchildren, and thousands of descendants in Australia and across the world.

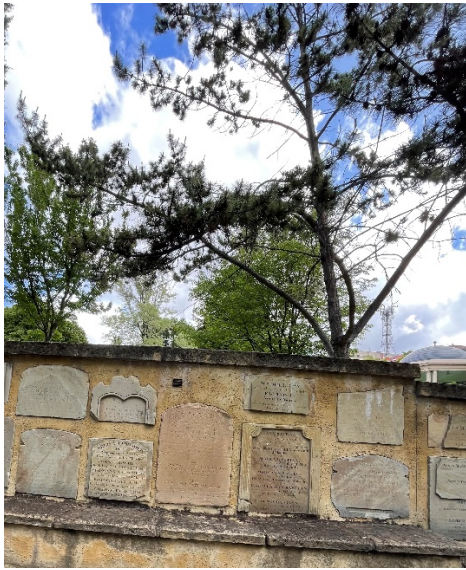




Cemetery of the first settlers

In October 2003 over 200 Potaski descendants held a gathering and concert in Hobart to celebrate the 200-year anniversary of the Potaski family's arrival and continue to meet every year to commemorate their remarkable ancestors. A memorial plaque has been erected at St. David's Park in Hobart by those descendants.





St.David's Park in Hobart

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Photos: Danuta and Bogusław Piotrowski

Sources:

Polonia in Australia: Challenges and possibilities in the New Millennium- Edited by Elizabeth Drozd and Desmond Cahill

The first settlers-<https://htfs.org.au>**Joseph Potaski - the first known Polish settler -**
<https://www.polishcommunity.org.au>