

JOHN MELTON BLACK

1830 - 1919



The man with a vision for a thriving port settlement

John Melton Black is credited with being the “practical” founder of Townsville. Townsville may not have grown to become the “Capital of North Queensland” without this man’s energy, vision and enterprise.

Black arrived from Scotland in 1852 and joined the Victorian gold rush. In Melbourne, he profited from a successful carrying business servicing the goldfields and also built the first Theatre Royal. Black set his sights on the vast tracts of unsettled lands in North Queensland as an opportunity for pastoral wealth. After establishing in the north, Black recognised the need for a coastal landing place closer to his pastoral leases. He sent his station manager to explore Cleveland Bay for a suitable site for a port. Ross Creek was identified and became the site of Townsville’s early development. Realising the area’s potential, Black, an astute businessman, entered into a partnership with prominent Sydney businessman Robert Towns to secure financial backing for the port and township.

In late 1864, under Black’s management, the first wharf, store and buildings were erected at the mouth of Ross Creek. For the next few years, Black was the driving force behind the new settlement. He worked as the town surveyor, builder, storekeeper, shipping agent, stockman and newspaper editor. When the town was proclaimed a municipality, he became Mayor for the first two terms. Troubled by failing health, the hardships of pioneer life and a strained relationship with Robert Towns, Black returned to Sydney in 1867, selling his share of the business to Towns. Black never returned to Townsville. However, the Townsville community sent him a beautifully designed gold cup which recognised “valuable services In opening up and developing the resources of North Queensland”. Black later married and settled in England. He died in London in 1919 aged 89.



John Melton Black (1830 - 1919)



Townsville 1870, showing South Townsville in background



Flinders Street East c.1870s