

ANA-MARIA TRAIAN

‘The Famous Mrs Fanny Finch’: one woman’s vote echoes down the generations

The sun is high in the sky. It’s voting day on the Castlemaine goldfields, and people are out and about in the January heat. Many are making their way to the Town Hall to elect their councillors for 1856. From a distance, two women stand out in the crowd. One of them is later described in the *Mount Alexander Mail* as a ‘coloured lady attired in very bright blue silk with artificial flowers’. Colourful dresses are an uncommon sight in Castlemaine, unless the wearer is Fanny Finch.

Mrs Fanny Finch was a striking figure in Castlemaine. Though most women would not be granted the vote in Victoria until 1908, Fanny had come to the Town Hall to make a stand. The law said that businessowners and ratepayers had the right to elect their councillors. So, Fanny – a well-known restaurant owner, a single mother, and the illegitimate daughter of an enslaved African domestic worker – went to cast her vote.

Fanny first came to my attention during one of Melbourne’s long lockdowns in 2021. Although the world was standing still, the library and its staff continued taking reference enquiries from the community. One day via our Ask a Librarian service, we received an enquiry from Karen, Fanny’s great-great-granddaughter, wanting to know about Fanny’s ballot. The question about that day in 1856 made me curious to rediscover Fanny and her remarkable story.

Municipal Council Voting Paper from the 1856 Castlemaine election cast by Fanny Finch, 1856, Castlemaine Art Museum, M94.15.

MUNICIPAL COUNCIL VOTING PAPER.

I, THE UNDERSIGNED, being duly Qualified, do hereby Vote for the parties under-mentioned, against whose names my Initials appear.

~~MR. JOSEPH DAVIS~~
~~MR. THOMAS ANDREWS~~
~~MR. A. S. PALMER~~
~~MR. JOHN MILLS~~
~~MR. W. T. SMITH~~
~~MR. WALTER SMITH~~
~~MR. HUGH McMILLAN~~
~~MR. ED. JACKSON~~
~~MR. O'KEEFE~~
~~MR. FROONES~~
~~MR. V. HERSCHÉ~~
~~MR. S. LOVE~~
~~MR. COLLYNS~~
~~MR. WIGHTMAN~~
~~MR. T. HINDS~~
~~MR. F. HERSCHÉ~~

Signed

Fanny Hindle

N.B. No Person can attach his Initials to more than Seven of the above Candidates, without Invalidating this paper.

Miss Fanny Combe (also spelt 'Coombe' in records) was born in London in 1815 to Lydia Holloway, an enslaved woman of African heritage who was a domestic servant. Lydia had her daughter out of wedlock, and it would have been hard for her to keep or support her child in her position and as a single mother. So, after baptising the baby Louisa King, Lydia organised for her to be accepted as a foundling at London's Foundling Hospital. Here, Louisa was renamed Frances Combe. The archives of the Foundling Hospital tell us that the parents of Louisa King (renamed Frances Combe) are Lydia Holloway and John King. Her baptism record states the same thing, but on her death certificate we find totally different names for her parents (Cecilia Hotham and naval captain Jackson Francis). The reason for this difference isn't recorded. As an adult, Frances' might have considered it better for her social standing to fabricate her origins.

As a foundling, Frances was taught to read and write, which would otherwise have been unusual for someone of her class. She was also taught housekeeping and other skills. Most girls coming out of the Foundling Hospital became domestic servants. When Frances turned 16 years old, she started working in the home of author and artist Julia Wyatt. Julia was married to surgeon Dr William Wyatt, who would become South Australia's first Protector of Aborigines. In 1836 they all embarked on the *John Renwick* bound for Adelaide.

Julia was an outspoken advocate for women's education and in Fanny, she found a bright young woman with an inquisitive mind and a natural curiosity. Julia invited Fanny to migrate with her and helped her receive free passage to Australia. Other passengers on the *John Renwick* described the special connection Julia had with her maid.

Soon after arriving in Adelaide, Fanny married sailor Joseph Finch. They had four children in the first ten years of their marriage. In 1841, South Australia was hit by a depression. Families like the Finches would have struggled with daily necessities. This may have been a factor in their brief imprisonment in 1844, after they were charged with stealing a six-pound cheque.

The incident – reported in newspapers of the time – began when Joseph was walking down Rundle Street and chanced upon an unattended cheque on the roadside. Although Joseph knew it was a cheque, he was illiterate and unable to make out its details. He took the cheque home and offered his wife a deal: if she were to cash it, he'd give her one pound of the six. The couple had three children under five years old at the time – one of whom was still nursing age. Evidently, Joseph knew cashing the cheque was theft. Did he believe that Fanny, as a woman, would be judged less harshly if she changed it?



Top Castlemaine in the 1850s was a busy mining town. ST Gill, *Market Square Castlemaine, Forest Creek*, lithograph, 13.9 x 20.3 cm, 1855, H94.83/3 (top). **Bottom** Thomas Ham, *Forest Creek, Mt. Alexander*, engraving, 21.0 x 30.0 cm, 1852, 30328102131678/7 (bottom).

Fanny did change the cheque, but she didn't tell Joseph. Instead, she kept the money for herself, and made a request to an Eliza Fleming, who was residing at 'Mrs. Finch's' at the time, to purchase goods on her behalf. Fanny was aware that under the *Marriage Act* of 1842 a woman and all she possessed were the lawful possession and responsibility of her husband.

When the owner of the cheque inquired with the bank, it was easy for the police to track Fanny down. Fanny was represented by two lawyers at the trial, while her husband Joseph stood undefended. The court ruled that no crime was committed as the judge considered that Joseph only picked up the cheque and gave it to his wife for safe custody and she misused it. The judge did deliver an admonition to Joseph for his 'imprudent conduct, and ill-treatment to his wife'. One of the witnesses during the trial said that Fanny was kept for long periods of time with no money, when it was the husband's duty to supply it.

In the early 1850s, Fanny left Joseph. She took the children and moved to Castlemaine, Victoria, where she went into business. She started with a restaurant, serving beef soup *à la mode* and pork roast daily from 7am to 7pm. Then she added some rooms for rent. In 1852, women on the goldfields were significantly outnumbered by men who had come to find their fortunes. Her business was well received, with many saying that it was the only decent place where you could find boarding. *The Mount Alexander Mail* reported that Fanny 'acquired great credit for the manner in which she conducted her restaurant... her refreshment at the time was the only one in which any person could get respectable accommodation'.

Fanny became known for being outspoken and fearless. It wasn't an easy life on the goldfields, especially for a single woman and a mother, but she nevertheless made a name for herself as a successful businesswoman. The law gave any ratepaying person who operated a business the right to vote. It didn't contemplate that such a person could be a woman, but Fanny saw the

Two women voted—one, the famous Mrs. Fanny Finch, gave a plumper for Mr. Walter Smith, which is noted as an incident of the day; and Mr. Aberdeen's vote was disallowed. It may be added that the members elected are mostly highly respectable, able, and efficient men, pretty well known in the district; and though some few may be disappointed, yet the inhabitants generally will be nearly satisfied with the result of the election as a whole, and support their municipality.

Using Trove (trove.nla.gov.au), Ana-Maria was able to find multiple newspaper references to Fanny. *The Argus*, 24 January 1856, p. 6.



Fanny's great-great-granddaughter Karen holding Fanny's voting ballot. Photo supplied.

loophole. And so, on 22 January 1856, Mrs Fanny Finch went to the Town Hall to vote. The two male assessors invalidated her vote due to her gender, but her ballot survives in the Castlemaine Art Museum.

Fanny's 1856 ballot was a stand for justice, casting her vote 50 years before that right was granted to most women in Victoria, and over 100 years before it was granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia. Fanny's courage in demanding a woman's right to vote is not forgotten. Her inspirational example was just the beginning.

Read Ana-Maria's blog about Fanny at blogs.slv.vic.gov.au.

If you're working on a family history project, State Library Victoria's Ask a Librarian service and free Access membership open a treasure trove of support and resources, including expert family history librarian support. Get started at slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/family-history