

History stands corrected: Smith, not Hargraves, first to discover gold in NSW

By [Julie Power](#)

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For 170 years all that remained of mineralogist William Tipple Smith was a quartz gold sample, an unmarked grave and a reputation as the fraud who claimed to have discovered payable gold before Edward Hargraves.

On Thursday the history that most Australian schoolchildren learnt about events leading to the NSW gold rush in 1851 was corrected.



Bill Hamburger, left, the great-great-grandson of William Tipple Smith, stands at Smith's grave in Rookwood Cemetery during the unveiling of a new headstone and plaque on Thursday. *KATE GERAGHTY*

An anonymous grave, previously known only as number 4929, section four, Rookwood Cemetery, was marked for the first time. It now reads: "William Tipple Smith, 1803-1852, Mineralogist, discoverer of Australia's first payable gold and co-founder of Australia's iron and steel industry."

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A commemorative plaque also details Smith's contribution to Australian history, ending a decades-long fight by his descendants to correct the record.

"A wrong perpetrated by a corrupt colonial administration in 1851 has been put to rights by its successor, the NSW government, almost 170 years later," was how his descendant and author Lynette Silver summed it up.

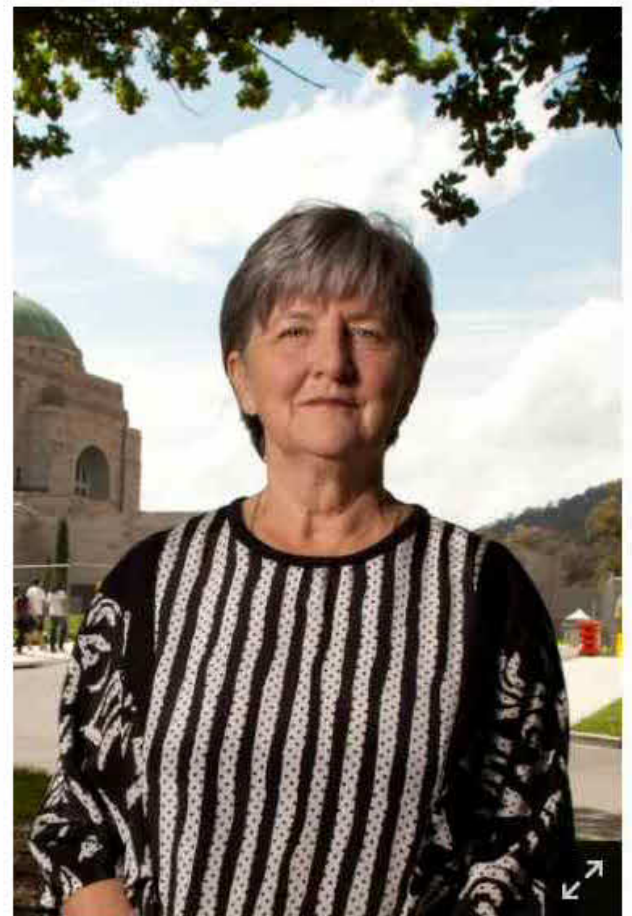
Ms Silver found missing documents that proved Smith had sent gold nuggets to England and letters detailing his claims that in 1848 he had found a payable goldfield near Yorkeys Corner. Missing for decades, the letters had been filed under "M" for Sir Roderick Murchison (a prominent British geologist who encouraged Smith) instead of "S" for Smith.

Three years later in February 1851, Hargraves heard there might be gold in the hills west of the Blue Mountains. He only found a few specks, but that didn't stop him from boasting of it to the Colonial Secretary and asking for a reward.

Hargraves returned to look for more gold, helped by men who had been told where Smith had found gold. When one of the men relieved himself in a creek near Yorkeys Corner, Ms Silver said, something sparkled – and he found a gold nugget. After Hargraves had claimed credit and boasted miners would find nuggets as "big as your boot", thousands rushed to the goldfields.

Hargraves received a £12,000 reward from the government while Smith's life ended in poverty and misfortune. He had lost the use of his right arm before migrating to Australia; Ms Silver said a stroke then affected his left arm and speech, making it difficult to pursue his claim.

Smith had emigrated to Australia from Suffolk in 1835. In 1847, he went looking for gold on the western side of the Blue Mountains and he found it the following year. That same year he and partners produced Australia's first iron and steel at Mittagong. His company would later become BHP.



Lynette Silver found missing documents that proved William Tipple Smith's achievement. PENNY BRADFIELD

Well before Hargraves made his discovery, Smith had visited NSW's colonial secretary in early 1849 carrying a gold nugget as proof, and promising to reveal the location in return for £500 to cover his costs.

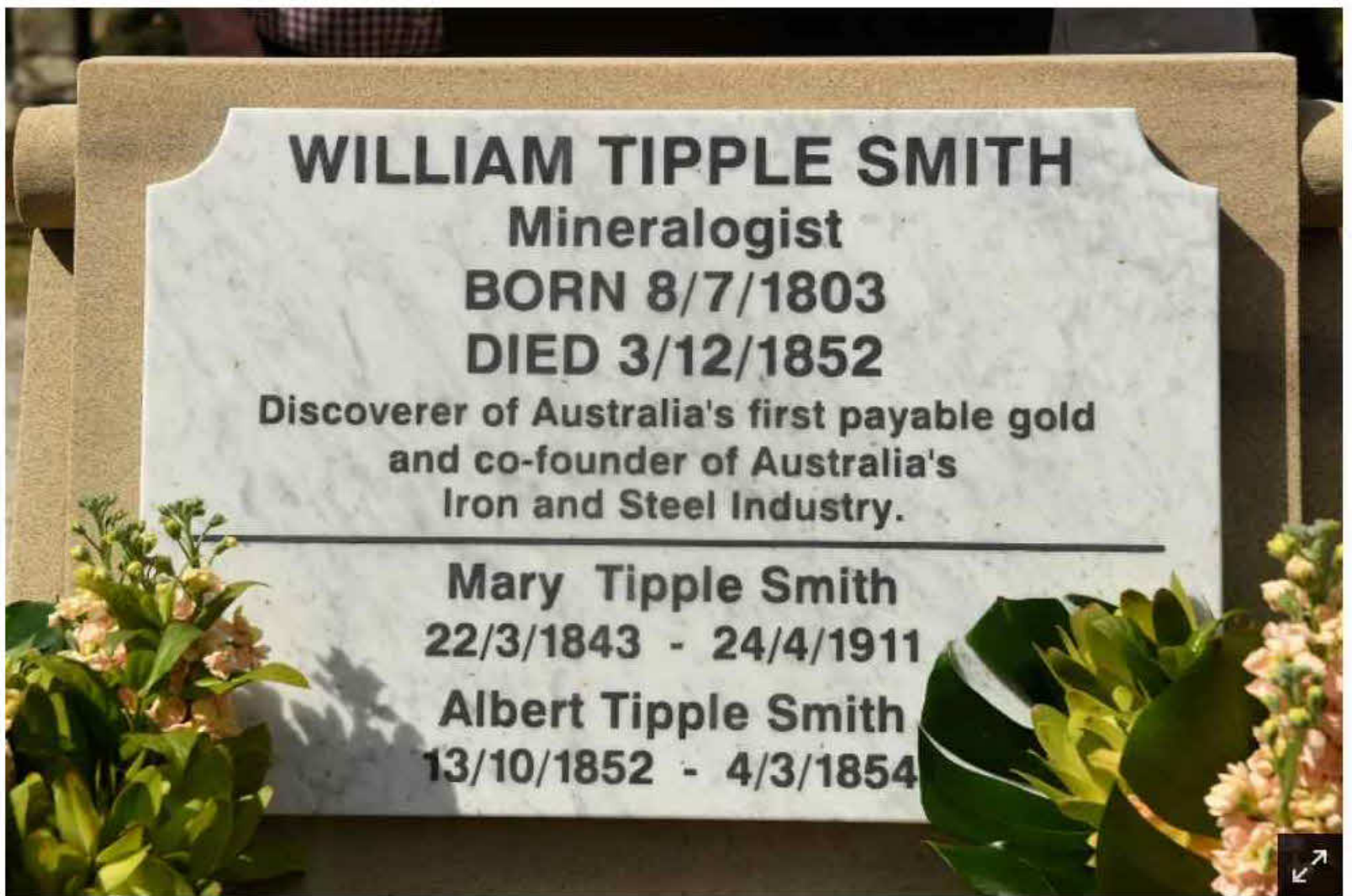


Bill Hamburger (centre) the great-great-grandson of William Tipple Smith unveiling a new headstone in Rookwood Cemetery. KATE GERAGHTY

Nothing happened, though the colonial secretary later attempted to find the gold himself and buy the land.

Smith again appealed to the government to acknowledge his claim but was branded a liar. Ms Silver said "the pesky mineralogist presented them with a problem. The colonial secretary and the governor knew he was first to find gold, but they had come under criticism for losing millions in government revenue for failing to control the mineral rights."

At Thursday's ceremony, NSW's Minister for Local Government Shelley Hancock said that when she first heard about Smith she thought it couldn't be true. A former history teacher, Ms Hancock said she had taught about Hargraves in schools.



The new headstone of William Tipple Smith at his grave in Rookwood Cemetery. KATE GERAGHTY

Convinced by Smith's descendant, Bill Hamburger, 91, of Sussex Inlet, Ms Hancock realised it had been "an outrage by a government" and had worked to "right the wrongs of the past".

The new headstone, costing \$11,250, was funded by private donations, the NSW government, Rookwood and Bluescope Steel.

Smith's great-great-grandson, Mr Hamburger, was moved to tears by Thursday's ceremony.

"When I was attending primary school, my grandmother said if they try and tell you Hargraves was the first to discover gold, you tell 'em the truth."

Smith died from a third and final stroke on December 3, 1852, four days after learning that his appeal for justice had failed, Ms Silver said. He was survived by his widow and seven children.