

The Argus, Melbourne, 6 January 1917

"Ticonderoga" by Donald McDonald

Where within Port Phillip Heads is Ticonderoga Bay? The question might be asked of many, and only a few familiar with the early history of the state would, by association of names and events, furnish the answer, for Ticonderoga Bay, like Shortland's Bluff, has passed out of use. Queenscliffe, the name given to the sea hamlet, superceded that of the Shortland's Bluff but Ticonderoga Bay, linked as it is with some sad and tragic events in the early days of the State, need not sink with the march of the years into complete oblivion. Historic in remoter times as the name of that fort by Lake Champlain, for which French and British fought so bitterly, it was long afterwards adopted for a death ship, which had a tragic voyage to this port in 1852. The story of the *Ticonderoga* is not quite new, but some old documents found lately amongst the records of the Board of Public Health throw a little further light upon the perils of sea-voyaging which have disappeared, or - as may be more correct, in these days of under-sea action - changed their nature. It must be 30 years ago that on a first visit to Nepean Station named after Evan Nepean, once Secretary to the British Admiralty - and resting on a hot day in a dense grove of teatree, sat upon a cube of moss-grown sandstone, and noticed that there were other cubes little more than a foot square scattered about the showy grove. Upon one of them, where the sunlight fell, it seemed to me that some familiar hieroglyph showed faintly through the moss, something in the form which nature may clothe, but never directly create. These blocks were all little gravestones, the curved lines which broke the even green of the moss vestments were inscriptions. That was somewhere about the western end of the flat upon which the Quarantine buildings stand, but like the graves of the first citizens of the state farther round by Sorrento, all sign has disappeared. In preparing for further additions to the Sanitary Station, men were sent to clean up this flat. The headstones were dug out and carted away without any one apparently noting the significance of their shape - traces of them were found long afterwards in the rubbish tip. This, if my memory serves, was at least a quarter of a mile farther west than the little Quarantine cemetery, where in the highest of the tombs, the wild bees lived and stored, until out of corruption, as the prophets say, came sweetness.

The official papers recently found by Dr Robertson (Chairman of the Board of Public Health) add something in detail not only to the story of the *Ticonderoga*, but other events associated with perhaps the most romantic and, until now, the most stirring page in our history. Point Ormand, or the Red Bluff of St. Kilda, served very well as an isolation ground until the gold rush. The emigrant ships were overcrowded horribly - even craft that were afterwards clippers of the seas, like the *Marco Polo*, being pressed in the sudden service. When you come to think of a ship of 1,650 tons carrying nearly a thousand - they were always "souls" in early references - you can imagine the congestion. Consider further that typhus, the horror of the times, was spread mainly by human parasites, and you realise that these gold-seekers in their crowded ships lived always above a live mine, and that a single case of illness might be the match for an explosion. The reasons for the choice of the station at Nepean are given in these old documents, and no better choice was ever made, either upon geographical or sanitary grounds. *"It is admirably adapted for the purpose"*, reported Dr. Thomas Hunt. *"Its position is isolated, its anchorage good and easy of access, both from outside the Heads, when a vessel takes a pilot there, and from Shortland's Bluff. The soil is sandy, and at all times dry, the air pure, and water is procured (by sinking wells to the depth of 12ft or 15ft) in abundance and of sufficient purity. It is somewhat aluminous, and impregnated with lime. A root resembling sarsaparilla, as well as wild parsley and pennyroyal, grows wild, and cured scurvy in a short time"*. In this last sentence we touch upon another scourge of the seas which had passed forever. The root "*resembling sarsaparilla*" I cannot identify; the wild parsley - a very good, well flavoured parsley too - is still found in the little shaded water courses, not at Nepean alone, but all around the coast. At Black Rock it was abundant a few years ago - a strong grower with more sap and substance than garden parsley, and with the burnished leafage of the *Ranunculus*. Had these earlier investigators but known, there was, in abundance, a better food and medicine plant than any of these in *Tetragonia* - a first cousin of which came into garden use afterwards as New Zealand spinach.

In 1852 commenced the rush of plague ships, which broke down the temporary station in Hobson's Bay. The *Wanata* had 796 passengers and typhus aboard. A month after the *Lady Eveline*, with 247 passengers reported small pox. In October also came *HMSD Vulcan*, carrying 859 people, including the 40th regiment, which was sent to quarantine because of a false alarm of small pox. Sometimes the death rate, without any determined cause - otherwise than overcrowding - was singularly high, and showed strange contrasts.

Take the cases of the *Marco Polo* and *Great Britain*, one of which, if not both, made their first voyages as emigrant ships. The *Marco Polo*, which arrived in 1852, and made the smartest trip of the year - 75 days - had 888 passengers, and 53 deaths on the voyage with out any infectious disease adding to the toll. The *Great Britain* came out with 630 passengers, was 82 days at sea, and had only one death upon the voyage. Why this significant difference, except that the *Marco Polo*, of only 1,625 tons to the *Great Britain's* 3,500 tons, carried 258 more passengers. Was it the mark of the beast alone that made all the difference to the passengers of the *Marco Polo*? In all these early records the confusion between passengers, crew and "souls" makes it difficult to determine how many people were actually on board these emigrant plague ships, but the figures, I think, generally refers to passengers old. All other experiences in sea voyaging during the golden years are tame as compared with that of the *Ticonderoga*, even though, startled by a new menace, the authorities were making ready for it. Empty vessels had been used off the Red Bluff to help out quarantine, and there was no lack of them, because as soon as a ship reached port her crew deserted almost to a man, and rushed off to the diggings. There were two evils in this plan - overcrowding spread disease instead of lessening it, and the shore was within easy distance to good swimmers. Neither bombastic regulations nor the waterside patrol could stop those who saw fortune beckoning them. The transfer to Nepean had been decided on, and wells were being sunk there when, on November 4, entered the *Ticonderoga*, after a voyage of 91 days, packed full of horrors. She was - I speak from uncertain data - only 1,090 tons and all told, she must have carried very nearly a passenger to the ton when she left England. The records speak of the landing of 718 passengers at Nepean, and she had dropped them - overboard - at the rate of more than one a day. The crew were not landed at all - they were kept upon the *Ticonderoga* and the hospital ship *Lysander*, afterwards a convict hulk. It is quite clear, though, that, making allowance for all possible confusion in figures, the *Ticonderoga* passengers must have been packed like herrings in a barrel, and when typhus got amongst them the sailmaker had constant employment as an undertaker. The deaths on the voyage were 96 - the number was almost doubled before the last *Ticonderogan* left Nepean, for 82 of them were buried upon the Peninsula. A few of them are in the little plot by the station - most of them lie in graves, forever lost. Few questions were asked in those days, but Dr. Hunt's report is suggestive. "*The great mortality seems to have been occasioned by the crowded state of her decks, and want of proper ventilation, particularly*

through the lower deck. This caused debility and sickness among her passengers to such an extent that a sufficient number could not be found to keep them clean. Dirt and filth of the most loathsome description accumulated, tainting the atmosphere, and affecting everyone who came within its influence as with a poison". And after 65 years, there are still decreasing minority of moderns who fear fresh air more than tiger-snake venom. In such a swelter of humanity typhus was king, and his scepter as busy scythe. About 460 people were treated for typhus at the station - the captain was the one man of all those stagnant "souls" who escaped disease.

There was some comedy, a little romance, and a good deal of average human nature mixed up with the tragedy of the *Ticonderoga*. To make way for her sick and smitten passengers, who were hurriedly housed in tents and under sails, the first lime-burners of Nepean were evicted. Outside of bounds they halted and set to work again. These gallants of the lime pits saw few women, and amongst the "souls" of the *Ticonderoga* were spinsters still comely, others hardy, if not handsome. So the lime-burners broke bounds upon one side, and the maidens upon the other. Once again Love laughed at locksmiths, and quarantine became a name. Others, hearing the continued call of the siren of Bendigo and Fiery Creek, bolted like Buckley of an earlier time, and made the toilsome circuit of the eastern shore. There were four things that went far to save the stricken, with all their sloth and discontent - the fresh, spring air of the Peninsula, the open-air housing, in which they could no longer wallow as pigs, the long walks to which monotony if not desire drove them, through a headland which, in scenic effects, is still one of the revelations of Victorian landscape - so much of the unexpected is there in what seems from seaward a monotonous scrub ridge. And, above all, there was fresh beef, and the best of beef, in abundance. Mr. John Barker, whom some of us remember long years afterwards as the venerable clerk of Parliaments, supplied from Cape Schanek station fresh beef for the *Ticonderoga* passengers at 5d. a pound. Mr. James Ford, of Portsea, took up the contract later at 4d. a pound. Many a housewife buying her new year joint realized that, with all its suffering and death, there was some soul of goodness in the things evil of these good old ghastly times.