

**FACTS, SPECULATION AND FIBS IN THE  
'MAHOGANY SHIP' STORY 1835–2010  
A REASSESSMENT AND NEW HYPOTHESIS**

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**Abstract**

*The story of the 'Mahogany Ship' has its origins in the sighting of an unidentified shipwreck on the coast near Warrnambool in 1836. This story has become confused and problematic owing to unfounded speculation and some fibs carried from source to source and retold from early times until the present. When reassessed here in the light of both historical and scientific evidence, the identity of the mysterious 'Mahogany Ship' actually involves two ships—both early 19th-century vessels of Australian origin. A new hypothesis is outlined and an amended story is told. It is posited that there is no plausible evidence that the 'Mahogany Ship' was either a 16th-century Portuguese or Spanish caravel, or a 15th-century Chinese junk, as some have suggested.*

ONE OF THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES of Australia Felix, as Major Mitchell called the territory that later become Victoria, involves an unidentified wooden vessel sighted on the coast near Warrnambool in 1836.<sup>1</sup> This 'wreck' was seen by many people up until 1881 when it disappeared, presumably buried beneath the moving sand dunes of the area. There were several unusual features surrounding this mysterious vessel: its position on dry land, well away from the water's edge, its elevation above sea level, its timber, and its construction. Named the 'Mahogany Ship' in 1884, this 'wreck' has been the subject of three

conferences at Warrnambool (1982, 1987, 2005), as well as scores of books and articles since 1847. However, this mysterious ship's identity (including the provenance of the ship's timber) is still open to debate, and therefore this 'wreck's' place in Australian history and our cultural imaginary remains conjectural and confusing.<sup>2</sup>

### **Old and New Hypotheses**

There has been much speculation about the origin of this 'wreck', most of it based on evidence that was published a century ago, without the knowledge and results of historical and scientific investigations over the past 30 years. Unfortunately, the 'Mahogany Ship' story has become mixed up with two other stories; firstly, the Dieppe maps, which were 16th-century French maps from the school of cartography at Dieppe based on earlier and otherwise unknown Portuguese maps; and secondly, the possible Portuguese discovery of Australia in the 16th century. Indeed, Kenneth McIntyre has suggested that the 'Mahogany Ship' was a 16th-century Portuguese caravel.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, the identity story of the 'Mahogany Ship' is problematic. It is a confusing series of stories and piecemeal compositions based on several different records over a long period of time, and, significantly, characterised by instances of unfounded speculation as well as untrue and unreliable sources that continue to be used and re-used and remain unquestioned.

The present investigation had two aims. The first was to bring up to date and re-assess the evidence, both historical and scientific, upon which the story of the 'Mahogany Ship' is based. The second aim was to use this newly assembled evidence to test various hypotheses that have been proposed to explain the origin of the 'Mahogany Ship'. All were found wanting because they did not adequately research the trail of available evidence. A new hypothesis, which critically examines that body of old and new evidence, forms a major part of this article. It was not an objective of the present investigation to consider broader questions around the possible discovery of Australia by the Portuguese, Spanish or Chinese before the 17th century Dutch discoveries, except to examine the nature of the evidence that others have taken from the 'Mahogany Ship' story and used in their alternative discovery of Australia theses. The term 'Mahogany Ship' is used in this study in a broad sense to include those ships and shipwrecks that, rightly or wrongly, have become part of this continuing story or series of stories

describing and naming the mystery wreck sighted near Warrnambool in the Port Phillip District of New South Wales in 1836.

### **Discovery of the ‘Wreck’**

Three reports were published during the 19th century recounting the discovery in 1836 of an unknown ‘wreck’ on the coast just a few kilometres west of Warrnambool. They were ostensibly reports from three different sources: Captain John Mills, David Fermaner and Hugh Donnelly, all active in the local whaling industry in the mid-19th century. However, they were passed-on third-hand, not eye-witness, accounts. These reports and their sources will be discussed here in some detail because they highlight the more general evidentiary problems upon which the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story is based.

### **Background**

John Mills (and his brother Charles) were sealing and whaling at Portland before the Hentys arrived in 1834. They were employed by Griffiths and Connolly from Launceston, who were also involved with shipbuilding and mercantile trading. In February 1835, John Mills was sent by his employers to New Zealand in the *Socrates* on a sperm-whaling venture.<sup>4</sup> At about the same time, Reiby and Penny, who were competitors of Griffiths and Connolly in Launceston, set up a new whaling station on Griffiths Island at Port Fairy (then known as Belfast), with Captain Francis Smith in charge. Smith, Wilson and Gibbs were among a ‘gang of whalers’ who sailed from Launceston aboard the cutter, *Mary Ann*, bound for the ‘Cumberland Bay Fishing Station’ (Port Fairy) on 27 March 1835.<sup>5</sup> This fishing establishment did not flourish, partly because of inadequate supplies for the men, many of whom had left by August 1835.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of 1835, Griffiths and Connolly bought the whaling interests of Reiby and Penny. After John Mills returned from New Zealand in the *Socrates*, he was employed by the former to manage the whaling station at Port Fairy.<sup>7</sup> It was in March 1836 that John Mills sailed the *Sarah Ann*, with David Fermaner as mate, from Launceston to Port Fairy with three whaling boats, crews and whaling gear that had just been bought from Reiby and Penny in Launceston.<sup>8</sup>

It was within this context—of the Port Phillip colony’s early whaling and fishing industries at Portland and Port Fairy—that the still contentious ‘Mahogany Ship’ story began. It appears that, in December 1835 or January 1836, Captain Smith with two other men, Gibbs and Wilson from the Reiby

and Penny establishment at Port Fairy, rowed eastwards in a whaleboat to Warrnambool, looking for seals. Their whaleboat was upturned and lost in the surf near the mouth of the Hopkins River. Captain Francis Smith was drowned. When Gibbs and Wilson were walking back to Port Fairy along the stretch of beach, they reportedly discovered an 'ancient wreck' in the sand dunes west of Warrnambool.<sup>9</sup>

### **Captain John Mills' Story**

John Mills did not arrive at Port Fairy until a few weeks after Smith's drowning, when Gibbs and Wilson supposedly told him about their recent mishap and their discovery of the 'ancient wreck'. Mills did not see this 'wreck' in 1836, but subsequently visited it and 'twice stood upon its deck' several years later, in 1843 and 1847. An anonymous report about the 'wreck' was published in the *Portland Guardian* on 29 October 1847.<sup>10</sup> It supports Mills' story. He may well have been the source of that information. It seems that Mills did not write down his story but told it to others including James Lynar, the postmaster at Port Fairy. Years later, and after John Mills had died in 1877, Lynar told that story to Joseph Archibald, who was curator of the museum at Warrnambool, and he published it in 1891.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Archibald's written version of the various re-tellings of the story almost 50 years after the sighting referred only to the discovery of an 'ancient wreck' by Gibbs and Wilson when walking to Port Fairy from Warrnambool after Smith had drowned. Gibbs and Wilson returned to Tasmania and Wilson was murdered there in 1837.<sup>12</sup> Gibbs left the whaling business and worked in the timber industry until he died at Launceston in 1853. Further, there is a contemporary report of Smith's death in 1836, although the mode of death (drowning) was not specified.

### **David Fermaner's Story**

The second source of information about the 1836 discovery of the 'ancient wreck' was David Fermaner. He had been a crew member on the *Elizabeth*, supporting the whaling industry at Portland and Port Fairy during 1835 before he joined Captain John Mills on the *Sarah Ann*, which sailed from Launceston to Port Fairy early in March 1836 to take over the whaling facilities there. Fermaner made no claim to have seen the 'Mahogany Ship' himself, but presumably heard about it first hand from Gibbs and Wilson, or indirectly from John Mills. Some years later, Fermaner told his version of the story to George Dunderdale, who published it in one

chapter ('Discovery of the Hopkins') of *The Book of the Bush* in 1898.<sup>13</sup> It mentioned a sighting of an 'ancient wreck', and Dunderdale recounted Fermaner's account of John Mills's unsuccessful attempt to recover the whaleboat lost by Captain Smith at the Hopkins River. In March 1836, Mills had taken two whaleboats and crews, with David Fermaner as mate, to try and recover Smith's whaleboat. In this attempt, both whaleboats also capsized in the surf at the mouth of the Hopkins, and now Mills himself narrowly escaped drowning. There was no mention of a visit by Mills and the crew on this occasion to the 'wreck' previously sighted by Gibbs and Wilson.

That this version of the story originally came from Fermaner, not Dunderdale, has not been emphasised previously. Fermaner left the whaling scene at Portland and Port Fairy in 1839. He became a pilot on the Yarra in 1840, and later worked as a pilot at Port Albert in South Gippsland. In 1852, he was appointed harbour master at Port Albert where he remained for many years. Dunderdale was clerk of courts at Alberton from about 1866, and later at nearby Tarraville. Thus, both Dunderdale and Fermaner held official positions in the same small South Gippsland community for several years. However, Dunderdale did not identify the origins of his sources for his book's stories, but Fermaner must have been an important source because he was involved in at least ten of the 26 chapters of *The Book of the Bush*, being variously identified as Captain David Fermaner, Dave or Davy. All those accounts appear to be factually based. Dunderdale would have been used to keeping accurate records of evidence as part of his job as clerk of courts. He may well have drafted Fermaner's stories in the 1870s, although Dunderdale's book was not published until over 20 years later in 1898, and five years after Fermaner, his source and presumably friend, died.

### **Hugh Donnelly's Story**

A third version of the story came from Hugh Donnelly, who told it to Joseph Archibald in 1890, who then published it in his 1891 article, 'Notes on the Ancient Wreck Discovered near Warrnambool' as follows:<sup>14</sup>

Mr Hugh Donnelly, of Laang, states that the wreck was first seen in 1836 by two men named Gibb [Gibbs] and Wilson, who lost their whale boat, and with it a messmate named Smith, drowned in trying to enter the river Hopkins in pursuit of seal. The survivors returned to Belfast, now Port Fairy, on foot, by way of the hummocks or beach. Having reported the discovery, the two

brothers Mills (one of whom was the late Captain J.B. Mills, afterwards harbour master at Belfast) in charge of two boats, with Donnelly as one of the crew, shortly after landed opposite the wreck, which they visited.

Thus, we have evidence from different sources that tell of two different events:

1. The drowning of Francis Smith and the loss of his whaleboat at the mouth of the Hopkins River in December 1835 or January 1836, and the first sighting of an unidentified 'wreck' by Gibbs and Wilson when walking back along the beach to Reiby and Penny's whaling station at Port Fairy.
2. The failed attempt by John Mills, David Fermaner and others in March–April 1836 to recover Smith's lost whaleboat, and the near-drowning of Mills, after Griffiths and Connolly had bought Reiby and Penny's whaling establishment at Port Fairy.

Hugh Donnelly included himself in these stories as an active participant in ways that were not supported by others, which raises doubts about the reliability of his evidence. In recent years, Jenny Fawcett has shown that Donnelly made up much of his personal involvement.<sup>15</sup> By his own admission, published in a letter to the editor of the *Warrnambool Standard* on 29 November 1881, Donnelly had never seen the 'Mahogany Ship' but had heard others talk about it. He had first joined the whaling station on Griffiths Island in 1842 when Captain Alexander Campbell was in charge, Campbell having taken over from John Mills. In support of Fawcett's view of Donnelly, it is noteworthy that when Richard Bennett was gathering stories in 1888 for his history of Port Fairy, Donnelly wrote him a long written submission.<sup>16</sup> One of Donnelly's first jobs after arriving at Port Fairy was to sail a seven-ton cutter, *Victoria*, from Portland to Port Fairy in December 1843, which the shipping records of the day confirm. In 1888, he made no mention to Bennett of the 'Mahogany Ship'. Donnelly also told his stories to Richard Osburne, some of which were included in Osburne's *The History of Warrnambool* in 1887.<sup>17</sup> Once again, Donnelly did not mention the 'Mahogany Ship'. Up until 1888, Donnelly's stories appear to have been factually based. By 1890, his reminiscences had become more embellished, ending up as a mixture of facts, fiction and downright fibs about his *direct* involvement with the evolving 'Mahogany Ship' story.

In fact, Donnelly did not arrive in Australia until 1841, and was probably not at Port Fairy until 1842.<sup>18</sup> He was born in County Down, Ireland, on 3 August 1821. He arrived in Melbourne in 1841 aboard the *Westminster*, with his wife, Ann, and an infant son. Donnelly worked in the local whaling industry between 1842 and 1851, and then in the regional timber industry before retiring to Laang. He died an elderly man at Warrnambool in 1903. Much of the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story he told Joseph Archibald was based on a series of fibs. The hand-written document that he presumably wrote after 1890 (when he was about 70 years old) was fictional. In fact, Donnelly was not in Australia in 1836 when those crucial events in which he later claimed to have taken part took place. However, while that does not mean that all of the evidence from his early years at Port Fairy (1842–1851) should be dismissed, it does mean that we should not accept it without independent corroborating evidence, especially in relation to the details he gave after 1888.

It appears that Donnelly was a major source of misinformation for almost everyone who has written about the ‘Mahogany Ship’ and the more general history of Port Fairy. For example, J.R. Carroll, whose *Harpoons to Harvests* was published in 1989, was misled by Donnelly’s claim that he arrived in Sydney aboard the *Viking Queen* at the age of 15 in 1835.<sup>19</sup> No such ship is recorded as having visited Sydney in those days.<sup>20</sup>

### **Henry Gurner’s Records**

Henry Gurner was yet another source of information about the fateful events at the Hopkins River in 1835–1836 and about Penny and Reiby’s unsuccessful whaling station at Port Fairy.<sup>21</sup> Gurner was the first solicitor in Melbourne from May 1841, and later became the first town clerk and then crown solicitor of Victoria. He kept unofficial records of many events in the early days of the Port Phillip colony. In 1876, some three decades later, Gurner published them. For December 1835, he had recorded the drowning incident at the mouth of the Hopkins River that John Mills probably passed on to him. He acknowledged Mills as one of his informants. However, Gurner got the names of the deceased and the survivors confused when he reported that all of Smith’s party, apart from Gibbs, had been drowned. He also recorded the sale of Reiby and Penny’s boats and whaling plant at Port Fairy to Griffiths and Connelly. There was no mention of an ‘ancient wreck’ having been discovered. For the month of April 1836, Gurner detailed the failed attempt by John Mills to recover Smith’s whaleboat from the



mouth of the Hopkins River (described above). The Hentys at Portland also received news of this failed attempt and of Mills's near-drowning, but not of an 'ancient wreck', from Captain Dempster of the *Thistle* on 21 April 1836.<sup>22</sup> Curiously, Gibbs and Wilson's reported discovery of an 'ancient wreck' was not so generally newsworthy at that time.

Where does this body of evidence of supposed sightings of the 'Mahogany Ship' leave present-day researchers? Despite the unreliability of Donnelly's evidence and the fact that we do not have an eye-witness account of the beginnings of the 'Mahogany Ship' story, we may still reasonably conclude from both the Mills and Fermaner versions of the story that, in December 1835 or January 1836, Gibbs and Wilson saw an unidentified 'wreck' on the coast a few kilometres west of Warrnambool. It is unlikely that anyone else saw this 'wreck' until John Mills in 1843.

### **Recent Studies of Some Old Stories**

Over the next four decades, many people reportedly saw the 'wreck' but did not take much notice of it. It was not until 1890 that interest in it revived and 'remembering stories' evolved, largely as a result of publicity provided by Archibald in his role as curator of the Warrnambool Museum. By then, Gibbs and Wilson, who might have been able to give a more detailed eye-witness account, had long been dead. However, many other people came forward with verbal or written accounts about having seen the 'Mahogany Ship' over the preceding 44 years. Some were first-hand reports, but others were second- or third-hand stories. All were based on recollections of observations made many years earlier. Archibald collated and summarised many of these memories in his 1891 paper.<sup>23</sup> About 20 years later, George Gordon McCrae collected additional reports that he published in 1910.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, E.P. Cleverden also gathered some extra 'Mahogany Ship' stories, but did not publish them.<sup>25</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight and new data, some aspects of reports of sightings of the 'wreck' between the 1840s and 1881, from about 40 different people, are discussed below. In the 1980s, J.W. Powling summarised much of this evidence (published posthumously in 2003) but not from the point of view adopted here. He relied heavily on Hugh Donnelly's stories, including the fiction and fibs that had not yet been challenged, and he did not include any of Fermaner's evidence. In addition, Powling was not able to integrate the available historical evidence with the important scientific data collected in more recent years.<sup>26</sup>



Significantly, these observers’ reports raise fundamental questions about the position of the ‘wreck’ in relation to the sea, beach and adjacent sand dunes. These reports have been categorised in the following table into three groups according to individuals’ sightings and the dates of these observations in relation to the position of the ‘wreck’ as outlined above:

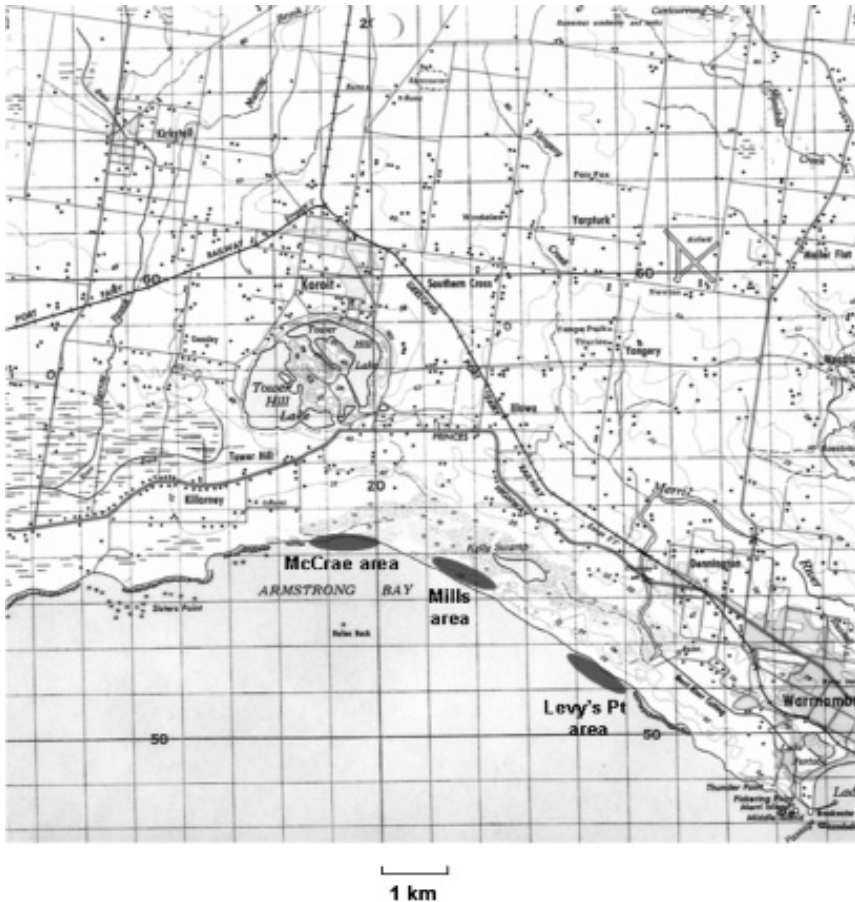
<p><b>1. Reports about a Wreck in the Sea</b>  W.J. Murray (1853–54) ‘only visible at low tide’  James O’Connor (1850s) ‘in the water and not inshore as supposed’  Fred Best (1855) ‘10–12 ribs visible 6 to 8 feet above water’  John Connors (1854) ‘one chain out to sea’</p>
<p><b>2. Reports about a Wreck on the Beach</b>  Mrs T. Manifold (c. 1850) ‘high up on the shore’.  A.C. Kell (c. 1847) ‘not on the hummocks ...up on the beach’  James Stevens (c. 1853) ‘on the open beach, outside the hummocks’  W. McGrath (c. 1879) ‘not far above high water mark [with] a high Hummock behind it’</p>
<p><b>3. Reports about a Wreck Partially Embedded in Sand Dunes</b>  Capt John Mills (via J.A. Lynar) (1843–47) ‘well in the hummocks’  John Mason (c. 1847) ‘embedded high and dry in the hummocks’  James Jellie (c. 1846) ‘could not be seen from the beach’  Richard Osburne (c. 1847–48) ‘high in the hummocks’  H.O. Allan (1840s) ‘on the summit of a hummock’  Alex Rollo (1854–55) ‘not visible from the beach’  Francis Saul (c. 1862) (near a fence he built on the dunes and the common)  John Begley (c. 1864) ‘in a lane formed by hummocks’  John Davis (c. 1865) ‘at the end of a gap between the hummocks’  M.C. Donnelly (c. 1881) ‘at the top of a dune’</p>

*Table 1. Three groups of reports from different people, and the dates of their observations, about where the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was in relation to the sea, the beach and the sand dunes.*

Several people independently reported seeing a 'wreck' that was definitely in the sea. Others said they saw a 'wreck' partially covered by a sand dune, at a surprisingly large distance from the sea. It was either not visible from the beach or was visible in a 'gap' between the dunes. Others again agreed that the 'wreck' was not in the sea, but well up on the beach, above high tide and with a high dune behind it, but not embedded in a sand dune. A distinction between reports in the second and third groups was not always clear. For example, in 1876, John Mason reported that in about 1846 he saw a 'wreck' 'embedded high and dry among the hummocks far above the reach of any tide'.<sup>27</sup> However, A.C. Kell was with Mason on that day and later disputed Mason's description of the 'wreck's' position, saying that it was high up on the beach, but not in the sand dunes. He also reminded Mason that they had seen a ship's spar lying nearby on the sand. We might expect some inconsistencies between different people's recollections of events 30 years earlier.

Despite the limitations of this evidence, when recalled decades after the events, it seems unlikely that such an important detail as the 'wreck' definitely being in the sea, or definitely being on dry land far from the sea, would be wrongly recalled by many people. This suggests that the reports were referring to more than one wreck sighted on that coast in the mid-19th century. One was in the sea and the other high up on the beach, far from the sea, whether or not it was partially embedded in a sand dune. That there were indeed *two* different unidentified 'wrecks' in this area was confirmed independently by two people who lived and worked nearby. William McGrath was a herdsman on the common on the northern side of the dunes. He said there was an 'older' wreck near Levy's Point and a more 'modern' wreck about two miles further west.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, James Stephen, who was a farmer nearby, saw two wrecks, one situated to the southwest of Dennington and the other a more 'modern' ship further west, which he thought was the one Captain Mills visited.<sup>29</sup> The 'Mahogany Ship' story must therefore account for two unidentified 'wrecks' observed along this six-kilometre straight stretch of coast in the first half of the 19th century. There are no records of any colonial shipwrecks in that area, although there were many further east, in Lady Bay at Warrnambool, and more again further west, at Port Fairy and Portland.<sup>30</sup>

The likely locations of the 'Mahogany Ship' wrecks have been canvassed elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> In summary, there are three ill-defined but separate areas in which most searchers have concentrated their efforts: one near



*Figure 1. A map of Warrnambool and Tower Hill districts showing three areas in which searches for the ‘Mahogany Ship’ have been carried out.*

Levy’s Point (Levy’s Point area in Figure 1), another further west towards Sandfly Rise (Mills area in Figure 1), and a third closer to Gorman’s Lane, running south from Tower Hill (McCrae area in Figure 1). Several people said that the ‘wreck’ in the Levy’s Point area was in the water, and the one in the Mills area was at some distance from the sea. Whether or not there was a ‘wreck’ in the McCrae area remains a matter of contention. Many people who reported seeing the ‘Mahogany Ship’ did not make mention of a second ‘wreck’ in the area, presumably because they were not aware of it. Thus, we cannot always be sure which ‘wreck’ they were referring

to in their reports. It may seem strange that there was so much uncertainty about the locations of these 'wrecks'. However, it is difficult to determine one's location along almost any part of this long straight beach because the view of otherwise obvious landmarks, such as Tower Hill to the north, is blocked by sand dunes up to 30 metres high.

### **People's Descriptions of the 'Wrecks'**

From the many reported sightings, we can piece together a description of the 'wreck' that was said to be in or near the sand dunes. Its hull was partially filled with sand, and some of its ribs and planks, and part of the decking, were still present in the 1840s, and perhaps the 1850s. There were no high structures at the bow or stern as in ships of the 18th century and earlier. There were no masts or spars attached to the hull, but there was a spar nearby on the sand. There was no description given of the bottom of the hull (e.g. whether it was flat-bottomed), presumably because it was not seen, being covered by sand. Nor were there any reports about the vessel being carvel or clinker-built. Carvel construction is where the planks of a wooden vessel are attached edge to edge to the ribs, rather than overlapping as in clinker construction. Estimates of the size of the 'wreck' varied from 50 to 100 tons but, somewhat surprisingly, did not include its linear dimensions. It was about 40 metres from the sea, although whether from high or low tide mark was not recorded, and it may have been several metres in elevation above sea level.

Captain John Mason, a captain of militia, not a sea captain, thought that the general appearance of the 'wreck' high up on the beach 'bespoke a very slight acquaintance of the builder with marine architecture'.<sup>32</sup> Exactly what Mason was referring to is uncertain, but we may speculate that various timbers had been cut or assembled in an unusual way, indicating the work of amateurs rather than professionals. However, it was the position of this 'wreck' above high-tide mark and above sea level that caught most observers' attention. Governor La Trobe reported seeing a 'stranded boat' to the west of Warrnambool in about 1844, but evidently did not think it important enough, or have sufficient time, to examine it carefully.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, the 'wreck' that was reportedly in the sea was described in the 1850s as a series of ribs sticking up from under the water, visible only at low tide, or as a wreck 'with its bulwarks still visible but with the hull largely filled with sand and the sea washing in and out of it'.<sup>34</sup> This 'wreck' has received much less attention than the other.

Around 1890, several people who claimed they had seen the ‘Mahogany Ship’ gave brief descriptions of the kind of vessel they recalled seeing (Table 2). None of these descriptions contains much detail, and we cannot always be sure which of the two wrecks they were referring to. However, more emphasis seems to have been placed on the wreck that was embedded in or near the dunes. These descriptions share some similarities, referring to a wooden vessel with the general outlines of a local lighter, but larger.

<p>John Mason (1846–47): ‘like a local lighter, though of greater dimensions’</p> <p>A.C. Kell (1846–47): ‘like an old flat-bottomed punt’</p> <p>Richard Osburne (1847–48): ‘like a large lighter, but not of special interest’</p> <p>W.J. Murray (1853–54): ‘like a coal barge’</p> <p>G. Gallagher (1870s): ‘like a sea-going fishing boat’</p> <p>M.C. Donnelly (1881): ‘about the size of the lumber boats towed by tugs ... on the Upper Shannon’</p>
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*Table 2. Descriptions of the ‘Mahogany Ship’ from six people who said they had seen it, and the approximate dates of their observations as reported in writing circa 1890.*

Lighters were the wooden boats, carvel-built and about 10–12 metres long, that were used to load and unload cargo and passengers from sailing ships in our coastal ports before wharves were built into sufficiently deep water.<sup>35</sup> A photograph taken by Jack Adamson in 1895 shows lighters on the beach at Portland, probably no longer in use by then.<sup>36</sup> They would have been run ashore at high tide and loaded or unloaded on the beach at low tide. They would mostly have been towed or rowed to and from ships moored some distance from the shore, although some had their own sails. The reports in Table 2 suggest that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was like one of these local lighters, but larger. We can but speculate that such a vessel may have been 15 or 20 metres long. Such vessels are called barges in the United Kingdom and Ireland where they were very common, carrying cargo on the rivers in the 19th century. Barges and lighters had a flat bottom that made it possible to beach them without tipping. In the early 19th century, many people in Australia would have been familiar with the locally built

lighters, and some people may have had personal memories of barges in the United Kingdom or Ireland.<sup>37</sup> A vessel like a local lighter or barge would certainly not resemble a Portuguese caravel. Nor would it resemble the Australian coastal trading vessels or whaling ships of the day.

### **The Supposed Antiquity of the ‘Wreck’**

In 1847, the first published report about the ‘wreck’ in the sand dunes suggested that it was already an ‘ancient wreck’. That opinion seems to have been founded on its weather-beaten appearance and a belief that it predated European settlement in that area, which began in the 1840s. Wood undergoes different changes over time depending on the nature of its chemical environment, particularly the amount of oxygen and water to which it is exposed, whether in the air, under water, or buried under sediments. Of itself, that a piece of timber is dark brown, dense, weather-beaten and hard to cut does not constitute reliable or sufficient evidence about its origin or age.

In 1891, Joseph Archibald recorded that the oldest Aborigines in the district said the wreck was present when they were children and they did not know when it first appeared. They also told stories of ‘yellow’ men coming among them in the past, which John Mills thought might have referred to Spanish or Portuguese sailors. However, neither these Aboriginal stories nor the weather-beaten appearance of the wreck provide strong evidence for the antiquity of the ‘Mahogany Ship’, particularly attempts to extend the origins beyond a few decades.<sup>38</sup>

### **Identifying the Wreck’s Timber**

In 1876, John Mason wrote that the timber of the wreck in the sand dunes that he saw in about 1846 was dark, ‘resembling either cedar or mahogany’. Much later, in 1890, Mason clarified this point and wrote that many Australian hardwoods would have looked the same under those circumstances, and he did not think the wreck was made of mahogany at all.<sup>39</sup> There were other reported descriptions of that timber. In summary, the type of timber was not familiar to observers at the time. It was dark brown or red-brown in colour, dense, very hard to cut, and it showed little grain when planed. Some said it could have been Australian hardwood such as red gum, ironbark or blackwood.

There are a number of samples of the timber said to have come from the ‘Mahogany Ship’ and now held in either the National Library in Canberra

(including part of Joseph Archibald’s collection) or as privately owned artefacts. Several people, including Captain John Mills, John Davis, Mr Cooper, the lighthouse keeper at Port Fairy, and Mr A. Penfold’s uncle, were reported to have cut pieces of timber from the ‘Mahogany Ship’ in the mid-19th century. In a letter to the editor of the *Age* in 1963, Penfold tells of his relationship to Cooper and of two pen handles fashioned from the famous ship’s timber owned by the Penfold family.<sup>40</sup> David Hamilton had a cylindrical ‘ruler’, also allegedly made from ‘Mahogany Ship’ timber and given to William Rutledge, who lived at Warrnambool in the 1850s and 1860s, and from whom David Hamilton was directly descended.

Different types of timber can be identified microscopically from their histological structure, even when partly decomposed. Such techniques have been used to identify several pieces of timber said to have come from the ‘Mahogany Ship’. In 1980, the timber from Hamilton’s ‘ruler’ was identified as *Syncarpia*, commonly called turpentine.<sup>41</sup> It is indigenous to the coast of northern New South Wales and Queensland, and nowhere else in the world.<sup>42</sup> It is fine-grained, red-brown in colour, dense, and unusually resistant to decay and marine organisms because of its terpine hydrocarbon content. On casual inspection, it could be confused with mahogany. The two wooden ‘pen handles’ owned by the Penfold family have been identified as *Eugenia* sp, now called *Syzygium* sp, and commonly known as satinash.<sup>43</sup> That too is indigenous to northern New South Wales and coastal Queensland.

The ‘Mahogany Ship’ timber in the National Library in Canberra has been identified as *Eucalyptus* of an indeterminate species.<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that these timbers show little decomposition macroscopically. The provenance of these pieces of timber may not be very clear, but the fact that they are all Australian gives no support to the idea that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch or Chinese, or that it was made of mahogany or any other exotic timber. The ‘Mahogany Ship’ was most likely to have been a vessel made in Australia.

### **Radio-Carbon Dating of ‘Mahogany Ship’ Timber**

In 1980, a sample of the ‘Mahogany Ship’ timber from Joseph Archibald’s collection (discussed above) was submitted to radio-carbon dating at the Australian National University Radiocarbon Dating Research Laboratory, Canberra. It was dated to 140+/-50 years BP, where BP stands for ‘before present’ (taken to be 1950), and 50 years is the standard deviation of error



involved in that estimate.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the best estimate is that this timber was from 1810 +/-50 years, not 1660–1710, as some have argued.<sup>46</sup> Far from being an ‘ancient wreck’, the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was probably built only about 20–30 years before it was discovered in 1836.

In recent years, several other pieces of timber have been dug up from sand dunes in the area, but their involvement in the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story is questionable. For example, in 2000, a slab of European oak was excavated from under 2.9 metres of sand in the Mills area.<sup>47</sup> This had evidently not been part of a ship, and may have been flotsam washed up from the wreck of the *Falls of Halladale*, wrecked further west near Peterborough in 1908 and known to have been carrying a cargo of oak timber. It is entirely feasible that flotsam was found later under several metres of sand near the seaward edge of the dunes. The superficial layer of sand on the dunes, but not their core structure, is quite mobile when blown by the winds. Various hollows or ‘gaps’ in the dunes providing direct access from the beach have, over a period of five decades, been observed by the present author to come and go.

### **In Search of the ‘Mahogany Ship’**

Organised searches for the lost ‘Mahogany Ship’ began in 1890 and have continued for over a century. In 1890, a search party looking along the beach and probing with metal rods in the nearby dunes within the McCrae and Mills areas (Figure 1) found a bronze spike (a large nail) and an unidentified piece of iron, possibly an iron latch.<sup>48</sup> The bronze spike is typical of those used for building wooden ships in the 18th and 19th centuries. Regardless of its age, it must have been carried there by humans because it is unlikely that an object of that shape and density would be carried up into the dunes by wave action without still being attached to a large piece of timber. This first systematic search and subsequent ones concentrated on the ‘wreck’ in the sand dunes and largely ignored the ‘wreck’ in the sea. In 1964, a group of geologists led by the present author first used a magnetometer to search for ferromagnetic metals that it was assumed would accompany a wooden shipwreck. That search was located about 50 metres east of the north-south line marking the 1862 ‘Municipal Boundary’, along which Francis Saul was thought to have built a fence in about 1860 when he saw the ‘wreck’ nearby in the sand dunes (at the eastern end of the Mills area). Later searches used more sensitive magnetometers. Between 1974 and 1981, teams led by Ian McKiggan carried out three such surveys, Operations Mole, Wombat and Sandfly.<sup>49</sup> The Mahogany Ship Association, based at Swinburne University,

carried out Operation Saul in the Mills area in 1982–1983. Searches in 1999, under the auspices of Heritage Victoria and the Mahogany Ship Committee at Warrnambool, have used ground-penetrating radar. John Sherwood has also used geochemical analyses of the dune sands, dug up with hand augers, for traces of copper, lead and zinc that may indicate the presence of a shipwreck.<sup>50</sup> Edmond Gill and others have described the geology and palaeontology of the sand dunes and the associated sediments.<sup>51</sup> Despite the very considerable time and effort involved in these investigations, they have added little to the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story. More importantly, the elusive ‘wreck’ or ‘wrecks’ have not been found.

### **Summary of Revised Findings**

The ‘Mahogany Ship’ story is still evolving. After being re-examined and stripped of unfounded speculation and fibs, the remaining historical evidence gains some credibility from consistencies in the reports from different people, despite the fact that most were not first-hand reports. The scientific evidence about the identification and age of timbers is very important, although there is some uncertainty about the provenance of those pieces of timber. Taking all this evidence together, we may reasonably conclude that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story has a factual basis. The key points of the revised story are stated below and form the basis of a new hypothesis:

1. There were there two unidentified ‘wrecks’ on the coast a few kilometres west of Warrnambool before European settlement in that area began in the early 1840s.
2. One ‘wreck’ was surprisingly far from the sea (horizontally) and above sea level (vertically), near or partially embedded in a sand dune. Another ‘wreck’ was in the sea, not far from the water’s edge.
3. At least one of those ‘wrecks’ was made of Australian timbers that must have come from northern NSW or Queensland. Those timbers were unfamiliar to local observers at the time, as they would be to most people in Victoria today. There is no evidence that either ‘wreck’ was made of mahogany, European oak, or other exotic timber.
4. A piece of timber said to have come from one of those ‘wrecks’ has been carbon-dated at 1810 +/- 50 years. This provides no support for suggestions that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was ‘ancient’. It was probably less than 30 years old when discovered in 1836.
5. The construction of the ‘wreck’ near the sand dunes was said to be crude,

suggesting that its builders lacked knowledge of naval architecture.

6. The 'Mahogany Ship' had the general shape of a local lighter, but was bigger, like a European barge. Any resemblance to a European ship from the 18th century or earlier, with high fore and aft castles, was specifically denied by several people.
7. John Mills, who was a very experienced seaman, thought that the wreck (the one near the dunes) was not a whaling ship or a coastal trading vessel, with both of which he would have been very familiar.
8. In sum, the best historical and scientific evidence we have at present suggests that the 'Mahogany Ship' story involves Australian ships from the early 19th century. The question remains, how did these ships get there?

### **Speculative Voices**

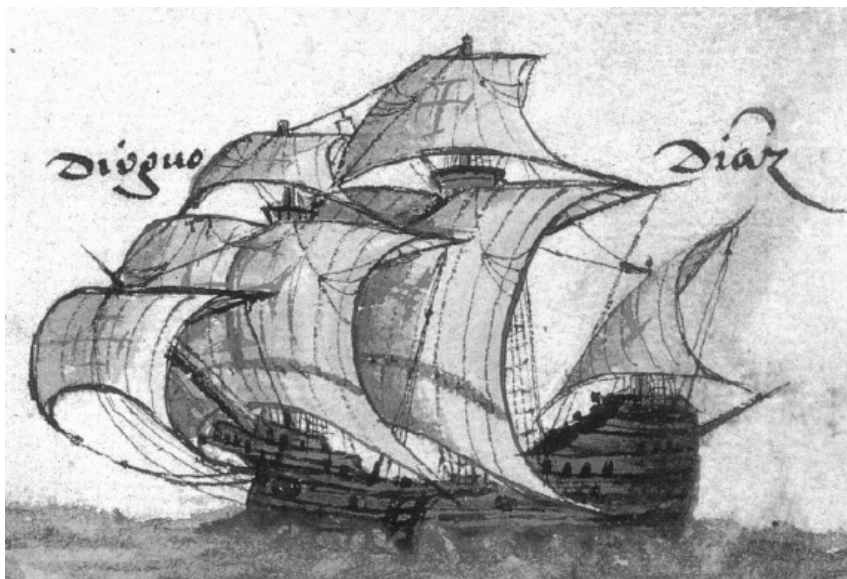
In the first published report about the 'ancient' wreck in the *Portland Guardian* in 1847, there was speculation, without any supporting evidence, that it might have been the wreck of an early Spanish or Dutch ship. In Henry Kingsley's novel, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, published in 1859, there was a scene set on the Victorian coast where a fictional character said there was a 'wreck of a very, very old ship', which he thought may have been Dutch, Spanish or even Chinese in origin.<sup>52</sup> Kingsley added a footnote, saying that there was such a wreck near Portland. Thus, there was community speculation about such matters from the earliest colonial times, most of it without any plausible foundation. The name 'Mahogany Ship' did not arise until 1884 when a journalist, J.S. James, alias 'The Vagabond', first referred to the 'Spanish Mahogany ship' in a flight of journalistic fancy.<sup>53</sup> This may have been fuelled initially by Alexander Dalrymple, the British hydrographer, who in 1770 published records of several early Spanish and Portuguese voyages to the south Pacific.<sup>54</sup> He was the first to draw attention to the possibility of Australia having been discovered in the 16th century, before Dutch discoveries in the 17th century. In Sydney, George Collingridge pursued this argument in some detail in 1895.<sup>55</sup> However, it was Kenneth McIntyre who, some 80 years later, first proposed a detailed hypothesis about the 'Mahogany Ship' and its possible relationship to a specific 16th-century Portuguese voyage and the Dieppe maps.

### McIntyre’s ‘Mahogany Ship’ Hypothesis

In his influential book, *The Secret Discovery of Australia*, published in 1977, Kenneth McIntyre used selected pieces of evidence from of a whole series of previously unrelated matters to support his hypothesis that the Portuguese had discovered and mapped eastern Australia in about 1521. The ‘Mahogany Ship’ story was but one of those matters. McIntyre’s interpretation of the Dieppe maps was another. He claimed to have identified part of the Victorian coastline, ending at Warrnambool, with coastal outlines on those maps. His navigational and cartographic interpretations have been criticised by others, and William Richardson, who analysed the place names on those maps from a linguistic point of view, reached very different conclusions in his 2006 study.<sup>56</sup> The geography of the Dieppe maps remains a matter of contention that is beyond the scope of this investigation to canvass. However, several other pieces of evidence in McIntyre’s argument have already been discredited. For example, the Bittangabee ruins that McIntyre thought were the remains of a 16th-century Portuguese fort were in fact those of a house being constructed in about 1844 by the Imlay brothers who had a whaling station there. They never completed the house because their financial empire collapsed and two of the brothers died soon after.<sup>57</sup>

However, for many people, McIntyre’s claim that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was a 16th-century caravel (Figure 2) remains crucial to his argument that the Portuguese discovered Australia. McIntyre claimed that the ‘wreck’ was of carvel construction, although no one said it was. He went on to claim that, for this reason, it must have been a Portuguese caravel. McIntyre has misunderstood the difference between a caravel as a ship and carvel construction of any wooden ship. While it is true that 16th-century Portuguese caravels were among the earliest ships to be constructed that way, carvel construction has been the norm for almost all wooden vessels of at least moderate size for the past 500 years.<sup>58</sup> In addition, McIntyre wrote of the ‘Mahogany Ship’ that: ‘It was probably this unusual feature (carvel construction) which led Mills and Mason to feel that the design was unusual, antique, not in accord with the rules of modern boat building’. On the contrary, it would have been very unusual for a wooden ship not to be carvel built. This type of construction gives no indication of the country of origin or age of any ship, including the ‘Mahogany Ship’. Significantly, McIntyre’s suppositions and errors on this matter have not been identified by other scholars and commentators.

As further support for his argument about the ‘Mahogany Ship’ being a caravel, McIntyre relied on Archibald’s account of Mrs Thomas Manifold’s mental image of what she had seen decades earlier.<sup>59</sup> She had come to the Warrnambool district from Tasmania in the mid-1840s as the wife of a prominent local landowner. She said she had seen a ‘wreck’ high up on the beach to the west of Warrnambool, probably in the 1850s: ‘The sides, or bulwarks, [were] after the fashion of a panelled door, with mouldings (as in a door) stout and strong’. McIntyre concluded that: ‘Nothing could describe a Portuguese caravel better’, a conclusion that now seems hard to



*Figure 2. A 16th-century painting of a Portuguese caravel, one of Pedro Cabal's fleet that sailed to India in 1500. It has raised fore and aft-castles and a mixture of square and lateen (diagonal) sails.*

justify. McIntyre either ignored or was not aware of other descriptions of the ‘Mahogany Ship’ that tell a very different story. It bore no resemblance to a 16th-century caravel (Figure 2) and looked like an unusually large lighter, or barge, instead (Figure 3). Perhaps McIntyre was misled by Joseph Archibald, who emphasised Mrs Manifold’s mental image of the ‘wreck’ in his published article, but ignored several more prosaic descriptions he had collected from other people that were in his unpublished notes. This is surely an example of selective use of evidence.

McIntyre’s claim to have successfully integrated the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story with that of the Dieppe maps and the Portuguese discovery of Australia in the 16th century is therefore discredited on several grounds. There is no plausible evidence that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was a caravel or that it had anything to do with Portuguese voyages or the Dieppe maps in the 16th century. Those stories should be considered separately, and on their individual merits.

### Others’ Hypotheses

Unfortunately, McIntyre’s specious argument about the ‘Mahogany Ship’ has been accepted uncritically by others. For example, Roger Hervé, from the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*, has accepted McIntyre’s idea that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ was a caravel, but believes it was Spanish rather than Portuguese, the *San Lesmes*, one of Loaysa’s fleet blown westwards from the Straits of Magellan, which Hervé believes discovered New Zealand and eastern Australia in 1525–1528.<sup>60</sup> A very different explanation for the ‘Mahogany Ship’ has been proposed in recent years by Gavin Menzies, who has suggested that it was a 15th-century Chinese junk, one of Admiral Hong Bao’s fleet that sailed from China in about 1420, which Menzies believes visited the Americas and Australia.<sup>61</sup> There is no evidence from the ‘Mahogany Ship’ story to support Menzies’ ideas any more than those of McIntyre or Hervé.

In 1910, McCrae speculated that the ‘wreck’ in the sand dunes was far from the sea because either the sea had retreated or because the sand dunes had moved a significant distance toward the sea since the ship came ashore. Another suggestion was that this ‘wreck’ had been lifted above

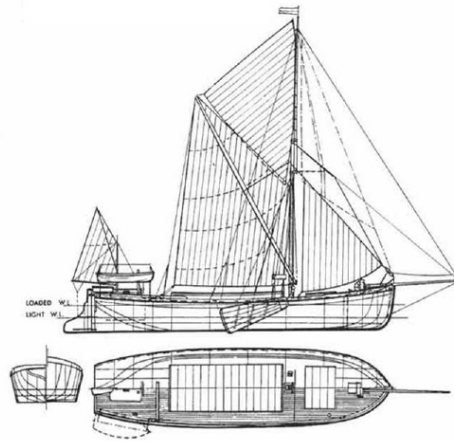


Figure 3. Plans of a typical 19th-century wooden hulled spritsail barge built on the Thames.

Reproduced from John Leather, *Barges*, Granada Publishing and [www.mmhistory.org.uk](http://www.mmhistory.org.uk)



sea level by a very large tidal wave or tsunami. Such explanations may have seemed plausible initially, but not in the light of later knowledge, nor without any additional evidence of such an unusual event. It has also been suggested that the 'Mahogany Ship' was a 'blubber-punt' from early whaling days, and that the dark colour of its timbers was due to staining from whale oil.<sup>62</sup> The latter suggestion raises the question of why a very experienced seaman in the whaling industry like Captain Mills would not have recognised a 'blubber-punt'.

### **'In conclusion ...' A New Hypothesis**

For any hypothesis to explain how the two ships came to be on the Victorian coast near Warrnambool, it must acknowledge the salient points of the evidence presented here. All previous hypotheses fail in that regard. In conclusion, this article presents a new and more comprehensive explanation that takes the many 'Mahogany Ship' stories and the relevant scientific evidence into consideration.<sup>63</sup> It can be summarised as follows.

There were many vessels stolen or pirated from Tasmania by escaped convicts before 1835. Some were recaptured before getting far. Others may have been lost at sea, which is what the authorities thought would happen to all of them. However, some escapees are known to have sailed to distant lands, including South America.<sup>64</sup> Wherever they ended up, they knew it would be difficult to pass themselves off as *bona fide* mariners because they did not have the necessary documents. Some tried to get around this problem by beaching their stolen ship and building a new one out of its salvaged parts so that they could sail away to a safe haven, claiming to be ship-wrecked seamen who had lost their documents. Some stolen ships that disappeared may not have been detected at their destinations. They are a potential source of unidentified shipwrecks on the Victorian coast (and elsewhere) that historians and others have thus far not considered.

By 1805, the Victorian coast was quite well known to sealers and whalers. It would make sense for escapees from Tasmania to sail to Victoria for a temporary safe haven. It is not far from Tasmania and it was uninhabited then by Europeans. If they did what other escapees did elsewhere, they would have beached their ship on a sandy beach, such as that near Warrnambool. With timber and other materials salvaged from their wreck, they would have proceeded to build a new ship. It would presumably have been constructed on the steepest part of the shore, high above sea level while the ship was being built, with the intention of sliding



it down a slipway and launching it into the sea. It was either not finished or not launched, for whatever reason, and was found partially covered by sand about 20 years later, in 1836.

Groups of escaped convicts were certainly capable of building a ship, even without stealing another for its materials. For example, an unusual 'lugger-rigged' craft (i.e. with a four-sided sail held up by a 'lug') that escaped convicts had built in southwest Tasmania was intercepted in 1814 by local officials as it was sailing up D'Entrecasteaux Channel, foiled in its attempt to sail away.<sup>65</sup> Another vessel, with a keel 11 metres long, was under construction by escaped convicts at Deceitful Cove on the Tamar River when it was found in 1817, before it could be completed.<sup>66</sup> Escapees would presumably have had limited materials, tools and skills, so any ship they built was likely to be crudely constructed, as was said of the 'Mahogany Ship'.

This writer has previously noted that, of the several ships that disappeared after being stolen or pirated from Tasmania before 1835, only one was built in northern New South Wales.<sup>67</sup> That is where the unique combination of three types of timber associated with the 'Mahogany Ship'—Eucalyptus, Syncarpia and Syzygium—would have been growing. That ship was the *Unity*, a 36-ton schooner built on the Hawkesbury River in 1808, pirated from the Derwent River by seven armed convicts in 1813, and never heard of again. We can but speculate that those escaped convicts sailed across Bass Strait and beached the *Unity* near Warrnambool. That would explain the presence of a 'wreck' near the water's edge. The new ship under construction from materials salvaged from the *Unity* would be on a steeper part of the beach, and above sea level, so it could be launched down a slipway. However, this new ship was presumably either not finished or not launched. The radiocarbon date of 1810 +/- 50 years for timber believed to have come from this ship is compatible with this hypothesis, which also explains the presence of another unidentified 'wreck' on the same part of the coast. In addition, it explains how at least some of the timbers for the new ship came from northern New South Wales, where the *Unity* was built, and why the new ship was crudely constructed.

### **An Australian Imaginary?**

Until the remains of those two ships are recovered, we will not know for sure what they were and how they got there, but the evidence at present suggests that they were built in Australia in the early 19th century.

The hypothesis presented here may be less romantic than McIntyre's identification of the 'Mahogany Ship' as a caravel and the possible Portuguese discovery of the Victorian coastline some two centuries before Europeans are known to have arrived, but it is no less important a mystery to be solved. The new hypothesis, drawing on a large body of historical and scientific evidence spanning the period 1835–2010, also gives fresh recognition to the ingenuity, resourcefulness and physical feats of European Australia's convict forbears. It is yet another 'Mahogany Ship' imaginary that shifts the focus to a more pragmatic and recent convict story. As such, this article's reassessment and new identity 'story' of this 'ancient Wreck' first sighted near Warrnambool in 1835–36 invites further thought and historical exploration.

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