

Melbourne Herald
October 26 1933

Ship Buried In Sand

Spanish Wreck Search Urged

HISTORY LINK

"Well to the Eastward of Gorman's Lane. Proceed eastward till you bring the point of land, on which the iron church stood, in line with the highest point of Tower Hill Island. The wreck would be almost in straight line with those objects, well in the hummocks".

The romantic suggestion of the text notwithstanding, this is not a quotation from "Treasure Island", but an indication of a sand-buried ship, cast up long ago on the dunes between Warrnambool and Port Fairy. Mr J. McC. Kerr, city solicitor and former member of the staff of the Public Library, wants the authorities to exhume it. He believes that investigation may date the wreck earlier than the accepted date of the discovery of Eastern Australia by white men.

Mr Kerr this week wrote to the Warrnambool Progress Association urging that the investigation of the wreck should be undertaken in view of the Centenary celebrations. It might throw new light on Victoria's origins as a place known to and visited by white men.

MAHOGANY SHIP

"I believe that a search for the wreck, which is traditionally known as "the Mahogany Ship" or "the Spanish wreck", Mr Kerr said today, "might bring some interesting history to light. There was never proper investigation of the wreck while it was still discernible. Its location is not now known precisely, but it should not be hard to determine."

A search by a representative of The Herald today disclosed a number of references to the wreck in magazines of the last century, and in the "Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia." The bearing, quoted above, was given by Captain J. B. Mills, onetime harbor-master at Port Fairy. He visited the wreck, and walked what was left of its hardwood deck, after its presence had been reported to him, in 1836, by Gibb and Wilson, two sealers.

REMAINS IN HUMMOCKS

In March, 1897, J Archibald, curator of the Warrnambool Museum, wrote in the new *[sic]* defunct magazine "Austral Light" that "the remains are still on the Warrnambool common, embedded deeply in the sand hummocks". He described these remains as "the only piece of historical antiquity on the Australian continent".

In 1847 the central part of the deck was still whole, according to Captain Mason, of Port Fairy. Thirty years later he wrote to a Melbourne newspaper, describing the wreck as resembling a large lighter, of a build which bespoke its makers' ignorance

of ship-building craft as he knew it. It was lying in-shore far beyond high water mark. According to Captains Mason and Mills, the deck was of mahogany or cedar.

The "Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society" for 1899-1901 report the discovery of a Spanish coin, dated 1717, or more than 50 years earlier than Captain Cook's discovery of the east coast of Australia.

DUG FROM GARDEN

This coin, dug up from a garden at Hamilton, was reputed to have been carried there by natives, who had found it near the Spanish mahogany ship. There appears to be no other evidence of the wreck's Spanish origin.

Naturally, in the absence of a close examination during the period when the wreck was exposed, there is no evidence of its age. But the Warrnambool Museum curator wrote that aborigines of the Yangery tribe, when questioned in the 1830's, said that the wreck had "always been there". They had played about it as little children.

As some of the blacks interrogated were at that time 70 years old, it was held that their testimony suggested that the wreck had been on the hummocks about 1766, or about four years before the Endeavour's Australian landfall.