

The layers beneath our feet along the Birrarung/Yarra

Emma Russell & Madeline Pentland, August 2022



We've written before about the [riverfront in the CBD](#), and of heritage supporting a [circular economy](#) with the Goods Shed No. 5 as an example. Our work at this place and surrounding waterways continues with our recent study into the timber piles and what lies beneath the wharf for Icon Construction as they work on the site. This article is about the layers of history that contribute to our places. (Spoiler: unfortunately, try as we did, we found no evidence of a sunken ship of treasures wedged beneath the site!)

Geology dates volcanic activity between Sunbury and the Great Dividing Range from 42 million to 57 million years ago. The volcanoes' lava flows formed the basalt (bluestone) foundations across parts of Naarm/Melbourne. Over a millennium a huge body of water formed to the north, narrowing and shifting to eventually become the Birrarung/Yarra River. The north side of the river is on Woiwurrung (language group) country. The traditional owners are the Wurundjeri willam, whose country is from the west of Darebin Creek to the east banks of the Maribyrnong River and Jackson's creek. South is Bunerong country, which wraps around the bay to Wilsons Promontory.

Ten thousand years ago, where the ocean tides met the Birrarung/Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers, a delta formed. Over the course of 3,000 years, salt and freshwater mixed, and silt, sand and vegetative debris were deposited on the swampy flats, and they eventually nourished a vast array of flora and fauna. For 5,000 years or so this saltwater wetland was a home of plenty for birds, fish, plants, grasses, and insects.



Doris Paton, Gunnai/Ngarigoi, Eel pot, 1993, Clay, paint, 66.5 x 31 cm, Koorie Heritage Trust AH2651
<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/meerreeng-an-here-is-my-country/eel-pot/>

The river was more shallow and narrow than today, and full of tree roots, broken tree limbs, and other natural debris. Upstream near today's Queen Street Bridge was 'the Falls' – a ridge of bluestone rocks crossing the river. They prevented the heavy salt from washing upstream making the Birrarung/Yarra both a salt- and a freshwater river.

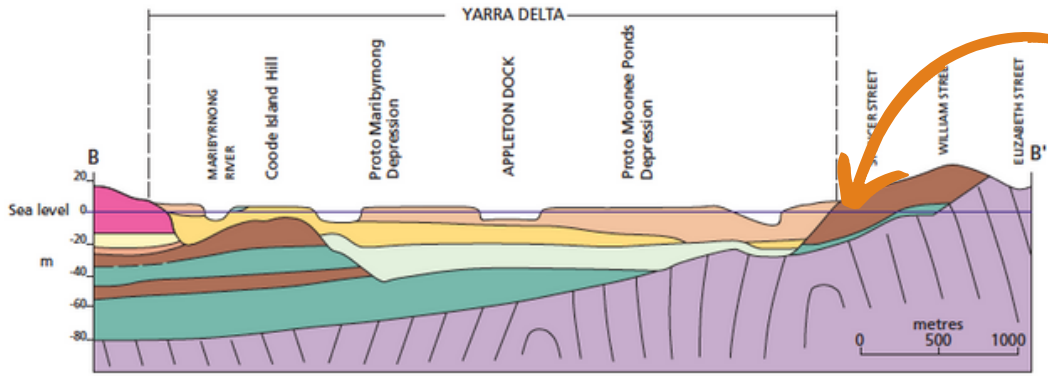
The Wurundjeri willam made clothes, baskets, bowls, mats, traps, and other domestic goods from the many different reeds and grasses. Eels were harvested in late summer using woven reed traps and rock traps set up in the river to catch them.

In the early 1800s a handful of non-indigenous people sailed past or into the heads and took note of its qualities. But in 1835, first John Pascoe Fawkner and soon after John Batman sailed upstream as far as today's CBD, and Batman declared the north bank of the river a 'place for a village'.

The gentle layering over time of natural forces and materials that created the river, its bank, swamplands, and wildlife was soon replaced by a far greater force.

'Melbourne 1836', R. Hofmann, State Library Victoria, Accession No. H18182 (excerpt)
Goods Shed No. 5 was to be constructed near the far left of this image on the north bank.





Geological cross-section from Elizabeth Street (on right) to Appleton Dock (centre) and the Maribyrnong River (left). Arrow points to location of No.5 shed atop Coode Island Silt (Quaternary era) and older volcanics (Tertiary era). Source: M. L. Cupper, S. Quilford White, 'Quaternary: ice ages – environments of change', in Gondwana Break-up and its Aftermath, p.350, January 2003, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309717584>.

Melbourne became an instant city with over 123,000 people by 1861 and a commercial destiny tied to the river's wharfs. These became the entry and exit points for pastoralists' wool, beef and grain empires, urban manufacturing industries, and millions of imports and exports. With the shipping, people, activity, and ballooning of human life in general the river and its banks were polluted and trampled on, and the waterways were used for industrial waste.

The Melbourne Harbour Trust (est. 1877) and British engineer Sir John Coode planned works that would dredge, widen and construct a canal from the junction of the Birrarung/Yarra and Saltwater Rivers through the flats south of the River's original horseshoe course (Fisherman's Bend) to re-join the river upstream near the existing wharfs. Coode Canal opened in 1886 and ships were soon navigating its length with ease, rapidity, and frequency. The CBD was bustling with constant maritime and commercial activity that impacted on every square inch of the river, its bank, and surrounding land.

The original berth (1864) on the site of today's No. 5 used to be No. 12 and used for coal and general cargo. All sheds and some berths on the north wharf were progressively reconstructed in the 1880s and 1890s, and several again in the late 1930s including 'our' shed, which by then was used for Victorian coastal and intra-state trade. Behind it a bluestone pavement was constructed, later covered in asphalt in 1958.

Timber was the primary material used 'on account of an unlimited supply of the finest hardwood timber in the world' - firstly Red gum and Iron bark from East Gippsland, with Jarrah

from Western Australia, and later Grey Box, Flooded Gum, and Yellow Stringy Bark also from East Gippsland. These timbers were resistant to *Teredo Navalis*, a species of salt water clam that bored through wood.

When Spencer Street Bridge was built in 1930, closing the river upstream, the sheds were renumbered and No. 12 became No. 5. You can read about the layers of history under Spencer Street Bridge and see the port in action here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CgY6K5YBwM7/>.

By the 1970's containerised ships and Swanson Dock had made the river redundant for shipping. No. 5 was left to store timber, used to train wharf workers during the 1980's, or neglected. Now heritage listed, the entire shed has been carefully dismantled so as to be eventually reconstructed as part of the new development on that site.

So, what of its historical layers from the deep to the recent past? Those beneath our feet around No. 5 shed could well include: lumps of basalt rock, ancient tree stumps, remnants of domestic goods, construction timbers, coal, any non-perishable goods that fell off a ship or the wharf, various timbers from East Gippsland or Western Australia in the 1864, 1894, and 1942 iterations of the shed, and a range of more modern fibre and telco cables, water and sewer mains, gas lines, underground litter traps, drainage pipes, electric cables, high- and low-voltage cables, and network infrastructure. - looking down can be just as interesting as looking around!

'North Wharf No.14, Melbourne', c.1890, State of Library Victoria, H4417. The large sailing ship is probably docked at No. 12, renumbered No. 5 after 1930. The wharf is constructed from timbers with concrete bollards.



Gary Presland, *First People, the eastern Kulin of Melbourne, Port Phillip and central Victoria*, pp.3-9; Docklands - Indigenous Heritage Trail, Wurundjeri Tribe Council, undated, p.5; Tony Dingle, *The Victorians, Settling*, p.21; Richard Broome, *The Victorians, Arriving*, p.57; Andrew C Ward and Associates, *Dockland Heritage Study*, September 1991; Biosis, *Seafarers Rest North Wharf Park, 731-739 Flinders Street, Docklands, Cultural Heritage Management Plan 16265*; Jarrod Reedie, 'Heritage Listed Goods Shed No 5's Retention Works Completed', *Architecture & Design*, 1 April 2021; Lovell Chen, *Berth No 5 North Wharf H1798, Heritage Impact Statement*, February 2018-Melbourne Harbour Trust Commission Drawings, 1938; Robert Sands Pty Ltd, *Goods Shed No. 5 Conservation Management Plan*, November 2008; Melbourne Harbour Trust and Port of Melbourne archive