

YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 52 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottneest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.

Now that the Island is again open to visitors, these Virtual Visits are continuing in 2021 to enable a further enjoyment of stories introduced at the Wadjemup Museum, the Chapman Archives or sites around the Island.

Enjoy, discover and share.

GEORGETTE AND CATALPA

From the eighteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, territorial waters were generally accepted as 3 nautical miles or 5.6 kilometres. Historically this was based on the range of a cannon, and thus equated the portion of an ocean that a sovereign state could defend from the shore. Since the late 20th century, the 12 mile limit (approximately 22 kilometres) has become almost universally accepted. Australia extended its territorial waters from three to twelve nautical miles in 1990.

The territorial waters around Rottneest have seen few if any shots fired in anger except for two days in April 1876. In an incident involving elements of ingenuity, bravado, bluff, frustration and restraint, an international incident was averted, and a continuing legend formed.

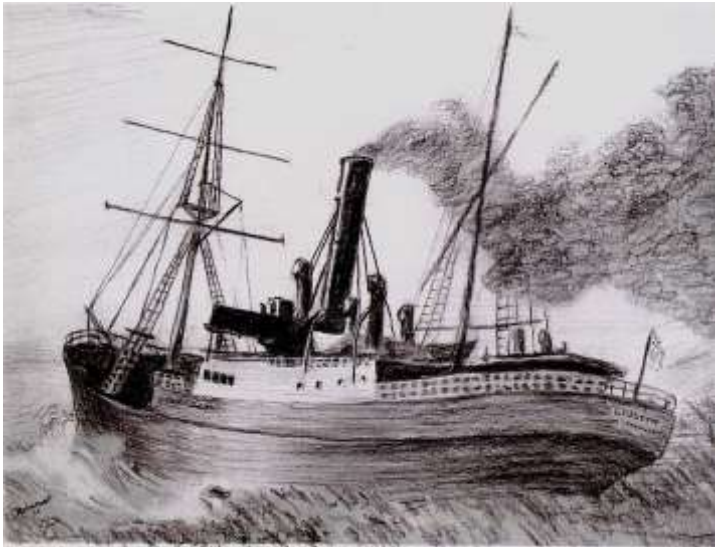
The Story Begins – The Fenians



The background to this story begins in 1868 with the arrival in Fremantle of the last convict transport, *Hougoumont*, carrying 279 convicts, including 62 Fenians. Fenian served, at the time, as an umbrella term for the Fenian Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, two secret political organisations dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic.

The Fenians prisoners were from the hundreds of men arrested in Ireland in 1865, on suspicion of complicity in a planned uprising. There were two elements amongst the men charged, convicted, and sentenced to transportation: civilians, and serving British soldiers. The civilians were classified as political prisoners, whilst the ex-military were treated as ordinary criminals. The following year one of the military Fenian prisoners escaped from Bunbury aboard an American whaling vessel. John Boyle O'Reilly sailed to America and settled in Boston, eventually becoming the editor of the *Boston Pilot*. In 1869 the civilian element was granted clemency and freed. This left eight military Fenians still imprisoned.

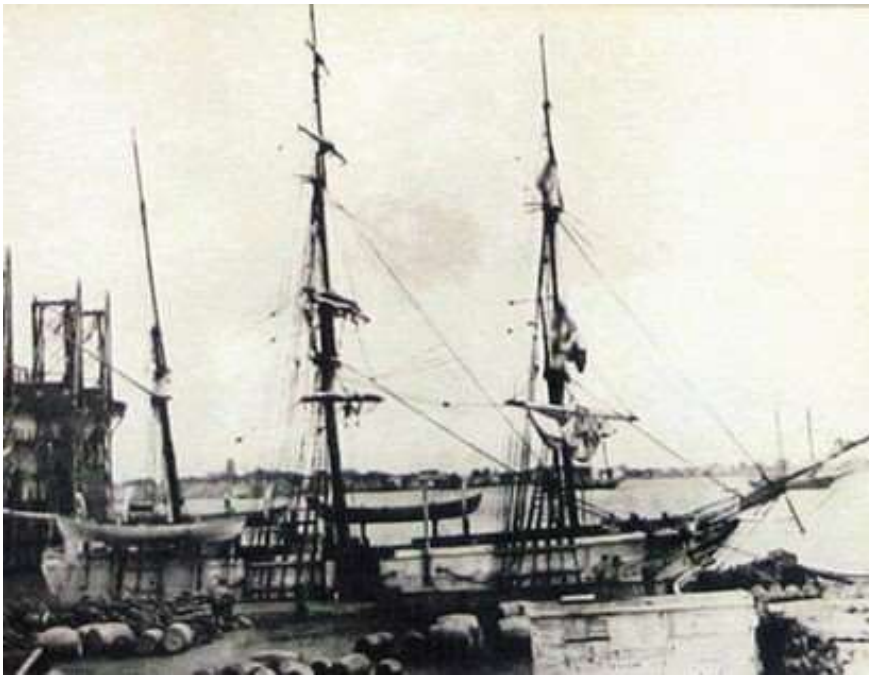
The Story Continues – The SS Georgette



The SS *Georgette* marked the beginning of change from sail to steam in Western Australia. Together with the SS *Xantho*, *Georgette* had a short and ill-starred career and sank soon after its arrival here. The *Georgette* an iron screw-steamer with two masts and a schooner rig, was built in Dumbarton, Scotland in 1872. She was 46.2m long, 6.9m wide, 3.4m deep and had the capacity of 460 tons.

She was bought to carry passengers and small trade between Albany, Fremantle and Champion Bay and arrived in Fremantle in September 1873.

A Rescue is Conceived – Enter the Catalpa



O'Reilly meanwhile had not forgotten his fellow prisoners. With Fenian support, a plan was suggested that a ship be purchased, laden with a legitimate cargo, and sailed to Western Australia. The Fenian prisoners would then be rescued by stealth rather than force of arms. The three-masted bark *Catalpa* was purchased to put the rescue to effect.

The *Catalpa* displaced 200 tons and was 28 metres long, with an 8 metre beam and a 3.6 metre draught. She was restored to the fitting and rigging of a whaleship and on 29 April 1875 sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts.

To manage the "land end" of the rescue operation, Fenian agents John J. Breslin and Thomas Desmond travelled to Western Australia. Breslin masqueraded as American businessman "James Collins", while Desmond adopted the alias of Johnson. They departed the US in September 1875 and arrived in Fremantle in November 1875, *Catalpa* fell behind the intended schedule owing to weather conditions. After 11 months at sea, she dropped anchor off Bunbury on 28 March 1876. Anthony and Breslin then began to prepare for the rescue itself.

The Rescue

The deceptions and preparations to support the escape are well documented and worth exploring. After some frustration, the escape was rearranged for 17 April, when most of the Convict Establishment garrison were watching the Perth Yacht Club regatta.. At 8:30 am, six Fenians who were working in work parties outside the prison walls, absconded— Thomas Darragh, Martin Hogan, Michael Harrington, Thomas Hassett, Robert Cranston and James Wilson. You can self-discover their adventurous flight to Rockingham.



The *Catalpa* meanwhile had dropped anchor in international waters off Rockingham. There it waited until signalled to despatch a whaleboat to shore to collect the escapees. The escape was detected while the escapees were still rowing back to *Catalpa*, and the *Georgette*, which was in Fremantle at the time, was sent with a water police cutter to intercept them.

However, the prisoners successfully reached *Catalpa* and, having no official orders to board *Catalpa*, *Georgette* and the police cutter withdrew. The following morning, *Georgette* returned and demanded the return of the prisoners. *Catalpa's* captain, George Anthony, denied that he had the prisoners on board, and pointed out that he was in international waters. *Georgette* then fired a warning shot with its 12 pounder cannon, but Anthony pointed at his ship's US flag and sailed away. *Georgette* pursued until it was low on fuel, then returned to Fremantle.



- <http://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/marine/jurisdiction/maritime-boundary-definitions>
- <https://ssl.law.uq.edu.au/journals/index.php/maritimejournal/article/viewFile/157/195>
- <https://margaretrivervista.com/redgate-beach/ss-georgette/>
- <https://fremantleprison.com.au/history-heritage/history/the-convict-era/escape-stories/>
- <https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/17584>
- <https://www.theirishstory.com/2017/03/07/the-fenians-an-overview/#.YIT9oJAZbIU>
- https://www.smithsculptors.com/The_Catalpa_Memorial%20Artists_Concept.html

<https://folkstream.com/180.html>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec228_a89WQ



During the voyage on the Hougoumont, many of the Fenians entertained themselves by producing editions of a shipboard newspaper entitled *The Wild Goose*. Seven issues of the newspaper were produced, each issue carefully laid out and decorated by hand. Only one copy of each issue was made, which was then read aloud to the convicts. The aim was to provide entertainment and encouragement aboard the ship during its long and arduous voyage to Fremantle.

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Wild_Goose

The title refers to the Wild Geese, the Irish soldiers who had left Ireland to serve in continental European armies since the 16th century. It also alludes to the “Flight of the Earls” which took place in September 1607, when Hugh O'Neill, 2nd Earl of Tyrone, and Rory O'Donnell, 1st Earl of Tyrconnell, and about ninety followers, left Ulster for mainland Europe. Their permanent exile was a watershed event in Irish history, symbolizing the end of the old Gaelic order.



On 9 September 2005 a memorial was unveiled in Rockingham to commemorate the Catalpa escape. The memorial, a large statue of six wild geese, was created by Western Australian artists Charlie Smith and Joan Walsh Smith.

You can read about how Charlie and Joan’s preparedness saved their Hills property during February’s fire in Volume 23 Issue 2, 2021 of *The Irish Scene* magazine.

https://issuu.com/irishscenep Perth/docs/irish_scene_issue_2_2021_lr

Last Voyage of the Georgette

On 29 November 1876, SS *Georgette* left Fremantle carrying fifty passengers and a cargo of jarrah, bound for Adelaide via Bunbury, Busselton and Albany. It was to be her last voyage. Shortly after midnight on 1 December, midway between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Hamelin, a leak developed, and the ship's pumps would not work. The rising water extinguished the engine's fires, leaving *Georgette* drifting into the surf at Calgardup Bay, where she was seen by the Bussell family's Aboriginal stockman, Sam Isaacs. Isaacs ran to the Bussell homestead to raise the alarm, where he found only Ellen Bussell and her 16-year-old daughter Grace. The legendary story of the rescue efforts by Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs is another one for you to explore.



The United States flag flown by the *Catalpa* would likely have had 37 stars. Although Colorado became the 38th state on 1 August 1876, this was long after the *Catalpa* had departed on her rescue voyage. The 37 star flag had been in use since the entry of Nebraska on 1 March 1867.



Notwithstanding the above, the National Museum of Ireland has in its collection a 38 star United States flag purported to be that which flew on the *Catalpa*. It is noted however that the *Catalpa* set out on its mission in 1875 and only returned to New York on 19 August 1876.

The *Georgette* would have flown the Red Ensign. Traditionally it was the flag of British merchant or passenger ships since 1707. It is the flag flown by British merchant or passenger ships since 1707. The Merchant Shipping Act 1854 included a specific provision that the Red Ensign was the appropriate flag for a British merchantman.



This Fenian flag was captured at Tallaght on 5 March 1867. The stars represent the 32 counties of Ireland taking its inspiration from the Stars and Stripes. Other versions more closely resembled Confederate examples from the recently concluded US Civil War.

