

Heritage Overlay No.: 045

Citation No.: 069

Place: Sanger Grave, 1286-1292 Calder Highway

Other Names of Place: N/A

Location: 1286-1292 Calder Highway, Diggers Rest (Reserve east of the railway line).

Critical Dates: Death: 1854; Original headstone c.1856; Reinterment of remains, reconstruction of headstone, and construction of present monument: c.1992

Existing Heritage Listings: None.

Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The JA Sanger grave at 1286-1292 Calder Highway Diggers Rest is of heritage significance as a rare, possibly unique, monument to the the goldrush travellers who walked to the Mount Alexander and other central Victorian goldfields in the great rushes of the early 1850s. Sanger and his mate were killed when the tilt dray under which they were sleeping tipped onto them when its back prop was displaced, possibly by horses (or perhaps thieves) pulling at feed in the

dray, or else by intoxicated revellers as a prank. In c.1992 the grave, threatened with destruction, was relocated to a park beside the former Highway in Diggers Rest. The brick monument now contains the cremated ashes of Sanger, and a reconstruction of the badly weathered original headstone. It is a rare and important place, indicative of the many burials that were carried out with minimal formality and outside reserved cemeteries in the colony's frontier days.

The JA Sanger grave, at 1286-1292 Calder Highway, Diggers Rest, is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2). It is associated with one of the most dazzling goldrushes in world history, and with Australia's largest goldrush. The throng pushing up Mount Alexander Road in the early 1850s was of historic magnitude, and faced hardships and dangers of sometimes epic proportions. The trip up to the diggings was an integral and distinctive part of the goldrush phenomenon, and memorable one to the diggers. Most diggers, like Sanger, travelled the road on foot, camping out and in poor weather sleeping under drays.

This may be the only marked grave surviving to testify to those who fell by the wayside on the Mount Alexander Road in the early 1850s. While many died on the journey as a result of mishap, sickness and murder, and were buried beside the road, few headstones appear to have been erected, and none are known to survive.

The grave also constitutes evidence of the considerable American presence on and contribution to the Victorian goldfields, as well as to the international dimension of the goldrush phenomenon. The Americans were one of the many 'foreign' (non-British) minorities on the goldfields. Reported visits to the grave by American servicemen during the Second World War demonstrates its significance as a *de facto* memorial to the Americans in the goldrushes.

The history of the grave, including its possible association with the name of the township of Diggers Rest, has been a subject of interest for Victorians over many years, as evidenced by articles and debates in major metropolitan newspapers during the 1930s and 40s. The relative proximity of the Diggers Rest Hotel (the more likely origin of the township name) to the grave is historically significant, as the bodies of the diggers were probably taken to the hotel after the accident.

The JA Sanger grave at 1286-1292 Calder Highway, Diggers Rest, is socially significant at a LOCAL level (AHC G1), as evident in the local community's maintainance of the grave, and careful relocation of it to an accessible and prominent location in the township.

Description:

The reconstructed headstone is a small pointed-arch shaped stone headstone which is inscribed simply: 'JA Sanger, Woodstock, USA, May 12th 1855, aged 24 years.'

It is currently situated in a reserve on the south side of the old Calder Highway, between the Diggers Rest Hotel, and the Diggers Rest Railway Station. It is embedded into a cream brick wall, set on a concrete base. The grave was relocated from a nearby location, approximately 150-200 metres up a hill on the north side of the Calder Highway, towards the Diggers Rest Hotel. It is said to have been one of nine graves in that particular location. However there has always been a question as to which one of these nine graves was actually that of Sanger.

The reserve also contains a monument to Harry Houdini's first powered flight in Australia.

History:

Contextual History: Mount Alexander Road in the Goldrush

The alluvial gold rushes of the 1850s changed the face of Australia. Victoria's goldrush was also an event of major international significance, comparing with (shading according to local contemporaries) the Californian rush in fame and size. 'Far famed Melbourne' and the names of Victorian goldfields rang around the globe in the early 1850s.¹ The 'diggings' of Ballarat, Castlemaine and Bendigo constituted the richest alluvial goldfields in the world.

The first rush to Ballarat's sensational Golden Gully in August 1851 was eclipsed by that to the Mount Alexander goldfield in October.² By late December some 25-30,000 diggers were on the Castlemaine goldfield.³ In the grip of the gold 'fever', more than 20,000 of Melbourne's population of 25,000 left for the diggings.⁴ The town was electrified, its people 'went mad', nothing was talked about but gold. Labourers, clerks, police, shopkeepers, professionals, and even clergymen and Members of Parliament deserted their posts and callings to prepare for the diggings.⁵

In early 1852 news of the fabulous Mount Alexander diggings reached England, and gripped the world. London was astounded when ships from Melbourne arrived with up to ten tons of gold each. Merchants advertised tents and provisions, and 'going to the diggings' inspired plays and a 'moving panorama'. Charles Dickens wrote of the 'legions of bankers' clerks, merchants' lads, embryo secretaries, and incipient cashiers; all going with the rush, and all possessing but faint and confused idea of where they are going, or what they are going to do.'⁶

The furore was fed by press reports, hastily published travel guides, and letters home. 'Each mail was like a bellows on popular excitement,'⁷ confirming tales of untold wealth awaiting in Victoria. 'We turn up our noses at California' said one letter, incredulous that the Mount Alexander escort was bringing 'a ton of gold' to town each week.⁸ A Castlemaine digger later recounted how the 'startling' news created 'uncontrollable excitement' among the youth of his town of Selkirk, who all wanted to pack for the diggings.⁹ The entire male population of another Scottish village is said to have set off for Port Phillip on the strength of one letter home from a former local.¹⁰

¹ George Robins, in *Records of the Castlemaine Pioneers* (Adelaide, Rigby, The Castlemaine Association of Pioneers and Old Residents, 1972), p.175

² Serle, Geoffrey, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861* (MUP, Carlton, 1968), p.23

³ 'Murrays Guide to the Gold Diggings: The Australian Gold Diggings: Where they are and how to get to them, with letters from settlers and diggers telling how to work them' (1852), in *Australian Historical Monographs*, edited by George Mackaness, Vol.8 (1956), p.37; Flett, James, *A Pictorial History of the Victorian Goldfields* (Rigby, Adelaide, 1976), p.xii; McCulloch, Alan, *Artists of the Australian Gold Rush* (Melbourne, Lansdowne, 1977), p.31

⁴ Flett, 1976, op cit, p.xi.

⁵ Garryowen (E. Finn), *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne 1835 to 1852, Centennial Edition, Vol. 2*, (Melbourne, Fergusson and Mitchell, 1888), p.807; Murrays Guide, op cit, p.31

⁶ Hocking, Geoff, *Castlemaine, From Camp to City: A Pictorial History of Forest Creek & the Mount Alexander Goldfields*, (The Five Mile Press, 1994), pp.29, 37, back dustcover; Hocking, Geoff, *To the Diggings! A Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Discovery of Gold in Australia* (Lothian, 2000), p.67

⁷ Blainey, Geoffrey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (revised edition, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1988), pp.177-8

⁸ Murray's Guide, op cit, p.38. (Letter was dated 8th December 1851). Another, dated 15th January 1852 declared that 'There is no mistake about the matter. Mount Alexander is without doubt the richest gold field in the world'. (p.43)

⁹ Walter Wilson, in *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.93

¹⁰ Hocking, 1994, op cit, p.23

In September 1852 the foreign influx landed; by May 1853 an average of two foreign and five colonial ships were arriving in Melbourne each day.¹¹ Their crews deserted for the diggings:- ‘The waters of Hobson’s Bay were scarcely visible beneath a forest of five or six hundred vessels’ observed William Westgarth.¹² Whereas nearly 14,000 people, most from neighbouring colonies, had arrived in Port Phillip in 1851, in 1852 95,000 people came, with the influx only marginally less (over 92,000) in 1853. In 1854 there were 83,500 new arrivals, and another 66,500 the following year. In 1856-58 the number was still nearly 50,000 per annum, falling to under 30,000 per annum 1859-61. Between 1851 and 1860 Victoria’s population increased sixfold.¹³

The overwhelming majority of arrivals in the years 1852-1854 headed for ‘Mount Alexander’ (Forest Creek, later Castlemaine) and Bendigo, a distance of almost 100 miles (160 kilometres). As early as November 1851 the road ‘was one continuous line of diggers’.¹⁴ Observers, in awe at the ponderous cavalcade, at first tried counting it.¹⁵ The rush to Bendigo’s Eaglehawk Gully in late April 1852 saw the road become even more famous and its traffic more numerous.¹⁶ With the influx of the Europe’s young and fit from September 1852, the traffic increased again. Locals estimated that traffic on this road was greater than all the other major roads in Victoria combined. Assistant gold commissioner C Rudston Read wrote that the road was ‘lined with people ten times as numerous as New South Wales, all on their way to Mount Alexander.’¹⁷ Others registered the international proportions of the phenomenon:- ‘The road resembled one of the great thoroughfares out of London’, observed a clergyman, ‘so full was it of wagons, drays, carts, gigs, equestrians and pedestrians, proceeding to the diggings.’¹⁸ In a paper delivered to the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science in 1855 engineer Edward Richardson declared that in the period late 1852 - early 1853 the traffic on the Mount Alexander Road had ‘exceeded that of any road in England.’¹⁹

As much as the sheer volume of traffic, it was the nature of that journey, including its colourful cast of travellers and the appalling state of the road itself, which were portrayed in contemporary writings and illustrations.

At the very time that the foreign influx landed, ceaseless traffic and a particularly wet winter had made the ‘roads’ (unformed bush tracks) virtually impassable.²⁰ But boggy roads, unbridged creeks and unimagined costs for provisions and repairs did not deter the brave young ‘new chums’ or more seasoned ‘colonials’ from their prospects.

¹¹ Blainey, op cit, p.197

¹² Westgarth, William, *Victoria and the Australian Gold Mines in 1857* (Smith Elder, London, 1857), p.194. (Westgarth, p.194. He was looking back from top of Flemington Road, in late 1854.

¹³ McCulloch, op cit, p.34; also Austin, KA, *The Lights of Cobb & Co: The Story of the Frontier Coaches 1854 -1924* (Adelaide, Rigby, 1972), pp.36-37

¹⁴ Annear, Robyn, *Nothing But Gold: The Diggers of ‘52*, (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1999), p.58

¹⁵ G Butler Earp, *Gold Colonies of Australia: comprising their history ... and every advice to Migrants* (Geo Rutledge, London, 1852), pp.196-7. (This calculates at about one dray every three minutes, or a near continuous stream of traffic at the speed of a bullock dray.). See also the *Argus*, 1/10/1851, p.3

¹⁶ Serle, op cit, pp.23, 35

¹⁷ C Rudston Read, *What I Heard, Saw and Did at the Australian Gold Fields* (Boone, London, 1853), p.123

¹⁸ Adcock, WE, *Gold Rushes of the Fifties*, with notes by James Flett (Poppet Head Press, Glen Waverley, 1977), p.70

¹⁹ Richardson, E, ‘Keilor Bridge’, paper read June 7th 1855, in *Transactions and Proceedings of the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science* (1854/55, Vol.1), p.149

²⁰ Flett, 1976, op cit, p.xii.; Annear, op cit, p.61

In the early months the movement of Melbourne ‘mums and dads’ up the road presented a spectacle:- ‘With the vehicles were a motley assemblage of all sorts, stout, sturdy, active men, an assortment of lame and halt, women with young children, boys with frying pans and tin dishes, girls with bundles as big as themselves, and old men with loads that would appal even the sturdiest in the mother country.’²¹

Soon the experienced colonial campaigner - ‘huge burly fellows’, a ‘sturdy and determined pedestrian’ - appeared, with:

‘...of course, either pistols or gun... Nearly the whole of his person is covered with his accessories – a roll of blankets strapped across his shoulders, tin saucepans, pots and pipkins...tied to his waist...articles numerous and unknown hanging before him.’ ‘Almost every man had a gun, or pistols in his belt, and a huge dog...their spades and picks tied together, and thus they marched up the country, bearing with them all they want, and lying out under the trees.’²²

They were part of an event of historic proportions. John Sherer’s guide to the diggings provided a view of the road to Mount Alexander that was simply epic:

‘Hundreds of drays and carts were tearing and toiling through the deeply rutted track; horses and bullocks smoking and sweltering beneath a broiling sun; drivers shouting and cracking their whips to the loudness of pistol reports.....All except the women were armed with weapons of some kind or other, from the Irish shililah [sic] up to the six barrellled revolving pistol. Verily, I believe, there never was seen, in any part of the world before, such a heterogenous stream of human prodigality, pouring itself along a single line of road, with such golden prospects in view. Every face was radiant with hope and every one was sure of his fortune.’²³

Walking to the Diggings

For Bulla local Isaac Batey ‘the number of footmen stepping it out gaily for Bendigo’ was remarkable.²⁴ As horses and carts were too expensive for most, and vulnerable on the abysmal roads, most of the Mount Alexander Road throng was on foot:

‘Some were going up with drays, others with their wives and families, in light carts, and many more trudging thither on foot with their “swags” on their backs, dusty and weary, foot-sore new chums, on their first trip to the diggings, to realize their golden dreams...’²⁵

²¹ *The Argus*, 1/10/1851, p.3

²² Contemporary sources cited in Bradfield, Raymond, *Castlemaine: A Golden Harvest* (Lowden, Kilmore, 1972), pp.10-11

²³ Sherer, John, *The Gold-Finder of Australia* (Clarke, Beeton, London, 1853; Penguin, Facsimile edition 1973), pp.21-22. Sherer’s noted diggings guide is probably not first-hand. (M.Rosalyn Shennan, ‘A Goldfields Adventurer’ in *Victorian Historical Journal*, March 2000, p.31) However the author is able to paint (others’) first-hand accounts and views onto larger canvasses. It is notable that he was prepared to describe the road to the diggings in 1852 in such unequivocal terms.

²⁴ Batey, Isaac, *Untitled Manuscript*, 1910, (RHSV MSS 000035 Box 16/2), p.49. Batey also observed the ‘marked contrast between the hopefuls and the returning digger thoroughly down on his luck’.

²⁵ Dobie, William Wilson, *Recollections of a Visit to Port Phillip Australia in 1852-55* (Edinburgh, Thomas Murray & Son, 1856), p.47

Occasionally there came ‘some youthful adventurer, lured by the golden bait, but manifestly trained to a very different life, trudging along, weary and footsore, bending beneath his cumbersome swag.’²⁶ But most had heard enough of bushrangers to travel in parties:-

‘... Now and then came a solitary wayfarer riding, driving or walking, but more usually they companied together in caravans of fifty or more; women carrying young children, and sturdy men with carts and barrows, shouldering their guns, and followed by dogs of every size, and breed.’²⁷

Travelling with parties had other advantages:

‘At that time bushranging was rampant, and the diggers travelled in large companies for mutual protection. About 50 of us left Melbourne for Forest Creek ... We passed through the Black Forest without molestation, but on entering a lagoon there with a heavy swag on my back I sank into the soft mud, and my mates had to pull me out.’²⁸

WH Wilson was one of those who carried a ‘ridiculously heavy swag’, and broke down at Keilor.²⁹ He was not alone: ‘At this distance from town men with large swags generally found that they had more than they could carry, consequently the [Keilor] storekeeper had an immense stock of goods on his hands.’³⁰ But most simply discarded excess gear along the road: ‘In those days anyone with a light trap could have done well by collecting articles thrown away in this manner.’³¹

Half of William Ottey’s party started out again from Keilor with blistered feet; many tried going barefoot.³² In incessant rain, Robert Mitchell became ‘knocked up wading through swamps and mud, my boots were soul-less ... I could walk no further.’ Through walking almost barefooted in swampy ground, his feet became poisoned to such an extent that all his toenails came off.³³

Many of the walkers ‘swamped it’, which meant helping a teamster in return for food and having their swag carried on the dray.³⁴ In 1854 Thomas Freebody and his mate paid a carter £4 each to show them up the Mount Alexander Road ‘and to give us a lift if we felt tired’. The carter apparently got the better of the deal: ‘with jibbing horses and bush tracks, we were about twelve days on the road, and during that time we must have unloaded 20 times.’³⁵

Walking in Winter

William Howitt completed the litany of a walker’s complaints: exposure to both the exorbitant prices of provisions on the way, and the elements. ‘Yet the numbers who are now going up the country under all these disadvantages, wading all day through the

²⁶ Hughes, in *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.2

²⁷ Kerr, JH, *Glimpses of Life in Victoria, by a ‘Resident’*; introduced by Marguerite Hancock (Carlton, Miegunyah, 1996), pp.90, 119

²⁸ Thomas Carte, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.161

²⁹ WH Wilson, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.158

³⁰ William Ottey, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.56

³¹ Robert Mitchell, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.35

³² William Ottey, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.56

³³ Robert Mitchell, *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.36

³⁴ Robert Roulston of Diggers Rest in the *Argus* ‘Weekend Magazine’, 28/7/1945

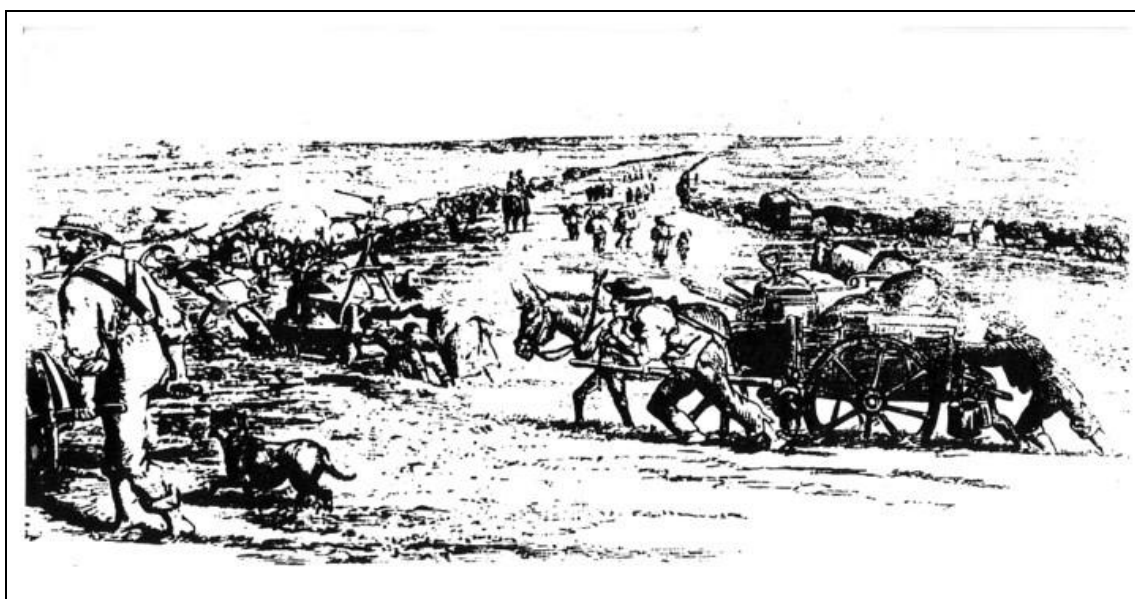
³⁵ Freebody, in *Castlemaine Pioneers*, op cit, p.53

quagmires of the roads, and lying ... wrapped in a single rug all night in the rain under a tree, and having no means of making a fire in the morning ... is quite awful.’³⁶

In wet weather even walkers struggled to get through the quagmires: those on foot ‘crawled like flies across a plate of treacle’.³⁷ James Briggs’ party, setting off on the 1st May, ‘plodded through mud a few miles each day.’ It took them three weeks to reach Bendigo.³⁸

The Keilor Plains - that ‘vast expanse of flat and dreary land’ – was a particularly ‘disheartening’ prospect in wet weather. To Ellen Clacy the Keilor Plains:

‘seemed almost impassable, and what with pieces of rock here, and a waterhole there, crossing them was more dangerous than agreeable. Now one passed a broken-down dray; then one’s ears were horrified at the oaths an unhappy wight was venting at a mud-hole into which he had stumbled.’³⁹



‘Travelling to the Rushes’ (Illustrated London News)

Little had changed when young Lucy Birchall’s family crossed the same dismal plain a few years later: ‘Now we were in a crabhole, places three or four feet deep filled with soft mud and water ... it was quite dark, the rain was falling fast and we were up to our knees in mud. Mama carried baby ... so wretched wet and miserable.’ Only three year old Harrie was unperturbed, striding ‘like a queen’ through the lot of it.⁴⁰

In the wet winter of 1852 John Chandler set off across the Keilor plains for Castlemaine. At ‘Clarke’s Special Survey’ (past the Gap) they had to:

³⁶ Howitt, William, *Land, Labour and Gold, or Two Years in Victoria ...* (Lowden, Kilmore, 1972), p.164

³⁷ Howitt, op cit, p.326

³⁸ ‘Memoirs of Mr James Briggs, JP of Springbark, Cudgewa’, State Library of Victoria, Manuscript.

³⁹ Clacy, op cit, p.34-5

⁴⁰ Birchall, Lucy, Hannah, ‘An Account of a Journey from Melbourne in July 1855 written to her Grandmother by Lucy (with accompanying letter)’ in *La Trobe Library Journal*, Vol.7 No.27, April 1987, pp.63-66. Their trip was in 1855.

‘stop with our drays up to the axles in water, and camp on a kind of island and walk to our drays up to our knees in water and mud on a cold wet night. We had no cover for we were obliged to keep our tarpaulins over our loads, and to all our miseries it came on to rain harder after dark and our poor horses stood shivering with cold.’⁴¹

Walking in Summer

Midsummer provided little relief. The road, gouged with ruts and holes, was ground into a fine powdery dust by the unceasing traffic. The same holes that had been filled with mud now became filled with dust, with similar results: ‘The horses were quite unable to get through it, and more than once were stuck fast in the deep holes which it concealed...’⁴² Police Magistrate William Lavender, travelling in depths of the 1852 winter quagmire, was told that the plains in summer were worse: ‘not a drop of water is to be had and the dust there is knee deep.’⁴³

Dust, flies, burning sun and hot winds were the cause of great discomfort.⁴⁴ The countless bullock drays were a hazard: ‘such is the cloud of dust they throw up that frequently you cannot see three yards before you, and great care has to be taken to prevent a collision.’⁴⁵ ‘Smothered in dust raised by bullocks’, many contracted the eye disease ‘ophthalmia’.⁴⁶ ‘Bearded men’ wore veils over their eyes,⁴⁷ and Lord Cecil struggled:

‘The dust was absolutely unbearable. It hung in a dense cloud about the cart, getting into your eyes, ears, mouth, and nose, stopping respiration utterly and clinging to hair, whiskers and beard as if it were flour. The particles were so small that they penetrated through the thickest clothing and choked up every pore of the skin.’⁴⁸

‘Orion’ Horne, on the gold escort, described:

‘... burning heat, and clouds of dust, which flowed by us so like a dense sandy torrent that we could see nothing below our knees, and very often, nothing in front but the horse’s neck and ears’.⁴⁹

For those trudging along under an ‘almost tropical sun’⁵⁰ the exposed and waterless Keilor Plains were the worst part of the journey. The stands of she-oak trees that had once been plentiful there had been cut down by bullock drivers for their cattle ‘when feed was scarce’.⁵¹ In summer there was now no shade from the burning sun, feed for animals, or water for man or beast:-

⁴¹ Chandler, John, *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, (Arthur’s Seat, Loch Haven, 1990), pp. 68-69

⁴² Scott, Earnest, *Lord Robert Cecil’s Gold Fields Diary* (MUP, Melbourne, 1935), p.15

⁴³ Letter William Lavender, 15/6/1852 (held by Mr David Francis).

⁴⁴ Kiddle, Margaret, *Caroline Chisholm* (MUP, Melbourne, 1969), pp.202-203

⁴⁵ Newton, William Cussons, *Diary* (SLV manuscript), Feb. 2nd 1853

⁴⁶ Snell, Edward, Griffiths, Tom (ed), *The Life and Adventures of Edward Snell: The Illustrated Diary of an Artist, Engineer and Adventurer in the Australian Colonies 1849-1859* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988), p.282; Sherer, op cit, pp.20, 286

⁴⁷ Blake, LJ, *Gold Escorts in Australia* (Rigby, Adelaide, 1978), p.18

⁴⁸ Scott, op cit, p.14

⁴⁹ Adcock, op cit, p.97

⁵⁰ Prout, JS, *An Illustrated Handbook of the Voyage to Australia and a visit to the Goldfields* (London?, 1852?), p.24

⁵¹ Chandler, op cit, p.38

‘The sun was very hot and the road very dusty, and we had no shelter from the heat, and we suffered severely from thirst...The sufferings of poor animals crossing Keilor Plains with heavy loads in those days was very great.’⁵²

A shanty near the Gap sold buckets of water for 2 shillings each, and John Chandler and his mate bought five to share with their horses. Robert Thomas, suffering seriously from the ‘burning sun’ and thirst, and choking on dust carried by the north wind, was truly thankful for the drink of milk he was able to obtain from a roadside shanty near Diggers Rest.⁵³ Another, ‘fearfully thirsty’, gave half-a-crown for the pannikan of cold tea he obtained from perhaps the same hut. In November 1852 a party was forced to obtain all its drinking water on the Keilor Plains from ‘ruts in the roadway’.⁵⁴

Walking in Fine Weather

In another season the beauty of the same country could take travellers by surprise. Camping at the foot of the Gap, Ellen Clacy was overcome: ‘a picture too magnificent to describe...a spot whose natural beauties I have never seen surpassed.’⁵⁵ Bonwick also thought the road between the Gap and Gisborne ‘one of the loveliest countries in the world.’⁵⁶

In good weather the adventure and joy camping in the pristine Australian bush was irresistible:

‘The first night we camped on Keilor Plains, everything being romantic and pleasant, water and firewood being near at hand. After supper, smoking and yarning began until, one by one each dropped off to his resting-place for the night. Bullocks, and horses did their best to lull us to sleep with their tinkling bells around their necks ... and our whole experiences might be likened to a repetition of the thousand and one nights’.⁵⁷

‘With light hearts we strolled on through Flemington ... and reaching the verge of the plains, camped, having Mother Earth for our mattress and heaven’s bright canopy spangled with myriads of stars, amongst which shone the Southern Cross, for our bed-curtains.’⁵⁸

In later years such experiences were remembered nostalgically by old diggers. One recalled the camp at ‘Diggers Rest’:

‘Little do those who pass this place now in railway trains, on holidays bent, know the number of ‘new chums’ who have boiled their billies, fried their chops, made their beds of bush leaves, and put their blue blankets over themselves at this spot’.⁵⁹

⁵² *ibid*, p.78

⁵³ Robert Thomas, Autobiography (Manuscript M2090, SLV), pp.124-127; Henry Boyle, in late 1851 was also happy to pay ‘two shillings for a quart of milk’ at perhaps the same shanty (Castlemaine Pioneers, op cit, p.118)

⁵⁴ Mark T Amos, Castlemaine Pioneers, op cit, p.181

⁵⁵ Clacy, op cit, p.36

⁵⁶ Bonwick, op cit, p.4

⁵⁷ Castlemaine Pioneers, op cit, p.225

⁵⁸ Castlemaine Pioneers, op cit, p.224

⁵⁹ William Ottey, in Castlemaine Pioneers, op cit, p.56

Dangers, and Death on the Road

As early as April 1852 the London press reported ‘riot, drunkenness, robbery and violence’ at the diggings in Victoria, ‘which being the richest have naturally attracted the greatest numbers and the most lawless characters in the colony.’⁶⁰ The year 1852 brought a ‘rich harvest for the criminal class’.⁶¹ Contemporaries remembered it as the year ‘law and order were almost abolished’.⁶² It was characterized by a dramatic upsurge of robberies and murder on the roads, particularly Mount Alexander Road, which was ‘infested with predatory scoundrels’.⁶³

‘In the first eight months following the discovery of gold at Mount Alexander [until c.winter 1852] there was no police protection and ‘highway robberies were incessant’. Between Kyneton and Gisborne the ‘sticking up’ of teamsters and travellers was ‘of almost daily occurrence, frequently accompanied by brutal injury to the despoiled victims’. The Black Forest was the bushrangers’ favourite haunt: ‘from its recesses they sallied out upon passers-by, robbed them ... bound them to trees, and rode off.’ The recorded episodes of shootings, beatings and murder there are many.⁶⁴

Many a lone, successful digger disappeared on his way back to Melbourne. Most crimes occurred in the Black Forest (which harbored gangs such as those of ‘Black Douglas’ and ‘Young Bendigo’⁶⁵), Sawpit (Elphinstone, the nearest licensed premises to Forest Creek), and in the vicinity of the Porcupine Inn (past Harcourt) and the Bush Inn (Gisborne).⁶⁶ One early commentator thought it was the summary (or ‘Yankee’) justice on the goldfields that persuaded some miscreants to ‘shift the scene of their exploits from the diggings to the neighbourhood of roadside inns, where the imprudent and intemperate invariably became their victims.’⁶⁷

For the new chum the Australian ‘bushranger’ was the ‘lowest in the scale of ruffianism of all who have followed the profession of highway robbery. He bears no affinity to those heroes of romance.’ Victims tied to a tree were left to perish ‘in a state of complete nudity, perhaps with his nose spit up or his eyes gouged out’ according to one unusually lurid (but not first-hand) account.⁶⁸

It was the ominous sounding Black Forest - ‘the dread of all unarmed travellers’⁶⁹ - and its most notorious gangleader, ‘Black Douglas’ (not a Scot, but a gigantic African American⁷⁰), which seem to have been known to every international arrival. But the almost treeless ‘great plain district of Keilor’ was also identified as prime crime territory, as bushrangers could ensure they would not be unexpectedly interrupted by other travellers. This country was ‘flat and monotonous in the extreme [and] melancholy and lonely beyond description in those

⁶⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 17/4/1852, p.299

⁶¹ Serle, op cit, p.36

⁶² Elliott, op cit, p.47.

⁶³ Flett, 1976, op cit, p.xii.; Adcock, op cit, p.92

⁶⁴ Adcock, op cit, pp.91-97

⁶⁵ Blake, op cit, p.25

⁶⁶ Flett, 1976, op cit, p.xii.

⁶⁷ William H Hall, in Keesing, Nancy, *Gold Fever: Voices from Australian Goldfields* (Eden, Sydney, 1989), p.174

⁶⁸ Dobie, op cit, pp.49-50

⁶⁹ Eg, Thomas, SLV ms, op cit, p.132

⁷⁰ Adcock, WE, *The Gold Rushes of the Fifties*, with notes by James Flett, (Glen Waverley, Poppet Head Press, 1977), p.95

days when lawlessness and insecurity were prevalent'.⁷¹ Squatters like JH Kerr trusted their superior steeds to put themselves beyond 'range of pistol-shot' in such expanses.

As a result, the travelling diggers were all well armed and travelled together for protection.⁷² James Arnot's party of 34 'bristled with weaponry', his three particular friends carrying two brace of pistols, a rifle, a ball gun, a bowie knife and a 'life preserver'.⁷³ At camp, extravagant salvos were fired to advertise these arsenals, and sentries kept watch all night.⁷⁴

The establishment of gold escort stations along the road from about Spring 1852 quietened bushranging such that by the late 1850s it was reported to be 'remarkably rare'.⁷⁵ A police escort had been established at Aitkens Gap, and police stations at Keilor Junction (the junction of the present Melton Highway and Calder Freeway) and Keilor.

The 'new chum' diggers' heads were full of these stories of murder and mayhem. Heading for the diggings in 1854, 'Cockney Tom' investigated the garden of the only public house in the Black Forest and was shaken to find a blackboard on which was written:- 'Here lies the body of William Brown who was murdered by his mate whilst coming down from the diggings.'⁷⁶ Ellen Clacy also relates the discovery of human bones, strewn upon the ground beside a broken-down cart in a sequestered part of the Black Forest. 'Whether accident or design had brought these unfortunates to an untimely end, none know'.⁷⁷

No-one can know the number of bones that came to rest beside the Mount Alexander Road through mishap, sickness, or murder. ST Gill's painting, 'Unlucky Digger That Never Returned', portraying the skeleton of a traveller laying in the bush with rifle, billy and hat, suggests it was considerable. 'Unlucky diggers were often seen stumbling in rags along the track back to Melbourne, pathetically begging or taking whatever menial jobs they could find'.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Kerr, op cit, p.106

⁷² Hall, op cit, p.174

⁷³ Annear, op cit, p.56.

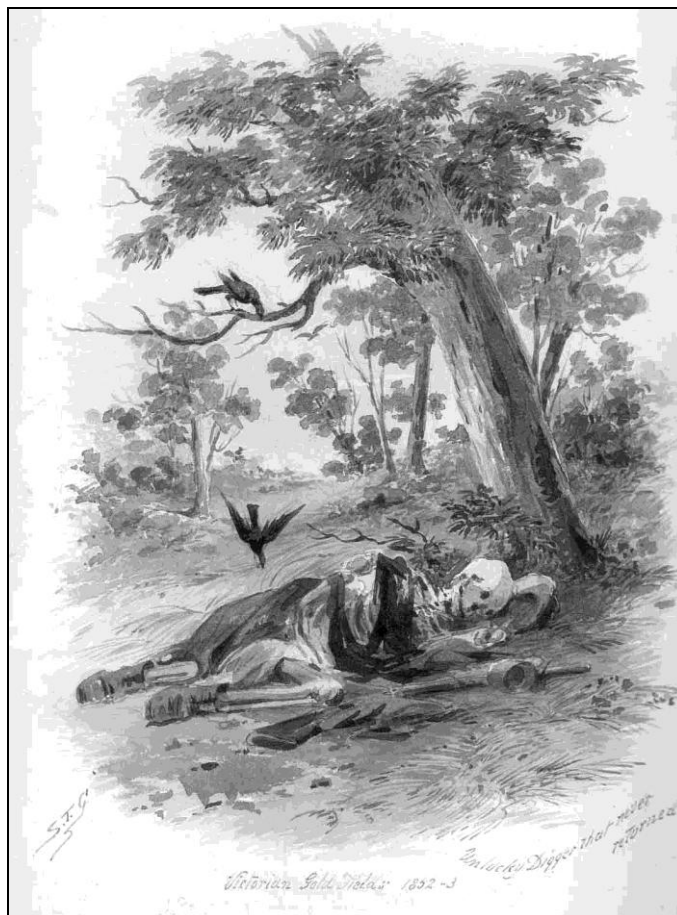
⁷⁴ *ibid*, pp.69-70

⁷⁵ Adcock, op cit, p.92; Dobie, William Wilson, *Recollections of a Visit to Port Phillip Australia in 1852-55* (Edinburgh, Thomas Murray & Son, 1856), p.50; Westgarth, op cit, pp.250-251; *Australia As It Is, or Facts, Features, Sketches and Incidents of Australia and Australian Life ... by a Clergyman* (Paul Flesch & Co, Melbourne, 1967), p.154

⁷⁶ *The Autobiography of Cockney Tom* (McClory & Masterman, Adelaide, 1881), p.29

⁷⁷ Clacy, op cit, pp. 37-38

⁷⁸ Cannon, M (ed), *The Victorian Gold Fields 1852-3: An Original Album by ST Gill* (O'Neill, Library Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 1982), pp.96-97



'Victorian Gold Fields 1852-53: Unlucky Digger That Never Returned', ST Gill

The Diggers Rest vicinity might be typical. Having crossed the Keilor Plains under the burning sun, and very sick, Robert Thomas reflected that 'had I died there I should probably have been laid in a grave by the roadside without a tombstone to mark the spot which would soon be forgotten'.⁷⁹ He was right. A row of nine graves and perhaps another of four, are recorded as having been located near the old road at Diggers Rest.⁸⁰ They are thought to have been located on the driveway of what became the Punjil Estate, and on a rise overlooking the hotel, and on an old road, but their exact locations may not now be known.

All but one of these graves, of Jack Sanger, was unmarked.

History of the Place

The Circumstances of the Death of JA Sanger

Most diggers travelled the road on foot, and camped out. If possible people slept under a dray in poor weather, perhaps throwing a canvass over the poles to make a tent. The stories relating to the grave all differ as to detail, but all agree that Sanger was killed when a tilt dray accidentally pinned him as he slept.

Isaac Batey, writing in 1910 relates an incident which, despite his estimate of the year as 1853, may have been the one relating to Sanger:

⁷⁹ Thomas, SLV ms, op cit, pp.130-131

⁸⁰ Batey, 1910, op cit, p.51; Mr Charles Watson, Diggers Rest.

‘It would be in 1853 that Mr Batey, riding to Aitken’s Gap in the morning, saw two young men lying dead. On the previous night they had asked permission to sleep under a loaded cart and the vehicle, for lack of a prop stick through the horses pulling at feed, tipped the dray on the hapless men. Other carriers were camped alongside. They heard nothing, but in the morning saw that a dreadful accident had occurred. Of course the poor fellows had been dead for ever so long. By father’s narration, the bodies were allowed to remain as where found for, he said, the projecting centre piece of the cart was rested on the chest of one while the cross piece had pinned the other across the neck. This man’s legs were drawn up, those of the other extended. The unfortunates, under such a heavy weight, would die instantaneously. Some of the carriers had gone to Sunbury to report to the police not long stationed there. Who the men were and to what public house the bodies were removed I have no idea. Perhaps they were taken to Speary’s Diggers Rest Hotel. That was the nearest to the Bald Hill where the double fatality occurred.

There were nine graves in a row, outside of the plot of ground that Speary held of Murphy. One of these was named Sanger of the USA. A headstone was erected to his memory, but as no one knew his grave it was placed on the top end of the row.’⁸¹

This is the earliest known source relating to this place, and the probable incident of the death. But Batey’s manuscript was not published and presumably not much known, and over the next decades different versions of the story of the headstone circulated in the local area, and in the metropolitan press. Many of these were collected by C.S.Smith whose ‘Newscuttings’ book is held by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

In November 1937 a Kevin O’Reilly was prompted to write to the editor of the *Age* by a recent article entitled ‘Some interesting Victorian place names’, which mentioned Diggers Rest. O’Reilly’s version of the event had it that, during the night:

‘some intoxicated individuals coming from a wayside grog shop saw Ganger asleep. One of the revellers decided to tip the dray upon the sleeping Ganger. They did, with the result that the young man met his death.’⁸²

The prompted another correspondent, JK Moir, to address a few factual errors by quoting the headstone inscription in full. Moir suggested that ‘the tombstone is of sufficient historical interest to warrant its preservation’. It would be a graceful act on the part of the residents, he added, ‘if the stone could be put in order and a stone fence was erected around it. There is ample stone in the locality.’⁸³

Another response came from WT O’Neill, who challenged the idea that the grave was the origin of the ‘attractive name’ of the Diggers Rest township. He wrote that as the licence for this hotel, ‘which no doubt was well known and patronised’, was granted in 1852, and the death occurred in 1855, the hotel was the more likely origin of the name of the township.⁸⁴

This prompted prominent pastoral historian AS Kenyon to join the debate. The ‘legend’ as to the origin of the name Digger’s Rest has several times been refuted he said, explaining that:

‘the word “rest” was in general use to signify a wayside inn. There were many “Travellers’ Rests” and several Shearers’, Farmers’, Squatters’ ditto, The rush to Mount Alexander diggings had hardly got into full swing when in April 1852

⁸¹ Batey, 1910, op cit, p.51 (Hotels were *de facto* mortuaries in this period.)

⁸² The *Age*, 6/11/1937

⁸³ The *Age*, 9/11/1937

⁸⁴ Undated Letter to the Editor of the *Age*, in CS Smith ‘Newscuttings’ book, RHSV.

Thomas Gregory obtained a licence for an inn, 'The Diggers' Rest'. The exact locality was a mile or so this side of the Railway station and was then known as Wind Gap, Keilor Plains.⁸⁵

On this basis he differed with JK Moir's opinion that the the tombstone was of sufficient historical interest to warrant preservation:

'The lamentable death of the American immigrant in 1855 has nothing to do with the case and his tombstone has no historical significance.'

This particular debate concluded, but the name 'Diggers Rest', and the story of the grave, continued to fascinate the public. In 1944 it was raised anew by the Rev Irving Benson DD in a *Herald* column entitled 'The Romantic Road to Forest Creek':

'I always thought that the origin of Diggers Rest was obvious as that it was one of the halting places for the streams of diggers tramping north. Now I am told that the little township derives its name from the last resting-place of an American digger. A young miner, J.A Sanger from the United States travelled the road in 1856. His first day's journey took him 14 miles from Melbourne. He camped under his dray while his friends of the road went off to drink at a grog shop. Coming back about midnight they saw Jack Sanger asleep and decided to tip up his dray on him for fun. This mad thing they did and Sanger died from the injuries he received. He was laid to rest there and a tombstone erected to his memory. When I walk the road I must search for the stone.'⁸⁶

The next year the issue arose again, in a different newspaper again, and apparently unrelated to previous stories, when JA Moscript of Sebastapol wrote in the *Argus*:

'Visited by many American servicemen from a nearby camp, is a lonely grave. It is in a paddock 100 yards from the Calder Highway, and is marked by a headstone on which is inscribed: "JA Sanger, Woodstock, USA, May 12th 1855, aged 24 years". The story is told locally that the young man was journeying to the diggings at Castlemaine with horse and waggon with others bound for the same field, he camped the night at Diggers' Rest, making his bed beneath his wagon, and Sanger, crawling out when disturbed, was struck on the neck by the falling and heavily laden vehicle and killed. He was buried near by, and the stone, subscribed by his friends, marks the spot'.⁸⁷

Mr Robert Roulston, who since 1911 had owned the property on which the grave was located, then joined the debate. He described the location of the headstone as 'about 200 yards from the Bendigo Road on the left hand side of the drive that comes up to my house'. (This area has probably now been altered by works on the Calder Freeway.) He continued:

'A very old resident told me 34 years ago that JA Sanger and a mate were "swamping" it to the diggings. Swamping meant that a man helped a teamster in return for his tucker and getting his swag carried on the dray. They camped for the night where an old stone building was. Now, only part of the wall is left standing, about midway between the Oval hotel and the Diggers' Rest railway station. At night the prop sticks were set to keep the dray put and the bullocks

⁸⁵ The Age, 11/12/1937 (CS Smith Newscuttings Collection, Book 2, RHSV)

⁸⁶ The Herald, 15/1/1944

⁸⁷ The Argus, Weekend Magazine, 28/7/1945

turned out to graze. There was a good deal of sly grogging attached at this house and in the carousing which took place someone, as a joke or accidentally, removed the back prop sticks and tipped up the heavy load of the dray which pinned the unfortunate men killing them. They were discovered dead in the morning and buried at a spot near where the stone is now.

There are several more graves there in a row but no headstones. Some of the occupants were killed in a railway cutting near by when the rail was being made. Word was sent to Sanger's people in USA and they sent money out to have this stone put on the grave and this inscription was cut into the stone: J.A.Sanger, Woodstock USA. May 12th 1855. Aged 24 years.⁸⁸

*Relocation of the Grave.*⁸⁹

In about 1992, with the new Calder Freeway looming, the Diggers Rest Lions Club arranged the exhumation of the grave of Sanger from the driveway of the former Punjil Estate, about half way up the hill immediately north of the town. The coffin was found only about half a metre below the ground, penetrated by a tree root. The bones were exhumed by Crawfords, a Melton Funeral Director, cremated, and placed in an urn. This urn is now within the new brick monument that is situated beside the Houdini monument on the old Calder Highway, Diggers Rest.

The original headstone was very badly weathered, chipped and broken. A copy was made by a Bacchus Marsh monumental stonemason and placed on the new monument. The location of the original headstone is now unknown.

Question of the Name Diggers Rest.

Despite A.S. Kenyon's argument to the contrary, it is still sometimes suggested that the grave is the origin of the name of the Diggers Rest township.⁹⁰ This is possible, but appears less likely than the theory that it is named after the hotel.

The earliest contemporary record I have been able to find that uses the name 'Digger Rest' is that of Lucy Birchall in about July 1855. Sanger and his mate died in May 1855 so it is conceivable the hotel acquired its name from this incident. But digger roadside deaths were not uncommon, and the headstone was apparently not erected until some years after the event.

The American Association

The grave is also representative of the American presence – one of the 'foreign minorities' – on the goldfields. The reports of visits to the grave by American servicemen during the Second World War demonstrates its significance as a *de facto* memorial to the Americans in the Victorian goldrushes.

⁸⁸ Letter to the Editor, *The Argus*, Weekend Magazine, (date uncertain, perhaps 28/7/1945). In CS Smith Newscuttings book.

⁸⁹ Mr Charles Watson, personal conversation, 9/12/1905

⁹⁰ Mr Glenn W Ford suggests that a very old diary, of a Mrs Cole may support the view that the origin of the name Diggers Rest in the Sanger resting place (rather than the hotel) was lost when the Victorian Railways dropped an apostrophe from its spelling.

Serle suggests that there may have been 3000 Americans on the goldfields in 1853, most ‘forty niners’, as well as many Europeans who had come to Australia via California.⁹¹ The American presence in Victoria during the goldrush was significant, not only in terms of their substantial numbers and (sometimes) distinctive manners and culture, but also in terms of their influence in terms of technology.

American innovations and contributions to Victoria in the gold period were important. They included the introduction of light leather-sprung ‘Telegraph’ coaches (and their popular ‘Yankee Whips’) introduced by Cobb & Co., and ‘American pole-wagons’, both of which came to dominate the roads.⁹² The all-important replacement of the bridge over the Maribyrnong River at Keilor introduced the American ‘Howe Truss’ to Victoria (perhaps Australia), a huge departure in terms of bridge building, but ultimately not so successful in this pioneering example due to construction inexperience and unsuitable timbers. In everyday life American stoves and tools were ‘recognised as far superior to any others’, and American water carts doused the Melbourne dust.⁹³ The diggings themselves employed Californian-designed cradles, and discussed ‘Yankee’ (summary) justice, and (occasionally) American republicanism. One of the most bizarre episodes of the Victorian goldfields was the importation of a giant block of Boston ice to the diggings by an American businessman.⁹⁴

There was an American contingent interested in the Eureka cause, and the first stockader put up for trial was an African American.⁹⁵ His acquittal was greeted with an uproar of cheering. Both the feared bushranger ‘Black Douglas’, and the keeper of an early shanty in the Diggers Rest area, were also African Americans. Individuals who attracted description tended to be flamboyant; the ‘forty niners’ undoubtedly added enterprise and colour to goldfields society. Lord Cecil provides an uncomplimentary aristocrat’s view of a ‘coarse’ Californian fellow-passenger whose dress was adorned only by large earrings and a pair of pistols in his belt. He noted that the American had a fondness for the phrase ‘put a bullet through his brain’, but also acknowledged his capability in a crisis on the road.⁹⁶ Isaac Batey suspected that the ‘proudly taciturn’ manner of some of Cobb & Co’s ‘Yankee Whips’ might have been well-practised, but again could only admire their practical capabilities (the thing that mattered in the day). To see them ‘tool’ a team down a long straight grade at little short of a gallop was ‘without question ... something grand’.⁹⁷ Cobb & Co historian KA Austin notes that the ‘Yankee Whips’ were much admired, and describes their progressive driving style: ‘They held the reins, or ‘lines’ in the left hand, and the whip in the right, its stock horizontal and parallel to the reins, so that it could be used quickly, mainly to control the wheelers’. The popularity of some, such as ‘Cabbage Tree’ Ned Devine, was legendary.⁹⁸

Serle concluded that:

⁹¹ Serle, op cit, p.76

⁹² Batey, Isaac, *Untitled Manuscript*, 1910, (RHSV MSS 000035 Box 16/2), p.51 (of typescript); Westgarth, William, *Victoria, and the Australian Gold Mines* (Smith Elder, London, 1857), pp.192, 194; Austin, KA, *The Lights of Cobb & Co: The Story of the Frontier Coaches 1854 -1924* (Adelaide, Rigby, 1972), pp.42-45; Serle, Geoffrey, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861* (MUP, Carlton, 1968), p.235.

⁹³ Serle, op cit, p.123

⁹⁴ Serle, op cit, p.123

⁹⁵ Serle, op cit, p.174

⁹⁶ Ernest Scott, *Lord Robert Cecil’s Gold Fields Diary* (MUP, Melbourne, 1935), pp. 12-15.

⁹⁷ Batey, 1910, op cit, p.50

⁹⁸ Austin, op cit, p.64

‘On the whole Americans were peaceable and well-behaved, but their tendency to assert the superiority of American republicanism, their brashness and their greater mining experiences led them to be regarded with “mingled admiration and irritation”.’⁹⁹

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: ‘Transport’; ‘Community’.

Known comparable examples:

Victorian Heritage Register and Victorian Heritage Inventory

- There are no single isolated wayside/roadside graves included in the Victorian Heritage Register.
- There are two isolated wayside/roadside graves included in the Victorian Heritage Inventory, both reputed to be of colourful proprietors of shanty or roadside inns:- the reputed grave of Kitty Cane, on the Walhalla-Woods Point Road south of Aberfeldy (there is no headstone on this grave); the James Stewart grave, at Sunny Point, Old Gelantipy Road Buchan.

Mount Alexander Road

No other marked roadside grave site associated with the Mount Alexander Road goldrush is known.

It is however firmly held lore in the Diggers Rest community that there are six unmarked graves, dating to the goldrush, between Diggers Rest and the Gap. Their location, or locations, are unknown.¹⁰⁰

Local

Numerous isolated graves are known to have existed around the Shire. This is the only one of these graves to retain a headstone, albeit a replica. The other known graves are:-

- Greenhills grave: on former Greenhills property, situated between Toolern State School and homestead is a grave now marked with a restored timber fence. It is reputed to have been of the governess Miss Batman (John Batman’s daughter Eliza), and is situated in the valley she had liked to paint prior to her death c.1850.
- Margaret Pinkerton and four grandchildren, in the forest to the east of the Werribee River south of Greigs Road. The graves were moved c.300 metres in recent years to accommodate works of the sewerage authority.
- A Staughton infant is buried on the east side of the Exford Road overlooking Toolern Creek. The site is (or was until recently) marked by the bluestone base of a broken marble cross, with a timber frame around the grave. It is reported

⁹⁹ Serle, op cit, p.76

¹⁰⁰ Watson, 9/12/2005, op cit

that this has recently been removed by vandals. A large stone pine marks the location.

- At least one early map marks ‘Graves’ on the east bank of Toolern Creek a few hundred metres south of the Diggers Rest – Coimadai Road. The graves are reputed to have been of surveyor Henry Wade and two others. The stone markers at the site have recently been removed.
- The grave of an unknown person in one of the former Sir WJ Clarke hare enclosures was until a few years ago marked by a small stone cairn. Its location is still known to a few.
- Descendents of the Kerr family believe that the former Kerr dairy farm on the north-west corner of Boundary and Downing Street contains the graves of two of the Kerr children. These descendents believe they know the location of the graves.
- A grave situated on the Kororoit Creek just downstream of the former Rockbank Inn (now ruinous) believed to have been one of the workers buiding the Inn in the early 1850s. (I was unable to locate this site during the heritage study.)

Condition:

Good

Integrity:

Remains relocated; Headstone replicated; Context altered.

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the:

- Victorian Heritage Register
- Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>Yes</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>No</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- The original headstone, if it survives, would be of high heritage significance. The Bacchus Marsh monumental stonemason may be able to provide further information on its whereabouts.