



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

For more information contact:

Joanna Newman on 385 2254 (hm)

Alan Olliver on 385 1022 (hm)

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As work and home life get hectic in the run-up to Christmas, Mt Victoria Historical Society goes quieter on the events front. Our next major activity is the stall at the Mount Victoria Fair on February 26. The Fair gets better every year, and we plan for our place in it to be more interesting and lively too. We'll also be offering guided walks, as we have for the past two years. Look out for more information about the fair and come with your friends and neighbours to visit our stall.

End-of-year news from the committee includes: the committee of the previous year were all re-elected, with the exception of Alan Olliver, who stood down because of a move overseas to work for a time; the Wellington Branch of the NZ Historic Places Trust is proposing the Home of Compassion crèche on the Basin reserve for Category 3 listing and we have written in support of their case.

With no events notice, this edition of the newsletter brings you a larger-than-usual historical note. The story of the Renners is presented with special thanks to Jennifer Robinson and her family for sharing their family history research.

HISTORICAL NOTE

The Sailor's Home from the Sea

In 1870, if you stood directly outside what is today No. 8 Macfarlane Street in Wellington, with Mt Victoria rising behind you, you would have had an unobstructed view of the harbour and town – no houses on the ridge in front to block the vista as there are now. Turning to the right, you would look across the widest expanse of the harbour to the Hutt Valley and the Tararuas. Ships would be coming and going across the steel-grey water to the port or to the mouth of the harbour out of sight. To the left, you would see the two wide tracks of Kent and Cambridge Terrace leading towards the Basin Reserve and the grim military Barracks on Mount Cook. The low wooden dwellings and business premises of Te Aro would sprawl westwards towards the centre of the town, not long since become capital of the colony. Directly in front and below would be the bustling wharves of the city, with sails and steamer funnels, horse-drawn vehicles and small figures at work; behind them a small strip of town then the dark, bush-covered Tinakori Hill looming behind.



Ships berthed at Queen's Wharf, including *Stormbird* far right, 1880's
Burton Bros [Alexander Turnbull Library PA7-34-20]

This is what Janet Renner, wife of Captain Frederick Renner, must have done many a time as she awaited the arrival of her husband from one of his numerous voyages at sea. His great-great-granddaughter tells the story of how Janet would look for the Captain's ship coming into the harbour at the end of a voyage and set to preparing dinner, to have it ready by the time he had docked and climbed the hill to his home on Mt Victoria.

Captain Frederick WS Renner, his wife and their two sons aged three and one, arrived in Nelson in October 1855 after a passage of 116 days from England on the *Queen Margaret*. He was a young master mariner of 31 and she was 29. Renner had been master of several ships involved in the trade with China and the Pacific before emigrating to this country at the bottom of the Pacific. Janet must have accompanied him on at least one of his voyages to China because her descendents often heard how she was offered rabbit stew in China but was so upset to discover that it was rat, not rabbit, after she had eaten it that she went straight outside and made herself sick.



Captain Renner [Auckland War Memorial Museum C20780]

Wives often did accompany their husbands on ships in those days; captains of merchant ships usually had a major investment in their vessels and, consequently, often no home on land for their new spouses. Other wives chose to voyage with their husbands because of the uncertainty of when, if ever, they might see them again. Who knows what motivated Janet to sail with her husband, with all the hardships and risks that entailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it indicates an adventurous and possibly even courageous spirit. Janet would have had to contend with storms, rough crew, and many challenges to daily life, quite apart from the unusual experiences of going ashore in exotic places such as China, Indonesia and islands of the Pacific. On the other hand, she would have had a degree of equality many other women of her time would not have experienced. Many captain's wives, for instance, learned to navigate and regularly 'took the sights' for the ship.

By 1857 the family had moved to Wellington, probably because most of the shipping companies which served Nelson were based in Wellington and it was easier to find employment there. Until 1874, Renner worked for the Wellington Steam Navigation Company, which became the New Zealand Steam Navigation Company in 1862, then the New Zealand Steam Shipping Company. He was master of several coastal steamers, including the *Wonga Wonga*, *Stormbird*, *Ladybird* and *Rangatira*. He made numerous trips between Wellington, Wanganui and Napier and the *Wonga Wonga* under Renner was the first steamship to sail up the Manawatu River.

In 1863, Captain Renner bought Town Acre 384 in Mt Victoria, running between Hawker Street and what is now Macfarlane Street, and built a house on the top of the slope. One storey, with a distinctive, steeply-pitched roof and dormer window, it stood out on the empty Mt Victoria hillside. The original house is still there as No. 8 Macfarlane Street, somewhat altered but unmistakable with its steep roof and dormer window.



Mount Victoria from Queen's Wharf, 1867, showing what is possibly Renner's house with its dormer window on the lower slopes.

[Walter Best Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library F-4699-1/2]

From the time he arrived in New Zealand, Renner was involved in coastal shipping. The 1870's and 80's were some of the busiest years in coastal shipping in New Zealand. They were also the most dangerous. The coasts were poorly-lit and treacherous and even ports were not always safe. The deadliest wrecks in our history took place between 1875 and 1885. Captain Renner, however, features as a hero in New Zealand's worst maritime disaster, the wreck of *H.M.S. Orpheus*.



The *Orpheus* struck the Manukau Bar on 7 February 1863. At 1.00 pm on the day of the disaster Renner, commanding the *Wonga Wonga*, left Onehunga at the eastern end of Manukau Harbour carrying a variety of cargo and 29 passengers. He rounded Puponga Point two hours later and saw the *Orpheus*. By 4.00 pm the *Wonga Wonga* was clearing South Head and heading for New Plymouth. The *Orpheus* meanwhile, attempting to enter Manukau Harbour by the main channel, appeared to be making no progress and Renner sensed that something was wrong. He signalled the ship, asking if she needed assistance, but didn't receive a reply.

HMS Orpheus, corvette, 1706 tons, wrecked Manukau Harbour Bar, 7 February 1863. G. C. Beale (The *Wonga Wonga* at left of painting) [Auckland City Libraries 7-C6]

Concerned, he climbed the rigging of the *Wonga Wonga* and saw through his telescope that the topmasts of the *Orpheus* were crowded with men. Knowing now that the vessel was stricken, but that the seas were too rough to approach it directly, Renner turned back down the South Channel and approached it up the main channel. Between 6.00 pm and 10.00 pm that night, as the *Orpheus* broke up, the *Wonga Wonga* picked up fifty survivors.

189 lives were lost but Renner was praised for his judgment and sound seamanship in the rescue.

By the 1870's Renner had become a ship owner, as well as master. In 1873 he had part-ownership of one vessel, but sold it not long after. In 1874, though, he became owner and skipper of the *Hannah Barratt*.

The *Hannah Barratt* was a top sail schooner of 57 tons built in Australia. Renner was now over fifty and this was one of the smallest ships he had commanded. Steam was starting to dominate coastal shipping but the *Hannah Barratt* would have been one of the many small ships, sometimes called the 'mosquito fleet', that competed for coastal cargo. Small sailing ships like the *Hannah Barratt*, while not as fast or reliable as the steamships, could still use some local ports that the steamers could not navigate.

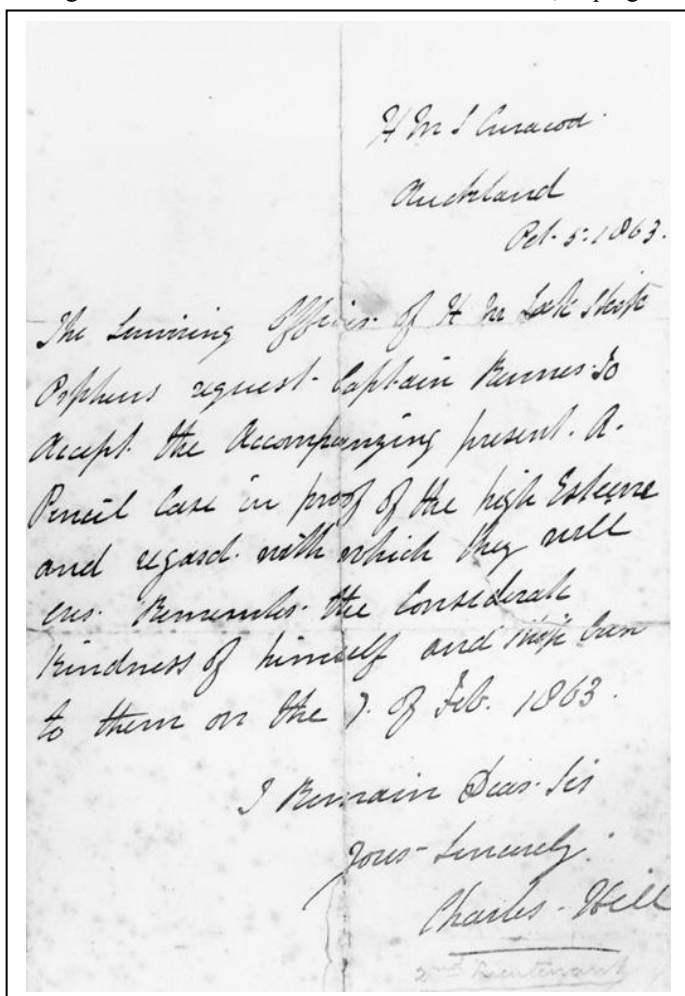
Sailing a ship like the *Hannah Barratt*, with a crew of only four, would have required considerable energy and physical strength even from the captain. Perhaps the call of the sea and the desire to be completely independent drove Renner in this last venture. For the next eight years he plied the coastal routes on the *Hannah Barratt*. She went aground twice, but these were only minor incidents, and Renner again went to the rescue when he picked up the sole survivor of the *William and Mary* near Kapiti Island.

On Monday April 2nd, 1883, the *Hannah Barratt* left Wellington harbour on what Renner had decided was her last voyage. He intended to take her to Sydney and sell her after this trip. The Captain and his crew of only three were bound for Picton to pick up a cargo of timber.

On deck, Renner waved his handkerchief to the captain of the steam ship, *Kiwi*, as he passed it under sail in Evans Bay. The *Waihi* passed the *Hannah Barratt* off Sinclair Head that afternoon and Captain Renner was seen still on the deck. Late in the afternoon, she was spotted by the watchman at the outer signal station, standing up well to a strong southerly as she rounded the Head. During the night, however, the wind rose to a gale and the seas became heavy. Conditions were bad enough to delay the steamer, *Penguin*, coming to Wellington from New Plymouth, by several hours.

Six days later, the local manager of the Union Steam Ship Company was riding round the coast from Cape Terawhiti to Happy Valley when he found wreckage, including a newly-painted life buoy marked "Hannah Barratt Wellington". Later, more wreckage turned up, including a small case, part of the *Hannah Barratt*'s cabin furniture and used by Captain Renner for holding private memorabilia. No bodies were ever found.

At the time of his death, Frederick Renner was only 58 years old. His wife, Janet, lived on at 8 Macfarlane Street until her death in 1910 at the age of 84. Did she still look out to the harbour, hoping to see her captain's ship coming home as she prepared her dinner?



*H M S Curacao
Auckland
Oct. 5. 1863.*

*The Surviving Officer of H M S Ship
Orpheus request- Captain Renner to
Accept the accompanying present. A
Pencil Case in proof of the high Esteem
and regard with which they well
our Remembers the Considerable
Kindness of himself and his crew
to them on the 7. of Feb. 1863.*

*I Remain Dear Sir
Yours sincerely
Charles Hill*

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Letter of thanks from the officer of the
Orpheus to Captain Renner, 1863
[Auckland War Memorial Museum C207802]