

JAMES MCAVOY (1831-1884)

'Yankee Jim' starts Warburton gold rush

James McAvoy, or 'Yankee Jim' as he was known, was not American at all, but came from Canada via the Californian gold rushes. Together with "Yankee Ned", his brother, they made their way through almost impenetrable bush from Dandenong towards Warburton looking for gold in 1859. Camped at their Yankee Jim Creek mining site, they walked over to the store keeper at Hoddle's Creek every week or so to cash in a small amount of gold dust - loudly complaining how hard it was to earn so little for so much work. They did not want people to know how rich the site was, which would start a gold rush.

In fact they had buried their stash of gold as they had really struck it rich. One day they were discovered cashing in a large amount of gold dust and nuggets at a gold dealer in Kew and their secret was out. Within days there were over 500 gold seekers along the Yarra River at the Upper Yarra site, later named Warburton. Population soon grew to over 3,000 and a small township became established.

James had been born on Prince Edward Island in Canada to parents Thomas and Elizabeth but left when quite a young man to try his luck on the Californian goldfields. Once settled in Victoria he married his wife, Mary Jordan, at St Francis Church Melbourne aged 23 in 1854. They had three sons but the first two died before reaching the age of 30.

Yankee Jim died at Warrandyte on 9th July 1884 of an attack of erysipelas. He had been working as a miner on the Thursday, fell ill on Friday with chills and fever and died a few days later. He was not seen by a doctor so there needed to be an inquiry.

Erysipelas is a severe bacterial disease. Before the advent of antibiotics it was often fatal within days. It entered the body through a cut or scratch so it is likely Yankee Jim suffered a wound while working in his mine.

He is buried at Andersons Creek Cemetery.

With the assistance of the Warrandyte Historical Society.



Find out more

Baird, D. Digging into History: goldmining at Warrandyte, (2007)
Miller, J & Buckland, I. The Yarra Miner (1988)
Polley, V. Wonderful Warrandyte: a portrait, (2014)



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Jan is a professional historian who has worked across the fields of heritage, education and tourism. She has taught at several universities, including Monash University where she delivered the master of public history course. She is also a former Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria. Jan was appointed to The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust in 2010.



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