

# History of St Helena Island National Park

Dr Ian Patterson

- I acknowledge the Quandamooka people as the First Nations owners of Noogoon (St Helena Island) which is part of Quandamooka Country



# Early history...

- Aboriginal middens record that local aboriginals visited the island (166 hectares) to hunt dugongs and flying foxes and to gather shellfish.
- Local aboriginals called the island Noogoon meaning the place of the flying fox
- Fishermen began to hunt dugongs around the island for their meat and their oil



# Origins of the name...

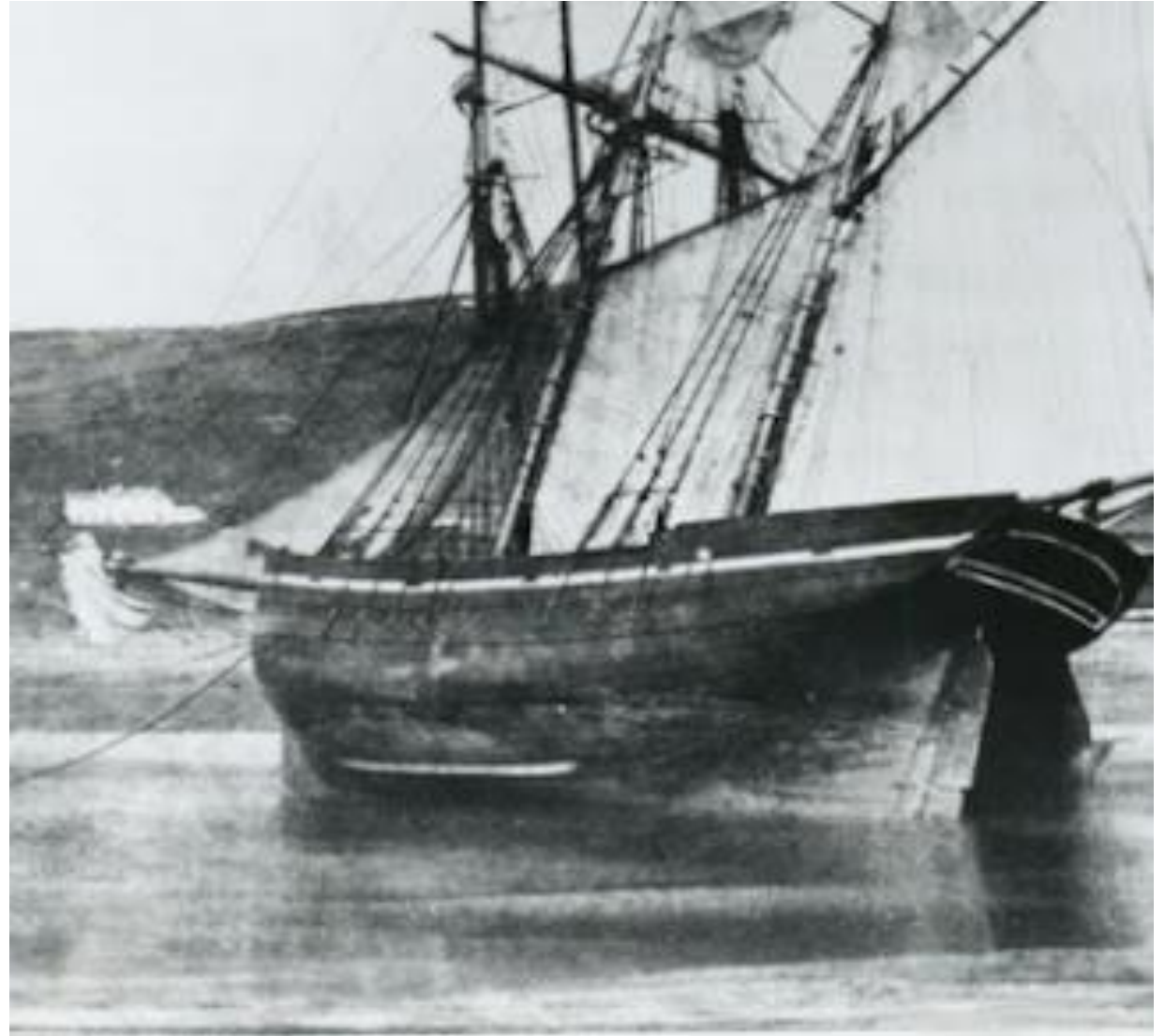
The island did not receive the name "St Helena" until 1828.

The name "St. Helena" was originally given by the Officer in Charge of the Penal Settlement on North Stradbroke Island when an Aboriginal man named Eulope stole an axe and was exiled to another island.

Eulope became known as Napoleon because of his likeness to Napoleon Bonaparte who was exiled to St Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean near Africa.

# Beginnings of the penal settlement

- In 1866 there was overcrowding issues in the Brisbane jail at Petrie Terrace
- 30 prisoners were transported to an old hulk named Proserpine in the mouth of the Brisbane River.
- The government originally wanted to build a quarantine station on the island



# Quarantine station

- Each day prisoners were taken to the island by whaleboat where they were put to work:
- sinking wells,
- clearing scrub,
- quarrying stone and
- building the quarantine station
- The building material was mostly timber and beachstone
- lime was used to make cement for mortar



# In 1867 a penal settlement is proclaimed

On 14 May 1867, the Governor of Queensland signed a proclamation declaring the island 'a place whereat offenders under order or sentence of hard labour or penal servitude may be detained'.

Proserpine's Captain John McDonald became the first Superintendent and warders managed a highly disciplined prison where security was tight and successful escapes were few.



NORTH EAST

THE DRAWINGS, LEVELS, CONSTRUCTION & BEING PERFORMED BY PRISONERS UNDER THE SUPERINTENDENCE OF J. M. DONALD.

SOUTH EAST

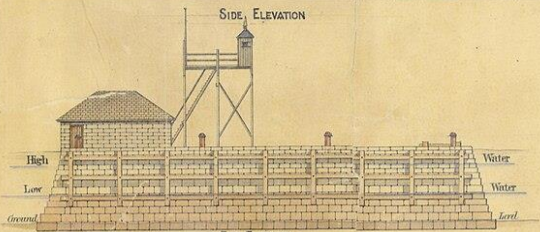
TOTAL LENGTH 1226 F<sup>t</sup>

**QUANTITIES**

Stonework	7899	Cubic Yards
Earthwork	3823	D <sup>o</sup>
Woodwork	109	Lineal F <sup>t</sup> 12"
Ironwork	270	D <sup>o</sup> 1'
Tramway	405	D <sup>o</sup> Yards
D <sup>o</sup> from Quarry	507	D <sup>o</sup>

**VALUE**

Stonework	19797	10
Earthwork	236	14 6
Woodwork	70	
Ironwork	30	
Tramway	100	
<b>Total Cost</b>	<b>20234</b>	<b>4 6</b>

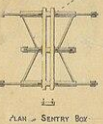


SIDE ELEVATION



SECTION 3.

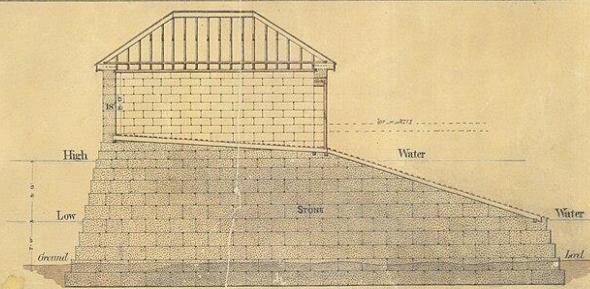
TOTAL LENGTH 1226 F<sup>t</sup>



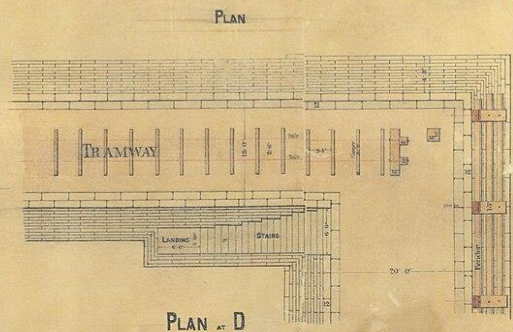
PLAN - SENTRY BOX



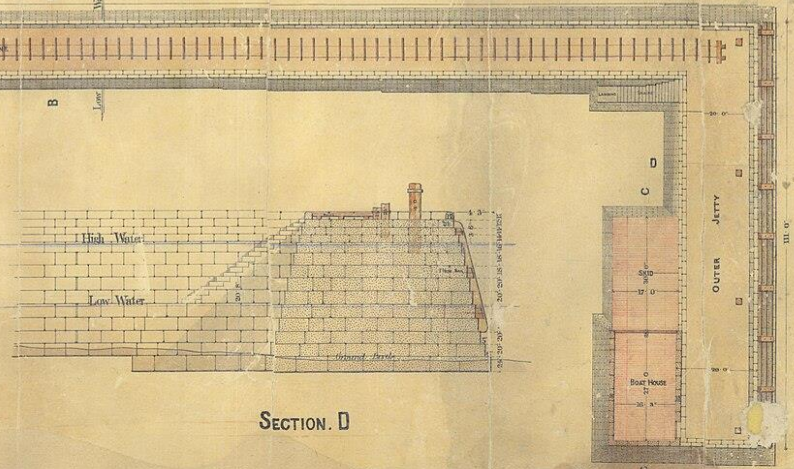
A. E. Mallorn, Sheriff.  
T. H. B. Barrow, Visiting Justice.



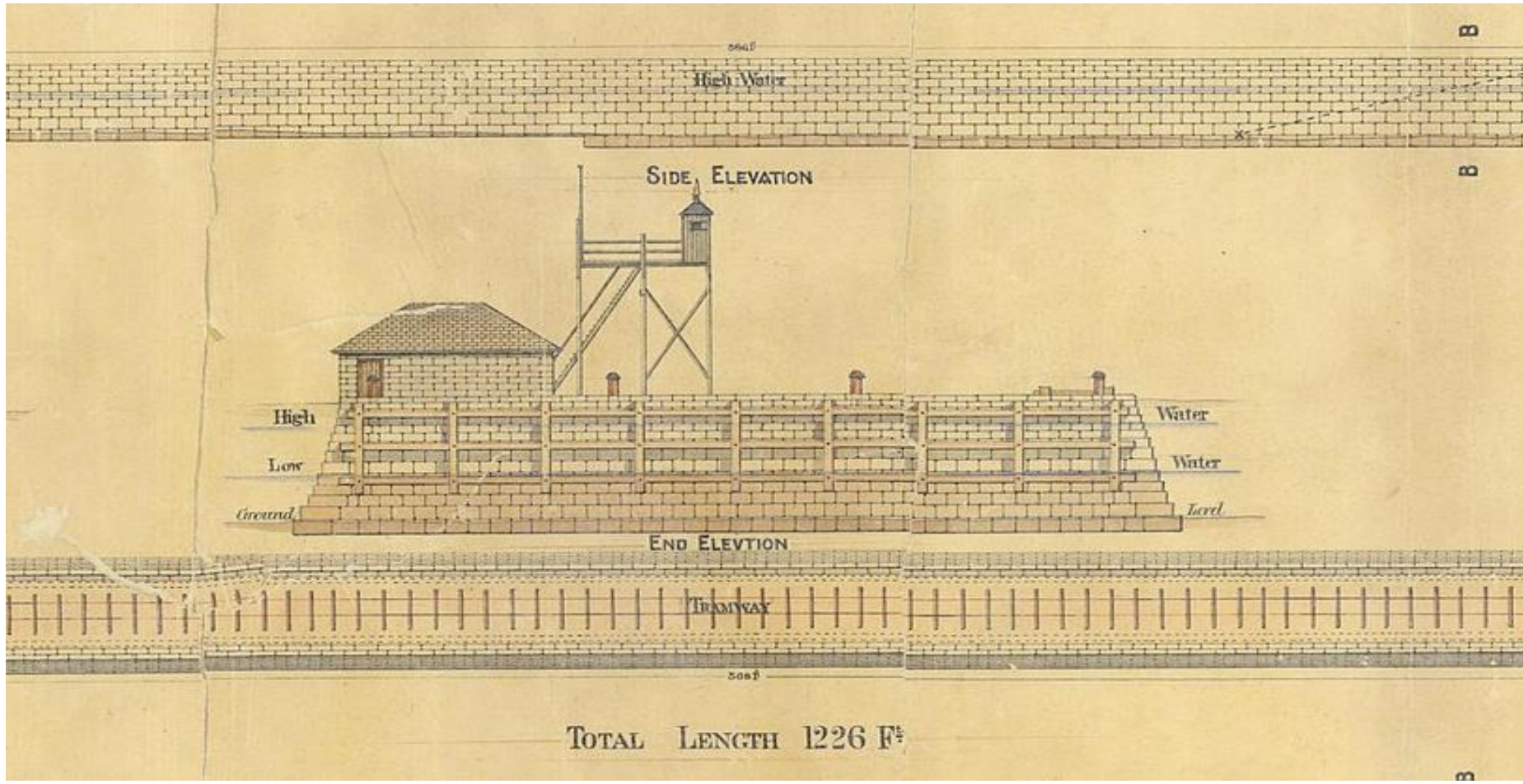
SECTION C.



PLAN - D



SECTION D.



# The early years...

- The first few years were devoted to:
- clearing and burning off scrub and old timber
- Sinking and lining water tanks with lime and cement
- Fitting out a storeroom
- Erecting the superintendent's house and his extensive garden
- Building a mess shed and kitchen



St. H.C.P. Chief Wardens quarters, Billiard and Recreation Room and Barracks.



## The Original Prison

- Consisted of two wards holding up to 80 inmates and single cells for 8 more.
- Inmates slept in hammocks.
- Other spaces included a hospital, kitchen and bakery, water tank, wash house, and dining shed.
- Opened with 60 prisoners – soon conditions at the Petrie Jail began to deteriorate due to overcrowding resulting in the number of inmates increasing to 300 by 1869.

# Regarded as 'the hell hole of the Pacific'...

- Most of the men who escaped were recaptured, punishment was brutal
- The first escape was on 26 June 1867 by Irwin, Dawson and Morris resulting in cat of nine tails lashes for 30 (Irwin) and 25 for the other two.
- The 'shot drill' was used - prisoners carried an 24lb cannonball continuously for an hour and a quarter; leg irons were worn
- Solitary confinement in underground cells, with the use of a gag and straight jacket
- In 1891 there were 17 murderers, 27 men for manslaughter, 26 from stabbings and shootings



surrounded by a wooden stockade wall, 14 feet high

# The early years toward self sufficiency...

- Prisoners cleared native vegetation, planted crops and constructed buildings.
- Maize and vegetable crops thrived in the rich soil
- Sheep and cattle herds provided much of the island residents' food requirements.
- The most successful island produce included sugar cane and award-winning Ayrshire dairy cattle.
- Olive oil produced from the island's olive groves won prizes in Italy





AYRSHIRE DAIRY HERD AND MILKING SHED, H.M. PENAL ESTABLISHMENT, ST. HELENA.



Ruins of the butcher's shop and bakery



## Communication with the mainland

- Early days- messages sent by flags – red and white flag meant a prisoner had escaped
- Visible by telescope but difficult to see on rainy or dull days
- 1867 a 24-pounder canon was used to warn of prisoner escapes
- 1879 electric telegraph replaced the canon

OLD GUN, ST. HELENA PENAL ESTABLISHMENT (24-POUNDER).



## The lime kiln and sugar mill

- In 1869 a lime kiln was built
- The lime that was used to make cement for mortar - by burning crushed shells and coral in a lime kiln.
- The first sugar mill was also built in 1869 was destroyed by fire.
- The second mill was much larger and worked by steam power. This mill ceased operation in 1889.



**Charles Edward Winn (1845–1892) architect and artist.** In 1878 after moving to Brisbane from Sydney, Charles Winn served three months at St Helena Penal Establishment with hard labour after being convicted of trespassing on private premises “with felonious intent” (possibly in an alcoholic stupor).

# 1870s & the trade workshops

- The range of industries expanded by the building of trade workshops.
- Warders with trade experience taught carpentry, boot making, tailoring, tinsmith, saddle making, bread baking and butchery.
- Many of these products were sold to the mainland.



A PORTION OF THE BOOTMAKERS' SHOP, H.M. PENAL ESTABLISHMENT, ST. HELENA.



Prisoners making uniforms in tailers shop, circa 1912



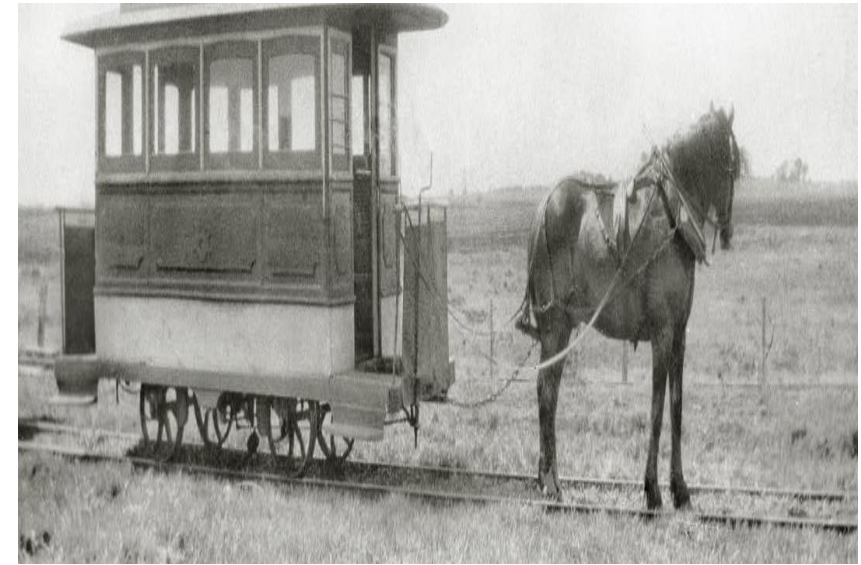
PORTION OF SADDLERS' SHOP, H.M. PENAL ESTABLISHMENT, ST. HELENA.

*Ms A 60061*

# St. Helena Island tramway

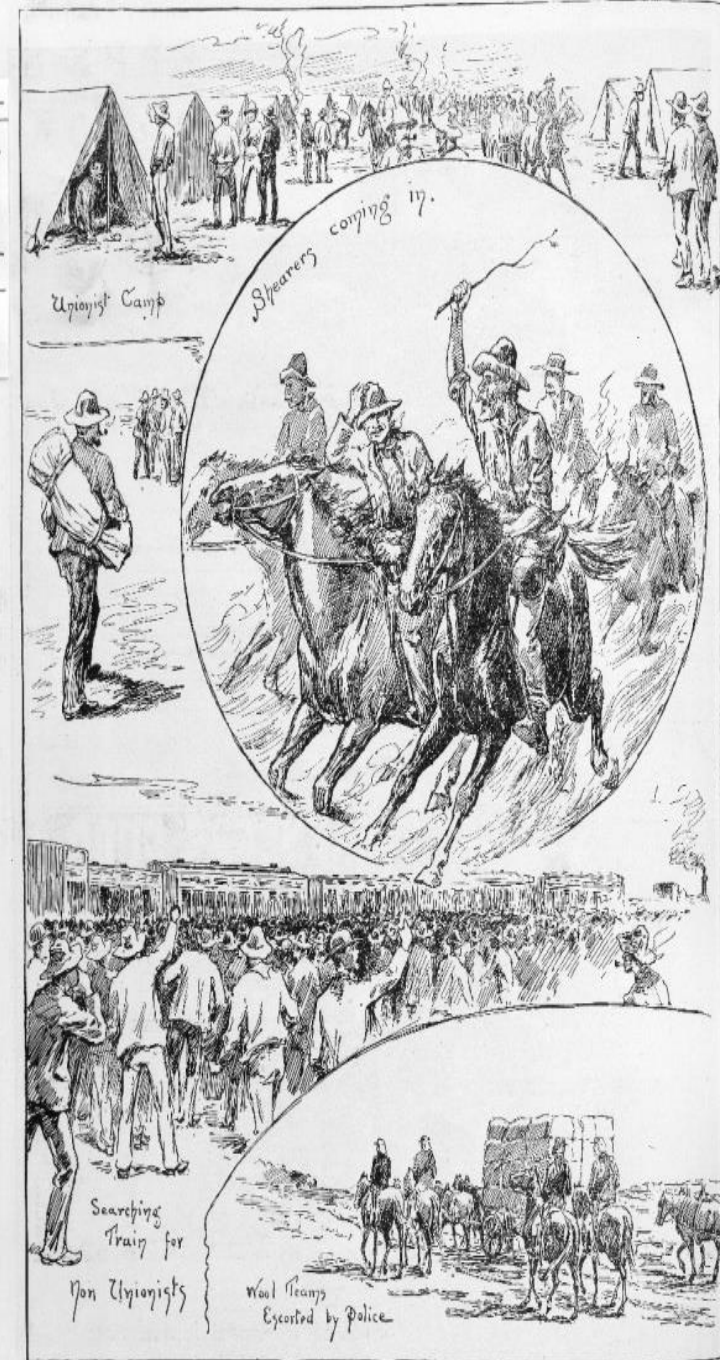
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- The horsedrawn tram was used to transport people from the causeway jetty to the prison buildings on the hill. The tram ran on 3'6' gauge tracks
- It operated between 1885 and 1932 and provided the first passenger tramcar service in Queensland.



# Shearers Strike 1890

- The dispute was primarily between unionised (ASU) and non-unionised shearers.
- In 1890 Logan Downs Station Manager Charles Fairbain asked shearers to sign a contract that would reduce the power of the union
- Resulted in the formation of large camps of striking workers
- The summer was unseasonably wet, and soon union camps were full of hungry, penniless shearers. The strike was broken.
- 13 union leaders were charged with sedition and conspiracy taken to Rockhampton for the trial, convicted, and sentenced to 3 years on St Helena Island.



Three of those imprisoned (William Hamilton, Julian Stuart, and George Taylor) later became Labor members of parliament – Hamilton in Queensland and the other two in Western Australia



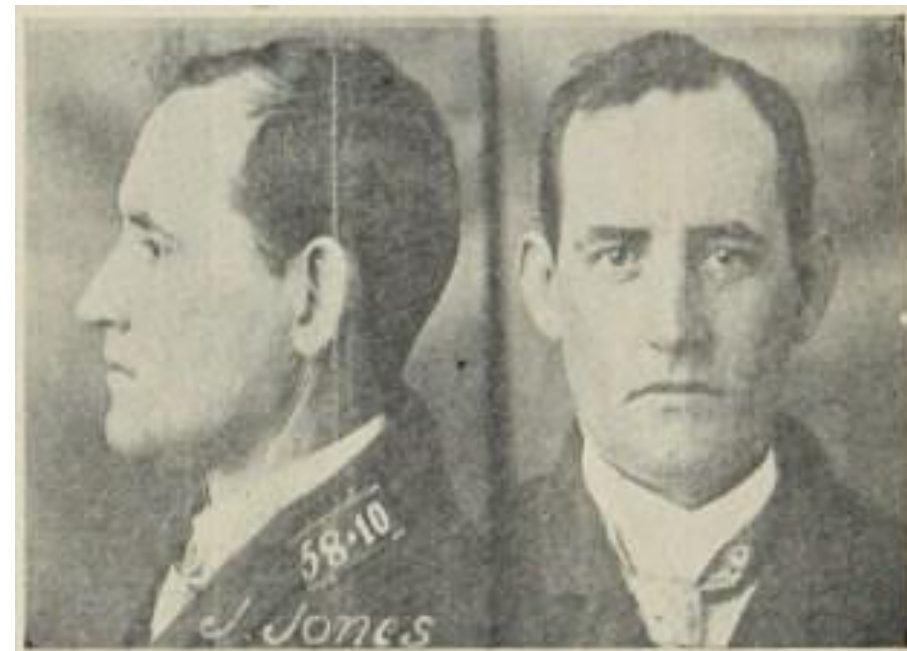
# William Hamilton (1858-1920)

- Took part in the shearers strike leading a group of strikers in Clermont.
- On 7 March, the strikers jostled and abused members of the Pastoralists' Association and threw rocks at the police.
- Although Hamilton had called on his men to show restraint he was charged with criminal conspiracy
- Hamilton stated, "I will see you in Hell before I'll scab on my mates" and served his full term
- Later he entered politics as the Labor member for Gregory.
- At the time of his death in 1920 he was President of the Queensland Legislative Council.



# The escape that never was...

- One of the greatest escape attempts lasted 11 days and was carried out by two prisoners: Henry Craig and David McIntyre.
- In November 1911, McIntyre secured the tools necessary for the escape from the tailor shop required for the escape.
- On the 5<sup>th</sup> November At 4am they chiselled out the door jamb at the prison hospital during the night.
- By leaving the door intact the alarm was not raised until 5.25am.
- From 6 to 15 November, they hid in the tinsmith's workshop roof and food was secretly delivered by a fellow inmate.
- On 16 November they made their way to the boathouse where they unsuccessfully attempted to move two boats.
- They gave themselves up on the morning of 17 November.



Taken in 1910.




# The later years..

- By 1920 the prison began to show its age and was described as “an old ramshackle establishment of decayed premises”
- In October 1921 the government announced that the prison was to be phased down to become a farm colony for “well behaved and trustee prisoners” - to dismantle the buildings.
- The majority of prisoners were removed from the island to Boggo Road jail.
- In 1932 only 40 prisoners with 90 cattle and 40 pigs were left.
- The last prisoner left the island on 15 February 1933



# Why did St Helena Island close?

- **Overcrowding:** the prison was not able to accommodate the increasing number of inmates
  - The **potential for a major fire** due to the ageing timber buildings
  - The **isolation of warders** from their family and friends
  - **A new social conscience**
  - Suggestions for the future included to be used as:
    - a naval base,
    - a home for wayward youth,
    - a sanitorium,
    - a zoo,
    - a botanical gardens,
    - a country club resort,
    - an aerodrome,
    - dividing the island into residential lots and linking it to the mainland by a railway on trestles across Moreton Bay
- 

# Preservation not restoration...

In 1973 Charles Carroll a retired canvas goods manufacturer bought the lease from the Lands Department for \$48,000 for 10 years to preserve the convict relics and to raise cattle on the island.

He and his son-in-law David Birney and family began by clearing the lantana from the historic ruins

He envisaged a horse drawn tram to take visitors to the old stockade and to turn the old admin block into a museum and to build a tavern

He encouraged tourism by giving guided tours, mainly for school children by operating a 10- metre launch "St Helena Star" from Manly Harbour 4 times a week

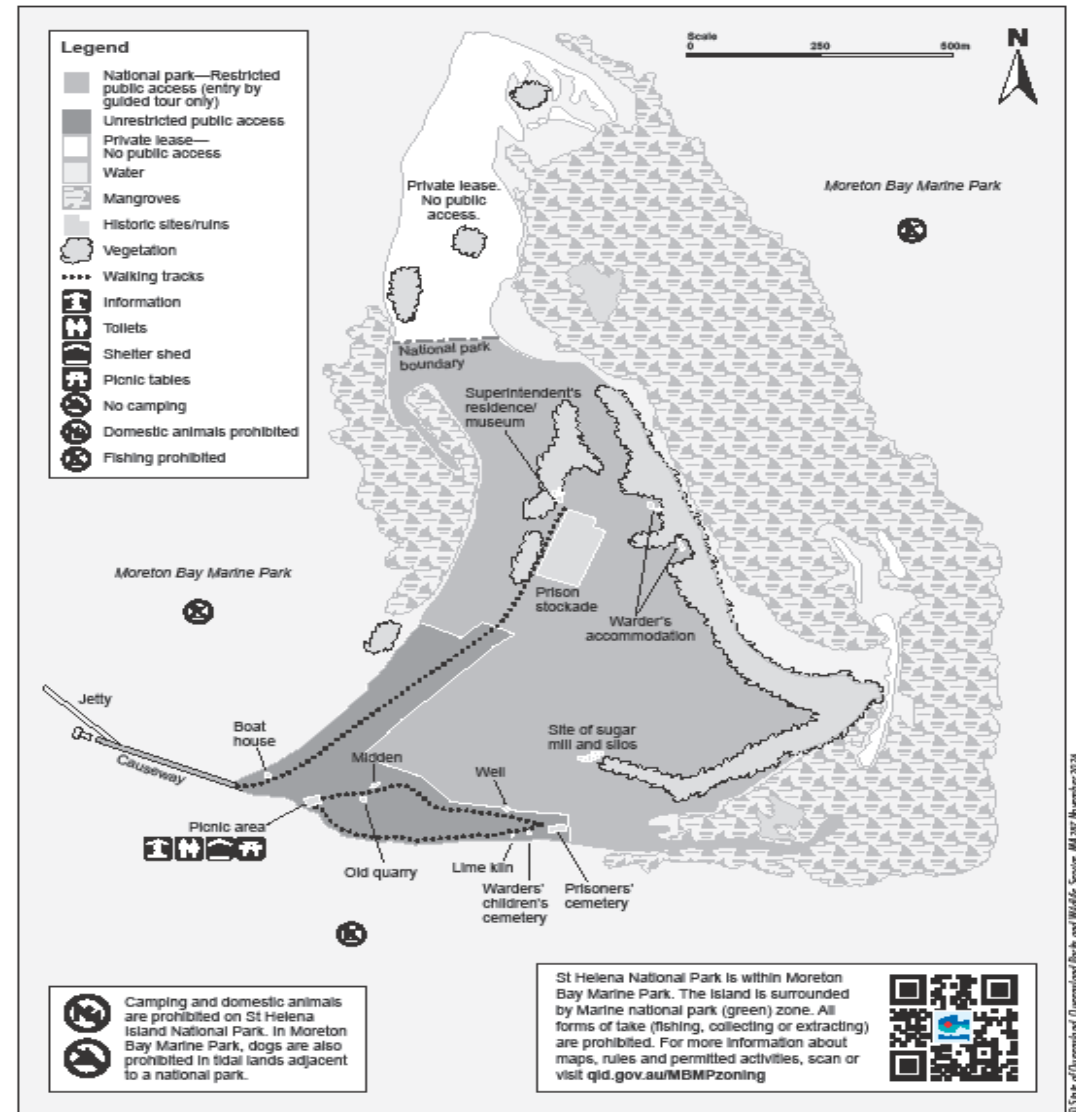
Wanted the Lands Department to extend his lease to 30 years...

In 1974 part of North Point was leased to 4IP radio to build a radio station

# Became a National Park

- In 1979 (4 Oct.) Gazetted as a National Park
- In 1980 (11 Sept.) Gazetted as an Historic Area (First in Qld) managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation for its historic values
- 1981 First Park Ranger appointed to the Island
- Today approximately only 7% of the original structures remain and they were the ones built from beachrock or brick.

St Helena Island National Park map





Cat o'nine tails was a 55ft, 130 seat passage catamaran that operated day cruises between 1982-2025. It sank at its mooring at Manly Boat harbour on August 20, 2025. The only boat going to St Helena is the Lady of Brisbane on 21<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> May 2026 at 9.00am from Hamilton (\$94 including lunch).