



How Melbourne's foundation history was cancelled

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A spot on the Yarra River's north bank near the Immigration Museum has deep significance for Melbourne, but it's likely most Victorians wouldn't know about it.

This is where a ship from Tasmania landed in August 1835, bringing a group of people to create a tiny settlement that would become a great metropolis. They set up tents and huts in the vicinity of current day William and Queen streets, not far from a rock formation in the river that separated salt from fresh water, thereby providing a drinking supply.

To be sure, there is a plaque – marred by graffiti - on a landing next to the river that notes the historic arrival of the schooner *Enterprize* with its ten occupants, some livestock and general cargo.

The *Enterprize*'s owner was Tasmanian (then Vandemonian) publican John Pascoe Fawkner, who wasn't able to make that historic voyage due to debt problems in Launceston.

Fawkner and his family arrived a few months later and built on the corner of what is now Flinders Lane and Market Street.

Today, a building on that site carries a plaque noting that Fawkner, "one of the founders of Melbourne erected his first dwelling and house of accommodation in October 1835". Up the hill on the corner of William and Collins streets, another plaque says that Fawkner bought a block "at the second Melbourne land sale in November 1837 and built here".

The two Fawkner plaques, the *Enterprize* plaque, *Enterprize* Wharf and nearby *Enterprize* Park are the only visible signs of the area's historical significance for Melbourne.

How many cities around the world can pinpoint the actual spot where settlement began, and know precisely the names and circumstances of those first settlers?

However, this part of the CBD does not honour those first settlers in any comprehensive way – there is no memorial or information board showing a detailed history of those early days.

You would think that the nearby Immigration Museum, originally Melbourne’s Customs House, would do the job. Certainly, the museum offers an exhibition covering aspects of early Melbourne, such as the importance of shipping and trade which were centred on that section of the Yarra.

But in a glaring omission there is no specific reference to the Fawkner settlers, nor to fellow Tasmanian John Batman, who had explored the site of what became Melbourne earlier in 1835, and who settled on land near present day Southern Cross Station in November of that year. (Batman had earlier concluded an infamous “treaty” with local Aboriginal leaders.)

You might expect that Melbourne Museum in Carlton, which has a local history section called Melbourne Gallery, would mention the European settlers.

Once again, no.

For the timeline 1835 to 1850, there is a description of “Melbourne’s landscapes”, noting that Port Phillip Bay was formed only 10,000 years ago, and that the rock ledge across the Yarra ensured a fresh water supply for “the settlement”. No mention of Fawkner or Batman as settlement pioneers, but many words devoted to Aboriginal culture and people.

On the floor below is Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre – a major exhibition on Indigenous culture, including the impact of European settlement on the people. It features videos of present-day Aboriginal community members dressed in traditional/tribal ways who discuss the past.

The only public museum in central Melbourne that gives some account of the city’s founders is Old Treasury Building on Spring Street, at the top of Collins Street.

Among its exhibitions is Yarra: Stories of Melbourne’s River, which includes a section headed **Invasion**, which explains how “two rival groups of pastoralists from Tasmania arrived in Port Phillip Bay, racing to claim the rich pastures inland”.

There is an account of Batman’s “treaty” with local Aborigines, a number of drawings of the settlement, and a note saying that the Yarra was mistakenly named, that its real name should be Birrarung.

Overall, the exhibition offers a fascinating history of the river, particularly its development as a trading river. While the section on the first settlers is relatively brief, it is welcome given the scant attention paid them by other city museums.

(It is interesting that Old Treasury Building, in common with a growing number of institutions, on its website “acknowledges that it stands on the **unceded land** of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation” (My emphasis)).

One might think that the City of Melbourne, which after all is the direct descendant of that founding settlement, would celebrate those first arrivals. Certainly, the council’s comprehensive website has a history section that says a settlement arose in 1835.

But there is no discussion of *how* that settlement happened and no mention of Fawkner and his schooner Enterprize.

Curiously, the section spanning 1830s to 1850s mentions Batman, but only insofar as he donated to a fund to build Melbourne's first church, St James Cathedral, which originally stood on the corner of William and Collins streets. There is no other information given on Batman's role in establishing Melbourne, apart from the fact that his was a "pioneer" family.

The council's best shot at describing the city's foundation is as follows: "In the 1830s, European settlement by mostly Anglo-Celtic people displaced the area's original inhabitants, the people of the Kulin Nation".

There was a time when the City of Melbourne did embrace the city's original settlement, most recently since the early 1990s when Melbourne Day was established. Held on August 30, the date of the Enterprize's arrival, the day was created by businessman Hedley Elliott who sought help from former Victorian premier Dick Hamer to ascertain the facts of Melbourne's founding.

Hamer was appointed inaugural chairman of the organising committee and within five years the original turning basin where the Enterprize moored in 1835 was reinstated. At the same time the eastern end of Batman Park was named Enterprize Park.

During that period and for decades after Melbourne Day was celebrated with a flag-raising ceremony at Enterprize Park and other activities. School children would attend the main event that included an address by the lord mayor, historical reenactments and performances by Aboriginal artists.

The city council supported and funded Melbourne Day until 2017, which was the last year that then lord mayor Robert Doyle attended the event. Doyle resigned from Town Hall in February 2018, and three months later Sally Capp became lord mayor in a by-election.

Capp showed no interest in Melbourne Day, except for an affiliated initiative called Junior Lord Mayor which was held separately from the flag-raising ceremony. In recent years the council has refused to comment publicly on why it has shunned the day, although it is clear that sensitivity to Indigenous community concerns is the reason.

An Aboriginal Melbourne Team within council advises "on Aboriginal interests and culture". This team's advice helped change the council's stance on Australia Day, with Melbourne now committed to lobby the Federal Government to change the date from January 26.

Presumably, the Aboriginal team also pushed for council to abandon Melbourne Day because it commemorates European settlement. The event has also lost major sponsors in recent years, including Melbourne Water and Metro Trains.

Melbourne Day still exists, but like everything else it was affected by Covid shutdowns, and over the last couple of years has been only symbolically presented.

In fact, Melbourne Day Committee chairman Campbell Walker has turned up at Enterprize Park to do the flag-raising by himself.

"Melbourne Day is currently having a holiday, and we're still evaluating whether there's a public interest in Melbourne history," he tells this writer.

Walker, son of former lord mayor and high-profile businessman the late Ron Walker, is frustrated with the council's lack of support.

"I'm certainly disappointed that the City of Melbourne has decided to be cautious rather than be on the front foot in embracing Melbourne's history," he says.

"They are the custodian of the city, they know the history, and it's a rich history, and it's something to be proud of."

Walker admits Melbourne Day is facing a bleak future – "If there's no interest at all, absolutely we'll wind it up and say we had a good go at it".

"But as I've always said, no one has said it was a terrible idea," he says.

"It might be politically incorrect, but not a terrible idea. Because when teachers used to come down (to Enterprize Park) with their students, the teachers were embarrassed that they learnt nothing about Melbourne."

By "politically incorrect", Walker means that events like Melbourne Day have fallen foul of a progressive push to repudiate or ignore colonial history in favour of a particular Indigenous/progressive narrative.

"Along the journey (of Melbourne Day) the consultation has always been there with First Nations people, and they've willingly participated in welcome to country and smoking ceremonies," he says.

"They've also welcomed the opportunity to talk to the local high school kids...about the history of the First Nations people."

"But some of the feedback from other First Nations people was: 'We're trying to get rid of Australia Day and we're hoping to be successful, and if you think Melbourne Day has got a chance then think again'".

Indeed, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, one of Melbourne's main Indigenous groups, rejects Melbourne Day.

"It is an invasion that caused the dispossession of Wurundjeri country from their ancestors and generational trauma that still impacts people," a spokeswoman told The Age newspaper in 2022.

And academic director of Indigenous research at La Trobe University, Julie Andrews, told the same newspaper that Melbourne Day did not fit with the Victorian treaty and "truth telling" process.

"Melbourne Day is meaningless today," she said. "You have to have days that are meaningful to a community, to a society and to a city. Not everyone knows what this is, let alone supports it."

While it may be true that not everyone knows about it, surely it is important that efforts are made to educate Melburnians about the origins of their city, warts and all.

However, we find that the opposite is happening with examples such as a growing trend to refer to Melbourne by its supposed Aboriginal name, Narm.

City of Melbourne and Melbourne Football Club are among organisations and institutions which use Narrm in certain contexts, such as in the AFL Indigenous Round in the case of football.

However, the diaries and reports of the first European settlers do not list Narrm as a name used by Aboriginal tribes for places in what became central Melbourne. Names that were used apparently included variations of Bearbrass, Barraring, Bearheap and Neramnew.

Melbourne, named for the British prime minister of the time, was a new colonial settlement which grew into a city, a phenomenon previously unknown to the Indigenous people.

Campbell Walker would like to see the history of those first settlers properly displayed at Enterprize Park. He believes that the city council's ambitious Greenline linear park project, which will run along the Yarra's north bank, could incorporate such a display with a maritime theme.

This is a fine idea, and certainly the nearby Immigration Museum should add more about those early Fawkner and Batman years to its exhibition. Same for Melbourne Museum.

And maybe Victorian school children should be more educated about the city's foundation.

But given the prevailing views among our institutions and political leaders, all this may be a pipedream.