

JOHN JAMES (alias Johnston)

John James was born in London in 1819. On his record sheet there are several entries of how he arrived, one stating that he arrived per the ship 'Theresa', another arriving in 1843 per 'Constant', sentenced to fifteen years transportation, and finally under the alias 'Chas Henry Johnson' to Van Diemen's Land per 'Tortoise' in 1843, for fifteen years. Whatever the case may be by 1852 he was living in Victoria.



At that time the ship 'Nelson' was lying in Hobson's Bay, while being loaded with cargo to take back to London. Already on board were 23 boxes containing 8000 ounces of gold valued at around £25,000. There appears to have been little secrecy surrounding the cargo and word reached three men who were visiting Melbourne at the time, who had previously been working in the Keilor Plains - Black Forest area; They were John James, James Duncan and James Morgan.

The trio made plans to attempt to steal the gold and enlisted the help of others to carry it out. It appears certain that Stephen Fox was one of these and possibly William Barnes, Edward Wilson and one other person unknown. Some reports stated that as many as twenty-two people may have been involved but this is highly unlikely.

On the night of 2 April 1852, the raiders stole two boats belonging to Mr Liardet, a hotel owner near to where the Nelson was anchored and quietly rowed out to the unguarded vessel. On board the ship were Mr Draper, the mate, three seamen, the cook, three passengers, and a visiting second mate from the 'Royal George' lying close by. As the gang climbed on board all those present were sound asleep in their cabins. As several of the gang called out loudly on the deck, waking its occupants, the others quickly rounded up those who came to see what the commotion was all about and strapped them to the bulwarks. After securing all on board Mr Draper was ordered to show them where the gold was hidden. He at first refused until one of the raiders shot him through the side and threatened to kill him. Draper eventually gave in and led them to the lazaret (a storeroom), whereupon they broke the door down and carried the gold boxes up on deck. After lowering the gold into the two rowboat's, the raiders herded all their prisoners into the lazaret and nailed the broken door back on to hold them in while they made their escape.

However, the three instigators of the robbery were soon under arrest, probably due to the £750 reward on offer for their capture. They were tried on 28 May 1852 and all sentenced to fifteen years on the roads, the first three in irons. On 18 December 1852 John James was housed on the prison hulk 'President' and was still wearing irons up to the 30 December 1856. For some reason unknown, on the 2 June 1858 he was granted a free pardon by his Excellency the Governor and released two days later.