

## James Baker – Scindian Convict #48

James Baker, a married blacksmith with six living children, changed his life and that of his family when he committed a crime that would be considered petty today. He was in the company of one Henry Webber when they stole four chickens from three men in February 1847. It was Baker's second conviction for larceny, the first being for stealing a bag of wheat in August 1816, the year after his marriage. For his first crime he was sentenced to 3 months hard labour which was served in Shepton Mallet Prison. He also had to pay a fine of 1 shilling. For his second conviction, over 30 years later, Baker was sentenced to 14 years' transportation, consisting of 7 years each for two separate offences. As per usual practice Baker was sent to Millbank Prison in London and remained there for six months before being transferred north to Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire. He was further moved to Portland Prison on 24 November 1848 to await transportation. Prison documentation records that he was visited by his father on 20 August 1849.

Transported to Western Australia aboard the first convict ship the *Scindian*, Baker along with 74 other men, arrived on 1 June 1850. He was one of the oldest of the convicts, aged 57 years on arrival. The description of his physical appearance at this time was: height 5' 7 1/2", dark grey hair, hazel eyes, full visage, dark complexion, and of stout appearance.

Ron Pimm, whose wife is a descendant of James and Charlotte Baker, has researched Baker's early employment in the colony:

*James' occupation as a blacksmith was physically very demanding and consequently the colonial authorities ensured that rations for such prisoners were increased to suit. An instruction written on 20 September 1850 from within the Superintendents Office granted extra rations to convicts undertaking specific tasks:*

*"The Steward will issue the following extra rations to the men employed as "Sawyers, Blacksmiths, Mortar Mixers and Washermen, on such days as they are fully employed at their respective trade or occupation viz- .... 48. James Baker 6 oz Bread, 8 oz Meat, 1 Pt. Beer"*

*Unfortunately, scant ticket-of-leave information for the 'Scindian' arrivals survives. James Baker was the third convict to receive his ticket-of-leave in the colony, but curiously it was awarded on 16 October 1850, eleven days earlier than advertised. Why was that? With no official documentation to inform us, we must turn to the Perth newspaper 'Inquirer' dated 16 October 1850 that contained an article entitled "MINING JOURNAL" which included:*

*"....the Geraldine Mining Company have at last succeeded in dispatching their party to the scene of their future endeavours....the Murchison River. The Company have succeeded in securing the services of an excellent blacksmith from among the late arrivals per Scindian".*

*As James Baker was the only blacksmith among the convict ship's passengers, and since the actual issue date of his ticket-of-leave coincided with the mining party's scheduled departure date to the Murchison aboard the ship 'Evergreen', it seems that James' first ticket-of-leave took him*

to the Murchison River. There he participated in the establishment of the Geraldine Lead Mine and its associated smelting works, an enterprise that became the first commercial mining venture undertaken in Western Australia. (Baker was paid 20 shillings per week for his work.)

Soon after his departure to the Murchison, James Baker became a topic of debate within the Western Australian Legislative Council. The Perth 'Inquirer' newspaper of the 20 November 1850 reported discussions held on Friday 15 November 1850 between the six official members and other colonial notables who formed the Council. The business of the day was devoted to the "Bill to provide for the due custody and discipline of offenders transported to Western Australia", wherein clause 30 considered whether "ticket of leave men ought, under any circumstance, to carry firearms". Mr Samson cited the example of the ticket-of-leave blacksmith who was a member of the Geraldine Mining Company party (ie James Baker). The Governor's concern was that "convicts will soon exceed the free population" and after discussion it was finally proposed by the Colonial Secretary and accepted by the Council that Justices of the Peace would grant convicts permission to carry arms and forward the details to the Colonial Secretary.

Soon after arrival, James made an application for his family to join him. Initially his wife Charlotte replied that she wished to wait a year before joining her husband. Subsequently, on 6 November 1852, Charlotte and two of their adult children, Jane, 18 years and Joseph, 26 years, arrived aboard the emigrant ship *Anne Maclean*. The records note that a further daughter, 20-year-old Mary Ann intended to join them, however, sadly, she died in June shortly before the family were due to embark.

According to Ron Pimm, James Baker set up shop as a blacksmith in Fremantle and in 1855 purchased 21¼ acres of land from Samuel Caporn, using the property for cutting timber to make charcoal for his blacksmith's forge. Baker was issued with his conditional pardon on 10 January 1857 and then two years later, he sold 11 acres of the property to George Cooper, a Sergeant Major of the Pensioner Guards, who built a four-roomed limestone house for his family. In July 1871 Baker sold his remaining land, which today forms the southern part of the Murdoch University campus. Location 25 Cockburn Sound was advertised for auction:

*"10¼ acres of Freehold Land (the greater part under cultivation, 1½ acres being vineyard) together with a substantially built FOUR ROOMED COTTAGE thereon, CART SHED, BARN, STABLING, STOCKYARD, and other out buildings, Fenced in".*

Ron Pimm tells of James and Charlotte Baker's final years:

*Infirmity drove the couple to spend their final years with son, Joseph, and on 23 September 1872 Charlotte died of "old age", followed 3 months later by James on 10 January 1873. James' death certificate described him as a "Farmer & Smith" who, like his wife of almost 60 years, also died of "old age". The pair were both buried in Fremantle's Alma Street Cemetery.*

In January 1863 Joseph married Irish emigrant Elizabeth McCabe who arrived in the colony on 6 April 1859 aboard the *Hamilla Mitchell*. The couple had four sons together before Elizabeth's early death in July 1870. After the death of his parents James and Charlotte, Joseph took a second

wife, Kate Parker, also from Ireland and 25 years his junior. The couple had a daughter who died in infancy and a son George who lived until 1935.

James and Charlotte's daughter Jane Baker married Steadman Sanders in 1856 in Fremantle. Their first child, a daughter, was born in Bunbury after which they moved to South Australia, where the remainder of their 13 children were born. Sadly, Jane was to bury 11 of her children and her husband before she died in Port Wakefield around 1920.

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### Sources:

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