

Finding Sickler: A Romp through the Records

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Estonian Archives in Australia

Historical research proceeds backwards and forwards as you chase various clues about your subject. I wish to discuss my research into the life of the first person from Estonia known to have settled in Australia. I will not be discussing the research process. I will highlight the range of available materials about individuals in the nineteenth century in Australia. My success may inspire others to search for other early migrants from the Baltic region.

The sources I will refer to are arranged as categories of records held by different types of institutions. I shall be dealing with examples from the following institutions:

Libraries (Mitchell Library (ML), State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW), National Library of Australia (NLA)): published sources, historic maps and plans, newspapers, paintings, photographs.

Government Archives (State Records of New South Wales (SRNSW), Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV)): correspondence files, maps, legal records.

Government Agencies (Lands Department of New South Wales (Lands Dept, NSW), New South Wales Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM, NSW)): land title records, government survey maps and plans, birth, death and marriage registrations.

Alfred Julius Sickler has been recognised for many years as the first Estonian in Australia. Peeter Lindsaar first brought his identity to notice in 1961. The information that was available to him at that time showed that Sickler had arrived in 1853 and that he was naturalised in 1859 aged 31 so that he could buy land at Dubbo, which was then a small town in the Central West of New South Wales. His nationality was unknown. (Lindsaar 1961, 189; *Austraalia eestlased* 1969, 107) Until now, Alfred Julius Sickler has only been a name bandied about as the ‘first’ Estonian. Who was he? What was he like? How long was he in Australia? How successful was his Australian sojourn? What happened to him? Finally, how ‘Estonian’ was he?

Sickler arrived in Victoria in 1853 on the steam ship *Great Britain*. (CSIL 63/4079, SRNSW 4/505) He worked as a doctor at Bendigo, a major gold mining town in northern Victoria. By October 1854, he was in Ballarat, the other major gold mining centre and

probably the richest in Victoria. He advertised his services as a surgeon and accoucheur, from premises next to the Baths adjoining the Bridge on the new Road. He was listed as A Sickler, M D. (*Ballarat Times*, 7 Oct 1854, 2)

In November 1854, miners opposing government attempts to enforce payment of licence fees for the right to search for gold built a stockade at the Eureka lead at Ballarat. A number of the rebellious miners were non-British subjects, including Americans, Germans and Italians. Tension grew as the government brought in troops but the miners vowed to fight. On 3 December 1854, 400 police and troops attacked the stockade. A total of five soldiers and thirty miners were killed. Many miners were captured and others were outlaws until caught. It was a key event in the rise of Australian nationalism and the emergence of radical politics in Australia. The miner's Eureka flag is still displayed in Australia as a sign of non-conformity, nationalism and rebellion.

No evidence has been located of Sickler's involvement or movements at this time. As a doctor, it is likely that he treated some of the injured whether soldiers or miners. As a non-British subject, he may also have fallen under suspicion. Maybe, he felt life would be less hectic elsewhere. Whatever the reason, Sickler left Ballarat soon afterwards.

Sickler went to New South Wales in 1855 where he practised at the Stoney Creek and Louisa Creek diggings. (*Bathurst Free Press*, 4 March 1857, 3; CSIL 63/4079, SRNSW 4/505) In November 1855, Whittingdale Johnson, the Gold Commissioner for the district, reported that the Meroo and Louisa Creek areas were doing well. New leads were being discovered and nuggets weighing 30 to 50 ounces (850-1420 grams) were being found. There were about 2,500 people in the gold district of whom 1,200 were diggers. (*Maitland Mercury*, 10 Nov 1855, 2)

But, by early 1857, these fields were running out of easily-won alluvial gold. Miners moved to newer fields. (BNE, SRNSW 1/397, 178) Sickler found that he could not make an adequate living there and moved away. On 23 February 1857, A Sickler, "Surgeon, Accoucheur etc" advertised that he would be operating as a doctor at Molong. (*Bathurst Free Press*, 28 Feb 1857, 3) On 27 April 1857, he married Maria Summers with Anglican rites at the Church of the Holy Trinity at Kelso, near Bathurst. (NSW BDM, Marriage Certificate 1857/1335) In later documents, his religious affiliation was given as Roman Catholic.

He soon moved from Molong to Dubbo. By 1859, Dubbo had surpassed Wellington, the original district centre and was growing rapidly from the overland trade in livestock. It was a

flourishing village with stores, inns and many tradespeople. (Dormer 1981, 58) Sickler signed two petitions at Dubbo, one dated May 1858 and the other 12 September 1859 requesting a Police Magistrate for Dubbo. (CSIL 58/1726, SRNSW 4/3379; CSIL 59/5284, SRNSW 4/3410)

Sickler was quickly accepted into the status hierarchy of the district. In October 1858, he was proposed as a patron for the school board. The Inspector, William Wilkins, reported that Sickler was reputed to be one of the “respected men in the District”. (BNE, SRNSW 1/401, 440-1) Sickler declined the offer replying, “I am not a British subject and I could not think of acting.” (BNE, SRNSW 1/403, 68b)

However, on 12 January 1859, Alfred Sickler applied for naturalisation at Dubbo so he could buy land. He claimed he was a 31-year-old medical practitioner. He had been born at “Reval in Russia”. He had arrived in Victoria in 1853 on the steamship *Great Britain* and had been living in New South Wales since 1855. (CSIL 63/4079, SRNSW 4/505) There was no objection. The Certificate was approved. The Governor of New South Wales, William Denison, signed a Certificate of Naturalisation for Sickler on 16 February 1859. (Certificates of Naturalisation, SRNSW 4/1201, No 563)

During the period in which Sickler practised in the district, he was not registered as a medical practitioner with the Medical Board of NSW. His name does not appear in the lists of registered medical practitioners. (*Australian Almanac*, 1857-65)

Sickler had arranged to buy land in Dubbo. On 9 September 1861, land on the western side of Macquarie Street had been sold to William Anthony. Sickler then contracted with Anthony to buy 68 feet (20.7 m) for £68, but paid only a deposit of £20. (LTOD, No 384 Bk 78) During the 1860s, this section of Macquarie Street developed as a major commercial area. Many substantial buildings were erected. (Dormer 1981, 66)

Problems arose for Sickler. From late 1860 until early 1862, a series of court actions were filed against him for the repayment of debts. Some of them related to money borrowed to buy and build on his land. (Supreme Court, Judgment papers, SRNSW 9/5795, 4th term 1861, No 134) When the matter came before the Court, these debts were proved against Sickler. In order to pay the judgment, the land that Sickler had agreed to buy from William Anthony was put up for auction on 3 April 1862 by the Sheriff, unless he could pay the debts in the meantime. On the land was “a substantial cottage and outbuildings ... let to a good tenant”.

(*Bathurst Free Press*, 29 March 1862) He could not repay the debts and the land was sold for £324. (LTOD, No 489 Bk 78)

The tenant occupying the cottage when it was sold might have been Dr Walter Hugh Tibbits, who was listed as owing £25 for rent to Sickler in 1862. (Supreme Court, Insolvency File, SRNSW 2/9053, No 5798) Tibbits later purchased the land and converted it to Torrens Title in 1865. (Real Property Application 998, Lands Dept, NSW) By that time, there was a cottage on the land plus a kitchen and stable in the yard at the rear with a garden behind. (Certificate of Title, volume 22 f 109, Lands Dept, NSW) This cottage also appeared in two photos of the street taken in the following decade. (Dormer 1981, 78; Picman, 40089-40090)

Sickler was in financial trouble. He had not been able to pay off his debts and had lost his main asset, his land and house. To avoid the worst, he filed for insolvency on 2 April 1862, the day before the auction of the land. According to the insolvency schedule, his assets were his clothes and furniture worth £30; “A few Drugs and chemicals” worth £10; his surgical instruments worth £10; plus “A horse in the neighbourhood of Wellington not likely to be found” worth £3. (Supreme Court, Insolvency File, SRNSW 2/9053, No 5798)

His official assignee reported on 7 January 1864 that a delay in obtaining the sequestration for insolvency had allowed the auction sale to proceed. Thus, the main assets, the land and house were sold, and “everything sold off for a very small sum”. No debts were collected by the official assignee. Sickler appears to have kept his instruments as tools of his trade. Sickler did not receive a Certificate of Discharge of his insolvency. (Supreme Court, Insolvency File, SRNSW 2/9053, No 5798)

By the time of his insolvency application in April 1862, Sickler had moved to Mitchells Creek. The earliest date at which he was shown at this address was 29 January 1862. (Supreme Court, Judgment papers, SRNSW 9/5795, 4th term 1861, No 132) Mitchells Creek was a relatively new diggings just off the main Sydney to Bathurst road. Alluvial gold had been discovered there in the 1850s. It was an active field by the early 1860s. Reef gold was being worked and there were 12 stamper batteries. A village had been established in the 1850s. The population at its peak rose to 2,000 people. (Cook & Garvey 1999, 47-8) A post office was established in January 1862. (*New South Wales Government Gazette*, 3 Jan 1862, 3)

Public schools were often one of the first public facilities to be established in any locality. But communities usually struggled for them by pressuring the government and collecting

funds. The resulting correspondence between local residents and government often provides valuable insights into the community. Since he was a doctor, and a local worthy in a small community, I expected that Alfred Sickler would have been involved with the local school, even if he only provided character references for local people. With these thoughts in mind, I examined the relevant correspondence about the establishment of a school at Mitchells Creek. Can you imagine my astonishment and delight when I found that not only was Sickler a local worthy, but he was so highly regarded that he was appointed secretary of the school committee?

Suddenly, the man emerged from the shadows. What I had thought was a man who spoke a highly accented English and may have had some trouble with the complexity of written English now appeared as an articulate man confidently phrasing his thoughts in English as well as one with neat flowing handwriting.

On 10 August 1862, Sickler wrote to the National Education Office that the residents of Mitchells Creek had collected £100 and wanted a school site. Since there was no official township, he sought help in obtaining a site. (BNE, SRNSW 1/420, np) The Board's slowness in responding brought forth a plea from Sickler on 29 December 1862, to act, since, "The Patrons of this proposed School are blaming me, as the secretary for it, for not asserting myself sufficiently to urge to the Board the great necessity and the want of a School here". (BNE, SRNSW 1/419A, np)

Six months later, Sickler was planning to leave the colony of New South Wales. He possibly wished to start afresh where he would not have an undischarged insolvency against his name. He made preparations for his departure seeking a copy of his Certificate of Naturalisation on 22 July 1863. (CSIL 63/4079, SRNSW 4/505)

On 11 August 1863, Sickler wrote to the National School Board. He wished to inform them, "that owing to my immediate removal from this place, I am compelled to resign my position as Hon Sec for the National School at this place". (BNE, SRNSW 1/422, np)

It is uncertain when he left the colony of New South Wales but he still followed the frontiers of gold. Gold had been discovered in New Zealand. The town of Havelock in the province of Marlborough on the north-east coast of the South Island had emerged by 1861, as a timber milling centre, which serviced the surrounding gold mining settlements. (Buick 1900, 391) On 6 July 1868, Alfred Julius Sickler of Havelock, Marlborough, was gazetted as a Justice of the Peace for New Zealand. (*New Zealand Gazette*, 6 July 1868, 333) Soon

afterwards, he was appointed as District Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. (*New Zealand Gazette*, 25 July 1868, 382) On 19 August 1868, an appointment as a Warden of the Warden's Courts for Gold Fields within the District of Marlborough followed. (*New Zealand Gazette*, 25 August 1868, 419) He seems to have acquired the respectability and security he sought. I could not find any further trace of the man after this.

How typical an “Estonian” was Alfred Julius Sickler? As Peeter Lindsaar noted his nationality (“rahvus tundmatu”) was not shown on the documentation. Sickler must have acquired his medical training (if indeed he had any) before about 1852. At this time, few people of Estonian origin were able to attend school, let alone university and medical school. He may have acquired his medical training as an apprentice to a practising medico. Sickler, though born in Estonia at Tallinn, is likely to have come from Baltic German stock, though he may have come from an Estonian family which sought to cross over by Germanicising its name. Maybe he was the son of a German national temporarily in Tallinn. Estonian national consciousness was still at a low level and at no stage did he identify himself as “Estonian”.

Sickler typified the influx of Estonian migrants to Australia after World War Two. Like him, they were highly educated, often from a middle class background. They did not form ghettos but mixed with the rest of the Australian population. Like them, his qualifications were not accepted, but by operating in a frontier area far from the direct control of government he profited from his skills.

On the other hand, Sickler has some surprising resonances for Australia. One of the greatest literary works of Australia is the novel trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, by Henry Handel Richardson. It is the story of a young doctor drawn from Britain to the gold diggings at Ballarat in Victoria. He lives through the Eureka uprising, marries, advances in status, wealth and respectability but is finally thrown into financial ruin. Both in the colony and in Britain, Mahony always found himself the outsider, never connecting with the society around him. Though *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* chronicles the life of a fictional character, allowing Richardson to explore aspects of Australian identity and never knew of the life of Sickler, there are striking parallels between the tale of the real life doctor A. J. Sickler and the fictional Mahony.

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