



# WARRANDYTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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LOUIS JOHN MICHEL,  
DISCOVERER OF THE FIRST PAYABLE GOLD FIELD IN VICTORIA.

by  
Evelyn J. Cooke.

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The following letter and article entitled "MICHEL" by Mrs. Evelyn J. Cooke, the great-granddaughter of Louis J. Michel, was addressed to Mrs. Jo Laurence of the Warrandyte Historical Society in May 1979.

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The letter read as follows: -

3 Park Avenue,  
Preston, 3072.  
10th May 1979.

Dear Mrs. Laurence,

Please find enclosed information about my great-grandfather, Louis John Michel. I hope that you and the members of the Warrandyte Historical society will find it interesting.

Another point of interest of interest is that his youngest daughter, Louise, married Charles R. Long who was an Inspector with the Education Department, and was also Editor of "The School Paper", which many of us well remember. It came out once a month, a paper for each grade and cost one penny.

I can assure you that it has given me much pleasure in writing this article and I always feel very proud indeed to be a Michel descendent.

Wishing you and the Society all the best.

Yours sincerely,  
{Mrs.} EVELYN J. COOKE.

*Warrandyte Historical Society*

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LOUIS JOHN MICHEL.

The first thing we know of the Michel family is that they were Huguenots, French Protestants, driven out of France by the persecution of Louis XIV<sup>th</sup>, in 1685. They fled to England but it seems that a generation or two later, some of them must have returned to France, as my great-great-grandfather was born in Rouen, approximately 1775. His father was a Reverend Louis Michel. My great-great-grandfather, also named Louis, was an only son. He married Elizabeth Watts of Walthamstone, Essex, and they had a family of sixteen. Louis John was the youngest, born at Walworth, London, on July 5th, 1825.

He left home at the age of fourteen and came to Australia accompanied by the son of a Mr. Maitland, who was a great friend of the Michel family. He landed in Sydney, and after a short while came to Melbourne, arriving on June 5th, 1839, aboard a ship called "The Mellish".

He was employed by a Mr. Mann, who had a mercer's store in Collins Street, where the entrance to "The Block" is today.

At the age of nineteen he was married to Miss Alicia Bell, of Killeshandra, County Devon, Northern Ireland. They were married in the original St. James' Church, which is now St. James' Old Cathedral, on October 21st, 1844. Louis and Alicia went to live in a cottage on the slope of the corner of Collins and Swanston Streets, where the Melbourne Town Hall is now situated.

"The Almanac" for 1847 shows Louis as a grocer's assistant. He also had a contract for carting stone for the building of the first Prince's Bridge.

In 1848, he applied on April 29th for a Licence to convert a building on the south-west corner of Swanston and Lonsdale Streets into the "Brittania Hotel; but was refused. Consideration was postponed until June 3rd. He finally obtained a License for this place on August 1st. He named it "Brittania Inn"; but later it became the "Brittania Hotel", and is still in business, as is the "Duke of Wellington" at the corner of Flinders and Russell Streets, where he also was for many years. Louis John later became lessee of the "Rainbow Hotel", which then and long afterwards stood on the north-eastern corner of Little Collins and Swanston Streets.

About the middle of 1851, he took a prominent part in a move to encourage local residents to search for gold. The drain on the population had become

alarming, owing to the departure for Bathurst, near which Hargreaves had made his famous discovery of the precious metal. Not only did Louis attend the citizens' meetings and subscribe to the reward fund, but he also, with some companions, including William Habberlin, did prospect diligently along the upper courses of the Yarra and its tributaries. The result was not long in coming. Early in July gold was discovered in the bed of Anderson's Creek, Warrandyte. Louis and William Habberlin lost no time in proclaiming the discovery, and some members of the Gold Committee, together with Mr. Fenwick, the Crown Lands Commissioner, and Mr. Walsh, a jeweller of Swanston Street, set out under guidance for the field.

The news had spread and some forty eager men were then waiting to follow and strike for fortune. The procession left Melbourne, wending their way through Richmond and on through Doncaster to the Creek, where fine grain gold was obtained on panning out the mud which occupied the bed of the Creek.

“THIS WAS THE FIRST PAYABLE GOLD-FIELD IN VICTORIA. The situation of their works being shown publicly on July 5th 1851, and full particulars communicated to the Government on July 8th. Licences to dig for gold were issued September 1st. That was before the issue of licences on any other gold field; and about 400 persons were at work there when Ballarat was discovered.”

The above extract is from Sutherland's "Victoria and its Metropolis". Louis did not stay long on the field, for he was the ninth man at Buninyong, and had a claim on Golden Point. Ballarat, and bottomed a rich hole in Golden gully, Bendigo.

Louis then rented the "Ship Inn" at William Town {as Williamstown was known then}, and during those phenomenal years in Victoria - 1852 and 1853 - he made a competency £20. 0s. 0d., over the bar before breakfast was the rule, and then retired. A depression during the latter 1850s ruined him, as it did many others, and he went into business once again.

He took on the proprietorship of the "Duke of Wellington" Hotel, Flinders Street, from which he retired soon after the death of his wife Alicia, August 3rd 1875. It was here that his grand-daughter, Alicia Abbott {my Mother}, was born, 20th February 20th 1876.

A few years after the death of his wife, Louis was appointed the City of Melbourne's Valuator and Rate Collector, on the retirement of the late Cr. Ievers.

He died at his home "Ivanhoe", Lygon Street, North Carlton, on September

14th, 1904; and was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery. A column about him in "The Australasian", October 1st 1904, states:

"His assiduous attention to the duties of his office, his fine character, and urbanity of manner caused him to be held in the highest esteem, by all who knew him."

He left a grown up family of four daughters and two sons.

I regard it an honour, that the name of Louis John Michel was considered worth of being included in the "Australian Dictionary of Biography", which means he was part of our National History.

E.J. COOKE, 1979.