

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

## **2019 The 20-Year Search for James William Humphreys**

**by Genny Kang**

## The Twenty-Year Search for James William Humphreys

“You look like a Humphreys” I was always told as a child. I had the same dark curly hair as my grandmother Ada Hughes Humphreys, but where did her ancestors come from? It took more than twenty years to discover the answer and to realise why the search had been so difficult.

The first of my grandmother’s family to come to Australia was her grand-father, James William Humphreys who arrived in Adelaide as a purser on the William Stewart on 14 July 1853<sup>1</sup>. A few weeks later, he married Margaret Hughes, a 17-year-old servant girl he had met on board ship<sup>2</sup>.

Not long after his arrival, he set up a business as a saddler in Port Adelaide before moving to Kadina and then to Wallaroo. After Margaret died in 1880, he married twice more, outliving all three wives.

When James William Humphreys died in Largs on 10 September 1917, his son-in-law, Alexander Wald reported in all good faith that he had been born in Woolwich in England and was 91 years old when he died<sup>3</sup>. Based on this seemingly reliable information, fruitless hours were spent combing through parish records in Kent.

Three of his grandchildren were in their nineties when I started my research and they did their best to help. My great uncle Jim Humphreys thought the family may have come from Scotland. My great aunt, Dorothea Humphreys, remembered her grandfather as a rather vain little man who went down to the wharves to watch the ships come in when he stayed with them in Port Wakefield.

In the latter years of his life, James William Humphreys lived with his daughter Esther Wald in Largs. He used to sit in the sun in the garden with his granddaughter, Dorothea Wald. He told her stories of his childhood, of his father who had owned slaves, of visiting his wealthy grandmother in a house with enormous rooms and that he had run away to sea because he didn’t get on with his stepmother. None of this fitted in with a likely background for a saddler from England. All my father knew of him was that that he had a reputation in the family as a teller of tall stories and I dismissed the stories as fantasy.

Twenty years later, the small band of dedicated Humphreys researchers had long since given up. We weren’t even sure of his name let alone where he came from. When he was married in Adelaide in 1853, he signed as John William Humphreys but on his third marriage in Wallaroo in 1891, he signed his name as James William Walter Humphreys.<sup>4</sup> We wondered if he had assumed an alias.

Trove came to the rescue with an article in the Adelaide Advertiser in 1910 titled “A Veteran Volunteer, Some Reminiscences”<sup>5</sup> In an interview, James William Humphreys told the Advertiser he had joined a commercial vessel in the Bahamas. After it was shipwrecked, he

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<sup>1</sup> A Veteran Volunteer. Some Reminiscences, The Advertiser 1 February 1910

<sup>2</sup> Australia Marriage Index, 1788-1949, <http://www.Ancestry.com.au>

<sup>3</sup> Australia Death Index, 1787-1985, <http://www.Ancestry.com.au>

<sup>4</sup> Australia Marriage Index, 1788-1949, <http://www.Ancestry.com.au>

<sup>5</sup> A Veteran Volunteer. Some Reminiscences, The Advertiser 1 February 1910

enlisted in the British navy. Despite the passage of sixty years, he was able to list the ships he had served on and their captains. We now had enough information to locate his naval records.

The naval records solved the mystery of his origins. When he joined the navy in 1841, it was as a “Boy, First Class.” His birthplace was recorded as Barbados and he was described as coloured.<sup>6</sup>

He was stationed in Malta with the HMS Volage when he married Calcedonia Cuschieri, a minor, on 18 January 1849 in an Anglican church. Records show he claimed to have been “born at sea but registered at Woolwich, Kent.” He never again acknowledged Barbados as his birthplace.<sup>7</sup>

The marriage made sense of another family legend, of a groom who was married in Malta but whose bride ran away after the wedding. The Catholic church in Malta regarded marriages in the Anglican church as invalid and sinful. However, in the eyes of the Anglican church, he was still legally married, a possible reason for using a different name when he was first married in South Australia.

The story quickly developed. We found that his father, James Pilgrim Umphrey, was descended from plantation owners who had settled in Barbados by 1640. He had indeed owned slaves and in 1836, received £62 2s 10d in compensation for the emancipation of six slaves<sup>8</sup>. His grandmother owned a large property. We now had evidence to support the stories he had told his granddaughter.

It was not unusual for men in Barbados to maintain a second family as well as a legitimate wife. While his stepmother may have resented him, he was regarded as a member of the family, taught to read and write and acknowledged by his grandmother. He was apprenticed to a saddler before going to sea.

We still don't know when he was born, other than it was sometime between 1819 and 1826. He may not even have known himself. In 1825, his father emancipated a young slave, James with his mother Mary Ann. This James was baptised in the same ceremony as two of James Pilgrim Umphrey's legitimate children in 1829.<sup>9</sup> If, as we suspect, this is James William Humphreys and his mother was a slave, he would have born a slave himself, regardless of his father's status.

We now understand why he eluded not just us but hid his origins from his children and grandchildren. Four generations later, I know where my curly hair comes from and DNA has confirmed ancestry from West Africa. What truly shocked the current generation was not finding that we are descended from slaves, but that we are descended from 200 years of slave owners.

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<sup>6</sup> Transcripts of naval records made by John Humphreys from <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> Records copied from Malta Family History Society in 2010, source no longer online

<sup>8</sup> Legacies of British Slave-ownership <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/details/>

<sup>9</sup> Barbados Church Records, 1637-1887, <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>

Submitted by Genny Kang