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FREEMASONRY AND THE GREYCLIFFE DISASTER

The worst maritime disaster to occur on Sydney Harbour was the sinking of the ferry, *Greycliffe*, in a collision with the Union Steamship Company's S.S. *Tahiti* on 3 November 1927 with the loss of 40 lives. The collision occurred at about 4.30 pm some 400 metres off Bradley's Head.

A number of those involved were Freemasons and some of the survivors subsequently joined the Craft.



Bro. Kenneth Horler, OAM.

The only remaining living survivor of the tragedy is Bro. Ken Horler, now 90 years of age, and he gave an account of the event when he was interviewed for the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Friday, 3 December 2003.

His account states that he will never forget November 3, 1927. It was a balmy Sydney afternoon with clear visibility. He was a 14 year old schoolboy at the time, catching his normal ferry home from Circular Quay to Watsons Bay. As usual, he and three schoolmates took their favourite positions at the back of the wooden ferry so they could look at the progress being made on the new Sydney Harbour Bridge.

It was a decision that saved their lives.

This service was known as the "School Boat" as it was generally packed with schoolchildren returning home. Fortunately, owing to the late finishing of the Public Schools Amateur Athletics Association Carnival at the Sydney Cricket Ground many children missed the ferry.

As the *Greycliffe* headed for Garden Island to pick up dock workers, Ken Horler got his first glimpse of the Union Steamship Company's mail steamer, *Tahiti*, coming up from behind, heading from Darling Harbour to San Francisco via New Zealand. At 7600 tons, with accommodation for 500 passengers, the *Tahiti* was three times the size of the *Greycliffe*.

"It was just a normal journey", recalls Horler.

Within a few minutes, the two vessels would collide, ending with the deaths of 40 passengers - the youngest a two-year-old boy, who was killed along with his mother and grandmother.

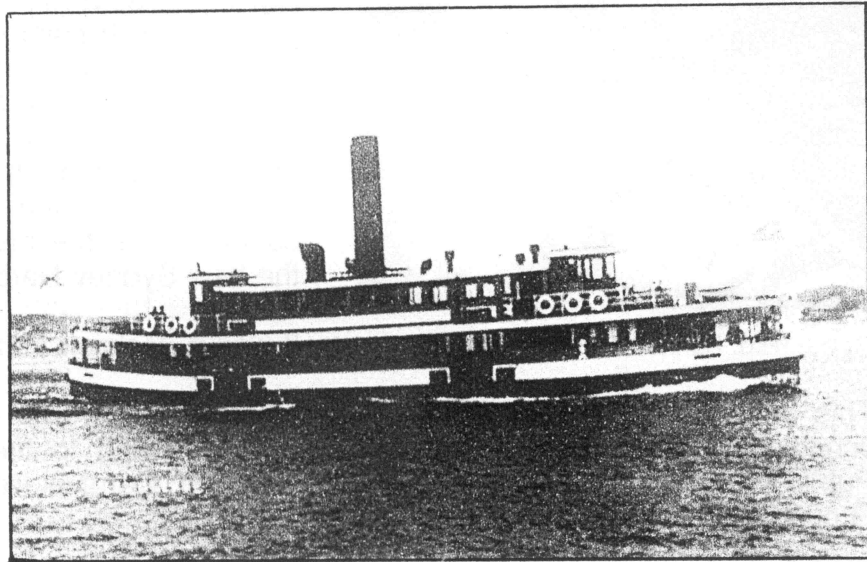
"We saw the two vessels were on converging courses," says Horler. "Eventually the great bow of the *Tahiti* struck us midships, cutting us in half. We were never warned. One moment we were sitting on the ferry, the next we were in the water being sucked down by the sinking ship." "It was," he said, "the most horrible moment of my life." He swam to the surface and clung to some wreckage until he was rescued by one of the many boats that witnessed the collision.

The fortunate ones like Bro. Ken Horler, were on the outside of the ferry. Those inside the *Greycliffe's* two cabins - one for ladies only, the other a smoking room for gentlemen - were doomed. The tragedy was made worse in that most of the victims came from the one small corner of Sydney, Watsons Bay. "I knew just about everyone who drowned," said Horler. Despite his ordeal, Bro. Ken Horler said that he still had an abiding love of Sydney Harbour and that he still travelled aboard ferries.

At the time of the sinking, Ken Horler was a student at Sydney Technical High School and lived at Cambridge Avenue, Vacluse. He qualified as a chartered accountant in 1931 and served six years in the RAAF during World War II, attaining the rank of Squadron Leader. He was awarded the OAM in 1997 for his work against world wide illiteracy.

Bro. Ken Horler was initiated in Lodge Vacluse No. 266 on 17 October 1946. He called off on 19 December 1968.

Greycliffe under way on Sydney Harbour. Typical of the Sydney ferries of the day, she was a wooden double-ended vessel with a wheelhouse, rudder and propeller at each end.



The collision and subsequent events are recorded in full in the book: *Greycliffe - Stolen Lives*, by Steve Brew, and the following is an abridged version of the collision from that book.

That fatal day aboard *Greycliffe*, most passengers were oblivious to the impending disaster.

A number were sitting outside or on the upper deck quietly reading or enjoying the scenery. Inside the men's cabin, the regulars sat in their accustomed seats. Among them were a trio of doctors who always shared the trip together.

Nearby, quietly reading his paper, sat Wor. Bro. James Treadgold, a retired council alderman and six-times Mayor of Liechhardt.

Businessman, Erik Dahlen sat in the stern of the same deck, facing aft. He glanced up momentarily from his paper and was startled to see the huge liner almost on top of them.

He heard shouts from below, when, almost simultaneously, the deafening blast of the *Tahiti's* horn abruptly shattered the idyllic scene. Heads whipped around as a second thunderous blast exploded from the liner's horn. Startled by its close proximity, the passengers were even more horrified to see the tall steel bow towering above them, higher than the ferry's upper deck.

The passengers jumped up in fright and ran in panic to wherever they felt would be safer. Pandemonium broke out as schoolgirls screamed and mothers instinctively snatched up their children. There was little time to think - people ran in all directions to escape the massive liner bearing down on them.

Bro. Captain William Barnes, until the blasts of the liner's horn, was completely unaware of the *Tahiti's* presence. He peered out the port side window. To his shock, he saw *Tahiti's* bow just feet from the ferry's side. It was clearly too late to avoid the inevitable.

The liner's bow struck the ferry by the aft gangway and, at first, it seemed that *Tahiti* would simply push *Greycliffe* aside, but within seconds, the ferry's bow wheeled around until she lay perpendicular to *Tahiti's* course. With the sickening creak and snap of splintering timber, *Tahiti's* sharp steel bow burst through the ferry like an axe, and split her in two. The decks of the *Greycliffe* came tumbling down and passengers were flung in all directions. Barely faltering, the momentum of the 8000-ton liner carried her on through the debris, portions of the ferry passing down each side. Escape for those in the cabins was almost impossible and those on deck were sucked deep into the underwater darkness as the ferry's broken body sank to the bottom.

Cold water found the *Greycliffe's* furnaces. With a roar, the bow heaved as the boiler imploded. With a gush, a great cloud of steam shot into the air, intermingled with flying pieces of timber. Water hissed and boiled as it closed over the ferry's pitiful remains.

At this moment, the Water Police launch, *Cambria* rounded Bradley's Head on routine patrol. Sergeant William Shakespeare could hardly believe the unexpected sight that lay before him. Passing ferries and all manner of vessels raced to the scene. The pilot Steamer *Captain Cook*, ferries *Kurraba*, *Kummulla*, *Lady Hopetoun* and *Woollahra*, the tug, *Bimbi* and the RAN workboat *Sapphire* as well as numerous small boats hurried to the area.

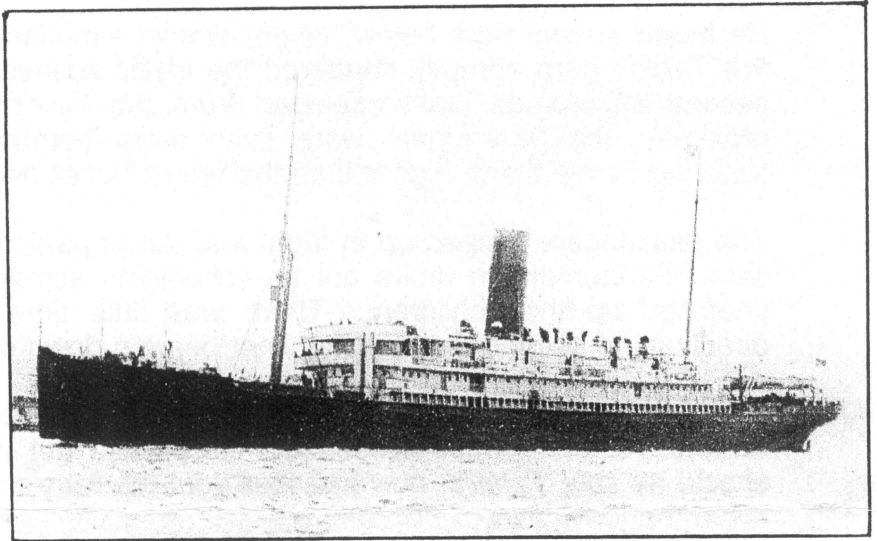
As the news broke, streams of anxious friends and relatives arrived at Bennelong

Point where the survivors, on route to Sydney Hospital, were landed, along with the bodies of the victims.

The dead were laid out on the pathway by the Man-o-War steps where police prepared them to be taken to the City Morgue. Meanwhile a fleet of ambulances rushed the injured up Macquarie Street to Sydney Hospital.

That evening, a deeply distressed Bro. Captain William Barnes was brought home to his little house at Dulwich Hill suffering from shock and the effects of immersion and remained under medical attention.

The S.S. *Tahiti* of 7,600 tons with its olive-green hull and shining white above-deck cabins which afforded accommodation for over 500 passengers. 460 feet long, it was three times the length of the *Greycliffe*.



By this time the *Tahiti* was anchored off Point Piper. The union Steamship Company sent their engineers to examine her for damage. Only deep scratches down each side of her bow were the evidence of the afternoon's tragedy.

Sun newspaper reporter, Norman Head, was despatched to obtain photos of the damage for the next edition. He was surprised to find nothing to photograph.

The Pilot of the *Tahiti*, Wor. Bro. Captain Thomas Carson, remained aboard the *Tahiti* into the evening. At 7.30 pm the liner was permitted to continue her voyage to Wellington and, after clearing the Heads, Pilot Carson was picked up by the Pilot Steamer, *Captain Cook* and he returned home.

The tragedy was reported in the New South Wales Freemason of December 1927.

The Greycliffe Disaster

The whole community was shocked to its foundations by the terrible disaster that took place on November 3rd, when the ferry-boat Greycliffe was cut in halves by the S.S. Tahiti, resulting in many lives being lost. Fortunately the mishap occurred before the heavy evening traffic set in, or the loss would have been very much greater.

No other ferry disaster in Sydney Harbour has been attended with such a serious loss of life. That there are not more accidents of a similar nature speaks well for the skill and seamanship of the masters of the ferry-boats.

The first news of the disaster was communicated by the broadcasting stations.

They kept their listeners well informed of the names of those rescued, as well as those who were killed.

Among the first names of those killed was Wor. Bro. Treadgold, of Lodge Greycliffe, Watson's Bay. This Wor. Brother had been connected with the Craft for many years, Lodge St. John, Leichhardt, previously having had him as a member. He was buried with Masonic honours at the South Head cemetery.

As in all such cases, the occasion brought forth the best in mankind. Many acts of bravery were performed by old and young, resulting in lives being saved that otherwise would have been lost.

The sudden strain put on the casualty ward of the Sydney Hospital met with a willing response by doctors and nurses.

To those who were fortunate enough to escape with their lives, although in many cases severely injured, we offer our congratulations. To those who have been bereaved by the death of dear ones, we offer our sincere sympathy, as do we also to those in command of the vessels concerned.

Wor. Bro. James Powell Treadgold was a retired accountant, aged 81. He lived at "Huntcliffe" The Crescent, Vaucluse. He was born at Stockton, Yorkshire, England in 1847. He had been a councillor on Leichhardt Council from 1892 to 1913, having held the office of mayor on six occasions.

His possessions when found were, 18 keys on a keyring, a season ticket from Watson's Bay, a gold watch and chain, a memorandum book, a pocket knife and £3 in notes. The official finding was 'death by drowning.'

He had been initiated in Lodge St. John No. 174 at Leichhardt in 1900 where he served as Wor. Master, and later affiliated with Lodge Greycliffe No. 559

Wor. Bro. Treadgold was buried with his wife in the Church of England Section of South Head Cemetery with full Masonic Honours.

The funeral service was carried out by the Rev'd W.E. Maltby who conducted a number of the funeral services for victims of the sinking.

Wor. Bro. Rev'd Maltby was initiated in The Lodge of Australia No. 3 on 10 October 1921, aged 28.

He affiliated with Lodge Ionic No. 65 on 19 November 1926 and served as Wor. Master in 1939-40. He then served as Chaplain for 22 years.

The rank of Past Grand Chaplain was conferred in 1960.

Wor. Bro. Rev. W.E. Maltby died on 23 July 1964.

(He was the father of Right Wor. Bro. Grahame Maltby, P.A.G.M., Past Dep. Grand Secretary.)

Five other Freemasons who were lost in the *Greycliffe* disaster were Bro. Charles Phillip Bloom, Bro. Henry Thomas Thompson, Bro. Alfred Edgar Barker, Bro. Dr. Robert Lee-Brown and Bro. Dr. Charles William Reid.

Bro. Bloom, aged 62, was a foreman painter at Garden Island and lived at "Sea View" Clarke Street, Vaucluse. He had been born at Newbury, Victoria in 1864.

His possessions when found were, £14.2s., gold watch and chain with three keys, tobacco pouch, wallet, notebook, tobacco box and pipe and a pair of gold cufflinks. His body was not recovered until 4 November and the official finding was 'death by drowning.' He was a member of Lodge Antiquity No. 1, and was buried at South Head Cemetery with full Masonic honours.

Bro. Thompson, aged 50, was an ex-naval officer and worked at the torpedo workshop on Garden Island. He lived at 757 Old South Head Road, Vaucluse and had been born at Chatham, England in 1877.

His possessions when found included a metal watch, a Masonic badge and a leather case with ferry tickets.

The official finding was 'death by drowning.'

Bro. Thompson was a member of Lodge Southern Cross No. 91 and also a member of the Masonic Club.

He was buried on 5 November 1927 at the South Head Cemetery - the service being conducted by Bro. Rev'd W.E. Maltby.

Bro Barker, aged 53, of 41 Fitzwilliam Road, Vaocluse, was an architect.

His body was recovered on 4 November.

His possessions when found were a gold watch, gold cufflinks, a savings bankbook, spectacles in case, pipe, a slide rule, silver pencil, pens, pocket knife, handkerchief and five shillings and one penny in coins.

The official finding was 'death by drowning.'

He was buried in the family vault in the Church of England section of Rookwood Cemetery.

He was a member of Lodge Vaocluse No.266 and had been initiated in the Lodge on 17 November 1910.

Bro. Dr. Lee-Brown was aged 67 and was the Chief Medical Officer at Long Bay Gaol, a position he had held for 15 years.

He also had a private practice in the City.

His address was 'Greystanes' Fitzwilliam Road, Vaocluse.

His body was not recovered until the 11 November, eight days after the collision.

His possessions when found included £23.03.0 in cash, gold ring and cufflinks, gold wrist watch, two pencils and a fountain pen, gold matchbox, cigarette maker, cigarette holder, bunch of keys and a spectacle case and spectacles.

The cause of death was given as 'drowning.'

He was cremated at Rookwood Crematorium.

At least 80 suits for compensation were dealt with in the courts, Bro. Dr. Lee-Brown's wife, Ada, sued each of the shipping companies, the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand and Sydney Ferries Ltd., for £5,000.

It was stated during the case that Dr Lee-Brown had earned £520 per annum from his prison work and £300 per annum from his private practice. He was the Patron of the Moore Park Golf Club and possessed a Life Policy with the AMP Society for £200.

Bro. Dr. Robert Lee-Brown was a member of Lodge Vaocluse No.266.

Edinburgh Educated Bro. Dr. Charles William Ried was the Chief Quarantine Officer for New South Wales and had held that position for 30 years.

He was 57 years of age and was very tall. He had to stoop to enter *Greycliffe's* cabin.

His address was given as 'Darnley', The Crescent, Vaocluse.

His body was recovered on 4 November and his possessions when found were a gold watch and chain, gold cufflinks, £2.10.0 in notes and thirteen shillings and ninepence in coins and a pair of 3½ inch spectacles in a case.

He was buried in the South Head Cemetery - the service being conducted by the Rev. John Edwards, a Presbyterian Minister.

Wor. Bro. Dr. Charles William Reid was the foundation Senior Warden of Lodge Vaocluse No. 266. in 1910. He served as Wor. Master for the term 1911-1912.

It was obvious that the *Greycliffe* had a fatal design flaw. From the wheelhouse, there was no clear view of ships coming from behind.

The *Greycliffe* having called in at Garden Island was continuing to Nielson Park, Parsley Bay, Central Wharf (near The Crescent), and Watson's Bay. It was ahead and to the right of the *Tahiti*. Most witnesses - including other ferry captains - agreed on two things: that the *Tahiti* was going too fast and that the *Greycliffe*, inexplicably, had turned sharp left into its path.

The captain of the *Greycliffe*, Bro. William Thomas Barnes, survived and insisted he had not consciously altered course. Instead he claimed that a few minutes after leaving Garden Island, he felt the ferry pull to port. He put that down to slackness in the chains (a problem with the steering mechanism) and said that he had compensated for that.

Sydney Ferries also came up with "the bow theory", which put the blame on the Sydney pilot of the *Tahiti*, Thomas Carson. The theory stated that when a large and a small vessel were on parallel courses in shallow water, with the larger vessel travelling faster, its bow wave could drag the smaller vessel into the larger one.

Bro. Captain William Thomas Barnes, aged 52, had been master of the *Greycliffe* on and off, for 10 years.

After the sinking, he was found clinging to a raft and was taken aboard the ferry, *Kurraba*. After recovering sufficiently he returned to the water in a lifeboat to help rescue others.

Bro. William Thomas Barnes was initiated in Lodge Sydney St. John No. 80, and affiliated with Lodge Wardell No. 182 on 20 October 1925.

The two Sydney Harbour Trust divers, William Henry Harris of Balfour Street, Rose Bay and Thomas W. Carr of Cecily Street, Lilyfield, were praised for their efforts in retrieving many of *Greycliffe's* victims from the wreck and bringing them to the surface during the week following the accident. William Harris described his dives and the recovery of the victims as "the worst experience that had befallen him in his 25 years of underwater work."

It is believed that William Henry Harris was a Freemason.

The 40 victims of the disaster were 20 men, 12 women and 8 children.

The survivors totalled 57 in all; 19 men, 13 women and 25 children.

All 5 members of the crew also survived.

Among the survivors were some freemasons and others ultimately became masons.

Bro. Charles Vernon Stoddart, a clerk, was 27 at the time of the sinking. He had been born in London and lived in Cambridge Avenue, Vacluse. He was sitting inside the upper deck cabin and saved himself by scrambling out a window. He beckoned two schoolboys to follow him and all three survived. He also helped others to safety.

Stoddart served as a private in the 9th Battalion, Volunteer Defence Corps from 1942 to 1945.

He was initiated in Lodge Prosperity No. 278 on 5 December 1923. He affiliated with Lodge Vauclose No. 266 on 19 November 1925 and called off from this Lodge on 28 April 1928. He re-affiliated with Lodge Vauclose on 14 June 1934 and called off again on 10 October 1994.

Bro. Stoddart received a 50 Year Certificate on 8 January 1980 and a 60 Year Certificate on 12 January 1993.

He died on 9 May 1995.

Survivor James (Jim) Edward Carruthers was a schoolboy of 13 and attended Sydney Grammar School. He lived at "Waleroi," 79 Wentworth Road, Vauclose and had been born at Canterbury in Victoria.

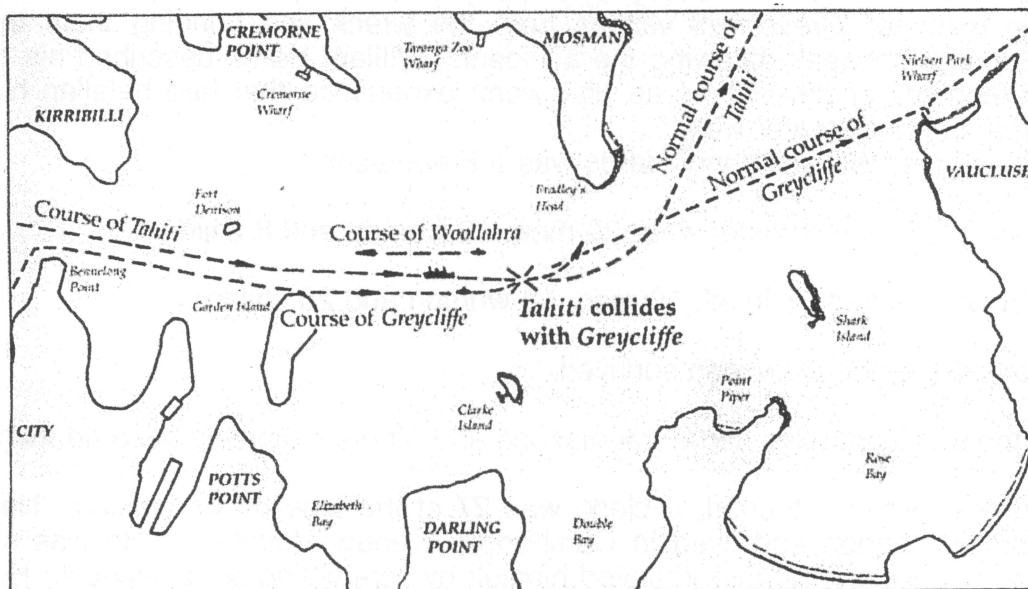
He had a remarkable rescue. His mother was travelling in the opposite direction on the ferry S.S. Woollahra and saw him floating face down in the water. Two passengers dived into the water to save him. He was delivered to Sydney Hospital unconscious and treated for immersion from which he fully recovered.

He served as a Lance Corporal with the Australian Army's 2/9th Armoured Regiment from 1942 to 1944.

Bro. James Carruthers was initiated in Lodge Long Bay No. 569 on 15 October 1935. His Membership Certificate is No. 128320.

There are probably a number of other survivors who became Freemasons.

Following the sinking of the *Greycliffe*, there were three inquiries, the first was the marine inquiry presided over by Judge James Lang Campbell of the Supreme Court. It is believed that he unfairly tarnished the reputation of the Sydney pilot of the *Tahiti*, Wor. Bro. Captain Thomas Carson. Campbell accepted evidence from witnesses that the *Tahiti* was probably travelling at 12 knots instead the permitted eight knots. However he refuted evidence from the same witnesses that the *Greycliffe* had turned directly into the path of the *Tahiti*.



The *Tahiti* and *Greycliffe*'s paths through Sydney Harbour

Yet the two subsequent inquiries - the coronial inquest and a civil action in the Admiralty Court - dismissed the bow theory and accepted that, even though the *Tahiti* was going too fast, the collision would not have occurred had not the *Greycliffe* turned into its path.



The Pilot of the *Tahiti*, Wor. Bro. Thomas Carson and his wife, possibly leaving one of the trials in Sydney.

The final court appeal handed down its verdict in 1931, concluding that while both captains were guilty of contributory negligence, the "*Greycliffe's* navigator" was twice as culpable as Carson.

Wor. Bro. Thomas Carson was the Sydney pilot in charge of the *Tahiti* and he was seen as the principal villain. His life had been ruined. Unlike Captain Barnes of the *Greycliffe*, he lived at Watson's Bay, surrounded by many of the victim's families. The Carson family became persona non grata by some members of the community.

Thomas Carson was 47 at the time of the disaster and had been a harbour pilot for 20 years. He was present at the three courts of inquiry and stated that the *Tahiti's* speed was 8 knots though this was disputed by many witnesses. His pilot's licence was suspended for exceeding the speed limit. It was later reinstated and he finally retired in 1939.

his own two sons would have probably been aboard the *Greycliffe*. Carson did not know this at the time of the collision.

Ironically, had it not been for the late finish of the School Athletic Carnival, which delayed the return home of many children,

Wor. Bro. Thomas Carson had been initiated in Lodge St. George No. 78 where he had served as Wor. Master. He became the Foundation Immediate Past Master of Lodge Greycliffe No. 559 at Watson's Bay, and he served as Wor. Master of that Lodge in 1926 - 27.

He died at his home in Watson's Bay on 9 January 1961.

One of the main witnesses called at the inquiries was Wor. Bro. John Robert Stringer, Harbour Master of Sydney Harbour, aged 56. He had been born at Hull, United Kingdom on 28 November 1871.

He was initiated in Lodge Neutral Bay, No. 267 where he served as Wor. Master in 1925-26. He also affiliated with Lodge Atheneum No. 195 on 27 July 1927.

His grandson, Wor. Bro. Michael Stringer, an undisputed authority on Sydney Harbour, addressed the members of the Masonic Historical Society at their meeting held at the Laurelbank Masonic Centre, Willoughby, on 24 January 2000. His story

of Sydney Harbour included many historical happenings such as the *Greycliffe* disaster and the wartime raid by Japanese submarines and he concluded with some of his experiences with the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol.

Wor. Bro. Michael Stringer, OAM, was initiated in Lodge Freshwater No. 901 at Collaroy on 10 August 1992. He was installed as Wor. Master on 14 September 1998. (Refer MHS Paper No. 58).

From the chapter on the *Greycliffe* sinking in Wor. Bro. Michael Stringer's book:-

Captain Aldwell was on the bridge with the Sydney Harbour Pilot Captain Carson on Thursday, 3 November 1927 when the Royal Mail vessel *Tahiti* slipped its mooring at No.5 Darling Harbour; it was 4.00 pm, the usual departure time for the liner.

As the crowds on the wharf bade farewell to friends, one young woman fell into the water alongside the ocean liner. A man in the crowd dived in and rescued her - she was a lucky young woman.

. . . By 4.30 pm the *Tahiti* was progressing very well towards Bradley's Head when a festive passenger remarked to a friend,

'they are putting the brakes on.'

and at the same time they heard the shrill blast on the *Tahiti's* whistle, a slight bump and the passenger continued,

'That was the last time I laughed. Looking over the side I could see the ferry slowly turning over and then to my horror, she split in halves. One piece swept by on the side on which I was standing. It was terrible to hear the women and children screaming. I could not look any longer, and in a minute or two we had left the wreckage and its struggling occupants behind.'

A passenger on the *Greycliffe*, Mr J.S. Bithell, said afterwards,

"The two boats were running practically parallel down the harbour. I took particular notice of the mail steamer, which did not seem to be more than the length of the ferry to the north of the *Greycliffe*, though slightly astern. At the same time I could see from my position on the port side that the *Woollahra*, from Watson's Bay, was almost in line with the other two vessels. It was when I saw the *Greycliffe* apparently converging on the path of the *Tahiti* that I realised that a collision was imminent. I should say that the bow of the mail boat struck us at an angle of 35°, though, whether actually amidship or not I was naturally unable to determine."

The engine room boiler of the *Greycliffe* burst when it became submerged as the two halves sank, creating a vortex of debris with men, women and children struggling for their lives against the suction of the sinking ferry.

The fireman of the *Tahiti*, Frederick Corby, immediately dived overboard and rescued two small children.

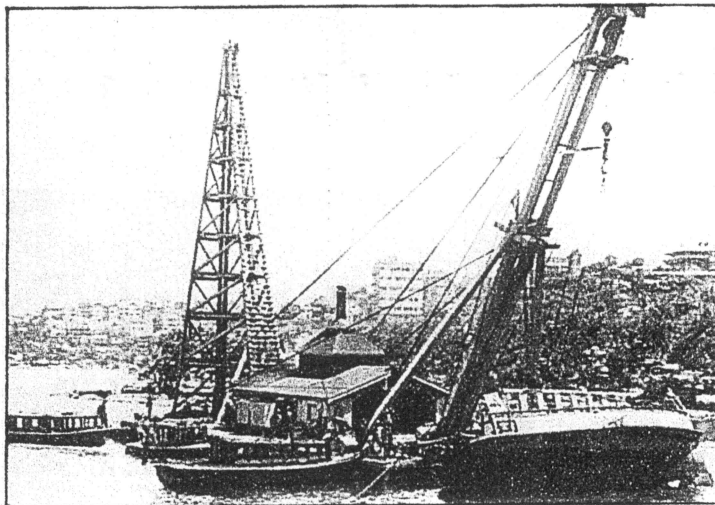
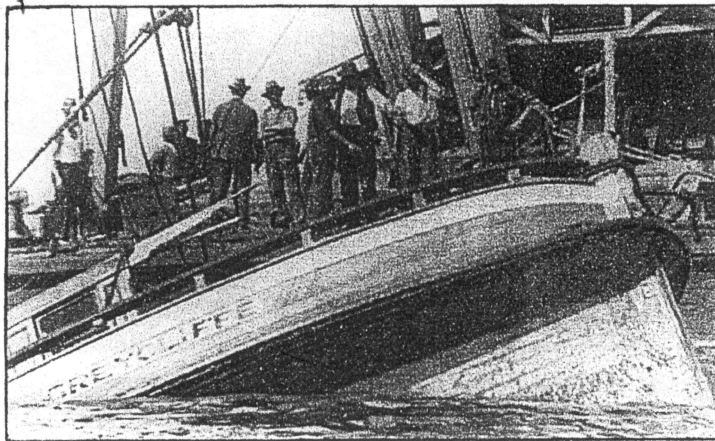
Within minutes the ferries *Woollahra* and *Kummulla* were at the horrifying scene of devastation, picking up the survivors, the injured and the dead.

The *Greycliffe* had sunk in eighty feet of water with the sections being scattered over hundreds of feet of the harbour bottom - divers from the Sydney Harbour Trust raised the wreckage and took most to the beach near Taronga Park wharf, where the Harbour Master, Wor. Bro. Captain Stringer, examined it.

In all, 40 passengers lost their lives on that November afternoon off Bradley's Head.

From the History of Lodge Rose Bay No. 371 (1921-1946) :-

At the December meeting (6th December 1927) the Worshipful Master mentioned the recent tragedy on Sydney Harbour when the steamer "Tahiti" collided with the ferry "Greycliffe." This disaster caused considerable loss of life. Many masonic families suffered bereavement. Masonic lodges, particularly Lodge Greycliffe, were mourning the sad fate of brethren. Fifteen guineas from the Benevolent Fund, which had been created to afford succour to the distressed, was donated to the fund opened by the Lord Mayor of Sydney to assist those whose circumstances had been strained by the tragedy. As a tribute of respect to departed brethren, the lodge was called to order whilst the organist rendered the "Dead March in Saul."

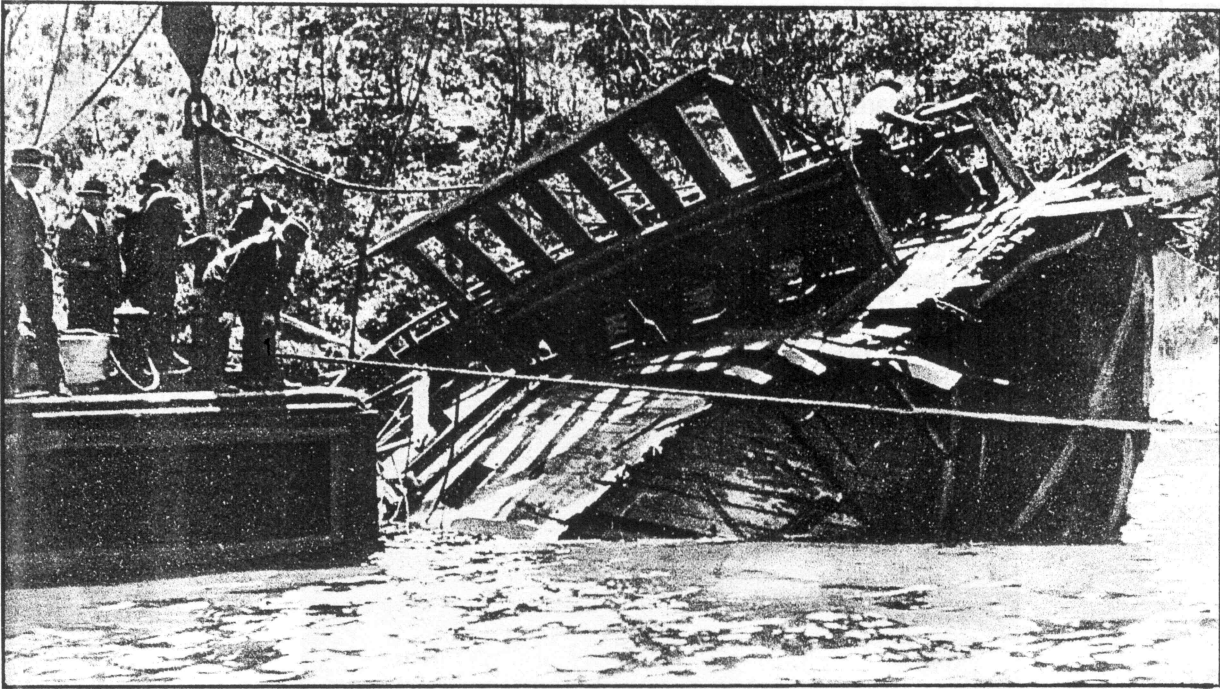


On 7 November 1927, a 25-ton section of the hull and ladies' cabin was raised by the Sydney Harbour Trust's sheerlegs. It was left hanging in its hawsers overnight. A portion of the name, *Greycliffe* is clearly visible on the hull.

Greycliffe's engines were salvaged from the harbour bed and sold to the Tirau Dairy Factory in New Zealand. They were acquired by the Museum of Transport and Technology at Auckland in 1964, and they are still there on display today.

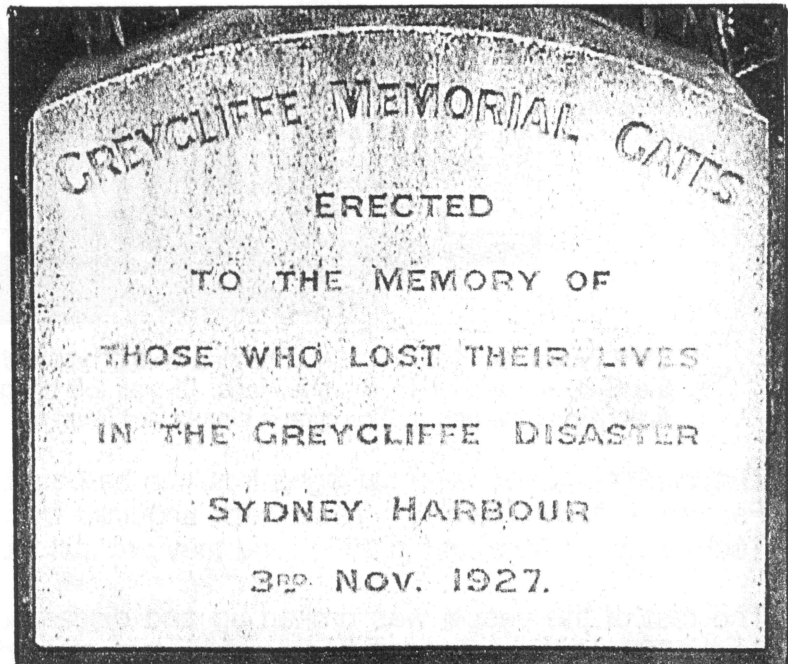
The rest of the vessel was broken up and discarded. Over a two-week period in April 1928, Harbour Trust divers used explosives to destroy the ferry's remains, her funnel being one of the first things to be demolished.

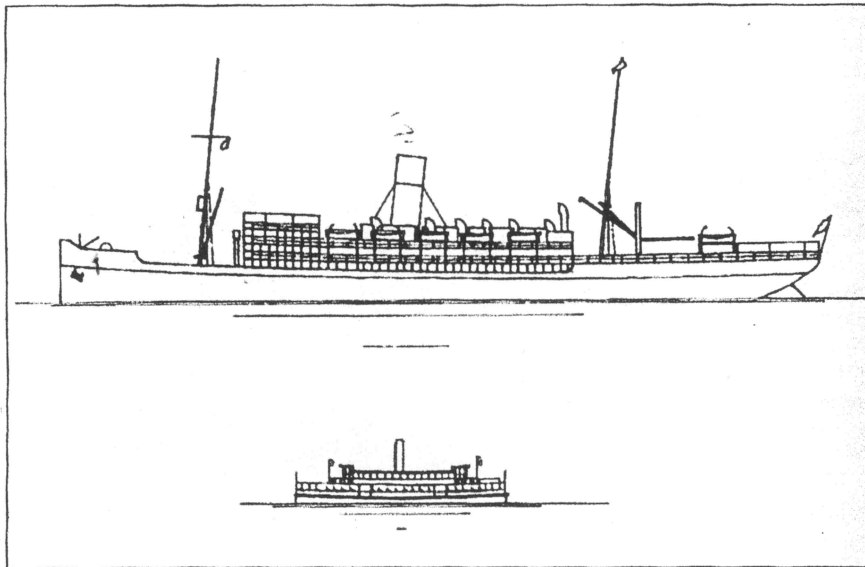
Although the origin of the ferry's name is unclear, it is most probable that her name was derived from Greycliffe House in Greycliffe Avenue, Vaucluse.



The splintered remains of the 133 ton ferry, *Greycliffe* on the beach near Bradley's Head. The Harbour Master, Wor. Bro. Captain John R. Stringer, second from left, inspecting the hull.

A plaque to the memory of the *Greycliffe* victims which stands at the entrance to St Peter's Church, Old South Head Road, Watson's Bay. It was unveiled by the Right Reverend Bishop D'Arcy Irvine on 11 May 1929.





A line drawing of the *Tahiti* and *Greycliffe* showing their relative sizes.

LODGE GREYCLIFFE No. 559

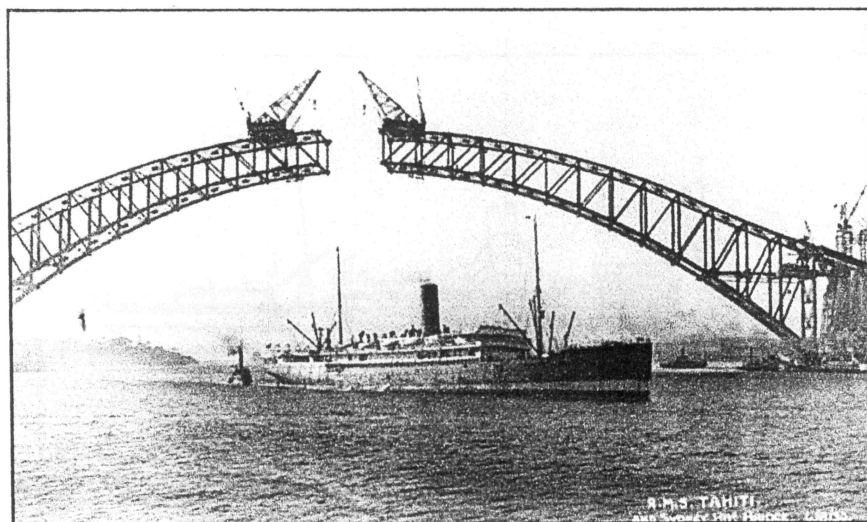
In 1840, Bro. William Charles Wentworth gave his son-in-law, Dr John Reeve, a parcel of land at Steel Point, adjacent to Nielson Park, as a wedding present.

They built a beautiful gothic mansion which they named 'Greycliffe House' on account of the peculiar colour of the nearby rocky foreshores.

Lodge Greycliffe, named after the property, was consecrated at the Watson's Bay Masonic Hall on 8 June 1925 by the Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. John Goulston.

Wor. Bro. H.M. Blair was the foundation master and there were 22 foundation members.

WHAT OF THE *TAHITI* ?



RMS *Tahiti* passes under Sydney Harbour Bridge as she returns to Sydney for her final visit on 4 August 1930. Just 14 days later, she lay at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

In August 1930, almost three years after the sinking of the *Greycliffe*, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, hundreds of miles from inhabited land, *Tahiti's* career came to a surprising and unexpected end.

In the early hours of Saturday, 16 August, *Tahiti's* port propeller sheared off, and ripped a gaping hole in the ship's hull.

A wireless message was received in Sydney just before 3.00 am:-

Tahiti disabled and drifting out of control in mid pacific - urgent request for assistance. Number four hold and engine room filling.

A number of vessels answered the distress signal but the nearest was some 700 miles away. All altered course and proceeded at full speed to the *Tahiti's* position.

When daylight dawned the passengers awoke to the news that their ship was slowly sinking. By nightfall, and with help still far away, the situation was getting serious. Captain Arthur Thomas Toten and his senior officers started discussing abandoning ship. Another radio message was sent:-

. . . . Engine-room bulkhead badly bulged and leaking, engine-room under control;
No. 3 hold water level with 'tween decks; passengers still aboard; pumps working
full bore

The situation however, continued to worsen and shortly after 5.00 am, Sunday, Captain Toten reported:-

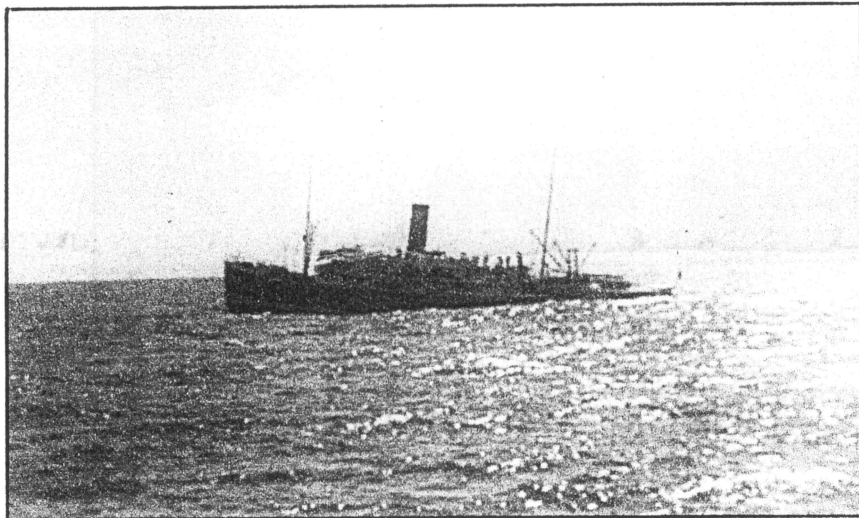
. . . . Engine-room beyond control now; if no further word will abandon ship

It became a race against time; it was not at all certain that the *Tahiti* would stay afloat long enough for help to arrive. Several ships made contact that afternoon, the *Penybryn*, *Antinous*, *Tofua*, and also the mail steamer *Ventura*.

At 8.30 pm lights were seen on the horizon and rockets were fired from the *Tahiti* to indicate her exact position. An hour later the tramp steamer *Penybryn* arrived alongside the stricken vessel to the cheers of the passengers. With a heavy swell running the Captain realised that it would be too dangerous to transfer passengers before daybreak.

A tired crew maintained the overworked pumps all night. By Monday morning the vessel had developed a bad list and Captain Toten realised that there was little hope of her lasting all day. The crew noticed signs that the engine-room bulkhead, strained for so long under the pressure of the water behind it, was beginning to give way. The Captain gave the order to abandon ship.

The liner, *Ventura* arrived at about 10.00 am. By this time five lifeboats of passengers had already been lowered. *Ventura* immediately lowered her lifeboats and assisted by those of the *Penybryn* evacuated everyone from the stricken vessel. Although a smaller ship than the *Tahiti*, *Ventura* still had adequate accomodation for everyone.



Tahiti's stern rides low in the water as she begins to sink. By the time this picture was taken, the passengers had been rescued and were watching from the decks of the *Ventura*.

The crew salvaged personal luggage and some mail but with the *Tahiti* listing heavily, this effort was abandoned. The Chief Engineer shut off the oil fires and left the pumps operating on the remaining steam in the boilers. The ship's carpenter smashed a number of portholes with a sledge-hammer to help her sink. The last of the crew and Bro. Captain Toten were transferred to the *Ventura*.

Minutes later, *Tahiti's* stern lay 400 feet under water, directly below her bow, which still protruded above the surface. There she floated momentarily; anything not tethered fell sternwards and assisted by the weight of water that rushed in, she was dragged under. Steam and water spray gushed from her portholes and ventilators and she slipped below the surface in a swirl of foam.

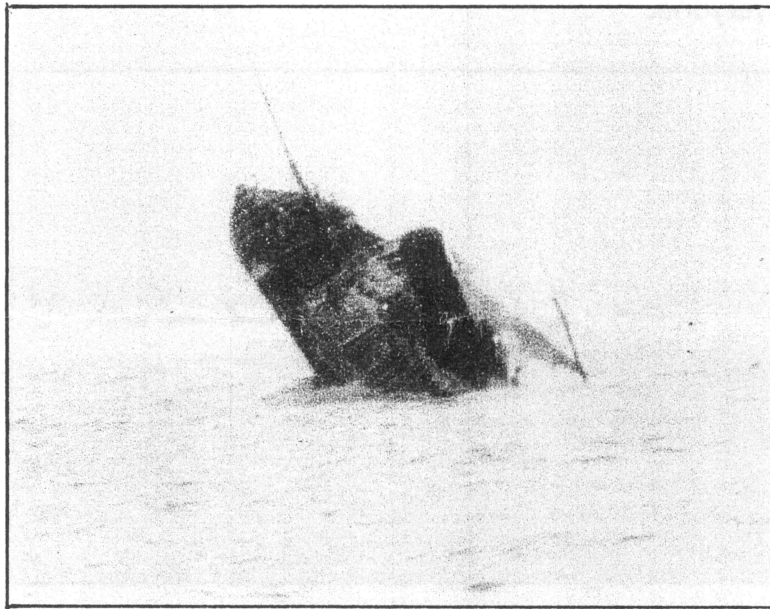
Passengers and crew of both vessels lined *Ventura's* rails and watched in silence with hats removed. Some of *Tahiti's* crew wept openly.

Bro. Captain Arthur Thomas Toten of the *Tahiti* was a member of Lodge Mosman No. 228. He had been initiated on 12 January 1914.

The *Ventura* proceeded to Pago Pago where she arrived the following day and disembarked *Tahiti's* crew and the passengers.

Less than three years after she collided with the *Greycliffe*, the Union Steamship Company's infamous Royal Mail Steamer *Tahiti* was gone after a career spanning just 26 years.

It was perhaps ironic that after the untold sadness and horror she had brought to the lives of Sydneysiders, *Tahiti* effectively committed suicide and sent herself to the ocean floor.



The last moments of the *Tahiti*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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