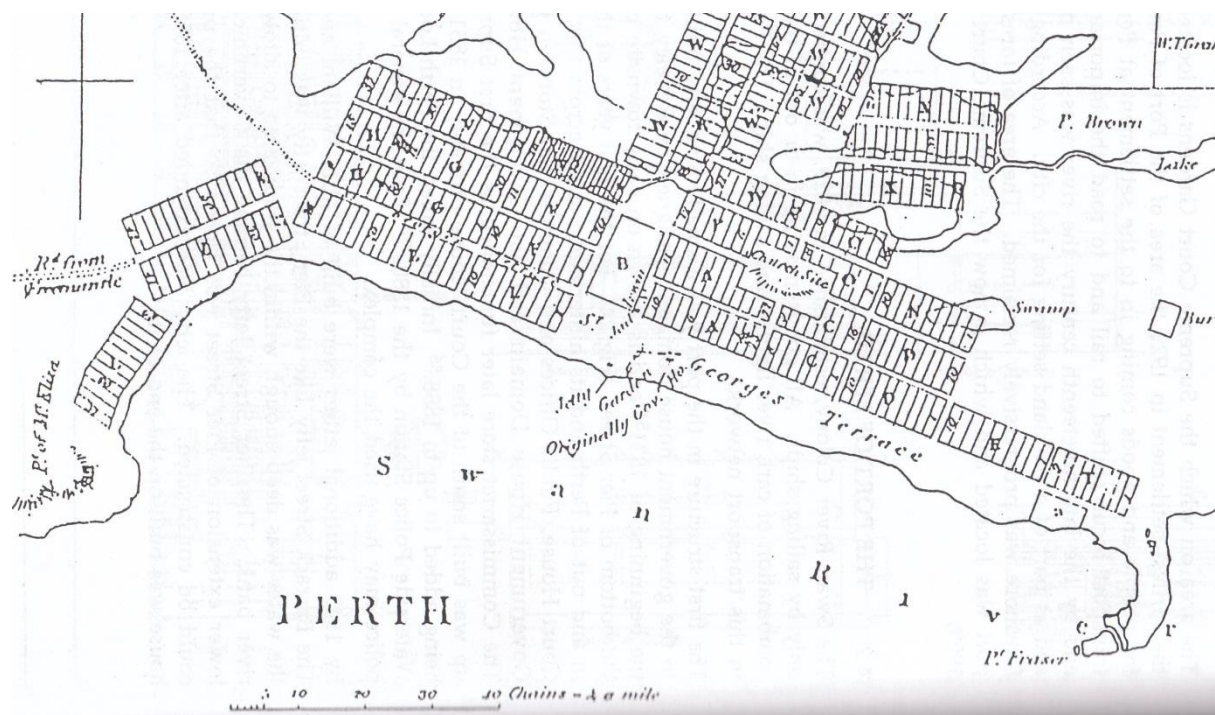


*Foreshore treasure: The potential archaeology of the buried Port of Perth

The Swan River Colony, established in 1829, was connected to its British homeland only by sailing ships. All goods and people moving in and out of the colony had to travel by a combination of cart, river lighter and sailing ship. The Port of Perth was a vital link in this water based transport network.

The first structure at the port was a small stone jetty built in 1831 off a spit of land adjacent to the Government House Domain at the end of Pier Street. The jetty was designed and built by Reveley who also built the first Court House, Public Offices, Commissariat Store, first Government House and the Round House in Fremantle. The jetty and a number of these buildings, can be seen spread across the Government Domain in a 1833 town plan. The plan also shows the location of the original shoreline of the Swan River adjacent to the Perth town site.

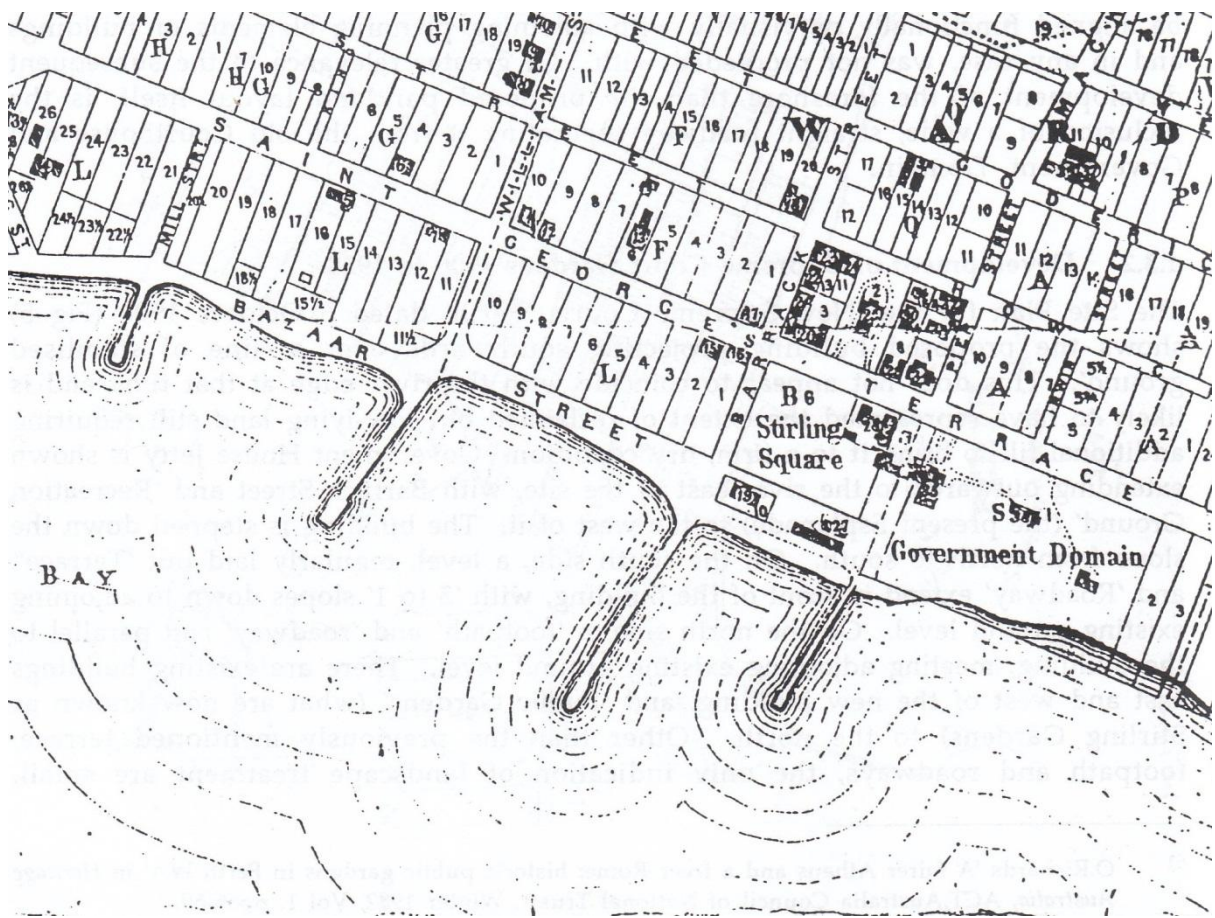
The Reveley Jetty still exists buried under the Supreme Court Gardens.



Plan of the townsite of Perth, published by J. Arrowsmith, London 1833 With additions. Reproduced from M. Pitt Morison "The Shaping of Early Perth 1829-1982" in Western Geographer Vol.1. Jan 1982.

A police lock up was built on the river bank south of the court house in 1851 or 1852, and the archaeological remains of the site were uncovered in 1987 when the new law library and Supreme Court additions were built. Unfortunately at that time, although an archaeologist was called to the site to record what was found, he had no power to stop or even slow down the builders and had to record what snatches he could during the builders lunch break before they came back and destroyed it (pers. Com. Jack McLroy).

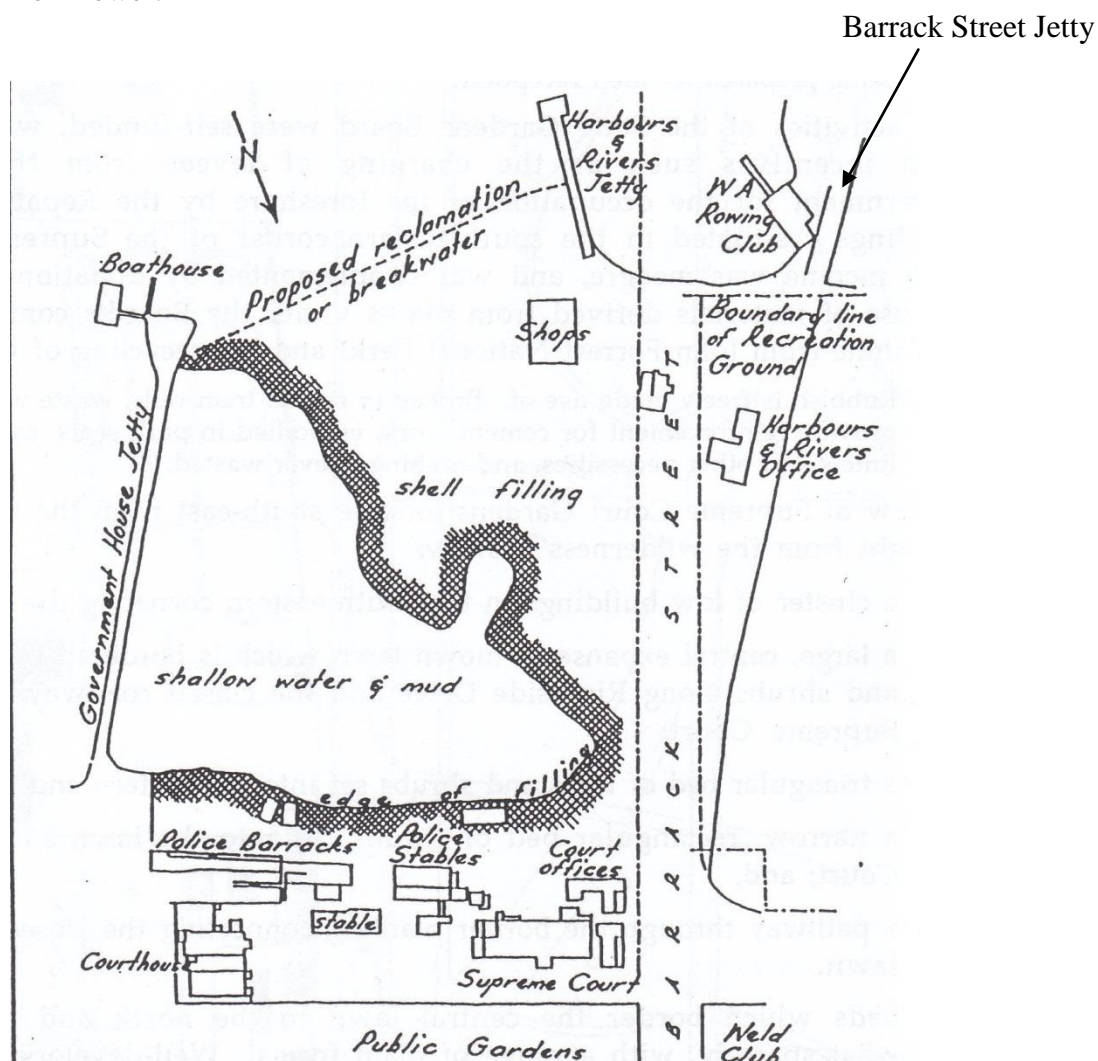
By 1845 additional jetties were built at Mill, William and Barrack Streets. The Barrack Street Jetty, like the Pier Street jetty was at first quite short, suggesting the deepest water was in this area, but both jetties were later lengthened, with the Pier Street Jetty becoming the Government Jetty in 1858 when Pier Street was closed off to allow the building of the current Government House. A plan of Perth dated 1877 shows both jetties extended with the first little bit of land reclamation straightening up the shoreline between Barrack St and the Government Jetty.



Extract from Plan of Perth 1877. Surveyor's General's Office, Perth. Courtesy of: Battye Library plan collection Ref 87C.

The Barrack Street jetty took over from Pier Street as the main general cargo jetty for the port. Goods were unloaded and often left near the base of the jetty for cartage to their final destination. Historic photographs of the Port of Fremantle at Arthur Head show the types of activities and structures which could be expected around the land based ends of jetties. At Arthur Head there was progressively, cargo holding areas for various merchants, warehouses, transit sheds and eventually lots of tram lines.

The Port of Perth shown in the 1877 plan was progressively buried by land reclamation which created our present foreshore. Plans showing the progress of the reclamation demonstrate that the Recreation Ground was the first large reclaimed area and that this new rectangular section of land must have had its own retaining walls as it does not follow the line of the existing jetties. The Barrack Street jetty was mainly swallowed suggesting the land filled through the jetty rather than against it, suggesting a jetty built on timber piles. However both the Government Jetty and the William Street Jetty were later used as retaining walls for sections of land reclamation indicating both jetties were of stone or stone rubble construction as a jetty of timber piers would not work as a retaining wall. The plan showing the proposed reclamation between Barrack Street and the Government Jetty shows that a substantial area of shelly sand had built up against the Barrack Street retaining wall extending out to the Government Jetty trapping part of the river as muddy shallows. This would be the “substantial beach” archaeologists reported finding near the Bell Tower.



Reproduced from G. Sedden and D Ravine, A City and its Setting, Images of Perth, Western Australia. Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1986 p213.

So what does this mean in terms of archaeology? Parks themselves have their own archaeology associated with leisure activities since they were created. However in the case of the foreshore parks there is a whole different landscape buried deep underneath them. This landscape consists of the buried portion of the river bed, the early river walls, the jetty sites themselves; even whole jetties used as retaining walls; and near the city more lightly buried beaches and cargo areas associated with the land based end of the jetties. Some of this can be seen as crop marks on aerial photographs, the Government Jetty shows clearly and the line of the Barrack Street Jetty can also be seen, however I have not had the chance to look for the others on a contract archaeological basis. I also found evidence of use during a metal detector survey of Supreme Court Gardens associated strongly with what would have been part of the cargo holding area of the Barrack Street Jetty.

Others, monitoring developments for Aboriginal heritage, has come across other evidence of what was buried and what was used to bury it. Steve Corsini (pers.com.) reports the type of fill is very uneven and what is covered also varied with Langley Park being a series of mudflats and evidence of a substantial beach being up near the Bell Tower. Evidence for a paleochannel was also found near the Concert Hall. Between the Bell Tower and the Pyramid, testing at 1.2 m recovered 1850s bottles and bricks, and near the old ABC building river materials were re-deposited in the 1920s as fill. The area between the causeway and bowls club was infilled as a rubbish tip where Steve found over 28,000 ceramic ginger beer bottles plus the numerous other artefacts present in an old rubbish tip. And he remembers UWA archaeologists finding old tram tracks at the causeway.

What has been found elsewhere can give an idea of what to expect from this area. The area of river bed associated with the Port of Perth jetties will have an artefact spread around it similar to the Long Jetty in Fremantle, 931 artefacts from which are at the WA Museum, or the Albany Jetty, 191 artefacts from which are curated. The base of the jetties will also have early cargo holding areas similar to that pictured for the early Long Jetty, short on structure but likely to be rich in dropped artefacts from cargo and wharf personnel lost in the sand. There is also likely to have been a growing collection of warehouses and transit sheds. Then there are some of the earliest stone structures in Perth buried under the foreshore; Reveley's 1831 Pier Street Jetty and the early river wall associated with it, surviving because they have been buried and forgotten and until now not disturbed.

Gaye Nayton

*From a paper delivered at a public forum: "More than grass – Exploring the Esplanade", organised by the History Council of Western Australia on 10 November 2011 at The New Esplanade Hotel, Perth.