

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 12/07/24

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## ERIC THE RED



S239 EricTheRed  
CapeOtway WoodenBeams



S239 EricTheRed  
CapeOtway DetailOfWood



S239 EricTheRed  
CapeOtway Inscription



S239 EricTheRed  
CapeOtway  
MeasuringRemnants



S239 EricTheRed  
CapeOtway  
RemnantsOnRocks



shipNo239 2009 07 28  
1248765382953  
compstinkodeck1



shipNo239 2009 07 28  
1248765432828  
compstinkodeck2

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### Location

Cape Otway, Cape Otway Reef

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S239

### Date lost

04/09/1880

**Official number**

8745 USA

**Construction material**

Wood

**Hull**

From E. & A. Sewall's Account of Cost for ship Eric the Red:<br /> <br /> Chains & Anchors<br /> 19145 lbs 90 fathom 2" stud link chain<br /> 306 lbs shackles<br /> 20475 lbs 90 fathom 2" stud link chain<br /> 6973 lbs small chain<br /> 3992 lbs P

**Propulsion**

Sail

**Number of masts**

3

**Length/Breadth/Depth**

198.70 Feet / 41.40 Feet / 17.50 Feet

**Builder**

Elisha P. Mallett

**Year of construction**

1871

**Built port**

Bath, Maine

**Built country**

USA

**Registration Port**

Bath, Maine

**Date lost**

04/09/1880

**Departure**

New York

## Destination

Melbourne

## Cargo

Exhibits for the USA pavilion at the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition, tinned kerosene and turpentine, tobacco, Bristol's Sarsparella, Wheeler and Wilson sewing machines, axehandles, furniture, cases of silver plate, toys, pianos and organs, carriages and waggons.

## Owner

Sewall Family  
E & A Sewall  
A. Sewall & Co. (successors)

## Master

1871-1875: Capt. Joseph Small  
1874-1875: Capt. Oliver  
1876-1880: Capt. Zaccheus Allen

## Weather conditions

Moderate north-west wind, hazy, overcast

## Cause of loss

navigational error, struck Otway Reef

## Passenger comments

2 saloon passengers

## Number of crew

25

## Crew comments

25  
Gus Dahlgren, carpenter (drowned)  
James F. Lawrince, Fourth Mate  
John French, cook

## Statement of significance

The Eric the Red is historically significant as one of Victoria's major 19th century shipwrecks. The wreck led to the provision of an additional warning light placed below the Cape Otway lighthouse to alert mariners to the location of Otway Reef. The site is archaeologically significant for its remains of a large and varied cargo and ship's fittings being scattered over a wide area. The site is recreationally and aesthetically significant as it is one of the few sites along this coast where tourists can visit identifiable remains of a large wooden shipwreck, and for its location set against the background of Cape Otway, Bass Strait, and the Cape Otway lighthouse.

## VHR history

The American wooden ship Eric the Red was named after the Icelandic Viking Eric 'the Red-Haired' Thorvaldsson, who was the first European to reach the shores of North America when he landed in Greenland in 980 A.D.  
The ship Eric the Red was owned by the Sewall family of Bath, Maine, and between 1873 and 1877 it operated in the coal trade between Britain and the USA. It then operated on the South American guano/ nitrates trade, before again trading between Europe and New York. On this voyage the Eric the Red had

been chartered to carry a full cargo of American merchandise including a number of exhibits bound for the international exhibition to be held in Melbourne in 1880. Eighty-five days out from New York with 23 crew and two passengers, the Eric the Red approached Cape Otway nearing the end of its long and uneventful voyage. At 1am on 4 September the weather was hazy with a moderate north-westerly wind, Captain Jaques Allen had all sail set except for the mizzen-royal and the crossjack doing 8 knots, and was steering by the light to keep 5-6 miles offshore and clear of Otway Reef. Returning to the deck after consulting his charts the ship bumped as it ran onto the Otway Reef. It struck a second time and then a heavy sea carried away the wheel ropes, and the man at the wheel. A third bump carried away the rudder, and shortly after this the ship completely broke up - within twelve minutes it had disappeared but for floating wreckage and cargo. Captain Jaques Allen recounted that:  
"The mizzen topmast fell with all the rigging, but strange to say, not a man was hurt by it, although they were all standing about. As soon as I found out there was no hope I said to Ned Sewell, the owner's son, and the third mate on board "Stick to me, and hang on to this mizzen mast". I peeled off everything I had on except my drawers thinking I would be able to swim better without my clothes; and Sewell and myself, clinging to the mast, were washed overboard....It was a fearful sea; I have never seen anything like it". Attempting to swim to a more substantial raft of wreckage, and losing touch with young Sewell in the process, Captain Allen struck out: " Just as I left the spar my drawers got down my legs, and entangled them, and down I went. I managed to clear one of my legs and on coming up I managed to get hold of some floating timber. There was a clear space of water between this timber and the deck, with the exception of the spare royal yard, and I again started, but the surf struck me and I went over and over. I managed to get hold of the spare yard, and after holding on to it for some time I managed to get to the deck. When I was pulled on to it I could not move, being so numb and cramped with the cold. The men had some blankets and other things which they had got from the passengers' room in the deckhouse, and they wrapped me in these. Shortly after I got onto the wreck we made out the steamer's lights, and as soon as she was within hearing distance the men halloed. This must have been about half-past four.....the Captain of the Dawn sent two of his boats to cruise about, and at daylight they picked us up off the wreck. We had drifted about four miles from the reef where the ship struck.... All those who were rescued were more or less bruised. One man had two or three ribs broken, and another had some fingers crushed off. My left foot is very much hurt, and I am black and blue from head to foot. I never knew such a ten minutes as that of the wreck, and I thought the time had come for me to 'hand in my checks'. The ship was worth about &15,000, and neither it nor the freight was insured one dollar". (Argus 14/9/1880).  
Three of the crew and one of the passengers had been swept away and drowned. Fortunately for those clinging to the remains of the shattered hull and floating wreckage, the steamer SS Dawn passed close by and the crew heard the distressed cries of the survivors. Boats were lowered and the survivors were rescued. The Dawn stayed in the area for several hours searching for more survivors. One body was found washed up at Cape Otway and was buried in the lighthouse cemetery. The captain and crew of the Dawn later received rewards and thanks from the United States consul for their efforts.  
The hull and cargo was sold for 410 pounds, and large rafts of floating wreckage and cargo washed up all over the Victorian coast. A section of the hull lies buried in the sand at the Parker River beach, an anchor is on the rocks at Point Franklin, a second anchor is on display at the Cape Otway lighthouse and parts of the ship are on display at Bimbi Park and at the Apollo Bay museum. Various wreckage is located in a concentration off Point Franklin, but suitable diving conditions are rare due to waves and strong currents.  
At the time of the wreck parts of its were salvaged and used in the construction of houses and sheds around Apollo Bay, including Milford House (since burnt down in bushfires), which had furniture and fittings from the ship, and the dining room floor made out of its timbers. A ketch the Apollo was also built from its timbers and subsequently used in Tasmanian waters.