

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 13/10/24

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## SIERRA NEVADA



S620 SierraNevada  
PortPhillipHeadsPointNepean  
DiverOnWreck Feb1985



S620 SierraNevada  
PortPhillipHeadsPointNepean  
Artefacts Feb1985



S620 SierraNevada  
PortPhillipHeadsPointNepean  
WoodRemains Feb1985

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### Location

Port Phillip Heads, Point Nepean, Portsea Back Beach

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S620

### Date lost

09/05/1900

### Official number

78711

### Construction material

Iron

### Hull

Iron; 2 decks; poop 50 ft, fore 32 ft; bar keel 9 ft; 1 bulk-head, cemented; draught 21 ft; mounded depth 25'4", freeboard amidships 4'11"

### Propulsion

Sail

**Number of masts**

3

**Length/Breadth/Depth**

133.00 Feet / 37.60 Feet / 23.50 Feet

**Builder**

Oswald Mordaunt & Co

**Year of construction**

1877

**Built port**

Southampton

**Built country**

England

**Registration Port**

Liverpool

**Date lost**

09/05/1900

**Departure**

Liverpool

**Destination**

Melbourne

**Cargo**

Machinery, brandy, cotton, earthenware, Iron (bar, sheet)

**Owner**

Sierra Shipping Co (Thompson, Anderson and Co.)

**Master**

Captain John Scott of Liverpool

**Weather conditions**

Heavy gale

## Cause of loss

Drifted ashore whilst waiting for the pilot

## Number of crew

28

## Statement of significance

Sierra Nevada is historically significant and representative of a small group of large iron-hulled international cargo sailing vessels wrecked on Victoria's west coast. Sierra Nevada has some social significance as the events surrounding the wreck and its aftermath represented extreme ends of the local community's social values. As part of the group of iron-hulled trading vessels wrecked on the west coast, Sierra Nevada's cargo helps make up part of the picture of the particular tastes of Victorian society and economy in the late 19th century. At the last site inspection in 1985, Sierra Nevada was broken up and scattered over a large area. There is potential for archaeological significance through typology studies of cargo materials providing reference information for other areas of historical archaeological research. Scientifically, Sierra Nevada can contribute to corrosion studies as an iron hulled vessel carrying iron cargo.

Significance assessed against criteria defined in Guidelines for the Management of Australia's Shipwrecks (1994)

CRITERION 1: HISTORIC

Iron as a shipbuilding material was in use for a relatively short space of time, being replaced by steel at the beginning of the 20th century. Sierra Nevada is historically significant and representative as one of a group of large iron-hulled international cargo sailing vessels wrecked on Victoria's west coast.

CRITERION 2: TECHNICAL

Iron ship builders are known to have deviated off ship plans so Sierra Nevada may have some technical significance if there is enough remaining of the vessel to study the ship's construction.

CRITERION 3: SOCIAL

Sierra Nevada's wrecking event was representative of social values of the time and created extremes in social behavior in the communities near the wreck site. Stories of lives lost were overlaid with some people's desire for washed up alcohol from the wreck creating drunken brawls over unattended corpses. As part of the group of iron-hulled trading vessels carrying cargo to Melbourne and wrecked on the west coast, Sierra Nevada's cargo makes up part of the picture of the particular tastes of Victorian society and economy in the late 19th century.

CRITERION 4: ARCHAEOLOGICAL

The wreck lies on an unprotected reef and is subject to aggressive sea action. At the last site inspection in 1985, Sierra Nevada was observed to be broken up and scattered over a large area. Ironwork and cargo items are cemented onto the substrate. Some areas of broken concretions were noted where divers have used chisels or crow bars to expose ceramics and bottles. A workshop lathe bed is visible and a large amount of flat iron bar which may have been ballast or cargo. Sierra Nevada's cargo could potentially contribute to typology studies of cargo materials. These studies have the potential to provide a reference collection for archaeological research into areas relevant to trade and consumerism.

CRITERION 5: SCIENTIFIC

In 1985, the scientific value of Sierra Nevada was seen predominantly in its cargo. Sierra Nevada could contribute to an area of research relating to the importation of materials into Australia, what market forces were at play and whether the material was available locally or not. As an iron-hulled ship carrying an iron cargo, Sierra Nevada can contribute information to any future corrosion studies.

CRITERION 6: INTERPRETIVE

It is possible to dive the site in good weather but due to the scattered remains any interpretive significance lies off site.

CRITERION 7: RARE

Sierra Nevada is one of five iron-hulled trading vessels wrecked in and around Port Phillip between 1883 and 1900. This group of vessels presents a rare picture of international iron sailing vessels trading with Melbourne.

CRITERION 8: REPRESENTATIVE

Sierra Nevada is representative of the large iron trading vessels that were used for a short time towards the end of the 19th century before steel took over. Iron's short life span in shipbuilding was due to complications associated with iron hulls such as compass anomalies and the corrosive properties of iron and water.

## VHR history

Sierra Nevada was an iron-hulled three-masted sailing ship, built in 1877 in Southampton. Part of the Sierra fleet of fourteen vessels, Sierra Nevada was built predominantly for the Rangoon rice trade. Very little is known of the vessel's early history but there is the possibility Sierra Nevada might have made one previous visit to Australia prior to 1900. In 1900, the vessel left Liverpool, England with a valuable general merchandise cargo bound for Melbourne. After 112 days at sea, Sierra Nevada reached Port Phillip Heads in rough weather late on 8 May and burned blue lights to indicate its presence to the pilot schooner. However, in the bad weather, Sierra Nevada had

missed the pilot ground and the pilot was unaware of the ship's arrival. Just after midnight 9 May, the vessel ran aground on Point Nepean and quickly broke up. Twenty-three of the 28 crew lost their lives, including the Captain.

The following day, the beach was strewn with wreckage and many people came down to help themselves to the cases of whisky that had washed ashore. The stealing was rife so the Permanent Artillery was dispatched to guard the beach (Caldow and Langenberg 1999). In spite of some press criticism, a Court of Marine Inquiry exonerated the pilot service - the verdict was one of imprudent navigation by the master of the Sierra Nevada, Captain Scott. The captain and ten of the seamen were buried in the Sorrento Cemetery.

At the last site inspection in 1985, Sierra Nevada was observed to be broken up and scattered over a large area approximately 1740 metres square. Ironwork and cargo items are cemented onto the substrate. A workshop lathe bed is visible and a large amount of flat iron bar which may have been ballast or cargo (Maritime Heritage Unit 1988: 14).

Sierra Nevada was recommended for provisional declaration in 1988 and gazetted in 1989. Its significance was assessed as a sub-group of the state resource of international iron/steel hulled cargo traders (Maritime Heritage Unit 1988: 14).