

EVIDENCE OF WILLIAM ECKFORD,¹ PILOT
21 JANUARY, 1820

1. How long have you been pilot?

Two years and a half.

2. By whom were you appointed?

By the Governor on the recommendation of Captain Wallis.

3. What is your pay and emolument?

A ration and a half daily, a house to live in and for piloting private vessels only, five shillings for those not exceeding fifty tons and all above, twenty shillings.

4. How long have you been a prisoner in the [this] country?

I was tried about six years ago before Judge Bent.

5. Is every vessel bound to take a pilot?

I do not know whether they are obliged to take one, but they all do if not for the pilotage for the sake of the boat [i.e., to obtain the assistance of the pilot's boat, especially in tacking] as they are all weakly manned themselves.

6. Is the harbour difficult to enter?

It is and a very dangerous harbour, on account of the shifting of the sands and the variety of currents caused by the passage between the main[land] and the island called Nobbys.

7. What draught of water is there at low and high tide?

Four fathom at high water and two and a half at low,

in some places it is more; but at low water without a leading wind a vessel could not enter, the channel is so narrow.

8. What is the greatest tonnage which vessels ought to be that come to load at this port?

Not exceeding one hundred though at spring tides larger may come. They must however wait for a fair wind and the springs to go out.

9. Have many vessels been lost since you have been pilot?

Only one and she drove from her anchors in the harbour on shore and was entirely lost.²

10. Have you heard of many being lost here?

A great many.

11. Were these losses occasioned by being blown off in attempting to enter the harbour?

Chiefly by want of skill in the persons commanding and of those vessels bound to the Hawkesbury.³

12. Are the colonial private vessels badly fitted out which come here?

Yes, they are.

13. Is the anchorage in the harbour here good?

The holding ground is but there is a want of room.

14. Is there any sand bank in the harbour?

There is a large one, that runs in the middle of the harbour leaving a channel on both shores.

15. What is the depth of those channels?
From three to five fathoms each.

16. Would not the channel on the south shore afford good anchorage for vessels loading provided there was a quay?⁴

It would.

17. What is the length of the shore where the deep water is?

About fifty or sixty rods. [I.e., about 275 or 330 yards.]

18. Could they drop down after loading to the principal anchorage?

They could.

19. Can a vessel go up the river to the place where they now cut wood?

Vessels drawing six foot [of] water can go up and formerly private vessels did.

20. How high does the tide rise here?

About six feet at spring tides but the height is affected by the quarter the wind blows from.

21. What is the depth of water at the end of the wharf?

About three feet at low water and, at some times, twelve at high.

22. Do you think that the pier now constructing will add security to vessels leaving and entering the port when it is finished?

When the pier is finished it will prevent the cross

tide and afford a safe harbour to enter and leave in south or south easterly winds.

23. Is there any considerable supply of fish on this part of the coast?

At times there is, but at others very little or none.

24. What is the most plentiful sort?

Snapper on the outside, mullet and black fish on the inside.

25. Is the coast favourable to fishing?

Only for lines, but not for trawling, the swell on all occasions is too heavy from the southward.

26. Have any vessels or boats been run away with since you have been here?

Yes, one, a sloop belonging to a man at Sydney taken by four prisoners. They have not been heard of since. No boats have been run off, they are sure of being brought back, for they cannot take provisions enough to enable them to go anywhere.

27. How many people were in the settlement when you came here?

Not exceeding one hundred.⁵

28. Was it customary at that period or since to send the prisoners back to Sydney on the expiration of their colonial sentences or were they ever detained?

Those who conducted themselves well were sent back, but those who did not were retained. In Captain Wallis' time, as

there was a great demand for labour at the public works, he detained those who were useful after their colonial sentence[s] had expired.

29. Were there any public buildings in the town before Captain Wallis' time?

None but the store and military barracks and a small gaol.

30. Is there always [an] abundance of water supplied from the well near the sea?

There is.

31. How has the settlement been supplied with provisions since you have been here?

Very regularly; but usually in the months [sic] of February there have been great deficiencies both of meat and wheat; but these have been always made up on the arrival of the vessels from Sydney.⁶

(signed) William Eckford

REFERENCES

1. Bonwick transcripts, Box 1, pp. 491-5.
William Eckford was born in 1765 in Ayrshire. He arrived in New South Wales as a gunner on the Earl Cornwallis in June 1801, and as a free settler began to farm land at Pennant Hills and Windsor. He was sentenced to death for sheep stealing in 1813 but Macquarie commuted his sentence to transportation for life and sent him to Newcastle. His maritime experience led to his employment as assistant pilot and in 1817 he was appointed pilot, a position he held until his retirement in 1828. From about 1818 he had a farm at Wallis' Plains and he became a settler there after

retiring. He died at East Maitland in 1833.

- (Proceedings of a board of inquiry regarding William Eckford's pension, Darling to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 August, 1828; Great Britain, Colonial Office, Records, 201/193.)
2. This was the new schooner Endeavour, owned by John Black of Sydney, (Sydney gazette, 20 December, 1817).
 3. The lack of clarity of the reply suggests an omission from the transcript.
 4. At that time there was only a small stone wharf at the foot of High Street, now Watt Street.
 5. The population of Newcastle in 1814 was 272 but Eckford is referring only to the town of Newcastle and not to the limeburners, cedar parties and settlers. C.f. Evidence of James Clohesy, q.6, who states there were not more than eighty five persons in the settlement exclusive of the limeburners, the settlers and the soldiers in 1816.
 6. After a period of shortage, the convicts were given food equal to the rations they had not received.