

# MASTERS HOUSE



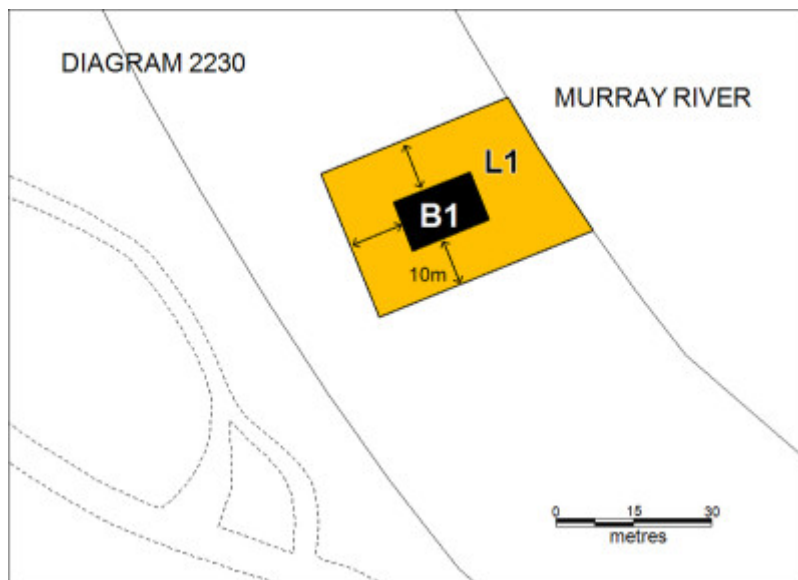
Masters House.jpg



Masters House from the Murray River's edge (Peter Mills photo 2642013).jpg



Masters House west side (Peter Mills photo 2642013).jpg



Masters House Map of Extent.jpg

## Location

MASTERS LANDING, MURRAY RIVER RESERVE, RIVER TRACK GUNBOWER, CAMPASPE SHIRE

## Municipality

CAMPASPE SHIRE

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2330

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO614

## VHR Registration

August 8, 2013

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is significant?

The Masters House which consists of a timber and corrugated iron dwelling located close to the bank of the Murray River on Gunbower Island, 6.5 kilometres northeast of the town of Gunbower, and remnant exotic plantings in the vicinity of the house.

### History Summary

Frederick Masters was reputedly living in a bark hut on Gunbower Island by the early 1860s. From 1874 this site became part of the Gunbower State Forest. As one of a handful of commercial fishermen who worked along the length of Gunbower Island, Frederick Masters is said to have built his own boats and took his catch to market in Echuca and surrounding towns by horse and cart. In the early 1890s Frederick commenced payment for a one-acre Residence Area under the Land Act. During the period of the Echuca river trade between the late 1850s and the late 1880s a riverboat landing stage was located in the vicinity of the Masters House. Frederick and Emma had twelve children. Emma died in 1889, Frederick in 1905 and their son William (Bill) took over as a commercial fisherman, sending fish direct to market by train after the railway reached Gunbower in 1915. He was also a shearer and cut firewood for the pumps of the Cohuna Headworks. The family presence along the river bank intensified in 1917 when William's younger brother Robert and his wife Emily and three children obtained a half-acre Residence Licence a short distance to the north. Robert also cut firewood, fished and worked as a labourer for the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission. In 1918 both William and Robert obtained additional two-acre Residence and Garden licenses. When Robert died in 1936 his family left the area. William died in 1952 and his wife Mary lived in the old house until she died in 1960. Her son James (Jim) stayed and continued the tradition of fishing and shearing. Jim's son Robert lived on the site for a period up until 2010. From the early 1970s the family established an ongoing tradition of maintaining the old house and holding family reunions centred at the building.

### Description Summary

The Masters House is a five-roomed dwelling made up of a two-roomed gabled pavilion facing the Murray River and a smaller single-roomed gabled pavilion, which are connected by skillion-roofed additions. The buildings are of bush-pole post and beam construction and are clad with Red Gum weatherboards. Roofs are of corrugated iron on bush-pole rafters. Early internal linings include a variety of lining boards and some hessian and paper. A few remnant garden plants including vines and fruit trees surround the house.

This site is part of the traditional land of the Yorta Yorta people.

### How is it significant?

The Masters House satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

Criterion B Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history

Criterion D Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects

Criterion G Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.

Why is it significant?

The Masters House is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

The Masters House is significant as a rare surviving riverbank residence of a Murray River fishing family, which was in use for over eighty years by three generations of commercial fishermen. Commercial fishing was widely practiced on the River Murray from first settlement until the 1950s, but there are no other known remaining dwellings associated with commercial fishing on the Murray River in the state. There is ample oral and documentary evidence of the family's activities on this site. (Criterion B: Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history)

The Masters House is significant as a fine example of the living conditions experienced by people living on Crown Lands who engaged in the exploitation of a variety of natural resources including fishing and firewood gathering. Those who took up this way of life had little capital but they made a significant contribution to the economy of the state. They frequently lived in the bush near to their resource, either illegally or under a permissive occupancy. The Masters House stands within a clear and intact context of the Murray River as the fishery, the forests for firewood cutting and the irrigation works that consumed firewood and provided employment. There is ample oral and documentary evidence of the involvement of three generations of the Masters family in fishing, firewood collection, labouring on irrigation works and shearing on nearby stations. (Criterion D: Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects)

The Masters House is significant as a fine example of a type of settlement on un-alienated Crown Land that paralleled selection under the Land Acts. From the early 1890s the Masters' riverside site was occupied under a Residence Licence, one of the less well-known forms of permissive occupancy of land made available under the Land Acts. While the Land Acts from the 1860s were primarily concerned with making land available for selection, the underlying motivation of 'opening up the land' led legislators to allow for occupation of Crown Land for a variety of other purposes. Like the Residence Area provision of the Miners' Right before it, the system enabled people with few resources to reside and cultivate a garden on a small area of Crown Land with some degree of security. Such licences were often taken up in undeveloped areas and on the fringes of more orthodox settlements. There are detailed records of negotiations over these licenses between the Masters family and the Gunbower State Forest administration and Lands Department. (Criterion D: Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects)

The Masters House is also significant for the following reasons, but not at the State level:

The Masters House is socially significant at a local level as the residence of a Gunbower Island fishing family over three generations. The ongoing attachment of the extended family to this place is demonstrated by their annual gatherings at the house, which have occurred since the early 1970s. (Criterion G: Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.)

## **Permit Exemptions**

### **General Exemptions:**

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices

without a permit, but you must [notify](#) the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### **Specific Exemptions:**

### **PROPOSED PERMIT EXEMPTIONS**

The following works and activities are exempt from requiring a permit:

- . Minor repairs (interior and exterior) that do not involve removal of pre-1960s fabric.
- . Emergency propping in the event of imminent collapse (see note below).
- . Emergency repairs to make the building secure and safe if the building has been subject to vandalism or forced entry (see note below).
- . Public safety and security activities provided the works do not involve the removal or destruction of any above-ground structures or sub surface archaeological artefacts or deposits
- . The erection of temporary security fencing, scaffolding, hoardings or surveillance systems to prevent unauthorised access or secure public safety which will not adversely affect significant fabric of the place including any archaeological features
- . Emergency stabilisation works necessary to secure safety where a site feature has been irreparably damaged or destabilised and represents a safety risk to its users or the public
- . Temporary repairs to doors and windows to enable the place to be made secure where such repairs can be reversed without damaging heritage fabric.

Note: Urgent or emergency site works are to be undertaken by an appropriately qualified specialist such as a structural engineer, or other heritage professional

Please note that minor works that do not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place may be exempt from permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit under section 66(3) of the Heritage Act. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is

required, it is recommended that the Heritage Victoria be contacted.

## Theme

1. Shaping Victoria's environment 2. Peopling Victoria's places and landscapes 4. Transforming and managing the land 5. Building Victoria's industries and workforce 6. Building towns cities and the garden state

Construction dates 1860,  
Heritage Act Categories Registered place,  
Other Names MASTERS HUT,  
Hermes Number 112676  
Property Number

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## History

### HISTORY

#### Contextual History

#### Commercial fishing on the River Murray

There is no visible evidence of commercial fishing activity remaining at the Masters House site. The material below is provided as context.

The first squatters on the central Murray observed Aboriginal fishing techniques including wooden pens used to contain fish described as 'boughyards', earth dams on flooded land to trap fish when the waters receded, prolific catches in nets and the use of hand spear and lines. (Trueman pp.4-5) Squatters fished for sustenance, but commercial operations such as the Moira Lake Fishing Company (later Murray River Fishing Company) started as early as 1855, initially for goldfields markets such as Bendigo. By 1862 this company was sending several tons of fish per week to the goldfields and Melbourne. (Trueman p.6, SMH, 4 August 1862 p.2) Many also fished for the local market.

In 1860 the river was described as being "alive" with fish. Fish were also abundant in the side creeks of the Murray. (Trueman p.14) But by the early 1860s there had already been fears expressed that the Murray Cod would be fished out. (SMH, 23 March 1863, p.3) However, it was only in the 1890s that a closed season for fishing on the Murray was introduced (Traralgon Record, 7 August 1896 p.2)

In the absence of refrigeration, fishermen returned cod to the river tethered by a rope through the gills. They were said to survive for up to a week in this fashion. (Argus, 2 February 1889 p.4) Fish from Gunbower Island were sent to Melbourne via Kerang. (Argus, 25 October 1884 p.4) Kerang was connected to the railway in 1884, and a tramway to Koondrook established in 1888.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the professional fishing industry increased greatly. In 1885 only 883 baskets of fish from the Murray were sent to Melbourne, but by 1895 over ten times this amount was sent. By 1896 there were said to be "hundreds" of commercial fishermen on the Murray. In the previous nine years to 1896 44,486 baskets of fish from the Murray had been sold in Melbourne. Another similar amount was sold in Victoria's regional cities. The distribution system was crude. A large quantity of the fish sent to Melbourne went bad before reaching market. By contrast, fish sent from South Australia to Melbourne was received in good condition because it was gutted, packed in ice and sent by express train. (Traralgon Record, 7 August 1896 p.2) In 1892 Murray Cod and Perch sold at the markets in Melbourne for from 2d to 4½d per pound. (Argus, 18 August 1892 p.10)

Most professional fishing was done with drum nets and cross lines. Drum nets worked best in murky water and caught all sorts of fish. Cross lining worked only in clear water when fish were bottom feeding, and was very selective for Murray cod and trout cod. Professionals also engaged in spinning with dead bait and used numbers of 'springers', or fixed rods, suspended over the water. After the Murray weirs were built, including the Torrumbarry weir completed in 1923, the river stayed clear and there was much greater pressure on the Murray cod and trout cod than on other types of fish. (Sinclair, pp.146-7. Cadwallader, pp.44-5)

By the late 1940s there was considerable depletion of fish stocks above the Torrumbarry Weir, and even greater depletion above the Yarrawonga Weir. By this time there were very few professional fishermen left at Echuca, but the rivers in the vicinity of Barham, Cohuna and Gunbower still provided an excellent living for several professional fishermen. (Cadwallader, pp.10,17,22)

Histories of the Murray River make much of the hard, temporary and solitary nature of early commercial fishermen's camps on the Murray, even well into the twentieth century. They also connect the fishermen to the tradition of the 'Murray Whalers', who were portrayed as a kind of riverine swagman. (Sinclair, p.142) There are few accounts of commercial fishermen living with their families in more established dwellings on the riverbanks, as was the case for the Masters. The Nominator's report found that there were no huts or houses extant along the shores of the Murray in the Barmah/Yielima area, a similar State Forest locale to that of Gunbower Island. Historical photographs from the South Australian part of the river show professional fishermen outside their modest family homes. (See for instance State Library South Australia Image No. B29991) The lack of evidence probably has to do partly with the attraction of the 'Murray Whaler' stereotype, and also with the lack of any systematic historical research into the lives of Murray River commercial fishermen and their families.

#### 'Masters Landing' - a riverboat landing stage

There is little documentary evidence of the functioning and longevity of Masters Landing as a stopping place for the river trade. A riverboat landing stage was definitely located in the vicinity, as indicated by the surviving place name 'Masters Landing'. Masters family members suggest it was probably about 200m upstream of the house. The extent of the earlier Masters' involvement in activities at Masters Landing is also not known.

The Echuca river trade contributed to the local economy between the late 1850s and the late 1880s, when railway transport took over. (Davis, p.44) On his riverboat trip up the Murray in 1884 the 'Vagabond' wrote of periodically "stopping at a woodpile to replenish our fuel". (Argus, 25 October 1884 p.4) These landings served a dual role as an unloading and loading place for goods for the nearest stations and town and as a depot for the firewood which was burned in vast quantities to power the riverboats. Numerous old photographs show boats unloading and loading goods and stocking up on firewood at informal River Murray landings. Typically the boats simply tied in at a suitable point on the bank and put a gangway across to the land. Firewood was manhandled across to the boat. Many such informal landing places were once closely spaced along the river, as riverboats needed to refuel around every twenty miles, and the larger boats used up to half a ton of firewood every hour. The firewood was cut into 1.5 m lengths and stacked by the landing. (Davis, p.46) The lack of trees in the vicinity of the shore at the Masters House remarked upon by foresters in the Masters occupation files may have been due to this firewood-getting activity.

There are a number of landings just in the length of Gunbower Island indicated by names on the map, including Bells Landing immediately downstream and Evans Landing immediately upstream of Masters Landing. Bottcher suggests Masters Landing serviced the needs of the Gunbower township, with produce loaded on to the steamers and goods for the stores and hotels of the Gunbower township loaded off. (Bottcher, p.104) It is unlikely that there was any substantial infrastructure involved at Masters Landing, and in any case, the ongoing erosion of the banks of the river, which was over one and a half chains (30m approx.) in extent at the Masters residence between 1891 the 1920s, has probably removed the ground concerned. (File 58/1329, Unit 429, P1, VPRS 11563)

#### Residences on the Murray River banks of Gunbower Island

A variety of sources indicate that there was a scattering of residences along the River Murray banks in the Gunbower State Forest. There is newspaper evidence of some other fishermen residing on Gunbower Island. Fisherman Frank Cameron from Gunbower Island was bitten by a black snake on the island in 1892. (Argus, 17 May 1892 p.5) Another fisherman, Manuel Monish, lived on the Island opposite Koondrook in 1893. (Argus, 12 July 1893 p.6; 5 September 1893, p.6)

The Parish plans for Gunbower show three illegal occupations along the river, one that of the Masters and another that of Bramley. (Regional Land Office working plan Gunbower parish plans 1 & 2, c2001-2004, digitized at PROV website) It appears that Bramley was a timber cutter of some sort, possibly of sleepers, for Bramley and Bower had logging rights for small red gum logs at Leitchville & Gunbower island. (File 51/931, Unit 317, P1, VPRS 11563) The Patho parish plan (on Gunbower Island south of Gunbower Parish) shows four occupations in the three-chain riverbank reserve, three of which are 'Illegal Occupation', including 'Pratt' and 'Hagen[der]'. (Regional Land Office working plan Patho Parish Plan, c2001-2004, digitized at PROV website)

The Victoria Government Gazettes show that George Meddings had a Residence Licence in Gunbower State Forest in 1895. (Victoria Government Gazette, February 1 1895, No.13 p.480) By 1905 he had selected Lots 121 and 124 Gunbower Island, 1400 acres at the far eastern end of the island. (Bendigo Advertiser, 19 May 1904 p.6)

Some occupiers appear in passing in the pages of the Masters' Residence Licence files. W.W. Heritage, who worked cutting firewood for the Cohuna Headworks, occupied a hut on a half-acre Residence Licence area close to the Masters House before it was taken over by Robert Masters in 1917. Other Lands Department file names indicate applicants for Residence Licences at Gunbower, including J. White, and transfers of licence from Mrs to Mr Thompson and Mrs to Mr Davis. There is a file for the residence of M. Gibson, which was an illegal occupation. (Index to VPRS 11563 Consignment P1, PROV) Finally, various former riverbank dwellers are hinted at by the names of bends and landings along the river. Worthy Bend is just upstream of the Masters House. Masters family members suggest that the Worthys were not commercial fishermen.

By the 1960s authorities including the Forests Commission and the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission were pushing for the removal of residences and recreational fishing huts along the Murray banks on Gunbower Island. (File 58/1329, Unit 429, P1, VPRS 11563) There was also a growing environmentalist aesthetic in which evidence of past human occupation was out of place in 'natural' areas. Sinclair notes that some of the tourists travelling the river in the 1940s and 50s found that the huts along the banks "defaced the beauty of the bush". (Sinclair, p.142) Masters family members indicate that in the 1950s and 60s there were numerous recreational fishing huts along the river just upstream of the Masters House, to the extent that they were two or more deep back from the shore and 'streets' were required. Due to the clearing efforts of government, now only the Masters House and Grahams Hut remain on the banks of the Murray along the whole length of the island. (See Comparisons section of this report.)

### Gunbower State Forest

For most of the first hundred years of occupation, the Masters House lay within the Gunbower State Forest. (The section of the island is now part of the Gunbower National Park.) The first Land Acts allowed for the temporary or permanent reservation of Crown Land for various purposes. The Land Act of 1862 allowed for reservation of State Forests for the preservation and growth of timber, and over 600,000 acres had been reserved in State Forest by 1873. Reserves doubled in the next decade. (Dingle, 1984 p.139) The 70,000-acre Gunbower State Forest reserve was proclaimed in 1874. (VGG, 16 January 1874, No.5 p.90)

Up until 1888 most of Gunbower Forest was leased for grazing to the owners of the Gannawarra, Gunbower and Torrumbarry stations. In that year 22,000 acres of the island were proclaimed as a public common. (Bendigo Advertiser, 14 December 1888, p.4) Other parts of the forest on the Island were grazed under separate licenses. The Conservator of Forests G.S. Perrin was strongly opposed to grazing in the State Forest. In 1890 he complained that the grazing was destroying young trees, and that 40,000 acres of Gunbower Island were grazed for just £130 to £160 per year. (G.O. Perrin Conservator of Forests, p.10)

Various parcels of land were excised from the forest for settlement over the following years, including 11,000 acres of the Gunbower State Forest revoked in 1893, 3000 acres was revoked in 1894 and various smaller areas. (VGG, 24 November 1893, No.147 p.4558; 3 August 1894, No.103 p.3248) These areas then became available for selection 53,000 acres was permanently reserved as State Forest in 1895. VGG, 6 December 1895, No.137 p.4044)

For most of the years up until the Forestry Act of 1907, the forest administration was hidden away in a corner of the huge Lands Department. This is clearly reflected in the Lands Department files for the Masters' Residence Licences. The Lands Department was primarily concerned with supporting selection, and its entrenched attitudes allowed little room for enlightened forest policy. (Dingle, 1984 p.139) These tensions would be played out in encounters over residence, grazing and timber getting licenses and commons in State Forests, including on the banks of the Murray in Gunbower State Forest.

## Licenses for Residence on Crown land

The first system by which workers and their families could legally, cheaply and securely reside on un-alienated Crown Land in Victoria was an outcome of the gold rushes and the miners' revolt of 1854 that culminated in the Eureka Stockade. From 1855 miners holding a Miners Right, which cost £1 per year, could build a house on land being leased for mining. From 1857 they could live on and cultivate a Residence Area consisting of a quarter of an acre of Crown Land. Improvements could be sold. From 1865 a Residence Area could be registered and sold together with improvements. The rent was only five shillings per year, and many took out the Miners Right solely to build a house. (Dingle, 2010 pp.173-4)

The Land Acts from 1860 and onwards were principally concerned with selection but also included provision for individual and group occupancies of Crown Land for a great variety of other purposes. Wright explains that these provisions derived from the old world understanding that those who had no property in land were entitled to the physical resources needed for individual survival. (Wright, pp.5-6) In Victoria this was achieved, in part, through the provisions for town, miners and farmers commons and also through a system of annual licences which allowed various resources such as timber to be utilized. (Wright, pp.104-5)

Provisions under successive Land Acts allowed for leases for long periods for non-agricultural purposes which included various industrial uses such as factories, inns and stores and quarries. Licences to occupy for short periods, which is the category which applied to the Masters' occupancy, applied to, among other things, extraction of timber, bark and stone, searching for minerals other than gold, and fishermen's residences and drying grounds. From 1884 a licence could also be obtained for a garden of up to three acres, a provision which is reflected in various applications by the Masters family.

For many people the Residence Licence proved to be the equivalent on Crown Land of the Miners Right Residential Area on Crown Land leased for gold mining. But while the rent was similarly small, this form of tenure was also more limited. The license had to be renewed yearly, and the land could be resumed at any time for a wide variety of purposes. Some of these Residence Licences did carry rights of purchase, but not those occupying Crown reserves, which was the case for the Masters Residence Licences within the Gunbower State Forest. (Nelson, pp.239-40)

In addition to those who occupied Crown Land and Reserves legally through the Miners Right and Residence License system under the Land Acts, many Victorians chose to occupy crown land illegally. There are no hard statistics currently available on this form of occupation. There are numerous old Lands Department files for illegal occupations. Its presence is also revealed by the court cases concerning such land use occurring all over the state from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, which typically eventuated when the occupation interfered with other land uses or became too obvious through the cultivation of large areas or the presence of extensive fencing. A search of digitized newspaper sources under 'illegal occupation' reveals many such cases.

A number of such accounts reveal that there was considerable sympathy for the illegal practice, not only from the public, but also from the judiciary and parliamentary representatives. In an 1884 case in the Kerang Police Court a timber cutter was charged with illegally residing on Crown Land on Gunbower Island. The bench dismissed the case because it considered that the man must live somewhere whilst engaged in his work. (Kerang Times & Swan Hill Gazette, 5 September 1884 p.2) In 1891 a public meeting was held in Creswick to protest against the order of the Conservator of Forests for removal of illegal occupiers from the State Forest. Among other reasons, the Conservator was concerned at the number of fires stated by the occupants. In the event, they were allowed to stay as long as they complied with forest regulations. (Argus, 19 March 1891 p.7)

Evidence of legal and illegal residential occupation of Crown Lands is provided by large numbers of Lands Department files held in the Public Records Office, but no systematic analysis has been done to date.

## Site History

Frederick Masters' parents Thomas and Lavinia came to Victoria from a Welsh fishing village, reportedly for the hot dry climate which would benefit Frederick's asthma. As assisted British immigrants Thomas Masters (aged forty), Lavinia Masters (aged thirty-seven) and Frederick (aged fourteen) arrived in Geelong in June 1855 on the *Epaminondas*. He had three siblings - Henry aged one, Sarah aged four and Emma aged ten. (Index to Assisted British Immigration 1839-1871, PROV online. Bottcher p.104) Frederick Masters is believed to have settled on the Murray around 1860. (Bottcher, pp.103-4) The first newspaper mention of Frederick Masters concerns the finding of the skeleton of a Chinese man on the island in 1874. Masters informed police that he had given food to the Chinese man on one occasion, and directed him to Gunbower Station on another. Masters was then residing on



the Murray River "about 26 miles from Echuca". (The house site is 23 miles as the crow flies from Echuca.) (Bendigo Advertiser, 30 November 1874 p.3) An 1879 newspaper article refers to Frederick Masters losing one of his two horses to a tiger snake bite on the Gunbower road while taking a cartload of fish to market in Echuca. (Bendigo Advertiser, 29 March 1879 p.2)

Bottcher recounts that "when the oldest of the children were quite small" the family moved to care-take a farm known as "Randall's" on the NSW side of the river several miles downstream. They then returned to Gunbower Island. The duration of their stay is not known. (Bottcher, 1987-1989 #187@p.103) The question arises as to whether they moved back to the same dwelling, or whether a new one was constructed.

The two main sections of house - the two-roomed pavilion and the living room pavilion - probably date from Frederick's occupation. There is some evidence of early use of Red Gum weatherboards elsewhere in the area, sourced from the various sawmills on the island. The first house on the selection of Theodore Cleave on Gunbower Island, built c1878, was said to have been clad in Red Gum weatherboards from Treacy's Mill, also on Gunbower Island. (Gordon, p.21)

Frederick Masters dabbled in selection on Gunbower Island. In 1878 he leased 72 acres 3 roods 5 perches of land at Patho, for a half-yearly rent of three pounds thirteen shillings, but appears not to have paid any rent by 1880. (Victoria Government Gazette, 5 March 1880, No.23 p.538) (Echuca 43568) This is probably the block known as 'Breretons' within the Gunbower State Forest (formerly Lot 97a), which another source also suggests Masters selected. (Cohuna Pioneers p.104) The lease on the block was apparently transferred from Frederick Masters to W.W. Moore in 1893, though the Gunbower Parish Plan shows that Moore purchased freehold for the block in 1891. (KT&SHG, 6 July 1883, p.3. Parish of Gunbower Plan 1) The right to purchase the various blocks selected may have been forfeited because the Masters could not make payments, or perhaps they had not improved the land during the initial lease period as required under the Land Act. By all accounts, the first years were very difficult for selectors even under the best of conditions. (Dingle, 1984 pp.65-66) In 1895 F. Masters selected fifty acres in the Parish of Gunbower. (Bendigo Advertiser, 24 April 1896 p.3) Another source suggests that he selected "a large part" of Fox Island, which may be the same instance. (Bottcher, p.104) The Parish Plans do not, however, indicate that Masters was granted any local land under the selection provisions of the Lands Acts. (Parishes of Gunbower and Patho plans)

The land on which the Masters House stood became part of the Gunbower State Forest in 1874. In 1891 the Superintendent of the Gunbower State Forest served Frederick Masters with a notice "to clear out" or take a licence. He reported that Masters had already been living on this land for some years. On 5 December 1891 Frederick Masters applied for a Residence Licence for a three-acre area on the banks of the Murray under Section 87 of the Land Act. The Superintendent could see no reason why continued residence should not be permitted to allow Masters "to follow his vocation as fisherman". He noted that "his present hut" was within the three-chain-wide Permanent Reserve for Public Purposes along the River Murray. At this point the foresters believed that Master's hut was on Block 102 in the Gunbower State Forest, rather than on Lot 97b where it was actually located.

Masters immediately started paying ten shillings a year rent, but in 1894 had to apply for a license again due to poor record keeping by the State Forest staff. The District Forester noted at this time that he had never seen Frederick Masters cutting timber. This may have been an attempt to pre-empt any assumptions by his superiors that the occupancy was contributing to deforestation along the Murray shores on the Island. Masters was finally issued with a Residence Licence in late 1894, after some delay because the forester could not reach Master's place for a signature due to floodwaters. The area had been reduced to one acre, suggesting that the Foresters did not want cultivation to take place in the forest. The first payments are recorded in the Government Gazette. Masters would continued to pay licence fees regularly until his death in 1905. (File 58/1328, Unit 428, P1, VPRS 11563, PROV. VGG, February 1 1895, No.13 p.480)

Emma died in 1889 at the age of thirty-seven, and Elizabeth took over the care of the large family. Frederick died in 1905 at the age of around sixty-four. Most of Emma and Frederick's children left the area. Only the first child Elizabeth and the sixth child William remained. (Bottcher, p.104)

William Masters, born c1877, continued to live in the house and worked as a fisherman, as a fireman at the Cohuna headworks and as a contractor supplying firewood for the headworks. Steam powered pumps were voracious consumers of wood, the Cohuna headworks using thousands of tons per year. In 1914 he tendered to supply the SRWSC 200 tons of firewood for the Cohuna headworks at five shillings and twopence per ton. (Bottcher, p.104. Ballarat Courier, 24 April 1914 p.5) Family members remember that he was also a shearer, and

he is said to have crossed the river in a boat and rode his bike to shear at southern Riverina stations such as Perricoota.

At first William sent his fish to outlying districts, but after the railway came to Gunbower in 1915 he sent the fish to market directly by train. (Bottcher, p.104. Bendigonian, 11 November 1915 p.10) In August 1923 he was reported to have landed cod of 76lb, 34 and 33lb. These fish were sent to Melbourne for sale. (Argus, 17 August 1923 p.14) Family members recall that William also sent Murray River crayfish to the branch of the family in Yallourn, packed in gum leaves.

The family presence along the river bank intensified when in 1917 William's younger brother Robert and his wife Emily and three children took over a two-roomed cottage on a half acre Residence Licence a short distance to the north of William's house, which had been recently abandoned by W.W. Heritage, a firewood cutter for the Headworks. Like William, Robert also cut firewood for the Headworks. He also built levee banks for the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission and was also a commercial fisherman. He soon obtained his own permissive occupancy for the site, conditional on his remaining employed by the Water Commission. (File 58/1329, Unit 428, P1, VPRS 11563, PROV)

In 1918 both William and Robert applied for three acre residence and garden licences. Robert had at first applied for three acres to grow citrus, but this was firmly squashed by the State Forest staff. In the end, both obtained additional two acre garden licenses to allow for yarding their livestock at night. The Masters' cause was supported by letters in support from by a very influential local. J.H. McColl, the son of irrigation promoter Hugh McColl, was a former member of State and Federal Parliament, and had served as the Minister of Lands from 1889-90. He purchased an irrigation property at Gunbower in 1917. The Conservator of Forests wrote to the District Forester that he should "deal with these men in a tactful manner, as with growing agitation to have forest areas thrown open for soldiers and others, it is reasonable to make provision to the extent of licensing a small area where a man may erect a home and cultivate a piece of land." As Mr McColl had written in support of the men on several occasions, the residence areas were to be marked off promptly. The reply letter to McColl, however, made clear that the Forest Act forbade any alienation of lands. (File 58/1329. Argus, 21 February 1929 p.7) Robert Masters died in 1936, and his widow Emily took over the Residence License. Soon after she transferred it to a Mr W.L. Williams. (File 58/1329)

In 1951 William attempted to obtain freehold. In his letter to the Forests Commission he stated that he had heard from "reliable people that the 4 acre block has been gazetted as our own". The Forests Commission abruptly refused. (File 58/1329)

William Masters died in 1952 at the age of seventy-five. (Canberra Times, 31 December 1952 p.4) After William's death, his wife Mary stayed on the old house and the family continued to pay rent on the original three-acre residence and garden area. (File 58/1329)

Periodically the Forests Department would suggest that administration of the Masters' licences should be handled by the Lands Department because the area lay at within the three-chain Public Purposes Reserve along the Murray River. (File 58:1329) Throughout most of Victoria water frontages were reserved for public purposes for two chains on either side. On the River Murray, however, the reserve was three chains wide. (Nelson, p.338) This idea was raised first in 1921 and again in the mid-1950s. The Forests bureaucracy overlooked the impact of the chain-and-a-half (30m) of erosion into the riverbank that had occurred between the 1890s and the 1920s, which had been noted in their own files. (File 58:1329)

In 1953-54 a new timber residence was erected to the west of the old house, but Mary stayed on in the old building. Her grand-daughters used to visit and spruce the building up for Christmas, including applying fresh wallpaper. (Daryl Knight pers. comm.) Mary died in 1960. (Bottcher, p.105) The old house was not lived in on a continual basis after her death. By this time there had been a burst of new illegal occupations elsewhere along the river in the form of recreation fishing huts. Family members recall a substantial group of such huts located just upstream of the Masters House. Mary's son James (Jim) took over payment of the residence licence, living in the new weatherboard cottage and continuing the fishing and shearing tradition. His son Robert lived on the site for a period until 2010. From the early 1970s the family established an ongoing tradition of maintaining the old house and holding family reunions centred around the building. There have now been six generations of Masters descendants associated with the site.

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## Plaque Citation

Three generations of the Masters family lived on this site from the 1860s sustained by commercial fishing and firewood collection. Their residence is a rare surviving example of this once common form of occupation of Crown Land.

## Assessment Against Criteria

### Criterion

#### ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

The Masters House satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

#### Criterion B Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history

The Masters House is significant as a rare surviving example of a riverside residence of a Murray River fishing family, which was in use for over eighty years by three generations of commercial fishermen. Commercial fishing was widely practiced on the River Murray from first settlement until the 1950s but there are no other known standing dwellings associated with commercial fishing on the Murray River in the state. There is ample oral and documentary evidence of the family's activities on this site.

#### Criterion D Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects

The Masters House is significant as a fine example of the living conditions experience by those living on Crown Lands and engaged in the exploitation of a variety of natural resources including inland fishing and firewood gathering. Those who took up this way of life had little capital but they made an significant contribution to the economy of the state. They frequently lived in the bush near to their resource, either illegally or under a permissive occupancy. The Masters House stands within a clear and intact context of the Murray River as the fishery, the forests for firewood cutting and the irrigation works that consumed firewood and provided

employment. There is ample oral and documentary evidence of the involvement of three generations of the Masters family in fishing, firewood collection, labouring on irrigation works and shearing on nearby stations.

The Masters House is significant as a fine example of a type of settlement on un-alienated Crown Land that paralleled selection under the Land Acts. From the early 1890s the Masters' riverside site was occupied under a Residence Licence, one of the less well-known forms of permissive occupancy of land made available under the Land Acts. While the Land Acts from the 1860s were primarily concerned with making land available for selection, the underlying motivation of 'opening up the land' led the legislators to allow for occupation of Crown Land for a variety of other purposes. Like the Residence Area provision of the Miners' Right before it, the system enabled people with few resources to reside and cultivate a garden on a small area of Crown Land with some degree of security. Such licences were often taken up in undeveloped areas and on the fringes of more orthodox settlements. There are detailed records of negotiations over these licenses between the Masters family and the Gunbower State Forest administration and Lands Department.

The Masters House is also significant for the following reasons, but not at the State level:

Criterion G Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions. The Masters House is socially significant at a local level as the residence of a Gunbower Island fishing family over three generations. The ongoing attachment of the extended family is demonstrated by their annual gathering at the house, which has occurred since the early 1970s.

## **Extent of Registration**

1. All of the land marked L1 on Diagram 2230 held by the Executive Director, being part of Crown Allotment 2020, Parish of Gunbower.
2. All of the building marked B1 on Diagram 2230 held by the Executive Director.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*