

Albury Customs House

Greg Ryan

In July 1851, what was known until then as 'the Port Phillip District of NSW,' was declared the separate colony of Victoria. Subsequently, custom duties had to be paid on goods moving both ways across the border. In 1875 the *Albury Banner* noted that goods crossing the border were "treated in precisely the same manner as imports from foreign countries."

Gold was discovered in Victoria in 1851. The colony's population soared and the new colonial government applied import duties to a large range of products (including opium, which was not a prohibited import until 1906). NSW's colonial government followed suit.



The notice attached to the Albury customs hut directed that "all persons driving vehicles and those on horseback or on foot conveying parcels must on passing call and report to Customs House."

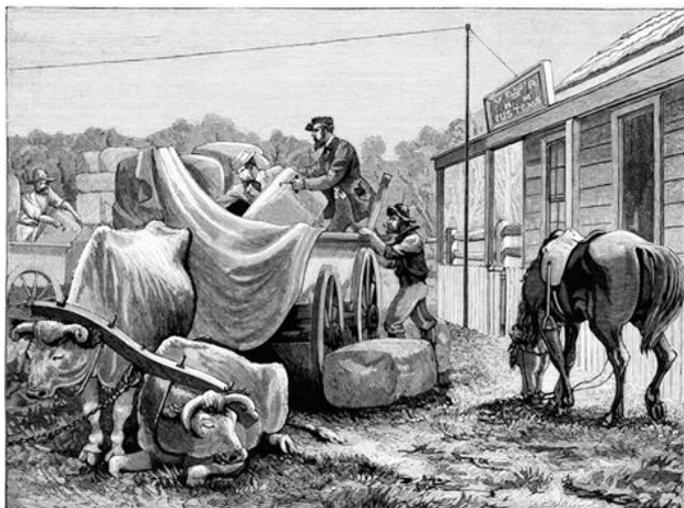
of opium from NSW into Victoria has been successfully carried on for a long time past, and it is hardly probable that the illicit traffic will be thoroughly stopped ... the temptation is too great, and the opportunities are too frequent. Opium, representing in duty £100, is easily stowed away on a packhorse ... it would take a regular army of Customs officers to watch the border."

Stock were also smuggled, particularly horses, with a duty of £2/10s per head in 1892. The *Banner* warned in 1899 that "revenue detectives, disguised as swagmen, patrol the river, with the object of catching people crossing with contraband goods from NSW."

With over £7000 collected by the Wodonga customs house in the first half of 1859, the *Border Post* in July 1859 proposed "that Albury was entitled to claim the right of representation in the Victorian Parliament."

Customs revenue continued to grow, the *Banner* reporting in January 1882 that "The collections at the Albury custom-house for the month of December amounted to £2442 ... The total collections for 1881 were £23,964." The yearly total converts to over \$3 million in 2023 money. Wodonga customs collected a similar amount for goods travelling south – little wonder the colonial administrations were reluctant to remove custom duties.

To avoid paying duties, smuggling was common. Liquor, tobacco and opium were the most commonly smuggled goods. An article in the *Albury Banner* in May 1882 reported "the smuggling



The lithograph (left) appeared in the *Australasian Sketcher* (Melbourne) on 13 August 1881 and captioned "Passing the Customs Officers at Wodonga." The sign on the building reads "V. R. H. M. Customs." The building at right looks very much like the *La Maison* restaurant of 2023.

The *Border Morning Mail* in April 1947 reported that "Before the customs barrier between the two Colonies were finally swept away, the little Customs House stood at the Albury end of the Union Bridge. In those days the formalities necessary to entitle one to cross from one Colony to the other were just as exacting as if one were crossing from one foreign country to another."

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After customs were lifted the small building became the clubhouse when Albury Bowling Club opened its rinks in the Botanic Gardens.