



**Peter John Wilson**

(City of Canning local history collection; cropped from pic 0240)

**W**ilson, Peter John (1869-1918) was born 4 May 1869 in Melbourne, one of five children from Peter John Wilson, a solicitor of Melbourne, and Elizabeth. Unfortunately Elizabeth died at the family home *Boa Vista* at Kensington in June 1878, when Peter junior was just nine years old. Peter senior remarried in January 1880, and had at least two more children with second wife Mary at *Royal Park Villa*. It appears that the Wilson family may have lived in relatively comfortable circumstances, but the start of the 1890s signalled the commencement of a disastrous economic period in Victoria. It is likely the teenage Peter gained his architectural training by serving ‘articles’ in Melbourne, and that his work prospects then diminished with the onset of the recession.

Wilson was one of many architects who left the Eastern States in the early 1890s, and came to Western Australia seeking to enjoy better conditions precipitated by a gold boom and period of building expansion. Peter was made an Associate of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in June 1892, by which time he had moved to Fremantle. In that month he was advising on the addition of a proscenium to the Fremantle Town Hall, with a newspaper article stating that the young man ‘had some connection with the planning of the Princess Theatre in Melbourne’, designed by William Pitt in the late 1880s.

Peter Wilson junior married widow Sarah Owston at Fremantle in 1893. Sarah was a daughter of Benjamin Mason, who had been in business with architect Francis Bird during 1870-1873, cutting forest near Kalamunda and transporting timber by railway to the river at Cannington. Previously married to Fremantle identity William Owston in 1879, then widowed with the passing of her first husband in 1888, Sarah had four children in the 1880s that survived infancy. Sarah had another four children at Fremantle with Wilson, with the first son carrying on the naming tradition: Peter John (Jack) in 1894, Esther Enid in 1895, Doris Day in 1897, and Frederick Gladstone in 1899.

Peter Wilson is listed in practice at the corner of High and Pakenham Streets, Fremantle from 1893 to 1896, and is also listed at Mouat and Suffolk Streets in various tender advertisements. There were a number of architects by the name of Wilson working in the State in the 1890s, which has caused some confusion as to various partnerships. Peter J. Wilson appears to have operated as a sole practitioner during the 1890s.

Peter Wilson's most notable design remaining in Western Australia is the *Federation Free Classical* styled Melbourne Hotel, on the corner of Hay and Milligan Streets, Perth. Amongst his other works was the grandstand for the West Australian Cricket Association, which seated 500 people with rooms for the players and Association members underneath. The gable-roofed brick building was decorated with 'heavy pediments, iron work friezes and ornamented brackets'. Wilson worked on the project in an honorary capacity and was rewarded with a life membership of the WACA in 1895.

Other projects included additions to a store in Pakenham Street, Fremantle for Cruickshank & Co (1894); weatherboard cottage and shop at Rockingham for Mr J. Bell (1895); a row of two-storey shops in High Street, Fremantle opposite the Town Hall (1895); residences in Beaconsfield, Fremantle and Cottesloe (1895); brewery and cellars for the Fremantle Brewing Company; cottages in Gordon Street, Perth; and, shop and offices, corner Market & Bannister streets, Fremantle for Holmes Bros & Co (1897).

Wilson may have tried a change of occupation, as *Wises'* 1901-1902 directory listings note that Peter was a farmer at Cannington, and in the early Twentieth Century he was a member of the Canning Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Wilson is not listed under 'architects' in WA directories after 1899, although he *is* described as an architect in the town directory for Cannington in 1903-1908, and there are a few tender notices in *The West Australian* newspaper. It is possible that Wilson had become an alcoholic – in July 1907 Peter Wilson, an architect and 'habitual drunkard', was cautioned in the Perth Police Court, and by 1909 he is not listed in WA.

Tragically, both of Peter and Sarah's sons were killed on the Western Front in Belgium during the First World War - Jack died 12 October 1917, and Fred died 25 March 1918. Notes in the service records indicate that their father's address was 'unknown' in 1916, but that he was deceased by 1918. Sarah Wilson has various addresses listed in the military correspondence, one of which is *Lindisfarne*, Albany Road (now Albany Highway), Cannington. Following Sarah's death in May 1939 the property was noted as having a 'substantial brick residence', probably a Wilson design, on 1 acre of land next to the Cannington Post Office. It has been demolished.

A general search of digitized newspapers for Peter Wilson architect has returned an item from the Melbourne Argus, 1 May 1915: "... The New Victoria Picture Theatre Hotel ... Specially planned by the well-known Sydney architect, Mr. Lindsay Thompson, and built under the supervision of Mr Peter Wilson, architect." Wilson remarried at some stage, and eventually moved to New South Wales. Wilson died in Sydney on 21 February 1918.

## References:

Various family details from: Department of the Attorney General, Western Australian Online Indexes at <http://www.justice.wa.gov.au/apps/pioneersindex/default.aspx> and The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board at <http://www.mcb.wa.gov.au/default.php>

William Owston and Sarah Mason - Caporn descendants, 4<sup>th</sup> generation, accessed 3 December 2010 at <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~scotlandfam/CAPORN/i0004408.htm#i4408>

Minutes of general meeting of RVIA, 7 June 1892, State Library of Victoria MS 9454.

*The West Australian*, 24 June 1892, p.3; 15 July 1892, p.7; 20 July 1892, p.4 (Fremantle Town Hall).

'Marriage', *The West Australian*, 14 March 1893, p. 4; 'Marriages', *The Argus*, 30 March 1893, p.1.

*The West Australian*, 20 April 1894, p.8; 3 April 1895, p.6; 20 May 1895, p.5; 11 March 1897, p.6; 27 July 1897, p.3; 25 September 1897, p.3 (various tender notices).

*The West Australian*, 7 February 1895, pp.6 & 11 October 1895, p.6 (WACA).

*The West Australian*, 30 March 1896, p. 8 (Melbourne Hotel).

Wises Directories 1900-1901 (Peter J. Wilson, farmer at Cannington).

'Metropolitan Courts', *The West Australian*, 16 July 1907, p. 31 ('habitual drunkard').

War service records from search index at <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/recordsearch/index.aspx> accessed 18 January 2009. Wilson Peter John: SERN 2277: POB Perth WA: POE Perth WA: NOK M Wilson Sarah; and Wilson Frederick Gladstone: SERN 7812: POB Fremantle WA: POE Perth WA: NOK M Wilson Sarah.

'P.J. Wilson, late of Turning Shop, Loco Workshops, died of wounds 12 Oct. 1917', *Swan Express*, 23 Nov. 1917, p. 5.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1918, p.11 notes the funeral of Peter John Wilson (husband of Mary Wilson) destination C of E cemetery.

'Deaths', *The West Australian*, 9 March 1918, p.1. (WILSON - On February 21, 1918, at Sydney, suddenly, Peter John Wilson, architect, late of Perth. Inserted by S.H.W. [Sarah Wilson?].)

<http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/familyHistory/searchHistoricalRecords.htm> notes 1918 death of Peter J Wilson, record 383/1918 in district of DRUMMOYNE.

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Melbourne Hotel - SLWA 234285PD;



WACA Grandstand - *The Western Mail*, 7 November 1903, p26