

Henry Kable

1763–1846

HENRY KABLE

Henry Kable was convicted of burglary together with his father and uncle at Thetford, Norfolk, England on 1 February 1783 and initially sentenced to death. On the 5 April, 1783, his father and uncle were hung, however the trial judge, Baron Eyre, sought the King's mercy on behalf of young Henry (due to his young age of 17). Consequently, his sentence was commuted to transportation to America for 7 years, but due to the American War of Independence, Henry remained imprisoned at Norwich Castle gaol. The conditions in the gaol were horrible, with rudimentary shelters built into the castle walls, extreme overcrowding and food shortages.

At Norwich Castle gaol, Henry formed a relationship with another convict, Susannah Holmes, who gave birth to a son, Henry Jnr in prison in 1786. They applied for permission to marry but were refused. When Susannah Holmes was chosen to be transported to Botany Bay on the First Fleet, Henry begged to accompany her to New South Wales but was refused. The captain of the prison hulk at Plymouth where Susannah was awaiting transportation refused to accept her baby on board, claiming he had no lawful authority to do so. The prison turnkey, John Simpson travelled to London and persuaded the Home Secretary, Lord Sydney to reunite mother and child, and permit Henry to accompany them to New South Wales. Eventually, with support from the Norwich gaoler, Henry and his child were reunited after 10 days and permitted to travel on the First Fleet. The story of the Kables gained traction, and a substantial sum of £20 was raised to supply the Kables with a parcel of goods. Henry embarked on the *Friendship*, which sailed in the First Fleet to New South Wales on the 11th March 1787. On Sunday 23 December 1787, Marine Lieutenant Ralph Clark recorded: Henry Kable *"Stole the beef and wood out of the Fore when they had gone down to pump water - Ther[e] never were Such Damned Rascals collected together as ther[e] is on board this Ship."*

After a treacherous 8-month voyage, the First Fleet arrived in Sydney harbour in January 1788. It is rumoured that Henry Kable was the first convict of Governor Phillip's party to set foot ashore in the new colony. On 10 February 1788, Henry married Susannah Holmes in one of the first weddings in the new colony.

THE COURT CASE

The first civil case in the new colony was commenced by Henry and Susannah Kable on 1 July 1788. The parcel of goods was stowed on the ship *Alexander* for the journey. The gift however was plundered during the voyage. Henry Kable sued Duncan Sinclair for the loss of the goods en route, receiving £15 compensation. Even though Henry was a poor, possibility illiterate convict felon, he was still able to sue the Ship's captain for the value of the parcel and win!

As Bruce Kercher argued in *Debt, Seduction and Other Disasters*, *"This was a great victory for the two illiterate convicts, who managed to overcome the restrictions of English law, the military tone of the colony and the court, and the vast legal and social gulf between them and Sinclair."*



Governor Arthur Phillip appointed Henry as an overseer. Later he was made a constable and nightwatchman, and eventually was elevated to Chief Constable. In 1802, Henry was dismissed for misbehaviour, for breaching port regulations and smuggling pigs.

Henry was a successful businessman and merchant in the NSW colony. Shipping records from 1808 show Kable and his two partners, boat builder James Underwood and Simeon Lord, as the principal ship owners in the expanding commerce of exporting Bass Strait seal skins and oil to the colony.

Kable had substantial landholdings at Petersham, Lane Cove, Cowpastures (Camden), on the Hawkesbury and in Sydney itself.

Kable, in his own words, 'reared ten children.' At least two of them, Henry junior and James, were mariners.

In February 1810, he announced that his son Henry Junior had taken over the entire management of his Sydney affairs. In 1811 Kable moved to Windsor where he operated a store and a brewery, with his partner, Richard Woodbury.

Henry Kable died on 16 April 1846 at Pitt Town near Windsor, NSW.