

Red Ribbon

*The diggers then held meetings high o'er the Sandhurst Flat
They flew a diggers' Banner with scarlet as the back
Pick and shovel, scales of justice, symbols of unity
Right proudly 'roo and emu, all for Australie*

- Ballad of 1853

A copy of one of the most important documents in Australia's goldrush history, the Bendigo Petition of 1853 in the possession of the Bendigo Historical Society. This Petition lists more than 5000 signatures and is 13 metres long. It was presented to Lieutenant-Governor LaTrobe during the great meetings of August 1853, which were part of the Red Ribbon Movement.

The story of the gold rushes and their dramatic impact on Victoria is well known. By mid-1853, there were about 60,000 diggers, plus their families on the Victorian goldfields; of these about 23,000 were at Bendigo. In June 1853 an Anti-Gold-License Association was formed at Bendigo to give voice to the diggers' many grievances about their conditions and centreing on the 30 shillings monthly license fee they had to pay. Everyone on the Bendigo gold field was a miner and they came from every continent and ethnic background. The leaders of the Association were George Thomson, Dr Jones, Captain Harrison and an Irish-born American, 'Captain' Brown.

These leaders drew up a petition, which articulated the diggers' grievances and made a number of demands, including a reduced license fee, improved law and order, the right to vote and the right to buy land. The Petition was signed by diggers at Bendigo, Castlemaine, McIvor (Heathcote) and Mount Alexander diggings. Although a claim was made that there were over 30,000 signatures, in fact it carried about 5,000 to 6,000, not including those from McIvor diggings (Heathcote), which were lost in a gold escort robbery.

The Petition was brought to Melbourne and presented to Lieutenant-Governor LaTrobe on 1 August 1853. Most of its demands were rejected, including the reduction in the license fee, which led directly to mass meetings of diggers in Bendigo. On 27 August, diggers' leaders presented Commissioners Wright (from Mount Alexander) and the 21 year-old Joseph Panton, ten shillings for the September license on Camp Hill. This was rejected by the Commissioners, who none-the-less did not collect licenses for September. Thus the common sense of both the diggers and Commissioners avoided possible bloodshed. This was over a year before the Eureka Stockade.

A re-enactment of this dramatic episode in Bendigo's history, involving students from Camp Hill Primary School, Girton Grammar and California Primary School and members of the Bendigo Historical Society, was held on Friday 26 August at 11 am in the Bendigo Art Gallery forecourt and Rosalind Park. Bendigonians wore a red ribbon (the diggers' symbol of protest) and joined the commemoration.