

Rex Jory

ON THE WEST COAST

Pioneer blazed a trail

ELLISTON: Few people know the name George Tramountanas, yet he was a significant figure in early South Australian history. Tramountanas is buried in a tiny cemetery in the isolated and desolate inland ghost town of Colton, 20km north of Elliston. There is something eerie about standing in the sublime country silence looking down on the gravestone. It is hard to imagine any place on earth more different than George Tramountanas's home in a fishing village on the Greek Islands.

Tramountanas was SA's first Greek settler. He was also an astonishing man. He opened the path for the tens of thousands of Greeks who migrated to SA and helped mould the culture and character of the state. Tramountanas was born in 1822 and, while his official papers say he was born in Athens, it is almost certain he was from a village by the sea.

Tramountanas is derived from "north wind" - a name with a strong nautical flavor - and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest his family were shipbuilders. There is a strong Tramountanas presence on the north Aegean island of Lemnos. It may well be he gave his birthplace as Athens because it was the only Greek name anyone in Australia knew 160 years ago.

At the age of 20, a handsome young man with blond hair and blue eyes, George decided to seek his fortune and boarded a ship which, more by coincidence than good planning, brought him to Port Adelaide. It was 1842, just six years after SA had been proclaimed a colony. Tramountanas



REVERED: The gravestone of George Tramountanas, at Colton.

was tough, hard-working and enterprising. He brought special skills to SA and his first job was making wine and brandy at John Peake's winery and brandy distillery at Clarendon.

To simplify life, George changed his surname from Tramountanas to North - an abbreviation of north wind. His love of the sea remained strong and he worked on several coastal ships and, early in 1858, he took the post of first mate on the S.S. Admella.

The appointment suggests George had a good knowledge of shipboard life and presumably could speak English. He worked on the Admella for less than a year, signing off on July 19, 1858. On August 6, the Admella struck a reef at Carpenter's Rocks in the South-East and 50 people on board drowned. While a seaman

based at Port Adelaide, George met Lydia Vosper, an English woman who arrived in SA in 1855 and, before they married, the couple converted to Catholicism - George from the Greek Orthodox faith and Lydia from the Church of England.

After they married in the Church of Lady of the Immaculate Conception at St Mary's on September 26, 1858, George returned to the land.

The couple worked around the Eyre Peninsula and settled at Green Patch, near Port Lincoln. They ran sheep but George also planted vines and cultivated vegetables. Tragically, five of the couple's seven children died.

In the 1870s, the Norths took a bullock team north-west and operated several properties in the Streaky Bay district. Probably the

best known was North Park, where mail coaches would stop to change horses and George would offer travellers fruit and a glass of homemade wine. By the 1890s, the Norths had become successful and respected graziers and they made a final move to Talia, just north of Colton, where they lived in semi-retirement.

Once again, George planted vines and offered grapes and other fruit to anyone passing through his property. George Tramountanas (North) died in the district on January 29, 1911, at the age of 89. He was never naturalised and, although he spent 69 of his 89 years in Australia, retained a keen interest in his native Greece and all things Greek. In 1911, the year he died, a census showed there were only 76 Greek-born residents in SA and it was not until after World War II that significant Greek migration began.

TO many Greeks living in SA, George Tramountanas is still regarded as the grandfather of their community. In 1989, a display of early Greek settlement at the SA Migration Museum featured documents and personal items belonging to George. In 1993, a plaque in his memory was unveiled in the Ridleyton Greek Home for the Aged chapel and on April 10, 1994, a commemorative headstone was laid in the little Colton cemetery.

It is still there, beautifully tended, a reminder that George Tramountanas was not only the grandfather of SA's Greek community, but a giant figure in SA's early development.