

Scholars are unravelling a historic document which puts Adelaide at the forefront of a global campaign for a fair society based on social justice and equality

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SOUTH Australians have always celebrated our origins as a “free colony”, but experts now believe we have an even more significant place in history.

A transcript of a 50-page unpublished document from 1832, to be unveiled at the Adelaide Festival of Ideas, suggests the colony was a social experiment linked directly to the ideas of Jeremy Bentham, one of the most influential philosophers of the time.

Bentham’s belief that society should strive to provide the “greatest happiness of the greatest number”, known as utilitarianism, became the basis of many reforms that guided the development of the UK and US.

University College London’s Bentham Project expert Dr Tim Causer will explain the significance of the document at the festival on Friday, including much stronger ties to Adelaide’s founders than first thought.

“We know that Bentham knew (Edward Gibbon) Wakefield, as well as a number of other prominent members of the Colonisation Society such as George Grote and Robert Torrens, but it is not clear why he wrote 50 pages about a proposed colony in SA,” Dr Causer said.

“I suspect ... that he wrote it in detailed response to the Colonisation Society’s proposal for the colony, as his plan contains a number of suggestions which are too similar to be a coincidence.”



Bentham was one of the founding fathers of what is considered today to be a just and fair society, advocating individual and economic freedoms, the separation of church and state, freedom of expression, equal rights for women and the right to divorce, as well as the decriminalising of homosexuality and abolition of slavery, the death penalty and physical punishment, including of children.

Bentham's handwriting was so poor that his Colonisation Company Proposal has never been properly transcribed into a publishable format until now.

Dr Causer said Bentham's "anti-colonial" ideas meant he envisioned SA being a very different place to the penal colony of NSW, of which he had been highly critical.

In the document, Bentham celebrates the idea of South Australia as a place that has as a goal the "maximisation of the happiness of the persons interested".

"Wakefield claimed to have converted Bentham to seeing the potential benefits of colonisation, but we have an unpublished letter in which Bentham says of Wakefield 'I have thrown my mantle over him and shall turn him to good account'," Dr Causer said.

The document could enhance the case for UNESCO World Heritage listing of the Mt Lofty Ranges by linking settlement of the region to Bentham's ideas considered to be of universal significance.

The document and an accompanying letter from Wakefield will become part of a new volume of the collected works of Bentham.