

Early Settlers in Nelson

Rhona Phillips, 2009, Nelson College for Girls

Excitement buzzed across the main deck as nervous, men, women and children assembled to find their places on what was to become their home for the next few months, the *Lord Auckland*. Children played merrily as adults rushed around trying to organize all their belongings into the hold on the massive ship. The colossal anchor was raised to merry chants of "Nancy O" and "Cheerily Men, Cheerily O" and the *Lord Auckland* began her journey down the Thames with her mainsail, main topsail, jib and flying jib hoisted.

Under Captain Jardine¹ passengers did not experience the harsh, unpleasant conditions they had heard whispers about, where passengers had been struck by diseases such as measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid, smallpox and tuberculosis; or endured vermin-ridden beds. Some passengers aboard the *Lloyds* were even "bedding the Captain and his crew" and the ship became known as a "floating bawdy house." In fact many passengers professed to enjoy their voyage and, despite being plagued by storms, they claimed "the fresh air was good for them" and people who had suffered from poverty stated, "the food was the best they has ever eaten." The only complaint passengers had was that of the water, which had turned stale due to the heat and many believed the single litre they were allowed per day for washing and cleaning was insufficient.²

Aboard the *Lord Auckland*, the steerage passengers, who had paid £15 for their voyage, were not to communicate with the cabin passengers who had paid £42 for their passage, as Captain Jardine believed it lowered the dignity of the ship.

After many months, of what can only be described as an almost pleasant voyage, the *Lord Auckland* at last entered Blind Bay and with delight, on the 26th February 1842, its passengers disembarked the enormous vessel to begin their new lives.

Passengers³ from ships such as the *Lord Auckland*, the *Lloyds*, the *Mary Ann* and the *Fifeshire* arrived to find the town already laid out, however, houses were non-existent so native rat-infested rough raupo, wattle huts and tents became their main residences. Little did they know of the organisation behind their new home.

It was early 1841 when Captain Arthur Wakefield led a preliminary expedition to Nelson, which was chosen as a hasty compromise for New Zealand's second colony and only because of its good harbour. The original plan set up by The New Zealand Company⁴ was 1000 allotments for a price of £300. Each allotment consisted of one town acre, fifty suburban acres and one hundred and fifty rural acres, which would have been perfectly suited to a place like Canterbury with its vast endless plains, but not Nelson with its fragmented pockets of flat land, infertile hill soils and extensive mountain tracts.

The key to the settlement was to sell all of the allotments; if not the settlement would fail. This would later prove to be a problem.

When the site of Nelson was finally selected, Captain Arthur Wakefield chose the summit of Church Hill to mark the base of the survey. The New Zealand Company barracks were sited here, alongside the office of The *Examiner*, the Courthouse and the Literary and Scientific Institute. It was not until September 1842, six months after the arrival of the first immigrants, that 250 houses had been erected and 230 whares for temporary accommodation also constructed.

The first industries began to emerge in 1843 when a brewery surfaced and following this a flax mill, tannery, solar salt works and woollen mill were also constructed.

Also around this period of time Nelson began facing many problems, the first of these being the lack of allotments which were being sold. By September 1841, a time when the Company hoped to be selling the last few packages, only a third had been sold and many of these were to absentee landowners who had little intention of ever coming to live in New Zealand. The result of not having a present landowner meant that, whilst some landowners struggled on poor quality land, a far better quality section was not being worked. It also meant less employment in the region, so the New Zealand Company had to organise relief work building roads and draining swamps. This relief work did not last long, due to the limited amount of roads needing to be built or swamps needing to be drained. This resulted in unemployment in the region, which increased and, within three years of their arrival, 25% of the original settlers had left Nelson and immigration ceased until the 1850s.⁵

Unfortunately Nelson's problems did not stop there. The original plan for Nelson was for it to consist of 221000 acres, something that Arthur Wakefield had overlooked in his choice of land. He bought significantly less than 221,000 acres from the Maori in the area, which meant the company were selling land they had no claim to. There is no other word but devious to describe the way the company went about attempting to acquire more land.

In 1843 Arthur Wakefield sent out a party to survey the Wairau area, knowing full well they had no claim to it, as it was not part of the initial contract with the Maori (and when they attempted to add it later they were caught out). Two Maori chiefs Te Rauparaha and Te Rangihaeta informed Arthur Wakefield they had no intention of selling the land for anything less than "a very great cask of gold" and to leave their land immediately. After much bickering and waiting impatiently for the Queen's Commissioner to look at their case, 50 armed settlers decided to take matters into their own hands and claim the land. It is unclear who fired the first shot, but it became apparent very quickly that the Maori, whose warriors had over twenty years experience as warriors, were coming off better.

Twenty two lives were lost, including Captain Arthur Wakefield, at this tragic event. It was later officially decided that the Company had no claim to the land, therefore the Maori faced no charges.

This incident resulted in many settlers taking up residence on Church Hill, which had been fortified, due to fear of future conflict.

Many settlers⁶ felt that the draw of land was unfair and that it should be divided up again so that absentee owners did not always have the best land. It was the people

themselves who came up with a resolution to their problem though, and the directors graciously agreed. The land was to be placed in a lottery (although settlers could keep their existing land if they preferred) and all unsold allotments would be cancelled and redrawn so that a fair distribution was granted.

Reminders of early settlers in Nelson are all around, from the old houses to monuments erected in recognition of our ancestors as and acknowledgement of the struggle they faced to bring Nelson off paper and to life.

References

1. Neale, J. (1978) *Landfall Nelson*. Nelson [N.Z.] : Anchor Press, p.109
2. Neale, p.117
3. *Nelson: the early years*: <http://www.nzine.co.nz/features/nelsoncityhistory.htm>
4. McAloon, J. (1997) *Nelson: a regional history*. Whatamango Bay, N.Z :Cape Catley in association with the Nelson City Council
5. *Wairau Affray* : <http://www.theprow.org.nz/wairau-affray/>
6. *The Settlement of Nelson and German immigration to Nelson*:
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ourstuff/NelsonSettlement.htm>