

A TORRENT OF COLONISTS

The arrival of European settlers

Why the Wairarapa?

There is quite sufficient land fit for arable purposes to suit settlers... The eastern side of the lake appears to consist of a number of terraces which are mostly free of bush...

Samuel Brees, 16 February 1843

I believe that upwards of 6,000 acres of available land, one half consisting of bush, the other of grass, will be found on the western side of the lakes; and on the eastern side about 30,000 acres of fine grass land, free at all times from inundation. ...There is little or no swamp on either side of the water, for where flooded the land is firm ... the native chiefs Te Raro, Te Teira, E Hiko, and Maniera, are very anxious to have white people among them, that they and their people may obtain such comforts and luxuries as they see the Ngatiawa possessed of...

Extract from a letter from H. S. Tiffen to the editor of the *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, 10 January 1844

The British colonists arriving in New Zealand in the 19th century came with dreams of owning land and prospering; an impossible ambition for them in class-bound Britain. When the first settlers arrived at Port Nicholson in 1840 to find the promised farming land in short supply, they soon began exploring the Wairarapa. Among the early explorers was a party including William Fox, Charles Clifford, William Vavasour and Henry Petre, whose purpose it was to find grazing land.

On returning to Wellington, they were visited by Manihera Rangitakaiwaho, an influential Wairarapa rangatira (chief), and other Maori, who stayed with Clifford and Vavasour. Te Manihera wished to encourage settlement, as he saw strategic and economic benefits in having Pakeha settlers in the Wairarapa, i.e., protection from invaders, and income from leases, employment and trade. He offered long-term leases of large tracts of land.



Manihera Rangitakaiwaho, photographer unknown, Wairarapa Archives

The lower valley, with its more open land and fewer areas of dense bush, was more attractive to settlers than the forested land further north. The first sheep and cattle stations were established on the eastern side of the lake by Clifford, Vavasour, Petre and Frederick Weld at Wharekaka, and Charles Bidwill at Pihautea. By 1847, there were over 14 leased properties in the Wairarapa, paying a total of £300 a year in rentals.



Portrait of William Mein Smith c 1860, William Beetham oil on canvas, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington



The great Wairarapa district & lake, Samuel Brees 1843 engraving, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington



Huangarua Station, 1850 William Mein Smith watercolour, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Artists like Samuel Brees, William Mein Smith and William Fox give us the earliest impressions of the Wairarapa landscape. Mein Smith was an early arrival, taking up land just north of Bidwill's Pihautea station in the 1840s. He left a visual record of the start of an influx of people who would alter the landscape forever. The artist William Beetham was also an early arrival in the Wairarapa. He and his sons established Brancepeth Station at Wainuioru east of present-day Masterton in the 1850s.

From leasing to ownership

Leasing allowed runholders to divert their capital into establishing their farms, and Maori received an annual income from rentals, the sale of produce to the new settlers and from providing labour. Maori were protective of Pakeha with whom they had special relationships, such as Angus McMaster, known as 'Hiko's Pakeha' because he leased land from the rangatira Te Hiko. By 1850 leases were worth £800, and all attempts by the Crown to purchase land in the Wairarapa had failed as Maori had no wish to sell.

But these lease agreements ignored the 1846 Native Land Ordinance, which outlawed the leasing of Maori land to private citizens. The Crown wanted to purchase land outright and onsell it to settlers. In 1853, attempting to exert some government control, Governor George Grey instructed Donald McLean (Native Land Purchase Commissioner) to begin the official purchase of land in the Wairarapa.

Maori were threatened with the loss of their settlers unless they agreed to sell large areas of land for nominal sums of money. The Crown aimed to buy low and sell high to generate a profit to fund settlement, help provide infrastructure and to pay for government services.

To speed the opening of the district for purchase, in August 1853 Governor Grey entered into a personal compact with Wairarapa Maori at Turanganui near the lake. In this oral agreement between the Crown's 'chief' and the rangatira of the Wairarapa, Maori were promised a range of ongoing benefits in exchange for their land: 5% of the profits from sales of land by the Crown to immigrants; ample reserves of land; pensions for leading rangatira; and the provision of schools and doctors. Few of these promises were kept.

From 1853, purchases of large blocks of land were negotiated by Donald McLean. The purchase of Tuhitarata, Angus McMaster's 40-acre homestead block for £15 in August of that year led the way, followed by blocks bordering the lakes.

Land surrounding Wairarapa Moana (Lake Wairarapa) sold between August 1853 and December 1854

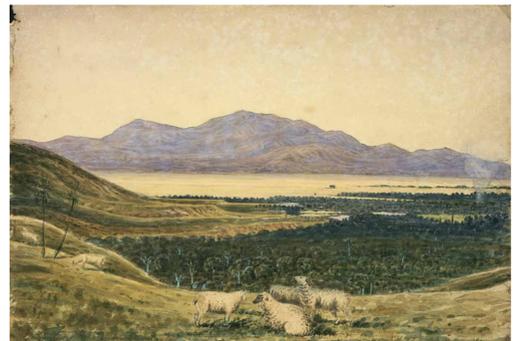
- Turakirae block: 200,000 acres, purchased for £2,000 (1 shilling – or 10 cents – per acre)
- Turanganui block: 120,000 acres purchased for £1,100
- Tauherenikau block: 430,000 acres purchased for £2,000 (all in 1853)
- Kahutara block: 15,000 acres purchased for £650 (in December 1854)

Reserves were set aside for Maori, and customary rights over the lakes and rivers were recognised but in just over a year, Ngati Kahungunu were persuaded to part with nearly one million acres of ancestral land. Many of the reserves set aside at this time were gone from Maori ownership by 1865, sometimes in secret deals involving only some of the owners.

The seeds of conflict

Demand for land was high as settlers flocked into the Wairarapa, and conflict soon arose over land on the edge of the lake. Boundaries of land purchases around lakes Wairarapa and Onoke were poorly defined, and any surveying hasty and incomplete. Maori understanding was that the lakes, and land up to the high tide mark, (i.e., floodline) were not sold (and later negotiations by the Crown to purchase land below the floodline seem to confirm this).

The 1855 earthquake made the situation worse by raising the lake bed and surrounding wetlands, creating many acres of good grazing but on land not included in original purchases. The contest over Maori and colonists' perceptions of ownership and rights intensified as some settlers took over land they were not entitled to and the Crown sold land it had not purchased.



Sheep near Lake Wairarapa, Edward Lyndon c1860s watercolour, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington