

The Treaty of Waitangi in Masterton

By Mark Pacey



Figure 1. Public Trust Building from Chapel Street. Mark Pacey

Introduction

As Japan emerged as threat to the peace of the Pacific during the early years of World War Two, the authorities here began to look at protecting important objects from harm should the Japanese attack. The Treaty of Waitangi was deemed one of these important objects and it was decided to send this and other records north to the Wairarapa town of Masterton for the duration of the war.

Background

In the decades after the signing of the Treaty, successive settler-based governments tended to ignore its significance.¹ By the 1930s, New Zealanders began to show a renewed interest in the Treaty. In 1932 Governor-General Lord Bledisloe and his wife donated the Treaty grounds to the country. In 1934 on the anniversary of the signing, 10,000 Māori attended a gathering there.² In 1940, New Zealand celebrated its centennial, and the Treaty formed a central part of the celebrations. The Treaty was now being seen as a founding document of the country. As such, it was essential that this document should be kept safe and well protected. At the time of the centennial, the country was at war with Germany, but the territorial aspirations of Japan were starting to cause some concern.

In a letter sent to the New Zealand Secretary of State by Joseph Cowern — who later became mayor of North Saint Paul in Minnesota³ — he asked if there were any records in New Zealand that were the equivalent of the



Figure 2. Public Trust Building in 1930s. Wairarapa Archive 97-152-018

United States Declaration of Independence. A reply was sent by Minister of Internal Affairs William Edward Parry. In his response he spent time commenting on New Zealand's "warm attachment of its people to their kin in Britain". In regards to the records of national importance, Parry's reply reflected Pākehā sentiments towards Māori and the Treaty at the time. While recognising the Treaty as one of our most important records, he also said that "Maoris have lived on terms of racial equality with the white people. They rightly regard the Treaty as the charter of their rights, and in this they are supported by the Government and the people of New Zealand".⁴

Regardless of interpretations of the Treaty, its national importance was recognised. As the war progressed, the situation in the Pacific changed. Japan had signed the Tripartite pact with Germany and Italy on 27 September 1940 and this gave them confidence to extend their influence in the Pacific region.⁵ One month before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Malaya, the New Zealand government made the decision to move the Treaty of Waitangi away from Wellington, which would be a prime target should Japan choose to attack.

Moving the Treaty of Waitangi

On 15 October 1941, under-secretary at the Department of Internal Affairs, Joseph William Heenan, gave instructions that "the Treaty of Waitangi and bound Historical Records in safe, are to be stored with Turnbull Library materials at Masterton".⁶ On the same day, Heenan issued a statement that two cases were urgently required for the storage of the historical records and asked for an officer to measure the records to ensure they would fit in the cases.⁷

Less than two months after this request, Japan simultaneously attacked Pearl Harbor and Malaya, declaring war against the United States and Great Britain. The decision to consign the records to Masterton suddenly took on greater importance. On 24 December the records were ready in their two cases and were marked for shipment. The consignment consisted of two cases of documents weighing three hundredweight (300 pounds) between them.⁸ They were then to be placed in the Public Trust Building.

The Treaty of Waitangi and other Historical Records in Masterton

The Treaty and the other historical records arrived in Masterton and were taken to the Public Trust Building on the corner of Chapel and Perry streets. The Treaty

was stored in one of the strong-rooms in the building of which there were two on each of the building's three floors.⁹ As to which strong-room the Treaty was stored in is uncertain. The bound Historical Records were in a larger case, and this was too large to fit into the lift. While the Treaty was safe in one of the strong-rooms, the bound Historical Records remained in their case which was stored in the entranceway to the Public Trust Office. In a memorandum dated 27 February 1942, the Masterton Public Trust Office requested a key to the case so they could remove the contents



Figure 3. Strongroom door in Public Trust Building. Mark Pacey

and store them safely with the Treaty. The case was also requested to be moved to the top landing. It was stated by a member of the Public Trust that the case "was placed in the entrance to our building and I shall be pleased if you can arrange to have it shifted as it is causing considerable inconvenience".¹⁰

The Department of Internal Affairs sent the key to open the chest and gave permission for the records to be removed and stored with the Treaty and the box to be taken to the top landing in the same building. The empty case was taken to the number four cellar in the Government Buildings.¹¹ The Treaty and the bound Historical Records were safe, locked away in the Public Trust Building in Masterton. They were well away from the capital and any chance of them being damaged from bombing or shelling was greatly reduced.



Figure 4. Entranceway where the large records box was initially stored. Mark Pacey

Threats to the Treaty

A natural threat to the treaty and the other records came on 24 June 1942 when a large earthquake struck the area. A second earthquake occurred on 1 August, exacerbating the effects of the June event. While there were no deaths in Wairarapa (there was one in Kelburn), twenty-four buildings were required to be partially or fully demolished. A further forty-three suffered cracks and collapses.¹² The Public Trust Building was not among those heavily damaged and no correspondence exists stating the Treaty and the bound Historical Records had to be moved from there.

Masterton's military defences were bolstered by the arrival of the Ruahine Infantry Regiment of the New Zealand Armed Forces who were in the Solway Showgrounds from mid to late 1942. Later, two battalions of the United States Marine Corps, the Third and Fourth Defense Battalions were stationed at the Solway Showgrounds and Cameron Soldiers Memorial Park between February and October 1943.¹³

While there was no danger by way of military action by the Japanese against Masterton during World War Two, in Wellington there was a brush with the Japanese navy. On 8 March 1942, just months after the Treaty was sent to Masterton, the Japanese submarine, I-25, surfaced in Cook Strait and launched its seaplane which flew a reconnaissance mission over Wellington. A week later she surfaced off Auckland and flew a similar mission there. These facts were obtained through the capture of Japanese documents which showed that the I-25 had started reconnaissance missions in Sydney, then to Melbourne and Hobart before coming to New Zealand waters. This was printed in the newspapers at the end of the war and show how close the Japanese came to New Zealand.¹⁴ As the paper stated, "These flights effectively shatter the fondly-treasured belief, held by many people, that the Japanese were not interested in New Zealand. They give lie to the complacent attitude, so frequently adopted of 'it can't happen here'".¹⁵ The decision to move the treaty and Historical records was well justified.



Figure 5. Public Trust Building from Perry Street. Mark Pacey

Returning the Treaty

After the Battle of Midway in June 1942 the main threat of the Japanese advancing further south diminished. By 1945 the Japanese were well on the retreat. For the duration of the War with Japan, the Treaty and the bound Historical Records remained in the Public Trust Building. It was not until the Japanese surrender in September 1945 that the Treaty and other records were returned to Wellington. Few knew at the time that one of the country's most important records was kept in Wairarapa's largest town. Even today it is not a well-known fact that for the duration of the war with Japan the Treaty and the bound Historical Records were safely put away in a non-descript building on the corners of Chapel and Perry streets in Masterton.



Figure 6. Public Trust Building. Mark Pacey

Endnotes

1. State Services Commission, "The Story of the Treaty Part 2," New Zealand History, July 2021, https://nzhistory.govt.nz/files/documents/The_Story_Part_2.pdf
2. Ibid., 16.
3. "North Saint Paul Mayor defeated by J.F. Cowern," *Star Tribune*, 06 December, 1939, 10.
4. ACGO 8333 W2578 158/70 R10765131, Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.
5. Jeremy A. Yellen, "Into the Tigers Den: Japan and the Tripartite Pact, 1940," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 51, No. 3 (2016) 555.
6. ACGO 8333 W896 158/67 R19967609, Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.
7. ACGO 8333 W896 158/70 R10765131, Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.
8. Ibid.
9. Watson and Gooder, Public Trust Office – Masterton Plan, Wairarapa Archive 16-119/1.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. A.G. Bagnall, *Masterton's First Hundred Years 1854-1954* (Masterton: Masterton Centennial Committee, 1954) 94.
13. Mark Pacey, "The Marines of Solway," *Leatherneck – Magazine of the Marines* (2020) 58-59
14. "It did happen here: Japanese plane over Wellington," *Nelson Evening Mail*, August 20 1945.
15. Ibid.