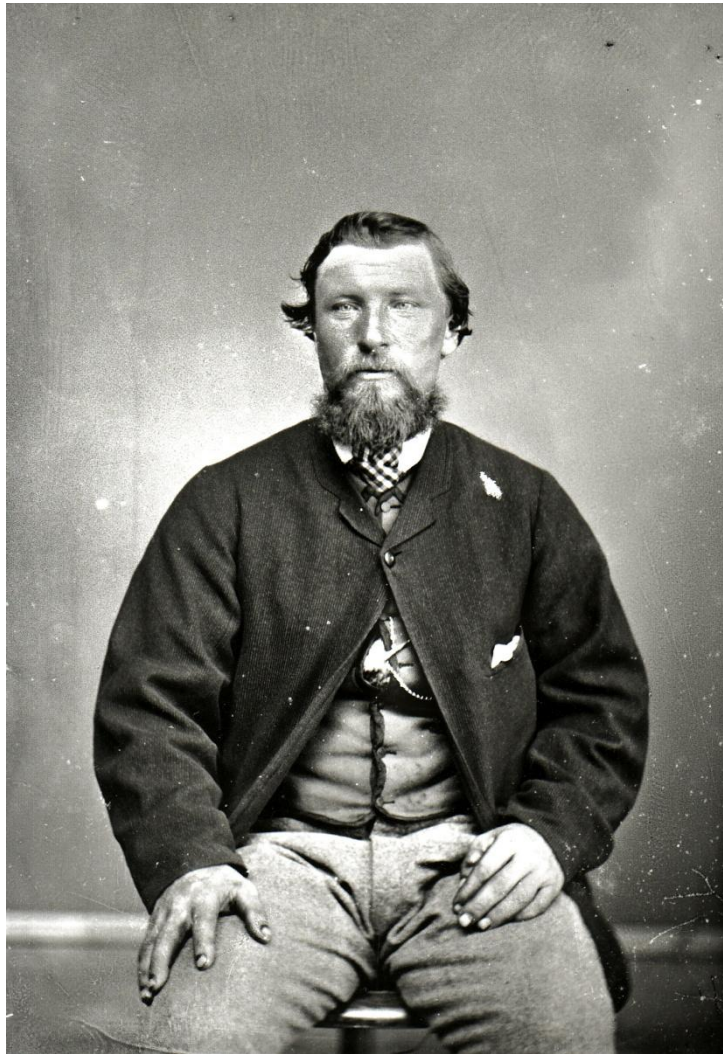


# **A HAMILTON FAMILY HISTORY**



Nelson Provincial Museum: April 1868 4057/2

## **JOHN HAMILTON'S STORY**

1823 - 1911

## 1. INTRODUCTION

John Hamilton was the great grandfather of my wife, Elizabeth Hamilton. This story started in March 2007 when Elizabeth and I went for a holiday to New Zealand. Having already visited the North Island, we planned to visit as much as we could of the South Island in the relatively short time we had available.

We planned an itinerary that would give us a feel of the major towns as well as the major southern attractions of the Milford and Doubtful Sounds and the majestic mountains of the West Coast. We visited the towns of Fox Glacier Greymouth, Cobden, Westport and Nelson before getting the ferry across Cook Strait to Wellington.

We were aware that John Hamilton had come to New Zealand and settled there and we were also aware that he had a hotel, the Imperial, in Wellington when he died so we decided to allow three days for research. In retrospect this was grossly inadequate and it was only a matter of months before we returned.

Before we left home we had a little information. We had details of the hotel and the correspondence that led to the sale of the Imperial in 1966 and the final winding up of John Hamilton's estate. The hotel had been a source of income to the family for a number of years but Elizabeth's grandfather, Samuel Hamilton, had died in 1949 as had several of his children and the income was being distributed to a larger number of people that was now including some of Samuel's grandchildren. It made sense to sell the hotel and make a final distribution to the beneficiaries.

A more important document was a handwritten note from Elizabeth's mother, Lil (Keane) Hamilton. We believe she had written it for Elizabeth's brother Stephen's wife, Rosalind. The note was most important to us as it represented all we knew about John Hamilton. We were also a bit wary of the contents as Lil was known to exaggerate, invent and in general put her own interpretation on many things. However, we took this note as our starting point and treated it as a hypothesis to be proven, disproven or to reach somewhere that might at least resemble what we were being led to believe.

For the record I will now indicate what Lil had written:

*"John Hamilton Born 1824 – 1910. (Castle) Blayney Nth Ireland M. Sarah Jane Rainey*

*John Hamilton was one of seven brothers and ? sisters. His wife Sarah left him with her three daughters and son Samuel (Stephen's grandfather). She returned to live with her brother a Presbyterian Minister. John Hamilton then sold his farm and emigrated to New Zealand. He operated a coaching service similar to Cobb & Co. acquired hotels and gold mines and became a wealthy man. He sent for his two nephews Gilmore to assist him and to them he left his fortune.*

*His son Samuel who he really never knew being in Melbourne visited him once. He complimented him on being a teetotaller and left him and his remaining sister in Ireland his hotel in Wellington New Zealand."*

In As our research progressed we became aware that this note is not entirely accurate which is what we expected. However, it did contain the core of John Hamilton's New Zealand story.

John Hamilton had left his family in Ireland but he had a large extended family in New Zealand. There were not two Gilmore nephews, as stated by Lil, there were five, the children of John's sister Margaret Dorothea, who had married Hugh Gilmer. In addition, there were

two further Hamilton boys and indeed a niece, the children of Andrew Hamilton of Annalittin who was a close relation. All of these are integral to John Hamilton's story. We also need to keep in mind that his eldest child, a daughter Dorothea, migrated to New Zealand and joined him in the Wairarapa region where she was a school teacher.

All of these Irish migrants were John's family and the boys were all in some way or another involved in his business activities. We will explore the details as we go because the John Hamilton story cannot be told without recounting the activities of the Gilmers and his other Hamilton nephews. They were business partners, family and friends that he associated with right up till his death.

Genealogical research can be very frustrating with the researcher delving for the smallest of detail in the hope it might lead to the opening up of new information. In our case and with John Hamilton in New Zealand, it has been quite the opposite. We have such a wealth of detailed information that it is difficult to know what to leave out. Not only that, this account commenced well before we fully explored all of the resources available and following a trip to Ireland in September/October 2009 we have to had revisit some areas to add detail or to make corrections.

To explain this further we need to return to our March 2007 holiday. Knowing we would be trying to research John Hamilton we set about getting some useful facts as a starting point (with due respect for Lil). We quickly found (by emailing Karori Cemetery) that John Hamilton had died on 16 June 1911 and was buried there. As a complete surprise we found that he was buried in the same grave as Dorothea who had died in 1904. We knew then that one of the things we would be doing in Wellington was making a visit to their grave.

We also quickly obtained his Death Notice from the Evening Post:

*Hamilton- On 16<sup>th</sup> June 1911 at Blaney Cottage No. 30 Marion St. John Hamilton aged 88 years. Private interment from Marion Street 17<sup>th</sup> June at 9am. No flowers by request.*

John Hamilton's Death Certificate showed his occupation as Settler a quaint term used by many an early New Zealand migrant once they reached their retired and elderly years. It also showed the Cause of Death was Enlarged Prostate which he had for several years and Heart Disease which he had for some months and Syncope a few days. It also indicated he had been born in Ireland and had been in New Zealand for 48 years, implying he arrived in 1863. His funeral was conducted by the Rev. J K Elliott a Presbyterian Minister.

More importantly for us by the time we had reached Christchurch, our starting point, a copy of John Hamilton's Will ordered from the National Archives, was faxed to us. This indicated that in addition to his cottage at 30 Marion St, he also owned 28 Marion St as well as two shops at Ingestre St, the Imperial Hotel and property at Cobden on the West Coast. This provided us with a large area of research and the details will be filled in as the story unfolds. His estate was divided equally between his surviving children Samuel Hamilton in Melbourne and Sarah Jane Burns in Ireland.

During this first trip to the West Coast we called at History House in Greymouth which unfortunately was closed. We drove around Cobden wondering which property John might have owned. However, on reaching Wellington a few days later at the National Library we quickly found that John had left lots of "foot prints" and literally within minutes we knew that in 1882 he owned a hotel in Wellington as well as one at Cobden which together had a value of 2370 pounds.<sup>1</sup> We also obtained similar information in respect of the Gilmers some of which was in individual names and others in the name of "Gilmer Brothers". After further research

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<sup>1</sup> 1882 Return of Free Settlers

we found that this was the business name of the formal partnership between four of the Gilmer brothers (excluding Henry) and John Hamilton.

Later the same day at the Land Information Office we needed the Cobden address of the hotel, so we rang the History House at Greymouth. Bob Naisbett was very helpful and it was clear that he knew a lot of the John Hamilton story. We were told that John Hamilton's Cobden Hotel was still there but operating under the name of "Kell's Hotel".

Bob referred us to John Hewstone at Nelson as a person who had already researched John Hamilton and the Gilmers. We spoke with John and read him Lil's note which he said was by and large true. He offered to help with our further research and very kindly offered to open up his files to us which on later trip we spent time copying. He also went with us to the West Coast tracing the steps of John Hamilton and the Gilmers. We are very grateful to him firstly for having an interest in the subject, being very thorough in his research and also for his initial and ongoing assistance.

John in turn referred us to Jean Gilmer a 93 year old granddaughter of Hamilton Gilmer and Elizabeth Hamilton (a daughter of Andrew Hamilton of Annalittin). She had written a family story about her mother Dame Elizabeth Gilmer which she has placed in the Turnbull Library in Wellington. We obtained copies of relevant pages as well the details she had put together on the Gilmer family and their descendants. She also referred us to Ian Hamilton at Turangi, near Lake Taupo, who had assisted her in putting these details together. We also believe she was assisted by John Hewstone.



**Elizabeth & Peter with Jean Gilmer at Eastbourne NZ 2007**

As one can imagine all of this assistance in a few days left our heads spinning with so much detail it was difficult to take in. However, a very major source of information that has kept us overwhelmed with detail since that time has been the New Zealand National Library website [www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz) which has digitized the major New Zealand newspapers and many of them are searchable by use of Optical Character Recognition. Thankfully the searchable papers include the Evening Post, The Grey River Argus and the West Coast Times.

With these resources we can now build a very real picture of the lives of John Hamilton and the Gilmers and his other young Hamilton relations. These resources were not available to John Hewstone and they have disclosed details that were not available to him when he was doing his early research. These details do not change the basic story, they add to it and fine tune some of the details. They also help clarify areas on which speculative conclusions might have been drawn without them.

More recently John Hewstone put Philip Watt in contact with us. The importance of this contact is that Philip is a great grandson of Sarah Jane Burns, Samuel Hamilton's sister, who remained in Ireland. This has opened up to us the details of the Irish side of the family and closed a loop we had only dreamed of closing. Philip has possession of family photographs which we also have and he has aunts and uncles still living who have some family stories from Ireland. These are of value in piecing together details of the family from other perspectives. A further important point is that we have met a number on this side of the family as well as others in Ireland with whom we share a common interest in the origins of their family.

Our story is still developing and growing and we plan to publish and progressively refine the details where new information becomes available. The task never really ends and as technology improves and new data bases of family records emerge we may be able to enhance the story.

In the meantime please enjoy reading the stories of the lives of John Hamilton and his descendants as well as those with which he lived in New Zealand.