

### 3. NEW ZEALAND THE EARLY YEARS

It has been difficult to establish with any precision when, how or where John Hamilton arrived in New Zealand. His death certificate says that he had lived for 48 years in NZ and this is consistent with our family understanding that he went there in about 1862 or 1863. The early shipping records are not good and indeed names were only shown for assisted migrants because they were recorded as debtors to the government with an obligation to repay some of the assistance they were provided with.

There is one record of a John Hamilton arriving on a ship at Auckland from London on 22 July 1863. This was the *Portland* which left Gravesend on 30 April, crossed the Equator on 22 May and passed the meridian of the Cape on 15 June arriving at 10am on 22 July. There were 14 Cabin Passengers with 173 in Steerage or Second Class.

We cannot be sure that this is our John Hamilton but landing at Auckland was not a chore as there was a very viable steamer service to all the major towns which were located on the coast. It would have been very easy to get a ship to Port Chalmers and the Otago goldfields.

The records in Ireland do not assist as the only potential source, the Hope Estate Rental Rolls has a gap with no records for the period from 1862 to 1866.

There have been various suggestions that John may have arrived before his Gilmer nephews and in fact sent for them or that he may have come out with the eldest, Hamilton Gilmer, in 1861. There is a record of a Hamilton Gilmour, aged 22, arriving in Melbourne in January 1861 on the ship *Blue Jacket*. This was the relevant age for Hamilton as he was born on 2 April 1838, and also the first name is so unusual that it could be regarded as unique. However, there was no John Hamilton on that ship.

Hamilton Gilmer had a look over the Victorian gold fields but quickly realized that the peak of the discoveries were past and so came on to New Zealand. We have not located a passenger record but at that time the record keeping was not good.

John's Obituary<sup>1</sup> does not help identify when he arrived. It simply says *"he was very well known on the West Coast in the early days and he participated in the gold rushes."*

In the early 1860's these were at Otago in the South. We have located several references to a John Hamilton. The first was on the list of Unclaimed Letters at the Chief Post Office Dunedin at 30<sup>th</sup> November 1862.<sup>2</sup> This implies that if John had left Ireland in early 1862 someone might have expected him to be there in that same year.

A further mention of a John Hamilton is on the same list of Unclaimed Letters for Dunedin twelve months later on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1863.<sup>3</sup> We are more certain that this is our John Hamilton because the same list also contains the names of Hamilton Gilmer and also Robert Gilmour, John Gilmour and Samuel Gilmour. We are not concerned by the differences in the Gilmer spelling as we have seen many different spellings such that we consider they are essentially interchangeable.

The important point is that with letters being received, there were people expecting them to be there. We believe the letters would only have come from Ireland and would have been sent soon after they left. The indications are therefore that they were all in New Zealand in

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<sup>1</sup> Evening Post 17 June 1911

<sup>2</sup> Otago Daily Times 3 January 1863

<sup>3</sup> Otago Daily Times 3 December 1863.

1863 (except perhaps for Henry). At this time John would have been quite young at 17 or 18 years of age.

There is only one further reference in the Unclaimed Letters list and that is for the Quarter ending 30 September 1864.<sup>4</sup> This contained Robert Gilmer's name but none of his brothers or John Hamilton. This seems to indicate that they had claimed their mail and perhaps had moved on.

The 1863 Unclaimed Letter record conflicts with the year mentioned in Sam's Obituary<sup>5</sup> (1864) for his migration to New Zealand. However, we know a little more about Hamilton Gilmer's movements. His obituary<sup>6</sup> records that he came to Australia in 1860 (which is the year he left Ireland) and in the early sixties was at Gabriel's Gully, near Lawrence, Otago.<sup>7</sup> This would have been in late 1862. If he had some early success and, had joined up with John Hamilton, it is very likely he would have quickly sent for his brothers to join them.

Hamilton was actually named George Hamilton Gilmer, which is the name on his Marriage Certificate. A newspaper article<sup>8</sup> recorded the following in relation to George Gilmer on his leaving Greymouth for Wellington:

*"Mr. George Gilmer has been identified with Greymouth from the earliest days, having come in 1865, when enterprising swarms of miners from Otago and Victoria found their way to the coast to encounter hardships of no ordinary nature but often met with a golden reward. Mr. Gilmer is in some respects a representative man.*

*Being the oldest (sic) of a large family of sons he left the Emerald Isle to prospect the new countries being opened up on this side of the globe. Like most others who were thrown on these shores in the early days, who were filled with hope and blest with energy, George Gilmer grappled with whatever came to hand as a means of making an honest living. Of course he must try the diggings, and in his searching after the precious metal he wandered over a large portion of Otago. He was early on the Wakamarina rush, where he combined storekeeping with gold mining meeting with considerable success in both.*

*But in those days it was too often the case of easy got easy go, the dashing enterprise that today yielded like a Pactolus, tomorrow often led to financial ruin. Of these ups and downs George had his share: but being young and strong with an equable temper, he made light of the failures and disappointments incidental to life in the colonies.*

*All the time, however, in good and bad luck alike, George Gilmer never forgot the "old folks at home" and the stalwart brothers he had left behind him. In this respect, like so many of his country and countrywomen too for that matter, no matter how small his gains, he always managed to spare and send home some trifle to show he was holding his own in the battle of life. As his fortunes improved he commenced to bring out his brothers one at a time....."*

With gold being discovered in Otago in 1861 and a little later at Hokitika in 1864 there were obvious movements by prospectors to follow the trail. We have found only one possible reference to Hamilton Gilmer prior to his Greymouth days. This was on 8 November 1864 when the horse carried mail service was extended from Deep Creek to The Forks on the Wakamarina gold fields. On 4 November 1864 George H Gilmour was appointed Postmaster at The Forks. It was common for the Postmaster to operate a General Store in conjunction with the Post Office agency business and this supports the comments at the

<sup>4</sup> Southland Times 29 October 1864

<sup>5</sup> Evening Post 15 January 1925

<sup>6</sup> Grey River Argus 27 June 1919

<sup>7</sup> My Mother's Story, Jean Gilmer

<sup>8</sup> Grey River Argus 10 February 1882

banquet. However, the mail service was reduced from one day a week to three from 1 May 1865 and The Forks Post Office closed in early autumn<sup>9</sup>. This seems to be when Hamilton would have gone to Greymouth.

We don't know where he and John Hamilton got together but it seems clear that the older and perhaps wiser and more experienced man, by some fifteen years, would have convinced Hamilton that the real gold was to be obtained by catering to the daily needs of the miners. This avoided many of the hardships of the gold fields and provided more secure rewards although perhaps these might not have matched the rare but higher value finds that were known to occur. The risk/reward equation clearly favoured the caterer or service provider rather than the digger.

There were six Gilmer brothers:

James Born 1834.

Hamilton Born 2 April 1838

Henry Born 12 May 1839

Samuel Born 1842

Robert Born 1843

John Born 1844 or 1845

James as the eldest boy inherited the family farm in accordance with Irish custom and accordingly never came to New Zealand. The farm was relatively small and certainly could not support six boys and their dependents so in common with a large number of other Irishmen they settled in new countries. In addition the boys' mother, Margaret Dorothea (Dolly) died in 1845 at the age of 30 and her husband Hugh remarried in 1846 to Ann Smith. This could have been a stimulus to the migration of the boys.

Henry also came relatively early and we have a record of him in 1869.<sup>10</sup> We know for certain John was there in 1870<sup>11</sup> and Robert in 1870<sup>12</sup>. These dates are not meant to imply that they were not in New Zealand earlier. They are simply our first identification of activities they were undertaking in New Zealand as part of the Gilmer Brothers business. As Greymouth was in its infancy and the Grey River Argus was not established until 1866, evidence of any earlier year of arrival there was always going to be difficult to establish.

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<sup>9</sup> Gold in a Tin Dish. A History of the Wakamarina Goldfields by Mike Johnstone.

<sup>10</sup> Grey River Argus 18 March 1869

<sup>11</sup> Electoral Roll 1870

<sup>12</sup> Grey River Argus 19 July 1870