

5.3 JOHN HAMILTON “The Greek”

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Our research into John Hamilton has been complicated by a number of references to John Hamilton “The Greek” and later with the arrival of John Knox Hamilton from Ireland in 1868 as an 18 year old. These have caused uncertainty in identifying who is being written about in newspapers or which individual is being referred to in documents. We have few means of distinguishing between people with the same name.

The situation was not particularly a problem when researching Greymouth activities. There any reference to a J. Hamilton could have been to John Hamilton of Cobden or it could have been James Hamilton of Greymouth. Generally, we have been able to distinguish between their activities. Some confusion has arisen with Grey River Hospital activities with both being involved at different times but on the whole we believe we have the correct persons identified.

However, the situation became especially complicated when we had three John Hamiltons at Ahaura, John Hamilton of Cobden, John “The Greek”, and John Knox Hamilton. The newspaper editors seemed to be aware of the problems and helped by using references to *John Hamilton (The Greek)* or *John Hamilton (Cobden)* or *John Hamilton (Gilmer)*. We are confident that references for the latter do not include John Knox as he was relatively young and without the means and reputations of the other two when major development activities were being undertaken. However, John Knox was quick to note the potential for confusion and regularly used his second name of Knox and also the initials J. K. to avoid confusion. This was certainly been the case on all electoral rolls and many other published details.

John Hamilton “The Greek” was a Storekeeper whose store and hotel in Clifton St were at the rear of the Ahaura Hotel. “The Greek” had difficulties with licensing regulations which prohibited the combining of a hotel with a store and therefore his hotel was initially run for him by Benjamin Gough. Gough had arrived at Ahaura fairly early and in 1866 had a hotel in partnership with Michael Grogan. This partnership was dissolved in that year and the hotel was operated by Ben Gough. This was bought by Gilmer Brothers and rebuilt and Ben Gough took over the running of “the Greek’s” hotel.



Gough's Hotel Ahaura 2007

John Hamilton and “the Greek” were the same age but John was respectable and well educated. On the other hand the Greek was a “sharp” business man, had difficulty with English (his books were kept in Greek) and was frequently in the courts which had given him a poor reputation. Most of his court appearances were related to his aggressive approach to the collection of debts. For someone with these attributes to have the same name as John must have been annoying to him and also to the Gilmers.

“The Greek” was also early at Ahaura and in 1868 his storekeeping business was shared with Thomas Olson. Their partnership was dissolved and “the Greek” continued it by himself.¹ He was an aggressive business man. As an example on 31 October 1868 he placed an advertisement for a clearance sale at reduced prices to last until 10 November “*at which date all outstanding accounts will be placed in the hands of a solicitor for collection.*”²

His collection activities often landed him in trouble. He did not always use a solicitor especially if the situation was likely to go bad. He would collect himself and fight in the courts later. While he was often in the courts he won a large number of his cases.

“The Greek” was conspicuous by his generous contributions to the Grey River Hospital. As the subscription lists were published perhaps his motive was more to be seen to be playing his part in supporting this important community activity. In any event he continued to give generously and gave more than most although this was perhaps because he had it to give.

Our John Hamilton was very active at Ahaura from 1869 and he could have been there a little earlier. It is useful to look at some of the more doubtful activities that we cannot conclusively determine which individual was involved. These activities indicate what each might have pursued or how either individual might have been involved in the town.

Ahaura Races and Grey Valley Jockey Club

The town of Ahaura although small in size and population wanted to create its own community and activities. One of these was to hold an annual race meeting. In November 1869 advertising of the event commenced and by December the program was published with New Ahaura Races Spring Meeting scheduled for 27 December 1869.³

This program showed John Hamilton as Treasurer but which John Hamilton was it? Our John was there at the time and he had a reputation as being a good judge of horses. However, the details of the event showed entries were to be sent to the Secretary at Gough’s Hotel. This could indicate it was “the Greek.” The program also showed John Hamilton had an entry in the Cart Horse Race. We do not know whose horse it was. At this time John Knox was only 19 and had been in New Zealand only one year so it was unlikely to be him. However, later John Knox was to become very involved with horses at Wellington.

The next year there was a move to form the Grey Valley Jockey Club and John Hamilton (Gilmer) was nominated for the committee⁴. The Greek did not become involved in this activity, at least initially. When the program for the race meeting was produced John Hamilton was shown as the Treasurer and a J. Hamilton was shown as a Steward. Were there two Hamilton’s involved or only one who was in both roles? Given John’s standing in the community vis a vis

¹ Grey River Argus 30 June 1868

² Grey River Argus 31 October 1868

³ Grey River Argus 11 December 1869

⁴ Grey River Argus 11 October 1870

“the Greek’s” we believe he was the Treasurer. Another compelling detail was that when it came to organizing the race meeting, all entries and settlements were organized at Gilmer’s Hotel.

Moonlight Creek Mining Lease

“The Greek” was also attracted by the gold rushes and there are instances where we do not know who was who. For example, in March 1870 there were a number of applications for leases at Moonlight Creek one of which was in the name of John Hamilton Ahaura that was called “*Hamilton Co*”.⁵ All the parties involved were Greymouth names and Hamilton Gilmer had been a driver of a company floated to mine this area. We are inclined to believe it was John Hamilton (Cobden) who was involved. At that time, he was at Ahaura on a very regular basis establishing the new Gilmer Brothers hotel there.

Agricultural Land Lease Application

In May 1870, in the Warden’s Court Ahaura⁶ a John Hamilton applied for an agricultural area of six acres along the bank of the Ahaura River, near the boat landing at the township. The Warden refused the application on the grounds that the land had been reserved as a landing place. “The Greek” had a farm and consequently is the more likely of the two to be engaged in farming activity. However, such leases were often sought with the view of looking for gold and both of them could have been interested. In this case our conclusion is that it was ‘the Greek’.

Member of Grey Valley Agricultural Association

At a meeting of the Grey Valley Agricultural Association on 25 August 1870⁷ John Hamilton was listed as present. Initially, we were not aware of who this was. Later the report covered nominations to the committee and in this case the nomination was for John Hamilton (Gilmer), Ahaura. This solved the identification problem. It also assisted that George H Gilmer was also a member and this would have influenced the view had there not been the specific identification made in the report.

This association kept them in touch with the farmers in the Valley where Gilmer Brothers had bought 200 acres of land farmed by Henry. This land was probably used to grow oats to feed the large number of horses in the horse hire business. It also seems to indicate that both of them saw a future interest in the Grey Valley as desirable for the potential of finding alluvial gold on the flats of the Grey River.

1874 Keeping of Bees

A correspondent commenting on the harvest in the Grey Valley noted that the keeping of bees was becoming popular among farmers: “.. *Mr. Warden Whitefoord and Mr. John Hamilton of Ahaura and late Mr. George Muir of Camptown were among the first to introduce these industrious little insects and they are spreading in a truly wonderful manner.*”⁸

We believe this was John Hamilton “The Greek” because he had a farm at Ahaura and as it was 1874 John Hamilton would not have been such a regular at Ahaura. By then Sam Gilmer had returned from Westport to take over the hotel.

⁵ Grey River Argus 17 March 1870

⁶ Grey River Argus 17 May 1870

⁷ Grey River Argus 25 August 1870

⁸ Grey River Argus 26 February 1874

“The Greek” Death and Will

The Greek never left Ahaura. He stayed there with his store, hotel and farm. In 1883⁹ He obtained a renewal of his hotel license but by 1886 he made an application to transfer the license to Robert Gooneh.¹⁰ (this was later found to be Gooch). Two days later the newspaper reported his death on 28 January 1886. He was 63 years of age. He was buried in Ahaura Cemetery.



John Hamilton “The Greek’s” Grave Ahaura Cemetery 2007

Following his death the executors, John Hogg and S. Roulston called for tenders for the purchase of the Store and its stock. The stock from his farm and his horses were sold at auction at Greymouth by Girdwood & Co.¹¹

The Greek had a sizeable Estate for a small country town storekeeper. It had a gross value of 1611 Pounds 7 Shillings. After all expenses the net amount was 947 Pounds and 6 Pence.

John left his estate to Mary Angelina Smith *“at present a minor to be paid to her on her attaining the age of 21 years.”* The Will did not mention any family including a daughter, wife or any other relatives. However, the headstone on his grave says *“Erected by Mary. In Affectionate Remembrance of Her Beloved FATHER.”*

⁹ Grey River Argus 7 June 1883

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 27 January 1886

¹¹ Grey River Argus 20 February 1886

If Mary was to die before turning 21, the estate was to go to Emma Jane Turner wife of John Turner of Moonlight Creek for her *“sole and absolute use and benefit free from the debts, control and engagements of the said John Turner.”*

The indication is that Mary Angelina was the illegitimate daughter of John Hamilton “the Greek” and Emma Jane Smith. Emma Jane Turner’s maiden name was “Smith” and she married John Turner in 1880.¹² It is also clear from the gravestone that Mary was “the Greek’s” daughter. It seems safe to assume that Emma Jane Smith was her mother. Mary Angelina married John Wallace Easson in 1896¹³ and the marriage record shows her name as Smith AKA Hamilton. It appears that the relationship to “the Greek” was well known.

The Will specified that Executors were to be paid Ten Pounds each for managing and finalizing his affairs. However, they found the task very difficult and applied to the Court for an additional amount to cover their costs in travelling between Greymouth and Ahaura as well as *“that we have had an extraordinary difficult in winding up the said Estate and collecting the debts due to it because the Deceased conducted his business of general storekeeper himself without the assistance of any clerk or storeman and consequently there was no one to refer to in connection with his affairs and all his books and accounts were kept in the Greek language and required to be translated into English.”* The Registrar agreed to an amount of them to be allowed *“3 Pounds 10 Shillings per centum”* on the gross value of the Estate.

He also made it very clear that the Trustees when required to invest funds of the estate they were to be invested *“other than in a Mining Company or a Joint Stock Company formed for the purpose of Mining.”* This was obviously a means of passing on the benefits of his experience!

¹² BDM New Zealand 1880/2362

¹³ BDM New Zealand 1896/4723