



Museum of Wellington
City & Sea

Early Māori and European Settlement

Many Māori place names in the Wellington area have originated from the stories about the creation and discovery of the land and harbour, passed down orally by iwi (tribes), these tales explain, celebrate and commemorate the region.

Māori Legend and Settlement

‘Te Upoko o Te Ika-a-Māui’ or the head of Māui’s fish is the earliest name for this region. The demi-god Māui, having smuggled himself aboard his brother’s canoe, used a magic fishhook to land an enormous fish: the North Island of New Zealand. Wellington, Wairarapa and Horowhenua are the head, Lake Wairarapa the eye and Wellington Harbour the mouth of the Māui’s fish.

The fish’s mouth was originally an enclosed lake, inhabited by two taniwha (water monsters) called Ngake and Whātaimai. Ngake, lively and restless, created the harbour entrance by crashing through a wall of rock at Seatoun. Whātaimai tried to follow, but got stuck in shallow water. He stayed there until a great earthquake lifted him above water, where he died. His back is the land bridge to the Miramar Peninsula.

At least 60 place names in the Raukawa Moana (Cook Strait) area relate to its discoverer, the great Polynesian explorer Kupe, who settled with his relatives for a time around Maraenui (Seatoun).

Stories of his adventures are many and varied. He twice wrestled with a wheke (giant octopus or squid), finally crushing its head with a whalebone patu (club). While away performing this feat, his daughters believing him dead, ritually slashed themselves in mourning, and their blood permanently stained Periwhero (Red Rocks) on the south coast.

Though Kupe and his party eventually continued on their voyage of discovery up the West Coast of Te Ika a Māui, their visit to this area is permanently recorded in many of its Māori place names.

The Māori name for Wellington Harbour is Te Whanganui-ā-Tara (The Great Harbour of Tara). Having been fished by Māui, altered by taniwha, and discovered by Kupe, the harbour was named after the founder of the first permanent settlement round its shores.

Tara and Tautoke were sons of Whatonga from the Mahia Peninsula. On an expedition to find them land, their father drew a line from Kapiti to (just above Castle Point). He apportioned the lands north to Tautoke and those south to Tara.

Tara and his people (Ngai Tara) built a pa (stockade or fortified place) on Matiu (Somes) Island. They later moved to the island of Te Motukairangi (now Miramar), where there was abundant kai moana (seafood) and the ridge-top pa Te Whetukairangi was sheltered. Ngai Tara built seven great hilltop pa, all within sight of each other, for defence purposes.

Defence was vital to protect precious food crops. Kumara, requiring both sun and labour-intensive cultivation, was grown on sunny north-facing slopes. Many kāinga (unfortified village) sites had gardens nearby as well as a stream.

Eventually more iwi, such as Ngati Kahungunu, Ngai Tahu and Ngati Momoe migrated to Te Whanganui-ā-Tara. Battles followed by peace making, and over many generations' new groups and old intermingled. Through the process of intermarriage, for example, Ngai Tara almost completely amalgamated with Ngati Ira (originally from Hawkes Bay).

Around 1822 a new phase of deliberate Southern occupation began. Tribes involved included Te Ati Awa, Ngati Tama and Ngati Mutunga from Taranaki and Ngati Toa from Kawhai. By the late 1820s, Ngati Ira and Ngati Kahungunu, after a series of clashes, abandoned Te Whanganui-ā-Tara, leaving Te Ati Awa as the tangata whenua.

European Settlement

Colonel William Wakefield left England aboard the *Tory* in May 1839 with two aims: to find the best site for the 'first and principal' New Zealand Company settlement in New Zealand, and to purchase it from its Maori owners.

The new town was to be a model of 'systematic colonisation' along the lines set out by the Colonel's brother, Edward Gibbon Wakefield. It was also to return a profit. Land shares in the settlement had been sold and settlers embarked before the company knew whether the site had been purchased.

Wakefield found the ideal location on 20 September 1839, when the *Tory* entered Port Nicholson. On 27 September 1839, 16 Māori (principal among whom were the chiefs Te Puni and Te Wharepuri) signed a deed conveying to the New Zealand Company that 209,000 acres of the land within this area was to be reserved by the New Zealand Company in trust for the future benefit of the chiefs and their families in perpetuity.

Problems quickly followed. Some Māori chiefs disputed Te Wharepuri and Te Puni's right to sell the harbour area where it affected their particular landholding. Pito-one (Petone), the first site chosen for settlement, proved unsuitable due to flooding. The settlers then moved to the other side of the harbour, where local Māori opposed the Company's land purchases. Many Māori also resented the fact that the one-tenth of town land supposedly reserved for them was chosen without regard to their existing arrangements or desires. The Company surveyor, William Mein Smith faced the daunting task of finding 1,100 one acre sections on the cramped and hilly site.

Yet despite these and other problems (included an earthquake and several fires), settlers took pride in the new town. The arrival of the first New Zealand Company emigrant ship, the *Aurora*, on January 1840 was celebrated with enthusiasm a year later as Wellington's Anniversary Day.