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Otago’s provincial history returns home after 130 years

Otago’s rich archival history as a self governing province is being returned to the Province this week after nearly 130 years.

Seven pallets of original records from the Otago Provincial Government (1853-1876) have been carefully prepared for the ferry and road trip home to Dunedin from Archives New Zealand’s head office in Wellington.

“The minutes, journals and correspondence of the provincial archives are the key source of information for this early and rich period in Otago’s history”, says Dunedin’s Regional Archivist, Peter Miller.

“The files include Applications for employment with provincial government agencies including the Police, cattle inspectors, prisons and gold fields. There are records on Gaols including escapes; and the Harbour records include a report on the wreck of the *General Grant*”.

The Provincial Government, headed by names including Cargill, Macandrew and Vogel, was responsible for education, public works, public health, gaols, police as well as immigration, colonisation and land sales.

During this period, Otago was one of the wealthiest provinces in the country, boosted by the gold rush economy. The population of Dunedin exploded to displace Auckland as New Zealand’s largest city. Dunedin also became the pre-eminent commercial centre and base for many large businesses. The arts and education were well supported by endowments by private families and New Zealand’s first University was established during this time.

Otago was one of the most strongly pro-provincial government and anti-central government of the provinces. It was at the forefront of the movement to separate the South Island provinces and establish a new colony, and took a leading role campaigning against the abolition of the provinces in 1876. Following abolition, the Superintendent of Otago, Macandrew, refused to

hand over all public documents to the Commissioner of Crown Lands in Dunedin, as instructed by the Colonial Secretary. However he was forced to do so the following year.

Some papers were sent to Wellington in 1877 and the remainder in 1919, where they were initially held by the Lands Department and Internal Affairs respectively, and more recently they have been preserved and made available by Archives New Zealand (formerly known as National Archives).

“We are proud to bring these important archives back to Otago where they can be viewed and researched by the public of Otago”.

Southland briefly had its own period of provincial government from 1861 until it reunited with Otago nine years later because of financial difficulties. The Southland Provincial Government archives are also held at the Dunedin Regional Office of Archives New Zealand.

The Otago Provincial Records will be available from the Dunedin Regional Office of Archives New Zealand from mid-July.

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www.archives.govt.nz

Background

- Archives New Zealand is the keeper of the public record and acts as the memory of government
- The Dunedin Regional Office of Archives New Zealand was setup in 1993
- Among the treasures held at Archives New Zealand in Wellington are
 - the original Treaty of Waitangi (1840)
 - the Women' Franchise Petition (1893)
- Website: www.archives.govt.nz