

AN ABSTRACT HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ONEHUNGA

In the beginning, the Catholic faith came to Onehunga through the Catholic members of the ROYAL NEW ZEALAND FENCIBLES, a military detachment of retired soldiers aged 48 years or younger, who were sent out from Ireland & England to help defend Auckland if the need ever arose.

The word FENCIBLE means “DEFENCE”, and these retired soldiers were not “fighting units” intended to be “sent into battle immediately”, but rather a “non-violent defence force” available to be called upon if necessary, in response to possible attacks against English settlements in Onehunga, Howick, Panmure and Otahuhu.

The FENCIBLES came in seven (7) ships between the years 1847 to 1852. They brought their wives and children with Them. The voyage to New Zealand was long and difficult. The conditions on board the ships were appalling, as an inducement to serve in New Zealand.

As a FENCIBLE, each retired soldier who signed up for service was promised a two-room cottage and one acre of land for himself and his family. On their arrival they found that the two-room cottages and one acre of land promised them were not ready. The first company of sixty-seven (67) FENCIBLES, with their wives and children came in the ship RAMILLIES, which arrived in Auckland on the 5th August 1847. When they disembarked from their ship on the 9th and 11th August 1847, they were all moved to the ALBERT BARRACKS in AUCKLAND CITY, where they were housed for 3 months until their village of ONEHUNGA was ready to receive them. On the 15th NOVEMBER 1847 they marched and walked with their families and their small possessions the SIX miles to get to ONEHUNGA.

TWENTY-NINE (29) of the soldiers were CATHOLICS and nearly all of them were IRISH. There were TWENTY-EIGHT (28) wives, and FIFTY-FIVE (55) CHILDREN. That group of ONE HUNDRED AND TWELVE (112) CATHOLICS founded the Catholic Faith in ONEHUNGA.

The terms and conditions under which the ROYAL NEW ZEALAND FENCIBLES were recruited specifically enjoined on each Pensioner that he would be required to attend Church Service wearing his uniform and bearing side – arms every Sunday for a period of seven years. Failure to attend was punishable by loss of certain privileges, unless a good excuse could be submitted to the Commanding Officer, who was at that time Major Kenny.

It is therefore reasonable to presume that 29 families were present at the first Mass, or at least that the heads of those families attended the compulsory Church Parade.

On Sundays the whole Company assembled on an open space near the corner of Queen Street and Trafalgar Street. After the Commanding Officer had inspected the parade, the company marched down Queen Street to the Church of England acre, where the Catholic pensioners broke-off, and made a left-turn into Church Street, and a senior sergeant led the Catholic

Contingent to the Church, where mass was to be celebrated. At the Church, the first five or six rows of seats on the Priest’s left-hand side were reserved for the men in uniform. When Mass had been said the men (Pensioners) formed up in two ranks outside the Church, where the sergeant in charge saluted the priest who had celebrated the Mass, and then dismissed the squad.

The FIRST MASS was celebrated here in Onehunga by father ANTOINE JOSEPH SEON, a FRENCH MARIST priest and chaplain to ONEHUNGA, on the 21st day of Nov 1847, and he subsequently appealed to his congregation for money to erect a building which would serve as both a schoolroom for

the children and a temporary chapel. The public records state that the first CATHOLIC SCHOOL opened in July 1848.

History records that all of the ONEHUNGA based FENCIBLES placed a high value on EDUCATION for their children. At first the children had been taught the basic essentials (rudiments) of reading and writing while they were on the ships as they travelled out to New Zealand. Thereafter, as the village of ONEHUNGA was established, the CHURCHES, both CATHOLIC and CHURCH of ENGLAND took over the role of education. The CHURCH and the Church School played a central role in the lives of all the fencible families. The Church building was a place of worship of God, a place of education for the children, and a place of gathering for the Catholic community.

In 1856 there were 100 names on the school roll. In 1858, the Parish Priest, father James PAUL, approached MOTHER CECILIA, the superior of the MERCY ORDER of Catholic nuns, and made a request for Mercy Order sisters to come to ONEHUNGA. It took Mother Cecilia SIX (6) years to fulfil his request. In 1864 she sent two (2) sisters and a French postulant (A young woman not yet in vows, proposing to join the Mercy order of nuns). The sisters lived in a temporary pensioners cottage in Galway Street. The building consisted of four rooms and an attic where the Sisters slept. Two (2) of the rooms were used as schoolrooms.

In 1864, FATHER PAUL built a more permanent CONVENT, dedicated to St Joseph. And a school which he called SAINT MARY'S, on the land where the school still is today. To the Catholic people of Onehunga, the land comprising the OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC CHURCH site and adjoining cemetery are indeed holy ground, sanctified by well over 100 years of constant prayer.

When catholic fencibles died, and when the wives and children of catholic fencibles died, and when Onehunga parish priests died, they were buried in the cemetery grounds adjacent to the church. They were buried in the cemetery grounds adjacent to the church.

FATHER JAMES PAUL, the third Parish Priest of Onehunga, was buried in the WEST TRANSEPT OF OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC CHURCH.

If you wish to view the special monument that serves as the major memorial to the memory of the original Catholic Fencible Pensioners, and their wives and children, and also to the memory of Father James Paul, their PARISH PRIEST.

Then look around you, because it is everywhere around you, in this Sacred Space which they constructed together on this particular piece of land, where we have all gathered this evening.

A RECENT HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In August 2018 the Parish Secretary of Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church, received a letter from Mrs Shirley Kendall of Armidale, NSW 2350 Australia. The letter read as follows: "Shirley had been a resident of Onehunga and had taken an interest in the local history and especially the Fencible families. She had over time investigated and accumulated the history of the persons buried in the graveyard and wanted the record to be kept at the Church and the Onehunga Fencible and Historic Society.

The RECORD is as received from Shirley, and the pages are as she had numbered them – including duplicates and missing numbers. The RECORD enclosed with the letter contains hundreds of pages of photographs of individual family grave sites and family biographical details of all the persons buried in the cemetery of Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church. The Parish Secretary photocopied the RECORD and delivered a copy of it to the Onehunga Fencible and Historic Society.

The original RECORD is held in the office of the Parish Secretary of OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC CHURCH in Onehunga. Between 1870 and 1912 the school was developed and the location of the classes in the school buildings was reorganised.

In 1923 the school had a roll of 110 pupils, and a new school was built; and named SAINT JOSEPHS. In 1985 the main block of this school was demolished because it did not meet the building code of that time. The present school was integrated into the STATE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION in 1981. It continues to give a high-class education to children of many different nationalities, mainly Samoan (48%), Tongan (27%), European (10%) Asian (6%) Other Pacific (5%) and Maori (5%).

ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

The amount of the pension which a fencible received from the Imperial government varied, according to the military rank held by the pensioner in the regiment, his length of service, his good conduct and his efficiency with arms. The rate per day started at six pence (6d) and went as high as one shilling and ten pence (1/10d). (twenty-two pence 22d) pensions were paid quarterly.

When “quarter – day” came round, the amount payable to recipients ranged from eight pounds six shillings and eight pence (8.6.8) to two pounds nineteen shillings and six pence (2.19.6.). Because their pensions were not sufficient for them to support themselves without working, they were provided with work by the Government (for the first year or two) on road formation, or development-type work such as erecting stone walls and fences, or breaking-in ground around the perimeter of their villages for market gardening and wheat and barley production. Wages for Government Work varied from three shillings (3/-) to four shillings and six Pence (4/6d) per day.