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Correspondence should be addressed to:

The Administrator
New Zealand Journal of Public History
Public History Research Unit (PHRU)*
History Programme
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Te Tari Tumu Korero
The University of Waikato Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato
Private Bag 3105
New Zealand

Or by electronic mail to: phruadmin@waikato.ac.nz

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William Henry was a boy when he arrived in Aotearoa in 1853, and after growing up in the village of Howick in Auckland, he took possession of the land granted to militia in Hamilton East, Waikato. He was soon involved in keeping the peace and defending the town. He was soon ‘in the thick of it’, as he disarmed and arrested a local Māori who had attacked his brother-in-law with an axe.¹ He was assigned the duty of driver and minder for Colonel Lyons; the pair travelled extensively throughout the Waikato region, where the relationship between Māori and Pākehā was strained because of the confiscation of Māori land.²

The following is an insight into the life of my great-great-grandfather, William Henry Kelly. Many sources referred to are ‘public’, as much of his private life was not recorded. There are snippets of information gleaned from government documents and contemporary newspapers, council records and Military Rolls, Registers of Births, Deaths, and Marriage, and reports on civil and military events he attended. There is a narrative recorded, from his son James, transcribed by Hensleigh Norris. This is the sole personal record of William Henry and his family that I have found. At the time of William’s appearance in Hamilton the population was low, and because of his social station in life — which was that of an Irish soldier and settler — his life was of little importance to those recording the events of the day. I have been able to piece together a tapestry of facts and educated guesses, and by employing historical imagination, I have woven a tale of hardship and dogged determination, which was my ancestor’s life, as it was for most of the folk in early Hamilton.

The way William lived and the lengths to which he went in order to provide for his family and fashion a life for them in a foreign land, humbles me and I am proud to be his great-great-grandson.

William Henry Kelly was born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland, on 16 August 1845, to James and Frances Kelly (née Moore). His father was a career soldier, who was born in the ‘Fort of Gibraltar’ into a military family in 1807. Kelly senior, who served in the Royal Artillery for 23 years, fought the French in Canada for 14 of those years, and he and his wife had added four daughters to the family before they sailed back to Ireland. William, or W. H. as I will refer to him, was born eight years after his closest sister, with his brother George completing the Kelly family when he was born in Cavan, Tullamore, Ireland, in 1850.³
Life was precarious at that time in Ireland, with the Potato Blight causing widespread starvation among the population. In September 1845, the year W. H. was born, the blight hit Ireland, subsequently causing the deaths of thousands of people.\(^4\) Once the call went out for ‘pensioned-off’ military men to emigrate to New Zealand, James jumped at the chance of making a better life for his family. W. H. was just six years old when he and his family sailed from their homeland to this unknown land full of promise. The voyage started in London on 14 January and finished in Auckland on 27 May 1853. The journey aboard the Inchinnan was a rough one, with 22 passengers dying between England and New Zealand. The majority of the dead were the very young, who succumbed to a measles outbreak on board the ship.\(^5\)

It was nothing short of a miracle that W. H. and his siblings — Frances (17), Mary Anne (15), Leticia (13), and George (2) — survived the cramped and unhygienic conditions they would have endured. Their older sister Rebecca (21) had already married, and she remained behind in Ireland. James Kelly had signed up for the ‘Fencibles’ Regiment, which consisted of mainly ‘pensioned-off’ Irish and British soldiers. These men were conscripted to help ‘defend’ Auckland’s European settlers against the ‘Māori threat’. James, after his long service in the British Artillery, was described as ‘discharged, worn out’.\(^6\) There were four settlements planned, one each at Onehunga, Otahuhu, Panmure and Howick. W. H. and his family arrived in Howick, where his father was given land to develop and to build a home.

Little is known about W. H.’s schooling. Howick was just a camp when they arrived, so there were no established schools. Thus the commentary on his life moves to the 1860s, when he enlisted in the Auckland Militia. He served under Colonel Pitt for three years while attached to the 65\(^{th}\) Infantry.\(^7\) His age upon enlisting is unclear, but it was common for men as young as 16 to join up. The Nominal Roll of the Waikato Militia has him signing up on 3 November 1863, which puts him at 19 years.\(^8\) W. H. was transferred to Hamilton as a member of the 4\(^{th}\) Waikato Militia under Captain Steele, who later gave his name to Steele Park in Hamilton East. W. H. moved to Hamilton with his brother George and their father James.\(^9\) The threat of war in the Waikato made their destination a dangerous place for their womenfolk. In 1865 he married Mary Mullions, daughter of fellow militiaman Joseph.

In 1869 he was granted ‘lot 124’, an acre block in Heaphy Avenue (later Grey Street) in Hamilton East, and a 50-acre block, ‘lot 88’, on the corner of Thomas and Hukanui Roads.\(^10\) Most of the larger lots of land granted to the military settlers were swamp, and without the time and money needed for drainage and development, the land was useless. According to an interview, recorded by Norris with W. H.’s second son, James (Shine) Kelly, he traded his 50 acres for two milking cows.\(^11\) Many men just abandoned their lots and
returned to the goldfields. This decision would have been difficult for him, as the land was to be his farm and part of the reason for his move to Hamilton. The cows would have provided much-needed milk and with babies arriving, W. H.’s concerns most likely lay with feeding his family.

W. H. commenced his service with the 4th’s on 3 November 1864, so according to records, he was with the 65th Regiment while living in Howick from 1861. He had to serve a three-year term in order to qualify for his land grant, and upon completing this he joined the Waikato Cavalry. He then transferred to the Armed Constabulary on 3 November 1868, where he remained under Colonel Lyons. The exact dates are obscure but his record shows his service for these regiments. W. H. took on whatever work was available to provide for the family, as a private’s pay was a meagre two and a half shillings per day. Therefore his time was divided between building his house, working for a wage and defending the town.

Figure 1: William Henry Kelly, c. 1880 (Private Family Archive, Auckland).

In 1866 Mary gave birth to Archibald Oswell, followed closely by James in 1867, Joseph Mullions (my great-grandfather) in 1869, William Henry Jr. in 1871, Frances Caroline in 1874, Frederick Charles in 1877, Leonard in 1879, Albert Edward in 1881 and Thomas in 1883.
W. H. saved his brother in-law from further injury or even death at the hands of a local Māori, Atia and his accomplice, when they caught the latter stealing potatoes from their garden in Tamahere.

According to Norris, Joseph Mullions (W. H.’s father-in-law) had held the thief overnight and was escorting Atia and the stolen vegetables to Hamilton, when the thief attacked Henry Mullions (W. H.’s brother-in-law) with a hammer or an axe. W. H. knocked down and disarmed the assailant, and took Henry to Dr Beale in Hamilton for treatment for his head wound.\(^{15}\)

In the 1870s W. H. was assigned to Colonel Lyon as his driver. In 1873 local Moana-tua-tua (Monovale) labourer Timothy Sullivan was shot, beheaded, and his heart reputedly taken as a trophy by Māori. W. H. drove the Colonel all over the Waikato with the officer trying, by his presence, to quell the ill feeling among the settlers and the dispossessed Māori. Norris described W. H. as having a ‘thin wiry frame and fair hair’, and recounts that he handled his team of horses with skill and pride and could make the trip between Cambridge and Hamilton in 45 minutes.\(^ {16}\)

According to James Kelly, his father was hard-working and took on any job available. He remembered W. H. milking his own cows on their Grey Street property, then walking to Tamahere where he milked three cows for ‘Aussie’ Graham, before ploughing for eight hours. He then milked Graham’s cows again before walking home and milking his own cows. He was paid five shillings per day for what would have been a 16-hour day. He proved to be an entrepreneurial man as he soon had his own cartage business, the first in Hamilton. He was an expert at handling a shovel and held tenders for gravel-laying and ditching around Hamilton.\(^ {17}\)
The 1870-1871 electoral roll indicates W. H.’s ownership of lots 139 and 143 in Hamilton East, then only lot 144 ten years later. W. H. was building roads, as most of the soldiers were, and he wrote to the Hamilton Borough Council in May 1879, complaining of interference to his access to the gravel pits. W. H. still had to fulfil his commitments to the Militia, and was called to parades and reviews all over the Waikato. The *Auckland Star* reported on one such occasion, when a ‘300 strong’ brigade of the Waikato Cavalry was to muster and parade in Grahamstown (Thames) that week in April 1879.

In May 1880, W. H. was involved in elections of the Calvary officers held in Alexandra (Pirongia). After a spell of hauling mail and goods for the Hamilton tramway, W. H. started up his goods agency.
March 1881 proved a mixed month for W. H., when his house caught fire and he received severe burns to his hands in extinguishing the blaze. Later that month he secured a contract delivering Huntly coal and extended his business to include storage and consigning goods. He continued subcontracting gravel work and expanding his cartage business, while building a reputation as an amicable and trustworthy citizen.

In March 1883 W. H. was attacked in his home by John Hall, a disgruntled worker he had dismissed for mistreating the horses. He was appointed ‘pound keeper’ in Hamilton East on 17 July of the same year; his main duties included catching and impounding stray stock. James Kelly Sr. died after a short illness, on 29 March 1884. W. H.’s mother, Frances, lived for a further eight years until she passed away, aged 81 years, and joined her husband in the All Saints Church graveyard in Howick in 1892.

W. H. continued to run his coach through the Waikato, offering cartage and passenger services. He ran a ‘spring wagon’ to the horse races at Ngaruawahia from Hamilton, charging two and a half shillings for the return journey. W. H. became a grandfather for the first time in 1890 when Archibald’s wife, Emily, gave birth to a son, Leslie. By this time W. H. had a thriving transport business, carrying passengers and freight across the region. W. H. remained attached to the Army and was one of the Militia survivors that planted an oak tree in Steele Park, on August 26 1889, to commemorate 25 years since they landed in Hamilton East.
In November, W. H. proved his worth as a marksman and tied for first place in the Hamilton Light Infantry’s Company Cup. His son James was marker. The Company followed up later by placing third in the New Zealand competition.

W. H. lost his eight-roomed home to fire in Hamilton East on 6 November 1908. He was not able to save the house this time. Unfortunately, nothing was saved from the blaze and it is unknown if the property was insured. The lack of fire-fighting machinery and the location of the house made saving the house difficult.

Thomas, W. H.’s youngest son, finally succumbed to injuries he received in a horrific accident. He had his hand torn off and his arm crushed in a flax ‘scutcher’ (a machine that separates the fibres in flax), while working at Tamahere in 1902, and died in 1910. In 1915 W. H. and Mary celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary. William Henry Jr. and Albert Edward both served in the reserves for the New Zealand Army during WW 1.

W. H. had lived a long and colourful life when, after a fall on the way to an ANZAC parade, he was admitted to Waikato Hospital. He never recovered from his injuries and died 2 May 1926. William Henry Kelly was 80 years old. His beloved Mary had passed away.
four years previously, on 2 February 1922, aged 77 years. W. H. had retired with the rank of sergeant and had served a total of 42 years in the Army and as a volunteer. W. H. and his father James Kelly were both awarded the New Zealand Medal.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Figure 6:} New Zealand Medal.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Figure 7:} Veterans of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Waikato Militia, at Steele Park, Hamilton East, c. 1889.\textsuperscript{37}
Figure 8: Headstone of W. H. and Mary Kelly, Hungerford Cemetery, Hamilton East (Property of author).

Notes

1 H. C. M. Norris, Armed Settlers: The Story of the Founding of Hamilton, New Zealand, 1864-1874, 2nd edition (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1963), p. 131. Most of Norris’s information about W. H. seems to have been gleaned from his interview with James Kelly; see note 11.

2 Norris, Armed Settlers, pp. 201-3.


6 The Royal New Zealand Fencibles, p. 149.


8 British Army, Nominal and Descriptive Rolls of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Waikato Regiments: 1863-1867, p. 263.

9 The Royal New Zealand Fencibles, p. 149.
New Zealand Army Department, *4th Waikato Regiment Land Register 1864*. Original register held by the National Archives, Wellington, New Zealand. Held on microfiche at the University of Waikato under *Nominal and Descriptive Roll, 3rd Regiment, Waikato Militia; 4th Regiment (Auckland, 1863)*.

‘Life Narrative Interview with James (Shine) Kelly, 1930-1949’. Interviewed by H. C. M. Norris, MSC 46, Box 6, Item 6, p. 36. Text held at Hamilton Public Library Archives. The fact that W. H. sold his farm is perplexing, as he had the skills needed to drain his land but he chose not to. The exact date of the interview is unknown; 1930 is four years after William’s death, and James died in 1949.

Archives New Zealand, New Zealand Defence Force (see note 7).

‘Waikato Militia Recruitment’, *New Zealand Gazette*, 3 August 1863, pp. 16-26. (Item 17 in ‘Conditions upon which land in the North Island will be granted to settlers willing to perform the after-mentioned military services’).


Norris, ‘Life Narrative Interview’.

Kete Hamilton <ketehamilton.peoplesnetwork.nz.info/Hamilton-heritage/topics/show/1861-steele-park-the-early-years> [accessed 12 August 2013].


*Waikato Times*, 17 May 1879, p. 2.

*Auckland Star*, 10 April 1879, p. 3.

*Waikato Times*, 4 May 1880, p. 2.

Ibid., 22 February 1881, p. 2.

Ibid., 12 March 1881, p. 2.

Ibid., 26 November 1881, p. 3.

Ibid., 5 April 1883, p. 3.

Ibid., 17 July 1883, p. 2.

Ibid., 9 April 1889, p. 3.

Kete Hamilton <ketehamilton.peoplesnetwork.nz.info/Hamilton-heritage/topics/show/1861-steele-park-the-early-years> [accessed 12 August 2013].

*Waikato Times*, 12 November 1889, p. 2.

*Evening Post*, 6 November 1908, p. 2.

Kelly Family Archive, Auckland. From a notebook dated 1922, author unknown, and photocopies of newspaper clippings held by the Kelly family.

*Auckland Star*, 26 April 1926, p. 5.

*Waikato Times*, 3 May 1926, p. 3.

