

The Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps

Introduction

The Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps is often viewed as a blip in the history of New Zealand. The initiative, created in response to Governor George Grey's call for more troops, was active for about ten years, from 1847-58. The Fencibles, which comes from the word defensible, were settled along possible invasion routes to Auckland. However, the feared attack from the south never materialised. Instead, the paranoia, in post-Northern War Auckland, eventually resulted in the New Zealand Wars, with troops being deployed south in large numbers.

While the Fencibles never played a major role in our national history, they did play an important role in the development of Tāmaki Makaurau. With a population of approximately 2,800 people, the town nearly doubled in size with the arrival of the Fencibles and their families, numbering around 2,500. Many of the men had served overseas, especially in India, and many were Irish, trying to escape the ongoing potato famine. Given land and pay in addition to their pension, they became the ancestors of many Aucklanders today. Rather than being a successful military project, the Fencibles proved to be an important part of strengthening the colonial sentiment in Auckland.

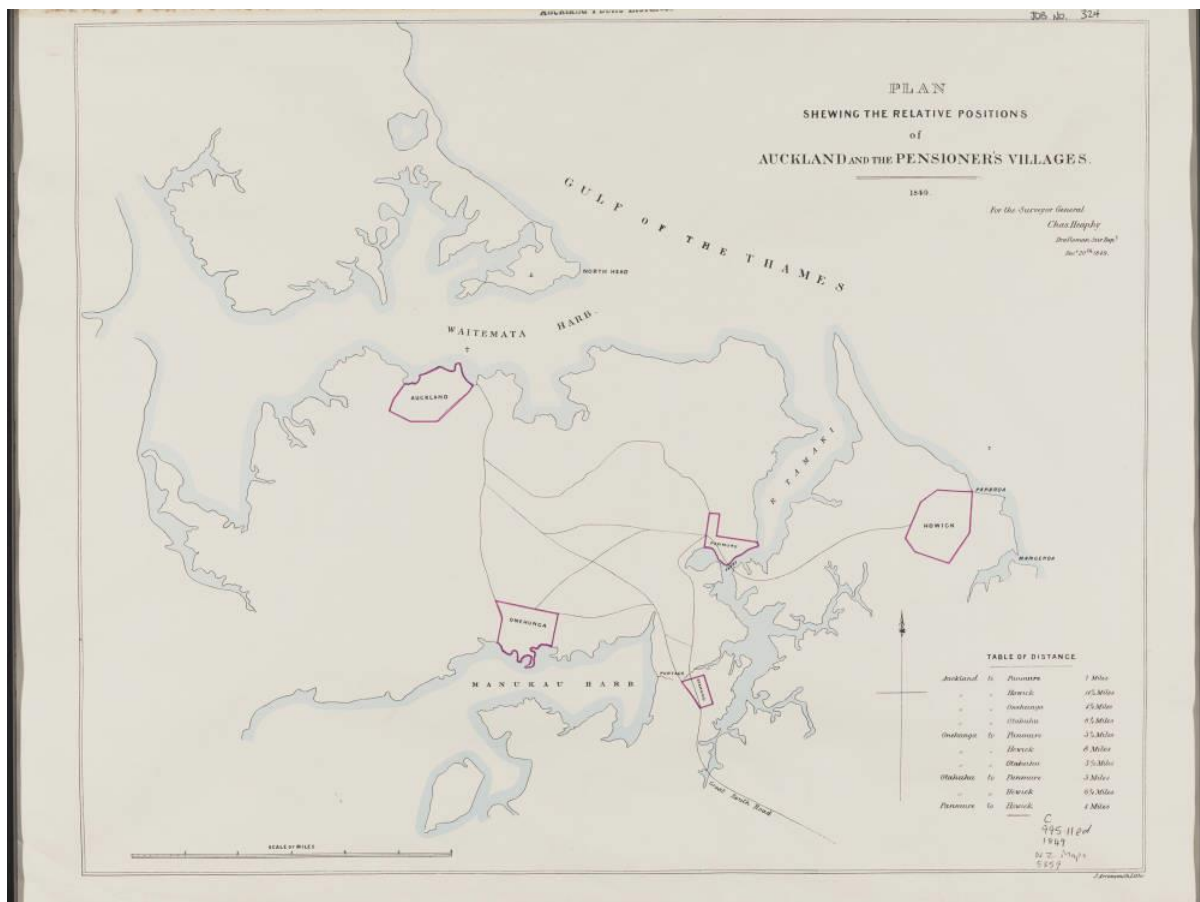
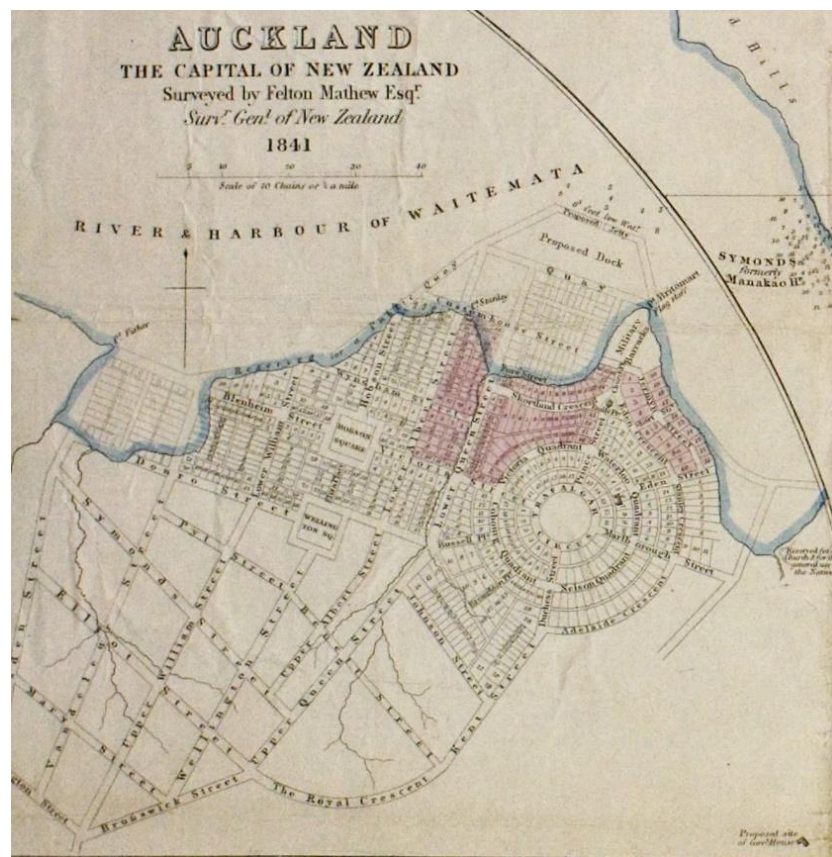


Figure 1. Plan shewing the relative positions of Auckland and the pensioner's villages. This a facsimile of a map published in Great Britain and was produced by Charles Heaphy, for the Surveyor General. [Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections Map 5359](#).

The Situation in New Zealand

The establishment of Auckland in 1840, later made the capital in 1841, drew attention and trade away from the Bay of Islands and the northern iwi. Hone Heke, the first signatory of Te Tiriti, led some Māori in a conflict with the Crown and other northern iwi between 1845-1846. This outbreak of hostilities, along with Heke's successes, shook the confidence of the government in Auckland and scared the settler population. In response to the growing fear amongst the settlers Governor FitzRoy requested additional troops from the British government, in part to secure the new capital from attack. This request was repeated and expanded upon by his successor, Governor Grey.



2

The British government saw the necessity for more troops but were unwilling to detach so many from the regular army. Thus a compromise was reached, the establishment of the Royal New Zealand Fencibles. This is laid out in Earl Grey's letter to Governor Grey, dated 24 November 1846.

'... you state that a military force considerably larger than that which is now stationed there will in your opinion for some years to come required... and that you consider not less than 2500 men to be necessary [for] this purpose.'

*'It will not however, be in the power of her majesty's government to supply the whole of this reinforcement from the regular army. A part of it will consist of a force of a different description to be formed for the purpose... This force will be designated as the Royal New Zealand Fencibles...'*¹

Governor Grey's initial fear was due to the Northern War, but the Fencible families would not arrive until after the conflict had been resolved.

As a result, the initial plan to settle the families in northern areas like Whangārei and the Bay of Islands fell apart amid fears of antagonising the already tense situation in the area. Instead, heated debate ensued about where the 'Pensioners', as the Fencibles were often called at the time, should be placed.

The Situation in the British Isles

The offer of employment and land in the new colony was highly appealing for many older soldiers who had been pensioned out of the army and were struggling to survive in harsh conditions. In Ireland the Potato Famine was devastating the entire island. The failure of the potato crop, which was the main source of food for a large portion of the population, led to massive starvation, disease and death. Over a million people died, and a million more emigrated out of the country in one of the worst famines ever experienced in Europe. It was so devastating that modern-day Ireland is still yet to recover its pre-famine population, over 150 years later.²

This was the harsh reality for those Irish soldiers who had taken their pension from the British army. With this in mind, it is wholly unsurprising that so many Irish took up the offer and volunteered themselves and their families for the Fencibles program. So many did this, in fact, that the majority of the Fencibles were both Irish and Roman Catholic, something that would remake the religious and ethnic makeup of Auckland.

England, however, was not going through such a rough time but large issues still existed. The obvious one was land. Returning soldiers who might have wanted to acquire land to farm were unlikely to be

¹ The New Zealand Fencible Society, *The Royal New Zealand Fencibles 1847-1852*, Waiuku, W. J. Deed Printing Ltd, 1987, p. 7

² Collinson, Paul. 'Echoes of Catastrophe: Famine, Conflict and Reconciliation in the Irish Borderlands', Paul Collinson and Helen Macbeth (eds.), *Food in Zones of Conflict Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014, p. 171, 174

able to do this, as there was simply not enough land to go around. With their soldiers' pay and pensions buying land was mostly out of reach, forcing those who were so inclined to look to the colonies. Additionally, those who didn't have a trade would have been forced to compete for work as low paid labourers, when it was available. As a result, the offer of regular employment and land in return for Fencible work sounded enticing to many, even without the push of famine that the Irish soldiers endured.

The Fencibles Themselves

Who Came?

There were 13,000 army pensioners in the British Isles, and all of them faced the same criteria for entry into the Fencibles program.

*'The men had to be of good character, under 48 years of age, (this was later lowered to 41 years of age as numbers requesting enlistment were so great), with a minimum of 15 years' service. They needed to be over 5ft 5 inches in height... industrious habits, robust frame and be medically approved of, as fit for the occasional military duties required.'*³

The fifteen-year period of service ensured that the service men had a wide variety of experience across the British Empire. From Canada and the Caribbean to Egypt and South Africa, these men had served across the British Empire. The most significant number of men had served in the wars in India and Afghanistan.

The early and mid-nineteenth century was a time of expansion and consolidation in British India. As British control over the subcontinent tightened so did determination to protect their position from outside threats. During this period the colonial authorities adopted a complex but increasingly aggressive diplomatic strategy towards neighbouring states. This led to a series of conflicts including the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842), where the British were led by Governor General Lord Auckland, our city's namesake. The fighting was harsh and so were the conditions, with many British soldiers dying due to exposure in bitter winters and contrasting desert conditions. The soldiers who emerged from these conflicts were hardened men.

In light of the struggles at home and the ruthless conflicts from which they emerged, it is little wonder these men and their families were willing to take a risk and travel to unknown islands on the other side of the world. Nelson Blake writes that the officials, '... received a flood of applicants and men were selected from over 40 Foot Regiments, Royal Artillery, Rifles Brigade, Foot Guards, Louth Militia, Sappers and Miners, Dragoon Guards, Light Dragoons and New Foundland Veterans.'⁴ These successful

³ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 7

⁴ Macdonald, Winifred, *Pioneer Village project: Who were the Fencibles? Where did they live? Why did they Come?*, Auckland, Museum of Transport and Technology, 1971

candidates received an advance of three months' pension, with the addition of a further one month for every dependent child, in order to purchase the necessary gear for their long voyages.⁵

Gravesend and Tilbury Port in England, Cork, Galway and Belfast in Ireland were the points of departure for the families, many making their way to the ports on newly constructed railways.⁶ Six months after the enlistment the first ship, the *Ramillies*, left with the first group of Fencibles. The *Ramillies*, *Sir Robert Sale*, *Minerva*, *Clifton*, *Sir George Seymour*, *Ann*, *Berhampore* and *Oriental Queen* - left between 1847-49, carrying 603 men, 527 women and 1047 children. The last Fencibles came in 1852 with 78 men on the *Inchinnan* and 40 men on the *Berwick Castle*.⁷



Figure 3. *Sir George Seymour* under sail. It was one of the first 3 ships to bring the Fencible soldiers to Howick in 1847. W.T. Howard. [National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London](#).

Prior to leaving their homes Fencible families were provided with clear instructions about what they would be provided and what they could and couldn't bring. Beds or other furniture were prohibited. While only clean and well-maintained clothing was allowed, as well as tools or other implements of trade unless they were too bulky. They were also allowed to bring household items like cutlery and

⁵ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 8

⁶ Macdonald, n.p

⁷ *ibid*

teapots but were told not to buy new items as some would be provided. Limits were put on the size of boxes, but women who had been employed sewing and washing could bring their gear. Fencibles were warned not to take on debt and any act of drunkenness or gross misconduct before departure would result in being struck off the embarkation list.⁸

The Voyages

The ships all took a similar route, through the rough waters of the Bay of Biscay, south to the equator on the Western coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope then straight across the southern Indian Ocean to New Zealand. The trip took roughly three months for most of the ships, but the *Inchinnan*, *Berwick Castle* and the *Ann* took four, six and seven months respectively. These ships stopped at the Falkland Islands and Tasmania, unlike the others. Often the ships were becalmed around the equator, before picking up the trade winds that took them to the Cape of Good Hope. Once there the warm weather and pleasant winds were over, as the harsh 'roaring forties' weather pattern blew the ships east. Nelson Blake imagines some of the best parts of the voyages,

*'The beautiful constellation of the Southern Cross would be first seen before reaching the Cape. The emigrants would experience wonderful sunrises and sunsets in the tropics. Even though the days would be hot they would see the phosphorescence at night when the sea would look like silver. Birds such as albatrosses and mollymawks would follow the ship for days in the air while dolphins and flying fish would keep them company in the ocean. Other companions would be cape pigeons, petrels and giant frigate birds poised high in the sky.'*⁹

The last part of the voyage from South Africa to New Zealand would have been the worst, as fresh food ran out and tough weather dominated their days and nights. Each family was squeezed onto a 10-foot square of deck with a blanket hung around their space for privacy. Washing was done frequently, given their small amount of belongings, and only salt water would have been available. Cooking was done in a tiny galley and higher quality food like butter, sugar, and vegetables would have slowly been replaced by dried fish, fatty salted pork, and ships biscuits. Ships biscuits, in particular, were an infamous source of nutrition for long voyages. More like rock hard, tasteless, dried bread than a modern biscuit, they often became infested with weevils. You could try to knock the biscuit against something to try to remove the weevils but most sailors didn't bother, insisting that the weevils added some taste to the meal.

For the times though, the experience of the Fencible families was better than most. Medical officers were required on board, and some individuals were paid to act as schoolmasters for the many children on the voyages. On the *Inchinnan* the surgeon had an assistant, Michael Foley, while the *Berhampore* had both an assistant, Alexander Bonner, and a nurse, Esther Riley. William Blackburn and Catherine Holland were school master and mistress aboard the *Berhampore*, being paid three and two pounds

⁸ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 13.

⁹ Macdonald, n.p

respectively for their efforts. Walter Baskerville was schoolmaster aboard the *Inchinnan*, being paid an impressive five pounds for his services.¹⁰

The families did their best to entertain themselves, with dancing and singing on the deck when the weather was pleasant, cards and music below deck when it was not. Harmonicas and accordions were around, providing some distraction for the bored families. Most Fencibles were illiterate, so reading to pass the time was largely out of the question.

Boredom was not the only issue the Fencible families faced aboard their ships, nor was it the most serious. Despite the presence of trained medical officers, illness and disease were unavoidable parts of maritime travel in this period. Medical science was still in its infancy and the cramped quarters of a ship were fertile ground for deadly illnesses. The *Inchinnan* suffered an outbreak of measles and chickenpox which killed 22, mostly children. Aboard the *Ann* influenza broke out, killing 12. The *Clifton* fared the worst, with 46 people passing away during the voyage.¹¹

Arrival in New Zealand

Unfortunately for the Fencible families, their arrival on the shore of New Zealand was not what they imagined. So far things had gone roughly to plan. The men and their families had received the money they had been promised, they'd been given free passage as well as the promised support whilst on board. But, as it turned out, the colonial authorities, not as organised or as focussed as their British counterparts, struggled to deliver on the promises made.

The men expected that *'[o]n arriving in New Zealand each pensioner would be put in possession of a cottage of two rooms, with an acre of land attached thereto, one-fourth part of which would be cleared and made ready for cultivation at the public expense, preparatory to his arrival.'*¹²

The New Zealand government had not handled any of these arrangements when the first ship, the *Ramillies*, arrived. In fact, they had still yet to agree where to send the settlers. Letters to the *Southern Cross* newspaper reveal the public awareness of the government's failure.

*'If we were disposed to be severe, we might with propriety say some hard things respecting the vacillation of purpose that has marked the conduct of the Government in reference to the location of the Pensioners.'*¹³

The major problem, besides a general lack of preparation, was the contradicting promises given to the Fencibles by the New Zealand government. While the potential sites at the Bay of Islands and Whangārei were ruled out due to fears of inflaming the tense relationship with northern iwi, Governor Grey still

¹⁰ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 15

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 14-15

¹² *Ibid*, p. 8

¹³ 'The Pensioners', *Daily Southern Cross*, vol. 3, iss. 121, 16 Oct 1847, p. 2
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18471016.2.7>

wanted to place a Fencible settlement at Mahurangi to defend Auckland from the north. The Fencibles, however, had been promised before they left that their villages would be within five miles of Auckland.¹⁴ This was a crucial provision for the families, as the ability to reach Auckland and find work in and around the city was important. In fact, it would prove even more vital than most of the Fencibles would probably have guessed.

The combination of Fencible reluctance and fears of angering the northern iwi eventually made the government reconsider. They acquired land around Onehunga, making it the first Fencible settlement. Those aboard the *Ramillies* were housed in the Albert Barracks in Auckland, while temporary buildings were being constructed for them in Onehunga.



Figure 4. Main guard, Albert Barracks. Matravers, Thomas, 1831-1895. [Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 3-137-26a](#).

There were two main problems with this. First, government procrastination had meant that the contractors had sold off a large amount of their timber supplies, which restricted the materials available to begin construction. Second, the temporary buildings were a far cry from the two room cottages and partially cleared land that the Fencibles had been promised. Instead, those from the *Ramillies* were

¹⁴ Macdonald, n.p

housed in what were basically large sheds, designed to fit a hundred men in each. They would stay a whole year in these temporary buildings.¹⁵

As the *Minerva* and *Sir Robert Sale* arrived in Auckland harbour, the matter of settlement location was still not resolved. It was the arrival of the commanding officer Major General Pitt with this contingent that finally put an end to the government's indecision. Excerpts from the *Southern Cross* go so far as to suggest the Fencibles and the settlers should be thankful for his opportune arrival and intervention.¹⁶ Putting an end to the ideas of northern settlements, it was instead decided that the Fencible settlements would guard important strategic points to the south of Auckland. Specifically, places where invading waka taua might stop. This was a big reason for choosing Howick as the next settlement, though the choice was a controversial one.

Once again, the pages of the *Southern Cross* reveal how lively the debate was at the time. The unsuitability of the new settlement that would become Howick is discussed at length. It was noted how much further it was from Auckland, 12 to 16 miles, and how this would make it very difficult for Fencibles to find work. The writer predicted that the men would either have to leave for Auckland six days a week, to the detriment of the village, or deal with a lack of employment opportunities.¹⁷ This would prove to be a very accurate prediction.

The suitability of the physical area was also called into question. The Tāmaki River, also known as Tāmaki Estuary, was considered too wide and rough and the settlers too divided by its banks to be practical. The proposed site of the village was also criticised, with its location in a valley surrounded by hills making it 'perfectly indefensible either by sea or by land.' It was also isolated, even by the standards of the time, leading to concerns it would be hard to maintain and that the Fencibles would be unable to build a sustainable community. On top of this the *Southern Cross* questioned the Government's rights to the land, as well as how useful a far-flung settlement would be to the defence of Auckland. A single sentence makes the writer's feelings clear,

*'The idea of these men sitting quietly down in their village in the wilderness and cultivating their gardens with either satisfaction or advantage to themselves, is so utterly absurd, as to be unworthy of refutation.'*¹⁸

Despite all of these points and all of the accompanying controversy, the settlement went ahead. In December 1847 800 people, from the *Minerva*, *Sir Robert Sale* and *Sir George Seymour*, were dropped off by the gunbrig *Victoria*. Once again, none of the promised preparations had been made. Two temporary sheds were again constructed to house the families until the cottages could be built.

¹⁵ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 18-19

¹⁶ 'The Pensioners'

¹⁷ 'Pensioners - Village OP Paparoa', *Daily Southern Cross*, vol. 3, iss. 124, 6 Nov 1847, p. 2

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18471106.2.4>

¹⁸ Ibid

The remaining ships arrived one by one. First the *Clifton* in January 1848, with its families establishing the settlement at Panmure. The *Ann* arrived in May, with the families establishing Otahuhu. Then the *Berhampore* and *Oriental Queen* in June and September 1849, whose passengers joined the settlement at Onehunga. When the last ships arrived, the *Inchinnan* and *Berwick Castle*, May and December 1852, their families were spread out among the four settlements.

Life in a Fencible settlement

Early Struggles

Things did not get easier for the Fencibles and their families for quite some time. The government was still apparently unable to provide for the new settlers, with their failures reflected once again in the pages of the *Southern Cross*.¹⁹ The promises given to the settlers turned out to be at best overly optimistic, at worst flat out lies.

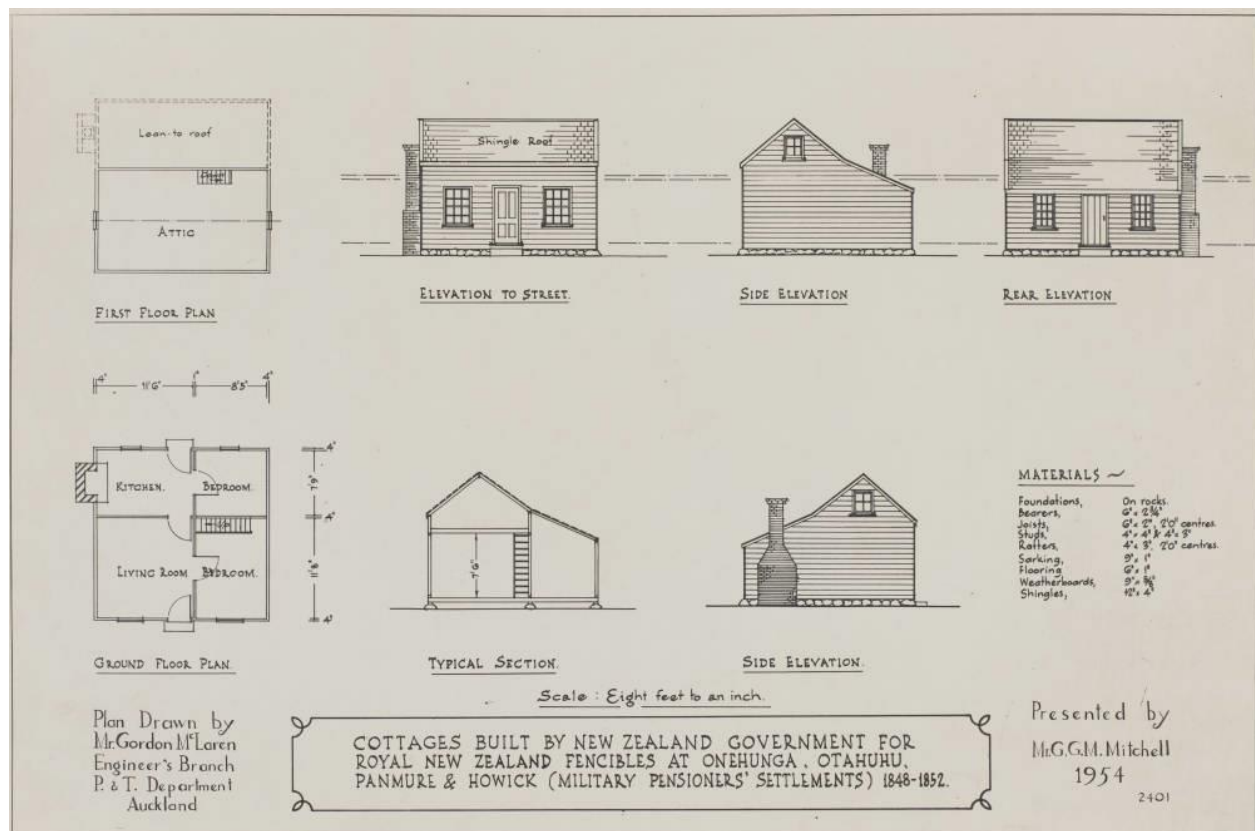


Figure 5. Cottages built by New Zealand Government for Royal New Zealand Fencibles at Onehunga, Otahuhu, Panmure and Howick (military pensioners' settlements) 1848-1852. [Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections Map 4628](https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18490623.2.5).

It turns out that the idyllic image of a two-room cottage with cleared land was more than a little misleading. Instead of a single, freehold standalone dwelling, the pensioners mostly got half of a larger cottage. There was a wall to separate the families from each other and they did get two rooms, though

¹⁹ New Zealand Fencibles', *Daily Southern Cross*, vol. 4, iss. 209, 23 June 1849, p. 2
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18490623.2.5>

they were a single room and a loft rather than two full rooms as might have been expected. The reason for this was, unsurprisingly, cost, as the double units turned out far cheaper to construct.²⁰ And, of course, since the Fencible families arrived to incomplete preparations, the promise 'that one fourth of his acre land shall be cleared and made ready for cultivation preparatory to his arrival' was also broken.

Living Conditions

The living conditions the Fencibles endured should also be examined, starting with the temporary 'immigration sheds'. If you're imagining a large, spacious and well-built modern shed, think again. The temporary sheds were constructed hastily and were woefully inadequate, even by the standards of the time. The families were packed in, living in conditions similar or even worse than they had suffered aboard the ships. The sheds are also recorded as letting in the wind and rain, hardly an ideal situation in New Zealand.²¹ Many Fencible families had to live in these conditions for up to a whole year, enduring all the seasons with their unique difficulties.

As for the cottages themselves, they were also less than expected. Some of them were well constructed and quite comfortable, particularly the officers' homes.

Most Fencible cottages, however, could be better described as rough raupō huts.

*'The very first houses of many pioneer families were often raupo huts - little thatched affairs with an earth floor - very dark and cramped and highly inflammable. In country districts, slab huts were often used until it was possible to build a more permanent frame house of sawn timber.'*²²

²⁰ Macdonald, n.p

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid



Figure 6. Fencible Raupō hut; Image kindly provided by Howick Historic Village. [2018.085.10](#).

An earthen floor might have been bad enough, but with the context of Auckland's wet weather this would quickly have become a muddy mess. The 'highly inflammable' nature of the huts is also important to note because while iron and brick ranges were common in England, they were deemed too large and too expensive for the huts. Instead, the families used an open fire, left burning basically year-round. Not only did this put the families in constant danger of accidentally catching their home alight, it also would have made the cramped hut smoky and undoubtedly hurt the health of the families.

The cooking was done with simple tools. A large frying pan, iron pot, a big black kettle, a small camp oven, things that were simple to use and, most importantly, cheap. The food itself was similarly basic. Porridge, bread but with little to no butter or jam, a stew or hot pot containing whatever was on hand, some meat on occasion and fruit and vegetables when they were in season. Boiled puddings, or similarly easy desserts like girdle scones or oatcakes, were also possibly on the menu. In the early years fruit and especially vegetables would have been less available as their sections were still being cleared. Produce from nearby Māori settlements, like pork, potatoes, kumara and peaches, could be purchased at reasonable prices, and would have been welcome additions before farming of the Fencible plots began in earnest.

Tensions in Auckland

For the colonial authorities, the promises that had been made were very hard for them to keep. In New Zealand the lumber industry was still in its infancy and the high costs associated were hard for the nascent colonial government to bear. If the Fencible settlements had been kept within 5 miles of Auckland their usefulness as defensive barriers would have been hugely diminished. Acquiring land that close would also have been difficult and expensive. The reception to the large influx of Fencibles amongst the existing citizens of Auckland was also mixed. Some fears were stirred up by the arrival of the Fencibles, even though the settlers of Auckland themselves had only been there for about five years themselves.

On the one hand, there are some recorded events that show an open and welcoming spirit amongst Aucklanders. Excerpts from the [*Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal*](#) document a large picnic feast that was held for the arrivals of the *Minerva* and *Sir Robert Sale*. This included fresh beef, buns with butter, honey from Paihia Mission Station, fresh milk and large puddings.²³ The citizens of Auckland had feared invasion for a few years now, so the Fencibles' arrival was welcomed as a strengthening of the defensive capabilities of the new capital.

Alternatively, there were significant prejudices that the Fencibles faced on arrival. First was the fear of disease. Ships were often made to sit in the harbour and wait out any sickness they might have picked up on their voyage. Some of the Fencible voyages had been marked by sickness and the worry that an epidemic might be caused by disembarking the passengers was real. At this time the early stages of modern medicine were still being explored, and the safest way to deal with epidemics of dangerous illnesses was still to let them play out aboard, despite the risk to the passengers. The pages of the *Southern Cross* reveal a minor panic and record the rumours that were spreading when the *Clifton*, the ship that fared the worst on the voyage, arrived in January 1848. It is not a coincidence that the paper, from the mostly English settlers, pointedly mentions the dire situation in Ireland.

*'We know what Ireland has suffered from fever as well as famine, and a ship from that country should only be admitted as having a clean bill of health after the utmost precaution. We fear our quarantine regulations are far too lax and that we shall someday suffer severely from our want of precaution.'*²⁴

Other fears were less reasonable. Aucklanders were skeptical about these 'old, worn-out, drunken soldiers', both in their ability to defend them and their general moral character.²⁵ Not only were these men mostly in their forties, in a society where life expectancy was around 60, but their time in the military would have aged them prematurely, making them look older than they were. It appears the existing Aucklanders could be less than forgiving about the incoming veterans. No doubt they, like the

²³ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 22.

²⁴ 'Paparoa - The Pensioners', *Daily Southern Cross*, vol. 3, iss. 136, 29 Jan 1848, p. 2
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18480129.2.6>

²⁵ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 22.

colonial government, had been hoping for battalions of fresh faced, well trained young soldiers, and were disappointed to be getting a group of pensioners instead.

The ethnic and religious tensions should also not be overlooked. The high proportion of Irish Catholic soldiers that were now arriving in Auckland would inevitably cause issues. Tensions between the Irish and English were high, partly due to the ongoing Potato Famine. Many Irish blamed the British government for policies that had worsened the famine. Things got so bad in Ireland that many point to the famine as an inflection point for the rapid growth of nationalist sentiment and Irish independence movements. On the other side many English had long held prejudices against both Irish and Catholics, with English history marked by hundreds of years of conflict to subjugate the Irish. Catholicism was also looked down upon, if not outright feared, even 160 odd years after the Glorious Revolution had kicked out the last Catholic British monarch. In the colonies, consequently, the complicated relationship between these groups was still highly relevant.

Poverty and employment

The Fencibles and the Aucklanders largely came to appreciate each other as a result of a unifying and simple motivator, money. To put it simply many settlers ran businesses that needed workers and the Fencibles desperately needed work. Due to the slow start with their properties the Fencible families faced high set up costs and little income. It would be a while before their properties became productive and the start-up costs needed to be covered alongside the additional everyday costs. Their pensions were not enough to live off of and work was needed.

*'The early farmers were handicapped by poor transport facilities and too few markets, so many of them had to go off for a period to work on roads or the new railways, or in a timber mill or out on the kauri fields of the north.'*²⁶

Here it is helpful to introduce Doctor John Thomas Watson Bacot. Dr Bacot was a well-educated Englishman from London who had served as Assistant Surgeon with the 39th Regiment during their tour in India. Upon returning from this posting he accepted the position of Medical Officer for the Fencible Corps and arrived in Auckland aboard the *Ann* in June 1848. His reminiscences about the period and his time with the Fencibles are a valuable historical source, and his blunt honesty serves to illuminate more personal and controversial parts of Fencible life.²⁷

²⁶ Macdonald, n.p

²⁷ Bacot, John Thomas Watson, *Reminiscences*, 1887. [Auckland War Memorial Museum Library. MS-1989-76.](#)



Figure 7. John Thomas Watson and wife Anne Bacot seated on a sofa, c. 1905. John married Anne the daughter of Captain Alexander MacDonald at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church in September 1851. Image kindly provided by Howick Historical Village [2018.302.01](#).

Bacot got into several difficult situations during his time with the Fencibles, and his experiences reveal the somewhat testy relationship the Fencibles sometimes had with the colonial officials. An example of this is the *Pensioner Gazette*, a newspaper run by Bacot and his friend Owen Grey. It had a short run and was shut down due to its open, honest, and apparently sometimes satirical, discussion of grievances among the Fencibles. Bacot wrote that,

'I suppose it was pretty outspoken and very likely insubordinate - at any rate the Editors received an intimation that if we did not stop publication we should have to return to England.'

This experience is just one example of the resentment many Fencibles seemed to hold. Their situation turned out to be less idyllic than they had hoped, and not only because of the government's broken promises. Their situation was odd. They were supposed to take any difficulties to their superior officers, since they were technically part of a military unit. But if the officers cared, which was not guaranteed, there wasn't much they could actually do about the political and economic issues plaguing their men. In many ways the Fencibles were now stuck in unenviable positions.

While describing the changes wrought in New Zealand by the start of the Australian Gold Rush in 1851, Bacot summarises a key issue for the Fencibles.

*'The Pensioners were tied down by the conditions of service. If they went [to Australia], they forfeited all claims and lost the cottage and acre which were to become their own property at the expiration of eleven years of enrolment. So the Pensioners stuck to the ship and grumbled.'*²⁸

This was the core issue with the Fencible settlements, and one that had been pointed out by eagle eyed observers during the debate over the settlement of Howick. Without cleared land and decent transport routes, which Bacot assures us there were not, the Fencibles could not make enough of a living off their properties. While those in Onehunga were close enough to travel to and from Auckland, allowing them to find work and keep up with the mandated military exercises, those further afield could not. These exercises had to be attended to maintain your claim on your allotted land.



Figure 8. Picton Street Howick looking East with All Saints Church in background and Fencible cottages in foreground; circa 1860; Image kindly provided by Howick Historic Village [1013](#).

The families, especially those in Howick, faced an unfortunate choice. Abandon their post to find regular work to support their family, thus losing their promised land, or stay and suffer. Many, mostly from Howick and Panmure, tried various ways to get the best of both worlds, but it was difficult. They could try to work during the week then return for weekly parade on Sunday, but as Bacot describes,

*'It was difficult for a man to leave work in Auckland on a Saturday night, be in residence for Sunday Parade, and return to Auckland in time for the work hour on Monday.'*²⁹

²⁸ Bacot, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

This would have also taken a toll on the families of these men. Despite his role as a medical officer even Bacot's wife was forced to 'turn her hand to anything' to keep their household functioning. He also records that he had a servant to groom his horse, which was necessary to own due to his new position as medical officer for both Panmure and Howick. But he had to let the man go after his pay began to take most of Bacot's own paycheck. From then on, the doctor had to groom his own horse.

The issue really became impossible to ignore with the other solution that Bacot records. He notes that the solution many came up with was to have the medical officer write sick certificates that exempted them from their Sunday parades. That way they could stay in Auckland and earn a living, but still be technically fulfilling their requirements as Fencibles. Bacot writes that,

*'... I almost think that I was the first offender. But the others had to follow suit. What was good for Howick was good for all and so sick certificates were plentiful enough on all Sunday parades.'*³⁰

This of course meant men who were meant to be there for the defence of the settlement, and thus Auckland, were streaming out of the villages and not returning even for one day a week. Obviously, this made a mockery of the entire idea of the Fencible Corps and one of the commanding officers put an end to the practice. There was discontent at this decision. Some of the men openly refused to attend the weekly parades and some were dismissed from the force for this, losing their homes and land in the process.

This did not solve the larger issue though, and Bacot writes that,

*'I have no doubt that the Command was right from a military point of view. But he must have known that it was a farce to treat the pensioners as a military force at all...'*³¹

A Changing Auckland

Political Life

It's worth noting another major reason for the breakdown in discipline amongst the Fencibles. Bacot explains the predicament,

*'Representative institutions were established in Auckland, and the Pensioners were allowed votes. Military officers on Full Pay, as well as Half Pay, were eligible for seats in the legislature and discipline is at an end when officers have to [canvass] for the voices of soldiers or Pensioners.'*³²

³⁰ ibid

³¹ ibid

³² ibid

The importance of this situation is rather obvious. From their perspective much of the hardship and difficulties that the Fencibles had faced were due decisions made by the government. If they could pressure their officers to loosen their enforcement by promising their votes, that made the situation even easier.

The heated letters recounted previously from the *Southern Cross* illustrate that even before representative institutions were established there was already a vibrant culture of open political debate in Auckland. Through the eyes of Bacot we can see how quickly things got messy.

Bacot records two major candidates for the Fencibles in the first election, Brigade Major Greenwood and himself. Major Greenwood represented a faction associated with Colonel Wynyard, while Bacot casts himself in the role of the opposition. While his campaign was successful, it also successfully irritated the establishment. Bacot had already annoyed the commanding officers with his ploys and schemes, and they seem to have taken to his political opposition with ill grace.

Bacot records Colonel Wynyard as ‘a man who did not easily brook opposition.’ When Governor Gray returned to England Colonel Wynyard became Acting-Governor and stood himself for the Superintendency of Auckland. Later, after losing in the election in September 1855, Bacot was planning on leaving the colony and had arranged to sell the house and land that he had earned as a Fencible to a Mr Hardington of the Exchange Hotel.³³ Unfortunately the colonial government informed Bacot that he had no legal claim to his house and land. This took him completely by surprise and brought him close to financial ruin, as Mr Hardington had already advanced part of the payment for the land.

Bacot did eventually manage to appeal this decision up the hierarchy, using his connections and a fair amount of persistence to have his land returned. But he heavily implies that the difficulties he faced were a direct consequence of his opposition to the Wynyard faction. Without his connections and the ability to fight for a fair deal Bacot would have been effectively beggared by the decision. One can only imagine how difficult a similar situation might have been for an ordinary pensioner who not only didn’t have any of the same elite connections but was also most likely unable to read and write.

Changes to Auckland

Bacot had arrived in Auckland in 1848, and eventually left for good in 1859. He records in detail the changes he saw in the province in that time.

‘There was in 1858 no longer a small aristocracy with a Crown Governor as ruler. The rule had fallen into the hands of the General Assembly and the Crown Governor reigned, but did not govern.’³⁴

³³ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

Despite his difficulties with the surprisingly cutthroat politics of Auckland, Bacot's reflection shows a lot of vitriol for the previous system that allowed for little to no public input. This was obviously more than an opinion of one of the elites as well, as the political debate in the *Southern Cross* demonstrates a yearning for political engagement in the early years of Auckland. Bacot clearly believes this yearning was at least partially satisfied with the election of the General Assembly, though his perspective is obviously limited by his personal experience as a comparatively wealthy, white member of the officer class.

As for Auckland itself, Bacot records it had 'altered very much.'

'There were more and better Hotels, [an] increase of Boarding Houses, the Queen street wharf had grown into a useful landing stage and promised greater accommodation. No doubt the town was ill drained and ill lighted in 1858 but it was [not] so bad as in 1848, when on my to the Annual Government House Ball picked my way through muddy and dimly illuminated Shortland Crescent, with goloshes to protect my pumps, only to find on arrival at the Government House, that one of my goloshes had disappeared somewhere in the mud.'

He also records more accessible transport in the form of private carriages and that 'the shops had greatly improved for money was comparatively plentiful.' He does record the poor sanitary conditions, even complaining that they were not improved after a large fire had allowed for the rebuilding of a large section of town. Overall Bacot seemed optimistic of the changes and growth of Auckland in the decade he was there, claiming it was 'rapidly progressing'.

The picture Bacot paints matches the general understanding of the development of Auckland in the late 1840's and 1850's. Since the arrival of the Fencibles the town had dramatically changed, with the influx of people and money slowly turning Auckland from a tiny backwater town to a thriving colonial capital. This is important to note as these dramatic changes occurred before the influx of soldiers and money brought in by the New Zealand Wars, which were just beginning as Bacot was leaving.

The Fencible Mission

The Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps had been created to defend Auckland from invasion. Had they achieved their aims?

On the one hand Auckland was never directly attacked and survived the period larger and more prosperous than it had been before. But this was not because the Fencibles had defended Auckland from outside threats. In the entire period that the Fencibles were active there was only one example of them being called up to service. On the 17th of April 1851, 180 Fencibles from Onehunga were called up by Major Kenny and arrayed at the top of Parnell Hill. They were there to discourage a landing by a fleet of Ngati Paoa war canoes, which had come from Coromandel apparently to avenge an insult given to a Ngati Paoa chief. No shots were fired, and the canoes turned around and returned home. There were rumours spreading that the fleet had been there to burn and pillage Auckland, but these were rooted in fear, not reality.

Consequently, with no actual fighting occurring it is difficult to claim that the Fencibles defended Auckland. One could argue their presence acted as a deterrence against hostile iwi who wanted to attack the new capital, but one might also be tempted to point out an almost complete lack of hostile iwi who might have been able to threaten Auckland. To put it bluntly, in the end it seems like the Fencible Corps was a solution without a problem.

Debates around the Fencibles continue to this day. At the time many questioned the cost and difficulties of the Fencible settlements compared to their lack of active service. Since their disestablishment on the 5th July 1858 they have often been relegated to the footnotes of New Zealand history and overshadowed by the New Zealand Wars that immediately followed. Yet the Fencibles were not just a military project, they were also a colonial one.

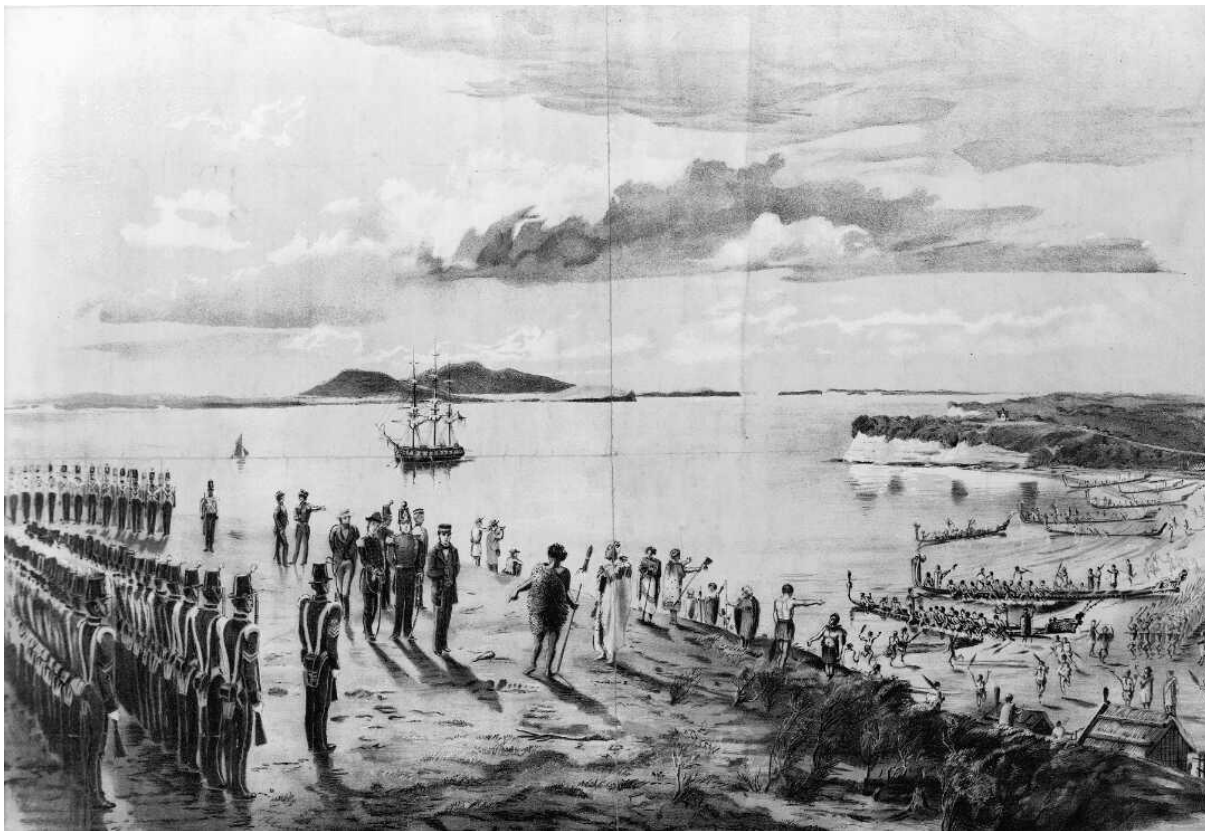


Figure 9. The invasion of Auckland by the Ngatiapaoo, April 17th, 1851. Shows Sir George Grey, Captain R. A. Oliver of H. M. S. Fly, and Colonel Wynyard with troops of 58th Regiment and Royal N.Z. Fencibles, meeting Maori warriors. H.M.S. Fly in harbour at background. Watkins, Kennett 1847-1933. First published in the New Zealand Herald, 24 April 1880 [Ref: C-033-003](#). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Strengthening the Colony

The Fencibles had an impressive impact on Auckland in basically every way. The 1849 census showed that of the total of 7955 people living in the Auckland district 2120 lived in the Fencible villages. The

same census shows that births in the Fencible villages outstripped the rest of the district, a trend that underlines the importance of the pensioners in growing the population of the capital.³⁵

The appearance of the pensioners as a large, viable workforce also helped the economic development of the colony. Bacot records that while the Fencibles were initially disappointed in their inability to take part in the Australian gold rush, they 'soon found out that there was little to grumble about.' The massive influx of thousands of fortune seekers into Victoria and New South Wales meant a huge spike in demand for food, which the farms of the Auckland district were eager to provide. Large tracts of land had been set up as farms by initial settlers around the town of Auckland, but to quickly ramp up production they needed an amount of labour that could only have been provided by the Fencibles.

Beyond this specific opportunity there were other obvious financial benefits to the presence of the Fencibles. The colony had several viable industries that desperately needed an influx of labour to ramp up production and thus profits. New Zealand timber, especially kauri, was in high demand overseas and the mills were able to capitalise on the arrival of the Fencibles to expand their workforce and production. With their pensions on top of their regular work, and with families to feed, sections to clear and improve and communities to build, the Fencibles were a massive boon for the local economy of Auckland. Bacot noted the inflow of money that allowed the shops of Auckland to vastly improve between 1848 and 1858, a lot of this would have been thanks to the Fencibles.

The morale of the capital was also vastly improved by the presence of the Fencibles. Despite prejudices and some disdain, many Aucklanders were thankful for the arrival of the Fencibles. While they might have wished for a different type of soldier, and there was much nitpicking the government's decisions, the fears of invasion were assuaged by the large number of experienced soldiers. The editor of the *Southern Cross* even wrote a very complimentary piece on April 2 1850 when he visited Onehunga to observe a Fencible drill. He noted the day was 'a lovely one' and that the review had 'drawn a considerable number of visitors'.³⁶

'... the mustering of so many veterans, - who had done glorious battle in many a varying clime, - for the purpose of showing how well they retained the knowledge of that steady discipline that had led them so oft to conquest, was well calculated to impart a striking character to the natural beauty of the landscape.'

'... [the spectators] were charmed with the firm array and martial bearing which these war-decorated veterans presented. Their dress, equipments, and soldierly look were themes of universal admiration...'

³⁵ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 111.

³⁶ 'Royal New Zealand Fencibles', *Daily Southern Cross*, vol. V, iss. 288, 2 April 1850, p. 3
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DSC18500402.2.8>



Figure 10. A double cottage at 40 Galway Street, Onehunga, built in 1847 for Charles Jefferson Beswick and Thomas Rowlands of the Royal New Zealand Fencibles with Mrs Harriet Beswick standing outside with six of her ten children. [Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 957-654](#).

This display, and others like it, served several important functions. It shows us that imperialism was alive and well in Auckland at the time but would have reinforced for the citizens of Auckland a pride that they were part of such a large, successful and glorious empire. It also helped work against the impression many Aucklanders had of the Fencibles as ill-disciplined drunks, an impression borne from their time in public houses in Auckland after work. But most of all it helped reinforce in the minds of the observers, and those who read the *Southern Cross*, a sense of safety borne from being protected by these experienced soldiers. The sense of safety and boost of morale this brought the settlers cannot be understated. Before the arrival of the Fencibles, during the Northern War, we have reports of some of the initial settlers of Auckland fleeing to Australia due to the fear that their homes would be invaded. This appears to have ceased, allowing Auckland to grow and become a viable settlement.

A lot of the change was also psychological. The newspaper the *New Zealander* summed up this change well,

*'One mischievous uncertainty is done away with, for Auckland now becomes the acknowledged capital; whereas it was only the capital before "under acting order".'*³⁷

³⁷ *The New Zealander*, vol. 3, iss. 144, 16 Oct 1847, p. 2
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZ18471016.2.5>

Since Auckland had been purpose built there had been a lot of disdain and dislike of the new capital, especially amongst the northern settlements that lost investment and attention. The town's rapid acclimation as capital had been doubted by many, and the panics and uncertainty around its defence had not helped its reputation. But now, with its population and economy growing and its defence apparently more secure the doubts about the viability of the new capital began to fade.

There are also the social and cultural changes wrought by the presence of the Fencibles. As discussed before, the large portion of Irish Catholic Fencibles remade the ethnic and religious map of Auckland. Building churches and schools were early priorities for the Fencibles, in Howick the All Saints Church was the first building to be completed.³⁸ The early isolation of these settlements and their determination to build functioning communities helped build unique identities in each of the villages. The presence of large numbers of working men from Fencible settlements in Auckland also helped develop a thriving drinking culture in the capital, as the men were away from their families and had little else to occupy their time. It would not be a stretch to draw a line between the heavy drinking of these veteran soldiers in Auckland and the drinking culture of modern New Zealand.



Figure 11. All Saints Church, Howick, the first parish church in Auckland built in November 1847. 1912-1930; Image kindly provided by Howick Historic Village [2018.183.16](#).

³⁸ Macdonald, n.p

The last point that must be mentioned is that the Fencibles were not the only group enlisted for the defence of Auckland. In 1849 as the Fencibles were still building their communities Sir George Grey persuaded Te Wherowhero of Ngāti Mahuta to bring 121 members of his iwi and settle in Mangere. This settlement was incredibly similar to the Fencible villages in many ways: each family received one acre of crown land for a dwelling that would become theirs after seven years of service, they were to attend military parades, come to the defence of Auckland when called and even received arable land around the settlement for cultivation. The community also put great stock in building a church, constructing the St James Church out of stone and holding their own services there.³⁹ The key difference between Mangere and the Fencible villages was in their later treatment. During the Taranaki and Waikato wars the inhabitants of the village were regarded with much suspicion apparently due to their Waikato roots, and many had their land confiscated on flimsy pretexts.



Figure 12. St James' Church, Mangere. The site of the church was part of the Mangere Militia Settlement. Spratt, Henry Thomas. Ref: [E-572-003](#). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

³⁹ The New Zealand Fencible Society, p. 109.

Legacy

Disestablishment

The Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps was officially disestablished on the 5th of July 1858. Those who had arrived on the first six ships had already earned their land, having finished their seven years of service. The settlers from the *Inchinnan* and *Berwick Castle* had their remaining months waved, largely due to the cost of maintaining officers for so few men. The timing of this was interesting as the first Maori King was crowned in June 1858, marking the official birth of the Kingitanga movement as a political entity. The Kingitanga would serve as the focal point for the government's fear-mongering over the next decade of conflict, and diminishing the movement was the key objective in the Waikato War.

Tensions were rising in general through the late 1850's, so the disestablishment of the Fencible Corps in this period shows an acknowledgement of its lack of effectiveness. Many of the men were too old to effectively serve and the necessity of their villages as defensible points had diminished as the colony's military capabilities and population had grown significantly. To put it simply, Auckland was no longer in danger, if it ever had been.

As a military force it is hard to see the Fencibles as anything but a costly waste. With only one instance of being called to defend the capital in over seven years the investment obviously does not match the utility. Even if a serious attack had occurred it is not clear that the scattered and isolated villages would have been able to adequately defend Auckland, or even themselves.

But, as we have noted, the true value of the Fencibles was not their military capabilities. They contributed massively to the population of Auckland, the development of the local economy, they even built much needed infrastructure like roads and bridges that would prove crucial not only to the villages and the expansion of Auckland, but also later to the invasion of Waikato in 1863. They brought a sense of solidity and safety to Auckland that had been sorely lacking in the 1840's, as well as diversity and a more cosmopolitan outlook. As a military force they might have been unnecessary but as a colonising force they were invaluable.

Enduring Influence

The legacy of the Fencibles greatly affected Auckland in the years after their disestablishment. First the obvious, many young men born in Fencible villages joined the militia and fought in the New Zealand Wars. The population and infrastructure built up by the Fencibles south of Auckland would also prove crucial to the war effort as it paved the way for the great military road constructed by Governor Grey that allowed for the full-scale invasion of Waikato.

The Fencibles also helped influence several enduring cultural ideas in New Zealand. There are the ones we have already mentioned, such as the heavy drinking and pub culture encouraged by working Fencibles in Auckland town. There is also the pride and connection to the British Empire the veteran

soldiers stirred in the population of the colony. This would be reinforced by the large numbers of imperial soldiers that would flow through New Zealand in the 1860's but some of the origin of New Zealand's obsession with England and its place in the empire can be seen amongst the articles about the Fencible drills. This would be a massive part of New Zealand's history, as our country would take far longer to find our way to independence and hang onto our connection to Britain much tighter than other dominions like Australia or Canada.

Some of the core myths of New Zealand identity can also be found amongst the experiences of the Fencibles. The most prominent is probably the DIY, No. 8 wire concept of New Zealanders as self-sufficient, hardy individuals. The perceived betrayal of the colonial government meant the Fencibles were largely left to build their own lives and communities, greatly adding to their sense of individualism. It is perhaps not surprising that the Fencible settlements were hard to control, lacking discipline and often ignoring rules they considered unreasonable. A lot of scepticism of bureaucracy and politics can be found in the history of the Fencibles, reinforcing the trend we could already see in the pages of the Auckland newspapers. On the other hand through a willingness to engage in the political system, voice their complaints and demand their rights and interests be represented would also develop. All these things can be seen in modern Auckland and New Zealand.

How do we think about the Fencibles?

The question of how we might think about the Fencibles today is a complicated one. Like many colonising projects, the Fencibles have some deeply troubling parts that must be acknowledged. The discussion around the government's claim to the lands given to the settlers of Howick presages conflict around the seizure of Maori lands and the dubious legal claims the crown would make time and time again. The fact this was already debated in the community of Auckland in the late 1840's shows how these actions were controversial even then.

The Fencibles can also be seen as an aggressive force simply in their establishment and existence. The Northern War hysteria in Auckland was mostly just hysteria and the importation of a large number of veteran soldiers was certainly a provocative move, hence the reluctance to settle them further north. Depending on how you feel about the conflict and Hone Heke's actions one might even point out that the deployment of further troops was unnecessary due to the local and specific nature of the conflict. Any fear that Auckland might be threatened from the south is also hard to justify, there were simply few iwi that even had the capacity to threaten Auckland and none seemed to have any intention to do so. With this perspective one might question why FitzRoy and Grey were so determined to request more and more troops if their intentions for the region were peaceful.

There is also the acknowledged difference in treatment between the Maori settlers of Mangere and the Fencibles. There is no way to read this but racial discrimination. The population of Mangere had always abided by the agreement they had made with the government and fulfilled their obligations, something that cannot be said of the Fencibles. Yet when conflict finally arose the two groups faced completely different treatment.

But these questions of discrimination and broad colonial ventures did not matter much to the Fencibles themselves. They had fought for the empire across the world but were now retired, and many of the Irish Fencibles no doubt harboured resentment at the treatment of their homeland. With all the evidence we have it seems clear these men and their families simply wanted a better life. They did not ask for much, only that the government fulfil the obligations of the deal that they had made. When they failed to do so the Fencibles did not riot or rebel, they simply worked hard to make do. On an individual level it is hard not to sympathise with their plight, and easy to be impressed by their grit and determination.

Despite their mixed legacy there is no denying the influence the Fencibles had over Auckland. Like any group in history their legacy is mixed, with some parts modern observers abhor and some that we might take pride in. However, we might feel the Fencibles undoubtedly formed an important part of the history of Auckland and New Zealand as a whole and are a fascinating historical subject on their own.

If you wish to learn more about the [Royal New Zealand Fencibles Corps](#) Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum has many items that can be requested through our [Research Library](#).

Written by: Nelson Bennett, Collection Technician, Online Cenotaph.

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