



Pukekura School building, stage one, 1908.

Photo courtesy of Shirley Tarburton.

Pukekura Training School (Pukekura Intermediate School), New Zealand

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The first Seventh-day Adventist post-elementary school set up in New Zealand, Pukekura Training School ran both high-school and training-school courses from 1908 to 1912.

Developments That Led to Establishment of the School

Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic endeavor commenced in various parts of New Zealand during 1885 and 1886. Almost immediately, converts began traveling halfway around the world to Seventh-day Adventist institutions in the United States of America (US) to train for service.¹ This was a very expensive enterprise, and they did not always return.²

A school for training workers in Australia was set up in 1897 at Avondale, New South Wales, and was strongly supported by church members from New Zealand as well as from Australia. As church members in New Zealand saw how successful this school was, they began to agitate for a similar institution in their own country.

In January 1906, at the annual New Zealand Conference Session, it was recommended “that this Conference take steps to start an industrial boarding school for the education of our youth.”³

Three men were appointed to select a suitable property and, after 11 months, finally found one that seemed perfect:

No other place that we have inspected has given such satisfaction as the one we have now secured. The climate is as nearly perfect as any I have ever enjoyed: in fact it is recognised by the Government as the most healthful part of New Zealand. The country is beautiful, and the soil is very fertile. . . . The building sites are all we can ask. . . . Not only is this a good place for our school and food factory, but also a most excellent location for a sanitarium. . . . It is very evident that the Lord has led in the selection of this property and has directed in all details.⁴

Founding of the School

On December 22, 1906, this farm of 168 acres at Pukekura (near Cambridge, North New Zealand) was purchased, along with farm animals and implements. It was planned to immediately begin building a school of a size to accommodate a large number of students and also a factory for the manufacture of health foods for sale all over the country.⁵

Frank Lawrence Chaney of Nebraska, US, who had studied nursing at Battle Creek and had been working in the Australasian field for the previous six years, was appointed to build and then direct the school. He commenced this task having only the inexperienced help of aspiring students and volunteer church members. Later, he had the able assistance of Mr. J. Higgins, a carpentry instructor.

Excavation of the basement for the main school building was begun in the late summer of 1907 (February), and as more helpers arrived, the work proceeded at an increasingly rapid pace.⁶ Within about three months, the first section of the three-story main building had been erected. It consisted of a central structure containing the kitchen, dining room, and offices on the ground floor, storerooms beneath that at the back, a chapel and classroom on the first floor, and several rooms for students on the second floor. Two 3-story wings were planned, one for each side of the central section, but only the west wing (on the right side of the building) was built initially. This provided for 50 students. Great care was taken to provide the best possible ventilation, lighting, and sanitary arrangements, as well as running hot and cold water.⁷ The latter never eventuated, though, and in winter, on rising at five o'clock in the morning, students would have to break the ice in their water jugs before they could wash.⁸ The water was initially plentiful because the school had a well containing a good spring,⁹ which supplied eight water tanks that held 6,800 gallons altogether. However, this supply was inadequate by 1911.¹⁰

Estate Development

Concurrent with the building, the farm was developed, and vegetable gardens were prepared to feed the students once school started. The existing apple orchard was revitalized and then augmented by planting 550 additional trees of various kinds, including stone fruit, citrus, and walnut.¹¹

Although the construction was not quite finished, the school opening was scheduled for February 4, 1908.¹² Fifty-three students had enrolled, making it necessary for some students and staff to be accommodated in rooms not intended for residence. There were only two staff houses, so several staff members had to live in students' dormitory rooms. Construction of the second wing of the building needed to commence as soon as money became available.¹³

The project received solid backing from the New Zealand church members. They were proud of the almost majestic building and the striking appearance of the attractively laid-out farm. Many families sold their homes and property and moved to the Pukekura district so that their young people could attend the school, donating time and money to make the building possible. Hundreds of pounds were loaned or pledged, and the building, costing over £2,000, was largely financed by this generosity. Despite all the generous support and encouragement, the board had gone heavily into debt in order to provide the basic amenities that were needed to operate the school and run the model farm.¹⁴ In this lay the seeds of the school's eventual demise.

History of the School

The opening ceremony on February 4, 1908, was attended by a large and representative gathering of the public as well as six church leaders from Australia and New Zealand:¹⁵ Pastor O. A. Olsen, Australasian Union Conference president; Pastor S. M. Cobb, New Zealand Conference president; Joseph Hare from the building

committee; Pastor Henning, secretary of the Religious Liberty Association of Australasia; J. M. Johansen, field secretary from the Signs Publishing Company; and A. G. McKenzie, also in the literature business. Civic representatives were the mayor, Mr. F. W. Buckland; the local justice of the peace, Mr. T. Wells; and two businessmen, E. N. Souter and O. Johnson, who all agreed that if the school was conducted on the lines indicated in Professor Chaney's opening address, it would be a very practical institution and would exert a great moral influence.¹⁶

Pukekura Training School began operations in 1908 with five teaching staff: Professor and Mrs. Chaney, who both taught full time; Mr. and Mrs. William James Smith; and Miss Mabel Piper (White). W. J. Smith, the New Zealand Conference vice president,¹⁷ was appointed as Bible teacher and farm manager; his wife taught part-time.¹⁸ The food matron, Mrs. Higgins, and Miss Prissie Hare, who was the school clerk and bookkeeper and also taught some business studies, made up the remainder of the staff.¹⁹

The main course taught was the biblical academic course, with the following subjects: Bible, language, physiology, business studies, music, sewing, drawing, and carpentry. The enrollment began at 53 and rose to 67 later in the year. A number of the students were married, so a one-room primary school was established for their children. This was taught by Miss Nellie Sisley.²⁰

Each staff member also worked outside the classrooms, doing, with the students, all the work necessary to keep the school running. The school had three categories of students: full-paying students (of whom there were not many), who paid £31 10s a year and worked 15 hours a week; half-paying students, who paid half that amount and worked extra hours to cover the remainder; and industrial students, who apparently paid no cash, did a half load of studies, and spent the rest of the time working.²¹ It appears that many of them also stayed during the holidays to work up credit for the ensuing term.

This system contributed to a cash-flow problem in the school finances. The conference assisted by paying the wages of W. J. Smith,²² but the other teachers' wages had to come out of the school's income, which was not much. The school was intended to be self-supporting, and even the money that the conference provided to establish the institution was considered to be merely a loan, which had to be paid back.²³ This burden on the school's finances was to prove too great to overcome.

The enrollment for 1909 rose to 86.²⁴ Despite selling produce from the gardens and dairy, not enough profit was made because most of the garden and farm produce was needed by the school.²⁵ In mid-1909, most of the cows were sold, with just a few being kept to supply the kitchen with milk, butter, and cream.²⁶ Although the money from this sale paid the accounts for the first half of the year,²⁷ the school lost another regular source of income. The pasture was plowed in preparation for agricultural cropping, but there was no money with which to buy seed. After two years of running at a deficit, the accounts were now actually in credit due to the sale of the cows, and by August 1909 they had also paid the first two quarters' interest.²⁸

It was decided that, because most of the profit the school made came from students' room and board,²⁹ they ought to expand the accommodation by building the east wing of the school.³⁰ Students were using rooms such as a bathroom, a reception room, and a classroom as bedrooms.³¹

To avoid more interest payments, the board decided to build only the shell of the new wing, which would cost £175³² (of which £75 was already promised)³³ and would attempt to raise the estimated £450 needed to finish the building at the upcoming camp meeting.³⁴ The east wing was built during the 1909 year-end holidays and 1910. However, the money they expected to raise during camp meeting did not eventuate, so the wing was used in its unfinished state (walls were just framed, doors were missing, and the floors were not finished) until the end of 1912.³⁵

Only 44 students arrived for the 1910 school year, half that of 1909, so the impetus went out of the work on the new wing. It was hoped that the financial position would improve in 1910, but by August the farm had a loss of £200.³⁶ Unfortunately, once again, the school closed at the end of the year in a "financially embarrassed condition."³⁷

The Chaney family transferred to Avondale in November 1910, and William J. Smith became principal.³⁸ Smith deferred the financial crisis by obtaining an interest-free loan of £150 for one year.³⁹

The food factory had been built, but the conference committee decided against transferring manufacturing operations from Auckland to Pukekura as had originally been promised,⁴⁰ so another projected source of income was lost. Instead, the building was used as accommodation for married students and their families. In the east wing, some rooms, such as the new library, were finished enough to be used and were furnished for the 1911 school year.⁴¹ The roll for 1911 was up slightly to 47 students.⁴² A large number were young ladies attending on the industrial plan, and it was difficult to find enough suitable work for them to do.⁴³ As the students were now, on the whole, younger, the name of the school was changed to Pukekura Intermediate School, with the main course taught being the intermediate course, standards 5 and 6 (grades 7 and 8), with the first two years of the biblical academic course continuing.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, at church headquarters in Sydney, Australia, in a Union Conference committee meeting held on September 11, 1911, the New Zealand Conference invited the Union Conference to take over all the Seventh-day Adventist institutions in New Zealand,⁴⁵ including Pukekura. The minutes state that on September 14, 1911, the decision was made to dispose of the whole Pukekura Estate or a portion of it. It was decided either to obtain another site altogether or, if only a part of it was sold, to continue to run the school on the remaining section of the property, which would still leave enough scope for the school's essential activities.⁴⁶ There is no intimation in any existing faculty or board meeting minutes that the knowledge of this decision was conveyed beyond the committee room.

After the close of school, the Smiths received a transfer to Carmel College in Western Australia,⁴⁷ and Joseph Mills was appointed principal for 1912. There was also a new chairman of the school board because Pastor

Pallant was replaced by Pastor J. M. Cole as president of the New Zealand Conference.⁴⁸

When the school opened for 1912, only 21 students arrived.⁴⁹ With so few students, no more staff could be employed, so Mr. and Mrs. Mills, with the help of a student teacher, had to run the whole program. The young age of the students⁵⁰ increased the difficulty of providing suitable work. School commenced two months late, on March 20, with the vacation being extended so that harvesting the crops and canning the fruit would not interfere with classes.⁵¹

Meantime, also in March,⁵² 100 acres, including the school buildings, were sold to Mr. William Nickle, whose family held nearby farms and had pioneered the district.⁵³ This sale temporarily relieved the school of its burden of debt, and they were permitted to stay on the property, operating the school until the close of the school year.⁵⁴ In August 1912, a new property of a mere 30 acres was chosen at Longburn, near Palmerston North.⁵⁵ This was a long way from Pukekura but only a two-hour journey from Wellington. The agreement was entered into on August 6 and completed on October 7, 1912.⁵⁶ Church members who had moved to Pukekura complained that the intention to sell the school was not revealed to the church members until the transaction was well underway. Within a few days of October 7, lengthy announcements had appeared in both the *Manawatu Standard* and the *Waikato Independent*, causing shock throughout the constituency.

When the news broke, school had about eight weeks to run. We are not sure just when classes concluded because the record book was never filled in. Teachers spent the time sorting and packing, preparing for the move. A few older students stayed behind to help pack.⁵⁷

All furniture and equipment that would be needed at Longburn was crated, and items no longer needed at Pukekura were sent down by rail first.⁵⁸ The Mills family vacated their house and shifted into the school building, while Mr. Mills went through the office records and papers and packed the documents needed at the new site. Mr. William Nickle shifted his family into the house the Coles had been living in on All Saints Road (renamed Nickle Road after most of the "saints" moved away).⁵⁹

The night before they were to leave Pukekura, the remaining group slept in their clothes in order to be ready for the expected early start in the morning. The remainder of the documents and equipment from the office, as well as the safe (containing a quantity of cash from the last-minute collection of debts), were stacked in the front office of the central wing. Mr. and Mrs. Mills and family were sleeping nearby, and some young men were in a ground-floor room of the unfinished wing. Boxes were stacked on the front verandah ready for the carrier,⁶⁰ and we believe that the Coles were in the building, too, because an eyewitness to the ensuing events mentioned the "American lady."⁶¹

About one o'clock in the morning on Monday, December 23, 1912,⁶² an alarm rang out, "The school's on fire!"⁶³ All who had been sleeping in the building escaped safely while the fire was still confined to the far end of the uncompleted (east) wing because of the warning given by Mr. W. Nickle. Vernon Nilsson, one of the young men

who slept in the east wing that night, reported waking just before the alarm was raised to a strong smell of kerosene and the crackling of flames.⁶⁴ The fire became so large that its roar woke all those in nearby areas. Its brilliance lit up the night and drew the attention of people in Cambridge, four miles away.⁶⁵ There was nothing that anyone could do except stand and watch, and that only from a safe distance because of falling debris. The Mills lost all their personal effects,⁶⁶ and all that was salvageable was £72 worth of melted silver from the silver coin in the safe. All the paper money vanished in the flames.

Historical Role of the School

Pukekura filled a vital role in the early development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in New Zealand by providing missionary-focused training for those who attended. Many of these would never have been able to travel overseas to gain such training. A high proportion of the students of Pukekura became pioneer Seventh-day Adventist workers in New Zealand, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. The school formed a valuable foundation for its successor, Oroua Missionary School at Longburn, as mistakes were not repeated, ensuring its success.

Chronology

Pukekura Training School (1908–1910)

Pastor Frank Lawrence Chaney (1908–Nov. 1910); William James Smith (Nov. 1910–1911)

Pukekura Intermediate School (1911–1912)

William James Smith (Nov. 1910–1911); Joseph Mills (1912)

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