

Eleanor Hancock: Early New Zealand Quaker

The story of an ancestor

BY LEENA TAYLOR

I became aware of Eleanor's story about ten years ago when I began to research our family history more seriously. It was intriguing to learn of this fascinating woman who must have been indomitable to deal with. She provides an inspiration for my granddaughters who can see from Eleanor's determination and faith that tragedy and difficult circumstances need not stand in the way of a life well-lived. She is their three times great grandmother. My sons' grandfather, Tony Leslie, died when his son was young, and the family lost contact. This is the reason I decided to try and find out more about where the Leslie family originated from. Before I began researching, we really knew very little.

Eleanor was born at Bristol, Gloucester on 18 April 1808. Her father, Joseph Hancock, was a shopkeeper. Her mother's name was Ellen. The family was Quaker.

As a young person Eleanor attended the Quaker school at Sidcot, near Winscombe (from 1818-1821). It was here that she met John Baker who was also a student from a Quaker family. She was 18 when they married in 1826. When John died from an accident in 1836, he left Eleanor with three children: Ellen, William and Manfield.

I have not been able to verify the date of Eleanor's arrival in New Zealand. It was sometime between the end of 1836 and late 1839. According to information from Lorelei Hayes in her book *Waiaua to Kauri Cliffs* it is believed that Eleanor arrived in New Zealand before the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. She travelled by herself, leaving her young children behind in England in the care of the Quakers at the school at Sidcot.

Eleanor's story in New Zealand

On 10 April 1840 Eleanor bought a piece of land from John Monk within the upper reaches of the Hokianga Harbour on the Orira River, a tidal creek across the harbour from the Mangungu Wesleyan Mission Station. She said in a letter written in 1849 that she had arrived in the Hokianga in 1840, as the area was the only place where she could obtain



Eleanor Baker



Eleanor Stephenson: She purchased Waiaua in her own name in 1854, and her grant was made official in 1862.

a 'peaceful residence and food.' She would have been in the country for some time before settling in this area, but I have not been able to verify when and how she got here.

However, within a year her home had burnt down, and she moved across the river to the Mission Station. She was described by the missionary Rev James Buller as 'a very singular widowed woman of the Society of Friends who is living in a very solitary place in the Orira Creek in an open hut with no other company than a native boy'.

She married George Stephenson on the 27 October 1842 at Mangungu. After her marriage to George the couple lived at Te Wharau until the property was lost in a fire in 1846. They moved to Auckland as a result, and while there, in 1849, Eleanor wrote to the Colonial Secretary requesting an exchange of her land at Hokianga for an allotment in Wakefield St, Auckland. In this letter she mentions the children still in England, hinting that she wants to provide a home for them here.

George Stephenson had arrived in New Zealand in 1835 and first lived on Motiti, a small island where the Waihou and Mangamuka rivers join the upper Hokianga harbour. He was a carpenter and sawyer, and he completed the Wesleyan Mission Chapel at Mangungu. He became known as the 'preacher who sang hymns as he worked'. He also assisted as a lay preacher, taking services at the small mission stations set up around Hokianga and Kaipara (Hayes, 2004).

Eleanor and George bought the property 'Waiaua' in the Far North, from Philip and Charlotte King (who were the first European owners) on the 8 March 1854. The land conveyance between Eleanor Stephenson and Philip King was unusual for the times as it stated, 'that the land was to be in Eleanor's name and to be free from all control of any present or future husband'. Eleanor still had to have her husband's consent to own the land, however, as women had few rights at this time, and were considered to be their husband's property! Altogether there were about 3,276 acres (more or less) of land involved. As a Quaker she had been

brought up with the idea of equal status with men, and it was also clear that she was a woman with considerable means. She had been the major beneficiary of her father's estate, which possibly enabled her to leave her elder children at the school at Sidcot and purchase land in New Zealand.

George and Eleanor had two sons, Albert and Edward, and three daughters, Fanny, Cecilia and Emily. Cecilia was later removed as a beneficiary from her mother's will because she married an Irish Catholic, William Day Leslie. Cecilia and William are my children's great-great grandparents. The Leslie children were brought up in the Church of England faith instead of involvement with the Society of Friends (Hayes, 2004).

One of her great-granddaughters mentioned that Eleanor found living at Waiaua primitive and lonely. She missed the companionship she had found in Auckland and at the Mission Stations. George was often away, which meant she was left with the responsibility of the family and the

property. The Stephensons also kept a small store at Waiaua.

In the winter of 1857, John Stewart, a surveyor who worked for the Government at Wanganui stayed with them. In a letter that he wrote to his brother in Scotland he spoke about the loneliness and deprivation Stephenson's had to deal with. He wrote 'he has rather a pretty place and some good flat land, keeps pigs, a few sheep and cattle, and a small store for the natives.' The Stephensons lived at Waiaua for about ten years.

Over time Eleanor's children from her first marriage also emigrated to New Zealand. In 1862 Eleanor sold Waiaua to Manfield Baker. Eleanor died in 1883 in Auckland on land owned by her first son, William.

Editorial Note: A more detailed version of this article can be read in the Newsletter section, Selected Articles, on the Quaker website.