

## 6.9 JOHN KNOX HAMILTON BUSINESS ACTIVITIES.

### The West Coast

John Knox was a son of Andrew Hamilton and Elizabeth Knox, born on their farm at Annalittin on 24 November 1849. He was the fifth child, 9 years younger than his eldest sister Ann and the second eldest son.

He emigrated to New Zealand at the age of 18 years in 1867<sup>1</sup> going to the West Coast as one would have expected. His next door neighbours, the five Gilmer boys were there and the Gilmer Brothers partnership, including John Hamilton, was also in place and expanding rapidly into hotels and other businesses. Trusted employees were needed to assist in running these businesses or at least working in them.

We have had difficulty locating newspaper references to John Knox. A major problem is the confusion of names especially with Uncle John Hamilton and also John Hamilton "The Greek" at Ahaura. However, given the nature of the activities undertaken, the differences in age of about 25 years and their respective financial resources, we believe we are correct in attributing them to John Hamilton. In this regard, the newspaper assisted in many cases by using "*John Hamilton (Gilmer)*" to distinguish John Hamilton from John Hamilton "The Greek." We have also observed that John Knox always used the name John K Hamilton in business documents, electoral rolls and directories. He too seemed keen to avoid any confusion.

Our first definite record of John Knox is at Ahaura in 1874. This was in the legal action **Hamilton V Elliott**.<sup>2</sup> John Knox was suing Elliott for 51 Pounds 3 Shillings and 4 Pence which was half the proceeds of a winning ticket in a Derby Sweepstakes on the Greymouth Jockey Club meeting run on St Patrick's Day. The sweep was drawn at Ahaura and the horse drawn subsequently won the race. At the settling Elliott presented the winning ticket and claimed the money. John Knox protested in writing claiming a share as Elliott's partner. He claimed they had bought this and a number of other tickets jointly.

At the Magistrates Court, the defence put the view that the magistrate needed to firstly decide whether the whole sweep was illegal or not. John Knox's lawyer prevailed in his suggestion that the Court needed to deal first with the simple fact that the two parties were partners in a venture which resulted in a gain which entitled them both to an equal share.

The verdict went to John Knox for the amount he claimed with costs of the Court, expenses and professional costs. Elliott gave notice of appeal and entered the required securities to prosecute the appeal.

The appeal was heard on 26 June 1874<sup>3</sup> at the Supreme Court in Nelson. The Court decided that the activity was an illegal activity as a lottery was a "*prohibited activity*" and the

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<sup>1</sup> Evening Post 27 October 1902

<sup>2</sup> Grey River Argus 21 April 1874

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Evening Mail 29 June 1874

Magistrate was not justified in disregarding a Statutory prohibition even to consider the equity of the case. The appeal was allowed with costs.

There had been an earlier case in November 1873 but this did not provide a first name but nevertheless we believe that John Knox would have been at the hotel at that time:

At the Resident Magistrate's Court, Ahaura, on Friday, an instance was given of the results of frivolous practical joking. A travelling jeweller, named Knopp, sued a young man, named Hamilton, for £3 10s, the value of a colonial gold ring, purchased by the defendant, as the plaintiff alleged. The facts were that on the 25th September the plaintiff was staying at Gilmer's Hotel, Ahaura, and the defendant asked him if he had any rings for sale. He showed him one weighing 16dwt, and the defendant took it away. On the following morning he asked the defendant for the ring, but could not get it, nor did he before he left the town. Before he went away he told the defendant he would expect to be paid for the ring. On his return to Ahaura the defendant offered him the ring, but he refused to take it as he considered it so'd. The defence was that when the defendant received the ring he went to the bar of the hotel to have it examined, when another person took it, and placing it upon his finger, walked away with it, so that the defendant could not return the ring, although he denied buying it. The plaintiff was nonsuited on a point raised by Mr Staite, that the plaintiff sued for the value of an article which he admitted was not sold. The proper course for the plaintiff would have been to sue for illegal detention.

Grey River Argus 17 November 1873

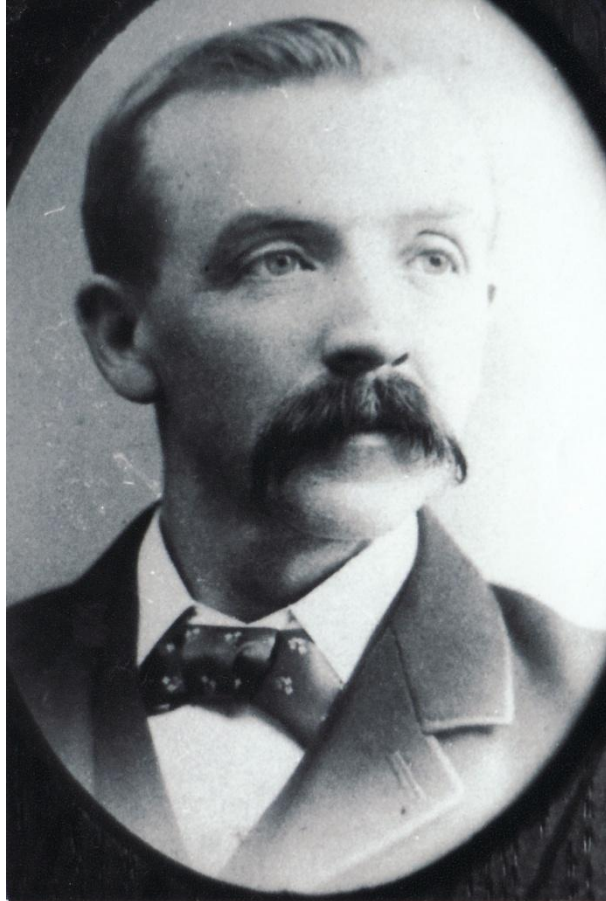
This was followed by a further report :

In the matter of Knopp v. Hamilton, a claim for the value of a gold ring, alleged to be purchased by the defendant from the plaintiff. His Worship stated that the case was called at Cobden on Thursday, and further adjourned for one month.

Grey River Argus 1 December 1873

There were no further newspaper reports on the outcome of the case.

John Knox appears to have spent most of his time on the West Coast at Ahaura and there is no doubt that he worked at the hotel and perhaps the stables there. He also bought a small town lot at Section 30, Corner of Camp & Grey Streets from Sam Gilmer. The Gilmers and John Hamilton had bought a number of sites in the early days of the town when its future prospects appeared to be bright. However, with their increasing success of their business and subsequent focus on Wellington these properties were not of use to them.



**John Knox Hamilton 1887**

### **Wellington and the New Zealander Hotel**

John Knox moved to Wellington in 1882. We believe the date was 13 May 1882 because on this day there is a passenger record of Mrs. Gilmer and five children from Greymouth for Wellington and there is also a Mr. Hamilton who is also a passenger. This could have been John Knox, Andrew or Uncle John Hamilton. We believe it is more likely to have been one of Elizabeth's brothers and that it was John Knox with his sister because at that time we believe Andrew was already at Wellington<sup>4</sup>.

On 9 December 1882 John Knox's application for the transfer of the license the New Zealander Hotel from Thomas Smith was granted by the Licensing Court.<sup>5</sup>

The New Zealander Hotel was one of Wellington's old hotels situated in Manners St between Cornhill and Lombard Streets. At this time, he was very close by Hamilton Gilmer who was

<sup>4</sup> Obituary gives date of Andrew's move to Wellington as 1881

<sup>5</sup> Evening Post 9 December 1882.

at the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel at the corner of Willis St and also Sam Gilmer at the Royal Oak at the corner of Cuba Street.

The original Land Grant was made on 27 September 1852 to George Hunter and Kenneth Bethune for Sections 208 and 209.



**New Zealander Hotel in the era of Thomas Smith (1880)**

On 9 January 1864 part of the land was granted to George Hunter. However, as usual the administration was behind the event and “*Mr. Allen’s New Zealander Hotel*” was operating as early as 25 November 1848.<sup>6</sup> Some of the subsequent licensees were Robert Jenkins 1852, Ferrer 1854 and John McKinnon 1864. In 1865 Bethune and Hunter called tenders for additions to the Hotel and at about the same time P. A. Chavannes took over the license. In April, there was a meeting at the hotel to form a Jockey Club in Wellington.

On 7 November 1868, Chavannes transferred the license to John McIntosh. The newspaper commented:

*“The New Zealander was for many years the principal tavern of Wellington and was the headquarters of those that took an interest in sporting matters. Mr. McIntosh is so widely known as an excellent Boniface that there is some hope that the old tavern under his management will recover its former prestige. It was Mr. McIntosh that was the landlord in its former more flourishing days and we know of no one who is more likely to resuscitate its departed fame. We wish him every success in his enterprise.”*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> New Zealand Spectator & Cook’s Strait Guardian 25 November 1848

<sup>7</sup> Evening Post 7 November 1868

McIntosh not only took over the license but he also purchased the freehold from George Hunter. The conveyance was registered on 13 December 1868. McIntosh mortgaged the property to Jacob Joseph and Joseph Nathan with a second mortgage to George Hunter. In June 1871, he cleared his mortgage with Hunter but Joseph and Nathan took a further charge. He clearly did not have the financial capacity to support his interest in the New Zealander.

McIntosh held on until 3 April 1876 when he sold the hotel freehold to Mace and Arkell (brewers) for 4000 Pounds but he held a mortgage. The hotel was leased to Player for a short period and then to Fenton until 6 March 1878 when Frank Mountain took over the lease. Mountain was there until March 1880 when Thomas Smith took over.

These transactions indicate that very often licensees were undercapitalized and did not have the financial and business skills to make a success of a hotel lease. The circumstances at the New Zealander were not unusual. Mace actually entered bankruptcy and the trustees sold the hotel to the NZ Loan and Mercantile Agency Co Ltd in August 1883.

Against this background, John Knox was entering his first business undertaking on his own account. We have no knowledge of his financial capacity although we believe it was limited. We also have no understanding of his business skills and we are not aware of any previous business where he had been solely accountable for the business. It is clear that running the New Zealander was not going to be easy. Many others before him did not last.

We believe that both John Hamilton and Hamilton Gilmer both financed John Knox into the New Zealander. In John Hamilton's case the evidence is more circumstantial than conclusive. In mid 1882 John took over the Imperial Hotel paying 600 Pounds but immediately mortgaged it for 1400 Pounds. Also in August 1882, he mortgaged his hotel at Cobden after clearing the earlier debt in February 1882 probably with funds from the dissolution of the Gilmer Brothers partnership. John at this time was 59 and approaching retirement and he had no need for any funds. He had the money and there were no other investments made by him for many years. The logic says he assisted John Knox into the New Zealander. John cleared both of his mortgages in 1889. This was ample time for John Knox to obtain good returns from his hotel and to repay any debts.

We know that Hamilton Gilmer was involved in financially assisting his brother in law. While John Knox was identified as the licensee from December 1882 on, we know he was in partnership with Hamilton Gilmer until 28 April 1885 after which a notice of dissolution of partnership was published:

**NOTICE** is hereby given that the partnership hitherto existing between the undersigned, carrying on the business as a Hotelkeeper in and upon the licensed premises known as the "New Zealander Hotel," has been this day dissolved by mutual consent.

The undersigned John Knox Hamilton will in future carry on the said business; and will receive all debts due to and discharge all liabilities owing by the late firm.

Dated at Wellington this 28th day of April, 1885.

**J. K. HAMILTON.  
HAMILTON GILMER.**

Witness to Signatures—  
**C. P. SKERRETT,  
Solicitor, Wellington.**

#### Evening Post 2 May 1885

It appears Hamilton, who had a very sound understanding of the hotel industry and why people succeeded and failed, did not have confidence in John Knox's experience and retained a partnership interest until he was repaid or until he was confident that John Knox would be successful. He was protecting his investment.

On the other hand, John Hamilton lived at the New Zealander for about twelve years. In the early period one can see that he would have been assisting and mentoring John Knox and at the same time keeping a good eye on how he was progressing. He would have been protecting his investment in John Knox in a far less formal way than Hamilton Gilmer.

In any event, John seems to have been quite close to John Knox and he lived at the hotel until he bought his cottage at 30 Marion St in 1895. He is shown on the Electoral Roll at the New Zealander until 1897 so it is safe to say he was there with him for about twelve years including the early years of John Knox's marriage.

John Knox married Alice Julia Brooks in 1887. They lived at the New Zealander Hotel and Electoral Rolls show them there until 1900. They had three young children at the hotel before John Hamilton left there.

#### Incidents at the New Zealander

- John Knox experienced a number of small incidents that were reported in the press that seem to be typical of events that occurred with publicans of the time: A person was charged with being on the premises illegally. He was given 48 hours imprisonment. A bed for a couple of nights was probably all he wanted and a cell would do!<sup>8</sup>
- John Knox was charged with selling liquor to a non lodger on a Sunday. It was argued that the liquor was sold to a lodger who supplied it to a non lodger and the case was dismissed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Evening Post 14 February 1883

<sup>9</sup> Evening Post 2 October 1883

- John Knox was charged with allowing water to be wasted by having a defective tap. He was fined One Shilling and costs<sup>10</sup>
- A theft occurred of a bottle of brandy taken from a shelf while John Knox had his back turned. The defense was that the thief had been drinking all day and did not know what he was doing. He was fined 40 Shillings.<sup>11</sup>
- Alice O'Donnell was charged with drunkenness and with damaging a window of the hotel. She was given 1 month in prison with hard labour for drunkenness and fined one Pound for damaging the window, in default 21 days imprisonment.
- John Knox was charged with selling ale to a policeman at a racecourse, not being duly licensed. This was a test case to determine whether the local licensing committee could provide a conditional license to a hotelkeeper from outside their local area. The complainant was a local hotelkeeper. The Magistrate dismissed the case and said it was clear the license could be issued to any hotelkeeper in New Zealand. He commented on the police bringing private grievances through the courts.<sup>12</sup>

John Knox's license at the New Zealander expired on 31 December 1900 and he decided not to renew it. This detail was conveyed to the Wellington community and his customers through a very large advertisement for the sale of all the furniture in the hotel. Everything was to be sold and there was no reserve on any of the items.

On 1 January 1901 the license of the New Zealander passed to J H Price who had previously been at the Albert Hotel with his father. This brought to a close the John Knox Hamilton era at the hotel.

John Knox had been at the New Zealander Hotel for a remarkable 18 years. Apart from Sam Gilmer at the Royal Oak Hotel, we have not identified a publican holding a lease at the same hotel for such a long period. Given the circumstances at the commencement of his lease John Knox was an outstanding success in running his business and he must have been very well thought of by John Hamilton and Hamilton Gilmer who assisted in his start.

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<sup>10</sup> Evening post 9 April 1884

<sup>11</sup> Evening Post 11 November 1884

<sup>12</sup> Evening Post 10 August 1897

FRIDAY AND SATURDAY NEXT,  
28th AND 29th DECEMBER,  
At 11 o'clock each day.

SALE OF THE WHOLE OF THE FUR-  
NITURE IN THE NEW ZEA-  
LANDER HOTEL.

Manners-street.

**MACDONALD, WILSON AND CO.**  
have received instructions from Mr.  
J. K. Hamilton, lessee of the New Zea-  
lander Hotel, whose lease is up, to sell on  
the premises of the New Zealander Hotel,  
Manners-street, on the above dates—

The whole of the household furniture  
and effects, without reserve, com-  
prising—

First-class piano by Challen and Hodg-  
son, London; handsome oval table  
(walnut inlaid), couch in plush,  
suite in tapstry, suite in rep,  
clock, two good leather suites, 6  
horsehair couches, pier glasses,  
easy chairs, large number oil  
paintings and other pictures, car-  
pets, linoleum, oilcloth, two din-  
ing tables, fenders and fire irons,  
lace curtains, poles, wool mats,  
small office table, two cheffoniers,  
two dozen good Austrian chairs,  
cutlery, cruets, meat covers, lot  
glassware, lot crockery, umbrella  
stand, linoleum on hall, staircase,  
and landing, and stair carpet

**THE CONTENTS of 14 BEDROOMS,**

comprising—Double and single  
iron bedsteads, dressing tables,  
washstands, mirrors, linoleums,  
carpets, chest drawers, chairs, bed  
linen, pillows, spring and wire  
mattresses, blankets; also, kitchen  
cooking requisites, tables, and lot  
house linen

And

One Alcock's billiard table (with  
cues, billiard balls, etc., all com-  
plete), gasalier and fittings, five  
stuffed forms, 30 billiard balls,  
bath gas-heater, ice chest, etc.

Remember—FRIDAY and SATURDAY  
NEXT, 28th and 29th December, com-  
mencing each day at 11 o'clock.

No Reserve. No Reserve.

Evening Post 24 December 1900

John Knox was interested in horses and played an active role in the foundation of the Wellington Trotting Club and its early years. An initial meeting was held to form a club in September 1891 and a committee was appointed to canvas for members. A second meeting was held at the New Zealander Hotel on 9 March 1892. The committee reported that there were 70 people prepared to pay an annual subscription of one guinea. It was decided to form the Wellington Trotting Club Mr. H D Crawford was President, Mr. J H Pollock Secretary and John Knox Hamilton was the inaugural Treasurer.<sup>13</sup>

A further meeting was held on 15 March which decided to hold a trotting meeting with six races and 125 Pounds prize money at the Johnsonville course on Queen's Birthday. 50 new members were enrolled.<sup>14</sup>

There had been another group of people who had held a meeting on 4 March 1892 at Johnsonville which also formed a Trotting Club and the Evening Post referred a dispute as to which club could call itself the Wellington Trotting Club. The response below followed:

### **THE WELLINGTON TROTTING CLUB.**

**TO THE EDITOR.**

**SIR—**I am requested by my committee to inform you by letter that there is no "dispute" as to which of the two trotting clubs lately formed is entitled to style itself "The Wellington Trotting Club." I am also instructed to inform you that the club to which I have the honour to be secretary has been duly affiliated to the New Zealand Trotting Association as *the* Wellington Trotting Club, consequently no other club can assume the title or claim to be affiliated under that name.

I am, &c.,

J. H. POLLOCK,

Hon. Sec. W.T.C.

[There is a most decided dispute as to which club is entitled to the name. Each claims it. It is not our province to say which is right.—ED. E.P.]

**Evening Post 18 March 1892**

This dispute was resolved with a New Zealand Trotting Association meeting accepting the applications of the Wellington Trotting Club and the Johnsonville and Hutt Trotting Club.<sup>15</sup>

John Knox was very active in the club carrying out many roles. He regularly received public recognition for the energetic way he went about his roles. He occupied many of the difficult roles that usually involve a lot of hard work and little praise or glory. He never took on the office of President or Vice President and this perhaps indicates something of his nature.

<sup>13</sup> Evening Post 9 March 1892

<sup>14</sup> Evening Post 15 March 1892

<sup>15</sup> Evening Post 16 April 1892

In the table below we have summarized the offices he held from 1892 when the club was founded until 1900<sup>16</sup>, the last reference to his work. This was very close to the time he finished at the New Zealander.

YEAR	OFFICE	COMMENT
1892	Inaugural Treasurer Secretary	Meetings held at New Zealander Hotel Appointed Secretary after J H Pollock resigned
1893	Secretary	Special mention for running of Summer Meeting
1894	Member of Committee Delegate Wellington Trotting Association	Meeting at New Zealander Hotel
1895	Treasurer Steward Delegate to Wellington Trotting Association Judge	
1896	Treasurer Steward Judge Delegate to Wellington Trotting Association	Sued in Supreme Court for 200 Pounds disqualifying a winning horse.
1897	Treasurer Steward	
1898	Treasurer Steward	Elected to Club Finance Committee
1899	No references identified	
1900	Committee	

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<sup>16</sup> Evening Post 2 August 1900

## WELLINGTON OPERA HOUSE

John Knox Hamilton and Sam Gilmer were Directors on the board of the company that built the Wellington Opera House. They were both involved in this enterprise and its later operations for extended periods. For Sam this is a little ironic as he was well known for not allowing “theatricals” into his Royal Oak Hotel and famously refused to accommodate Dame Nellie Melba at the Royal Oak. Perhaps it was his experiences with the opera house business that caused this.

John Knox was appointed in 1888 and held office continuously until his death in 1902, a period of 14 years. Sam was appointed a director in 1886 and in 1915 he was still a director at the age of 73, a tenure of 29 years. Throughout the period to 1912 the largest shareholder was T. G. Macarthy who was a well known Wellington brewer and also the mortgagee of Sam Gilmer’s Royal Oak Hotel. As one Turangi based wit has remarked, with two long serving and successful hoteliers and a brewer on the board at least the bar at the Opera House was certain to make a profit.

The initial years of the company were, to put it mildly, difficult, but the board contained men who single mindedly were determined to see the city with an opera house comparable with the best in New Zealand and Australia. This vision did not necessarily align with the interests of all shareholders but there were some who were to put their own money on the line to ensure that the dream materialized. John Knox and Sam Gilmer were two of them.

The first opera house in the city was destroyed by fire in 1879, a fire which engulfed a number of other buildings including the newly built Royal Oak Hotel of W. Emeny, the Wesleyan Church, the Nag’s Head Hotel and more than 20 other buildings.<sup>17</sup>

By 1885, the original Opera House had not been replaced but at a meeting of the Te Aro Theatre and Opera House Company<sup>18</sup> it was reported that plans for a new building on the the old opera house site were well advanced. These were prepared by well known architect W C Chatfield after visiting Melbourne and Sydney looking at the main theatres and also meeting with theatre managers, artists and designers. He was looking to avoid any errors in previous designs as well as combining the best points of all the best buildings. The building was said to seat 1487 and would take 12 months to complete.

By October meeting<sup>19</sup> the building site in Manners St had been purchased for 2750 Pounds and tenders were called for the building. These disclosed the lowest cost for completion of the theatre and two shops, would exceed the capital of the company. However, arrangements were made by Macarthy for an Overdraft which together with the uncalled capital meant that 12,000 Pounds were available. A contract was let to the builder James Ranson for 7000 Pounds for the auditorium to be completed in nine months with the stage portion to be completed for a further 3,450 Pounds.

The meeting was very lively with many questions about the funding. The Chairman was T. G. Macarthy. To complete the building would require more borrowing or an increase in the capital of the company. The main protagonist saw bankruptcy ahead and agreed to sell his shares the next morning. Macarthy offered to buy them. The basis argument was that a top quality theatre was required to bring the best production companies to the city. John Knox

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<sup>17</sup> The Colonist 17 June 1879

<sup>18</sup> Evening post 22 June 1885

<sup>19</sup> Evening Post 21 & 24 October 1885

Hamilton was a shareholder and present at the meeting. He moved the motion to reappoint the auditors.

At the next Annual Meeting in 1886,<sup>20</sup> the Chairman advised that the theatre would be built and fitted out for 17,000 Pounds, 500 Pounds over the original estimate. Also the amount owing to the Bank of New Zealand was now 8,000 pounds but six of the directors had made themselves personally responsible for the repayment. On completion of the building, the loan might have to be repaid and this would require mortgaging the building or possibly increasing the capital. Estimates of income were about 1600 to 1700 Pounds per annum. The shareholders showed their confidence in Macarthy by re-electing him. Sam Gilmer was also appointed a director for the first time. He was the only nomination which is understandable given the difficult circumstances the company was facing.

The opera house opened on 17 November 1886 to a full house. The newspaper was effusive in its praise of all involved: the architect, builder, directors, management and especially Macarthy. *"To Mr. Macarthy is due in a great measure the success of this large undertaking. He has labored unremittingly from first to last and spared no pains in the difficult work he has had to perform."*<sup>21</sup>

However, the company's problems continued. It was clearly undercapitalized and a general meeting of shareholders was held on 17 February 1887.<sup>22</sup> The motion put to the meeting was that (1) the Capital of the company be increased (doubled) or (2) the company be wound up voluntarily.

Macarthy pre-empted the vote by saying that he held proxies from the largest shareholders and he would vote against the proposal to increase the capital (and hence would vote in favour of liquidation.) Aside from the bank loan, which was secured by a mortgage and director's guarantees, there were 2088 Pounds of outstanding accounts while assets were 1161 Pounds of unpaid calls of which most was not recoverable and about 400 Pounds cash. The theatre was insured for 5000 Pounds and the premium paid.

If the company was liquidated a new company could be formed in 14 days to take over the theatre. The objective was to buy the theatre at a discounted price and if possible reduce payments to creditors. In the main these were the builder and tradesmen who worked on the building. Sam Gilmer and James McDowell were appointed as liquidators and they immediately set about managing the theatre.<sup>23</sup>

The new company was the Wellington Opera House Company and it met to appoint interim directors on 2 April 1887.<sup>24</sup> It was likely that there would be nothing available to shareholders from the old company but still almost all of the original company's shareholders had signed the list consenting to take up shares. These would be allotted shares with Five Shillings to be paid on application and also on allotment with four calls of four shillings making 26 Shillings a share. Present debt of 9,000 to 10,000 Pounds would reduce to 7000 Pounds and a loan company had agreed to lend that amount. It was later revealed that the mortgagees were Saunders and Macarthy. The theatre was purchased from the old company for 9,990 Pounds, a substantial discount from its initial cost of about 17,000 Pounds.

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<sup>20</sup> Evening Post 5 November 1886

<sup>21</sup> Evening Post 18 November 1886

<sup>22</sup> Evening Post 17 February 1887

<sup>23</sup> Evening Post 31 Mar 1887

<sup>24</sup> Evening Post 2 April 1887

The new company traded well but it was only 12 months before disaster struck in the form of a fire. After a meeting with the architect and the City Engineer it was concluded that the walls could be strengthened and reused<sup>25</sup>. An enquiry yielded an open finding as to the cause and a very lively director's meeting quickly followed. The balance sheet had been burnt in the fire and the financial situation was unclear. The insurance on the building was only 5000 Pounds, well short of the rebuilding cost.

The view was put that rebuilding with greater economy was the best option for shareholders board had not sought plans or cost estimates although a preliminary estimate from an architect had been obtained by one of the directors. There was dissatisfaction with the directors with some calling for liquidation of the company but a spill of all board positions occurred and a new lot of directors were appointed. These included both Sam Gilmer and John Knox.

The original architect WC Chatfield and builder James Ranson were employed and the rebuilding was completed in eight months using the existing walls. There was extensive fireproofing avoiding timber and using brick and concrete. Additional fire hoses were installed. The total cost was about 7500 Pounds. The new theatre opened on 6 December 1888 with a Gilbert and Sullivan Japanese opera evening.

At the next annual meeting in 1889 there were more calls to wind up the company but the directors were reelected and the company continued. From this point trading conditions stabilized and improvement became evident. The critical factor was the rental income of the company and over the years there was progressive improvement. Discussions changed from shoring up the capital position to leasing the theatre for as many nights of the year as possible.

The table shows the annual rent in each year from 1890. By 1896 the directors were confident enough to pay the first dividend of the company. This was 4 Shillings a share.

YEAR	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901
Rent Pounds	1304	1224	1718	1922	2060	2049	1660	1731	2117	1775	1954	2529

#### **Annual Rent Received 1890 to 1901 Wellington Opera House Company**

To this point the directors were unpaid and this was their first return. However, we believe they were able to take their wives and families to the theatre on the free list.

The health of the company was improved by the establishment of Wellington based production company established by a Mr. Bentley that would tour New Zealand towns. This was to be set up as a different company owned by the Wellington Opera House company. In this way the Opera House could receive some of the returns from the actual shows themselves rather than rely on rents to production houses.

From 1894 the company was able to start reducing its mortgage and by 1896 restructured its borrowings by paying out the mortgage which was costing 8% pa and issued debentures at 4.5%pa saving 150 Pounds in interest. Dividends were increased in 1900 to 5% and to 6% in 1902. By 1907 there was mention of payment of the "*usual 105 Pounds bonus to directors.*"<sup>26</sup> In the same year the theatre was leased to J C Williamson for five years and in 1913 this was extended for a further two years.

<sup>25</sup> Evening Post 29 March 1888

<sup>26</sup> Evening Post 8 April 1908

By 1912 Wellington had grown significantly and the board decided to build a new and much larger Opera House. They purchased land in Manners Street from T G Macarthy for 23,200 Pounds on 5,000 Pounds deposit with the balance payable over 10 years at 4.5% pa interest. These terms were very favourable but unfortunately TG Macarthy died on 19 August 1912 and did not see the completion of the new theatre.

The new Grand Opera House opened on 12 April 1914 with capacity for 2200 people and to the credit of all involved it still survives and is servicing the Wellington community today almost 100 years later.

John Knox and Sam Gilmer were shareholders from the start of the second Opera House Company in 1885. They went through the difficult and most contentious period of building, liquidation, establishment of a further company and then the fire destroying the building. They responded with their funds when called upon and contributed generously with their time for little or no reward for a lengthy period. Sam saw the good years and the new Opera House but unfortunately John Knox was not so rewarded.



**The Opera House 2010**

