

FURLEY, Matilda (nee WEBB)

1813–1899

Storekeeper, Baker, Butcher, Hotelkeeper, Community leader

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Matilda Webb was born at North Nibley, near Dursley, Gloucestershire, England, on 30 May 1813, the daughter of Ann Hill and her husband, Thomas Webb. The Webb family had been engaged in the wool and cloth trade for generations and at the age of 12 Matilda Webb went to learn the trade in the woollen mill at Dursley owned by her father. At Oldham, Lancashire, on 9 May 1835, she married **Samuel Furley**, a weaver. They had three daughters: **Matilda**, who was born in New Zealand 15 years later, followed by **Sarah** and **Mary**.

It is probable that in 1837 the Furleys left England on the *Royal Admiral*, bound for South Australia, but in 1840 or 1841 they arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, where they lived first in Princes Street, central Auckland, and then Mechanics Bay. They ran a general store in the main thoroughfare, Queen Street, until 1844 when they moved to Onehunga and established a small bakery and trading-post. Matilda Furley was an active partner in these business ventures. She traded with Māori from the Māngere area, bartering for their pigs and produce. Of necessity she became an expert butcher and supplied an essential service to the village.

The arrival of a contingent of the Royal New Zealand Fencibles in 1847 brought considerable extra trade and in 1848 permission was given to build new premises on their section in Princes Street, Onehunga. This business was sold about 1854 and Matilda Furley then opened a bakery and confectionery shop in Queen Street, Onehunga. In 1863 Samuel Furley was first recorded as the licensee for the Royal Exchange Inn in Princes Street. He also owned a store and bakery adjacent, and a substantial stone and brick house. During the 1860s he dealt in real estate around Auckland, leaving Matilda to manage the inn and store, which she did most competently.

Since her arrival in Onehunga, Matilda Furley had been a leader in the small community. She was a member of St Peter's Church (Anglican) and was involved in charitable schemes. In May 1863, shortly before the outbreak of war in Waikato, it was believed that an invasion of Auckland by Waikato Māori was imminent. Settlers south of Auckland were evacuated from their land and taken to Onehunga, where the women and children were at first accommodated in barracks. Their living conditions were cramped, and they suffered from cold and hunger. In a letter, one of the women related that Mrs Furley, keeper of the store and inn in Princes Street, gave her a loaf of good bread each day, on the understanding that it could be paid for later. A public meeting, called to discuss relief measures for the stricken families, resulted in the establishment of the **Onehunga Ladies' Benevolent Society**. Matilda Furley was a foundation member of this society.

From 1864 the licence of the Royal Exchange Inn was transferred a number of times, but Samuel Furley retained the freehold until 1871, when the building burnt down. He died of heart disease on 9 February 1878. Matilda Furley carried on the bakery in Queen Street until the 1890s. Her wide expertise continued to be of use in the community. When the Onehunga Woollen Mills were about to open, problems occurred with the looms, which had been imported from England. It is said that Matilda Furley, calling on her early work experience, was able to establish that an error had been made in their assembly. This was soon rectified, and the looms were in working order for the official opening in October 1887.

Matilda Furley died on 22 October 1899 at the age of 86. She was buried beside her husband in St Peter's churchyard, Onehunga.

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