

## **The Naming of the Town at the Mouth of the Whanganui River**

### **A Paper Prepared for Te Runanga o Tupoho and the New Zealand Geographic Board**

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**3 March 2009**

#### **Introduction and Executive Summary**

This paper seeks to provide some historical background to the naming of the town at the mouth of the Whanganui River; a town that has, since 1854, been known as 'Wanganui'. The paper covers three main issues:

- i. The naming of the town by the New Zealand Government and debate over the names chosen.
- ii. Historical usage of the spellings Whanganui and 'Wanganui'.
- iii. Historical debate over the spelling and pronunciation of the name Whanganui.

Given the certainty emerging from the evidence that Whanganui is the correct spelling, the long-standing use of the 'Wanganui' spelling is placed in single quote marks throughout this paper, except where it is being directly quoted from a referenced source.

The town established near the mouth of the Whanganui River from 1841 was initially known as 'Wanganui', being named for the river that ran through it. It was initially spelled without the 'h'. It was a time when many Maori words and places that are all now spelled with a 'wh' were spelled by many writers (Maori and Pakeha) without the 'h'. This early error reflected how recently te reo Maori had been recorded as a written language - rather than a purely spoken one - which meant that the rules of written Maori (such as spelling, capitalisation, and word breaks) were still developing and were not yet consistent.

By the 1850s, the correct use of 'wh' in words such as 'whanga' was well established by early scholars of written Maori. Government officials and some Pakeha began to consistently use the correct spelling of Whanganui and other names incorporating 'whanga' during the 1850s. Nonetheless, many Pakeha continued to use the earlier spelling of 'wanga' for 'whanga'. This is reflected in the names of many early settler communities, such as Whangaparoa, Whangapoua, Whangarei, Whangaroa, Whangaruru, and Whangaehu. All of these names were initially and officially spelled without the 'h' in 'whanga', but all were subsequently corrected from the late nineteenth century until as recently as 1949 (in the case of Whangaehu, corrected from 'Wangaehu'). 'Wanganui' is the notable exception.

In the very early years of settlement Whanganui Maori also usually spelled Whanganui without the 'h'. However, as the spelling of written Maori became codified

in the 1850s, they too adopted the spelling of Whanganui with the 'h'. Thereafter, they maintained the correct spelling of Whanganui, through to the present day. The correct spelling was also used by some officials in their dealings with Whanganui Maori and in at least one government publication until at least the 1960s.

At the same time, in the face of the official misspelling of the town as 'Wanganui', fewer and fewer Pakeha continued to spell Whanganui with the 'h'. Whanganui remained misspelled largely because of the incorrect spelling ('Wanganui') was incorporated into a Wellington Provincial statute in 1854. The need for the statute arose because in November 1842 the Governor (apparently at the instigation of the New Zealand Company) had proclaimed that the town known as 'Wanganui' was to be renamed Petre (in honour of a director of the New Zealand Company). The confusing name Petre was hated by the Whanganui settlers, who in 1844 petitioned the next Governor (FitzRoy) to restore the name 'Wanganui'. The name change did not proceed, but only a few officials ever regularly used the name Petre and most settlers and local Maori continued to refer to the town as 'Wanganui'.

When settlers were granted representation by the new provincial government structure established in late 1853, the Whanganui representative Watt soon moved to enact the provincial statute, the Wanganui Act 1854. This removed the name Petre and restored the name 'Wanganui', which was, according to the elected representative of Whanganui, what the settlers wished to call the town. Maori were not represented in the Wellington Provincial Council. The incorrect spelling, without the 'h', was used by Watt on the basis that this was how an unnamed Maori he allegedly stopped one day on the river bank in Whanganui had spelled it out for him. This is the extent of the 'integrity' of the enduring misspelling of 'Wanganui'. In other words, 'Wanganui' was the name chosen by Pakeha in the mistaken belief that this was how Maori spelled Whanganui. It is not.

As early as 1842, when the name Petre was imposed on Whanganui, some settlers had debated how the name should be spelled and pronounced. This debate continued sporadically through the rest of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century. Scholars of the Maori language, and settlers who had acquired some knowledge of it, all agreed that Whanganui, with the 'h', was the correct spelling, and that the word 'wanga' in 'Wanganui' had no meaning at all. This was explained in newspapers, scholarly journals, and also in a government publication.

In 1902, even the then Mayor of Whanganui lobbied for the reinstatement of the 'h' in 'Wanganui', but despite support from some settlers his campaign was defeated by a majority of his own councillors. Some of those opposed to correcting the spelling mistake did so on the grounds that a change to Whanganui would be inconvenient, but at least one councillor continued to argue that 'Wanganui' was how the word was spelled and pronounced by local Maori. It was not, and this was a well established fact long before 1902. It remains a fact today.