

An amateur job that impressed the experts

By the beginning of February 1860 it had become obvious to the inhabitants of the farming districts outside New Plymouth that war with the Maoris was a certainty.

It had seemed a strong possibility for some weeks; in fact, the settlers at Bell Block, Omata and Mangorei had already made public announcements to the effect that they were unanimously determined to stay and defend their lands in the event of war, and had even gone as far as to lay plans for the erection of stockades for this purpose.

At Bell Block in particular, local enthusiasm for such a project was strong, and within days of a stockade being mooted a planning committee was hard at work drawing up the dimensions, while other settlers were out milling and carting timber and making a start on earth-works.

Planning

There was considerably less enthusiasm at Omata. The site of an old Maori pa named Ngaturi was selected for the stockade and the planning was handed over to one of the local residents, Mr T. Good.

A certain amount of timber was provided and occasionally a settler would turn up to put in an hour or two's work on the site, but most often, in those early days Good was to be seen working alone on the stockade after his day's work on the farm was over.

Stockades

Unfortunately, early in February, the military commander in New Ply-

mouth, Colonel C. E. Gold, visited both districts and ordered that the work on the stockades be stopped. It was Gold's contention that his military had the situation well in hand and that his occupation of Waitara would be all that was required to ensure a continuation of the peace.

History has recorded how naive Gold was. On March 17 the first shots of the war were fired by the troops at a pa which the Maori had defiantly built on the Waitara Block.

As far as the settlers were concerned, the outbreak of war rendered Gold's orders regarding their stockades null and void, and at both Bell Block and Omata the work of building recommenced immediately. The settlers at Mangorei, having not made a start before the outbreak of fighting, had no option but to abandon their farms and move into town.

Courtyard

The stockade at Omata was of oblong shape with towers at two opposing corners, but instead of being wholly roofed over as was the one at Bell Block, it was left as an open courtyard with buildings around the inside walls.

The outer walls were constructed of logs set upright into the earth and standing about 10 feet high. The logs were roughly trimmed with axes to ensure that they fitted as closely as possible together

and offered no hand or footholds to any attackers.

Sealed

Any slight apertures which might have been left were effectively sealed up by the placing of an inner lining of sawn slabs.

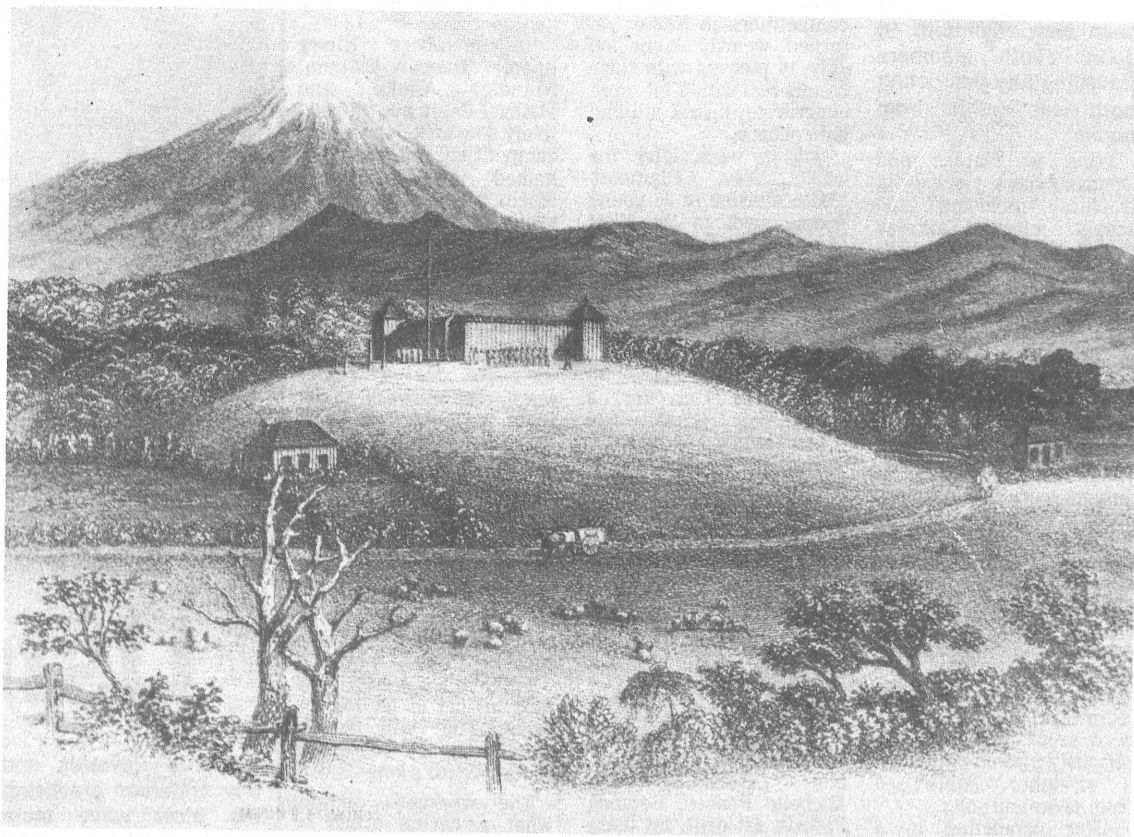
Even though Good was a man with no military planning experience, his stockade (which was completed in smart time with the assistance of all hands once war had broken out) proved to be a remarkably workmanlike piece of defence construction.

It certainly attracted the attention and admiration of Colonel Alexander to the extent that he made it the subject of a technical paper which he presented to the Royal Engineer's Institute in England.

Militia

Throughout the war of 1860-61 the Omata Stockade was garrisoned by the Militia under Captain G. R. Burton, although there were, at times, detachments of Imperial troops sent there to strengthen the outpost. Even so, the stockade did not fulfil its purpose.

Due to Gold's peculiarly defensive outlook the garrison was never permitted to move out against the Maori, who enjoyed unmolested freedom in controlling the countryside. Before the war was over almost every house at Omata had been burned or



Omata Stockade, an artist's impression showing the clean, well proportioned and not altogether unattractive lines of a structure designed and built by civilians.

vandalised, the destruction often carried out in full view of their owners watching from behind the stockade walls.

Village

On a number of occasions the war came very close to the stockade. On March 27 the Southern Maori struck the first blow of their war against the Europeans when they killed five people from the stockade near what is now the Omata Village.

On the following day, seeking to "rescue" a party of settlers who were still living beyond the village under local Maori protection as "neutrals" in the war, a force of Imperial and local troops marched to Omata.

Muddled

In an amazingly muddled operation the settler force allowed itself to become dragged into a fight with the Maori. Al-

though it seemed for a time that the stockade might become involved in the battle, the fighting remained confined to the Waireka area and the Militia garrison was relegated to the role of listeners to the rumble and rattle of the gunfire.

On a number of occasions the stockade was fired on from various vantage points, notably the old Te Ngahoro Pa site on the opposite side of the road, but nobody appears ever to have been hurt.

May 1863 the Omata Stockade was again garrisoned by the Militia. However, the extreme front-line position which it had enjoyed during 1860-61 was lost from the beginning. St Patrick's Redoubt, near the seaward end of Waireka Hill, was built shortly before the recommencement of hostilities.

This was followed by Fort Robert, overlooking the Tapuae, in October, and Allen's Hill Blockhouse midway through 1864.

Waireka

Early in September of 1860 a renewed threat from the south was countered by the soliders building a redoubt on top of Waireka Hill. The outlines of this position known as Waireka Camp, are still visible on the top of the hill above the Waireka Cemetery.

The existence of this camp was a short-lived one. Almost as soon as it was completed the Maori withdrew to the south and Waireka Camp was abandoned.

Front-line

With the outbreak of the second Taranaki War in

Advance

Only once during the second war did the Maori advance with any purpose into the Omata area; that was in October 1863, when they were rather more interested in "having it out" with the garrison of St Patrick's rather than the Militiamen at Omata.

The battle at Allen's Hill, fought on October 2, forced the Maori to withdraw to their bush positions in the Ranges.

It is not known when the Omata Stockade was finally abandoned, or when the structure was demolished. A painting made in 1869 shows it still in existence at that time.