

The wreck of S.S. "WAIRARAPA" New Zealand

By Dr. Andrew M.T. Cheung FRPSL

Historic Background

The *Wairarapa* was a New Zealand ship of the late 19th Century plying the route between the Auckland, New Zealand and Australia; a journey of over 1,250 miles. It had a gross weight of 1716 tons and was built in Dumbarton, Scotland in 1882 for the Union Steam Ship Company.

It came to tragic fame when it struck a reef and sunk about 100km off Auckland at the northern edge of Great Barrier Island. 140 people died in this incident and it remains one of the largest losses of human life related to maritime disaster in New Zealand's history.

The *Wairarapa* sailed from Sydney, Australia on 24 October 1894. The ship's destination was New Zealand port city of Auckland. The ship's Captain was Captain J.S. McIntosh.

Despite the dense fog and storms encountered when the ship reached the North Island of New Zealand, McIntosh refused to slow the ship from nearly full speed of 13 knots. Fatally, the ship went off-course, possibly due to a faulty compass bearing.

Whatever the cause, the ship skirted to the west of the Poor Knights Islands, not the east. As a consequence she was much closer to the mainland than the ship's crew believed. On Monday, October 29, 1894, the *Wairarapa*, with more than 230 passengers and crew aboard, crashed on to rocks at Miner's Head on Great Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand shortly after midnight.

On deck, the survivors clung to the ship's rails for twelve hours, and at last a line was taken to shore by a steward, and secured. A thick rope was then hauled to land, and the passengers attempted to get ashore to safety. A lifeboat eventually succeeded in reaching a local community of Ngati Wai Māori based at Katherine Bay, on the western coast of the island. They were able to rescue and provide care for a number of the survivors.

Although the *Wairarapa* was expected in Auckland, there was no way of knowing where she was lost. As the only contact with the island at the time was via weekly trips from a steamer, it was three full days until news of the shipwreck reached Auckland when a small coastal ship *ss Argyle* saw the wreck and took the survivors back to Auckland on 1 November.

The *s.s. Argyle* returned two days later to salvage the remaining 109 sacks of mail of the 117 which had been on board. 23,224 pieces of mail were recovered, taken to Auckland on November 3.

Captain McIntosh, his crew and 134 passengers perished in this disaster. A Court of Enquiry was held afterwards and the Captain's action was found the primary cause of the disaster.



Figure 1
SS *Wairarapa* wrecked at Miner's Head

The Shipwreck Handstamp

Surviving letters were handstamped "Saved from the wreck of the/Wairarapa" (in two lines), in violet or blue ink. Letters backstamped "AUCKLAND 3 NO 94" are usually struck in deep violet, but those backstamped on November 5 or 10 are usually in violet-blue.

A much rarer handstamp has been seen, far smaller, and in black. It is thought that this was the first one to be used, but was found to be too small and indistinct, and so discarded.

The Letter from Hong Kong

Fig. 2 is a letter from Hong Kong datestamped 24 September 1894 salvaged from the incident. The original Hong Kong stamp was floated off.

The letter addressed to the Bank of New Zealand in Auckland was carried by ship *ss Chingtu* to Sydney and then put on the *Wairarapa* on its last voyage to New Zealand.

The letter shows an Auckland arrival datestamp of 3 November 1894 proving that it was the first batch processed after the rescue. (Figure 3) The cachet is in violet, top line measuring 57mm and second line 48mm.

This appears to be the only surviving cover recorded from Hong Kong, although a second letter may exist since there is offset of two Hong Kong c.d.s. of the same date on back of this letter.

A wreck cover is also known carried by the *ss Chingtu* from Japan. A third letter is known from Amoy to Hawkes Bay, New Zealand datestamped Amoy AP 15 1894³ (Figure 4)

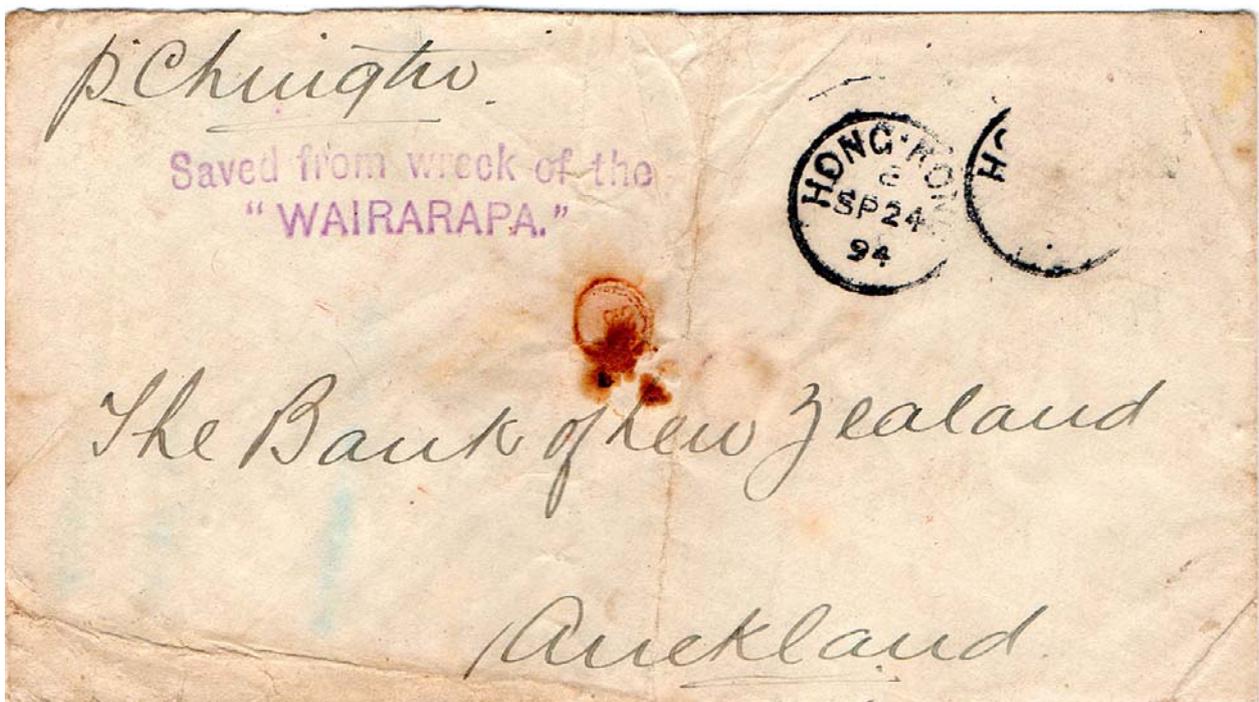


Figure 2



Figure 3

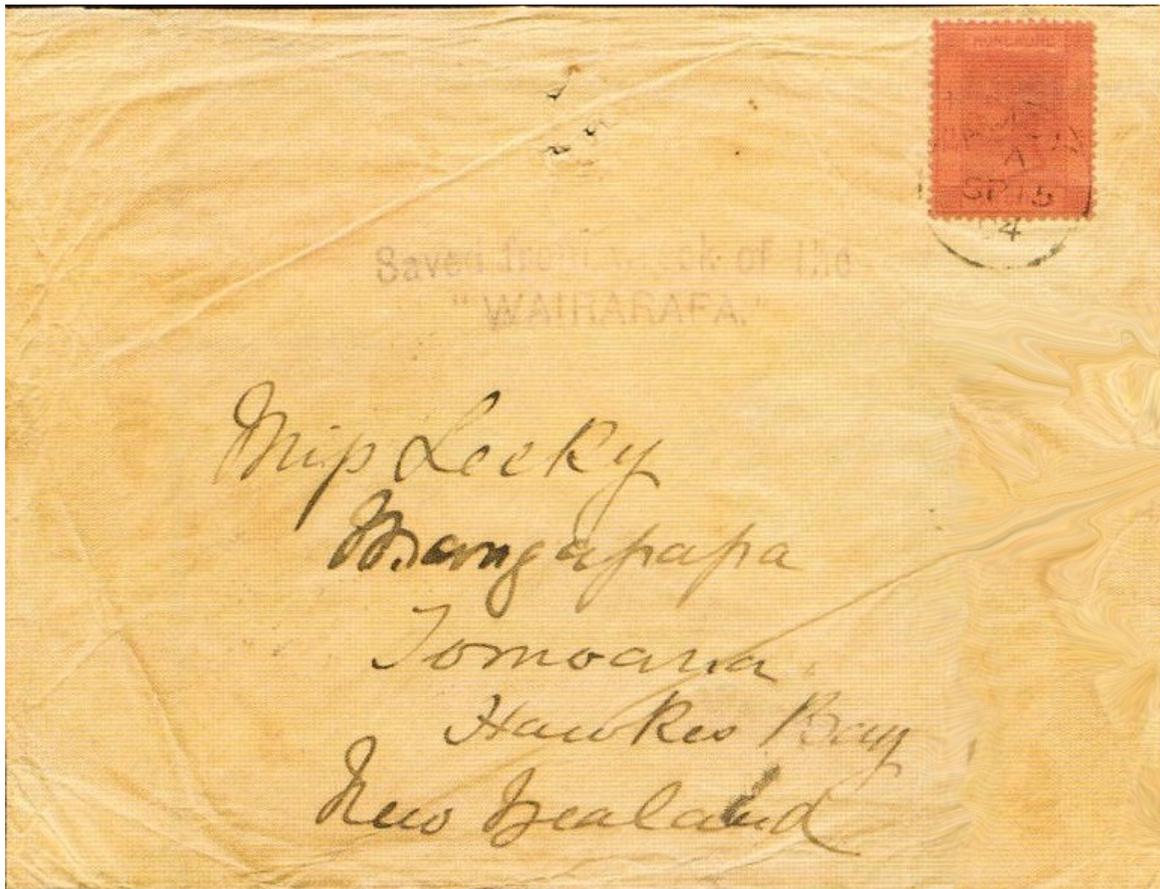


Figure 4

Acknowledgement:

My sincere thanks to Mr. Robin Gwynn of New Zealand who provided the historic background of the maritime disaster and the statistics of the surviving covers.

References:

1. Brian Peace, "Australasian Disaster Mail" published in April 1997
2. Robin Gwynn, paper 1993
3. 'Richard C.K. Chan collection of Hong Kong and Treaty Ports' lot 115 Cavendish 6 March 2003 sale