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# THE FIRST TOPHOUSE: A LANDMARK IN THE NELSON PASTORAL LANDSCAPE

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In 1861 an article in the *Nelson Examiner* lamented, “between Tophouse and Hurunui there is no single accommodation house or public shelter” (*Nelson Examiner*, 8 May 1861). The article referred to the first Tophouse, the first settler homestead in the upper Wairau Valley (Figure 1). This paper considers its origins and how a settler homestead considered “a poor one” (Saxton Diaries, 25 November 1847) came to be considered a crucial landmark in the Nelson pastoral landscape. Built in 1847, the owners of the first Tophouse met the New Zealand early colonial expectation of offering shelter to passing travellers. It later became an unofficial and then official accommodation house. When the Province of Marlborough was surveyed and separated from Nelson in 1859, the first Tophouse became a trig point, Top 2, an official landmark (Figure 2). This paper uses secondary sources and archival material to show that it was also a significant landmark for South Island settler society, representing both ‘conquest’ and ‘refuge’ in an unfamiliar landscape.

## **The Struggle of Pastoral Establishment**

Nelson was one of the earliest New Zealand Company settlements and the decision by its leader Captain Arthur Wakefield, to prioritise finding a suitable port over adequate farmland had far reaching consequences. In 1842 surveyor John Sylvanyus Cotterell reported finding 250,000 acres of good farmland in the Wairau Valley, owned by Ngati Toa. In April 1843 Wakefield, knowing the New Zealand Company was 165,000 acres short of land to fulfil its contracts with settlers, swore in a group as special constables and proceeded to the Wairau with a false warrant for the arrest of Ngati Toa chief Te Rauparaha. In the ensuing battle, four Maori and twenty-two pakeha were killed (Burns 1989: 233). Nelson historian Ruth Allan suggested that the Wairau ‘Massacre’ (Affray) was a defining event for Nelson settler society (Allan 1965: 137). Set-

tlers became incensed and fearful and the ranges separating Blind Bay from the Nelson hinterland became a dividing line of fear and mistrust (*Nelson Examiner*, 6 April 1950). Prospective pastoralists remained without land and the competition for purchase of land within Blind Bay increased.

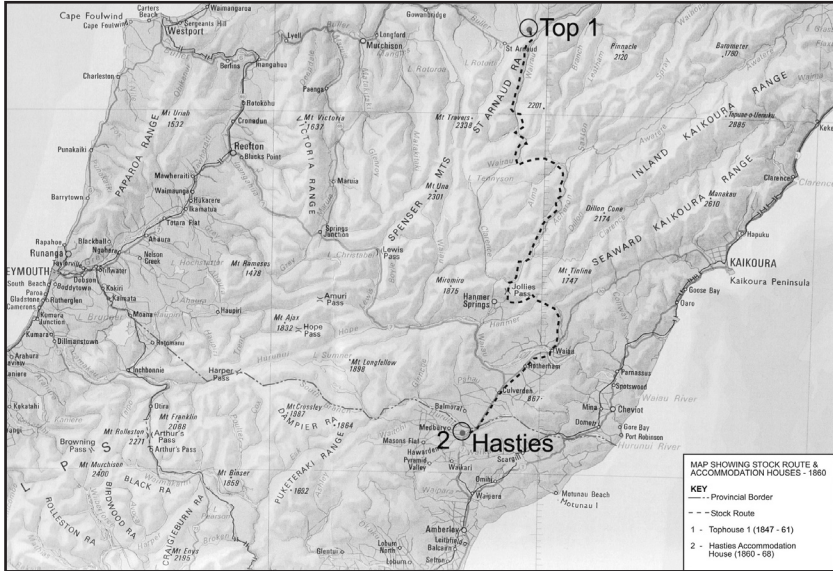


Figure 1. Map of stock route and accommodation houses, 1860.

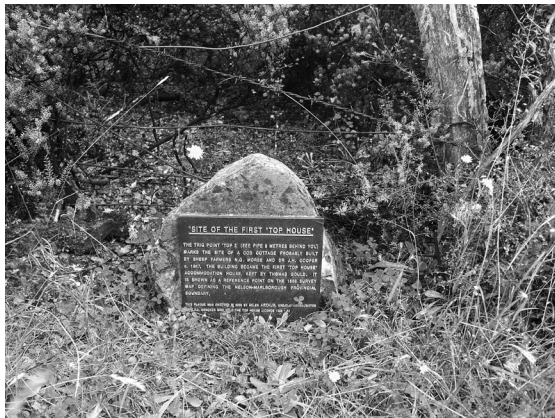


Figure 2. Bronze plaque at the site of the first Tophouse. Photograph by Clare Kelly, 2006.

Dr James Henry Cooper and Nathaniel George Morse were aspiring Nelson pastoralists. When they failed to secure pre-emptive purchase of their leasehold land in Motueka in 1846, they drove sheep over the Tophouse Pass and became the first squatters in the Wairau Valley. The diaries of a prominent Nelson settler, John Waring Saxton record that in November 1846 Saxton:

called on Mr. Cooper. Mr. Cooper and Mr. White were about to ride up the Waimea to overtake and accompany Mr. Morse and Dr. Bedborough and their sheep on the way to the Wairau Valley. (Saxton Diaries, 16 November 1846)

The Saxton Diaries recorded how Cooper and Morse's leasehold land in the Motueka area had been purchased acrimoniously.

Mrs Cooper told me that her husband had been compelled to move the sheep to the Wairau by the jealousy of Dr Munro and Mr Dillon who as land purchasers had said they would not withstanding Mr Fox take possession of all the grazing land at Motueka and had carried all with a high hand until Mr Cooper had said he would drive his scabbed sheep among theirs when they yielded and apologised. (Saxton Diaries, 18 November 1846)

It had been a bad year financially for wool prices (Saxton Diaries, 16 November 1846) but the move cannot have been entirely the push of economic necessity, for Dr Cooper had told Saxton whilst finishing his garden in Nelson that he “longed to sell it [his Nelson house] and go into the country” (Saxton Diaries, 29 June 1846). Part of this eagerness may be explained by a later diary entry suggesting Dr Cooper was in poor health (Saxton Diaries, 3 September 1847).

Morse succeeded in building a house by mid January 1847 and extended the tradition of station hospitality to travellers (Arnold 1981: 252). A traveller through the Wairau recalled in the *Nelson Examiner* in early 1847 how Morse's residence was located “upon a small piece of table land within hearing of the waters of the Wairau”. He recorded Morse's hospitality to travellers:

Here [at the Tophouse] I need not say that every traveller will meet with a friendly reception and such hospitality as can be reasonably expected from a gentleman sixty miles from the nearest market, and that over a hilly and difficult country to traverse and consequently unable to replenish his stores at a moment's notice, and therefore not to be expected to empty them as suddenly. Should any of his friends however visit him at particular seasons he can treat them to a superb lambs fry and tail soup. (*Nelson Examiner*, 23 January 1847)

The author wrote that his party “halted one day with Mr Morse” on the return journey (*Nelson Examiner*, 30 January 1847).

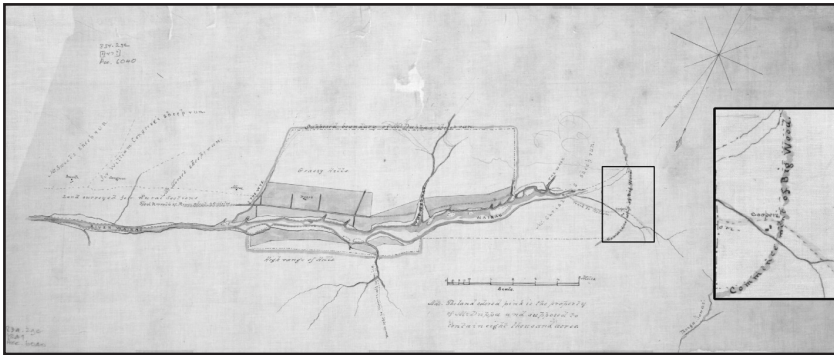
By August of 1847 Dr Cooper had succeeded in letting his house in Nelson and he went to the Wairau with Morse to select a house site (Saxton Diaries, 3 August 1847). Mrs Cooper informed Saxton that the initial intention was that, “the ladies live in the cottage and the gentlemen in a tent” (Saxton Diaries, 21 August 1847). In referring to the ladies she meant herself, her mother-in-law and her children. The wisdom of this proposal in the depth of a high country winter took a blow when Cooper found difficulty getting skilled labour and was demoralised by the cost of packing in supplies. Saxton noted: “Walked with Mr Cooper who seemed very dejected and dissatisfied...He had been trying to engage a man to go to the Wairau to cut timber for him at 8s per 100 feet planks” (Saxton Diaries, 31 August 1847). The cost and distance of packing in supplies for a family and the prospect of losing their house once the Wairau was surveyed also weighed heavily on Cooper (Saxton Diaries, 31 August 1847). The struggle to find labour and cart construction materials meant that although Mrs Cooper, her mother and children left Nelson in mid September they were forced to stay en route at McRae’s homestead and arrived at the Wairau a month later. The space in the house must have been inadequate for Dr and Mrs Cooper, their children and Mrs McDonald (Dr Cooper’s mother-in-law) because in February 1848 the Saxton Diaries suggested that overcrowding gave way to ill-feeling: “Mr Morse had given up his house all but one room for himself but soon gave that up and now they have quarreled with him...Their servant had insisted on leaving” (Saxton Diaries, 2 February 1848). Under these circumstances the partnership dissolved and Dr Cooper returned to Nelson with his pregnant wife, children and homesick mother in law (Saxton Diaries, 1 January 1849).

Like many aspiring pastoral farmers Cooper and Morse lacked colonial farming experience. They were driven by failure to secure pre-emptive purchase of their Motueka run and hampered by lack of available building materials and labour when they arrived in the Wairau. Of early Canterbury pastoralists houses, historian W. H. Scotter suggested “living conditions depended not only on what money was available but on what women were prepared to put up with” (Scotter 1971: 180). Ultimately Cooper and Morse’s pastoral partnership ceased because of what women were not prepared to put up with.

There are no remaining images of the first Tophouse. While textual references to it after 1853 refer to it as a single building it may originally have been two (Figure 3). While some wealthy pastoralists bought kitset homes (Salmond 1986: 27), in the first decade of pastoral expansion, pastoralists’ financial priorities generally dictated a home of raw utility; typically a simple two-room

building with a communal room (with a fireplace) and a private/bed room. Construction was the vernacular of the region of England or Scotland a settler had come from and depended on local material availability (Salmond 1986: 30-31). When the farming operation was more financially secure, a third room and verandah were added (Salmond 1986: 31) or a more substantial dwelling was built. Often bachelors would establish pastoral runs and then send for their wives or marry. The first Tophouse was a version of this typology, to afford business partners shelter whilst they established a pastoral run. (As points of comparison, the first Glens of Tekoa station homestead, Nelson Province, and the Dean's Cottage, Canterbury, were this simple typology for pastoral farmer business partners.) Archival sources suggest it was built of cob. The Saxton Diaries noted: "Mr Cooper and his family were well and comfortable in their clay plastered house" (Saxton Diaries, October, 1847). Reinforcing this view, Minnie Landon Lane who lived at the Tophouse Telegraph Station from 1876-1889 wrote to area historian J. N.W. Newport in 1954 and recalled her childhood memory of the ruin of the first Tophouse:

A mile on the Blenheim side of old Wisen's [Adolphe Wiesenhavern's second Tophouse] was the ruin of a much older mud accommodation house . . . The house was cob and thatch and built on the boundary line between Marlborough and Nelson. It had a huge chimney. (Landon Lane to Newport, letter, 17 November 1954)



*Figure 3. Map drawn in 1849 showing 'Dr Cooper's', Tophouse 1. MapColl 834-2gc-1847-Acc6040. Alexander Turnbull Library Cartographic Collection. Edited by Clare Kelly.*

It was clearly inauspicious architecture for Saxton noted in his diary that eminent Nelson residents "Mr Dillon and Mr Stafford thought Mr Cooper's place a very poor one" (Saxton Diaries, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1847). Today the bronze

plaque near the trig point Top 2 could read as a testimony to the inglorious struggles and failures of pastoral establishment.

### **A Symbol of Conquest?**

Historian Giselle Byrnes has suggested that naming and mapping were central to the colonisation of New Zealand. The act of naming constructed a “‘new’ cultural space . . . Names domesticated, memorialised and celebrated the British settler presence” (Byrnes 2001: 77). The Tophouse was thus named because it was assumed to be at the highest altitude in Nelson Province. The prosaic name for a simple cob homestead considered by eminent Nelsonians to be “a very poor one” (Saxton Diaries, 25 November 1847), also evoked supremacy, elevation and oversight. Byrnes wrote:

Names inscribed on the land . . . were deliberate and provocative statements of power; they were assertions of presence and signifiers of occupation . . . As each colonising group imposed place names on the land they did so over those colonised. (Byrnes 2001: 80)

Settlers in Nelson nursed sentiments of self-righteous indignation and fear after the Wairau Affray (McAloon 1997: 34-35) and when Cooper and Morse built their homestead the Wairau had not been purchased. The naming of the Tophouse was an emphatic statement of settler occupation and an attempt to write over the palimpsest of Maori ownership (Mitchell 2004: 371-373). The language of empire and evocation of conquest was used in the *Nelson Examiner* to describe this modest cob homestead despite the fact that Morse was squatting on Maori land.

Here you come in sight of the residence of G. [Nathaniel George] Morse Esq. who may be said to be “monarch of all he surveys” for at present “his right there is none to dispute” and from one side to the other he may be said to be “lord of the fowl and the brute,” the first consisting of tame and wild fowl, the latter of sheep . . . The house stands . . . surrounded if not by “cloud capp’d towers and gorgeous palaces” with snow capped mountains and craggy precipices. (*Nelson Examiner*, 23 January 1847)

Figure 3 shows an early map of the upper Wairau Valley. The cartographer is standing on the Richmond Range with a ‘God’s eye’ view of the pastoral runs below. The Tophouse is the last run before the Tophouse Pass. While the primary purpose of the map was to encode the extent and relative size of pastoralist George Duppa’s land holdings (8000 acres), the choice of view reinforced Byrnes’ observation that:

Strategies employed in mapping – the reinscription, enclosure and ordering of space – have been shown to provide an analogue for ac-

quisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power. (Byrnes 2001: 90)

In this view the pastoral runs appear to have extended through the Wairau and into the Nelson hinterland. This view shows “one of Te Rauaparaha’s most treasured possessions” (Burns 1989: 224), the Wairau Valley, four years after the Wairau Affray, written over. It is an image of conquest and the Tophouse, the forerunner, was part of this ‘colonial victory’.

So while only a (poorly constructed) cob homestead, the Tophouse in nomenclature, popular press description and inscription was not only a landmark but a symbol of conquest. All the more provocative when considered that at the time of both description and inscription the land was in Maori ownership. In all probability this ‘statement’ was more powerful to those Nelson settlers who remained in Blind Bay. To those travelling in the Wairau the first Tophouse was a landmark and at nightfall, a refuge.

### **An Unofficial Accommodation House**

While the details of occupation of the Tophouse between 1849 and 1855 are unclear, it is evident that it remained a known landmark and after developing a tradition of overnight hospitality to travellers, it became an unofficial accommodation house.

The first pastoral licenses were issued in the Wairau in January 1849 and Nathaniel Morse squatted on land bounded by the Wye River and Boundary Creek (the future Wantwood Run) that year (Denton 1981: 7 & 26). Having learned from the loss of his run in Motueka in 1846 he made the pre-emptive purchase of two sections of this land in October 1851, one for the homestead (Wantwood) site and the other for outstation buildings (Denton 1982: 26). As it was common practice to employ boundary shepherds it is possible that Morse lived in the Tophouse until the completion of the Wantwood homestead in early 1852. Certainly his name remained associated with the Tophouse for some years after he left. Captain Mitchell of the Bombay Infantry travelled through the Wairau in 1853. His diary entry on 19 December 1853 recorded: “After crossing streams and hills passed through a Black Birch Forest to N. G. Morse’s Tophouse” (MacKenzie Diary: 1853 in Dickenson 1974: 17). In his letter to his brother Numa in France in March 1853, however, Father Antoine Garin wrote:

We passed under the Tophouse. These words mean “summit house”. There used to be an inn with that name which was called that because it was higher than all the other inns in Nelson.

His letter went on to say that the next day, “We passed Mr Morse’s Station” [Wantwood] (Father Garin to Numa Garin, letter, 22 January 1853). As



Garin was a Nelson resident and knew many Nelson pastoralists personally his comment that the Tophouse “used to be an inn” suggested that for a time from 1849-1852 the homestead had been an unofficial accommodation house but was abandoned. Whether Nathaniel Morse lived at Tophouse and accommodated travellers until Wantwood was completed or that task fell briefly to another squatter is unclear. By early 1853 Garin’s letters suggest that the Tophouse was being still used as an overnight shelter for travellers through the Wairau. Writing to his brother in France, Garin described a night staying at the Tophouse in February, 1853.

Anyway we got across the river all right and we arrived at Tophouse where we were going to spend the night. Three other travellers who arrived before us were there. As these gentlemen were, as always, loaded with provisions by their loving wives they told us that they had put some tea on the fire, but they had only two cups to drink it from. The tea was being made in dilapidated old rusty kettles. There were two of them but they didn’t hold more than one good one. I saw some mutton and some bread on the table. Seeing that they were going to be altogether I said, “Here’s some bread. It’s all that I’ve got.” And I gave them a large piece of bread. I could have had some of their tea and mutton without being unfair even though they would have been very pleased to share it with me without my contribution. After we’d had tea they asked me where I’d like to put my bed. “The first to arrive should choose first,” I said, “I sleep happily anywhere.” Those who are scared of fleas grab the roughly made wooden beds. They are raised two or three feet above the floor . . . I said my service, then choosing the floor as my bed, I folded my blanket in two so as to lie on half of it and cover myself with the other half. Before going off to sleep everyone recommended to everyone else that they should get up early so as to get to Mr Wilson’s place (Father Garin to Numa Garin, letter, 22 February 1853)

The letter continued to describe how Garin was elected to be the first to wake, fill the kettles in the stream and wake the other travellers to hot tea and breakfast. While Garin’s description is one of frugal austerity and questionable hygiene, the spontaneous cooperation of fellow travellers ensured an experience of basic food and shelter was also one of fellowship with other travellers.

By 1855 the Tophouse was occupied by Thomas and Mrs Gould and they were offering overnight accommodation to travellers. Father Garin’s diary records that in January 1855, “we made a halt at Gould’s to have dinner” (Father Garin, Diary, 30 January 1855). After the earthquake in March 1855, however,

the Tophouse was damaged and again briefly abandoned. Garin described it in his diary as being “in a state of ruin” (Father Garin, Diary, 8 March 1855).

The stocking of the Wairau runs from 1849 increased travel between the Wairau mouth (Blenheim) to the Buller and West Coast and the Tophouse was an important landmark and place of overnight refuge for travellers. In 1855 explorer and pastoralist Fredrick Weld discovered what Amuri historian, W. J. Gardner has termed ‘the sheep highway of the south’ (Gardner 1983: 44), an inland route through the mountainous high country between Nelson and Canterbury allowing the droving of sheep from overstocked Nelson pastoral runs to understocked runs in Canterbury. Those journeying between Canterbury and Nelson also began staying at the Tophouse. Thus, after the earthquake, realising the Tophouse was a crucial refuge, Thomas Gould undertook repairs and a Nelson Provincial Council Public Works Report in 1856 stated that in December 1855 expenditure of £25 to repair the Tophouse walls and £2 to repair the doors was authorised to be paid to Thomas Gould, but expenditure of £20 to make a stockyard was declined (NVP 1856).

### **A Publican’s Bush License: An Official Accommodation House**

Gould wrote to the Superintendent in January 1856 requesting “a license to sell Wines Ale and Spirits at the Tophouse leading to the Wairau” and proposing to build “sleeping apartments and to have every accommodation for travellers, and good stabling” (RSPN NP 7 1856/34). By June 1856, Gould had obtained a Publican’s Bush License. In a ‘Return of Houses Specially Licensed for the Sale of Spirituous Liquors, &c, for the Accommodation of Travellers’, he was granted an annual license in June 1856 for a fee of £50. The only provisions were that he keep “2 Bedrooms and 1 sitting room for the accommodation of travellers.” It is notable that there was no requirement for providing meals for travellers, stock enclosure, or stabling. With the granting of this license the first Tophouse had thus become an official accommodation house.

The Tophouse remained a refuge for travelers. The *Nelson Examiner* detailed a perilous and ill-advised journey through the Nelson to Canterbury inland stock route in early July 1858 by eminent Nelson and North Canterbury pastoralists, Robinson, Wilson, McDonald, Capper and Augarde. Having endured severe frostbite the party “reached the Tophouse . . . the travellers were supplied with food and rest and received every attention from Mrs Gould” (*Nelson Examiner*, 14 July 1858). Father Garin’s letters and diaries record him returning to spend nights at the Tophouse until 1859. As a well-known landmark the Tophouse was also used as a place to hold meetings. Garin noted his annoyance in his diary in October 1856 when his ride to the Tophouse to meet

Mr Ward (a lower Wairau Catholic run holder), to talk about education proved fruitless, as Mr Ward did not come (Father Garin, Diary, October, 1856).

A letter to the Superintendent of the Nelson Province from Thomas Gould in April 1858, included a signed testimonial from twelve local men confirming that they considered him a “fit and proper person to keep the Tophouse” (SPN NP 7 1858/499). Such a testimonial was only called for before a man was chosen to run an accommodation house or if the conditions of its upkeep were called into question by complaints to the Provincial Superintendent. While the first Tophouse had been described with unbridled enthusiasm in 1847, it had been left abandoned for a period and suffered damage from the 1855 earthquake. It is possible that licensing may not have had the desired effect of controlling alcohol consumption as Garin wrote in his diary in February 1858 “As we left it (the bush) my horse made a sudden bound the like of which I had never seen. I thought I saw a man lying asleep or drunk on the ground. I got to Tophouse” (Father Garin, Diary, 19 February 1858).

While travellers in the late 1840s and early 1850s were pioneering pastoralists, explorers and religious missionaries, all prepared for isolation and sleeping rough, by the early 1860s, not only drovers but families relocating were moving between these places. Rusty kettles, hard beds and no stabling probably impaired the comfort of overnight shelter.

In September 1858, Christian Deuscher wrote to the Provincial Secretary stating that he thought the lease for Tophouse Accommodation House and reserve were open for renewal and offered to reimburse Gould for improvements and either “accommodate travellers in such a manner that no reasonable complaint may be laid against me” or “if I could have the run itself without anything to do with the house I should agree to pay a certain amount of money bonus for keeping the house” (SPN NP 7 1858/526).

Gould sold the Tophouse to Christian Deuscher for £80 and a receipt of this sale was deposited with the Provincial Secretary in November 1858 (OSepN NP 11/2 1858/385). While Deuscher applied for a Publican’s Bush License from mid 1859 for the coming year (SePN NP 7 1859/569), by January 1860 the task of running the Tophouse Accommodation House must have proved too great.

Adolphe Wiesnhavern made application to the Provincial Superintendent for the license for the Tophouse Accommodation House and run (SPN NP 7 1860/542). Having acquainted himself, however, with the challenges posed in running the Tophouse, he wrote again to the Superintendent in September 1860 with his analysis and proposed solution.

Will you excuse me addressing you regarding the buildings of the Tophouse.

As the accommodation house since [sic] nearly two years (During the Landlordship [sic] of Mr Deuscher) was left without any repairing, the house was in a very dilapidated state when I took possession of it. I repaired different parts of the house, but after passing this heavy winter, walls, roof and chimneys are in such a rotten condition,- except that part of the house which was built by Mr Gould -,that a further repairing is useless and it will be for the intendand [sic] and the travelling people, most inconvenient to stay any longer in the old house.

Also it is necessary to have here paddocks for public use as well as to cultivate oaten hay and other farming produce.

I therefore apply, your honour will sanction me to build a new accommodation house containing a public room, 2 bedrooms, private room, kitchen and store,- not less than 6 rooms in all,- also to erect sufficient paddocks as is necessary for the place.

Horsestable is [sic.] building, the bad weather of late kept me back to have it finished by this time.

I must begin building as soon as the weather is settled and I beg your Honour will consider my application without delay (SPN NP 7 1860/542).

The Provincial Secretary replied that the Government accepted his proposal under the conditions:

That the House shall contain at least one good sitting room & two good bedrooms for the exclusive accommodation of Travellers, and that you erect a good four-stalled stable provide a good paddock for the Horses and Cattle of Travellers & at the expiration of your tenancy, should you want to dispose of the Business, the Govt. will require the incoming tenant to take the Buildings at a valuation, such valuation, however, not to be binding on the Govt. for more than £150. (OSEPN NP 11/3 1860/362)

Adolphe Wiesenhavern abandoned the first Tophouse and built the second Tophouse between 1861 and 1862 on a site closer to the Nelson to Canterbury inland stock route (Figure 4). Along with Jollies Pass Accommodation House, 1862 (SPN NP 7 1862/599); Tarndale Accommodation House, early 1863 (Richmond Diary 1863,12); the Acheron Accommodation House (Richmond Diary 1863,12) and Morris's Accommodation House, Waiiau (SPN NP 7 1864/751), late 1863; and Barnett's (Hurunui North Bank) Accommodation House, 1865 (SPN NP 7 1865/808), it became part of an interdependent chain



was being surveyed, a survey peg was driven into its wall and today it is an official trig point, Top 2. The site of the first Tophouse has not been the subject of archaeological investigation but is commemorated with a bronze plaque. Few today could readily identify the original Nelson dwellings of the honorable Constantine Dillon or (the later New Zealand Premier) Edward Stafford, yet the first Tophouse, a small cob homestead they deemed “a very poor one” became for Nelson settler society a crucial refuge in the pastoral high country and has remained an important landmark.

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