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## THE RAILWAY HOTEL SITE (R27/196), JOHNSONVILLE, WELLINGTON

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The building known as the Railway Hotel (Fig. 1) was, until recently, the oldest in Johnsonville. It occupied a prominent position next to the round-about on Johnsonville Road. The building became known as the Railway Hotel in the mid 1880s at about the time the railway reached Johnsonville. It continued to operate as a hotel until the area went dry in 1908. It was demolished in March 1993 when the corner section on which it stood was re-developed for a KFC outlet.

There is no record of exactly when the Railway Hotel was built. The oldest photograph showing the building dates to about 1885-6 but conservation architect Ian Bowman argues that the architectural style indicates that the building was constructed in the 1860s or 1870s (*Evening Post* 12 December 1992). After 1908, the building underwent a number of changes of use and in its last years it was occupied by a real estate agency. The area around the hotel has changed considerably since the building was erected. Structures have been built and demolished, railway tracks have been laid and ripped up, and roads have been put in and upgraded. The hotel building itself has undergone changes, the most drastic when the Burgess Road end was shortened by about 2 m sometime between 1908 and 1951 (see photographic evidence in Meyer 1990:50, 74).

There is documentary evidence to indicate that, prior to the Railway Hotel building being constructed, another hotel had occupied the same site. This earlier hotel was in business by about the time the road north was put through in around 1846 (N.Z. Historic Places Trust file 12011-002 Railway Hotel, Johnsonville).

### ASSESSMENT

An assessment of the archaeological potential of the Railway Hotel site was undertaken on 22 December 1992 at the request of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. The building is on the edge of the commercial area and extensive modification of the ground surface in the immediate vicinity over the years for houses, small workshops, offices and shops had obscured the original topography. There was evidence, however, that the Railway Hotel building sat on a terrace excavated into the toe of a spur. The original ground surface at the rear of the section had been completely excavated away when the terrace was built, but it was thought that some archaeological deposits associated with



Figure 1. Taylor's Railway Hotel (reproduced with permission of Porirua Museum). Not dated, but the name indicates a date in the mid 1880s. Taylor was the licensee from the late 1870s through to 1887.

the earlier building on the site might be buried towards the front of the section. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust subsequently issued an authority for redevelopment of the site conditional on a small investigation of part of the area.

## INVESTIGATION

Tony Walton, Ann Williams, and Ian Bowman spent just under two hours on site on 26 March 1993, soon after the demolition of the Railway Hotel building. A concrete slab which had been laid under the floor of the Railway Hotel building in the recent past had been removed by the contractors and limited test excavations were begun towards the front of the section. It quickly became clear that there was a substantial deposit of fill there. The extent of this build-up had not been evident from the initial surface inspection because of the extent to which ground surfaces adjoining the front of the section had also been altered. This had disguised the original lie of the land at the very toe of the spur.

The terrace on which the Railway Hotel building stood measured approximately 15 m x 15 m, with the front of the building hard against the footpath next to Johnsonville Road (Fig. 2). In recent years, the terrace had

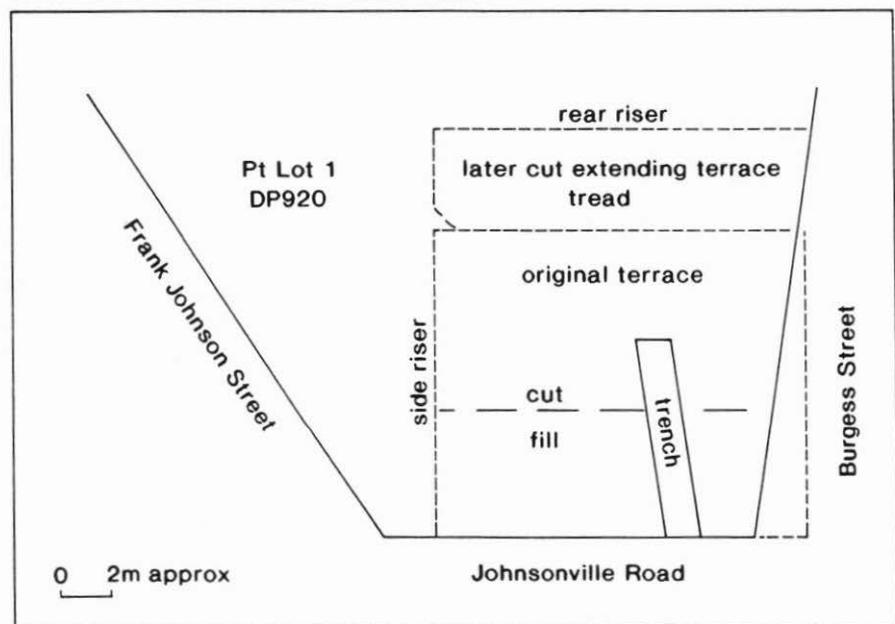


Figure 2. Sketch Plan of Railway Hotel site.

been extended to the rear by a few metres to accommodate a garage. Excavation was confined to trenching at the front of the section to determine if archaeological deposits had survived. A trench 8 m long and 1.2 m wide was cut obliquely across the terrace using the excavating machinery available on site. The trench showed that about 4-5 m at the front of the section had been covered with fill. The build-up reached a maximum depth of 500 mm adjacent to the footpath. The layer of fill continued under the footpath.

The fill at the front of the terrace overlay a grey, waterlogged soil which contained well preserved roots and other organic material. Twenty-three items were recovered from the original ground surface and from the lower part of the fill. This material had been lying around on site when the terrace was cut. The material was analysed by Dr N. Ritchie (Table 1). Thirteen pieces of glass represent a minimum of four bottles and a drinking glass. There are two pieces of stoneware and eight pieces of earthenware, each piece probably representing a different item. The earthenware includes fragments of six plates, a bowl, and a cup. Four of the plates and the bowl are decorated with willow pattern. This pattern was popular over a long period. The absence of any items which can be definitively attributed to a particular period allows only very imprecise dating of the assemblage to the period 1870-1920.

The artefactual material, which was buried at the time of the formation of the terrace, was probably associated with the last stages of occupation of the 1840s-1870s hotel. The assemblage was buried by, or incorporated in, the fill when the terrace was constructed for the new building. The likely 1870s-1920s date of the assemblage rules out the possibility, entertained at the time of the investigation, that the terrace might date back to the 1840s. Construction of the terrace, either by extending an existing one or by cutting an entirely new one, probably obliterated any evidence of where the earlier hotel had sat.

The investigation was limited in scope. The material found in and below the terrace fill is the only evidence found of occupation prior to the construction of the Railway Hotel. None of the artefacts found are especially rare or particularly worthy of note. As the plan of the Railway Hotel building was already well established, nothing was to be gained by excavating the tread of the terrace. Nothing was found to indicate the site had a history different from that established from the documentary record. The two lines of evidence mesh together very well.

## CONCLUSION

The original assessment of the potential of the site relied on both documentary evidence and field inspection. It was done against a background of very limited exploration of historical archaeological sites in the Wellington urban area. The recognition that the Railway Hotel building sat on a terrace was crucial to the assessment of the archaeological potential of the site. If additional time had been available for excavation, more artefacts might have

been recovered and this might have allowed more detailed inferences to be drawn from the artefact assemblage.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Neville Ritchie for the analysis of the artefact assemblage, Ian Bowman for his assistance on site, and Mary O'Keeffe for information about the building. Pat Stodart drew our attention to the photograph reproduced as Fig.1. Fig. 2 was drawn by Sean Hutton. The investigation was part funded by KFC.

## REFERENCE

Meyer, R.J. 1990. *Up In The Hills: A History Of Johnsonville*, Northern Suburbs Community Newspaper Trust, Johnsonville.

TABLE 1. RAILWAY HOTEL ASSEMBLAGE

| <i>Artefact/Item</i>         | <i>No.</i> | <i>Comments</i>  |
|------------------------------|------------|--|
| <b>GLASS</b>                 |            |  |
| Whisky/beer                  | 5          | Neck and 4 side fragments. Dark green glass. Neck has striations.                            |
| Bottle                       | 5          | Side fragments, dark green. Possibly part of above bottle, but thicker glass appears darker. |
| Large 'ring seal beer'       | 1          | Base and side fragment, medium green.  |
| Aqua glass bottle            | 1          | Side fragment, undiagnostic to type.   |
| Glass                        | 1          | Clear base of wine/spirit glass.   |
| <b>CERAMICS: STONEWARE</b>   |            |  |
| Porter bottle                | 1          | Stoneware, cream glaze, neck and lip section.  |
| Ginger beer?                 | 1          | Exterior chip, light brown glaze stoneware.  |
| <b>CERAMICS: EARTHENWARE</b> |            |  |
| Dinner plate                 | 1          | Rim fragment. Blue on white. Diameter 340 mm.  |
| Plate                        | 1          | Rim fragment. Blue on white. Diameter 240 mm. Willow pattern "Iron Stone China".             |
| Plate                        | 1          | Base Fragment. Willow pattern (part of fence).   |
| Plate                        | 1          | Rim fragment. Blue on white. Diameter  |

|       |   |  |
|-------|---|--|
|       |   | 240 mm. Probably willow pattern. 'Crown type' part of R mark. Not attributable to a particular manufacturer. |
| Plate | 1 | Fragment. Willow pattern (fence, pagoda, blossoms, etc). Possibly part of plate above.                       |
| Bowl  | 1 | Rim fragment. Blue on white. Diameter 155 mm. Willow pattern.  |
| Plate | 1 | Pale blue underglaze on one surface. Different from above.   |
| Cup   | 1 | White glaze with green hairline. Diameter 75 mm.   |