



Arthur St Cemetery Memorial

Dunedin's First Cemetery

Dunedin's first cemetery was a reserve of 15 acres 1 rood and 12 poles (approximately 6 hectares) in Arthur Street granted by the Crown to the Superintendent of the Provincial Council¹. Of the original grant, only a small portion in the south eastern corner, bounded by Arthur and Rattray Streets, was used for interment.

The first burial was performed by the Wesleyan minister, Reverend Charles Creed, for a member of Kettle's surveying team, labourer James Campbell, on 29 October 1846. It is thought that 80 settlers were buried on the site between 1846 and 1856.² Perched on the side of a steep hill, the burial ground soon became an eyesore for the fast growing city and was considered inconvenient for burials. Further, the risks from drainage, particularly after heavy rain, were considered injurious to the health of neighbouring residents

The Arthur Street cemetery, as it was known, closed on 13 March 1858, but continued to accept burials of family members ('the corpse or coffin of the husband, wife or parent of any person already buried there') of those previously interred until at least 1865. New fencing was erected around a small corner to contain the burial area. No longer an active cemetery, it soon fell into decline and the headstones and fences became dilapidated, despite the efforts of the prisoners who were brought to the site to mend the fences in an effort to keep grazing cattle out. A photograph by Burton Bros dated 1879 confirms the neglect, which prompted Councillor A H Ross to report to Council on 3 June that year that "he believed every councillor was aware of the state of the cemetery and thoroughly ashamed of it."³

Council resolved to improve the site, and landscape the area as a memorial park, but not without initial opposition from the families of some of those buried there. Eventually, with the majority support of representatives of the families buried therein, the tombstones and the fences around the graves were removed to other cemeteries and the ground leveled. The remainder of the land was withheld for public recreation and educational use.

On 4 November 1879 Council adopted the Reserves Committee's recommendation to commemorate the cemetery site with a single monument near the intersection of Arthur and Rattray Street. George Smith's preliminary

¹ Crown Grant No 1472

² Ockwell, N. *Southern Cemetery Burial Register*.

³ Griffiths, G. *Otago Boys High History*. Otago Heritage, Dunedin, 1983

sketch for the memorial shows an obelisk mounted on a stepped platform stone base, surrounded by an iron railing fence.

The families of those buried in the Arthur Street cemetery were offered new burial sites in the Southern Cemetery. For those whose families did not take up the offer their remains were re-interred in a single grave below the memorial. Made of sandstone, the obelisk was dedicated on 20 August 1880. A tablet on the east face of the obelisk records the event thus:

“This monument was erected in the year AD 1880 by the Corporation of the City of Dunedin in memory of a number of early settlers whose names, so far as known are recorded on this obelisk”.

Another tablet inscribed with the names of those buried below was mounted on the base of the obelisk, although it is thought that the list may be incomplete.

The choice of an obelisk for the memorial was possibly inspired by public fascination for the unfolding story of Cleopatra’s Needle in London. One of a pair (the second was installed in New York’s Central Park in 1881), the red granite obelisk quarried from stone at Syene (near Aswan, Egypt), erected at Heliopolis circa 1500 BC and subsequently relocated to Cleopatra’s royal city of Alexandria in 12 BC had been presented to the British nation by Egypt in 1819 but was lost at sea during a storm on the voyage to England. It was later successfully recovered from the Bay of Biscay and erected on the Thames embankment in 1879.