



Heinrich Friedrich Wilhelm Nees was born in Berlin on 4th April 1836, the fourth child of Heinrich Gotlieb Nees. In the 1850s Wilhelm Nees changed his name to William Nees.

After some time serving as a cabinet-maker under his father, he emigrated to Australia in 1854 to join his brother, HG Carl Nees, bringing with him Carl's wife and infant son. All of them settled in Creswick, near Ballarat, and William was reputed to have taken part in the siege at the Eureka Stockade. How long they spent gold-mining, and with what success, is not clear. Carl set up a cabinet-cum-joinery shop in Creswick and probably William joined him in this venture.

They seem to have left for Dunedin soon after 6 November 1862, when William married Harriet Ann Mannix in Sydney. After arriving in Dunedin William took a quick look around then lit to the goldfields in Central Otago. After having no success on the fields he returned to Dunedin and set up as a cabinet-maker in 1863. His first premises were "off Great King Street", up a lane between George and King Streets, near Moray Place.

He soon relocated to the top left-hand side of St. Andrew Street, between George and Filleul Streets, where they lived above the shop for some 20 years. There, Harriet brought up 11 children, all born there, and did some French polishing in her spare time. When the business needed more space the family relocated to 326 George Street [George Street has been re-numbered twice since then]. By this time the three oldest boys were working for their father.

In 1898, shortly after William had purchased some new machinery (some used items obtained for him by his brother in Berlin) the business relocated to new premises built in Great King Street between St Andrew and Hanover Streets. The business began a rapid expansion made possible by generous financial help from some of his fellow Masons.

The business was formed into a private company about 1913, the guiding hands by this stage being two sons, and a final move was made to 266 Hanover Street in 1908 to purpose-built premises. William was still the chairman but did not take much active part in the day to day business. Considerate and kindly, nevertheless, he kept a very close hold on the purse strings. Each member of the family was provided with free board, clothing and lodgings for working for him, plus a certain weekly amount of pocket money depending on years of service – the greatest being five shillings (50 cents). Inevitably this led to a certain amount of industrial unrest "before some of the older ones even reached the age of 30", this in turn led to the formation of the private company.

Right up to the end of his life William attended to the handing out of the weekly pay packets to all the staff, engaging each in a separate conversation about the well-being of wife and family, all of whose names he knew.

He was a kindly man, had a very good tenor singing voice, was an enthusiastic member the Masonic Community, acted as a sort of 'Honorary Consul' helping immigrants from Central Europe become integrated into the community, and was renowned for having a perfect set of teeth on which no dental work was ever needed.

He died on 2 May, 1913 aged 77, and is buried in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery, along with his wife Harriet Ann, who had died at age 40 on 10 February 1887, and a daughter, Lillian Julia, who had died on 11 September 1899, aged 27.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand from 'On your Nees: the story of H.G. Carl and H.F. Wm and their families, 1790-1996' held at the Hocken Library.