

## Upokongaro War Memorial Hall



**Location:** State Highway 4, Upokongaro  
**Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number:** Nil

**Physical Description:** The single storey timber framed, stucco and weatherboarded hall has a rectangular floor plan and shallow pitched hipped roof with lean to along the south side. The building has a flat roofed extension with large scaled windows, which projects towards the road. Its roof extends to the south as a canopy to the recessed entry on the south west corner. The entry is emphasised with a return parapet above the roof, hiding the lean-to from the road and signage on the blank section of wall stating "Upokongaro Memorial Hall". The rear of the building gives an indication of the age of the building with weatherboards extending beyond the stuccoed front section.

**Other known names:** Upokongaro Native Land Court, Court Theatre

**Current Use:** Memorial hall, community hall

**Former Uses:** Maori Land Court

**Heritage Status:**

**District Plan Class:** Class B

**Architectural Style:** Modern

**Date of Construction:** 1881

**Register Item Number:**

365

**Building Type:**

- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Recreation
- Institutional
- Agriculture
- Other

**Significance:**

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Cultural

**Thematic Context**

- Early Settlement
- Residential
- Industry
- Agricultural
- Commerce
- Transport
- Civic/Admin
- Health
- Education
- Religion
- Recreation
- Community
- Memorials
- Military

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**Materials:** Painted stucco, rusticated weatherboards, timber and aluminium joinery, corrugated steel roofing.

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:**

**History:** The Upokongaro Hall is deceptive in its appearance. It looks like any other village hall that one might find around the country. However, this 130-year-old hall dates to 1881, when local hotelier John Kennedy built it. As well as being the venue for concerts and fundraising activities, its original role was as a Maori Land Court.<sup>i</sup>

The relocation from Wanganui in July 1881 of what was then called the 'Native Land Court,' was not popular with the residents of Upokongaro, with local Maori, or with at least some prominent European residents of Wanganui. The *Wanganui Herald* of 12 July 1881 (p. 2) included a letter from 'No Monopoly' who wrote: "*Sir – I am informed that the settlers near Kennedy's are very much disgusted to find that the Land Court is to be held there, as, with the exception of one person, they receive no benefit...*"

A meeting at the Wanganui Borough Council offices on July 12<sup>th</sup>, attracted 150 people, who were of the opinion that relocating to Upokongaro was "*prejudicial to the interests of all parties concerned.*"<sup>ii</sup>

On 14 July 1881, a deputation consisting of Messrs T. Bamber, J.P. Watt, Joseph Chadwick, and Pollock, who had been appointed at "*Tuesday night's meeting, waited this morning upon His Honor, Judge Brookfield (who was accompanied by Mr F.E. Hamlin, the Court Interpreter), to protest the removal of the Court to Upokongaro. Accompanying the deputation were Aperahama (Wangaehu), Hori Kerei (Putiki), and several other native chiefs from Napier, Otaki, and elsewhere.*"

Mr Bamber explained the reasons for the deputation, and the reasons in favour of holding the courts in Wanganui (as opposed to Upokongaro). The judge replied that in a very few words he would explain the reason for moving, and stated that the decision had not been taken lightly. He said that: "*They all knew the scenes that took place in Wanganui at the last meeting of the Court, the utter want of (a) proper camping ground, many natives simply lying on the bank of the river. Disease had been caused, from which he believed one or two died;*

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*it had been thought advisable to avoid that this time. The deputation must also remember that when large bodies of natives got together they were in the habit of imbibing too much. It was true they could do that at Upokongaro, but it was much easier to keep guard over one hotel than over 20 or 30.*

*“As to the pounds, shillings, and pence part of the business, he might mention that a few days ago another body of gentlemen came to him and said they would not have the Court in Wanganui on any condition and suggested Parikino. He made enquiries and found that place would not do at all, especially as there was no accommodation for Europeans. Taking all these matters into consideration, and not thinking that the storekeepers would suffer so much, as the supplies must be obtained here, he had determined after consultation with the Chief Judge and the Native Minister to hold the Court at Upokongaro. Such arrangements had been made there, with regard to the erection of buildings and so forth, that it was quite impossible to alter the determination.”*

When asked whether this arrangement would continue for future courts, the Judge said that it would only last for the present court – about a month or six weeks. In answer to another question, the judge said that the move had been more in the interests of the Maori than the Europeans – and that it was too late to change even if he wanted to. He said that *“Mr Kennedy was putting up a large house 40 x 20, at his own expense, for the natives attending the Court, which building would be useful afterwards for other purposes.”*

Aperahama, who stated that he represented 60 or 70 people, and other Maori gave their reasons against the removal of the Court. However, the judge said that his decision was final, and explained the implication if he were to change his mind.<sup>iii</sup>

A few days later, the *“tempest in a tea tray”* over the court relocation and *“King Kennedy the 1<sup>st</sup>”*, had waned. Meanwhile, Kennedy’s hotel was doing well - and being *“respectably conducted”*. The judges and court officials were also satisfied with their accommodation at the hotel.<sup>iv</sup>

The *Wanganui Herald* of 30 August 1881 (p. 2) investigated conditions at the Maori camp at Upokongaro. The reporter noted that some 500 Maori were now encamped in tents in a large paddock adjoining Kennedy’s hotel, *“the scene*

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being a veritable 'canvas town.' The tents are divided into numerous batches, representing the various hapus and districts. Kemp's people have of course the lion's share, then comes Topia's. Although there is no love lost between these two redoubtable chiefs, their followers, on the other hand, appear to be on best terms with each other." The detailed article continued, describing the recent heavy rain having flooded part of the paddock, turning it into a swamp. However, the tents had been safely placed on higher ground, with trenches dug around them. Mr Kennedy, meanwhile, was "in a financial sense...making hay while the sun shines."

The first court session ended at Upokongaro in mid-September 1881 after a two-month sitting.<sup>v</sup> It resumed again in mid-March 1882, however, matters were less orderly than the earlier session, with canoe-loads of alcohol from town competing with Mr Kennedy's sales.<sup>vi</sup>

The point at which the hall stopped being used as a courthouse was not researched. However, John Kennedy sold his hotel to Thomas Rowe in March 1887.<sup>vii</sup> The *Wanganui Chronicle* of 29 May 1894 (p. 2), in publishing an article on the town, commented that: "A bijou theatre to seat 100 people, with a drop scene and other accessories, also stands on Mr Rowe's property and should someday be in great request for small travelling companies. This little building was originally the Native Land Court, and Mr Rowe with that enterprise which has guided him throughout his seven years' residence at Upokongaro, expended quite a little sum in altering it into and fitting it up as a theatre."

## Court Theatre

The first concert held in the new hall took place on 5 August 1881 to raise funds for St. Mary's Anglican Church. "The Courthouse erected by Mr J. Kennedy had improvised as a concert-hall for the occasion." The hall was so crowded that several people had to be seated on the platform, and the event was very successful. The *Wanganui Chronicle* also reported that "There was a large presence of Maoris throughout the evening and the concert, though got up in a very few hours, seemed to give satisfaction to everybody."<sup>viii</sup>

As well as fundraising, many parishioners also took part in amateur dramatics in what came to be commonly known as the 'Court Theatre'.<sup>ix</sup> The school held its concerts at the 'Court Theatre, electoral meetings were held there and the

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impressive-sounding 'Court Theatre' was listed as the venue for voting – alongside all the other places that blandly identified their various community centres as a their local 'Hall'.<sup>x</sup>

## Upokongaro Memorial Hall

In 1952, the present façade, which was designed by architect R.G. Talboys,<sup>xi</sup> was added to the building as part of a scheme to create more 'practical' memorials than had occurred in previous wars. Accordingly the hall was rededicated as the Upokongaro Memorial Hall.

Fiona Jack's 'Living Halls' project lists this hall amongst many others. Of the memorial halls, she states that: *"Following the Second World War, New Zealanders wholeheartedly embraced the idea of constructing utilitarian memorials to honour soldiers killed in action instead of the 'traditional' monuments favoured after the First World War. Government subsidies encouraged the widespread building of community centres and halls as 'living memorials' for all to share. These were monuments with an inside, conceptually complex spaces that were built by communities to symbolise their grief, but also to solve a practical need for a place to gather for everything from dancing to voting."*<sup>xii</sup>

The Mayor's e-column media release of 15 May 2006 recorded that a Bycroft Petherick seismic assessment of various rural and community halls, had listed the Upokongaro Memorial Hall as being amongst those of its halls with seismic ratings of less than 30%. The buildings would need a structural upgrade under the earthquake provisions of the then new Building Act. The Mayor (Michael Laws) added that while *"the private sector might get away with the risk and the cost, the public sector will not."*<sup>xiii</sup>

The minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Wanganui District Council on 29 May 2006 include a presentation to the committee regarding the district's rural community halls. Mike Skelton, who represented the Upokongaro Memorial Hall Committee, stated that while the hall was old, it was well supported by the community. It was also a war memorial hall, where the community remembers its members lost during the World Wars.

The present status of the hall was not researched, other than to note that like

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many older rural halls, it does not at present look the lively centre of its community that it clearly once was.

## Bibliography

Pettigrew, Wendy, *St. Mary's, Upokongaro: The Church on the River* (Wanganui 2005).

**Architect/Designer:** Unknown

**History of changes:** Converted to theatre c1890, Façade installed 1952

**Date Period:** The hall was constructed in 1881.

**Rarity / Special Features:** The building was used as a Native Land Court, although not exclusively.

**Integrity:** The façade was altered in 1952 and many of the original features have been lost.

**Representativeness:** The front of the building is typical of the Modern style in design and construction.

**Context/Group Value:** The building has remained within its context and retained constant use as a community facility (Maori Land Court, theatre and Community Hall).

**Diversity (Form and Features):** Decisions made by the Maori Land Court would have shaped the pattern and form of development in the region.

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** Reference has been found to a 2006 Council report indicating that the hall is less than 30% of the Building Code. It is unknown if any work has been undertaken in this regard.

## Summary of Significance:

### *Archaeological Qualities*

The hall was constructed in 1881 and as a result is considered an archaeological site under the Historic Places Act 1993. The building has a strong historic link with both Maori and European as a result of its use as the Maori Land Court.

### *Architectural Qualities*

Additions to the original hall were designed by well-known architect Robert Talboys. The building was added to by Talboys in the Moderne style.

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## Historic Qualities

The building has an intriguing history both for Maori and European and the history of decisions made in respect of Maori land having operated as the Maori Land Court. Decisions made here shaped the form and pattern of development in the District. The building in its use as a Memorial Hall also commemorates those that lost their lives in WWII. Memorial Halls commemorating WWII are common throughout the country.

## Cultural Qualities

The building has had a long history of community involvement first as the Maori Land Court, a theatre and then the more recent use as a Memorial Hall. Many momentous decisions relating to land ownership and development would have occurred, affecting Maori and European. .

## Reference Source:

## Associated Pictures:

Date of Survey: 2012

Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr

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- <sup>i</sup> Wendy Pettigrew, *St. Mary's, Upokongaro: The Church on the River* (Wanganui 2005), p. 12
- <sup>ii</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 13 July 1881, p. 2
- <sup>iii</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 14 July 1881, p. 2
- <sup>iv</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 23 July 1881, p. 2
- <sup>v</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 19 September 1881, p. 2
- <sup>vi</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 16 March 1882, p. 2. See also W.H. 30 January 1906, p. 3, ('The Native Land Court')
- <sup>vii</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 8 February 1887, p. 3
- <sup>viii</sup> Pettigrew, p. 12; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 6 August 1881, p. 3
- <sup>ix</sup> Pettigrew, p. 12
- <sup>x</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 30 April 1892, p. 3(1), 30 October 1901, p. 1, & 8 February 1909, p. 5
- <sup>xi</sup> Email dated 8 February 2012, Wendy Pettigrew to Val Burr.
- <sup>xii</sup> Fiona Jack, 'Living Halls': <http://fionajack.net/projects/living-halls/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wanganui District Council: Mayor's e-column – 15 May 2006:  
<http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/showNews.asp?id=542&show=single>