

## Wanganui Rowing Club



**Location:** 1A Taupo Quay, **Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga**  
Whanganui **List Number:** 1010

**Physical Description:** this two storeyed, rectangular planned, timber framed building is designed in the Frontier style with a symmetrical elevation facing the street. This comprises a tall, half timber framed, parapet hiding the first floor gabled roof behind it and a central ornate shallow pitched gable with simple gable screen. Either side on the ground floor of the main façade are lean-tos similar to the side aisles of a church. The main entry is in the centre of the street elevation and has toplights, with a pair of double windows either side. The windows have a triangular pediment above them while the door has a semi-circular pediment. The first floor street elevation has a single central window with a pair of windows with canopies side, and each has a semi-circular head. The side walls are clad with corrugated steel and have simple timber windows.

The Wanganui Rowing Club building, now the Riverboat Museum. Built in 1898, with the second storey added in 1905, this building replaced the original boat shed built in 1876. The side addition accommodated the Collegiate School rowing club.

Register Item Number:

44

**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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The riverside extension built to accommodate the *Waimarie* restoration detracts from the building; however, this extension is not a permanent fixture. Three flagpoles top off the upper parapet with the letters "W.R.C." The "AD 1881" above the front door should be changed to "AD 1898" or removed.

## Condition:

Good. Front door is in course of restoration.

## Other known names:

**Current Use:** Riverboat Museum

**Former Uses:** Rowing club building

**Heritage Status:** Heritage NZPT List **District Plan Class:** Class B  
(Cat. 2)

**Architectural Style:** Frontier style **Date of Construction:** 1898

**Materials:** Painted timber weatherboards, coverboards and joinery, corrugated steel roofing and side wall cladding.

**Registered owner:** Whanganui Riverboat Restoration and Navigation Trust (under special arrangement with Whanganui District Council).

**Legal Description:** Lot 5 DP 7126 (CT WN 386D/953), Wellington Land District

## History:

### *Of the site:*

In February 1876 the newly-formed Wanganui Rowing Club built its first boat shed on this site. The building contract was let to Messrs Alexander & McFarlane and the shed cost £97 10s. This original shed is shown in all 1880s and early 1890s photographs of the Whanganui riverbank. The shed was demolished in 1898 when the current building was erected. During rebuilding, the Club's boats and equipment were stored next door in the Union Boat Club's old shed.

### *Of the Wanganui Rowing Club:*

Although discussions were under way about setting up a rowing club in Wanganui in April 1874, it was not until 22 December 1875 that the Wanganui Rowing Club was formally established at a meeting held at the Commercial Hotel. A committee was appointed to raise funds for a boat shed to be built on the riverbank to protect the boats. The first President and Club Captain was Samuel T Fitzherbert, a noted barrister and solicitor in Wanganui. Foundation members of the Club included Harold Beauchamp (father of Kathleen), William

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Alexander, TD Cummins, Dr Robert Earle, Dr Tripe, John Nixon, CH Borlase. The Club attracted many prominent people in Wanganui and was the focus of many social activities in its early years. The opening of the rowing season in Wanganui, especially in the pre WWI years, was a great social occasion.

In 1877, several “workers” of the Wanganui Rowing Club left to form a rival club – the Union Boat Club – which was located next door. The two clubs quickly became rivals for rowing success on the river. In 1905, the Wanganui Rowing Club was the first to have 8-oared boats on the river. Two outrigger boats were imported from Melbourne, then shipped from Wellington to Wanganui on the coastal vessel, *Stormbird*. The first 8-man races were held by the Club on the river in March 1905.

The Wanganui Rowing Club assisted with the development of rowing at Collegiate School, no doubt helped by the fact that many of the Club members were Old Boys of the school. In 1885, the school was first allowed to use a Rowing Club four oared boat on which the crew trained four times a week between 6 and 8am. The relationship with Collegiate developed over the years, with annual fours races – usually won by the school crews. Collegiate had the use of the addition to the boat shed on the southern side of the building until they built their own shed at Aramoho in 1971.

Many early records of the Wanganui Rowing Club were lost in the 1940 flood (the highest recorded to date), but reports in the newspaper of AGMs and regattas provide much information on the early success of the Club crews. The Club went into recession during WWI, when 38 members had enlisted by 1915, and again in the Second World War. The Club’s fortunes suffered somewhat during the 1920s, but improved during the 1930s with success at various championship regattas.

In 1985, the Wanganui Rowing Club merged with the Aramoho Rowing Club and moved up to the Aramoho boatshed. Today, the Aramoho-Wanganui Rowing Club continues its friendly rivalry with its old offshoot, the Union Boat Club.

## *Of the building:*

Wanganui architect, Thomas Harvey James designed the new boat shed for the Club in 1898. James was a member of the Rowing Club and a Collegiate Old Boy; he designed the building in his honorary capacity as a committee member.

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The tender of Nicholas Meuli, noted Wanganui builder, was accepted by 4 August 1898 and the new boat shed was completed in October that year. The *Wanganui Herald*, 13 October, commented that the new boathouse “is a fine commodious place, and has a greater storage capacity for racing boats than any other club’s boathouse on the coast”. The building contained a 38’ x 80’ boatroom, dressing room, committee room, shower room (“a special feature in itself”), lavatory and other conveniences. With two sliding doors at the riverside, and being built on totara piles, the building was designed to sit above the level of all known floods. The *Herald* also commented that “the building is attractive in appearance, the elevation being finished off with neatly designed gable and three flagpoles above the front parapet.” Nicholas Meuli also provided lettering – perhaps the “WRC” letters that are still in place on the front parapet – and local painter, Robert Hughes gilded the letters.

The Club’s AGM was held in the committee room of the new boathouse on 13 October 1898, with Club President, Samuel Drew presiding. It was reported that the new boathouse had cost £350, of which £250 had been borrowed from the Wanganui Loan & Finance Co, repayable in instalments over the next seven years. A fundraising performance of “Dandy Dick” by the Wanganui Amateur Musical and Dramatic Society raised £35 for the building. At this time, the Wanganui Rowing Club had 112 members.

1905:

The second storey was added together with the southern outbuilding (which accommodated the Collegiate boats). No building permit or tender notice has been found for this work, but it was most likely designed by TH James as he was still associated with the Club (he was the official starter from 1903 onwards for many years, a Vice President in 1905 and later a Life Member). A grand bazaar had been organised by Club Captain, Cecil Wray, in September 1904 (with Drill Hall stalls designed by TH James) to raise funds to purchase two 8-man clinker boats; the Club’s centennial history indicates that this bazaar was also to raise funds for additions to the boathouse, but no reference to this has been found in the newspaper reports. The 7-year loan taken out in 1898 for the new boatshed would have been paid off by 1905; the AGM report in *The Yeoman* on 28 September 1905 indicates that the Club still owed the Finance Company £80, so it is possible that the Club extended their loan to pay for the additions. The Treasurer’s Report at the AGM indicated that the Club was in a sound financial

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position and had 147 members, 87 of which were “active”.

*The Yeoman* on 28 September commented that the additions to the building provided “more dressing room, more accommodation for boats, a proper committee room, and a hall where members will be able to hold social evenings during winter months.” When the 1905/06 rowing season opened, “Slide” in his *Yeoman* report on 12 October commented on the “splendid additions to the old structure” of the WRC boathouse. “The balcony particularly calls for special mention. The view obtainable therefrom is a very fine one” and the spacious room leading off the balcony had a table laden with delicacies organised by the ladies for the occasion.

The Union Boat Club next door had built a new two-storied boat shed in 1899, designed by its Club Captain, Thomas Battle. The story that the Wanganui Rowing Club considered they had to have a two-storied building to match that of their rival may have some element of truth. Finances, however, dictated that the WRC had to wait until 1905 to get their second storey built. (The Union Boat Club demolished Mr Battle’s shed and built another two-storied boathouse in 1924.)

The Wanganui Rowing Club continued to use the building for all its operations until 1985. During WWI, while rowing activities were suspended, the shed was made available for wool storage. While this brought money into the Club, the weight of wool bales damaged the floor and foundations. The building was once again “closed for the duration” during WWII, although some older members kept an eye on the premises and the Club’s equipment.

After the Club moved out, the building was leased by Trott Grovehill & Associates as the base for a sculling and rowing school. This was shortlived and the building became in dire need of restoration.

In 1992, the Trust established to restore the paddle steamer, *Waimarie*, was able to lease the building from the District Council as a base for its restoration programme. An extension was added at the river side to create more space for the riverboat (the upper balcony having already been removed at an earlier date). At the time, the District Council specified that this extension was to be temporary for the lifetime of the riverboat restoration programme. The Riverboat

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Trust was also responsible for restoring the building, with recycled floor boards from the Wanganui Opera House contributing to part of this work.

As well as accommodating the riverboat restoration – which was completed in time for the restored *Waimarie*'s maiden voyage on 1 January 2000 – the building now houses the Riverboat Centre Museum (established 1996) as well as offices for the Trust.

**Architect/Designer:** TH James

**History of changes:** Upper storey added 1905

**Date Period:** 1890s, 1881, 1898, 1905

**Rarity / Special Features:** The building is designed in the Frontier style, a style normally seen in small country towns where the façade was designed to give the impression of a much larger scaled building. It is possibly the earliest boating club still on its original site in New Zealand.

**Integrity:** Altered substantially on river side to accommodate restoration of *Waimarie*; reversible.

**Representativeness:** The use of materials and construction techniques are typical for the period.

**Context/Group Value:** The Wanganui Rowing Club building contributes much to the Taupo Quay and Whanganui River landscape. It is one of the few early buildings on the riverbank to retain its original features.

**Diversity (Form and Features):**

**Fragility / Vulnerability:**

## Summary of Significance:

### *Archaeological Qualities*

Having been constructed prior to 1900, its site is considered to be an archaeological site.



## **Architectural Qualities**

This is the only example of a late Victorian rowing club building in Wanganui. It is possibly the only pre-1900 boathouse still on its original site. (The Star Boating Club shed in Wellington was built in 1885 but moved in 1989. The Union Boat Club in Wanganui rebuilt its shed in 1924.) The building retains many of its original features, especially on the Taupo Quay façade.

The style of the building is intriguing as the Frontier style is one more usually associated with small American towns, with a number of examples in Reefton. The architect for the 1905 additions was probably T H Battle, a locally important architect of the period.

## **Historic Qualities**

The boathouse was built for one of the earliest provincial rowing clubs in New Zealand – the Wanganui Rowing Club, established in 1875. Together with the Union Boat Club, the WRC was one of the founding members of the NZ Amateur Rowing Association. The Riverboat Museum now housed in the building recalls much of the important history relating to the Whanganui River and its navigation.

## **Technical Qualities**

The building was used to restore the paddle steamer, *Waimarie*, which was relaunched on the Whanganui River on 1 January 2000. The building was extended and altered to accommodate this restoration programme, which was carried out from 1992-2000, much of the work done by volunteers.

The materials and construction techniques used to build the rowing club are typical for the period.

## **Cultural Qualities**

The Wanganui Rowing Club was instrumental in developing the sport of rowing in Wanganui, for which the town is still known nationally. The building also has important cultural significance in its current role as the Riverboat Centre, with its displays on riverboats and the restoration of the *Waimarie*, which departs from

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the neighbouring wharf for regular cruises up the Whanganui River.

## Reference Source:

W. Pettigrew 2003. Wanganui District Heritage Inventory. B1-5.

Wanganui District Council building file.

Wanganui Borough Council Register of Building Permits.

*Weekly Herald* 4/04/1874

*Weekly Herald* 18 & 25/12/1875.

*Wanganui Herald* 4/08/1898

*Wanganui Herald* 13/10/1898

*Wanganui Herald* 14/10/1898

*Wanganui Herald* 7/10/1903

*Wanganui Herald* 16/09/1904

*Wanganui Herald* 27/09/1904

*Wanganui Herald* 9/02/1905

*Wanganui Herald* 1/03/1905

*Wanganui Herald* 30/03/1905

*Yeoman* 28/09/1905

*Yeoman* 5/10/1905

*Yeoman* 12/10/1905

*Wanganui Herald* 11/09/1907

*Wanganui Herald* 29/09/1915

*Wanganui Rowing Club Centenary Celebrations 1875-1975*

1990 Heritage Study, Item 1/3

Wanganui Rowing Club Subject Index cards, Heritage Room, Wanganui District Library.

[www.collegiate.school.nz](http://www.collegiate.school.nz) – information about history of rowing at the School and involvement with Wanganui Rowing Club.

[www.unionboatclub.co.nz](http://www.unionboatclub.co.nz) – includes information about foundation of Union Boat Club. [See B1.4]

[www.rowingnz.org.nz](http://www.rowingnz.org.nz) – includes details of founding clubs of NZ Amateur Rowing Association.

[www.venueweb.co.nz](http://www.venueweb.co.nz) – information on Star Boating Club building, Wellington.

Information from Judith Crawley

## Notes:

The WRC Centennial History says that the 1940 flood resulted in the loss of all



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early records, including Club minute books from 1905-1920.

No reference has as yet been found in the *Wanganui Herald* or *Chronicle* re architect or builder of the 1905 addition to the Rowing Club building.

Whanganui Riverboat Museum Archives have 1904 flood photograph showing the single-storey boathouse prior to the addition of its upper storey and side wing.

## Associated Pictures:



Wanganui Rowing Club boatshed (on left) after the upper storey was added.

(Photo: Whanganui Riverboat Museum Archives; date: pre 1925.)



A side view of the original part of the Rowing Club building

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This poster in the Riverboat Museum illustrates the *Manuwai*, the largest of Hatrick's fleet of riverboats on the Whanganui.

Date of Survey: 2012

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