

19th Century Correspondence

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In this guide

Introduction

19th century record- Keeping

Information in the letters

Topics of the letters

Indexes, Registers and Correspondence

Indexes

Registers

Destroyed Files

Searching

Reading the Letters/Files

New Record-Keeping System

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Introduction

The Register Room holds many registers and indexes for New Zealand government departments up to 1913. The registers and indexes are used to find letters written to and between government departments, from private individuals and people in government positions.

The Colonial Secretary's Office (later the Department of Internal Affairs) was the first government department to be created. Its goal was to administer the new British colony. The early Colonial Secretary's Office served as a catch-all for the working of government in the new colony. As certain functions became too large for this one department, they splintered off into separate departments.

Researchers need to determine the relevant government department.

19th Century Record-keeping

Government record-keeping during the 19th and early 20th centuries was an Annual Single Number system. When a letter was received by a government department, it was given a new number and entered into a Register for that year's inwards correspondence. The letters were filed by number. Later some departments created Indexes to give access to the Registers and Files.

In general the annual single number system for each department consists of:

- Inwards Letters – Series 1
- Registers of Inwards Letters / Correspondence – Series 2
- Indexes to the Registers – Series 3

However, there was variance in practice between government agencies. For example, Internal Affairs Registers and Indexes both come under

Series 3 [IA 3]. It is necessary to look on Archway, under either the series or agency description, to determine the codes. Archway gives information on how the records are organised and related to one another.

Information in the letters

Early correspondence is a rich source of information about people in colonial New Zealand. 19th century correspondence has captured the day-to-day business of the departments. It records the issues and events of the period as well as providing other valuable and interesting information of a more personal nature.

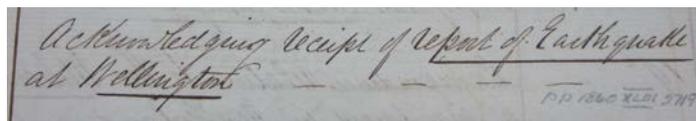
People wrote for various reasons. A lot of the information in these records concerns their business with the Crown. But there are also many letters which contain personal information. The people of New Zealand wrote to the government for quite individual reasons and interesting histories are revealed over the correspondence.

Topics of the letters

The record topics are varied. They range from important resignations and monetary matters, to the more mundane. They are of interest in various ways: for researching a subject, for family history research, and for the history of a particular region.

Topics include:

- Construction and renovation of early civic buildings
- Tenders to work in the goldfields
- Requests for assistance from the Colonial Secretary
- Reports on disturbances between Maori and European settlers
- Statistical information from different regions
- Gaol reports, and petitions to be released from gaol



This entry in a Governor Register dated 13 July 1855 [G 22/1] led to Reports to the Colonial Office about the Wellington/Wairarapa earthquake on 23 January 1855. See page 2.

Indexes, Registers and Correspondence

Indexes and registers are, in most cases, the only means of accessing correspondence files up to about 1913. Unless there is individual listing of letters on Archway, which is rare, the registers and indexes in the Register Room must be used to locate archival references to letters. The letters/files themselves are held in the repository and must be ordered up.

If a close date is known, a register can be the initial place to search, using the date columns and then the writer or subject columns. Otherwise the indexes should be searched first. There may be two types of indexes: General/Nominal and/or Departmental.

Indexes

General/Nominal – arranged chronologically by name of writer or position

General/Nominal indexes are searchable by surname, or by title of the position held by the writer. A name will be followed by a number such as 68/778. This is the file number given to the letter, where the first part refers to the year (1868) and the second part is the specific number given to the letter/file. The next vital step is to go to the Register to determine what happened to that letter.

Departmental – arranged alphabetically by name of department

The Departmental indexes have the greatest variation in organisation. Generally they are alphabetical by writer – department, organisation or individual. They are arranged chronologically and the reference that appears at the beginning of the index may be to the actual letter itself or to a page within the index. In the case of the latter, further information about the letter can be found.

Registers

If a file reference has been found in an Index, choose the Register covering the year, and go to the entry number – for the above example to the register for the year 1868 and to the entry number 778. The Registers detail who wrote the correspondence, when it was written and received and a short outline of the topic. In the far left column may be the reference required to order up the correspondence from the stacks, but see below.

What happened to a letter is recorded in the right hand column of the register. A letter may have been filed, or later correspondence may have been added. If there was more than one letter about a topic, then all the chain of correspondence will be gathered together under its most recent item number. This 'carrying forward' mechanism could go on for years, ensuring that all related correspondence was kept together.

When there is no new reference in the right hand column, the correspondence should be under the file number for that last entry (left hand column), which is used to order up the whole file from the stacks. However clerks were not always accurate and 'carried forward' references were not always entered, making it difficult to find some grouped correspondence.

Destroyed files

Not all correspondence has survived. Fires destroyed records; with the following departments most affected:

Lands & Survey	Head Office correspondence	1854-94
Public Works	all correspondence to	c1913
Native/Maori Affairs Dept	correspondence	1864-1890
Marine Department	most correspondence to	1913

For these departments in the above periods, the register entries may be all the record there is of correspondence.

Searching

Searching for people writing to government

Some knowledge of the individuals searched for is necessary – **when** they were writing, **to whom** they were writing **in which department**. This may require background research into which departments administered which government functions.

Searching for government employees receiving letters

Knowledge needed about the government employee is: - **position held** and **in which department**. Again, background research may be needed.

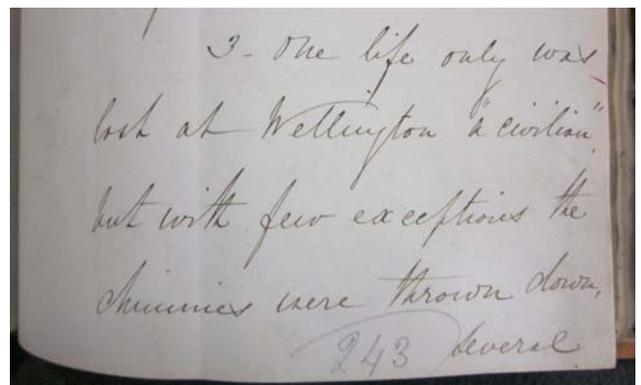
Reading the Letters/Files

The letters are handwritten documents and not always easy to read. It may take time to decipher what is written. Sometimes it is helpful to enlarge the script by means of digital copying or photocopying. It is not unusual for the scribe to have used shorthand or abbreviations. An archivist may be able to help.

New Record-Keeping System c1913

A Royal Commission on the Public Service in 1912 investigated record-keeping, among other things. It found that there was no uniformity of record keeping in the public service. A committee set up by the newly appointed Public Service Commissioner inquired into the record keeping systems of the government departments.

The committee recommended a uniform system of record-keeping for the public service, a Multiple Number Subject or Series system. Some departments had already implemented this system before 1913; others did not adopt it for years. The Police, for example, used an Annual Single Number system until the 1950s.



From Report on 'Wellington' earthquake to Colonial Secretary 26 February 1855.

Governor – Duplicate Outward Despatches [G 30/25 p956]