

## Balclutha, New Zealand and Founding Father, James McNeil

Balclutha is a town in South Otago, it lies towards the end of the Clutha River on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand. Known locally as "Clutha", Balclutha's name - and that of the river on which it stands - reflects the Scottish origin of the town's settlement. The name comes from Scottish Gaelic and would be spelt Baile Cluaidh in that language; this translates into English as "Town on the Clyde". James McNeil from Bonn Hill, Dumbartonshire, Scotland, who is regarded as the town's founding father, arrived in 1853 - via Port Chalmers, NZ in 1849. His farm was on the site of the present town, where he and the Provincial Government established a ferry service across the Clutha in 1857; as a result the town was initially called Clutha Ferry. The Māori name for the area is Iwikatea, literally "Bleached bones" (a local Māori tribal battle in 1750 left the decomposing bodies of the defeated, their bones whitened in the sun).

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balclutha,\\_New\\_Zealand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balclutha,_New_Zealand)

Our New Zealand Association President, Paul Washington, is a descendant (great, great, great grandson) of James MacNeil (his father Douglas McNeil Washington is the son of Reta Elizabeth Washington nee McNeil, daughter of Alexander, son of James, son of James).

Paul is sharing some of his family history linking him directly back to the original settlers and possibly some of other Macneils who are searching for theirs in New Zealand!



Elizabeth (g-g-g-granddaughter), Paul and his Father, Douglas McNeil Washington



Headstone on the family plot

The next photos are of a ceremony wherein Paul's father presented a McNeil Bible to the Balclutha Mayor. This Bible was found in a cottage and handed to the family, it belonged to Joanna, wife of Alexander Robert McNeil, nephew of the first Mayor of Balclutha, John McNeil, son of James and brother to the James in my lineage. This coincided with the unveiling of a Kiosk at the cemetery commemorating the founding family. The Otago District Council built this, so we made an event of it with a gathering of descendants of James McNeil.



The original Mayoral chains worn by John are shown beside the Kiosk



The bible is now held in the South Otago Museum which has an area designated to the McNeils

*Remembering our heritage*

The Balclutha Old Cemetery is the final resting place of two of the most important figures in Balclutha's history: James McNeil was a founding citizen in 1852, while his son John became the first Mayor of Balclutha in 1879. The South Otago Historical Society takes a look at the life and times of James and John McNeil.

The establishment of the free church of Scotland in 1843 was soon followed by a search for suitable land for its members to settle in the British colonies. This movement became known as the New Edinburgh settlement and from its inception the McNeil family of Dumfriesshire, Scotland was part of this iconic diaspora to Otago, New Zealand.

Andrew McNeil set out with the first immigration vessels of 1848 and was joined by his father James and the rest of the family on the *McNeil* the following year.

James McNeil took up land on the banks of the Clutha River in 1852 and immediately sent his son John to settle his land with some of the family's cattle. A two-roomed barn nearby was built in 1853 and James soon took up residence with his wife Anne. Within the year, James McNeil had two suitable boats built and he passed them on to the river establishing a ferry service, giving our community the pioneer name of "Clutha Ferry". During this time the McNeil's hospitality was renowned, on one occasion Mrs McNeil gave up her own bed for three days.

John went on to become an advocate for having the subsequent town proclaimed a municipality and was successful in 1870, his funeral occurring the first Mayor of Balclutha the following year. Tragically, James was struck by a horse at Christmas day sports and died from his injuries in April 1875. He rests at the family plot at the Old Cemetery erected by his eldest son Alexander.

Aside from being the respected founding family of Balclutha, it is acknowledged that the McNeil's former spirit and entrepreneurship rekindled the town as the place to cross the Clutha River - a service that continues to be crucial to the community's ongoing development as the hub of the Clutha District today.

The map to the left shows where the Old Balclutha Cemetery is in relation to the present Balclutha Cemetery. It also shows the location of the Clutha S2FE and the Clutha District Council main office where cemetery records are held.

**CLUTHA DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
Clutha Country