

The place that rose from the swamp

By Sue Edmonds

Have you ever wondered why, in a region largely defined by Maaori names (and correct spellings), there's a place where the Greek name was made famous by a mathematician getting into a bath?

There are several 'legends' about how Eureka was named, but the more I thought about how the district came to be, the more appropriate it seemed.

The area was originally part of the enormous acreage 'confiscated' from local Maaori for disagreeing with the British colonisers who wanted to 'settle' on it. But while it might some time make great farmland, at the time most of it was covered in water, and known as the Great Piako Swamp.

Well there's always a determined entrepreneur somewhere about and this one was named Captain William Steele. With others, including a friendly lawyer and an MP, he persuaded the Crown to sell them 86,502 acres (34,600 ha) of this wilderness in 1874. They had formed a company called initially the New Zealand Land Association. At five shillings an acre it represented a purchase price of 21,635 pounds. But one of the conditions of the sale was for the buyers to construct 25 miles (40 kilometres) of road across the Swamp, and if this could be managed, then the Crown would refund two shillings and sixpence an acre towards the cost.

The job was mind boggling. With shovels, spades and wheelbarrows, newly recruited immigrants dug enormous drains, some measuring 3.5 metres wide at the top, 2 metres at the bottom and 3 metres deep. To be able to camp on dry land, the workers (many unsuited to hard physical labour) often had to walk 2 kilometres to get to the worksite. But their efforts eventually turned 91,250 acres (36,500 ha) into good agricultural land. It's nice to think that some of those workers earned enough to buy parcels of it to live on.

There aren't many hilly areas around the old swamp. As work progressed the company began looking for a good, and presumably dry site for its headquarters. There are two 'legends' arising from this. One is that Captain Steele, while riding out with a group, reached the top of a singular hill and announced 'Eureka, I have found it!' The second, much more romantic, is that on 1 July 1875 a group had a picnic on the same hill, held a discussion on what the area should be called, and formed the name Eureka from the initials of the women present.

Whether either is 'true' doesn't matter. What is interesting is that when Archimedes got into his bath the water level rose. When the Eureka Estate and later the Eureka district were settled it was because the water went down!