

The women's suffrage petition: from document to database

One of the things I've learned from working with the women's suffrage petition over the past six years is just how big a number 25,000 is. This is approximately the number of women who signed the main petition which was presented to Parliament in July 1893.

A 270 metre roll containing 546 pasted-together sheets make up this petition. This survives and is on display in the fabulous new [He Tohu exhibition space](#) at the National Library in Wellington.

As the stories of the women who signed the petition are starting to be told, we should also remember the many women (and some men) who helped create and then bring to life the document over the past 125 years.

Creating the petition

Barbara Brookes, in *A History of NZ Women*, writes that petitions served an educational purpose as well as an activist one: the sponsors of a petition had to be able to explain its purpose as well as to convince others.

'...members of the WCTU [Women's Christian Temperance Union] who had little experience in political debate honed their skills in the exercise of convincing others that signing a petition to Parliament was worthwhile. ' Barbara Brookes, *A History of NZ Women* p125.

Gathering signatures in the suburban areas often involved going to go door-to-door and making the case for signing to any women in the household over the age of 21 (though we found a fair few signatures of women under this age!) .

Some of the women were illiterate and marked the sheet with an 'X'. A witness would then write out their name and address. Eg see [Sheet 334](#) from Wellington.

A large proportion of the population lived in more remote areas where large distances between houses and limited transport options made door-to-door canvassing impractical. For much of the country gathering signatures meant organising meetings at halls or workplaces, meetings that had to be advertised well in advance in the local newspapers.

WOMEN'S FRANCHISE.

Mrs Hatton, president of the Women's Franchise League, reports that this year's canvass of the country districts, hitherto but casually touched, has resulted most satisfactorily. From one place alone, where the directory indicates some 106 householders, two petitions, with 99 signatures, have this week been returned, with one other list yet to be sent in. From two other neighborhoods, not previously reached, the signatures show that about 96 per cent. of the women are in favor of their immediate enfranchisement.

A telegram, conveying hearty congratulations to Sir Robert Stout on his victory at Inangahua, has been forwarded to Napier by the president.

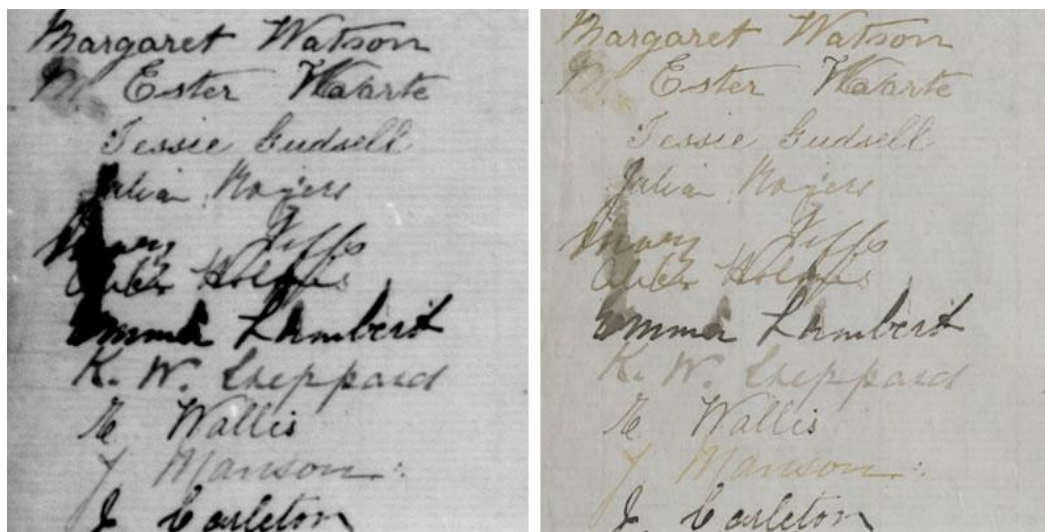
Evening Star 12 June 1893 p2

There were no private telephones, let alone the internet, so organising the work of canvassing for signatures, coordinating with other centres to compile the sheets and then stick them together to get the petition to Wellington was an enormous task involving hundreds of volunteers from all over the country. That this work was all done between February and July 1893 is an astounding achievement, one that would be a challenge even today.

Digitising the petition

Jumping forward one hundred years and we find another group of volunteers doing extraordinary work on the suffrage petition.

In the years leading up to the centennial celebrations in 1993 conservation work was carried out on both the 1892 and 1893 petitions and they were both filmed and put on microfiche by National Archives (now Archives New Zealand). The names and addresses on the petitions were then transcribed by volunteers from the Society of Genealogists as part of a 1993 Suffrage Centennial programme and in time for a related exhibition at National Archives.



Comparing scan used in 1993 to 2011 version.

The digital copies these volunteers were working from were relatively poor quality and the hard-to-decipher signatures and address information on the sheets would have made the task both time-consuming and I'm sure frustrating at times. This vital work deserves more recognition: without it there would be no way to know who signed the petitions, we would have no searchable databases and we would have no starting point for uncovering the stories of these women.

The 1892 petition, which had 18,724 signatories, is also held at Archives New Zealand though the individual names are not searchable on Archway. However, the 1993 transcript is available as a [spreadsheet which you can download from NZ History](#). Although no detailed comparison has been made, a quick survey shows there are quite a few names that appear on the 1892 petition that aren't on the 1893 one. (It is not known what became of the [1891 petition](#) which had 9685 signatures.)

Accessing the petition today: He Tohu, Archway and NZ History

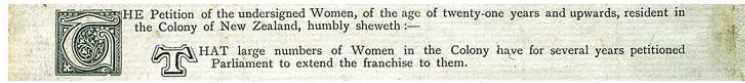


Digitising the 1893 suffrage roll (Te Ara). Archives New Zealand.

In 2011 Archives New Zealand re-digitised the main 1893 suffrage petition at a much higher resolution. One useful result of this work was that many of the errors from the 1993 transcripts could be corrected. This correction work was done by Archives staff in preparation for adding the transcript as metadata for the [Archway](#) online search tool.

At the same time the Ministry for Culture and Heritage was working on creating an [online database of the petition](#), which was launched in 2011. As part of this process, a lot of effort was put into establishing standardised location information for each signatory. This enabled us (with a lot cross-checking other sources) to assign every woman to consistent town/suburb and city/region information.

Mary J. Carpenter



Signed family name: Carpenter

Signed given name: Mary J.

Given address: Yaldhurst

Sheet number: 1

Town/Suburb: Yaldhurst

City/Region: Christchurch

Notes:

Biographical information provided by Canterbury Museum for the [He Tohu exhibition](#):

Mary Jane Carpenter (nee Griffiths), the very first name on the main Petition, was born on 23 May 1850 in Worcestershire, England. Her parents were Mary (formerly Wyer, nee Harper) and John Griffiths, a boilermaker. Family traditions say that Mary was related to the first Anglican Bishop of Christchurch, [Henry Harper](#).

The family later moved to Derbyshire where Mary's elder brother John was married in 1868. In 1870, Mary Jane travelled with her parents, brothers John and Samuel, sister Sarah, sister-in-law Hannah, and nephew John, to New Zealand aboard the *Zealandia*, arriving in Lyttelton on 23 December 1870. Mary Jane was listed as a domestic servant.

A year later, on 13 December 1871, Mary Jane married George Frederick Carpenter, a widower. They had a family of seven daughters and two sons; Harriet Frances (1872-1957), Margaret Alice (1873-1936), Ethel Mary (1875-1888), Edith Bessie (1877-1938), Emily (1879-1953), John Frederick (1881-1923), Daisy Sarah (1882), William James (1884-1947), and Evelyn Gladys (1887-?).

Mary Jane was very involved in family and church affairs, being an ardent supporter of the Methodist Church. After her husband died she lived with her daughter Emily at 415 Papanui Rd until her death from cancer on 8 October 1920, aged seventy. She is buried with her husband in Yaldhurst Cemetery.

Her mother, [Mary Griffiths](#) of Upper Riccarton, also signed the Petition.

Mary J Carpenter signatory page from the NZ History online roll.

The database also provided a separate webpage for each woman who signed. Family members and other researchers could add information about the women to these pages via the community contributions function. A later addition was the ability to link to pdfs of the recently re-digitised sheets from Archives New Zealand, allowing visitors to see the signatures in their original context.

In 2015-17 the NZHistory team at MCH liaised with Archives New Zealand staff who were working on the He Tohu exhibition launched earlier this year. This cooperation has meant that recently the over 700 biographies written for He Tohu, along with some corrections from the Archway indexing work, have now been added to the NZHistory database.

The goal is to try and ensure that all three channels (He Tohu, Archway and NZHistory) are as consistent and up-to-date as we can make them. From now on any new information about the signatories will be added to both NZHistory and He Tohu with any corrections to names also being used to update Archway.

As we approach the 125th anniversary of New Zealand becoming the first country in the world to grant women the right the vote in parliamentary elections it is a great time to find out more about the women who signed the suffrage petition in 1893. If you would like to contribute, this guide for writing suffrage biographies will help you get started as we once more call on the labour of volunteers to bring these women's stories to life.

This article originally appeared as a Facebook Note. It was written by Jamie Mackay and published in November 2017.

