

Chronological History of Spiritualism in New Zealand

A Centre of Enlightenment historical overview

1. Early Seeds (1850s - 1870s)

Spiritualism first reached New Zealand through imported books, letters, and reports from Britain and America. Settlers experimented with mesmerism, trance speaking, and table phenomena, often privately due to strong church influence.

By the early 1870s, interest had grown enough to spark the first organised public investigations into mediumship and spirit communication.

2. Dunedin: The First Wave of Public Spiritualism (1870s - 1880s)

Dunedin became the birthplace of New Zealand's **first major wave** of Spiritualist activity — the city where mediumship first entered public life.

Key Figures

- **Sir Robert Stout**, Vice-President of the *Dunedin Society for Investigating Spiritualism* (1872). Though a rationalist, he defended Spiritualists in the *Otago Daily Times*, arguing that spirit communication was no more unreasonable than biblical miracles. His support gave the movement political legitimacy.
- **John Logan**: Early freethinker and committed Spiritualist. Logan funded séance circles and endured heavy criticism from religious communities to keep the movement alive.

Major Events

- **1872**: Dunedin Society for Investigating Spiritualism founded the first public Spiritualist organisation in NZ.
- **1879**: Emma Hardinge Britten's Dunedin lectures draw crowds of up to 1,800 people.

Chronological History of Spiritualism in New Zealand

- **1880s:** Dr J.M. Peebles tours NZ, inspiring new circles and connecting NZ to global Spiritualism.

Why Dunedin matters

Dunedin was the **intellectual spark:** the first city where Spiritualism became a public conversation, debated in newspapers, lecture halls, and political circles. Its congregation later became the **oldest continuous Spiritualist church**, but **not** the first formalised church body.

3. Auckland: The First Formalised Church Societies (Late 1800s - Early 1900s)

While Dunedin ignited the movement, **Auckland built the organisational foundations** that allowed Spiritualism to become a recognised national church.

Key Figures

- **Elizabeth Harris:** Founder of the *Auckland Society for Spiritual Progress*. A major pioneer who shaped early Spiritualist worship.
- **Margaret Stevenson:** Organised structured services in Auckland that resembled modern Spiritualist church practice.

Major Events

- **Late 1800s:** Auckland groups begin holding formal services in the historic Wesleyan Chapel on High Street.
- **Early 1900s:** Auckland's branches become the most stable and structured Spiritualist organisations in NZ.
- **1924:** When the *Spiritualist Church of New Zealand Act* is passed, Auckland's established societies become central pillars of the national denomination.

Why Auckland matters

Chronological History of Spiritualism in New Zealand

Auckland created the **first formalised, permanent Spiritualist church structures** the organisational backbone that made national recognition possible.

4. Conflict & Collapse: The Freethought Split (1880s)

During the same era, Spiritualism collided with secular rationalism inside the Dunedin Freethought Society.

Two opposing factions

- **Rationalists** attempted to expose mediumship as fraud using scientific scepticism and public demonstrations.
- **Spiritualists** argued mediumship was empirical, based on direct experience rather than religious dogma.

Outcome

- **1885:** The Freethought Society collapses due to internal conflict.
- Rationalists move toward atheism; Spiritualists build independent networks.
- This split indirectly pushes Spiritualists toward forming formal churches, especially in Auckland.

5. Creative Mediums & Cultural Growth (1890s - 1920s)

As the movement matured, women mediums brought Spiritualism into the arts and public exhibitions.

Key Figures

- **Minnie Chapman** Held public séances in Dunedin (1909) and produced "spirit drawings" guided by an ancient Persian spirit.
- **Berta Sinclair Burns:** Created automatic spirit paintings that attracted attention from art and religious communities.

Chronological History of Spiritualism in New Zealand

- **Sophia Garland Allan:** Part of the wave of psychic artists blending abstraction and spiritual symbolism.

These mediums helped embed Spiritualism into everyday culture, linking it to emerging conversations about art, feminism, and new religious movements.

6. Legal Recognition & National Structure (1920s - Present)

1924: Spiritualist Church of New Zealand Act

This Act formally recognises Spiritualism as a religion, granting:

- corporate status
- authority to hold property
- power to oversee branches
- ability to regulate mediumship training

Auckland's organised societies become the backbone of the national church.

Marriage Act 1955

Recognised Spiritualist bodies can nominate marriage celebrants.

Repeal of Witchcraft Laws

- NZ inherited the **Witchcraft Act 1735**, which punished those who *pretended* to use magical powers.
- **Imperial Laws Application Act 1988** removes these outdated laws, ensuring mediumship is legal unless fraudulent.

Modern Consumer Protection

Mediums today operate under:

- **Fair Trading Act 1986** - no misleading claims
- **Consumer Guarantees Act 1993** - services must be delivered with reasonable care

Chronological History of Spiritualism in New Zealand

These laws regulate honesty and professionalism, not belief.

7. Legacy: Two Cities, One Movement

Dunedin

- First public wave
- First investigation society
- Oldest continuous congregation
- Intellectual and political birthplace

Auckland

- First formalised church structures
- First stable organisational network
- Administrative centre of the national church
- Backbone of the 1924 Act

Both cities are “first” - in different ways. Dunedin lit the spark. Auckland built the house.

8. The Centre of Enlightenment Perspective

For us, this history shows how Spiritualism grew through courage, inquiry, and community. It survived criticism, evolved into organised churches, gained legal recognition, and today stands as a respected spiritual path grounded in integrity, compassion, and personal responsibility.

This chronological story honours the pioneers who carried the light forward and the communities who continue that work today.