

citizen. What steps, if any, he took towards changing his nationality are not known, but in November, 1840, he wrote to the American Consul in Sydney, claiming to have bought 500,000 acres, for which he had paid 78,000 dollars, and expressing a fear that the British Government would take it all unless the United States Government would take the matter in hand. "They have not taken any of my lands as yet," he added, "but I expect they will take all from me, and every other American, unless our Government will take it in hand to stop it."

At the same time he sought to ingratiate himself with the authorities of his newly adopted country by offering to sell them the Great Barrier Island (which he claimed to have bought) for a very small sum.

Having thus set matters in train, he concluded that his presence in New Zealand, or, for that matter, in Australia, would be a hindrance to his plans. He went to Sydney, where he chartered a bark called the "Planter," intending to take a cargo to England, whence he hoped to proceed to America and ask the United States Government to support his land claims; but his Sydney creditors, getting word of his intentions, had him imprisoned for debt.

On regaining his freedom early in 1841 he decided to make the best of a bad job and prefer his land claims before the New Zealand Commissioners. On receiving his letter announcing this intention, Willoughby Shortland, the Colonial Secretary, was puzzled by an allusion it contained to the American Consul at Sydney. Was the claimant a British or American subject? Shortland wrote forthwith to inquire, explaining to Webster at the same time that he could not be both; that if he chose to be the latter he must relinquish all the rights of a British subject, such as the ownership of a British vessel which he was understood to possess.

Till now Webster had not viewed the situation in this light. He found the question regarding his nationality so awkward that he did not answer it at all, but merely wrote saying that he was willing to take his chance with the others. The reply, however, was taken to mean

that he would take his chance with the other British subjects; and as Webster appeared in person to give evidence before the New Zealand Land Commissioners there seemed to be no doubt whatever that his meaning had been correctly interpreted.

The first Land Commission awarded Webster 7,540 acres, all of which he at once sold for 20s. an acre; but shortly afterwards an Ordinance came into force forbidding any grant to be made of more than 2,560 acres. Webster's grant was accordingly reduced, and the people to whom he had sold his land as fast as he acquired it were left with nothing for their money.

By this time Governor Fitzroy had succeeded Governor Hobson. Fitzroy felt sorry for Webster—so sorry, indeed, that on this occasion, as on many others, he allowed his better instincts to get the better of him. By his order, the whole question of the awards was referred to a second commission, by which Webster was awarded 17,655 acres—12,655 to allow him to fulfil his obligations and 5,000 for himself—all of which he sold within four months. It is worthy of note that even at the end of these transactions he was still in debt to the Sydney merchants.

Fresh difficulties now arose. When Lord Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies, heard of Fitzroy's generosity he wrote condemning the augmented grants of land, but his letter was not received in New Zealand until three years after the grants had been made, and, incidentally, eighteen months after Fitzroy had been replaced. The situation was without remedy. Webster, having sold all his land, could not be expected to restore it. Worse still, it was now discovered that in many cases he had not fulfilled the conditions of sale with the Maori vendors, who refused to deliver up the land to the unfortunates who had bought it from him. In order to put them in possession, the discrepancies had to be made up by a grateful country. By this time Webster had seen fit to make himself scarce.

The years rolled by until in 1856 a Land Claims Settlement Act was passed by the New Zealand Parliament for the