

Westpac Banking Corporation in Fiji: 1901-2013

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Westpac, the first Australian bank to open a branch in Fiji, was established on 12 August 1901, as the Bank of New South Wales. It is Fiji's longest continuing bank and is the first bank to introduce telephone banking in Fiji.

The Beginning

In 1876, First Governor of the Island colony recommended that Westpac, then known as the Bank of New South Wales, establish branches to service growing trade between Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. However it wasn't until 12 August 1901 that the Bank of NSW opened its first branch in Suva with just three employees. The following timeline provide key developments in this regard:

1901 - Westpac began operations as Bank of New South Wales in Suva on 12 August with 3 staff. The bank manager was Mr. William McRae who was joined by an accountant and a junior officer to run the bank. All records were manually updated and maintained. The Bank's inspector, Henry Norman was sent to Suva to find a suitable office. His response, dated 13 July, 1901, was:

I have secured premises in a very central position opposite the wharf, being portion of the building remainder of which is occupied by the Fiji Times. It is virtually an iron shell with wooden ceiling, road on west and south sides. I have arranged for a sub-lease for 3 years with option of renewal. The building is somewhat cramped and rent somewhat high but I found it next to impossible to secure any place in a central position. The expressions of pleasure at our opening are numerous and gratifying (Westpac, 2011:4).

Senior Officer William McRae believed the key to success was to earn all his customers' business by letting the Bank's solid banking reputation and expert financial advice speak for itself. In two years the number of customers doubled and the bank moved to larger premises on Suva's reclaimed foreshore. The land was leased from the Government for 50 years - the Bank of New South Wales had firmly put down its roots.

1909: On 1 June, the bank opened its second branch in Levuka, which was the capital of Fiji then and a growing trade centre.

1910 – A branch was opened in Lautoka, where there was a booming sugar trade industry. The branch catered for the banking needs of people on the western side of the Viti Levu.

1918: On 18 December Bank of New South Wales established its branch in Labasa, Vanua Levu.

1932: The discovery of gold led to a branch being opened in Tavua to service the miners.

1934: Construction begun on new premises in Thomson Street, Suva, which now is the site of Westpac's current Suva branch and a national heritage building.

1940: In the 1940's, banking facilities were made available to Savusavu customers by the then bank of New South Wales. Every three months, two male bank officers dressed in white shirts and knee length socks and shoes turned up for business. They usually arrived on board one of the regular schooners that used to service the outer islands and both were equipped with guns for protection against hold ups. Banking transactions were done on board the schooner and customers were allowed on board one at a time (Westpac, 2011).

1948: Nadi agency opened as the town grew in business.

1950's: Branches were opened in Ba, Rakiraki and Sigatoka to cater for the booming sugar industry.

1951: The agency in Nadi town was converted into a branch.

1966: The opening of new branches saw expanding job opportunities for local people. By 1966 there were a growing number of local employees, including quite a few women. The staff complement enabled the bank to understand local needs and to respond to them quickly. Rosie Prasad Karan was the first lady officer appointed in 1978. Following the Burns Commission Report and representation made by the British Government, a policy for the employment of local staff was approved by the Bank on 4 March 1960 (Westpac, 2011).

1970 - Fiji gained independence. By then the Westpac had 40 points of representation throughout Fiji.

Name Change and Growth

1982: On 1 October 1982, the bank formally changed its name to *Westpac Banking Corporation* which derived its name from the fact that its major operations were in the Western Pacific. The change was a result of a merger between the Bank of New South Wales and the Commercial Bank of Australia. Along with the change came new staff uniforms.

1980's: In the 1980s the Rakiraki, Savusavu and Nabua agencies were converted to branches. Westpac supported many organizations including statutory bodies like the Fiji Electricity Authority, the Fiji Sugar Corporation and the national airline Air Pacific.

1981: Westpac introduced a mainframe ICL computer system to replace the manual banking tasks. This was a significant change for the Bank which enabled an enhancement to customer service.

1988: Westpac acquired the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) branch in Fiji, which had established its branch some 18 months earlier.

Financial and Technological Innovation Era

1991: Westpac was the first bank in Fiji to introduce Electronic Funds Transfers at Point of Sale (EFTPOS) machines and Automated Teller Machines into the country.

1994: Up to 1994 banking transactions were done manually, customers had to travel to branches or agencies to do their banking and transactions were all recorded on paper.

1999: Westpac became the first bank to introduce Telephone Banking - an automated service which allowed registered personal customers to dial in and access their accounts.

Millennium Evolution

2004: Internet Banking (now known as Online Banking) was introduced.

2007: Westpac opened in branch in Laucala Bay, Suva near University of the South Pacific to cater for students, lecturers and nearby residents.

2007: On 3 September, the 18 branch of Westpac opened in Port Denarau, Nadi with 6 employees and a branch manager. On 21 November, Westpac opened a branch in Nakasi also with 6 employees and a branch manager.

2008: On 20 June, the 19th branch of Westpac opened at MHCC, Suva.

2013: On 22 January, the 20th branch opened in Lautoka Challenge Plaza with 10 staff. Chief Guest at the opening was Westpac's oldest customer in Lautoka, 83 years old Chhabildas Jamnadas. [In 2012, its oldest customer on record was 103 years old Mr. Duraga Prasad, whose father was one of the workers at the Bank of New South Wales].

Community Involvement with Social Responsibility

2007: Westpac Fiji was one of the founding partners for the Rotary Pacific Water for Life Foundation which aimed to provide water and sanitation solution to communities around Fiji.

2009–2010: In response to Fiji Government's Microfinance Initiative, Westpac Fiji actively promoted *Financial First Step* and *Financial Literacy and Savings*. At the end of 2010, the bank had 8000 customers in this segment (Westpac, 2011). The '*unbanked*' segment grew to more than 35,000 by the end of 2011 (Westpac Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme, 2012).

2011: On 8 March, Westpac Women's Education Grants (WWEGs) were launched. Three grants were awarded to girls in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions to help meet the costs of their education.

2011: In June Westpac became the first bank to introduce multicurrency payments onto the Internet Payment Gateway. Mobile Banking was launched.

2011: In November: Westpac's Pacific Graduate Program was launched, which provided selected final year university students opportunities to join the bank initially for a 12 month program.

Journey of Success

The Westpac Banking Corporation, with its 104 years presence in Fiji, is the oldest and one of the largest banks in the country. With the humble beginning with 3 staff, today it has more than 470 staff across 20 branches. It now has 32 ATMs. In 2012, 98% of its employees were Fiji citizens; 56% were females, 38% of the managers that lead the team were women of which 6% were in Executive Leadership Team (Adrian Hughes, General Manager, 2012). With the bank size of \$1,685,858,000 and Capital Adequacy Ratio of 13.35% (Reserve Bank of Fiji, 2015), Westpac Fiji has grown in size, asset portfolios, and deposit customers.

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