

The Hill River Settlement initially constituted the eastern part of the town of Sevenhill and, due to the Polish residents living there, was popularly known as Polish Hill River for many years. It had a distinctly agricultural character. When the first Polish settlers arrived, the land was subdivided and sold to immigrants at fairly affordable prices. They cleared trees and bushes and established fields for cultivation. The settlers had an hour's journey to the center of Sevenhill. Nestled among the hills, the settlement reminded Polish emigrants of their homeland. Under favorable climatic conditions, it was possible to quickly repay loans taken out for purchasing land and think about further development.

The first Pole to buy land in Hill River for his own farm was a man with the surname Niemiec; others followed in his footsteps. Over the years, the group of Polish emigrants who arrived in the 1850s formed a close-knit community, striving to preserve their existence, Polish identity, and faith.

Thus, the settlement in Hill River is, in its origins, even older than the earliest Polish settlements organized in North America. Interestingly, all economic, social, cultural, and religious initiatives came from the Poznań peasants, not from a priest, whom they were only trying to bring in.

It is also difficult to determine the exact number of Poles living in Hill River today. Archbishop Francis Patrick Moran from Sydney noted that in May 1871, there were about 26 Polish families there. Father Patrick Dalton, based on the parish archives in Sevenhill, compiled a list of 40 Polish surnames. It is known that under some surnames, there were sometimes several families, e.g., four Pawelskis, four Ruciochs, two Małychs, two Nykiels, and two Niemiecs.

The existence of 40 families was noted by Father Rogalski in 1879. In the following years, the number of families continued to increase, especially after the Franco-Prussian War. By the 1870s, the number of families had at least risen to 63. During Rogalski's time, in 1876, new families came from the Poznań region, specifically from Babimost, Zbąszyń, Paradyż, and Dąbrówka. These families bore the surnames: Buda, Bocian, Matys, Bryksy, Borowski, Wiśniewski, Kozłowski, and Małycha. Matys and Kozłowski reportedly inflicted wounds on themselves to avoid being conscripted into the Franco-Prussian War.

In 1892, Father Rogalski wrote that the population of Hill River numbered between 300 and 400 inhabitants (of which around 250 could have been Poles).

Lech Paszkowski examined, among other documents, 25 naturalization records from the Federal Archive in Canberra. Among the Polish surnamed residents of Sevenhill and Hill River, the most frequently mentioned place of origin was Babimost, followed by Dąbrówka in second place, Zbąszyń in third, and one person originated from Kraków.

Regarding the professions of the residents of Sevenhill and Hill River, they were identified as follows: eight farmers, eight laborers, two tailors, one mason, one shoemaker, one gardener, one housewife, and three people without a profession. Unlike the Poles living in Adelaide, where the largest concentration of Poles after Sevenhill was found, this population was predominantly agricultural and craft-oriented.

Polish emigration, although not devoid of a political background, was primarily a peasant, agricultural exodus. According to the accounts of a contemporary witness, these people represented a "hard Polish type."

Jan Rucioch (born 1901), who lived in Hill River until 1979, contributed to the restoration of Polish land ownership in the 19th century on a 20-acre farm inherited from his grandfather. At that time, there were 32 Polish farms, but alongside them lived English and Irish settlers. The land was divided into 80-acre sections (lots). Many Polish settlers owned an entire lot, while others only owned a part, most often 20 acres, and there were even some who had just one or part of an acre. Most farms ranged from 20 to 80 acres. There were also a few landless families who did not appear on the landowner list (Kubiak, Przybyła, Naida, Buczkowski). Jan Nykiel was one of the very enterprising farmers; he bought and sold land for profit. At the height of his success, he owned over 1,000 acres.

The lack of English language skills and the economic and climatic conditions made the initial situation of Polish farmers quite difficult. They primarily used methods derived from medium-sized Polish farms. They also had too small plots of land to secure a decent life in Australian conditions. Initially, they lived in makeshift huts, looking for additional work, and were hired as shepherds or for domestic service. They rented all their agricultural equipment – mainly plows and horses – from wealthier farmers. Over time, they built modest but comfortable brick and stone houses covered with white metal. Typically, their homes had two or even three rooms. In contrast, the farm buildings were small because the relatively warm climate did not require securing animals.

In a photograph depicting the committee for the construction of a small church in Hill River from 1869, it can be seen that the Polish people were fairly well-nourished and dressed appropriately, though modestly. Unfortunately, there were too many illiterates in the first generation. The teacher of the Polish school, J. H. Crowe, wrote on November 13, 1884, to an unknown recipient:

Surely it will please you to know that your countrymen on this side of the globe are not only increasing their wealth and steadily growing in number, but also showing lively social activity. [...] The first Polish families who arrived here around 1854 and have remained in this colony are doing very well.

However, the early 1880s turned out to be particularly unfavorable for agriculture in South Australia. Father Rogalski lamented in letters from 1881 and 1884 that for several years, the harvests had been very poor, which hampered the settlement's development and discouraged farmers, leading them to abandon their farms and move north to more fertile lands or switch to industry. Some also longed for their homeland and even wanted to return there. The collapse of agriculture had negative consequences for the development of the Polish Hill River settlement.

In 1886, Father Rogalski wrote:

I can take pride in my Poles and in general the local Catholics. If it weren't for the recent unfruitful years, which forced so many to emigrate north, life in our Catholic community would undoubtedly look much better externally, and I would have certainly brought Polish nuns here to educate Polish children. However, God's Providence wanted otherwise. I am convinced that this is just a test of our zeal, and perhaps of our brothers and sisters across the sea, in our homeland.

L. Paszkowski, *Polonica Australiana*, p. 3; Letter from L. Rogalski, Sevenhill, March 12, 1892.

S. M. Szczepanowski, *The First Polish Settlement*, pp. 12, 18, 19, 21-23.

L. Paszkowski, *Poles in Australia*, p. 32.

Letter from L. Rogalski, Sevenhill, March 12, 1892.

Letter from L. Rogalski, Sevenhill, November 26, 1886. – A. Maksymowicz, *Emigration from the border of Brandenburg, Silesia, and Greater Poland to South Australia in the years 1838-1914*. Zielona Góra 2011, pp. 203-223.