



Alexander Burt was born on 4 April 1840 at Camelon, Stirlingshire, Scotland, the son of Frances (Fanny) Ross and her husband, James Burt, a nailmaker. Later in 1840 the family moved to Glasgow, where Thomas Burt was born. He was baptised in the parish of Barony, Glasgow, on 17 December 1842. James Burt died in 1847.

At the age of 10 Alexander went to work as a message boy for an ironmonger. He earned 3s. a week, working from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. After three years, and now earning 6s. a week, he apprenticed himself to a plumber. His younger brother, Thomas, was also apprenticed to a firm of plumbers and brassfounders.

In 1859 Alexander and Thomas Burt emigrated to Australia with their mother and a younger sister. They arrived in Melbourne on 21 August on the *Morning Light*. There they joined an older married sister. The Burt brothers tried the Victorian gold diggings with little luck. Alexander went to New Zealand to join the goldrush to Gabriels Gully in Otago in 1861, but again met with little success. In Dunedin, on his way back to Melbourne, he met William Park, an acquaintance from his apprentice days, who offered him a temporary job in his plumbing partnership with James Curle. Burt accepted, decided there were good prospects in the growing town, and sent for Thomas. Together they planned to open a plumbing and gas fitting business and obtained a lease on a small shop in the Octagon, in the centre of Dunedin.

On 15 August 1862, as Alexander and Thomas Burt were about to open for business, Horatio Hartley and Christopher Reilly made history by depositing 1,000 ounces of gold at the office of the chief gold receiver in Dunedin. The Dunstan goldrush began forthwith. Alexander and Thomas Burt joined it and this time did well. A few weeks later they returned to their premises and their original business, which soon prospered. In 1865 they won their first major contract, to provide gas lighting for the New Zealand Exhibition in Dunedin.

The firm expanded from domestic and commercial plumbing into coppersmithing, brass moulding and metal finishing. When expansion on the Octagon site had reached the limit of available space, new premises were built in Princes Street and occupied in 1866. Coppersmiths and brass moulders were recruited from Glasgow, and further room for expansion was needed. A retail store, foundry and engineering workshop were opened on the corner of Cumberland and Stuart streets in 1874. Alexander Burt managed the business side of the partnership. Thomas was in charge of the works, where he was known for his energy and ingenuity in solving practical problems.

Burts' Otago Lead, Copper, Brass and Engineering Works employed about 300 staff by the turn of the century. As managing director of the firm Alexander Burt affirmed his belief in the viability of New Zealand industries, aiming to produce goods at prices which would compete with imports. The firm's success he attributed largely to 'deuced hard work and long hours'. Production ranged from street drinking fountains, church bells and domestic spouting to large-scale projects and equipment such as city waterworks systems, steelwork for the Dunedin Town Hall, gold dredges, and industrial boilers. Branches were established in Wellington, Christchurch, Invercargill, Auckland, Timaru and other centres. In 1897 the firm of A. & T. Burt was registered as a limited liability company. In 1908 a London office was opened. By the time the firm celebrated its 50th jubilee in 1912 it was known throughout the country and employed 850 people. Dunedin businessmen marked the occasion with a complimentary dinner for Alexander Burt and presented him with an illuminated address.

Childhood deprivation had made Alexander Burt an enthusiast for education. He was active in support of the Caledonian Society's evening classes, and was made a life director. He served on the committee of the Arthur Street School for 33 years, and in 1888, with G. M. Thomson, was one of the founders of the Dunedin Technical School. He remained on the school board until 1918, serving as president until 1905. He served as a Dunedin city councillor in 1873–74 and was a government representative on the Otago Harbour Board from 1879 to 1883. In 1881 he was one of the original directors of the National Insurance Company and remained on the board until 1920. He was associated with Knox Church from 1862, and active in the Masonic order from 1867.

Thomas Burt contracted tuberculosis and by 1881 the disease had advanced to a stage which made it impossible for him to take any active part in the business. A partnership deed was drawn up which vested control of the business in Alexander, but denied him the right to stand for parliamentary office, the mayoralty, or a place on the city council. On 20 January 1870 in Dunedin Thomas had married Jean Brodie Reid. On 15 September 1884 he died at his home in Grants Braes, Dunedin. Jean Burt died a year later, leaving six children.

On 27 April 1866 in Dunedin Alexander Burt had married Janet Crawford. They had six sons and three daughters. The eldest son predeceased his father and another son became a doctor, practising in Dunedin and Sydney. The family influence in the business remained strong, however. Four of the sons of Alexander and Thomas Burt held executive posts in A. & T. Burt Limited when Alexander died in Dunedin on 2 January 1920. In his will Alexander Burt left £300 to the Dunedin Technical School to fund a scholarship for practical trades. The assembly hall of King Edward Technical College, which was built in 1918, was named Burt Hall in his honour.