

## HAWAIIANS AT FORT VANCOUVER

Alice and Edward Beechert, January 2005

### *EARLY TRAVELERS*

Within ten years after Captain Cook's 1778 landing in Hawaii the islands became a favorite port of call in the trade with China. Ships needed to replenish food supplies and water, and to recruit Hawaiians as crew members. Hawaiians proved to be excellent seamen and were soon much in demand by ship's captains. Ships in the China trade for the first few years stopped at Lahaina on Maui, Hilo on the island of Hawaii, sometimes Kauai to load potatoes and pigs, and after 1794, at Honolulu on Oahu. The first American whalers landed at Kealahou in 1819 and hired Kanaka crew members. The largest number of Hawaiians left as crew members on whaling and merchant ships. Many of these men settled or worked for extended periods on the west coast of America.

Records are scarce making it difficult to determine precisely how many Hawaiians left, or their reasons for signing on as seamen or as contract workers. The lot of the Hawaiian commoner was not as enviable as the lush surroundings suggested. Until 1819, after the death of Kamehameha I, a complicated system of *kapus* [taboos] surrounded everyday lives and many of these restrictions carried severe penalties, including death. Observing the vastly different life styles of the visiting ships' crews, the Hawaiian commoner was quick to seize the opportunity to ship out for the unknown world.

The first person known to leave was a young Hawaiian woman who sailed to the Northwest as the servant of Captain Charles Barkley's wife on the *Imperial Eagle* in May 1787. Even the high chiefs were intrigued by the lure of foreign shores. High chief Kaiana of Maui left in August 1787 to visit the Pacific Northwest and China. In 1789, Chief Atoa left Hawaii

with Captain Robert Gray and was with him when he discovered the mouth of the Columbia River in 1792.

As early as 1790 ships were taking on Hawaiian crew members for ships involved in the now thriving Pacific Northwest fur trade. Captain Meares of the British-owned Bengal Fur Company, established a colony of Chinese laborers at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in 1788 and provided Hawaiian wives for the workers. Other Hawaiians were employed at various places along the West coast and in Mexico.

Before long, many Hawaiians were employed at posts of the Pacific Northwest Fur Company. By 1811, the American Fur Company at Astoria employed twelve Hawaiians on three year contracts at the newly established trading post at Astoria, Oregon. They were paid room and board and received \$100 in merchandise at the end of the contract. When the Hudson's Bay Company [HBC] merged with the Northwest Fur Company in 1821, the HBC Governor George Simpson, recommended that fifteen more Hawaiians be hired for "common drudgery and as guards." They were also to be employed as crewmen on the *Cadboro*, a vessel used in the coastal trade. Later, the Columbia Bar escort schooner, *Dolly*, employed an Hawaiian crew. Thus, the first bar pilot may have been Hawaiian. By 1824, the HBC employed thirty-five Hawaiians west of the Rockies.

As the Company expanded its operations, they employed more Hawaiians. At Fort George [Astoria] some eighteen Hawaiians were employed in 1825. Governor Simpson's report for 1825 showed this population: 37 men [20 + extra men, brigadiers, 8 express men, 9 belonging to Governor's canoe], 17 women, 35 children, 11 slaves. Of the 37 men, eighteen

were Hawaiians.

### *FORT VANCOUVER: EMPORIUM OF THE NORTHWEST*

The Astoria location proved to be unsatisfactory for HBC operations. A more suitable location was needed which would provide the agricultural resources needed to sustain the extensive network of fur traders. The move upstream some 100 miles to the fertile plain of Vancouver was undertaken in 1825. For the provision of supplies, Fort Vancouver was eminently qualified.

Dr. John McLoughlin, the newly appointed Director of the Northwest Hudson's Bay Company set about establishing Fort Vancouver as the chief supply center for the regional operation. By 1828, the farm "reaped 4,000 bushels of potatoes, 1,300 of wheat, 1,000 of barley, 400 of corn, 300 of peas, and 100 of oats, and in the spring of 1829 they tended 200 pigs, 153 cattle [not including calves], and 50 goats." By 1829, 200 hogs and an Hawaiian swineherd kept the Fort supplied with pork.

The Hudson's Bay company annually sent out from Fort Vancouver two well-equipped hunting and trapping parties, usually numbering between fifty and one hundred men and women. Food supplies and trade goods were sent from Fort Vancouver to smaller posts. Furs traded by the Indians at each post, or trapped by HBC employees, were sent to Fort Vancouver by regularly scheduled canoe, boat, and horse brigades and loaded onto company ships and transported to London. Much of the labor at each stage of this process was performed by Kanakas.

In addition to agriculture and the fur trade, McLoughlin established a sawmill upstream

from the Fort and by 1828 lumber and smoked salmon were being exported on a regular basis to Honolulu. HBC ships sailed between Hawaii and the Columbia River on an average of twice a year. Kanakas provided the labor force at the sawmill, perhaps the same loggers who had cleared the Sandwich Island's sandalwood forests for the maritime fur traders.

In March 1835, James Douglas recorded in his journal that the mill "works twelve saws and cuts about 3500 feet of inch boards during the twenty-four hours." By 1837, the mill employed ten yoke of oxen and twenty-eight men and large stocks of lumber were dried at the mill for export. The Kanakas were a cheap yet skilled source of labor. They were paid between ten and nineteen pounds a year, plus food, largely smoked salmon and sea biscuits. [The smoked salmon quickly became a staple in the Island diet as *lomo lomi* salmon]. In 1840, one visitor wrote that "the Islanders are felling the pines and dragging them to the mill. using oxen and horses, sets of hands are plying two gangs of saws by night and day, nine hundred thousand feet per annum are constantly being shipped to foreign ports." Lumber, salmon and wheat rapidly became the principal economic activities of Fort Vancouver.

By 1849 the Hawaiian population exceeded that of the French Canadians due to the declining importance of furs and the rising export business of Fort Vancouver's agricultural production and the consequent larger use of Hawaiian servants.

#### *KANAKA VILLAGE*

The rapid development of the various functions of the newly established supply depot and the strict class segregation policies of the Company, led to the establishment of living quarters for the "gentlemen" of the Company within the stockade and housing for servants,

Hawaiians, French-Canadian *metis*, and Indians [primarily the wives of servants] outside the stockade. The scale of operations at Fort Vancouver made it impractical to include servants within the stockade as the Company did at its other smaller locations. The servant class built their own shelters, usually one or two rooms, of whatever material was at hand. By 1848 the village consisted of 60-75 buildings according to some reports. Maps of the village made in 1846 and 1850 show only 20-odd structures. In 1854 Governor Stevens of the Oregon Territory estimated 20 “cabins” remaining in the village. As Stevens reported, “...the structures were, with few exceptions, built of slabs and untenanted and left to decay.” Another writer called Kanaka Village “a boisterous little community...where the Company employees of lower rank—Iroquois, Scottish, Hawaiian, French *metis*—lived with their Indian wives and families.” At its peak, the village was home to around 535 men, 254 Indian women and 301 children.

Population figures for the village vary considerably. For example, employee rosters for 1827 list 99 servants at the Fort. A year later, 82 members of the work force were left after those on “detached service” were gone. Of these only 33 had occupations suggesting they lived in the village. “Detached service” employees provided communication and supplies between the posts of the Columbia District. Hawaiians were a significant number of the detached service personnel as they were employed as “watermen,” on the canoes and ships of the Company.

The employee roster for 1843 lists 136 servants, but perhaps only half of these were in the village. The others had occupations indicating they might be living at the sawmill, or at dairies and farms in the vicinity of the Fort. McLoughlin described the size of the Fort Vancouver work force and its mobility in 1843:

...[W]e had last year [1842] 149 men on our list in winter, and we have every year a large winter Establishment, because we have in the winter all the men who

come with the Express, the Goers and Comers for the Snake Country, and the extra men for the Brigade in the Summer.

The brigades employed large numbers of company servants who lived in the village only on a seasonal basis. The Snake country and summer brigades were trapping and exploring expeditions sent annually from Fort Vancouver to Snake River country, British Columbia, and central California. Many Hawaiians, especially in the early years, were part of this transient population.

Between 1827 and 1842, approximately 50% of the Hawaiians were engaged in water-based occupations. By 1842, a dramatic shift had occurred and the majority were engaged in land-based occupations. At the peak of employment in 1844, there were probably from 300 to 400 Kanakas employed on the Columbia River.

#### *HAWAIIAN SERVANTS*

Hawaiians served in a variety of capacities, all under the general classification “servants.” In addition to laborers, they were mill workers, sailors on both the river boats and trans-ocean ships, gardeners, soldiers, and cooks. All employees were expected to perform “any task that needed doing: guard duty, farm labor, maintenance work, or any of the tasks associated with paddling or portaging canoes, and cleaning, drying, sorting, and baling furs. This policy applied to all Fort employees, including Fort physicians who were required to serve as clerks when not busy with medical work. In practice, some Kanakas specialized in particular tasks and worked as shepherd, sawyers, cooks, coopers and woodcutters or stokers on steamships. They were sometimes paid a small bonus for special assignments, or for “particularly loyal service as cooks or household help for company officers.”

The servant class of employees were provided with weekly food rations which varied over the years depending on supply. In 1838 these consisted of “4 Quarts Pease. ½ lb Tallow, 9 lbs Salmon, and 3 lbs bread or Potatoes.” In 1845, employees were receiving 21 pounds of salted salmon per week and 12 pounds of flour when potatoes were not available. On occasion, fresh meat or game was made available.

These rations were extended only to servants, not to their families. A few exceptions were made for widows of servants with children. Since a servant’s ration was seldom adequate to feed himself, much less a family, women were obliged to either forage for food or earn enough to purchase it. Some of the Indian wives worked as farm laborers or salmon processors and they may have been employed in the manufacture of items such as candles, portage straps, and other items for sale in the Company store. Luxury items such as tea, coffee, molasses, liquor, and condiments had to be purchased at the sales shop. Beer made from barley was produced at Fort Vancouver until 1836 when production was curtailed “because of the bad effect on the men.”

The daily routine was work from sun up to sun down, with only Sundays off. Some of the Hawaiians formally married Indian women, as did the Canadian *metis* in the village. Many had their children baptized even when these were offspring of unsanctified marriages. Liaisons between the traders and Indian women were actively encouraged by the Company, and many of the common-law marriages were as solid as those performed in the church.

#### *RELIGION AND EDUCATION*

The Hudson’s Bay Company was from the start concerned with the religious and moral

values of its employees and the Indians with whom it traded. The Company's "Regulations for Promoting Morality and Religious Improvement" specified that

divine service be publicly read once or twice every Sunday at all

Establishments....at which every man, woman and child resident, will be required to attend, together with any of the Indians who may be at hand, and whom it may be proper to invite for the purpose of moral and religious improvement of the servants, and more effectual civilization and instruction of the families, and of the Indians.

Women and children were to be furnished with "regular and useful occupation as is suited to their age and capacities, and best calculated to suppress vicious and promote virtuous habits."

The employee was to address and encourage his wife and children to use his language, be it French or English, and to "devote part of his leisure hours to teach the children their A.B.C., catechism," in order to promote education.

With the growth of a school age population, formal schooling was provided at Fort Vancouver and environs for the children, starting with the arrival of a teacher in late 1832 and continuing, with some lapses, until at least 1845. A succession of teachers, including a clerk, a voyageur, and a clerk's wife, taught classes, first in the dining hall and later in a school room erected in the stockade. At various times, classes included a day school for children and an evening school for boys and young men, ten of whom were also being boarded in the school room inside the stockade in 1837. At maximum attendance, the school had "about sixty scholars, one third being Girls." A visitor in 1836 recorded that pupils included not only the traders' and laborers' children but also Indian children.

As for religious instruction, McLoughlin instituted two services every Sunday. One was

Church of England which he conducted for the first few years, and the other was a Catholic service for the French Canadians, conducted by a French Canadian employee who could read.

For two years, 1835-1837 the Company provided an Anglican chaplain for the Fort, Herbert Beaver, who in a very short time antagonized almost everyone. His frequent quarrels with McLaughlin led to his early departure which was a relief to all. One of Beaver's chief complaints was that services had to be held in the dining hall which was also the schoolroom, and that he had to live in a servant's house.

Most of the French-Canadian *metis* were Catholic and McLoughlin expressly asked Beaver not to interfere with the instruction of the children of the Roman Catholic servants. In spite of this, Beaver "commenced a course of religious instruction based on the catechism of the Church of England" and attacked the "fur trade marriages" of Company servants, including six such marriages between Hawaiians and Indian women.

Protestant missions established after 1835 also depended on Kanaka labor, some recruited directly from Honolulu, to build the missions and work on mission farms. The missionaries relied on Fort Vancouver for some of their supplies. A number of Kanakas were loaned by the HBC to work temporarily for the missions, and visiting missionaries occasionally would hold Sunday services at the Fort.

Catholic missionaries visited the village in 1838, making note of the Catholic residents and taking steps to formalize their marriages to Indian women. The priests resided at the post for only a few weeks or a month at a time and it wasn't until 1843 that a full-time cleric was stationed at Fort Vancouver. In 1846, a church and parsonage [St. James Church] were built towards the northwest corner of the village.

In 1845, Dr. McLoughlin asked the Hudson's Bay Company to send to the Fort an Hawaiian who was educated, trustworthy and able to "read the scriptures and assemble his people for public worship." McLoughlin was concerned about the drinking, gambling, fighting, and other "corruptions" among the Hawaiians in Kanaka Village. William R. Kaulehelehe, soon known as Kanaka William, and his wife Mary S. Kani met with a mixed reception. Sunday was the only free day available for gardening, carpentry, or recreation which the inhabitants of the village were reluctant to give up. Others hoped that Kanaka William would address some of their complaints about the HBC.

The Hawaiians have repeatedly and daily asked me to see about their trouble of being repeatedly abused by the white people without any cause. They thought I had come as an officer to settle their difficulties. I said no, I did not come to do those things. I had no instructions from the King and ministers of the government in Hawaii to do those things. All that I have come for was the word of God and school.

By the 1850s, Kanaka William was not listed as a minister on the HBC records, but as a teacher. He established a small church within the stockade—the only Hawaiian to live within the compound. Kanaka William returned briefly to Hawaii in 1850, returning to Fort Vancouver when he discovered his family's land had been taken for a sugar plantation. He remained in his church after the Hudson's Bay Company relocated to Victoria, British Columbia, and was there until the U.S. Army burned the stockade in 1860

#### *KANAKAS: AT END OF HBC SERVICE, RETURN OR REMAIN?*

There were those Hawaiians who considered Fort Vancouver their home, but who did not actually live there for most of the year. In this group were the trapping parties—men, women and children—that made up the Snake River expeditions, and the sailors of the

company's marine service which included Hawaiians in the coastal trade or sailing on ships to Hawaii or England. This meant that the Hawaiians were often shifted from one post to another, making it difficult to track their employment.

When their terms of service ended, many of the Hawaiians returned to Hawaii, but some re-enlisted or chose to stay in the Northwest seeking other employment. Some simply remained with their Indian families. Exact statistics of births to Hawaiian/Indian unions are difficult to come by unless the children were baptized or in some other way recorded in the Catholic Church records [1839-1863], again often with different spellings for each entry. The haphazard nature of record keeping also make it difficult to track deaths at the Fort.

From the beginning, Fort Vancouver was subject to devastating epidemics of "intermittent fever" [probably malaria.] At first, Dr. McLoughlin served as physician and administrator for the Fort. When the Hudson's Bay Company sent doctors to the Fort, McLoughlin required that they serve as clerks when not busy with medical work. As "professional men" some of them resented standing behind a counter to sell goods to the Fort's servants.

Between 1829 and 1833, the seasonal epidemic wiped out an estimated three-fourths to nine-tenths of the Indians of the Lower Columbia. No one was immune. Burials of Hawaiians, *metis*, and Indians recorded by the Catholic Church show the devastating effects. Despite the arrival of a physician in 1832 and the construction of a hospital in the village, the extent of medical knowledge did little to alleviate the problem. In the early 1840s, an outbreak of influenza accounted for a upsurge of "sepulture" entries in church records. In 1848, there was increased mortality among Hawaiians and Indians at Fort Vancouver from dysentery following

measles.

Richard Henry Dana in *Two Years Before the Mast* [1834] described the problem of tracing the movement of Hawaiians through the existing records:

The long name of Sandwich Islanders is dropped, and they are called by whites, all over the Pacific Ocean, "Kanakas." Their proper names in their own language being difficult to pronounce and remember, they are called by any names which the captains or crews may choose to give them. Some are called after the vessel they are in; others by our proper names, as Jack, Tom, and some have fancy names, as Ban-yan, Foretop, Ropeyarn, Pelican, etc., etc.

There is a Ropeyarn listed in HBC records for 1835 as sailing on the *Ganymede*, and then as a laborer at Fort Vancouver 1841-1845, with nine years of service.

There are also names recorded like John Bull, America, Columbia, and sometimes simply Kanak or Owyhee. Hawaiian names recorded phonetically by an Englishman, or a French Canadian priest, could vary from one record to the next. For example, there is a *Peopeo* first noted in 1824 as going on an expedition from Fort George, Astoria, under the spelling *Peo Peow*. In 1827, he was with the group from Fort Vancouver sent to establish Fort Langley under the name *PeoPeo*. In a census of 1839, his name is spelled *Peeohpeeoh*. He married an Indian woman and one of his daughters married an Hawaiian, *Ohule*, who with *Peopeo* and his son Joseph Mayo were trappers at Fort Vancouver. Then there is *Momonta* [1824], [*Moumouto, Moumouto, Moumouton*], a servant listed at Vancouver in 1844 with twenty-eight years service.

One Hawaiian who stayed after his initial contract period, *Como*, was one of two Kanakas in the party sent to establish Fort Langley in 1827. He had joined the Northwest Company before 1820, married an Indian woman, and signed up for two more years in 1830. He served as cook for Hudson's Bay Company trader, John Tod. Church records show two children

born to this marriage, and the subsequent marriage of a daughter to a stonemason. Como retired to Fort Vancouver after more than thirteen years in company service and died in 1850 at age fifty-four.

Then, of course, there is Naukane, who became known as John Coxe [also as Cook, Wihi, Cowe, Kokcanak]. He had an eventful life in Hawaii and at Fort Vancouver. He claimed that as a child he had witnessed the death of Captain Cook [1779] on the Island of Hawaii. In 1811, he was appointed by King Kamehameha I as a royal observer to accompany twelve Hawaiians employed by the American Fur Company in Astoria. He returned to Hawaii in 1814. He later accompanied King Kamehameha II to London in 1823 on the ill-fated journey to visit King George IV, returning to Honolulu with the bodies of the King and his consort. He then entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company and became swineherd at Fort Vancouver. He continued working for the Company until 1843 when he was sixty-two years of age. Company records show Coxe's purchases at the company shop in 1847. Paul Kane, the artist, drew his portrait in 1847. Despite some inconsistencies in his many tales, Naukane was a well-recognized character at Fort Vancouver who lived and died at his residence two miles downstream from the Fort.

### *CHANGING TIMES*

By 1834 the trade with Hawaii had increased to the point where an office was set up in Honolulu, where Columbia River salmon and the surplus products of Fort Vancouver, as well as European goods, found a ready market. Besides flour and fish, sawn lumber became an important article of export. The shippers received in return coffee, sugar, molasses, rice and salt.

The Hawaiian agency was not a regular fur-trading establishment under a chief factor, but rather a commercial post. After 1834, the Honolulu Agency became the Company's channel for recruiting Hawaiians and paying any amounts due them on their return to Honolulu at the end of their contracts.

In 1840, Kamehameha III, faced with the seeming threat of racial extinction due to depopulation by both emigration and disease, enacted a law that required captains of vessels desiring to board Hawaiians to obtain the written consent of the island governor and sign a \$200 bond to return the Hawaiian within the specified time. That same year, a contract was signed by HBC agent Pelly and the governor of Oahu.

...Kekuanoa allows Mr. Pelly to take sixty men to the Columbia River, to dwell there three years and at the end of said term of three years, Mr. Pelly agrees to return them to the Island of Oahu. And if it shall appear that any of the men have died, it is well, but if they have deserted by reason of ill treatment, or remain for any other cause, then Mr. Pelly will pay twenty dollars for each man who may be deficient.

Hudson's Bay Company Governor Simpson, on a visit to Hawaii in 1841, reported that

About a thousand males in the very prime of life are estimated annually to leave the islands, some going to California, others to the Columbia, and many on long and dangerous voyages, particularly in whaling vessels, while a considerable number of them are said to be permanently lost to their country, either dying during their engagements, or settling in other parts of the world.

Governor Simpson began to worry about the number of Hawaiians employed in the Company service and in 1842 ordered McLoughlin to hire no more. McLoughlin, faced with problems of increased production, disagreed and disobeyed the explicit order and hoped the home office in London would understand the necessity and overlook this breach of discipline. .

In December 1845, the Territorial Provisional Government considered an act providing

“that all persons who shall hereafter introduce into the Oregon Territory any Sandwich Islanders ... for a term of service shall pay a tax of five dollars for each person introduced.” When the Provisional Government census was taken in August 1846, Indians, Hawaiians and “half-breeds” were not counted. Considerable discussion preceded this decision about whether any but white inhabitants should be allowed to become enrolled as American citizens and accorded voting privileges. When the Governor objected to including non-whites, the matter was referred to the Supreme Judge of the Territory who ruled that the inclusion of Hawaiians would be in violation of U.S. laws which had been written to exclude Africans and Native Americans.

In 1846, Dr. McLoughlin purchased the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Oregon City mill with his share of that year’s proceeds and left the Company. In that same year, the area became part of the United States and HBC began its withdrawal to British Columbia..

Another factor disrupting the operation of Fort Vancouver was the exodus of people to the gold fields of California in 1848-1849. The Fort was almost deserted and Indian laborers were hired to replace the deserting Hawaiians. The crew of a ship loaded with wheat for the Russian settlement at Sitka was left at the wharf. “The vessel was partially unmanned, several sailors having taken French leave for the mines. It is remarkable how wide spread is this gold mania.”

### *CONCLUSION*

Several circumstances combined to bring an end to Hudson’s Bay Company’s activities at Fort Vancouver. The decline of the fur trade, the arrival of numerous American settlers to the newly organized Oregon Territory, the settlement of the boundary dispute with Great Britain which put the area under American sovereignty, all combined to hasten the decision to move the

headquarters to Victoria, British Columbia. An additional factor influencing the move was the ease of access to Victoria's harbor and open access to the Pacific compared to the constant danger of the Columbia River bar at the mouth of the river.

By 1859, Hudson's Bay Company's withdrawal to Victoria was complete and they had also closed the office in Hawaii. A Honolulu newspaper, *The Polynesian* noted the passing:

As a mercantile house, in all that constitutes the credit and glory of a merchant, the Hudson's Bay Company Agency in Honolulu stood in the foremost rank....Their withdrawal from Honolulu was understood to be owing to the fact that the discovery of gold mines on the Fraser River and consequent settlement gave more employment for the capital of the Company nearer home.

The Hawaiians who chose not to return to Hawaii after 1850 scattered along the Pacific Coast, joining other Hawaiian groups. Some went a few miles north to Kalama, the majority went to Canada. A few of the older Kanakas remained at Fort Vancouver until the U.S. Army burned the now empty stockade and village in 1860.

Hawaiians played an important part in establishing the economic institutions of the Pacific Northwest. They provided the food and built the shelters of the fur traders and the early missionaries. They had worked on many of the merchant ships plying between Hawaii, China, Europe and the Northwest. From the earliest Hawaiians who came as seamen or contract workers, to the ones who worked at Fort Vancouver and elsewhere along the Pacific Coast, they all made an important contribution to the development of the area.

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