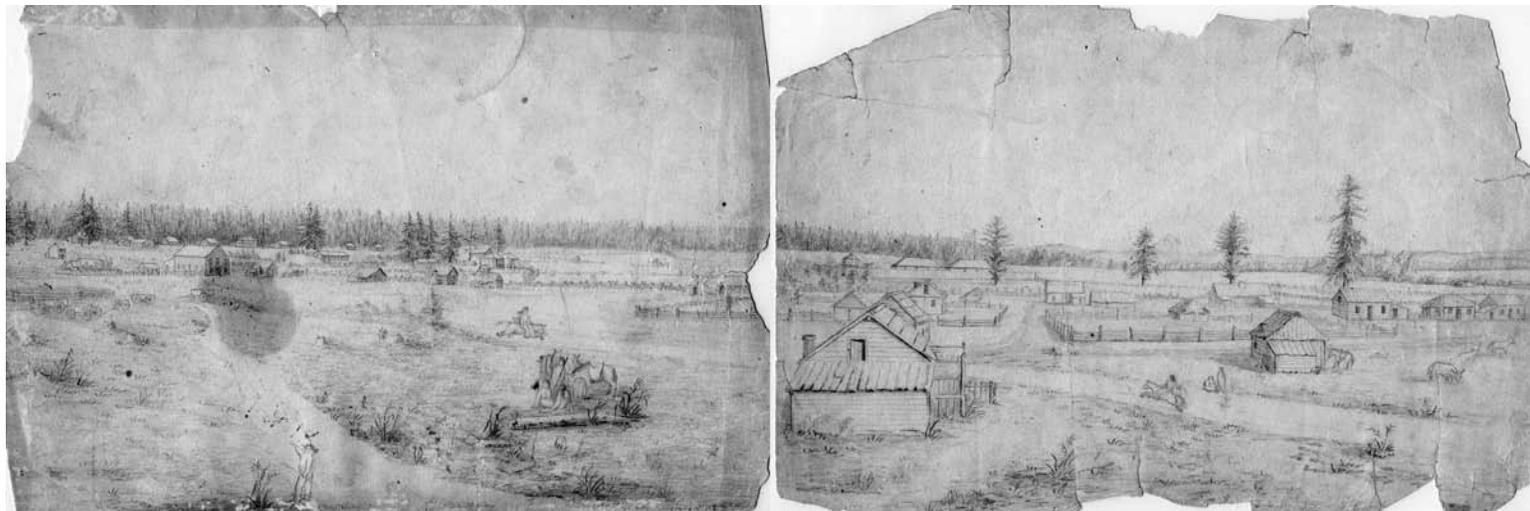




## Hawaiians at Fort Vancouver



In the 1850s, American visitors to this area referred to the Village as “Kanaka Town.” At the time, Hawaiians were known as Kanakas, meaning “human being,” and this name for the community is evidence of their significant presence at Fort Vancouver. This sketch, perhaps by George Gibbs, includes the north end of the Village, the fort, and the military post. Courtesy of the National Park Service

### A “Lively Exchange of Commodities”

The Hudson’s Bay Company’s (HBC) Fort Vancouver had a unique relationship with the Hawaiian or “Sandwich Islands,” the 19th century trade hub of the Pacific. Sailing vessels worldwide stopped regularly at “Owyhee” for recreation, supplies and ship repair, simultaneously developing a “lively exchange of commodities” amongst nations. The HBC exchange might include trading furs for Boston’s knives and copper pans, swapped for Hawaiian sandalwood or whale oil, bartered for Cantonese silk and tea for Northwest use. Hawaiian imports included items such as hogs, sugar cane, salt, molasses, coffee, wicker baskets, and sweet potatoes. By the 1830s, Fort Vancouver exported produce, wheat, flour, lumber, and salmon. Northwest timber built Hawaii’s European style homes, while Hawaiian coral supplied lime for fertilizer and whitewash, and mortar for the Fort’s chimneys. Meanwhile, the now traditional lomi lomi salmon served at present-day luaus remains a forgotten legacy of the fur trade era.

### Hawaiian Workers at Fort Vancouver

Christian missionaries, disease, and cultural decimation accompanied trade goods to Hawaii. By 1819, as the regulatory Kapu system broke down, many left the islands to obtain European goods. In 1829, the HBC opened an Oahu office, appointing an agent to manage trade in goods and people, including Kanaka workers, recruited or impressed into service. Hawaiians quickly dubbed the store *aienui*, or the “big debt.” HBC agent George Pelly often identified these “fine athletic young men,” who contracted for three year terms as HBC servants. These men, paid in cash and merchandise (warm clothing), worked on fur brigades, or as sailors, guards, loggers, guides, and cooks at the Fort.

In 1828, Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin announced, “We now have a Small Saw Mill a going.” The water powered mill was staffed mainly by Hawaiians and was the first to impact Pacific Northwest forests. The HBC later erected a steam sawmill, described in 1840 as: “a scene of constant toil. Thirty or forty Sandwich Islanders are felling the

pinces and dragging them to the mill; 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.” By 1844, more than 100 Hawaiians worked at Fort Vancouver, with 300-400 employed by the HBC at various Columbia River posts.



“Hudson Bay Mill.” John Mix Stanley Lithography. Image 2002.0.22.3 courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society

### Daily Life, Marriage, and Family

Hawaiian workers were typically young single men, and like others in the fur trade often married Native women. HBC leaders soon discovered that trade benefits came with intermarriage, and Hawaiians with families were likely to renew their contracts. In 1829, Roman Catholic missionaries “officially” married some 50 Kanaka laborers to their Native wives, mainly Chinook and Cowlitz women. These couples often lived in “Kanaka Village,” using Chinook Jargon to communicate. Company servants built their own homes on their own time, primarily at their own

expense. The wives of Kanaka workers often worked as farm laborers, salmon processors, or even in manufacturing candles and portage straps for sale at the company store. Their sons often worked for the HBC, while daughters frequently married other Hawaiians. Thus, American Indian communities and Hawaiians became intimately connected throughout the Northwest. Over time, census records classified their descendants as “Indian” and many lived on reservations, sometimes unaware of their Hawaiian heritage.

## “A Prodigy of Wit and Humor”



“Old Cox” by Paul Kane, 1846. Image 946.15.271, courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada

Naukane, called John Coxe, was a 19th century Hawaiian emigrant to Fort Vancouver. Son of a Kona coast king, Naukane sailed as royal observer in 1811 for Kamehameha I. He worked at Fort Astoria, and

traveled overseas with explorer David Thompson, who described him as “a prodigy of wit and humor.” When his contract ended, Naukane returned to Hawaii and the retinue of Crown Prince Liholiho, who became Kamehameha II in 1819. In 1823, the new monarch, his queen and court, including Naukane, went on a goodwill tour to England. They arrived in mid-May and by June 10 measles struck the entire party, except Naukane. The king, queen, and three other Hawaiians died. When the survivors returned to Hawaii in 1825, they faced suspicion.

Naukane left Hawaii in 1826 and settled at Fort Vancouver, where he married a Native woman and worked for the HBC as a middleman (rower). He also established “Coxe’s piggery,” building the HBC swineherd from 200 to 1,500 hogs. When his contract ended in 1843, Naukane remained as a freeman. Artist Paul Kane (1846) painted one of the few images of Hawaiians at the fort, “Old Cox, a Sandwich Islander who was present at the death of Captain Cook.” Naukane died on February 2, 1850, and was buried in the HBC cemetery.

## Kanaka William

William Kaulehelehe, or “Kanaka William,” came to Vancouver in 1845 with his wife, Mary Kaii, to serve as teacher and chaplain for Fort Vancouver’s Hawaiians. Kaulehelehe preached at the Owyhee Church inside the fort, requesting that Hawaiians curb alcohol consumption and observe the Sabbath. With meager food rations, Village residents hunted, gardened, or performed domestic duties on Sunday, their only day off. Some asked Kaulehelehe to assist with “their trouble of being repeatedly abused by the white people” to which he responded that he had come only for “the word of God and school.” His stance created tension and he and Mary soon moved from the Village into the stockade, the only Hawaiians to live inside the Fort. The church burned in the mid-1850s and Kaulehelehe returned to the Village, refusing to abandon his house when the HBC left in 1860. The U.S. Army forced him away by tearing down his door and windows, and he moved to Fort Victoria.



William Kaulehelehe and Mary Kaii in England. Image I-67874 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, British Columbia

## Hawaiians Today



As American settlement increased in the 1840s, Hawaiians experienced poor treatment due to their former HBC employee status. They also experienced racial discrimination and were denied American citizenship. Like African Americans, they were explicitly excluded from land ownership. Yet, many remained in the Northwest, their impact visible on the landscape in place names like Kanaka Creek, Kanaka Bar, Kanaka Glen, and the Owyhee River in Eastern Oregon. The river town of Kalama north of Vancouver reflects the region’s Hawaiian heritage. Kalama means “light” or “torch” and refers to Hawaiian HBC agent John Kalama, stationed there by the HBC and whose descendants remain.

*Hawaiians remain an integral part of Northwest culture, as evidenced by this Ho’ike festival in Esther Short Park. Courtesy of the Ke Kukui Foundation*

## Recommended Reading:

Jean Barman and Bruce McIntyre Watson. *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest, 1787-1898*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.

Milton Bona. “Hawaiians Made Life ‘More Bearable’ at Fort Vancouver.” *Clark County History*, 13 (1972): 159-175.

Tom Koppel. *Kanaka: The Untold Story of Hawaiian Pioneers in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest*. Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1995.

<http://www.ccrh.org/resources.php>

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