



Fort Vancouver as it appeared in 1845, the year Kanaka William arrived to be chaplain to the Hawaiians employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. Water-colour by an unknown artist.

KANAKA WILLIAM

By Yvonne Mearns Klan

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KANAKA WILLIAM'S PRESENCE drifts like a ghost through the chronicles of Fort Vancouver. Old journals kept by visitors to the fort record the novelty of a Hawaiian chaplain and congregation on the banks of the Columbia, and faded maps recall the existence of an 'Owhyhee Church' within the fort's stockades. For a brief period Kanaka William became the central figure in an international dispute which hastened Fort Vancouver's closure, but in spite of his fleeting appearance on the international scene little is known about the Hawaiian chaplain. The few threads of his existence are scattered through archives in Manitoba, British Columbia, Oregon and Hawaii, and have never been woven together.

Kanaka William and the hundreds of Hawaiians who served in the fur trade never rose to historical prominence, so their colourful and important contribution to the development of the trade has generally been overlooked in accounts of the era. The earliest maritime traders, bound for the fur-rich shores of the Pacific Northwest, took aboard Hawaiians to replenish crews which had been depleted by scurvy, accidents and desertions. Russian fur traders recruited Hawaiians to work in remote Alaska outposts. In 1811 the Pacific Fur Company relied on Hawaiian labour to build Astoria, the first establishment on the Columbia. When Astoria was taken over by the North West Company the tradition of using Hawaiian labourers was maintained.

The harsh and rugged life of the fur trade took its toll. Men froze in subzero winters, drowned in turbulent rivers, succumbed to disease and injury, or were slain by hostile Indians; and the traders were hard pressed to find new men to replace those who had died or deserted. Native Indians were employed where feasible but they were accustomed to seasonal work habits and had neither the inclination nor motivation for the drudgery of steady labour around the forts; nor could their loyalty be depended upon in the event of Indian-white conflicts. The traders therefore turned to the Hawaiian Islands for the cheapest, most accessible source of manpower.

The Hawaiians were found to be willing workers, docile and honest, and excellent boatmen. They were considered to lack the qualities of leadership but this deficiency was offset by their loyalty — an important consideration when isolated outposts were surrounded and outnumbered by unpredictable native Indians. Another advantage in hiring Hawaiians was their willingness to accept only food and clothing for wages.

The 1821 merger of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company brought about many changes in the Pacific fur trade, but the Hawaiians' wages remained constant. Governor George Simpson conceded that the Islanders were useful for 'common drudgery' and were 'valuable in establishing new

Countries as they can be depended on in cases of danger from the natives', but otherwise he had a low opinion of their abilities and maintained that food and clothing were 'sufficient recompense for all the services they render'. Nonetheless, in 1824 the Company awarded them a salary of £17 a year — the minimum wage for servants of the lowest rank. Other employees resented the Hawaiians' elevation to salaried status, 'and very naturally so' proclaimed Simpson, 'as they are by no means such serviceable people.' The contentious salary was therefore reduced to £10 a year and this, reported Simpson, 'satisfies all parties'.

It is debatable that the Hawaiians actually gained by receiving a salary. Reverend Herbert Beaver, the Company's chaplain at Fort Vancouver, reported that each Hawaiian

before embarkation in their own country, received a small advance of money, part of which their chiefs seize as a bonus for permitting them to have it The remainder is usually squandered; so that when they arrive in a colder climate they are destitute of adequate clothing, the supply of which generally consumed the whole of their wages for the first year. Nor are they afterwards able to save much of these, for all their necessaries are charged at the rate of 100 per cent. . . .

Beaver was a relentless (and, at times, inaccurate) critic of the Company's Columbia operations. He strongly protested the use of corporal punishment, and maintained that the Hawaiians' condition

is little better than that of slavery, being subject to all the imperious treatment which their employers may think fit to lay on them, whether by flogging, imprisonment or otherwise, without a possibility of obtaining redress.

Why did the Hawaiians leave their sun-blessed islands for the cold and rain-swept north? And, when their contracts had expired, why did many elect to re-engage rather than to return to their homeland?

Initially, adventure and the lure of distant lands enticed many young men and women away from the Islands. Some eventually rose to positions which carried more prestige than they could ever hope to attain if they returned to Hawaii. Even with their meagre salary many could earn more by working in the Columbia District than they could by working in the Islands. Those who were thrifty enough to save money returned home relatively wealthy men; those less frugal were ashamed to return empty-handed and wanted another chance to 'make good' in America. If the Company's discipline was sometimes severe, it was no worse than that inflicted by short-tempered foremen in Hawaii. The sandalwood trade was particularly notorious for its brutal treatment of workers.

Many Hawaiians along the coast acquired Indian wives, had children, and were unwilling to abandon these ties. Those who manned the dismal and lonely little forts upcoast had to obtain permission from a senior officer to take an Indian wife, and often this



Kawaiahaeo, the first church established in Honolulu, as it appeared in 1847. Kanaka William was a member of this church before his departure for the Columbia District.

permission was granted only if the man re-engaged for a further two-year period. Other Islanders were reluctant to trade the comparatively easy-going life on the Columbia for the oppressive missionary regime in Hawaii where gambling, working on Sunday, and drunkenness were indictable offences, and any hint of sexual misconduct was severely punished.

Perhaps it was the Hawaiians' gleeful response to Fort Vancouver's free-wheeling society which prompted Chief Factor McLoughlin, in 1844, to request the Company's Honolulu agents 'to search out a trusty educated Hawaiian of good character to read the scriptures and assemble his people for public worship.' The candidate would also be required to serve as a teacher and interpreter. His salary would be £10 per annum. 'This is not a very large salary' noted the Honolulu newspaper *Ka Elele*, 'because necessities are very expensive there.'

McLoughlin's request was passed on to Dr G. P. Judd, one of Hawaii's foremost missionaries, who quickly responded:

... Wm. R. Kaulehelehe is the Teacher whom I have procured to go to the Columbia ... His wife accompanies him. Although not as well qualified as the person at first selected, I hesitate not to give him a good character and high recommendation as a faithful, industrious Skillful Teacher, and in regular standing as a member of the church.

He will be competent to act as Chaplain to the Hawaiians in the Columbia.

Mary S. Kaai, his wife, is highly recommended to me ... and I have no doubt will prove herself useful.

The Hawaiian couple arrived at Fort Vancouver on 23 June 1845, and from this time William R. Kaulehelehe became known as Kanaka William. 'Kanaka' derives from the Hawaiian word for man, *kane*, and became the popular term for 'Hawaiian.' Thus Kanaka Creek, Kanaka Flats, Owyhee River, Kanaka Falls and Kanaka Bar commemorate Hawaiian pioneers in the Pacific Northwest, and many frontier settlements had a 'Kanaka Row'.

At Fort Vancouver the chaplain and his wife were lodged in the Kanaka section of the village, a boisterous little community beside the fort where the Company's employees of lower rank — Iroquois, Scottish, Hawaiian, French and Métis — lived with their Indian wives and families. The officers lived within the fort with their families.

To their dismay, William and Mary were given a hostile reception by the Hawaiian community, who feared that the new chaplain had come to curtail the freedom and pleasures they had found on the Columbia. In a letter to Judd, William wrote:

... during the days we were living with the Hawaiians there was much abuse, malicious speaking, a very few people loved us. I was

told by someone that they disliked us and I think the reason for it was because we wanted them to observe the Sabbath, because on that day they did their carpentering, horse riding, agriculturing, and the like.

Fortunately, a Mr Kakeleiki (probably James Douglas) learned of the tense situation in the Hawaiian community and moved William and Mary to a house inside the fort. William's letter continues:

... we were taken to the enclosure. We went and lived in the house furnished us and we are living comfortable and well. There is nothing wrong with us, we are being well taken care of.

William's letter supports Reverend Beaver's charges of excessive disciplinary measures, for he reported:

... 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 of Hawaii to do those things. All that I have come for was the word of God and school. As for their difficulties I could not do anything, that is the duty of someone else. That is for the king and ministers to attend. So I told them, but they were not satisfied. They told me that this trouble was at Walamaka [Willamette?] and they almost have a riot. . . .

The new chaplain seemed poorly equipped to deal with the enormous challenge facing him. When his parishioners turned to him for leadership and advice he denied them — a move which surely did little to lessen their initial antipathy towards him.

Indeed, William's actions fulfilled the Hawaiian community's gloomiest forebodings. His first task was to work towards a decorous observance of the Sabbath, and in this endeavour he was able to report some small success:

... there is a little order on Sundays now, not like former times when there was much disturbance. Men and women have attended the two meetings on each Sunday. But on account of daily labor we have not found time to conduct school and meeting. We thought of conducting a school at night but can't because the nights are short.

William's next task was to instil the habit of sobriety among his parishioners, and here he was less successful. Reverend Atkinson visited Fort Vancouver in 1848 and commented on the Hawaiian chaplain and his recalcitrant congregation:

This is a striking fact that a converted heathen has left his country and become a christian missionary to his countrymen abroad. He sustains a good reputation. Has not been ordained. Has no church and few members. Has from twenty to forty hearers, every Sabbath. Has much difficulty to keep them from drinking. In fact he brings in to Mr. Ogden a weekly report of those who drank on the week or Saturday previous. That of last week was six. The Hawaiians prove their tendencies to become beastly drunkards. They drink without mercy, buy it on Saturday and have Sabbath to get sober in so as to work on Monday. Some Americans bring it over and sell it clandestinely just below the fort to all classes. . . .

In spite of the difficulties William faced, James Douglas, an officer of the Company, was satisfied with his work and stated that except for his ignorance of English, he was well qualified and 'seems to exercise a salutary influence on the minds of his countrymen'.

Royal Ontario Museum



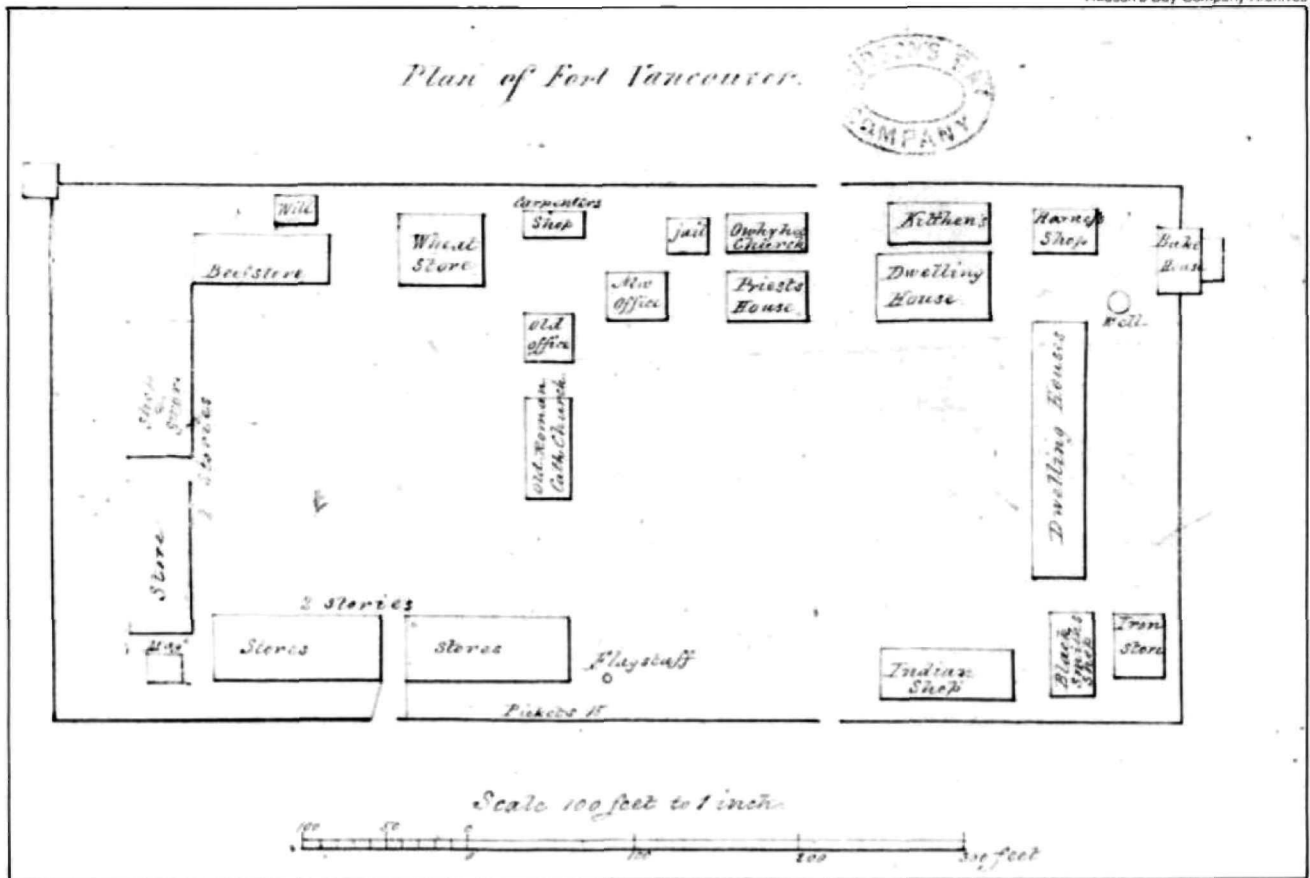
John Coxe, a Hawaiian who spent some 40 years in the service of the Company. He ended his days at Fort Vancouver, where he was one of William's parishioners. Sketch by Paul Kane.

William's parishioners were the shepherds, gardeners, dairymen, sawmill workers and general labourers who worked on the Company's extensive holdings around Fort Vancouver. The Hawaiian temperance journal, *The Friend*, estimated that by 1844 three to four hundred Islanders were employed in the Columbia District. Many of these worked around Fort Vancouver, while others were employed on the Company's ships or at the isolated outposts up the coast: Forts Nisqually, Langley, Victoria, McLoughlin, Rupert, Simpson, Stikine and Taku.

In 1849 news of California's fabulous gold strikes spread along the coast. Gold fever raged like an epidemic, and men deserted families and employers to join the rush to the gold-fields. Gold fever infected the Hawaiians, too, and William's little congregation became even smaller. Reverend Damon of Honolulu visited Fort Vancouver in 1849 and noted:

Much to the credit of the company, it pays the salary of an Hawaiian preacher and school teacher. At the time of my visit he was labouring under serious hindrances, in consequence of so many of his countrymen leaving for the mines, and others becoming indifferent to religion. He accompanied me to visit an old *kanaka* who had been nearly forty years in the Company's service, during which period he had visited England. He said that he had been away from the Islands "three tens and nine years."

The 'old *kanaka*' was John Coxe.



'Plan of Fort Vancouver' by M. Vavasour, 1845, shows the 'Owhyhee' church near the north wall.

Defections caused by the gold rush were only one of the many problems facing Fort Vancouver. The Oregon Treaty of 1846 placed the Canadian-American boundary at 49° but allowed the Company 'possessory rights' to land it already occupied. What started out as a thin trickle of American settlers into the area turned into a surging flood of homesteaders who either settled on acreage which had been cleared and cultivated by the Company, or built on land claimed by native Indians. The inevitable conflicts between settlers and Indians gave rise to fears of a bloody, full-scale Indian uprising, so when the United States Army requested the Company's permission to establish a post adjacent to Fort Vancouver the Company agreed.

Relations between Company officials and United States Army officers were initially cordial but soon deteriorated when each side placed a different interpretation on the meaning of 'occupied land' and 'possessory rights.' Bit by bit the Company's holdings were pre-empted, which led one irate official to complain that since 1846, between squatters and concessions to the military, there remained 'but the wreck of our once flourishing settlement at Vancouver.' In 1846 the fort boasted 16 officers, 215 employees under articles of agreement, and a large number of Indian workers. By 1860 there were only about fourteen employees of all grades.

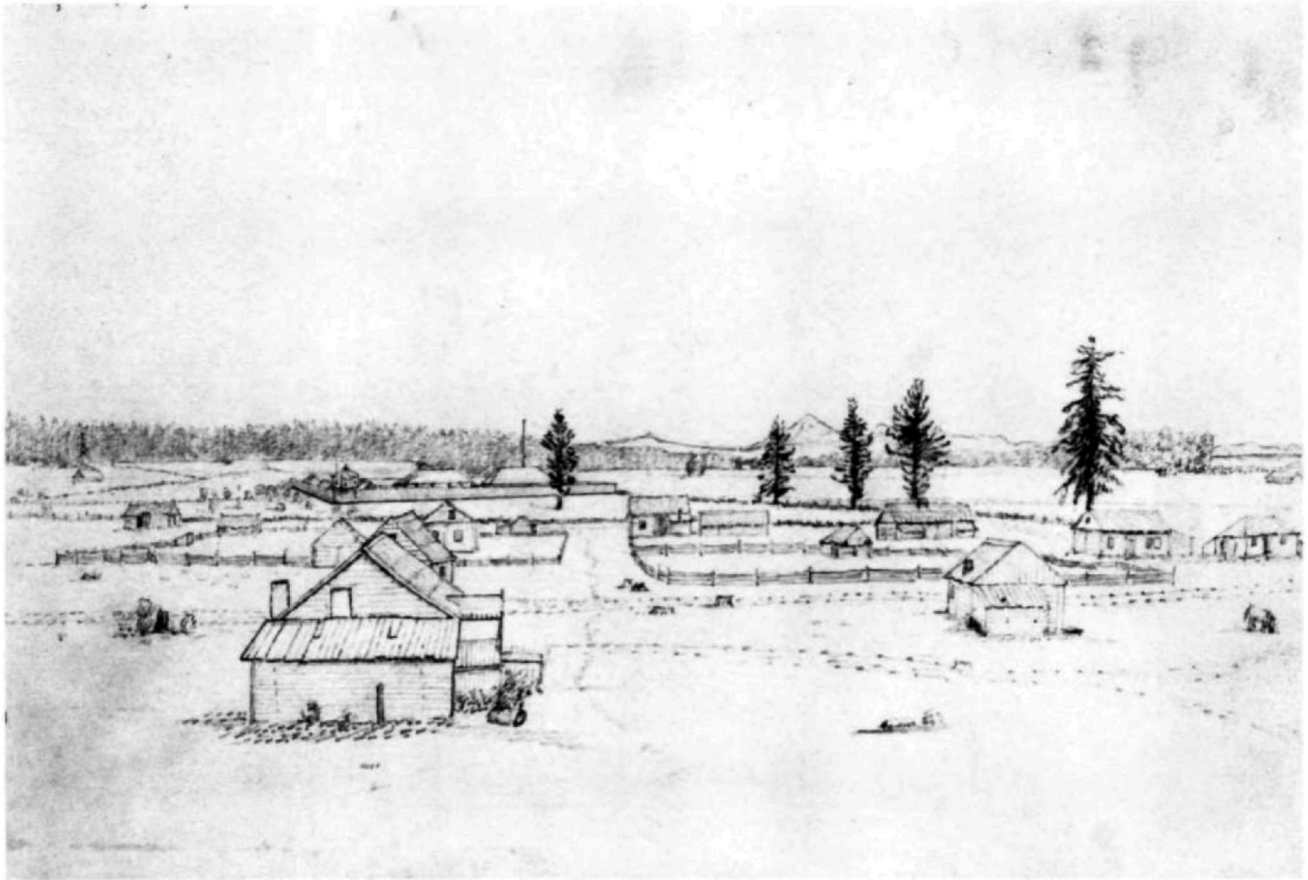
William's fortunes paralleled those of Fort Vancouver. The fort's drastically reduced holdings required fewer Hawaiian workers and William's diminished congregation was further reduced. His 'Owhyhee Church' was torn down sometime between 1855 and 1858 and was not replaced. At some point prior to 1850 William was moved from the fort to the less prestigious village.

The village typified the disintegration of Fort Vancouver. The colourful, bustling community of the 1840s was virtually deserted by 1860. United States military officials considered the area was no longer 'occupied land' and decided it should be cleared out and put to more productive use. They appointed a board 'to examine and report upon the value of certain improvements on the military reserve, placed there by the Hudson's Bay Company'.

And so began the chain of events which eventually thrust Kanaka William into the centre of an international storm. The military board found the improvements claimed by the Company were

... mere shells, rapidly going to decay, most of them propped up to prevent their falling down, the only exception being the dwelling-house in front of the depot quartermaster's office, which, although occupied, is also in a dilapidated condition.

The dilapidated dwelling belonged to Kanaka William and although it was undoubtedly humble it



The Kanaka village on the west side of Fort Vancouver, 1851. From a drawing by George Gibbs.

was his home. When William was ordered to evacuate he consulted John Work who was then in charge of Fort Vancouver. Work told William not to leave until directed to do so by Work himself, then wrote an indignant protest to the military officials:

... one of the Company's oldest and most faithful servants, who has occupied his present residence — which with the adjoining field cultivated by him is a part of the Company's property — for more than ten years, has been notified that he must leave his house next week, or be forcibly removed by a file of soldiers, as his house was to be torn down and his garden thrown open.

The army responded by stating that if any of the buildings on the area possessed any value,

you are at liberty to remove them, and in fact you are respectfully requested to do so within the ensuing week . . . The execution of these instructions will make it necessary that "Kanaka William" find shelter elsewhere.

But William and Work held fast. On 12 March 1860, William watched the army remove the fences from around the Company's fields. On the 16th he saw the soldiers burn down a vacated house which had been used for storing hay. On the 19th the soldiers destroyed the Company's old hospital and another house, and then they turned their attention to William's dwelling. When they removed the doors and the windows William finally left. The next day, 20 March, the Hawaiian watched helplessly while soldiers set fire to the remains of his old home.

The outrage was quickly reported to officials in London. British protests were presented to President Buchanan, who immediately dispatched orders to military officials in Oregon 'which will prevent effectually any interference with the conditions of the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company'.

The 'Kanaka William incident' hastened the Company's decision to abandon Fort Vancouver, and what little was left in the way of services and personnel was transferred to Victoria.

Company records indicate that William R. Kaulehelehe worked as an 'assistant' in Victoria until at least 1868-69. Mary, William's wife, is not mentioned after 1845, and it is possible that she is one of the many Hawaiians who died at Fort Vancouver and who were buried in the nearby cemetery.

After 1869 Kanaka William fades from history's pages. Did his twenty-five years of service with the Company terminate because of his death? Or did he, like many of his fellow-Islanders, retire to a small farm on the coast of British Columbia?

Most Hawaiians who settled on the West Coast took Indian wives and became part of Indian communities. Today many coastal families recall a Hawaiian ancestor whose name has vanished from memory. It is quite possible that one of these forgotten ancestors was Kanaka William. ♦