

A LOST MINORITY

HAWAIIANS IN VICTORIA



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SITUATION BRIEF # 43

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One group of settlers important to the establishment of Fort Victoria and early days of colonial life has disappeared into only the briefest of mentions in the narrative of early Victoria.

Kanaka, was a term applied to indigenous people from various Islands in the South Pacific, but mainly Hawaii (Named by Cook as the Sandwich Islands). Skilled mariners, they hired on as crew on trans Indo-Pacific trading vessels plying routes from Cape Town, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, California and British Columbia, as well as connecting with Fiji, the Soloman Island Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Easter Island. In the Hawaiian language *kanaka* means person or people: *kānaka ʻōiwi* or *kānaka maoli*.

Since the 1780s Kanakas had been jumping ship to take jobs in the



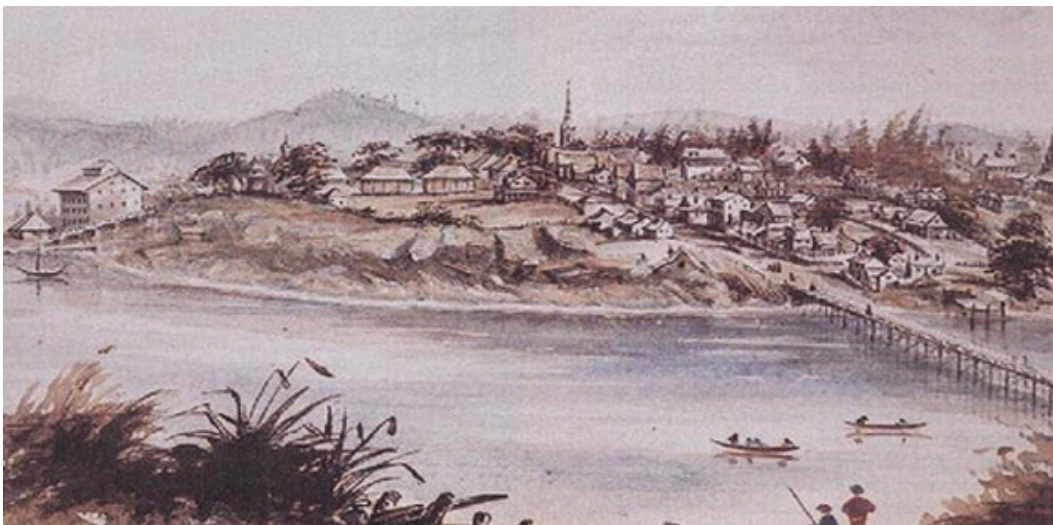
burgeoning fur and later mining and timber industries. In the 19th century they were recruited by the Hudson's Bay Company as semi-skilled workers, typically signing two to three-year employment contracts. They worked alongside Metis as boatmen, blacksmiths, carpenters, farm workers, mill hands, and general laborers. Many were fleeing the rapid economic and social changes overtaking the Hawaiian Islands at this time as local population were displaced in favour of sugar plantations.

The first Kanakas to purposely immigrate for employment opportunities in the Pacific Northwest arrived on the *Tonquin* in 1811 to clear the site and help build Fort Astoria, an undertaking of the New-York based Pacific Fur Company. (Kanakas had built Fort Elizabeth on the island of Kauai in Hawaii for the Russian American Company in 1817.) Others followed.



By the 1820s, Kanakas were employed in the kitchen and other skilled trades by the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, mostly living outside the main palisade in an area known as "Kanakan Village." They were accomplished linguists able to navigate between English, Chinook, French, numerous aboriginal languages as well as their own Pacific Island languages such as Hawaiian pidgin (mandated as the official national language by King Kamehameha III in 1839).

With the transfer of the HBC Oregon territory to the United States in 1848 Kanakas, along with Blacks and Chinese, lost their rights to buy land and vote. At the time an estimated 200 were working for the HBC and many moved to Vancouver Island. Some were immediately employed in construction of the Fort. Kanakas settled in the Lower Mainland at Fort Langley (Kanakan Creek). Like at Astoria the Kanakas established their own settlement outside the walls of Fort Victoria on the banks of James Bay giving a popular name to it, 'Kanakan Row'. The Empress Hotel occupies part of the site today. On the mainland their settlement 'Kanakan Ranch' became Stanley Park.



Sketch, "Victoria" Josephine Crease BC Archives Coll.

In the run-up to the Civil War, the Oregon Territory declared all people of color persona-non-grata unless they were on Indian reservations. Like African and Native Americans, Kānakas were not permitted to own property, vote, intermarry with whites or even purchase liquor. Many were told to leave the state under penalty of whipping

On establishment of Vancouver Island as British colony in 1849 Hawaiians were entitled to the same civil rights as other newcomers and could vote or pre-empt land provided they became naturalized as British citizens which most who stayed did. By 1860 one source counted 122 Hawaiians employ by the HBC out of a total labour force of 535, another identified some 400 employed across the Pacific Northwest between 1813 and 1858.

By 1855 Kanakas were taking up land on the Gulf Islands engaging in fishing and establishing farms. They were pioneering orchardists. Many enthusiastically joined the 1858 gold rush, memorializing their presence among the sluice mining sites on the Fraser River at “Kanaka Bar”.

Kanakas, like the Metis, were for the most part Roman Catholic. By the late 1880s about 24 Kanaka families were living on Salt Spring Island where they donated the land and built St. Paul’s Church at Fulford Harbour. The church graveyard, resting place for many from the community, is a valued part of Island heritage and undergoing restoration at the present time. The Maria Mahoi farmstead on Russell Island is now protected as part of the Gulf Island National Park Reserve. Well into the twentieth century families on the Gulf Islands celebrated each autumn’s harvest with a luau-style party, where food was roasted in a fire pit dug in the beach.

Kanakas, like most other settler groups, contributed larger-than-life characters to our early history. Unfortunately, almost none are remembered now.

Reputedly the first Hawaiian to land in the Pacific North West was a young

woman, Winee, was hired as the personal servant of the captain's wife on the British merchant ship, Imperial Eagle. They landed at Nootka Sound. She then died at sea, never making it back to Hawaii. According to historian Jean Barman many Kanakas liked to claim royal ancestry. William Naukana was believed to have been a grandson of King Kamehameha I. A member of the Nahu family of North Vancouver was described on his death in 1957 as a grandson of Miyu, a Hawaiian prince, who was expelled by his brother, King Kamehameha, after attempting to gain the throne.

Unlike the large populations of Chinese, Japanese and Sikhs who settled in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, the Kanaka weren't subject to exclusionary laws, race riots and the restrictive white-nationalist politics that defined Canadian citizenship policy during most of the country's first century.

As historian Timothy Stanley has noted Kanakas "formed a small but significant group in British Columbia's racially stratified society, falling somewhere in between Anglo-Europeans and the Aboriginal population in the colonial hierarchy ... They found a society in which identities were fluid, and they shifted identities like everyone else." Historians face difficulties tracing family lines as names were treated casually, many going only by first (Christian) names or unsystematically Latinized tradition names in baptismal registries. Their children saw themselves as Canadians, or in many cases part of Indigenous communities and the Hawaiian identity faded away. At least one Salt Spring family could afford to return to Hawaii and recover their identity.

Jean Barman concludes that many Kanaka descendants still value their ancestry. The Nahanees of the Squamish Nation, some four hundred trace their origins back to a single man. "Although never a clearly defined community in the sense of having formal institutions, Hawaiians in British Columbia have valued

their heritage. Stories passed down from generation to generation remain remarkably intact, in part perhaps because many members of the first generation were illiterate and subsequent generations have been for the most part ordinary British Columbians whose culture is as much verbal as written”.

Observations

- A rich body of academic research has resulted in little formal recognition of the critical role Hawaiians. Links to Victoria’s current vigorous Filipino and South Pacific communities might be encouraged to explore this heritage in concert with local First Nations.
- A public interpretive plaque on Humbolt Street, adjacent to the site of ‘Kanaka’ row would be an appropriate location to tell the story of early Hawaiian settlers in Victoria.
- Research and publication of family histories of South Pacific Islander pioneers needs to be encouraged and facilitated.

References

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