

James Hunnewell

“James Hunnewell was early associated with the commercial interests of these islands, and his long and useful life was marked by such constant goodwill to my kingdom, That I shall always cherish his memory with sincere regard.”

“Although he was only removed in the fulness of time, I deeply sympathize with you in the loss of such a parent, but I congratulate you in the inheritance of such an honored name.” (King Kamehameha IV to Hunnewell’s son)

His Early Life

“A distinctly adventurous Boston group with which the Frothinghams intermarried was the Hunnewell family. Like the Frothinghams, the Hunnewells had much to do with Charlestown. ... ‘Hunnewell's Point’ on the western shore of the Kennebec River, not far south of Bath, Maine, was named. This ‘Point’ was the site of Lieutenant Richard Hunnewell's garrison at the time of Benjamin Church's expeditions against the Indians.” (Crawford)

James Hunnewell was born in a part of Charlestown, Massachusetts, now Somerville, on February 10, 1794. Although born of families that had for generations shown marked attachment to old homes and land life, he, like the rest of his class, desired to try the sea and to visit the wide world, not as a rover, but to find means and place for mercantile business.

“James Hunnewell was the youngest but one of the seven children of William and Sarah, and he it is who justifies our description of the Hunnewells as ‘adventurous.’ Before his time none of the family had been interested in a seafaring life, but he studied navigation with the distinct intention of journeying to distant countries”. (Crawford)

He attended Charlestown School, and ‘graduated at fourteen.’ At school, he acquired a handwriting that always afterward was clear and strong, and had a good proficiency in arithmetic. Soon afterward he learned mathematics and navigation.

‘No man or boy that I ever knew dared, or did, swim greater distances than myself – once from Charleston to Boston and back without stopping, and at the wide part of the river, below the bridge (and then when the river is broader that it is now).’ (Hunnewell)

‘I suppose that I made myself useful, as old men often invited me to go with them on sailing, fishing, or gunning excursions.’ He also had a boat, and there is a legend that he thought his mother’s best tablecloth was, when he lacked other material, a proper thing to borrow without leave for a mainsail.

“As a boy, he was bright and active, of slight figure; at the age of fifteen years, when he first went to sea, weighing but ninety pounds. He was offered attractive situations in stores, but his decided predilection was for the sea.”

“His purpose to go to sea, however, was not prompted by a desire to be free from the parental restraints and the influences of home. He was not a wild, reckless youth, of a roving disposition. On the contrary, his affection for home and kindred was singularly strong.” (Seamen’s Friend)

Going to Sea

'In early life, although none of my relatives, on either my father's or mother's side, had ever been to sea, I had a strong desire for a seafaring life, and, more than any other way, enjoyed being on board boats and vessels.' (Hunnewell)

'My mother, father, and other friend told me all the frightful stories they could think of to try to deter me from going to sea. The effect of these frightful stories on me was, that instead of deterring me they increased my desire to go, and to encounter its dangers and hardships.'

'When I had arrived at the age of about twelve years, she, seeing my strong desire, told me she would give her consent when I was fourteen years old. ... I went to school with a good will, and so little did I say about going to sea, that my mother appears to think I had given up my project.' (Hunnewell)

But, promptly on his fourteenth birthday, he came, with his books, home from school, reminded her of his age, and added 'You know what you told me,' 'She acquiesced, remembered her promise, and I never went another day to our town school.' (Hunnewell)

In 1809, at fifteen years of age - small, slight, weighing only ninety pounds, - he went to sea.

"In October, 1816, he started on his first voyage to the Pacific. On that voyage he visited California and the Sandwich Islands, and was absent from home two years."

"(I)t was urged by some of the chiefs that knew me on my previous voyage that I should remain instead of a stranger to trade with them." (Hunnewell) He traded his boat and cargo for sandalwood, "We were the only traders on shore at Honolulu that had any goods to sell." There was no currency at the time, so they generally traded for sandalwood. (Hunnewell, The Friend)

Marriage

"Before sailing on his next voyage James Hunnewell married (September 23, 1819) Susanna Lamson of Charlestown, whose grandmother as well as mother had been born a Frothingham. Then, after a honeymoon which lasted exactly a month, he sailed on the Thaddeus for a 'Trading Voyage to the North-West Coast.'" (Crawford)

"It is indeed with a kind of melancholy pleasure I have sat down to write. There is a satisfaction in reflecting on the endearing relation which you sustain towards me that I would not part with for worlds; but when I consider the distance that separates us and the time that has and will elapse before we meet my feelings are overpowered."

"Instead of becoming habituated to your absence by length of time I seem everyday less reconciled to it & 'still alone' seems stamped on everything around me." (Susannah Hunnewell to her husband James, November 6, 1820)

For all but seven months of the first eleven years of their marriage, James Hunnewell was living in the Pacific, Susannah was in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

Hawai'i Business Interests – the Foundation for the Formation of C Brewer

“During his first residence at the Islands, he had formed the determination to establish there an independent commercial house”. (Seamen’s Friend)

The company Hunnewell formed in the Island’s had a lasting legacy. The following are the various names which the firm was known: James Hunnewell, Hunnewell & Peirce, Peirce & Hinckley, Peirce & Brewer, C Brewer & Co, SH Williams & Co, C Brewer 2d, C Brewer & Co Ltd. (The Friend, January 1, 1867)

It eventually became C Brewer & Co., Ltd., incorporated on Feb. 7, 1883. The company grew, as did a handful of others. They became known as the Big 5: Amfac - starting as Hackfeld & Company (1849;) Alexander & Baldwin (1870;) Theo H. Davies (1845;) Castle & Cooke (1851) and C Brewer (1826.)

If an exact date and a single act are to be assigned, it was on Monday, December 8, 1817, when James Hunnewell, officer of the brig Bordeaux Packet, agreed with Andrew Blanchard, master, to remain at Honolulu after the sale of the vessel. (Thrum)

He would dispose of the balance of her cargo and invest and forward the proceeds. This was the beginning of the long business career of Hunnewell connected with the Islands, and his first act in settling there. At first, business was generally in small transactions and by barter. American goods of nearly all sorts were received and sold on consignment. (Thrum)

Then in 1826, with a stock of merchandise, he then purchased the premises of John Gowen (to which he added some land by exchange in 1830.) “As soon as I secured this place, I landed my cargo, and commenced retailing it...” (Hunnewell)



In October, 1828, Captain Marcus T Peirce, an old and intimate friend of Hunnewell’s, arrived in the brig Griffin from the north-west coast. He gave up the command of his vessel to Captain MW Green, he preferring to return home.

In doing so, he requested that Hunnewell to take charge of his younger brother, Henry A Peirce, who had been a clerk with him. Young Peirce first worked for \$25 per month and board until September, 1830; after that he was given a share in the profits.

Hunnewell decided to return home on the continent (November 20, 1830) and left Peirce in charge. In December, 1835, a co-partnership was formed by Peirce and Brewer. Under this partnership, the firm of Peirce & Brewer conducted a general merchandise and commission business at Honolulu. (Peirce)

“When I was received as a partner in business with Mr. Henry A. Peirce, I continued the firm name of Peirce & Brewer until Mr. Peirce retired, in 1843. I then continued the business as C Brewer & Co., with my nephew C Brewer, 2d, until the year 1845.” (Brewer)

After later changes, C. Brewer & Co., Ltd., was incorporated on Feb. 7, 1883, with Peter Cushman Jones as president and manager; absorption of William G Irwin & Co. by C. Brewer & Co., Ltd., followed E. Faxon Bishop’s elevation to the presidency. (Nellist)

Hunnewell and the Hawaiian Islands Mission

After trading sandalwood in China and then back to the northeast, Hunnewell returned to the Islands. "This was the memorable voyage when we carried out the first missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands." (Hunnewell)

"In October (23), 1819, he embarked on his second voyage to the Pacific, in the noted brig Thaddeus, of which he was an officer, and which vessel and her cargo were the first in which he had an interest as owner. This voyage of the brig Thaddeus will be memorable through all coming time ..."



"Although he and they did not have the same purpose in visiting those distant islands, yet, it is not strange, he seems to have caught something of their spirit; for from that time until the close of his life, the missionaries and the cause of missions in the islands, found in him a faithful and sympathizing friend, an untiring, efficient and ready helper." (Seamen's Friend)

After about 160 days at sea, on March 30, 1820, the Pioneer Company of American Protestant missionaries first sighted the Islands. Later that day, they learned Kamehameha died, Liholiho was now King and the kapu was abolished. Journal entries from some on the Thaddeus tell of the joy they felt ...

"March 30, 1820 - Let us thank God and take courage. Early this morning the long looked for Owahyee and the cloud capt and snow spt Mauna Keah appear full in view to the joy of the animated multitude on board ..."

"... Capt. B. (Blanchard) this afternoon sent off a boat to make inquiries respecting the king &c. Mr. Hunnewell, a mate, Thos. Hopoo, J. Tamoree and others, went nearly to the shore and fell in with 10 or 12 native fishermen in their canoes who readily gave the important information that the aged King Tameamaah is dead - that Reehoreeho his son succeeds him - that the images of his Gods are burned ..." (Thaddeus Journal)

"It was Mr. Hunnewell's privilege to hear from the lips of Hewahewa, the last High Priest of the old idolatrous system, an account of the causes which induced the destruction of idolatry."

"He says: 'This Chief told me he knew the wooden gods could not send rain, or cause food to grow, or send fish, or take care of the old men and women, and he knew there was but one great God dwelling in the heaven; and that in this persuasion he cautiously conversed with the King, Kamehameha II., when he found the King was of the same belief with himself.'"

"And, adds Mr. Hunnewell, 'I had the pleasure of bringing from the shore to the mission the glad tidings that Hawaii's idols were no more.'" (Seamen's Friend, October, 1869)



Shortly thereafter, Hunnewell participated in the first printing in the Islands; “The first printing press used at the Islands was taken out by the missionaries in the brig Thaddeus. At its inauguration, the first impression was struck off by Ke’eaumoku, the Governor, the third by Mr. Hunnewell”. (Seamen’s Friend)

It is a sheet four by six inches, headed ‘Lesson I,’ beneath which are twelve lines, each having five separate syllables of two letters. This was certainly the first printing at the Hawaiian Islands, and probably the first on the shores, of the North Pacific Ocean.

The first printing press at the Hawaiian Islands was like the one first used by Benjamin Franklin, and was set up in a thatched house standing near the old mission frame house (but was not put in operation until that January 1822 pressing.) (Hawaiian Club, 1868)

Later, in 1825, Hunnewell negotiated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Missions, “to take the missionary packet out, free from any charge whatever on (his) part for sailing and navigating the vessel - provided the Board would pay and feed the crew, and allow (him) to carry out in the schooner to the amount (in bulk) of some forty to fifty barrels”. (Hunnewell) Hunnewell as a great friend and benefactor to the mission.

Hunnewell’s Support to the Mission was Many and Varied

“Captain Hunnewell's career, as a seaman, a merchant and an especial friend of the Sandwich Islands Mission, entitle his memory to sincere respect. ... His love for those distant Islands began fifty years ago; and he loved them and their benefactors until the end of his life.” (Seamen’s Friend)

As an example, Hunnewell supported Kekela; “Kekela was born at Mokuleia, Waialua, Oahu. In a public address before an Hawaiian congregation in July, 1852, he said: ‘I am a native of these Islands, my parents were idolaters, and I was born in times of darkness.’ He early came under the influence and instruction of my father, Rev. John S. Emerson, missionary of the ABCFM, who became his life long friend and counselor. From him he acquired a familiarity with civilized and Christian ways of living and became an apt pupil in various kinds of industrial work, such as farming and household activities.”

“He attended and graduated from the Lahainaluna Seminary, at the expense of James Hunnewell, Esq., of Charlestown, Mass., and in recognition of his great obligation to his benefactor, he adopted his name and was ever known as James (Hunnewell) Kekela.” (Emerson, The Friend)

“On December 21, 1849, he was ordained to the Christian ministry, being the first native Hawaiian clergyman, and became the pastor of the native church at Kahuku, Oahu ... July 15, 1852. he sailed on the missionary schooner, Caroline, accompanying the mission which went to explore the islands of Micronesia, returning in November of the same year to make a report to his countrymen of the Christian work thus inaugurated.”

Hunnewell also gave Kekela a boat; that gift later led to a special gift from President Abraham Lincoln to Kekela. “Rev James Hunnewell Kekela was sent to the Marquesas in 1850 as a Protestant missionary. ... an incident took place which nearly resulted in the roasting of an American Sailor (Jonathan Whalon) from a whaling ship”. (Advertiser, February 24, 1968)

“Meanwhile the missionary had learned of the affair and came to beg for the life of the man. The chief was obdurate, however. The white men had killed his people and he must have his vengeance. Finally after a night of parley the chief agreed that if Mr Kekela would give him his new six-oar whaleboat he would let the captive go.” (Hawaiian Gazette, December 2, 1904) Whalon was eventually released.

When the whaling vessel arrived in the United States, the brave role played by James Kekela was reported to President Lincoln. Although the President was engrossed in the ‘War Between the States,’ he was so moved that he sent \$500 in gold to Dr. McBride, US Minister resident in Honolulu, for the purchase of suitable gifts that would express his gratitude to those who had participated in the rescue.

The gifts included a fine gold hunting-watch with an inscription (in Hawaiian) on the inside cover. The watch can be seen today in the archives of Hawaiian Mission Houses. The inscription is translated as follows: “From the President of the United States to Rev. J. Kekela For His Noble Conduct in Rescuing An American Citizen from Death On the Island of Hiva Oa January 14, 1864.”



Rev. Kekela sent a thank you letter, in response. In part, it stated: “Greetings to you, great and good Friend! ... When I saw one of your countrymen, a citizen of your great nation, ill-treated, and about to be baked and eaten, as a pig is eaten, I ran to save him, full of pity and grief at the evil deed of these benighted people. As to this friendly deed of mine in saving Mr. Whalon, its seed came from your great land, and was brought by certain of your countrymen, who had received the love of God. It was planted in Hawaii, and I brought it to plant in this land and in these dark regions, that they might receive the root of all that is good and true, which is love.”

“I gave my boat for the stranger’s life. This boat came from James Hunnewell, a gift of friendship. It became the ransom of this countryman of yours, that he might not be eaten by the savages who knew not Jehovah. This was Mr. Whalon, and the date, Jan. 14, 1864.” (Kekela as quoted by Robert Louis Stevenson) Unfortunately, President Lincoln never received the thank you note; Lincoln was assassinated shortly before the note’s arrival.

Missionary Period

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the “Missionary Period”), about 180-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai’i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands. Collaboration between Native Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries resulted in, among other things, the

- Introduction of Christianity;
- Development of a written Hawaiian language and schools that resulted in widespread literacy;
- Promulgation of the concept of constitutional government;
- Combination of Hawaiian with Western medicine; and
- Evolution of a new and distinctive musical tradition (with harmony and choral singing)