

# 'Ōpūkaha'ia

## The Inspiration for the Hawaiian Mission

Scrawls on a hand-drawn map by Brintnall told of the murder of his supercargo, brother-in-law and close friend Elihu Mix, who died aboard the seal hunting ship Triumph in Honolulu Harbor after allegedly eating a poisoned fish dinner sent to the ship. Family tradition suggests Mix was not the target – rather, the Triumph's ship captain, Brintnall was intended to be killed; "Luckily for Brintnall, he was ashore and missed the dinner." (Chris Cook)

It seems, in January 1808, Kamehameha made arrangements with Captain Caleb Brintnall, Master of the Triumph out of New Haven, to take his 12-year old son and heir apparent, Liholiho, to New England for his education. (A few years earlier, Kaumuali'i of Kauai had sent his son Humelemele to New England for school and Kamehameha wanted his heir to equal to his rival's in Western education.)

However, Ka'ahumanu saw Kamehameha's plan for the boy (she was his guardian) as a threat to her influence and political hold. So Ka'ahumanu was likely the unnamed 'Queen of the Sandwich Islands' who Brintnall reported had sent an outrigger canoe with a fish dinner out to his ship in Honolulu Harbor - a gift for the Captain and Mix.

In the Hawaiian tradition of 'apu koheoheo (the poison cup) the fish had been basted with the deadly toxins of the keke (puffer fish), which swam in nearby fish ponds.

However, Brintnall was on shore at Honolulu. Mix ate the dinner and died from the poisoning.

Two important questions remain unanswered: Did Brintnall sail from the sealing islands off Baja first to Honolulu to load fresh water and supplies, or to Kealahou Bay on Hawai'i Island? Did the murder of Mix in Honolulu cause Brintnall to alter his plans and sail to Kealahou to finish provisioning his ship before returning to Baja?

Kealahou was the same place where Captain Cook landed on the Island of Hawai'i; across the bay from Hiki'au Heiau is where Cook was later killed.

From Hiki'au, a young Hawaiian boy, 'Ōpūkaha'ia, swam out to the ship. Both of 'Ōpūkaha'ia's parents had been slain by warriors of Kamehameha following the battle of Kaipalaoa in Hilo in 1796.

The convergence of the Triumph sailing to Kealahou, and 'Ōpūkaha'ia desiring to leave Hawai'i, set in motion a chain of events key to the sending of missionaries to Hawai'i a decade later. Questions remain: If Mix hadn't been murdered in Honolulu, would the Triumph ever have sailed to Kealahou? If 'Ōpūkaha'ia had remained in Kealahou would missionaries ever have sailed to Hawai'i from Boston?

The only surviving member of the family (who dwelt in the Punalu'u-Ninole coast in Ka'u), besides himself, was an infant brother he hoped to save from the fate of his parents, and carried him on his back and fled from the enemy.



But he was pursued, and his little brother, while on his back, was killed by a spear from the enemy. Taken prisoner, because he was not young enough to give them trouble, nor old enough to excite their fears, 'Ōpūkaha'ia was not killed. He was later turned over to his uncle, Pahua, who took him into his own family and treated him as his child. Pahua was a kahuna at Hiki'au Heiau in Kealakekua Bay.

'Ōpūkaha'ia's uncle, wanting his nephew to follow him as a kahuna, taught 'Ōpūkaha'ia long prayers and trained him to the task of repeating them daily in the temple of the idol. This ceremony he sometimes commenced before sunrise in the morning, and at other times was employed in it during the whole or the greater part of the night.

'Ōpūkaha'ia was not destined to be a kahuna. He made a life-changing decision – not only which affected his life, but had a profound effect on the future of the Hawaiian Islands.

"I began to think about leaving that country, to go to some other part of the globe. I did not care where I shall go to. I thought to myself that if I should get away, and go to some other country, probably I may find some comfort, more than to live there, without father and mother." ('Ōpūkaha'ia)

He boarded Brintnall's 'Triumph' in Kealakekua Bay; also on board was Hopu, another young Hawaiian. They set sail for New York, returning first to Baja, back to Hawai'i, then to Canton, China (selling seal-skins and loading the ship with Chinese goods).

Russell Hubbard, a son of War of 1812 General Hubbard of New Haven, Connecticut was also on board. "This Mr. Hubbard was a member of Yale College. He was a friend of Christ. Christ was with him when I saw him, but I knew it not. 'Happy is the man that put his trust in God!' Mr. Hubbard was very kind to me on our passage, and taught me the letters in English spelling-book." ('Ōpūkaha'ia)

They landed at New York and remained there until the Captain sold out all the Chinese goods and the Triumph. Then, they made their way to New Haven, home of Yale College. "In this place I become acquainted with many students belonging to the College."

"By these pious students I was told more about God than what I had heard before ... Many times I wished to hear more about God, but find no body to interpret it to me. I attended many meetings on the sabbath, but find difficulty to understand the minister. I could understand or speak, but very little of the English language. Friend Thomas (Hopu) went to school to one of the students in the College before I thought of going to school." ('Ōpūkaha'ia)

'Ōpūkaha'ia was eager to study and learn – seeking to be a student at Yale. 'Ōpūkaha'ia "was sitting on the steps of a Yale building, weeping. A solicitous student stopped to inquire what was wrong, and Obookiah (the spelling of his name, based on its sound) said, 'No one will give me learning.'"

The student was Edwin Dwight, a distant relative of the college president. "(W)hen the question was put him, 'Do you wish to learn?' his countenance began to brighten. And when the proposal was made that he should come the next day to the college for that purpose, he served it with great eagerness." (Dwight)

'Ōpūkaha'ia was taken as a servant into the family of the Rev. Dr. Dwight, President of Yale College, where he was treated with kindness, and taught the first principles of Christianity. At length, Mr. Samuel J. Mills Jr., took him under his particular patronage, and took him to live with his father, the Rev. Mr. Mills of Torrington.

The Mills family invited 'Ōpūkaha'ia into their home. Later Mills brought 'Ōpūkaha'ia to Andover Theological Seminary, the center of foreign mission training in New England. Mills is noted as a founder of the American foreign missions movement. He led the famous Haystack Meeting at Williams College in 1806, and was one of the theology students who requested in 1810 formation of the American Board.

The younger Dwight began to study theology over the following years and on October 17, 1815 was licensed to preach by the South Association of Litchfield County ministers, and then made Schenectady his headquarters for further study. In 1816 he did some missionary service in Western New York, and later was preaching in Woodbury, Connecticut.

In October, 1816, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) decided to establish the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Litchfield County, Connecticut, for the instruction of youth like 'Ōpūkaha'ia. By 1817, a dozen students, six of them Hawaiians, were training at the Foreign Mission School to become missionaries to teach the Christian faith to people around the world. Initially lacking a principal, Dwight filled that role from May 1817 - May 1818.

The object of the School as set forth in its Constitution, was "The education in our own country of Heathen Youths, in such manner, as, with subsequent professional instruction will qualify them to become useful Missionaries, Physicians, Surgeons, School Masters, or Interpreters and to communicate to the Heathen Nations such knowledge in agriculture and the arts, as may prove the means of promoting Christianity and civilization." (Missionary Herald, January 1821)

At the beginning of the school's tenure, 'Ōpūkaha'ia was considered a leader of the student body, excelling in his studies, expressing his fondness for and understanding of the importance of the agricultural labor, and qualifying for a full church membership due to his devotion to his new faith. 'Ōpūkaha'ia yearned "with great earnestness that he would (return to Hawai'i) and preach the Gospel to his poor countrymen."

'Ōpūkaha'ia was being groomed to be a key figure in a mission to Hawai'i, to be joined by Samuel Mills Jr. Unfortunately, 'Ōpūkaha'ia died at Cornwall on February 17, 1818, and several months later Mills died at sea off West Africa after surveying lands that became Liberia.

Dwight is remembered for putting together a book, 'Memoirs of Henry Obookiah' (the spelling of the name based on its pronunciation), as a fundraiser for the Foreign Mission School. It was an edited collection of 'Ōpūkaha'ia's letters and journals/diaries. The book about his life was printed and circulated after his death, becoming a best-seller of its day.

'Ōpūkaha'ia, inspired by many young men with proven sincerity and religious fervor of the missionary movement, had wanted to spread the word of Christianity back home in Hawai'i; his book inspired missionaries to volunteer to carry his message to the Hawaiian Islands.

From Andover Theological Seminary, Hiram Bingham wrote in a letter dated July 18, 1819, to Reverend Samuel Worcester of the ABCFM that "the unexpected and afflictive death of Obookiah, roused my attention to the subject, & perhaps by writing and delivering some thoughts occasioned by his death I became more deeply interested than before in that cause for which he desired to live ..."

"... & from that time it seemed by no means impossible that I should be employed in the field which Henry had intended to occupy ... the possibility that this little field in the vast Pacific would be mine, was the greatest, in my own view." (Bingham noted by Brumaghim)

The coming of Henry 'Ōpūkaha'ia and other young Hawaiians to the US, who awakened a deep Christian sympathy in the churches, moved the ABCFM to establish a mission at the Islands. When asked "Who will return with these boys to their native land to teach the truths of salvation?"

Bingham and his classmate, Asa Thurston, were the first to respond, and offer their services to the Board. (Congregational Quarterly) They were ordained at Goshen, Connecticut on September 29, 1819; several years

earlier from Goshen came the first official request for a mission to Hawai'i; this ordination of foreign missionaries was the first held in the State of Connecticut.

In giving instructions to the first missionaries, the ABCFM, noted: "You will never forget 'Ōpūkaha'ia. You will never forget his fervent love, his affectionate counsels, his many prayers and tears for you, and for his and your nation. You saw him die; saw how the Christian could triumph over death and the grave; saw the radiant glory in which he left this world for heaven. You will remember it always, and you will tell it to your kindred and countrymen who are dying without hope."

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from the northeast United States, set sail on the Thaddeus for the Hawaiian Islands.

There were seven couples sent in the Pioneer Company of missionaries to convert the Hawaiians to Christianity. These included two Ordained Preachers (note: Bingham and Thurston were ordained as missionaries at Goshen, a more complex position than preacher), Hiram Bingham and his wife Sybil and Asa Thurston and his wife Lucy; two Teachers, Mr. Samuel Whitney and his wife Mercy and Samuel Ruggles and his wife Mary; a Doctor, Thomas Holman and his wife Lucia; a Printer, Elisha Loomis and his wife Maria; a Farmer, Daniel Chamberlain, his wife and five children.

Among the other Hawaiian students at the Foreign Mission School were Thomas Hopu, William Kanui, John Honoli'i and George Prince 'Humehume' (son of Kauai's Kaumuali'i).

By the time the Pioneer Company arrived, Kamehameha I had died and the centuries-old kapu system had been abolished; through the actions of King Kamehameha II (Liholiho), with encouragement by former Queens Ka'ahumanu and Keōpūolani (Liholiho's mother), the Hawaiian people had already dismantled their heiau and had rejected their religious beliefs.

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 establishment of 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)

On August 15, 1993, 'Ōpūkaha'ia's remains were returned to Hawai'i from Cornwall and laid in a vault facing the ocean at Kahikolu Church, overlooking Kealakekua Bay.

### **"A Short Elementary Grammar of the Owhihe Language" – 'Ōpūkaha'ia's Grammar Book**

A manuscript was found among Queen Emma's private papers (titled, "A Short Elementary Grammar of the Owhihe Language"); a note written on the manuscript said, "Believed to be Obookiah's grammar". Some believe this manuscript is the first grammar book on the Hawaiian language. However, when reading the document, many of the words are not recognizable. Here's a sampling of a few of the words: 3-o-le; k3-n3-k3; l8-n3 and; 8-8-k8. No these aren't typos— here's a link to summary on 'Ōpūkaha'ia's Grammar Book ... take a closer look:

<http://wp.me/p5GnMi-2yo>

(Mahalo to Chris Cook, author of 'OBOOKIAH The Providential Life & Heritage of Henry Obookiah', for reviewing and providing recommendations to this text.)