

Hawai'i's Oldest House

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of American Protestant missionaries from the northeast US, led by Hiram Bingham, set sail on the Thaddeus for the Sandwich Islands (now known as Hawai'i.) Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the "Missionary Period",) about 184-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.

Hawaiian Mission Houses Historic Site and Archives is on an acre of land in the middle of downtown Honolulu. It includes Hawai'i's two oldest houses, the 1821 Mission House (wood frame) and the 1831 Chamberlain House (coral block,) a 1841 bedroom annex interpreted as the Print Shop.

In addition, the site has the Mission Memorial Cemetery, and a building which houses collections and archives, a reading room, a visitors' store, and staff offices. A coral and grass stage, Kahua Ho'okipa, was added in 2011. This was the headquarters for the American protestant Sandwich Island Mission. Across King Street is the red brick Mission Memorial Building 1915.

In addition to the buildings which are part of the collection, the Mission Houses object collection contains over 7,500 artifacts, including furniture, quilts, bark cloth, paintings, ceramics, clothing, and jewelry.

The archival collections include more than 12,000 books, manuscripts, original letters, diaries, journals, illustrations, and Hawaiian church records. Mission Houses owns the largest collection of Hawaiian language books in the world, and the second largest collection of letters written by the ali'i.

The size and scope of these collections make Hawaiian Mission Houses one of the foremost repositories for nineteenth century Hawaiian history. The archives, English and Hawaiian, are available on site and online. Together, these activities enrich our community "by fostering thoughtful dialogue and greater understanding of the missionary role in the history of Hawai'i." (Mission Houses' Vision Statement)

While now not part of the Mission Houses, the Mission Memorial building was built by the Hawaiian Evangelical Association as a museum and archive to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Protestant Missionaries in Hawaii. The city took over the building during the 1940s and it has since been converted to the City Hall Annex.

The organization developed a professional staff in 1970 and named the public program component Mission Houses Museum. In early 2012 they established a new name, Hawaiian Mission Houses Historic Site and Archives.

A National Historic Landmark, Mission Houses preserves and interprets the two oldest houses in Hawai'i through school programs, historic house tours, and special events. The Mission Houses collections are critical to understanding the dramatic changes in the 19th-century Kingdom of Hawai'i that helped shape contemporary Hawai'i.

Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, a 501(c)3 non-profit educational institution, founded in 1852 and incorporated in 1907, acquired the 1821 Mission House in 1906, restored and opened it in 1908.

1821 Wood Frame House

The wood-framed Mission House, built in 1821, was one of the first wood-framed buildings built in Hawai'i. The frame house stands on the grounds of the Hawaiian Mission Houses, near Kawaiaha'o Church on the makai side of King Street.

It is the oldest wood frame structure still standing in the Hawaiian Islands.



The timbers of Maine white pine were cut and fitted in Boston in 1819 and came around the Horn on the brig Thaddeus with the first mission company in April 1820, arriving first in Kona. The frame of the house arrived in Honolulu on Christmas morning of that year on board the ship Tartar.

Since the lumber for this New England plan type was actually pre-cut prior to shipment, it could also be considered in a broad sense a very early example of prefabrication.

Architecturally, it has a simple and straight-forward design; the relatively low ceilings, and basement are strong evidence of its New England concept, foreign to the temperate climate of Honolulu. It has two stories plus a basement and measures about 40-feet in length and 24-feet in width, excluding the kitchen wing (which extends the basic rectangular plan on the right rear (Ewa-makai) by about 20-feet.) The overall height is just over 23½ feet.



The first floor (which has been altered by both additions and demolition) consists of two rooms across the front. A smaller room and hall are located behind the front room on the left. The second floor consists essentially of two large rooms separated by a stair-hall.

The foundation wall is about a foot thick, except on the Waikīkī side where it becomes an average of almost 2-feet (where a now-demolished wing once stood.) The basement walls are adobe brick set in a mud mortar. The basement consists of one room on the left (Waikīkī)

and a larger space on the right. Basement access is by an exterior coral stair on both the front and rear and an interior concrete stair leading down from the kitchen. All walls are plastered, the floors are brick and the ceiling exposed wood.

The Frame House was used as a communal home by many missionary families who shared it with island visitors and boarders. It served as a residence for various missionaries, including Hiram Bingham, Gerrit Parmele Judd and Elisha Loomis.

In 1904, several contractors were called in to examine the building which was found to be so badly eaten by insects it was considered beyond repair. After considerable study extensive repairs were undertaken to restore the house to its original appearance.

In 1925, the premises were again inspected and again extensive insect damage was found. By 1935, the house was completely renovated and restored. Since 1935, various minor repairs such as repainting and some plastering have been undertaken.

Today the frame house is maintained by the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society as a memorial to the early missionary effort in the Hawaiian Islands.

Furniture and other articles of the first mission families are displayed in the house, together with photographs of the men and women who lived and worked there.



Pre-Fab Wood Frame Housing

It wasn't until the California Gold Rush (1848) that prefab housing started to really catch on, on the West coast of the continent and elsewhere.

As news spread of the discovery, thousands of prospective gold miners traveled by sea or over land to San Francisco and the surrounding area; by the end of 1849, the non-native population of the California territory was some 100,000 (compared with the pre-1848 figure of less than 1,000.) They needed places to stay.



Ralph Waldo Emerson noted the gold seekers brought 'framed houses' with them, "Suddenly the Californian soil is spangled with a little gold-dust here and there in a mill ... the news flies here and there, to New York, to Maine, to London, and an army of a hundred thousand picked volunteers".

"(T)he ablest and keenest and boldest that could be collected, instantly organize and embark for this desert, bringing tools, instruments, books, and framed houses, with them. Such

a well-appointed colony as never was planted before arrive with the speed of sail and steam on these remote shores, bringing with them the necessity that the government". (Emerson, 1849)

Framed houses were also an early article of overseas trade, and before long the American colonies, in their turn, were making and shipping houses to the Caribbean sugar islands. After that both Europe and our Eastern Seaboard produced them for the settlement of Australia and California.

At the height of the Gold Rush in 1849 port cities around the world were sending large numbers of buildings to San Francisco. Hawai'i - and especially Honolulu - was soon to share them. (Peterson)

The Polynesian notes, "A New Article in Commerce. From all parts of the world we hear that HOUSES, in perfect order to be set up in a short time, are being constructed for California. From the humble wooden tenement of a single room, to immense iron and framed buildings of three stories".

"Belgium, France, England, the British Colonies the South American States and China, are all sending their quota ... from New York and immediate vicinity alone, 5,000 houses have been ... shipped for El Dorado." (Polynesian, March 2, 1850)

A century later, the Islands saw the proliferation of 'pre-designed' homes built by Harold Hicks. In 1949, Hicks brought his family to the Islands and started his own residential construction company in the laundry room of his house. Hicks designed and built homes for the 'First Time Buyer,' as well as for subdivision developers. He wanted to offer affordable homes to the working families of the islands and would build one home or 100 at a time. (BIA)

1831 Coral Construction Chamberlain House

Hawaiian architecture evolved over time, starting with Hawaiians use of natural resources, to influences from all of the various visitors to Hawai'i. Soon after missionary arrival, builders began to incorporate coral blocks from Hawai'i's reefs, with the coral serving as a substitute for bricks the American and Europeans used in their homeland.

The second oldest home in Honolulu is referred to as the 'Chamberlain House'. Started in 1830, the Chamberlain House is one of the early masonry houses constructed on O'ahu.

Mr. Levi Chamberlain, business agent for the Sandwich Island Mission and member of the Second Company, built the structure to provide storage space for the goods of the mission and living quarters for his family. Upon completion of the building in December of 1831, Chamberlain's family moved into three rooms on the lower level. In 1910, the Mission Children's Society acquired ownership of the house.

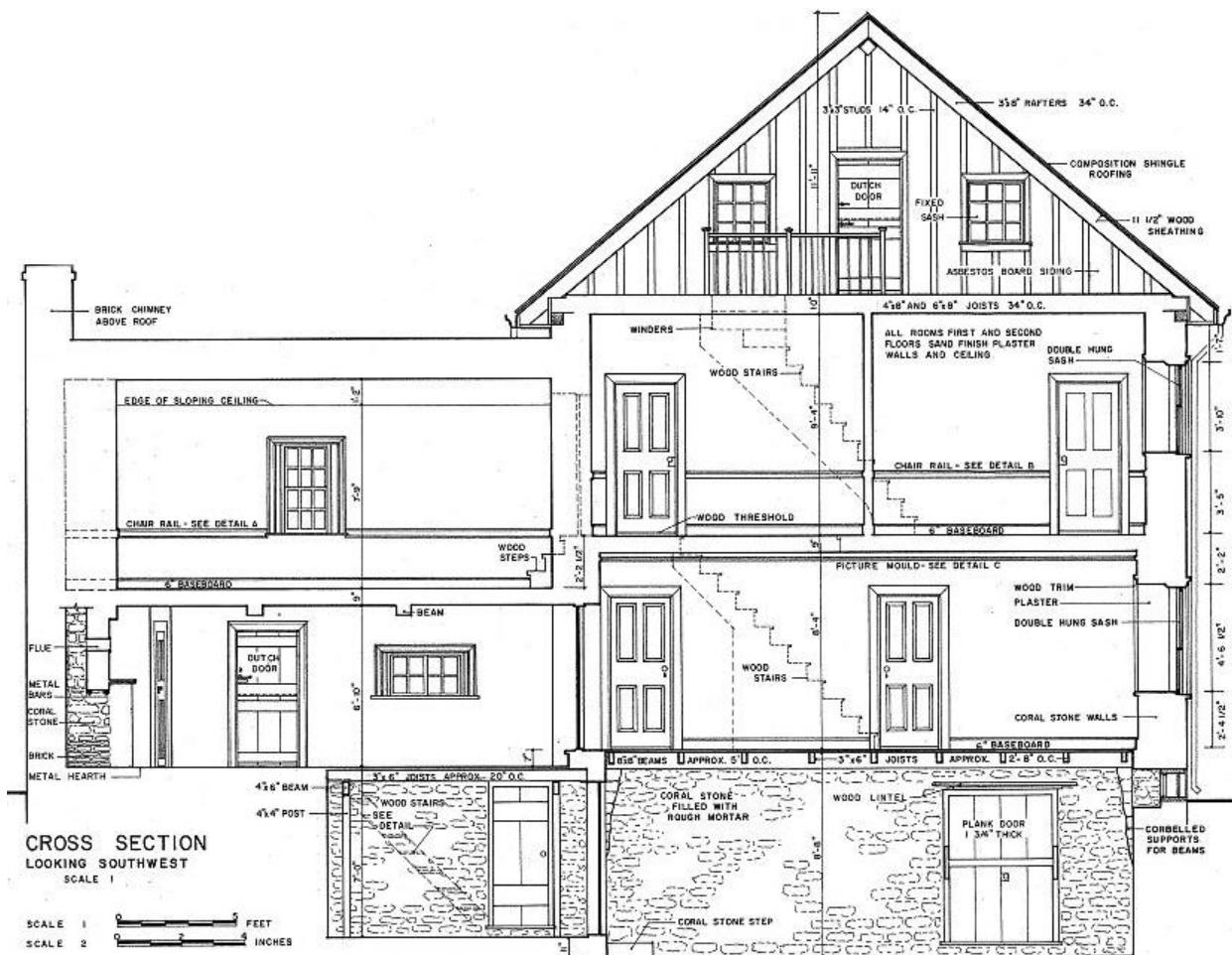
The building was made of coral blocks cut away from the ocean reef, which were dried and bleached by the sun. These blocks were arranged and assembled to build the Chamberlain House. From this location, Levi Chamberlain was able to plan out and undertake the disbursement of provisions for the entire Sandwich Islands Mission. It now serves as the Museum's Exhibition Gallery.



In getting the coral, "When the tide was low, the men would pray as they entered the water, and they would pray again on exiting. They carried tools, mamaki with koa for long handles, and the 'ō'ō, a metal rifle barrel pounded to a sharp point inserted over a wooden shaft. "

"Tools were made by the men themselves to gouge out of the reef blocks of coral ... The blocks were hoisted onto canoes and paddled ashore, where they were shaped with special tools. They also practiced breathing and would take turns diving, going to depths of no more than fifteen to twenty feet, or it became too hard to hammer. When they did this at night it looked like torch fishing." (Cheever)

In his June 1, 1830 journal entry, Levi Chamberlain recorded the following entry: “Walked down to the sea where the natives were cutting the coral stone for my building. The coral forms the surface of the whole flats; it is in thicknesses from three to four inches to about twelve inches; the natives cut it the right width and pry it up with levers. The work of getting it resembles cutting up the surface of a pond frozen over.” (Chamberlain)



Hale Pili o Na Mikanele

The wood frame and coral houses were actually subsequent homes of the missionaries. When they first arrived, and generally the first home for most companies, were hale pili, just like the homes of the Hawaiians.

“(The frame of) the building assumes the appearance of a huge, rude bird cage. It is then covered with the leaf of the ki, pandanus, sugarcane, or more commonly (as in the case of the habitations for us) with grass bound on in small bundles, side by side, one tier overlapping another, like shingles.”

“A house thus thatched assumes the appearance of a long hay stack without, and a cage in a hay mow within. The area or ground within, is raised a little with earth, to prevent the influx of water, and spread with grass and mats, answering usually instead of floors, tables, chairs, sofas, and beds.”

“Such was the habitation of the Hawaiian, - the monarch, chief, and landlord, the farmer, fisherman, and cloth-beating widow, - a tent of poles and thatch-a rude attic, of one apartment on the ground-a shelter for the father, mother, larger and smaller children, friends and servants.” (Hiram Bingham)

“The Hawaiian mode of building habitations was, in a measure, ingenious, and when their work was carefully executed, it was adapted to the taste of a dark, rude tribe, subsisting on roots, fish, and fruits, but by no means sufficient to meet their necessities, even in their mild climate.” (Hiram Bingham)

As part of the expanding interpretive plans at Hawaiian Mission Houses, a hale pili will be constructed near the 1821 wood frame house. The reconstructed hale pili will not use pili grass for the covering; instead a fire-retardant thatch panel will be used (it is situated next to the oldest wood frame house in the Islands.)

The proposed Richard’s hale pili will be reproduction of a hale that Boki ordered built for the new missionaries arriving as the Second Company in 1823. The hale represents a bridge between cultures and represents support given to the missionaries by the host culture, and the cooperative relationship that existed between the chiefs and the missionaries.

Clarissa Richards dimensioned her house with “one room – 22 feet long and 12 feet wide” with a height of “12 feet from the ground to the ridge pole. ... (It) had three windows, or rather holes cut through the thatching with close wooden shutters.” The door was “too small to admit a person walking in without stooping.” (Betsey Stockton)

The interior of each of the houses was one large room with no floors, but the “ground spread with mats.” Most of the furniture in each of the houses had arrived with the individual family in the reinforcement.

Clarissa Richards described the sleeping accommodation in her house, “Mats are fastened over and at the sides of our bed, except the front, which has a tappa curtain.” The rest of the furniture in the Richards’ House consisted of “a bed, two chairs, (one without a back,) a dozen trunks and boxes, and a couple of barrels.” Four large square trunks made a table. (Leineweber)

“Mr. R’s writing desk and the beautiful workbox presented by my beloved Cordelia. Over this table hangs a small looking glass - and on the other table (at) the other side of the window are arranged a few choice books, most of them testimonials of affection from absent friends.” (Clarissa Richards; Leineweber)

Missionary Row was Diamond Head side of the present wood frame building at Mission Houses – it fronted along what is now King Street.

