

Hawai`i's Early Plantation Heritage

Sugar plantations played a pivotal role in Hawai`i's dramatic, and sometimes tragic, entry into the world economy of the late-19th century. At mid-century, plantations began to populate the more remote Hawaiian communities with Chinese and Japanese workers, to clear the forested landscape, to claim increasing water resources once used by Hawaiian taro farmers, and to require government investment in roads, harbors, and courts necessary to support the sugar industry. Eventually, economic and political demands of the plantation system on the Hawaiian native government brought pressure for annexation to the U.S. Over a 50-year period, Hawai`i changed from an agricultural society characterized largely by subsistence production to an industrial society organized by the needs of plantation production. The earliest mills were powered by animals and fire wood, employed 50 to 100 Hawaiians, grinding cane from about 200 surrounding acres. Workers lived in scattered housing of either grass or woodframe construction. The typical sugar plantation of 1900 utilized powerful steam engines, employed 200-300 workers, relied on elaborate irrigation flumes to water the fields, and housed an industrial community of ethnically-based work camps. Whole families worked in the sugar fields. The change was radical.

It makes sense to preserve and interpret aspects of plantation life, community landscapes, and the technology of sugar production that came to life during these earliest years of sugar's growing power in Hawai`i. Debates of the 1990s often draw us back to the early plantation system. Questions about loss of Hawaiian sovereignty, about the impacts of recent plantation closures on Hawai`i's outer islands, about the future development of Hawai`i's water and forest resources all encourage a deeper look at the plantation in Hawai`i's history.

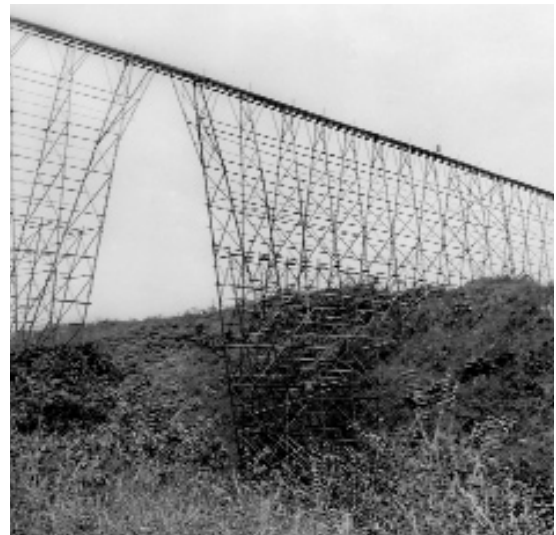
The plantation had a significant impact on the politics of the young Hawaiian nation. With the emergence of a native Hawaiian constitutional monarchy in the 1840s, the demand for money by a cash-starved government gave a boost to the plantation system. As the centerpiece of an export economy, increased sugar production became synonymous with proper government. But sugar and the plantation system brought irreversible changes

to the native Hawaiian economy. The demands for increased export income fueled pressure to privatize landholdings and sell large tracts of government-owned acreage. Access to forests for wood fuel to power the mills and water to irrigate the cane lands was imperative to an expanding industry. As the documentary record shows, these changes did not occur without vocal dissent from native Hawaiians.

It was the early plantations that brought workers from China, Japan, South Sea islands, Portuguese colonies, Europe, and the U.S., before 1900, together into new communities to plant and harvest sugar cane, transport it to the mill, crush, grind, and crystallize it for the San Francisco market. This was the period of contract labor, or indentured servitude, when workers from China and Japan were recruited in large numbers to fulfill 5-year contractual obligations on plantations. Plantation stores, worker camps of Chinese men, Japanese families, and Hawaiian households, 6-day work schedules, irrigation systems drawing water from miles away, powerful grinding and boiling machinery in the mills, grueling work by men, women and children cutting cane in the field and transporting it by ox carts to the mills—all characterized the early industrial plantation.

To document and interpret Hawai`i's plantation history is to understand the multiple uses of power which have brought about the Hawaiian economic, political and cultural transformation. It

Irrigation flume to carry water to the plantation from a distant source. Irrigation systems such as this were built on Maui in the late-19th century. Photo circa 1880-1895. Photo courtesy Hawaiian Historical Society.



was on the early plantation where patterns of work, technology, and industrialization were established. There are few plantation structures still standing which date back to the 1800s that invite interpretation. But there are, instead, rich documentary sources available in Hawai'i in which to dig for information.

Structural remains from the earliest plantation periods exist in the form of partially standing stone walls of sugar mills. Housing from this early period of plantation development no longer exists—long ago removed to make way for more cane lands. The Wilder mill, located at O'ahu in Kualoa, still stands as a partial stone structure. A failed plantation, it operated in the 1860s on O'ahu's windward shore. Partially standing also, is the Make'e sugar mill at Ulupalakua on Maui. A stone wall and chimney are all that remain. Both the Wilder and Make'e mills tell a story of plantations that failed in the years prior to annexation when competition between Hawaiian, Manila, and Peruvian sugars in the San Francisco market was fierce. Newspaper accounts and personal correspondence document the issues facing planters in this environment—paramount among them was sugar mill technology that constantly broke down, difficulty in transportation of cane from the field to the mill, and a Hawaiian workforce that preferred independence to indentured servitude whenever possible. This is the era that spawned the plantation store, food dependency by Hawaiian workers on plantation managers, and a debt system that continued well into the 20th century.

In addition to standing mills, there exist the remains of elaborate irrigation ditches and flumes built in the 1880s and later which carried water from distant rain forests to plantation lands. Access to and control of water became the primary means by which sugar planters and their plantations achieved the economic power over island life by 1900. The Hawai'i State Historic Preservation Office has begun to document these ditches through the written record. However, no inventory

of physical remains of these ditches and flumes yet exists.

Most of what we can learn about features of early plantation life and technology is hidden in a rich source of business archives. A NEH project in the 1980s retrieved and inventoried plantation records from Hawai'i's still-existing sugar companies. A relatively untapped source of information, the Hawai'i Sugar Planters' Association archives, now housed at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, provides scholars and citizens alike with production records, maps of worker housing, photographs, medical information on workers, plantation store records, and voluminous correspondence. Records exist for 20 plantations, dating back as early as 1850. Records for 15 other plantations are available at the Bishop Museum, housed in the Theo. H. Davies collection. The Grove Farm Homestead houses record back to the 1860s for the Grove Farm Plantation on Kaua'i.*

To the cultural resource specialist, business archives may seem a bit dry and impenetrable. But in Hawai'i they will provide some fascinating information on the plantation system's rise to power. The story of sugar's development of water resources, buried in these records, is the story of a changing landscape. Dietary and consumption habits of working families are found in the plantation store records. The tale of worker indebtedness to the plantation store is buried in old ledgers and journals. The health of plantation workers is found in infirmary records of plantation companies. And the tales of technological experimentation, failure, and success is detailed in manager reports and correspondence.

While the structural features of Hawai'i's early sugar industry have all but left the landscape, the story that remains largely untold is waiting in the archival record.

Note

* The most extensive business archives are located at: (1) Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (Honolulu), Plantation Archives. In 1996 These archives were relocated to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. (2) Bishop Museum Archives (Honolulu), Theo. H. Davies Collection: Records of Hawaiian Plantations and Agricultural Companies. (3) Grove Farm Homestead (Lihue, Kaua'i), Grove Farm Plantation Records. Miscellaneous plantation records are located also at the University of Hawai'i, Hamilton Library and the Hawai'i State Archives.

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1860s mill at Kualoa, O'ahu. Wilder Sugar operation ran from circa 1864-1870. Photo circa 1920. The stone walls have further deteriorated. Photo courtesy Hawaiian Mission Children's Society (HMCS).

