

The Uchida Coffee Farm in Kona, Hawai'i

Preservation often means reaching out—both to new constituencies and toward the recognition of little appreciated resources. This has been the case with Hawai'i's many small-scale coffee farms, scores of which still dot the western (leeward) coast of the Big Island of Hawai'i. Identifying these often ephemeral, but strongly ubiquitous places, and making their value known both to the “mainstream” of preservationists, historians, and planners and to the communities that inhabit and work them has been a challenging task. Beginning in the early 1990s, however, this is precisely what the Kona Historical Society has undertaken to do.

The Kona Historical Society (KHS) is located in the district of Kona on the Big Island of Hawai'i. The Society headquarters are located in the historic Greenwell Store, listed on both the State and National Register of Historic Places and is situated in the southern uplands at an elevation of about 1,500 feet above sea level. The KHS is a community based, non-profit organization with a staff of four and a membership of over 800. The Society's primary mission is to collect, preserve, and disseminate the post-contact history of the Kona District. The district runs 60 miles along the southwest side of the island in the leeward coast and is situated at the foot of two active volcanoes, Mauna Loa and Hualalai.

The KHS serves the community as the only repository for Kona history, both material culture and ongoing research and preservation projects. Its collections include visual images, artifacts, a small research library, extensive research files containing land use records, and oral histories of the district between 1845-1950.

*Kona Coffee Farm
c. 1930 overlooking
Kealakekua
Bay.*



When British explorer Captain James Cook landed at Kealakekua Bay in 1779, he and his crew found a productive agricultural region, a land “in high cultivation” at elevations between 1,000 and 2,000 feet. Dense with breadfruit, sugar cane, sweet potato, taro, and banana, this area supported a population of at least 10,000 people at the time of contact.

After the Kona district was “discovered” and then exploited by the Western world, new crops were experimented with such as tobacco, pineapple, sisal, cotton, commercial sugar cane, and coffee. Coffee would be the only commercial crop sustained in the area into the 20th century. Introduced to Kona as an ornamental in 1828 by an American missionary, coffee very quickly became the crop upon which plantations were built by early European and American planters. Throughout the 19th century, nearly everyone—Caucasian, Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Japanese—participated in the production, processing, and export of the fledgling industry. Fluctuations in the world market, plant disease, and insect problems would create a series of “busts” with an occasional “boom” throughout the later decades of the 19th century. Toward the end of the century, large-scale planters began to divide their landholdings into smaller family-sized farms, generally of 5 to 10 acres. Initially farmed by Portuguese immigrants, production on the smaller holdings quickly became dominated by incoming Japanese laborers.

By the turn of the century, the isolated Kona district had become a haven for Japanese immigrants (*Issei*) disenchanted with life on the large sugar plantations. In Kona, an enterprising immigrant could secure a five-acre coffee lease for very little capital and lose himself in the remote coffee land. The Kona district offered these rugged individualists the opportunity to achieve both a financial and personal independence unattainable in Japan or on the sugar plantations. As these pioneers carved out a place for themselves in the district, they adapted traditional Japanese architectural styles and building techniques, agricultural methods, religious practices, and daily life to their new environment. Within 50 years of immigration, the Japanese were the predominant population in the district. The Japanese who settled in Kona during this period played a significant role in the development of Kona in the 20th century.



Uchida Coffee Farm kitchen with a traditional Japanese open hearth. The woodbox is at right. Photo by the author.

The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community that shaped what we now refer to as Kona's "coffee lifestyle" is still very much alive in the district. Second generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*) born on coffee farms continue to farm the lands cleared and planted by their parents as do Filipinos, Hawaiians, and Portuguese. After decades of hardship and struggle by these early pioneers, Kona coffee now ranks itself

as one of the premier gourmet coffees renowned worldwide for its consistent body and flavor.

By 1991 the *Issei* had, for the most part, passed on and the *Nisei* were also reaching their twilight years; once gone, their stories were in danger of being lost forever. Coupled with Kona's growing population and accelerated demographic changes, the need to preserve this unique architectural and cultural history became increasingly apparent. Built between 1900 and 1945, the hundreds of small coffee farms—at one time there were over 1,500—that once dotted the rural Kona landscape were rapidly disappearing. Nowhere was the architecture, material culture, or the stories of Kona's unique coffee farming being preserved. This was the primary impetus for the Kona Historical Society Board of Directors' decision and commitment to preserve a typical coffee farm from this era.

In order to preserve this history, it was known that the Society would need the support of the coffee farming community, in particular the Japanese and Filipino communities. They were the people whose story it was; they had lived the history. A volunteer steering committee made up of members of this community was established. These were individuals who could sell the project to the community as well as provide the expertise needed in documenting both the material and social history of coffee farming families.

Since that time the KHS, with the support of the Kona community, has worked toward that goal. In 1994, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Hawai'i State Legislature, private foundations, and the Kona community, the KHS secured a farm site that met both national criteria for preservation and the practical needs of providing access to the public by

the KHS. All of this and more was found at the D. Uchida coffee farm established in 1913 by immigrants from the Kumamoto Prefecture, Daisaku and Shima Uchida.

The Uchidas were typical of many Japanese immigrants who arrived in the district between 1845-1920. Because they were raised in a rural rice producing region in the Kumamoto Prefecture of Japan, the idea of an independent family-operated farm appealed to them. Between 1913 and the late 1920s, the industry underwent a "boom" and the Uchidas, like many others, prospered. In 1925, at the height of the coffee "boom," many farmers built larger homes and coffee pulping mills. The Uchida farm, as it stands today, was built between 1925-1945 and includes a Japanese-style bath house and several sheds and chicken coops. The farm buildings are surrounded by a five-acre coffee and macadamia nut orchard.

Once the site had been secured, a photographic record of each of the structures was made. The KHS then organized a team of scholar and preservation professionals to work with the KHS staff and community members to preserve and interpret the site. An initial meeting with this group helped to lay out the long-range plan for the project which established the period of interpretive significance as 1925 when the existing buildings were constructed and 1945 with the end of World War II. Planning took into account the need to stabilize and restore the structures as well as provide for the research needed in order to tell the stories associated with the structures. This included the collection, documentation, and interpretation of the artifacts and other material culture associated with Japanese coffee farms of the period.

This research includes a survey of farms of the period still occupied by *Nisei* farmers, canvassing of the district for artifacts from the period, oral history interviews with the Uchida family on the use of interior and exterior spaces and the location and use of artifacts, and oral history interviews with other *Nisei* so that it was possible to draw a picture of what life was like for immigrants and their children living in the remote coffee lands during the early decades of the 20th century. To date, nearly 1,000 artifacts, hundreds of photographs, and dozens of oral histories have been collected, documented, described, transcribed, and catalogued. Measured drawings of the complex have been completed, and several reports document the history of the machinery at the farm are in place.

Historically, the Kona district is the only coffee-producing region in the United States. The remote location and climate provided a unique opportunity for immigrants hardy enough to survive the austere conditions of the coffee farm life and the ever-fluctuating world coffee market.

For over 80 years, the Uchida family, like others, worked the coffee and raised their children, through two World Wars, earthquakes, epidemics, the never-ending “busts,” and the all-too-infrequent “booms” of the coffee industry. Through it all, they maintained a work ethic, strong family ties, and a lifestyle that has become synonymous with Kona coffee farming, yet this lifestyle remains unique in modern Hawaiian history. It is hoped that this project will serve as an initial step toward the recognition of the unique and fragile resources and that the museum effort will help create a preservation consciousness among those still inhabiting the working farms of the Kona district.

References

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Editor's Note:

The Kona Historical Society has completed the restoration of the mill and hoshidana at the Uchida coffee farm and restoration of the house began in spring of 1998.

Meeting in the Freely Associated States of Micronesia

The Freely Associated States of Micronesia (FAS) is comprised of the Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, including Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae and Yap. The U.S. Historic Preservation Fund has been extended to these sovereign governments until the year 2001, with the exception of the Republic of Palau who signed their Compact of Free Association in 1995 (the U.S. government agreed to provide funding for 15 years under the compacts). Palau may receive HPF grant funds until 2010. In 1986 when the Compacts of Free Association were signed, the United Nations trusteeship for these island groups ended. The National Park Service (NPS)



Group photograph at Bai-ra-irrai, the traditional Palauan bai or men's meeting house on Airai Island in 1996. Photo by David Look.

main objective in assisting the FAS is to provide financial and technical support to establish programs appropriate to Micronesian society and culture; programs that will accrue sufficient local support to continue after the termination of the Compacts of Free Association.

The NPS meets annually with the Historic Preservation Officers (HPOs) and other FAS staff members to discuss current program direction, review activities and plan for the future. The meeting also provides opportunities for training courses, lectures, field trips, and staff interaction and communication.

Key historic preservation program issues discussed were the 1996 and 1997 program reviews, FAS program status reports, FAS project status reports for 1997 projects, cultural resource training initiatives, and recruitment for archeologist and anthropologist positions. The Republic of Palau received the 1997 Outstanding Historic Preservation Program Award for the Cultural Affairs Office's performance in identifying, preserving, and protecting the cultural resources of Palau for its citizens and future generations.

This year's annual meeting was held in Yap, Federated States of Micronesia, February 2-3, 1998, with David Look, AIA, Cultural Resources Team Leader, Paula Falk-Creech, Micronesia Program Coordinator, and Mark Rudo, Archeologist. FAS representations included: Carmen Bigler, Secretary of Interior and HPO for the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Clary Makroro, Deputy Historic Preservation Officer; Vicky Kanai, HPO for the Republic of Palau, Rita Olseong, Palau HPO Archeologist, Florencio Gibbons, Palau Oral Historian, and David Orak, Deputy HPO; and Emensio Eperiam, Deputy HPO for Pohnpei State, Berlin Sigrah, HPO for Kosrae, Standon Andrew, Staff Surveyor for Kosrae, and John Tharngan, Yap Historic Preservation Officer.

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