

## Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific

The Pacific area possesses a number of historic sites as the properties of unusual interest to historic preservation. One of these is Vailima, the estate home and final resting place of Robert Louis Stevenson, located three miles from Apia in Western Samoa.

“Tusitala,” or “teller of tales,” as he was locally known, and author of such enormously popular novels as *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, had turned to the climate of the tropics to alleviate his life-long battle with tuberculosis. A Scotsman, he had first journeyed to Samoa in 1889 at the age of 39 to research articles for the *New York Times* on the “Samoa question.” He chose for his site a 300-acre coconut plantation, naming it Vailima after the five streams that cross the property.

The construction period of Vailima spans more than a century, from 1891 through 1993, when the final restoration was concluded. Original materials for the house were acquired from Australia and the mainland United States. These included choice Oregon redwood, glass for windows, and most other components. To complete the homestead, 72 tons of furniture were shipped from England to equip the five-bedroom house. A ballroom large enough for a hundred dancers and an expansive library grace the first floor. The house also features the only interior fireplace in Samoa. The restored dining room conveys something of the property’s lavish past, of dinners of New Zealand oysters on ice and special imports of Bordeaux wines served up free-flowing. Stevenson was visited frequently and honored in his exotic home by heads of state and his contemporaries. Queen Victoria sent a damask table cloth and a sugar bowl used by Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott; Rodin was inspired to produce a sculpture for Vailima.

After Stevenson’s death, the property was taken over by Gustave Kuntz, who added the principal wing. From 1904–1962, Vailima housed governmental officials, first German and then the New Zealand high Commissioner. The King of Western Samoa used the grounds as the royal residence from 1962 until the mid-1980s. During this time, the building endured many structural additions, as well as suffering damage from two cyclones.

Finally in 1992, the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum Foundation assumed occupancy and charted a course for restoration. Paul Fritz Engineers of Milwaukee and Arizona took charge. Michael McDaniels, the project interior designer from Arizona, was able to recover a minimal amount of original furnishings and obtain a number of appropriate period pieces. Paint-color studies were carried out by a London company with representatives in Suva, Fiji. The work that began in January 1993 was complete when the residence was reopened as The National Museum of Western Samoa, on December 5, 1994, the 100th anniversary of Stevenson’s death.

At a monthly operating cost of \$8,500 U.S., the continued success of the museum is much dependent on visitor entrance fees (\$6.50 U.S.). Therefore, the site is a much-touted destination for the 2,500–3,000 tourists who visit Western Samoa each month. The present administration by the National Museum is an amicable blending, boding a bright future for Western Samoans and Stevensonophiles alike.

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This short description of the Stevenson house is based on a talk presented by William Murtagh at the US/ICOMOS breakfast meeting, held at the Fort Worth conference of The National Trust for Historic Preservation, October 1995.