

Connections to the Sea: Maritime Heritage in American Samoa



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A coastal pillbox near the village of Alao; signposts of the Pacific War.

NOAA's Maritime Heritage Program

The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries created the Maritime Heritage Program (MHP) in 2001 to meet NOAA's obligation to protect and manage the historical, cultural, and archaeological resources within the National Marine Sanctuary System. Since then the MHP has become the nation's leader in the discovery, assessment, and preservation of these unique objects and sites.

Maritime heritage resources include sites and features of cultural, archaeological, or historical significance, such as shipwrecks, submerged aircraft, inundated prehistoric landscapes, and locations of tribal or indigenous cultural importance. Unlike most marine resources, heritage artifacts and sites are often nonrenewable. Once a site or artifact is damaged or lost, it is gone forever.

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is committed to preserving historical, cultural, and archaeological resources within the sanctuary system and within federally controlled waters, and sharing these unique windows on the past with the public.

Cultural Heritage from the Sea?

Cultural heritage resources in the marine context emphasize all types of past human connections to the sea, whether those connections are centered in Samoan traditions and lifestyles (fa'a-Samoa), Samoan coastal archaeological sites or cultural uses of marine resources, or maritime heritage sites such as historic shipwrecks and other significant underwater objects.

Certain coastal and marine natural features like *tupua* also have strong cultural connections as visible touchstones of oral history, parts of the heritage record. According to Volk, Knudsen, Kluge and Herdrich, "these sites are of extraordinary significance to Samoan culture. Compared to all of the archaeological and historic sites that the HPO [Historic Preservation Office] tries to protect, these sites are seen as the most significant to local residents." (*Towards a Territorial Conservation Strategy...1992*)

Maritime Heritage: Stories from the Past

In June 2007 NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries completed an initial document-based maritime heritage resource inventory for

American Samoa. The inventory features multiple aspects of history in American Samoa: 1) historic shipwrecks lost in American Samoa; 2) World War II naval aircraft lost in American Samoa; 3) World War II fortifications, gun emplacements, and coastal pillboxes; 4) Samoan coastal archaeological sites; and 5) coastal and marine features associated with ancient Samoan myths and legends. Very few of the historic ships or aircraft have been located within the waters of the Territory; the initial inventory work was document-based and did not involve field survey. Some of the potential sites, if located and confirmed, could be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Fagatele Bay's Management Plan Review Process

Strategies considering cultural and maritime heritage resource management and preservation have been included in the initial draft plan for Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary as part of the sanctuary's management plan review process. These are ways to enhance the public stewardship of marine resources and learn from the rich heritage of American Samoa.



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The Samoan Voyaging Society's (Aiga Tautai o Samoa Association) replica double-hulled voyaging canoe *Alia*, built at the Nu'uuli Vocational Technical School by Maselino Ioane, 1996.



Photo Archives, American Samoa Jean P. Haydon Collection

Wharf at Swains Island lagoon, circa 1937. Swains' lush coconut groves supported a copra plantation for many years.

Swains Island: a Special Location

The story of Swains Island, a tiny atoll which is part of American Samoa, has been almost lost in time, yet Swains Island has a unique and varied past, touching on Pacific Island voyaging, Spanish discovery in the early 17th century, the historic whaling era, Pacific copra plantations, the U.S. Navy, and more. Few archaeologists or historians have ever visited the island. The marine areas adjacent to Swains are currently being considered as a potential addition to Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary (FBNMS) as a sanctuary unit.

In 2009 NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries initiated a maritime heritage study of Swains Island, including the

available historical documentation, photographs, and oral interviews (including His Highness Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi of Samoa, Alex Jennings and Wally Thompson families, and others). The study produced a heritage timeline of both ancient and contemporary events on Swains. In May 2011 the sanctuary system sponsored a visit to Swains Island, hosted by the Jennings family.

Potential for a 2012 Survey

The 2011 reconnaissance at Swains highlighted the potential cultural and historic discoveries as yet unrealized at the island. Assembling a small select survey team for a short but effective investigation of the heritage

resources at Swains can address many of these fascinating issues. Is there archaeological evidence of ancient Pacific voyaging at Swains? What remains of the historic 19th and early 20th century structures on the island? Has the lagoon preserved evidence of the past?

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and the Maritime Heritage Program have supported numerous investigations of our shared maritime heritage in a wide variety of locations and environments. Understanding these resources teaches us about our past connections to the sea, our place within the ecosystem, and our role as stewards of the marine environment.



Photo: NOAA OMNS

A whaler's try pot for processing whale oil; this one is circa 1865, recovered from Swain's Island.



Polynesian Photo Archives, American Samoa Jean P. Haydon Collection

Jennings' faletele, circa 1937 Naval personnel and Fitafita Guards near the structure.



Photo: NOAA NCCOS

Satellite image of Swains Island, showing the lagoon in the center.