

Reconnecting with historic Ka Lanakila Church at Keomoku Village

Trustee's note: This month's column is written by Kepā Maly, executive director of the Lāna'i Culture & Heritage Center.

In ancient times Lāna'i's windward coast was home to thousands of Hawaiian residents. In the 1800s, the native population rapidly declined and the landscape was impacted by deforestation. In the 1890s, Fredrick and Talula Gibson Hayselden, who controlled large tracts of land on Lāna'i, developed the Maunalei Sugar Co. Ltd., with operations focused at Keomoku. Keomoku Village became the island's population center and "capital." The plantation built houses, stores, an inn, sugar mill and hospital at Keomoku. Struggling with inadequate finances and water shortages, the plantation failed and closed in March 1901, and the population of Lāna'i rapidly declined to around 125.

In 1903, the island's Hawaiian families joined an association of Hawaiian churches and began construction of this wooden church at Keomoku. The church, Ka Lanakila, was dedicated Oct. 4, 1903. The congregation included multi-generational members of families under such names as: Apiki, Kaenaokalani, Kahaleanu, Kahikiwawe-Cockett, Kahoohalahala, Kalua, Kane, Kaopuiki, Kauakahi, Kauhane, Kauila, Kauwenaole, Keliihanantui, Kukaloloua, Makahanaloa, Mano, Nakihei, Namauu, Ohumukini and Puulei. Services were done solely in the Hawaiian language and structured in three distinct Sunday services, Kula Euanelio, Hālāwai Haipule and Kula Sabati. Families arrived at church before 10 a.m. and remained there through 1 p.m. In those early days, no work was allowed on Lāpule (Sunday), so families prepared all food the day prior to service, and then returned home for a quiet day of rest and reflection.

By 1930, the population of Keomoku Village had mostly moved to the uplands with the development of ranching operations and the Dole Pineapple Plantation. Ka Lanakila Church remained in regular use

until 1951, when Rev. Daniel Kaopuiki Sr. and his wife, Hattie Kaenaokalani Kaopuiki, relocated from Keomoku to Lāna'i City. Ka Lanakila was abandoned and decommissioned and the land was returned to the owner.

In the late 1980s, a restoration project on the church was begun, and large sections of the wooden structure were removed and replaced. Unfortunately, the work was left incomplete, and over the next 20-plus years, siltation buried the footings of the church, and posts and piers below the church rotted. Fram-

ing, walls and roofing materials also rotted, and the floors began to sink. Following lengthy discussions with kūpuna, it was decided that this historic feature should be cared for. The Agape Foundation Charitable Trust, OHA, community members and statewide partners offered support for the project, and Castle & Cooke Resorts LLC granted a right-of-entry agreement to the Lāna'i Culture & Heritage Center to undertake the stabilization, which began October 2010.

On June 23, 2012, the last kūpuna, who as children grew up in the Keomoku area, and attended Ka Lanakila gathered with the community to celebrate the restoration of the old church. It is envisioned that Ka Lanakila will once again serve as a gathering place for the people of Lāna'i, and as a place of welcome to guests who seek to explore and learn about Lāna'i's history.

The building continues to hold a special place in the hearts and minds of the people. Several kūpuna and their 'ohana hope to once again hold an occasional service at Ka Lanakila. This historic wooden church is a connection with an earlier time in Lāna'i's history and is the last physical structure of what was once the most significant settlement on the island.

For more information, come and visit the Lāna'i Culture & Heritage Center or our website at lanaichc.org. ■



Colette Y. Machado

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