

## THE RETURN OF SAM BRANNAN TO HAWAII

By Riley Moffat, Presented to the Mormon Pacific Historical Society at Keaukaha,  
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We have all heard the story of Sam Brannan and how he led a party of Latter-day Saints from New York to California aboard the ship *Brooklyn* around Cape Horn in 1846. As part of that journey they stopped for awhile in Honolulu to resupply the ship. This journey was highlighted again as part of the sesquicentennial celebration of the pioneer trek west.

What I was not aware of was that Sam Brannan later returned to Hawaii under quite different circumstances.

Last Summer the Library of Congress referred a lady doing research involving Mark Twain to me. Twain's journal of his visit to Hawaii in 1866 mentioned some friends on board the *Ajax* who were supposed to be coming to Hawaii to do surveying. Also mentioned as being on board was a Thomas Jefferson John Quincy Adams who, Twain claims, was going to Honolulu to rennovate Sam Brannan's mansion in the Sandwich Islands. My curiosity was piqued. What was Sam Brannan's connection with Hawaii after his 1846 stopover on the *Brooklyn*?

Let me first review Sam Brannan's career. Then it will be easier to place Brannan's return to Hawaii in context.



Samuel Brannan was born in Saco, Maine in 1819 and was working as an apprentice printer in Painesville, Ohio in 1835 when he found himself watching Joseph Smith build the temple in nearby Kirtland. Young Sam joined the Church but drifted for awhile after the Church in Kirtland broke up. He reassociated himself with the Church and was printing the Church's newspaper called The Prophet in New York when Joseph and Hyrum were martyred in 1844. He was disfellowshipped for supporting his associate in New York, William Smith, Joseph's brother, in his claim to lead the Church but saw the error of his ways and was reinstated in May, 1845 and began publishing a new Church newspaper called The Messenger.

When Orson Pratt left New York to return to Nauvoo in October, 1845 he recommended that Sam take the press and lead the Saints then living in New York to California by ship. This idea was amplified by Amos Kendall, the U. S. Postmaster General, and one of the few men of any consequence in Washington willing to speak up for the Church. Kendall was also a big proponent of Manifest Destiny and saw this as an opportunity to establish an American, albeit Mormon, colony in Mexican California. Kendall even persuaded Brannan to sign over half of all the lands the Saints would colonize in California to Kendall and his friends (Bailey p. 51).

Even at this early age Sam showed considerable leadership and organizational skills and by February 4, 1846 the "First Elder", as Sam styled himself, had 238 Saints and the press aboard the ship *Brooklyn* bound for the Pacific Coast. After talking to Kendall and others I'm sure Sam was convinced that Brigham Young would lead the Saints to this Garden of Eden in California. The *Brooklyn* rounded Cape Horn but a storm drove them away from Valparaiso, Chile where they planned to resupply. They landed instead at a practically deserted Juan Fernandez, "Robinson Crusoe Island", where they resupplied for free, saving much needed cash. The *Brooklyn* arrived at Honolulu on June 20, 1846 for a ten day stopover.

At Honolulu Sam was surprised to find Commodore Robert Stockton of the United States Navy preparing for an attack on Monterey, California. The United States was at war with Mexico! What would this mean for the Saints hoping to escape the tyranny of the U. S. by settling in Mexican California? Stockton encouraged Brannan to land at the small Mexican presidio of Yerba Buena in San Francisco Bay and claim it for the United States. He

even gave Sam 150 stand of arms and Brannan immediately began drilling the Mormon men behind Honolulu and on board the *Brooklyn*.

The *Brooklyn* sailed into San Francisco Bay on July 31, 1846 and found the American flag flying over the motley collection of huts around Yerba Buena Cove. Commander John Montgomery of the U. S. sloop *Portsmouth* had taken the area just days before. The Saints on board *Brooklyn* had mixed emotions. Some were happy to arrive again in the United States of America. Others were unhappy to be back in the United States because of the way they felt the U. S. had treated the Church. Sam Brannan, I think, was a little disappointed because he had been looking forward to some action, adventure, and glory.

Brannan's autocratic style of leadership and the fact that the joint stock company, modeled after the United Order, which all the *Brooklyn* Saints were required to subscribe to, was in his name caused dissention in the ranks of the company and many now wanted out. Brannan's reaction as "First Elder" was to excommunicate them.

Now in California Sam seemed to put more effort into developing his own position as a leader in the dynamic new community growing around San Francisco Bay than building the Kingdom of God. He hob-nobbed with all the new U. S. civil and military leaders and the old Spanish landowners and began distancing himself from the humble Mormon community. He liked the opportunities he saw for himself in this new land. He was getting in on the ground floor and he had the resources as the leader of the Mormon colony to make things happen. For awhile the Mormons were in the majority in San Francisco.

As the last of the Donner party were straggling out of the Sierra Nevada in the late Spring of 1847 Brannan was excited as he headed east from Sutter's fort over the Sierra snowpack to find Brigham Young and the Saints headed west and lead them back to California. Sam met Brigham and the advance party on the Green River on June 30, 1847. Neither eloquence nor logic could convince Brigham to go to the California Eden Brannan described rather than to the barren valley of the Great Salt Lake. He was appalled that Brigham would choose the Salt Lake Valley to be the new Zion. Brigham explained that he wanted to develop some place no one else would want and California sounded like a place other gentiles would be attracted to and the Saints wouldn't have the peace they needed. Sam argued with Brigham and left to return to California on August 9, 1847 disappointed but not apostate. Sam's position as presiding elder in California was also unclear now that

the Mormon Battalion was there. Sam had secretly thought he deserved an apostleship for his service. He met a large company of the Mormon Battalion near Tahoe heading east to meet the Saints and spoke disparagingly of the Salt Lake Valley. Back in California, Sam liquidated the *Brooklyn Saint's* joint stock company and focused his efforts on making money for himself. He ignored his Church responsibilities and was happy to turn over the leadership of the Bay area Mormons for awhile to Addison Pratt when he arrived from Tahiti. By 1848 Brannan had pretty much distanced himself from the Church, seeing his connection with it as a barrier to the development of his fortune in California.

When gold was discovered in January, 1848 at Sutter's mill by Mormon Battalion men Sam had the only store in the Sacramento Valley. Sam's newspaper, the Alta Californian, was instrumental in publicizing the discovery of gold the rest of the United States. He quickly became California's first millionaire by supplying the miners with all their necessities rather than mining himself. When apostles Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich visited California in 1849 they warned the Saints there not to pay attention to Brannan. Sam had refused to turn over the tithes he had collected from the Mormon miners to the apostles to take back to Salt Lake City.

At the same time Sam was very civic minded and a force for good in the bustling San Francisco community. He donated money to many good causes and led the development of the Vigilance Committee that cleaned up a lot of the lawlessness in San Francisco in 1851. In July of that year Parley P. Pratt visited Sam and when his entreaties to return to the fold were rejected Pratt finally disfellowshipped Sam from the Church. Sam had become an open-hearted, generous philanthropist trying to live down his Mormon past. As an astute businessman he was in on the development of practically everything and for good reason he is called the "First Forty-Niner". He was also a gregarious socialite and partier who led the development of the Napa Valley wineries and the spa at Calistoga.

Sam's socializing ended up getting him in trouble with his wife Eliza who sued for divorce in 1870 demanding her half of his assets in cash. This was the final straw in his golden California career. Before long he was a penniless drunkard and died in 1889 in Sonora Mexico trying to peddle dubious land schemes to potential American settlers. His body went unclaimed in San Diego for six months before being buried.

Sam's appetite for fame and fortune always challenged his desire to do good and fame and fortune usually won. He should have been a better follower. Sam Brannan the elder thought he knew better than Brigham Young the prophet. California was the obvious salubrious Garden of Eden; but it was not what the Lord had in mind for the Latter-day Saints. I think Sam finally realized when Brigham came out the winner in the so-called "Utah War" that Brigham had made the right choice for the Saints. If they had gone to California, when gold was discovered, the challenges to the fabric of the Church would have been insurmountable. But Sam was enamoured with California; Amos Kendall had him convinced of its singular desirability even before he sailed on the *Brooklyn*.

Now that we have an inkling of Sam Brannan's background, character, interests, and inclinations lets look at an aspect of the larger cultural milieu prevalent at that time in the United States and particularly in California. The 1840s witnessed the rapid expansion of the United States across the North American continent. The belief that this expansion was America's providential mission became known as Manifest Destiny, a term coined in 1845. One of the radical manifestations of Manifest Destiny was that some U. S. citizens felt it their duty to bring their benighted neighbors into the glorious sphere of U. S. influence on their own. These private attempts at annexation were called "filibustering". Several such schemes were attempted in the 1850s. We are talking actual armed invasions by U. S. citizens of a foreign country: Cuba in 1849 and 1850, Nicaragua in 1855, Lower California in 1852-54, Sonora in 1854-55, and two separate attempts in northern Mexico in 1856. These schemes found particular support in California among disappointed Gold Rushers.

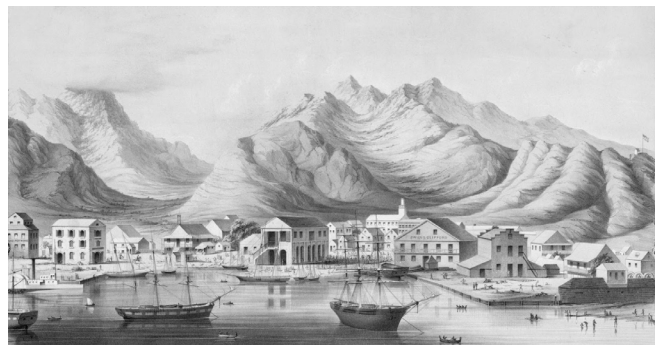
A conservative Scotsman, Robert Crichton Wyllie, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Kingdom of Hawaii, had good cause to be concerned about possible filibustering from the United States. British naval Captain Lord George Paulet had succeeded temporarily in seizing Hawaii in 1843 and French Admiral Legoarrant de Tromelin had made an attempt on Hawaiian sovereignty in 1849. On March 12, 1851 a worried Hawaiian government placed a sealed document in the hands of American Commissioner Luther Severance providing for "provisional cession" of Hawaii to the U. S. if France should try to take the Islands.

As early as September 1847, British Consul General William Miller predicted the tide of American immigration to California would extend to Hawaii, an obvious threat to British interests in the Islands. As Sam Brannan was leading the development of San Francisco and

the Vigilance Committee in 1851 Wyllie began hearing rumors that plans for a filibustering expedition to Hawaii were being hatched in San Francisco. Obviously many of the people coming to California did not strike it rich and these types of adventurous people were naturally susceptible to get-rich-quick schemes whether they dealt with gold, land, or power. Wyllie knew California contained many disappointed Gold Rushers full of Manifest Destiny.

The San Francisco press was reporting that Hawaii was ripe for the taking. Among the reasons given were that the King was ready to seek U. S. protection from other foreign powers such as the French, or that the King would welcome the opportunity to get out from under the influence of the Protestant missionaries by ceding Hawaii to the U. S. and retire on an annuity in indolent ease. Other reports called the rumored filibustering expedition a colonizing effort to buy land, import settlers, take over sugar plantations from foreigners, and claim the islands for the United States of America. This attitude influenced Sam and others.

To counteract these rumors Wyllie tried to organize a militia of 5000 men in the Islands. There was, of course, not near enough arms for such a force but drilling of some of these Hawaiian troops by officers of the *U.S.S. Vandalia* did take place. The United States and Britain reiterated their support of Hawaiian sovereignty. Reports reaching Wyllie in October 1851 from San Francisco mentioned “a party of restless young bloods numbering about 160 are about sailing from this part for the Sandwich Islands for the purpose, it is said, of revolutionizing the government of his Kanaka majesty” (San Francisco Daily Evening Picayune Oct. 15, 1851). Other reports inflated this figure to 500. The leaders were reported to be Samuel Brannan, James M. Estill, and Benjamin F. Hanna.



The ship *Game-Cock* docked in Honolulu on November 15, 1851 from San Francisco with Sam Brannan and 25 other men connected with him on board. The best account of the events of the filibustering expedition are contained in the memoirs of William Cooper Parke, Marshal of the Kingdom of Hawaii. It was Parke's job to keep track of the filibusters. Upon arrival, the party moved into a house called the "Bungalow" on Richards Street "a handsome coral-stone building, which Mr. Brannan purchased at once" (Parke p. 27). Parke continues with his history of the events:

"The vessel arrived in the morning, and in the afternoon of the same day one of the party was arrested for furious riding.

On being arrested he drew a revolver, but was knocked down by the constable, his revolver taken from him, and he was brought to the Fort.

In a short time Mr. Brannan called on me in regard to this man. I then told him that the object of his mission was known, and that he had been misinformed as to the condition of affairs. I also advised Mr. Brannan to be careful of his actions, as he and the rest of his party were being watched.

In regard to the man arrested, I told Mr. Brannan that the carrying of weapons was prohibited by law, and that to draw a weapon on an officer was a serious matter; and I further requested him to inform the rest of the party of this law.

Matters remained quiet for a few days. In the mean time I had become acquainted with some of the party, and found one of them who for a consideration would divulge their secrets; so I was informed from day to day as to their plans. At the time the party arrived here the King was at Lahaina; consequently, they had not been able to interview him.

On the following day I was told that a committee had been appointed by them to go to Lahaina, to see the King, and lay their proposition before him.

This was on Monday, November 24, and they were to go on the schooner *Maria*, commanded by Captain Hobron. As soon as I received this information, I called on the Ministry and told them of the proposed plan.

John Ii and Governor Kekuanaoa were sent for, and it was decided that I should go up and forestall this committee, armed with two letters, - one from John Young, and one from John Ii.

I then made my arrangements, and from the Fort watched the actions of the Committee. I saw them go down to the schooner with their gripsacks, place them on board, and then return to their house. Seeing that the wind was from the south, I supposed the captain had told them he could not get out. I then went to him and said that it was very important that I should proceed to Lahaina at once; so if he would get two whale-boats to tow the schooner out, I would pay all the expenses of hiring them. He agreed to this, and I went on board. He went in search of the boats, and in ten minutes we were on our way out of the harbor. We had a good run to Lahaina, arriving at 10 A.M. the next day.

I went to the King's residence and delivered my letters, which advised his Majesty to act as I should suggest. I then proposed to him that as the Committee would in all probability come up by the next vessel he should call out his Hulumanus, and have them stand guard around his premises, which would prevent any person from coming into the yard without permission.

I also suggested to the King that he should send for Mr. G. D. Gilman to act as Interpreter, in case the Committee arrived; which plan was adopted. After making other necessary arrangements, I left the same night for Honolulu. As the schooner came up to the wharf the next day the three Committee-men were there; and when they saw me, they said so loudly that I could hear them, "That damned Marshal has been to Lahaina, and prevented our seeing the King". They started however that day for Lahaina, and on their arrival called on the King; but the guard at the gate refused to allow them to enter. They then sent in their cards; meanwhile Mr. Gilman had been sent for, and through him the King declined to see them.

The Committee therefore returned to Honolulu greatly disgusted at the failure of their plan.

At a meeting held that evening, my informant told me that my name was mentioned by them in anything but complimentary terms.

By this time the party saw their game was up. They also consulted a number of the residents, who told them they were on the wrong track." (Parke pp. 27-30)

Brannan and other expedition leaders were eventually introduced to the King in Honolulu on November 28th at a levee according to a social notice in the Polynesian on Dec. 6, 1851 but they were never allowed lay out their proposals.



Two popular histories of Brannan by Paul Bailey and Reva Scott claim that Sam bought several lots and houses in Honolulu and a sugar plantation on Kauai from a Scotsman. Bailey asserts that Brannan invested the proceeds from the sale of his holdings in the San Francisco newspaper, the Daily Alta Californian, amounting to \$125,000, into his Hawaiian adventure. (Bailey p. 224)

Realizing that he had been terribly misinformed, Sam was among the first of the filibusters to return to San Francisco, arriving aboard the *Golden Rule* on January 2, 1852.

The story goes that the party had already divided up the spoils they hoped to gain even before they arrived in Honolulu. Brannan was to be governor general and others were promised lesser offices such as governors of the various islands, collector of the port, commander of the troops, and so on. A letter back to Wyllie reported that those on the wharf to greet the *Golden Rule* in San Francisco called out to Brannan: "Well, have you taken the Islands? Who's the King? Is it you?" (Rolle p. 260) The Daily Alta Californian of Jan, 2, 1852 stated: "The *Golden Rule* brings back most of the persons who sailed from here some two months since with extravagant notions relative to a change in the Hawaiian government."

In contrast to some of the other filibustering expeditions of the time, Brannan's group was neither large enough nor heavily armed enough to effect an armed take-over. The fact that Brannan attempted to call on the King in Lahaina like a regular businessman indicates that Brannan hoped he could achieve his goals in a peaceful business-like way rather than through armed intervention. Also the fact that Brannan quickly abandoned his attempt at buying off the King and taking over Hawaii and went home as soon as he realized that his whole plan was based on faulty information suggests that he had not planned to accomplish his goals through force of arms, which he was obviously not prepared to do.

I think Brannan was a businessman looking for an opportunity to increase his holdings, following up on a lead like a modern entrepreneur organizing a corporate take-over; with the added hope that in buying his way into Hawaii he could gain enough power to bring Hawaii into the United States. There is no indication he had considered what international repercussions his filibuster might have. How would Britain and France react to an extremely pro-American government in Hawaii at this time? There were often British,

French, or American men-of-war such as the *Vandalia* in the Islands with their compliments of Marines. How did Brannan think they would react to his filibuster if he tried to force the issue? Not only was Brannan operating with faulty information, I don't think he had thought through a lot of the possible outcomes of his little adventure. It is probably just as well that he took the hint that his escapade was doomed before any real damage was done.

Brannan appears to have left Honolulu just in the nick of time. Rumors were abounding that on the voyage over on the *Game-Cock* Brannan and others had rifled the mail bags on board looking to intercept letters that would shed light on their plans. Violating the mail was a serious offense to the many whalers in port long absent from home. Feeling that some of their precious letters might have been destroyed, Marshal Parke says that: "in consequence of this they came very near giving some of the party a coat of tar and feathers." (Parke p. 30) In March of 1852 one of the leaders of the filibusters, Benjamin F. Hanna, charged a James H. Tanner in the Honolulu courts with libel in the matter. Tanner testified that on board the *Game-Cock* Brannan took the mail bag to his stateroom and found letters from U. S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster to the U. S. Commissioner in Honolulu Luther Severence containing rumors of the expedition and letters to British Consul General William Miller speaking of Brannan in low terms, according to a report in the Polynesian of March 27, 1852.

On this sad note ended Sam Brannan's ill-fated return to Hawaii. Rumors of other filibustering expeditions from California to Hawaii continued through 1854. Even though the 1851 Hawaiian offer of provisional cession, brought on by fear of a French invasion, was not accepted by the United States, the topic of annexing Hawaii to the United States began to be discussed on the floor of Congress beginning in 1852. Reasons for possible annexation included the suspected French designs upon Hawaii and to protect California and the Pacific Coast in time of war and to support trade with Japan and the Orient. Many of the goals of the filibusters were eventually realized with the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy on January 17, 1893 by pro-American businessmen and the annexation of Hawaii to the United States on July 7, 1898.

But what of Sam Brannan's Hawaiian legacy? By all accounts he is a tragic footnote. I can find no records of the fate of his real estate purchases in Hawaii. Paul Bailey says that

the U. S. government forced him to eventually sell his Hawaiian holdings for \$45,000, which amounted to quite a loss on his original investment of \$125,000 (Bailey p. 224). The mention in Mark Twain's journal that a Thomas Jefferson John Quincy Adams sailed to Hawaii with him on the *Ajax* in March of 1866, and returning to the U. S. in August, for the purpose of renovating Sam Brannan's Honolulu mansion, probably the "Bungalow" on Richards Street, would suggest that that this property at least stayed in Brannan's hands probably until he had to liquidate his holdings for his 1870 divorce.

The experiences of Sam Brannan serve as a cautionary tale. Gifted with talent and opportunity, Sam succumbed to pride, fame, and fortune. He failed to follow his priesthood leaders when the common sense of the moment conflicted with counsel. The "First Forty-Niner", once blessed with ability, wealth and fame, died forgotten.

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