



1-1-2013

Two Early Missionaries in Hawaii: Mercy Partridge Whitney and Edward Partridge Jr.

Scott H. Partridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Partridge, Scott H. (2013) "Two Early Missionaries in Hawaii: Mercy Partridge Whitney and Edward Partridge Jr.," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol52/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Left, Mercy Partridge Whitney (1795–1872). *Right*, Edward Partridge Jr. (1833–1900). Mercy was one of the first company of Protestant missionaries in Hawaii, and she lived there from 1820 to the end of her life. In 1854, she received a visit from her nephew, Edward Partridge Jr., who was serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Hawaii. The portrait of Mercy Whitney was painted by Samuel F. B. Morse. Courtesy Kauai Museum, Hawaii. Photo of Edward Partridge Jr. courtesy Scott H. Partridge.

Two Early Missionaries in Hawaii

Mercy Partridge Whitney and Edward Partridge Jr.

Scott H. Partridge

When Edward Partridge (1793–1840) converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, it caused a terrible rift in his family: his sister Emily said that she wanted nothing to do with him as long as he held such ideas, and his parents began to question his sanity. Edward had eleven siblings, including his sister Mercy (1795–1872). Mercy was prominent in the Congregational Church and in 1819 went to Hawaii as a missionary and remained there the rest of her life. Edward was called as the first LDS bishop¹ soon after his conversion and was faithful for the rest of his life; he died in Nauvoo in 1840. In 1854, Edward's son, Edward Partridge Jr. (1833–1900), was sent on an LDS mission to preach the gospel in Hawaii, where he met his aunt and a cousin for the first time. Their meeting is an interesting intersection of two missionaries in one family, divided by their devotion to their respective religions.

1. Edward Partridge, the son of William Partridge and Jemima Bidwell, was born on August 27, 1793, in Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts. He married Lydia Clisbee in Kanesville, Ohio, in 1819, and they were the parents of seven children. He was baptized into the LDS Church on January 11, 1831, and on February 4 was ordained a bishop. He moved with his family from Ohio to Missouri and suffered from mob persecution with the Saints, eventually moving to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he died on May 27, 1840. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–1936), 1:218–21.

Mercy Partridge in Hawaii

Mercy, like Edward, was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. She was devoted to her beliefs and to her Congregational Church. When Mercy came of age, Congregationalist women began to take on new roles as crusaders for Christ,² and she dreamed of becoming a missionary. At age twenty-four, Mercy was introduced to Samuel Whitney, who also wanted to serve a mission and was required to have a wife accompany him. Only two hours after meeting Samuel, she accepted his proposal of marriage, and they were soon wed. They were among the very first Protestant missionaries to preach Christianity in the Sandwich (later Hawaiian) Islands. For five months, they sailed the eighteen thousand miles from Boston around South America to Hawaii while crammed into a six-by-six-foot cabin already filled with luggage, goods, and a single narrow bunk. Mercy kept an extensive record of her activities and correspondence from the time she sailed from Boston until her death in the Islands fifty-three years later. Her eight volumes of journal entries and twenty-three letter books are carefully kept by the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu.³

In the early nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans often judged people of other cultures and races, including American Indians, Africans, and Hawaiians, to be savages.⁴ Mercy, growing up in that culture, was very critical of the customs and living arrangements in Hawaii. But she was content with the prospects of “communicating the blessings of the gospel . . . , together with the conviction that . . . providence has opened for us a door of usefulness.”⁵ She and Samuel taught religion and modern skills to natives, both adults and children. She was very committed to the work of teaching Hawaiians and wrote, “I feel it my duty to instruct them in everything which may promote their civilization, so far as I have strength, and they are

2. Between 1819 and 1850, eighty women served around the world as assistant missionaries under the direction of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Seventy of these women were married. Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), xi.

3. Mercy P. Whitney, Journal and Letters, March 10, 1820, to March 15, 1870, Mission Houses Museum, Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society, Honolulu, Hawaii. Mercy’s rich documentary history was likely referred to by James A. Michener as he wrote his famous novel *Hawaii*; in fact, Mercy and Samuel may be seen as models for the characters Jerusha and Abner.

4. On Christian missionary views particularly, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

5. Whitney, Journal, July 23, 1820.

willing to learn.”⁶ Yet she was humble about her own merit, and as a true Calvinist she wrote, “I feel that I never did nor never can do one meritorious act in the sight of God, but that if ever I am saved it must be all of grace, free, rich, sovereign, unmerited grace.”⁷

Mercy, like other missionary wives, viewed her responsibilities as a wife and homemaker as mission service. She served as a living demonstration of what Hawaiians were told was a truly proper lifestyle. The culture of New England was taught alongside Christianity, and Hawaiian women were encouraged to show reverence for God, to be decent and modest in behavior, and to be domestically oriented. She was frustrated when their teaching seemed to have little effect. In 1832, after twelve years in Hawaii, Mercy wrote:

Although we have the greatest encouragement to labour for the good of this people, & notwithstanding there has been a very great change for the better in their manners and morals, still I think they are at present far, very far, from being placed on a level with civilized countries. . . . Instances have occurred of persons who have for a long time appeared like true Christians both in conduct and conversation, and yet have afterwards conducted in such a manner, as to make it evident they were actuated only by selfish or sinister motives.⁸

Mercy was also much exercised over the arrival of Catholic missionaries in Hawaii in 1840, claiming that they brought “destruction and ruin.”⁹

Mercy and Samuel had four children, and when each of the children reached about age eight, they were sent back to the United States to live with Congregationalist host families. This separation was very hard to bear, but Mercy and Samuel had seen other missionary children adopt the local customs and desired their children to live a good Christian life. Samuel Whitney spent his entire missionary career on the island of Kauai, traveling around the island to visit the seventy villages on his circuit. Whitney had great influence with the chiefs on Kauai and, in time, became an effective speaker; his audience sometimes rose to thousands of people.¹⁰ He became ill in September 1845 and died that December, at age fifty-two. The shock of her husband’s death must have been great on Mercy, for she quit writing

6. Mercy Whitney to Mrs. Mary Clark, July 15, 1830, quoted in Mary Zwiep, *Pilgrim Path: The First Company of Women Missionaries to Hawaii* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 99.

7. Mercy Whitney to Dr. and Mrs. Winslow, October 13, 1849, quoted in Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty*, 75.

8. Whitney, Journal, November 8, 1832.

9. Whitney, Journal, November 16, 1840.

10. Edward Joesting, *Kauai: The Separate Kingdom* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Lihue, Hawaii: Kauai Museum Association, 1984), 128.

in her journal for the next two and a half years, making no entries until August 1848, when she wrote, "I feel at times almost disconsolate, cast down and dejected. The Lord alone is my consolation."¹¹

Mercy must have been pleased when three of her children, Maria, Emily, and Henry, returned to the islands in 1848, but unfortunately they returned to live in Honolulu, leaving her still alone on Kauai. Her son Samuel W. Whitney stayed in the United States. Henry Whitney became editor of a Honolulu newspaper, *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, and later served as the first postmaster in Honolulu.¹²

Over the years, Mercy maintained contact with her family in spite of the slowness of the mail, which could take six months to make the journey around the Horn from Boston. Her relatives kept her informed of the activities of Edward, as he moved to Kirtland, then Missouri, and finally Nauvoo. Mercy recorded her thoughts in her journal in 1832:

I received two letters one from cousin C. Ely, & another from br. C. He gave an account of Edward's leaving his home in Ohio, & joining himself to a sect called Mormonites, & had gone to the Rocky Mountains¹³ with a view to convert the Indians. I cannot account for any one's embracing such a faith as brother C. describes that of the Mormonites to be, who is not given up to a delusion to believe a lie; for I am sure there is no ground for such a faith in the word of God. May Edward be brought to see the error into which he has fallen, repent of his sins & embrace that faith which alone can save his soul.¹⁴

The Family of Edward Partridge

After his conversion, Edward was called by Joseph Smith to return to Massachusetts and preach the gospel to his parents and siblings, and he continued to write about the gospel to his family over the years, but they never joined him in Mormonism. Edward Jr. was born in Independence, Missouri, and was only six years old when his father passed away in Nauvoo in 1840. The family started west in 1847, and by then Edward Jr. was able to assume much of the burden of the physical labor needed during the trek. They arrived in

11. Whitney, Journal, August 8, 1848.

12. Postmaster Whitney issued stamps that became known as "Hawaiian Missionaries" because they were frequently used by American missionaries on the Islands to send letters back to the continental United States; these stamps are among the world's philatelic rarities.

13. Edward did not travel to the Rocky Mountains of the western United States; Mercy may be referring to Edward's move to Missouri.

14. Whitney, Journal, June 28, 1832.

the Salt Lake Valley in 1848 and settled down to scrape together enough to live on and to put together some kind of shelter.

Sandwich Islands LDS Mission

The Mormon mission to the Sandwich Islands arose from the gold fields of California. Ten young Mormons, the most prominent being George Q. Cannon, future Apostle and member of the Church's First Presidency, were called to leave their hunt for treasure and open up a mission in the Sandwich Islands. They accepted their calls and sailed from San Francisco, landing in Honolulu on December 12, 1850. The day following their arrival, the young missionaries climbed a hill outside of the city, improvised an altar, sang a hymn, and offered a prayer for the success of their mission.

The missionaries began their proselyting on the assumption that they were to work among the Islands' white people, and for weeks they labored with little or no success. Eventually, under these frustrating circumstances, five of the missionaries left the mission. Four of them returned to the United States, while a fifth decided on his own initiative to switch his mission to Tahiti.

As the five remaining missionaries evaluated their situation, they felt that their mission was not to be primarily among the "haoles" (whites) but among the native Hawaiians. This recognition imposed upon them the tasks of learning the very difficult Hawaiian language and becoming accustomed to living among the natives. The chief advocate of this change was the youngest of the missionaries, George Q. Cannon. Once moving in this direction, the tiny mission saw success.¹⁵

Edward Partridge Jr. Comes to Hawaii

At general conference on April 6, 1854, twenty-year-old Edward Jr. was among twenty men called on a mission to the Sandwich Islands. Edward began immediately to make the necessary preparations for the journey to the coast of California. Like other Mormon missionaries of the time, he was to go without purse or scrip and was to depend on the contributions of members and sympathetic nonmembers as well as income he might earn through temporary employment to pay for his travel expenses and to provide the necessities of life during his tenure as a missionary. In July he arrived at Los Angeles where, for the first time in his life, Edward beheld the ocean and an ocean-going ship. Between July 10 and December 1, Edward lived in the San

15. Edward Partridge Jr., Journal, typescript, 1854–1899, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, p. 9a.

Francisco Bay area; he quickly earned enough money for his own steerage passage but donated it to other missionaries. By November, Edward and the other two remaining missionaries of the original twenty obtained passage on the brig *Abigale*. Although there were ocean-going steamers at the time, the missionaries apparently elected to travel to Honolulu by sailing ship because the fare was cheaper. It took the ship twenty-two days to travel from San Francisco Bay to the island of Oahu. On the voyage, Edward wrote that he was seasick only on the first day and seems to have felt fine for the rest of the journey even though the slow progress of the wind-driven ship made the “time pass wearily away.”¹⁶

On a bright Sunday morning, December 24, 1854, Edward and his companions awoke to find the city of Honolulu spread before them. The travelers had no difficulty in locating the house where the missionaries lived and found four elders eagerly waiting for them. The newcomers were informed that they had arrived just in time to observe a change in the rulership of the islands, since King Kamehameha III had died on December 15.

On Christmas Day, Edward called on his first cousin, Henry M. Whitney, the son of Mercy Partridge Whitney. Mr. Whitney was unfriendly. He said he was very busy and invited Edward to call some other time. On January 12, Edward and another new missionary left Honolulu on board the steamer *Kalama* for the island of K auai, about 250 miles from Honolulu. They paid \$4.00 each for deck passage. After two days at sea, they landed at the little town of Nawiliwili. Here he got his first taste of native food, which he described as “anything but pleasant.” He found his quarters to be a native hut. He observed that when the floor was covered with mats, the huts presented a very comfortable appearance. On Sunday, January 14, Edward attended his first native meeting in his assigned district and wrote, “Here I endeavored to get my mind as much upon the native language as possible.” He was finally able to get to the serious work of serving as a missionary.¹⁷

The Visit of the Two Missionaries

On Tuesday, March 6, 1855, Edward went to visit his Aunt Mercy in Waimea, which was the largest town on the island. He noted that there was a good stone church and three or four foreign residences, the remainder being native houses. Mrs. Whitney lived in a large two-story house with a veranda in front. Edward went in and introduced himself to his aunt and handed her a letter from his mother (Mercy’s sister-in-law), Lydia Partridge. She

16. Partridge, Journal, December 3–12, 1854, p. 8.

17. Partridge, Journal, January 14, 1855, p. 12.

received it very coldly, but he recorded that was what he had expected from what he had heard of her. He described Mercy as a tall, slim woman aged fifty years,¹⁸ and she described him as a fine, healthy-looking man about twenty-one years of age.

In her journal entry for the day, Mercy commented on the letter Edward had given her. It was, she wrote,

the first line I have ever received from her pen, & this was quite unexpected. It was dated the 3rd of last May, almost a year ago. She speaks of their trials and persecutions as having been very great, & says, "There Are many things believed with us, which at first comes in contact with the prejudices of the people at the present day, yet to those that understand them, they are perfectly consistent, & according to scripture, therefore judge not hastily but prove all things." In the above sentence, I suppose she refers to polygamy as one thing.

In another part of her letter she says, "It was by searching the scriptures & obeying the requirements laid down by Christ & his Apostles, that I came in possession of my present belief, the Spirit of God bearing witness of the truth, & I do thank the Lord that I have been brought to a knowledge of these things." Her letter is written in a very good spirit, & perhaps she is a christian, notwithstanding all her errors.¹⁹

During the late afternoon and evening that Edward and Mercy were together, they spent much of their time discussing the differences they had on organized religion. Mercy shed a tear over hearing confirmation that three of her nieces were married to the same man. She did not consider them any better than public prostitutes and consequently did not feel like acknowledging relationship with them or anyone who believed such a doctrine. She said it was in direct opposition to the whole tenor of the Bible; she and her husband had spent years teaching the native population to forsake the practice of polygamy, which now her Mormon relatives were following.

Edward told her that he had not found anything in the Bible that forbade men the privilege of having a plurality of wives but had read of many men who were considered good men and received the approbation of the Almighty and actually received revelation and the ministrations of angels, and yet were polygamists. Mercy responded by noting that, based on her observation of polygamy among Hawaiian natives, women in polygamous families lived in jealousy and a spirit of contention. Edward said that his sisters living in the same household were contented and seemed very happy.

18. Partridge, Journal, March 6, 1855, p. 14.

19. Whitney, Journal, March 6, 1855.

Mercy further argued that Christ put down polygamy in the Bible. In response Edward asked her to show him the place in the scriptures where that occurs. She took the Bible and looked through it but was unable to find any such scripture. Mercy then referred to Genesis chapter one where it says that a man should cleave unto his wife—wife not wives. Edward responded by referring to 2 Samuel 12:7–9, in which the Lord gave a man a plurality of wives.

Having exhausted the subject of polygamy, Mercy and Edward covered a variety of other subjects and had differing opinions regarding most of them. Edward said the scriptures show that we shall be rewarded according to our works. Mercy responded that she did not think she would be saved for any good she had done; if she were saved, it would be through grace. Edward argued that Mercy had a way of “spiritualizing” scriptures to make them mean something they do not say, but Mercy countered that Mormons take such portions of the Bible as suit them and reject parts that don’t suit them. Mercy asked why Mormons were so insistent on baptism, since baptism is not essential to salvation. Edward taught that there is no virtue in the water, but baptism is in obedience to the requirements of the Almighty.²⁰

Mercy, in her journal, concluded the following regarding Edward and the message he was bringing to the islands.

Mormonism was the principal subject of conversation during his stay, & I learned a good deal respecting their views, which I should think in some respects similar to the Unitarians. Edward seems to be trusting principally to his own good works for salvation, but is willing to have Christ supply his lack of perfect obedience should he come short. He does not believe in the doctrine of original sin, but thinks mankind are born “pure & holy as the angels.” When I spoke of the new birth or that change of heart which all must experience before they are prepared to enter heaven, he said he did not know what I meant by that expression, as he was not accustomed to hear anything about a new birth, & it was very evident to me from his conversation, that he knew nothing respecting it from experience.²¹

In addition to the philosophical differences Mercy had with Edward, she was also concerned that he had been living on the opposite side of the island among the natives—“accommodating himself to their customs and habits, and eating fish and poi, of which he says he has become quite fond.” She feared that he would soon be no better than those with whom he associated, since he was secluded from all civilized society.

Finally, Mercy offered this hope:

20. Partridge, *Journal*, March 5, 1855, pp. 14–15.

21. Whitney, *Journal*, March 6, 1855.

O let us pray that his coming to these islands may be the means of his conversion from Mormonism to Christianity. Should this be the case, he will have cause to all eternity to bless God for sending him hither—He told me that if he could find Any better religion than the Mormons he would embrace it, but he thought most sects or denominations were nothing but hypocrites. I asked him if he included me in that. No. He replied. “I did not say so,” but from what he did say there could be but little doubt as to his meaning. This visit I have long dreaded, and rejoice that it is past. Such seasons are too exciting for my feeble bones.²²

Edward summarized the visit by writing:

She told me that she did not feel like receiving anyone at her house that believed and taught such principles, which I told her was no more [than] I had expected. I was prepared to receive almost any kind of treatment. I stayed all night with her but should probably not have done so if I had known of any other place where I could stop.

Wed., March 7, 1855. This morning after conversing with Aunt till 10 o'clock I arose to depart, having previously saddled my horse. I bore my testimony to her that Mormonism was true and Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and told her that inasmuch as she did not feel like receiving me at her house as a relative I should trouble her no more, and with this understanding I took my leave.²³

Edward reported no further visits with his relatives in Hawaii.

Edward Partridge Jr. as Mission President

Twenty-seven years later, on April 6, 1882, while attending general conference in Salt Lake City, Edward Partridge was again called to go to the Sandwich Islands, this time to take the presidency of that mission and to take some of his family with him. On June 1, 1882, Edward and his family took the train for San Francisco. The party consisted of Edward, his wife Sarah, and two of their sons, who were to serve as missionaries.

The world had changed greatly in the intervening years. Instead of taking many weeks to cross the deserts and nearly a month to cross the ocean, they were able to travel from Salt Lake City to Honolulu in just over ten days. Also, the position of the Church had changed. Although the Church had grown and was therefore able to send more missionaries and provide permanent chapels and other facilities, the opposition against it, largely due to the continued practice and unwavering defense of polygamy, was more intense and worldwide.

22. Whitney, Journal, March 6, 1855.

23. Partridge, Journal, March 7, 1855, p. 15.

During Edward's second year as mission president, he and Sarah took the opportunity to visit some of the other islands. While visiting Kauai, he recorded the following:

Mon, Sept. 10, 1883. Went to Makawali traveling slow as Sarah could not ride fast. Distance about 9 miles. We went out of our way a mile or two for the purpose of visiting Waimea and the grave of my aunt Mercy Whitney, who I visited when I was here on my former mission, when she refused to receive me at her house because I was a Mormon, although I stopped overnight. The church that was built for Mr. Whitney was a large, stone building of rather an imposing appearance compared with other buildings of the same period which I have seen on other islands. Mrs. Whitney's buried back of the church. A heavy slab of white marble marks her last resting place and her plot is surrounded by a rough picket fence. The inscription on the slab is as follows:

Sacred to the memory of Reverend Samuel Whitney,
Pioneer Missionary of the ABCFM and First Pastor
of the Waimea Church. Born in Bradford, Connecticut,
April 28, 1793, Landed at Kaioua March 20, 1820,
Died at Lahaina, Maui, December 15, 1845 age 52 years
And to the memory of his wife Mercy Partridge Whitney
Born at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 14, 1795
Died at Waimea, December 26, 1872, age 77 years
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.

We rode to the Whitney residence not far from the church. The building looks natural but is fast going to ruin. The upper porch is nearly all fallen down as well as the outside stairs. The trees in the yard and everything bear an appearance of neglect and desolation. I went to the house of the Reverend Mr. Lowell and got the keys to the house. We went through the different rooms which were bare of furniture but dusty and musty and ornamented and festooned with cobwebs. I pointed out the place where stood the lounge on which I sat and the room on the second floor where I slept the one night I stayed there, and it was with peculiar feelings when I looked upon the desolate place to contemplate the changes wrought by time and the providences of God.

I felt hurt when I was turned from her door but harbored no resentment towards my aunt. I felt like I would like to do her a kind action in return for her enmity towards me, and I thought while I stood by her grave and wrote in my memorandum book the inscription upon her grave, that perhaps the time had come that I could do her a favor by having the ordinances of baptism performed for her and her husband, and if she was sincere in her course of life on earth, she may be convinced of the truth of the gospel in the place to which she has gone, and be grateful to those whom she despised on earth as unfit to associate with her, if they shall perform for her the ordinances of the gospel that she would not, in consequence of her false religious bigotry, perform for herself.

After ascending two pairs of stairs into the tower I found papers and tracts strewn around, some bearing dates of 1822 and 1825 and 1829. I picked up a few as matters of curiosity.²⁴

And with that wish to perform temple work for his relatives, Edward expressed his desire to be one with them in the eternities. Each of these two missionaries in Hawaii performed their work dutifully and true to their faiths, never seeing eye to eye on matters of religion.

Scott H. Partridge (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Hayward, where he taught for thirty-two years. He received a BS from Brigham Young University, an MBA from the University of Oregon, and a Doctor of Business Administration from Harvard University. He is the author of “The Failure of the Kirtland Safety Society,” *BYU Studies* 12, no. 4 (1972): 437–54; and “Edward Partridge in Painesville, Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 42, no. 1 (2003): 50–73.

24. Partridge, *Journal*, September 10, 1883, pp. 409–10.