KOOLAU DISTRICT, MAUI,  
THE BEGINNING OF A SUCCESSFUL LDS MISSION 
by Adren J. Bird

Joseph Smith fully realized the importance of preaching the gospel to "the peoples on the isles of the sea" early in the history of the Church. As he translated the Book of Mormon and received revelations, later printed in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord indicated His concern for those dwelling on the "islands of the seas" in a number of scriptures.¹ Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 10:2, 2 Nephi 29:7 and D & C 1:1 are a few of these scriptures. He called missionaries to labor in the Sandwich Islands as early as 1843 while residing at Nauvoo, Illinois. These elders left for San Francisco that year but being unable to secure passage to the Sandwich Islands, they booked passage on a ship sailing for the South Pacific. The elders disembarked in the Society Islands intent upon preaching the gospel to any people found dwelling on those or neighboring islands.

The Sandwich Island (Hawaiian) Mission dates from 1850 when on December 13th of that year 10 missionaries arriving from San Francisco dedicated the Islands for the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we know, within a few months, five of the original ten missionaries had either returned home (Utah or California) or had gone to other South Seas Islands to preach the Gospel.²

In the Sandwich Islands, two formidable and persistent adversities hampered the missionaries in their attempt to preach and spread the gospel. First, they were constantly, and in some cases, severely opposed by the major Christian groups in the islands, the Protestant (mostly Calvinists and Presbyterians) and the Catholics. Ministers and priests from these groups caused no end of problems between the Elders and government officials as well as with the people themselves. Persecution and hatred from other Christian denominations were not unfamiliar to Mormon Elders and, generally, they were able to defend themselves and their beliefs adequately as they encountered unfriendly clergy and others. However, learning the Hawaiian language shackled their effectiveness in teaching the Gospel to the general population. Many unkind accusations and falsehoods were uttered against the Mormons by various clergy and government officials to the Hawaiian people in their own tongue prior to the missionaries learning the language.

All the missionaries struggled in learning the Hawaiian language. Elder George Q. Cannon states that he received the ability to interpret the
Hawaiian language as a divine gift.\textsuperscript{3} Other missionaries report that they learned the language through hard work, prayer and determination—which is an effective method, but a much slower process. Once the language was mastered, the spread of the Gospel throughout the Islands spread like a grass fire with more than 3000 people aligning themselves with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints during the first three years of the mission. When compared to the local population of the Islands in 1854 which totalled about 70,000\textsuperscript{4}, three thousand members represented a substantial percentage of the population. Kuykendall observed that the Mormons had done more towards converting the Hawaiians to Christianity in the island kingdom within three years than the Calvinists had done in thirty.\textsuperscript{5}

It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to determine with any degree of accuracy the identification of the first convert to the Church as well as where and when the first baptism occurred. The large distances which separating missionary zones both by land and by water, the mode of travel which was usually walking or sailing in a small boat or canoe, and the time needed to send communications from one area to another each contributed to the inaccuracy of their records.

Dr. Joseph H. Spurrier reports in his newly published book, \textit{Sandwich Island Saints}, that the first baptisms occurred on the island of Maui on Sunday, June 22, 1851.\textsuperscript{6} This information is also engraved on the memorial at Pulehu. However, Elder James Keeler records in his journal that Elder Hawkins, laboring on the Big Island, wrote him a letter dated April 19, 1851 tell of his baptizing 14 people into the Church on that island.\textsuperscript{7} Another entry in Elder Keeler's journal, which demonstrates the difficulty the Elders had with communications, indicates that the baptisms spoken of by Hawkins might have occurred as early as March 11, 1851.\textsuperscript{8} The date of the first conversion is further confused by the following entry in Elder Henry Bigler's journal dated April 9, 1851: "Pres. Clark had been to see us and said he had fasted and prayed and the Lord showed him there was but one man who would obey the Gospel on the islands and that one man, whom he had already baptized was by trade a printer. He counseled us to leave the Sandwich Islands and go to the Marqueses Islands and there open up and that the man he had baptized would go with
us taking his type and fixtures and do our printing and print some Church works where the gentile missionaries did not have such a stronghold as they have here."

To my knowledge, there are no records of this baptism nor have I been able to find the name of this printer Pres. Clark reported baptized. The important point, it seems to me, is not who was the first convert nor where the baptism occurred, but being able to observe the progress of the missionaries efforts in spite of the vigorous opposition they constantly encountered and the lack of ability to articulate in the Hawaiian language which plagued most of the Elders, the work was progressing through their heroic efforts.

Early in 1948, I traveled from Wailuku to Hana in the company of Mission President E. Wesley Smith, Elder Frank McGhie, Elder Calvin Boren and two lady missionaries, Sister Hammond and Sister Winch, we stopped in front of the Ke'anae chapel. The gardenias were in bloom and President Smith picked two or three blossoms for the sisters. During the conversation which followed while standing in front of the Ke'anae chapel, Pres. Smith spoke directly to Elder Boren and me concerning the work of the Church and its progress in the Hana district. In effect, he stated: "We have a special responsibility to the people of Ke'anae as this was a favored place for George Q. Cannon, as well as other early missionaries, and was the first fully organized branch of the Church in the Hawaiian Islands."

Elder Boren and I took Pres. Smith literally at his word concerning this important piece of information and soon began discussing our newly discovered knowledge of the area of Ke'anae with other missionaries in the field. This lead to some lively discussions in the Kahului mission home during the next month or so following a special conference for missionaries held at Pulehu. We contended that Ke'anae was the first branch of the Church while the Kahului missionaries insisted that Pulehu marked the location of the first organized branch in the Hawaiian Islands.

Upon inquiring of other missionaries in the field and after doing a cursory investigation on the subject, I was left wondering if I had misunderstood Pres. Smith or if he had other things in mind when he told us about Ke'anae. Certainly our conversation with the President and Bro. McGhie included other information about Ke'anae and how much Elder Cannon always enjoyed going to the windward side of Maui.
Recently, I read the following information quoted from the journal of Elder Henry W. Bigler.

"Elder Farrer and myself, having been invited by Elder Cannon to visit him and the Saints on Maui and to attend the dedicatory services of a new meeting house at Ke'anae on that island. On Thursday, Aug. 19th (1852), we made a start and got into Honolulu where we went to see Brother and Sister Harris."\(^{10}\)

The entry goes on telling how they sailed for Lahaina aboard the schooner "Pauahe" from whence they walked to Wailuku where Elder Cannon was found at the home of Napela busily translating the Book of Mormon into Hawaiian. The quotation continues:

"Saturday, Sept. 4, 1852. The best Latter-day Saint meeting house hitherto erected by the Saints on the island of Maui was dedicated at Ke'anae in the Koolau district. The house was 56 X 21 feet, built in native style with lauhala. The people were much pleased with it as it was a better building than the one owned by the Calvinists at the same village. Its dedication was celebrated with large and interesting meetings and a grand feast. Of American Elders, Bros. Cannon (who offered the dedicatory prayer), Keeler, Hawkins, Hammond, Bigler, and Farrer were present. These brethren, accompanied by others, arrived in Ke'anae Aug 31st and left Sept. 7th. During their visit in Koolau district, 26 were baptized, a number of brethren ordained to the Priesthood and meetings held in a number of villages.\(^{11}\)

Noteworthy to this occasion is the fact that all five of the original Sandwich Island missionaries were present at this dedication. It is possible that President Smith was referring to the first dedicated branch building in attempting to impress me and my companion as to the importance of applying ourselves more diligently as missionaries in Ke'anae.

From the information found in the journals of the early Hawaiian missionaries, there is little doubt that a branch was organized in the Kula area on Aug. 6, 1851. The exact location of that branch, in all probability, was at the village of Kealahou in the Kula district. Elder Cannon records the event as follows.

"When I started back to Kula, which I did on Tuesday morning (Aug. 5, 1851), I felt very tired, with the amount of
labor that I had performed. My object in returning then, was to organize the Saints who had been baptized into a branch, so that I could return again to Ke'anae.

"In organizing the branch at Kula, I ordained two teachers whose names were Kaleohano and Maiola, and three deacons, Pake, Kahiki and Mahoe." 12

Within two weeks time, Elder Cannon returned to the Koolau district of Maui and again preached the gospel with great success. During this visit he reports organizing branches at Ke'anae, Wailuanui, Waianu and Honomanu.

There is little doubt, as supported by Elder Cannon's enthusiasm in reporting the large numbers of members baptized into the Church as well as other activities he engaged in with the Saints, that Ke'anae was, and rightly so, a favored place for the Utah Elders. Listen to Elder Cannon's description of his first trip to Ke'anae:

"The road over which we traveled part of the distance to reach Ke'anae, passed through a most romantic country. The vegetation was of the most luxuriant description, the trees being of a kind new to me and very grand. Such a wealth of vegetation I had read of, but never before beheld; and is not seen in any land outside of the tropics. The shrubs and ferns were in great variety, and grew in almost endless profusion. Many of the trees were masses of living green from the root upward, being covered with a multitude of vines and creepers of various kinds.

"To me the journey was most romantic, and I enjoyed it, the more so as I now understood the language and was able to obtain many interesting items from the natives with whom we traveled and met concerning the country and their history and traditions.

"Our arrival in Ke'anae created great excitement. The people had been watching for us, and seeing us approach from a long distance, had gathered to meet us. Had we been princes they could not have treated us with greater consideration and honor." 13

To have completed such a journey and then be greeted in such a royal way by the entire population of that area, would be a never forgotten experience, but for Elder Cannon and his companions, the best was yet to
come. They obtained the use of the Calvinist meeting house to present their Gospel messages and within the short time spent in Ke'anae on this trip, baptized approximately 130 people into the Church. Is it any wonder that he returned to Kula exhausted from his labors?

This was a very significant turning point for the mission. Up to this time, the Elders had been reporting baptisms in relatively small numbers, but with the outpouring of the spirit in this "romantic" place, and with the people accepting the Gospel in such great numbers, it must have seemed to the Elders that they had virtually entered a missionary's "Garden of Eden" with converts approaching them from under every bush and tree.

In an attempt to understand Elder Cannon's thinking, we must recognize the dilemma in which he found himself. On one side of the mountain, in Kula, he had about 19 Saints struggling, in his absence, to keep the faith against heavy persecution. In Ke'anae, the Elders were meeting with great success, unknown before in the Hawaiian Islands, in performing convert baptisms. The large number of new members in Ke'anae gave some assurance to Elder Cannon that they would be reasonably safe and secure against any Calvinist threats during his short absence. It may be seen where he followed the wisdom spoken of by the Savior in the parable concerning the Good Shepherd. He went to rescue the lost "one", or those who might soon be lost, while the main flock remained reasonably safe in "green pastures". At the same time, he did not want to leave these new converts alone and leaderless for any great period of time.

This, then, is one possible reason a branch was first organized in Kualahou with others being formed and organized very promptly thereafter in the Koolau district of the island. In baseball vernacular we would say that Elder Cannon was attempting to cover two bases at one time.

The importance of Elder Cannon's conversion successes in Ke'anae and the Koolau district villages cannot be over emphasized. His visits to the area served as both a healing balm to his physical well being and brought peace of mind and soul as he and his fellow missionaries brought large numbers of people into the Church during those trips. President Cannon reports: "We had many excellent times at Ke'anae".13 He refers in his journal to recreational type activities as well as the pleasure of conversing with the Hawaiian people and learning of their customs and family values system.

The success they had at Ke'anae came at a very crucial time of the
mission. It is difficult to measure the importance these conversions would later have on the growth of the Church in the Hawaiian Islands. There are Hawaiian descendants of these early East Maui converts throughout the islands who have held to the faith and made substantial contributions to the growth and leadership of the Church in Hawaii as well as elsewhere.

Within a few years of the above mentioned events, the hauole would take the water by ditch and canal from every stream in the Koolau district to provide life to the barren isthmus of the Valley Isle and develop one of the richest sugar plantations in the world. This of course, disrupted the ecological and economic balance of the Hawaiian ‘ohana lifestyle in those beautiful valleys of East Maui and lead to an exodus of people from the Koolau district to the urban centers of all the islands where jobs and foreign goods were available. Many of the present-day members of the Church in Hawaii trace their LDS ancestral heritage to those people converted to the Gospel by these pioneer missionaries while living in Ke‘anae, Wailua, Kaupo, Kipalulu and Hana--and even from villages now rarely spoken of, such as Na‘ihiku, Honomanu, Wailuaiki, Wailuanui, Ulunio and others.

What then did President Smith mean when he stated that Ke‘anae was the first organized branch in the islands? I am inclined to believe he had more than one objective in mind. First, he wanted to accentuate the fact that we were serving a mission in a special place where the ground had been hallowed from the diligent labors of the many worthy servants of God coming before us and, second, that here was a place where people joined the Church by the hundreds in the past and we had a responsibility to "thrust in our sickles and reap". He may have meant to say Ke‘anae was one of the first organized branches of the Church or he may have had reference to the fact that Ke‘anae had the first dedicated chapel in the islands.

President E. Wesley Smith was the son of a great Hawaiian missionary and President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith. He was born in Laie while his father was serving his second mission to the islands. He spoke Hawaiian fluently and it can be assumed that his knowledge of the Hawaiian Mission history was excellent having served three missions to the Hawaiian Islands. Knowing how important the missionary labors in Ke‘anae were to the beginning of the Church in Hawaii, I am inclined to think Pres. Smith was using the point to encourage diligence on the part of
two Elders and not attempting to rewrite the history of the Hawaiian Mission.

It must also be recognized that most of the historical information we have concerning the Sandwich Island Mission comes from journals of the early missionaries. Elders are known to be inclined to "catch-up" on the events of the week by completing their journals on Saturday night. Certainly this affects the accuracy of personal journals, although we cannot discount the recalled information contained therein. However, we should be cognizant that many times personal journals leave more questions unanswered by the authors than are answered.

To read of the dedication of these early Mormon missionaries, to learn of the hardships they willingly endured, to hear of their success in preaching the gospel to a people having believing hearts and to know the miracles our Father showered upon these islands after so many centuries of darkness adds to one's testimony by bringing past and present together. May we rededicate ourselves and our efforts to living and spreading the Gospel of the restored Church of Jesus Christ throughout these beautiful islands, is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.
Sources Cited

1. Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants.


5. Kuykendall, Ralph S.

6. Spurrier, Joseph H.,

7. Jenson, Andrew.

8. Jenson, Andrew.


10. Jenson, Andrew.

11. Jenson, Andrew.


13. Cannon, George Q.