

A History of the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Hawaii

Sources:

Daniel Peterson for the Deseret News. February 2015

Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks. Hal Pierce

In September 1850, **Charles C. Rich** of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints called 10 young elders to leave Northern California and commence missionary work in the Sandwich or Hawaiian Islands. After a rough month at sea, they reached Honolulu in December; within days, Elder **George Q. Cannon** and two others were assigned to the island of Maui.

Mid-19th-century Hawaii bore little resemblance to today's modern American state. The Maui elders lived first in a grass shack in Lahaina. Later, a generous woman named **Nalimanui** offered to [move in with her daughter](#) to allow the missionaries to use her home.

Eventually a counselor to four LDS Church presidents, President Cannon has acquired legendary status in Hawaiian Mormon history, partly because of his miraculous command of the native language.

On one occasion, while praying in a garden behind Nalimanui's home, President Cannon received a powerful divine manifestation so sacred to him that he seldom mentioned it in public and never supplied details. Later, though, he recorded that God "revealed himself to me as he had never done before. ... Many things were revealed to me during those days, when he was the only friend we had to lean upon. A friendship was thus established between our Father and myself, which I trust will never be broken or diminished. ... He condescended to commune with me, for I heard his voice more than once as one man speaks with another."

On his deathbed in 1901, President Cannon assured his son that he knew that God lived because he had heard his voice. However, there is more: During an 1893 meeting in the newly completed Salt Lake Temple, he testified that he had "seen and conversed with Christ as a man talks with his friend," "face to face."

"I know that God lives," he wrote in the Deseret Evening News on Oct. 6, 1896. "I know that Jesus lives; for I have seen him. ... I testify to you of these things as one that knows — as one of the Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ." Lahaina, on Maui, may have been President Cannon's personal "sacred grove."

In March 1851, he traveled via the Iao Valley from Lahaina to Wailuku, where he met and baptized a prominent Hawaiian judge named **Jonathan (or Jonatana) Napela**. Together, they eventually translated the Book of Mormon into Hawaiian.

With Napela's help, President Cannon established himself in Pulehu, a settlement in the Kula district on the volcanic slopes of Haleakala, where, under his leadership in 1852, the already rapidly growing LDS community built a one-room chapel that is older than the Salt Lake Tabernacle and still stands today. Its importance for Hawaii compares to that of Wilford Woodruff's Gadfield Elm chapel for England.

Later, during an 1869 trip to Utah, Napela became the first Hawaiian to receive the ordinances of the temple. Unfortunately, his wife, Kitty Napela, was diagnosed in 1873 with Hansen's disease, or leprosy, and was sent to Molokai's famous leper colony at Kalaupapa. Courageously choosing to accompany her, Jonathan Napela devoted the remainder of his life to the colony's Mormon membership and, working closely with the Belgian-born Catholic priest **Father Damien**, to serving the entire settlement. Both St. Damien — canonized in 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI — and Jonathan Napela themselves ultimately died of leprosy.

However, Hawaiian Mormonism didn't die. President Cannon returned to North America in 1854, but more young missionaries arrived in the islands

that September. Fifteen-year-old **Joseph F. Smith**, a future president of the church, was assigned to Kula, where, within just three months, he had mastered the local language and been chosen to preside over more than 2,000 members on the islands of Maui, Molokai and Lanai.

In 1854, the island of Lanai, easily visible from Lahaina, was chosen as a “gathering place” for the Saints. By 1865, however, Laie, on Oahu, was selected to replace it. Fifty years later, while making his fourth visit to Maui, President Joseph F. Smith also dedicated the site for a temple in Laie. He died before it was completed, but in 2000, a second Hawaiian temple was dedicated in Kona, on the “Big Island.”

In 1921, then-Elder **David O. McKay** visited the Pulehu chapel with a small group of Saints. While praying there, Elder McKay and others said President Cannon and President Smith, both years dead, joined them.

Maui is famous for its whale watching, snorkeling and sunny beaches. However, it should be famous, too, for its sacred history.

There is a small LDS chapel on the island of Molokai at Kalaupapa that now is empty but once served several hundred church members who had leprosy. They were visited each week by priesthood leaders and missionaries from other parts of the island who spoke, taught lessons and blessed the sacrament.