

Nancy Sumner, Hawaiian Courtlady

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 1850s the inquisitorial guns of Western warships had abated; verbal battles between foreign diplomats and Hawaiian officials were silenced, at least for the time being. Consequently, life under the reign of Kamehameha IV became quite agreeable to both *haole* and Hawaiian residents of the island kingdom. Once it became clear that the Hawaiian Kingdom was not about to be swallowed up by one or another of the great powers, Hawaiian court society focused its attention upon the pleasures of court life.¹

King Kamehameha IV and his beautiful part-English Queen, Emma Kalanikaumaka Naea Rooke, shared ideas and responses more closely akin to European mores and trappings than to those of American origin. Emulating the English court, the royal couple exercised social leadership within the framework of the monarchy to which their high position and personal qualities entitled them.²

Along with the British court's rules of behavior and etiquette, the Hawaiian court showed visible evidences of political intrigues coupled with social divisions and petty prejudices among various cliques. The Hawaiian court was not without its romantic liaisons tinged with the growing pursuit of hedonistic pleasures.³ When it came to scandals and decadence along these lines, the tiny Hawaiian court ran abreast of some of the more seasoned European courts and at times was without peer.⁴

The uniqueness of the Hawaiian court and its social components lay in its division into three sub-societies; the Hawaiian, the *haole* (foreign), and the part white-part Hawaiian aristocratic groupings, all of which functioned with "Neo-Hawaiian society."⁵ The court's center of attraction was a sparkling bevy of elegant Hawaiian and *hapa-haole* (half-

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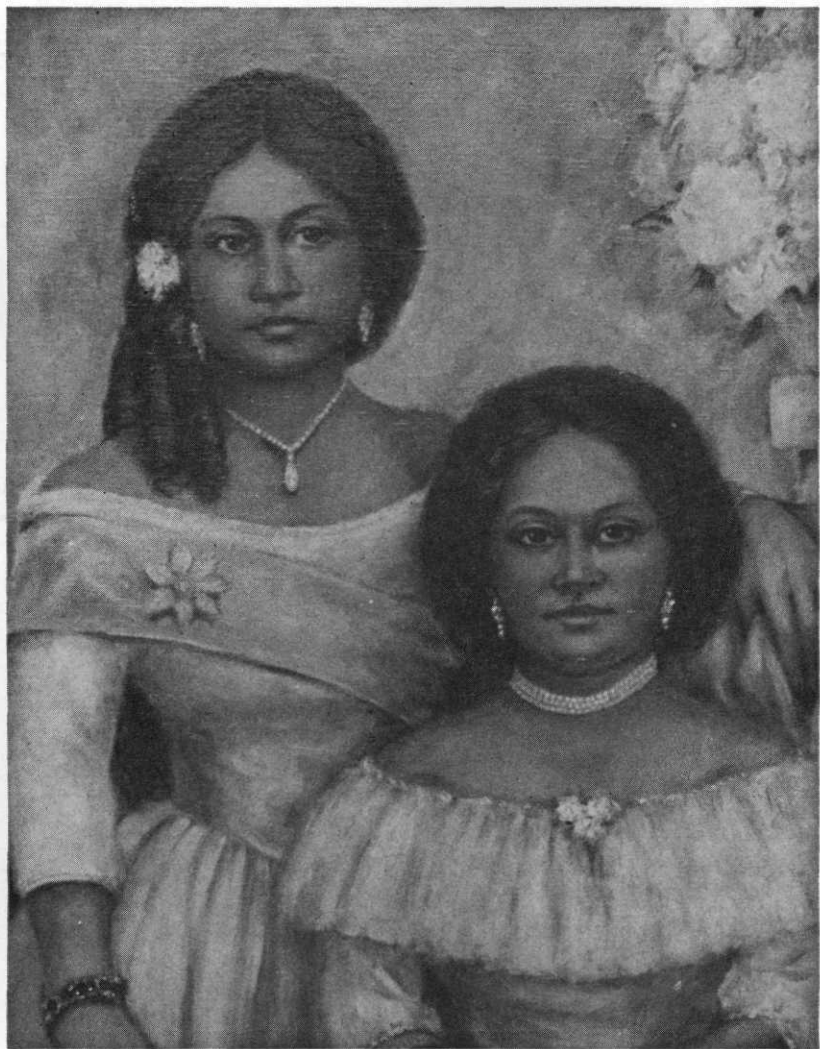


FIG. 1. Left: Princess Victoria Kamamalu; right: High Chiefess Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner, 1860? All photos for this article courtesy of Mrs. Myrna Anne Kamamoakualii Buffandeau Topolinski and Mrs. Rose S. Quinn Buffandeau Rossebo.



FIG. 2. Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner, about age 19-20.

white) ladies of nobility, admired by many in Hawaiian society and by foreign naval officers and visiting dignitaries who frequented the courts of Kamehameha IV and Kamehameha V.⁶ The courtladies of *hapa-haole* racial mixture seemed very alluring both in physical countenance and expression of character.⁷ The training of such women destined for careers at court started at a young age. Reportedly they were taught Hawaiian and English manners and the proper etiquette of the court by selected individuals who were carefully scrutinized by the parents.⁷

In 1858, the official list of courtladies included: Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal Victoria Kamamalu Ka'ahumanu, Princess Bernice Pauahi Paki Bishop, High Chiefess Lydia Kamakaeha Liliuokalani Paki Dominis, High Chiefess Marie Kaha'awelani Beckley, High Chiefess Elizabeth Kekaaniau Laanui, High Chiefess Mary Ann Kino'ole Pitman, High Chiefess Kiliwehi, High Chiefess Maryann Kame'ehiwa Tressilyn, High Chiefess Martha Swinton, and High Chiefess Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner. By virtue of being the great-granddaughter of King Pomare I of Tahiti, through her mother, Nancy Sumner was also accorded the title of Princess befitting the Tahitian Royal court of the Pomares.⁸

The High Chiefess Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner seemed to epitomize the sterling qualities of these ladies who graced the court of Queen Emma. Born in Honolulu on March 9, 1839, Nancy was the only child of High Chief William Keolaloa Kahānui Sumner and Princess Manaiula Tehuiarii of the Pomare royal family of Tahiti. Nancy's maternal Tahitian grandfather was Prince Tute Tehuiarii, the royal chaplain for King Kamehameha III and IV. In contrast, Nancy's paternal grandparents were Captain William Sumner of Northampton, England (known for his direct role in the expulsion and deportation of the Catholic priests, Fathers Bachelot and Short, in 1831) and High Chiefess Keakuaaihue Kanealai Hua, the cousin and adopted sister of Chiefess Ahia Beckley. Related to the Kamehamehas through Uminuikukaaiani, Nancy descended from the famous twins Kahanui and Kahā'ōpūlani who were charged with the responsibility for rearing Kamehameha the Great in infancy.⁹

Though she is relatively obscure in the recorded annals of modern Hawaiian history, Nancy Sumner typified many women born into her class and generation. Her formal education included a long list of Hawaiian and foreign tutors who schooled her in art, languages, history, and the like. At about age seven, she entered Mrs. Gummer's School for young girls. Finally, Nancy was placed in the Royal School to complete her formal education in 1854. The Royal School was the successor of the Chief's Children's School, under the new Headmaster Mr. Beckwith.

Some of Nancy's schoolmates were Victoria Kamamalu, Liliuokalani, and Jane and Martha Swinton.¹⁰

In 1858 Nancy emerged in court society as one of ten courtladies chosen by Queen Emma. She was quite a beauty, sophisticated, charming, and especially known for her polished manner laced with an air of haughtiness which accentuated her queenly bearing. Nancy also displayed behavioral attitudes that proved to be bicultural in character. These attributes combined with natural intelligence and talent gained her great favor at court during the 1860's.¹¹

By the eventful arrival of the Duke of Edinburgh in 1869, Nancy's popularity had already risen to heights of such importance within court circles that even the famous Lord Charles Beresford fell captive to the romance and charm of her sultry beauty.

MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

The Duke of Edinburgh, second son of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, arrived at Honolulu aboard *HBMS Galatea* on July 18, 1869.¹² After landing, His Royal Highness took leave of the ship, by invitation of His Hawaiian Majesty, King Kamehameha V, to stay at the King's father's residence. The Duke and his suite were to be presented to the Dowager Queen Emma at 12 noon.

In a hasty note to the Dowager Queen, King Kamehameha V wrote: "[The Duke was most] happy for the house [I] offered to him and his suite [while visiting here] . . . I favor [at your command] having the [court]-ladies attend court today at the Prince's presentation, as well as the gentlemen. Lord [Charles] Beresford is with the Duke—as Lieutenant."¹³ It was during this momentous visit of the Duke of Edinburgh that Beresford sought the hand of Nancy Sumner in marriage.

Nancy's association and friendship with Charles Beresford went back to the spring of 1865, in the month of May. The *HBMS Clio* lay anchored in Honolulu harbor for several days awaiting the embarkation of Dowager Queen Emma, bound for England via Panama. Charles Beresford was a midshipman of the *Clio* who enjoyed the sparkle of life in an adventuresome way. Along with several ship's officers, Beresford had attended one of the lavish entertainments hosted by High Chief William K. K. Sumner and presided over by his daughter Nancy.¹⁴ Unable to forget Nancy's charm and beauty, Beresford continued their friendship through correspondence which eventually blossomed to a sort of love affair via penned letters.

In the evening, following the presentation to Emma, His Royal Highness and company were the guests of the Hawaiian King at a royal



FIG. 3. Lord Charles Beresford, 1869?



FIG. 4. The widow Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner Ellis, age 50.

state dinner. The following night a great ball was held at Iolani Palace. The spacious grounds were lighted and the pillars of the palace were hung with fragrant evergreens festooned with flowers. The band from the *Galatea* delighted everyone with their music. Flags of Hawaii and Great Britain were displayed with those of the United States, France, the North German Confederation, and other friendly nations of Europe. A little after 8 p.m. the guests began arriving. H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh, accompanied by Lord Charles Beresford, Hon. Elliot Yoke, Lieutenant Heneage and the entire suite including officers of the *Galatea* arrived in grand style amid a grand burst of music.¹⁵

Upon arrival at the palace, the Duke and his entourage entered the ballroom and were again presented to King Kamehameha V, Dowager Queen Emma, and other dignitaries of the court. The ladies of the court were presented individually to the Duke as was the custom. Their presence added that touch of elegance and refinement characteristic of European balls and parties. Nancy's diary recorded the following: "As I stood by one of the open doors leading to the palace lanai with Lizzie Kekaaniau fanning myself for want of fresh air, dear . . . Charles Beresford and Lieutenant Heneage approached us. We began to converse with the usual small talk one usually enters into at these functions. As before I was much taken by his eyes, and must admit his suave and dashing manner had not changed. He is still a strikingly handsome man. . . ." ¹⁶

In the course of the evening Beresford and Nancy were paired off. Nancy continues her written account: ". . . at length the orchestra struck up a stirring invitation to the ballroom . . . about one hundred ladies representing the youth and beauty of Hawaii [and] the gentlemen numbered about one hundred and fifty . . . [attended the grand ball.]" ¹⁷

The illustrious guest, the Duke of Edinburgh, with his company, opened the dancing with a quadrille, the Duke leading Dowager Queen Emma out as a partner, and Lord Charles Beresford with Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop. Then followed the waltzes and gallopades, all of which Beresford danced with Nancy. Enjoyment reigned supreme. The ladies, dressed with great taste and some with luxurious elegance, were radiant. Indeed, according to the account given by the *Hawaiian Gazette*, a stranger entering the ballroom might have supposed he was in one of the centers of European royal splendor.¹⁸

In Nancy's diary we find her most blissful moments recorded:

Lord Charles has asked me to marry him. He wants to take me to England. I'm afraid . . . though I want him so . . . his blue eyes are beautiful . . . lovely blond

hair . . . truly handsome and adoring man . . . my heart pounds with the thought of his dear name, to touch his tender lips . . . to feel his power over me. . . . Is this love? Tell me my sweet. . . .¹⁹

Loving the man and yearning for him intensely as a woman, her practical mind brought her back to the reality that, for her, survival and affluence was certain only in Hawaii. Perhaps she was apprehensive of Lord Beresford's romantic dreams of the future. Finally, demonstrating that she could turn away any proposal of marriage, no matter who offered it, Nancy declined Lord Beresford's offer, upsetting her father, to say the least.²⁰

Nancy's reluctance to return to England with Lord Charles Beresford might lead one to believe that she was the provincial unsophisticated "small town girl", lacking the necessary confidence she would need in a completely western society. According to the available information, Nancy would have been at ease in English society. One might speculate that Nancy, knowing the level of the aristocratic rank of Lord Beresford in his own social station, might have thought that her Hawaiian blood would be detrimental to him among his English peers in a society which was both white and very aristocratic in its context. Within that environment their offspring might have been treated as half-breeds, below the social par of their cousins and pure white relatives.

Obviously, Lord Beresford's love for Nancy was not sufficient to induce him to live in the islands, thus becoming *her* husband. Beresford was fully committed to his station and way of life—and Nancy's refusal to accept marriage on his terms perhaps indicated her recognition of ethnic and cultural limitations.

When Lord Beresford did marry, it was an unhappy alliance, but he remained publicly married for the sake of his family image. Thereafter, it was known in and out of English court circles that Beresford kept several mistresses, as was a common practice of Victorian men of the aristocracy.²¹

The brief romantic interlude ended. Lord Charles Beresford left Hawaii never to see Nancy again. The memory of their romance was symbolized in a lock of her hair which Beresford had fashioned into "hair jewelry", an adornment worn by women in the later 1860's, set in gold. Beresford sent the hair jewelry to Nancy.²²

Four years after Nancy died in 1895, Lord Beresford revisited Hawaii on his way to the Far East, and paid a visit to Nancy's residence. Saddened to hear of her death from her daughter, Victoria, Beresford asked, "Did she suffer much?" "Yes, she did," replied Victoria. Then, "he looked up at Mama's portrait as if trying to recapture, in mind,



FIG. 5. Lord Charles Beresford in British uniform, 1899?

those moments which he shared with Mama many years ago. Then after a few moments of silence he turned to me and said, 'She was a beautiful woman.' I then said, Mother often spoke of you with much fondness. He seemed much affected by what I said.''²³

EPILOGUE

This brief essay on Nancy Sumner requires a postlude for clarification. Nancy's failure to conclude a brilliant marriage as expected of her, was apparently due to personal character traits rather than to social pressure. Everything about her, from family to court influence, urged her toward marriage and toward a selection of a high-born mate, but not necessarily a high-born mate outside of her culture, and she did not lack the opportunities to make such a match.²⁴

A compounding element in view of Nancy's situation was that she was attached to a bicultural stratum of part-Hawaiian women who were, at times, victimized by that element of Hawaiian society that struggled for Western approval and survival.²⁵ These women were also victims of their own inadequacies and frustrations due to a lack of complete self-confidence. However, their existence, where Nancy Sumner was concerned, was marked by extreme opulence and wealth veiled in an uneasy feeling of ephemeral pleasure-seeking.²⁶

This situation with its morose mixture of cultural and personal contradictions continued as the exposure of these women to titled people, wealth, and the finery of the Western world became the catalyst or substance that nurtured their wants and cravings.²⁷ As Nancy moved from one affair to another, her reputation achieved notoriety with each romantic liaison.²⁸ She continued her flirtatious, elusive games which ended in a series of rejected suitors.²⁹

The list of these suitors included Kamehameha V. His proposal of marriage was also met by a negative response, and he too fell victim to Nancy's cold words of rejection.³⁰ Nancy's clumsy blunder and insulting actions were met with open ostracism and protest from the aristocracy.³¹ Her rejection of Kamehameha V precipitated the uncalculated demise of her social activities, influence, and career at court.³²

Finally, as if driven to desperation, Nancy married her coachman Charles Kuinao Ellis on December 11, 1873.³³ Her choice of Ellis, however strange, predestined the future monetary status of her three children and their descendants.³⁴ Ellis was a man of low genealogical bloodlines, without position, influence or monetary status. Nancy's father felt he had no choice but to disinherit her—stripping her of all title to the large land holdings acquired by the Sumner family.³⁵

Three children were born to Nancy and Charles Ellis: William Kualii Sumner Ellis, Victoria Kualii Sumner Ellis (afterwards Mrs. Eugene Derville Buffandeau I), and John Kapilikea Sumner Ellis.³⁶

As the wife of Ellis, Nancy was unsuccessful in adjustment to her new life of ostracism and material hardship, a situation intensified by an agony of mounting misfortunes. Perhaps the hardest thing for Nancy to accept was the grim, sad reality of early widowhood in April 1877.³⁷

Apart from Nancy's attendance at King Kalākaua's coronation in 1883, her remaining years were lonely and uneventful.³⁸ It was during these years that Nancy saw to the education of her children financed from monies acquired from her own personal real estate which she received from her mother Manaiula.³⁹ Nancy viewed the education and rearing of her three children as a positive step toward their upward mobility in Hawaiian society once more, even as her own life began to ebb.

In seclusion, bedridden with asthma, Nancy clung to her precious life as death slowly approached in the beginning of 1895.⁴⁰ Her lingering presence seemed alien to the tumultuous times of political unrest.⁴¹ She was of another era, a time of remote consequence to the generation of her children. And the passing decades had dimmed the sight and memory of those who were a part of that generation. A great change came over Nancy's face (which once dazzled Hawaii's court society with its alluring beauty), as she fell into the sleep from which there is no return. Nancy drew her last breath at 4:30 o'clock on the afternoon of January 10, 1895.⁴²

"Lovely one, thy generations already own thy name. Advance to the summit of immortal reverence. In death thou has lived to be renowned. Love's fragrant breath is thy cherished remembrance. O Princess, the new star of luster appears above. 'Tis the fairest glory of the royal heaven. Now look upon thy beloved treasure, for thou art Nancy, the beauty of Kualii'i."⁴³

NOTES

¹ Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1968), pp. 154-157.

² Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. II, 1854-1874 (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1966), pp. 34, 83.

³ Gavan Daws, class lecture notes from History no. 499, University of Hawaii, 1971.

⁴ Queen Emma Collection, AH; David Gregg, Diary, 4 February 1857, AH.

- ⁵ Sumner Family Collection, in possession of Mrs. Myrna Anne Kamamoakualii Buffandeau Topolinski, Honolulu, Hawaii; A. Gavan Daws, "Honolulu, The First Influence in the Development of the Town," Diss. University of Hawaii 1966, pp. 427-541.
- ⁶ Nancy Wahinekapu Sumner, Diary, 1 January 1858, Mrs. M. A. K. B. Topolinski, Honolulu, Hawaii; Queen Emma Collection, AH.
- ⁷ Sumner Diary, 21 July 1869; Robert Wyllie Collection, AH; Zenafren Kepelino, *Kepelino's Traditions of Hawaii*, edited by Martha W. Beckwith, Bishop Museum Bulletin 95 (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971) pp. 140-144.
- ⁸ Emma Ahuena Davison Taylor Collection, AH.
- ⁹ Mary Kawena Pukui, interview, January 1970 to December 1974, Honolulu, Hawaii; Nancy Kean King, interview, January 1970 to December 1973, Honolulu, Hawaii; Emma L. McVeigh, interview, 22 November 1973, Vanness, California; Emma Ahuena Davison Taylor Collection, AH; Father Reginald Yzendoorn, *History of the Catholic Missions in the Hawaii Islands* (Honolulu: Honolulu Star Bulletin, 1927) pp. 40-48; Captain William Sumner, Diary, 1839 (fragments), Mrs. M. A. K. B. Topolinski; Probate no. 3102, Nancy Sumner Ellis, 1897, AH.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Sumner Family Collection; Order of Exercise, Annual Examination of the Royal School, 17, 18 May 1852, 8 November 1852, 4, 5 May 1853, 4, 5 May 1854, HMCS; *The Friend*, Honolulu, 26 July 1858, p. 55, 2 January 1859, p. 5; Mary A. Richards, *The Chief's Children School* (Honolulu: Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 1937).
- ¹¹ Beckley Family Genealogy and History (n.d.), A H. Sumner Family Genealogy and History, Mrs. M. A. K. B. Topolinski; Sumner Diary, 1858.
- ¹² HG, 30 July 1869.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*; Queen Emma letters, 1860-1869, Daughters of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- ¹⁴ Sumner Diary, 1865; Emma Ahuena Davison Taylor historical notes; Albert P. Taylor, *Under Hawaiian Skies* (Honolulu: Advertiser Publishing Co., Ltd., 1922). pp. 98-99.
- ¹⁵ HG, 30 July 1869; Sumner Diary, 30 July 1869.
- ¹⁶ Sumner Diary, 30 July 1869.
- ¹⁷ HG, 30 July 1869.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Sumner Diary, 2 August 1869
- ²⁰ Sumner Family Collection, 1860-1870 (n.d.)
- ²¹ Keith Middlemas, *The Life and Times of Edward VIII* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972), pp. 86-87; Daws, "Honolulu," pp. 472-514.
- ²² Mrs. Rose S. Quinn Buffandeau Rosselo, interview, 22 November 1973, El Segundo, California.
- ²³ Mrs. Victoria Kualii Sumner Ellis Buffandeau, Diary, 1899, Mrs. M. A. K. B. Topolinski.
- ²⁴ Sumner Diary, 16 December 1874.
- ²⁵ McVeigh, interview (note 9).
- ²⁶ David L. Gregg, Diary, 1854-1862, AH; Steven Reynolds, Journal, 1850-1855, HMCS; Taylor Collection, 1910, Daws, lecture notes.
- ²⁷ Daws, lecture notes.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*; McVeigh, interview; letters, Princess Teresa Owana Wilcox to Delegate Samuel W. King, 1936; AH; Sumner Collection, 1870-1875, 1883
- ²⁹ Letters, Wilcox to King, 1936, AH.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*

- ³¹ Nancy Sumner Diary, 1877; Alexander Cartwright Collection, letters, 1870-1880, AH.
- ³² Letters, Wilcox to King, 1936, AH.
- ³³ Nancy Sumner Diary, 1877; Cartwright letters, 1870-1880, AH.
- ³⁴ Deed and assignment, William Sumner to John Sumner, 3 February 1876, Liber 44, Bureau of Conveyances; Deed, Ellis Minors (Guardian of) to T. Sorrenson, 28 March 1884, Liber 88, Doc.; Probate no. 3102; McVeigh interview, 1973.
- ³⁵ Deed, Charles Ellis to Harriet Ellis, 5 September 1873, Bureau of Conveyances; McVeigh, interview; Mrs. Marie Eugenie Manaiula Holt McInerny, interview, December 1972.
- ³⁶ Rev. Prince Tute Tehuiarii, Diary, 1838-1839, AH; Reynolds, Journal, 9 March 1854, HMCS; Sumner Family Genealogy Book; letters, Princess Tekau Pomare to John R. Kaha'i Topolinski, 9 March, 26 May, 12, 18, 23 June 1972; letters, Princess Tekau Pomare to Mrs. Anne Kamamoakualii Buffandeau Topolinski, 27 September 1972, 15 January, 8 April, 3 September 1973.
- ³⁷ Letter from A. J. Cartwright, 10 April 1877, Bruce Cartwright Collection (HAM-24) 1882-1939, AH; Sumner Diary, 9, 10 April 1877; Court Proceedings no. 3554, 3615, 4279, 1092, John K. Sumner, Kaaukai Wright and William Wright vs. Nancy Sumner and Charles Ellis, 20 August 1875, AH; Probate no. 824, John Moanauli, 10 December 1883, AH; Sumner Collection, 1883.
- ³⁸ Court Proceedings, Probate no. 2425, Bernice Pauahi Bishop, 3 November 1884, AH; Sumner Diary; Sumner Collection, 1883.
- ³⁹ Deed of Trust, Mrs. N. S. Ellis and C. Ellis to A. J. Cartwright, Bureau of Conveyances, Liber 47, 28 August 1876; A. J. Cartwright Collection, 4 February 1876, AH.
- ⁴⁰ Buffandeau Diary, 10 January 1895.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7, 8, 9 January 1895.
- ⁴² DB, 12 January 1895, p. 1; Buffandeau Diary, 10 January 1895; PCA, 11 January 1895, p. 7.
- ⁴³ A tribute to Nancy Sumner, John R. Kaha'i Topolinski Collection.