

Cable Imbrolio in the Pacific: Great Britain, the United States and Hawaii

Phillip E. Koerper

During the Colonial Conference at Ottawa, Canada in 1894, the Pacific Cable was a subject of primary importance. Before the conference was concluded, a resolution was passed calling for a preliminary survey to be made and tenders to be accepted for the construction of an all-British Pacific cable from Canada to Australia and New Zealand.¹ One last question remained unanswered. In the Ottawa Resolution, Article Four called for steps to be taken to secure neutral landing rights in the Hawaiian Islands. That statement brought Great Britain and her colonies momentarily into a small diplomatic imbrolio between the United States and Hawaii during the annexation crisis of the 1890's.

At least a year before the Ottawa Conference began, the British Government and some officials in the colonies had already indicated an interest in utilizing one of the remote islands in the Hawaiian groups as a cable relay station.² It was advantageous to have cable stations located along the route of a submarine cable because the signal in long sections of cable became weaker over long distances and the transmission speed also decreased.³ The Vancouver to Fiji section of the Pacific Cable as projected, was to be an exceptionally long cable and a landing point was a necessity.

There were two islands under consideration by those working to make the British Pacific Cable a reality. Fanning Island, located about midway between Hawaii and the Samoan Islands, seemed to offer some promise as a cable relay point. It was almost entirely uninhabited and was the nearest English possession to Vancouver on the route to Australia. On the other hand, Hawaii, though not controlled by Britain, was much closer to Vancouver and would make it possible for the cable section from Vancouver to be much shorter than a Vancouver to Fanning Island line.⁴

In 1893, when the Hawaiian Islands were first mentioned in official British correspondence relating to the Pacific Cable, Hawaii was in political turmoil.

Phillip E. Koerper is an Associate Professor of History, Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama.

The new United States President, Grover Cleveland, had just instituted an investigation into the improprieties of the American Minister, John L. Stevens, during the 1893 rebellion. The United States Congress was still debating the question of annexation as the inquiry by James A. Blount, Cleveland's investigator, was being carried to its conclusion.⁵ British proponents of the Pacific Cable did not seem worried about the prospects of annexation or a change in the Hawaiian Government since both political factions in Hawaii had promised to honor existing agreements with Great Britain.⁶

The British interest in Hawaii was strengthened by an act which had been passed by the Hawaiian Government on August 21, 1884, promising a subsidy of £5,000 annually for fifteen years to any company that would lay a cable from North America to the Hawaiian Islands.⁷ In short, the backers of the Pacific Cable scheme hoped to use Hawaii as a means to cut the expense of laying the cable as well as an excellent geographic location for establishing a cable station. The objection to Hawaii as a landing post was skillfully raised by those interested in the project as an imperial enterprise that would greatly improve colonial defense by utilizing only British possessions. On the other hand, the General Post Office felt that the all-British Cable was not that valuable since no international convention upheld the protection or neutrality of cables during periods of war. The Post Office did point out the advantage of the subsidy offered by Hawaii and expressed a belief that it would substantially reduce the cost of establishing the line.⁸

While this question continued to rage in the government and circles of men supporting the project, Sir Sanford Fleming, a Canadian agent, offered a possible solution to the question of landing sites along the proposed route. He suggested that the mid-ocean stations should be British possessions, and he felt that it would be desirable for Britain to make diplomatic efforts to gain control of one of the Hawaiian Islands.⁹ Fleming did not believe that any of the main islands making up Hawaii could be obtained, but he did point out that Necker Island, about 240 miles west of the Hawaiian group, was available and would make a more direct route to Queensland than either Hawaii or Fanning Island. It was uninhabited and, as far as he could ascertain, was unclaimed by any nation.¹⁰

In November 1893, Lord Ripon, then the Colonial Secretary, suggested to the Foreign Office that it investigate the possibility of annexing Necker Island. The reply, based on the tenuous position of the Hawaiian Government emphasized that time was not propitious for opening the negotiations.¹¹ This same suggestion was made by the High Commissioner of Canada to Lord Ripon, who concurred with the advice.¹²

The decision to forestall opening negotiations by the British Government was correct as the political crisis in Hawaii was to remain clouded for some time. President Cleveland had hoped to undo the wrongs of the American Minister and to restore Queen Liliuokalani to her throne. But with the report of the Queen's threats to execute her political opponents, Cleveland quickly handed the problem over to the United States Congress in December 1894.

A five-month debate by Congress resulted in resolutions against the "inexpediency" of annexation and the belief that the Hawaiian people had a right to select their form of government without foreign intervention.¹³

The provisional regime in Hawaii used this indecisive action by the United States to establish a more permanent but undemocratic republic. The result was a closer political and commercial union with the United States, which eventually worked to the disadvantage of the British cable project.

In the meantime, Necker Island had remained a topic of conversation in official British correspondence. The Hydrographer to the Admiralty had reported to the Post Office and Colonial Office that very little was known about the island.¹⁴ On January 30, 1894, the Foreign Office advised Sir Julian Pauncefote, the British Ambassador to the United States, that Necker Island might be acquired as a cable station and requested his views concerning the attitude of the United States and its feeling about Britain receiving the subsidy.¹⁵ Pauncefote replied that the line would probably be of great service to the United States, if it were connected at Honolulu. He felt that the United States, if it were given this assurance, would probably consent to an understanding.¹⁶ Finally, in early March, Pauncefote brought up the Necker Island proposal to the United States Secretary of State whose attitude left no reason for apprehension concerning the freedom to negotiate for the concessions with Hawaii.¹⁷

With the apparent good wishes of the United States, the Foreign Office advised the provisional Hawaiian Government of British intentions concerning Necker Island. The Hawaiian reply was a firm request for the British Government to elaborate on its plans so that their government might decide upon the desirability of permitting a British occupation of the island.¹⁸ Because of the tone of the reply, Lord Ripon instructed the Foreign Office not to respond until a thorough examination of the island could be completed. Ripon considered the tone of the reply to be an assumption by the Hawaiian Government that it owned Necker Island and that the British Government was requesting permission to occupy it.¹⁹

He also suggested giving the captain of the survey vessel the authority to raise the British flag, in the event that the island was found to be satisfactory for a cable site. Ripon felt that prior claims to the island which could be substantiated could be examined later.²⁰

The Foreign Office, which had received further information indicating that Hawaii did claim Necker Island, agreed to send the vessel to examine the island, but refused to give the captain the authority to raise the flag for fear of inevitably causing international complications.²¹

Before instructions could be sent to the Admiralty, word arrived that the Hawaiian Government had hoisted its flag over Necker Island on May 27, 1894.²² This development did not dampen the British spirits for any length of time. Less than a week later, the Admiralty informed the Foreign Office that it had discovered information indicating that the British vessel, *Champion*, had visited Necker Island during November 1893, and found it to be unsuitable for a submarine telegraph station.²³

Ripon still felt that the island should be carefully examined and charted so the Admiralty agreed to send the *Champion* back to Necker Island. The Admiralty also informed Ripon of two other islands west of the Hawaiian Islands that might prove suitable as cable posts.²⁴ Ripon instructed the Admiralty to survey the two islands, French Frigate Shoal and Laysan Island, and to determine whether any governments claimed them.²⁵

In early November, the Colonial Office received a report from Captain Edward Rooke of H.M.S. *Champion* concerning that vessel's second surveying voyage to Necker Island. Once again the island was described as a poor choice for a cable station. The report indicated that the island had fair harbor facilities, but the banks dropped off too abruptly for cable landings. Other unfavorable characteristics included the lack of fresh water and very sparse vegetation.²⁶

In the meantime, Sir Sandford Fleming and William H. Mercer, an agent from the Colonial Office, had arrived in Hawaii. They were authorized by the Ottawa Conference Resolutions to negotiate for a cable relay location with the Hawaiian Government.²⁷

Prior to visiting Hawaii, Fleming and Mercer visited Washington, D. C. where they had an interview with Walter Q. Gresham, the Secretary of State. The Ottawa Conference had decided on leasing an island with Britain receiving exclusive rights to the island or else landing the cable only on British soil. Because of a reciprocity treaty between Hawaii and the United States, it was feared that the cable would be precluded from touching in Hawaii. Fleming asked Gresham if the United States would object to the British leasing one of the small islands in the Hawaiian Group. Gresham's reply indicated that leasing an island would not interfere with the treaty.²⁸

Fleming and Mercer went on to Honolulu and entered into negotiations with the Hawaiian Government. The British representatives did not ask for exclusive cable rights in Hawaii. They requested only the exclusive right to an island that would suit their needs. That is, no other cable company could land on that island; the British had no intention of interfering with other cable enterprises.²⁹

Fleming and Mercer entered into negotiations with the Hawaiian Government and the discussions were cordial. Fleming proposed that the Hawaiian Government lease an island to the Dominion of Canada for use only as a cable station. He requested a subsidy of £7,000 annually for fifteen years. In return for that, the cable company was to build a branch cable from the island to Honolulu and only charge the following rate for messages: commercial business, one shilling a word; government dispatches, ninepence; and press dispatches, sixpence.³⁰ This was a very low rate, considering the prices charged by other companies.

The Hawaiian Government was apparently impressed with Fleming's terms because a surveying ship, the *Hyacinth* was sent out to investigate Bird Island. Fleming and Mercer accompanied the vessel and joined in the examination of the island. Although it possessed more favorable facilities than Necker Island, it too offered very little for consideration as a cable relay site.³¹

Several days before receiving any of the unfavorable survey reports, the British Government received a dispatch from Consul-General Albert G. Hawes at Honolulu stating that the Hawaiian Government had arrived at a decision on the Pacific Cable negotiations.³² The British Agent wrote:

The difficulty of obtaining a conclusive agreement now is undoubtedly owing to the hands of this Government being tied by their Reciprocity Treaty with the United States. They are perfectly willing to accept the proposals for the telegraphic connection, but are afraid to do anything that might possibly imperil the advantages they derive from the present treaty.³³

Hawes' conclusion was quickly confirmed by a reply from Francis Hatch, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Hawaii, to Sir Sanford Fleming and William H. Mercer, advising them of the decision that had been arrived at by the Hawaiian Government.³⁴ Hatch explained to the two imperial representatives that the Reciprocity Treaty of 1876 with the United States precluded the leasing of any islands to Great Britain.³⁵ He quoted Article Four of the Treaty:

It is agreed on the part of his Hawaiian Majesty that, so long as this Treaty shall remain in force, he will not lease, or otherwise dispose of, or create any lien upon any port, harbor, or other territory in his domains, or grant any special privilege or rights of use therein to any other Power, State, or Government, nor make any Treaty by which any other nation shall obtain the same privilege relative to the admission of any articles free of duty hereby secured to the United States.³⁶

Somewhat set back by the Hawaiian response, the British Government considered opening negotiations in Washington. This idea quickly lost its appeal when the British Consul in Washington instructed the Foreign Office that a time-consuming Senate modification of the Reciprocity Treaty would be required if the leasing of an island were still desired.³⁷

In the meantime it had been discovered that both Laysan Island and French Frigate Shoal also belonged to Hawaii.³⁸ Almost immediately after reaching this apparent impasse, references to landing a British cable in Hawaii virtually disappeared.

In London on February 18, 1894, *The Mail* carried an article which intimated that Fanning Island was to be used as a cable station.³⁹ The apparent victory for the advocates of an all-British route was proclaimed in several British newspapers in early May when it was publicly announced that there was no chance of obtaining a cable station in Hawaii.⁴⁰

Apparently the proceedings of the Ottawa Conference and the attempted negotiations for a landing site in Hawaii had revived the project of an American Pacific Cable. After almost a year of rumor and discussion, the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations reported a bill in May 1896. The bill authorized an annual sum of \$160,000 over a twenty-year period for a cable from San Francisco to Japan via Hawaii.⁴¹ During the same month the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee of the House of Representatives reported on a similar bill that was estimated to cost \$7,500,000 when completed. Neither bill passed that session.⁴² The United States was still uncertain about

its relationship to Hawaii and the Far East, and was unwilling to help Britain obtain a cable site in Hawaii, while lacking the boldness to commit herself to cable project of her own.⁴³

(*Editor's Note*: At the time this study was made, the author was not aware of a master's thesis on the cable based on the British Foreign Office and Hawaiian government records, while his is based primarily on the British Colonial Office records. "Hawaii's part in attempts to build a trans-Pacific cable, 1893-1898" was submitted by Pauline N. King (Joerger) to the University of Hawaii in 1965.)

NOTES

- ¹ The Pacific Cable, which was not completed until 1902, was an imperial project constructed and maintained by Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. The Ottawa Resolution can be found in: Great Britain, Colonial Office, *PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS*, Vol. LVI, c. 7553, "Report by the Earl of Jersey on the Colonial Conference at Ottawa, 1894," p. 359. Or see Canada, *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), L (1899), 8361.
- ² Audley Coote, Minister of Lands in New South Wales, to the Postmaster-General of Queensland, March 21, 1893, Great Britain Colonial Office, 881/10.
- ³ George Owen Squier, "An American Pacific Cable," *Electrical Review*, XXXVII, p. 35.
- ⁴ The Vancouver-Fanning Island route was expected to require 3,232 knots of cable while the Vancouver-Necker Island route was estimated to require only 2,431 knots of cable. See Sanford Fleming's Memorandum, October 11, 1893, C.O. 881/10, Enclosure in No. 109.
- ⁵ Richard Leopold, *The Growth of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1965), pp. 136-138.
- ⁶ Coote to Postmaster General, Queensland, March 21, 1893, C.O. 881/10.
- ⁷ A Copy of the 1884 Hawaiian Telegraph Act can be found in C.O. 42/786, No. 10815.
- ⁸ J. C. Lamb, *General Post Office to Colonial Office*, July 5, 1893, C.O. 881/10, No. 96.
- ⁹ Earl of Aberdeen (Canada) to the Marquess of Ripon, October 28, 1893, C.O. 881/10, No. 106. Enclosed was the memorandum from Sir Sanford Fleming to the Earl of Aberdeen.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Percy Anderson, Foreign Office to Colonial Office, May 30, 1894 C.O. 881/10, No. 140 (Confidential).
- ¹² Earl of Aberdeen (Canada) to Colonial Office, June 2, 1894, C.O. 881/10 No. 140, Enclosure. Also see John Bramston, Colonial Office to Foreign Office, December 7, 1893, C.O. 881/10, No. 113, which contains the opinion of Charles Tupper.
- ¹³ Leopold, *Growth of American Foreign Policy*, pp. 136-138.
- ¹⁴ Evan Macgregor, Admiralty, to Colonial Office, January 30, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 124.
- ¹⁵ Foreign Office to Sir Julian Pauncefote, January 30, 1894, C.O. 418/2, No. 2012.
- ¹⁶ Julian Pauncefote to the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office, February 2, 1894, C.O. 418/2, No. 2053. Also see Pauncefote to Foreign Office, March 10, 1894, C.O. 418/2, No. 4413, SECRET.
- ¹⁷ Foreign Office to Lord Ripon, Colonial Office, March 12, 1894, C.O. 418/2, No. 4454.
- ¹⁸ British Minister in Honolulu to Foreign Office to Colonial Office, May 8, 1894 C.O. 331/10, No. 8008.
- ¹⁹ Colonial Office to Foreign Office, May 24, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 139.

- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ H. Percy Anderson, Foreign Office to Lord Ripon, Colonial Office, May 30, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 140. For an excellent account of the flag-raising issue from The Hawaiian side, see Damon, Ethel M., *Sanford Ballard Dole and His Hawaii*. (Palo Alto, California, 1957), p. 298-299.
- ²² Lord Kimberly, Foreign Office to Colonial Office, June 9, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 143. Also see Foreign Office to Colonial Office, July 13, 1894, C.O. 885/6, No. 1, which contained an account of the Hawaiian flag-raising at Necker Island.
- ²³ Admiralty to Foreign Office to Colonial Office, June 14, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 145.
- ²⁴ Evan Macgregor, Admiralty to Lord Ripon, Colonial Office, July 19, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 152.
- ²⁵ Lord Ripon, Colonial Office to Lord Kimberly, Foreign Office, August 6, 1894, C.O. 881/10, No. 152.
- ²⁶ Admiralty to Colonial Office, November 1, 1894, C.O. 886/6, No. 36. The survey was enclosed in this dispatch.
- ²⁷ Lord Ripon, Colonial Office to Foreign Office, September 5, 1894, C.O. 885/6, No. 11.
- ²⁸ Albert S. Willis, United States Minister to Hawaii to Walter Q. Gresham, United States Secretary of State, October 19, 1894. This letter can be located in U.S., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Affairs in Hawaii*, Senate Ex. Doc. no. 31, 53rd Cong., 3rd Sess., Part 2, 1894, pp. 1378-1379.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1379. Also see *The Times* (London), November 2, 1894, p. 5.
- ³¹ The *Hyacinth* investigated Bird Island one week after the *Champion* had visited Necker Island. See *The Times* (London), November 9, 1894, p. 5.
- ³² Albert G. Hawes, Consul-General to Foreign Office to Colonial Office, October 17, 1894, C.O. 886/6, No. 39, Confidential. Hawes replaced Major Wodeshouse as Consul-General in August 1894.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Francis Hatch, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Hawaii to Sir Sanford Fleming and William H. Mercer, October 17, 1894, C.O. 886/6.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ W. E. Goshen, Consul-General in Washington, D.C. to Foreign Office, November 20, 1894, C.O. 885/6.
- ³⁸ British Consulate in Honolulu to Foreign Office to Colonial Office, October 25, 1894, C.O. 885/6. The report was enclosed in this dispatch.
- ³⁹ *The Mail* (London), February 18, 1895, p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ *The Times* (London), May 2, 1895, p. 5.
- ⁴¹ *The Times* (London), May 7, 1896, p. 5.
- ⁴² *New York Sun*, December 12, 1896, p. 3.
- ⁴³ Perhaps the interest expressed by the French on October 15, 1894 when they established a French Pacific Cable had something to do with the United States' change of attitude. Albert S. Willis to Walter Q. Gresham, October 18, 1894, U.S. Department to State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Affairs in Hawaii*, Senate Ex. Doc. No. 31, 53rd Cong., 3rd Sess., Part 2, 1894, pp. 1378-1379. Britain eventually succeeded in laying the Pacific Cable. It was completed on October 29, 1902 and opened for traffic on December 8, 1902. The United States, after making no effort to help the British in obtaining cable rights in Hawaii, finally decided to lay a cable to the Philippine Islands by way of Hawaii. Of course these decisions were made following the Spanish-American War and the annexation of Hawaii. The American Cable was completed on July 4, 1903. See "The Pacific Cable," *Electrical Review*, XL. (February, 1902), p. 257. Also see *The Times* (London), July 6, 1903, p. 7.