

Notes on Wire Landings Along Hamakua Coast on the Island of Hawaii

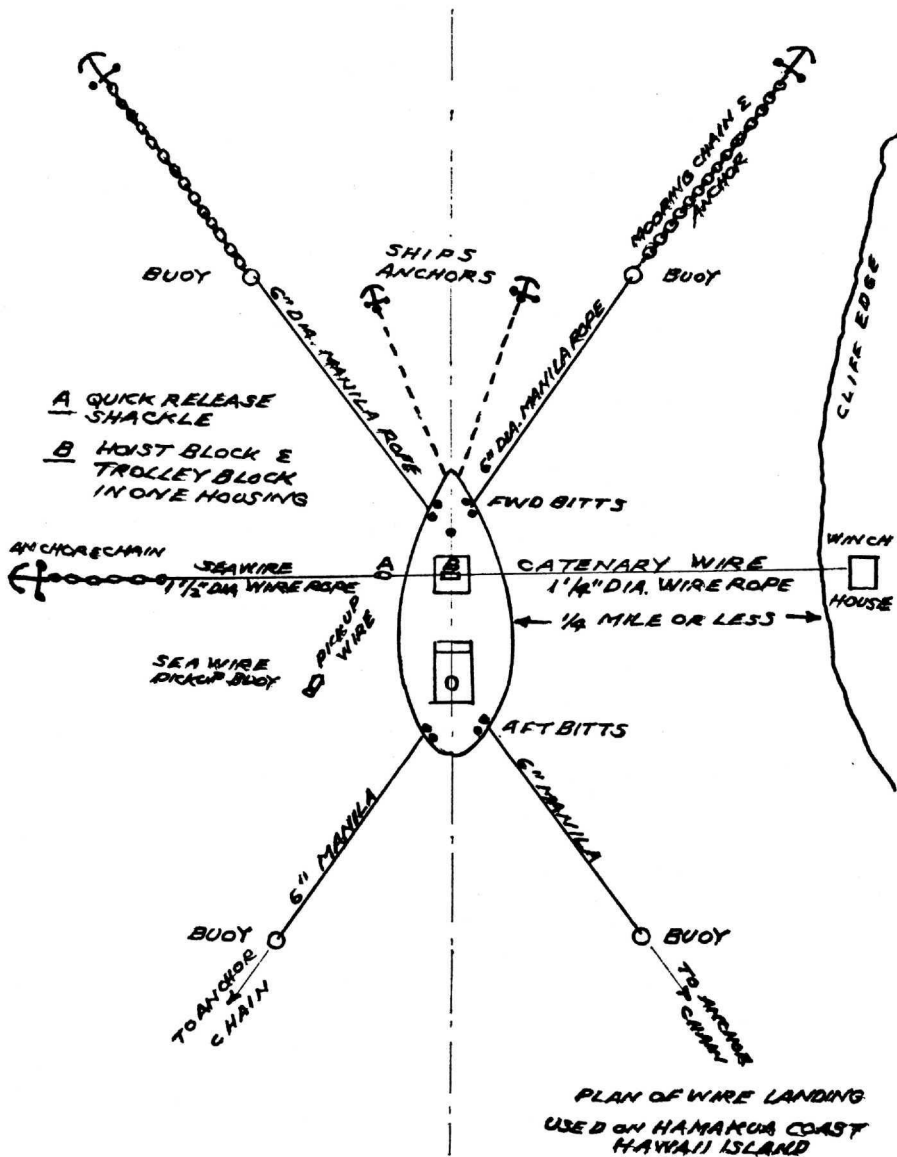
Richard Nelson. Biographical Sketch by Frances (Nelson) Frazier.

Richard Nelson Smith was born on August 22, 1866, in Ocean Beach, New Jersey. His boyhood was spent in Waterbury, Connecticut. He was a non-conformist from early days and did all he could to avoid going to school. He had always wanted to go to sea and finally, after attending the Waterbury High School, with his parents' permission, he decided to go to New York where he became the ward of his maternal uncle, George W. Nelson, and legally changed his name to Richard Nelson. As only boys who lived in New York State were eligible, this enabled him to join the New York Nautical School Ship, named *St. Marys*. He remained two full years on the *St. Marys* and was graduated in the fall of 1895, number one in the class. Turning down an opportunity to take the examination for Annapolis, he soon shipped on as "boy" or "ordinary seaman" on the full rigged-skysail yard ship *Tillie E. Starbuck*, which was the first all iron (not steel) sailing ship built in the U.S. at Chester, Pennsylvania. Later he left the *Tillie E. Starbuck* and moved ashore at Honolulu, where he was employed by the Inter-Island Steam Navigation Company, finally becoming Master of several of their ships at various times.

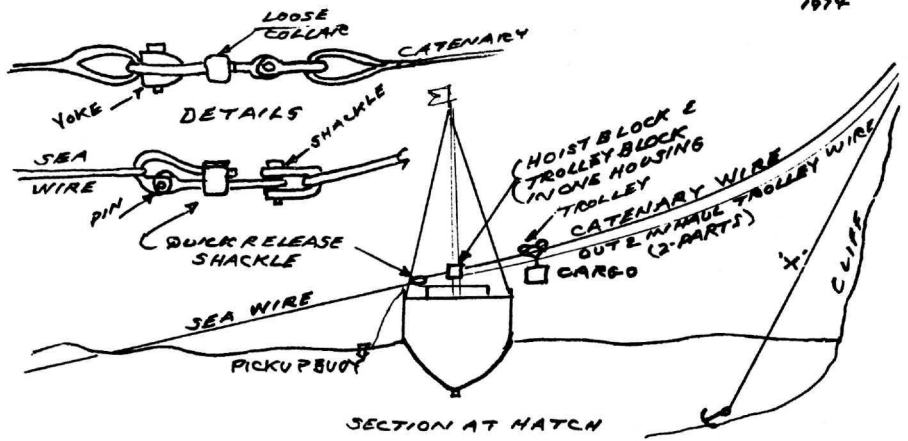
In 1913 he was asked to go to Pearl Harbor and be the first pilot and harbormaster after the channel was opened to navigation. Later he became a pilot at Honolulu Harbor and remained in that position until about 1935, when he retired. During World War II he was asked to return to Pearl Harbor as a pilot, which he did for awhile. He died in Honolulu in 1961.

Nelson wrote a reminiscence of his years at sea and on the inter-island steamers. The following excerpt describes the method used to transfer cargo and people ashore along the Hamakua Coast, noted for its steep cliffs. This same method was also used on other islands with similar coastlines.

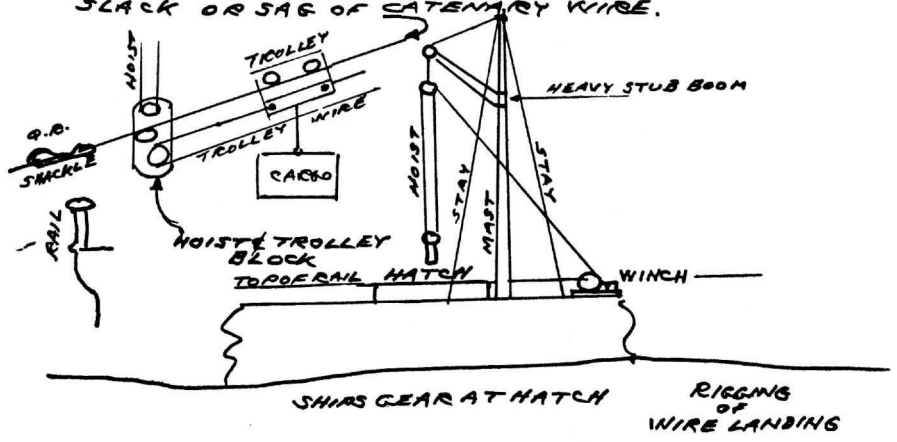
Richard Nelson was a captain on inter-island steamers. Frances (Nelson) Frazier, his daughter, is the Hawaiian translator, Hawaii State Archives.



NVF
1978



NOTE: CATENARY WIRE IS PULLED ABOARD SHIP BY FIRST LOWERING MANILA MESSENGER ROPE FROM HOIST HOUSE ON A SHACKLE SLIDING ON WIRE 'X' TO WAITING SHIPS BOAT WHICH TAKES MESSENGER TO SHIPS CAPSTAN. CATENARY IS SHACKLED TO SEA WIRE. TROLLEY RUNDOWN! AND ITS WIRE PASSED THRU TROLLEY BLOCK. HOIST LINE FROM SHIPS BOOM TO BLOCK ADJUSTS RAIL CLEARANCE. SHORE HOIST ADJUSTS SLACK OR SAG OF CATENARY WIRE.



NOTES ON WIRE LANDINGS

During the years [following] 1897, when I started working in Hawaii and left the *Starbuck*, I was working for two steamship companies. One was the Wilder S.S. Co. and the other was the Inter Island Steam Navigation Co., always referred to as the I.I. Co. The Wilder Co. was absorbed by the I.I. Co. about 1902. I was second mate, mate, and master of various vessels during the years between 1897 and 1913, when I went as pilot to Pearl Harbor. I spent three very happy years on the *S.S. Hawaii* with Hilo as the home port, learning how to handle the steamers and the wire at the wire landings. Our duty in those years was to act as tenders to the Matson sailing ships. There were two steamers, the *Hawaii* and the *Kaiulani*, in this trade, and our work was to tow the sailing ships in and out of Hilo Bay and to place them at their moorings under the direction of the Pilot. We then came alongside the sailing ships and took their cargo on board for the various "outside" plantations and then brought sugar in from those plantations and delivered it to the ships to take to San Francisco. We usually were at anchor in Hilo Bay during the nights, but left each morning between 2:00 and 4:00 so as to be at the landings at daylight to start working. When necessary, we worked through all the daylight hours and such a thing as overtime was never thought of. All the plantations we worked were within 50 miles of Hilo, and in going out early in the morning there was a mist not as thick as fog, but at times obscuring the sight of the shore. We could always tell which plantation we were passing by the smell. The land breeze blows off the land during the night and each plantation had its own peculiar smell. Some were of pig pens, others were of strong molasses, and in others we could hear the mules braying as we passed. The water was deep close to shore all along this coast, and we were never very far off the rocks; sometimes we could hear the surf on the rocks even when we could not see them. Most of the places we went to had wire landings, but there were a few derrick landings, which were mostly disliked by the Captain and crews of the steamers as they were more dangerous in rough weather than the wire landings, which could be worked in most any kind of weather except when the wind was from the north, when even they were unsafe.

The coast of Hawaii known as the Hamakua Coast was a stretch of about 50 miles running north from Hilo to Kukuihale [sic]. The shore was a continuous bluff from 100 to 400 feet above sea level. All the plantations were on the top of the bluff, and the reason for the wire landings was that the shore line was so rough and dangerous for boat work most of the time that some means had to be found to enable the loading to be carried on in all kinds of weather. The idea of loading by wire was imported from the Pacific Coast when lumber from the redwood forests had been shipped that way for many years.

As the trade winds blow almost constantly from the east north east all the landings and moorings were laid out so that the steamer would lay head to the wind and sea. There were four (4) mooring buoys with heavy anchors and chains to them at all wire landings, and a small buoy with a light chain only a

few feet longer than the depth of water was fastened to the end of the sea wire, which lay on the sea bottom all the time when there was no steamer using it. There was also a permanent wire from the top of the bluff leading down to an anchor not very far from the shore. This wire was used when first getting the hauling rope from shore. A weight was slid down this wire with the end of the hauling rope attached to it. The ship's boat would go in to this wire and pick up the end of the hauling rope that came down from the top of the bluff. This end they took back to the ship, and this way the connection with the landing was established.

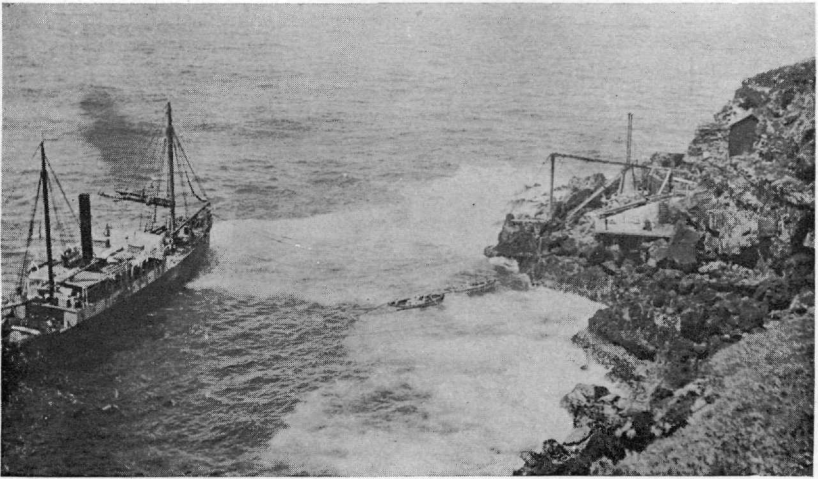
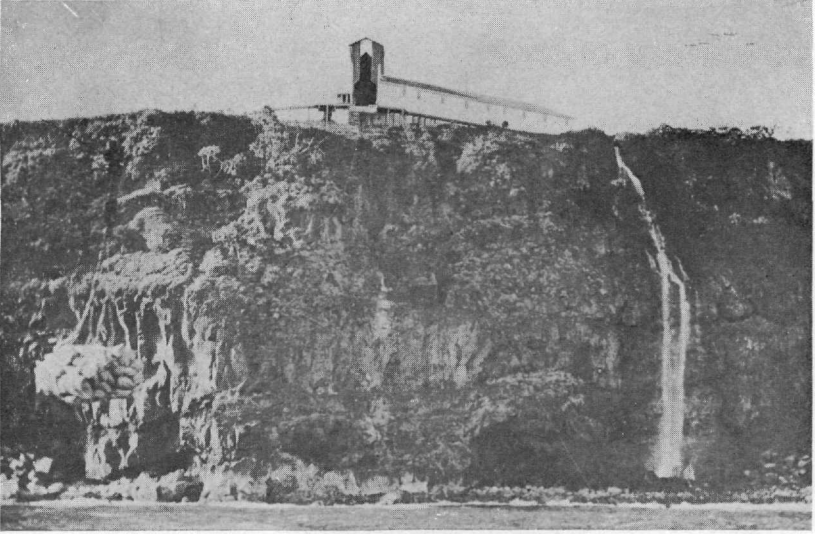
In coming to a wire landing, the steamer was taken in between the two head buoys and one or two anchors let go and enough chain payed out to allow the ship to turn around head to the wind, with the small "wire buoy" alongside the off shore side of the ship near the fore hatch. The ship was then approximately in the right position but not yet secured, so the two boats with the stern lines already coiled in them were lowered, and the stern lines (2) run to the buoys and secured there. The boats then went to the two bows and got the two bow lines and ran them to the buoys and hooked them on there. The boat on the off shore side was then hoisted up and the inshore boat went in to the permanent wire and got the end of the hauling line, which had been sent down on the wire from the landing on top of the bluff. When this hauling line was received on board the ship from the boat, the boat was hoisted up and the work from here on was divided between the ship and the shore gang.

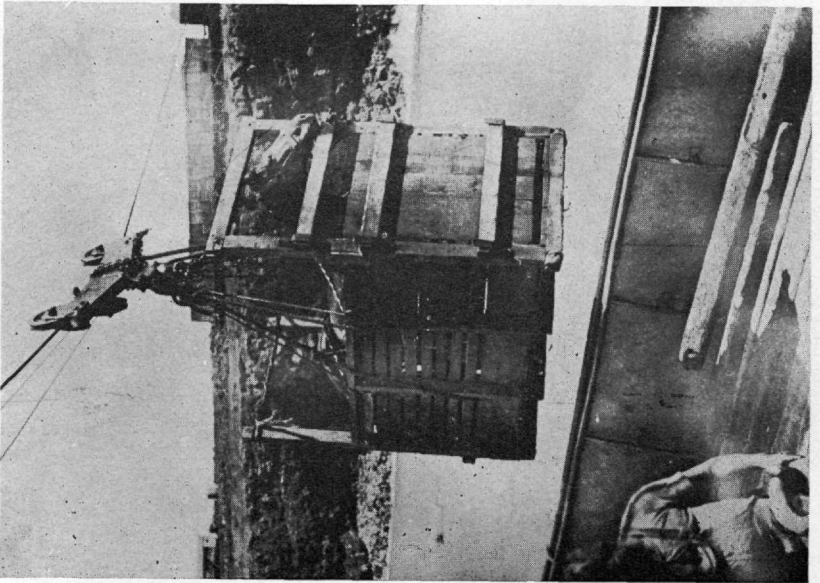
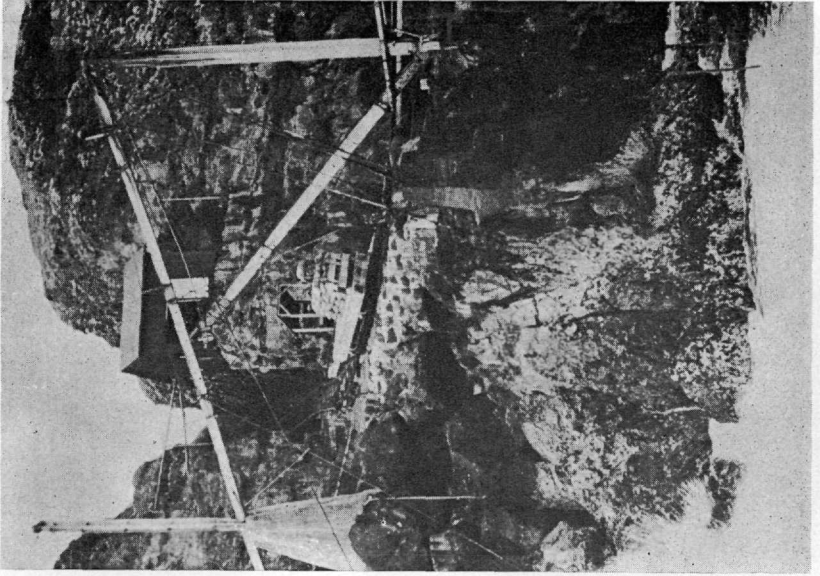
In the meantime, the wire buoy alongside had been hoisted up by the cargo hook and the small chain attached to the shore end of the sea wire was hauled in, bringing the end of the sea wire up from the sea bottom. It was then lashed to the ship's rail until the shore wire had been handed down from the landing by the hauling rope. When the ends of the two wires were connected by the "quick let go shackle," a signal was given, usually by the ship's whistle, and the shore wire was hove tight by the winch on the landing. It was usually hove tight enough to take the weight of the wire off the ship's rail and then the ship's lifting tackle was hooked on and the wire system was lifted or lowered by the ship's winch as necessary to have the load clear the ship's rail as it came down and then to lower the load and land it on the hatch so the hook on the slings could be let go. After the wire was hove tight, the running block was hauled down from the landing. This was a hard wood block bound with iron and it had a sheave hung under it around which the running wire passed as the carriage was hauled up or down from the landing. After the running wire was hove tight enough and the two ends secured to the carriage, the system was ready for work.

Between the diagrams and the photographs, it can be seen how this system works. When all was connected up and ready the work began. If we had cargo, that was first hoisted up out of the hold and landed on deck or on the half of the hatch cover that was always left on for the crew to stand on. The wire was

Top : Sugar coming down the wire at Kukuihaele Landing.

Bottom : S. S. Helene loading sugar at Koholalele Landing.





then lowered by the winch-man and the load hooked on to the hook under the carriage. The wire was then hoisted up far enough so the load would clear the ship's rail, and the winch man on the landing would then haul the load up to the landing where it would be landed on a car on rails, and then the empty carriage would be sent down for another load. After all the cargo was ashore, the process was reversed and the [bagged] sugar was sent down on the carriage and landed on the ship's hatch and then tumbled down for the rest of the crew to stow away in the hold.

This was a very nice system and it worked very well at places where it would be impossible to handle freight otherwise. Sometimes we would have to shoot a line ashore with the life saving gun that all ships are required to carry if it was too rough for the boat to get close enough to get the first rope from the landing. Then the landing crew would have to climb down the face of the bluff and find the shot with our line attached to it. At other times it would be smooth enough so the boat's crew could go right into the rocks and throw a "heaving line" to the man on shore. There were slightly different conditions to meet at each landing, but the principal was the same in all of them, and the ship's crew and the landing gang were trained so that everything went along smoothly in hooking up and letting go. The purser of the steamer had to go ashore to check the freight and sugar, and at most landings they had a box with seats in it for the purser or captain or any passengers to travel up the wire in. Many times the purser or freight clerk just sat on a bunch of slings and rode up on them.

Any heavy cargo over two tons had to be landed in or on two boats lashed together and taken in to a derrick landing when it was smooth enough. If it was too rough it had to be kept on board until a smooth enough time came around.

Nearly every wire landing had a derrick landing also, but where this was not possible the heavy cargo had to be taken to another landing and then put on trucks to be taken to the mill where it belonged.

One wire landing, "Ookala," was so high on the bluff that no running line was necessary. The carriage was allowed to run down on the shore wire by gravity and hauled back by a single wire fastened to the carriage. This landing had the only "lock strand" shore wire. The outside of this wire was as smooth as an iron bar and no strands were visible.

Part of the duties of the captains of the steamers was to keep the mooring buoys, anchors and chains and the sea wire in good condition, and to replace the buoys and chains when worn out. During the earlier years, the mooring buoys were big logs imported from the Pacific Coast. They had a hole in each end, one for the anchor chain and the other for the mooring lines. Later these big wooden buoys were replaced by iron buoys with big shackles and rings in each end. The wood buoys often got waterlogged and sank and had to be fished up and replaced. The mooring lines had to be passed through the holes

Left: Horse coming down the wire at Hawi Landing.

Right: Sugar on a car coming down the wire at Koholalele Landing.

in the wood buoy and hitched and lashed so that there would be no chance of their coming adrift while the steamer was working. We had big safety hooks on the mooring lines for the iron buoys, which was much more quick and safer for the boat's crews.

The sea and wind made it quite rough at these wire landings, and we had to be prepared to let go the wires and mooring lines and get out if it got too bad or if the wind came from the north. The north wind was dangerous, as we had to depend on the stern mooring lines to hold us in place. The moorings were laid out so the steamer laid head to the wind from east to northeast, and it would get quite bad before we had to get out on account of the wind or sea, as we had one or two anchors down and they took the strain from the mooring lines. The wind could not blow from the south as we were in the lee side of the whole island of Hawaii and were protected from any south wind.

There were about eight of these wire landings along the Hamakua Coast. Starting from Hilo there were Onomea, Pepeekeo, Honomu, Hakalau, Papaloo, Okala, Puahau, Honokaa and Kukuihale. The last one was partly sheltered in Waipio Bay and was afterward developed into a double wire landing fitted to work over two hatches at once on a Matson steamer.

Kukaiau was the worst of the derrick landings. It had an inclined railroad from the derrick a little above sea level to the top of the bluff. It was almost always rough there and it was the most disliked landing along the coast, as several boats had been lost there and some of their crews drowned.