

## Mail from Maui

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Situated on the south coast of Maui, the Hawaiian chain's second largest island, Lāhainā became the seat of government for the Kingdom of Hawai'i when King Kamehameha III relocated that seat from Kailua, Kona, early in his 30-year reign (1824–1854). It remained an important coastal town until after 1845 when he again moved the government, this time permanently to Honolulu. Lāhainā did not have a harbor, as did Kailua and Honolulu, but it did have an extensive, safe, offshore anchorage, protected by the islands of Maui, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, and Kaho'olawe. It became attractive to whaling fleets after the whalers discovered the North Pacific whaling grounds in 1820. This was the same year the first American Protestant missionaries arrived in Hawai'i, soon also finding their way to Lāhainā, with the essentials for establishing printing, schools, and American government practices. Traders and merchants appeared on the scene, too.

All these factors led to the necessity of some kind of postal service. By the 1830s, trade was thriving, and Lāhainā had numerous merchants whose stores clustered around the boat landing. A resident missionary's home was located a block inland from the landing.<sup>1</sup> Government functions took place in a building near the boat landing.

A system for sending mail developed during these years before a government postal service was formalized by the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1850. Until this time, the government assumed no responsibility for mails, foreign or domestic. But the mail went forward, very often with the help of private "agents." Those mail practices of the period leading up to 1850 are the subject of this article.

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## POSTAL RATES AND ROUTES

From Lāhainā, as well as from other locations in the Kingdom, inter-island mail was generally sent free. Hawai'i's foreign mail was frequently sent collect and received pre-paid. Postage rates for outgoing foreign mail varied over the years but included a 2¢-per-letter fee due the ship's captain when he turned in or collected these "ship letters" at a United States post office. Captains taking mail "privately" (that is, unofficially or for friends or acquaintances) often did not charge the fee.<sup>2</sup> This mail went out via either Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope, often being transferred at major mercantile stops along the way, such as San Francisco, Mazatlan, Boston, London, Valparaiso, Chile, or Sydney, Australia. One-way transit could easily take up to a year to accomplish, and news was always seriously out of date when it was finally received.

Postage rates, pre-paid or due on arrival at a destination, were scribbled by mail forwarders onto the letters, usually at the upper right. When circular date handstamps came into general use in United States post offices, the amount of postage due or paid was indicated in large numerals within the handstamp, below the date.

In the late 1830s, and until the new Pacific territories route became established after 1847, a Mexican overland route was popular and, except during the Mexican War, infinitely faster than either Cape route. Consuls at both ends, at Mazatlan or San Blas on the Pacific and Vera Cruz on the Atlantic, arranged for forwarding and collecting the Mexican postage. Often marked *Franqueado* for "pre-paid," the Mexican postal rate grew from two *reales* (25¢) in 1846 to 50¢ during the Mexican Revolution and reached \$1.00 by 1848.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, from July 1, 1845, to July 1, 1847, a 7¢ rate (5¢ for under 300 miles plus the 2¢ ship fee) or a 12¢ rate (10¢ for inland destinations beyond 300 miles plus the 2¢ ship fee) was charged on half-ounce letters sent through U. S. post offices. The cost was noted in the large circular postmarks. On July 1, 1847, a new 40¢ inland rate went into effect for U. S. mail to and from the Pacific Coast territories, and this, plus the 2¢ ship fee, was usually noted on stampless letters, from October 1850 through late 1851, as "42."

Until June 30, 1845, a single letter was defined as a single sheet of paper of any dimension, and extra paper of any sort made it a double letter at double the price, three pages a triple letter at triple

cost, and so on. Beginning July 1, 1845, a single letter could weigh not more than one-half ounce.<sup>4</sup> At these rates, it is understandable why foreign letters were written on tissue-thin paper, with the handwriting filling the page from top to bottom, the paper then turned and written on again crosswise.

Incoming mail was handled in various ways. On arrival at a Hawaiian port, the mail bag was delivered to the Harbor Master, local ship's agent, or mail forwarding agent, and poured out on the floor of the establishment. Hopeful recipients then went to that location and sorted through the contents. The agent made up packets for further distribution to recipients who lived in other towns or on other islands. Whaling crews, for example, often had to make the rounds of all possible locations, looking for their mail addressed "care of" consulates, seamen's chapels, missionaries, or merchants.<sup>5</sup>

In Lāhainā during this period, Kingdom residents and visitors could choose to send outgoing letters by one of five letter bags, depending on their affiliation: missionary, foreign government consular office, whaler, custom house/post office (or kingdom supporter), or mercantile. Each group preferred its mail to travel without being mixed with that of the others, lest the sender become identified with the wrong group.

Briefly, missionary mail consisted of stampless, free mail, sent out at Lāhainā and other Island locations in these early years, to the ABCFM in Boston. Lāhainā mission station "postmaster" (an unofficial position) Reverend Dwight Baldwin estimated in 1846 that had he charged 6¼¢ on each of the more than 4,000 letters he forwarded in 1845 alone, he would have collected \$250.00, a tidy sum for postage in those days.<sup>6</sup>

Consular letter bags, maintained by the representatives of the United States, Great Britain, and France at Lāhainā, were sent to the Honolulu post office by inter-island coasters to connect with ships departing for foreign ports. Consular letters sent in closed diplomatic mail pouches received no postal markings, but their manuscript notations and inside date lines serve to document this form of mail service.

Mail sent to foreign destinations after December 1850 by whalers and kingdom supporters in the Lāhainā custom house letter bags was routed through the Honolulu Post Office where newly appointed Postmaster Henry M. Whitney sorted it by destination in a back room of the *Polynesian* newspaper office (on the corner of present day Bethel and Merchant streets). Incoming whalers' mail was kept separate from that addressed to Island residents.



SHIP

Wm George Webster

Spiddle Island

Stafford County

New York  
U.S.A.

FORWARDED BY  
WALDO & CO.  
HAUL

Care of John Cook

FRANCISCO  
13  
MAY  
1840

PER STR ISTHMUS

Mrs Angelina G. Cook

FORWARDED VIA PANAMA.  
BY BUSH & CO.  
LAHAINA

Swanton Falls

Maine

U.S. States

California } Panama }

Mail agents could and did serve double, even triple duty. U. S. Vice Consul at Lāhainā, Giles Waldo (see the article on Waldo elsewhere in this issue) created a mild sensation when he raised the Stars and Stripes over his ship chandlery in September 1846. In his dual role of Consul and merchant, Waldo sold marine supplies and ship provisions and provided a public service letter bag that was also sometimes used by whalers in port.

There is no way of ascertaining the percentage of volume of outgoing mail that these forwarding agents handled, but it must have been a sizeable amount.

#### LĀHAINĀ'S MAIL FORWARDING AGENTS

The custom of forwarding mail for a small fee began in the coffee houses of Europe and was continued by London merchants. One such group, Harnden & Company, opened an office in Boston and advertised in Honolulu newspapers in the 1840s.<sup>7</sup> This practice, probably brought by ship captains who joined mercantile firms in Lāhainā, quickly gained popularity and spread through the Kingdom, Honolulu merchants with Boston connections also offered a letter bag forwarding service during this same period.

Most foreign governments, including the United States, required arriving ship captains to check their mail bags with the collector of customs at the first port of entry where they would collect a 2¢ per letter ship fee. Residents then called at the Custom House for their mail and paid any postage due. Before departure for distant ports, ship captains would pick up the outgoing letter bag when they cleared the ship at the Custom House.

That was also the routine in Lāhainā. But some letter writers preferred to trust their mail to the ship Chandler mail forwarders, prepaying the postage to the destination. These mail forwarders may have been considered more reliable than the collector of customs. Whatever their reasons, this alternate delivery system was quite popular. Unfortunately, very few letters sent from Lāhainā in this period survive to document that service. The few extant covers bear unique handstamps (figs. 1 and 2) but give no other details about

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FIG. 1 (*top*). Waldo & Co. adopted a handstamp in April 1846. The folded letter, sent around Cape Horn, took ten months to reach New York. (Honolulu Advertiser Collection photo.)

FIG. 2 (*bottom*). Folded letter from Lahaina to Lewiston Falls, Maine, handstamped in red and sent by Bush & Co. letterbag. (Honolulu Advertiser Collection photo.)

their fee, a date, or the name of the ship by which the letter was sent. Because of missing records those details may never be known.

The forwarding agent companies that provided outgoing mail service included men who would become leading businessmen and sugar plantation developers in the second half of the century. The earliest was Benjamin F. Bolles, who after his arrival on the American ship *Betsy Williams* in October of 1848, formed a partnership under B. F. Bolles & Co. with L. H. Anthon and Svend Hoffmeyer. This partnership expired at the end of 1849, and Bolles on May 1, 1851 joined forces with Gorham D. Gilman.<sup>8</sup> They merged their considerable ship chandlery and general mercantile business skills and continued as mail agents. The company had other changes, and Bolles eventually moved to Honolulu after the whaling industry waned, where he died.

Svend Hoffmeyer, Bolles' one-time partner, became Lāhainā's collector of customs in July 1851, then resigned in October on the promise that he would obtain the appointment as Consul of Hawai'i at Copenhagen, Denmark, his homeland. (He actually filled this post from 1863 to the year he died, 1878.)

Gorham Gilman had arrived, in Honolulu, in 1841 where he worked as a clerk for several years. He probably entered business in Lāhainā in the 1840s. Gilman also formed Gilman & Co. in the 1850s. During the partnership with Bolles in the early 1850s they served Lāhainā as mail agents for Gregory and Co., Hawai'i's postal agents in San Francisco. When a ship from San Francisco stopped at Lāhainā en route to Honolulu and delivered a sealed government mail bag to Bolles, Gilman or a clerk broke the seal. This action so angered Postmaster Whitney, that he terminated Gregory & Co.'s services and chastised Bolles and Gilman for their blunder when they "should have known better, considering their many years of experience with mail handling."<sup>9</sup> Gilman in later years formed other partnerships in Lāhainā and Honolulu and eventually returned to Boston where he managed the family drug store and served as Hawai'i's Consul in that city.

Von Pfister & Co. was another shipping mercantile outfit to offer the letter bag service. John R. von Pfister also provided marine intelligence to James Jackson Jarves for his young newspaper, the *Polynesian*, in 1841. After he left Lāhainā for Honolulu in 1845, von Pfister formed other partnerships until 1848 when, like so many others, he was affected by "gold fever." In July he rushed to work the Sacramento streams and only a few months later, in October,



was murdered in an unprovoked attack by a drunk, one Peter Raymond, from a nearby camp at "the mill on the south branch of the American fork about fifty miles from Sutter's Fort."<sup>10</sup>

The next forwarding agency was formed by Captain James Makee who arrived in Lāhainā in 1843 as master of the whaler *Maine*. Makee left the ship to form his first Lāhainā business partnership with one Eli Jones as the firm Jones & Makee.<sup>11</sup> It was a general ship chandlery and shipping commission business. Jones terminated the association and left for the United States in April 1847, and Makee then became partners with Julius A. Anthon who had joined the firm the year before. Alfred W. Bush, another enterprising man, entered the business in July of 1847, and it was then reorganized as Bush, Makee & Co., by which title it became well known. Located near the canal, this mercantile establishment was threatened by the fire that wiped out Lāhainā's new Government Market, Waldo's bowling alley, and several grass huts nearby, on May 27, 1848, but the Makee building survived. Bush left the company in 1850.

Makee gained another partner, Charles Brewer 2nd, and both were very enterprising. Brewer joined Makee & Anthon in 1848 when those two men opened a Honolulu ship chandlery.<sup>12</sup> This business rapidly expanded, with Captain Makee financing construction of the Makee and Anthon block on Queen Street, using materials imported from Boston for Honolulu's first three-story brick building.

Makee also established his 'Ulupalakua, Maui sugar plantation at Rose Ranch with a former Honolulu Wells, Fargo & Co. agent and accountant, W. K. Snodgrass.<sup>13</sup> Brewer and Makee together bought lands on Maui in 1856 which became known as the Brewer Plantation. Makee, capitalizing on the burgeoning sugar industry, eventually formed Makee Sugar Company on Kaua'i, and Brewer went on to become a major sugar factor in the Islands.<sup>14</sup>

Merchant Giles Waldo arrived in Honolulu on board the American bark *Toulon* on August 12, 1845, with U. S. Consul Alexander G. Abell who appointed him Vice-Consul for Lāhainā. Waldo soon established his ship chandlery and began forwarding mail. Waldo with partners expanded their business interests and opened a hotel, billiard parlor, and bowling alley in Honolulu. Waldo, like von Pfister, struck out for California where, in 1849, he died at the age of 34.

Former Salem, Massachusetts native George W. Punchard formed a commission merchant partnership with Samuel A. Reynolds on



January 1, 1844, becoming the primary Lāhainā agent for brother-in-law Abram Fayerweather's Waimea, Hawai'i sugar plantation. Punchard went bankrupt in 1848 when his partner Samuel Reynolds, nephew of Stephen Reynolds, Honolulu merchant, died suddenly. The business had been in the row of buildings which housed most of Lāhainā's commission merchants along Front Street, above the beach. Punchard sold his business interests to Alfred W. Bush in 1850 and died at the age of 33 in 1852.<sup>14</sup>

#### GOVERNMENT MAIL

In the meantime, a provision of the Organic Act of 1846 set up a postal system within the Kingdom. Growing trade and commerce decreed such a development, and the public had long complained about the handling of mail. Rates of postage were fixed both for inter-island mail and mail brought to the Islands from abroad.

In 1849, the Kingdom of Hawai'i ratified a treaty with the United States which went into effect in August 1850. Under this agreement, U. S. steamships carrying public mails across the Pacific were exempted of all port duties; and the postal systems of the U. S., and the Kingdom of Hawai'i would handle each others' mail. To meet this new obligation, an official postal service was established with Whitney as Postmaster. The postal duties previously handled by the collectors of customs were transferred from the Custom House to the new government Post Office in the *Polynesian* office. A Hawaiian postal rate came into effect, to be used with the appropriate rate of the country of origin or destination.

Collectors of customs at Hawai'i's three main ports of entry, Honolulu, Lāhainā, and Hilo, were designated as ex-officio postmasters by King Kamehameha III in 1846, since they also sent and received mail bags as provided for in the new Civil Code. Departing ships took these letter bags to a U. S. port of entry post office or forwarding agent after clearing with Hawaiian customs. (Frances Jackson's "The Point of Lahaina," *Hawaiian Historical Review*, April 1964, provides a detailed description of the Lahaina landing, store, and custom house.)

Because of the radical change effected in the transition of mail between the U. S. and Hawai'i, a new day in postal services had arrived. The rapid growth of population in California and the acquisition of California and Oregon as territories by the U. S. led to fairly regular sailing ship communications between the West

Coast and Hawai'i and then to regular steamship mail service. This all made possible faster, safer transmission of the mails.

For a few years residents and transients continued to patronize private mail forwarders, until about 1860. Bush & Co. was formed July 6, 1850, for example, with ship chandlers and commission merchants Alfred W. Bush and Charles P. Robinson, the latter a native of Australia, and lasted until October 1851 when Bush died. Robinson lived on in Honolulu until his death in 1866.

After 1860, when the Lāhainā government building housing the Post Office and other offices was completed, most of the mail from Maui appears to have been sent through the Lāhainā Post Office for redistribution to final destinations.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Rev. Dwight Baldwin was stationed at Lāhainā 1835-1870 where he was instrumental in building the seaman's chapel and providing a free letter bag service to all seafarers. See *Missionary Album Sesquicentennial Edition* (Honolulu: HMCS, 1969) 36-37.
- <sup>2</sup> Information on postal rates is from: Theron Wierenga, *United States Incoming Steamship Mail 1846-1875* (Muskegon, Mich.: T. Wierenga, 1983); Kenneth Rowe, *The Postal History of the Forwarding Agents* (Louisville, Ky.: Leonard W. Hartman, 1984). See also an earlier study by Henry A. Meyer, et al, *Hawaii: Its Stamps and Postal History* (New York: Philatelic Foundation, c 1948).
- <sup>3</sup> J. F. Westerberg, "Hawaii-Overland Mail Via Mexico 1841-46," *Collectors Club Philatelist*, vol. 34, no. 1: 6, cites Levi Chamberlain, letter to ABCFM, 21 Feb. 1843; Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 2, 1854-1874 *Twenty Critical Years* (Honolulu: U Hawai'i P, 1953) 26-32. Giles Waldo & Co. Letterbook 1846, AH, lists cash amounts collected for mail sent overland via Mexico.
- <sup>4</sup> Congressional acts establish all postal rates based on size and weight of mail. Postal rates from 1825 on provided for sending folded letters, a practice that continued until envelopes came into general use about 1850.
- <sup>5</sup> Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 2: 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Rev. Dwight Baldwin, Annual Report of the Lāhainā Station 1845, ms, HMCS Library.
- <sup>7</sup> Randall E. Burt, "Whalers' Mail in Hawaii," *Po'oleka O Hawaii*, 41 (Honolulu: Hawaiian Philatelic Society, 1985): 4-18; George E. Hargest, *History of Letter Post Communication Between the United States and Europe 1845-1875* (Lawrence, Mass.: Quarterman Publications, 1975); Rowe, *The Postal History of the Forwarding Agents*; Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 2: 26-32.
- <sup>8</sup> *F*, Oct. 1848; partnership dates were determined from business cards and public announcements appearing in Honolulu newspapers, FO & Ex, correspondence files, and the Collector General of Customs letter books in AH.
- <sup>9</sup> Henry M. Whitney, Letter Book 1853, Persis Corporation, Honolulu.
- <sup>10</sup> *P*, 28 Oct. 1848.
- <sup>11</sup> For information on McKee, see George F. Nellist, ed., *The Story of Hawaii and Its Builders* (Honolulu: HSB, 1925) 155-157.

- <sup>12</sup> HAA 1896: 68–73; Josephine Sullivan, *A History of C. Brewer & Company, 1826–1926* (Boston: Walter Advertising and Printing, 1926).
- <sup>13</sup> Alexander J. Cartwright, letter to B. F. Durham 8 Aug. 1862, AH. Durham was a clerk for Wells, Fargo & Co. in San Francisco. Cartwright resumed that function for the Honolulu agency in January 1863 when Snodgrass joined Makee to manage Rose Ranch. Randall E. Burt, *The Private Expresses of Hawaii*, unpub. paper.
- <sup>14</sup> Abram Fayerweather Letters, AH; Bob Dye, “Lihue—The Lost Plantation,” *Honolulu*, Nov. 1986: 140.