

Remarks before Hope United Church of Christ: Pacific pilgrim: A tribute to Henry Obookiah [Ōpūkaha‘ia]

Senator Spark M. Matsunaga Papers

Senate, Public relations, Speeches, Organizations, Box PR78, Folder 48

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"PACIFIC PILGRIM:
A TRIBUTE TO HENRY OBOOKIAH"
DELIVERED BY U. S. SENATOR SPARK M. MATSUNAGA
AT HOPE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1986 - 10:30 A.M.

THANK YOU, DEACON MAHINA BAILEY, FOR YOUR WARM WORDS OF WELCOME. REVEREND (HOWARD) BORGSTROM, REVEREND (MARC) STEWART, REVEREND (CHERYL) STEWART, PARISHIONERS AND FRIENDS OF HOPE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST: ALOHA!

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LEARNING TO SPEAK THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. HE EVEN LEARNED TO WRITE A LITTLE UNDER THE TUTELAGE OF A SEAMAN NAMED RICHARD HUBBARD. WHEN THEIR VOYAGE ENDED IN NEW YORK, HENRY WAS OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN THE CREW OF ANOTHER SHIP BOUND FOR HAWAII. HE DECLINED, FOR BY THEN HE WAS DETERMINED TO LIVE IN AMERICA TO GAIN PROFICIENCY IN WRITING, A SKILL UNKNOWN IN THE LAND OF HIS BIRTH.

THE TWO HAWAIIAN YOUNGSTERS TRAVELED WITH THEIR SEA CAPTAIN TO HIS HOME IN NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT. THOMAS WAS TAKEN IN BY A YALE UNIVERSITY FAMILY NAMED HOTCHKISS AND SOON GAINED AN ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE, ABILITIES WHICH STILL ELUDED YOUNG HENRY. THOMAS THEN RETURNED TO THE SEA WHILE HENRY FOUND AN ENGLISH TUTOR NAMED EDWIN DWIGHT, A YALE STUDENT TRAINING TO BECOME A FOREIGN MISSIONARY. SUBSEQUENTLY, HENRY WAS INVITED TO JOIN THE HOUSEHOLD OF YALE'S PRESIDENT, THE REVEREND TIMOTHY DWIGHT. STILL LATER HE MOVED TO TORRINGFORD, CONNECTICUT, INTO THE HOME OF ANOTHER CLERGYMAN, SAMUEL MILLS.

IT WAS DURING THIS PERIOD THAT HENRY WAS DRAWN TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OF HIS BENEFACTORS, FOR WHOM HE UNDERTOOK FARMING CHORES. THIS CHILD-VICTIM OF WAR FELT HIMSELF ATTRACTED TO THE PRINCE OF PEACE AS SOMEONE WHO PROVIDED MEANING TO LIFE FAR STRONGER THAN THAT OF THE 'AUMAKUA, OR FAMILY GODS, OF HIS KAHUNA UNCLE'S FAITH. HENRY WENT ON TO BECOME A COMMITTED CHRISTIAN AND THE FIRST HAWAIIAN SCHOLAR OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION. HE TRANSLATED THE BOOK OF GENESIS FROM ENGLISH INTO A HAWAIIAN FORM OF WRITING AND BEGAN TO WORK ON A HAWAIIAN GRAMMAR, DICTIONARY AND SPELLING BOOK. HE ALSO UNDERTOOK TO WRITE THE STORY OF HIS OWN LIFE, BASED IN PART ON A JOURNAL AND DIARY HE KEPT IN HIS LAST YEARS. HIS REPUTATION AS A CHRISTIAN CONVERT SPREAD AND HE WAS ASKED TO SPEAK AT WORSHIP SERVICES IN COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT NEW ENGLAND. THE MOST MEMORABLE OF HIS SERMONS WAS DELIVERED AT AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS. HE WAS RECEIVED INTO THE CHURCH ON APRIL 9, 1815, AT WHICH TIME HE ANNOUNCED HIS INTENTION TO RETURN TO HIS PACIFIC HOMELAND UPON COMPLETION OF TRAINING FOR

THE MINISTRY. HE HAD FINALLY FOUND THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WHICH HAD PLAGUED HIM THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, "WHY HAD HIS LIFE BEEN SPARED SO MANY TIMES?" AT AGE 23, HE HAD DISCOVERED HIS MISSION IN LIFE: THE CONVERSION OF HIS COUNTRYMEN TO CHRISTIANITY.

WITH SEVERAL OTHER HAWAIIAN YOUNG MEN, HE ENROLLED AT THE FOREIGN MISSION SCHOOL IN CORNWALL, CONNECTICUT. THERE, UNFORTUNATELY, AFTER AN ILLNESS OF SEVERAL WEEKS HE DIED ON FEBRUARY 17, 1818, AT THE AGE OF 26. IN HIS LAST DAYS HE EXPRESSED REGRET THAT HE HAD NOT BEEN ABLE TO RETURN TO HAWAII. HE EXPIRED AFTER BIDDING THOSE AT HIS BED-SIDE "ALOHA OE." AS ONE OBSERVER LATER WROTE, "HIS SPIRIT HAD DEPARTED - BUT A SMILE, SUCH AS NONE PRESENT HAD EVER BEHELD - AN EXPRESSION OF THE FINAL TRIUMPH OF HIS SOUL, REMAINED UPON HIS COUNTENANCE."

THE EXAMPLE OF HIS LIFE INSPIRED THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES TO VENTURE TO HAWAII. HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, MEMOIRS OF HENRY OBOOKIAH, WAS PUBLISHED AFTER HIS DEATH AND BECAME

THE BEST-SELLER OF ITS DAY. IT WAS ESTIMATED THAT 500,000 PEOPLE READ HIS BOOK AT A TIME WHEN THE COUNTRY'S POPULATION WAS ONLY NINE MILLION, SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND, AND THE ADULT LITERATE POPULATION WAS PROBABLY LESS THAN ONE OUT OF FIVE.

WHO WOULD HAVE IMAGINED THAT THE CONVERSION AND FERVENT FAITH OF ONE PROMISING YOUNG MAN -- CLAIMED BY DEATH AT SO EARLY AN AGE -- WOULD BE INSTRUMENTAL IN DRAWING HIS ISLAND HOMELAND INTO THE ORBIT OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION? I HAVE LONG BELIEVED THAT 'TIS BETTER TO BE KNOWN AS A GOOD MAN THAN A GREAT ONE, FOR GREATNESS IS AN ASSESSMENT OF MORTALS; GOODNESS A GIFT OF GOD. IN THE CASE OF HENRY OPOOKIAH HIS GOODNESS WAS SUCH THAT HE PLAYED A GREAT ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF HIS PEOPLE. FOR HIM THE BIBLICAL INJUNCTION TO GO FORTH AND TEACH ALL NATIONS WAS A CALL TO RETURN HOME TO HIS OWN PEOPLE. IN THE YEARS SINCE HIS PASSING, OBOOKIAH'S STRIFE-TORN HOMELAND HAS BECOME THE ALOHA STATE A SYMBOL OF LOVE AND HARMONY, HAVING RESPONDED TO HIS CRY: "E ALA NA MOKU KAI LILOLOA" - "AWAKEN, YE ISLANDS OF THE FAR-AWAY SEAS."

MAHALO FOR YOUR KIND INVITATION TO JOIN WITH YOU IN
WORSHIP TODAY. MAY GOD'S BLESSING BE WITH YOU ALL -- NA KE
AKUA OE E HOOMAIKAI MAE.

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