Notes & Queries

The Palmyra Atoll Digital Archive

JESSE JOHNSON

The Palmyra Atoll has been part of Hawai'i (even sharing a zip code with one of its counties for a time) since 1862, following it through the 1898 annexation into United States territory status. Though named for the first recorded vessel to crash on its reefs in 1802, the US brig *Palmyra*, the islets were actually discovered four years earlier by Captain Fanning. While on his famed Pacific exploratory cruise, he experienced a series of premonitory dreams the night before reaching Palmyra, and by these avoided his own vessels wrecking in the shallow coral surrounding the atoll.

Despite sitting 1,000 miles southwest, this small group of islands in the middle of the Pacific are deeply linked to the history, events, and people of the Hawaiian Islands, and the rest of the United States as well. Though it has experienced brief periods of attention from media and academic circles over the years (not all of them very pleasant), until recently no formal attempt has been made to collect, catalogue, and preserve the history of Palmyra.

Jesse Johnson has been collecting and cataloging information about Palmyra since 2004. He created and curates the Palmyra Atoll Digital Archive from his home in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he lives with his wife and 5 daughters. You can follow the archive on Instagram (@palmyra.archive) and Facebook, or visit it directly at palmyraarchive.org to learn more.

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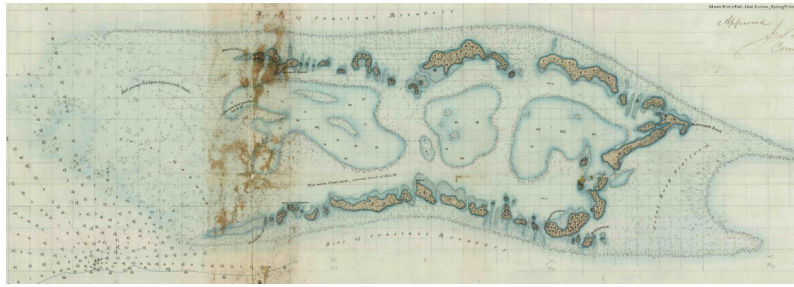
In January of 2017, I created the Palmyra Atoll Digital Archive for this express purpose, in the hopes of promoting research into the first 200 years of Palmyra's discovered history, and thereby expanding the larger contextual history of Hawai'i as a whole. From its discovery by Captain Fanning in 1798, up until its sale to the Nature Conservancy in 2000, little was collectively known about the details of events and people on Palmyra. Since launching with just a few dozen items, our collection has grown to nearly 200 entries, many of them rare and previously unknown. It includes hundreds of photographs and documents previously kept in personal collections, or gathering dust in boxes at facilities such as the National Archives in Washington, DC, likely never to be digitized.

Here are just a few examples of what our team has found or has been donated to us by generous parties:

Chart Survey from the visit of the USS *Portsmouth* in 1873

This rare and extensively detailed survey chart was found by our research consultant working at the National Archives in Washington DC. Despite being the default source on Palmyra for cartographers, sailors, and scientists well into the early 1900s, the only copies of this chart up to now were grainy digital scans or faded prints included in other publications.

Thanks to the discovery of this original copy, high resolution scans have been made and placed in our archive, revealing a much more detailed description of the atoll from that time, including physical



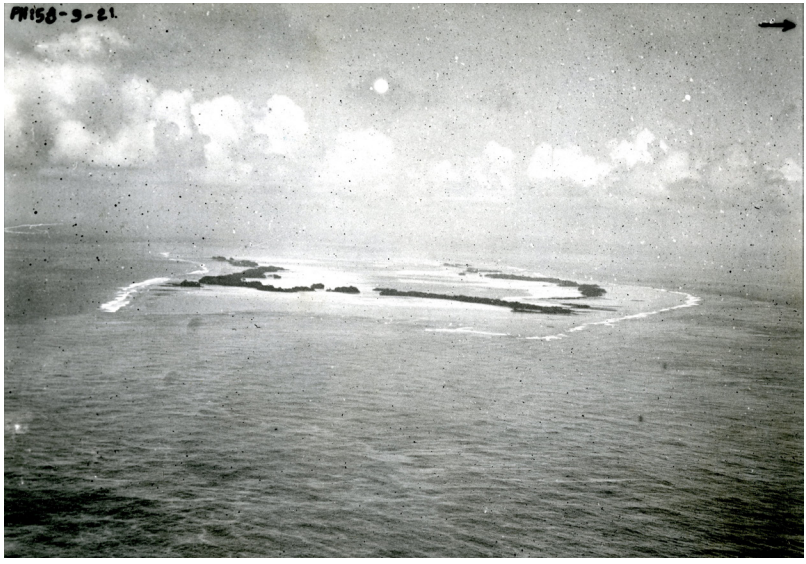
USS *Portsmouth* Chart: 1876 chart created by the crew of the USS *Portsmouth* during its visit to Palmyra. Public domain.

geography and lagoon depth soundings, along with islet names and landing locations from the expedition.

Aerial Collection of 1921

Prior to our research, the earliest known aerials of Palmyra were those included in various newspaper articles and military publications, beginning in the 1950s. Most of these were taken from scientific expeditions to the atoll, or shared from the private collections of military personnel. We have since found dozens of aerials from the Smithsonian archives and the National Archives in Washington, both before and after the massive naval construction works of the early 1940s.

The most significant of these finds came earlier this year, when we stumbled across mention of a US Navy sponsored aerial photography mission to Palmyra in 1921 (the first coastal survey of its kind in the nation's history, which started in Hawai'i before the crew moved on to Palmyra). The only evidence of this mission were a few photos in an obscure medical journal from that same time. We have since identi-



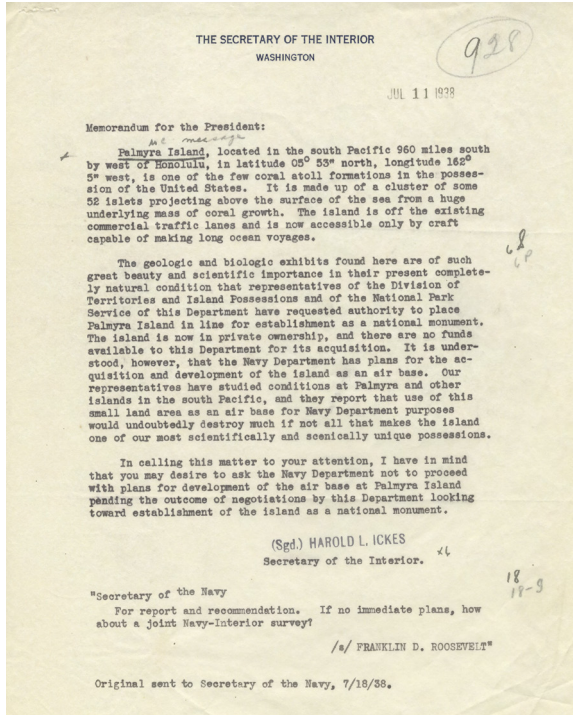
1921 Aerial: First known aerial photograph of Palmyra, taken by the crew of the USS *Eagle 40* in 1921. Public domain.

fied the details of the mission, including the name of the ship and its crew, and several other images, all of which are now in our archive.

These photos and reports provide a unique view of Palmyra prior to its massive physical changes during the World War II naval occupation, help us understand in even greater detail how it has changed over the years, and what attention has been paid to it by interested parties such as the US military.

Harold Ickes' Memorandum for President Roosevelt

The legal troubles between the United States government and Palmyra's last private owners, the Fullard-Leo family (culminating in a very public 1948 court case), are well known and often cited events. What



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

928

JUL 11 1938

Memorandum for the President:

Palmyra Island, located in the south Pacific 960 miles south by west of Honolulu, in latitude 05° 53" north, longitude 162° 5" west, is one of the few coral atoll formations in the possession of the United States. It is made up of a cluster of some 52 islets projecting above the surface of the sea from a huge underlying mass of coral growth. The island is off the existing commercial traffic lanes and is now accessible only by craft capable of making long ocean voyages.

The geologic and biologic exhibits found here are of such great beauty and scientific importance in their present completely natural condition that representatives of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions and of the National Park Service of this Department have requested authority to place Palmyra Island in line for establishment as a national monument. The island is now in private ownership, and there are no funds available to this Department for its acquisition. It is understood, however, that the Navy Department has plans for the acquisition and development of the island as an air base. Our representatives have studied conditions at Palmyra and other islands in the south Pacific, and they report that use of this small land area as an air base for Navy Department purposes would undoubtedly destroy much if not all that makes the island one of our most scientifically and scenically unique possessions.

In calling this matter to your attention, I have in mind that you may desire to ask the Navy Department not to proceed with plans for development of the air base at Palmyra Island pending the outcome of negotiations by this Department looking toward establishment of the island as a national monument.

(Sgd.) HAROLD L. ICKES
Secretary of the Interior.

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18-9

"Secretary of the Navy

For report and recommendation. If no immediate plans, how about a joint Navy-Interior survey?

/s/ FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT"

Original sent to Secretary of the Navy, 7/18/38.

Ickes' Memorandum: 1937 memo from Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to President Roosevelt, requesting Palmyra be made a National Monument. Public domain.

wasn't known until our research began, is that in 1937, two years prior to the construction of naval facilities on Palmyra, then Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes wrote a desperate letter to President Roosevelt. He implored the commander in chief to scrap the plans for a Navy base and instead designate Palmyra a national monument, to protect its natural beauty and scientific value. In the memorandum he wrote:

> The geologic and biologic exhibits found here are of such great beauty and scientific importance in their present completely natural condition that representatives of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions and of the National Park Service of this Department have requested authority to place Palmyra Island in line for establishment as a national monument.

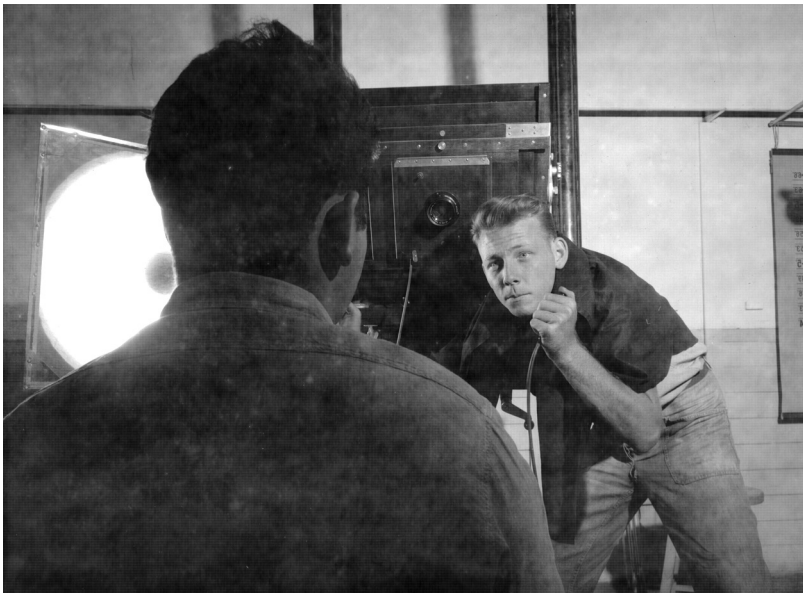
While the military plans won out, this is an important piece of Palmyra's history. Thanks to research assistance at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, this previously unknown letter has been digitized for inclusion in our archive. Documents like these help us as modern citizens relate our current struggles with presidential policy and public lands to those not-so-different struggles of the past.

James R. Carter Collection

The World War II naval occupation of Palmyra is perhaps the single most significant event of its history, and certainly the one that draws the most attention from our visitors. Up to now, the only material on Palmyra available from this time were the occasional personal photograph or document spread across various obscure websites and or in government repositories. Very little of it had been digitized, and much of it had not even been declassified.

During our research, we acquired two large photographic collections (one donated, one purchased at auction), hundreds of pages of documents and a variety of other materials (even a matchbook with a map of Palmyra in relation to Hawai'i). Much of this came from the National Archives in San Francisco and the Smithsonian Institute Archives, but the crowning piece is our James R. Carter Collection.

Carter was a Navy photographer's assistant during the war, stationed on Palmyra from 1943 to 1945. During his time there he took hundreds of photographs, varying from profile and group photos of



Carter Selfie: Naval Photographer James Carter at work on Palmyra in 1943. Courtesy of James Carter.

seaman, to candid shots of daily life and activities. After his discharge from the Navy, Carter kept many of the negatives, storing them in a box in his home. In early 2017, his son contacted us and donated the collection, which we've since scanned and touched up, and made available to the public in our archive.

The photos paint a very personal picture of Palmyra, showing the daily lives of those stationed and working there, as well as previously unseen details like building interiors and equipment. We are honored to house these images and look forward to sharing them with future generations.

Excerpt from the World Safari Documentary

Those familiar with the history of 20th century sailing have surely heard of the vessel *Klaraborg*. It was, until 1982, the world's oldest, still-sailing ship. In 1970, a young Australian purchased the *Klaraborg* and took her to sea, sailing for months across the Pacific with

The *Klaraborg*: Members of the *Klaraborg* crew anchored off Palmyra's in 1974. From left to right: Jan, Klara (the dog), Erica, Anne, Dottie, Jill, and Gail. Courtesy of Gail Maltby.

a ragged and often changing crew. The self-proclaimed captain, Alby Mangels, took quite a bit of footage during the trip, later editing it into a documentary called World Safari. The film exists now only in hard-to-find, online digital repositories, but it has otherwise been forgotten.

Our research found the *Klaraborg* made a stopover on Palmyra during its voyage, lasting several weeks. Along with a group of still photographs shared by a member of the crew, we also found its time on the atoll was included in the documentary footage. Little was known about the state of Palmyra at this time, but this incredible excerpt showcases the terrible shape the small islets were in and helps contextualize what had been going on there since the Navy left in the 1940's, leaving much behind for squatters and scavengers like those aboard the *Klaraborg*.

In Conclusion

All of these items, and much more, are now freely available to everyone from our archive. From the works of Robert Louis Stevenson,

inspired by Palmyra's pirate legend, to photographs from the nuclear tests observed there in the 1950s and 60s, to the research of famed oceanographer Walter Munk, to ships' journals from the 1840 United States Exploring Expedition and its visit, the list goes on and on. We work daily to add more material and dispel the misinformation built up around Palmyra over the years. Hawai'i has a rich and well documented history, with wonderful documents, maps, and photos for anyone who is interested to discover. We maintain the archive so the lost history of Palmyra may come alongside that great tradition, as a key piece of Hawai'i's heritage, and be shared with and rediscovered by future generations.