

## Notes & Queries

### Father Damien's First Photograph at Kalaupapa Reveals Its Secrets

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ACCORDING TO TRADITION Father Damien (1840–1889) had his picture taken on all significant moments during his lifetime. In total there are eleven historical photos of him, which is quite extraordinary for a missionary of the nineteenth century.

In 2013 there was a small exhibition of all these photographs in the Damien Center in Leuven, Belgium, near Father Damien's crypt. On this occasion, all the images were subjected to a critical examina-

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The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 53 (2019)

tion. When was the picture taken? Who was the photographer? In which collections are the negatives and/or original prints saved? In this exhibition, the photographs were also linked to the key moments in Father Damien's life: his departure to the missions in 1863, his arrival at Kalaupapa in 1873 and his death in 1889. Further research, however, has shown that the historical reality is less systematic.

### 1878 INSTEAD OF 1873

This research sheds new light on the photograph that is commonly known as "Damien at the age of thirty-three, the year he went to Kalaupapa".

The glass plate negative is kept in the Hawai'i State Archives and has been attributed to the photographer Menzies Dickson.<sup>1</sup> In many



FIGURE 1. Father Damien. Photograph by H.L. Chase, 1878. Hawai'i State Archives.

publications up until today the picture was dated 1873.<sup>2</sup> This attribution and dating has never been questioned.

After comparing the glass plate negative of the picture of Father Damien (Figure 1) with the glass plate negatives of pictures of the people of Kalaupapa made by photographer Henry L. Chase in May 1878, on the occasion of a visit of a Special Sanitary Committee to Kalaupapa, we found strong indications for a different dating and attribution.<sup>3</sup>

The note in the *Hawaiian National Bibliography* on the content of the report of the Special Sanitary Committee, which visited Kalaupapa in 1878, mentions that twelve pictures of patients were taken by photographer Henry Chase from Honolulu.<sup>4</sup> The picture of Damien with the girls' choir with the number 13 written on it (Figure 3), was also taken by Chase on this occasion. It is likely that Damien asked



FIGURE 2. Patient Ephraim Kanoe, sent to Kalaupapa in 1877. Photograph by H.L. Chase, 1878. Hawai'i State Archives.

Chase to have his portrait taken, or that Chase asked Damien to sit for him in his makeshift photo studio because, at the time, Father Damien was receiving a lot of attention in the Hawaiian Islands.

When comparing the pose, composition, and background of the picture of Father Damien with, for instance, the picture of Ephraim Kanoe (Figure 2) it becomes clear that both portraits must have been taken at the same time and at the same place. The lines and shadows that are present in the background (and were touched up in the older prints) are identical and led to our conclusion that this picture of Father Damien was taken by Henry L. Chase in May 1878 and not by Menzies Dickson in 1873.



FIGURE 3. Father Damien with the girls' choir. Photograph by H.L. Chase, 1878. Hawai'i State Archives.

## ADDITIONAL CLUES

The oldest records we have of this photograph of Father Damien date back to 1880 when Damien included it in a letter to his parents: “*I send you my picture and you will note that I am still more or less the big Jef. My health is excellent and I have never had reason to complain about the situation given to me here by Divine Providence.*”<sup>5</sup>

In 1882 the French missionary magazine *Les Missions Catholiques* used this picture to illustrate a letter from Damien. And we also know that Damien gave this picture to the writer-journalist Charles Warren Stoddard when Stoddard came to visit him in 1884.<sup>6</sup>

We have always wondered why Damien would have waited seven years before sending the photograph to his family. Knowing that the picture was taken in 1878 instead of 1873 makes the delay in sending the picture much more reasonable.



FIGURE 4. Engraving of Father Damien based on photograph of Father Damien made by H.L. Chase, 1878, published in P. Tauvel, *Vie du Père Damien, l'apôtre des lépreux de Molokai*.

## ORIGIN OF THE MISTAKE

A reproduction of this photo can be found in one of the first biographies of Damien dating from 1890 (Figure 4).<sup>7</sup> The caption of the picture reads “Le Père Damien à l’âge de trente-trois ans” (Father Damien aged thirty-three years). It was here that the picture was dated 1873 for the first time. Numerous later publications repeated this identification.

The reason for putting this date with the picture is obvious. The moment Damien made the decision to share his life with the people of Kalaupapa had to be illustrated with a photograph. The fact that Damien made his choice at the age of thirty-three years, the age of Christ when he gave his life for the redemption of the world, only added more weight to the symbolic nature of the moment. Therefore, it is not surprising that a photograph of the young Father Damien, that had no exact dating, was linked to this significant moment.

We are happy to have been able to correct this mistake. It is an important example of how we can learn more about Father Damien by looking closely at the people of Kalaupapa. The photo of Ephraim Kanoe has only been published recently<sup>8</sup> and it was seeing this photo that enabled us to correctly identify the place and date of the first photo of Father Damien taken at Kalaupapa.

NOTES: We want to express our gratitude to Alice Tran and Luella Kurkjian of the Hawai‘i State Archives for helping us with our research and to Anwei Law who volunteered to edit the English translation of this article.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Personal Communication, Luella H. Kurkjian, AH, February 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Gavan Daws, *Holy Man. Father Damien of Molokai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1973) photo spread between pp. 114 and 115; Anwei Skinsnes Law and Henry Law, *Father Damien . . . A Bit of Taro, A Piece of Fish, and A Glass of Water* (Seneca Falls: IDEA Center for the Voices of Humanity, 2009) 18.
- <sup>3</sup> John R.K. Clark, *Kalaupapa Place Names. Waikolu to Nihoa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018) 180.
- <sup>4</sup> David W. Forbes, *Hawaiian National Bibliography*, Vol. 3: 1851–1880 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998) 660, nr. 3234.
- <sup>5</sup> Letter of Father Damien to his Mother, Brothers and Family, January 30–31,

1880, in *Father Damien's Letters* (Rome: Congregation of the Sacred Hearts SS.CC., 2017) 361.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Warren Stoddard, *Charles Warren Stoddard's Diary of a visit to Molokai in 1884 with a letter from Father Damien to his brother in 1873* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1933) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Philibert Tauvel, *Vie du Père Damien, l'apôtre des lépreux de Molokai* (Brugge, 1890) 79.

<sup>8</sup> Anwei Skinsnes Law, *Kalaupapa : A Collective Memory* (Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).