

Out of the Archives

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Hudson's Bay Company sent Hawaiians to work in Washington Territory

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The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) posts in Oregon Territory, Washington Territory, Alaska, and Canada provided animal furs, salmon, and lumber to go east for trade.

Fort Steilacoom was established in the Puget Sound area as a military post on the company's property in August of 1849.¹ Fort Vancouver was originally a Hudson's Bay post, established early, in 1824 or 1825, and operated under several other titles. Fort Vancouver was transitioned to military barracks around 1849, and the company transferred out of the fort around 1860.²



Fort Vancouver, Hudson's Bay Company, c. 1895.

The Hudson's Bay Company was predominately made up of French employees with

It's estimated there were anywhere from 50 to 400 Hawaiians employed by Hudson's Bay Company between 1829 and 1861, but no exact numbers can be verified.³ Many of the Hawaiian employees were given three-year contracts to travel between London, Hawaii, and the West Coast trade routes to load ships and other odd jobs at the various HBC posts.

Washington Territory Census, Pierce County, page 19, 1854.

There were around 30 Hawaiians enumerated in Vancouver and Oregon Territory in November of 1850.⁵ Many returned to Hawaii after their work contracts expired as HBC's trade business declined. Others left to pan for gold in California, and to avoid the lash laws of the times. Hawaiians fell under the lash laws since they were considered people of color.⁶

Some Hawaiians settled in Washington Territory, such as the Kalama family, who can be found in various records held in the State Archives.⁷ Frontier justice records reveal Kalama brought a civil case against Thomas J. Chambers in 1852 for collections of wages that indicated he was a work-for-hire person.⁸ The death record for Peter Kalama indicated he was born in Thurston County in 1860, to John Kalama and his wife Mary, believed to come from the Nisqually tribe.⁹

1. Forts of the West by Robert W. Frazer 1965, Washington State Archives - UA 26 A6 F7 page 174-175.
2. Forts of the West by Robert W. Frazer 1965, Washington State Archives - UA A6 F7 page 176-177.
3. The Hudson's Bay Company in Honolulu, 1829-1861, by Alexander Spoehr, pages 32-34.
4. Washington State Census 1854, Pierce County, Washington Territory, page 19, Washington State Digital Archives, original Puget Sound Branch.
5. 1850 U.S. Federal Census, Schedule I, Oregon Territory, Clark County, no township designated, dated November 4, 1850, enumerated by Joseph L Meek, page 39, Sandwich Islanders lines 5-7, 9-10, and 12-17. These are just a few of the Hawaiians enumerated in 1850, via ancestry.com, accessed April 2020.
6. Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793-1858, by Bruce McIntyre Watson published 2010, volume 1 page 93.
7. Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793-1858 by Bruce McIntyre Watson published 2010, volume II page 505 biography of Kalama.
8. Thurston Frontier Justice case file 3 plaintiff Kalama, defendant Thomas J. Chambers, dated 1852, Washington State Archives, Olympia, WA.
9. Washington State Death Certificate, Peter Kalama, resided Nisqually Indian Reservation, died 5-6-1947, Olympia, Thurston County, WA, State file no. 90, recorded 5-9-1947, via familysearch.org, accessed April 2020.