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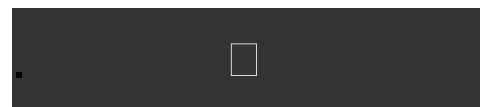
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The forgotten Hawaiian islands in Canada

British Columbia's Gulf Islands are testament of an era when, during a period of internal strife, Hawaiian royalty left their tropical home for distant islands.



By Diane Selkirk
24 November 2020

Located off a faded game trail on uninhabited Portland Island, the orchard waited. Though the trees were gnarled and twisted, moss-covered and forgotten, the

apples were surprisingly crisp; tasting of the kind of nostalgia you don't find in a modern supermarket apple. The orchard also held a story. But over time, as the forest encroached and the trees grew older, the story itself threatened to disappear.

But time turned out to be on the old orchard's side, and recently in September, when I returned after a 15-year absence to British Columbia's Portland Island, the land around the orchard had been cleared.



Canada's Gulf Islands are scattered across the Salish Sea between Vancouver and Southern Vancouver Island (Credit: Bloomberg Creative/Getty Images)

In 2003, Portland Island, with its winding trails, sandstone cliffs and shell-midden beaches, had become part of the **Gulf Islands National Park Reserve** (GINPR), a sprawling national park made up of protected lands scattered across 15 islands and numerous islets and reefs in the Salish Sea. Over the next 15 years, 17 abandoned orchards, on eight of the islands, **were studied by Parks Canada archaeologists and cultural workers** in order to gain a glimpse into the lives of early settlers in the region. On Portland Island, a new park sign told me, the

heritage apples including Lemon Pippin, Northwest Greening, Winter Banana and Yellow Bellflower had been planted by a man called John Palau, one of the hundreds of Hawaiians who were among the earliest settlers in the region.

The Gulf Islands are comprised of dozens of islands scattered between Vancouver and Southern Vancouver Island. With a mild climate and bucolic landscapes, it's been the continuous unceded territory of Coast Salish Nations for at least 7,000 years. The Spanish visited in 1791 and then Captain George Vancouver showed up, claiming the Gulf Islands for the British Crown. Not long after, settlers began arriving from all parts of the world. Many of them were Hawaiian, while black Americans, Portuguese, Japanese and Eastern Europeans also settled on the islands.

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I found the story by chance during a cocktail party

History, though, can become obscured. And the story of the Gulf Islands became an English one. “People think of the islands as a white place,” BC historian Jean Barman told me by phone. “Time erases stories that don’t fit the preferred narrative.”

During my early autumn visit to Portland Island, I began reading more about its early Hawaiian settlers, sometimes known as Kanakas, after the Hawaiian word for person. I learned that in the late 1700s, during a period of strife when Indigenous Hawaiians (including royalty) were losing their rights and autonomy at home, many of the men joined the maritime fur trade.





A large number of Hawaiians settled on the western shore of Salt Spring Island where they could continue their traditions of fishing and farming (Silentfoto/Getty Images)

Employed by the Hudson Bay Company, hundreds, if not thousands, of Hawaiians found their way to Canada's west coast. By 1851, some estimates say half the settler population of the Gulf Islands was Hawaiian. Then in the late 1850s, as the border between the US and present-day Canada solidified, many Hawaiians who had been living south moved north, where they were afforded the rights of British citizenship.

Once in BC they became landowners, farmers and fishermen. Gradually, they intermarried with local First Nations or other immigrant groups and their Hawaiian identity was almost lost. But during the years when the land containing the orchards was researched and studied, their story was revived, and Hawaiian Canadians began reclaiming their heritage.

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Curious as to why this part of island history had faded from general knowledge – and how it had been rediscovered – I asked Barman. As a historian she's made a career of looking for excluded histories. "I found the story by chance during a cocktail party," she said. In the late 1980s, a provincial politician named Mel Couvelier told her he believed he had Indigenous ancestors and asked what she could find out.

Starting from a two-line obituary, Barman began research. She learned Couvelier had an ancestor named Maria Mahoi, a woman born on Vancouver Island in about 1855 to a Hawaiian man and a local Indigenous woman. Mahoi's story intrigued Barman. "Her ordinary life adds to BC's story of diversity," Barman told me – something she says is more important than ever.



Maria Mahoi lived on Russell Island in the early 20th Century, and her legacy helped shape the creation of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve (Credit: Diane Selkirk)

“When people share the stories of who they are, they’re partial stories. What gets

repeated is based on how ambivalent or how proud you are,” Barman said, explaining this is why many British Columbians of Hawaiian descent she’s spoken to claim royal heritage. It was a story they were proud of.

While royal heritage might be likely (Hawaiians from the royal family certainly came) – it’s harder to trace. Part of the problem is the fact that the records of Hawaiians who came to the west coast are particularly challenging. Newly arrived Hawaiians often went by a single name or just a nickname. Even when a first and last name was recorded, a name’s spelling often changed over time. So it became difficult to track a specific Hawaiian royal through his or her lifetime.

For Barman, the stories of regular people like Mahoi have more to offer. In her 2004 book, **Maria Mahoi of the Islands**, she writes that, “By reflecting on Maria Mahoi’s life, we come to realize that we each, every one of us, do matter. Stories about the everyday are as important to our collective memory as a society as is the drama and the glamour. Maybe the easy dismissal of Maria’s worth lies not with her, but with how we think about the past.”

The restoration of Mahoi’s story ended up helping to shape part of a national park.





By 1851, it's estimated that half the settler population of the Gulf Islands was Hawaiian (Credit: Bloomberg Creative/Getty Images)

Maria Mahoi spent her young adulthood sailing a 40ft whaling schooner with her first husband, American sea captain Abel Douglas. As they had children and their family grew, they settled on Salt Spring Island. Here a large number of Hawaiian families had formed a community on the western shore extending south from Fulford Harbour to Isabella Point, overlooking the islands of Russell, Portland and Cole.

Mahoi's first marriage ended, leaving her a single mother with seven children. She then married a man named George Fisher, the son of a wealthy Englishman called Edward Fisher and an Indigenous Cowichan woman named Sara. The two had an additional six children and made their home in a log cabin on 139 acres near Fulford Harbour.

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The restoration of

This changed in 1902, when Hawaiian farmer and fruit grower William Haumea left Mahoi 40 acres on Russell Island. This land was superior to their land on Salt Spring

Mahoi's story ended up helping to shape part of a national park

Island, so the family moved, and within a few years they'd built a house and expanded the orchard to six to eight rows of four types of apples and three types of plums (some which came from nearby Portland Island and farmer John Palau). They also had fields of berries and raised chickens and sheep. The family stayed in the home until 1959, enjoying a legacy of apple pies and dried apples as well as clam and fish chowders.

Much of what we think of as Hawaiian culture – hula dance, lei making and traditional food – are the customary domain of women. So those parts of the Hawaiian culture didn't come to the Gulf Islands with the first male arrivals. But the Hawaiians left their mark in other ways. The community provided both the land and the volunteer builders for the St Paul's Catholic Church at Fulford Harbour; and **Chinook Jargon**, the local trade language of the time, included many Hawaiian words. The culture also showed in where the Hawaiians chose to live: most settled in the islands where they were able to continue their practices of fishing and farming.



Visitors can enter Maria Mahoi's house on Russell Island and hear stories about her life on the island (Credit: Diane Selkirk)

In Mahoi's case, she also left behind the family home. The small house – with doorways that were just 5'6" – reflects the small stature of the original inhabitants, something that intrigued later owners. Over time, as more of Russell Island's unique history became clear, it was acquired by the Pacific Marine Heritage Legacy in 1997 and then deemed culturally distinct enough to become part of GINPR in 2003.

I visited Russell Island in the middle of learning about the Hawaiian legacy in the islands. Wandering down a gentle trail that weaves through a forest of Douglas fir, arbutus, Garry oak and shore pine, I looked out over the white-shell beaches where Indigenous people once had their clam gardens. Stepping over the wildflowers that were blooming on the rocky outcrops, I took the trail into the forest that leads to the small house where Mahoi's family had lived. These days, descendants present their history (during non-Covid times) by inviting visitors into the small home where they share their memories and tell stories about Mahoi's life on the island.

Beside the house is what remains of the large orchard. A sign invited me to pick a handful of the small apples. Crunchy and tart, the flavour was similar to the apples I'd sampled on Portland Island so many years ago. Yet this time they tasted sweeter. Later, when I cooked them into an apple crumble, I wondered if the extra sweetness came from knowing the history and understanding a bit more about the diverse cultures that built this province I call home. I wondered if the richer flavour came from finally learning Maria Mahoi's name.



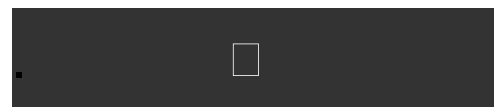


The legacy of the early Hawaiian settlers was virtually erased from history, but now Hawaiian Canadians have begun reclaiming their heritage (Credit: Steve Satushek/Getty Images)

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