

The case of the myste

By Jan TenBruggencate
Advertiser Kauai Bureau

A mysterious low island, in the vicinity of Kauai and Niihau, has been missing for more than 200 years.

Where was it? What happened to it?

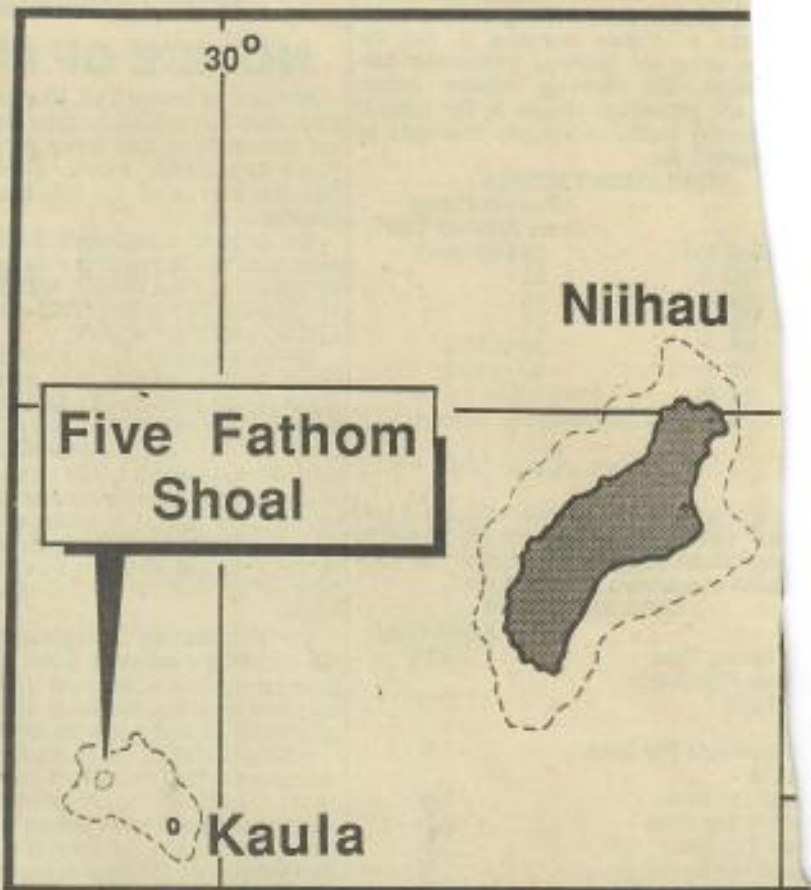
It is a puzzle that has perplexed people since the men of Capt. James Cook's first visit to Hawaii heard of it in 1778.

The British voyagers heard of this island, which they wrote as Modoopapappa or Tammata pappa, at least three times. In modern spelling, those names probably come out Moku papa or Ka moku papa. (Ka in Hawaiian is the definite article, "the.")

Capt. Charles Clerke specifically looked for it in early 1779, after Cook's death. He even came across a canoe heading for it, but Clerke never found it.

Clerke believed he was looking for a sandy island, where no people lived, but where turtles were known to haul out of the water. The men in the canoe said they were going to catch some of those turtles at that place.

The island's location is fixed on no chart



Various descriptions have it to the southwest of Kauai and Niihau. Clerke thought it was southwest of Kaula, an islet southwest of Niihau. It wasn't. The nautical charts show no shallow places in that direction.

Dave Nekomoto, executive officer of the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai, flies over the waters off Kauai and Niihau. He said he knows of no shallow reefs or sand bars off Kaula.

Koichi Masaki, a veteran Kauai fisherman, is credited with discovering the only thing close to a shallow off Kaula. It is a rock pinnacle that reaches within 30 feet of the surface, about 6 miles northwest of Kaula.

Masaki said that in all his years of fishing the waters, he located nothing else in the area that would meet the description of Clerke's island.

Victor Lipman, who with turtle expert George Balazs studied the issue for a 1983 article in "Honolulu" magazine, came up with Masaki's pinnacle as the only likely answer.

Kauai diver Sam Lee, who calls it Five Fathom Shoal, said it is shaped like an ice cream cone, with the top flat and the sides dropping steeply to the slack depths below. And that flat top is not much bigger than a floor in a good-sized office building, Lee said.

Could the "island" have simply been a sunken reef? Would Hawaiians have collected turtles feeding and resting at such a spot?

Balazs, who studies sea turtles for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said he visited the spot and finds it unlikely.

Balazs said he received one report that pre-Cook Hawaiians might have built a platform, hauled it out there and anchored it to the pinnacle to collect turtles.

"At first it sounded absolutely ludicrous," he said, but he considered it. Balazs said he concluded no such platform could have survived in those open ocean conditions long enough to become a regular turtle collection spot.

A man familiar with Hawaiian folklore said there were traditions in Hawaii of ghost islands, "certain legendary islands that were supposed to pop up and disappear." But that would not account for a spot so firm that you'd go looking for turtle there.

Another theory is that the sandy island named is actually one of the low islands of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The next two islands beyond the Kauai-Niihau group are rocky Nihoa and Necker, but beyond them extends the chain of sandbars and shoals, beginning with French Frigate Shoals.

However, a Kauai canoe on a short fishing trip would not be going hundreds of miles across open ocean for turtles. There were enough turtles around the main islands.

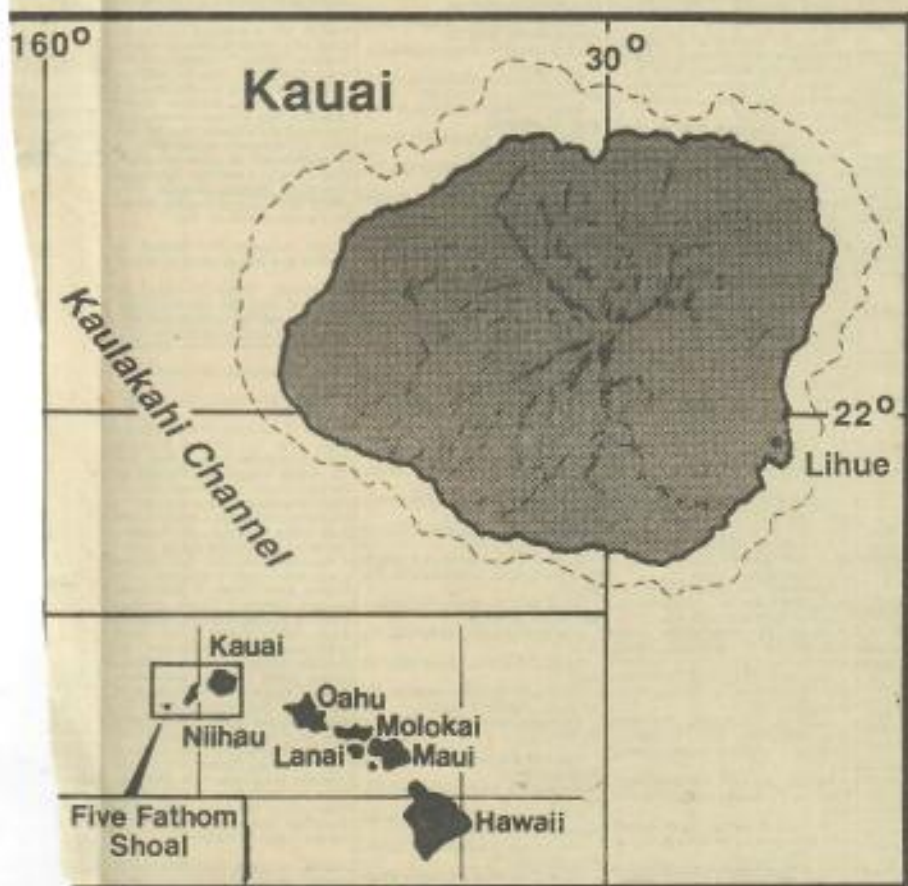
There is also the possibility the island referred to was one of the many small islands and rocks off Niihau. One fisherman suggested Kuakamoku, a rock off the southwestern coast of

Niihau, could once have supported a sand bar. It does not, today.

Finally, there is the likelihood that the Europeans on Cook's ships simply misunderstood their informants.

One meaning of Moku papa could be flat island, but Samuel H. Elbert, co-author of "Place Names of Hawaii," said the

erious disappearing isle



Map shows the location of an area known as Five Fathom Shoal. Kauai diver Sam Lee said it is shaped like an ice cream cone, with the top flat and the sides dropping steeply to the black depths below. While the area may be the mysterious "missing island," others say there is no evidence it could have been at the surface or supported a sandy area as little as 200 years ago.

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words could mean many other things.

"Moku and papa are both pretty common words," he said. Moku can be an island, a district, a severed portion of something, he said. Papa can refer to a native offspring, things growing thickly together, a kind of lava, a part of a fishing net or a wind of a specific area,

he said.

"Moku papa can just mean a rock," he said.

The word papa'u can mean a sand bar or a shallow place.

The Hawaiians in the canoe Clerke saw could have been saying they were going to an islet or reef where turtles gathered, rather than giving the specific name of the place.

There are enough small islands off the coasts of Kauai and Niihau to meet the rough description. It is quite likely the Hawaiians were referring to an island or islands that did and still do exist. We just don't know which.

Or maybe there was a disappearing island, which has remained invisible all these years.