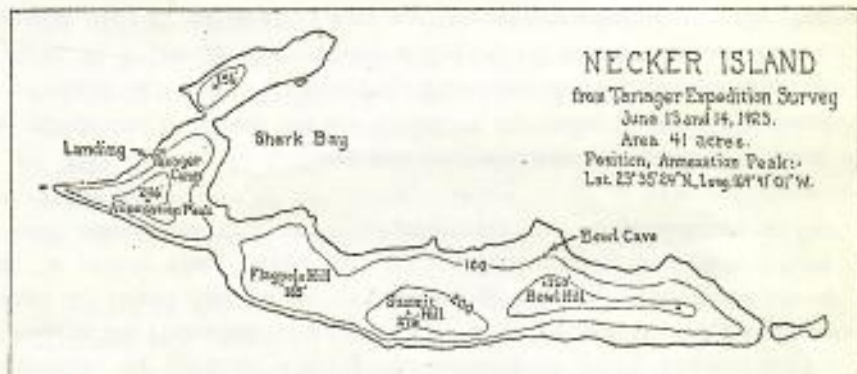


## CHAPTER 49

# Necker Island\*



Necker Island is a precipitous, narrow ridge of volcanic rock, about 1,300 yards long, east and west, by a tenth as wide. It is estimated to have an area of 41 acres. From the western end a narrow spur extends about 200 yards northward, like the bone point on a Hawaiian trolling hook. The main crest undulates in a series of five hills. The westernmost of these, called Annexation Hill, is 246 feet high; the next, Flagpole Hill, 185 feet; the middle one, Summit Hill, 276 feet; the next, Bowl Hill, 260 feet; and east of that a narrow ridge, slightly over 200 feet high. The spur, the highest point of which is 156 feet above sea level, forms with the main stretch of the island a shallow, rocky cove called Shark Bay. During the greater part of the time the water in this bay is too rough to provide a landing, as it faces both wind and current. West of the spur, however, is a small lee where landing can be made on rocky shelves in moderately calm weather.

This rocky islet, particularly its nearly vertical sides, appears from a distance to be bare of vegetation. Closer examination discloses that its rounded crest and narrow terraces on its flanks are sparsely carpeted with five species of low, nearly prostrate plants: a species of goosefoot shrub (*Chenopodium sandwichicum*), which also is common on forehills

(\* Paradise of the Pacific, vol. 50: no. 1, pages 21-22, Jan. 1928.)

throughout the main Hawaiian islands and is known to the Hawaiians as awaeo, is commonest on terraced slopes; a bunch grass (*Panicum torridum*), called on the main island kakonakona, is found on the north-slope, but very dry much of the time; purslane (*Portulaca lutea*), the common ili weed, is common on the flat tops; a patch of pickle weed (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*) grows on the lower northeastern slope of Annexation Hill, where it can be reached by the spray from waves dashing into Shark Bay; and a few plants of the much-branching ohai shrub (*Sesbania tomentosa*) sprawl, vine-like, along the windswept crest. None of the plants reaches a height of more than two feet above the thin, rocky soil. There is no sign of half a dozen other species of plants which were carefully set out by the late Territorial Forester, Charles S. Judd in June, 1923. Apparently they could not stand the unfavorable conditions.

Dr. Harold S. Palmer, in 1923, estimated that the rainfall might be 20 to 25 inches a year. Two small seeps of water, strongly tainted with guano, together might furnish ten gallons of water a day.

The only inhabitants, larger than cockroaches and a native species of Rhyacogonus weevil, related to the species on Nihoa, are birds. There are hordes of them, all sea birds. At certain times of the year their eggs cover every bit of level ground so thickly that it is difficult to walk without stepping on them. The birds rise in clouds at ones approach. Some species cry all day, and others moan and howl all night. The five days we spent on the island in June, 1923, seemed long enough to devote to such an inhospitable place.

And yet to the student of native culture Necker Island is perhaps the most interesting spot in the Hawaiian islands. By its very isolation and lack of hospitality it has preserved evidence of the culture of what is believed by Kenneth P. Emory, ethnologist at B. P. Bishop Museum, to have been archaic Hawaiians. On the main islands of the group this ancient culture has been overlain by the changes brought about by the incoming Ari'i and their priests who arrived during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from the Society Islands. Only fragments remain on the main islands of the ditches, fishponds, and other stone structures, ascribed to the early Menchunes, who were the real, archaic inhabitants, not a fairy folk. But on Necker were some thirty-four temple platforms, which seem to find their nearest counterpart in the marae of southeastern Polynesia. Here also were found the famous stone images, beautifully carved stone bowls, adzes, sinkers, a grindstone, and human bones, all



mute evidence of at least semi-permanent residence by a Polynesian people. Those who are interested in this subject will find Emory's "Archaeology of Nihoa and Necker Islands" a well written convincing, and entertaining account.

Necker Island appears to have been unknown to the Hawaiians at the time of its discovery by La Perouse on November 4, 1786. This famous French navigator sailed within a third of a league of the island on his passage westward, noting the perpendicular cliffs, white with the droppings of birds, the absence of trees, and the violence of the sea, which made it impossible to land. He called it *le Necker*, in honor of Monsieur Jacques Necker, French Minister of Finance under Louis XVI.

John Turnbull, who visited the Hawaiian islands, December 17, 1802 to January 21, 1803, in the British ship *Margaret*, mentions in his account of the voyage that he had two Hawaiians, who had been engaged to dive for pearls on a reef in the leeward Hawaiian islands, had landed on Necker, and had their curiosity aroused by a "range of stones, placed with some regularity in the manner of a wall, and about three feet high." Apparently they were the first persons to set foot on Necker Island in modern times.

Lieutenant J. M. Brooke visited Necker during January, 1859, and determined its position. During the summer of 1859, Captain N. C. Brooks, of the Hawaiian bark *Gambia*, on a sealing and exploring voyage, passed the island, but makes no mention of landing, although he states that "a ravine makes down from the southeast end of the rock, where at some seasons there is water. A boat may land in good water at the foot of this gulch."

In 1894, Captain J. A. King was commissioned by Sanford B. Dole and authorized to annex Necker Island in the name of the Provisional Government of Hawaii. On board the Hawaiian steamer *Iwawani*, Captain William K. Freeman, the expedition arrived off Shark Bay on Sunday morning, May 27, 1894, at 11 a.m. and landed immediately. The landing party consisted of Captain King, Captain Freeman, Benjamin H. Norton, and nine sailors. A flagpole was erected on Annexation Hill, the Hawaiian flag hoisted, and Captain King read the annexation proclamation. In the course of their exploration of the island the party found some stone images and noted the stone platforms with their rows of upright stones. Fragments of six images were collected during the four hours spent on the island. Copies of seven photographs, taken at the

time by B. H. Norton, engineer of the *Iwaloani*, are now preserved in Bishop Museum.

On September 24, 1894, H.B.M.S. *Champion*, Captain Rooke, landed a party on Necker Island. They collected four more images, two of which are now in the British Museum, London.

On July 12, 1895, Captain King headed another expedition to Necker, on the Revenue Cutter *Lehua*, to map the island and see if additional images could be found. Dr. William T. Brigham, first director of Bishop Museum, went to make scientific observations, but discovered no additional images. The survey and map were made by F. S. Dodge, of the Hawaiian Government Survey. Professor W. D. Alexander was also a member of the party.

Several other landings were made during the following quarter century, including two by George N. Wilcox, two by officers of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Thetis* (1910 and 1913), H. L. Tucker and excursion party in 1917, and the late Gerrit P. Wilder, warden of the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation, on the lighthouse tender *Kukui*, October 6, 1919. Mr. Wilder found the leg of an image.

The Tanager Expedition put two parties ashore between June 12 and 29, 1923. At this time a plane-table map was made by Charles S. Judd and Dr. H. S. Palmer, and a careful study was made of the plant and animal life by other members of the party. The *Tanager* made another visit to Necker, July 14 to 17, 1924, with a party which made a thorough archaeological survey.

Officially Necker Island is part of the City and County of Honolulu, it having been one of the islands acquired by the United States from the Republic of Hawaii, July 7, 1898. On June 2, 1904, it was leased for fishing purposes for 21 years. February 3, 1909, it became a part of the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation, and as such it is administered jointly by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Territory of Hawaii. Its position is North 23° 34' 41", 164° 42' 22" West; 393 miles northwest of Honolulu.

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