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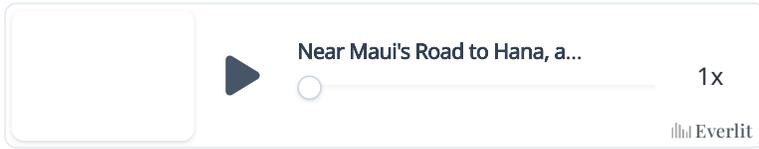
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By **Eric Brooks**, *Freelance writer*
March 6, 2025



Baldwin Beach on a beautiful day, Maui, Hawaii.
Rob DeCamp Photography/Getty Images



Sometimes the most interesting find isn't the most obvious one.



That's precisely what I learned on a recent trip to [Hawaii](#), when I went to a popular Maui beach and ended up stumbling into something mysterious right next door. And as it turns out, I was one of just a few visitors who had set foot there in a long, long time.

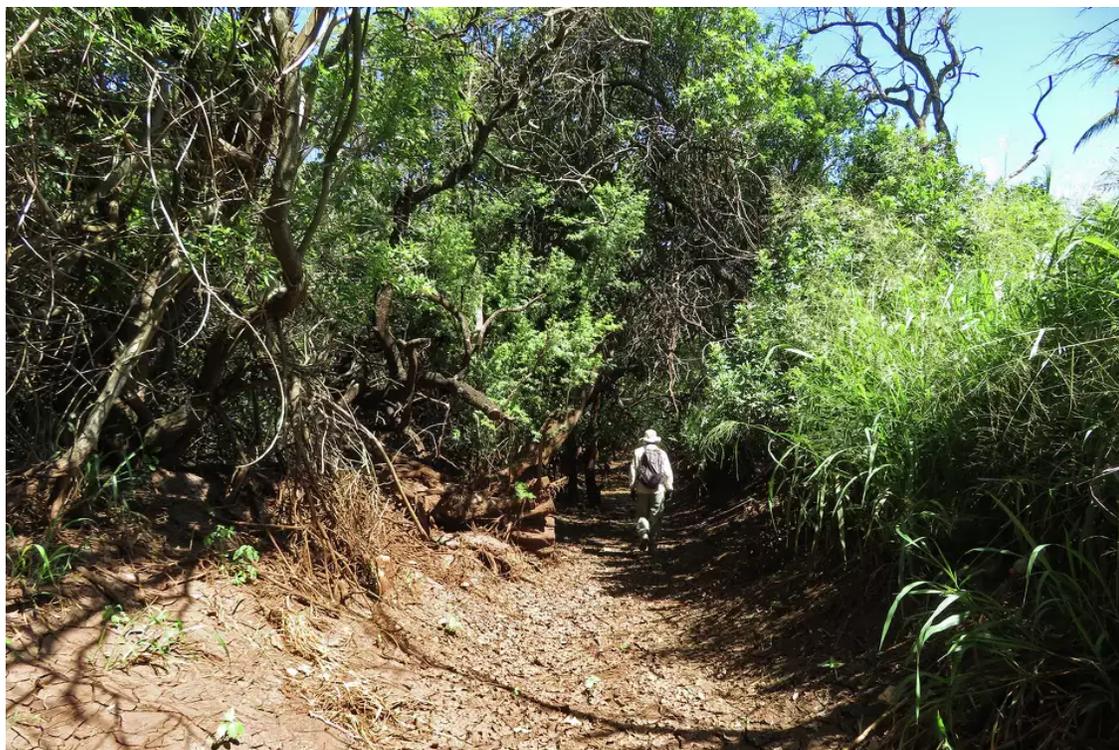
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This site isn't listed as a roadside attraction on Google Maps or in any visitor brochures. I found it when driving through Paia, a small community on Maui's North Shore that marks the start of the [Road to Hana](#). The town is littered with locally owned shops and eateries — including the [world-famous Mama's Fish House](#) — and is a "must stop" for those about to embark on the 52-mile curvy coastal highway.

In looking to meet up with my family at Baldwin Beach Park, a very popular beach and recreation area located right next door, I came across a dirt path.

As I followed it into the woods, I quickly came upon two large stone columns that signaled the entrance to something, though it was unclear exactly where I was headed. Perhaps this was the official entrance to Baldwin Beach Park?

There was only one way to find out. I froze in my tracks just a few steps later.



A trail at [Baldwin Beach](#) in Paia on the island of Maui, [April 16, 2021](#).

There, just beyond some overgrown grass, was what looked like a group of headstones. Next to that, another 5 to 10 feet away, were more headstones. I rounded the corner to see an entire graveyard surrounded by sand and unmaintained brush. I estimated maybe 100 headstones in all.

It was apparent what I had stumbled into, but I was left with a lot of questions. Closer inspection — with respect to where my feet were placed — revealed every grave was weathered by the marine setting and time. Some were even tipped slightly to the side, perhaps by seismic activity or decades of erosion.

Noticeably, each had what appeared to be Japanese calligraphy, so I had no clue how old each headstone was or who might be resting there. I soon realized I was enclosed by a wire fence separating me from Baldwin Beach.

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There were also tall trees and shrubbery on all sides, so I was pretty obscured.



An abandoned graveyard, Paia Hongwanji Cemetery, is hidden right next to Baldwin Beach Park on Maui.
Eric Brooks

I could see sunbathers through the vegetation just a few hundred feet away from where I was standing, completely oblivious I was there in a cemetery right behind them. This sacred place seemed to be a completely concealed mystery cut off from everything around it.

But who was buried there? Why was it so unkept? How did it end up so hidden? I needed to know.

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‘Place that time forgot’

It turned out the area’s history in agriculture was key to unraveling its mystery.

Baldwin Beach Park and much of the surrounding land used to be owned by Maui's Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company, or HC&S, a titan of the top industry in Hawaii for many years, according to Lucienne de Naie, author and docent at [Hale Hoikeike at the Bailey House](#), a local history and art museum located in nearby Wailuku.

"The big boom in sugar cane came in the 1880s and 1890s," de Naie told SFGATE.

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That's when plantation owners, keen to take advantage of the growing sugar cane business, began to import contract workers from countries like Japan, China, the Philippines and Portugal. "There were little camps of Japanese workers; the plantations tended to segregate their workers," said de Naie, a resident of Maui since the 1970s who knows Paia very well. "The Chinese workers would live in another, the Philippine workers would live in another and so on. The camps had communal activities."

One shared interest was religion. In this area, it was Buddhism.



Paia Hongwanji Cemetery at Baldwin Beach in Paia on the island of Maui, April 16, 2021.
Forrest and Kim Starr via Flickr CC 2.0

Citing a book called “Island of Maui Cemetery (Map & History) Directory,” de Naie was able to pinpoint the original name of the cemetery as the “Paia Hongwanji Cemetery.” It was associated with a Buddhist group called the Makawao Hongwanji, she added, which opened a temple in the area in 1908. The group moved not too far northeast to Upper Paia in 1917, later relocating about 7 miles southeast to Makawao in 1968, according to their website.

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Though the group is still active today, it appears the cemetery was simply left behind.

When reached by phone, a woman at the Makawao Buddhist Temple who didn’t want to be identified indicated the cemetery hadn’t been cared for in several decades, though she did say that the headstones were, at one

time, cared for by people from the temple even years after the congregation left the area. But that's no longer the case.

Another Buddhist congregation sits right next door to the abandoned graveyard on the other side of the wire fence. It's called the [Rinzai Zen Mission](#) and was started in 1932 — about 15 years after the Makawao Hongwanji left the Lower Paia area.

In a phone interview, the temple's minister provided an honest assessment of the cemetery. "It's sad to say but it's kind of abandoned," Kodai Haga told SFGATE. "No one takes care of the cemetery." Haga said that he's only been asked once about it by a descendant. Other than that, no one asks.

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"This is really not unheard of," de Naie explained. "Most of the cemeteries [on Maui] that I have visited don't seem to have robust support systems. In other words, the people who are related to the folks that are buried there may have left Maui or have not left plans to care for them."

"Paia is the cemetery capital of Maui," de Naie added. "For a small town, it probably has nine to 10 recognized cemeteries. It's amazing how many cemeteries are there. Catholic, Protestant, Chinese and Mormon cemeteries. It's a very easy place to dig, with the sand dunes. You put them where you can easily dig."



Shops and food establishments in Paia, Maui, Hawaii. Paia Town was established in 1896 with the founding of a company store for plantation workers. In recent decades, Paia has become a laidback town with local businesses, shops and boutiques.

Barry Winiker/Getty Images

The number of cemeteries is due in large part to decades of population explosion in the Paia area followed by steady population decline — all thanks to the sugar cane boom, de Naie explained. In fact, Paia’s population once reached more than 10,000 people in the 1930s. It came in at just over 2,200 in the last U.S. census.

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There could also be another reason the cemetery was left to decay.

“One reason why this cemetery and others like it are forgotten or not cared for, especially Buddhist cemeteries, is because of World War II,” said Erin Aoyama, curatorial assistant at the Los Angeles-based Japanese American National Museum. “After Pearl Harbor, many of the folks seen as anti-American were Buddhist and Shinto priests. There was a huge disruption and community uprooting that happened.”

That wave of arrests, specifically targeting those who were community and religious leaders, had a major impact on Japanese immigrants in Hawaii — then a U.S. territory.

Aoyama's grandfather was born on a Maui pineapple plantation.

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"He grew up working with his parents and siblings on this pineapple plantation," Aoyama told SFGATE in a phone interview. "The stories that I've heard, they remember fun things about being kids and growing up on these plantations. Every now and then, my auntie would talk about how terrible the conditions were. I know the sacrifice made by my great-grandparents. I can only imagine so much was left behind [in Japan]."

Another fascinating angle is the religion's core belief that the dead should not be forgotten, according to Emily Anderson, curator at the Japanese American National Museum.



The many headstones at Paia Hongwanji Cemetery are written in kanji.
Eric Brooks

“The worst thing that can happen to you is to be an abandoned spirit,” she said. “You want to be remembered. You want to know that your life will be remembered in some way. There’s a whole ritual system that’s in place for relatives and those who knew the deceased to make sure you will not be forgotten.”

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Records seem to identify only a few of the cemetery’s permanent residents, with many graves listed as “unknown.” Of those that are identified or partially identified, all are either Japanese immigrants or first-generation residents descended directly from immigrants.

Those with names attached to them are people like Usha Hokama Yonamine, who died in 1919 at the age of 24 from the flu. Two of her infant children are buried there with her. Also buried in the graveyard is Tsuguo Kitahara, another infant who died less than a week after birth from bronchitis. His father reportedly worked for the Maui Agricultural Company in Paia, another agricultural company that owned many fields and operated camps on the island.

Many of the headstones are apparently written in kanji, which are Chinese characters adapted and used in the Japanese writing system.

“These were probably people who were bachelor wage laborers who came out, died young and didn’t have family locally to look after their graves or move them to another location,” Anderson said. “The fact that the cemetery has been abandoned means they didn’t have people to look after them after they died.”

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“They’re just kind of lost to history,” she added.

For de Naie, it’s “this place that time forgot.”

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Eric Brooks is a multimedia journalist with over a decade of experience in radio and digital storytelling. He hails from the Midwest and now proudly calls the Bay Area home.

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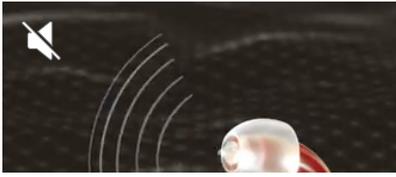
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