



MEMO TO: Las Vegas Hawaiian Civic Club Members
SUBJECT: History Report
Date: March 2024
FROM: Gail Wright, LVHCC Historian

The Building of Hawai'iloa

The planning for construction of the double-hulled canoe Hawai'iloa by the Polynesian Voyaging Society, funded by the National Parks Service, began in the late 1980s. The plan was to build a Hawaiian voyaging canoe, as much as possible, out of traditional native materials. The purpose of the project was to recover knowledge and skills associated with traditional Hawaiian canoe-building.

"Hokule'a was built quickly, of modern materials mostly," Nainoa Thompson recalls, "and then we went right into sailing – it was an ocean project – the emphasis was on sailing her, not building her. But when our ancestors built and sailed voyaging canoes, it required the labor and arts of the entire community, everyone working together. So, we thought that building a canoe of traditional materials would bring our entire community together, not just the sailors, but the craftspeople, artists, chanters, dancers and carvers"

The canoe would be named for the voyager Hawai'iloa, who, according to one tradition, was the first discoverer of Hawai'i. He is said to have found the islands on a long fishing expedition from a land called Ka-'aina-kai-melemele-a-Kane, "The land of the yellow sea of Kane." He returned home and came back to Hawai'i with his wife and followers, including eight navigators. Because only Hawai'iloa brought his wife with him, all Hawaiians are said to be descended from him. The island of Hawai'i was named for him, while Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua" were named after his children.

One of the first problems in designing the canoe was the discovery that the forests of Hawai'i did not contain Koa trees large enough for the canoe hulls. A search for logs in 1989-1990 identified the Koa forests have been ruined by forestry and cattle grazing. Reviewing history it was discovered that during one of the visits to Maui by Captain George Vancouver in the 1790s he had measured a large canoe and found it to be over 108 feet long. It was fabricated, as he later wrote in his ship's log, "of the finest pine." Vancouver knew that pine did not grow in Hawai'i and asked the chief who owned the canoe "where did the wood come from?" "It was a gift from the gods," the chief replied.



Pressing the matter, Vancouver learned that a pine log had drifted ashore. Hawaiians had never seen such wood before so they assumed it was a divine gift; but Vancouver had seen pines growing on the northwest coast of North America so he guessed it had drifted from there to Hawai'i. As a result of finding this information, the search for logs took the canoe builders to Alaska. When told about the unsuccessful search for logs, Byron Mallot, CEO of the SeAlaska Corporation (owned by several tribes of Southeast Alaska), offered to donate two Sitka spruce logs. In 1990, SeAlaska located trees large enough on U.S. Forestry land on Shelikof Island in Soda Bay, Prince of Wales Island, west of Ketchikan, Alaska. The 200-foot-tall trees, seven feet in diameter, were over 400 years old. After traditional Hawaiian and Tlingit tree-cutting ceremonies

were performed, the trees were felled and shipped to Hawai'i.

"Even though we (Hawaiians) did not directly cause the abuse of our forest," Nainoa recalls, "we needed to take responsibility for it and care for the land. So gradually the answer became clear, we needed to plant trees in our own forest before we cut any down in Alaska." A few months later, at the fence line separating the Kilauea Forest Reserve and the Keahou Ranch, a circle of about a hundred people joined hands for a prayer. They had spent most of the day replanting Koa trees, now it was time to ask the akua to bless their work. Among that group at the replanting were members of the board of directors from Sealaska. It was a diverse group with a sense of growing community. What started as a project of artisans and people within the Hawaiian voyaging culture now extended out as far away as Alaska."

The construction of Hawai'iloa began in 1991. The canoe hulls were designed by Rudy and Barry Choy and Dick Rhodes. The rest of the canoe was designed by project director Nainoa Thompson, Kahuna kalai-wa'a (master canoe carver) Wright Bowman, Jr. and Wally Froiseth. Numerous volunteers worked cutting, shaping, drilling, chiseling, sanding, painting, lashing, etc. Dimensions: Length: 57 feet; Beam: 19 feet; Sails (2): 240-420 sq. feet each.



Hawai'iloa, for the most part, was built of traditional materials – Lauhala for the sails, Olonā for the lashings, Koa and pine for the hulls, 'Ōhi'a for crossbeams to connect the hulls, and Hau for stanchions, decks and steering paddles. The canoe was completed, blessed, and launched in July 1993, sea-tested, then dry-docked for modifications in October 1993. The modifications included trimming 3 tons from the weight of the canoe to increase its carrying capacity and speed, and reduce stress on the lashings. The canoe was relaunched in July 1994, for more sea trials before its voyage to Nukuhiva via Ra'iatea and back.

In May-July 1995, the voyaging canoe Hawai'iloa journeyed from Seattle, Washington, to Juneau, Alaska participating in cultural and educational exchanges along the way. The canoe stopped at Hollis on Prince of Wales Island, west of Ketchikan, Alaska, where the two Sitka spruce trees used for

her hulls originally came from.

Currently, Hawai'iloa is back in the water after 4 years of rebuilding and modifications. This was required because of wear and tear on several parts of the canoe due to long sea voyages. As of now, Hawai'iloa will be used to train new crew members.

Sources:

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