

Palawai Basin

Lanai, Hawaii, United States of America

The Palawai Basin was designated as the first gathering place for Hawaiian Latter-day Saints in 1854. It was originally named the Valley of Ephraim and a settlement built there was called the City of Joseph.¹ Ephraim Green, a missionary who was put in charge of the settlement, described laying out the city on October 3, 1854 as follows:

*"I tuck my cumpas and commenst to lay out a town at the fut of the mountain and laid out one stret runing south to the sea three mildes to a fine litle harbour whare we land out boats bear we intendt to build a store[hou[se] to leave our produse. I then laid out three more streets thruing [turning] the town in to blocks fore acres each with the streets fore rods wide. This is a butiful location for a town."*²

In the fall of 1857 the missionaries in Hawaii were called back home to Utah, as were many missionaries throughout the world, with the impending difficulties with the United States federal government that developed into the Utah War.

Walter Murray Gibson was sent on a mission by Brigham Young to the Far East and came to the Hawaiian Islands in 1861. He subsequently declared himself the "Chief President of the Islands of the Sea and of the Hawaiian Islands, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints." Afterwards he began selling certificates of membership and offices to members of the Church. Gibson also had the titles of the Church's property transferred to his own name.

The First Presidency sent a group of brethren consisting of Ezra T. Benson, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, Alma L. Smith and William W. Cluff to investigate Gibson's activities. Upon arrival to the island of Lanai, Joseph F. Smith described the situation as follows:

"We found that he had ordained twelve apostles. High priests, seventys, elders, bishops, and



View of the Palawai Basin
Photo courtesy of Fred E. Woods

*"priestesses of temples," all of whom had to pay a certain sum corresponding to the various degrees of honor bestowed upon them.... Gibson had bought the district of Palawai (6,000 acres) by the donation of the Saints, assuring them he was doing it all for them for the Church. He persuaded them to give all they had to the Church and made it a test of fellowship....Brothers Benson and Snow required him to sign the land over to the Church as it was dedeed to him and his heirs. This he flatly refused to do informing them he should take his own course."*³

Gibson was excommunicated from the Church, although he retained the land which was purchased under the auspices of the Church. Joseph F. Smith was appointed the local leader and the faithful members relocated to Laie on the island of Oahu where today Brigham Young University-Hawaii, the Polynesian Culture Center and a temple is located.

In 2004, the Mormon Pacific Historical Society and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation erected a monument to the Palawai Saints paying tribute to those early members who established



the first gathering place of the Saints in Hawaii. The dedication of those early Palawai pioneers helped to establish a foundation of faith which continues today and is exhibited by the faithful Saints of Hawaii.

SOURCES

- ¹ Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1941), 323.
- ² R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1986), 113.
- ³ “Walter Murray Gibson,” *Improvement Era*, (December 1900).
- ⁴ Britsch, 122.

FURTHER READING RESOURCES

- R. Beck, “Palawai Basin: Hawaii’s Mormon Zion,” 1972.
- R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.), 1986.
- George Q. Cannon, *My First Mission*, 1879.
- Andrew Jenson, “Walter Murray Gibson,” *Improvement Era*, Vol. 4, (November 1900).
- Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.), 1969.