

Interview with author Christopher L. Cook

- **Why is the story of Henry Obookiah-‘Ōpūkaha‘ia significant today almost 200 years after his death in Cornwall, Connecticut? And what is the meaning of the name given to him by his parents at his homeland in Ka‘ū?**

A young Native Hawaiian man departed his homeland for New England in 1808, beginning an odyssey that changed the fate of Hawai‘i. He became known by two names: ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia, his birth name, and Obookiah, Henry Obookiah, a moniker given him by Connecticut sailors unable to correctly pronounce Hawaiian words.

His names mirror the two lives he led. ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia, the kama‘āina, child of the land from rural Ka‘ū, the south tip of Hawai‘i Island, who rose above personal tragedy to become a kahuna-scholar. And Obookiah, an evangelical “heathen-turned-Christian” celebrity and saint of the Second Great Awakening.

The life of ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia-Obookiah remains significant today as a scholarly role model for Native Hawaiian youth, and for his watershed role in bringing Christianity to Hawai‘i. Henry led a providential life: looking back, he moved ahead thanks to many chance encounters and he narrowly escaped death during several brushes with fate. Without Henry in the picture, all of post-Kamehameha the Great Hawaiian history changes. His plea for the Gospel to be sent to Hawai‘i directly led to the arrival of American missionaries in 1820. Remove from Hawai‘i’s history the Sandwich Islands Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and arguably another foreign power would now control Hawai‘i. Hawai‘i might have been groomed to be just a trading and provisioning crossroads, and a mid-Pacific fortress. Take away the sugar plantation boom of the late nineteenth-century, replace the American flag and for better or worse you have quite a different society in place.

- **How did you discover the story of Henry Obookiah-‘Ōpūkaha‘ia?**

Following Obookiah’s Hawai‘i-New England odyssey became my quest on a summer day in 1983; this quest began at his hillside grave site in Cornwall Cemetery in Connecticut. That summer I traveled from my home in Kaua‘i to the East Coast, on a trip back to the past, to explore the places of my childhood and of my New England ancestors. Cornwall, is located in a valley ringed with mountains in the Litchfield highland region of northwest Connecticut. Directly north, in Massachusetts, right along the New York State line, lie the Berkshire Mountains. There my ancestors farmed in Hancock Valley in the post-Revolutionary War era.

In 1983 I traveled with my parents to this region. My father, a professional photographer in Manhattan, was on assignment to photograph a stained glass window made at a studio in North Adams, Massachusetts. On the way back south, heading to our family home located in a tree-shaded neighborhood about a thirty-minute train ride from Manhattan, we planned to stop in Cornwall, a place I had read about in Hawai‘i history books.

Turning off Connecticut State Highway 7, which runs north and south along the western edge of Litchfield County, we drove through the barn-red West Cornwall Covered Bridge, crossing the Housatonic River. The twentieth-century receded along the leafy country highway as we neared Cornwall village. It was a day of clear blue skies spent about 5,000 miles away from the shores of Kauaʻi. I immediately sensed we were entering an outlier of the Islands, one of those handful of places in the mainland United States with a significant link to the heritage of Hawaiʻi.

We pulled over along Cemetery Hill Road, a quiet, forested area located nearby Cornwall Village. On a hillside green with summer grass, stood the raised grave site of Henry Obookiah. An inscribed, weathered stone slab lay atop a base of field stones about a yard high. Remembrances left behind by other Cornwall pilgrims decorated the grave: a cloth lei with markings from the Kamehameha Schools, shells from a Hawaiian beach. A lengthy memorial cut into the stone in an antique script told the story of “a native of Owhyhee” who, “When almost prepared to return to his native isle, to preach the Gospel, God took to himself.”

The nearby idyllic village of Cornwall seemed in appearance and pace closer in spirit to the era of Obookiah and the Second Great Awakening than to modern times. A cast iron, freshly-painted sign detailed the story of the Foreign Mission School. The academy opened in 1817 to educate “heathen” students from the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere discovered living in New England. The historic marker sign pointed out the lot where the barn-like, belfry-topped academy once stood. The school, though torn down long ago, remains notable for its connection to Obookiah and Hawaiʻi, and a place central to the formation of the Sandwich Islands Mission that departed for Hawaiʻi in October, 1819.

Standing on the village green on that warm day a strong desire came upon me to search out the story of Obookiah and his impact on the history of Hawaiʻi. I wondered what his life was really like in Cornwall, and what adventures he experienced in New England. After my summer sojourn on the East Coast I returned to Hawaiʻi driven by this mission.

• **What is the scope of *The Providential Life & Heritage of Henry Obookiah*?**

The posthumous publication in 1818 of *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*, a slim, hand-sized book, became a Federal Era best-seller, making “Obookiah” a household name in the United States and across the evangelical world overseas.

The *Memoirs* has been the standard work on his life for almost two hundred years. *Memoirs* compiler Edwin Welles Dwight, Foreign Mission School Principal in Cornwall, Connecticut (a close friend and mentor of Obookiah) edited down reams of letters, drew on mission and newspaper articles and blended them with Obookiah’s handwritten life story.

The *Providential Life of Henry Obookiah* explores, and expands on, the text of the *Memoirs*, providing a fresh and often surprising account. This account spans the years Obookiah’s birth in 1787 to the early years of the Sandwich Islands Mission, ending in 1824.

Beyond a detailed retelling of his fateful life, my account offers a fuller understanding of the intertwined fates of Christians from New England, Hawai'i and Tahiti. These Christians, the sons and daughters of the Pilgrims and Puritans, and Polynesians, brought a new faith to Hawai'i following the collapse of the ancient Hawaiian religion.

These missionaries from across the globe, and from the ancient source of spiritual revelation in Hawai'i, the land of Kahiki, gathered in Hawai'i during an epic era. The coming of Christianity in Hawai'i came as evangelical Protestant Christianity broke the bounds of the Reformation in the United States, Britain and Europe, by launching a global foreign missions movement.

• **What did Henry Obookiah-‘Ōpūkaha‘ia accomplish in his short life?**

As do troubled youth in Hawai'i today, ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia faced emotional and social problems due to social upheaval within Hawaiian society. He witnessed the brutal murder of his parents and baby brother; he lived with an abusive guardian, one of the men who had murdered his parents; he escaped, becoming an apprentice scholar at the Hikiau Heiau at Kealakekua, but still he hurt deep inside. He gave up everything to leave Hawai'i, hoping adventures away from Hawai'i would soothe his troubled soul. In the end, all things did work for good in his life.

- His path of Christian discipleship and evangelism in the New England church proved that a “heathen” was an equal to the sons and daughters of the Pilgrims both in the eyes of God, and in one’s ability to express a relationship with God. His life became one of the foundation blocks of the global mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, leading to the establishment of mission stations across the “pagan” world.

- His desire to bring the Gospel to Hawai'i was the seed for the support for the organization, funding and sending of a mission to the Sandwich Islands; his untimely death brought him even greater celebrity through the publication of *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*, and was a key factor in launching the mission to Hawai'i, which departed in October, 1819 from Boston. This led to Hawai'i becoming a Christian nation within a generation, and one through a desire to read Bible scriptures, one of the most literate in the world.

- His scholarship in translating the Book of Genesis from Hebrew to the Hawaiian language, in forming a rough grammar and speller for his native tongue, led to the translation of the Bible into the Hawaiian language. This preserved the Hawaiian language in a written form as the Native Hawaiian culture became marginalized during the nineteenth-century.

- In Hawai'i today, ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia is a worthy role model for youth, as scholar, as a young man who led a pono, righteous, life. ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia in his own unique manner became an exemplary Christian while retaining the best character traits of his Native Hawaiian heritage.

- Little known is the role he played in bridging racial barriers, influencing the young lives of Americans who became key figures in the antislavery movement.