

ASA THURSTON

TWO GENERATIONS OF FITCHBURG KIN GO TO WAR



Asa Thurston read avidly during his life spent as a missionary minister at the Mokuaikaia Church in Kona.

Hawai'i State Archives



Minutemen left their ploughs to arm themselves and march to Lexington and Concord. National Archives



Prospect Hill near Boston saw one of the earliest American flags, raised on New Year's Day, 1776. Pa'a Studios

THE PIONEER HAWAII MISSIONARY ASA THURSTON (1787 -1868), from rural Fitchburg in northeast Massachusetts, grew up the son of Patriot militia officer Captain Thomas Thurston.

The roots of the Thurstons in Fitchburg go back to Thomas's father John Thurston, born 1723, who settled there about 1765 with his wife, Lydia, and seven children. John raised apples and manufactured cider. John served as one of the first deacons of the Fitchburg Congregational church, a church leadership tradition Asa would bring to Hawai'i. A history of Fitchburg notes the musical skill of the Thurstons, a talent Asa displayed with Hiram Bingham in singing as a duo the hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" at their ordination in 1819, and upon arriving in Hawai'i in 1820. John Thurston's, "...rich singing voice also endeared him to the community. His children, inheriting the musical talents of their parents, won the family the name of the 'singing Thurstons.'"

Thomas Thurston John's fifth son and Asa's father, a Revolutionary War veteran, grew up on the Thurston farm until apprenticed to a shoemaker in Concord, Mass. There he became a music teacher and started singing schools. He married Lydia Davis, one of his students. He died in Fitchburg in 1807.

The military service of two generations of the Fitchburg Thurstons is notable.

Asa's grandfather John Thurston, at age 52, rushed with fellow Fitchburg Minute Men to the Battles of Lexington and Concord in spring 1775. John had been a soldier in the French and Indian war. His Revolutionary War record reads: "Thurston, John, Fitchburg. Private, Capt. Ebenezer Bridge's co., Col. John Whetcomb's regt. of Minute-men, which marched on the [Concord] alarm of April 19, 1775, to Cambridge; left place of rendezvous April 24, 1775; service, 6 days; also, Capt. James Burt's co., Col. Whetcomb's regt.; receipt for advance pay, signed by said Thurston and others, dated Camp at Cambridge, July 5, 1775; also, company receipt for wages for Aug., 1775, dated Prospect Hill."

Samuel Thurston, John's brother, from Lancaster, Mass. at age 48 served as a sergeant at Cambridge too, in April, 1775.



Thomas Thurston, the father of missionary Asa Thurston, witnessed the surrender of British General Burgoyne and his army at Saratoga, New York on October 17, 1777. Thomas served in this battle which is proclaimed as the turning point in the American Revolution for ending Burgoyne's hopes of cutting off New England from the colonies to the south. The victory swayed the French government to commit to arming and sending troops to the Continental Army. Architect of the Capitol

Prospect Hill is just northwest of Boston and provided a strategic artillery fort and observation post overlooking the towns of Charlestown and Cambridge, and harbors. Prospect Hill became an important high point following the Battles of Lexington and Concord when militia surrounded the British army isolated in Boston at the Siege of Boston.

Asa Thurston's father Captain Thomas Thurston was born in 1755 to John Thurston and his first wife, Hepzibah Burpee Thurston, prior to the family moving to Fitchburg.

Three years after his father served as a minuteman at Lexington and Concord Thomas went to war.

"As the war years dragged on, men disabled on the field of battle or their tour of duty completed, returned to Fitchburg and others took their places. It seemed as if the army was made up of boys who joined their fathers or older brothers in harassing the British up and down the Atlantic coast."

Preceding Thomas fighting in the Revolutionary War his brave brothers Stephen Thurston, age 16, and John Thurston, Jr. age 18, signed up in 1777. Barely a teenager, Abijah Hartwell joined them at age 14. Thomas Thurston and the Fitchburg men marched about 150 miles to Saratoga. Prior to this most of the young soldiers had only visited nearby villages.

In the Battle of Bennington in Vermont in August 1777 the local militia warriors out fought German Hessians intent on capturing supplies for British. General Burgoyne's troops who stretched their supply lines a great distance south toward Albany, New York were desperate for supplies. Burgoyne's plan was to cut off New England from New York and the Middle States by taking control of the Hudson River Valley.

Thomas was sworn in at age 23 on Apr 4, 1777. He served as a private in Capt. Thurlow's Co. for 25 days, in the regiment of Maj. Ebenezer Bridge at the critical victory for the Patriot army at Saratoga.

“Heartened by their victory at Bennington, New England militia turned out in great numbers to continue their campaign. Captain Ebenezer Bridge, who had headed the Fitchburg Minutemen, commanded a regiment at Saratoga sent to reinforce General Gate's army. Burgoyne, surrounded and on short rations, was forced to capitulate.... John [Thurston Jr.] and his older brother Thomas Thurston and other Fitchburg men, watched the humiliated British turn over artillery and muskets to the rebel army. The battle was to turn the tide of the war, encouraging sorely-needed French aid to come to the Patriots side.

“Out of this kind of chaos, soldiers of the Continental Army forged a victory over professional British and German soldiers near Saratoga, New York. The two battles fought here in autumn of 1777 changed the course of the American Revolution and insured the independence of the former British colonies that became the United States of America.”

The Thurstons military record, and their service at the Fitchburg Congregational church where John Thurston served as one of the first deacons, gave young teenage Asa Thurston a solid standing in his hometown

“Spritely Asa was a grandson of John Thurston, French and Indian War soldier, and son of Thomas Thurston, Revolutionary War veteran. During Asa's apprenticeship he left the Thurston hillside farm to live with the Farwells. Destiny marked him not for a scythe-maker but an eminent missionary to the Sandwich Islands.”

Asa born 1787, second son of Thomas was an avid wrestler.

“The work in the shop and life in the village were congenial to Asa. Strong, robust and active, while on his way to his work he vaulted back and forth over the rail fence all the way from the house to the shop, and at noon he would amuse himself and others by jumping in and out of a hogshead without touching the sides – a difficult and dangerous feat. While at work in the shop, or using his superfluous energy in athletic sports, there was no hint of the future, no premonition of his destiny. The Sandwich Islands, lying in heathen darkness in the far away Pacific, and the young apprentice in Fitchburg – a mysterious Providence was even then weaving the web that should join their destiny.

“But disease and death are factors to be reckoned with in this world. In the autumn of 1805 typhoid fever was prevalent in Fitchburg, and to quite a number it proved fatal. Asa contracted the disease and for some time his life trembled in the balance. It is related that his elder brother, Thomas, who was studying for the ministry, watched with him one night, and that he spent a greater part of the time in prayer. The next morning, when asked about his brother, he said: ‘Asa will get well and be a missionary, but I shall not live long.’”

“Mrs. Thurston nursed her son with a mother's care and devotion, and he recovered, but she was taken down with the same disease and died January 19, 1806. This sad loss to him was quickly followed by the death of his brother Thomas, February 15, and thirteen days later by the



The Fitchburg Calvinistic Congregational Church attended by Asa Thurston in his youth. History of Calvinistic Church...Fitchburg



Asa Thurston showed his athletic prowess by jumping into a hogshead barrel, then jumping back out. He challenged all comers to wrestling matches he won. In Kona he joined the men of his church in felling large ‘ōhi’a trees.

Fitchburg Historical Society



George Prince Kaumuali'i, Humeleme, the son of Kaumuali'i, the Mō'i of Kaua'i and Ni'ihau in an engraving based on an 1819 drawing by Samuel F. B. Morse in Boston. As a young teenager Humeleme faced a life of desolation in Asa Thurston's hometown of Fitchburg. Pa'a Studios

death of his sister Elizabeth, both of the same disease." Asa's father Captain Thomas died in 1807.

"These sad events had a powerful and lasting effect upon him. Now Asa Thurston began to feel the effect of character and environment. With a deeply affectionate disposition, fond of music, a natural lover of pleasure, and possessed of a keen sense of humor, he had also a tender conscience and a vein of strong and serious feeling. For years his mind had been at times turned to the subject of religion; members of his family had urged him to profess a Christian life, and now, again, his thoughts turned in that direction, and most seriously. But it was hard for him to give up worldly pleasures and take only the will of God for his guide. That, with him, could not be done in any half-way or doubting manner; it must be a self-renunciation."

Asa Thurston decided for the ministry as his life's path, but not yet as a missionary. He entered Yale college in 1812 as a divinity student.

In 1812 as Asa departed for Yale he may have crossed paths with the son of Kaumuali'i, the King of Kaua'i, George Prince Tamoree, or Humeleme as he was known in his homeland. Humeleme had been sent away at a young age, entrusted to a Yankee sea captain. His father paid for his passage and future education with a generous cargo of sandalwood. The trust funds ran out, possibly from corruption, and Humeleme found himself in Fitchburg at about age thirteen "throw upon his own resources" and speaking only English, having lost his remembrance of the Hawaiian language. A Baptist minister took him in until he found work

in a tannery. Facing punishment at the tannery Humeleme ran away, possibly dwelling in an abandoned farm house. During the War of 1812 he enlisted in the U. S. Navy at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. His first-hand account of the war has him being wounded in sea battle between the U.S.S. *Enterprise* and the British frigate *Boxer*. Found about 1816 living with the Purser at the Navy yard, Humeleme ended up in Litchfield County at the Foreign Mission School where he would have met Asa at his ordination in Goshen, Conn. For 163 days Asa, his bride Lucy Goodale Thurston, and Humeleme would be shipmates on the brig *Thaddeus* during the sail of the Pioneer Sandwich Islands



Asa Thurston and Hiram Bingham were ordained at the Goshen Congregational Church in late September, 1819. Just days earlier Asa first met, and soon proposed to his soon-to-be missionary wife Lucy Goodale. Pa'a Studios

Mission Company departing from Boston for Hawai'i in October 1819.

"New Haven was a long way from Fitchburg at that time, and he came home but seldom. In 1815 he came, however, and spent some weeks here during the college vacation. He graduated in 1816, and immediately entered Andover Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1819, ready to enter upon his chosen career of a missionary" and to sail to Kona in Hawai'i Island to spend the rest of his life in serving the Hawaiian people there.