

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 15, 2020:
[HENRY OPUKAHA'IA](#)

This week's theme: Connecticut history, because it's my home and I'm sheltering in it. Today's story: the remarkable Hawaiian scholar (and CT transplant) Henry Opukaha'ia.

THE STORY

Orphaned during Hawaiian civil war and unsure of what the future held, Henry joined an American captain on his ship and returned to New Haven, Connecticut. A gifted and hardworking student, he learned English and continued education with local ministers, and soon caught the attention of a Christian mission school.

At the Foreign Mission School, which sought to train indigenous people to bring Christianity to their home countries, Henry studied Latin and Hebrew, and began creating a primer of the Hawaiian language including a translation of the Book of Genesis. Everyone hoped he would return to Hawaii to convert the locals, but this was not to be so: Henry died of typhus in Connecticut in 1818, at only 26 years of age.

That might have ended the story, had one of Henry's teachers not written the *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*. The story publicized a groomed version of Henry's life, describing him as a noble savage, orphaned by the cruelty of his native people and taken in to God and education by the grace of benevolent white men.

Because readers saw a dramatic, feel-good transformation – from a boy who described Hawaiian gods in pidgin English, to a charming young man who studied Euclidean geometry and could read the Hebrew Bible – the *Memoirs* ended up serving as a motivational tract for a generation of Christian missionaries. Henry's story specifically inspired evangelists to focus their efforts on Hawaii, where an influx of Western do-gooders eventually opened the door to not only religion but trade, and the American annexation of Hawaii.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

- What does this tell you about the power of story – and who tells it?
- How should we approach histories like Henry Opukaha'ia's, which demonstrate the damage of colonialism to indigenous societies?
- What do you know about [Native Hawaiian culture](#)?
- Do you think missionary activity can ever be justifiable?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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You can now learn native Hawaiian [on Duolingo](#).

Primary source: Edwin Welles Dwight, [The Memoirs of Henry Obookiah](#) (1819)

[“A Great Hope for Hawaii Dies in Cornwall,”](#) *Today in Connecticut History*