Hawaiian quilts developed as the Polynesian and American worlds intersected in Hawai`i in the nineteenth century; it is clear that they were inspired in part by America’s appliqué album quilts that primarily came from the Mid-Atlantic States. We do know that the missionaries who came to Hawai`i as part of the ABCFM were mainly from New England but some also came from such mid-Atlantic states as New York and Pennsylvania. Furthermore, American album quilts from these regions were given to missionaries in Hawai`i (and other states) in the mid-nineteenth century in support of their missions. We also know that the missionary women taught sewing skills (piecework) and quilting (patchwork, embroidered and appliqué) to the Hawaiians. After the introduction of American appliqué album quilts, Hawaiian women began to develop their own form of quilting unique from American quilting designs. It may be safe to say that the Hawaiian appliqué quilt represents the Hawaiian modification of American appliqué quilts from the mid Atlantic states.

The Forbes quilt provides evidence that Hawaiian and American quilters inspired each other in their design processes, especially for presentation quilts. The Forbes quilt is one of only a few quilts from the mid-nineteenth century to survive in Hawai`i and its’ firm documentation and provenance are important in the current research[1] that has finally developed a chronology of the development of quilting in Hawai`i from patchwork, to album quilts with small repeated appliqué blocks in a grid pattern, to very large appliqué blocks with a central focus, and then finally to a single, large appliqué design.
To tell the story more fully, we need to go back to 1820 and the arrival of the missionaries.

INTRODUCTION OF QUILTING TO HAWAI`I

American missionaries from the American mainland, arrived in Hawai`i in 1820. Prior to that time, the indigenous Hawaiians primarily had contact with outsiders through the trade of items such as sandalwood which grew here on the islands. The sandalwood trade was a lucrative business and the royalty (ali`i) used some of the proceeds from its sale to add Western-made items to their households. Woven textiles arrived in the Islands through this trade and was used as a form of currency, even before the missionary wives arrived and began to teach the skills of sewing clothing and quilting to Hawaiians. Missionaries provided fabric to Hawaiian women in trade for labor after Hawaiians began to sew clothing and bedcovers. In 1837 a missionary woman wrote about pieced ponchos worn by Hawaiian children in the rain, and in her letter home asked for patchwork to be sent to Hawaii for the children to sew. She stated “a patchwork shawl is considered an article of great value.” [2]

Patchwork quilts were made in the missionary boarding schools where girls were taught to sew.[3] The oldest extant Hawaiian quilt discovered during this research was made by Princess Pauahi while she was a student at the Young Chief’s School between 1839-1843. The beautifully made patchwork quilt is just over five feet square, made of elongated triangles of silk in geometric patterns. The borders are made of alternating triangles of bright colors paired with black triangles; the outer edge is scalloped.
APPLIQUE QUILTS IN HAWAI`I

What is most striking about the Hawaiian quilt is the appliqué technique in which a large sheet of fabric is folded into fourths or eighths, cut into a design, then stitched onto a contrasting background, followed by contour quilting around the motif. This style evolved during the nineteenth century and was inspired by earlier American quilting techniques. Both in technique and style, Hawaiian appliqué reminds us of paper snowflakes made by schoolchildren, a contemporary remnant of cut paper work that was popular in the United States during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Many Pennsylvania Germans practiced *scherenschnitte*, a form of decorative folded paper cutting. Similar cut paper designs were executed by New England schoolgirls, who crafted pictures with their scissors. A quilt from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia shows the use of *scherenschnitte* done on an appliquéd quilt top dated to 1855. The missionary wives brought *scherenschnitte* with them to Hawai`i and taught it to schoolchildren.[4] The Honolulu Academy of Arts has a *scherenschnitte* quilt (made between 1865-1870).[5]

Forty years earlier in 1830, Laura Judd (a missionary wife) received a set of friendship blocks with which to make an album quilt. In 1840 an appliquéd album quilt top was sent to the mission at Wailuku Female Seminary on Maui. Just a year later, one of her students, Kameo, wrote to the students at Mrs. Coan’s school on the island of Hawaii saying, “We have made an appliqué quilt as a contribution to you in your time of need. It is with deep affection that we have made it and thus we give it with these good intentions.” [6]

American album quilts with small appliqué blocks, and quilts where different appliqués were placed on the large top sheet were both being made in the mid 1800s.
These quilt types were apparently the inspiration for at least two quilts made in Hawai`i, (they are in a private collection on the island of Kaua`i). They feature nine blocks of identical appliqués made of stylized Hawaiian flowers cut on the fourth; these were appliquéd to a white background. Each quilt had a border around the set of blocks.

Quilts with overall patterns made of a few very large, separate, unconnected appliqués were made in the mid 1800s in Pennsylvania. It is this form of quilt that we see in the Forbes quilt, an appliqué quilt in a tulip design featuring pink and green fabrics appliquéd to the top. Embroidery on the quilt indicates that it was made by the women of the Glade Run Church and presented in 1853 to Reverend and Mrs. Forbes after they had returned to the Mainland from their mission in Hawai`i. A quilt that is somewhat similar to the Forbes quilt was made in Waimea for Reverend Lorenzo Lyons' 50th anniversary as a minister there (in 1882). However, the Lyons quilt design motifs are clearly Hawaiian in origin. It is also held in the Mission Houses Museum’s permanent collection. Additional quilts with similar designs can be found in other collections in Honolulu including the Bishop Museum and the Queen Emma Summer Palace. They all feature very large appliqué designs in the quilt with a central focus. Both the Bishop Museum and the Queen Emma Summer Palace quilts date between 1850-1860. Unfortunately, these are not specific dates. This type of quilt is very important to the design evolution of Hawaiian quilting. They show the interaction between Hawaiian and American quilters and give evidence to the back and forth design inspiration that was happening in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Many visitors came to Hawai`i in the nineteenth century. One well-traveled woman, Isabella Lucy Bird came to visit the Hawaiian Islands in 1873 and wrote:
I was delighted to see a four-post bed, with mosquito bars, and a clean pulu [7] mattress, with a linen sheet over it, covered with a beautiful quilt with a quaint arabesque pattern on a white ground running round it, and a wreath of green leaves in the center. The native women exercise the utmost ingenuity in the patterns and colours of these quilts. Some of them are quite works of art. [8]

Miss Bird’s description above is very much like one of the quilts at the Queen Emma Summer Palace; like the Forbes quilt it has four large appliqué blocks in the corners of the quilt. This style of quilt when done in Hawaii can be seen as a transitional step toward the development of what we now recognize as the traditional Hawaiian quilt. This quilt style is one in which the appliqué design is cut from a singular piece of a brightly colored fabric and set against a light background and developed in the mid 1800s. The earliest quilt fitting this pattern, is believed to have been made in the Kohala area of the Big Island by Ka`aia Kuawalu between 1839 and 1858. The design was of a carnation, with the appliqué in turkey red against a white background. It is echo quilted over a wool batting.

The final step in the development of what we recognize today as the traditional Hawaiian quilt is a style of quilt originating in the 1850s, and probably on the island of O`ahu. A retainer of Queen Emma and King Kalakaua IV confirmed that the design form that we recognize as the traditional Hawaiian quilt developed mid century. She noted that women in the Kingdom of Hawai`i began making their finest quilts to celebrate the birth of Prince Albert in 1858. A stunning array of quilts was given to the Prince in 1858 after his birth[9]. As Stella Jones noted, “it is quite natural that on such an occasion the Hawaiians would turn to a more colorful and individualistic medium for expressing their joy than was afforded by the patchwork quilt”. [10] One of these presentation quilts (with
diaper pins as part of the central motif) still exists and is in the Queen Emma Summer Palace collection.

By the mid nineteenth century, quilting was well entrenched in Hawai`i. Reverend Lorenzo Lyons, who served as a missionary for 56 years in Waimea, on the island of Hawai`i, wrote in 1883: “The females of Waimea are distinguished for the industry in making quilts. In some houses companies of women will be found busy at work around a quilt, and the sides of the houses will be hung with the quilts they have gotten off”.[11]

The Forbes quilt is an important part of this story. One of only a few quilts from the mid-nineteenth century to survive in Hawai`i, its’ firm documentation and provenance provide important signposts to quilt historians researching the history of this beloved style of quilting – the Traditional Hawaiian Quilt.


[7] A soft fiber from the hapu`u tree fern, pulu was used for mattress stuffing in nineteenth century Hawai`i.

