



W.C. Peacock: The Whiskey Man Who Made Waikiki

By Jack Sullivan

Today Waikiki Beach on the Hawaiian Island of Oahu is one of the most popular recreation areas in the world. A British-born Honolulu saloonkeeper and liquor dealer named Walter Chamberlain (abbreviated to W.C.) Peacock more than a century ago saw the promise in a barren strip of land along the Pacific Ocean. He built the Moana Hotel at Waikiki, still a landmark (**Fig. 1**), and began a history of development that continues to this day.

The Royal Hawaiian and Moana hotels dominated Waikiki Beach throughout the 1930s and '40s. - University of Hawaii Library



Fig. 1: The Moana Hotel opened on March 11, 1901 as Waikiki's first hotel. Affectionately called "The First Lady of Waikiki."

Born in 1858 in Lancaster, England, Peacock arrived in the Territory of Hawaii from Australia about 1881, apparently accompanied by his mother, Margaret, and other family members. Not long after arriving, Peacock started a wholesale liquor business with a local named George Freeth. By 1890, Freeth had departed and the firm known as W.C. Peacock & Co. Ltd emerged, as shown on a porcelain bottle cap (Fig. 2).



Fig.2: Porcelain bottle cap for W.C. Peacock & Co. Ltd., Honolulu, T.H. (Territory of Hawaii)

In addition to selling liquor at wholesale, Peacock also ran a string of saloons in Honolulu. A trade token names the Royal, Pacific and Cosmopolitan, (Fig. 3). For the Royal Saloon in 1890, he designed and constructed a brick building at the corner of Merchant and Nuuanu Streets in Honolulu's Chinatown. The building (Fig. 4) was relatively modest by current standards, featuring white stucco pilasters, cornice and balustrade, and another spot of stucco over the bricks of the upper walls. Peacock gave it windows and door bays along the street creating a feeling of spaciousness. Still a Honolulu landmark, the Royal Building currently is occupied by an Irish pub.



Fig.3: A trade token names three of Peacocks establishments: Royal, Pacific and Cosmopolitan Saloons.



Fig.4: Still a Honolulu landmark, the Royal Building (Royal 1890) is currently occupied by an Irish pub. Located corner of Merchant and Nuuanu Streets in Honolulu's Chinatown

About 1896, Peacock incorporated and opened an expanded liquor house on Merchant street near Fort. Street, shown here on a postal cover (Fig. 5). His liquor empire continued to expand although his customer base was confined to the islands. He packaged his wines and liquors in glass bottles, both amber and clear (Figs 6, 7). He also sold gin in the characteristic "case" shape (Fig. 8). The owner's nephew remembered working at the company filling those bottles: "Peacock sold 3 grades of gin increasing in price. Many bought the most expensive kind. However, in the back room all the gin came out of the same barrel." Peacock's bottles are avidly collected in Hawaii today.



Fig.5: In 1896 or so, Peacock incorporated and opened an expanded liquor house on Merchant street near Fort. Street, shown here on a postal cover.



Figs.6&7: Peacock packaged his wines and liquors in glass bottles, both amber and clear.



Fig. 8: Peacock also sold gin in the characteristic "case" shape bottles.

For a short time, W.C. and a brother, Corbert, ventured into the farm implement business in Australia. Directories in Melbourne from 1899 to 1901 record the existence of the W.C. Peacock & Bro. firm, making and selling rotary disc plows in a design that one of the brothers likely invented. Peacock returned frequently from Australia to supervise his Honolulu businesses and returned for good in 1901.

Meanwhile he was piling up riches from sales of liquor, both from his store and saloons. Like many liquor dealers of that time he provided bar tokens to retail consumers and gave shot glasses, some with fancy gold rims, to favored saloon owners and barkeepers (**Fig. 10**). One glass had the seal of Hawaii lithographed in the base (**Fig. 11**).



Figs. 10&11: Peacock provided bar tokens to retail consumers and gave shot glasses, some with fancy gold rims, to favored saloon owners and barkeepers. One glass had the seal of Hawaii lithographed in the base.

In the late 1800s, Peacock built a mansion for himself on a spit of land on the eastern side of Oahu that looked out on the gently rolling surf of the Pacific. As the 19th Century drew to a close, he also noted that more or more steamships were docking at Honolulu and the influx of tourists was increasing rapidly. Moreover, there was a dearth of hotel accommodations at the beach.

As a result, Peacock created a new company, capitalized at \$100,000, later increased to \$150,000. He called it the Moana Hotel Company Ltd. and planned a new hotel on oceanfront land not far from his home. A photograph exists of the newly finished hotel with a tramway in front taking visitors to nearby Diamond Head (**Fig. 12**). Nothing else had yet been built on Waikiki.

A hotel history tells the story: "The Moana Hotel officially opened on March 11, 1901 ushering a new era of tourism for the islands. Designed in the old colonial style architecture of the period, it had 75 rooms and was the costliest, most elaborate hotel building in the Hawaiian Islands at the time. Each room on the three upper floors had a bathroom and a telephone - innovations for hotels of the times. The hotel also had its own ice plant and electric generators. The first floor had a billiard parlor, saloon, main parlor, library, office and reception area." Patrons paid a hefty \$1.50 per night for their rooms.

Peacock took a strong interest in many aspects of the Moana. According to family lore he personally is reputed to have planted the giant banyan tree that still spreads over the grounds (**Fig. 13**). Because of the remoteness of Hawaii in those pre-airplane days, the Moana may not have been the immediate profit center Peacock anticipated. Or he may not have liked the hotel business. In any case, he sold the property in 1905 to Alexander Young, a prominent Honolulu businessman with other Hawaiian hotel interests.

Although W. C. Peacock is gone from the Honolulu scene, this far-sighted entrepreneur is still celebrated for his pioneer work for the Hawaii tourist industry and the development of Waikiki.

Subsequently the Moana, with a number of additions over the years, became known as the "Grand Queen" of Honolulu hostleries. It also was the pivotal building that led to the massive development of Waikiki. My parents stayed at the Moana in the 1950s and I have overnighted there in more recent years. Peacock's hotel remains a marvelous destination after more than a century.

In 1909 Peacock, still young at 50, died. He had been in bad health for several years and the cause of death was said to have been disease of the liver. He seems never to have married, possibly because of devotion to his mother. He was buried in the Oahu Cemetery in a section known as the "Peacock Plot." His mother, Margaret, age 82, soon would join him in the grave. Mother and son are memorialized on a joint headstone (**Fig. 14**).

After W.C.'s death other family members took over the management of the Peacock liquor interests. Their time would be limited by the 1915 passage of territory-wide Prohibition in Hawaii.

Although W. C. Peacock is gone from the Honolulu scene, this far-sighted entrepreneur is still celebrated for his pioneer work for the Hawaii tourist industry and the development of Waikiki. On a contemporary view of Waikiki (**Fig. 15**) the Moana Hotel is the first building with beach frontage, dwarfed by surrounding high-rise hotels and condos. Find it on the postcard and remember W.C. Peacock, Hawaii's whiskey man who got it all started.



Fig.12: The newly finished Moana Hotel with a tramway in front taking visitors to nearby Diamond Head.



Fig.13: According to family lore, Peacock personally is reputed to have planted the giant banyan tree that still spreads over the Moana Hotel grounds.



Fig.14: W.C. Peacock is buried in the Oahu Cemetery in a section known as the "Peacock Plot."

Fig.15: A contemporary view of Waikiki. The Moana Hotel is the first building with beach frontage, dwarfed by surrounding high-rise hotels and condos. Find it on the postcard.

