

# American Colonists in the Central Pacific

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FOR three and a half years American colonists have occupied Baker, Howland, and Jarvis, three small coral islets in the equatorial central Pacific. During the first year, March, 1935 to March, 1936, they were maintained by the U. S. Department of Commerce, with William T. Miller, then Superintendent of Airways of the Department of Air Commerce, in direct charge.

Proclamation by President Roosevelt, May 13, 1936, transferred the jurisdiction of these three islands to the Division of Territories of the U. S. Department of the Interior. In July, 1936, Richard B. Black arrived in Honolulu as representative in charge. In March, 1938, colonists were also placed on Canton and Enderbury islands of the Phoenix group.

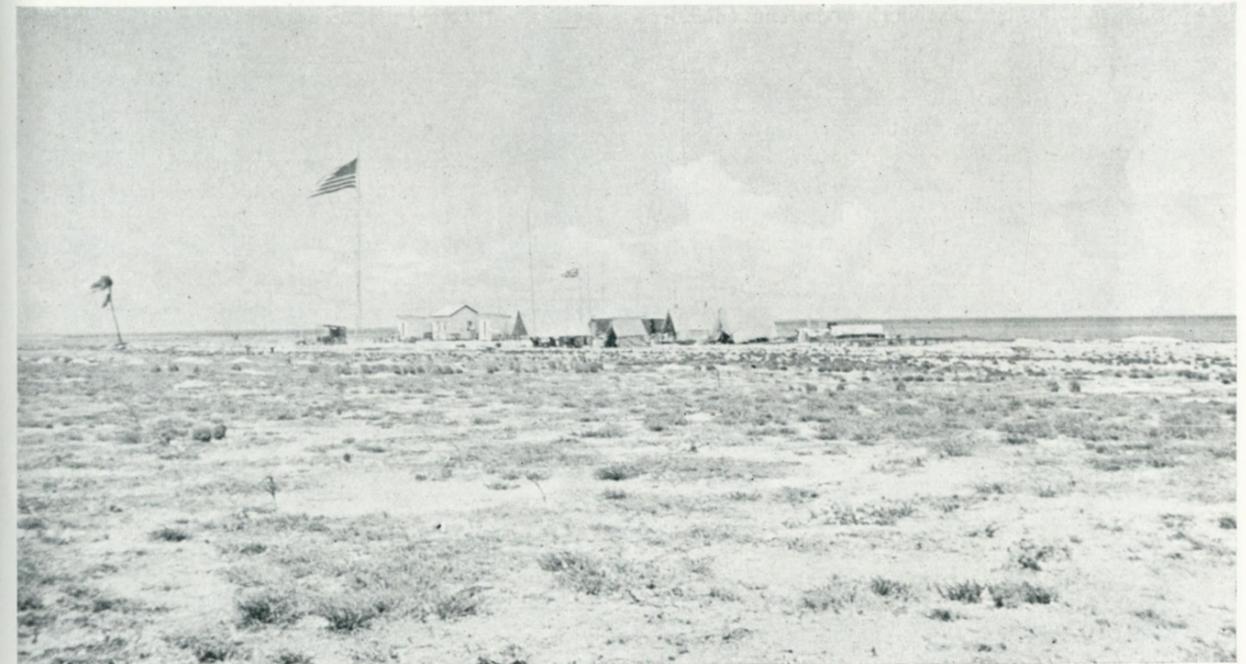
The islands have been visited at intervals of about three months by U. S. Coast Guard Cutters, to supply the colonists with food, water, and equipment, and to make changes in personnel. The ships which have made these routine trips so efficiently have been the *Itasca* (March, 1935, to December, 1936, and June to August, 1937), the *Duane* (January, 1937), the *Shoshone* (March, 1937), and the *Taney* (October, 1937 to date). In the course of fourteen trips, a number of officials, scientists, and observers have visited the islands, and, on some of the trips, also American Samoa. These persons included the Governor of Hawaii, the head of the Division of Territories, U. S. Department of the Interior, and Hawaii's Delegate to Congress. The writer has had the privilege of making two trips, the first and that of July-August, 1938.

Camps on the first three islands were first established by men of the U. S. Army, in charge of Captain Harold A. Meyer, U. S. A. Most of the colonists have been young men of Hawaiian or part Hawaiian blood, the majority of them students or graduates of the Kamehameha Schools, in Honolulu. They were carefully chosen after thorough medical examination. Very few have suffered any ill-effects of the experience, most of them being in even better condition as a result of the open-air life. That they enjoy it is shown by the fact that the same boys have volunteered over and over again.

The choice of colonists has been a good one, and these young men have measured up in every respect to their task of living happily on barren, isolated islands for from three to several months at a stretch. The camps have been improved steadily, from the initial tents to the present substantial frame and stone buildings. The colonists have been liberally paid and carefully supplied with food, water, clothing, reading matter, and equipment, including radio and now refrigeration.

They have been kept busy with routine duties. As the camps have been maintained largely in the interests of trans-Pacific aviation, one of their main duties has been to make a daily record of the meteorological conditions on the islands, including the upper air. Air fields have been laid out, lighthouses built, the grounds about the camps attractively improved, and numerous attempts made to get vegetation to grow.

Four questions are generally asked about these islands: Where are they? What are they like? Why should



American and British Flags Fly Over Canton Island—Richard B. Black Photograph



EQUATORIAL AMERICAN ISLANDS—Itascatown, Howland; Four Hawaiians and Fijian, Canton; Jarvis; Amaranth Wreck, Jarvis; Meyerton, Baker; Enderbury; Returning Colonists; "King-Doyle" Park, Baker—E. H. Bryan Jr., Photos, Courtesy B. P. Bishop Museum

various departments of the United States government go to so much trouble and expense to maintain colonists on them? What right do we have to them anyway? Let us try to answer these questions in the order asked.

The islands are in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, close to the equator. Jarvis is 1,300 sea miles nearly south of Honolulu and 23 miles south of the equator. Howland and Baker are a thousand miles west of Jarvis, 49 and 13 miles north of the equator, respectively, and 36 miles apart. Canton and Enderbury are the two most northern islands of the Phoenix group, 375 miles east-southeast of Baker, and 700 miles north of Tutuila, American Samoa. Canton is 169, and Enderbury 187 miles south of the equator.

Jarvis, Howland, Baker, and Enderbury are flat coral and sand islets, fringed by narrow reef. They have steep beaches which rise to a height of from ten to twenty feet, within which is a depression, in part of that on Enderbury there being a small, shallow brackish lagoon, the others dry. Jarvis and Baker are about a mile square; Howland is two miles north and south, but scarcely over a half mile across; and Enderbury two and a half miles north and south by a mile wide.

Canton is a different sort of island, an atoll, consisting of a narrow rim of land, from fifty to six hundred yards wide, enclosing a large salt lagoon which is triangular in outline ("shaped like a pork chop," some writers say), eight miles east and west by four miles wide at the west end. Into this lagoon there are three or four small entrances, all on the west side, only one of which will admit of even a rowboat. The land rim does not reach an elevation of more than twenty feet.

Canton and Enderbury are the most luxuriant of the five islands. They have small groves or thickets of scrubby trees and a few planted coconut palms. On Howland there are some low clumps of very dry kou trees. Otherwise the vegetation consists of herbs and low shrubs, mainly purslane, bunch grass, stunted ilima shrub, and the like.

Without shade the grayish-white sand becomes hot and glary, even though a cool breeze keeps the air temperature from rising unduly. On the flat islands without lagoons there is very little rainfall, brought about by the nature of their surface. Most of the day a column of warm air rises from the surface, preventing the formation of clouds directly above. It is a common observation

that a tropical shower, moving towards the island, will divide, part passing on each side. Only in the early morning are there light showers.

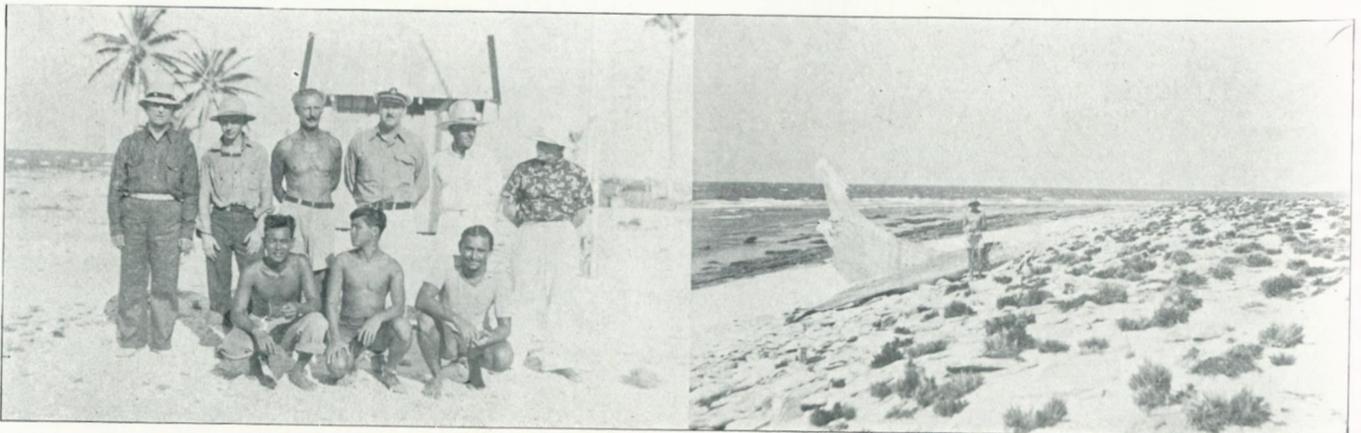
The reason for the awakened interest in these equatorial Pacific islands is to be found in the recently proposed establishment of a trans-Pacific air route from Hawaii to New Zealand, via Samoa and Fiji. There is need in this connection for both stopping places, regular or emergency, en route; and for meteorological stations from which data can be obtained as to flying conditions.

These islands were chosen because they were among the best available to which the United States might lay claim. This claim goes back to both discovery and utilization. All five islands are thought to have been first discovered by Americans. At least, they were mapped and their positions definitely determined by the United States Exploring Expedition and other American vessels. All five were among the numerous guano islands in the central Pacific which were definitely claimed by American companies during the period from August 18, 1856, when Congress passed an act making it lawful for Americans to claim and utilize unclaimed islands for the purpose of digging guano, down to about 1880. Guano was extensively dug on four of these islands by the American companies, and the fifth, Canton, was much frequented by American whalers, and was not extensively used by any other people. To be sure, after the best of the guano had been dug, and it was no longer profitable to operate the islands, British interests utilized them, but they in turn abandoned the islands, after which they were not made use of up to the establishment of the American colonists, except by the eclipse expeditions on Canton in 1937.

Baker, Howland, Jarvis, and Enderbury are now admittedly American islands; and Canton is under joint administration, the British and American camps being located side by side, with the most friendly relations existing between both groups.

## Valuable Hawaii

If our United States was forced to hold a plebiscite—Constitution permitting—as to whether it would lose Hawaii or a State, there is no doubt but that Hawaii would be retained by a substantial majority vote.



At Canton Island (left) and the Wreck at Jarvis Island (right)—Courtesy of E. H. Bryan, Jr., and Bishop Museum