



Island homes on the island of Raiataia, French Polynesia

Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

French Polynesia

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French Polynesia consists of approximately 130 islands scattered in the central South Pacific Ocean. The main groups are the Marquesas Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, the Gambier Islands, the Tubuai Islands, and the Society Islands.

Introduction

The capital, Pape'ete, is located on Tahiti Island in the Society Islands.¹ The Society Islands were named after the Royal Society of London, which sponsored James Cook to visit and report on the transit of Venus in 1769. Prior to Cook's voyage, various Portuguese, Dutch, and British explorers had visited the Marquesas and Tuamotu groups. Throughout the nineteenth century, France adopted the islands in a piecemeal fashion and in 1946 the entire area was made an overseas territory of France that has since come to be an overseas collectivity moving towards independence.²

Pitcairn Visits

During the 1890s, the Seventh-day Adventist mission schooner *Pitcairn* visited French Polynesia during each of its six voyages. It first arrived off Pape'ete, Tahiti, just before Christmas 1890.³ During its stay in the island group, the vessel visited Mo'orea Island, Raiatea Island, and Huahine Island. At Raiatea, the people told *Pitcairn's* missionaries that they had originally observed Saturday, but the French had forced them to change to worshipping on Sunday.⁴ Wherever *Pitcairn* sailed, the missionaries sold books or gave them away freely. Their final stopover in the island group was at Rurutu Island where they found relatives of the Pitcairners who welcomed them enthusiastically. They were asked to send a permanent missionary, a request that was fulfilled a few years later.⁵

In August 1892, on the *Pitcairn's* return voyage, Albert and Hattie Read disembarked at Pape'ete to direct mission activities. They found that Paul Deane had read the books he purchased and was observing Saturday together with about twenty-three fellow Christians on Tahiti. His brother, Henry, on Raiatea, and others on Huahine were also persuaded.⁶ Read worshipped with them but did not rush any baptisms. Instead, he concentrated on translating books such as *One Hundred Bible Facts, Which Day, and Why?* and portions of Stephen Haskell's *Bible Readings on the Life of Christ*.⁷ Deane himself donated a portion of his land at Arue, east of Pape'ete, where a small church costing £160 (Australian pound) was erected and dedicated on November 29, 1893. The membership voted some rules of decorum including "Do not spit in the church," "Do not allow dogs to enter the church," and "Everyone should stand during the hymns and kneel during the prayers."⁸ On April 8, 1894, Read conducted a baptism of fourteen in the group, the first for French Polynesia. It took place in a little river near the mission as an estimated one hundred individuals, including Pape'ete dignitaries, observed.⁹

On its second voyage, the *Pitcairn* arrived at Tahiti on April 8, 1893. Because of the interest shown on a number of islands, Benjamin and Ida Cady disembarked to establish a mission station at Uteroa on Raiatea Island.

During August 1894, the third voyage brought Rodney and Carrie Stringer as self-supporting medical workers in answer to the call for resident missionaries on Rurutu Island.¹⁰

As did the first three voyages, the last three voyages of the *Pitcairn* (1895-1899) delivered new missionaries to the islands and conveyed home to the United States others whose health had failed.¹¹ Most missionaries served only a couple of years with the exception of Cady. By the time *Pitcairn* called on its final voyage, Cady had established himself on Raiatea Island and Stringer had moved from Rurutu Island, where prospects were initially bright, to build a new church in Pape'ete.¹²

Cady's Industrial School

Early in Cady's term of service he began a small school on Tahiti, but the French authorities forced its closure, insisting all instruction be conducted in the French language.¹³ Cady, however, persisted with his plans to evangelize through education.¹⁴ In August 1898, he returned to Raiatea Island and purchased a coconut plantation at Avera where oranges, limes, mangoes, breadfruit, and guavas were cultivated. Cady also introduced vanilla production on the estate.¹⁵

While attending the 1901 General Conference session, the Cadys sought missionaries who would join them in French Polynesia.¹⁶ Ever the entrepreneur, Cady raised approximately £100 (Australian) among the delegates by selling strings of Tahitian sea-shells for his enterprise. Eleven missionaries joined the Cadys on the return trip to the islands, among them farmers, bakers, nurses, and teachers.¹⁷ Key among them was Anna Nelson who spoke French and, thus, could teach at the industrial school, bringing the institution into compliance with French law.¹⁸ She taught up to twenty students,¹⁹ her salary paid by the Australasian Union Conference (AUC). All others were supported by the industries on Raiatea, including an orchard, sugar mill, copra drying mill, and a cattle ranch.²⁰ A bakery and health food store was also operated in Pape'ete.²¹

The school enterprise went well until Nelson became ill in 1908 and returned to America.²² Cady himself was relocated to Fiji the following year and the school and industries ceased.²³

A Change of Methods

Frank and Almeda Lyndon arrived in 1910 to replace the Cadys.²⁴ Lyndon quickly realized that if he was to continue managing the commercial trades, including business interests of the Pitcairners, he would have little time for regular evangelism. He also learned that most of the original members at Arue had abandoned Adventist principles and those remaining faithful in other areas were few and scattered.²⁵ Cady had spent much time developing the industrial school but neglected to nurture the converts. The statistical report at the close of 1912 testified of only twenty-one members in two churches throughout French Polynesia,²⁶ a drop from 173 members in six churches in 1906.²⁷ No national workers were forthcoming from the industrial school. It was a

poor result for two decades of mission work by approximately thirty individuals. Lyndon was virtually starting afresh. He was primarily a preacher and Bible teacher, naturally gravitating to literature distribution, pastoral visitation, and church planting.

One enduring legacy of Cady's work was the publication of a Tahitian periodical titled *Te Maramarama* (the light), first issued in December 1906²⁸ and later renamed *Tiarama*. Four hundred subscriptions were sold within the first year and its popularity continued to grow.²⁹ Henry and Louisa Thomas from South Australia, who assisted both Cady and Lyndon, successfully canvassed the periodical in addition to French *Signes des Temps* (Signs of the Times)³⁰ and a tract entitled *Où Sont les Morts?* (Where are the Dead?).³¹

In 1911, Lyndon visited the islands of Mo'orea,³² Taha'a, and Bora Bora, distributing literature without any tangible results.³³ Later, Henry Hill established a small following on Mo'orea and a church was dedicated in 1920, but the members were left largely without nurture.³⁴ A similar handful regularly met on Taha'a Island at Pahure.³⁵ It was not until 1928 that a mission worker, Tefa (Joseph), was placed on Bora Bora Island.³⁶

Lyndon, William Howse, and a national named Urari'i walked the perimeter of Huahine Island in 1913 and called at every home with books and periodicals.³⁷ Stowell Cozens also tried to build a membership there, but by 1921 reports spoke of only two baptized members in a Sabbath School of twenty attendees.³⁸ Cozens took time from his work on Huahine to accompany a young national convert, Tetara'a Maurai, to Takume Atoll where the Tuamotu group resided. The two men returned undernourished in 1920 after a six month trial.³⁹ At the same time the Sterlings took their folding organ and tried, with national worker Tihoni (Johnnie), to pioneer the Marquesas group, choosing Taioha'e Bay on Nuka Hiva Island.⁴⁰ They also suffered extreme privations, sand flies, and mosquitoes, which broke their health and forced them to abandon the enterprise in about 1925 after three individuals were baptized.⁴¹ More than two decades after the Stringers had left Rurutu Island a second attempt was made in 1921, but abandoned two years later.⁴² All of these efforts were made in the face of stiff opposition and ridicule from other denominations.

French Polynesia covers a vast area of hundreds of little islands and atolls, mere dots in the ocean. Lyndon never showed any interest in acquiring a boat for his mission. He depended on copra trading vessels for transportation, a system that provided no regularity or predictability. His reports were always optimistic, but he seemed to suffer from an island-hopping syndrome, daunted by the task of spreading his message to every island and rushing the work in the belief that he had little time in which to do it. Arguably, spreading his meager resources thinly was a flaw in his method. He was resigned to converting "a few here and there,"⁴³ but he may have achieved better results by building rapport on key islands such as Tahiti, Raiatea, and Huahine, where those who came on the *Pitcairn* first established bases.

Two Steps Forward, Ten Steps Backward

The Sterling's recovered their health and returned to Tahiti to manage the mission for most of the 1930s. Lyndon, in his parting report, spoke of thirteen scattered companies with a total Sabbath School membership of 243.⁴⁴ The number baptized was significantly less than this figure. Sterling had oversight of the print shop in Pape'ete that had been moved from Rarotonga a decade earlier. A Tahitian convert, Agnes Poroi, was the efficient manageress of this important enterprise that continued to issue the periodicals and Sabbath School lessons in the regional native languages.⁴⁵

Unlike Lyndon, Sterling worked to strengthen the bases already in operation. A small workforce limited the number of new outposts that he could establish. The Doom family, converts in the Tubuai group, engaged in some evangelism. Charles Doom focused on his home islands and Memory Doom, with his wife, Elizabeth, went to Mangareva Island where they had relatives and sought to share their faith.⁴⁶

Phillip Wright replaced Sterling in 1938 and showed promise of being an energetic superintendent, but his good reputation collapsed when it was discovered he was involved in an extra-marital affair (see Phillip James Wright). It had an adverse effect on the mission throughout the 1940s. Forrest Hollingsworth,⁴⁷ Harold Wicks,⁴⁸ and Ronald Heggie were appointed to Tahiti for short terms in an attempt to repair the situation. Wright's downfall decimated the mission to the point of having only two functioning churches in 1948 with a membership of 162, the lowest it would plunge post-Second World War.⁴⁹

The French Era

In 1949, Charles Doom and Charles Flohr were ordained, the first French Polynesian ministers.⁵⁰ It heralded a shift from an English-speaking leadership to an era of French-speaking leaders such as Eugene Landa,⁵¹ Marcel Bornert,⁵² and Ernest Veuthey. Baptized membership began to grow steadily. Figures for 1961 were reported as 453 members among six churches.⁵³ The children of converts, especially secondary students, faced Sabbath observance difficulties in the government system, so long range plans were laid to establish an Adventist school. A small beginning was made in April 1962 when an elementary school of three rooms opened on the Fautaua church property in Pape'ete. In its first year, it attracted sixty pupils.⁵⁴ This enterprise continued to expand so that by 1975 there were 120 students attending up to academy level. Mission administration decided to accept government finance for further development, enlarging the school with the addition of college level studies, and an école maternelle (infants or kindergarten).⁵⁵

The Tahitian Era

National leadership began in 1976 when Lazare Doom was elected president,⁵⁶ followed by Marcel Doom in 1984.⁵⁷ These men vigorously carried the evangelistic and educational programs forward. By 1980, there were over two thousand baptized members spread among eighteen churches.⁵⁸ Additional classrooms were added to the Fautaua school and officially opened on February 16, 1978, with two hundred students.⁵⁹ It was renamed the

Tiarama School. One teacher, Camelia Flohr, taught for almost forty-two years at the institution and two others, John Flohr and Linda Kurdykowski, each gave thirty-five years before retirement.⁶⁰

In August 1983, the college sector of the Tiarama School was transferred to a new location high above the Tipaeru'i Valley. It was named Collège du Pic Vert and began with 110 students. It was an unpopular move because road access was steep and fraught with hair-pin bends. Rapidly declining numbers forced its removal back to the Fautaua site in 2001 when it was renamed Collège Tiarama.⁶¹

Radio evangelism was also fostered under national leadership. The entity was first listed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* in 2006 as Voice of Hope (Tahiti),⁶² however, a radio ministry on FR3 Radio Tahiti with an affiliated Bible Correspondence School was functioning in 1976 or earlier.⁶³

The French Polynesia Mission, headquartered in Pape'ete, no longer attracts derision as it did in its early history. It is a respected component of French Polynesian society, with forty-one churches and over five thousand baptized members.⁶⁴

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