



Fiji Islands
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Fiji

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Fiji consists of approximately 330 islands in the mid-South Pacific Ocean, the largest being Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

Background

The capital, Suva, is on the southeastern shore of Viti Levu. Fifty-four percent of the population are indigenous Fijians (Melanesians), and forty percent are descendants of Hindu Indian laborers originally brought in to work on the sugar cane plantations. There is a small percentage of people of Polynesian descent in the eastern islands! Among the early Europeans to enter Fijian waters were Abel Tasman (1643) and James Cook (1774). Methodist missionaries arrived in the nineteenth century and established a Christian base, having converted influential chiefs who, in turn led their clans to accept the faith together with many Western social mores. The country became a British crown colony in 1894 and gained its independence in 1970. Friction has developed between the indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, the indigenous chiefs gaining the upper hand with sole land rights under a republican government since 1987?

Arrival of Seventh-day Adventists

The missionary ship "Pitcairn" reached Suva, Fiji, on August 3, 1891. John and Hannah Tay remained at Suva to sell medical books to the Europeans while the boat sailed on to the old capital, Levuka, on Ovalau Island. Albert and Hattie Read, together with Pitcairner James Russell McCoy, were left to canvass books as the captain took the "Pitcairn" further to Savu Savu Bay on Vanua Levu and then on to Taveuni Island. They were well received by the Europeans, sold their entire stock of books, took orders for more, and preached at times in public halls or Wesleyan pulpits.³ The Tays were left in Suva to establish a mission base but, sadly, John Tay died of influenza on January 8, 1892.⁴

Starting Again

When the "Pitcairn" visited on its second voyage, August 9 - 30, 1893, Dr. Merritt Kellogg went ashore to survey the interest and concluded, "We ought by all means to place workers on the Fiji Islands. I have great hopes of the native people."⁵

In response to Kellogg's assessment John and Fanny Cole transferred from Norfolk Island in mid-1895 and settled at Levuka because that was where the most encouraging prospects were reported to exist. However, after twelve months Kellogg decided Suva was the better option. John and Susie Fulton joined him there on July 18, 1896, and together they worked to find individuals interested in their message.⁶ Roads were either poor or non-existent, so they purchased a tiny boat to travel the safer waters inside the reef, naming it "The Loughborough."⁷ It was the first Seventh-day Adventist mission boat stationed in the South Pacific, the "Pitcairn" being based in California.

After two years in Fiji the Coles returned to America due to ill health and were replaced by Calvin and Myrtle Parker. Fulton and Parker had worked together in America and proved to be a strong team in Fiji, both becoming familiar with the local language. "The Loughborough" was disposed of and a larger vessel, a cutter they named the "Cina" (meaning "Lamp"), was purchased.⁸ The sixth and final voyage of the "Pitcairn" delivered them a marquee for public crusades.⁹

Breakthrough

At the Fourth Australasian Union Conference Session, July 1899, letters were read from John Fulton and Myrtle Parker describing the change in the experience of two key individuals, Pauliasi Bunoa and Ratu Ambrose. Bunoa had served as a preacher and missionary for the Wesleyan Mission. Reading Fulton's tract on Sabbath keeping persuaded him and his family to align with Fulton. Ambrose, or Roko-tui-Suva (King of Suva), gave up his tobacco and alcohol and was baptized a Seventh-day Adventist.¹⁰ Ambrose was especially impressed by the humility evident in the foot-washing ceremony.¹¹ The influence of these two men should not be underestimated, for in Fijian society notable male leadership was of paramount importance.

Steady Progress

In February 1900 Fulton took the "Cina" from Suva, accompanied by Bunoa and Ambrose, and embarked on an exploratory trip north to Batiki Island, Ngau Island, Nairai Island, and on to Savu Savu Bay, Vanua Levu.¹² On another occasion Bunoa took the "Cina" south to Kadavu Island and distributed literature.¹³ Later, on a coastal trip from Suva, Bunoa was preaching to a group when a gale suddenly sprang up and the "Cina" broke away from its moorings and was wrecked on the reef.¹⁴ It caused a temporary setback until another vessel, the "Andi Suva" ("Queen of Suva") was readied for service in late 1903.¹⁵

Bunoa, whose home island was Vanua Balavu in the Lau Group to the east,¹⁶ pioneered those islands, establishing three companies of believers.¹⁷ Fulton and Parker visited the area in 1902, making the decision for the Parkers to settle on Vanua Balavu and capitalize on Bunoa's work. Because land was difficult to purchase, they were forced to live on the beach at Lomaloma in a thatch hut with mats on an earthen floor. The smell of rotting fish was distressing and the heat during the day was oppressive.¹⁸ Parker baptized ten individuals and formed a church in 1902,¹⁹ the second in Fiji after Suva Vou (1899). From his base he sailed his cutter "Ramona" (his daughter's name) to nearby islands such as Cikobia²⁰ and Lakeba to develop further interests, but results were minimal.²¹

Both Fulton and Parker quickly obtained a working knowledge of the Fijian language. Fulton in particular used it to produce his own literature. Cole had dispatched a small printing press from California on which Fulton printed a periodical titled, *Na Rarama (The Light)*, Adventism's first periodical for the South Pacific.²² By 1900 he had translated fifty hymns for use in their services.²³ In addition to various tracts he prepared a booklet of Bible studies in 1901 titled, *Nai Balebale ni Parofisai (The Meaning of the Prophecies)*.²⁴ He abridged and translated Ellen White's *Great Controversy*, titled *Nai Tukutuku ni Veigauna*, a 1903 edition of two thousand copies printed by Avondale Press.²⁵

The medical work began indifferently. Arthur Currow arrived in 1902, supported by the Cooranbong Church and school community.²⁶ He started giving simple treatments,²⁷ but it soon became apparent that he was not welcome by the Fijians and expatriates. Fulton wrote letters to George Irwin at the Australian headquarters, disparaging of Currow

who left in 1904.²⁸ Some medical work on a small scale followed²⁹ as the educational work took center stage.

Training Schools

At the end of 1904 a young teaching graduate, Septimus Carr, arrived from Australia to establish a missionary training school at Buresala on the west coast of Ovalau Island.³⁰ In its first year, 1905, he taught twelve students under primitive conditions while the buildings of native materials were gradually constructed.³¹ The classrooms were ready for dedication in 1907³² and better dormitories were built in 1909.³³ One of the earliest students, Josefati, pioneered the Wainunu District on Vanua Levu in 1907.³⁴ Another student, Benisimani "Bennie" Tavodi, was chosen by Carr to accompany him to pioneer a Papuan mission in 1908.³⁵ For thirty-five years this school was the engine room for the training of Fijian youth who led in the village services throughout Fiji. In the early years lesson instruction was done in Fijian by Europeans who had learned the language,³⁶ but English gradually became the language of the educated. By 1923 Buresala's curriculum included one unit in Fijian composition, regular subjects such as arithmetic and physiology, together with specific SDA units such as history of the Sabbath, doctrines, denominational history, ancient history as it related to Bible prophecies, and SDA mission geography.³⁷

Training for the Indian-Fijians began with the arrival of Ellen Meyers in 1912.³⁸ An Anglo-Indian woman, she found a home in Suva and began an elementary school on her veranda with a handful of students. By 1914 a better site was found amid Indian settlements on the northern outskirts of Suva at Samabula.³⁹ Fifty students attended in 1917.⁴⁰ The conversion of Indian Fijians proved to be more difficult than that of Wesleyan Fijians. There were occasions when youth choosing to attend Sabbath School were ordered by the local imam to be flogged.⁴¹ However, a few remained loyal and were baptized, the first fruits being manifest in 1917.⁴² In the early 1920s some of these appeared in lists of mission workers, names such as Jimmy Ramkhelewan,⁴³ Golai, Nellie Singh,⁴⁴ and Na Bahadur Singh.⁴⁵

Mission Expansion

Prior to the First World War small groups of believers had formed at Suva Vou, Buresala, Lomaloma, Namarai, Navolau, Lakeba Island, the Wainunu and Cakandrove Districts on Vanua Levu, and Loa and Somosomo on Taveuni Island. Alipati Rainima and his wife, Eseta (Esther), tried pioneering Kadavu Island in 1911⁴⁶ but he succumbed to a fatal illness in April 1912⁴⁷ and a second attempt was not made for a decade.⁴⁸ It seemed that every success brought some degree of opposition from the Wesleyan Mission. In 1912 Gata and his wife, missionaries at Lomaloma, were imprisoned for three months on trumped up charges.⁴⁹

When the War was in its closing phase there occurred in the mountain regions of Viti Levu a remarkable series of events that SDA church leaders referred to as "The Awakening."⁵⁰ Two eccentric nationals, Sailosi Nagusolevu and Aisake Sivo, began to preach that Germany had won the War and the British rule over Fiji was ended, so therefore they no longer had to pay taxes. Adventist literature had obviously been carried into the hinterland and influenced the men to also advocate Saturday as the Sabbath. The SDA Mission came under government suspicion, but Parker visited the Colonial Secretary and assured him of their allegiance to the Crown.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the government committed Sailosi to an asylum and Aisake was exiled.⁵² Their message however served to bring the Sabbath issue to the attention of the people and a large delegation came to Parker with the claim that there were thousands in the mountains ready to join the SDA Church. Parker and a Fijian pastor, Mecusela (Methuselah) Naisogo, toured the villages and were met with crowds lining aisles festooned with flowers and singing *Sa lako mai ko Jisu* (Jesus is coming again). Parker was impressed but reacted cautiously, wanting to fully instruct the eager people in the Adventist principles of healthy living before he began mass baptisms.⁵³ After all, he represented what was commonly known as Lotu Savasava (Clean Church, meaning one that advocated obedience to the Mosaic code of forbidden animals as food).

Fijian and European missionaries quickly moved into key villages of the mountains of Viti Levu, extending to the Ba River area of the northwest. In 1921 Parker made a five-week trek to assess progress, moving along the Wainimala River where several churches were established, including Nukulau and Nasonggo at the headwaters. He proceeded to the churches at Nadrau⁵⁴ and Lewa in the Ba District, returning to Suva via the Wainibuka River where more churches were operating, including Drekeniwai, Navuso, and Waisa.⁵⁵ Contrary to initial reports of "The Awakening" there were no mass baptisms of thousands, but instead a steady increase from 210 members in 1915⁵⁶ to 804 members in 1923.⁵⁷

Further Educational Institutions

Capitalizing on "The Awakening" a temporary school was established at Naqia on the Wainibuka River headwaters in 1920. It was only a native materials building. The teacher had one piece of chalk and a small blackboard hung from a post. Seventy students sat on the earthen floor with their slates on their knees. A permanent site was found downstream at Navuso in 1921 and buildings were raised throughout the year, enabling an opening in 1922.⁵⁸ A break was taken as more buildings were erected in 1923 and a re-opening took place in 1924.⁵⁹ The following year there were one hundred students attending. It was named the Wainibuka or Navuso Intermediate School, a feeder for the senior Buresala School.⁶⁰ However, lack of funds continued to hinder improvements, prompting the government education inspector to issue a poor report, condemning the overcrowding and lack of suitable equipment.⁶¹

Elsewhere, for almost three decades missionaries had visited the Lau Group and extended their trips to Taveuni

Island and Vanua Levu, baptizing small numbers who were widely dispersed. Harry Martin, in 1926, had wished for another intermediate school to be established on Vanua Levu.⁶² His vision was fulfilled when a school was begun at Vatuvonu on Buca Bay, strategically located to service the scattered islands of northeast Fiji. It opened on April 5, 1933, with fifty-seven students that year, the more successful ones advancing later to Buresala School⁶³

The Buresala School, being the senior institution, trained the workforce for the Fiji Mission. The 1928 *SDA Yearbook*, for example, listed thirty-seven homeland Fijian missionaries in addition to two serving in Papua.⁶⁴ Five years later these figures had risen to forty-nine employed in Fiji and four in Papua New Guinea.⁶⁵ Some lost their lives in service. Seven Buresala students were lost at sea in 1930 while trying to take their mission vessels to a nearby safe harbor during a hurricane⁶⁶ (see biography of Frederick Lang).

Fulton College

The Second World War years brought a significant upgrade in government laws regarding education, especially teacher training. Buresala's isolation from other schools provided no opportunities for teacher trainees to gain practical experience. Rather than spend money improving the four main SDA schools the decision was made to lift the standard at a new central location. A large property was found in 1940 at Nakalawaca in the Tailevu District just north of Suva. Consequently, the Buresala Training School was closed. Samabula, Navuso, and Vatuvonu continued with reduced educational levels. In honor of pioneer John Fulton the new senior institution was first named Fulton Missionary School⁶⁷ or Fulton Training School,⁶⁸ later Fulton Missionary College (1950)⁶⁹ and Fulton College (1972).⁷⁰ A large auditorium and administration block was constructed in 1964 and new dormitories in 1973. By 1978 the enrollment numbered three hundred and catered to sixteen different cultures from the South Pacific countries⁷¹

Shifting to a Modern Dynamic

The division of the Fiji Mission into two administrative units in 1951 heralded the introduction of departmental secretaries and the appointment of an increasing number of national men to leadership positions within those departments.⁷² Two decades later, in 1971, Filimone Beranaliva was elected president of the re-united Fiji Mission.⁷³ At the same time Aisaki Kabu, mission evangelist, had become the voice of the Fiji Mission by translating Voice of Prophecy tapes and having them beamed back to Fiji via Radio Tonga.⁷⁴ Two decades later, in 1991, Dr. Nemani Tausere was appointed principal of Fulton College.⁷⁵ At the time there were 13,447 members in Fiji spread throughout ninety-eight churches, more than any State conference in Australasia.⁷⁶

In December 2002 the lease on the land at Fulton College was due for renewal, but local owners challenged the proceedings. Expensive court cases over the issue cast a pall of uncertainty over the institution, especially regarding any further capital expenditure on site.⁷⁷ Finally in 2007 it was deemed wise to search for an alternative property and start again with modern buildings. A suitable place was found on the western side of Viti Levu at Sabeto, immediately north of Nadi airport. Classes began in time for the 2014 college year even though construction was incomplete.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Fiji is primarily one of evangelism by means of educational institutions. The earliest missionaries such as Fulton, Parker, Carr, and Martin recognized the value of boarding schools where instruction in the teachings of the Church was advocated and the ethics of a healthful lifestyle were promoted. Training at Buresala, Samabula, Navuso, Vatuvonu, and the senior institution Fulton College all provided a stream of dedicated church members and mission workers, not only for Fiji, but for much of the South Pacific region.

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