

HISTORIC WEST OAHU

I enjoy telling students on field trips here at the Capitol about all the exciting developments happening in Ewa, the fastest growing district on Oahu. I am also proud of the rich heritage of both the area I represent and its neighboring areas. Events of global and national significance, Native Hawaiian history, immigration patterns, by-gone commerce, and more all contribute to the colors and texture of the social fabric we know as West Oahu. Rich and abundant in historical sites from different periods, I believe the state should work with stakeholders to preserve these areas while promoting modern goals.

A pre-dawn air raid on the Marine Corps Air Field in Ewa and Fort Barrette in Kapolei on the morning of December 7, 1941 was the very first act of Japanese aggression against America and precipitated the entrance of the U.S. into World War II. More continuous strafing was fired on this area than any other on Oahu that morning because Japanese planes staged and re-grouped here.

In three passes on that fateful morning, Japanese Zeroes struck low and fast, killing four Marines and some civilians and destroying most of the fifty aircraft on Ewa Field before Kamikaze conducted the more well-known bombing of Pearl Harbor. A Department of Defense report concluded that the attack on Ewa Field was “so precise and well-executed that it appeared as though each plane previously had selected its particular target...with the purpose of riddling them, and setting fire to the gas tanks to render them useless for pursuit and interception.”

The cannons of Fort Barrette to protect Pearl Harbor made it also a target for the Japanese raid. Fort Barrette Road was a supply road to the railway in Ewa and it also connected the military base to the Kapolei Military Reservation. The roadway was riddled with bullets in the one-hour attack on the Fort and Ewa Field. One Hawaii soldier was killed as the brave servicemen shot back at the Japanese planes. One Japanese aircraft was seen descending in flames past Fort Barrette and crashing into the sea near Barbers Point. After the assault, the site was built up to increase its defense capacity. One still-existing military bunker and its connecting roads – Guadalcanal, Roosevelt, Ranger, and Coral Sea – remain as a testament to our strong military heritage.

The Honouliuli Internment Camp that resulted from the national tenor of fear during World War II was situated north of the H-1 freeway in Kunia. One of five such camps in Hawaii, its 160 acres, isolated in a deep gulch, was set up to hold up to three thousand internees. Although Japanese Americans comprised the largest group of detainees, Italians, Germans, and Koreans were also confined there. Mainland archeologist Jeff Burton, an expert on Japanese American internment, concluded that the Honouliuli camp may be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hawaiian religious and cultural specialists have long held that the Ewa plain and coastline contain burial, religious sites, and remnants of structures of ancient Hawaiians. Hawaiians say that the area is the resting ground of seven alii including the last king of Maui and Oahu before Kamehameha the Great. Part of Fort Barrette Road is on an extinct dormant volcano shield known as Puu o Kapolei and is built on the ancient trail named in honor of Kualaka'i, the chief who brought ulu to the region. Kualaka'i was a leader whose many accomplishments benefitted the Hawaiian people who lived in the Ewa region.

Hawaii's grand role in the worldwide sugar industry literally has roots in Ewa's fertile farmlands. The Ewa Sugar Plantation, Ewa Villages, and old Waipahu Sugar Mill are reminders of a golden age gone by. The colonial style Plantation Manager's Mansion in Ewa was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The cultural richness and Asian-Pacific blending in our islands is directly the result of all of the laborers brought from overseas to work in the fields and live in plantation housing. The last remaining segment of OR&L, the old train and railroad that carried these prized agricultural products to the harbor in Honolulu, is preserved in Ewa and is now on the National Historic Register.

These and more areas from the Ewa coastline sweeping up to the Waianae range and Kunia are historical markers in Hawaii's history, and should be preserved where possible. As needed development for our growing population continues in the region, the important history of our state should be remembered and honored for future generations.

I am introducing a bill in this year's Legislature to identify the Ewa Plain in West Oahu as a significant area in culture and history for the state of Hawaii. If the bill becomes law, this area would be known as the West Oahu Historical District. The state agency responsible for the preservation of historical sites would be permitted to work with interested stakeholders to promote this area for educational, tourism, and economic purposes while preserving its historic place and significance. I hope you will join me in this effort.