

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Slide 1: Intro

After the Spanish-American War, Hawaii became increasingly strategic as a midpoint for staging the US military between the mainland and the Pacific, territories of Guam and the Philippines. This rekindled the Navy's interest in Pearl Harbor, which, since 1893, had been used only as a coaling station, located near the entrance to the harbor.

Slide 2: Coaling station

In 1908, Congressional Representative for Hawaii Jonah Kalaniana'ole argued that it was essential to protect Hawaii by establishing a fully operational naval base at Pearl Harbor, including a repair dry dock to support a fleet.

Slide 3: 1907 Map of PH

To make this possible, the harbor needed to be accessible, and in 1907, Congress allocated funds to dredge the channel to allow for deep-draft ships.

Slide 4: 1908 Dredge working at PH:

Walter Dillingham was the founder of Hawaiian Dredging and Construction Company. He was the son of Benjamin Dillingham, who built the OR&L railroad, which would become an integral part of the construction of the naval base.

Slide 5: Dillingham Correspondence

Hawaiian Dredging outbid six other competitors with a 3.56 million dollar bid to dredge a channel 600 feet wide and 35 feet deep across a sandbar and a reef that blocked the entrance.

The contract also included shaving the edge of Bishop's Point on the Waikiki side of the channel and cutting away 4 to 8 acres from the tip of Waipio Peninsula to make the upper channel more navigable.

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Slide 6: Dillingham Correspondence

Slide 7: Map of SE Loch at PH before filling:

The company estimated that the spoil from the project for just the channel would be 5 million cubic yards. This spoil was loaded onto barges and dumped at various locations around the harbor but much of it was used to fill East Loch.

Slide 8: The Dredging Dry Dock #1

The company also secured a 2.5 million dollar contract to build what would be the world's largest dry dock to date. But the dry dock story deserves its own presentation.

Slide 8: the Dredge the Governor

The work began on March 1, 1909, using clamshell dredges named the Gaylord and the Governor.

Slide 9: the Dredge the Reclamation

They were later joined by the more powerful and faster suction dredger named the "Reclamation," which had been built from salvaged parts in California and shipped from the Mainland.

Slide 11: Map of the town

In 1908, Walter started construction of a town on the eastern side of the channel to house employees working on the dredging and the dry dock, as well as those building the nearby 14th Naval District facilities. But as we will see, the town had a very short lifespan.

It lay just mauka of Ft. Kamehameha on 2,000 acres subleased from Honolulu Plantation Co, which held the primary lease for the land from Queen Emma's estate. Dillingham wanted to call the town "Puuloa," but the Navy Dept. asked him to use a different name because there was already a Puuloa junction and a nearby plantation camp of the same name. Only Walter knows why he named it "Watertown."

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Watertown was a “company town” that provided all the necessities and amenities for employees and their families. This was a smart move, as all the dredge and dock workers, engineers, and management worked on the harbor, in the 14th Naval district, or at Fort Kamehameha. Walter had another reason for setting up a company town. He was no fan of labor. As a part-owner of the Ewa and Honolulu Plantation companies, he had already dealt with worker strikes and hoped that by providing all their needs, he could discourage his employees from organizing.

Beginning in early 1908, Walter and his engineers laid out the town, and it seemed to magically appear on the landscape over the next four years. The population was diverse, comprised of Native Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Caucasians, African Americans, Koreans, and Filipinos. Later, permanently stationed naval and Army personnel also moved into the town. The first baby was born in 1909. Its total population has not been recorded, however, as you will see, over a few short years the settlement grew from a village into a sizeable town.

Slide 12: Temporary RR Spur to Watertown

This project required a lot of manpower. Bringing in a daily workforce was inefficient because, at that time, there were limited transportation options: there were no roads through the Honolulu Plantation Company’s cane fields that covered all the land on the eastern side of the channel.

His OR&L railway provided transportation via a temporary spur laid from the town to Puuloa Station. Later, a main road through the town was cut to the junction; however, the train was always the best and fastest option.

Slide 13: Dredgers Row Housing:

Walter built the town’s housing, including Pearl Court, Charly Camp, and others such as “Dredgers Row.”

Slide 14: Dry Dock Row Housing:

And “Dry Dock Row”:

Slide 15: The Eagle House Hotel

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Dillingham also purchased four hotels in Honolulu: The Eagle House, the Honolulu, and the Queen, and another unnamed hotel, which were dismantled and then reassembled at Watertown to serve as barracks for single men.

Slide 16: St. The St. Francis and the Eagle together

One was operated as a hotel called the St. Francis, and it featured a tennis court.

In 1910, before the completion of the water lines from a new well being drilled on the Damon Estate, 5 miles away, barges delivered water to fill 10,000-gallon water tanks. Once it began to flow, Walter built a waterworks with pumps in the town.

By 1911, there were offices and an administration building, workers' barracks, a company store with a restaurant, two Chinese and one Japanese store, a police force of one, and a school staffed by two teachers.

By 1913, the town had its own post office, clubhouse, and laundry. Businesses unaffiliated with Hawaiian Dredging were beginning to open in the town, which were an insurance firm and a building company.

Slide 17: Train running from Watertown

By 1916, a permanent OR&L track ran from Puuloa station through the expanding naval base to Watertown.

Slide 18: Opening of the Dry Dock #1

Dillingham finished dredging the channel in 1913, and the dry dock opened in 1919. Dredging continued for the next few years on a limited scale to maintain the depth of the other locks in the harbor.

Slide 19: Aerial of Completed Dry Dock #1

Slide 20: Taxi Service Advertisement

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

By the 1920s, Watertown had all the amenities found in larger towns, including a local taxi service, and a theater.

Slide 21: Joan of Arc Catholic Church

and a Catholic church named St. Jeanne D'Arc.

In the late 19-teens and early 20s, a branch of the Bank of Hawaii, an ice plant, and two gas stations had opened. For families, there was a health clinic, a public park and playground, an award-winning garden, and a PTA.

Slide 22: Newspaper Heading on Blind Pigs

For the adults, soldiers, and sailors, there were entertainment venues, some legal, some not so much. There was a dance hall and a clubhouse, but at the military's request, there were no bars or liquor stores, and this restriction was furthered when Prohibition was instituted. However, this void was filled by numerous illegal saloons known as blind pigs, and stills hidden away all over town churned out okolehao and sake.

Slide 23: Newspaper article on Liquor and Opium Bust

Opium was for sale, and secret gambling dens were set up in back rooms and behind kitchens.

Slide 24: Notice of discontinued service of the train

After the initial dredging and the dry dock was completed, and work on the naval base's infrastructure slowed, the OR&L discontinued passenger service due to declining ridership and began operating just two labor trains per day to and from the town.

Slide 25: 1943 Former Location of Watertown:

This was the prelude to the end of Watertown. A year later, Congress authorized 16 to 18 million dollars for the construction of a new Army air base, and this would be the town's death knell. Watertown lay in the path of the new Hickam airfield and its surrounding support infrastructure, which stretched from John Rogers Airport to the harbor edge.

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Slide 26: Map of the Condemned land

After some legal tussling and payment of remuneration, 2200 acres of the Damon, Bishop, and Queen Emma's estates were condemned, with the military paying \$1,084,000. Dillingham received money, as did some of the residents who had leaseholds. At the end of 1935, only 1,000 residents remained. Continuing to wag the proverbial military dog, Dillingham's Company won the bid, and clearing began in 1936.

Slide 27: Home being moved

The homes were torn down, except for 60, which were moved to Forts Kam and DeRussy in Waikiki as quarters for enlisted personnel.

Slide 28: Soldiers worshiping at the Chapel in 1938

The church was moved to Ft. Kam and renamed St. Joan of Arc Chapel.

The school buildings were taken over by the Army quartermaster as offices for engineers and draftsmen, and the 282 school kids were relocated to Aiea and Moanalua schools. By September 1936, only four families remained, including the Yoshinos, who were allowed to keep their store and luncheonette open to serve the military and other personnel.

Slide 29: 1968 Aerial of western end of HAFB after Clearing

By 1968, Watertown had been completely subsumed under the base.

Today, the only remnants of Watertown are artifacts found during subsurface archaeological work on the airfield's infrastructure.

Slide 30: Ceramic artifacts:

These are a few of the artifacts found during a 2003 archaeological investigation conducted near Watertown, and they illustrate, to some degree, the town's lifeways. The photo shows two types of ceramics.

The whiteware shown on the right of the photograph is a refined earthenware that was a standard household item during the plantation era. Types include creamware, pearlware, and whiteware, and were dining and

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

tea sets, as well as decorative items such as vases and large bowls. Here is an example of a whole platter.

Slide 31: Whiteware platter

Slide 32: Blue transfer print :

The blue transfer-print ceramics on the left side of the photo are examples of Asian porcelain wares imported from China and Japan for everyday use. These were common during the plantation era. They featured traditional, detailed scenes and motifs using flowing or precise transfer patterns. Dishes included rice bowls, sauce dishes, platters, and tea sets, but there were also vases, spoons, and other things.

Slide 33: Bottle glass fragments

Slide 34: Medicine Bottle:

Opaline glass apothecary or cosmetic bottles were in use during Hawaii's sugar and pineapple plantation era. And this one represents the medical and commercial history of Hawaii.

I think what makes this subject so interesting is that Watertown was completely obliterated from the landscape. NOW, we know this has happened to plantation camps, but I think this may be the only town of this size and this importance to the development of Hawaii that this has happened to. And it has resulted in a loss to the historical record of an important place and events in the military development of Pearl Harbor and of Hawaii.

Slide 35: Thank you to Peter, Jeff and Windy

I would like to acknowledge Peter Young. He steered me to some materials, and his excellent website, "Images of Old Hawaii," is a great place to read about Hawaii's history. Please visit his website at

I would also like to thank Jeff Livingston, historian for the Hawaiian Railway Society. He provided photographs of trains not currently available elsewhere in Hawaii that served Watertown. Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't use them all. The society offers train rides along the

Watertown Presentation

[May 1, 2026 FINAL]

Waianae coast on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays from its Barber's Point location. Please visit their website at

Finally, the artifact pictures are from a report of an archaeological project conducted by Windy McElroy. Thank you Windy.