

History of Kahalii and Onomea Bay: The Legend of Twin Rocks

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Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden sits in a valley that extends from the four-mile “scenic drive” off Highway 19 all the way down to beautiful Onomea Bay.

In the 1800s, the area was a rough-water seaport. In the second half of the 19th century, when the sugar industry sprung up, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers lived there and worked in the cane fields and helped build the Onomea Sugar Mill.

In older times, though, the Onomea Bay area was a fishing village called Kahali‘i. The story goes that one day a chief from Kahali‘i spotted many canoes sailing toward shore. Fearing an attack, the chiefs and village elders met and decided they should build a reef that would prevent the canoes from landing on their beaches. But there was no time.

So they asked for two people willing to sacrifice their lives to protect the village instead, and two young lovers agreed.

That night, the chief sent a decree to the people of Kahali‘i stating that they must remain indoors from sunset to sunrise, making no light or sound, under penalty of death. The next morning, when everyone went down to the shore, they found the man and woman gone but two large rock formations standing at the entrance to the bay. The rocks were attached and looked as though they were guarding the bay and village. The chief said the guardians would keep unwanted canoes away from the treacherous currents that swirled around them.

The lovers—and their offspring—still stand guard at the head of Onomea Bay.

At Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden, you can still see the two rocks from Twin Rocks Vista on our ocean trail.

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