

## The Atherton YMCA (The Charles Atherton House)

The Charles Atherton House opened on June 1, 1932 as a dormitory for male students at the recently established University of Hawaii. Dedicated to one of the university's principal supporters, Charles Henry Atherton (1867-1928), the three-story combined Georgian and Renaissance Revival structure included dorm rooms and a lobby, a dining room, a social hall, and meeting rooms. The cost to students was between \$10 and \$20 a month; board was an additional \$30. James F. Morgan (1889-1977), treasurer of the Big Five firm of Alexander & Baldwin, headed up the building committee, which awarded Walker and Olund the \$100,000 construction contract.

Planned soon after Charles's death in 1928, the building's cornerstone gives the date of 1931. The aim was to promote Charles Atherton's ideals of racial harmony and Christian fellowship. As his brother Frank C. Atherton (1877-1945) asked rhetorically in his dedicatory address: "Are we sure that our education is of the right kind?" and "Is it teaching our young people to live finer lives?" Frank argued that the YMCA offered just such a solution—to "foster the spirit of interracial goodwill and fellowship, which," he concluded, "is one of the chief characteristics of Hawaii."



*Figure 1. The Charles Atherton House, 1932.*

The Charles Atherton House provided a complement to the relatively new YWCA on Richards Street, with which it had much in common. The "Richards Street Y"—now known as Laniākea—was completed in 1927 with funding from a number of well-to-do local residents, including the Atherton family and also members of the Hawaiian Girls Club, which donated the initial \$1,000 toward the new building. The local YWCA's secretary Grace Channon traveled to California to meet with the proposed architect, Julia Morgan

(1872-1957) then fresh off her work for publisher William Randolph Hearst at San Simeon. Morgan, who directed the construction from a distance, had first come to Hawai'i around 1917, remodeling a house for the Athertons in Waikiki and later providing the designs for the Fernhurst Building at King and Alapai Streets as a home for struggling women, itself the gift of the younger Athertons in honor of their sister Kate (1879-1919). Fernhurst, was the name of the former Atherton homestead (1871), which stood at this location.

Charles Atherton was one of six siblings, children of Joseph Ballard Atherton (1837-1903) and his wife Juliette Montague (Cooke) Atherton (1843-1921). Born in Honolulu, Charles was educated at Punahou Preparatory School, Oakland High School in California and Oberlin College. He began his career with Castle & Cooke, advancing to treasurer by his early thirties. He later became president of the Hustace-Peck Co., vice-president of the Mutual Telephone Co., vice-president of Young Brothers, Ltd., boat builders, and finally a director of the Bank of Hawaii (his father's firm), the Hawaiian Electric Company, the Oahu Railway & Land Co. and the Honolulu Rapid Transit & Land Co. Listed in *Men of Hawaii*—a paean to the haole establishment of the early Territorial Period—Atherton was a trustee of the Central Union Church, president of the Library of Hawaii, a director of the local YMCA, and active at the Outrigger Canoe Club, the Commercial Club, the Pacific Club, and other elite organizations. His brother Frank held a comparable range of positions, including vice president of Castle & Cooke, secretary of the Bank of Hawaii, and president of the *Honolulu Star -Bulletin*.



Figure 2. Charles Henry Atherton, 1867-1928.

The Atherton House's architect, Guy Nelson Rothwell (1890-1971), had similar roots in the islands. Born in Honolulu, Rothwell attended Punahou School and the University of Washington, where he studied structural engineering and architecture, completing his degree in 1911. His first job was with the Navy, which brought him back to a position at Pearl Harbor. Trained in the Beaux Arts tradition, with its reliance on classical forms,

Rothwell designed a large number of significant buildings in Hawai'i, both on his own and in partnership with John H. Kangeter and Marcus Lester. (At the time of the Atherton House's construction the firm was Rothwell & Lester.) These included several buildings at Punahou School, the Palama Settlement, All Saints Church in Kapa'a, Kauai, and the original designs for Honolulu Hale. Around the time of the Atherton House he was also completing Roosevelt High School, the Haiku branch of the Bank of Hawaii, the Hilo Armory, and Koloa Church. Rothwell served as a Naval Reserve officer and was an avid sailor (he claimed a relationship with Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson; his English father, John George Rothwell (1860-1933) had in fact been a sea captain). He was notable too as an ardent royalist, a friend and Waikiki neighbor of both Queen Liliuokalani and Prince Kuhio.



Figure 3. Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, estate of George Henry Lee, 2nd Earl of Lichfield, ca. 1720.

The design for the Atherton House, grounded in the Italian Renaissance owes a specific debt to Scottish-born architect James Gibbs (1682-1754), whose famous St Martin-in-the-Fields Church on Trafalgar Square in London also provided the inspiration for the then recently completed Central Union Church on Beretania, by architect Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942). (Gibb's church, with its revolutionary joining of a tower and Roman temple front also inspired nearly every other church in the U.S. since the mid eighteenth century!) Gibb's *Book of Architecture* (1728) featured completed designs and various proposals, including the design for Lord Lichfield's estate at Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire (Plate 39). The major departures from Gibbs's original for the Charles Atherton House were the substitution of pilasters for quoins in the central section and of round arched openings on the first story.

In 1957, the YMCA reorganized its management of the property as the Charles H. Atherton Branch. Shortly afterward, the YMCA branch leased the adjacent land from the then defunct Hawaii School of Religion to build a new facility aimed at women students. Designed by the Honolulu firm of Johnson & Perkins, the Mary Atherton Richards—named after Charles's sister Mary Atherton (1869-1951)—building opened in 1959. The new YWCA center, a

splendid essay on mid-century, tropical modernism, provided space for community activities and a few residential apartments. In the meantime, the Charles Atherton House still served as a dormitory, offering housing as well to the first East West Center students in 1960-1961. The organization tried to maintain a balanced ratio of local students, international students, and U.S. mainland students. Among the original residents under the East West Center program was Barack Obama Sr. (1936-1982), father of the future president. (He met Stanley Ann Dunham (1942-1995) in 1960 when he was resident at the Atherton House; Barack Obama Jr. was born in August 1961.)

The original Atherton House suffered a number of alterations over the years. These included the addition of a one-story section on the makai side of the building in 1961 (which served for many years as a restaurant) and a shed-roofed addition at the rear. A second addition was made to the mauka end of the building, also at the rear. The windows were altered sometime in the 1980s, with applied grid metal windows substituting for the original divided wood windows. There were also numerous unsympathetic alterations to the interior spaces. It is uncertain whether the building was always pink. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel, which opened in 1927, may well have set the precedent.

In 2017, the University of Hawai'i and UH Foundation signed an agreement with the YMCA of Honolulu to purchase the site, including both buildings. Following a number of studies—including one that suggested conversion of the older Charles Atherton House into a university-run hotel—the university has partnered with the Hunt Corporation to develop a medium rise residential facility on the property as part of a public-private partnership. The unfortunate scheme calls for the demolition of the 1959 Mary Atherton Richards Building and the partial demolition of the Charles Atherton House, leaving only the street-facing façades.