



How a piece of
government furniture turned out to be
a masterwork from the days
of the kingdom

The Historian, the Conservator, the Attorney and his Desk

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David Louie's desk is covered with stacks of paper, all part of the Hawai'i state attorney general's daily work. Of course there are many desks in the AG's offices in the elegant 1939 Mission Revival building on Queen Street, but Louie's stands out. Its wood glows with an orange fire. Its precisely turned legs and finials mark it as coming from another era. The rectangular boxes that are its twin drawers have been artfully trimmed with a darker wood. It looks at once antique and brand new. Louie, himself a woodworker who turns koa bowls, knew the desk was special when he moved into the office in 2011. At that time the desk was covered with a dark finish, but its unusual size and design struck him. And then he discovered what it was made of.

"One of my predecessors had chipped away at that finish, so you could see that it was koa," Louie recalls. Koa is Hawai'i's most prized wood. It's sturdy (about as hard as walnut or teak), exceptionally beautiful and very expensive. If you wanted to buy a new koa desk like Louie's today, it could set you back \$13,500.

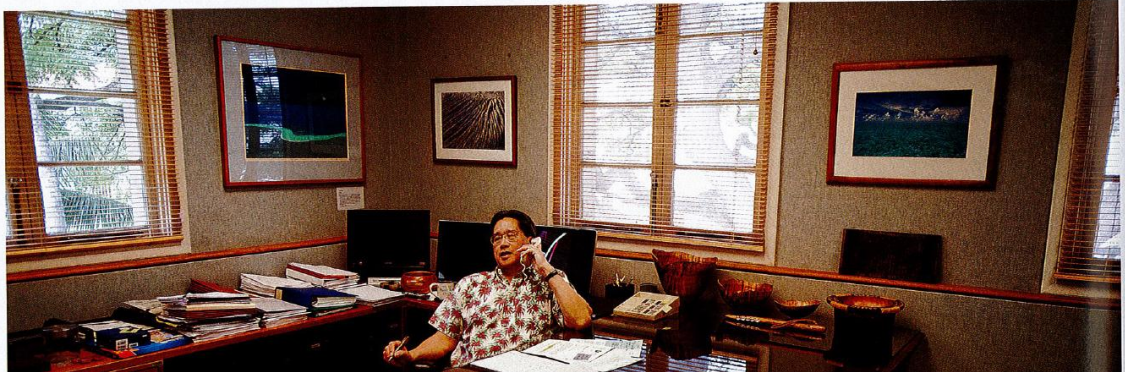
Many local families proudly display koa bowls or furniture in their homes, but it's unusual for such heirlooms to show up in government offices. Intrigued by the desk, Louie called up some of the former AGs who'd sat at the same one. He got his

best lead from Michael Lilly, who first sat at the desk as deputy attorney general from 1981 to 1985 and who liked it so much that he took it with him to the AG's office when he assumed that position. Lilly didn't know much about the desk itself, but he did know someone who might: furniture historian Irving Jenkins.

Louie called Jenkins, who examined the desk and told Louie that not merely was it an heirloom piece, it was also a piece of history: one of thirteen such koa desks known to exist, most of them dating to the time of the Hawaiian monarchy. Others

were in such historic places as Bishop Museum and 'Iolani Palace; in government buildings like Ali'iolani Hale; and at Washington Place. A couple of desks had made their way to Hawai'i Island. They were at Hulihe'e Palace in Kailua-Kona and McCandless Ranch in Captain Cook. Furthermore, Jenkins told Louie, the AG's desk did not merely share an esteemed pedigree with its dozen cousins: More than likely Louie's desk was the first one made—the exemplar after which the rest had been fashioned.

No one knows the desk's exact history—people don't keep diaries about their office furniture, even if it is quite nice—but if anyone's qualified to make an educated guess about the AG's desk, it's Jenkins. Born in Hilo and raised on Kaua'i, Jenkins developed a love for Hawaiian furniture early. His father's work on the sugar plantation gave the young Jenkins a chance to visit the Hanalei homes of wealthy families, such as the Wilcoxes, which were filled with koa calabashes and furniture. "I grew up seeing koa treated with reverence," says Jenkins. "That started it for me." He went on to study drawing and painting in college, then start a small business that he sold in 1975, giving him the time to write *Hawaiian Furniture and Hawai'i's Cabinetmakers* in 1983. The book is still considered authoritative today.



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When Louie took over as attorney general, the koa desk in his office was in bad shape. The restorers examined similar desks from the late eighteenth century, like King Kalākaua's partners desk (at right) currently in 'Iolani Palace, for examples.

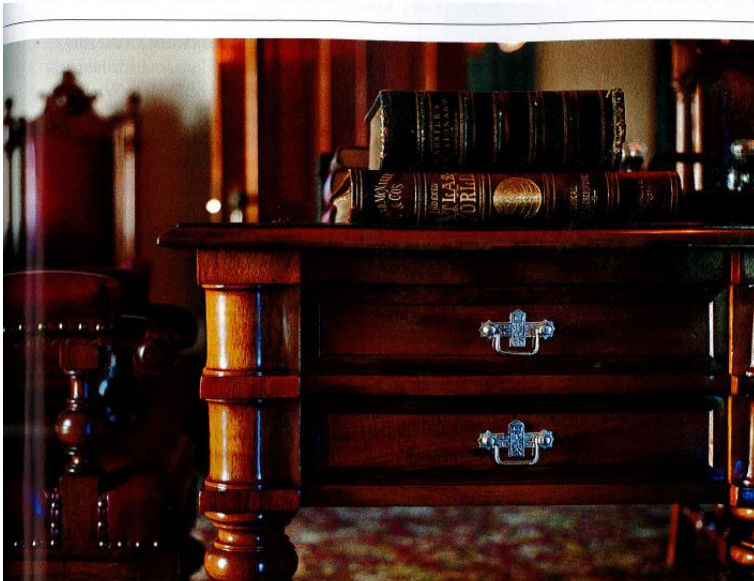
Later that year a reporter with *The Honolulu Advertiser* enlisted Jenkins' help tracing the origins and whereabouts of these semi-legendary koa desks. Turns out that the chief justice had one, and there was another in the office of the state Corrections Division. Even Duke Kahanamoku had sat behind one when he served as sheriff of Honolulu; that desk found its way to Honolulu Hale, where Mayors Neil Blaisdell and Frank Fasi used it. Fasi returned the desk to Kahanamoku's widow, Nadine, after Duke died; it's now in Bishop Museum. There were different theories about who'd made them; one popular misconception held that they had been built by prisoners. "These stories rise up again and again but just aren't true," says Jenkins, who helped put that particular myth to bed. Prison workshops did exist, and prisoners did sometimes make simple furniture, but the talent and tools required



to make desks like the attorney general's would have been beyond them.

Louie's call gave Jenkins a reason to continue his research. While Jenkins is quick to point out that there are no receipts,

records or photos that could prove the desk's origin beyond doubt, Jenkins believes that the "Attorney General's desk," as it's come to be called, was made in 1869 by a Honolulu furniture maker named



Major T. Donnell. His evidence: a notice published in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* on April 30, 1869 that states: "The desk for the use of the Secretary of the Legislative Assembly was manufactured

at the establishment of Mr. M.T. Donnell, and will bear inspection. The wood, which is koa, shows that the handsomest of furniture can be made here, if our mechanics are patronized."

1869: Kamehameha V was king. With a population of just fourteen thousand, Honolulu looked more like a small frontier town than a city. The furniture trade was dominated by Charles E. Williams, who had opened the kingdom's first furniture store in 1859. Much of Williams' furniture was imported from the United States, but he and his cabinetmakers also crafted koa furniture. After Williams came the smaller fry, cabinetmakers named John Hopp and Johann Wicke as well as Donnell, all of whom built koa desks. (A peculiarity of the trade at the time: Many cabinetmakers earned extra scratch as coffin-makers.)

Donnell himself is an enigmatic figure. According to Jenkins, records show a divorce and custody battle over his daughter with his former mother-in-law, who prevailed by accusing Donnell of drinking and marrying a "registered common prostitute." But he was unquestionably talented, creating pieces that newspapers noted for their novelty, such as a settee that could convert into a bed. "The very few pieces of furniture attributed to Donnell indicate he was a highly trained craftsman, perhaps too highly trained for a small town like

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Honolulu,” says Jenkins. “It is not likely Honolulu was his first choice in which to establish a career as a superior craftsman. There was just not enough of a population to sustain high-end commissions for a fine furniture-maker.” Donnell and other furniture makers eventually went broke in part because they over-invested in expensive koa pieces.

It’s the simplicity of the AG’s desk that leads Jenkins to believe that it predates all the others. It is just one drawer deep on each side, while later iterations are two to four drawers deep and feature a bamboo motif. Jenkins attributes four of the others

to Johann Wicke in the 1880s. (Records from the Hawai’i Kingdom Interior Department show a payment of \$529 to Wicke for two large desks and four stands, the equivalent of roughly \$12,300 today. “At that time in Honolulu, you could buy a small house for \$500,” notes Jenkins.) Not all of the known koa desks are quite that old: Two were likely made in San Francisco for Williams’ furniture store as recently as pre-World War II.

Why would these cabinetmakers all hew to Donnell’s design over a span of decades? “I think the first desk made quite a stir and was quite admired,” says Jenkins.

The desks are still admired today by people like Louie. “This is historic furniture, and we should honor and cherish it,” he says. “It was *there*, back in the day, when the Hawaiian kingdom was there.” He likens learning of the desk’s origin to his experience of visiting the Smithsonian and seeing the chairs and table where Grant and Lee sat when they ended the Civil War at Appomattox. But unlike those pieces the Attorney General’s desk was in sad shape. He wanted it restored, but it wouldn’t be easy. The state put the job out for bid, says Jenkins, but at least “two refinishers just wouldn’t touch it—too old, too rare.”



Conservator Thor Minnick (also at right) took on the challenge of restoring “the Attorney General’s desk” to its original 1869 luster. It proved a difficult job, not least because Minnick had to carefully remove a dark finish an earlier attorney general had applied and hand-polish the desk with layer upon layer of new shellac.



Enter Thor Minnick, whom Jenkins describes as a “true conservator.” These classic koa desks are, indirectly, the reason Minnick is a conservator today. Raised in Spain, he moved to Honolulu in 1974 to start a business in decorative painted finishes but decided to focus on restoration instead. Minnick studied botany and chemistry at the University of Hawai’i while still working at the business. In the early ’80s, ‘Iolani Palace hired a legendary furniture conservator from the Mainland, Mervin B. Martin, to restore a number of its pieces, including a massive koa desk—an 1880s partners desk, big enough for two people to work at at once. Minnick and Martin met in Honolulu, and “I guess he saw something in me,” says Minnick. “He knew my interest was in more than just refinishing furniture, and he introduced to me to this field called conservation.”

There’s a huge difference between conservation and restoration, explains Minnick; conservation requires specialized knowledge of chemistry, of materials and their properties and of traditional and historic construction techniques.

The Attorney and his Desk

The Attorney General's desk was in "dreadful" condition, says Minnick. Restoration would take over six months of painstaking work and help from local woodworkers. It was sagging. Someone had replaced its original felt desktop inlay with a koa veneer panel, secured with countless tiny nails and glue. Termites had chewed into the legs. After 142 years the rails on which the drawers slide were badly worn. Entire pieces were missing, like the two decorative drop finials hanging down like stalactites. They'd either been knocked off by accident or removed by someone tired of banging their knees on them. Then there was that dark finish—applied in the 1980s by an AG who wanted the desk to match some rosewood furniture—now badly chipped and scratched. Minnick caught a break there: The refinishers, Joe and Nohea Santimer, had refused to use stain and instead sprayed on a semi-transparent lacquer. Had it been stain, says Minnick, it would have been virtually impossible to remove.

With the help of master woodworker James Ferla, Minnick removed the koa veneer panel. He straightened the desk using airplane-grade plywood. Replacing the missing pieces required a lot of homework: Minnick and Jenkins studied the legs, finials and brackets on the other surviving desks. The finials were a team effort—Jenkins recalls that Louie himself lathed some prototypes, and Minnick's wife, jewelry maker Diane Heldreich-Minnick, helped calculate the curves and radii. To match the historic materials, Bishop Museum cultural resources volunteer and woodworker Sol Apio donated extremely rare

The Attorney General's desk, redux. It appeared in the 2013 Hawai'i Woodshow—the first historical piece ever exhibited in the show, which is dedicated to featuring contemporary Hawai'i wood artists—before reporting for duty in Louie's office. "It was nice before," says Louie, "but it's spectacular now."

koa wood for the brackets, which were fashioned by Big Island woodworker Peter Ziroli, who also turned the finials. Dark koa beautifully complements the lighter koa; most of the thirteen desks used it for trim pieces.

Koa is attractive bare, but what really sets it alight is a good finish. In 1869 Donnell would have used a technique called French polishing—rubbing in layers of shellac by hand. In 2013 Minnick did the same. Strange as it sounds, shellac is a resin secreted by scale insects that eat tree sap. Somewhere in a forest, most likely in East India, tens of thousands of scale insects gave their all so that this desk might shine again here in Honolulu, and so did Minnick. After a straight month of French polishing, he had to visit a doctor for shoulder pain.

The restored desk debuted with some fanfare. It appeared in the 2013 Hawai'i Woodshow before returning to Louie's office, where Louie invited all the living attorneys general to a reception to welcome it home. "It was nice before but it's spectacular now," he says.

Jenkins is continuing his research into historic furniture, including other desks he hopes to get restored; just recently he learned of a fourteenth koa desk likely built in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century by a Chinese furniture maker in Honolulu and currently located in Maine.

The AG's desk is now back to work, holding piles of paper and serving as a gathering place for meetings. "I think it keeps us all grounded, maintaining the continuity of the office," says Louie. "All my predecessors for the past thirty years have sat at it; so will all the people who come after me. I'm just pleased I could have a little part in restoring it. I'd like to see, hopefully, the rest of these desks get restored. It's always hard to do that, I know, but it's worth doing." **HH**

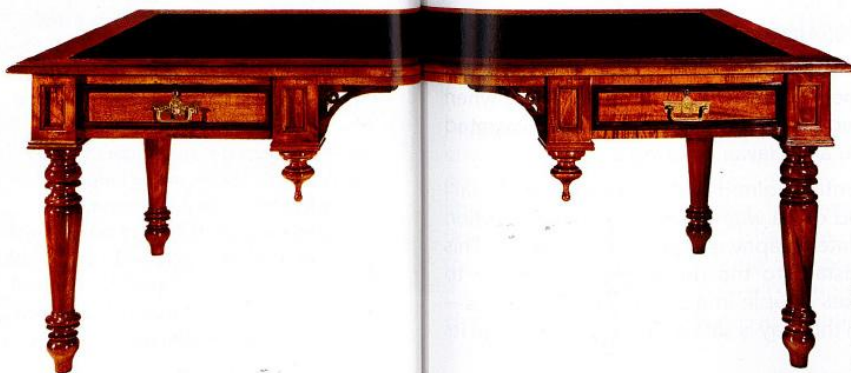


Photo by Hal Lum