

MARY MORAGNE COOKE / 1936-2022

Philanthropist was key figure in historic preservation

By Steven Mark
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Mary Moragne Cooke, an activist and philanthropist who was a key figure in Hawaii's historic preservation efforts, particularly in Manoa Valley, died Saturday at her home in Manoa after a brief bout with COVID-19. She was 86.

Cooke was recognized for her contributions to Hawaii's land preservation efforts, the arts and volunteerism, receiving awards from the YWCA, the Junior League of Honolulu and the Garden Club of Honolulu, to name a few. She served as a trustee for the National Trust for Historic Preservation for nearly a decade and also sat on the board of her alma mater, Punahou School, for 43 years.

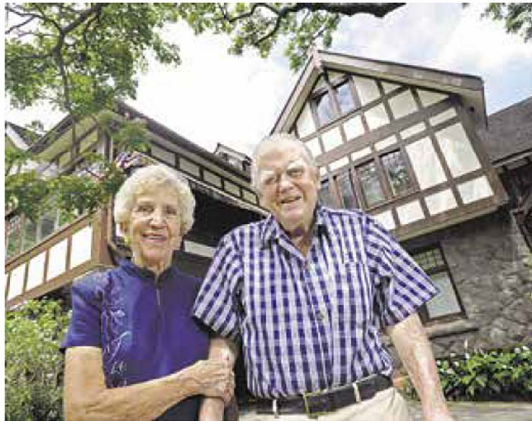
She and her husband, Samuel Alexander Cooke, a successful stockbroker and descendant of a prominent kamaaina family, were a power couple in philanthropy and community service, with both earning commendations from the Hawaii Land Trust, the Hawaii Arts Alliance, the Historic Hawaii Foundation and the Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs.

In 2005, when Honolulu Magazine and the City and County of Honolulu celebrated the 100 residents who had made significant contributions to Honolulu in the previous century, they were the only couple on the list.

Much of their focus was on preserving Manoa, where Sam Cooke's grandfather, Charles Montague Cooke Jr., had built a beautiful Tudor-



COURTESY MANOA HERITAGE CENTER



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At top, Mary Moragne Cooke in her garden and, above, with her husband, Sam Cooke, in front of their historic home in Manoa. The home has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Mary Cooke died Saturday at age 86.

style home, named Kualii in honor of the last chief of Oahu before unification of the islands. Together the couple founded the Manoa

Heritage Center on an adjoining site.

"Manoa Heritage Center was really her legacy," said Jessica Welch, executive

director of the center. "She loved Manoa and she really loved historic preservation, and the way that took shape at Manoa Heritage Center was the decision to restore the heiau on the property."

The restoration was complete in the mid-1990s, and as the story goes, "They looked at each other and said, 'Now what?'" Welch said. "And they made the decision to share it with schools specifically, and that's when they formed Manoa Heritage Center."

David Lee, a close family friend, said that while the Cookes had a shared vision of the center, it was Mary who was responsible for its implementation.

"They had a kind of pro forma groundbreaking in the fall of 2015," he said, "but then (Sam) died in December 2015, so she was left basically with bringing the whole thing into existence — the building and how they were going to operate."

Lee said Cooke had "a gracious tenacity. ... She was not a strident person or an unduly aggressive person, but she was quietly tenacious."

Her leadership and influence extended to Lee himself. "I never quite understood how it happened but somehow I became a docent at the Manoa Heritage Center, and then on the board; I've been a board member for many years now," he said.

Mary Cooke also spearheaded the late 1990s battle to keep Hawaiian Electric from building utility towers on Waahila Ridge. She was instrumental in forming the group Malama Manoa,



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which organized community opposition to the project.

"Mary knew that Waahila was an important part of the moololo of Manoa, and so she took the time to learn that story," Welch said. "They turned it into a children's book, and so they used this children's book to fight HECO," she said, adding that the utility and Malama Manoa are now on good terms.

Mary Cooke was born in 1936 in Koloa, Kauai. Her grandfather came to Hawaii in 1898 and settled on the Garden Isle, serving as its county engineer and overseeing design and construction of many of the island's bridges and other civic

projects, according to Cooke's daughter, Cathy Cooke. Another descendant was involved in management of sugar plantations on the island.

A favorite family story involved her courtship by Sam Cooke. As children, they first met at a wedding on Kauai, and while both were students at Punahou School, he told her they would eventually marry. Her response was to bet him \$5 that wouldn't happen.

They went on to attend Cornell University at the same time but did not become romantically involved until a year after Mary had graduated. She had gone back to visit her then-boyfriend at Cornell, who asked her to type a term paper for him. Instead, she went to visit her "old friend" from Hawaii, who was still in college. A short time later, when they strode down the wedding aisle together, she handed him \$5.

Although Mary Cooke trained to become a teacher, she eventually got into fashion retailing, marketing clothing from the family home. She had "a very creative, very artistic" side, which also came out in her skills as a gardener, Cathy Cooke said.

"She was quite a green thumb," she said. "Her flower arrangements were just gorgeous."

"She was very bright, and very headstrong. She was quite a perfectionist, and very hardworking."

Cooke is additionally survived by two other daughters, Julie and Edi, and two grandchildren. Funeral arrangements are pending.