

Hawaii's Legacy of Colonialism

Timeline of Colonization

1100–1200 C.E.: Polynesian Settlement of Hawaiian Islands

Polynesians settled the Hawaiian Islands, likely around 1100–1200 C.E. (Some scholarship places the date of first settlements as early as 400 C.E.) Native Hawaiians developed very successful agricultural techniques, which in turn supported a rich culture and trade networks. Hawaiian society was organized around chiefdoms, which sometimes clashed with one another.¹

1778: First European Contact

In 1778, the British explorer James Cook landed on the island of Kauai. He and his crew were the first Europeans to reach the Hawaiian Islands. Not long after, Cook died in a skirmish which also killed dozens of Native Hawaiians. In the decades following contact with Europeans, Hawaiians unified under one single monarch.

The Europeans brought infectious diseases, which decimated the local population. Estimates put the population of the Hawaiian Islands at either around 300,000 or 683,000 in 1778. By 1920, the population of Native Hawaiians had plummeted to 24,000, according to the US census. (Today, the population of people descended from the original Hawaiians is returning to its pre-contact size.)²

1893: American-Backed Coup D'état

The Kingdom of Hawaii was recognized around the world as an independent nation. In 1893, Hawaii was governed by a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Lili'uokalani at the head. However, a group of wealthy American businessmen staged a coup d'état that year, overthrowing Queen Lili'uokalani's government and establishing their own "provisional government." The president of the United States at the time, Grover Cleveland, condemned the coup, but did not force the provisional government to return power to the Hawaiian monarchy.³

1898: Annexation by the United States

After the coup d'état overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani, Native Hawaiians organized to petition the US government to return power to the monarchy. In 1898, however, the Spanish-American War began, which made Hawaii useful to the United States as a naval base and a refueling station. Congress passed a resolution that year annexing Hawaii as a US territory.⁴

1959: Hawaii Becomes a US State

In 1959, the US government organized a vote in Hawaii to determine if the territory should become a state. This move was partially designed to prevent Hawaii from claiming independence. The vote passed, and Hawaii became the 50th US state. Some dispute the legitimacy of this vote, however. The ballot contained only two options to choose between: for Hawaii to stay a US territory or for Hawaii to become a US state. There was no option to vote for independence. White settlers and military personnel outnumbered Native Hawaiians at this time.⁵

Connect: Is there anything in this timeline that connects to what you already knew about the history of Hawaii or the history of indigenous peoples in other places?

Extend: How does the information in this timeline extend or broaden your understanding of Hawaiian or US history?

Challenge: Does this timeline challenge or complicate your understanding of Hawaiian or US history? What new questions does it raise for you?

1 Sumner La Croix, *Hawaii: Eight Hundred Years of Political and Economic Change* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

2 "Hawaii - History and Heritage," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 6, 2017. Gene Demby, "It Took Two Centuries, But The Native Hawaiian Population May Be Bouncing Back," NPR's *Codeswitch*, 2015.

3 Kauanui, J. Kehaulani. "Precarious Positions: Native Hawaiians and US Federal Recognition," in *Recognition, Sovereignty Struggles, and Indigenous Rights in the United States*, ed. Amy E. Den Ouden and Jean M. O'Brien (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 311-336.

4 "The 1897 Petition Against the Annexation of Hawaii," National Archives website, accessed October 8, 2019.

5 Kehaulani, "Precarious Positions: Native Hawaiians and US Federal Recognition."

Excerpt from *Smithsonian Magazine's* "The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples' Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea"

[The main reason Native Hawaiians oppose the construction of the TMT] is the legacy of colonialism in the Hawaiian islands. Ever since a dozen or so non-native businessmen overthrew the legal and world-recognized government of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, the islands have been inundated with immigrants and development, while Native Hawaiians themselves sank to the bottom in terms of many social and economic indicators. Countless Hawaiian sacred sites have been bulldozed, dismantled, or even used for military target practice. Unsurprisingly, this has left a great many Native Hawaiians very unhappy. And with the 1970s cultural renaissance and the increase in political awareness, many are taking a bolder stance against further desecration of Hawaiian culture and traditional sites.

Enter the TMT. Now to say Hawaiians are opposed to technology or science is simply wrong. Hawaiians have a long and illustrious tradition of adopting Western technologies. King Kalākaua had electricity in his palace before the White House had it. And he is quoted as follows:

"It will afford me unfeigned satisfaction if my kingdom can add its quota toward the successful accomplishment of the most important astronomical observation of the present century and assist, however humbly, the enlightened nations of the earth in these costly enterprises..."

~ King Kalākaua, September 1874 as quoted in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, upon arrival of a British expedition of astronomers to Hawaii

But that was when Hawaiians were in control of their own country, and before the devastating impacts of American rule. Now many are saying "enough."¹

1. What role does the legacy of American colonialism play in the events happening on Maunakea?

2. Who do you think should get to decide what happens to Maunakea and why?

1 Dough Herman, "The Heart of the Hawaiian Peoples' Arguments Against the Telescope on Mauna Kea" *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 23, 2015.