



TOPIC: Hawaii Statehood
GRADES: 7 - 12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

Before Hawaii became part of the United States, it was an independent kingdom with a distinct culture that had been in place since the 12th Century.

Queen Liliuokalani was the last reigning sovereign of the unified Hawaii kingdom; in 1893, she was overthrown in a coup by American sugar planters, backed by the United States. In 1898, the island was annexed as a U.S. territory, and then becoming the fiftieth state in 1959.

During the 19th Century, Americans and Europeans saw the profit potential in the island nation's sugar cane plantations and hired contract laborers from Asia due to the lack of native labor. The first Chinese contract laborers arrived in 1852, followed by the Japanese. By 1890, the Chinese and Japanese made up a third of the population. Concerned American colonizers and Native Hawaiians established a commission in 1894 to investigate the growing Chinese and Japanese population, concluding that although they felt that the growing Asian population was not good for the island, their labor was nevertheless necessary. By 1900, Asian Americans were 65% of the population, while Native Hawaiians shrank to just 24%.

Some steps have been taken to support and honor Native Hawaiians. In 1921, the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act allowed the homesteading for people of 50% or more Hawaiian ancestry. In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the Apology Resolution, admitting the United States' responsibility in the overthrow of the monarchy and that the native people did not directly relinquish their land. However, in 2009, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that several clauses in the Apology had no binding legal effect in terms of land claims by Native Hawaiians.

The Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement has been an ongoing grassroots campaign that seeks to establish autonomy or independence for Native Hawaiians. From 2000 to 2009, Senator Daniel Akaka proposed a series of bills, including the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act (Akaka Bill), to gain U.S. federal recognition of indigenous Hawaiians similar to Native Americans.

VOCABULARY

- **Haole:** slang term for someone not descended from the aboriginal Polynesian inhabitants of Hawaii; and used to describe white people, whether or not they are Hawaiian-born
- **Homesteading:** obtaining ownership of government land
- **Plantation:** an agricultural estate usually worked by resident labor
- **Sovereignty:** the ability to rule over oneself without outside interference

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What factors lead to a rise in immigrants from Asia to Hawaii?
- Why were immigrants from different countries able to work together, both in the fields and in workers' rights movements?
- How did the labor movement lead to a "political revolution" in 1954?

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Native Hawaiian History

Have students learn more about Hawaii's history by compiling a timeline that explores key events from Polynesians arrival to Hawaii to U.S. statehood in 1959. This can be a physical timeline with class contributions, using a roll of paper or whiteboard. Or this can be individually submitted as an assignment for students.

Begin by placing two dates on your timeline with the intent of having students explore key events and milestones that fall in between those dates:

- 200 - 800 C.E.: Estimated settlement of the Hawaiian islands by Polynesians
- 1959: Congress passes the Hawaii Admissions Act, bringing in the admission of Hawaii as the fiftieth U.S. state.

For educators' reference, timeline events that students *may* contribute include some of the following:

- 1778: British explorer James Cook becomes the first foreigner to make contact with Hawaiians.
- 1790: The Battle of Kepaniwa was fought between the island of Hawaii and Maui.
- 1795: After a series of battles, and with the help of European firearms, King Kamehameha I of the island of Hawai'i consolidates rule over most of the major islands and initiates the Kingdom of Hawaii.
- 1795-1874: The Kamehameha dynasty reigns over Hawaii.
- 1848: King Kamehameha III proposes the Great Mahele, or land redistribution, which displaced Native Hawaiians from their land and opened land ownership to non-native

Hawaiian. By the end of the 1800s, the vast majority of the land is owned by American sugar plantation owners.

- 1850s: An influx of immigrant laborers arrives from China, followed in the subsequent decades from Japan, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Korea, and the Philippines.
- 1893: Owners of the most powerful plantations — who also had control over banking, trade, and government — overthrow Queen Liliuokalani, imprisoning her in the palace, and form a new government: the Republic of Hawaii. They begin petitioning for the United States to annex Hawaii.
- 1898: U.S. President William McKinley signs a resolution to officially annex the Republic of Hawaii and make it a territory of the United States.
- 1941: The Japanese military bombs a U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, bringing the United States into World War II.

After the class has completed the timeline, discuss the following questions:

- What impact did European and American relations have on the Kingdom of Hawaii?
- What factors lead to a rise of immigrants from Asia to Hawaii?
- What factors led to Hawaiian statehood?

Activity 2: Hawaiian Statehood

In 1959, following a referendum in Hawaii in which more than 93% of voters approved, Congress passed the Hawaii Admissions Act admitting the territory of Hawaii as the fiftieth state of the United States. Although the shift to statehood was a huge boon to the political progress of Asian Americans on the island, it simultaneously complicated the chances of sovereignty for Native Hawaiians.

Divide students into small groups of three to four and have them conduct research on the following labor movement events:

- Hawaiian Sugar Strike of 1946 – What happened and why? What was the result?
- Hawaii Democratic Revolution of 1954 – What happened and why? What was the result?

Additionally, ask student groups to conduct research on the Hawaii Admissions Act ballot vote, including support and opposition by different demographic groups on the island using primary and secondary sources. Students will analyze the issues that matter to these groups and share their findings and sources in the class discussion.

Fact Sheet:

- Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, and Mixed Asian groups that were descendants of immigrant laborers.
- Puerto Rican laborers, who came to Hawaii after Puerto Rico's own sugar plantation industry was affected by two hurricanes in 1899.
- Caucasians
- Native Hawaiians

Have the class reconvene for a discussion based on their research, on the following questions:

- How did each of the groups respond to the statehood of Hawaii? Who supported it? Who opposed it? Why?
- Should there have been more weight on the opinions of Native Hawaiians regarding statehood? Why? Why not?

- What was the Hawaiian Sugar Strike of 1946, and how did it lead to multi-ethnic worker solidarity?
- What was the Hawaii Democratic Revolution of 1954, and how did it lead to Hawaiian statehood?
- How did the passage of the Hawaii Admission Act impact Asian Americans?
- How did the passage of the Hawaii Admission Act impact Native Hawaiians and their struggle for sovereignty?

Activity 3: Akaka Bill

Beginning in 2000, Senator Daniel Akaka, the first U.S. Senator of Native Hawaiian ancestry, first proposed the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act of 2009, more commonly known as the Akaka Bill. The bill would have given the 400,000 Native Hawaiians the ability to organize themselves into an indigenous tribe that would be recognized by the federal government, similar to mainland Indigenous American tribes. Despite years of trying, Senator Akaka never mustered enough votes to shepherd a law that would have granted federal recognition to the Native Hawaiian people.

Assign students to research the Akaka Bill to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of the bill, as seen **from the point of view of Native Hawaiians**. Students will answer the following questions for a whole class discussion:

- In your own words, what is the goal of the Akaka Bill?
- What connections can you make between the political progress made by Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians in the 1950s and '60s, and the Akaka Bill (2000-2009)?
- What are some arguments *for* passing the Akaka Bill?
- What are the arguments *against* passing the Akaka Bill?
- Do you think it is possible for the U.S. to one day recognize a Native Hawaiian government? Why or why not?

FURTHER INFORMATION

- ["Hawaii Alive."](#) Bishop Museum



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