

King Kamehameha I

c. 1758–1819



WHY HE MADE HISTORY King Kamehameha I unified the Hawaiian islands and resisted colonization by westerners.



As you read the biography below, think about the ways in which a king can provide unity to a people. How is Hawaii different today from the time when it was ruled by a king and queen?



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By the late 1800s many Americans felt it was time for the United States to claim territories abroad. They turned their attention toward Hawaii. Situated in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Hawaii was a desirable location for many western countries. Not only was it an ideal spot for naval bases, it offered numerous opportunities for trade. However, Hawaii's king, Kamehameha I, wanted to ensure that the islands remained independent.

King Kamehameha I, also known as Kamehameha the Great, was born between 1748 and 1761 in Kohala, Hawaii. Legend has it that a comet had been seen in the sky, and Hawaii's kahunas (priests) believed the comet was a sign that the mightiest ruler in the history of Hawaii was going to be born. The reigning king, Alapai, believed the prophecy referred to his nephew's coming birth. Viewing the baby as a threat, Alapai ordered the baby to be killed at birth. Instead, when the baby was born, his mother named him Kamehameha, the Lonely One, and sent him to live with another family. Five years later, Alapai had a change of heart and allowed Kamehameha to come home.

As Kamehameha grew up, he became a skilled warrior. When Kalaniopuu, a ruling chief on the island of Hawaii, died in 1782, his people worried that the chief's son would divide up the land unfairly. So instead of raising the chief's son to the kingship, they asked Kamehameha to lead them, which led to a series of civil wars over the next decade. Once Kamehameha controlled the island of Hawaii, he turned his attention to seven other islands. By 1810 the civil wars were over and the united kingdom of Hawaii was established under Kamehameha's rule. A contemporary of the emperor Napoleon (who conquered most of Europe), Kamehameha was called the Napoleon of the Pacific for his conquest of the Hawaiian Islands.

While encouraging trade with Europe and the United States, Kamehameha instituted taxes on sandalwood, a popular Hawaiian export

Entering the World Stage**Biography**

that became a significant source of income for the kingdom of Hawaii. In addition, Kamehameha established laws and guarded old Hawaiian customs and religion. He is most famous for the Law of the Splintered Paddle, which he decreed after he was beaten by a fisherman during a raid on the fisherman's village. The oral tradition says that after realizing he should not have attacked the village of peaceful fishermen, Kamehameha declared, "Let the aged, men and women, and children lie down by the road in safety." The edict meant that innocent civilians would no longer be the target of warfare. During a later battle, Kamehameha invoked the Splintered Paddle law and stopped his soldiers from killing thousands of villagers. The first written law of the Kingdom of Hawaii, the Law of the Splintered Paddle is still a part of the state's constitution.

Though he built up trade with western nations, Kamehameha was zealous in his insistence on Hawaiian independence. He prevented colonization by barring non-Hawaiians from owning land. Even after Kamehameha's death in 1819, it would still be nearly 80 years before Hawaii was annexed by the United States.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Why did westerners want to colonize Hawaii?

2. **Make Judgments** What is your opinion about Hawaii being annexed by the United States? Explain.

ACTIVITY

It is the year 1810 and Kamehameha I has just unified the Hawaiian Islands. If you were a newspaper reporter, what questions would you ask the king about his plans for the new kingdom?