

## This Day in History... August 21, 1959

### Hawaii Becomes America's 50th State

On August 21, 1959, America became the 50-state country we know today with the addition of Hawaii. Hawaii's path to becoming the 50th state was long, complicated, and sometimes controversial.

The islands had been settled by Polynesians more than a thousand years before any Europeans arrived, and they developed a rich culture with their own rulers, language, and traditions. In the late 18th century, King Kamehameha I united the islands into a single kingdom, giving Hawaii a central government for the first time. However, once Western explorers, missionaries, and traders began to arrive, Hawaii's future began to shift. By the mid-19th century, American and European business interests

were deeply involved in the islands, especially through sugar and pineapple plantations. These companies grew powerful, and their influence would eventually shape Hawaii's destiny.

The US took a growing interest in Hawaii, both for its agricultural wealth and its strategic position in the Pacific Ocean. The deep harbor at Pearl Harbor made Hawaii extremely valuable as a naval base. In 1887, American and European businessmen forced King Kalākaua to accept a new constitution that weakened the monarchy and increased their control. This was called the "Bayonet Constitution" because it was essentially forced on the king under threat. A few years later, Queen Lili'uokalani tried to restore royal power and defend the rights of native Hawaiians, but she was overthrown in 1893 by a group of businessmen backed by US Marines.

After the overthrow, the businessmen created a temporary government and lobbied for annexation by the United States. At first, President Grover Cleveland opposed the takeover and called it illegal. But by 1898, during the Spanish-American War and with a new president, the United States recognized Hawaii's strategic value. Congress approved annexation, and Hawaii officially became a US territory.

As a US territory, Hawaiians were American citizens, but they did not have full representation in Congress and could not vote for president. Many in Hawaii (particularly the growing non-native population) began to push for statehood, arguing that they contributed greatly to the United States, especially through their agricultural exports and military bases. World War II highlighted Hawaii's importance even more. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Hawaii became the center



*This stamp issued on the day Hawaii became a state pictures a Hawaiian chief extending a lei of welcome, a map of the Islands, and a star representing statehood.*



*Airmail picturing the volcanic cone, Diamond Head,*



*Issued for the 25th anniversary of Hawaii statehood.*



*Stamp pictures King Kamehameha I who led a 28-year conquest to unite the islands of Hawaii.*



*Greetings from America stamp picturing Waikiki Beach, Oahu and the state flower, yellow hibiscus.*



*Issued for rate change to 37¢.*

# This Day in History... August 21, 1959 continued

of America's Pacific war effort. Thousands of Hawaiians, both native and non-native, served in the military, and the islands were under martial law for much of the war.

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*Virtually unchanged since its creation in 1816, Hawaii's flag has eight stripes, for the eight main islands of Hawaii. Great Britain's Union Jack is in the upper left corner symbolizing the friendship between the two.*

After the war, the movement for statehood gained momentum. Hawaii's advocates argued that the islands had proven their loyalty and sacrifice, and they deserved full rights as Americans. At the same time, there was resistance. Some members of Congress worried that Hawaii's distance from the mainland made it too different, and white segregationists were concerned about the islands' large Asian immigrant population. Still, support grew steadily through the 1950s.

In 1959, the issue was finally put to a vote. The islands held a referendum that overwhelmingly supported statehood, with more than 93 percent voting in favor. (Many of those favoring independence boycotted the vote, however, resulting in a turnout of only 35%.) On August 21, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the proclamation admitting Hawaii as the 50th state of the Union.



*This Flags of Our Nation stamp pictures Hawaii's flag, mountains, ferns, and an ohia tree with lehua flowers.*

Since becoming a state, Hawaii has played an important role in American culture, politics, and the economy. It became a popular tourist destination almost immediately, with its beaches, volcanoes,

and tropical beauty attracting visitors from all over the world. Tourism grew into Hawaii's largest industry, reshaping the islands' economy and way of life. At the same time, Hawaii became known for its multicultural society, where Native Hawaiian, Asian, and Western traditions blended. The state also developed a strong sense of identity, celebrating both its unique heritage and its role as part of the United States. Hawaii has also been important to America's military, with Pearl Harbor, Hickam Air Force Base, and other installations continuing to serve as major centers for the Pacific region.



*Stamp pictures the state bird and flower, the nene (or Hawaiian goose) and a native yellow hibiscus.*

At the same time, Hawaii has faced challenges since statehood. The high cost of living, dependence on tourism, and environmental concerns such as protecting its fragile ecosystems have all been ongoing issues. Native Hawaiians have also continued to fight for recognition of their rights, culture, and sovereignty. Movements



*Issued for Hawaii's 50th statehood anniversary, this stamp pictures a surfer on a longboard and two people in an outrigger canoe.*

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