

King David Kalākaua



November 16, 1832, marked the birthday of David La‘amea Kamanakapu‘u Mahinulani Naloia‘ehuokalani Lumialani, the son of high chief Caesar Kapa‘akea and high chiefess Ane Keohokālole. His younger sisters were Lili‘uokalani, the last sovereign ruler of the independent Hawaiian Nation, and Likelike, the mother of Princess Ka‘iulani.

Kalākaua was educated at the Chiefs’ Children’s School in Honolulu, now known as Royal School, and was later privately tutored in military training, serving as a member of the Kingdom’s militia at a young age. He also studied law with a tutor and was admitted to the Bar in the Kingdom. His legal background helped Kalākaua serve as the Kingdom’s first Postmaster General.

When Kamehameha V died in 1872 without naming a successor, the Constitution of the Kingdom gave the Legislature the power to elect a new ruler. In 1873, William Charles Lunalilo was elected King instead of Kalākaua, his opponent. When Lunalilo died a year later, the Legislature chose Kalākaua over his opponent Queen Emma, wife of the late Alexander Liholiho, Kamehameha IV, by a vote of 39 to 6. Shortly after Kalākaua was elected King in 1874 at the age of 37, there was a riot in Honolulu by the supporters of Queen Emma.

There were several important firsts during Kalākaua’s seventeen-year reign as a monarch. He was the first king to circumnavigate the globe, visiting many nations in Asia and Europe and strengthening Hawai‘i’s diplomatic ties internationally. He used his travels to increase his own knowledge and understanding of other countries. He had ‘Iolani Palace rebuilt in 1882 and equipped with electric lights in 1887, the first royal palace in the world to have electricity. Kalākaua was also one of the first in the Hawaiian Kingdom to have a telephone.

Described as a very fine and intelligent man by Robert Louis Stevenson, Kalākaua was an accomplished musician and author. During his reign, Kalākaua revived the Hawaiian culture with particular interest in music from the chants of his ancestors to the popular waltzes of the time, including restoring public performances of the hula. His most notable works are the Kingdom’s national anthem (now appropriated as the State of Hawai‘i anthem), “Hawai‘i Pono‘ī,” and “The Legends and Myths of Hawaii,” originally published in 1888. He was nicknamed the “Merrie Monarch” because of the many gala events and festivals he hosted at ‘Iolani Palace. Today, the world-renowned Merrie Monarch Festival held annually in Hilo on Hawai‘i Island honors him for his efforts in the revival of Hawaiian culture.

Kalākaua faced many political challenges, especially those from the non-Hawaiian business community. The wealthy pro-American businessmen felt that the King should share his power. It was a power struggle that the King was not able to win. On July 6, 1887, he was forced to sign a new constitution, often referred to as the Bayonet Constitution (for obvious reasons), which severely restricted his powers and signaled the end of the monarchy.

By 1890, the King’s health began to fail because he suffered from a kidney ailment. Under the advice of his physician, he traveled to San Francisco. But his health continued to decline. He died on January 20, 1891. Sadly, his remains were returned to Honolulu aboard the American ship, the USS *Charleston*. Expecting a gala celebration on his return home, the people instead attended the King’s funeral.