

Kamehameha I



In 1871, Kamehameha V designated June 11 as a public holiday to honor the memory of his grandfather, one of Hawai‘i’s most respected *ali‘i*, Kamehameha I. Although his name means “the Lonely One,” Kamehameha possessed all the qualities of a strong leader. He fulfilled the prophecy of the birth of a male who would become the greatest of all chiefs in Hawai‘i.

Kamehameha was born in Kokoiki, North Kohala, island of Hawai‘i. Although the exact year of his birth is not known, it is probable that he was born in November 1758 because of the appearance of Halley’s comet during his birth.

His birth chant, in part, tells of “thunder and lightning, cold wind and rain; a *hōkū welowelo* (comet) shines above.” Astronomers know that Halley’s comet was seen in 1758. Because of the prophecy, Kamehameha was seen as a threat to the ruling *ali‘i* at the time who did not want the child to live. Kamehameha was secretly taken to ‘Āwini in Pololu Valley where he was cared for by his *kahu* or guardian until he was a young boy.

In 1795, the prophecy came true. Kamehameha, a skilled warrior, conquered the islands through warfare with the exception of Kaua‘i. That island came under his control through a diplomatic agreement with Kaumuali‘i, the *ali‘i nui* of Kaua‘i in 1810. The consolidation of the Hawaiian Islands into one kingdom is considered perhaps one of the greatest achievements in Hawaiian history. Powerful in physique, Kamehameha was trained to become a warrior by Kekūhaupi‘o, the greatest of all warriors of the time. His agility, fearlessness, and strong mind allowed him to inspire loyalty in his supporters. He was also kind and forgiving when the need arose. He used the services offered by foreigners, yet he never fell under their power.

In later years, Kamehameha focused on governing his kingdom. He appointed governors for each island, made laws for the protection of all, planted taro, built houses and irrigation ditches, restored *heiau*, encouraged industry (farming and fishing) among his people, managed natural resources such as sandalwood, and traded shrewdly with the foreign sea captains that arrived after Captain James Cook European discovery of Hawai‘i in 1778. Foreign sea captains such as George Vancouver of Britain and Otto von Kotzebue of Russia thought favorably of Kamehameha. Vancouver described him as having “an open, cheerful and sensible mind; combined with great generosity of disposition,” and provided him with cattle, sheep, grapevines and orange trees. Von Kotzebue wrote, “The king is a man of great wisdom and tries to give his people anything he considers useful. He wishes to increase the happiness and not the wants of his people.”

Kamehameha’s good judgment and strong will prevailed which also helped him hold the kingdom together until his death in 1819. Kamehameha was buried secretly by trusted companions as befits a high chief and was greatly mourned by his people.