

ROBERT C. SCHMITT

Holidays in Hawai‘i

HOLIDAYS OF SOME KIND OR ANOTHER go back many centuries in Hawai‘i. In precontact times, the most important was the *makahiki*, described by Pukui and Elbert as an “ancient festival beginning about the middle of October and lasting about four months, with sports and religious festivities and taboo on war.” There were also individual feast days, most of them accompanied by religious observances. These occasions were loosely analogous to what we now call “holidays.”¹

During the nineteenth century many other holidays were added, some by royal proclamation and others unofficially, usually by members of the foreign community celebrating days observed in their homelands. The native population enthusiastically adopted many of the introductions.

The first official list of “national holidays” adopted by legislative enactment was approved June 13, 1896. Seven such days were specified: New Year’s Day, Downfall of the Monarchy Day (January 17), Kamehameha Day (June 11), Birthday of the Hawaiian Republic (July 4), Regatta Day (third Saturday in September), Thanksgiving Day (set at November 28), and Christmas Day.²

This list was considerably expanded and modified over the next century. Seventeen holidays were added, the first in 1899 and the most recent in 1988. Ten, including three from the 1896 list, were eventually deleted. Many others were shifted to new dates, renamed, or temporarily suspended.

Robert C. Schmitt, an associate editor of the Journal, is a retired statistician for the Hawai‘i State Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism.

The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 29 (1995)

By 1992, the *Hawaii Revised Statutes* named fourteen separate state holidays, thirteen of them celebrated annually and one (Election Day) biennially.³ These fourteen, as well as those no longer officially recognized, included the following days:

January 1, New Year's Day, was established both by custom and royal proclamation long before it entered statute law in 1896. No record of its earliest observance in the Islands has come to light.⁴

Three holidays created by the leaders of the Provisional Government and Republic met with little enthusiasm among the native Hawaiians and by 1903 were quietly dropped.⁵ In chronological order, this group included Downfall of the Monarchy Day, January 17, first observed in 1894; Birthday of the Hawaiian Republic, July 4, also 1894; and Flag Raising (or Annexation) Day, August 12, 1898.⁶ Admission Day, June 14 (established in 1900), met a similar fate.⁷ July 4, of course, continued as American Independence Day, and a new Admission Day appeared in 1969.

The state's newest legal holiday, designated by the 1988 legislature, is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, the third Monday in January.⁸

Franklin D. Roosevelt's birthday, January 30, was set aside as a holiday by the 1945 territorial legislature and first celebrated the following year. In 1953 it was consolidated with Abraham Lincoln's birthday, February 12 (established as a holiday in 1941), and George Washington's birthday, and all three were observed on President's Day.⁹

Washington's Birthday, February 22, had been observed quietly (and unofficially) for half a century when it was finally adopted legally by the 1903 legislature. Combined with the birthdays of Roosevelt and Lincoln, as Presidents' Day, in 1953, the renamed holiday was eventually shifted (by the 1969 legislature, effective in 1971) to the third Monday in February.¹⁰

Kuhio Day (March 26), unofficially observed as early as 1940, was granted official status by the 1949 legislature. In 1978 it was renamed Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalanianaʻole Day.¹¹

Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, was declared a territorial holiday by the 1941 legislature. It was also a legal holiday, apparently, for a few years during Kalākaua's reign.¹²

According to Thomas G. Thrum, Memorial Day, May 30, was "first

observed in Honolulu in 1883, with the organization of the Geo. W. DeLong Post of the G.A.R.," an organization of Civil War veterans. The 1903 legislature made it a territorial holiday. The 1969 legislature then moved this holiday, once known as Decoration Day, to the last Monday in May, effective in 1971.¹³

Kamehameha Day, June 11, was first proclaimed by Kamehameha V (on December 22, 1871) as a day to honor his grandfather, Kamehameha I. The 1896 legislature declared it a national holiday, the only one of royal origin to survive their Republican scrutiny. Almost from its first observance in 1872, this day was celebrated chiefly by horse races in Kapi'olani Park, but the races eventually gave way to today's parades of floats and *pā'ū* riders. In 1978 the legislature renamed this holiday King Kamehameha I Day.¹⁴

Independence Day, July 4, became a territorial holiday through action of the 1903 legislature. Thrum noted "its first recognition here of which we have record dating back to 1814, at the time of Kamehameha I., and so, with the exception of the makahiki days of ancient time, [it] was probably the first national holiday celebrated in Honolulu."¹⁵ From 1894 to 1902, July 4 was a double holiday, also commemorating the proclamation of the Hawaiian Republic.

A decade after Hawai'i achieved statehood on August 21, 1959, the 1969 legislature set aside the third Friday in August as Admission Day.¹⁶

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, "was first observed here in 1900 by members of labor unions, and through them was admitted in 1903 to place as a legal holiday."¹⁷

Regatta Day, the third Saturday in September, was made a legal holiday by the 1896 legislature and survived until 1949, when it was abolished and replaced by Kūhiō Day. Thrum traced its initial enactment to a "response to Honolulu's populace for a day for aquatic sports most likely to be weather favored. This used to be the main feature in the celebration of Kalakaua's birthday, which fell on November 16th." After Kalākaua's death, the events were shifted to a less rainy time of the year.¹⁸

Discoverers' Day, the second Monday in October, began as Columbus Day, a holiday established by the 1969 legislature, effective in 1971. It received its present name from the 1971 legislature. Although still recognized as a "day," it was downgraded in 1988

(effective the following year) to nonholiday status to make way for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day.¹⁹

Both primary and general election days were designated legal holidays by the 1915 legislature. Primary elections, which normally take place on Saturdays, were deleted from the list by the 1965 session.²⁰

Veterans' Day, set at November 11 by the 1919 legislature, has probably undergone more changes in name and date than any other state holiday. Originally called Victory Day, it was renamed Armistice Day in 1941. The 1953 session combined it with Memorial Day and decreed it would be observed on May 30 under that name. Two years later the legislature uncoupled the two holidays, renamed Armistice Day to Veterans' Day, and moved it back to November 11. The celebration was shifted to the fourth Monday in October by the 1969 legislature, to take effect in 1971, but in 1976 it was moved back to November 11.²¹

Thanksgiving Day has likewise undergone many changes. According to Meiric K. Dutton, "The first Hawaiian royal proclamation to call for a day of thanksgiving appointed the 31st day of December, 1849." After President Lincoln in 1863 designated the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day, Americans living in Hawai'i tended to follow the mainland practice. The 1896 legislature agreed on November 28 as a national day of thanksgiving, but the amended list enacted in 1903 omitted any reference to the holiday. Traditionally proclaimed by the president, Thanksgiving Day continued to be observed in Hawai'i and beginning in 1911 was presumably included under a new law specifying "any day appointed or recommended by the president of the United States as a day of thanksgiving, fasting, or religious observance, or appointed by the governor of the Territory as a holiday." Thanksgiving Day was not specifically referred to in the state statutes again until 1978, when the legislature designated the fourth Thursday in November and at the same time reworded the 1911 law.²²

Christmas was first celebrated in Hawai'i aboard the *Queen Charlotte*, commanded by Captain George Dixon, in Waimea Bay, Kaua'i, on December 25, 1786. Anchored nearby, Captain Nathaniel Portlock of the *King George* exchanged gifts with Ka'iana ("Tyaana"), likewise an Island first. Fifty-one years later, on December 30, 1837, the *Sandwich Island Gazette* wished its readers "a 'merry Christmas' and a

'very happy new year,' " the first time in Hawai'i the phrase had appeared in print. Advertisements for Christmas gifts were first published, in *The Polynesian*, in 1847. The Hawaiian version of "Merry Christmas," *Mele Kalikimaka*, did not surface until 1904, when it was printed by *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*. First proclaimed a national holiday (by Kamehameha IV) in 1862, Christmas was included in the list enacted by the 1896 legislature and has remained a legal holiday to the present time.²³

Many other days are celebrated but lack official status. One such day is Lei Day, first observed May 1, 1928. Another unofficial celebration period is Aloha Week, inaugurated October 26–November 2, 1947, as a spur to slack-season tourism. Both Lei Day and Aloha Week have flourished over the years. State law designates March 21 as Baha'i New Year's Day, April 8 as Buddha Day, April 15 as Father Damien De Veuster Day, the third Sunday of October as Respect for Our Elders Day, the first Friday in November as Arbor Day, and December 8 as Bodhi Day, but explicitly excludes all six from the list of official state holidays.²⁴

The list of nonofficial and minor holidays can be extended almost indefinitely. In the nineteenth century, Islanders at one time or another observed the birthdays of King Kamehameha III, Prince Leleiōhoku, King Kalākaua, Queen Lili'uokalani, and Queen Victoria, the date of Kalākaua's accession, Chinese New Year, Restoration Day, and the anniversary of the 1843 recognition of Hawaiian independence, among other occasions.²⁵ A state-issued 1994 calendar notes Jack Hall Day, Valentine's Day, Malasada Day, Girl's Day, St. Patrick's Day, April Fool's Day, Ching Ming, Boy's Day, Mother's Day, Historic Preservation Week, the beginning of O-Bon Season, Flag Day, Yom Kippur, the Chinese Moon Festival, Double Ten Day, Halloween, and Rizal Day, to cite only a few.²⁶ Religious holidays like Easter comprise a major category of nonofficial holidays. Further additions to the list in future years seem likely.

NOTES

¹ Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1986) 225; E. S. Craighill Handy et al., *Ancient Hawaiian Civilization*, rev. ed. (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1965) 61–68; David

- Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, trans. Nathaniel B. Emerson, Bishop Museum Special Publication 2, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1951) 33, 141–59.
- ² Statute Laws of Hawaii (hereafter SLH) 1896, Act 66.
- ³ Hawaii Revised Statutes (hereafter HRS), 1992 Supplement, vol. 1, sec. 8–1.
- ⁴ HAA 1875: 11; SLH 1896, Act 66; “Hawaiian Holidays, Observed and Otherwise,” HAA 1911: 110–11.
- ⁵ SLH 1903, Act 55; HAA 1911: 111, 113, 114.
- ⁶ HAA 1895: 6, 132; HAA 1896: 6; SLH 1896, Act 66; “The Days We Celebrate. Holidays and Their Observance in Honolulu,” HAA 1898: 63; HAA 1899: 6; HAA 1911: 111, 114.
- ⁷ HAA 1911: 113.
- ⁸ SLH 1988, Act 220.
- ⁹ SLH 1941, Act 132; SLH 1945, J.R. 8; SLH 1953, Act 278.
- ¹⁰ HAA 1911: 111; SLH 1903, Act 55; SLH 1953, Act 278; SLH 1969, Act 156.
- ¹¹ HA 11 Mar. 1940: 11; SLH 1949, J.R. 15; SLH 1978, Act 205.
- ¹² HAA 1876: 4; SLH 1941, Act 132.
- ¹³ HAA 1911: 112; SLH 1903, Act 55; SLH 1969, Act 156.
- ¹⁴ HAA 1911: 112; HAA 1916: 155; SLH 1896, Act 66; SLH 1978, Act 205.
- ¹⁵ HAA 1911: 113; SLH 1903, Act 55.
- ¹⁶ SLH 1969, Act 156.
- ¹⁷ HAA 1911: 114; SLH 1903, Act 55.
- ¹⁸ HAA 1911: 114–15; SLH 1896, Act 66; SLH 1949, J.R. 15.
- ¹⁹ SLH 1969, Act 156; SLH 1971, Act 21; SLH 1988, Act 220.
- ²⁰ SLH 1915, Act 20; SLH 1965, Act 162.
- ²¹ SLH 1919, Act 54; SLH 1941, Act 132; SLH 1953, Act 278; SLH 1955, Act 9; SLH 1969, Act 156; SLH 1976, Act 220.
- ²² Meiric K. Dutton, *Christmas in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Eugenie and Meiric Dutton, 1950) 14, 16; HAA 1895: 133; SLH 1896, Act 66; SLH 1903, Act 55; HAA 1911: 115; SLH 1911, Act 167; SLH 1978, Act 205.
- ²³ Dutton, *Christmas* 24–26; Roger Bye, *How Christmas Came to Hawaii*, 3rd ed. (Honolulu: Dillingham Corp., 1967) 1–4, 9, 17; SLH 1896, Act 66.
- ²⁴ HAA 1929: 104; “Hawaii’s First Aloha Week,” *PP* November 1947: 3–7; SLH 1963, Act 162; SLH 1971, Act 39; SLH 1979, Act 17; SLH 1982, Act 46; SLH 1986, Act 15; SLH 1990, Act 216; HRS, 1992 Supp., vol. 1, sec. 8–1.
- ²⁵ HAA 1875: 11; HAA 1882: 4; HAA 1892: 6; HAA 1911: 111–15.
- ²⁶ Hawai’i State Department of Land and Natural Resources, *Hawai’i’s Cultural Landscapes 1994* (1993). Punctuation is that shown in the source.