Princess Abigail Kawānanakoa: The Forgotten Territorial Native Hawaiian Leader

One of the problems writing women’s biography is that their contribution to history is often not reflected in the sources. As Abi Pirani observes, “Silence is that powerful and restrictive protection, particularly enforced by our patriarchal society, that hides so many truths, so many ‘herstories.’” Hawai‘i represents an example of a society which regressed to this situation during the first half of the 20th century from a previously more positive position for women. Before the coup d’état of 1893 and the subsequent annexation of 1898, women had a high profile in Hawaiian politics, Queen Emma and Queen Lili‘uokalani being two notable examples. In a feudal type society some women could achieve the highest political positions, despite the fact they did not have the franchise. After 1898, however, Hawai‘i regressed to the patriarchal society observed by Jack London where women no longer had any opportunities to achieve political positions because the Territory of Hawai‘i as part of a republic, the United States, no longer recognized feudal leaders and all women were denied the vote.

This article looks at the “herstory” of Abigail Kawānanakoa (fig. 1). She played an important role in the history of Hawai‘i between World War I and World War II but is almost completely ignored in

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the secondary sources. Yet she appears as an anonymous “prominent Hawaiian leader” during the Massie Case of 1932 in Paul F. Hooper’s otherwise excellent study of Hawaiian international relations. There are a few exceptions. There are short biographies in _Women of Hawaii_ (1929) and _Notable Women of Hawaii_ (1984). But these sources do not give the reader any idea of Kawananakoa’s historical significance. The only clues to her importance can be found in Lawrence M. Judd’s autobiography (Judd was a contemporary of Kawananakoa), in John Stephan’s study of Japan’s plans for the occupation of Hawai‘i in the Second World War, and in a fictional account of the Massie Case, by Norman Katkov, that appeared as a novel and television mini-series in the mid-1980s, in which Kawananakoa appears as Princess Luahine.

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**FIG. 1.** Princess Abigail Kawananakoa, undated. Hawai‘i State Archives.
Reconstructing the life of Kawananakoa (1882–1945) is rather difficult. There are few surviving primary sources. The most comprehensive are newspaper articles. However, even these only provide a fragmentary picture of Kawananakoa's life, particularly the period before the Massie Case. There is also a collection of correspondence between Kawananakoa and Samuel Wilder King, while he was Delegate to Congress, which provide an insight into her personality and beliefs. But her letters extend over only a few months in the 1930s.

Kawananakoa's life spans Hawai'i's period of transition from an independent Polynesian monarchy to an incorporated part of the United States of America. She was born in the Campbell House on Emma Street, Honolulu, on January 1, 1882. The house was later acquired by the Pacific Club, a meeting place for prominent business, professional, and government leaders. She was the eldest daughter of James Campbell, millionaire financier, landowner, and businessman, and Abigail Kuaihelani Maipinepine Bright. Her mother was a member of a part-Hawaiian family from Lahaina, Maui, where she had been born in 1858. Bright was well known for her charity work. There were a considerable number of aged Native Hawaiians who were “pensioners” of her bounty, and she also paid the medical bills of numerous Native Hawaiians who were less fortunate than herself.11 Kawananakoa's father was a Protestant immigrant from Londonderry, Ireland, who had been born in 1826, the son of a carpenter. Like Bright, he was a prominent royalist.12

Kawananakoa's early education was at private schools in Honolulu conducted by Miss Berry, Miss Ethel Wodehouse, Miss Charlotte Carter, and Mrs C.W. Ashford. She subsequently joined her father in San Jose, California, where he had business interests. There Kawananakoa attended the College of Notre Dame, a Roman Catholic convent, from which she graduated in 1900.13 During her time at the convent, Kawananakoa converted from Protestantism to Catholicism.14

On January 6, 1902, Kawananakoa married Prince David La'amea Kahalepouli Kawananakoa Pi'ikoi in San Francisco. The ceremony was performed by Archbishop Riordan at the Occidental Hotel. Through her marriage, Kawananakoa received the courtesy title of princess.15 Prince David, together with his brothers, Edward and Jonah, had been created Princes of the Crown by royal decree in 1883 by King Kalākaua (1874–1891). Her mother refused to agree to the
marriage until a prenuptial settlement had been agreed upon protecting her daughter’s inheritance from the spendthrift Prince Kawānanakoa. Three days before Kawānanakoa’s marriage to Prince David, her mother had been remarried in the same hotel by Judge J.C.B. Hubbard of the California Superior Court. Kawānanakoa may not have been entirely happy with her mother’s new husband, the part-Hawaiian Colonel Samuel Parker. He was a notorious spendthrift while Kawānanakoa was noted for her financial acumen.

During their marriage, Kawānanakoa and Prince David had three children, two daughters and one son. Prince David died of pneumonia in San Francisco on June 2, 1908. He was only 41 years old. He had converted to Roman Catholicism about a year before his death, probably as a result of the influence of his wife. Prince David’s estate consisted principally of a half interest in the Kapi‘olani Estate Limited, the other half interest belonging to Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalanianaʻole. Prince David left his estate to his son Kalākaua and daughter Liliʻuokalani. He left nothing to his wife.

The year 1908 was a particularly sad one for Kawānanakoa. The death of her husband in June was followed by the death of her mother on October 31 of heart failure, following a successful operation for breast cancer. The death of Kawānanakoa’s mother left a vacancy on the board of trustees of the Campbell estate. The estate was worth between three and four million dollars. Her mother held a life interest in it and was entitled to one-half the income, while the other half was divided among her four daughters. Her half now reverted to the estate, and the income was divided among the heirs. Kawānanakoa’s mother also left a very large estate in her own right, independent of her first husband’s estate. One of the heirs to this estate was Kawānanakoa’s eldest daughter, Kapi‘olani, who had been adopted by her grandmother several months before her death.

Little is known about the life of Kawānanakoa from 1909 to 1924. However, it is known that in 1912, possibly in response to an article in the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, she organized the collection of funds in Hawai‘i for an association organized for a proposed Woman’s Titanic Memorial in Washington, D.C. Kawānanakoa had apparently cancelled her booking on the Titanic just before the liner sailed. She collected some $1,000 from at least 278 women in Hawai‘i. This was a major contribution given that by January 1914 the Woman’s
Titanic Memorial Association had only collected $43,000 from the whole of the United States. In the same month, the sculptor, Getrude Vanderbilt Whitney, had her design chosen by the Fine Arts Commission. However, the memorial was not completed until May 26, 1931.

Kawananakoa took an increasingly active part in Territorial politics after the death of her brother-in-law, Prince Kūhiō, in January 1922. Unlike her husband, she was not a Democrat, but a Republican like Prince Kūhiō and her stepfather, Colonel Parker. She was a keen party worker from near the beginning of the party’s foundation in Hawai‘i in 1900 and a contributor to party funds. Not all Republicans on the mainland favored the participation of non-white party members from Hawai‘i in the national party. However, at the 1924 Republican National Convention, for the first time, women from every state and territory were given equal representation on the party’s national committee. Kawananakoa was the first woman from Hawai‘i to serve on the committee. She served for 12 years, from 1924 until 1936, and on several occasions attended sessions of the national party organization on the mainland. She did not stand for reelection in 1936 because she had been offered a government position.

Kawananakoa first registered as a voter on February 8, 1922, following the passage of the 19th amendment of the United States Constitution. Thousands of other women were influenced by her example to become voters. She was one of the early advocates for women’s rights in Hawai‘i and supported legislation for the welfare of women and children. She advocated jury service for women and frequently pressed for its inclusion as an item in the platform of the Territorial Republican Party. However, Kawananakoa was not successful. In 1945, the year of her death, Hawai‘i was still among the 18 mainly Southern states and territories that barred women jurors. Women did not achieve the right to sit on juries in Hawai‘i until 1952. Surprisingly, it was not until 1975 that the United States Supreme Court ruled that the exclusion of women from juries raised a constitutional issue.

After Prince Kūhiō’s death, Kawananakoa had effectively become the leader of the Native Hawaiian community. In recognition of this role, the Territory’s political leadership allowed her to act as official hostess to important national and foreign visiting dignitaries.
nanakoa's home on Pensacola Street in Honolulu became famous for the receptions that she organized there. Governor Lawrence M. Judd recalled in his autobiography a particularly memorable reception Kawananakoa organized for King Prajadhipok and the Queen of Siam (Thailand) in September 1931. Among other prominent guests were: Crown Prince Gustav Adolf and Princess Louise of Sweden; the Maharaja of Kapurthala; the Duke of Spoleto who later became King of Croatia; Don Juan, son of King Alphonso XIII of Spain, and his bride, Princess Maria de las Mercedes de Bourbon-Siciles, who visited Hawai‘i on their honeymoon; and the playboy, Baron Maurice de Rothschild. Kawananakoa’s correspondence with Samuel Wilder King suggests that organizing and participating in society events were among the great pleasures of her life. These events also kept alive the spirit of Hawaiian royalty.34

Kawananakoa was angered by the way the Territory’s political leadership handled the Massie Case. In September 1931, Thalia Massie, the wife of a naval officer, alleged that she had been raped by four “Hawaiian” youths. The Honolulu police arrested five non-Caucasian youths, three of whom were Native Hawaiians and two of whom were Japanese-Americans; they were charged with rape. In their trial, the jury, which was made up of six Caucasians and six non-Caucasians, was unable to reach a verdict, and the judge declared a mistrial and freed the defendants on bail. Massie’s husband and mother took the law into their own hands and with navy accomplices murdered one of the defendants, a Native Hawaiian, Joseph Kahahawai. Lieutenant Massie and his mother-in-law together with two naval ratings were charged with murder. Grace Fortescue, Thalia Massie’s mother, hired Clarence Darrow, the famous criminal lawyer, to defend her and the other three accused. Darrow came out of retirement for what was to be his last case. The four were found guilty of second-degree murder in spring 1932.35

Governor Judd commuted the sentences of the four convicted murderers from 10 years hard labor to one hour. Kawananakoa condemned the Governor’s action and declared, “Are we to infer from the governor’s act that there are two sets of laws in Hawai‘i, one for the favored few and another for the people in general?”36 Judd, however, felt his action was necessary in order to prevent the very real possibility of the loss of local governance in Hawai‘i. Living in a soci-
ety where there was a long tradition of interracial marriages between Caucasians and Hawaiians, Kawānanakoa probably did not appreciate the strength of the racist culture prevalent on much of the mainland United States. In the American South, the murder of Kahahawai would not have been seen as a crime.

The trial gained wide publicity on the mainland. Sensationalist journalists created the impression that the safety of “white” women could not be guaranteed in a territory where the police force employed large numbers of Native Hawaiian and other non-Caucasian officers. Furthermore, they alleged justice could not be guaranteed in a territory where Native Hawaiian and other non-Caucasian citizens served on juries. Rear Admiral Yates Stirling, Commandant of the 14th Naval District and a Southerner like Grace Fortescue, advocated the abolition of local governance and the establishment of a military government. In response, the United States Justice Department carried out an investigation, finding serious shortcomings of law enforcement in Hawai‘i. Kawānanakoa believed that the Native Hawaiians were cruelly and outrageously misrepresented during the Massie Case. She befriended the staff writer for the Chicago Tribune, Philip Kinsley, who had come to Hawai‘i to report the case, and he helped ensure her views were widely disseminated through his syndicated reports on the mainland.

Kawānanakoa was “delighted” when the Republican Party adopted as a plank in its national platform for the November 1932 general election a commitment to the preservation of the existing form of territorial government and the maintenance of the appointment of bona fide citizens of the Territory to administer the government. Hawai‘i’s Caucasian political leadership also managed to persuade the American public and the federal government that in fact “white” women were safe in Hawai‘i and prevent the abolition of the territorial government. However, this was achieved by a reduction in the participation of Native Hawaiians and other non-Caucasians in the territorial public service and local politics. Kawānanakoa led the resistance to this backlash against Native Hawaiians. She unsuccessfully opposed the abolition of the five-year residency proviso for the Honolulu chief of police and supported the Democrats in opposing her own party’s leadership’s attempt to abandon the direct primary in Hawai‘i.
As a consequence of her resolute stance during the Massie Case, Kawananakoa gained a reputation for nonpartisanship. For this reason in July 1935, 12 U.S. senators, both Republicans and Democrats, including Senator Millard E. Tydings, chairman of the Committee on Territorial and Insular Affairs, recommended that she be appointed to the reorganized Hawaiian Homes Commission (HHC). Her appointment was opposed by some of the Territory’s Caucasian politicians, and it was not confirmed until March 1936. The HHC, which had been established by the U.S. Congress in 1921, sought to revitalize Native Hawaiians by returning them to the land. Kawananakoa had taken an active interest in the HHC for many years. In October 1931, Governor Judd had appointed her chairman of a special committee to investigate complaints made by some of the homesteaders against the Commission. The committee’s report presented on December 31, 1931, found in favor of the complainants.

The report was highly critical of the members of the HHC including Kawananakoa’s stepsister, Mrs. Frank Woods. Woods, the former Princess Elizabeth, widow of Prince Kūhiō and daughter of Colonel Samuel Parker, had replaced her first husband on the HHC after his death in 1922. She was an extremely poor manager of money, as was Kūhiō, and both during and after his lifetime had succeeded in helping to spend most of his share of the royal family’s inheritance. Kawananakoa’s criticisms of the financial mismanagement of the HHC may have been partly aimed at Woods, who had been noticed for her irregular attendance at HHC meetings. Woods died in February 1932 shortly after the report was released. As chairman of the HHC, Judd decided to disregard the report’s recommendations and initiated a paternalistic regime, of which Kawananakoa disapproved.

As a member of the commission, Kawananakoa strongly advocated that those qualifying under the act, Native Hawaiians of 50 per cent or more native blood, return to the land. She was responsible for the establishment of a finance committee and as its first chairman put the Commission’s finances in order. She also initiated a rehabilitation project, an additional houselot area at Keaukaha, on the island of Hawai‘i, for Native Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians. She did not always hold her fellow commissioners in high regard. In April 1937, she wrote that she had “never met such a helpless group of people in my life, they are either ignorant, too lazy or too busy . . . .” After the Keaukaha project had been completed, Kawananakoa intended to
resign in spring 1939 from the HHC to take her grandchildren to
Britain to place them in a boarding school in London, and to then
tour Europe. In fact, she resigned at the end of 1938, declining to
comment on rumors of discord in the commission. The Keaukaha
project was not completed until spring 1940 because of opposition
from territorial Governor Joseph Poindexter.

Kawananakoa also experienced a personal tragedy with her way-
ward son, David Kalākaua Kawananakoa, during the 1930s. He was
convicted of manslaughter of a young woman in 1933 and given a
suspended sentence, and in 1937 he was again charged with the man-
slaughter of another young woman, Arvilla Kinslea, his common-law
wife. His mother retained Frank E. Thompson, attorney for the
Matson Navigation Company, to defend him. Thompson had been
Kawananakoa’s attorney and business advisor since at least 1908, but
despite his advocacy, her son was found guilty as charged and was
imprisoned for several years.

During the Second World War, Japan’s unsuccessful plans for the
occupation of Hawai‘i included the possibility of the re-establishment
of the Hawaiian kingdom with Kawananakoa as one of several poten-
tial monarchs. The Japanese regarded her as a “powerful leader of
the anti-Roosevelt Republican Party.” Kawananakoa was unaware of
these plans and seems an unlikely collaborator given the ill-feeling
she expressed in her private correspondence with Samuel Wilder
King against Hawai‘i’s Japanese-American community to whom she
referred as “nasty little Americans of Jap ancestry!” During the war
she became a “mother” to the American servicemen and women in
Hawai‘i. In February 1942, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor,
she lent her Mālaekahana beach house to the United Service Organi-
zation (USO) for use as a recreation center for the American armed
forces. In December 1944, she also leased her famous Pensacola
Street home in Honolulu to the USO to be a Service Women’s Club.
Her Pensacola Street home was a wedding gift from her mother. She
had entertained numerous official guests of the Territory of Hawai‘i
there.

Princess Kawananakoa died in Honolulu, on April 12, 1945, at
the end of the war. Her cherished collection of royal Hawaiian arti-
facts was bequeathed to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington,
D.C. It is significant that Kawananakoa left her royal Hawaiian arti-
facts to the Smithsonian rather than the Bishop Museum. The
Bishop Museum acquired many of its Hawaiian exhibits as gifts from the Republic of Hawai'i, including many former possessions of the Hawaiian monarchy. Perhaps Kawānanakoa felt that this was inappropriate?

The career of Princess Kawānanakoa was not without contradiction. One derived from the fact that she was of dual ethnicity: as a part-Hawaiian she was strongly committed to defending the rights of the Native Hawaiians against the ruling Caucasian oligarchy. She believed that:

Missionaries of the olden days taught the Hawaiians to be gentle and submissive; that if you were slapped on one cheek to turn the other cheek, and we have been turning our cheeks from right to left ever since. It is high time that we became aggressive enough to fight for the rights of the Hawaiian people in any of their pilikias [troubles].

Her strong commitment to her mother's people is shown by the amount of time she gave to the Native Hawaiian societies, especially Hale o na Ali'i of which she was regent. Hale o na Ali'i was dedicated to the preservation of the traditions and obligations of the Hawaiian chiefs. Kawānanakoa completely reorganized this ancient society and placed it on a sound financial basis.

She was also part of the Caucasian oligarchy. As Emory S. Bogardus observed in 1935: “The Caucasian-Hawaiian has status in the Islands, despite the fact he is of mixed blood. Both the parental groups have status, and hence he does also . . . .”

When her son was in trouble in 1937, she had no hesitation in employing the services of one of the oligarchy's top lawyers. Her membership in the Republican Party is also a contradiction. It was the forces associated with the Republican Party that helped overthrow the Hawaiian monarchy to which both her father and mother had been strongly committed. Pauline King, daughter of Kawānanakoa’s correspondent Samuel Wilder King, defending Prince Kūhiō against a similar charge of “opportunism” for aligning himself with the Republican Party, suggests that Kūhiō made the right choice in working with the existing political order to further the interests of Native Hawaiians. The same could be argued in the case of Kawānanakoa. Yet the fact remains: Kawānanakoa collaborated with the enemies of her mother’s people, the sort of unpalatable fact that Dea Birkett
and Julie Wheelwright suggest is integral rather than peripheral to a woman's biography. Although Kawananakoa was an active member of the Republican Party, in both the Massie Case and the Hawaiian Homes Commission, her principal opponents were Republicans. Indeed a prominent territorial Republican acknowledged at the time of her death that she fought fearlessly for Native Hawaiian rights. The *Paradise of the Pacific* also observed in 1936:

> Much as a loving and beloved queen champions the welfare of her devoted subjects and loyal admirers, Princess Kawananakoa has many a time and oft interceded for the humbler citizen in the now complicated and more or less mysterious American political game which became part of one-time royal Hawaii's simple and happy (if not always scientific) government.

During the period between 1922 and 1945, Kawananakoa represented a last link with the Kingdom of Hawai'i. She spoke for a people who were gradually losing their voice in a territory where they formed only a small ethnic minority. After Kawananakoa's death her younger sister, Alice Kamokilaikawai Campbell, took over her role. In the period before statehood she became the most prominent representative of Native Hawaiians who looked back to pre-1893 Hawai'i.

**NOTES**


11 "Death of Mrs. Campbell-Parker at the Hospital," *PCA*, Nov. 1, 1908: 1, 5.


21 "Death of Mrs. Campbell-Parker at the Hospital," *PCA*, Nov. 1, 1908: 1, 5.


37 Daws, Shoal of Time 322–331.
39 On December 12, 1932, it was reported that she arrived at the annual lū'au (feast) of the Native Hawaiian organization, the Hawaiian Civic Club, accompanied by Philip Kinsley. "Hawaiian Civic Club Protests Proposed Bills; Resolutions Defending Right to Self-Government Are Adopted At Annual Luau,"
Her views are reported in two of Kinsley's articles on the Massie Case.

40 “Leaders Here Gratified Over Hawaii Plank,” HSB, June 16, 1932, 1–2, 6.


43 Delegate’s File, Samuel Wilder King, File: Hawaiian Homes Commission—1935 to June 1942: G.K. Larrison, Hawaiian Homes Representative, U.S. Dept. of the Interior to the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, Honolulu, Mar. 21, 1936, AH.


52 “Kawananakoa’s Case Ends With Plea of Guilty; Sentence Suspended,” HSB Last Edition, Feb. 24, 1933: 1; “Kalakaua’s Case Before Kelly: Manslaughter


55 Stephan, Hawaii Under the Rising Sun 157.


59 HSB, Nov. 5, 1931: 16.

60 Nellist, Women of Hawaii 155; "Portrait of Princess David to be Unveiled at Iolani Palace Wednesday," HSB, May 31, 1949: 4. Earlier, in 1924, she had established that religious services would be held annually for King Kalākaua and his dynasty. (PP Mar. 1924: 16.)


64 “Tribute is paid by Delegate to Princess David,” HSB, Apr. 14, 1945: 1, 4.

