

The King Goes to Washington

Who was the guest of honor at the first-ever White House dinner? The king of Hawai'i.

White House staff was abuzz: President Ulysses S. Grant had announced a formal dinner—hosted by himself and First Lady Julia—honoring a visiting head of state. The black-tie gala was the first of what would become a tradition that endures to this day, with King George VI, Emperor Haile Selassie and Queen Elizabeth II among past honorees. And the inaugural guest of honor? The Queen of Spain? The Emperor of Japan? No: The honoree of the first-ever White House state dinner was King David La'amea Kalākaua, ruling sovereign of the Hawaiian Islands.

The Kanaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) monarch was in the United States to conclude a treaty of commercial reciprocity between





King David Kalākaua (seen on page 82) sat for a formal White House photograph during his visit to Washington, DC, in 1874. President Ulysses S. Grant (seen above) honored the king—the first foreign head of state to visit the United States—with the first White House dinner.

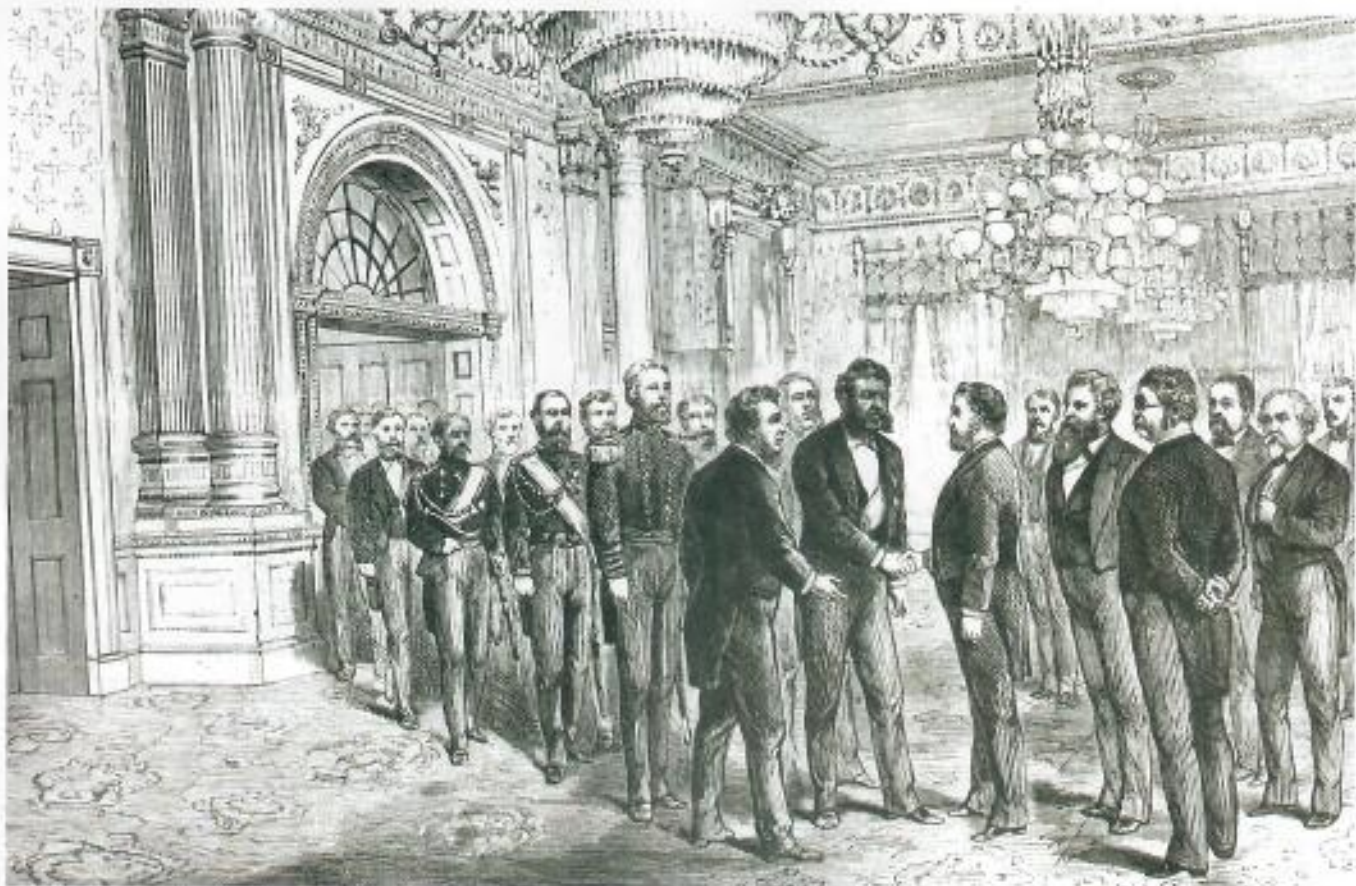
Hawai'i and the United States. The proposal removed tariffs on Hawaiian sugar entering the United States, which would greatly enrich Island producers and, in turn, the Hawaiian government, which collected taxes from them. For its part, the United States coveted Hawai'i's deepwater harbor at Pu'uloa (Pearl River Basin) on O'ahu as a potential US Naval base. Negotiations had begun the previous year, and both nations' leaders felt that a personal appearance from Hawai'i's king before Congress might seal the deal.

Mō'i (king) Kalākaua left Honolulu Harbor on November 17, 1874, aboard the USS *Benicia*. Upon arriving in San Francisco on December 12, the fourteen-gun US Navy ship and its royal passengers were afforded a grand welcome. A local newspaper reported, "The thunder of a twenty-one-gun salute from the fort sent thousands of people hurrying their way to the docks to catch a glimpse of the King." Upon reaching the shore, the Presidio Military Band serenaded Kalākaua with his own recent composition, "Hawai'i Pono'i"—

the Hawaiian national anthem. The landing marked another first attributed to the Hawaiian king; never before had any ruling monarch stepped foot on US soil. Nineteenth-century ocean crossings were dangerous—as was leaving your throne in someone else's hands for an extended period.

Kalākaua, however, and the nation he represented, were characterized by an outsize boldness. In 1843, the diminutive group of Pacific islands with fewer than eighty thousand inhabitants became the first non-Western nation in the world to achieve international recognition as a coequal sovereign state. The November 28 Anglo-French Declaration afforded the Hawaiian Kingdom membership in the influential "family of nations." The progressive constitutional monarchy had a female justice, Kekāuluohi on its 1840 Supreme Court—a feat not matched by the United States until 1981 with the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor. The kingdom's 1852 Kumukānāwai (constitution) banned slavery and offered universal manhood suffrage. A decade before the US Civil War, a man from any part of the globe, of any color, could immigrate to Hawai'i, become a citizen, own property and vote. By the 1870s, the Hawaiian Kingdom could boast of being one of the most literate nations in the world. Honolulu hosted a growing international business community in which more than 150 different currencies were exchanged and the kingdom's foreign office had executed political and commercial treaties with Great Britain, the United States, Italy, Spain, France, Denmark, Belgium, Sweden and others.

Kalākaua came to power in 1874, the seventh monarch of the Hawaiian Kingdom, determined to capitalize on the opportunities these international connections offered. The 39-year-old monarch possessed a seeming obsession with learning about new technologies and tools that might benefit his kingdom while also grounding Hawai'i's modernism in the ancient traditions of his people—Kalākaua was shaping a distinctively Hawaiian cosmopolitanism. He traveled extensively including an 1881, 285-day circumnavigation of the globe—yet another first for a head of



President Grant receives King Kalākaua and his entourage in the White House's Blue Room. The monarch achieved another historic first on his trip, becoming the first foreign head of state to attend a joint session of the US Congress.

the aftermath of a civil war that had taken more than six hundred thousand lives in a struggle over whether or not to allow the enslavement of men who looked like the Native monarch. While the issue of slavery had been settled, not so the hearts and minds of many Americans. Federal troops occupied Southern cities as the enforcement of antislavery laws and the extension of civil rights to freed slaves was proving challenging. A group of Confederate veterans had founded the Ku Klux Klan in 1865, and in the spring of 1874, just months prior to Kalākaua's arrival, an even more volatile group was established, the White League. The Louisiana-based paramilitary faction called for the "extermination" of politicians of either party who opposed white supremacy. In August 1874, the group had murdered Julia Hayden, a 17-year-old African American schoolteacher who had begun her job teaching freed slaves only days

earlier. In an article titled, "Louisiana and the Rule of Terror," *Harper's Weekly* reported that "Her murderers escaped" without punishment and warned its national audience, "This fearful association extends through every Southern State." That October, an estimated five thousand armed White Leaguers launched a bloody attack on New Orleans's integrated police force and state militia, barricading the streets of the French Quarter and occupying the state capitol. The "Battle of Liberty Place" continued for three days and left thirty-five dead. The capitol building was retaken and the barricaded streets cleared but there were no arrests and the White League's leadership was intact.

Now, on December 9, three days prior to the dark-skinned Kalākaua's arrival in Washington, DC, Grant received a disturbing telegram from the Louisiana governor, WP Kellogg: The White League was back. The governor

reported that his forces had intercepted "deadly plans" concerning a plot to blow up the state house and take control of the government in the Crescent City. Kellogg was making an emergency request for federal troops, framing the plea as "a question of whether or not the United States can maintain order within its limits."

Kalākaua arrived in Washington

aboard a private train car from Baltimore at 11:30 a.m. on December 12. The news of the king's arrival had filtered out, and an enormous crowd had gathered at the station. Kalākaua briefly acknowledged the throng before US diplomats whisked him away to his quarters at the Arlington—the city's "most opulent" hotel, adjacent to Lafayette Park a block from the White House. The US government had gone all-out to host the Hawaiian king, with Congress appropriating \$50,000 (the

state—on which he met with numerous leaders, including the Emperor of Japan, the Queen of England and Pope Leo XIII. Officials who interacted with Kalākaua on his three trips to the United States noted his “intelligent nature,” “extensive knowledge of international law” and “overtly gregarious manner.” Following an 1890 visit to Southern California, the *San Diego Union* commented, “He is one of the most enlightened and thoroughly able monarchs of modern times, a patron of arts, science and literature, a friend of liberal government and a wise and sagacious ruler.” Kalākaua was a potent ambassador for his kingdom, his people and their place in a modernizing world—a fitting guest of honor for the first White House state dinner.

In San Francisco, the Hawaiian monarch toured the US mint—

an excursion that would spur the 1883 creation of an official Hawaiian currency in the form of one million dollars in silver “Kalākaua coins” minted at the site. Kalākaua also visited the Western Union Telegraph Company, where he took the opportunity to send an opening communication to President Grant. On December 14, 1874, the White House received the cable: “Kalakaua, King of the Sandwich Islands, sends greeting to his great and good friend, the President of the United States. He acknowledges a generous reception, characteristic of a warm-hearted people, and will hasten to express in person those sentiments of sincere respect and lasting friendship entertained toward the President and the great nation he so worthily represents.” The following day, an answer arrived in San Francisco: “The President of the United States extends the cordial welcome of the nation to his great and good friend, His Royal Highness Kalakaua, on his arrival in the United States, and tenders his personal congratulations on the safety of his voyage.” The telegram closed with Grant wishing Kalākaua a safe journey across the United States.

The danger Kalākaua faced on his trip to the United States lay not only in the uncertain task of getting there. America was still simmering in



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Above, an illustration of Grant formally receiving Kalākaua at the White House. The Native leader had come to secure the Treaty of Reciprocity with the United States, but he also made an impression on a nation still struggling over issues of race and justice in the aftermath of its Civil War.

seating was supplied by twenty-four Empire chairs purchased by President Monroe in 1817. On the wall hung a life-sized portrait of General Grant on horseback—a recent gift from the city of New Orleans. The dining table at the center of the room was, according to the *Evening Star*, “something to behold,” with elaborate floral decorations and settings for thirty laid out, accompanied by glasses for sherry, claret and champagne. A small bouquet enhanced each of the Sèvres porcelain plates recently imported from Paris. Under each plate was an engraving of the

White House and the name of the gentleman or lady assigned to that seat. Kalākaua sat beside First Lady Julia Grant, directly across from the president. The table was filled out with Chief Justice Morrison Waite and Mrs. Waite, Speaker of the House James Blaine and Mrs. Blaine, all members of the cabinet and high-ranking military officers. The Marine Band played intermittently throughout the evening and it was reported that the opulent feast went on for some *thirty* courses.

Following the dinner in Kalākaua’s honor and his visit to the Congress,

the legislature passed the Treaty of Reciprocity—even without the Hawaiian monarch giving up Pearl Harbor—and Grant signed it into law. Kalākaua’s mission to the United States was a success, and Hawaiian Kingdom revenues subsequently soared. Beyond the pomp and ceremony of his visit, the Native Hawaiian king seems to have left a lasting impression. Soon after, the US Congress passed a piece of “landmark legislation,” the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The law required “that all persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment

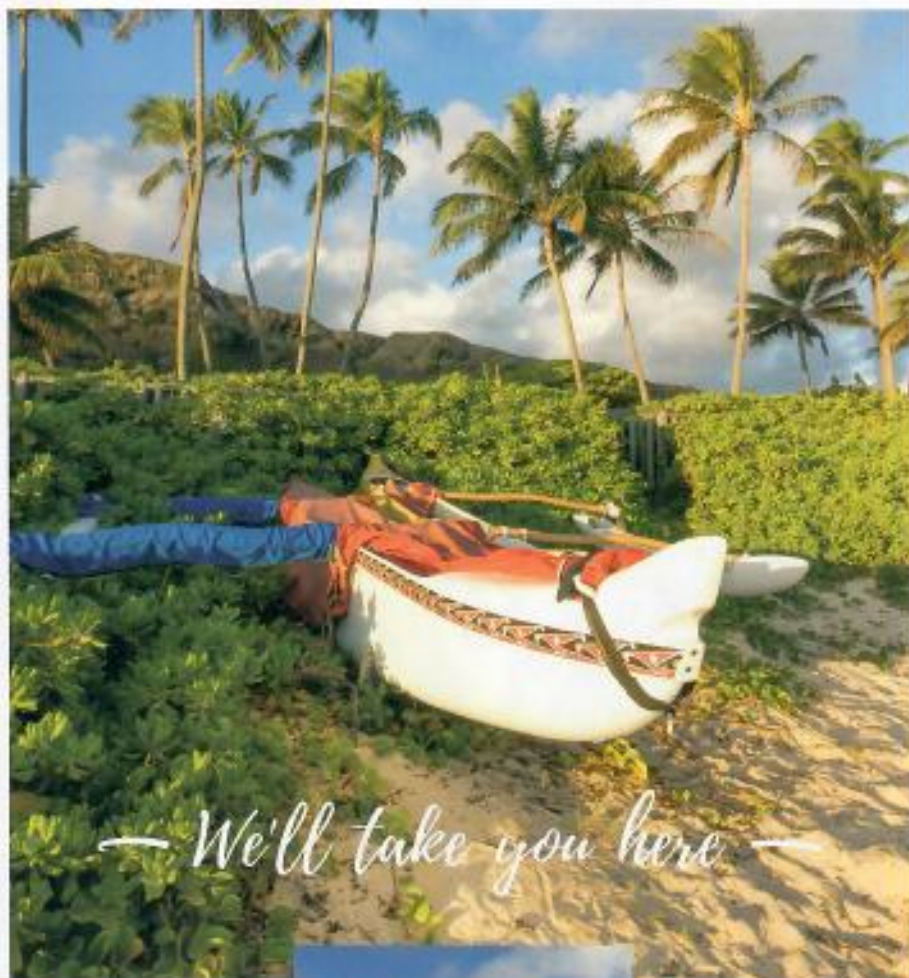
equivalent of \$1.4 million today) for his stay. Government buildings, businesses, hotels and churches throughout the city were decorated with flags and bunting.

Kalākaua had accepted an invitation to address a joint session of the US Congress—yet another first for a head of state—on December 18, and he used the days prior to play inquisitive tourist. On December 16, Kalākaua made a pilgrimage to George Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon. The following day he visited the US Naval Academy at Annapolis; that visit inspired his later attempt to found a similar academy in Honolulu.

The king arrived at the US Capitol on the scheduled day and was guided to the office of the Senate President, where congressmen were presented to the king one at a time. The Native monarch made quite an impression, with the lawmakers later describing him as "intelligent," "well-spoken" and "gregarious." Following the introductions, Kalākaua was escorted to the assembly hall where the full Congress took their seats. The sergeant-at-arms rose and addressed the Speaker of the House, declaring, "Mr. Speaker, I have the honor to present to you His Majesty the King of Hawaii." The Speaker responded, "On behalf of the American Congress, I welcome you to these halls. Your majesty's appearance among us is the first instance in which a reigning sovereign has set foot upon the soil of the United States and probably no single event could more strikingly typify the country's progress, in your majesty's country and in our own, than the scene now transpiring." Unfortunately, the king had come down with a significant cold in the days prior to his appearance and he was unable to address the Congress himself; his prepared speech was read by his aide-de-camp.

The first White House state dinner was held on December 22.

"The state dinner at the Presidential Mansion last evening, in honor of the King of Hawaii, was brilliant beyond all precedent," reported the *Washington Evening Star*. The magnificent East Room was brilliantly illuminated by crystal chandeliers installed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830, and



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of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement." The *Boston Globe* tied Kalākau's visit to the Civil Rights Act: "To be sure, he is an educated and, to some extent, a polished gentleman, but not more so than thousands of colored men in the United States. The very fact that a colored man was received and dined at the Executive Mansion, where he had the honor of escorting to the table the First Lady of the Republic, is a powerful blow to caste." **hh**

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