

THE PRINCE AND THE PARTY

Prince David Kawanakoa and the Founding of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i

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Appointed emissary for the Queen in Washington, D.C., Prince David Kawanakoa was dismissed by the Hawai'i Republican Oligarchy as “ornamental.” Thus Prince David — one of the founders and guiding lights of the Democratic Party in Hawai'i — became very nearly a footnote in the political history of Hawai'i.

Prince David Laamea Kahelepouli Kawanakoa Piikoi was born February 19, 1868; a son of High Chief David Kahalapouli Piikoi and Princess Kinoiki Kekaulike and the great-grandson of Kaumualii — the last king of Kauai. His mother was the sister of Queen Kapiolani, wife of King David Kalakaua, who in 1883 appointed David and his younger brothers, Jonah and Edward, Princes of the Realm and “Heir Presumptive” to the Hawaiian throne after the popular and lovely Princess Kaiulani, daughter to King Kalakaua's sister, Princess Likelike.

CONSPIRACY AND INTRIGUE

Returning from school to Hawai'i in February, 1889, for his 21st birthday and a grand ball at Iolani Palace, Prince David immediately became aware of the pervasive intrigue and the many subtle political undercurrents. It was clear to Prince David or “Koa” as he was affectionately called by his young cousin, Princess Kaiulani, that he was desperately needed at home. The handsome, debonair and brilliant Prince David “was always present with the King at state receptions, banquets and levees, and on all formal occasions, he received with His Majesty. Whenever the King made calls aboard foreign warships, Prince David accompanied him.” Educated in Europe and California, he was the toast of high society and a welcomed guest at the Royal Courts of Europe.

Understanding several European languages as well as Hawaiian and English, the astute Prince David picked up important bits of information as he danced the night away with some of the most politically well-connected women in Hawai'i — information that would ultimately spell doom for the Kingdom that he loved. Liliu Kamakaeha, the King's sister

and heir to the throne, knew full well what was taking place. Unable to stem the tide alone, she made a bond with the young Prince — a secret bond that was to last the rest of their lives. In January 1891, the King lay mysteriously dying in San Francisco and he urged the Hawaiians to “persevere” and to not give up. For most people in Hawai'i it was the first time they had ever heard of Thomas Edison's new wax-cylinder recording machine. In spite of the imperfections of the device, the King's recorded message was clearly understood.

Upon Kalakaua's death, Liliuokalani became Queen of the Hawaiian Islands and the maneuverings for control by the conspirators increased. Less than a year later, tragedy again overwhelmed the Queen. In September 1891 — two days after the death of her husband, John Dominis — the widowed Queen named Prince David to the Privy Council and Clerk in the Palace Foreign Office. The Prince was to be apprized of all the foreigners actions. His princely appearance, subtle, sophisticated air, and his mastery of several languages made him perfect for the position.

THE OVERTHROW: REPUBLIC TO TERRITORY

Though later criticized for not “manning” the guns at the time of the overthrow, it is now clear that the young Prince's assigned task was far more important. With a direct line to the Queen, maintaining his position was paramount. The self-appointed Provisional government chartered the steamer Claudine to take its' commissioners — Lorrin Thurston, W. C. Wilder and W. R. Castle — to Washington, D. C. to negotiate a treaty of political union between Hawai'i and the United States. In January of 1893, Queen Liliuokalani named the Prince and another of her most trusted advisers, Paul Neumann as her envoy to Washington. Along with Charles Reed Bishop's demeaning description of the Queen as “deceitful and treacherous and of poor moral character,” W. R. Castle further declared, “The Prince is a pleasant fellow but purely ornamental.”

Hostile to the Royalist, the press implied that the Prince was the lover of his cousin Princess Kaiulani, and wrote of other unsubstantiated liaisons with numerous beautiful women — thus painting him as a playboy-prince of no substance. In the long run, this

description served him well as it allowed the Prince to move in and out of circles otherwise closed to the Royalists. Only once did the newspapers suggest that he was anything but a potted plant. Though the label was short-lived, he was also branded as a “traitor.” Following the Queen's orders and retaining an emissary position, Prince David remained virtually out of sight during the 1895 counterrevolution. However, Prince David was arrested along with the Queen and 200 other Hawaiian leaders by the Republican Oligarchy (the government of the Republic), for “misprision of treason” (concealing a crime). Unable to prove the underlying suspicion that he and his close friend Johnny Wilson had provided ammunition to the insurgency, he was released by the court-martial.

POLITICAL LINES ARE DRAWN

The patriots, the later founders of the Democratic Party, understood the dire consequences of being loyal to the Queen. They shrewdly moved — from the well-organized Hui Kalai'aina, formed as a political party, and from Hui Aloha Aina, formed as the annexation resistant party — into the larger political arena. The early members of the Democratic Party grasped that the only way left for them to regain their nation was through the American political system. Taking the lead from Teddy Roosevelt, they “had to sit at the table of real power.” Sit at the table of power? Having grown up amidst the intrigues of the Palace, the Prince and Johnny Wilson understood this concept and an elaborate plan emerged.

Armed with the Organic Act which ended the Republic and defined the Territory (and made the Democrat and Republican Parties legal in Hawai'i), on April 30, 1900, Johnny Wilson and The Prince called a meeting of some other close friends to make plans for the Democratic Party of Hawai'i and their own plans for the bigger picture. The Democrats would claim to be the party of Democratic President Grover Cleveland who had opposed the overthrow and supported Queen Liliuokalani.

On May 15, 1900, an organization meeting of the Democrats was called. Going public was frightening but the only thing to do and Prince David Kawanakoa, Dr. John S.

McGrew, Charles J. McCarthy, Delbert Metzger, and Johnny Wilson led the valiant little group of Democrats. Nearly 500 people showed up the following day at the Drill Shed for a meeting of the newly formed party — including E. P. McClanahan, John E. Bush, J. K. Kaulia (who spoke in Hawaiian), Charles J. McCarthy, John Wise, and Dr. McGrew. McGrew was elected chair of party and McCarthy his assistant. The immensely-popular stalwart of the new Democratic party, Prince David was elected a delegate to the National Democratic Party convention and National committeeman from Hawai'i. Lorrin Thurston's anti- Democratic, *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* reported on the event.

On May 19, 1900, “William Marshall Editor of the Royalist newspaper, *The Volcano*, was found guilty of libel in the First Degree. He was fined \$1,000 and sentenced to 6 months of hard labor.” He had dared to print a derogatory remark of Republican Supreme Court Justice Judd. This signaled the end of an opposition newspaper, as well as setting the example of what journalists could expect if they wrote against the ruling elite.

JOHNNY WILSON

In addition to being a close friend and classmate of Prince David's, Johnny Wilson was a construction contractor. On May 27, 1900, the cabinet of the Republican Territorial Government requested a meeting with Wilson to review his contract to develop a Honolulu sewer system. Was it possible, Wilson pondered while pacing up and down, “Had they changed the contract's specifications in the middle of the project, as they had been known to do,” or “Is there a question of my finances since L. Ahlo, my backer had lost a notable part of his income in the Chinatown fire?” Or was it the fact that Wilson was a supporter of the Queen and now a Democrat?

Whatever the reason, the next day, Wilson asked for an extension and was refused. The contract was gone and Wilson discovered that politics under the Republican Territorial status was to be considerably even more restrictive and punitive than he might ever have imagined. Even John Wise, a secretary for the Hawai'i Board of Missions, “lost his pulpit for supporting the Queen.” In June of that year exercising their new right to vote with no property restrictions (which the Republicans had lobbied against), the

Hawaiians founded the Home Rule Party.

THE FIRST BIG ELECTION

The first elected Delegate to Congress from Hawai'i would have no voting rights because Hawai'i was a territory, but that did not lessen the political fight. Prince David Kawanakoa became the first Democratic candidate for Delegate, Sam Parker the standard bearer for the Republicans, and Robert Wilcox the Home Rule candidate. Republican Sam Parker was declared the winner the day after the election by Thurston's *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* and five days before the Neighbor Island votes were tallied. To Thurston's surprise and embarrassment, the Home Rule candidate, Robert Wilcox was the winner.

In spite of campaigning hard all over the territory, the Democrats could not overcome the strength of the independent Home Rule Party who won the major races throughout Hawai'i in 1900. In contrast to the negative picture painted by the Oligarchy press of the Native Hawaiians, in reality they were well-organized and had tasted their own power by executing a defeat of the annexation plan in the U.S. Congress — only to have the Spanish-American War and American imperialism intrude. Congress, literally in the heat of battle, passed an illegal act to annex Hawai'i and putting a final end to the Hawaiian dream of the restoration of their own government. From the time of the overthrow, the Republican Oligarchy had tightened and narrowed its' power and control.

Understanding what Theodore Roosevelt meant about having a “seat at the table” of power, the Hawaiians formulated a brilliant plan. The moment the Organic Act was signed into law, they moved into the existing Republican Party, created the Democratic and Home Rule parties, and “as one Tutu put it when asked about family members being in different political parties, ‘We are all Hawaiian.’”

On becoming a Territory, all of the money and power of the government was sucked out of Hawai'i and transferred to Washington D.C. The federal government would thereafter appoint the governor, the judges, and the boards & commissions. The mechanisms that

the once-independent nation had in place to raise money had been eviscerated, leaving the Oligarchy dependent upon the Sugar Barons.

The Organic Act had also given the Hawaiians the rights that had been denied them by the Republican Oligarchy since the time of the overthrow. The right to vote with no property restrictions — and the ability to create municipalities. The Hawaiians understood by creating counties they would “sit at the table” of power. They could have their own government; a government where they had the votes, as well as the hearts and minds of the people, where their newspaper editors would not be imprisoned for what they wrote, and where they could raise taxes. County government was where they could begin to control their own destiny. The power elite also well understood this new reality.

Bob Krauss, author of “Johnny Wilson: The First Hawaiian Democrat” notes, “In 1900, once the elections were over, all three parties appointed committees to draw up county government legislation. Johnny Wilson signed up for the Democratic committee and was assigned to the statistics section. He was good at dredging up facts and figures because he read a lot and kept track of numbers such as voter registration by race. This hobby made him a pioneer in transforming the Democrats into a multiracial party. He served on the committee with typical Democrats: two hack drivers, a few attorneys, an electrician, two printers, a farmer, a schoolteacher, a judge, a painter, a surveyor, another contractor, and one fellow who ambitiously listed himself as a capitalist but who really had been a hotel manager.”

The Republican County Charter Committee was heavy on wealthy businessmen with a sprinkling of less important people, including C. B. Wilson. The Home Rulers, also called “Independents” by the newspapers, had many Hawaiians on their committee, including Prince David and John Wise who were what was later to be called “a Democrat Home Rule fusion.” The Democrats had drawn up their proposed county charter, which the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* ridiculed for its naiveté and alleged contradictions. The county act proposed by the Home Rulers received the same treatment.

The Republican charter was held up as a model of perfection. The legislature, dominated

by Home Rulers, then passed a bill calling for county government in Hawai'i along the lines set forth by the Home Rule County Charter. While Republican Territorial Governor Sanford B. Dole promptly vetoed the bill, the stage was now set for another dramatic overthrow. But as they say, that is another story.

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