

Japanese laborers arrive in Hawaii (1886)



My Drift

Title: Hawaii Immigrants

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This question came up the other day while I was having a cold beverage with friends: **Who were the first immigrants to come to Hawaii?**

Do you want to take a guess? Here are your choices:

The Filipinos – The Japanese/Okinawans – The Chinese – The Koreans – The Portuguese



Polynesian Voyaging Canoe

I will answer that question a little later but first let's have a quick Hawaii history lesson. For most of the earth's history, the Hawaiian Islands set out there undiscovered in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with no humans on them.

The first people to settle in Hawaii were the Polynesians sailing the ocean on voyaging canoes (like the one pictured above) sometime between 124 and 1120 AD. After that, nobody else came to the islands where the Polynesian (Hawaiian) civilization was isolated from the rest of the world for more than 600 years.

But then the “white man” or “haoles” (Hawaiian term for people who are not Native Hawaiian or Polynesian) arrived. Europeans led by British explorer James Cook were among the initial imperialistic groups to arrive in the Hawaiian Islands in 1778. Within five years after Cook's arrival, European military technology helped Kamehameha I conquer and unify the islands for the first time, establishing the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1795. The kingdom was prosperous and important for its agriculture and strategic location.



Captain Cook in the Hawaiian Islands

Immigration began almost immediately after Cook's arrival, led by American Protestant missionaries who set up plantations to grow sugar. Their methods of plantation farming required substantial labor. Waves of permanent immigrants came from Japan, China, and the Philippines to work in the fields.

The native population succumbed to disease brought by the Europeans (particularly smallpox), declining from 300,000 in the 1770s to about 60,000 in the 1850s to 24,000 in 1920. Americans within the kingdom government rewrote the constitution, severely curtailing the power of King "David" Kalākaua and disenfranchising the rights of most Native Hawaiians and Asian citizens. This gave a sizeable advantage to plantation owners. Queen Liliuokalani attempted to restore royal powers in 1893 but was placed under house arrest by the US military. Against the Queen's wishes, the Republic of Hawaii was formed for a short time. This government agreed on behalf of Hawaii to join the US in 1898 as the Territory of Hawaii. In 1959, the islands became the state of Hawaii of the United States.



Aloha Week participants at the first Aloha Week in 1947, representing the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ethnic groups, with Diamond Head in the background.

Laborers from all over the world moved to the Islands to work on the sugar plantations and stayed to make Hawaii what it is today.

Beginning in the 1850s, as the sugar industry grew and plantations began to multiply throughout Hawaii, plantation owners—many tracing their ancestry to English and American missionary families—began importing contracted laborers from outside the Islands to supplement Hawaiian laborers. By the early 20th century, thousands of laborers from China, Portugal, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, Puerto Rico, and Okinawa had moved to the Islands, completed their sugar plantation contracts, and elected to stay.

The Chinese

Chinese laborers were the first immigrant group to arrive in Hawaii for work on the plantations and numbered more than 50,000 between 1852 and 1887. Many also arrived to work on rice plantations throughout the Islands, which replaced kalo (taro) as a mass-farmed crop at the time. After finishing their contracts, about a third returned to China. Many more, however, elected to raise families here to provide their children better educational opportunities than they could in their homeland. Many Chinese laborers moved to urban areas like Honolulu, creating business and residential enclaves. Honolulu's Chinatown district, one of the oldest such districts in the U.S., remains a thriving hub of Chinese culture more than a century after it was first settled.



Chinese shopkeepers in Honolulu's Chinatown

Best event to learn about the Chinese culture



Chinese New Year: The Lunar New Year is celebrated throughout the Islands with Chinese lion dancing, firecrackers, and the eating of traditional foods. The biggest gathering, however, happens in Honolulu's Chinatown district at the end of each January with festivals, a parade and block parties.

Notable people:



Don Ho: Oahu-born musician and entertainer whose charismatic stage presence and catchy hit "Tiny Bubbles" made him Hawaii's first international superstar. There's even a statue of him in Waikiki.



Hiram Fong: Prominent Oahu-born businessman and politician. First Asian American and Chinese American elected a U.S. Senator, serving from 1959 to 1977. First Asian American to seek the Republican Party's nomination for U.S. President in 1964.

How many Chinese are there in Hawaii today in 2020?

About 60,000 or 4% of Hawaii's total population.

The Japanese

Japanese contract laborers in Honolulu, in 1899, on their way from Japan to a sugar plantation on Hawaii Island. Most Japanese immigrants were put to work chopping and weeding sugar cane on vast plantations, many of which were larger than any single village in Japan. They were paid about \$13.00 a month, not including travel costs, which were deducted from their wages.



Between 1885 and 1924, more than 200,000 Japanese immigrated to Hawaii as plantation laborers until their arrivals suddenly stopped with the Federal Immigration Act of 1924. After that, the door was shut but it's the only (Hawaii) ethnic group really defined by generation. The Issei, or first generation, kept strong connections to Japan, with many planning to return. Impacted by World War II, second generation Nisei felt it necessary to prove their patriotism to a country that interred many of them for having the enemy's face. The Sansei, or third generation, further removed itself from Japanese culture, growing up speaking only English. Sansei and generations since, however, have more often sought to learn and share the culture of their grandparents and great-grandparents, evidenced in numerous festivals, celebrations and other events offered statewide.

Interesting Fact: 1.6 million visitors from Japan came to Hawaii in 2019 and generated nearly \$2.2 billion in visitor spending.

Best events to learn about Japanese culture

Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii: The Oahu-based center serves as the hub of Honolulu's Japanese community and is home to an art gallery, resource center, martial arts studio, teahouse, and gift shop. It also hosts multiple cultural events and exhibitions.

Urasenke Tea House: This traditional teahouse, in the midst of Oahu's bustling Waikiki resort area, welcomes visitors to participate in Japanese tea ceremonies.



Japanese/Okinawan Bon Dance

Bon Dance Season: Each summer, Japanese/Okinawan Buddhist temples statewide host evening bon dances, honoring the spirits of family members who have passed away.

Notable people:



Daniel K. Inouye



Patsy Mink



Ellison Onizuka

Daniel K. Inouye: World War II veteran, Medal of Honor recipient and member of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Longest serving Hawaii U.S. Senator, first elected in 1962. Highest-ranking Asian American politician in U.S. history.

Patsy Mink: First woman of color and first Asian American woman elected to Congress, in 1965. Served six consecutive terms.

Ellison Onizuka: Hawaii Island-born NASA astronaut. In 1985, he became the first Asian American and first person of Japanese ancestry to fly into space.

The Portuguese



The J. I. Silva Homestead Store in Eleele, Kauai, founded by Portuguese immigrant John Ignacio Silva in 1900, who went on to be a successful businessman and postmaster in Eleele.

More than 16,000 Portuguese immigrants, many of them from the offshore islands of Madeira and the Azores, arrived in Hawaii from 1878 to 1911 to work the plantations. While Chinese and Japanese workers arrived in the Islands as single men, the Portuguese came as families with plans to stay. Being European, they were offered superior contracts than immigrant workers from Asia, receiving an acre of land, better working conditions, and often serving as *luna*, or supervisors. They were also offered American citizenship when Hawaii became a territory of the U.S. in 1898. Upon completing their labor contracts, many Portuguese started their own businesses or farms. Some opened restaurants and bakeries while others became paniolo, working the ranches on horseback. Today, there are about 23,000 Portuguese in Hawaii and their influence on its culture is found everywhere from restaurant menus featuring comfort food favorite Portuguese bean soup to the distinctive plucking of the Hawaiian steel guitar.

Best events to learn about Portuguese culture

Portuguese Genealogical Society of Hawaii: Founded in 1981, its Oahu headquarters houses a library where visitors can peruse historical documents collected by the society.



Portuguese Style Sweet Bread

Kona Historical Society: The Hawaii Island-based nonprofit perpetuates the traditional art of Portuguese bread baking weekly in a large, wood-fired Stone forno. Volunteers are welcome to help roll the dough.

Notable people



Manuel Nunes



Shane Victorino



Frank De Lima

Manuel Nunes: Madeira immigrant credited with bringing the ukulele to Hawaii and becoming one of the instrument's first local craftsmen.

Shane Victorino: Maui-born, part-Portuguese former major league outfielder. His father Michael Victorino is the current mayor of Maui county.

Frank De Lima: Popular Hawaii Portuguese comedian.

The Filipinos



Young Filipino ladies at a Waipahu cultural event

The first Filipino plantation laborers arrived in Hawaii in 1906, most male and unmarried. By the industry's peak in the early 20th century, however, Filipinos made up more than half of the sugar plantations' labor force in the Islands. As their contracts ended, Hawaii's Filipino population boomed as many of the men remained and sent for their families. By the 2010 U.S. Census, Filipinos had surpassed Japanese as the state's largest Asian ethnic group.

There has been a steady increase of Filipinos in Hawaii over the years with new immigrants coming all the time. Currently in 2020, there are 197,000 Filipinos in Hawaii or 14% of the total population. The Japanese population has actually decreased in the past 20 years. Currently in 2020, there are 186,000 Japanese in Hawaii or 13% of the total population. The impact of Filipino culture is now felt in all aspects of Hawaii life, from politics to sports, healthcare to education, food, and entertainment.



Filipinos in Hawaii: 114 years of migration

Best events to learn about Filipino culture



Filipino Community Center: Established in 2002, the Oahu community center in Waipahu offers cultural programs, social services, and language classes.

Flores de Mayo Festival: Held each May in Waikiki's Kapiolani Park, the annual festival features a young leaders' conference, a Filipino cook-off, and screenings of Filipino movies, in addition to a fiesta and parade.



Flores de Mayo Festival



Waipahu Festival Marketplace

Waipahu Festival Marketplace: Opened in 2007, the indoor farmers market in Oahu's Waipahu town resembles open markets found in the Philippines, selling a variety of fresh and imported Filipino delicacies.

Notable people



Ben Cayetano: In 1994, he was elected Hawaii governor, becoming the first Filipino American governor of a U.S. state.



Angela Perez Baraquio (Grey): Crowned Miss America 2001, she was the first Asian American and first Filipino American to win the title.



Brian Viloria: Oahu-born professional boxer and former world flyweight and lightweight champion.

The Koreans

Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese laborers were already long entrenched in the hard labor of Hawaii's sugarcane fields when the first large group of Korean immigrants arrived in 1903. A mix of men, women, and children, they were mostly from small rural villages in Korea. With Hawaii a U.S. Territory and the 1900 Organic Acts, which banned contract labor, passed before they arrived, Korean laborers were not locked into long-term contracts and quickly ditched plantation life to live and work elsewhere and open businesses. Within two years of the first arrivals, more than 7,000 more Koreans would arrive in Hawaii for work, with many of them staying on. Today in 2020, there are about 26,000 Koreans in the Hawaiian Islands.



Korean Immigrants

Best Places and Events to learn about Korean culture

Throughout the islands there are many Korean stores, bars, and restaurants.



Korean Store



Korean Bar



Korean Restaurant



Korean Food

Korean Festival and Taste of Korea: A popular annual Oahu festival featuring Korean dance, art, music, and food.



Notable people

Michelle Wie: Oahu-born professional golfer. At age 10, became the youngest player to qualify for a USGA amateur championship.

B.J. Penn: Hawaii Island-born two-time, two-division UFC mixed martial arts champion, first American gold medalist in the World Jiu-Jitsu Championship.



Michelle Wie



BJ Penn

Summary

Okay, those are the major ethnic groups that immigrated to Hawaii from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. There were others like the Puerto Ricans and various Pacific Islanders but as you could tell, most of the Hawaii immigrants were from Asia. That is the primary reason Hawaii is the only state in the U.S. with an Asian majority population. Here are the Hawaii population statistics:

Asian	37%
White	26%
Two or more races	24%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders	10%
Black	2%
Other	1%
Hispanic or Latino*	11%

*Hispanics may be of any race, so they are included in applicable race category.

If you read the article, you should know the answer to the question:

Who were the first immigrants to come to Hawaii?

The answer is the Chinese who first arrived in 1852.

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