



Hawaiian Heritage

 **beanstack originals**



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Learn more about Hawai'i's Indigenous heritage.



For at least 16,000 years, humans have called the lands that now make up the United States home. Thousands of nations and tribes have lived and continue to live across the country. These peoples created many unique heritages. A heritage is a sense of identity, culture, and history that is passed down over time. Read on to learn more about just one part of the country's rich and varied Indigenous heritage.

Polynesian History

You probably know that Hawai'i is part of the United States—the 50th state, to be exact. But did you know that it is also part of a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean known as Polynesia? Hawai'i's history begins some 3,500 years ago—long before the United States ever existed!

Around 1,500 BCE, a group of people living in southeast Asia set out to explore the seas. They are now known as the Lapita. Using canoes, the Lapita explored much of the Pacific Ocean. They also settled many of the islands there. Today, those islands are known as Polynesia. Over time, the people on these islands created their own cultures and identities. By the 600s, Polynesian explorers had also reached and settled on the islands of Hawai'i.

DID YOU KNOW?

The early Polynesian explorers were sometimes called wayfinders. They were expert ocean travelers who used the stars and the ocean currents to find their way.



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Hawaiian Tiki Statues.

Who Are the Hawaiians?

Today, anybody from Hawai'i is sometimes referred to as a Hawaiian. But Hawaiians are actually the Indigenous people of Hawai'i. They are descended from the Polynesians, who first settled there more than 1,400 years ago.

FUN FACT

Not long after King Kamehameha I united Hawai'i, Europeans and Americans seized control of the kingdom. In 1893, a group of Americans violently captured the islands. In 1898, the U.S. government officially claimed Hawai'i. In 1959, it became the nation's 50th state.

Because Hawai'i is made up of several islands, the ocean became an important part of Hawaiian life. People mastered fishing and used local materials in everyday life. They carved animal bones to create fishhooks and knives. They used nearby pili grasses to make the roofs for their homes. And they used plentiful rocks from along the shores for stone tools or floors. They also carved wood into canoes and surfboards.

For many hundreds of years, each Hawaiian island was ruled by a set of leaders known as ali'i. These leaders sometimes fought. This led to battles between the islands. However, in 1810, one ali'i named Kamehameha united all of the islands into the kingdom of Hawai'i.



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Two Hawaiian men dancing with fire.

Art and Culture

Just like it was a part of survival, the ocean has become an important part of Hawaiian culture. In fact, surfing—known as *he‘e nalu*—traditionally became a part of everyday life. Throughout history, most Hawaiian people surfed, no matter what age or gender they were. In fact, *ali‘i* sometimes held surfing competitions. Surfing also became a part of some spiritual ceremonies.

Other ceremonies feature music, dance, or chanting. Hawaiian art often reflects water themes or ocean animals. Some art includes carving volcanic stone, wood, or bone. And some art is featured on people’s bodies! Traditional Hawaiian tattoos, or permanent ink drawings made on people’s bodies, often have great personal and spiritual meaning.