

# Puukohola Heiau

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • HAWAII

## ADMINISTRATION

Puukohola Heiau National Historic Site, a unit of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, is administered by the superintendent of Pu'uohonou o Hōnaunau National Historical Park. Address all inquiries to Honaunau, Kona, HI 96726.

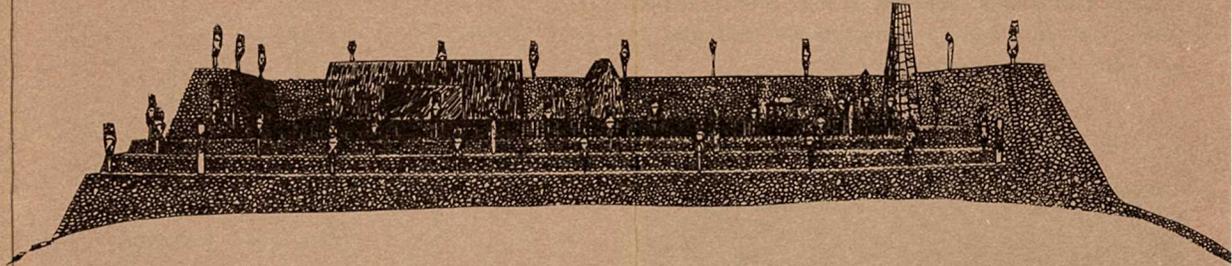
As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

High on a hill above the Pacific Ocean, near the village of Kawaihae on the island of Hawaii, sits Pu'ukoholā Heiau—the last major religious structure of the ancient Hawaiian culture built in the islands.

An artist's conception of Pu'ukoholā Heiau as it probably appeared at the beginning of the 19th century.

Courtesy of  
Bernice P. Bishop Museum.



This heiau, or temple, was built by Kamehameha I in 1790-91 on Pu'ukoholā, the "hill of the whale," and was dedicated to his family war god Kū-kā'ili-moku.

Hawaiians constructed the massive temple platform by carefully setting waterworn lava rocks and boulders together, without using mortar. It measures 68 by 30 meters (224 by 100 feet) with walls on the landward side and on the ends. Three long narrow terraced steps cross the side that faces the sea, thus opening the interior to view from canoes floating offshore.

Over the years, the platform has withstood major earthquakes on this volcanic island, but recent earthquakes have begun to collapse the outer

layers of rock. The National Park Service is now planning how best to repair the damages and to do maintenance work stemming from 150 years of abandonment.

When the temple was in use from 1791 to 1819, there were thatched houses and an altar for the ruling chief and his priests. Wooden images of Hawaiian gods stood on the platform and terraces. The houses, images, prayer tower, altar, and other temple furnishings were either destroyed or left to disintegrate, and only the massive stone structure remains today—a reminder of the role played by Pu'ukoholā Heiau in the founding of the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1795 by Kamehameha the Great.

## THE CHIEF BUILDS A TEMPLE

In 1782, Kamehameha became ruler of the north-west half of the island of Hawaii, and for about a decade he fought unsuccessfully against his rival chiefs for control of the entire island. Without securing the remainder of the island chiefdoms, he invaded and conquered the islands of Maui, Lanai, and Molokai. Meanwhile, his rivals on Hawaii battled each other until eventually Kamehameha had only one remaining rival—his cousin Keoua Kū'ahu'ula on his home island of Hawaii.

While on Molokai, Kamehameha heard that Keoua Kū'ahu'ula was attacking his property. He sent his aunt to the island of Kauai to seek direction from a famous prophet, Kāpoūkahi, who told her that Kamehameha would conquer all the islands if he built a large temple to his family war god Kū-kā'ili-moku atop Pu'ukoholā hill at Kawaihae. Kamehameha returned to Hawaii to defend his land from Keoua Kū'ahu'ula, who retreated but still held his half of the island.

In 1790, Kamehameha began to build the temple. The prophet Kāpoūkahi joined Kamehameha's staff as the royal architect of the temple, and thousands of workers, camping on the nearby hills, labored to carry the stones to form the massive structure. Even Kamehameha labored with the others. Only one person, his younger brother, was excused because one high chief had to remain ceremonially clean to preside at the religious services. To please the war god, this temple had to be ritually perfect.

When news that Kamehameha was building a major Hawaiian temple reached his rival ruling chiefs,

they decided that they must attack him at Kawaihae while he and his subjects were thus occupied. At best, the invasion would eliminate Kamehameha and stop completion of this culturally significant temple. At worst, the interruption would interfere with the construction process and its prescribed series of ceremonies. If they could keep the temple from being ritually perfect, perhaps Kamehameha's war god would be displeased. An invasion therefore had the potential of eliminating or reducing the spiritual power Pu'ukoholā Heiau could supply Kamehameha. The chiefs of Maui, Lanai, and Molokai reconquered their islands and joined by the chiefs of Kauai and Oahu sailed to attack Kamehameha. Kamehameha counterattacked, was successful, and resumed building his temple.

It was a long and arduous task, but finally, in the summer of 1791, the temple was finished. Kamehameha invited his rival Keoua Kū'ahu'ula to the dedication to make peace. Perhaps acceptance of the completed temple and its significance—a fatalistic resignation to his doom—was among the reasons Keoua Kū'ahu'ula came willingly. As he stepped ashore from his canoe on the beach below Pu'ukoholā Heiau, there was a scuffle and he and his close companions were slain. His body was carried up to the temple and offered as the principal sacrifice to Kamehameha's war god.

Keoua Kū'ahu'ula's death ended all opposition on the island of Hawaii, and the prophecy began to be fulfilled. About 1794, Kamehameha reconquered the islands of Maui, Lanai, and Molokai. By 1795 the island of Oahu was added, and Kamehameha

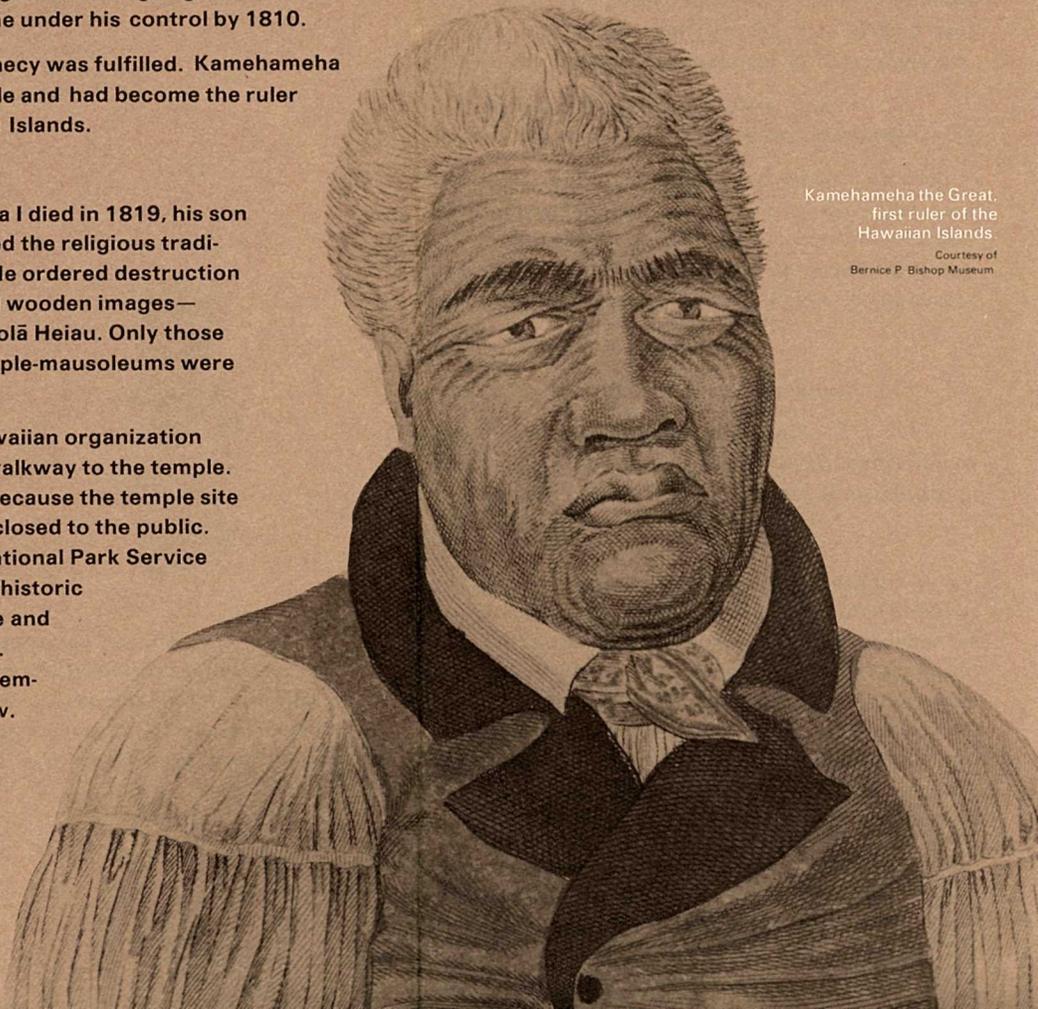
established his kingdom. Through agreement with its king, Kauai came under his control by 1810.

Kāpoūkahi's prophecy was fulfilled. Kamehameha had built the temple and had become the ruler of all the Hawaiian Islands.

## EPILOGUE

After Kamehameha I died in 1819, his son Liholiho abandoned the religious traditions of the past. He ordered destruction of the temples and wooden images—including Pu'ukoholā Heiau. Only those that served as temple-mausoleums were not destroyed.

About 1928, a Hawaiian organization built steps and a walkway to the temple. Today, however, because the temple site is crumbling, it is closed to the public. The goal of the National Park Service is to preserve the historic religious structure and to protect visitors. You can view the temple site from below.



Kamehameha the Great,  
first ruler of the  
Hawaiian Islands.

Courtesy of  
Bernice P. Bishop Museum

## VISITING THE PARK

All points of interest in the park, which is open all year, can be visited on foot. The sites are identified for you on the map of the park area—an area covering 31 hectares (77 acres).

Before 1819, heiau, or temples, played an important role in the cultural and religious life of the islands. Three temple sites are found in the vicinity: the ruins of Pu'ukoholā Heiau—the most famous—and Mailekini Heiau and the traditional site of the Hale-ō-ka-puni Heiau.

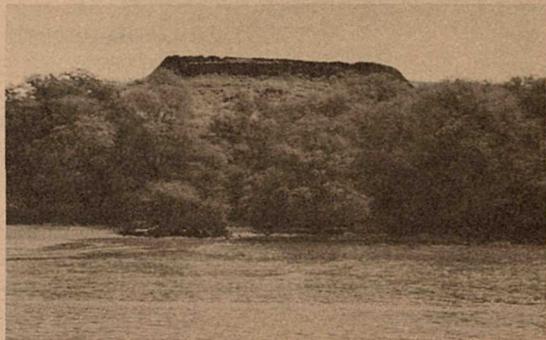
This park was authorized by Congress August 17, 1972. Archeological work will continue here to study the ruins and to search for structural remains of other sites and artifacts. Archeological survey will be done on Queen Emma's home, John Young's housesite, and Hale-ō-ka-puni Heiau in the waters of the bay.

*Please help us protect and preserve the park.*

Leave all plants, animals, rocks, shells, and other natural and manmade features undisturbed. Under the Federal Antiquities Act, it is unlawful to disturb "any historic or prehistoric ruin or monument or any object of antiquity" on Federal lands.

## 1 PU'UKOHOĻĀ HEIAU

Kamehameha built this temple because a prophet had told him that if he did so, he could fulfill his goal of conquering the Hawaiian Islands. The temple was completed in 1791, and Kamehameha dedicated it to his war god Kū-kā'ili-moku with a sacrifice of the body of his principal rival on Hawaii. The island soon fell to him, and about 4 years later the Hawaiian Kingdom was founded—and Kamehameha was ruler of all.



The great platform of Pu'ukoholā Heiau as seen from the shore of Kawaihae Bay.

## 2 MAILEKINI HEIAU

On the hillside between Pu'ukoholā Heiau and the sea are the ruins of Mailekini Heiau, a temple used by Kamehameha's ancestors.

An early English missionary said this temple was nearly equal in its dimensions to that on the summit of the hill (Pu'ukoholā), but inferior in every other respect. It appeared to have been literally crowded with idols, but no human sacrifices were offered to any of its gods. During Kamehameha's time this temple was converted by John Young into a fort to protect Kawaihae.

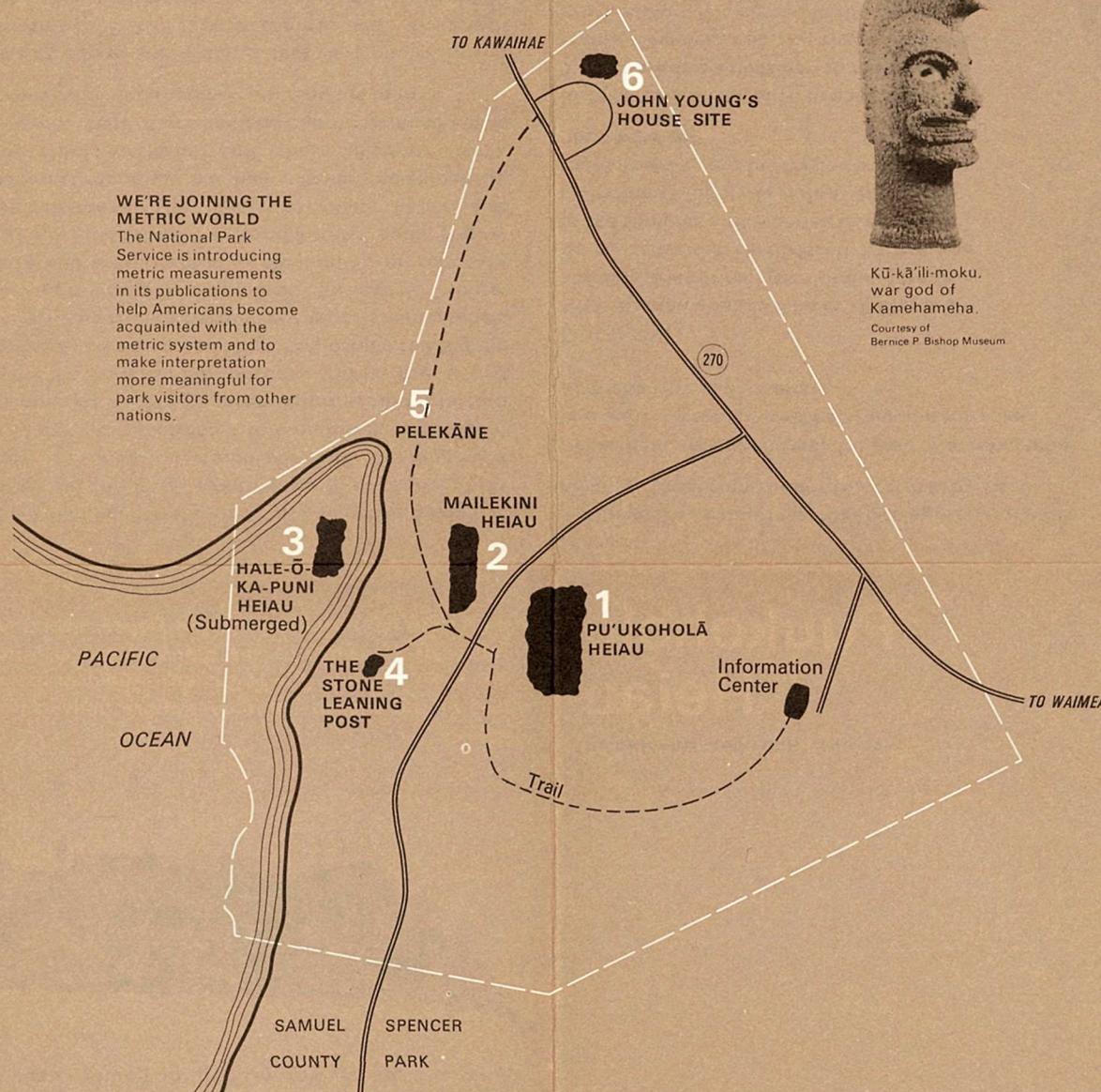
## 5 PELEKĀNE

Along the coast, below Mailekini Heiau, is the site of the king's residence at Kawaihae—the royal courtyard. King Kamehameha II returned here after the death of his father to prepare for his role as king of the Hawaiian Islands.

## 6 JOHN YOUNG'S HOUSE SITE



Kū-kā'ili-moku, war god of Kamehameha. Courtesy of Bernice P. Bishop Museum.



**WE'RE JOINING THE METRIC WORLD**  
The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

## 3 HALE-Ō-KA-PUNI HEIAU

The Hale-ō-ka-puni Heiau is believed to be submerged just offshore of Pu'ukoholā. Archeological work needs to be done to determine the location and extent of the ruins of the temple, which was dedicated to the shark gods.

## 4 THE STONE LEANING POST

On the beach nearby is the rock that the high chief Alapa'i-kupalupalu-manō leaned against as he watched the sharks circle about the Hale-ō-ka-puni Heiau before devouring the offerings he had placed there.

## 6 SITE OF JOHN YOUNG'S HOUSE

John Young was a British sailor stranded on Hawaii in 1790. Young became a trusted adviser of Kamehameha the Great and more closely associated with him than any other foreigner. Kamehameha, who called him Olohana, made him a Hawaiian chief. Olohana served as governor of the island of Hawaii from 1802 to 1812, and as business agent for the king. He often made trips to Honolulu and elsewhere and supervised trade with ships at Kawaihae. He also administered

the lands Kamehameha had given him—lands which were later inherited by his granddaughter, Queen Emma, wife of King Kamehameha IV.

Little is left of Olohana's home, a compound of several buildings reflecting both European and Hawaiian architectural styles. The house Olohana lived in was made of stone and mortar—probably the first western-type house on the islands. His wife (who was Kamehameha's niece), children, and servants probably lived in other houses of native Hawaiian style. The site of Young's house is north of Pu'ukoholā Heiau across State Route 27.

## SAFETY TIPS

To help you have a safe and pleasant visit with us and to preserve this historical area for everyone to enjoy, please observe the following:

- Do not climb on the walls of the temple.
- Stay on designated trails.
- The trail from the information center to the major features in the park is long, hot, and rugged. If you are not physically fit and attired in proper clothing or footwear, do not attempt the hike. You may view the area from the Spencer Beach Park road.
- To prevent grass fires, please do not smoke; this area is very dry and sometimes windy.
- The beach fronting Pu'ukoholā is unsuitable for swimming because the silt from the stream and coral stockpile have collected there. Swimming and picnicking are permitted at nearby Spencer Beach Park, a facility of the County of Hawaii.
- Use caution while getting off and onto the road if you park in front of Pu'ukoholā Heiau on the Spencer Beach Park road. Traffic is heavy.

Have fun—safely!

## TRANSPORTATION AND SERVICES

Airlines make scheduled flights several times daily from Honolulu to airports at Hilo, Keahole, and Waimea-Kohala—which is about 19 kilometers (12 miles) from the park. Taxis and car rentals are available at all airports.

The Hawaii Visitors Bureau, a nonprofit organization with offices in Honolulu, Hilo, Kona, Wailuku, Lihue, and 209 Post St., San Francisco, CA 94108, will supply information about trips to and through the Hawaiian Islands.

Camping and picnicking are not permitted within the park. Information on nearby camping at Samuel Spencer County Park may be obtained from Hawaii Visitors Bureau or State or county offices.

Gasoline and oil and a general store for supplies are 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) away in Kawaihae. The closest hospital is 46.5 kilometers (29 miles) away in Honokaa.