

# America's Sovereign States: The Obscure History of How 10 Independent States Joined the U.S.

It is often said that before the Civil War, the United States “are,” but after the War, the United States “is.” This is a reference to the formerly theoretically sovereign nature of each state as compared to “one nation, indivisible.”

More than just the theoretic sovereignty of the individual states, the territory now comprising the U.S. has a rich history of sovereign states outside the control of the federal government. Some of these you've almost certainly heard of, but a lot of them are quite obscure. Each points toward a potential American secession of the future.

## **Vermont Republic (January 15, 1777 - March 4, 1791)**

**Current Territory:** The State of Vermont

The earliest sovereign state in North America after the Revolution was the Vermont Republic, also known as the Green Mountain Republic or the Republic of New Connecticut. The Republic was known by the United States as “the New Hampshire Grants” and was not recognized by the Continental Congress. The people of the Vermont Republic contacted the British government about union with Quebec, which was accepted on generous terms. They ultimately declined union with Quebec after the end of the Revolutionary War, during which they were involved in the Battle of Bennington, and the territory was accepted into the Union as the 14th state - the first after the original 13.

The country had its own postal system and coinage, known as Vermont coppers. These bore the inscription “Stella quarta decima,” meaning “the 14th star” in Latin. They were originally known as “New Connecticut” because Connecticut's Continental representative also represented Vermont Republic's interests at Congress. However, the name was changed to Vermont, meaning “Green Mountains” in French.

Their constitution was primarily concerned with securing independence from the State of New York. Indeed, the state was known as “the Reluctant Republic” because they wanted admission to the Union separate from New York, Connecticut and New Hampshire - not a republic fully independent of the new United States. The genesis of the issue lay with the Crown deciding that New Hampshire could not grant land in Vermont, declaring that it belonged to New York. New York maintained this position into the early years of the United States, putting Vermont in the position of trying to chart a course of independence between two major powers.

The Green Mountain Boys was the name of the militia defending the Republic against the

United States, the British and Mohawk Indians. They later became the Green Mountain Continental Rangers, the official military of the Republic. The “Green Mountain Boys” is an informal name for the National Guard regiment from the state.

In 1791, the Republic was admitted to the Union as the 14th state, in part as a counterweight to the slave state Kentucky. The 1793 state constitution differs little from the constitution of the Republic. The gun laws of Vermont, including what is now known as “Constitutional Carry,” are in fact laws (or lack thereof) dating back to the days of the Green Mountain Republic. The constitution likewise included provisions outlawing adult slavery and enfranchising all adult men.

### **Kingdom of Hawai’i / Republic of Hawaii (May 1795 - August 12, 1898)**

**Current Territory:** The State of Hawaii and the Johnston Atoll

Hawai’i as a sovereign state is almost as old as the United States itself. Its origins were in the conquest of the Hawai’ian island. Western advisors (and weaponry) played a role in the consolidation of several islands into a single kingdom under Kamehameha the Great, who conquered the islands over a period of 15 years. This marked the end of ancient Hawai’i and traditional Hawai’an government. Hawai’i was now a monarchy in the style of its European counterparts. It was also subject to the meddling of great powers France and Britain, in the same manner of smaller European states.

The Kingdom was overthrown on January 17, 1893, starting with a *coup d’état* against Queen Lili’uokalani. The rebellion started on Oahu, was comprised entirely of non-Hawai’ians, and resulted in the Provisional Government of Hawaii. The goal was, in the manner of other states on our list, quick annexation by the United States. President Benjamin Harrison negotiated a treaty to this end, but anti-imperialist President Grover Cleveland withdrew from it. The failure of annexation led to the establishment of the Republic of Hawaii on July 4, 1894.

In 1895, the Wilcox rebellion, led by native Hawai’ian Robert William Wilcox, attempted to restore the Kingdom of Hawai’i. The rebellion was unsuccessful and the last queen, Liliuokalani, was put on trial for misprision of treason. While convicted, her prison term was nominal. She was sentenced to “hard labor,” but served it in her own bedroom and was eventually granted a passport to travel to the United States, which she used to extensively lobby against annexation.

When pro-imperialist President William McKinley won election in 1896, the writing was on the wall. The Spanish-American War began in April 1898, with the Republic of Hawaii declaring neutrality, but weighing in heavily on the side of the United States in practice. Both houses of Congress approved annexation on July 4, 1898, and William McKinley signed the bill on July 7th. The stars and stripes were raised over the island on August 12, 1898.

And by April 30, 1900, it was incorporated as the Territory of Hawaii.

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