The Wailua Complex of Heiau was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Consisting of Poliahu Heiau, Hikinaakalā Heiau, Kalaeokamanu Heiau, and Malae Heiau, these heiau denote the religious and social significance of the Wailua ahupua'a to the history and culture of both Kaua'i and Hawai'i. Other sites within this historic complex are the royal birthsite at Holoholokū, the petroglyphs at the rivermouth, and the bellstone.

Wailua River State Park was initially established in 1954 in recognition of the outstanding scenic and wilderness character of the Wailua River along with the significant historical, archaeological, geological, and other scientific values. The heiau sites were included in the park in 1962 to promote preservation and public awareness of these important cultural resources.

Traditionally, food items were left as offerings at a heiau. Please do not wrap or move rocks and do not leave items such as coins, incense, or candles as they cause long-term damage to this fragile resource.

Special recognition is given to Nā Kahu Hikina A Ka Lā, a community volunteer group, for their hard work and dedication as the curators of Hikinaakalā Heiau.
Hikinaakalā is translated as the rising of the sun. It is here that the rays of the sun rising in the eastern sky off Wailua first greet the shore of Kaua‘i. For centuries, the dawn was celebrated with prayers and chants at Hikinaakalā.

The walls of this large rectangular enclosure encompass an acre of land at the mouth of the Wailua River. The walls were once described as 6 feet high and up to 11 feet wide on the southern wall. Today, you see only the parallel row of large, upright boulders that formed the foundation for these once massive walls. The labor force required to move and erect these stones attests to the power and authority of the ali‘i (chiefs) and their kāhuna (priests) who oversaw the construction of such a site. Traditional history suggests that the site may have been built as early as the 1300s.

The large size of this site suggests its importance but little is known about its function. Might astronomers have come here to mark the changing of the seasons by the rising of the sun on the horizon? What structures might have existed within these walls? Was there an entry through the wall?

A row of wooden ki‘i (images) were placed outside the walled enclosure and faced the rivermouth. These ki‘i with their arms of kapa cloth watched over the site and were said to sway and tilt while being washed by the waters of Wailua.

Hauola (dew of life) is the name passed down from ancient times for this place at the mouth of the Wailua River. Traditional history records a pu‘uhonua (place of refuge) located here where one could escape punishment and find safety during times of war. The boundaries of this pu‘uhonua may have changed over time and as a chiefly area, it could have included much of the Wailua ahupua‘a (traditional land division). The religious center of Hauola was this site called Hikinaakalā.

NĀ KĪ‘I PŌHAKU (PETROGLYPHS)

The river and ocean currents remove the blanket of sand that covers the boulders along the riverbank. When exposed, you can see the ki‘i pōhaku (petroglyphs) marked on these stones. Created many generations ago, the meaning of these human, fish, and geometric images is uncertain today.

Sometime after the petroglyphs were made, the boulders were used as grinding stones. The smooth surfaces on the boulders are reminders of those who came here to sharpen, shape, and polish their adzes. These stone tools were lashed onto a handle and used for woodworking.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

This site area has undergone many changes in the past 700 years. Believed to be one of the early sacred sites of Wailua, it was converted to a secular use when the traditional religion was abolished in 1819.

In the 1700s, the walls of the site enclosed the sacred area. These massive walls were 6 feet high and 11 feet wide. A row of wooden ki‘i (images) known as ka pae ki‘i o Wailua stood near the river and watched over Hikinaakalā.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many rocks were removed and used in roadbeds. Only the foundation stones of the once massive walls remain today as reminders of the site’s importance.