

December 16th

On this day in 1949, a group of Northern Marianas political leaders adopted a charter to establish a regional government to be known as the Marianas Union.

The impetus for the charter came from Captain Walter C. Holt who served as governor of the Northern Marianas and commanding officer of the Tanapag Naval Air Station.

Holt, who assumed his duties in April 1949, believed that establishing a regional government would allow the United States to address two important responsibilities that came with administering the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, i.e. developing local political institutions and promoting local self-government.

After discussing this matter with his staff, Holt determined that a convention of leaders representing the inhabited islands of the Northern Marianas should be called to adopt a charter for this purpose.

At that time, five islands were inhabited – Saipan, Tinian, Rota, Alamagan and Agrigan.

On 12 December 1949, a charter convention was convened in the navy's officers club, known as "The Roundhouse," on the beach in Susupe.

Saipan was represented by 13 delegates, Tinian by three, and Rota two. The residents of the Alamagan and Agrigan were represented by Saipan delegate Juan M. Ada in his capacity as president of the Northern Marianas Development Company.

As its first order of business, the delegates elected Chief Commissioner Elias P. Sablan to serve as the convention chairman.

Sablan then appointed Vicente D. Guerrero of Saipan and Henry Hofschneider of Tinian to serve as convention secretaries.

The Navy was represented by Holt and the civil affairs administrator Commander James Grey and his staff.

Over the next two days a five-member charter study committee chaired by Saipan delegate Ignacio V. Benavente debated and revised various provisions of an initial draft charter which had been prepared by the deputy civil administrator Lt. Commander James B. Johnson.

The resulting final draft charter reported out by the study committee called for the Northern Marianas to be known as the Marianas Union. Chalan Kanoa was designated its capital city.

The Marianas Union was to have a unicameral legislature consisting of a senate whose members would be elected every two years. No senator could represent more than 300 residents.

Based on their respective populations, Saipan was to have sixteen senators, Rota was to have two, and Tinian, Alamagan and Agrigan one each.

The charter empowered the senate to make local laws, levy and collect taxes, borrow money, and constitute tribunals. The senate would also exercise certain executive branch functions.

All powers of the senate would be subject to naval approval.

The chief officer of the senate would carry the dual titles of President of the Senate and President of the Marianas Union.

The charter was formally adopted by unanimous vote during the final convention session held at the Roundhouse on the afternoon of 16 December. The document was then signed by Holt and by all 16 delegates on that same day.

The following month, the signed charter was forwarded to Trust Territory High Commissioner Admiral Arthur Radford in Honolulu for final approval.

Concerned that the existence of a regional government in the Northern Marianas would conflict with the "unit concept" for the Trust Territory, Radford disapproved the charter.

Undeterred by this setback, local leaders continued to aggressively pursue the political development of their islands in consultation with representatives of the administering authority.

Their efforts would culminate, more than two decades later, with the adoption of the Covenant which formally established the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.



Convention chairman Elias P. Sablan signs the Marianas Union Charter at the Roundhouse on 16 December 1949 while convention delegates and navy officials look on.