

# Cherry Blossoms in Big Apple Part 1—Past to Present

John Tedford

The center of New York City is Manhattan, although residents of the 'outer boroughs' may disagree. And as the name proudly proclaims, Central Park occupies the center of Manhattan. And in the center—actually the south-east corner—of the park is Central Park Zoo. And in the middle of the zoo is a lake and in the center of that lake is a small island and on that island lives a colony of Japanese macaque monkeys (*nihon-saru*), frolicking carefree in the midst of New York's most expensive real estate. Thus, Japan has a presence at the heart of this great city even if it is distinctly simian! Unlike their cousins in Tohoku, these New York macaques had to pass this winter (with temperatures hovering around 0°C) indoors rather than luxuriating in a *rotenburo* outdoor hot spring. And monkeys are not the only Japanese animal to move to New York; as I walk throughout the city I see more and more *shiba-inu* dogs sniffing contentedly at the fire hydrants of the Big Apple.

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## First Encounters

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The special relationship between Japan and New York City certainly goes back long before the first macaque or shiba-inu arrived here. In 1860, the first official delegation from Japan to the USA ended its national tour in New York after visiting Washington and other cities. As the historian Walter LaFeber noted in his book *Clash*, the *New York Times* gloated that it was only right that the tour should climax in New York rather than in the 'more provincial cities (i.e. Washington) through which they have been dragged as a kind of vulgar show.' Tens of thousands of New Yorkers turned out in great numbers to view the exotic Nipponese in their kimonos and *chonmage* topknots. All was not instant love—some Americans shouted insults, calling the more diminutive Japanese 'monkeys,' while the Japanese wrote home with disgust at the

decadence of America, noting in particular the uncomfortable sight of bare-shouldered women dancing in the intimate embrace of their male partners. But there was a flurry of mutual curiosity that still thrives. America's exuberant poet of the era, Walt Whitman (1819–92), published a long poem called *The Errand Bearers* in the *New York Times* on 27 June 1860, exulting, 'Superb-faced Manhattan, Comrade Americanos—to us, then, at last, the Orient comes...'

Even before the Japanese delegation visited New York, the city could already claim other links to Japan. Commodore Matthew Perry (1794–1858), whose 1853 expedition 'opened' Japan to the outside world, married the daughter of a wealthy New York banker in 1814 and the couple maintained homes in both New York and Newport. The latter was long considered his burial place but that is now contested with some historians believing he is buried in the churchyard of St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery in the East Village, an area of New York City now very popular with young Japanese expatriates. The delegation from Yokosuka visiting America in honor of the 150th anniversary of Perry's expedition chose to visit both Newport and New York (although they may have had some shopping and sightseeing motives for the latter).

New York itself played no small part in Perry's expedition; the city was a center of the China Trade and as such was eager to see Japan open its ports to American ships, both for coal and trade. As a commercial center, New York eagerly latched on to the new word 'tycoon,' a corruption of the Sino-Japanese *taikun* meaning 'great prince.' This was an artificial title invented by *bakufu* officials to refer to the shogun in early negotiations with the Americans—they were attempting to conceal the embarrassing fact that the shogun was, in theory, only the representative of the Emperor. One New Yorker who certainly heard this

misleading word was Townsend Harris (1804–78), America's first consul to Japan. Harris was a prosperous New York businessman who had made money in imports from China and in the large real-estate boom that followed the adoption of the street grid plan in 1811. In 1847, he founded The Free Academy in New York, the precursor of City College. Today, the college boasts an extensive collection of Harris' documents and memorabilia, including the faded American flag that flew over the first American Consulate in Shimoda.

This long-ago period when samurai overlapped with cowboys was made especially vivid to me as a child in the 1960s when one episode of the very popular TV western *Wagon Train* featured the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa (1889–1973). If I remember correctly, Hayakawa played a samurai escort for a Meiji diplomat returning home across the Great Plains from a meeting in Washington. They joined up with a wagon train for protection and company. At the end of the drama Hayakawa somehow fails in his feudal duties and commits *seppuku* (ritual suicide by self disembowelment) much to the astonishment of the toughened American cowboys watching this 'hairy-kerry.' Earlier in the episode, he has an encounter with Native American Indians who greatly admire his swords, his stoicism, his rather Indian face and even his 'Mohawk' hairstyle. So the character played by Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai* was scarcely the first 19th century American to meet a samurai up close!

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## Then to Now

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After the initial burst of enthusiasm of contact with Japan, relations remained at a low level for many decades, although a Japanese Consulate was opened in New York in 1872. The 1890 census showed

only 2039 Japanese in America most of whom were on the West Coast. (Hawaii was of course still independent.) Some Japanese did come to New York mostly working as cooks, stewards and kitchen staff for the Brooklyn Navy Yard. But bit-by-bit Nippon moved to New York. Miyako, the oldest Japanese restaurant, opened in 1910 while the Japanese American Association of New York (*Nikkeijin-kai*) also dates from that period. The harshest period in Japanese–American relations was from 1924 when the Quota Immigration Act prohibited Japanese immigration through the end of WWII. By 1924, the Japanese population in New York had grown to only around 3000, most of whom were employed in domestic work. During the war, Japanese–Americans in New York were not interned, but some religious and political leaders were taken into custody. As the war wound down, many Japanese who had been forcibly displaced to detention camps from their homes on the West Coast came to settle in the East where memories were less bitter and prejudices less entrenched. These new arrivals gave a strong boost to various Japanese–American organizations. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, relations between Japan and America improved rapidly. A memory of my childhood in that period is the Takashimaya Store that opened on Fifth Avenue. I don't remember how long it stayed in business, but store windows with kimono-clad manikins brought a bit of exotic Japan to the main shopping street of New York. Movies such as *Sayonara* (1957) and *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) played at Radio City Music Hall, introducing New Yorkers like myself to the charms and customs of their recent enemies. I also remember a Japanese girl in my fifth grade school in the New York suburbs—no doubt her father was part of the first wave of Japanese businessmen sent to work overseas. But even in the



Yummy Sushi to Die For—We hope they don't mean *fugu* (poisonous blowfish)!

(Author)

late 1960s when I began studying Japanese it was not easy to find a Japanese restaurant in the city. Then came the business invasion. In the 1980s, the Japanese economy exploded and with it the number of Japanese businessmen and their families in the New York area. The pricey suburb of Scarsdale became so inundated with Japanese schoolchildren that the high school received the snappy Japanese nickname '*suka-hai*.' Non-Japanese Scarsdale parents lamented that there were so many Japanese students in their high school that they were pulling down the SAT college admittance test scores since they did well in math but not in English. Riding the

Metro North trains from Grand Central Terminal toward the Westchester and Connecticut suburbs it suddenly seemed that every other passenger was reading a Japanese newspaper. Friction and stereotypes flourished, but also a profound growth in contact and interaction between the visiting Japanese and the city around them. ■

Part 2 of this article is continued in *JRTR* 39.



### John Tedford

Mr Tedford has worked for the Japan Railways Group New York Office since 1979. He graduated from Earlham College with a double major in Japanese Language and Fine Arts and also studied at Waseda University. He has also done freelance translation and performed professionally on the Japanese *koto* (a harp-like stringed instrument played horizontally). Born and raised in the New York suburbs, he has lived in Manhattan since 1973.