

The United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853

On July 8, 1853, American Commodore Matthew Perry led his four ships into the harbor at Tokyo Bay, seeking to re-establish for the first time in over 200 years regular trade and discourse between Japan and the western world.



Commodore Matthew Perry

Although he is often credited with opening Japan to the western world, Perry was not the first westerner to visit the islands. Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch traders engaged in regular trade with Japan in the 16th and 17th centuries. Persistent attempts by the Europeans to convert the Japanese to Catholicism and their tendency to engage in unfair trading practices led Japan to expel most foreigners in 1639. For the two centuries that followed, Japan limited trade access to Dutch and Chinese ships with special charters.

There were several reasons why the United States became interested in revitalizing contact between Japan and the West in the mid-19th century. First, the combination of the opening of Chinese ports to regular trade and the annexation of California, creating an American port on the Pacific, ensured that there would be a steady stream of maritime traffic between North America and Asia. Then, as American traders in the Pacific replaced sailing ships with steam ships, they needed to secure coaling stations, where they could stop to take on provisions and fuel while making the long trip from the United States to China. The combination of its advantageous geographic position and rumors that Japan held vast deposits of coal increased the appeal of establishing commercial and diplomatic contacts with the Japanese. Additionally, the American whaling industry had pushed into the North Pacific by the mid-18th century, and sought safe harbors, assistance in case of shipwrecks, and reliable supply stations. In the years leading up to the Perry mission, a number of American sailors found themselves shipwrecked and stranded on Japanese shores, and tales of their mistreatment at the hands of the unwelcoming Japanese spread through the merchant community and across the United States.

The same combination of economic considerations and belief in Manifest Destiny that motivated U.S. expansion across the North American continent also drove American merchants and missionaries to journey across the Pacific. At the time, many Americans believed that they had a special responsibility to modernize and civilize the Chinese and Japanese. In the case of Japan, missionaries felt that Protestant Christianity would be accepted where Catholicism had generally been rejected. Other Americans argued that, even if the Japanese were unreceptive to Western ideals, forcing them to interact and trade with the world was a necessity that would ultimately benefit both nations.

Commodore Perry's mission was not the first American overture to the Japanese. In the 1830s, the Far Eastern squadron of the U.S. Navy sent several missions from its regional base in Guangzhou (Canton), China, but in each case, the Japanese did not permit them to land, and they lacked the authority from the U.S. Government to force the issue. In 1851, President Millard Fillmore authorized a formal naval expedition to Japan to return shipwrecked Japanese sailors and request that Americans stranded in Japan be returned to the United States. He sent Commodore John Aulick to accomplish these tasks, but before Aulick left Guangzhou for Japan, he was relieved of his post and replaced by Commodore Matthew Perry. A lifetime naval officer, Perry had distinguished himself in the Mexican-American War and was instrumental in promoting the United States Navy's conversion to steam power.

Perry first sailed to the Ryukyus and the Bonin Islands southwest and southeast of the main Japanese islands, claiming territory for the United States, and demanding that the people in both places assist him. He then sailed north to Edo (Tokyo) Bay, carrying a letter from the U.S. President addressed to the Emperor of Japan. By addressing the letter to the Emperor, the United States demonstrated its lack of knowledge about the Japanese government and society. At that time, the Japanese emperor was little more than a figurehead, and the true leadership of Japan was in the hands of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Perry arrived in Japanese waters with a small squadron of U.S. Navy ships, because he and others believed the only way to convince the Japanese to accept western trade was to display a willingness to use its advanced firepower. At the same time, Perry brought along a variety of gifts for the Japanese Emperor, including a working model of a steam locomotive, a telescope, a telegraph, and a variety of wines and liquors from the West, all intended to impress upon the Japanese the superiority of Western culture. His mission was to complete an agreement with the Japanese Government for the protection of shipwrecked or stranded Americans and to open one or more ports for supplies and refueling. Displaying his audacity and readiness to use force, Perry's approach into the forbidden waters around Tokyo convinced the Japanese authorities to accept the letter.

The following spring, Perry returned with an even larger squadron to receive Japan's answer. The Japanese grudgingly agreed to Perry's demands, and the two sides signed the Treaty of Kanagawa on March 31, 1854. According to the terms of the treaty, Japan would protect stranded seamen and open two ports for refueling and provisioning American ships: Shimoda and Hakodate. Japan also gave the United States the right to appoint consuls to live in these port cities, a privilege not previously granted to foreign nations. This treaty was not a commercial treaty, and it did not guarantee the right to trade with Japan. Still, in addition to providing for distressed American ships in Japanese waters, it contained a most-favored-nation clause, so that all future concessions Japan granted to other foreign powers would also be granted to the United States. As a result, Perry's treaty provided an opening that would allow future American contact and trade with Japan.



Townsend Harris

The first U.S. consul assigned to a Japanese port was [Townsend Harris](#). Like many of the early consuls in Asia, Harris was a New York merchant dealing with Chinese imports. He arrived in Shimoda in 1856, but, lacking the navy squadron that strengthened Perry's bargaining position, it took Harris far longer to convince the Japanese to sign a more extended treaty. Ultimately, Japanese officials learned of how the British used military action to compel the opening to China, and decided that it was better to open its doors willingly than to be forced to do so. The United States and Japan signed their first true commercial treaty, sometimes called the Harris Treaty, in 1858. The European powers soon followed the U.S. example and drew up their own treaties with Japan. Japan sent its first mission to the West in 1860, when Japanese delegates journeyed to the United States to exchange the ratified Harris Treaty.

Although Japan opened its ports to modern trade only reluctantly, once it did, it took advantage of the new access to modern technological developments. Japan's opening to the West enabled it to modernize its military, and to rise quickly to the position of the most formidable Asian power in the Pacific. At the same time, the process by which the United States and the Western powers forced Japan into modern commercial intercourse, along with other internal factors, weakened the position of the Tokugawa Shogunate to the point that the shogun fell from power. The Emperor gained formal control of the country in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, with long-term effects for the rule and modernization of Japan.