

Trading Places by John Kendall, Volunteer Researcher with the Clallam County Historical Society

In a very roundabout way, Britain's opening trade with Japan in 1854 began 20 years earlier on rocks near Cape Flattery.

In 1834 three Japanese sailors washed ashore after 14 months adrift in a vessel bound from one Japanese port to another, a trip of 325 miles. But a typhoon blew the *Hojun-maru* with its crew of 14 off course and onto the Kuroshio current which runs from the Chinese coast eastward across the Pacific to the west coast of the United States.

Japan was then ruled by the Tokugawa shogun, a clan that forbade any contact with foreigners except the rulers' tight control of trade with China and the Netherlands. To prevent any Japanese vessels leaving the archipelago, the rulers ordered that all ships be no larger than 150 tons, have no keel to steer with, one large mast and a single square sail. When blown off course, the endangered crew members could only pray while their vessel – now a floating hulk—drifted on. This resulted in derelict Japanese vessels found in present-day Alaska and Hawaii. One study cited 60 such vessels in the Pacific region from 1617 to 1871.

The three sailors—possibly the first Japanese to set foot on what is now the continental U. S.-- “would be among the first of many to cross the Pacific Ocean against their will and end up changing history,” wrote Evelyn Iritani in “An Ocean Between Us.”

A Makah seal hunter spotted the survivors, who had lived on rice and rainwater. They were Iwakichi, 28, the navigator; and cooks Kyukichi, 15, and Otokichi, 14. They were taken to Ozette, one of the Makah's five villages, where they were held as slaves.

A passing sea captain saw the sailors, who gave the captain a piece with their names in Oriental characters and a drawing of their shipwreck. This was given to Dr. John McLoughlin, patriarch of the Hudson's Bay Company trading post at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River.

Four months after being washed ashore, they had a new master: the Hudson's Bay Company.

At Fort Vancouver, they were nursed back to health while missionaries began training them in English and Christianity. McLoughlin alerted his superiors in London and urged the sailors be used as bargaining chips in an effort to begin communication with Japanese rulers regarding trade opportunities.

The three boarded a vessel for London in November 1834 and became the first Japanese to land in Britain. The British government rejected any overtures to Japan – it was busy with the lucrative opium trade with China.

Their political value was now zero, so a captain took them to Macao, near Hong Kong, where the British abandoned them. Dr. Karl Gutzlaff, a German-born missionary, befriended them and had them translate the New Testament into Japanese. An American trader took the three, plus four survivors of another Japanese wreck, to Japan. The vessel was rebuffed when it tried to enter two ports, so all returned.

In 1853, U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry entered a Japanese port. Initially rebuffed, his vessels shelled several buildings before leaving a message from President Millard Fillmore with officials. Perry then left; in February 1854, he returned, and Japan agreed to open two ports to U. S. trade.

That same year, a British admiral was dispatched to Japan to urge the Japanese to deny supplies and port facilities to Russian ships because the British feared those ships, if they traveled to the Black Sea, south of Russia, would aid in their fight against the British in the Crimean War.

The sailor Iwakichi was the admiral's interpreter. Unfortunately his English was not that good, so the original mission failed; fortunately he somehow managed to negotiate a commercial treaty with Japan, similar to what Perry had done for the U. S.

The British, "thanks to Otokichi's accidental assistance, ended up leaving Japan with a commercial treaty that opened up several Japanese ports to British trade," summed up Iritani. "Nearly two decades later, McLoughlin's hopes that the young Japanese sailor would be of commercial use to Britain's commercial interests in Asia were fulfilled."

Otokichi married an Englishwoman, perhaps the first to do so, and worked for a British trading firm in Shanghai. The other two remained with Gutzlaff.

The Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay has a replica of the *Hojun-maru*, made by a master Japanese carpenter and donated in 2006; some porcelain from the original ship; and a bag of sand from a descendant of one of the sailor's families who left it in 1991. Those items may not be on public display.

For further reading besides the Iritani book, there is "Shipwrecks and Rescues on the Northwest Coast" by Bert and Margie Webber.

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For more information about the Clallam County Historical Society's museum and research facility, call 360-452-2662 or send an e-mail to [artifact@olypen.com](mailto:artifact@olypen.com).