

Triumphs and Tragedies of the Wakamatsu Colony

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People know what it means to be “Japanese American,” but very few know who the first Japanese Americans actually were. The first immigrants to set foot in America from Japan were the people of the Wakamatsu Colony (Iwata). This colony endured a multitude of tragedies in both Japan and America before earning their triumphs as the first Japanese Americans. Ultimately, bridging Japanese and American cultures, establishing the Japanese as a dominant force in California agriculture, and paving the way for future Japanese immigrants to California, comprise the lasting legacy of these early pioneers.

The year was 1869. Japan had suffered a civil war between the Tokugawa shogunate and Imperial forces. Losing this *Boshin War* was a tragedy for shogunate rule in Japan and marked the transfer of power back to the Imperial Court, a more western style of government (Ehrgott). Under the samurai code of *bushido*, the defeated samurai were expected to live in exile or preserve their honor by taking their own lives (Tanimoto). After losing the war, samurai of Aizu-Wakamatsu were determined to seek an alternate fate. They would escape to America, where they might renew their legacy through farming.

The mastermind behind the emigration was John Henry Schnell (Fig. 1). Schnell was a Prussian adventurer and keen businessman, who profitted by selling weapons from the recent American Civil War to the Japanese Civil War (Tanimoto). His best customer was Lord Matsudaira, ruler of the Aizu-Han, a group within the Tokugawa

shogunate. Schnell developed an alliance with the powerful Lord Matsudaira, who rewarded him by naming him a samurai. An unusual honor to bestow upon a westerner, Schnell was also allowed to marry Matsudaira's daughter, a samurai herself (Tanimoto). The recent Gold Rush in America promised wealth and fertile farmland, and this piqued Schnell's interest (Orth). When imperial forces threatened Aizu-Wakamatsu, Schnell organized their escape to America.

Each leg of their journey was a triumph for the Wakamatsu Colony. After sailing for three weeks on the steamship *China* (Fig. 2), Schnell and the colonists stepped foot in America at San Francisco (Iwata). From there, they traveled to Sacramento by riverboat, and eventually to their destination at Gold Hill by covered wagon. Each leg of this journey signified a victory for the colonists escaping Japan and starting a new life. Despite the sadness of leaving home, the colonists were fueled by high hopes for America in the summer of 1869 (Iwata). They planned to grow Japanese tea plants, bamboo, and rice, and they brought mulberry trees from Japan to cultivate silkworms (Iwata). The 22 Wakamatsu colonists felt safe in their new land, for they had John Henry Schnell, a great leader who they knew would protect them. Although Asians experienced discrimination in the US, Schnell served as a Japanese interpreter and advocate (Orth). The colonists soon learned English, but Schnell remained the only white person who spoke Japanese (Bertram). He also had funds supplied to him by Lord Matsudaira. Matsudaira's goal for the colonists was to renew Aizu-Han in a place safe from Imperial government (Tanimoto).

The class transition from samurai to farmer was a significant challenge for the colonists. In Japan, a farmer who didn't bow to a samurai would be punished (Tanimoto). Furthermore, fleeing one's homeland instead of maintaining honor by taking one's life was in strict disobedience to samurai code (Tanimoto). After arriving in America, the former samurai realized that they wouldn't be bowed to; they would actually be looked down upon. Americans, already familiar with Chinese workers from the Transcontinental Railroad, treated Asian immigrants with disrespect (*The Japanese Colony*). What the Americans did not realize, however, was that these former samurai would begin an agricultural revolution.

When the colonists arrived at Gold Hill, California, near Placerville, they saw rolling hills, blue skies, and plenty of rich soil to farm. Historians at the American River Conservancy believe that Schnell visited California in the spring of the previous year, to plan out a destination (Orth). Having pre-chosen farmland a year in advance was key, because the recent Gold Rush made housing expensive and hard to find (Boggan). Historians believe Schnell initially saw California in green; what he didn't see was California's hot and dry summers (Bertram). While Japan and California lie on the same latitude, they have vastly different climates (Guglieri). Schnell purchased the Graner House, which included 200 acres of farmland (Ehrgott). Next to the house, the colonists planted a *keaki* tree, their symbol of strength and perseverance (Fig. 3). The *keaki* tree provided welcome shade in hot summers, and reminded them of their roots (*The Pacific*

Historian). The Graner House and *keaki* tree are symbols of triumph, because they represented the colony's home in the new land, and more importantly, because they survive today.

On the heels of this triumph, the colony faced a major tragedy. The massive drought of the summer of 1869 devastated their first plantings (Ehrgott). Japanese tea plants thrive in moist, cold soil, so farming through the hot, dry summer was difficult (Bertram). Thankfully, there were kind neighbors willing to help. The Veerkamps were farmers who advised the colonists and shared resources. They assisted financially, as well as with physical labor and moral support (Orth). The farm might not have survived if it weren't for the Veerkamps (Fig. 4).

The colony was not about to succumb to the drought, but it did drive a few back to Japan (Ehrgott). Those who returned likely spread word of California and planted the seed of adventure for others in the years to come. However, with only 22 colonists to begin with, the loss of a few cost those remaining a great deal of extra work. Thankfully, Schnell brought 17-year-old Okei Ito from Japan to help care for his family (Tanimoto). Okei also served as a light that rallied the group, and motivated the colony through tough times (Tanimoto).

"Alta California," a popular newspaper in San Francisco, highlighted the Colony's products and spread word about the farm, boosting business.

"The Colony is entitled to kindly encouragement. Its success will quicken the development of the State, diversity of its products, and increase its attraction to Immigrants. We shall yet see colonies of European silk and grape growers taking up mountain lands and establishing thrifty settlements."

-*Alta California* article, May 27, 1869 (Iwata)

In 1869, Schnell took one of his best samurai, Matsunosuke Sakurai ("Matsu") to an agricultural fair in Sacramento (Fig. 5). They displayed silk, mulberry trees, kimonos, and other goods from Japan (Iwata). They also attended a San Francisco horticultural fair in 1870, which resulted in increased popularity and demand for Japanese goods (Ehrgott).

Between the summers of 1869-1870, the Wakamatsu Colony had a year of modest farming, but ultimately, water became scarce again (Ehrgott). The Japanese feared another drought, so they used their ingenuity to dig an irrigation ditch to water their crops (Tanimoto). This water flowed from a local mine, still active due to a "mini post-Gold Rush." Miners had settled the land next to the Wakamatsu Colony, and they were unhappy about Asians diverting their water. Moreover, iron sulfate from the mine contaminated the water, making it toxic for the Wakamatsu plants (Ehrgott). Thus, the innovative concept of preserving water, and the hard work in building the ditch for irrigation, ultimately backfired.

Back in Japan, Lord Matsudaira was captured by the Satsuma of the Imperial forces (Bertram). Being on the losing side of the *Boshin War*, Matsudaira was forced into Shinto priesthood. Stripped of his power, he could no longer fund the Wakamatsu Colony (Ehrgott). This sealed the fate of the first Japanese settlement in America. Shortly after funds were depleted, Schnell departed with his wife and children (Bertram). No one knows where they went, but historians believe Schnell returned to Japan to seek financial support (Bertram). Unfortunately, we may never know the truth about what happened. Nevertheless, Schnell's strong leadership, innovative ideas, and keen business acumen, contributed to the Wakamatsu legacy that lives on 150 years later.

By 1871, most of the original Wakamatsu colonists dispersed throughout the Sacramento region. One samurai, Masumizu Kuninosuke ("Kuni") married a local woman and lived in Coloma as a farmer and miner (*America's First Issei*). Okei Ito and Matsu lived with the Veerkamp family and helped on their farm (Ehrgott). A former samurai, Matsu dedicated the rest of his life to tending the farm and looking after Okei. When Okei died at the young age of 19 from a fever, she became the first Japanese to be buried in America (Ehrgott). Matsu was devastated, and he used his savings to secure a headstone for Okei's grave (Fig. 6). She still lies there today, at the site of the original Wakamatsu farm. By maintaining the farm after all others left, both Okei and Matsu proved their true honor: dedication to each other, loyalty to the farm, and commitment to their original mission.

Despite the short life of the Wakamatsu colony, these pioneers changed the course of Japanese immigration to the US, and thus, the landscape of our country (Bingman). The Wakamatsu were ambassadors of Japan to the US, as well as role models for future Japanese Americans. Their decision to pursue farming, and their talent in innovating new farming and irrigation methods foreshadowed the dominance of Japanese in California agriculture over the next 50 years (Iwata). Their numerous tragedies set the stage for even greater triumphs as the first Japanese Americans. In 1969, exactly 100 years after the colony's end, California Governor Ronald Reagan proclaimed the Wakamatsu Farm site as California Registered Historical Landmark No. 815 (Ehrgott) (Fig. 7,8). A centennial festival in 1969 garnered newfound respect for the colony, and celebrated their pioneering spirit that ushered in future Japanese immigrants and farmers (Enomoto) (Fig 9).

The Wakamatsu Colony had a lasting impact on Japanese immigration, farming, and California history. "The colony helped bridge Japanese and American cultures, contributed to California's agricultural economy, and established California as a gateway for Pacific immigration into the United States." (Bingman).

This colony represented the inaugural *issei*; subsequent waves of immigrants from Japan began around 1904 (Geisseler). Japanese in search of a new life saw the Wakamatsu as inspiration to break out of a centuries-old mold in search of better fortune. Because there were already many Chinese in America, Japanese immigrants

confronted rising discrimination in the dawn of racism against Asian Americans. This excluded many higher paying jobs, so like the Wakamatsu, Japanese immigrants turned to farming, still considered a respectable profession (Iwata). Newspaper reports about the Wakamatsu Colony being a group of hard working farmers created a reputation that helped future Japanese settlements flourish (*The Japanese Colony*). But why would other *issei* come to America when the Wakamatsu Colony had *failed*? They failed on account of inexperience in California and lack of funds (Bertram). Their failure was not an end, but rather, just the beginning. They paved the path for subsequent *issei*, who built on the lessons learned, improved irrigation and farming methods, and secured more reliable financing.

Issei, by definition, means “first generation of Japanese in a new country” (Tanimoto). The Wakamatsu opened the floodgates for Japanese into California. By 1890, there were 2000 Japanese immigrants in America, and by 1907, the annual number of Japanese immigrants reached 30,000 (Iwata). The majority chose to settle in California, attracted by the climate and agricultural opportunities (Iwata). To this day, California has 272,528, the highest Japanese population of any state (2010 Census Brief). Soon, Japanese-Americans would produce more than 10% of all California farm products (Ehrgott). By 1941, *issei*, along with their *nissei* children, were producing 30-35% of all commercial crops in California (Iwata).

One of the lasting legacies of the earliest Japanese immigrants in California is rice production. It was discovered that, while American long grain rice from the Carolinas grew poorly on the west coast, Japanese short-grain rice thrived in California soil. (Geisseler). The original grains of Japanese rice brought over by the Wakamatsu were undoubtedly the seedlings that later launched one of the most successful crops in California. Short-grain rice skyrocketed in popularity, and production in California ultimately overtook Japan in volume (Iwata). In fact, California is the world's number one Japanese rice producer today (Geisseler).

The Veerkamp family owned and continued to operate the Wakamatsu farm for the next 140 years (Fig. 10, 11). In 2007, the Veerkamps sold the farm to the American River Conservancy, an organization dedicated to land conservation, stewardship, and education (Ehrgott). In addition to restoring the original Graner House and Wakamatsu Farm, the ARC will host a sesquicentennial festival in June 2019 celebrating 150 years of Japanese-American heritage.

Even the best of things cannot last forever. Author Herb Tanimoto describes the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony as the essence of *Yin* and *Yang*. Nature has to have a balance; everything needs to stay equal. The fact that the colonists were able to escape their crumbling homeland, arrive in a new and foreign country, and establish a settlement of their own were major triumphs (signifying *yin*). Having to escape the death and devastation of war in their own homeland was a tragedy. Enduring California

droughts, discrimination in the new land, and the final fall of the farm, all signified the *yang* (Tanimoto). Beyond this, the Wakamatsu Colony served a much greater role for us today. They opened up the United States to immigrants from Japan, bringing with them innovative ideas and a culture of hard work and perseverance. The colony's establishment of the Wakamatsu farm laid the groundwork for Japanese farming over the next century. In a letter from the White House in 1969, President Richard Nixon wrote of the colony's centennial milestone, "The immigrants from Japan who settled in this country raised civic-minded, law-abiding families, and became doers and leaders in our communities. They have enriched our way of life more than any of us can ever say." (Nixon, Fig. 12).

One such "doer and leader" is Helen Otow, of Otow Orchards in Granite Bay, CA (Fig. 13). In 1911, Helen's father purchased 20 acres of farmland 25 miles west of the Wakamatsu farm, where they grew persimmons and citrus (Otow). Tragedy struck when her family was forced into internment during World War II, but Helen rebuilt the farm and continues working the land to this day, at age 103 (Fig. 14). She embodies the samurai's strong work ethic and ultimate triumph in California.

Although there are no written diaries that retell their experiences, there is one lasting treasure that speaks greater volumes than any text. The *keaki* tree that the Wakamatsu planted upon arriving remains a majestic symbol of strength, perseverance, and breathtaking beauty. Today, the original tree has grown

exponentially, towering over the Graner House as a living legacy of the first Japanese Americans (Fig. 15). The keaki tree likely inspired and motivated the colonists to forge on through trying times. As a Japanese American, I am able to stand in awe of their full grown *keaki*, and feel that same inspiration myself.

Appendix



Fig. 1. John Henry Schnell, Photograph, <https://eldoradoartscouncil.org/teasilkgold>. Civil War arms dealer to Lord Matsudaira, and leader of the Wakamatsu Colony.



Fig. 2. *Steamship China*, Painting. Courtesy of the American River Conservancy.



Fig. 3. Chang, Kai. The restored Graner House with the majestic *keaki* tree in front.

House and grounds restored by the American River Conservancy. Placerville, CA. Photographed by the author on December 2, 2018.



Fig. 4. The Veerkamp Family, Photograph. Courtesy of the American River Conservancy.



Fig. 5. Matsunosuke Sakurai, Photograph. Courtesy of the American River Conservancy.

https://www.arconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/WakaNews_Spring2017-1.pdf. Samurai in service of John Henry Schnell, who stayed with the farm after it collapsed.



Fig. 6. Okei's Headstone, Photograph. Sally Taketa Collection #JA 155, Japanese American Archival Collection. Donald & Beverly Gerth Department of Special Collections and University Archives. University Library. California State University, Sacramento.



Fig. 7. Governor Ronald Reagan marks the Wakamatsu Farm as a California Registered Historical Landmark, Photograph, 1969. Journal of Sierra Nevada History and Biography, <https://www.sierracollege.edu/ejournals/jsnhb/v5n1/ito.html>.



Fig. 8. Governor Ronald Reagan gives a speech about the Wakamatsu Colony,
Photograph, 1969, image courtesy of the American River Conservancy.

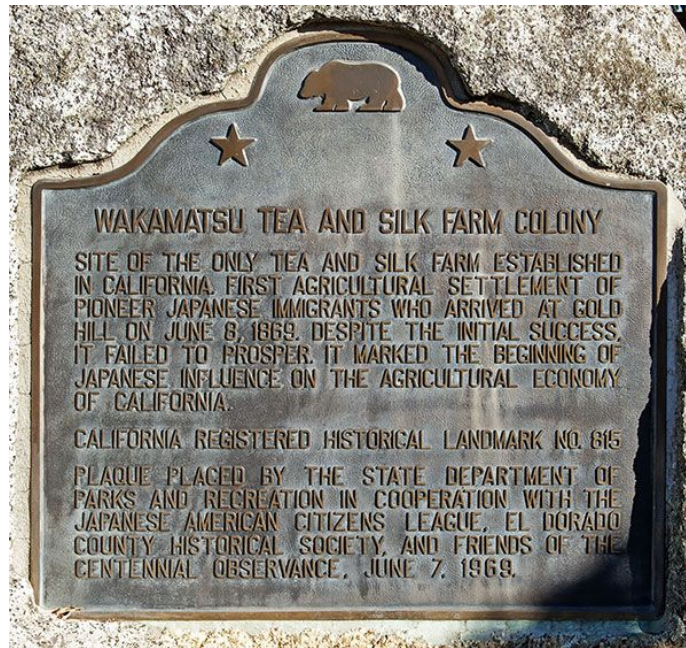


Fig. 9. Plaque proclaiming the Wakamatsu Colony California Historical Landmark

Number 815, Photograph, <https://noehill.com/eldorado/cal0815.asp>.



Fig. 10. The Veerkamp Farm Logo, Photograph.

<https://eldoradoartscouncil.org/teasilkgold/>.



Fig. 11. Descendants of the Veerkamp family and Wakamatsu Colony displaying the original Aizu-Wakamatsu banner and sword, Photograph, 1930

<https://eldoradoartscouncil.org/teasilkgold/>.

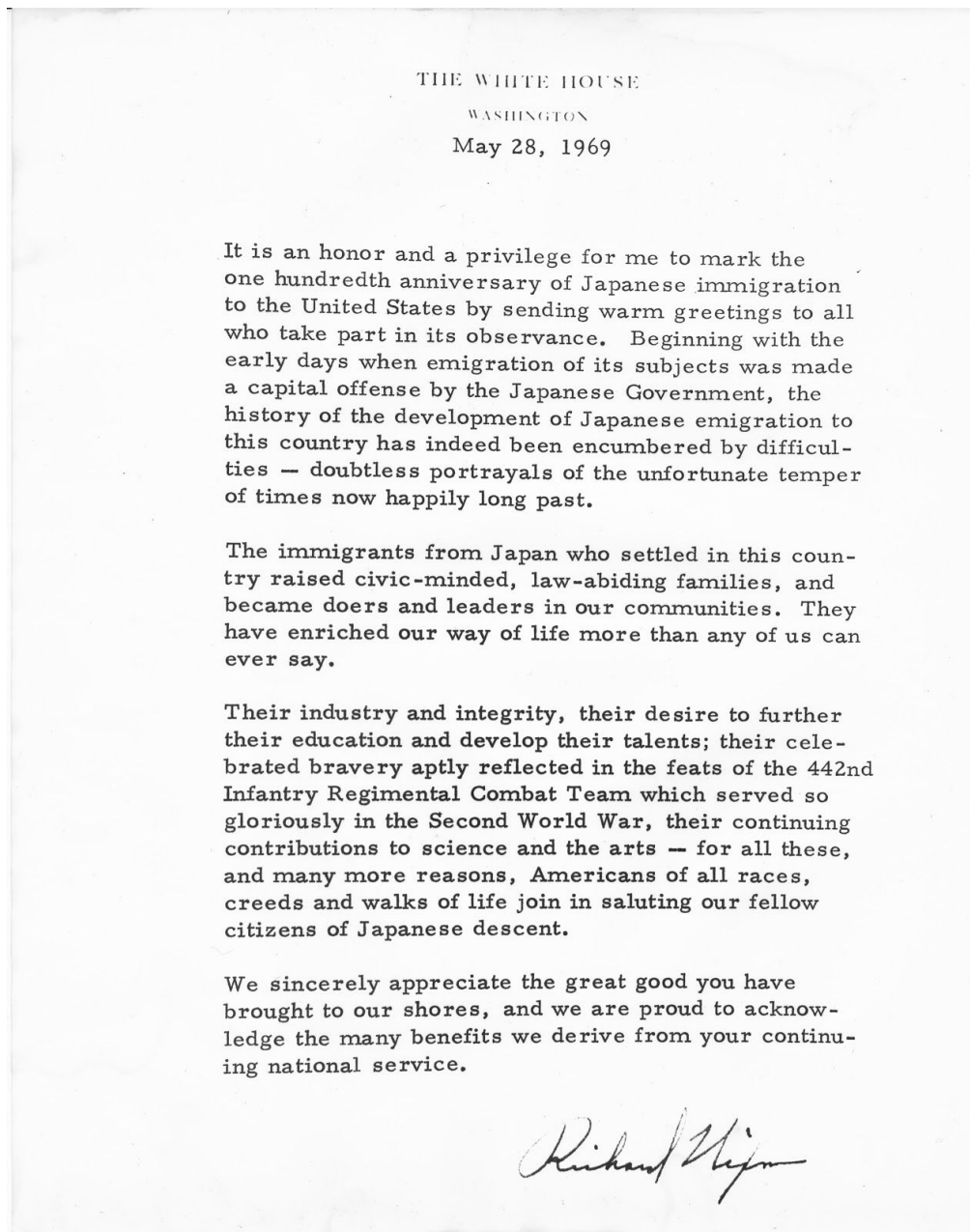


Fig. 12. Letter from President Richard Nixon, 5/28/1969. Courtesy of the American River Conservancy.



Fig. 13. Chang, Kai. Helen Otow, owner of Otow Orchards in Granite Bay, CA, posing with the author on her farm. At age 103, Otow still works on her farm every day. Photographed by Norika Malhado-Chang on March 31, 2019.



Fig. 14. Chang, Kai. The author posing with an original farm truck used at the Otow Orchards, Granite Bay, CA. Photographed Norika Malhado-Chang on March 31, 2019.



Fig. 15. Chang, Kai. The original keaki tree that the Wakamatsu Colony planted.

Placerville, CA, photographed by the author, December 2, 2018.

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Otow, Helen. In-person interview by the author, March 31, 2019. At 103 years of age, Helen Otow is one of the oldest surviving Japanese *nissei* (second generation) farmers in California. She still tends to her orchard today, and has a wealth of information to share about growing up as a Japanese American and farming in the Sacramento Valley over the last century.

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Bertram, Susan Morioka. In-person interview by the author, Dec. 2, 2018. Ms. Bertram is a docent at the Wakamatsu Farm, who provided information about the Graner

House, *keaki* tree, and each individual colonist. She provided insight into shogunate rule, Lord Matsudaira, how Schnell led the colony, and the role each colonist played on the farm.

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in California over the years. It also provided information about American views on the Japanese.

Orth, Donna. In-person and e-mail interviews by the author, December 2, 2018. Ms. Orth is a docent at the Wakamatsu Farm. She provided great detail on the Veerkamp Family, and explained the Colony's lasting impact on farming in California.

Tanimoto, Herb. In-person interview by the author, November 4, 2018. Mr. Tanimoto is a docent at the Wakamatsu Farm. He has particular expertise on Japanese history, the role Okei Ito played on the farm, as well as details on each individual colonist.

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