

On the Waterfront

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The night is nearly at its end. An opal vault of blue and violet soars overhead, unmarred by even the merest wisp of cloud. Ships and piers and buildings are one great brooding black shadow. Yokohama is still asleep.

The name means "side beach," and that is exactly what Japan's premier port once was: a beach on the southwest side of what is now known as Yokohama Bay. Until 1859 the semi-island bore a scanty collection of tumbledown fishermen's huts set in a patchwork of rice paddies; a river and an adjoining canal separated it from the mainland shore.

After the visits of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry in 1853 and 1854, the ports of Shimoda (at the end of the Izu Peninsula south of Tokyo) and Hakodate (in Hokkaido) were opened to foreign ships. The United States-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce, signed on July 29, 1858, stipulated that four more ports were to follow: Nagasaki (in Kyushu) and Kanagawa (on the Tokaido road about five kilometers north of Yokohama) were to be opened on July 4, 1859; Niigata (on Honshu's western coast) and Hyogo (the modern Kobe) were scheduled to follow on January 1, 1860.

The Tokugawa government was deeply divided about what effect a foreign merchant colony might have on the Japanese populace: Siting unpredictable outsiders so close to the capital of Edo (now Tokyo) on the vital Tokaido was seen by many officials as entirely too risky. Peremptorily changing their plans, the shogunate relocated the new port to Yokohama, away from the Tokaido and by virtue of its geography more easily isolable. A frenzy of construction ensued, with granite piers and quays, causeways and bridges, houses and godowns and a customhouse all being completed in short order. Representatives of the United States

and the other four nations (Great Britain, Russia, France and Holland) that had concluded treaties with Japan protested vehemently, but their merchants saw that Yokohama was actually the better location. Commercial sense eventually prevailed: On the day that the treaty took effect, cargo-laden ships were already riding at anchor awaiting the opening of the customhouse.

Until that day, the archipelago had been a *sakoku*, a "closed country." In an effort to exclude what was at that time justifiably seen as an acquisitive, intruding foreign presence, from 1639 the Tokugawa shogunate had forbidden both the landing of foreigners in Japan and the exit of Japanese from their home islands.

There were a few exceptions: The Dutch and Chinese were each granted a small trade delegation at Nagasaki; the island of Tsushima was allowed limited commercial relations with Korea; the Satsuma clan in Kyushu was permitted contact with the Ryukyu kingdom, which in any event was later to become part of Japan as Okinawa Prefecture. Through those narrow windows, the changing world had been seen dimly and from afar. However, with the opening of the treaty ports that once-distant world had come in a single leap to Japan's own threshold. Yokohama, the nearest of those ports to the capital of Edo, was the door to the future, with all its promise and uncertainty.

An orange glow ignites the horizon, giving sharp outline to a towering cargo crane and the slender masts of a training bark. The disparate shapes, one so modern, the other a memory of another time, are welded together as the sun begins its climb.

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