Letter from President Millard Fillmore to the Emperor of Japan

The president letter opened a closed country to the West
~ Marvin Pinkert and Lee Ann Potter

In 1852, Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed to Japan with instructions to deliver a letter from President Millard Fillmore to the Emperor. The letter eventually led to the 1854 treaty of Kanagawa and the opening of Japan to trade with Western nations. The state Department’s letter book copy of the letter is featured in this article. (A letter book is bound book containing copies of official letters.)

Since the early 1600s, Japan had maintained a policy of sakoku or “close country”. The Tokugawa Shogun’s government had prohibited virtually all travel abroad & trade with foreign nations (with the exception of a small Dutch enclave maintained on the island of Deshime near Nagasaki). The purpose of the policy was to put an end to what the Shogunate perceived as missionary interference & the potential corrupting influence of contact with foreigners, especially Western “barbarians.” The full title of the Shogun means “barbarian-subduing general,” & the power to stop Westerners from violating Japan’s seclusion policy was seen as a measure of the Shogunate’s right to hold power.

Conversely, by the 1850s, with the extension of the U.S. border to the Pacific following the recent war with Mexico, policymakers, including President Fillmore & Secretary of State Daniel Webster, looked to Asia as the next logical expression of “manifest destiny.” European powers were already contending for control of Chinese ports, & the United States did not wish to be excluded from this arena. Though trade with Japan was considered desirable, the drive to open Japan focused specifically on two other issues.

As stated in the letter that was first drafted by Webster in Many 1851, the United States wanted Japan to provide safe haven for U.S. sailors from whaling fleets who became shipwrecked near Japan’s shores. &, the United States wanted Japan to allow American steamships to be supplied with coal, provisions, & water in Japanese ports.

That the letter was addressed to the Emperor rather than the Shogun reflected some ignorance on the part of the American leaders. Real political power at this time rested with the Shogun’s advisors, not with the Emperor. Nonetheless, when Perry & his squadron of four warships entered Edo (Tokyo) Bay in early July 1853, a senior court counselor ceremoniously accepted the letter.

Perry’s arrival caused considerable alarm. The city of Edo was very vulnerable because it depended greatly on sea supply for its food. The “Black Ships”(the Japanese noted both the color of the hull & the columns of smoke pouring from the steamships) represented an unexpected technological advance. The ships carried more armament than all of Edo’s coastal defenses, which had been neglected during two countries of peace. Moreover, the ships could use steam power to overcome wind & tide.

After delivering the letter, Perry left for Hong Kong & vowed to return early the next spring for negotiations. A few days after Perry left Japan, the Shogun became sick & died. His chief counselor took the unprecedented step of consulting with the regional lords on how to respond to the threat posed by the United States. With no responsibility for the result, many of the lords used this opportunity to criticize the Shogunate for its failure to expel the “barbarians.” The Shogunate’s embarrassment was a contributing factor in the disintegration of its authority.

In January 1854, Perry heard that the Russians & the French might have sent their own diplomats to Japan. So, he altered his timetable & risked a dangerous winger voyage back to Japan-this time with nine ships. He arrived in Japanese waters in mid-February, & reached a compromise with Japanese officials to hastily build the Treaty House in the village of Kanagawa (today part of Yokohama) for the site of the negotiations.
Between March 8 & March 31, Perry negotiated with Japanese commissioners led by Prince Ido of Tsushima. One of the challenges faced by negotiators on both sides was that neither had a representative at the negotiating table who could speak the other’s language. Nor was there an existing Japanese-English dictionary that both could consult to translate from one language to the other. Instead, all of the proposals between the two sides had to be translated into one of the two languages for which they both had translators – Dutch & Chinese.

The final Treaty of Kanagawa, signed on March 31, 1854, was considered “unequal” in that it granted the United States rights while giving no comparable rights to Japan. It did, however, reflect compromises on both sides. Perry asked for five coaling ports. Article II of the treaty provided for just two-both remote from major population centers. Also, Perry wanted to establish trade, but settled for supplies to be provided through the Japanese government. Even the absence of a Japanese signature on the English, Dutch, & Chinese versions of the treaty was a concession to the Japanese negotiators who explained that their laws prohibited signing documents in foreign languages.

But both sets of negotiator told their respective governments that all their major goals had been achieved & that the compromises were of little consequence. In early summer of 1854, the U.S. Senate ratified the treaty, President Franklin Pierce made an official proclamation on June 22, 1855, & U.S. Consul Townsend Harris became America’s first diplomatic representative to Japan in August 1856.

Within two years the British, French, Russian, & Dutch governments had concluded their own “unequal” treaties with Japan. The treaties fueled the efforts of regional lords to first question & later openly rebel against the Tokugawa Shogunate. A new government installed under the Emperor Meiji in 1868 committed itself to the modernization of Japan & the revision of the unequal terms of the treaties.

Commodore Perry absolutely prohibited officers & men from sending home journals, notes, drawings, curiosities or specimens from the voyage without permission or allowing their letters to be given to the newspapers. The order reflected Perry’s previous experience with press criticism & his desire to control the flow of information about his sensitive diplomatic mission. While at least two of his crew disobeyed this order, still much of what is known about the expedition comes from Perry’s own narrative & his personal journals, all in the holdings of the National Archives. They contain many illustrations & written observations of people & customs. Perry brought two artists & a naturalist on the expedition for the purpose of gathering scientific & cultural data, making this a voyage of exploration as well as diplomacy.

The Japanese also made both written & visual records of the extraordinary events of 1853-54. The “Black Ship Scroll,” a thirty-foot-long set of hand-drawn illustrations, is an example of a contemporary Japanese account.

Note: You can access the document featured in this article from the records of the Department of State, Record Group 46, & is in the holdings of the National Archives. The original letter that was received by the Emperor burned in a fire in Japan in 1858.

Chronology of the Mission to “Open Japan”

- **1844** The Dutch unsuccessfully seek relaxation of exclusion laws & warn the Japanese of America’s future ambitions.
- **1846** Commodore James Biddle leads first official American mission to open Japan but fails to be granted a meeting with senior Japanese officials.
- **1849** Captain James Glynn leads second American mission, securing the release of captured American seamen, but no agreement.
- **June 10, 1851** Secretary of State Daniel Webster sends instructions to Commodore J.A. Aulick of the East India Squadron to lead an expedition to Japan for purposes of securing a treaty to provide coaling ports, protect shipwrecked whalers, & establish trade.
- **January 22, 1852** Following Aulick’s personal scandal, Commodore Matthew C. Perry reluctantly accepts command of the mission. He spends months briefing himself on Japan & meticulously organizing the logistics of the voyage.
- **November 24, 1852** Perry sails out of Norfolk, Va., on the *Mississippi* bound for China, by way of Madeira, St. Helena, Cape Town, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, & Singapore.
- **April 6, 1853** Perry arrives in Hong Kong & is joined by other ships of the East India Squadron.
- **July 8, 1853** Perry’s squadron of four “black ships” enters Edo (Tokyo) Bay to deliver a letter to the Emperor requesting a treaty.
- **July 17, 1853** Perry leaves for Hong Kong promising to return in the spring for negotiations.
- **January 15, 1854** Hearing that the Russians & French may already have missions on their way to Japan, Perry changes his timetable & risks a dangerous winter voyage back to Japan, this time with nine ships.
- **February 13, 1854** Perry arrives back in Japanese waters & reaches a compromise with Japanese officials to hastily build the Treaty House in the village of Kanagawa (today part of Yokohama) for the site of the negotiations.
- **March 8-31, 1854** Perry negotiates with Japanese commissioners led by Prince Ido of Tsushima.
- **March 31, 1854** Treaty of Kanagawa is signed.