

With Perry in Japan



Somewhat more than 100 years ago, Commodore Matthew C. Perry represented the United States in negotiations with Japan which resulted in the opening of that nation to commerce with the Western world. As a junior officer of USS *Macedonian*, 24-year-old passed midshipman John Glendy Sproston recorded his impressions of these conferences and the reaction of the Japanese to the visit of U.S. men-o'-war to feudal Japan

The 105-page manuscript *A Private Journal of John Glendy Sproston* first came to light when it was purchased by the Library of Congress in 1926. The previous owner of the manuscript was not known and, since that time, it has not been possible to trace its earlier history.

Macedonian had sailed from New York in April 1853 and joined the Squadron in February 1854 at the American Anchorage in Edo Bay. Although Commodore Perry had given strict orders not to communicate with anyone in regard to the Squadron's movements, discipline or regulations, Sproston lost no time in recording the activities of the expedition.

After a brief preliminary mention of the present visit, he began his journal with Captain Henry Adam's interview with the Japanese commissioners and closed it eight months later in Hongkong only because he had the opportunity to forward it to his family in Baltimore through a personal friend who was homeward bound. Enclosed with the rough draft of the manuscript was the note: "Sent in an unfinished

state; will correct on reaching home, if I live."

Sproston did live through the Japan expedition and duty with the East India Squadron. He returned home in 1856 but did not have time to revise his journal.

On 28 Apr 1861, then LT Sproston was ordered to take command of USS *Powhatan* for duty along the Virginia coast and inland waters. Later, he was transferred to USS *Colorado* and later to *Seneca*, one of the vessels of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, as executive officer. He was killed in June of the following year in Florida while in command of an expedition sent ashore to capture a Confederate captain.



COMO Matthew C. Perry USN

8 Mar 1854, Yedo Bay, Japan

THIS DAY, if it be not hereafter remembered by our own, will at least be long kept in mind by the people of this country. The morning opened clear and pleasant with a light northeasterly wind which died away entirely in the latter part of the forenoon.

From *A Private Journal of John Glendy Sproston, USN*, edited by Shio Sakanishi. Published by Sophia University, Tokyo, 1949.



AMERICANS FACING Japanese Commissioners in private room seem to have difficulty sitting Japanese fashion.

In the morning watch, I noticed the Japanese erecting a fence from the landing to the House of Reception. This, I knew, was contrary to the express desire of the Commodore who stated to them that he would not land if they did so; a few minutes after, a gig left the flag-ship and pulled to the landing, which resulted in the fence being taken down.

At 11 AM, thirty boats belonging to the squadron pulled for the landing with Captain Buchanan leading in his gig (he having charge of the military proceedings of the day). Reaching the landing, [they] disembarked the Marines and armed seamen picked for the occasion.

About this time *Macedonian*, which had been sprung broadside to, fired a salute of seventeen guns. The Marine guard was drawn up on the left and the seamen on the right, leaving a space of about a hundred feet in between the two, forming two columns stretching from the water's edge to the entrance of the main building, with bands of music at each end—bass and small drums, fifes and so forth, arranged near the troops. The boats hauled off, anchored in what was intended to be a line 30 yards from the beach. In the middle of the line were 12 launches, each mounting a howitzer, intended for saluting.

THE SIGHT NOW was certainly a pleasing one. From the House of Reception, about 100 yards, sloping very gradually to the water's edge, were drawn up the troops as I before mentioned: The Marines, 160 in number, in full dress, their arms glittering in the sun; opposite to them the sailors, 224 in number in blue jackets and trousers, and blue caps with bands of red, white and blue, with stars worked in the blue stripe. Their arms consisted of musket, pistol and cutlass.

The white barge with the blue broad pennant now approached. As it passed the boats, the officers and men rose and took off their caps, a mark of respect. As soon as the Commodore landed, the drums rolled, the troops at the word of command from Major Zeland presented arms, the bands struck up the "Star Spangled Banner," and gunboats commenced saluting. The first salute was a national one of 21 guns, and the second a commodore's of 17 guns, or rather a minister's, for it was in that capacity that the Commodore appeared, being styled as the "Lord High Commissioner from America."

Preceded by the broad pennant, the pole of which was ornamented with a gilt battle-ax head, and followed by the officers composing the suite [with] six armed servants bringing up the rear, the Commodore passed up between the lines bare-headed, and entering the building disappeared from my view (my station being in charge of the boats from this ship).

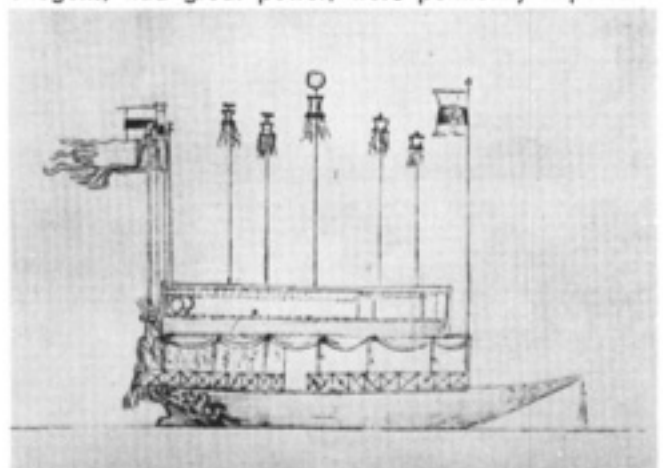
Being close to the shore and having a good spy-glass, I observed with ease everything that was going on outside. I saw them passing up and down the lines with cake and candy for the officers, who also made them distribute it among the sailors and soldiers. The two bands of music performed alternately, relieved by a strong muster of drums and fifes. The latter excited their curiosity very much, it being a kind of music which they could better understand.

The open space included about five acres, round which were erected canvas screens like their flags, with white, black and white stripes and diamond-shaped holes cut at regular intervals. Here and there for some extent a cord only denoted the line of demarkation, and here were assembled crowds of natives, most of them being servants, evidently, from their livery. Some were of blue with white strips of different shapes, others of a reddish color with lacquered hats, shaped or formed like those of the Chinese. Numbers of the outsiders would watch their opportunity and creep in to see the show, when the authorities, observing them, would attempt to seize them and the race that ensued reminded me of a militia training when the police officers are in chase of boys.

IT BEING NOW about 1 pm, I sent a boat ashore with the grog to freshen their nip. In the meantime, negotiations had commenced. The Commodore, attended by five officers and the Japanese Commissioner, followed by a like number, had retired to a private room to arrange preliminaries, while the remainder of the suite in the company of several princes and the Governor of Uraga (the place of the former conference) occupied the main building discussing the rather limited bill of fare, the principal viands being cold soup sweetened, snake chowder, mixed vegetables, cake and candy. Not being as yet able to speak from personal observation of the interior of the building, I shall not at present give any description of it.

About half past three pm, the drum sounded to quarters [and] officers and men resumed their stations. About a dozen Japanese conveyed a number of kegs and boxes containing *sake* and sweetmeats down to the landing. (Presents for the Commodore.) A few minutes after, several Japanese authorities passed along the line and entered their boats; these were followed in time by the Commodore, accompanied by the Commissioner.

ANOTHER of the sketches shows the Shogun's barge. Shoguns, had great power, were politically important.



Again the drums rolled, the escort presented arms, the bands sounded their martial strains. When the barge pulled from the landing, the men in the boats rose and doffed their caps, the officers saluted, then the boats were beached. The seamen, Marines, bandmen, having again been martialled in their respective boats and the line abreast reformed, the escort set out on its return in good order, and all expressed themselves well satisfied with the proceedings of the day.

On the following day, Captain Adams, fleet captain, met a deputation of the Japanese on board *Mississippi* and held a consultation. This was followed by several similar interviews.

March 23

ONCE MORE DID a visit of ceremony take place between the Commodore and Commissioners. I went in charge of our boats but without the howitzer. The men, however, were armed as usual. I had also another officer with me, who remained by the boat after the Marines were landed, thereby enabling me to see the proceedings of the morning.

In the principal audience hall were displayed the presents from the Emperor of Japan to our Government. As I entered, the Commodore and Commissioners passed out to the open space in front where seats were ranged for their convenience, but for what I did not then know. Without delay, I entered the building and being at the time the only inmate of the room, had an excellent opportunity of closely examining the various articles spread out before me.

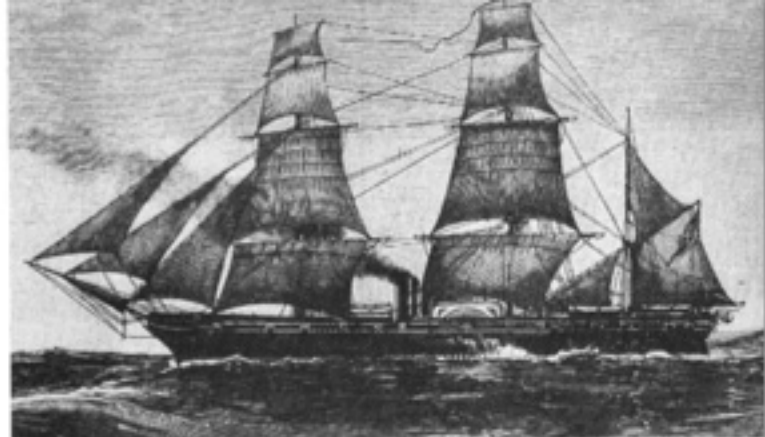
There were lacquered boxes of different sizes and shapes, embracing several varieties of style, the exterior of some being plain, the interior dark purple with gilding. Others had on the exterior raised metal figures of birds, some six inches in length and beautifully executed, also vines and flowers. Besides boxes, there were sets of small drawers supported in a stand, resembling a miniature wardrobe without doors in front. These were also gilt.

Then there were several low tables exactly like (in form, not material) the tables I had often seen used at Loo Choo by the scribes to write upon—they sitting cross-legged by them. These were ornamented like the boxes, except the figures were not raised. Covered cups, plates, saucers, cup stands and chow-chow stands completed the assortment of lacquerware, as well as I remember. Their quality was evidently superior and beautiful, excelling every other nation. I compared several articles of Chinese lacquerware with some procured at Loo Choo and found the former very inferior to the latter, which in its turn could be compared with a similar kind here displayed. Of the more beautiful varieties, no other nation can produce them.

The silk and crape department next attracted my attention. Both were of a pattern very similar to our own. The former wanted body, but the latter was very superior in style and texture. Besides the above-mentioned articles there were many others, some of which were packed up so I could not discover what they were.

Returning to the open space in front of the building, I found the officers and Japanese assembled witnessing the Marine guard drill, which they did very well. The maneuvering evidently astonished them.

THE MARINE DRILL OVER, the Chief Commissioner waved his fan and gave his order, when immediately some 25 or 30 Japanese, large, powerful and stout men,



SIDE-WHEEL steamer *USS Powhatan* was Perry's flagship. Commissioned in 1851, it was considered Navy's best.

robbed only in waist cloths, came forward and at the word of command each seized from a large pile two bags of rice, each weighing from 160 to 180 pounds, and carrying them a distance of about 300 feet, piled them up again. Then two or three of the stoutest, taking one of the bags and raising it up above his head, threw it up and, turning it at the same time, caught it at the other end. Another, again, raising it breast high, would turn a somersault lifting it with him as he rose again. The rice was then presented to the Commodore, who sent it off in the launches.

We then adjourned to the Treaty House. The paper-covered windows on one side had been drawn aside and seats arranged for the officers nearby. The ground in front had been cleaned and a ring formed. A Japanese official then took his station at one end and called off the wrestlers by pairs, who appeared upon the arena two at a time. After each round, they took a mouthful of *sake* and rubbed some salt upon their chests.

They first assembled together round the ring and went through a rather classical or gladiatorial pantomime, in which their large proportions appeared to advantage. Then they retired and the first two were called out.

They took positions at opposite ends of the ring and in a stooping position clasped their hands twice before them, then spread out their arms full length, after which they advanced into the middle of the ring and stretched their limbs then, stooping down with a short sharp cry, they closed in for the contest.

Their method of wrestling differed from our own in not using their feet, but confining their exertions to the muscular use of their hands and arms and butting with the head upon the chest and shoulders. In their respirations they would give forth a sound like "Hiss-hiss;" others reminded me of the words "Yes Sir."

ORNATE TENTS housed about a dozen Japanese soldiers. Military garb differed little from civilian clothes.





SPROSTON drew a rough outline of the squadron's position as it lay at anchor in the harbor of Shimoda.

When one of the combatants would be thrown or forced out of the ring, he would either return to the contests and make one or more efforts to overcome his opponent or, bowing his head as he assumed a half-swooping position, would thus acknowledge his defeat.

This exhibition over, we sat down to a chow-chow at which I demolished four or five dozen oysters with a splinter of wood for a fork, also eggs, fish, cake and candy and carried off, like the rest, the remnants of the feast in a piece of paper.

28 March

THIS DAY CLEAR with a strong northerly wind. Put our ship in prime order and dressed the crew in white frocks over blue. At 2 pm, the Japanese boats were seen approaching from the direction of the town. Three stopped at *Mississippi* whilst the fourth, containing the interpreter, pulled to our ship and he told us in very good English that the Commissioners requested that Captain Adams might be sent for to accompany them in their visits to the different ships. They were, I suppose, more accustomed to him than to other officers since, as flag captain, he had considerable intercourse with them.

The Commissioners having walked round the decks of *Mississippi* took their departure for our ship, and the officers assembled on the quarterdeck to receive them. The boats with the retainers first came alongside. They, assembling on each side of the gangway and bowing to the Commissioners on their hands and knees as they passed them, followed on behind. The boatswain piped and the Marine guard presented arms.

The Captain introduced the officers and then walked them round the spardeck, showing them the large ten-inch pivot guns, being larger than they ever saw before; but they betrayed very little astonishment. Then they visited the cabin and officers' apartments, gun and berth decks, and all the other parts of the ship, with which they were very much pleased.

We went to general quarters, exercised the big guns, called away boarders, pikemen, firemen, axemen, carbineers and pumpmen, going through the various evolutions with a great deal of spirit, and having evidently the desired effect upon them of convincing them of our power and force when occasion required.

THE EXERCISE BEING over, the Commissioners shoved off in their boats for *Powhatan* where they were to be entertained in a more substantial manner. Five or six officers from this ship, I among the number, then started in a boat for the flagship, which we found handsomely decorated with flags, and on the quarterdeck

were ranged tables, or I might say a table, for they were placed so as to form one continuous display of delicacies, many of which I, for one, had not seen or partaken of for months.

The Commissioners had been examining the machinery, they having steam up and slowly revolving the wheels to show them the operation of the several parts of massive iron jointed together. What knowledge they possess of steam I cannot say, but I am told that the interpreter understands well the principal and motive power, and I should judge from their intercourse with the Dutch that they had informed themselves of the various discoveries in science and mechanism made heretofore by enlightened nations.

Having walked round the ship, they descended into the cabin with the Commodore and captains where they were, no doubt, well entertained. Their retainers remained on deck and joined us in the onslaught upon the numerous edibles there displayed. Champagne, sherry, port, whisky, punch and, in fact, every kind and quality of wine or liquor that came first to hand, satisfied their wants. A rather tall and gaunt Japanese that sat next to me drank them all and was, of course, rather merry afterwards.

31 March

THIS DAY has the treaty of amity and friendship been signed by the Commodore and Commissioners. Captain Adams sails with it for the United States in a day or two, taking passage as far as the Sandwich Islands in *Saratoga*.

4 April

SARATOGA set sail this morning and was cheered by the whole squadron as she stood out of the harbor, homeward bound. She still has half the world and stormy Cape Horn to encompass before she reaches her wished-for haven of rest and security.

11 April

IN OBEDIENCE to signal from the flagship, the squadron this morning got under way, the steamers leading, and stood out of the harbor of Kanagawa, bound we hardly knew whither. When about three miles from our former anchorage, we noticed that *Lexington* was aground. The Commodore sent *Vandalia's* launch to her assistance. When we had reached the middle of the Bay, signal was made and the squadron anchored. We had felt considerable curiosity as to whether we would go to Yedo or not, and the general opinion was that the Commodore intended to anchor as close to the capital of Japan as he could; and the fact of the wind being from the northeast, which was ahead, accounted for our anchoring without changing our destination.

But in the course of an hour or so we were again under way and standing down the harbor, anchored off Webster Island or, in other words, came to in the American anchorage. Naturally curious as to the reason of our apparently uncertain movements during the day, I enquired for an explanation from some of the officers of the flagship and received the following solution:

It was well known to all that the Commodore on the day the treaty was signed expressed to the Commissioners his intention of visiting Yedo. But they dissented, saying they had not the power to grant him the privilege, having no instruction on that point, and politely declined the offer of a passage in the steamers. The Commodore, however, reiterated to them his intention of doing so.

The next day we heard of the interpreters having said that if the Commodore went up to Yedo, they would commit the *Harikari*.

Now the steamers had, when first under way, headed up the Bay in the direction of a small island which we called Yedo Beacon, but that afterwards they had changed their course. The two Japanese boats towing astern convinced us that the interpreters were on board. From what we could learn, it appears that the one on board *Mississippi* actually became sick when he saw the course of the steamers, and when they were only a few miles from Yedo, commenced standing right up in the direction of that port. He threw his cloak and long sword to young [LT William] Speiden saying "take them, for I have no more need of them. My short sword will be all that I shall require."

18 April

WE HAVE NOW been at sea six days, having sailed the morning following our anchorage off Webster Island, bound to the Bonin Islands. We stood down the Bay of Yedo with steering sails set on both sides, and this time passed to the eastward of the main island, which is preferable both going and coming, as you have more sea-room in case of a gale springing up. The first three days out we experienced rainy, blowy weather, wind generally from the northeast. The weather being continually overcast, we were unable to determine our position every day, which was very much to be desired, as there is a regular gulf stream of strong current sweeping along the coast of Japan, of which but little is known.

Saratoga, when near the entrance to Yedo Bay, was swept to the northward and eastward and was three weeks [days?] working back. We experienced a heavy tumbling sea which made everyone seasick, at all predisposed that way. The air and water, taken every hour,

differed from six to 10 degrees, the water being the warmer and in every respect the appearances were the same as we would have encountered in our own Gulf Stream, excepting in this case there was no gulfweed. This boisterous weather was succeeded by a calm which lasted 24 hours.

We had so far passed near to, but not in sight of, any of the numerous islands which abound in these seas, contrary winds having prevented us from doing so. They are all small and uninhabited, but as seldom any vessels but whalers visit these waters, the position of many of these islands as laid down on the chart must be incorrect; it is very necessary that any such mistakes should be corrected, as in all probability before many years, hundreds of ships will pass through these groups in the California and China trade.

17 May

In the afternoon two sails were reported in sight from aloft which, on nearing them, proved to be whalers, both hoisting American colors, one a ship and the other a barque.

The barque passed close to us and hove to. We did the same, and the first mate came alongside in a whale-boat which, impelled by four long oars and steered by a fifth, fairly danced over the long heaving swell. He stated the barque to be the *Rambler*, six days out of the Bonins where they had been provisioning ship.

He said they were two years and a half out from the United States and had 500 barrels of sperm; they were then bound to the Japan Seas. We informed him of the existing treaty between the two countries and pointed out the commercial ports on the chart which were open to us.

[The foregoing is an excerpt from the *Sproston Journal*, covering the section in which the author was in Japanese waters—ED.]

'TOM THUMB' railway interested the Japanese most of all the presents and exhibits brought by Commodore Perry.

