Townsend Harris Biography

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Biography

American merchant and diplomat Townsend Harris (1804-1878), the first U.S. envoy to reside in Japan, opened commercial relations between Japan and the United States.

Townsend Harris was born on Oct. 3, 1804, in Sandy Hill, N.Y., and educated at the local primary school. In 1817 he began work at a dry goods store and later joined his father and brother in importing china and earthenware. Harris read and studied widely and became proficient in French, Spanish, and Italian. Elected to the New York Board of Education in the 1840s, he served as its president. Harris was almost solely responsible for legislation creating the New York Free Academy, a public institution that provided free higher education for the poor and eventually became the College of the City of New York. After his mother died in 1847, Harris left for California. He purchased a ship and started trading with ports in China and the British and Dutch East Indies.

In 1853 Harris applied for a consular position in Hong Kong or Canton but was appointed instead to Ningpo (modern Ningbo) in eastern China. Rejecting this, he went to Washington to apply to Secretary of State William Marcy, an old friend, for a position as consul to Japan, which had just established treaty relations with the United States. Named consul general in 1855, Harris traveled by way of Siam (Thailand), where he negotiated a new commercial treaty, and arrived at his post, a small seaport near Yokohama, in August 1856.

After many difficulties, in 1857 and 1858 Harris finally persuaded Japanese officials to agree to commercial treaties which secured rights of American residence and trade at certain ports, regulated duties, provided for extraterritoriality and religious freedom for Americans, and established diplomatic representation at Edo (modern Tokyo). Named minister resident, Harris advised the Japanese in their conflicts with other countries. Opening a door to the West caused internal troubles in Japan resulting in violence that included assassination of the U.S. legation secretary and translator. Harris rejected military retaliation; his friendly but firm diplomacy won the admiration of the Japanese people.

Harris submitted his resignation to President Abraham Lincoln in 1861. He retired to New York City and continued his involvement in the temperance movement and church, civic, and foreign affairs. He died on Feb. 25, 1878.