



History of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony

By Alan Ehr Gott, Executive Director, American River Conservancy, Summer 2017

On November 1, 2010, the American River Conservancy (ARC) purchased a 272-acre property called the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony. Wakamatsu Farm is approximately two miles south of Coloma and the Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park. The physical address is 941 Cold Springs Road, Placerville, California.

Within the American River watershed, Wakamatsu Farm is prime agricultural land with a mosaic of springs, streams, wetlands, and woodlands of blue and live oak. Ponds on the Farm attract wildlife, particularly migratory waterfowl during the winter and early spring. But the most compelling feature of the land is its Japanese cultural history. In 1869, the first Japanese emigrants to America arrived on this property. They were samurai, farmers, craftsmen, their families, and a 17 year-old girl named Okei Ito. Fleeing from Japan, they brought from home 1000s of mulberry trees, tea plant seed, fruit tree saplings, paper and oil plants, rice, bamboo and other crops to establish their Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony.

To understand the significance of the Colony, it is important to highlight the context of Japanese society that the Wakamatsu colonists were fleeing. Beginning in the early 17th century, Tokugawa shogunates emphasized cultural isolation and prohibited Japanese citizens from traveling abroad. This isolationist doctrine remained in place for over 250 years until Commodore William Perry, acting for the United States, forced open several Japanese ports to U.S. trade during the years of 1853 and 1854.

By the 1860s, cultural isolation in Japan was faltering. The daimyo (local lord) of the Aizu Wakamatsu province was Matsudaira Katamori (1835-1893), who was related by marriage to the Tokugawa family. Matsudaira disagreed with the Tokugawa policy of isolation, and he instead chose to walk the fine political line between "Eastern ethics and Western science." John Henry Schnell, an early member of the Prussian embassy, also dabbled in merchandising European weapons. Matsudaira was one of Schnell's best customers.

Schnell trained Matsudaira's samurai in the use of firearms. Schnell was given a Japanese name, samurai status as a "general," and he was allowed to marry a Japanese samurai-class woman named Jou to further strengthen his ties to Japanese society. Strife between the Tokugawa faction and those who propped up the Emperor for their own benefit resulted in civil war, ultimately leading to the Meiji Restoration and the dramatic defeat of Matsudaira's force of 4,000 samurai by over 20,000 of the emperor's soldiers at Aizu, Wakamatsu, in 1868.

After Matsudaira surrendered, Schnell's life was in jeopardy. With Matsudaira's blessing and funding in April of 1869, Schnell booked passage on the *PMSS China*, a side-wheel steamer rigged for sail. This mail ship carried Schnell, his wife, and their young daughter, along with Okei Ito and the other Wakamatsu colonists to America. Their arrival in San Francisco on May 20th caught the attention of the San Francisco Alta Daily News, which noted that the colonists brought the means for their agricultural productivity with them, including "50,000 three-year old kuwa (mulberry) trees" used for the cultivation of silk worms and six million tea seeds. The newspaper praised their Japanese work ethic, as well as Jou Schnell's beauty and grace.

In June of 1869 John Henry Schnell purchased approximately 200 acres, a farmhouse, and farm outbuildings from Charles Graner, who had settled the Gold Hill Ranch during the early 1850's. Graner had become prosperous by making wine and whiskey to sell to the miners. Applying the farming skills they brought with them from Japan, the new colonists quickly went to work planting mulberry trees, tea plants, and other crops. Schnell successfully displayed silk cocoons, tea, and other plants at the 1869 California State Agricultural Fair in Sacramento then also the 1870 Horticultural Fair in San Francisco.





Unfortunately, the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm was destined to be short-lived. Soon after their first planting, there was a serious drought. The colony arranged for diversion of water from a mining ditch to irrigate the Farm. However, the water was contaminated with iron sulfate. This chemical coated and strangled the tea plants. In addition, the financial support from Matsudaira ended. When the new Meiji government pardoned Lord Matsudaira, he chose to become a Shinto priest and remain in Japan, effectively cutting off the main source of financial support for the Wakamatsu colony.

The fate of only a few Wakamatsu colonists is currently known. In Coloma during 1877, Colonist Kuninosuke Masumizu married Carrie Wilson, an African and Native American descendent. Kuninosuke died in 1915, and his family still lives in the Sacramento region. Colonist Matsunosuke Sakurai, believed to be a samurai, worked for the remainder of his long life for the Francis Veerkamp family, who formally purchased the land in 1873. The Schnell's nursemaid, Colonist Okei Ito, also remained with the Veerkamps until her untimely death at the age of 19 in 1871. Okei-san is recognized as the first Japanese woman and immigrant buried on American soil where she still rests in peace today at Wakamatsu Farm.

In 2014, ARC was contacted by a young student from Tokyo, Japan, who had discovered one of her paternal ancestors was a Wakamatsu colonist while she was researching her family roots. Further research by ARC confirmed that her ancestor, Matsugoro Ofuji, was a carpenter with the Wakamatsu Colony. This discovery was the first proof that some of the colonists had returned to Japan after the colony disbursed.

Although short-lived, the Wakamatsu Tea & Silk Farm Colony represents the beginning of permanent Issei migration to the United States. By 1900, more than 10% of all California Farm products were produced by Japanese-Americans. In 1969, then Governor Ronald Reagan proclaimed the Wakamatsu Farm site to be California Registered Historical Landmark No. 815. At the same time, the Japanese-American community designated June 8, 1969 as the Japanese-American centennial. Ichiro Matsudaira, the grandson of the colonists' daimyo financier, and the Japanese Consul General at the time, Shima Seiichi, both attended the event and both supported the proclamations.

For about 140 years, the Veerkamp family was principally responsible for maintaining the agricultural nature of the property and preserving its cultural heritage. In late 2007, the Veerkamp Farm heirs approached ARC seeking to sell the property at fair market value while ensuring public access its historical features and restoration of the old farmhouse. In 2010, ARC purchased the property and continues to manage it. Because the property contains excellent agricultural soils, ARC also supports organic projects and farming operations at Wakamatsu Farm. Onsite is a budding native plant nursery, bountiful giving garden, and beautiful 1.5-mile wheelchair accessible trail around the small lake. Two farming businesses lease land and buildings on the property. Independently-owned, *The Bear & The Bee Farm* offers sustainably-grown produce and other goods through the onsite farm stand. The family-owned *Free Hand Farm* offers pastured dairy herd shares, pastured lamb and wool products, and pastured eggs from happy animals living on the Farm.

As a working farm, Wakamatsu Farm is private property, so unscheduled drop-in's are not appropriate. ARC offers public access to the property through many year-round public and private tours and events. Visitors can find all dates to visit Wakamatsu Farm by viewing the calendar at www.ARConservancy.org/wakamatsu. Becoming a Wakamatsu volunteer is a great way to gain greater access to this gorgeous Farm. Finally, ARC is always open to new ideas about using this lush northern California landscape in innovative and sustainable ways that maintain its integrity, honor the ecosystem, and remain beneficial to our community and all parties involved.

Save the Date: June 6th, 7th, 8th, June 9th of 2019 – ARC's big WakaFest150! In 2019, Wakamatsu Farm will celebrate its 150th anniversary during a 4-day sesquicentennial celebration. You can support this international festival today by volunteering, donating, or sponsoring the event. If you want to participate, or you have ideas about activities and programs to include in the festival, please contact ARC sooner rather than later. Find more WakaFest150 info at: www.ARConservancy.org/wakafest150, or email wakamatsu@ARConservancy.org, or call 530-621-1224.

