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Bridge of Friendship Between Japan and The United States: Eliza
Scidmore and Japanese Cherry Trees

Every year, in spring, National Cherry Blossom Festival is held in Washington D.C. to celebrate the start of the new season and to “commemorate the 1912 gift of 3,000 cherry trees from Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo to the city of Washington, D.C.” (Yanagisawa) More than 1.5 million people come to Washington D.C. to see over 2,000 beautiful Japanese cherry trees along the Potomac River, which flows through the heart of the city along the Capitol and various government buildings, making it one of D.C.’s most famous and iconic landmarks. Thus, this festival is now one of the most famous events of the city (Tinong). Why were the cherry trees-the spirit of Japanese people-planted along the Potomac? Why are they hugely beloved and respected by the citizens? It all started with the journey of an American woman, Eliza Scidmore. Japanese cherry trees have been certainly connecting Japan and the United States for over 100 years, and Scidmore’s legacy is still living on today.

Eliza Scidmore was an American journalist, photographer, and National Geographic’s first official female writer (Strochlic). Soon after she graduated from Oberlin College, Scidmore began working as a newspaper columnist and used the money she earned to visit various places. In 1883, Scidmore took her first trip as a journalist to Alaska, and then after returning to the mainland, she collected articles she had written during the travel and published the first complete guidebook of Alaska (“Appletons’ Guide-book...”).

Her journey continued, and in 1885, she visited the Far East for the first time to see her brother working in Japan, which completely changed her career as a journalist. During her visit, she was greatly impressed by the Japanese people, Japanese culture, and the beauty of Japanese cherry trees known as *Someiyoshino* (More). She was especially fascinated by the view of cherry trees in Ueno Park and the Mukoujima district so much (Scidmore and Tonosaki) that she mentioned later in her paper that “Cherry Trees are the symbol of the Spring Festival, which has been respected with fluttering passion for 2,000 years (“maegaki”).” After her first trip to Japan, she fell in love with Japanese cherry blossoms and became completely determined to create a Mukoujima on the Potomac in the belief that the most wonderfully beautiful trees in the world have to be planted to beautify the Potomac Park, and those are Japanese cherry trees (Ruane). She initiated a campaign to make her vision a reality, approaching the U.S. Army Superintendent of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds with her idea of planting Japanese cherry trees along the Potomac (Stone). However, it was met with enormous number of oppositions by many members of the Office since they strongly considered the idea of planting foreign trees in National Parks they managed as inappropriate and threat to the country’s unique environment; moreover, they planned to fill the Potomac Park with “All-American” trees instead of foreign trees to make the Potomac Park a symbol of not only Washington D.C., but also the US itself (Baker).

Her long, arduous, lonely, and foggy struggle eventually succeeded in 1908—nearly 24 years later—as David Fairchild, a plant expert, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) official decided to test whether Japanese cherry trees could adapt well to the climate there in Washington D.C. He planted more than 300 cherry trees in schoolyards in DC and his

own garden in Maryland. As a result, the experiment was a great success, which paved the way for cherry trees to be planted along the Potomac (“History of the Cherry Trees”).

Scidmore needed an even bigger ally to import the trees from Japan and raise the money required to purchase them. She sent a letter outlining her idea to raise money to purchase cherry trees and then donate them to the district to Helen “Nellie” Taft, wife to former president Howard Taft and the nation’s new first lady at that time back in 1909. Mrs. Taft had an experience of living in Japan and was greatly interested in beautifying the district (Ruane). Mrs. Taft started working on a plan to plant the trees around the Tidal Basin, and cherry trees was considered to be an integral part of the plan, not only because she considered cherry trees as the answer to beautify the district, but also because she sensed that it would be an outstanding opportunity to forge a diplomatic and cultural relationship with Japan. At that time, Japan and the U.S. had a relatively good relationship, but there were not enough channels to connect between the two countries from a nongovernmental standpoint. Both countries also wanted to enhance cultural exchanges through this plan. After being informed about the First Lady’s plan, the mayor of Tokyo, Yukio Ozaki, agreed to the plan and gifted 2,000 young cherry trees to the D.C. as a gesture of goodwill in January 1910 (“New beginnings...”). However, soon after they made it to the United States, a USDA inspection team found that they were infested with insects and non-native pests. Thus, to protect the native plants in the country, the gifted trees were all burned. This caused such a tense situation between the two countries that even the Secretary of State and Japanese ambassador in the district had to get involved. The Secretary of State sent formal letters to the Japanese Ambassador Chinda to express deep regret and sorrow. After receiving the news, all parties involved in Japan worked hard to reorganize the plan with determination and positive will. Fortunately, Ozaki shipped a second, even greater amount of 3,020 cherry trees which were

taken from the famous collection along the Arakawa River to the capital of the United States in January 1912 (“History of the Cherry Trees”). After many highs and lows, and the efforts of many people in both Japan and the United States, the trees finally arrived safe and florid in D.C. in late March 1912.

On March 27, 1912, more than 25 years after Scidmore first visited Japan and was fascinated by Japanese bloomy cherry trees, First Lady Helen Taft and Viscountess Iwa Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador at that time, planted the first cherry trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin in a private ceremony, followed by many trees later (“Japan-U.S. Cherry Blossom Centennial”). Of course, Scidmore was invited and attended the first planting ceremony, earning her place securely in the history of the Japan-United States long-lasting friendship (Parsell).

Scidmore once said, “No other flower in all the world is so beloved, so exalted, so worshipped, as *sakura-no-hana*, the cherry-blossom of Japan” (Parsell). Many years after her courageous endeavor, cherry trees in Washington D.C., the spirit of the Japanese has become a symbolic landmark of the positive, firm relationship for over 100 years through thick and thin, deepening the ties between the two countries. Cherry trees hold many meanings in Japan, the first being that life is fleeting. The flowers are so short-lived: blooming for only a few weeks and then they fall to the ground, and hence they symbolize both life and death, beauty and violence. They also symbolize the brief, but beautiful and colorful life of the Samurai. Their duty called “Bushido” was to exemplify and maintain virtues like respect and honor and to be fearless even in the face of death. This is the reason many people think cherry trees beautifully symbolize the dying of the Samurai like beautiful flowers. Throughout the years, Japanese cherry trees have been a significant symbol of Japan and Japanese people have hugely loved them. Thence, it is of

great importance that Japanese cherry trees were planted in the Potomac Park, the heart of Washington D.C. and ultimately the United States to emphasize and celebrate our long-lasting and unchanging friendship. Nowadays, there are over 3,800 Japanese cherry trees in the Potomac Park. In 2012, First Lady Michelle Obama, together with Japanese ambassador, planted trees again during the National Cherry Blossom Festival to commemorate the unwavering friendship over the years and a continental anniversary of cherry trees planted along the Potomac (Jackson, Nakayama). As of now, of the original 3,020 cherry trees, about 100 are still sublimely standing today in the district, continuing to spread Japanese pride and traditions every spring. Eliza Scidmore's extraordinarily adventurous actions and her greatly dramatic way of life will certainly be passed down from generation to generation for many, many years to come.



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