

# Westford Abbot helped open Japan to world trade

By Gordon B. Seavey

Eight generations ago there was no imbalance of trade between the United States and Japan because trade did not exist. Japan's markets were closed to the world.

Today the enormous imbalance in U.S.-Japanese trade amounts to \$37 billion. Congress is stirred to the point of threatening protectionism if the Japanese in turn don't buy more products with the "Made in U.S.A." label.

We like Japan's Toyotas, Sony TVs and Yamabe printers. The Japanese say the dollar is too high. We are at a crossroads.

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## Westford Wanderings

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Our history reminds us that relations with Japan some 130 years ago was an entirely different matter. The Japanese so distrustful of other countries they had shut themselves off from the rest of the world. Countries who wished to trade with them were foiled as ports were closed to all decreed the rulers.

By 1852 Congress had decided that stern action would have to be taken to protect American seamen and property in Japanese waters. Commodore Matthew Perry (brother of Commodore Oliver Perry of Lake Erie fame) in charge of the U.S. fleet in the Pacific was the man assigned to take on the task of opening Japan to the world.

## Westford Officer

Sailing with Perry was an outstanding naval officer, a Westford native by the name of Joel Abbot. From a 19-year-old midshipman fresh out of Westford Academy, he had risen in 40

years to flag officer of the fleet succeeding Perry in this post.

For over 250 years Westford men have served with distinction in several wars, expeditions and skirmishes starting with campaigns against the Indians up to and through the Vietnam war. Because of the make-up of the early local population of farmers and sons of farmers, Westford men were "land folk" and few got to receive the smell of the sea.

But Joel Abbot chose the Navy. He enlisted in the naval service in the war with Britain in 1812, to be followed shortly by his younger brother. Young men were accepted on and after their 16th birthday.

The father was also Joel Abbot and with a local girl, the former Lydia Cummings, raised a family of three boys and three girls in the house which stood until 1914 opposite the Center post office.

Joel was their second child, born in 1795. He entered the Academy which was across the street and later went on to bigger things. After serving as a midshipman, he became aide and signal officer to Commander Rogers of the frigate *President*. He later came under the command of Commodore Macdonough who headed the naval forces on Lake Champlain. For gallantry in the area, he was promoted to lieutenant commander.

## Head of Navy Yard

Furthering his career during the next decade, he was to take a prominent part in the astounding American expedition in the Pacific, which historians like to write about the opening of Japan to the world.

In the Pacific, Abbot was in command of the U.S. *Macedonian* and with the fleet sailed into Tokyo Bay on July 8, 1853, with a demanding letter from

President Fillmore.

By show of force and through tough diplomacy in which Abbot had a sizeable part, Japan reluctantly opened its ports of Hakodate and Shimoda, granting trading rights to the United States and the rest of the world.

It was reported that Abbot performed delicate diplomatic duties to the complete satisfaction of the government while in Japanese waters.

Later, he supervised the placing of buoys and a light ship in Shanghai Harbor, defining the channels and sailing course for the first time.

The opening of Japan is deemed one of history's most significant diplomatic achievements as it not only changed American and European policy

toward Japan but brought about a marked change within Japan itself which in the years to come would be a great world power.

Today, Europe as well as the United States and other countries find that Japanese goods now flood local markets.

A bronze plaque on the memorial to all wars at the apex of the Common reads of the early exploits of the Westford Naval officer during the War of 1812-15 and activities on Lake Champlain. It mentions that when Commodore Macdonough asked if he were ready to die for his country, young Abbot's reply was "Certainly, sir, that is what I came into the service for."

*Gordon Seavey is a local historian and frequent contributor to the Eagle.*