

Finding Common Interests in the Times of Rising Conflict: Shibusawa Eiichi and the 1909 Japanese Commercial Commission to the United States

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Introduction to Commission

Research Methodology

This project is a historical analysis of the 1909 Japanese Commercial Commission to the United States, using articles from US newspaper archives covering the commission's visit.

The 1909 Japanese Commercial Commission was an unofficial diplomatic mission, headed by Eiichi Shibusawa and a group of the leading figures of Japan, including businessmen, financiers, heads of chambers of commerce, educators, and newspapermen. They came at the invitation of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce and the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Pacific Coast and hoped to improve relations between the United States and Japan, through private, economic diplomacy.

The purpose of the Commission was to develop friendship between the two nations and encourage trade and commerce, a sentiment repeatedly expressed by Shibusawa and other commission members, as well as their American hosts.

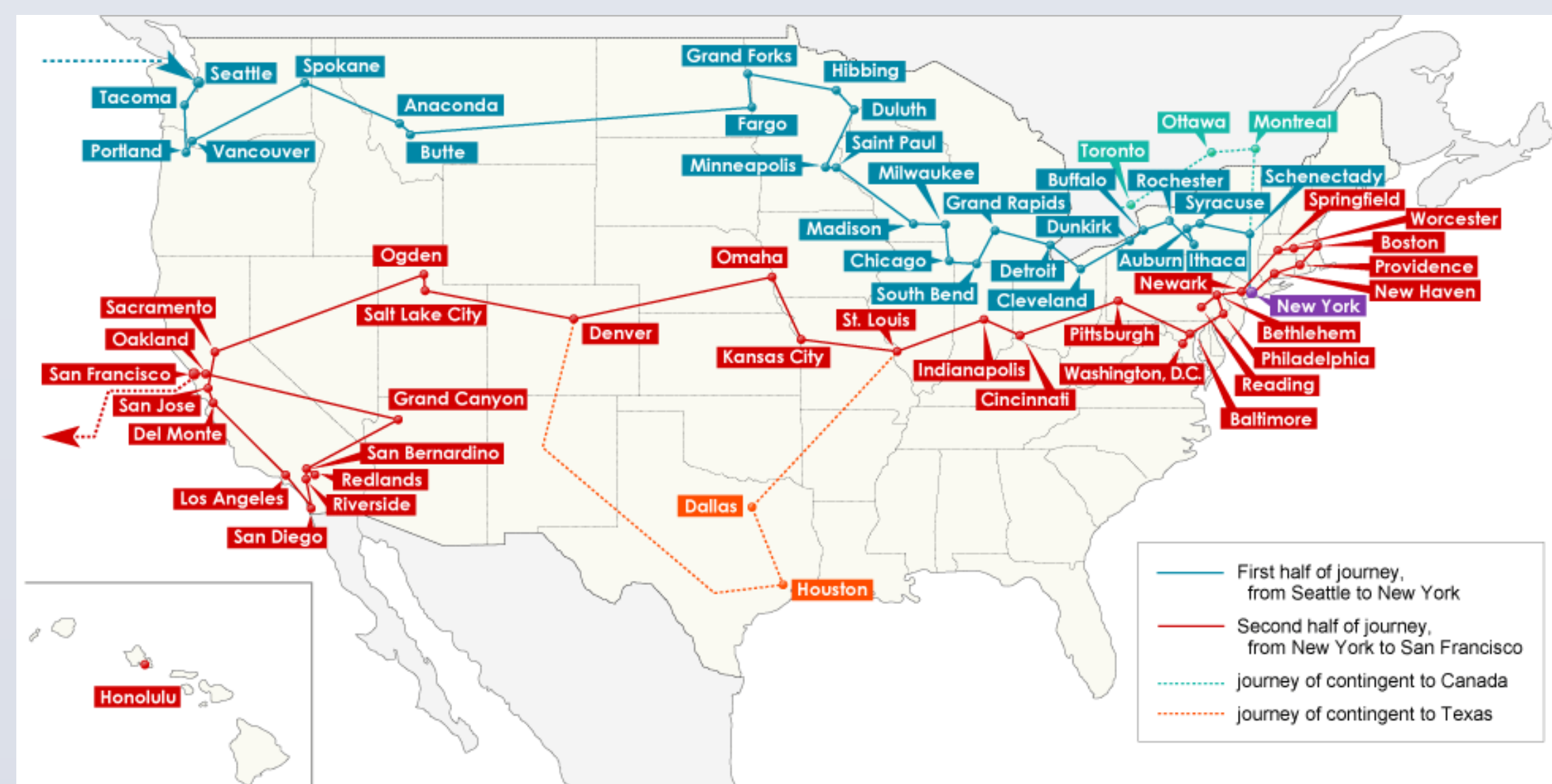
This project in part examined the international relations between Japan and the United States, specifically in context of Japan's recent victory in the Russo-Japanese War.



Baron Eiichi Shibusawa

Path of the Commission's Journey

The Japanese Commercial Commission left Yokohama, Japan on August 19, 1909 and arrived in Seattle to the welcome of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce on September 1, in time for the Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition. The Commission traveled throughout the United States for approximately three months, departing from Honolulu on December 6 and returning to Japan December 17.



The Commission was met with a warm welcome in every city they visited, and were hosted by local chambers of commerce, as well as local, state, and federal government leaders, including United States President William H. Taft in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Secretary of State Knox, in Washington D.C.

The Commission at a garden party at the Japanese garden for the Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition, September 4, 1909.



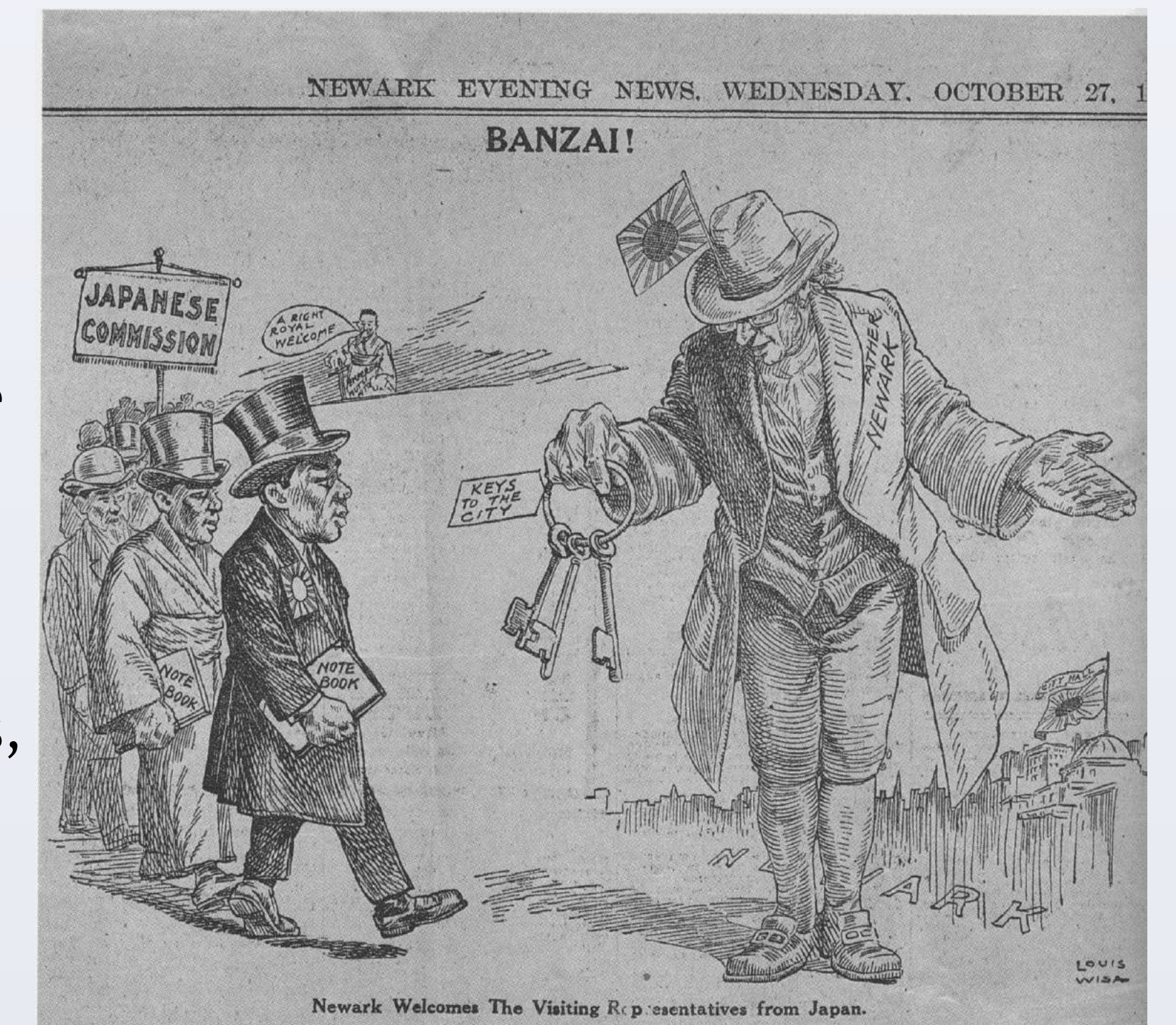
Commemorative Postcard

The newspaper coverage of the time the Commission spent in Los Angeles and San Francisco proved to be some of the most prolific and divided of the Commission's trip. California was the focal point of American anger over Japanese immigration and labor, but it was also in California that the Commission found some of its most welcoming hosts, possibly because of the great potential for increased trade that California businessmen stood to gain from.

Russo-Japanese War Context and Significance of Commission

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 shocked the world. It was the first modern victory of an Asian nation over a western power, and it signified Japan's emergence as a world power. The United States reacted with alarm, with some newspapers claiming that war with Japan was imminent, and US Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft showing a marked change in policy toward Japan. It also led to increased controversy over labor and immigration, especially in California.

The Commission's timing coincided with heightened tensions between the two nations as a result of these events. From the Japanese perspective, it served as an opportunity to espouse the benefits of closer commercial ties, as well as to ease fears concerning immigration and war. For American businessmen, it was the chance to increase trade and take advantage of Japan's rapidly increasing and modernizing economy. For US leaders, it was an opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties with a nation that now demanded to be taken seriously and treated fairly.



With Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan became a recognized world power, in effect challenging long held perceptions of weakness and backwardness held by the United States and the West. The timing of the Commission's visit coincides with rising anti-Japanese, anti-immigration sentiment in the United States in response to what was perceived to be a new, growing, and immediate threat from Japan. The goal of Eiichi Shibusawa and the Japanese Commercial Commission of 1909 was to ease these tensions between the United States and Japan through private diplomacy and commercial ties.

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Poster images from Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation, www.shibusawa.or.jp