

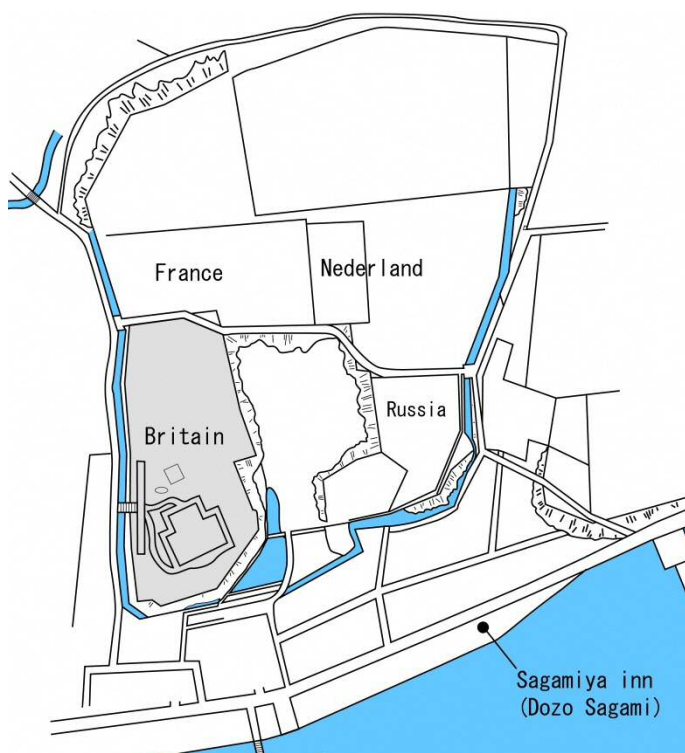
●Shinagawa Historical Museum Explanatory Sheet

The Foreign Embassies of Gotenyama and the Arson Incident

The Opening of Japan's Ports and Attacks on Foreigners

The arrival of Commodore Perry's ships in Edo Bay in 1853 served as the impetus for the eventual conclusion of treaties between the shogunate government and the Five Countries: the United States, Holland, Russia, Britain, and France, led by Ii Naosuke in 1858. The following year, the three ports of Nagasaki, Hakodate and Yokohama opened to foreign trade.

There were, however, many people who came to harbor grievances against the shogunate government due to the shortage of goods due to exports and the steep rise in prices. These people coalesced around a principle of rallying for the emperor and resisting foreigners. In March 1860, Ii Naosuke was assassinated by members of this faction. This was followed by a series of attacks on foreigners, such as assassinating the American interpreter Henry Heusken in 1860, and burning down the British embassy in 1861.



▲Layout of the foreign embassies at Gotenyama (Based on the "Gotenyama Embassy Diagrams" from the Historiographical Institute, The University of Tokyo)

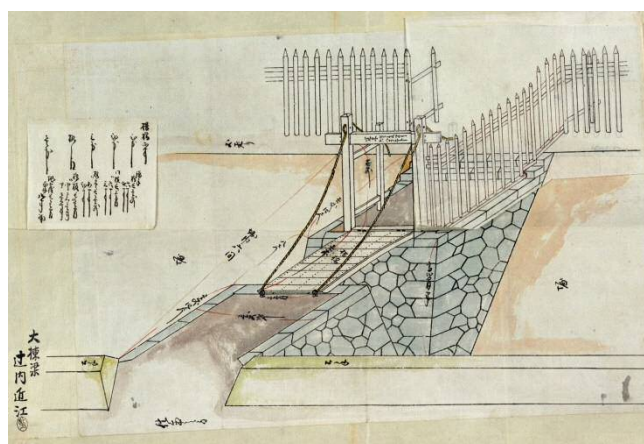
The Foreign Embassies at Gotenyama

Responding to the increasing attacks on foreigners, the various countries demanded the shogunate government to provide a safe and convenient haven to house their embassies. Gotenyama in Shinagawa was chosen to be the site of this complex.

The Western-style embassies at Gotenyama were planned for construction and the complex was equipped with many defenses against attacks, such as deep moats, high fences, and a draw bridge at the entrance. Each country covered the expenses of its own embassy, and the British embassy was the first to be constructed, in the southeast corner of the complex.

Constructing the foreign embassies on Gotenyama, which was a beloved Sakura cherry blossom viewing spot for people throughout Edo, incited the anger of the common people. Shinagawa Post Station, with its historical connection to Gotenyama, and out of sympathy with the common people, also lodged a letter of protest against the construction.

Construction commenced amid this uncertain



▲The drawbridge at the British Embassy at Gotenyama ("Architectural Diagrams of the Five Country Embassies at Gotenyama, Shinagawa" Tokyo Metropolitan Library Archives)

atmosphere. British ambassador Ernest Satow wrote in his memoirs that it was essential the embassy be completed, and the British staff locate as quickly as possible, demonstrating the wariness the British felt about the threats at the time.

The Burning of the British Embassy by the Samurai of Choshu (present-day Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture)

As Satow worried, the British embassy was attacked by Japan's anti-foreigner faction.

The attack was carried out by a group of 13 samurai in their early 20s led by Takasugi Shinsaku, Kusaka Genzui, Inoue Kaoru, and Ito Hirobumi.

At one a.m. on December 12, 1862, the group gathered at the Dozo Sagami Inn at Shinagawa Post Station, and then infiltrated the soon-to-be completed British Embassy and set it ablaze. Ito, who went on to become a statesman in the Meiji Government, left a record detailing the events of that night.

According to Ito's memoirs, the group crossed the moat and fence to enter the grounds of the embassy, and stacked up a pile of burnable objects such as sliding doors before lighting gunpowder to set fire to the entire complex. Takasugi and Kusaka watched the fire from an inn in Shibaura (present-day Minato City, Tokyo), while enjoying sake, and stated that the common people welcomed the turn of events.

What Became of the Perpetrators?

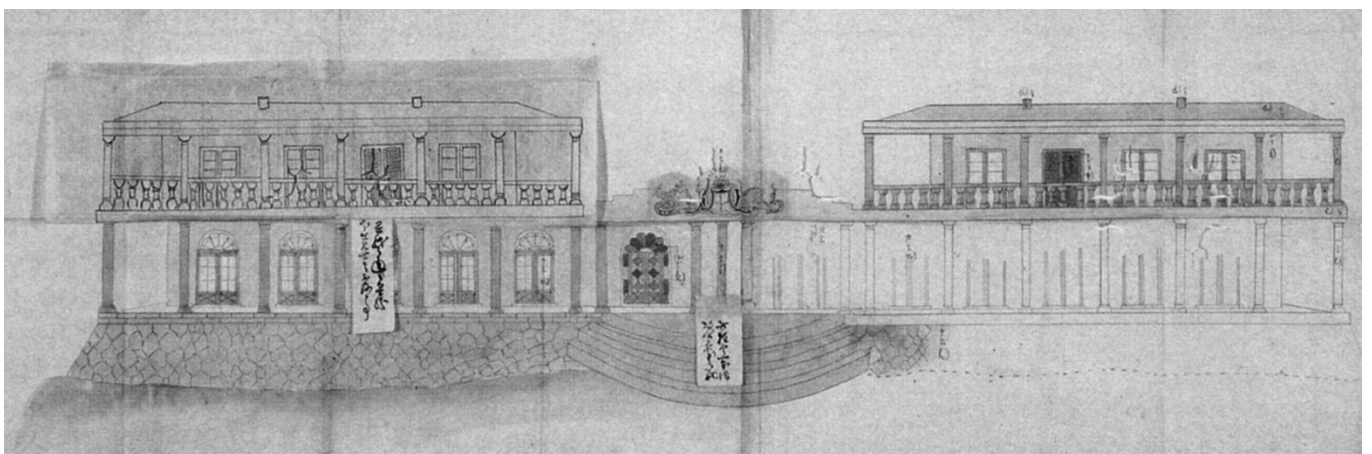
Kusaka died in July 1864, in a war between the Aizu Domain (currently, the area around Aizu-Wakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture), the Satsuma Domain (today, primarily Kagoshima Prefecture) and the Choshu Domain.

Takasugi gained power in the Choshu Domain, and sought to overthrow the shogunate government with a military organization of his domain, but died of illness in 1867.

Ito and Inoue survived until the Meiji Period, and Ito went on to become the first prime minister of Japan, and Inoue also assumed key posts within the government. The grave of Ito can be found in Nishi-Oi, Shinagawa City (normally closed to the public.)



▲ Dozo Sagami Inn at the end of the 1920s



▲ Side diagram of the British embassy at Gotenyama, August 1861 (Historiographical Institute, The University of Tokyo Collection)