

Photos tell history of Japanese in Sierra foothills



These are some of the photographs the Veerkamp family donated to State Parks. Photo/Provided

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

A glimpse into the Placerville area's extraordinary past emerged last week with a donation of historic photographs chronicling the bittersweet story of America's first Japanese settlers.

The nearly 150-year-old portraits, which a local family is giving to the state park system, evoke a time when samurai swordsmen and silk traders found refuge from a bloody uprising against Japan's shogun in California's Gold Country.

Against an unfamiliar backdrop of mining towns and timber

mills, the Japanese refugees built an agricultural community on mulberry trees, tea plants and bamboo shoots. The so-called Wakamatsu Colony didn't last long, however, owing to drought and a lack of money, but it endures in the history books as an important footnote in California's cultural evolution.

"Most Japanese believe it was the Plymouth Rock of Japanese immigration," said Herb Tanimoto, a historian who leads tours of the former colony outside Placerville. "It really opened the door to a much larger influx from Japan."

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