

4 From Ezochi to Hokkaido

Hokkaido Development Commission Main Sapporo Office

In order to proceed with full-scale settlement and development of Hokkaido, in 1869, the new Meiji government established the “Kaitakushi”, now commonly called the Hokkaido Development Commission. As it strove to settle and develop Hokkaido -- a land with vastly different climate and natural environment than Honshu and other parts of Japan -- the Kaitakushi eagerly adopted technologies and lifestyle culture from western countries such as the United States of America. The western-style architecture of the Kaitakushi Sapporo Main Office came to symbolize the beginning of a new style of settlement and development in Hokkaido.

Under its policy of national seclusion, the Tokugawa shogunate restricted trade partners to Holland and China, and limited trade ports to only Nagasaki. However, around the middle of the 19th century, countries such as the United States of America and Russia began to request rights to trade freely, and the Tokugawa shogunate opened several more ports. Hakodate was selected to become one of these international trade ports. The Tokugawa shogunate placed magistrates in Hakodate, and took direct control of Hakodate, the surrounding lands, and all of Ezochi from the Matsumae clan as it began efforts to settle and develop Ezochi.

In 1867, Shogun Yoshinobu Tokugawa restored political power to the Emperor of Japan, marking the end of the Edo period. The new Meiji government began settlement and development of Hokkaido in earnest, installing the “Kaitakushi” (now commonly called “the Hokkaido Development Commission”) in July 1869, and renaming Ezochi to Hokkaido in August. The reasons behind settlement and development of Hokkaido were concern over unresolved border disputes with Russia, and desire to create prosperity in Japan by developing diverse industries.

From the era of the Kaitakushi onward to the Hokkaido Prefectural Government, many residents of Honshu and throughout Japan started new lives in Hokkaido under government settlement and development policies. This settlement occurred on scales of all sizes, from individual people to entire communities. Every settler had their own reason to move to Hokkaido, such as escape from poverty or disaster-stricken areas, or pursuit of dreams of wealth in a new land. However, even settlers who were granted land would face many taxing challenges, such as cutting down dense forests before they could begin to plow fields.

As government settlement and development policies progressed, the Ainu faced many hardships as their traditional way of life was forbidden as "barbaric". Even activities that the Ainu had previously been relatively free to perform — such as deer hunting and salmon fishing — were banned. Some Ainu were forced out of their homes. In response to this situation, the government issued the Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act in 1899. However, out of convenience for the Wajin, this act forced Wajin ways of life upon the Ainu, and thus could not truly resolve the hardships they faced.



The Opening of Hakodate Port and the Ainu People

Shortly before Hakodate Port was opened, the Treaty of Peace and Amity between Japan and Russia was concluded in February 1855. This treaty established national borders of the Kuril Islands, but failed to clarify ownership of Sakhalin (Karafuto). The Tokugawa shogunate became increasingly alarmed over Russia's advance into Sakhalin (Karafuto), and decided solidify Ezochi's defenses by colonizing the island. The Tokugawa shogunate earnestly developed a variety of industries, and encouraged Wajin settlers to settle Ezochi's lands. Meanwhile, the Tokugawa shogunate also accelerated implementation of policies to adapt Hokkaido's Ainu population to fit into the Japanese culture, for example by regulating hairstyles and names to fit Wajin standards.



Hokkaido's New Residents - the Tonden-hei (Farmer-soldiers)

Hokkaido's New Residents: the Tonden-hei (Farmer-soldiers)
While settling and developing Hokkaido, the Meiji government placed settlements of tonden-hei (farmer-soldiers) to areas deemed important. Along with their role as agricultural pioneers, the tonden-hei also served as soldiers to defend Hokkaido. The first tonden-hei took up settlements in Kotoni (now part of Sapporo City) in 1875. Later, the tonden-hei spread through inland Hokkaido, including the area which is now Asahikawa City. Until the policy was discontinued in 1904, 7,337 people from throughout Japan settled Hokkaido as tonden-hei. Including their family members, the total population of these settlements was about 40,000.