

An Ever-Blossoming Woman: In 1885, travel journalist Eliza Scidmore wrote of the cherry blossoms she had seen in Japan. Five years later, while home in Washington, D.C., malaria and yellow fever outbreaks in the Potomac lowlands became a community health issue for district politicians who had long dealt with the ill effects of these marshlands. As a form of disease control, Army engineers pumped out mud that then created barren land in need of plantings. Scidmore proposed the district plant Japanese cherry blossom trees. Her plan incorporated health, ecological, and aesthetic solutions. Officials denounced her plan. One cited a full force of police would be needed to keep boys from climbing the trees to pick cherries. Scidmore informed that the trees produced only blossoms, no cherries. Rebuffed, she did not relent. Convinced her plan would curb disease as well as beautify the district, Scidmore presented her proposal repeatedly for a number of years and personally began raising money to purchase trees she could donate.

The election of 1908 brought President William Howard and First Lady Helen Herron Taft to the White House. Scidmore knew they had lived in Japan and wrote to the First Lady seeking her support. Mrs. Taft, well aware of Washington's mosquito-infested swamps where tramps gathered and criminals found refuge, was grateful for this opportunity to effect a much needed civic improvement and responded promptly.

That same spring, Dr. Jokichi Takamine, the Japanese chemist who discovered adrenaline, was in Washington as was the Japanese consul, Mr. Midzuno. When told of the cherry blossom trees to be planted, they offered First Lady Taft a donation of 2,000 trees from Tokyo. They arrived in January infested with insects and diseases and had to be destroyed. In 1912, 3,020 healthy trees arrived. That year, in a simple ceremony attended by only a few which included Scidmore, Mrs. Taft and Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador, planted two cherry blossom trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin as a gift of friendship to the United States from the people of Japan. These two trees still stand marked by bronze plaques that commemorate the occasion but do not commemorate Eliza Scidmore.

In 1934, the first "Cherry Blossom Festival" was held, in 1940, the first pageant. By 1948 cherry blossom princesses were selected from every state and from them, a queen chosen to reign during the festival. In 1954, a 300-year old Japanese Stone Lantern was presented to the United States by the Japanese Ambassador to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first peace treaty between these two countries signed by commodore Mathew Perry at Yokohama in 1854. Lighting this lantern officially opens the festival each year.

In 1957, the president of Mikimoto Pearls, Inc. donated to the festival, the Mikimoto Pearl Crown of over two pounds of gold and 1,589 pearls which crowns the queen. In 1958, a Japanese Pagoda of rough stone was presented to Washington D.C. to symbolize the spirit of friendship between the United States and Japan. In 1965, a Japanese gift of 3,800 cherry blossom trees was given to the beautification program of another First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson. In the 1980's, 676 new cherry trees were planted to reinstate the original number of trees.

In 1999, fifty trees bred from the 1,400+-year old "Usuzumi" Cherry tree, a declared National Treasure of Japan that grows in Gifu Prefecture, were planted in West Potomac Park. In 2002, sixty-nine trees bred from those of 1912 were planted to ensure

genetic tree lineage. Today, the festival, expanded to two weeks, continues to celebrate the friendship between these two countries and is a yearly source of millions of tourism dollars into the economic welfare of Washington, D.C. Over one million visitors were expected in 2006.

Inaugurating cherry blossom trees in the nation's capital by Eliza Scidmore, a health and environmental project of unparalleled beauty, created unparalleled wealth of economic, social, and political prosperity and unabashedly created an expression of friendship between two countries that once warred, abashedly. Scidmore who attended Oberlin College was a member of the National Geographic Society, authored seven books plus numerous travel articles, died in 1928. Her ashes, at the request of the Japanese government, were buried in Japan. This woman who painted pink, the red, white, and blue capital of the United States of America, is not memorialized in ever-blossoming Washington, D.C.

Sources: "She Painted the Town Pink," Sarah Booth Conroy;
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