

元年者

# Deconstructing the GANNENMONO

A look at the history  
and meaning of the term  
“Gannenmono”

By Antonio Vega  
& Kristen Nemoto Jay

On May 16, 1868, an estimated 150 individuals left everything they knew in their home country of Japan for a chance at a new life in Hawaii. A century and a half later, that group of brave souls is known as the “Gannenmono.” Typically translated as the “people of the founding/first year,” this term is understood today as a reference to the first year of Japan’s Meiji period. However, when one looks a bit deeper into this story, it becomes clear that the term “Gannenmono” is at best misleading and at worst simply incorrect.

## Those of the Closing Year

Historians believe that the term “Gannenmono” was not created until the second group of Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawaii in 1885. At that time the term meant something like “the old-timers” and was used to refer to any Japanese immigrant who had traveled to Hawaii prior to 1885. It was likely not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Gannenmono would begin to be used to refer just to the Japanese migrants who arrived in Honolulu aboard the *Scioto* in 1868.

“When the Gannenmono departed Japan and arrived in Hawaii, it was actually the fourth year of the Keiō era,” explains Dr. Mark T. McNally, a professor of history at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa specializing in Japan’s Edo era. “Only after the Meiji era was declared later that year, in October, was it given a retroactive starting date of January 1868, so there was no way they could have been ‘of the founding year.’” Although some may say that the distinction McNally makes regarding when exactly the Meiji

Japanese names are written last name first.



era was declared is a trivial one, McNally emphasizes that it is not. “These were people whose connection to the previous Tokugawa [Edo] period was arguably even stronger [than any they had to the Meiji period],” he said. “Their arrival was also the culmination of human efforts and also historical forces in the years and even decades leading up to 1868. Thus, as important as it is to view the Gannenmono in continuity with later developments, it is also vital that we look at them as connected to earlier developments.”

## Leaving Turmoil for a New Life

In November of 1867 Japan’s last shogun (military ruler), Tokugawa Yoshinobu, resigned, ending the more than two-and-a-half-century rule of the Tokugawa family over Japan. This sparked a struggle between pro-Imperial forces and Tokugawa supporters that led to the Emperor being restored to power and the start of the Meiji period. This period of massive political turmoil was the culmination of many years of change and instability in Japan, which likely made the idea of heading outside of Japan in search of fortune all the more appealing for many.

Eugene Van Reed, the American businessman tasked by the Kingdom of Hawaii to recruit Japanese laborers for work in Hawaii’s booming sugar plantations, took advantage of the situation. While political factions jostled for power in Japan, Van Reed put up posters advertising “wealth” and “adventure” in a far-off land. It did not take long for people to start showing up.

With travel papers for his recruits secured from the Tokugawa government, Van Reed was ready to send his laborers to Hawaii. However, as McNally explains, within days of the recruits’ scheduled departure date, pro-Imperial forces took control of Yokohama in the spring of 1868 and deemed the papers invalid. Over the course of nine days, Van Reed appealed this decision seven times, but to no avail. And so Van Reed ordered the crew of the *Scioto* to secretly set sail from Yokohama during the early hours of May 16, carrying its human cargo, the roughly 150 people we know today as the Gannenmono.

McNally notes that Japanese newspaper reports of the time did not use the term Gannenmono. Instead, they called them *ihō tokōsha*. Literally meaning

“illegal travelers,” this was a reference to their being smuggled out of the country by Van Reed. Interestingly, though, the group aboard the *Scioto* were far from the only “illegal travelers” to make their way to Hawaii around that time.

## The Other Gannenmono

In 1636 Japan enacted a series of edicts that started a more than two-century-long policy of national seclusion. According to this policy, those who left Japan without permission from 1636 to 1866 were either imprisoned or even executed if they ever returned. Nevertheless, prior to the arrival of the *Scioto* in Honolulu, there were already many Japanese people in Hawaii. In fact, between the years of 1804 to 1866, an estimated one hundred Japanese people had settled or passed through Hawaii as castaways. It is important to note that until the meaning of the word narrowed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of these individuals would have been considered Gannenmono as well. And to further complicate things, some of them even came to be incorrectly grouped in with those who came to Hawaii aboard the *Scioto*.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing of the “mistaken Gannenmono” is a man named Ishii Sentarō. Reports from the time mention someone named Sentarō as having acted as an unofficial interpreter for the newly arrived Gannenmono in June 1868. The list of names that supposedly indicates who was aboard the ship has the name of Ishii Sentarō on it, strongly suggesting that he was this interpreter and that he got on board in Yokohama. However, McNally explains that this is most likely not the case. That list of names appears to have been made only after their arrival in Honolulu, and not in Yokohama before the ship’s departure, and evidence strongly suggests that Ishii Sentarō, who was already living in Hawaii when the ship arrived, got his name added to the list in order to get a job or perhaps even for some other reason.

As for who exactly the interpreter Sentarō was, McNally puts forth two candidates. The first one is a member of Japan’s warrior class (*bushi*) who was named Ishii Sentarō and who arrived in Hawaii in 1866. The other candidate is a man simply known as Sentarō. He had no official last name (because he was a commoner) and was a ship’s cook-turned-castaway who arrived in Honolulu, also in 1866. As both of these men were in the

islands prior to the arrival of the *Scioto*, McNally believes that it is possible for either one of them to be the Sentarō whose name is mentioned as a kind of interpreter for the Japanese migrants in a letter from the leader of the Gannenmono to Van Reed in the summer of 1868. However, Ishii Sentarō likely never left Maui, and so reports of an interpreter named Sentarō in Honolulu could not have been him. Thus, the interpreter in Honolulu was most likely the former ship’s cook. McNally adds that it is quite possible that both of these men had enough knowledge of English that they could have both been interpreters at the same time but in different places, so that the deeds of one of them could have been mistakenly applied to the other in the historical records, making it seem like there was just one interpreter named Sentarō, instead of two—thus confusing things even more and leaving historians in the dark about who the interpreter Sentarō really was.

Though not associated with the group that came aboard the *Scioto* like Ishii Sentarō was, the famous Nakahama Manjirō and his friends all would have qualified as Gannenmono prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Known for being one of the first Japanese people to visit the United States, Manjirō, who was also known by his nicknames John Manjiro and John Mung, was born in 1827 in what is now Kōchi Prefecture. At the age of 14 Manjirō and four of his friends were fishing one day when their boat wrecked on an uninhabited Japanese island known as Torishima. An American whaler ship called the *John Howland* rescued them and took them to Honolulu. While the four friends stayed in Honolulu, Manjirō decided to remain on the ship and go on to the States, where he



Courtesy of Mark McNally

attended the Oxford School in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. Manjirō studied English and navigation for a year and even apprenticed as a cooper. He set out for San Francisco during the California Gold Rush and made enough money to return to Japan. However, before returning home, he made a stop in Honolulu, where he managed to find two of his fishermen friends. They joined Manjirō on his journey back to Japan and in 1851 the three arrived in Ryūkyū (Okinawa), where

they were quickly taken into custody. Following their release months later in Nagasaki, they returned to their homes in Tosashimizu. In 1853 Manjirō was made a samurai and worked as an interpreter for the shogun.

Unfortunately, not all castaway stories end in success. McNally believes that many of the Japanese who lived in Hawaii kept a low profile due to fear about what could happen to them if taken back to Japan. The previously mentioned cook named Sentarō, for example, seems to vanish completely from historical records not long after the arrival of the *Scioto*. “Japanese historians speculate that he may have feared treatment as a criminal and so fled to the West Coast and gone into hiding. He was likely a real person, we just don’t know what happened to him after the summer of 1868.”

## More to Discover

The story of the Gannenmono is a complex one, especially when viewed from the perspective of what the word used to mean. Aside from the parts of this story that this brief series of articles was unable to touch upon, there are many other unknown aspects, due to a lack of historical records. However, McNally does not seem to mind. Rather, he appears to enjoy the mystery and appreciates the endless possibilities of things yet to be discovered. One potentially untapped source of further information is the Hawaii State Archives. McNally says that he has heard there are several boxes there simply labeled “Gannenmono” that have yet to be cataloged due to the linguistic limitations of the staff. Although he is busy with many other projects at the moment, McNally looks forward to opening those boxes someday and seeing what else can be learned. 終

(Opposite page)

A depiction of the *Scioto*  
(watercolor by Tom Tomita)

(Center)

Dr. Mark McNally

Artwork courtesy of Tom Tomita

Do you know of any interesting stories related to Japanese establishments? Or perhaps you have a great family story you’d like to share. If so, then send us an email at [mail@readwasabi.com](mailto:mail@readwasabi.com)