

CHAPTER
28

Section 2

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*

During the Meiji era, the government attempted to modernize Japan by sending representatives to Europe and North America to study Western ways. Yukichi Fukuzawa (1834–1901), a well-known Japanese educator and advocate of Western learning, traveled to the United States and Europe several times. In the following excerpt from his autobiography, Fukuzawa describes one of his visits to America. What were his impressions of California?

Our hosts in San Francisco were very considerate in showing us examples of modern industry. There was as yet no railway laid to the city, nor was there any electric light in use. But the telegraph system and also Galvani's electroplating were already in use. Then we were taken to a sugar refinery and had the principle of the operation explained to us quite minutely. I am sure that our hosts thought they were showing us something entirely new, naturally looking for our surprise at each new device of modern engineering. But on the contrary, there was really nothing new, at least to me. I knew the principle of the telegraphy even if I had not seen the actual machine before; I knew that sugar was bleached by straining the solution with bone-black, and that in boiling down the solution, the vacuum was used to better effect than heat. I had been studying nothing else but such scientific principles ever since I had entered Ogata's school.

Rather, I was surprised by entirely different things in American life. First of all, there seemed to be an enormous waste of iron everywhere. In garbage piles, on the seashores—everywhere—I found lying old oil tins, empty cans, and broken tools. This was remarkable to us, for in Yedo, after a fire, there would appear a swarm of people looking for nails in the ashes.

Then too, I was surprised at the high cost of daily commodities in California. We had to pay a half-dollar for a bottle of oysters, and there were only twenty or thirty in the bottle at that. In Japan the price of so many would be only a cent or two.

Things social, political, and economic proved most inexplicable. One day, on a sudden thought, I asked a gentleman where the descendants of George Washington might be. He replied, "I think there is a woman who is directly descended from Washington. I don't know where she is now, but I think I have heard she is married." His answer was so very casual that it shocked me.

Of course, I knew that America was a republic with a new president every four years, but I could not help feeling that the family of Washington would be revered above all other families. My reasoning was based on the reverence in Japan for the founders of the great lines of rulers—like that for Ieyasu of the Tokugawa family of Shoguns, really deified in the popular mind. So I remember the astonishment I felt at receiving this indifferent answer about the Washington family. As for scientific inventions and industrial machinery, there was no great novelty in them for me. It was rather in matters of life and social custom and ways of thinking that I found myself at a loss in America. . . .

Before we sailed, the interpreter, Nakahama, and I each bought a copy of Webster's dictionary. This, I know, was the very first importation of Webster's into Japan. Once I had secured this valuable work, I felt no disappointment on leaving the new world and returning home again.

from Eiichi Kiyooka, trans., The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 110–117, 134–135, 214–217. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., Documents in World History, Vol. II (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 60–61.

Activity Options

1. **Writing for a Specific Purpose** Imagine that you are Yukichi Fukuzawa. Write a travel journal entry in which you record impressions of your trip to the United States.
2. **Clarifying** With a partner, role-play an American or a Japanese journalist who interviews Fukuzawa about his visit to California.
3. **Summarizing** Collect Fukuzawa's impressions of California in a cluster diagram or another kind of graphic organizer.