

First U.S. Go? 19th-Century Philadelphians learn “peculiar draught-like game

Franco Pratesi

The year was 1860. Commodore Perry had opened Japan to international trade a few years earlier, and the corresponding official treaties had to be signed. To accomplish this, the Japanese government dispatched a group of statesmen and distinguished travelers to the US. They visited several towns, Philadelphia among them. Records of this visit are kept in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, particularly the June 16 edition, which reports that a “magnificent torchlight parade” was organized to honor the guests, who also toured several local factories.

The same report contains the first known mention of Go in print in the United States. The local chess club knew of shogi and wished to learn more about it.

Eight Japanese soldiers familiar with the game came to the club to give a demonstration.

The reporter was quite impressed: “Every one who once witnesses the Japanese game, will be forced to the conclusion that our game, for which many are found to claim a scientific and mathematical perfection, is but a branch from the parent stock – a puny and dwarfed offspring of the grand original.... They described to us another Japanese game, somewhat similar to draughts, played on a board nineteen squares every way – that make three hundred sixty-one square.” The Westerners, like many to come after, do not seem to have known what to make of this peculiar draught-like game.

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