

【Ii Naosuke】

Ii Naosuke (1815–1860) is remembered for his efforts to promote traditional arts and crafts, his involvement in opening up trade with the West, and the untimely circumstances of his death—by assassination.

Naosuke was born the fourteenth son of the daimyo Ii Naonaka (1766–1831). His mother, Tomi, was one of Naonaka's concubines. Having numerous older brothers, there was never any expectation that Naosuke would be made the lord of Hikone, and he spent his youth studying at a Buddhist temple. At 17, Naosuke moved into a small residence in the castle complex, which he shared with Naonaka's fifteenth son, Ii Naoyasu (1820–1888). Three years later, the younger Naoyasu was adopted into a different daimyo family, but Naosuke received no such opportunity. He spent the next twelve years living in that small residence. During that time, Naosuke studied philosophy, painting, poetry, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and a number of martial arts. Eventually, he gave his residence the name “Bogwood House” (Umoreginoya). The name was both an allusion to works by well-known poets of the time and a reflection of the studious life Naosuke expected to live—isolated from the strife of the world, like a piece of bogwood.

But during those years, the thirteen male siblings who preceded Naosuke either died or were adopted into other families one by one. When Ii Naomoto (1809–1845) died, Naosuke unexpectedly found himself in position to become lord of Hikone, which he did in 1850. As the daimyo of Hikone, he was appointed to a position within the shogunal government in Edo (now Tokyo). Only eight years later, he would be made *tairō*, or chief minister.

In July of 1853, United States Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) arrived in Edo Bay with four warships to (forcefully) negotiate the opening of Japanese ports. Japan had been a closed country for centuries at that point, but Perry succeeded in intimidating the shogunate into signing a treaty that allowed ships from the United States to dock at several Japanese ports. In 1855, U.S. Consul General Townsend Harris (1804–1878) arrived to negotiate a full trade agreement. Ii Naosuke was appointed as chief minister soon after, and he became responsible for conducting the negotiations. Anti-foreign sentiment was high, and Naosuke realized that it was prudent to consult the emperor on such a matter. He tried to stall the decision. However, a fatal miscommunication between Naosuke and his subordinates led to the unintended signing of the treaty. The decision, made without the emperor's approval and in opposition to the views of those loyal to the court, created many enemies for Naosuke.

The shogun at the time, Tokugawa Iesada (1824–1858), was prone to illness and

largely depended on Ii Naosuke to exercise governmental power on his behalf—and exercise it he did. Taking action to suppress any perceived opposition, Naosuke imprisoned or executed over 100 bureaucrats and civilians who opposed his policies. This severe measure would become known as the Ansei Purge (1858–1860). Ii Naosuke's tyrannical actions were not without consequences—on March 3, 1860, seventeen samurai assassinated him just outside the Sakurada Gate of Edo Castle. His assassination would come to be known as the Sakuradamon Incident.