

# ***Yamato Colony: The Pioneers Who Brought Japan to Florida***

**By Ryusuke Kawai, translated by John Gregersen and Reiko Nishioka.  
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 208 pp. \$19.95 (softcover). ISBN  
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*Yamato Colony: The Pioneers Who Brought Japan to Florida* is the 2020 English translation of Ryusuke Kawai's 2015 Japanese book, *大和コロニー: フロリダに「日本」を残した男たち* (*Yamato Colony: The Men Who Left "Japan" in Florida*). A native of Kanagawa Prefecture and a member of the Japan Writers' Association, Ryusuke Kawai is a freelance author and journalist based in Japan. After earning a BA in political science from Keio University, Kawai began his journalism career with the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper in 1980. In 1986, he left Japan for an internship with the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. Kawai first noticed the remains of a Japanese settlement in Florida on a trip from Daytona to Miami. The highway exit sign on I-95 he saw in this early moment of his career is prominently featured on the cover of his 2015 Japanese language book.

Kawai's collected history of the Yamato Colony is dedicated to "the adventurers who sought new lives in other lands." In this work, Kawai sought to answer questions such as "Who were they? Why did they travel to such a place as southern Florida? What did they hope to accomplish?"<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the lives of ordinary people, Kawai documented both the adversities and the triumphs of early Japanese pioneers in the Sunshine State. The compelling story not only sheds new light on an important period in Florida history, but also firmly links America and Japan together in the twentieth century.

After the Meiji Restoration in the late nineteenth century, Japanese people began emigrating abroad. Because of the limited opportunities in their homeland, those pioneers bravely accepted the challenge of establishing new lives for themselves in a different world. They settled in not only China, Korea, and Southeast Asia, but also the United States and Latin America. At age 19, Sukeji Morikami was one of those young immigrants. He planned to make a fortune in America and return home to marry his sweetheart in Japan. However, "life is all about things that do not go as plan[ned], and that is why it is interesting."<sup>2</sup>

With the construction of Henry Flagler's East Coast Railway in the early twentieth century, Florida became the land of opportunity, attracting immigrants from near and far. Lured by the prospects of economic success, in 1906, Morikami joined other Japanese colonists in a farming settlement in South Florida. Through his extensive research, Kawai vividly chronicles the experiences of this small agricultural community, from its initial success with growing pineapples to the ensuing blight, economic recession, and other hardships that the immigrant settlers endured. Kawai also explains the community's eventual closure; the agricultural land was seized by the United States for military training during World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryusuke Kawai, *Yamato Colony: The Pioneers Who Brought Japan to Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), 181.

<sup>2</sup> Ryusuke Kawai, FHS 2021 Virtual Public History Forum - Session 5: Annual Awards Presentation, May 22, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX7ODAdhs\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX7ODAdhs_8).

## Reviews

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As the last survivor of the Yamato Colony, Morikami never returned to Japan to marry his first love. He remained single all his life, learned English as an adult, became an American citizen, purchased land in Delray Beach, and continued farmwork well into his 80s. Shortly before his death in 1976, he donated his property to Palm Beach County. That land later became the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, a fitting tribute to the legacy of the Yamato Colony and Florida's Japanese American heritage.

Today, the story of the Japanese colony in Florida is not well known in the United States or Japan. Besides various newspaper articles and academic essays, the only book on this topic is Virginia Aronson's 2002 title *Konnichiwa Florida Moon: The Story of George Morikami, Pineapple Pioneer*. However, the thin Pineapple Press biography is a children's book, written for grades four to twelve. Hence, Kawai's work is not only the first full-length monograph in English, but also the most comprehensive book in existence on the Yamato Colony and the early Japanese pioneers in Florida thus far. By utilizing primary source materials in Japanese and adding a new narrative to the immigrant journey, Kawai's work greatly enhances our understanding of Japanese perspectives about the Yamato Colony's endeavors. Therefore, this work represents a unique contribution to the existing literature and a valuable, welcome addition to research on Florida history.

In addition to searching through Florida newspaper articles about the Yamato Colony and the activities of Japanese colonists over the years, Kawai engaged with the archives of the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, the Virginia Snyder Collection at the S. E. Wimberly Library of Florida Atlantic University, and the Boca Raton and Delray Beach Historical Societies. With his knowledge of Japanese, he was also able utilize diaries and journals kept by the Japanese colonists. More remarkably, Kawai executed an extensive family history search in Japan, collected letters of correspondence between the settlers in Florida and their Japanese families, and conducted interviews with some of the settlers' grandchildren. The comprehensive bibliography of Japanese language materials at the end of the book makes this title a very useful resource on the history of the Japanese immigration to the United States. However, since Ryusuke Kawai is a journalist by training, not an academic, the book does not include any footnotes or endnotes, which makes it somewhat difficult for interested individuals to track down original archival sources or link primary materials to a particular assertion in the text.

Interestingly, the book's two translators were long-term employees of the Morikami Museum. John Gregersen was a senior curator and cultural director who joined the institution in 1978, and Reiko Nishioka was director of education at the museum starting in 1990. For their efforts in promoting friendship and mutual understanding between American and Japanese peoples, both have received the Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation Award. Their skilled translation has made the English edition pleasant to read and easy to comprehend. The book also contains multiple historical photographs, considerably enhancing the experience. In 2021, Kawai's *Yamato Colony* received the Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore Award from the Florida Historical Society, which recognizes an outstanding book or monograph relating to Florida's ethnic groups or dealing with a significant social issue from a historical perspective. The book is highly recommended to anyone interested in Florida history, immigration history, and the Asian American experience more broadly.

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