

Reischauer Center Monograph Series

Bridging Continents

Japan and Tennessee in Partnership

By Thomas Bell



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The Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies

Established in 1984, with the explicit support of the Reischauer family, the Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) actively supports the research and study of trans-Pacific and intra-Asian relations to advance mutual understanding between Northeast Asia and the United States.

The first Japanese-born and Japanese-speaking U.S. Ambassador to Japan (1961-1966), Edwin O. Reischauer later served as the Center's Honorary Chair from its founding until 1990. His wife Haru Matsukata Reischauer followed as Honorary Chair from 1991 to 1998. They both exemplified the deep commitment that the Reischauer Center aspires to perpetuate in its scholarly and cultural activities today.

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The flags of Japan, the United States, and Tennessee.

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¹ Japan-America Society of Tennessee. 2021. <https://japanamericasocietyoftennesseeinc.wildapricot.org>.

1. Introduction

Relations between Japan and the United States are often analyzed at the national level, framed through the lenses of security alliances, trade imbalances, and geopolitical strategy. Far less attention is paid to the role of individual American states in shaping, sustaining, and institutionalizing that bilateral relationship. Yet subnational actors have played a consequential role in translating diplomatic alignment into durable economic and cultural ties. Among them, Tennessee presents a particularly instructive case.

At first glance, there is little to suggest that Tennessee would occupy a meaningful place in the U.S.-Japan relationship. The state is geographically distant from the Pacific, does not host a historically large Japanese-American population, and has never been among the largest exporters to Japan. Trade statistics alone do not place Tennessee at the forefront of the bilateral economic relationship. Nevertheless, over the past half-century, Tennessee has emerged as one of Japan's most significant destinations for greenfield investment in the United States, hosting major manufacturing facilities, corporate headquarters, and more than 50,000 employees of Japanese firms. Japan is today the largest source of foreign direct investment in the Volunteer State, a position built not on accident or inevitability, but on sustained political entrepreneurship and relationship-building.

This paper argues that Tennessee's importance within the U.S.-Japan relationship lies not in trade volume or demographic coincidence, but in its disproportionate success in attracting and institutionalizing Japanese foreign direct investment beginning in the 1970s. That success was catalyzed by structural shifts in the global economy – including rising trade tensions, currency realignment, and the outward expansion of Japanese firms – but it was made durable through intentional state-level diplomacy, particularly under Governor Lamar Alexander (1979-1987).

Over time, economic engagement generated deeper political, diplomatic, and cultural linkages, culminating in the relocation of Japan's New Orleans Consulate-General to Nashville, the establishment of Tennessee's own Japan office in Yokohama, and a dense network of sister-city and educational exchanges.

Tennessee's experience demonstrates how subnational actors can convert macroeconomic disruption into long-term institutional advantage. It also illustrates the vulnerability of such relationships to federal-level volatility in trade and immigration policy. By tracing the historical foundations, economic integration, political ties, and future prospects of Japan-Tennessee relations, this paper situates the Volunteer State within the broader architecture of the U.S.-Japan alliance, arguing that Tennessee has become not merely a participant, but a consequential node in one of the world's most important bilateral partnerships.

2. Historical Foundations

Early Ties

Relations between Tennessee and Japan are, necessarily, rooted in the history of the national-level relationship between Japan and the United States. Relations were largely nonexistent until the middle of the 19th century, as the United States found its footing as a relatively new country post-independence. Across the Pacific, meanwhile, Japan remained under the rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the Edo Period. Japan's foreign policy was decidedly isolationist, with the *sakoku* (鎖国) policy in effect beginning in the 1600s.² This policy, which was enacted after the Tokugawa Shogunate prevailed at the Battle of Sekigahara, severely limited trade between Japan and the outside world.³ Trade continued through a handful of limited exceptions, the most noteworthy being through the port of Nagasaki. However, foreign nationals were almost entirely banned from entering Japan, while Japanese were likewise prevented from leaving. By the mid-19th century, *sakoku* had been enforced for well over two centuries. As a result, relations between Japan and the United States were for all practical purposes nonexistent.

The impetus to break this status quo came first from the United States. Throughout the 19th century, the U.S. pushed westward from its base on the Atlantic Coast, in the expansionist phenomenon known as Manifest Destiny.⁴ By the 1840s, the United States finally found itself at the shores of the Pacific; first, through the Oregon Treaty of 1846, which delineated the U.S.-

² Kazui Tashiro, and Susan Downing Videen. "Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8, no. 2, 1982: 283–306. <https://doi.org/10.2307/132341>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Armando Navarro. *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlán: Struggles and Change*. AltaMira Press, July 7, 2005, p. 62.

British Canadian border at the 49th parallel. Perhaps more importantly, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 ended the Mexican-American War, and gave the United States all or part of present-day California, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming (plus acknowledgement of the status of Texas).⁵ The United States had transformed, in less than a century, from a loose confederation of coastal Atlantic states to a continent-spanning federation with a vast Pacific coastline.

Amidst this fundamental re-shaping of the United States into a two-ocean power, it is no coincidence that American overtures to eastern Asia came quickly afterwards. The U.S. was increasingly interested in trade with countries in the Asia-Pacific, and with China in particular.⁶ The proximity of Japan to U.S. whaling grounds (perhaps most famously chronicled in Herman Melville's 1851 classic, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*) further cemented the region's importance to the new Pacific power.

Wishing to expand its access to ports for American trade and continue the ideals of Manifest Destiny, U.S. President Millard Fillmore assigned Commodore Matthew C. Perry the task of opening Japanese ports via gunboat diplomacy.⁷ Perry departed from Virginia in 1852, first arriving at the Japanese archipelago in the summer of 1853. He returned a half year later, in February 1854, eventually landing in modern-day Kanagawa Prefecture. Under threat of the use of force, Perry and a representative of the shogun agreed to the Convention of Kanagawa.⁸ The accord opened the ports at Shimoda (Shizuoka Prefecture) and Hakodate (Hokkaido) to

⁵ Ibid, pp. 80-82.

⁶ John Whitney Hall. *Japan: From Prehistory to Modern Times*. Boston: Tuttle, January 1991, pp. 255-257. <https://archive.org/details/japanfromprehist0000hall/page/256/mode/2up>.

⁷ Kazui Tashiro, and Susan Downing Videen. "Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8, no. 2, 1982: 283–306. <https://doi.org/10.2307/132341>.

⁸ Ibid.

American trade, and de facto ended the *sakoku* policy after two and a half centuries.⁹ U.S.-Japan relations had begun, albeit under clear duress.

In the years immediately after Commodore Perry's trip to Japan, both countries underwent significant change. Japan, partially as a result of its forced opening, eventually underwent a civil war called the Boshin War (戊辰戦争), which ended the Tokugawa Shogunate and restored imperial rule in 1868.¹⁰ The Meiji Restoration saw Japan pursue rapid industrialization, and the westernization of its political and social structures. Japan also began a period of imperialist expansion, colonizing Taiwan and Korea and defeating Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) – a shock to European powers.

The United States also found itself transformed in this period. The Civil War (1861-1865) finally settled the matter of institutionalized chattel slavery, and led to the development of a more centralized and robust political and military apparatus. The United States won its own war against a European nation in the Spanish-American War of 1898, through which it acquired the territories of Guam and the Philippines in the western Pacific.¹¹ By the turn of the 20th century, both countries were expanding to meet their wider ambitions – and both viewed East Asia as a potential area for expansion.

Tennessee Enters

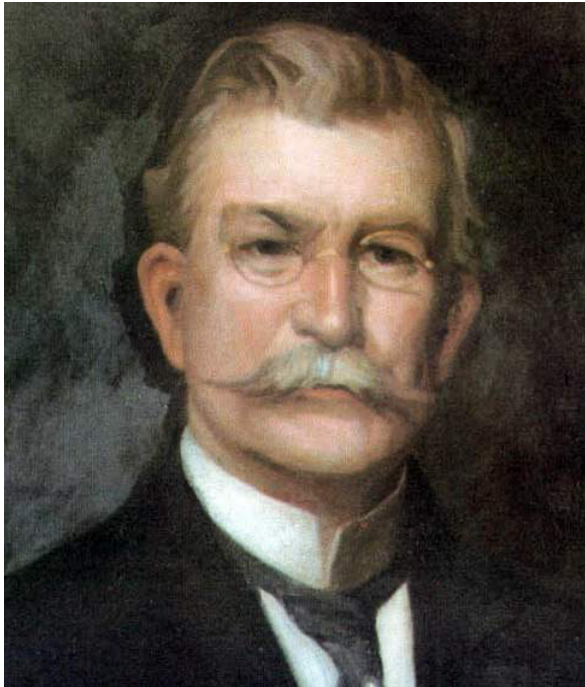
It is in this context that the first notable connection between Japan and Tennessee was established. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War and the Russo-Japanese War, the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tōru, Hōya. "A Military History of the Boshin War." Chapter. In *The Meiji Restoration: Japan as a Global Nation*, edited by Robert Hellyer and Harald Fuess, 153–70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹¹ Armando Navarro. *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlán: Struggles and Change*. AltaMira Press, July 7, 2005, pp. 80-85.

United States sought to deepen ties with Japan. In 1906, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt sent Luke Edward Wright, of the state of Tennessee, to serve as ambassador to Japan.¹² Because previous chiefs of mission had used the title “minister resident” or “envoy,” Wright became the first full ambassador of the United States to Japan.¹³



Luke Edward Wright, first U.S. Ambassador to Japan

¹⁴ Wright, who grew up in Memphis and was a Confederate military veteran, served for a relatively brief sixteen months in his post. However, his presence at a formational time in U.S-Japan relations helped to lay the groundworks of Tennessee’s eventual relationship with the country. His tenure immediately followed the Russo-Japanese War’s conclusion and the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth. Ambassador Wright was tasked with managing ongoing tensions related to the immigration of Japanese workers into the west coast; the dispute

eventually led to the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, wherein Japan voluntarily reduced the movement of its citizens to the western United States.¹⁵ The Root-Takahira Agreement would follow (albeit after Wright’s tenure as ambassador), in which the U.S. and Japan recognized the

¹² Office of the Historian. “Chiefs of Mission for Japan,” United States Department of State, March 14, 2024. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/chiefs/mission/japan>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ William Gardner Bell. “Luke Edward Wright,” House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/20635>.

¹⁵ Susan E. Hamilton. “Gentlemen’s Agreement.” EBSCO, 2023. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/gentlemens-agreement>.

status of each other's territorial possessions in the western Pacific. Wright was thus present during an important period of diplomatic activity between the two countries, even amidst continued U.S. showmanship in the region.

For instance, President Roosevelt's envisioned Great White Fleet, in which a group of U.S. battleships circumnavigated the globe, was met with relative calm by Japanese politicians and journalists in Tokyo.¹⁶ However, Wright served as a voice of caution, concerned that the demonstration of naval power might have "an unfavorable effect upon the mind of the average Japanese."¹⁷ While the trip, which visited the port of Yokohama in October 1908, was largely devoid of the feared U.S.-Japan friction, Ambassador Wright's mindful approach would foreshadow Tennessee's approach in the decades that followed.

Japan's connection with Tennessee would be delayed by global circumstances. U.S.-Japan tensions in the Asia-Pacific increasingly grew as ambitions in both countries advanced unabated. The outbreak of the Pacific theater of the second World War represented a final break in ties. Rather than hosting Japanese businessman, traders, and tourists, Tennessee hosted hundreds of Japanese-American detainees at Camp Forrest in Tullahoma.¹⁸ The war, and the reconstruction that followed, delayed the development of Japan-Tennessee relations for many decades. The latter part of the 20th century, however, would create the conditions that would eventually transform the relationship.

¹⁶ Thomas A. Bailey. "The World Cruise of the American Battleship Fleet, 1907-1909." *Pacific Historical Review* 1, no. 4. 1932, p. 394. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3633111>.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 395.

¹⁸ Suikei Furuya, *An Internment Odyssey: Haisho Tenten*, translated by Tatsumi Hayashi, foreword by Gary Y. Okihiro, introduction by Brian Niiya and Sheila Chun. Honolulu: Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i, 2017, pp. 86–96.

3. Economic Integration and Investment

Tennessee-Japan Economic Origins

Economic ties between the United States and Japan are robust, and have transformed dramatically since the end of the second World War. Rather than impose punitive economic constraints on the defeated Japanese, the U.S. used Japan as a vehicle to address the geopolitical realities of the emerging Cold War. This led to the 1951 signing of the *Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan* (日本国とアメリカ合衆国との間の相互協力及び安全保障条約), which established a formal military alliance in 1952.¹⁹

Although the revision of the treaty in 1960²⁰ was met with unprecedented resistance via the Anpo Protests (安保闘争), the U.S.-Japan alliance remains a cornerstone of the foreign policy of each country, three-quarters of a century since its signing.

This stabilization of relations in the postwar period allowed extensive trade relations between the two nations to develop. In 1955, Japan exported \$456 million of goods to the United States, while U.S. exports to Japan were \$771 million in the same year.²¹ Closer to the beginning of the Bubble Economy in 1982, these figures had exploded to \$36 billion and \$24 billion, respectively.²² Although important changes have taken place in both the U.S. and Japanese economies since that time, trade has continued to accelerate, with Japanese exports to the U.S. totaling \$167 billion in 2021; U.S. exports to Japan in the same year totaled \$112

¹⁹ CFR Editors. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance,” Council on Foreign Relations. May 3, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-japan-alliance>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kanemitsu Hideo. “U.S.-Japanese Trade Relations, 1955-1982.” In *The United States and Japan in the Postwar World*, edited by Akira Iriye and Warren I. Cohen, 145–70. University Press of Kentucky, 1989, p. 153. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt130j6f6.15>.

²² Ibid.

billion, despite relative declines due to the COVID-19 pandemic and recession.²³ These figures make the U.S. Japan's second largest export destination, while Japan is the 4th largest export destination of the United States.²⁴

The U.S.-Japan economic relationship, therefore, is a clear instance of strong trade relations persisting over the decades. Where, then, does Tennessee fit into this relationship? Although this paper will ultimately argue that Tennessee punches above its weight in the U.S.-Japan economic relationship, this is not immediately clear from a simple analysis of bilateral trade data.

Take, for instance, the volume of exports in both goods and services from individual U.S. states to Japan. California and Texas, the country's two largest population centers and two largest economies, export far and away the most goods and services to Japan. California exports to the country totaled \$18.9 billion in 2021, closely followed by Texas at \$16.5 billion.²⁵ A number of other states outpaced Tennessee in their exports to Japan, including New York (\$5.9 billion), Washington (\$5.1 billion), and Illinois (\$4.6 billion). Tennessee, meanwhile, accounted for only \$2.3 billion of exports in that year.²⁶ While this figure outperforms most other southern states, including North Carolina, Florida, Virginia, and Louisiana, it is far from an unexpected outlier.

²³ East West Center and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. "Japan Matters for America / America Matters for Japan. Asia Matters for America, 2023, p. 18. <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 20-21.

²⁶ Ibid.

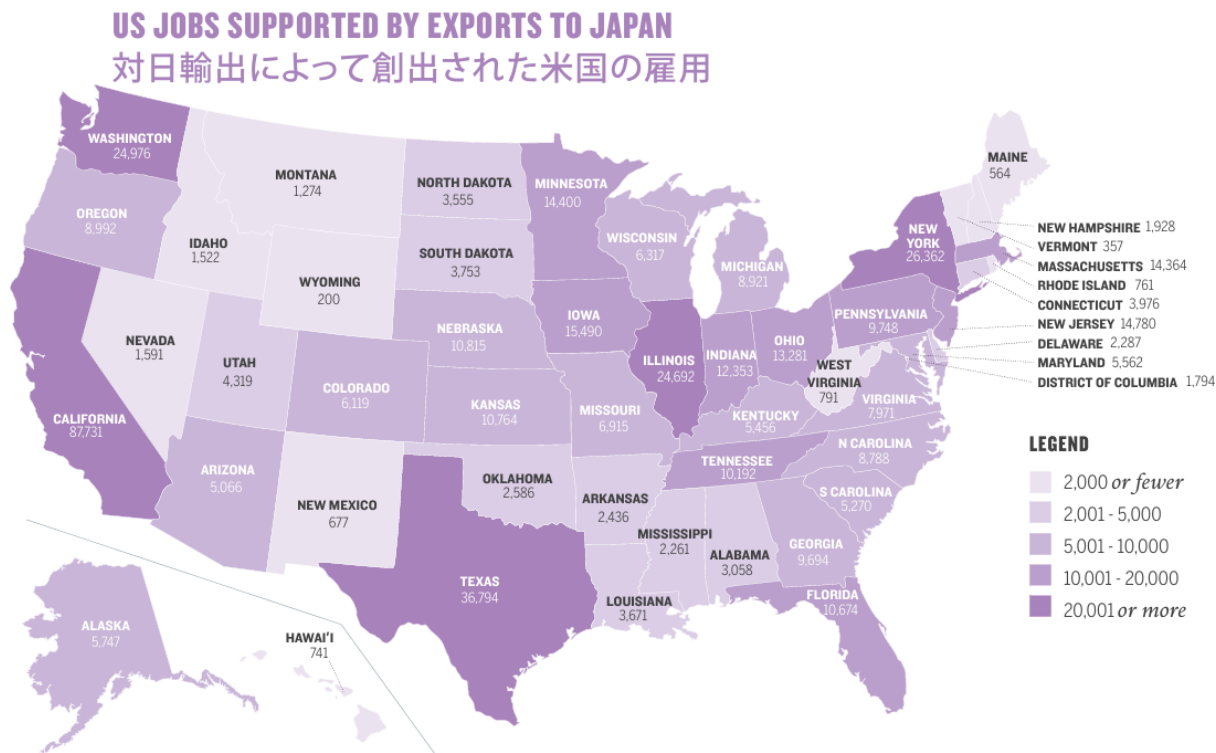
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In terms of job creation, too, focusing on trade provides an incomplete picture of Japan's full relationship with Tennessee. Given Tennessee's noteworthy, but not exceptionally high, level of exports to Japan, it is perhaps unsurprising that export-backed job creation is relatively minor in the state. All told, Tennessee-based exports to Japan supported 10,192 jobs in the state in the early 2020s.²⁸ By comparison, states such as California (87,731), Texas (36,794), New York (26,362), Washington (24,976), and Illinois (24,692) far exceeded Tennessee.²⁹ Even

²⁹ Ibid.

smaller states with fewer raw exports, such as Nebraska and Iowa, had more jobs supported by their exports, at 10,815 and 15,490, respectively.³⁰



(Source: <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>)

What, then, is the basis of the Japan-Tennessee economic relationship, if not exports in goods and services? Rather than trade, the answer lies in Japanese investment in the state.

Causes of Japanese Investment in Tennessee

Although investment trumps direct trade in the Japan-Tennessee relationship, the roots of the Japan's investments in the state lie, perhaps paradoxically, in the U.S.-Japan trading relationship. In the early years and decades of Japan's economic miracle, Japan imported

³⁰ Ibid.

significantly more from the United States than it exported, serving as a net purchaser of U.S. goods and exports.³¹ This relationship benefited the U.S. manufacturing base, and fueled the consumer demands of Japan's burgeoning middle class. However, as Japan's manufacturing base recovered from the war, this dynamic began to shift. By 1965, the economic relationship had flipped, as Japan achieved its first export surplus with the United States – a surplus that has persisted without exception in the decades since.^{32 33}

The United States, alarmed at its growing trade deficits, imposed a ten percent tariff on Japanese imports in August 1971.³⁴ Japan, which was restrained in its security posture by the constitutional limitations imposed by Article 9, was incentivized to maintain good trading relations with the United States, lest trade imbalances interfere with the security relationship. In one move to satisfy the Americans, the two countries agreed to a number of Orderly Marketing Arrangements – self-imposed export limits on politically sensitive products.³⁵ An early instance of an Orderly Marketing Arrangement was in Japanese-produced color television sets, agreed to in 1977.³⁶ Japanese exports of the television sets totaled 2.9 million units in 1976, spurring American manufacturing and labor groups to complain of jobs losses. The agreement limited these imports to 1.75 million units, and exports did indeed shrink in the years after the agreement.³⁷

³¹ Ronald E Dolan and Robert L Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

³² United States Census Bureau. "Trade in Goods with Japan," 2025. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5880.html#questions>.

³³ Dolan and Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 390.

³⁶ Thomas E. Mullaney. "'Orderly Marketing' Pacts And Restriction of Imports," *The New York Times*. March 10, 1978. <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/03/10/archives/orderly-marketing-pacts-and-restriction-of-imports-the-economic.html?login=email&auth=login-email>.

³⁷ Ibid.

Part of Japan's growing export strength was also its relatively weak currency, which the U.S. suspected was grossly undervalued.³⁸ Until August 1971, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) par value of the Japanese yen was 360 yen per U.S. dollar – a figure which made Japanese exports extremely attractive to buyers holding U.S. currency.³⁹ As with Orderly Marketing Arrangements, Japan was willing to negotiate on the value of its currency if it meant securing its defense arrangements. After 1971, the yen began to appreciate compared to the dollar thanks to a number of policy decisions⁴⁰, eventually culminating in the Plaza Accord of 1985.⁴¹ Although the legacy of this appreciation is debated, the strengthening of the yen vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar gave Japanese individuals and firms significantly greater purchasing power than they previously had.⁴²

As a result of the yen's appreciation and the Orderly Marketing Arrangements, Japan in the 1970s and 1980s had a strong incentive to invest in the U.S. economy. Trade tensions with the United States increasingly made rising exports a source of political tension in the bilateral relationship. Negotiations, including the Orderly Marketing Arrangements, occasionally provided artificial caps on the quantity of Japanese exports into the United States. Finally, an appreciating Japanese yen made U.S.-bound exports less attractive in principle – while empowering Japanese firms to invest more efficiently in the U.S. economy. It is amidst these important changes that the Japan-Tennessee relationship truly began to develop.

³⁸ Kanemitsu Hideo. "U.S.-Japanese Trade Relations, 1955-1982." In *The United States and Japan in the Postwar World*, edited by Akira Iriye and Warren I. Cohen, 145–70. University Press of Kentucky, 1989, p. 146. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt130j6f6.15>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Dolan and Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

⁴¹ Funabashi Yoichi. *Managing the Dollar: from the Plaza to the Louvre*. Institute for International Economics, 1988, pp. 21-24. <https://archive.org/details/managingdollarfr0000funa/page/236/mode/1up>.

⁴² Dolan and Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

The Japanese Investment Wave

In 1975, the only Japanese manufacturing facility of note in Tennessee was a Sumitomo Chemical plant in Mount Pleasant, south of Nashville.⁴³ As the U.S. increasingly pushed Japan to limit its exports to the country, Tennessee rapidly became a destination for Japanese investment. The next significant Japanese movement to Tennessee came in 1977, when Toshiba (東芝), then officially called Tokyo Shibaura Denki (東京芝浦電気), opened a major manufacturing facility in Lebanon, Middle Tennessee.⁴⁴ Toshiba, which was a major manufacturer of color television sets at the time, was directly impacted by the preceding year's Orderly Marketing Arrangement capping the import of such products from Japan. Toshiba's Lebanon plant employed hundreds of Tennesseans, and allowed the company to avoid trade issues entirely by producing its television sets domestically. Other activity would follow; in 1979, Sharp (シャープ) established the Sharp Manufacturing Company of America (SMCA) in Memphis, Tennessee.⁴⁵ Sharp's facility began producing microwave ovens and, unsurprisingly, color television sets.⁴⁶

The year 1979 also saw the inauguration of Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander. Alexander, who would go on to become Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush and a United States Senator for Tennessee, was an early proponent of Japanese investment in the Volunteer State. In his first year on the job, Alexander followed the advice of then-

⁴³ Lamar Alexander. *Friends: Japanese and Tennesseans – A Model of U.S.-Japan Cooperation*. Kodansha International, 1986, p. 16.

⁴⁴ United States Senate. "Senate – Wednesday, May 8, 1991." Congressional Record – Senate. 1991. <https://www.congress.gov/102/crecb/1991/05/08/GPO-CRECB-1991-pt7-10-1.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Sharp. "Sharp History – 1979: First Overseas Manufacturing Base in an Industrialized Country." Sharp Corporation. https://global.sharp/corporate/info/his/h_company/1979/index.html.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

President Jimmy Carter and traveled to Japan, intent on attracting Japanese manufacturing to the state.⁴⁷ Alexander devoted a significant time as Governor to building relationships in Japan, spending eight working weeks on the issue in his first two years as Governor – three weeks of which he spent in Japan.⁴⁸ Given the high importance of trust-based relationships in the Japanese business world,⁴⁹ Alexander’s efforts were especially noteworthy – and have paid off handsomely.

Alexander’s two-terms as Governor were defined by the rapid growth in Japanese investment in Tennessee, helping to justify his efforts. While the Toshiba and Sharp plants both represented significant investments, Nissan Motor Corporation’s (日産自動車) search for a U.S. manufacturing home was seen as an even bigger prize. In 1980, Nissan selected Tennessee as the location for its new plant, and broke ground on the facility in Smyrna, Middle Tennessee. The \$300 million vehicle manufacturing complex, which opened in 1983, represented the largest Japanese foreign investment in history at the time.⁵⁰ In a further vote of confidence, Nissan would move its North America headquarters to Franklin, Tennessee – fifteen miles south of downtown Nashville – from Gardena, California in 2005.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 150.

⁴⁹ Ritu Lohtia, Daniel C. Bello, and Constance Elise Porter. “Building trust in US-Japanese business relationships: Mediating role of cultural sensitivity.” *Industrial Marketing Management*, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2007.06.016>.

⁵⁰ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 150.

⁵¹ Lindsay Chappelldale Jewett. “Nissan Moving U.S. Headquarters To Nashville; Relocation To Begin Next Summer.” *Autoweek*, November 9, 2005. <https://www.autoweek.com/news/a2082976/nissan-moving-us-headquarters-nashville-relocation-begin-next-summer/>.



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Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander at the 1981 groundbreaking of Nissan's Smyrna manufacturing plant, amidst union protests.



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Nissan's vehicle assembly plant in Smyrna, Tennessee as seen thirty years after opening in 2013.

⁵² David Plazas. "Japan matters to Tennessee's future: A conversation with Ambassador Koji Tomita | Plazas." *The Tennessean*, November 10, 2021. https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2021/11/10/tennessee-japan-foreign-direct-investment-global-trade/6346182001/?sltsgmt=0154_E.

⁵³ Nissan Motor Corporation. "Nissan's Smyrna, Tenn. Vehicle Assembly Plant." Nissan Motor Corporation USA Newsroom, October 14, 2013. <https://usa.nissannews.com/en-US/photos/photo-fcab963a505343d09811d9d71a5b660a-nissan-s-smyrna-tenn-vehicle-assembly-plant>.

Nissan's investment in Tennessee represented an important boon to Japan-Tennessee relations. Far from being a high-water mark, however, the Nissan investment would spur a dramatic acceleration of Japanese business in the Volunteer State. Following the success of Nissan's facility, a number of major Japanese companies (many of them automotive in nature) opened manufacturing plants across the state. Notably, Toyota Motor Corporation (トヨタ自動車) has made certain vehicle components in Jackson, Tennessee since 2005.⁵⁴ Other companies invested in the state include Denso Corporation (デンソー), M-TEC/Mugen Motorsports, (エムテック・無限), Unipres Corporation (ユニプレス), and Calsonic Kansei Corporation (カルソニックカンセイ) – now known as Marelli (マレリ).⁵⁵ Bridgestone (ブリヂストン), one of the world's largest tire manufacturers, relocated its U.S. corporate headquarters to Nashville from Ohio in 1992,⁵⁶ and operates several manufacturing facilities in the state.⁵⁷



Bridgestone Tower, left, in downtown Nashville.

⁵⁴ Toyota. "Toyota Motor Manufacturing Tennessee." Toyota Newsroom, 2026. <https://pressroom.toyota.com/facility/toyota-motor-manufacturing-tennessee/>.

⁵⁵ Sally Avery, Jeremy Stiles, and Robert Suttles. "Foreign Direct Investment in Tennessee." Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development, November 1 2016, p. 2. https://tneecd.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fdi-white-paper_6-1-.pdf.

⁵⁶ Bridgestone Americas, Inc. "Our Headquarters." Bridgestone Americas, Inc., 2025. <https://www.bridgestoneamericas.com/en/contact-us/headquarters#>.

⁵⁷ Avery, Stiles, and Suttles. "FDI in Tennessee," pp. 1-3.

⁵⁸ Bridgestone, "Our Headquarters," 2025.

Although Alexander’s time as Governor ended in 1987, his efforts to bolster Japanese investment have continued to pay dividends. In 2019, Mitsubishi Motors Corporation (三菱自動車工業) announced that it would relocate its U.S. headquarters to Franklin, Tennessee from Cypress, California.⁵⁹ In 2024, Denso announced that it would expand its existing presence in Athens, Tennessee, adding tens of thousands of square feet of manufacturing space in a \$100 million capital investment.⁶⁰ And in 2025, T.RAD (ティラド) – a Japanese maker of heat exchange components – announced a new manufacturing facility in Clarksville, Tennessee.⁶¹ Even Kewpie Corporation (キューピー), the maker of a famous Japanese mayonnaise, opened a 160,000 square-foot plant in Clarksville, with the intention of serving over half of the U.S. market.⁶²

⁵⁹ Mitsubishi Motors. “ミツビシ・モーターズ・ノース・アメリカ、本社をテネシー州フランクリンに移転.” Mitsubishi Motors Newsroom, June 26, 2019.

https://www.mitsubishi-motors.com/jp/newsroom/newsrelease/2019/20190626_1.html.

⁶⁰ McMinn County Economic Development Authority. “DENSO Announces Expansion of 200 Jobs and \$100 Million Capital Investment.” Make It In McMinn, October 24, 2024.

<https://www.makeitinthemcminn.org/news/p/item/60010/denso-announces-expansion-of-200-jobs-and-100-million-capital-investment>.

⁶¹ Johnny Bradigan. “Clarksville, Tennessee’s Business Boom Grows with New \$90 Million Investment.” Construct Connect, December 11, 2025. <https://news.constructconnect.com/clarksville-tennessees-business-boom-grows-with-new-90-million-investment>.

⁶² Chris Smith. “Inside Kewpie plant in Clarksville, which will serve sauces for over half of United States | VIDEO.” Clarksville NOW, June 25, 2025. <https://clarksvillenow.com/local/kewpie-plant-in-clarksville-will-serve-mayo-dressing-sauces-for-over-half-of-united-states-video/>.



Kewpie's manufacturing facility in Clarksville, Tennessee, flying the flags of Japan, the United States, and Tennessee.

Tennessee in the 21st Century

The flurry of investment, manufacturing facilities, and corporate relocations beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 2020s demonstrates the success of Tennessee's economic relationship with Japan, at least in real terms. Even when compared to other states, however, Tennessee has a clear edge. For instance, since 2003 Tennessee has been a leading destination for greenfield investment; that is, building or expanding new facilities as opposed to purchasing existing ones.⁶⁴ Tennessee has attracted \$10.3 billion in such investment since 2003, placing it third in the nation in that time period. Tennessee trails both Texas (\$11.3 billion) and California (\$10.8 billion) by less than 10%, a figure made all the more impressive considering the larger size of each in both economic and population terms. Texas' nominal GDP in 2024 was 4.93 times larger than Tennessee's, while California's was 7.46 times larger.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, as

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ East West Center and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. "Japan Matters for America / America Matters for Japan. Asia Matters for America, 2023, pp. 28-29. <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Bureau of Economic Analysis. "GDP by State." U.S. Department of Commerce, 2025. <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gdp-state>.

measured by the U.S. census' 2025 population estimates, Texas had 4.22 times the population of Tennessee; California had 5.72 times the population of the Volunteer State.⁶⁶ While Tennessee may not contribute as much as other states to the direct trading relationship between the United States and Japan, it is clearly a preferred place to build Japanese products for the North American market.

Japanese investment has also had a dramatic impact on the Tennessee labor market. Japanese establishments in the state, which numbered over 200 in December 2025, employ more than 50,000 workers in Tennessee.⁶⁷ When compared to the rest of Tennessee's top five sources of foreign direct investment – South Korea, Germany, France, and Canada – Japan's employment figures alone surpass their combined total, per the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD).⁶⁸

While Tennessee's performance is remarkable for a medium-sized state, it does face important challenges from competitors similarly keen to attract foreign investment. Outside of Tennessee, Japanese firms have developed manufacturing facilities in places such as North Carolina (Toyota), Kentucky (Toyota), Mississippi (Toyota, Nissan), Alabama (Toyota, Honda), Indiana (Toyota, Honda), Ohio (Honda), and more.^{69 70 71} While Tennessee lacks a monopoly on Japanese automotive manufacturing in the United States, its preeminent position as a top

⁶⁶ United States Census Bureau. "Quick Facts." United States Census Bureau, 2025. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/geo/chart/ID/PST045222>.

⁶⁷ Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development. "International Business." TNECD, 2025. <https://tnecd.com/advantages/international/>.

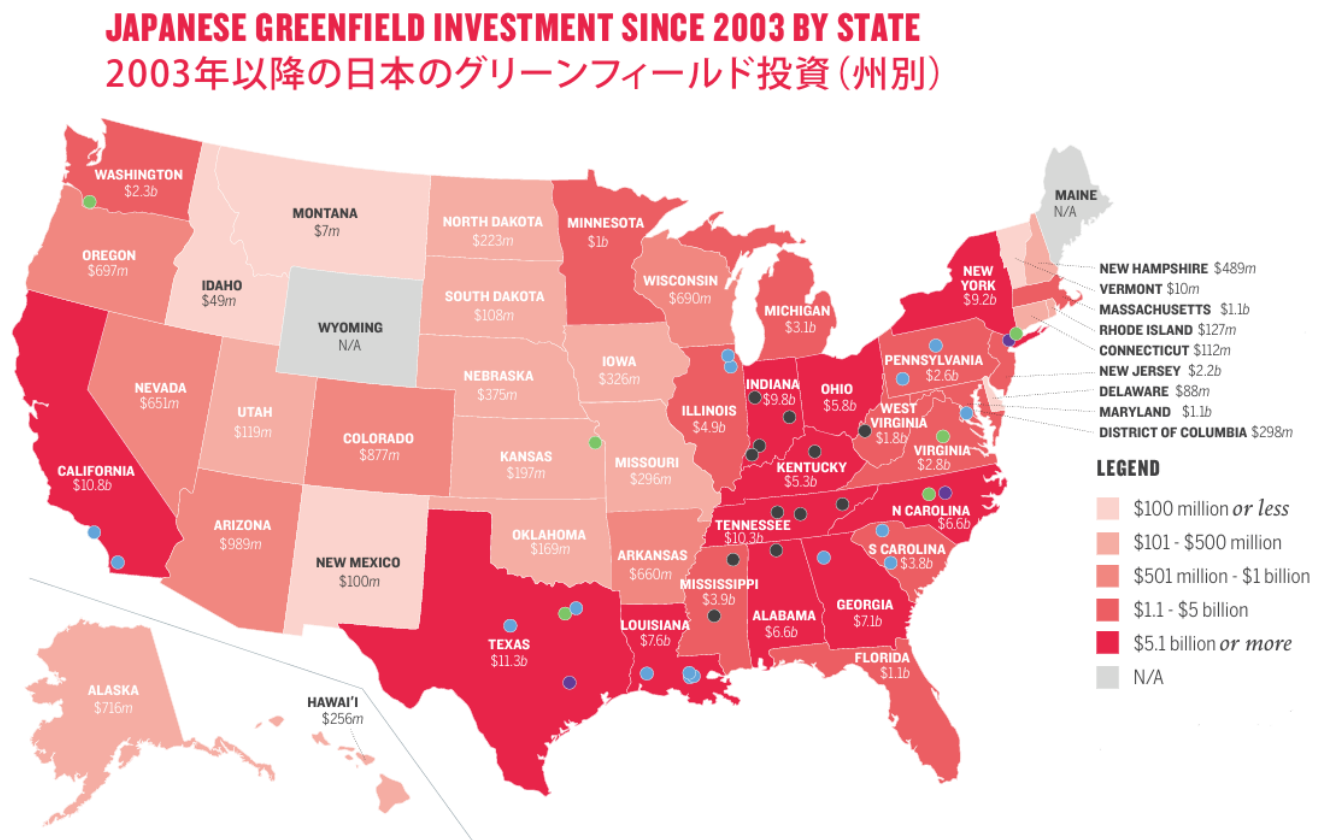
⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Toyota. "We are Toyota: 14 Manufacturing Plants in North America." Toyota Newsroom, 2026. <https://pressroom.toyota.com/we-are-toyota-14-manufacturing-plants-in-north-america/>.

⁷⁰ Honda. "Investing in America." Honda, 2026. <https://www.honda.com/operations>.

⁷¹ Nissan Motor Corporation. "North America." Nissan Motor Corporation, 2025. https://www.nissan-global.com/EN/COMPANY/PROFILE/EN_ESTABLISHMENT/NORTH_AMERICA/.

recipient of foreign investment highlights the productive relationship between the two economies.



⁷² (Source: <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>)

While it may be tempting to view the competitive nature of other manufacturing states as a sign that Tennessee is simply one of many, this ignores the state's important first-mover advantage. While states across the American South have attracted significant sums of Japanese greenfield investments since 2003, highlighting an undeniable regional pattern, Tennessee's role as an early breakthrough state sets it apart. Measuring Japanese capital investment in Tennessee

⁷² East West Center and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. "Japan Matters for America / America Matters for Japan. Asia Matters for America, 2023, pp. 28-29. <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>.

as a whole highlights the state's advantage, with over \$21 billion in capital investment by December 2025, per TNECD – making Japan by far the largest source of foreign direct investment in the state.⁷³ Tennessee's deep relationships with Japanese businesses, dating back to the 1970s, helped to set the blueprint that competitor states would follow.

⁷³ Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development. "International Business." TNECD, 2025. <https://tnecd.com/advantages/international/>.

4. Political, Diplomatic, and Cultural Relations

The Role of Individuals

Japan's relationship with Tennessee has not been purely economic in nature. Rather, human relationships have played a significant role not only in establishing the Japan-Tennessee economic partnership, but in maintaining it over the decades.

As mentioned in the second section of this paper, Tennessee's first direct diplomatic link with Japan was through native Tennessean Luke Edward Wright – the inaugural U.S. ambassador to Japan to use the title.⁷⁴ Wright's brief time as ambassador was largely without major diplomatic incident, but represented an important phase of the U.S.-Japan relationship. The United States' 1898 victory over Spain in the Spanish-American War made the Philippines and Guam, located in the western Pacific, U.S. territories. Japan, meanwhile, had proved its own military capabilities by defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Ambassador Wright's tenure, and his status as the first full ambassador to Japan, reflected the growing importance of both countries in a time of change.

While Ambassador Wright's tenure was the first formal connection between Tennessee and Japan, it would be several decades before political and diplomatic ties would be substantially renewed. Initial relations were broached in the hope of attracting Japanese investment to the state. In the course of these contacts, however, cultural connections also began to flourish. Rather than any diplomat, it is former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander who deserves much of the credit for forging the Japan-Tennessee relationship in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁷⁴ Office of the Historian. "Chiefs of Mission for Japan," United States Department of State, March 14, 2024. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/chiefsomission/japan>.



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Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, and Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker Jr. in Tokyo.

Alexander's two terms as Governor saw an unprecedented level of Japanese investment in the state. His frequent visits to the country helped to lay the groundwork not just for a robust economic relationship, but for deeper political and cultural ties, as well. Tomita Koji, a former ambassador of Japan to the United States (2020-2023), told *The Tennessean* that Alexander was "instrumental" in developing the relationship.⁷⁶ Alexander took advantage of an increasingly

⁷⁵ Lamar Alexander Papers. *Miscellaneous Photos from Japan Voyage, Photos-Governor*. Vanderbilt University, 1979. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.39161969>.

⁷⁶ David Plazas. "Japan matters to Tennessee's future: A conversation with Ambassador Koji Tomita | Plazas." *The Tennessean*, November 10, 2021. https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2021/11/10/tennessee-japan-foreign-direct-investment-global-trade/6346182001/?sltsgmt=0154_E.

multilateral world, advocating strongly for Japanese business in Tennessee. Alexander emphasized connections and relationships, helping to deepen Tennessee's value as a partner. These overtures allowed him to ingratiate himself with Japanese counterparts, despite not including Japan ties in his gubernatorial run and – by his own admission – knowing virtually nothing about the country before becoming Governor.⁷⁷ In a 1982 forum on Japan-Tennessee relations, for example, then-Governor Alexander moderated a discussion with then-U.S. Trade Representative Bill Brock (a Tennessean), then-Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker Jr. (a Tennessean), then-U.S. ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield, and then-Japanese ambassador to the U.S. Okawara Yoshio – demonstrating his robust diplomatic efforts.⁷⁸



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Governor Alexnader hosts a forum on Tennessee-Japan relations in 1982, with William E. Brock, USTR; Howard Baker Jr., Senate Majority Leader; Mike Mansfield, U.S. Ambassador to Japan; and Okawara Yoshio, Japanese Ambassador to the U.S.

While Tennessee was successfully courting Japanese investment at the state level, many of the aforementioned Tennesseans would play central roles in the contentious U.S.-Japan trade

⁷⁷ Alexander, *Friends*, pp. 15-17.

⁷⁸ Lamar Alexander Papers. *Japan-Tennessee Forum, Photos-Governor*. Vanderbilt University, 1982. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.39162417>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

relationship of the 1980s. Under Majority Leader Howard Baker, the Senate in the 1980s was preoccupied with Japan's barriers to trade and the widening U.S. trade deficit.⁸⁰ U.S. Trade Representative Bill Brock, who served during the Reagan administration, called on Japan to ensure smooth market access for U.S. products.⁸¹ Trade disputes at the national level ultimately incentivized Japan's manufacturing investments in the United States, which Governor Alexander successfully capitalized on. As relations improved, Vice President Al Gore – the highest-ranking Tennessean since Andrew Johnson's presidency ended in 1869 – was another asset, working to strengthen security and climate ties as the Cold War came to a close.⁸²



U.S. Vice President Al Gore (center) with Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro (right) and Foreign Minister Obuchi Keizo (left), December 1997.

⁸⁰ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. "U.S. trade relations with Japan: hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations," United States Senate, September 14, 1982. Washington: U.S. G.P.O.

⁸¹ Clyde H. Farnsworth. "Brock Warns Japan on Trade." The New York Times, March 2, 1982.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/02/business/brock-warns-japan-on-trade.html>.

⁸² Sandra Sugawara. "Gore Tries to Mollify Japan, APEC." The Washington Post, November 19, 1995.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/11/20/gore-tries-to-mollify-japan-apec/7e57bad1-706e-46a9-8bcc-5af7c804dc67/?no_nav=true&utm_campaign=tt_2510:control;ret_2406:2&utm_.

⁸³ CFR. "How Are International Agreements Helping Fight Global Warming?" CFR, September 17, 2024.
<https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/international-agreements-climate>.

Sister-City and Cultural Ties

Beyond politics, Japanese investment in Tennessee coincided with a wave of important sister-city relationships. One of the earliest such instances was between Hendersonville, Tennessee, and Tsuru, Yamanashi in 1983. The relationship began through grassroots, person-to-person interactions between Tennessee Baptist missionaries and Japanese host families – showing that Japan-Tennessee relations were not limited to purely commercial matters.⁸⁴



Concert featuring participants from Hendersonville, Tennessee and Tsuru, Yamanashi.

Other sister cities relationships began as extensions of business relationships, before developing into genuine cultural ties. Smyrna, the location of Nissan's large vehicle assembly plant in Tennessee, became sister cities with Zama, Kanagawa in 1991.⁸⁶ At the time, Zama hosted a major Nissan manufacturing facility, as well.⁸⁷ Although the plant closed in 1993

⁸⁴ City of Hendersonville, Tennessee. "Hendersonville's Sister City: Tsuru, Japan." City of Hendersonville, Tennessee, 2026. <https://www.hvilletn.org/484/Sister-City>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Smyrna. "Sister City Program." Town of Smyrna, TN, 2026. https://www.townofsmyrna.org/live/sister_city_program.php.

⁸⁷ Associated Press. "Nissan Plant closure a Blow to city's Future." LA Times, March 8, 1993. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-08-fi-1777-story.html>.

amidst Japan's economic crisis,⁸⁸ Zama continues to host Nissan's Zama Heritage Car Garage – a museum featuring retro Nissan vehicles.⁸⁹ Camp Zama, shared between the United States Army Japan and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force Zama Garrison, served as a further incentive for deepening ties.⁹⁰ While economic and military relations were a clear impetus for the Smyrna-Zama relationship, the two cities have developed regular student exchanges, engaging in cultural activities even as economic conditions have changed.⁹¹ The Smyrna-Zama relationship demonstrates how economic relations can be bolstered into deeper human connections.

Indeed, in recent years sister-city ties have spread to some of Tennessee's largest municipalities. These include Chattanooga and Tono, Iwate in 2017,⁹² and Knoxville and Muroran, Hokkaido in 1991.⁹³ In 2014, Nashville began a friendship city relationship with Kamakura, Kanagawa. While the Nashville metropolitan area is home to a significant portion of Japan's investment in Tennessee, the Nashville-Kamakura relationship has made a point to emphasize culture. In 2011, Nashville sent a Grammy-award winning bluegrass artist to perform in Kamakura; in 2013, Kamakura responded by sending biwa musicians to Music City.⁹⁴ Nashville hosts Tennessee's Japan-America Society, which was established in 2000 and supports business and cultural activity across the state.⁹⁵ A key component of this has been the Nashville

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Nissan Motor Corporation. "Nissan Heritage." Nissan Motor Corporation, December 20, 2023. <https://www.nissan-global.com/EN/HERITAGE/>.

⁹⁰ Smyrna. "Sister City Program." Town of Smyrna, TN, 2026. https://www.townofsmyrna.org/live/sister_city_program.php.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Chattanooga Sister Cities. "Tono, Japan – Since 2017." Chattanooga Sister Cities, 2025. <https://chattanooga.org/sistercities/tono-japan>.

⁹³ Muroran City. "International Friendship with U.S.A." Muroran City, July 9, 2024. <https://www.city.muroran.lg.jp/content/?content=1993>.

⁹⁴ Sister Cities of Nashville. "Kamakura, Japan." Sister Cities of Nashville, 2016. <https://www.scnashville.org/kamakura-japan.html>.

⁹⁵ Japan-America Society of Tennessee. 2021. <https://japanamericasocietyoftennesseeinc.wildapricot.org>.

Cherry Blossom Festival, which features one thousand sakura trees⁹⁶ donated by Japan beginning in 2008.⁹⁷ Student and musical exchanges have continued since then, highlighting the increasingly visible role Nashville plays in Japan-Tennessee relations.



Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell, left, with Japanese Consul-General Watanabe Shinji at the 2025 Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival.

Tennessean Leaders – Ambassadors and Governors

Beyond cultural exchanges, there has been an increasing amount of diplomatic activity between Japan and Tennessee since the beginning of the 21st century. Former Senator Howard Baker, Jr., of the state of Tennessee, was appointed Ambassador to Japan in 2001 by President

⁹⁶ Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival. “2026 Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival.” Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival, 2026. <https://www.nashvillecherryblossomfestival.org/cherry-trees.html>.

⁹⁷ Shannon Wells. “Japan Matters to Tennessee.” The East-West Center, December 17, 2021. <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/articles/japan-matters-to-tennessee>.

⁹⁸ Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival. “2026 Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival.” Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival, 2026. <https://www.nashvillecherryblossomfestival.org/cherry-trees.html>.



Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, left, with U.S. Ambassador to Japan Howard Baker Jr., right.

George W. Bush – becoming the second Tennessean to take the role, nearly a century since Luke Wright.⁹⁹ Baker helped to guide the U.S.-Japan relationship amidst the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which saw unprecedented military involvement by the Japan Self-Defense Forces.¹⁰⁰ Baker’s patient approach and positive reputation as a statesmen helped to bolster the

relationship, and he played a “vital role” in encouraging openness in the U.S.-Japan relationship.¹⁰¹ Baker resigned in 2005, and in 2008 was awarded the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Paulownia Flowers – one of Japan’s highest honors.¹⁰²

Tennessee would not need to wait another century to receive its next Ambassador to Japan. President Donald Trump appointed Bill Hagerty, a native Nashville businessman and two-time Vanderbilt University alum,¹⁰³ to the post in 2017, making him the third Tennessean to serve in the role.¹⁰⁴ Hagerty had previously served, from 2011 to 2014, as commissioner of the

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of State. “Biography: Howard H. Baker, Jr.” United States Department of State, September 5, 2001. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/outofdate/bios/b/4816.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ Steven K. Vogel. “Japan After Koizumi: The Abe Opportunity.” Brookings, October 1, 2006. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/japan-after-koizumi-the-abe-opportunity/>.

¹⁰¹ Shuzaburo Takeda. “In commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Senator Howard H. Baker.” Takeda & Associates, December 14, 2025. <https://tkdas.jp/EN/2025/12/14/november-13-15-in-commemoration-of-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-birth-of-senator-howard-h-baker/>.

¹⁰² Baker Donelson. “Howard H. Baker Jr. 1925 – 2014.” Baker Donelson. <https://www.bakerdonelson.com/Howard-H-Baker-Jr-1925-2014>.

¹⁰³ Vanderbilt University Law School. “Bill Hagerty ’84 appointed as U.S. Ambassador to Japan.” Vanderbilt University Law School, March 24, 2017. <https://law.vanderbilt.edu/bill-hagerty-84-appointed-as-u-s-ambassador-to-japan/>.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth R. Weinstein and Bill Hagerty. “The US-Japan Relationship under New Administrations: A Conversation with Senator Bill Hagerty.” Hudson Institute, February 6, 2025. <https://www.hudson.org/events/us-japan-relationship-under-new-administrations-conversation-senator-bill-hagerty>.



U.S. Ambassador to Japan Bill Hagerty, left, with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, right.

Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, further highlighting the importance of Japan-Tennessee business ties.¹⁰⁵

In that role, Hagerty helped to draw additional Japanese investment to the Volunteer State from companies such as Bridgestone, Calsonic

Kansei, and Nissan.¹⁰⁶ He also spent

parts of three years in Tokyo working with Boston Consulting Group, managing western clients in the region.¹⁰⁷ Hagerty's time as Ambassador saw the U.S. adopt the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's conceptualization of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (自由で開かれたインド太平洋) and expand activity among the Quad.¹⁰⁸ These moves helped to mark a decisive shift in U.S. policy in the region.

Furthermore, the U.S. and Japan agreed to a trade deal in September 2019, much of which was negotiated under Hagerty's tenure as Ambassador.¹⁰⁹ Given the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, the 2019 trade pact helped to alleviate concerns of

¹⁰⁵ Joey Garrison. "Trump to name Nashville's Bill Hagerty ambassador to Japan." The Tennessean, January 4, 2017. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/04/trump-name-nashvilles-bill-hagerty-ambassador-japan/96166922/>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth R. Weinstein and Bill Hagerty. "The US-Japan Relationship under New Administrations: A Conversation with Senator Bill Hagerty." Hudson Institute, February 6, 2025. <https://www.hudson.org/events/us-japan-relationship-under-new-administrations-conversation-senator-bill-hagerty>.

¹⁰⁹ Ana Swanson. "Trump Announces a Trade Pact With Japan." The New York Times, September 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/25/business/trump-announces-limited-trade-pact-with-japan.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

renewed trade restrictions on automobiles and agricultural goods. Hagerty, who would be elected a United States Senator for Tennessee in 2020, was awarded the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun in 2025.¹¹⁰

Beyond the ambassadorship, Tennessee's state leaders have continued to build upon Governor Alexander's example. Former Governor Phil Bredesen (2003-2011) worked to develop economic ties through trips and dialogue, including at the 2005 World Exposition in Aichi.¹¹¹ His successor, Governor Bill Haslam (2011-2019), made similar outreaches. At a 2016 investment summit in Tokyo – co-hosted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) – then-Governor Haslam called Japan's relationship with Tennessee "historic" and advocated for its continued success.¹¹² Both Bredesen and Haslam, who made numerous trips to Japan during their respective administrations, would be awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star for their efforts.¹¹³

Governor Bill Lee (2019-2027) has continued Tennessee's outreach to Japan. Since taking office in 2019, Governor Lee made numerous trips to the country, touting Tennessee's friendly business environment and proven success at international relationship-building. Under Governor Lee's administration, Tennessee has reached over \$20 billion in capital investment

¹¹⁰ Embassy of Japan. "2025 Spring Conferment of Decoration: The Honorable William Francis Hagerty IV." Embassy of Japan in the United States of America, April 29, 2025. https://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/2025-spring-conferment-hagerty.html.

¹¹¹ Nashville Post. "Bredesen, Kisber Head to Japan." Nashville Post, April 19, 2005. https://www.nashvillepost.com/home/bredesen-kisber-head-to-japan/article_d69cf2b7-2f44-50e4-8b4b-6fd15ffc3595.html.

¹¹² TNECD. "Governor Haslam, Commissioner Boyd Host Tennessee Investment Seminar in Tokyo." TNECD, May 11, 2016. <https://tnecd.com/news/governor-haslam-commissioner-boyd-host-tennessee-investment-seminar-in-tokyo/>.

¹¹³ Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville. "Decorations Conferred by His Majesty the Emperor of Japan." Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville. https://www.nashville.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000346.html.

from Japanese companies as of 2025¹¹⁴ – a figure that speaks to the consistent efforts of Tennessee’s leaders in building ties across the Pacific.



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Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, third from right, speaking at the 47th Japan-SEUS Annual Joint Meeting.

Institutional Ties

Beyond individual connections, both Tennessee and Japan have created the political institutions necessary to further their relationship. In 2007, Japan moved its 85-year-old consulate-general in New Orleans, Louisiana to Nashville.¹¹⁶ While New Orleans was a strategic location in a time of cotton production and Mississippi River shipping, the increasing volume of Japanese business in Tennessee made a move appealing.¹¹⁷ Japan’s Consulate-General, which is located in the Palmer Plaza in midtown Nashville, facilitates business in the region, cultural activities, and education exchanges – including the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET)

¹¹⁴ Office of the Governor. “Gov. Lee, Deputy Governor and TNECD Commissioner McWhorter Announce Strategic International Recruiting Trip to Asia.” Office of the Governor, October 7, 2025. <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2025/10/17/gov--lee--deputy-governor-and-tnecd-commissioner-mcwhorter-announce-strategic-international-recruiting-trip-to-asia.html>.

¹¹⁵ Gov. Bill Lee. “Honored to speak...” Facebook, October 29, 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/GovBillLee/posts/honored-to-speak-at-seus-japan-2025-to-share-the-significant-impact-of-japanese-/1356148815880561/>.

¹¹⁶ Kimberly Quillen. “Japan will close New Orleans consulate.” The Times-Picayune, November 30, 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20140104204404/http://blog.nola.com/tpmoney/2007/11/japan_will_close_new_orleans_c.html.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Program.¹¹⁸ Japan's presence in Nashville led to a record number of Tennesseans being selected for the JET Program (including the author), bolstering people-to-people ties.¹¹⁹ Former Consul-General Kobayashi Hiroyuki's soliloquy on first trying Nashville hot chicken, meanwhile, highlights the unexpected cultural experiences that the Consulate brings to the Japan-Tennessee relationship.



2019 JET Program participants with then-Consul Kobayashi Hiroyuki.

Tennessee, too, has built an institutional relationship with Japan. Although its status as a subnational unit makes direct diplomatic ties an impossibility, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development – of which Senator Hagerty was Commissioner from 2011 to 2014 – operates a Japan Office in the Minato Mirai neighborhood of Yokohama, Kanagawa.¹²⁰ That Yokohama also hosts Nissan's world headquarters, in Nishi-ku, is no coincidence. The office serves largely as a recruitment hub for attracting Japanese investment,

¹¹⁸ Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville. 2026. https://www.nashville.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itprtop_en/index.html.

¹¹⁹ Kobayashi Hiroyuki. "Record number of Tennessee graduates chosen for Japanese exchange program." *The Tennessean*, August 8, 2019. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2019/08/08/japan-exchange-teaching-jet-program/1936581001/>.

¹²⁰ Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville. "Basic information about Tennessee." Consulate-General of Japan in Nashville, February 13, 2021. https://www.nashville.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/11_000001_00225.html.

and focuses on building trust with Japanese business leaders.¹²¹ While the office highlights instances of cultural exchange – such as the opening of a Tennessee-themed bar in Nihonbashi serving Jack Daniels and other Tennessee whiskeys¹²² – it is less empowered than a consulate to participate in diplomatic affairs.

However, the TNECD Japan Office plays an important symbiotic role with the Consulate-General in Nashville at the economic level. As TNECD succeeds in attracting investment to Tennessee, the Consulate-General is available to support the Japanese businesses operating in the region. The Consulate-General’s broader ability to engage in cultural activities – especially when combined with the tens of thousands of Tennesseans employed by Japanese firms – helps to serve as an effective driver of goodwill for Japan in Tennessee.

¹²¹ Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development. “International Business.” TNECD, 2025. <https://tnecd.com/advantages/international/>.

¹²² Baylee Vrtiska. “A Taste of Tennessee in Tokyo.” Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development, May 24, 2024. <https://tnecd.com/news/a-taste-of-tennessee-in-tokyo/>.

5. Reasons for Tennessee's Success

Why Tennessee?

Japan's extensive business relations with Tennessee, its strong political and diplomatic ties, and growing cultural exchanges highlight the state's significant place in the U.S.-Japan relationship. While Tennessee's Japan-based investment makes it one of the most important states within the U.S.-Japan alliance, this status begs the question – why has Tennessee been so successful?

At a glance, there appears to be little that is inherently exceptional about Tennessee from the Japanese perspective. Tennessee is located far from the U.S. Pacific coast, making early ties logistically complicated. For many years, Japanese immigration to the United States reflected this reality. At the time of the 1970 census, which predates most Japanese investment in Tennessee, the Volunteer State was found to be home to only 857 Japanese-Americans – placing 36th in the country.¹²³ Tennessee's Japanese population lagged far behind Pacific states, such as Hawaii (217,175), California (213,277), and Washington (20,188).¹²⁴ Perhaps more notably, Tennessee also lagged behind most other mid-sized southern states, with Virginia (3,296), North Carolina (2,088), Georgia (1,334), Alabama (1,043), Kentucky (920), and Louisiana (876) all boasting larger Japanese communities.¹²⁵

With population growth and the arrival of business relations, the Japanese-American population in Tennessee grew to 11,366 by the 2020 U.S. census, passing states like Kentucky

¹²³ United States Census Bureau. "Japanese Population by Sex and Urban and Rural Residence: 1970." United States Census Bureau. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1970/pc-2-1g/42043783v2p1d1gch5.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

(7,943) and Alabama (7,276).¹²⁶ Despite this growth in Tennessee's Japanese community, the state still ranks around the U.S. median with the 24th largest group.¹²⁷ Importantly, Tennessee continues to trail rival southern states in overall Japanese population size – including Virginia (29,667), Georgia (22,313), and North Carolina (20,484).¹²⁸ While these states all exceed Tennessee in total population as well, the census data makes clear that the cultural impact of a large Japanese-American community is unlikely to be the main factor drawing investment to Tennessee.

An alternative theory is that, thanks to its economic climate and regulatory environment, Tennessee is simply a good place to do business – irrespective of Japan-related issues. One key component of this argument is Tennessee's strategic location, which gives it proximity to key markets.¹²⁹ In the 1980s, Tennessee was located within five-hundred miles of three-quarters of the U.S. population – making transportation and logistics convenient.¹³⁰ Beyond geography, Tennessee offers other business advantages. Tennessee is a right-to-work state, and has historically had a weaker union presence than many other parts of the country.¹³¹ Tennessee also provided financial incentives for Nissan's Smyrna plant – spending \$12 million on supporting infrastructure and \$7 million on training.¹³²

¹²⁶ United States Census Bureau. "Total Population." *Decennial Census, DEC Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics File A, Table T01001*.
[https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDDHCA2020.T01001?t=041:3824&g=010XX00US,\\$0400000&y=2020&d=DEC+Detailed+Demographic+and+Housing+Characteristics+File+A](https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDDHCA2020.T01001?t=041:3824&g=010XX00US,$0400000&y=2020&d=DEC+Detailed+Demographic+and+Housing+Characteristics+File+A).

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ David Plazas. "Japan matters to Tennessee's future: A conversation with Ambassador Koji Tomita | Plazas." *The Tennessean*, November 10, 2021. https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2021/11/10/tennessee-japan-foreign-direct-investment-global-trade/6346182001/?sltsgmt=0154_E.

¹³⁰ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 150.

¹³¹ Daniel F. Cuff. "Tennessee's Pitch to Japan." *The New York Times*, February 27, 1985.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/27/business/tennessee-s-pitch-to-japan.html>.

¹³² Ibid.

In the 21st century, too, Tennessee often ranks highly in media rankings of the best states for business. In 2019, Forbes ranked Tennessee as the seventh best state to do business in the country – thanks primarily to its supportive regulatory regime.¹³³ Similarly, in 2025 CNBC ranked Tennessee as the eighth best state to do business in the U.S., also citing a friendly regulatory environment.¹³⁴ However, Tennessee is far from unique among southern states in its business environment. On the Forbes list, Tennessee lags behind North Carolina (first), Texas (second), Virginia (fourth), and Georgia (sixth).¹³⁵ Similarly, Tennessee trails the same four southern states on CNBC’s list – in first, second, fourth, and seventh place, respectively.¹³⁶ Tennessee’s status as a good place to do business, bolstered by lower regulations and taxes, could certainly play a role in attracting Japanese investment. However, the state is far from unique in its business-friendly stature – especially compared to competitor states in the region.

Former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, who authored a 1986 pictorial book on the Japan-Tennessee relationship, points to qualitative reasons.¹³⁷ He highlights the fact that Tokyo, located at 35°41’23” N, is around the same latitude as Tennessee. This geographic coincidence grants both locations a similar climate – including their mutually oppressive summer humidity.¹³⁸ Alexander points, too, to shared geographical features, from the vibrant red maple leaves¹³⁹ to the verdant green mountains.¹⁴⁰ He notes that Japanese cherry blossoms (桜) bloom around the

¹³³ Forbes. “Best States For Business.” Forbes, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/best-states-for-business/list/>.

¹³⁴ Scott Cohn. “America’s Top States for Business 2025: The full rankings.” CNBC, July 11, 2025. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/10/top-states-for-business-americas-2025-the-full-rankings.html?msockid=359b534d7ccf6c3034d5427b7d016d8d>.

¹³⁵ Forbes. “Best States For Business.” Forbes, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/best-states-for-business/list/>.

¹³⁶ Cohn, “America’s Top States for Business 2025,” <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/10/top-states-for-business-americas-2025-the-full-rankings.html?msockid=359b534d7ccf6c3034d5427b7d016d8d>.

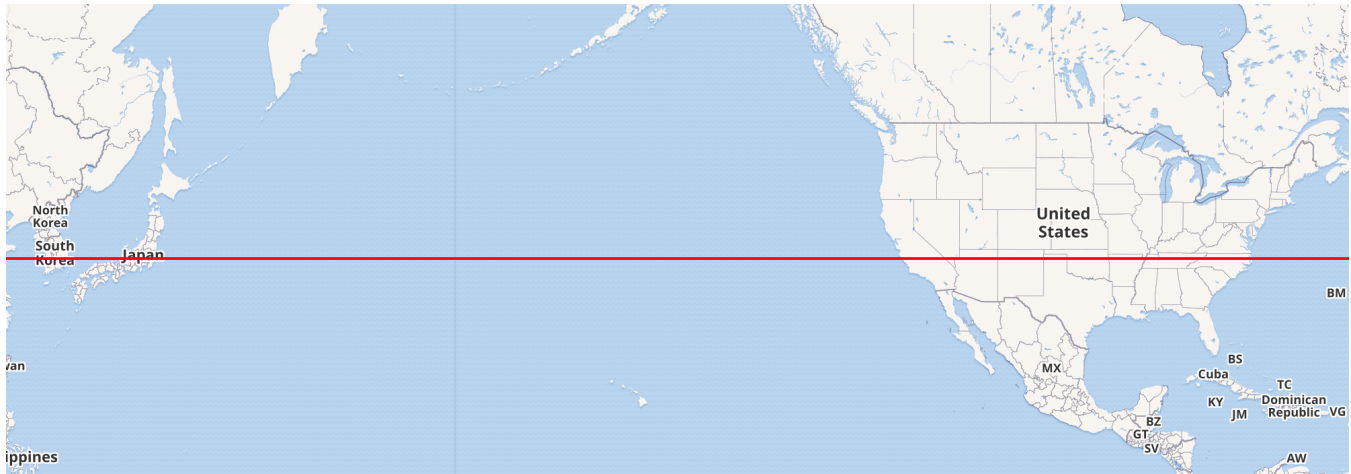
¹³⁷ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 151.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 75

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 26

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 75.

same time as the dogwood trees do in East Tennessee.¹⁴¹ He even mentions the shared trauma of enduring an occupation by the U.S. military as a defeated nation – for Japan, after the Pacific War (1945-1952)¹⁴²; for Tennessee, after the U.S. Civil War (1864-1871).¹⁴³



Latitude 36 °N, crossing through the center of Japan and Tennessee.

Can the strong relationship between Japan and Tennessee be explained by mutually sticky summers and shared foliage? It is certainly plausible that these key geographic, cultural, and historical parallels could have aided the relationship. However, much of what Alexander describes is not inherently unique to Tennessee – particularly when compared to the rest of the South. Across the region, states experience similar weather around latitude 35/36° N – with 35 ° N forming Tennessee’s southern border with Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Maple trees and dogwood blossoms blanket the South, and the entirety of the former Confederacy was

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 28.

¹⁴² John W. Dower. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. Norton, 1999. ISBN 0-393-04686-9.

¹⁴³ Sarah McCanless Howell. “The Civil War and Reconstruction.” Britannica, February 20, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Tennessee/The-Civil-War-and-Reconstruction>.

¹⁴⁴ Wikimedia Maps. “Interactive Map.” Wikimedia Maps.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circles_of_latitude_between_the_35th_parallel_north_and_the_40th_parallel_north#/maplink/0.

subjected to a U.S. military occupation during Reconstruction.¹⁴⁵ While these shared elements cannot be written off completely as contributing factors to the Japan-Tennessee relationship, their widespread nature across the South indicates that more is at play.

Relationship-Building

Tennessee is a good place to do business, shares geographic similarities with Japan, and boasts cultural coincidences. Rather than these elements alone, however, the Japan-Tennessee relationship is best explained by the intentional manner in which early diplomatic overtures exploited these advantages. Despite his state-level title, Governor Alexander was the most important diplomat in these efforts. Although he initially knew almost nothing about Japan, Alexander visited the country repeatedly, establishing and nurturing personal relationships with politicians and business leaders.¹⁴⁶ He took advantage of the state's commonalities with Japan, taking then-Nissan president Ishihara Takashi to see the fall colors (紅葉) at Cade's Cove in East Tennessee – reminiscent of the fall colors at Nikko.¹⁴⁷ As Governor, Alexander opened educational exchanges, ensuring that Japanese-language programs began operation across the state.¹⁴⁸ He boosted contact with, and between, the Japanese population living in Tennessee, inviting families to picnics at the Governor's residence.¹⁴⁹ He ensured that Tennessee hosted regular business conferences with Japanese counterparts,¹⁵⁰ which was particularly vital at a time when many state governors expressed concerns about inviting Japanese investment.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Sarah McCanless Howell. "The Civil War and Reconstruction." Britannica, February 20, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Tennessee/The-Civil-War-and-Reconstruction>.

¹⁴⁶ Alexander, *Friends*, p. 175.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 28-29.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 153.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Daniel F. Cuff. "Tennessee's Pitch to Japan." The New York Times, February 27, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/27/business/tennessee-s-pitch-to-japan.html>.

Alexander's efforts were so successful that then-Nissan USA chairman Zaitu Masahiko said "when I come to Tennessee, I feel at home."¹⁵² Alexander's understanding of the importance of relationships to Japanese business¹⁵³ was a key part of unlocking Japanese investment in the state – and setting the groundwork for the economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties that would continue to develop. Tennessee's business environment and geographic similarities may have set the stage, but it was the consistent efforts to bridge the two societies that led to Tennessee's continued success.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ritu Lohtia, Daniel C. Bello, and Constance Elise Porter. "Building trust in US-Japanese business relationships: Mediating role of cultural sensitivity." *Industrial Marketing Management*, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2007.06.016>.

6. Future Prospects

Changes to the Status Quo

Despite its distance from the Pacific coast, its relatively small Japanese-American population, and only minor contacts before the 1970s, Tennessee has emerged as one of Japan's favored destinations for foreign investment. While the past half-century of Japan-Tennessee relations has been a definite success story, the future holds important challenges – in addition to opportunities.

The most notable shift in the status quo arrived when U.S. President Donald Trump began his second presidential term in January 2025. Trump, making good on his campaign promise to raise tariff rates to unprecedented levels, imposed a base tax of 24 percent on most Japanese goods as part of his April 2025 “Liberation Day” announcement.¹⁵⁴ Noting Japan's low imports of American rice, Trump also pushed for an additional 25 percent levy on Japanese automobiles¹⁵⁵ while threatening to raise overall tariffs on Japanese imports to as high as 35 percent.¹⁵⁶

In the context of the U.S. trade disputes with Japan in the 1980s, some of President Trump's rhetoric may sound familiar. In 1971, the United States' growing trade deficit with Japan led President Richard Nixon to institute a 10 percent tariff on imports.¹⁵⁷ Likewise, one of President Trump's key rationales for his tariff push was the U.S. trade deficit. Trump declared a

¹⁵⁴ Megan Messerly, Ari Hawkins, and Daniel Desrochers. “Trump plans to slap Japan with new tariffs amid stalled negotiations.” Politico, June 30, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/30/trump-plans-to-slap-japan-with-new-tariffs-amid-stalled-negotiations-00433773>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Alexandra Stevenson and River Akira Davis. “They Did Deals With Trump to Get Lower Tariffs. Now They Are Stuck.” The New York Times, February 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/22/business/trump-tariffs-japan-indonesia.html>.

¹⁵⁷ Dolan and Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

national emergency, and invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to justify the reciprocal tariffs.¹⁵⁸ Also at issue for the President was the flow of Japanese-made products, such as automobiles, into the country.¹⁵⁹ This rhetoric, too, mirrors the concerns of the 1970s and 1980s, when the U.S. worried that Japanese-made televisions and cars would supplant domestically-produced alternatives.¹⁶⁰



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Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae, left, meets with U.S. President Donald Trump, right, at the White House, March 2026.

¹⁵⁸ The White House. “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security. The White House, April 2, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/>.

¹⁵⁹ Messerly et al, “Trump plans to slap Japan with new tariffs,” <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/30/trump-plans-to-slap-japan-with-new-tariffs-amid-stalled-negotiations-00433773>.

¹⁶⁰ Dolan and Worden. *Japan: A Country Study*. 1992, p. 389. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029874/>.

¹⁶¹ Javier C. Hernández, “Using Charm and Restraint, Japan’s Leader Mostly Avoids Trump’s Wrath,” March 20, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/20/world/asia/trump-japan-prime-minister-meeting.html>.

Tennessee – Opportunity and Challenge

Much has been written about the potentially adverse impacts of the U.S. trade war on the overall economy, including Japan's.¹⁶² From Tennessee's perspective, however, a period of elevated trade barriers could serve as an opportunity for increased investment. This process would plausibly mirror the wave of Japanese investment that followed the trade barriers, including tariffs and Orderly Marketing Arrangements, of the 1970s.¹⁶³ If tariffs increase the cost of Japanese exports to the United States, Japanese businesses would have an even greater incentive to move manufacturing to the United States, where they would avoid tariffs on finished goods.

Tariffs are far from an irrefutable benefit, however. Automotive manufacturers, including Tennessee-located Nissan and Denso, are still susceptible to the rising cost of metal and other input goods that tariffs cause.¹⁶⁴ Uncertainty regarding the cost of importing critical materials like steel could serve to moderate interest in Tennessee-based investment.

Months after Trump's "Liberation Day" announcement, the United States and Japan agreed to a large trade deal in July 2025.¹⁶⁵ The deal set U.S. import taxes on Japan to 15 percent, including on automotive goods – without imposing quantity restrictions reminiscent of the Orderly Marketing Arrangements.¹⁶⁶ Another key component of the deal included a Japanese

¹⁶² Robert Ward. "Why Japan sees President Trump's tariffs as a 'national crisis.'" NPR, May 27, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/27/g-s1-68682/trump-tariffs-japan>.

¹⁶³ Thomas E. Mullaney. "'Orderly Marketing' Pacts And Restriction of Imports," The New York Times. March 10, 1978. <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/03/10/archives/orderly-marketing-pacts-and-restriction-of-imports-the-economic.html?login=email&auth=login-email>.

¹⁶⁴ Ana Swanson. "The Effects of Tariffs, One Year Into Trump's Trade Experiment." The New York Times, February 2, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/02/business/trump-tariffs-one-year-later.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Hoskins and Tom Espiner. "Trump says US has struck trade deal with Japan." BBC, July 23, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpwq4dljldko>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

pledge to invest \$550 billion in the United States – although the amount was initially scarce on details.¹⁶⁷ After several months, the first \$36 billion worth of investment was announced, which included a natural-gas plant in Ohio, a crude oil export facility along the Gulf of Mexico, and a diamond manufacturing plant in Georgia.¹⁶⁸ While the initial investments did not involve Tennessee, the state may be competitive for future investment opportunities – especially given the state’s preexisting relationships with Japanese firms. The terms of the U.S.-Japan trade deal thus represent a unique opportunity for Tennessee, especially given the enormous investment that Japan has agreed to.

Continued uncertainty, however, could pose a threat to this tariff and investment-driven dynamic. On February 20, 2026, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Trump had improperly used IEEPA, rendering many of his “reciprocal” tariffs illegal.¹⁶⁹ Trump responded by using other legal justifications to impose a flat 10 percent tariff on all goods in the hours after the decision, before raising the rate to 15 percent the next morning.¹⁷⁰ Given the need for regulatory stability for investors, the hour-by-hour shifts in U.S. trade policy could serve to disincentivize foreign investment. Additionally, the Supreme Court’s repudiation of “reciprocal” tariffs, such as the threatened levies against Japan, could cause the Japanese government to question the wisdom of its trade deal. Japan agreed to invest \$550 billion in the United States – an enormous sum of money – in order to lower its tariff rate to 15 percent. Now that the global rate is 15 percent regardless, the necessity of committing to such lofty investments may be questioned – especially

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ River Akira Davis and Ana Swanson. “Trump Hails Japan’s First Batch of U.S. Investments.” The New York Times, February 17, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/17/business/japan-trump-investments.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Alexandra Stevenson and River Akira Davis. “They Did Deals With Trump to Get Lower Tariffs. Now They Are Stuck.” The New York Times, February 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/22/business/trump-tariffs-japan-indonesia.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

as Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae’s government reportedly reconsiders its next round of financing.¹⁷¹ Additionally, the global 15 percent rate could expire without a Congressional extension – further complicating the fate of the deal.¹⁷² Japan may well wish to preserve the pact to avoid diplomatic tension, but a collapse of the U.S.-Japan trade deal – or even a dilution of Japan’s investment pledge – could have a direct effect on Tennessee, which is sure to be lobbying for projects.

While the Trump administration’s trade policies cast a shadow of uncertainty on Japanese investment, some of the President’s other policy priorities could similarly affect the Japan-Tennessee relationship. One key issue that could eventually pose challenges is the administration’s deportation efforts. In September 2025, U.S. Immigration and Customs



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with South Korean detainees.

Enforcement (ICE) raided South Korea-based Hyundai’s \$7.6 billion manufacturing plant in Ellabell, Georgia – one of the state’s largest facilities.¹⁷³ Over 300 of the 475 workers detained were South Korean nationals, including those who had entered the country through the visa waiver program

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Tony Romm and Ana Swanson. “Trump Says He Will Raise Global Tariff to 15 percent. The New York Times, February 21, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/21/business/trump-tariffs.html>.

¹⁷³ Hallie Golden. “What to know about a large-scale immigration raid at a Georgia manufacturing plant.” Associated Press, September 6, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-raid-hyundai-plant-4dd1a6b2ad66d27567b2463c5f3c97bb>.

allowing for business activities.¹⁷⁴ The raid at the Hyundai facility prompted a diplomatic protest, with the South Korean Foreign Ministry demanding that U.S. law enforcement activity not “unjustly infringe” South Korean business activity and investments.¹⁷⁵

The ICE activity at Hyundai’s manufacturing facility presents important questions for the Japan-Tennessee relationship. Like Hyundai’s Georgia plant, Nissan’s manufacturing facility in Smyrna, Tennessee is one of the company’s most important U.S. investments. Just as South Korean workers were present at Hyundai’s Ellabell plant, Japanese workers are present in facilities across Tennessee. Most importantly, federal law enforcement is out of the jurisdiction of state-level authorities, meaning that immigration raids could proceed over the objections of Tennessee officials. While Japanese companies have avoided a similar raid so far, even one incident could stress relations between Japan and Tennessee – and give companies second thoughts when choosing to invest.

Long-Term Reasons for Optimism

While shifting policy priorities have introduced some degree of uncertainty into the Japan-Tennessee relationship over the short-term, long-term ties between the two shows no sign of slowing. Tennessee continues to be a competitive place for investment amid a favorable regulatory regime. The state’s geographic advantages, located between much of the U.S. population’s densest areas, continues to be relevant for logistical reasons. And in a potentially lengthy new era of trade barriers, Tennessee will appeal to companies seeking to avoid costly tariffs.¹⁷⁶ Tennessee’s strong relationships with Japanese politicians and businesses, developed

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Stephanie Rickard. “The Supreme Court has ruled against Trump’s tariffs, but they may be here to stay and could reshape global industrial policy,” LSE United States Politics and Policy, February 23, 2026.

over decades of persistent effort by Governor Alexander and others, give the Volunteer State a leg up in attracting Japanese investment. This effort has accelerated under Tennessee's current leaders, including Governor Lee and Senator Hagerty. Bolstered by the presence of the TNECD office in Yokohama and the Japanese Consulate-General in Nashville, both Tennessee and Japan have laid the institutional groundwork to continuing cooperation. Tennessee remains one of the most important states within the U.S.-Japan relationship, and its role shows no sign of abating.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between Japan and Tennessee illustrates how subnational actors can translate national alliances into durable economic and institutional realities. While the U.S.-Japan partnership is typically defined by its security architecture and macroeconomic scale, its longevity has also depended on the quieter work of states, cities, firms, and individuals. Tennessee's experience demonstrates that even a geographically inland, medium-sized state can become a consequential participant in one of the world's most important bilateral relationships.

Tennessee did not emerge as a major partner of Japan because of demographic inevitability or significant trade volumes. Rather, its rise stemmed from a convergence of structural opportunity and deliberate action. The trade tensions and currency realignments of the 1970s and 1980s created powerful incentives for Japanese firms to expand production within the United States. However, many states competed for that investment. Tennessee distinguished itself through sustained political entrepreneurship under leaders like Governor Lamar Alexander, Ambassador Howard Baker, Ambassador Bill Hagerty, and Governor Bill Lee – who all recognized the centrality of trust, continuity, and personal engagement in Japanese business culture. Early investments – such as Nissan's Smyrna plant – created an anchor effect, encouraging supplier ecosystems and subsequent corporate relocations that compounded over the decades.

Over time, bilateral economic engagement deepened into mutual institutional presence. The relocation of Japan's Consulate-General from New Orleans to Nashville, the establishment of Tennessee's Japan office in Yokohama, the proliferation of sister-city agreements, and the growth of educational and cultural exchange programs reflect the maturation of the relationship. These developments suggest that foreign direct investment can serve not merely as an economic

transaction, but as a foundation for broader political and social ties. In this respect, Tennessee's trajectory offers a model of how subnational diplomacy can reinforce national alliances.

At the same time, the future of Japan-Tennessee relations will not be insulated from federal-level policy changes. Trade policy shifts, tariff escalation, immigration enforcement practices, and broader geopolitical recalibrations all carry implications for investment flows and corporate decision-making. Tennessee's comparative advantage – its established relationships and institutional density – may provide resilience against such shocks, but not necessarily immunity.

Nevertheless, the historical record suggests a durable foundation. For half a century, Japan and Tennessee have moved from tentative outreach to sustained partnership, and from isolated manufacturing facilities to deeply embedded economic ecosystems. Tennessee's role within the U.S.-Japan relationship is neither accidental nor peripheral. It is the product of structural change and strategic adaptation – a reminder that the strength of international alliances often depends as much on statehouses and factory floors as on national capitals.

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<https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-Japan-Matters-for-America.pdf>.

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