

# WWII Japanese War Brides

## The Untold Story

I thought she was beautiful, although I never understood why she plucked her eyebrows off and penciled them on every morning an inch higher. She had been captain of her high school basketball team in Japan, and she ran circles around us kids on a dirt court in our small town in Upstate New York. I can still see this Japanese woman dribbling madly about, yelling “Kyash! Kyash!” That’s how she said Kath, or Kathy.



Hiroko and Bill with Kathy, left, Sam and Susan. The video is the trailer to a short documentary film, "[Fall Seven Times, Get Up Eight: The Japanese War Brides](#)," which features Hiroko and two other war brides.

She married my American GI father barely knowing him. She moved from Tokyo to a small poultry farm just outside Elmira, N.Y., and from there she delivered eggs all over the county and into Pennsylvania. My sister describes her as having a “core of steel.” She raised us as determinedly as any mother could, and yet, looking back, I barely knew her. Some people think the film I co-directed, “[Fall Seven Times, Get Up Eight: The Japanese War Brides](#),” is a paean to loving Japanese mothers. When one interviewer suggested as much to me and fellow director Karen Kasmauski, we exchanged a look that said, “Shall we tell him the truth?” The film, titled after a Japanese proverb, is about strong women, for sure. Warm and loving mothers? No.

So who are these women and what do we, their children, know about them? They are sisters and daughters of the ferocious enemy that attacked Pearl Harbor in the “day of infamy,” an enemy that surrendered four years later after waves of firebombing on Japanese cities and the dropping of atomic bombs. They married men who occupied their country and came to the United States. And then? They disappeared into America. There were tens of thousands of them, yet they vanished from public awareness — Japanese women who were barely a blip in

immigration history, who married into families of North Dakota farmers, Wisconsin loggers, Rhode Island general store owners.

They either tried, or were pressured, to give up their Japanese identities to become more fully American. A first step was often adopting the American nicknames given them when their Japanese names were deemed too hard to pronounce or remember. Chikako became Peggy; Kiyoko became Barbara. Not too much thought went into those choices, names sometimes imposed in an instant by a U.S. officer organizing his pool of typists. My mother, Hiroko Furukawa, became Susie. How did it feel to be renamed for someone in the man's past, a distant relative or former girlfriend? My mother said she didn't mind, and others said it made their lives easier to have an American name.



**After World War II, tens of thousands of Japanese women moved with their new husbands, American soldiers, and assimilated into American culture.**

The brides, as many as 45,000, landed in the home towns of their husbands, places where Japanese people had been visible only on World War II propaganda posters. Was their skin really yellow? One war bride in South Carolina was asked to pull up her sleeve since no yellow was visible on her hands and wrists.

My mother, once a daughter of privilege, came to her in-laws' chicken farm. She has lived in the same two square miles of countryside ever since. It has been 64 years. I read and reread the transcripts from interviews I had recorded with my mother when I was pregnant with my own daughter more than 20 years ago, when I realized I didn't have even a timeline of her life. Six hours of tapes and they didn't tell me what I now wanted to know. So I went back to her recently to try to understand what she could possibly have been thinking when she made the choice to

marry an American soldier she barely knew. “I wasn’t thinking. I just had to get out,” was one of her succinct responses.



**Hiroko Furukawa Tolbert, 85, mother of Kathryn Tolbert, arrived in Elmira, N.Y., in 1952. Her in-laws called her Susie.**

I didn’t know other women like her, although I had two journalist friends who were also daughters of Japanese war brides. When they proposed making a film about our mothers, I readily agreed because I had always wanted to tell her story. And she’s such an excellent raconteur that, sitting beside her in the film as her interviewer, I’m almost an unnecessary prop.

In making the film with Kasmauski and Lucy Craft, I began to understand that my mother’s struggles as an immigrant woman who was alone in this country were mirrored in the lives of tens of thousands of other Japanese women of her generation who came as wives of Americans. As a journalist, I felt compelled to talk to some of them before it was too late. As a daughter, I wanted to know my mother’s place in U.S. history and perhaps my own. I received a grant from my alma mater, Vassar College, to travel the United States and interview Japanese war brides and their families, to capture their voices in audio stories and scan their old photographs, to create an oral history archive. Over the course of a year I recorded some 60 conversations.



**Hiroko and Bill Tolbert with their children at Fort Lee in Virginia, where Bill finished his military duty.**

Sometimes the women, now in their 80s and 90s, were reluctant to be interviewed and were coaxed into being recorded by their families, especially their children, who wanted to hear the stories themselves. But once they started to talk, these women remembered some of the most startling details of their early lives — the small lies they told their mothers, the sudden glimpses of temper in the men they would marry, the sweetness or bullheadedness of American men trying to communicate with future Japanese fathers-in-law. They showed me albums with wonderful treasures — photos of striking young couples, of themselves in glamour poses perhaps influenced by the Hollywood films that were so popular in Japan, of beach outings with their soldier boyfriends. These are the stories they and their families tell.

The bombs fell, the emperor surrendered, and hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops landed on the Japanese homeland by troopship and transport plane, to prevent starvation and social collapse while they remade the defeated nation. Only families of wealth and elevated social status were able to insulate their daughters from the world of American soldiers. Those who had survived needed work, and the Americans provided it. They set up typing schools and English classes, hired secretaries, clerks, maids, babysitters. Nightclubs and cabarets sprang up for the occupiers, and Japanese women found work there, too.

My mother, the daughter of an Imperial Japanese Army officer, had a pampered childhood in Korea when it was ruled by the Japanese, with maids and dance lessons. An aide came every morning to polish her father's boots and chauffeur him to camp. But her father died of an illness, and the family came back to Japan during the war, reduced in circumstances. After high school, she looked for a job.



**Hiroko, right, with her mother, Ume Furukawa, and her brother, Masaaki, in a portrait taken in Korea, where the family lived a privileged life under Japanese occupation.**

There was no money for her to go to college; it would be saved for her brother. The U.S. military operated a PX — or Army post exchange, a retail outlet for soldiers — in the Ginza area of Tokyo. She went for an interview and was hired as a sales clerk in the jewelry department, helping servicemen pick out gifts for their girlfriends. Sometime in 1950, she was going home on a streetcar when a GI started talking to her. She told him she worked at the PX. He started showing up there to talk to her and ask her out. She turned him down, but he kept asking. Japanese men, the war brides recount, rarely pressed their luck after being rebuffed. American men? Extremely persistent.

These ardent Americans also brought presents the Japanese could not afford or had never seen before — chocolate, dresses from Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward and even Spam, a culinary oddity. And they seemed handsome. Tall, well-fed, wearing crisp uniforms. Japan had lost so many of its young men in the war, and the ones who came back were physically and mentally debilitated. American chivalry, the notion of “ladies first,” also enchanted Japanese women. War brides almost universally say “he was such a gentleman” to describe their American suitors. There was, of course, bad behavior. A woman remembers seeing GIs in a train station with watches up and down their arms, taken from Japanese men. Others I spoke to witnessed physical abuse of Japanese civilians.

My mother liked Bill, the soldier from Upstate New York who spoke to her on the streetcar. Liked him well enough, that is; she wasn’t head over heels. He was quiet and well-behaved compared with some of the American soldiers she had seen; he did not drink. She does not speak of romance, only of her desperation to get out of what she viewed as her hopeless situation in Japan. He was her opportunity.

I met a family whose story begins with a similar chance meeting in postwar Japan, and in their case led to rural Wisconsin. In a small ranch-style house with a large fenced garden, a deer blind and, across the road, an expanse of cornfields, Nancy Roberts, 84, recalls the day she met Don. Her name was Hiroko Yamamoto then. Her girlfriend dragged her through a Kyoto department store where they worked to look at the Marine who she said resembled Montgomery Clift, the actor in their favorite movie, [“From Here to Eternity.”](#) Hiroko was a sophisticated city girl and thought he was cute, in a country bumpkin kind of way. She brazenly spoke to him, and he invited her out for a meal. He began to call her Nancy, because she reminded him of the cartoon character in Nancy and Sluggo, with her button nose and black curly hair. She had no idea who that was.

It was 1953. Hiroko was 21, enjoying a life of movies, parties, going around with groups of other young people determined to have fun and not think about the future. There was a kind of recklessness about these young women who had seen their families and nation ruined by war.



“We didn’t care about yesterday or tomorrow because we found out that everything we believed in wasn’t true and we just lived for today — fun, fun fun!” That’s how Hiroko once described herself to her eldest daughter, Charmaine Roberts.



**Hiroko Yamamoto Roberts, known by her family and friends as Nancy, is 84 years old and lives with her husband in rural Wisconsin. She still enjoys watching the movie “From Here to Eternity.”**



**Hiroko Yamamoto and Don Roberts on Aug. 17, 1954, the day of their marriage in Kobe, Japan.**

The Yamamoto family was respectable, and for a daughter to date a GI was a big blemish on its reputation. Some families disowned daughters, striking their names from family registries, the all-important record of ancestry. Hiroko's father died when he was struck by a truck while riding a bicycle, and she hid her Montgomery Clift look-alike boyfriend, a Marine and cook for the officers club, from her mother for quite a while.

As for my family, my Japanese grandmother opposed my mother's relationship with Bill, and neighbors gossiped pointedly. My mother didn't care. Neither did she care when my grandmother warned her with an old proverb: "He's like the bones of an unknown horse." My grandmother was saying: Before you marry a man, you must know his family, his circumstances, his values. The soldiers were an unknown quantity in a society where lineage is all-important.

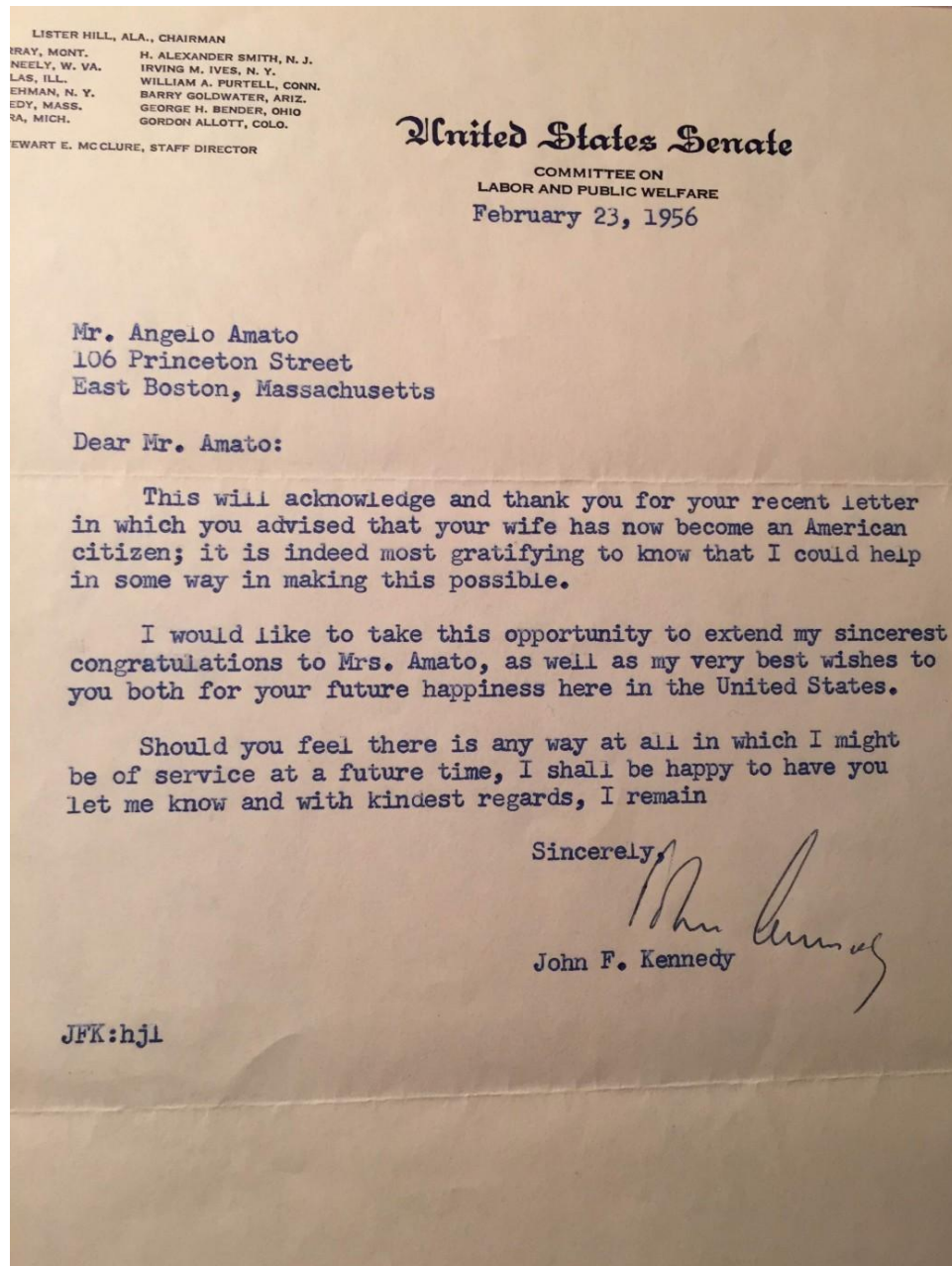
The U.S. government was not in favor of these liaisons either. The men faced tremendous legal hurdles to bringing home Japanese wives. The Immigration Act of 1924, which limited immigrants through a quota system by nationality, also excluded any person who was not eligible for citizenship, and that meant Asians. Several temporary laws in the late 1940s allowed servicemen to marry their Japanese girlfriends and bring them home if they could complete the paperwork in time. The system was designed to make marriage difficult to accomplish, and easy for the young man to change his mind.

Passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952 removed the legal obstacles, although paperwork was still considerable. Commanding officers continued to discourage the relationships, not just out of personal animus but also because they anticipated the unions might be deemed illegal in the men's home states. In 1952, interracial marriages were still banned, at least on the books, in more than half the nation. The Supreme Court declared those laws unconstitutional in the 1967 decision for *Loving v. Virginia*.



**Kimiko Yamaguchi Amato, 90, lives in East Boston, in the same house her husband bought in 1954. After Congressman John F. Kennedy sponsored a private bill on her behalf, she was able to come to the United States to join her fiance. She arrived on Christmas Eve of 1950 and married Angelo Amato the following year.**

With their can-do American persistence, some men lobbied their congressmen for help. In 1947, Angelo Amato had just turned 20 and was determined to bring Kimiko Yamaguchi — “the most beautiful girl I had ever seen” — home to East Boston. That’s how the young John F. Kennedy, his congressman, came to sponsor H.R. 8558, “A Bill for the relief of Kimiko Yamaguchi, May 18, 1950.” Their son, Joseph Amato, treasures the sheaf of letters from Kennedy regarding the bill. On Christmas Eve 1950, his father brought his fiancée home to a triple-decker in his Italian American neighborhood, where she has lived ever since.



One of the many letters from John F. Kennedy to Angelo Amato regarding efforts to bring Kimiko Yamaguchi to the United States.



It seems incomprehensible to me, as a mother, to let a daughter go so far away with a foreign man, knowing communication would be difficult and coming home almost impossible. But I also know that some families were large, and poor, and to send a daughter off with what they thought was a rich American was a tough but practical decision. America meant a brighter future.

The young women were ill-prepared for their lives in the United States. As one family liked to joke, their mother went from life in Tokyo with a maid to life in Florida with an outhouse. And women who married black GIs entered an America segregated to a degree they did not imagine. “My husband told me about it. He mentioned to me before I left Japan,” said Chizuko Watkins, 88, of Los Altos Hills, Calif. “He told me when you go to the States, you see something, funny things like that.” But she didn’t think much about it until she traveled by train to meet her husband in Atlanta, where she unknowingly checked into a “white” hotel and her husband, Clifford, couldn’t join her, or even meet her there.

And what about the men? What did they expect? Probably wives who would be more submissive than American women, but also, paradoxically, wives who would run American-style households, cook American meals, raise American kids and impart American values to those children. The Red Cross in Japan ran popular “brides schools,” where Japanese women were taught how to make beds, bake cakes, wear makeup and walk in high heels.



**The Red Cross ran brides schools in Japan starting in 1951 to teach American customs to the young Japanese wives of U. S. servicemen. Many of the volunteers teaching the classes were wives of U. S. military officers. Toyo Swartz is standing at left.**

Toyo Swartz, 92, of Vallejo, Calif., showed me glossy photographs of herself in those classes and recalled being taught how to make meatloaf. Such photographs were taken to show Americans that the Japanese women were going to fit right in.



**Toyo Kaneko Swartz, 92, tried to do everything right, attending a brides school in Tokyo run by the Red Cross to learn American housekeeping and getting her U.S. citizenship as soon as she could.**

In many cases the men were unprepared as well. After all, my mother knew she was going to a farm. My father probably never suspected he was bringing home an opinionated, strong-willed woman who could never be content as a chicken farmer's wife. Mother remembers vividly her second day at the chicken farm. She was pregnant with me. Helen, her mother-in-law, took her into the hatchery to see the baby chicks. They were a blanket of yellow fuzz in large drawer-like trays under heating lights. A potbellied stove nearby kept the entire room warm. What happened next made my mother sick. Her mother-in-law reached into that peeping sea of yellow and pulled out a chick that was deformed in some way, a runt perhaps or exhibiting some other sign of poor health. And she opened the door of the stove and tossed the chick into the flames. It made a popping sound. She repeated this several times while my mother struggled to stay upright.

At this moment my mother realized that life on the farm was going to be like nothing she had experienced or expected. It's painful for me to hear her describe her shock at farm life — the dirtiness of the house, the crude, rough way of living. Her constant fights with my father over what she wanted — a life apart from the farm, for him to continue his education on the GI Bill. Her frustration with his lack of ambition. The more my father wanted to settle for what he had — a house trailer and low-level farm work — the more my mother fought for what she wanted. And for years, that was the pattern. She says it made their marriage worse, and she blames herself as much as him: she wasn't the right wife for him. Not because she was Japanese, but because they were poorly suited for each other. In temperament. In outlook. After more than 30 years together, they got divorced.

He remarried and died more than 15 years ago. I wish I had asked him why he chose my mother, what made him think he should marry her and bring her home to the farm, whether he believed in the obedient Asian wife stereotype. I do know that as the years went by, he resented her ambition, her desire to expand the grocery store, build a new home, push her children to apply to the best colleges possible. And because of their personalities, she got her way. Never once did she consider going back to Japan. No war bride I've interviewed felt they could go back to Japan. When they left, they recalled, they were warned: Don't come home crying. And certainly don't come home crying with children. Some descended into bitterness and depression. Most simply moved forward as best they could — raising kids, finding solace in friendships or faith; reinventing themselves to fit their changed reality.

There were many exceptions, of course. Great love stories, solid partnerships, loving families; men who cared about their wives' Japanese roots. More than 12 years after his wife, Kiyoko, died, 82-year-old Joe Sexton of Philadelphia still sends a large box of gifts every Christmas to her relatives in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, and calls them annually, using an interpreter. He treasures his favorite ramen broth that they send to him in return packages, and he shares the bounty with his children.

Women married to career military men more easily found other Japanese war bride families to form friendships. But they also endured husbands absent for long stretches — including duty in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s. During that period, the Japanese wives left behind near the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Aberdeen, Md. formed a social group that continues to this day. About a dozen of the women meet every month, often at the Golden Corral for the all-you-can-eat brunch, loading their plates with fried chicken, macaroni and potatoes. They trade Japanese books and magazines, teach each other how to make new origami ornaments, go to cheer the Japanese youth baseball team that comes to compete in the Cal Ripken World Series.



**Yoko Sasaki Breckenridge, 83, is a successful real estate agent and founder of a Japanese lending library in Minneapolis. For many years she was a barber before deciding she wanted a job that involved less standing. But selling homes involved a whole new set of challenges for her.**

In the United States, work — any work — felt like a form of liberation and was often a necessity. The skills many of them brought from Japan were as seamstresses and barbers. Keiko Ingerson's Keiko's Family Hair Care in Lewiston, Maine, was an institution for many years. Most of her customers did not know of her hardships, her need to work to support her three children after her husband left. Yoko Breckenridge's abusive father made her learn barbering so he wouldn't have to pay for a shave. She married Roger to escape him, and she became a successful barber when she landed in Redwood Falls, Minn.



**Yoko Breckenridge was a highly skilled barber, shown here as a judge of the hair styling contest in the Upper Midwest Barber Show in 1965.**

My mother worked at the family farm, processing eggs and delivering them. Then she and my father, Bill, ran a small grocery store after it was clear the farm was too small to survive. When my parents divorced, my father offered my mother the choice of keeping either their house or the country store — assuming she'd take the home. It only went to show how much he still misjudged her. My mother took Tolbert's Store and made an unlikely success of it — also demonstrating a kind of feminism by employing only women, from Ellie, who worked the deli, to "Betty, my butcher." In fact, Betty Maramack became my mother's closest friend and business confidante — teaching her how to control inventory and also persuading her to get her first flu shot. Betty advised my mother when to sell the store — a sale that made enough money to usher her into comfortable retired life.

The Japanese war brides were determined to raise what they imagined were all-American children. And they did. Their children are American, and they have little connection to Japan. Most do not have Japanese names. I don't think of myself as Asian American. In my Upstate New York upbringing, there weren't other Asians, certainly not other Japanese Americans, with whom I might have felt some affinity. But I was surprised to find that even children of Japanese

war brides on the West Coast — with its deeply embedded Asian communities — did not think of themselves as especially Japanese American.

I think that's partly because the Japanese war brides so rigorously suppressed their former identities to become American. Their departures on the arms of American men were viewed with sadness, by the women and their families alike, because they were probably leaving forever. And there was an underlying tinge of shame that they had turned away from Japan or that Japan could not provide for them. The women don't view their families today as a branch on their Japanese family tree; they started from scratch. "I came here alone, and today I have 28 family members," one woman told me with quiet pride.

My mother didn't speak Japanese to us. Very few war brides used Japanese at home. Their husbands didn't want them to, fearing it would become a shared language that excluded them. And the women viewed it as counterproductive to their efforts to become real Americans and to have their children be seen the same as other kids. Some of their children who later learned Japanese or who were able to spend time in Japan found it gave them unexpected insights into their mothers. Rodney Yoder, of Boston, was a Harvard student spending a year at Doshisha University in Kyoto when his mother, Itsuko, came to visit. Decades later, sitting in his Back Bay apartment, he choked up at the recollection. "I could understand my mom for the first time. I could hear her speak, I could hear her sense of humor. My home-stay family told me how bright and cheerful my mother is. So in a way it was like getting to know her for the first time."

The women often stayed away from Japan — perhaps taking only one or two trips "home" during 60 years. Sometimes it was because of the expense. But also, Japan had changed, become unrecognizably rich, and they themselves had become strangers there. My mother enjoyed more regular visits to Japan — sometimes as a member of the local delegation in the "Sister City" exchanges between nearby Corning, N.Y., and the city of Kakegawa. Japan may have changed, but the food she loved was the same. Her mother, brother and sister always welcomed her. Her nieces took time off from work to go around with her. She was lucky. But she never told her mother that she was divorced; she couldn't bring herself to undermine the picture of her American life that she had painted over the years, of a good marriage and wonderful family. She also didn't want to concede that her mother had perhaps been right more than six decades ago with her warning about the bones of an unknown horse.

She herself knew she did not make a mistake. She has said over and over that it was the right decision to leave Japan. She bounced back from a hard landing, made a life and is satisfied with how it turned out. America has been perfect for her in that sense, because she was entrepreneurial and the harder she worked, the more she could get ahead. That brought her immense satisfaction. And she raised four children, not with warmth or expressions of love, but with a fierce determination.





**Hiroko Tolbert on the family poultry farm in the early 1950s.**

The language my mother used when we were growing up was always about hard work and studying, getting ahead. Like Japanese mothers in general, she was obsessed with education. She paid for tutors. She read my history chapters when I was in junior high so that she could ask me questions before a test. She wanted us to succeed because that would mean she succeeded. That was extremely important to her. She said she didn't want people to say, "Look what happens when a Japanese comes to this country." Her mothering didn't include saying to her children, "I love you." To this day she doesn't say it, although she now returns goodbye hugs, if stiffly.

I am the oldest child, the custodian of her story. I tell my mother's story, and those of other Japanese women like her, to give them recognition for what they endured and what they achieved. For their extraordinary resilience. I have learned Japanese and taught it to my daughter. I also hug my daughter every time I see her, and I always tell her I love her.



**Hiroko with her daughter Kathryn Tolbert and granddaughter during a Christmas 2008 visit to Washington.**

[Source: The Washington Post | Kathryn Tolbert | September 12, 2016 ++]