

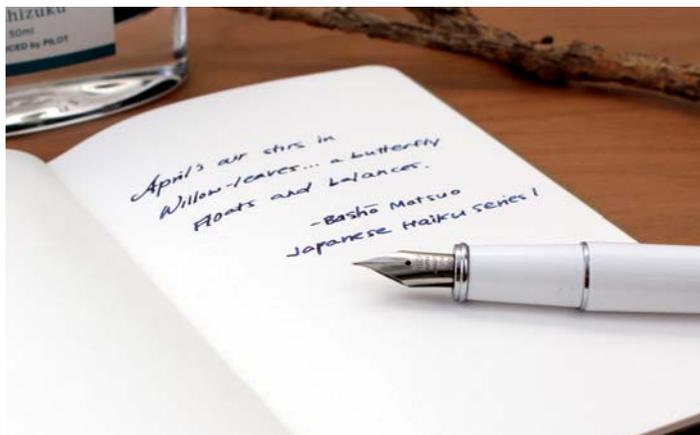
Two thousand years after paper's invention, a pen-friendly incarnation attracts true believers.

# Tomoe River: Another Visit From Japan's Paper Goddess?

BY GREGORY PETERSON



From left—Jetpens.com features Tomoe River paper in its 3.5 x 5.5 inch Kanso Sasshi booklets. GPC Tomoe River paper notebooks from goultpens.com come in a variety of colors and sizes, lined and unlined.



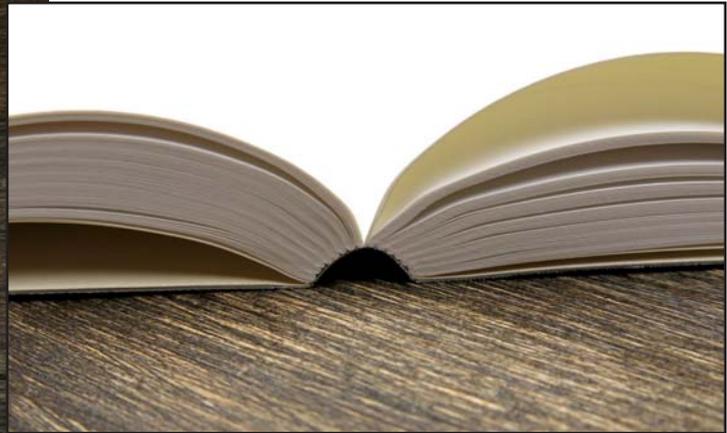
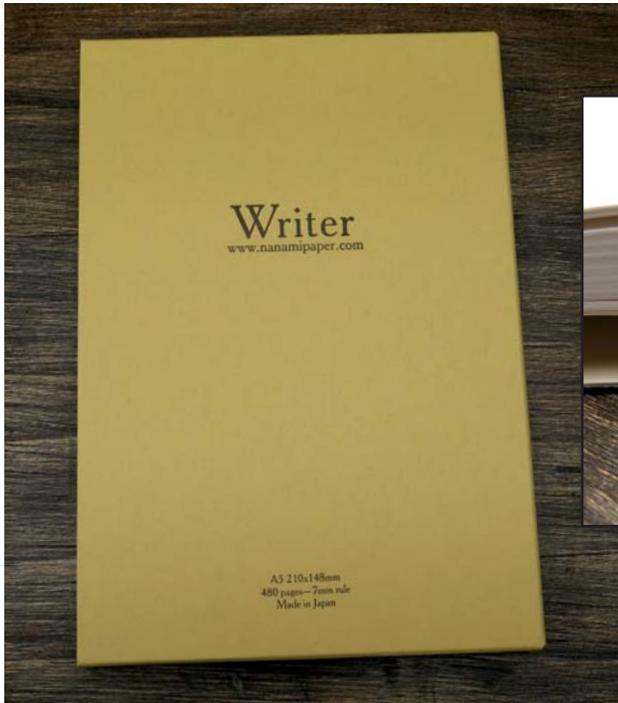
As historians tell us, paper was officially invented in 105 CE—when Cai Lun, a Chinese courtier, reported his revolutionary process for making smooth writing sheets. In Japan, however, paper's “creation story” is a little less cut-and-dried.

According to Japanese legend, the secret of paper-making came as a gift from Kawakami Gozen—the Goddess of Paper. Her offering was not lost on the Japanese, whose exquisite papers have delighted the world ever since. In the town of Echizen (whose ancient residents

received the deity's visit so long ago) citizens still host an annual festival to honor paper's longstanding role in Japanese culture and commerce. Appropriately enough, it was in Japan that papermaking—a technology now 2,000 years old—recently proved that it still has a few tricks up its sleeve. Paper's latest magic? A writing paper that fountain pen users describe as “heaven-sent.”

Tomoe River is an innovative paper produced by Tomoegawa, a century-old firm whose papers are milled in a plant outside Tokyo. Papermakers there were seeking to produce thinner sheets for reference books (notoriously bulky) and catalogs (whose lower weight would reduce mailing costs). After years of research, the company's investment paid off: a Bible-paper-thin sheet with a coating that held ink in a most advantageous way.

Although Tomoe River paper was developed for *commercial* applications, it wasn't long before fountain pen users discovered its potential as an uncommonly good *personal* writing paper.



Nanami Paper offers reams of Tomoe River paper but is known for its Seven Seas notebooks, like this A5 “Writer” journal. Just in case, keep blotter paper handy when writing with Tomoe River.

### WHAT’S SO SPECIAL ABOUT TOMOE RIVER PAPER?

Tomoe River paper is silky smooth—both to the hand and under the nib. Its translucent pages are lustrous, glare free, and exceptionally lightweight. Yet despite their thinness, these remarkable sheets hold pools of ink, resisting bleed-through from all but the juiciest, broadest, stub nibs.

What’s more, this paper refuses to feather. Writers who take pleasure in an ink’s display of shading and sheen (qualities that may have lain dormant on another paper) find that Tomoe River’s coated surface provides a veritable showcase. Few other papers are so utterly flattering to the magical combination of a well-tuned fountain pen nib and a nuanced ink.

Hyperbole? Maybe so, and this wouldn’t be the first Tomoe River review that lent itself to flights of fancy. A case in point: “Tomoe River paper makes your ink look like you paid four times as much for it,” gushed one online forum comment. “It gives your writing an almost three-dimensional appearance.”

Similar comments appear—again and again—from pen users worldwide. For many of them, Tomoe River has become the undisputed paper of choice. Even with a host of vivid descriptions and online reviews, this is a paper that must be experienced. Fortunately, Nanami Paper ([nanamipaper.com](http://nanamipaper.com)) makes a “test drive” easy— through its \$3.00 sample pack. Or you can enjoy a virtual sample by viewing the Tomoe River video at [jetpens.com](http://jetpens.com). (Whatever path leads you to a Tomoe River audition, don’t be surprised when this paper earns a place in your stationery drawer.)

### A MATTER OF PERSONAL PREFERENCE

Some naysayers are quick to fault Tomoe River paper for its slow dry times—a criticism that is not unwarranted. When ink meets this paper it isn’t quickly absorbed (as it would be on cotton bond, for example); instead, it dries through evaporation. Depending on one’s ink, this drying may take a while. How to mitigate slow dry times? Use a drier ink or a finer nib—or just keep a sheet of blotter paper on hand.

Other complaints center on this paper’s thinness and the aesthetic trade-offs that inevitably result. Even when there’s no ink bleed-through, the press of a nib will leave an impression on a wispy sheet like this, and some users find the result objectionable. Likewise, using dark or highly saturated inks on this—or any other—translucent sheet will result in ghosting, especially when the paper is held to a light source.





Hand-stitched Ezra Arthur leather notebooks come in Whiskey (pictured), Malbec (dark brown with undertones of burgundy), Jet (black), Jet Top Stitch (black with gold stitching), navy blue, and green. Large notebooks retail for \$50 and small notebook sell for \$25.

This noticeable “show-through” will prevent some users from enjoying both sides of a Tomoe River page; other users gladly will accept a *ghosting* trade-off for the uncommonly high page counts in journals and notebooks. Many, in fact, *celebrate* the aesthetic pleasure of writing on crinkly pages that already show ripples and traces of what came before. Like so many other factors shaping the analog experience, this one comes down to a matter of personal preference.

### THE QUEST FOR TOMOE RIVER PAPER

Given its growing reputation, pen users worldwide began seeking Tomoe River—only to find themselves facing limited availability and long waits. Pen shows and online forums frequently gave rise to pen users’ plaintive question: *How can I get my hands on Tomoe River paper?* Before long, ardent pen users and entrepreneurial stationers took matters into their own hands.

In the United States, one of these early adopters of Tomoe River was Jay Potter. His “paper chase” began when he had a special letter to write but couldn’t find a pen-friendly correspondence paper that was “just right.” Potter’s Goldilocks moment came when he found the paper from Tomoe River. After accumulating a stash for his personal use, he recognized this paper as something that *other* pen users would desire. Potter began importing the paper in sheets and hard-bound journals—and with that, [paperforfountainpens.com](http://paperforfountainpens.com) was born.

A similar quest for excellent stationery gave rise to another boutique supplier: Nanami Paper. This company’s flagship products are its popular “Seven Seas” notebooks: A5-sized journals whose Tomoe River paper allows 480 pages in a well-constructed volume only 15 mm thick. In addition, this site’s proprietor curates a delightful collection of Japanese stationery products—including Apica, Kokuyo, Kyokuto, Marumono, Mauruman, Midori, and Tsubame.

As Tomoe River paper fast became something of a commodity, resellers differentiated their products through private-label branding and custom-designed notebook covers and configurations. Curnow Bookbinding & Leatherwork ([facebook.com/curnowbooknleather](https://facebook.com/curnowbooknleather)), for example, created hundreds of cover design options for notebooks filled with pen-friendly papers—both Tomoe River and other good stock. Goulet Pens ([gouletpens.com](http://gouletpens.com)) also designed a private-label notebook—available in both the paper’s original weight (ultra-thin) and a heavier version (with less of the show-through that some customers don’t prefer.)





Curnow Leather and Bookbinding's series of journals are lauded both for their binding and paper quality. The floral hand-stitched notebook below was commissioned by Dan Smith of nibsmith.com. Photos courtesy Steve Curnow.

Tomoe River's original Bible-paper-thin version, however, is precisely what attracts so much attention and so many fans. Leathersmith Sebastian Sandersius, for example, became interested in paper when he noticed the emerging "analog writing culture" and decided to create a slim notebook for his line of leather goods. "We wanted to use one of the nice American-made papers, but they just weren't thin enough to give us the high page count we desired," Sandersius says. His Ezra Arthur leather goods site (ezraarthur.com) recently launched handsome, saddle-stitched notebooks filled with unlined Tomoe River pages. "There's a reason Tomoe River paper is prized by people who love their pens," he adds.

Many pen users already will be well-familiar with JetPens. This informative, well-stocked site features Tomoe River and numerous other brands of Japanese paper products— including Akashiya, Apica, Hobonichi, Kokuyo, LIFE, Maruman, Midori, Pilot, and Tsubame. Another online resource is the Taroko Shop—an amazon.com seller offering both a popular Tomoe River journal and the writing paper (in both the ultra-thin and the thicker version.)

### JUST A PASSING FANCY?

Despite Tomoe River's resounding success, there are still contrarians who dismiss this paper as just a passing fancy—the Beanie Babies of today's pen community, they say. But if there is any diminished interest or enthusiasm, that evidence isn't representative of the glowing comments from pen shows and online forums.

What we have seen is a stream of new converts enjoying the pleasures of pen and ink. We also have witnessed a revitalized enthusiasm among ink-stained veterans—as they rediscover performance characteristics of favorite pens and inks. And we have noticed a growing awareness of what a pen-friendly paper truly can be.

If this constitutes a fad, let's hope it has legs.

*Gregory Peterson is a writer and communications consultant in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*



Tomoe River is far easier to find now, but a little guidance is a good thing. Visit these Tomoe River retailers: [gouletpens.com](http://gouletpens.com) • [jetpens.com](http://jetpens.com) [nanamipaper.com](http://nanamipaper.com) • [ezraarthur.com](http://ezraarthur.com) [www.facebook.com/CurnowBookNLeather/](http://www.facebook.com/CurnowBookNLeather/)