

THIS PLACE

Revitalize WA Conference
in Port Townsend

Building a future for
Seattle's Georgetown
Steam Plant

Announcing a new grant
program for historic
cemeteries



VASHON ISLAND: Revisiting Japanese American Heritage

THIS PLACE

April 2018

A publication of the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation

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Cover photo: A Japanese American man picking strawberries on Vashon Island. Photo from Densho, Ouchi Family Collection. See page 4 to read more about Japanese American Heritage on Vashon Island.

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GET INVOLVED

APRIL 23-25 Revitalize WA 2018

Join us in Port Townsend for RevitalizeWA, Washington's annual historic preservation and Main Street conference. More conference details and information can be found on pages 8-11.

MAY 12 Vintage Washington

You are cordially invited to our annual fundraiser which will take place this year at the Georgetown Steam Plant. Don't miss this opportunity to be among the first to dine in this National Historic Landmark and be there when we announce our list of Washington's 2018 Most Endangered Places. Tickets are available now!

MAY 31 Youth Heritage Project - Applications DUE

Experience the majestic beauty of the North Cascades, while learning about its historic built environment, this summer at the Washington Trust's annual Youth Heritage Project. All high school age youth are encouraged to apply!

JULY 10-13 Youth Heritage Project

Youth Heritage Project is a multi-day field school that engages teens hands-on by connecting them to historic places. All high school age youth are invited to apply and join us as we venture to North Cascades National Park to explore the balance between protecting both historic and environmental resources and the role of our national parks in the field of historic preservation. See page 3 for more details. Application deadline is May 31.

OCTOBER 19 Annual Member & Business Meeting

Join the Washington Trust in Walla Walla for our annual members meeting where we will reflect on our accomplishments from the past year and announce our slate of new board members.



Gorge Dam at North Cascades National Park.

For more information about Washington Trust events or programs, please visit preservewa.org, or call our office at 206-624-9449.

VASHON ISLAND

Revisiting Japanese American Heritage in Washington

By Tamiko Nimura

Like many Japanese Americans of my generation, I come from agricultural roots. My Issei grandparents were sharecroppers in California during the Depression, and my Nisei father and his siblings grew up working in orchards. My Filipina immigrant mother also loves fruit, so I grew up with an abundance of fresh produce—peaches, pineapple guavas, mandarin oranges, among other fruits—and weekly farmers market visits.

So when the Washington Trust received a 4Culture grant and initiated a project to highlight Japanese American Heritage on Vashon Island, it was a great pleasure and privilege to learn about that history on Vashon—an island that I'd only known before as a heavily wooded place across the water from my second hometown, Tacoma. The Island has changed so much in the years since the early Japanese American pioneers arrived and cultivated the land. I don't know if I'll ever see the Island in the same way again.

Many Washingtonians are aware of the rich Japanese American history in Seattle and Bainbridge Island, but our “deep dive” into Vashon's Japanese American heritage shows that there is a great deal of compelling history here as well. I think it's safe to say that my co-writer Vince Schleitwiler and I were surprised and moved by the powerful stories that we found about the Island's Japanese American families—stories of adventure, humor, resilience, dedication and persistence. These stories are now publicly accessible through revisitwa.org, a heritage website the Washington Trust launched last year based on the classic 1941 WPA guidebook,

Washington, A Guide to the Evergreen State. Now, the Washington Trust is developing additional stories and sites for the new website, to bring to light histories that have not been traditionally well-represented through historic preservation in the United States. Japanese American heritage on Vashon Island is the pilot project for this additional content, and will serve as the framework for many more diverse stories to come.

It was a great privilege to speak to current Island farmers who have stewarded the land and its history, as well as the descendants and relatives of those early Japanese American farmers. I'm so grateful to all the organizations and individuals who helped us in our work, including the families of the farmers, Island historians Bruce Haulman and Alice Larsen, Densho, the Vashon Heritage Museum, UW Libraries Special Collections, and the Seattle Municipal Archives. And finally, a special thanks to 4Culture for providing the grant money that made the entire project possible.

Japanese American Heritage on Vashon Island

Though agriculture on Vashon Island began several thousand years ago with the S'Homamish people, Japanese American agriculture on Vashon began with migrant workers around 1900, when the first Japanese appeared on the Vashon census. Over the first several decades of the 20th century, Japanese American farmers created a close-knit and thriving community on the Island, despite barriers to citizenship and land ownership, as well as wartime mass incarceration.

Many of these first-wave migrants were young, single, itinerant men who were students—the first population that the Japanese government permitted to emigrate. Early migrants faced several waves of anti-Japanese sentiment in the region as well as the nation, even before World War II. Laws at the federal and state levels prevented them from owning land and eventually even their American-born children. The passage of the 1907 “Gentleman's Agreement” restricted immigration from Japan. However, a few families purchased land in their children's names before this law took effect, and some had earned enough eventually to rent or lease land of their own. After the “Gentleman's Agreement” passed, a different kind of migrant entered the United States—those who came from landed families, determined to make their new home in the United States, eager to adapt the small-scale farming practices they had learned from their own farming in Japan.

Though there was apparently some local Island resistance to Japanese workers and farmers, the Japanese Americans on Vashon formed a close-knit

community, and for the most part lived integrated lives with the greater Island community. They organized growers' associations with other farmers. They held dances, funerals, and annual picnics at the centrally located Island Club, and created political organizations such as the Vashon Progressive Citizens League. Those who were Christian attended the Methodist church. They went to the same elementary and high schools as other children on the Island. Several farmers arranged for a Saturday Japanese language school on the Island, bringing a teacher from Seattle. Two Japanese farmers donated cherry trees and evergreens to the Vashon Union High School. They participated in the Island's annual Strawberry Festivals which began in 1909, and some probably even traveled to the Alaska Yukon-Pacific Exposition for its “Vashon Day” that same year.



Japanese American women at a flower stand in Pike Place Market. Photo from Seattle Municipal Archives.

revisitwa.org

Crops and Cultivation

Japanese American farmers grew and raised a variety of fruit and livestock, but favored strawberries and poultry especially. Strawberries were first grown commercially on the Island in 1890. As a result of efforts by early Native Americans, European settlers, and the logging industry, a great deal of the island landscape was open to the sunlight. The middle of the Island was cleared so extensively that by the 1930s, you could see “clear across the Island,” as farmer Bill Mann remembered: “[It was] one big berry and chicken farm.”

Farm work involved everyone in the family, including young children. Farm life in the early part of the century was difficult, with only a few homes operating with electricity and indoor plumbing. Many operations on the small farms were performed by hand, including the seeding, thinning, weeding, and watering. By the late 1930s, the Japanese community on Vashon had grown to 140 people on the 1940 census, more than 5% of the overall Island population. Twelve Japanese families owned farms. The larger-scale farms employed seasonal Filipino or First Nations workers at harvest time.

Though strawberries are not a plant native to Japan, Japanese American farmers on Vashon and elsewhere on the West Coast were drawn to this crop for several reasons. Strawberries are highly profitable; they produce a high yield of product per acre. And though they are fragile, the recent invention of refrigerated rail cars around this time also permitted a greater amount to be barreled for transport. Vashon Island's glacial soil characteristics meant that crops such as hay or corn were more difficult to grow, but crops requiring good drainage (such as berries) were easier.

During strawberry harvest, early morning harvests would go to wooden flats and shipped onto ferries to markets such as Seattle's Pike Place Market, which opened in 1912. Harvests later in the day would go to the “canners,” or the berries used for preserves or freezing. Because strawberry plants take several years to reach their full growing potential, some families rotated their crops through different parts of their land or diversified by growing other fruits such as loganberries, raspberries, gooseberries, currants, or cherries.



Upper: Heisuke and Yoneichi Matsuda. Photo from the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Association.

Middle left: First Nations workers picking strawberries on Vashon Island. Photo from the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI).

Middle right: View of view of B. D. Mukai's strawberry fields and farm on Vashon Island, c. 1927. Photo from the Washington State Historical Society.

Lower left: Tacoma Ferry Landing at Vashon Island. Photo from the Densho/Sakahara & Tanaka Collection.

Lower Right: View of the Van Olinda Store from Portage ferry dock on Vashon Island, listed as 1908 but may be c. 1903-1906. Photo from UW Libraries Special Collections, Oliver S. Van Olinda Photographs.



Wartime Imprisonment

In December 1941, news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor stunned Japanese Americans on the Island, and their subsequent eviction in May 1942 was a difficult time for many. Members of the administration for the Vashon high school and newspaper both expressed their support publicly for Japanese American families. Many Japanese American families struggled to arrange for their belongings and property in a matter of days, each family member carrying a suitcase or two in order to walk to the Island Club in Vashon town where they had held community gatherings. A few families arranged caretakers for their property. They left by jeeps, which took them to a special ferry, taking them to Seattle, where they boarded trains headed for the Pinedale Assembly Center and then Tule Lake in northern California (and eventually other “camps” in Wyoming and Utah). Unfortunately, not all farms were responsibly managed and unable to keep up with taxes, land management, and harvest during the war.

Postwar and Contemporary

After the war, approximately one-third of the 140 Japanese returned. The local paper had changed ownership, and with it came a new wave of anti-Japanese rhetoric; moreover, three homes formerly owned by Japanese (where families stored their belongings) were burned down by several local teenagers in an act of arson. (Notable exceptions included the Matsuda, Mukai, Otsuka, and Takatsuka families.) Nevertheless, the families who did return were mostly successful in rebuilding their farms and their lives; a small group of descendants of the prewar Japanese American community still live on the Island. From the 1980s to the present, a new wave of Japanese Americans with historic roots outside of Vashon has settled on the Island and developed their own farms. Read more about the rich Japanese American history on Vashon island at revisitwa.org.