

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.



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Legal Barriers

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 eventually. 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 farms in Japan.

Close

Community Development

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.

Close

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.” Vashon Japanese farmers often sold their produce (berries, eggs, flowers or seedlings).

Farm Labor

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 farm 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.

Strawberry Growing

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 area. 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.

Close

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.

Close

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.

Close

Images



Takao Fujii, “Pop”, fishing at Vashon.



Cultural Waypoints

Mukai Farmstead and Garden

The Mukai Farmstead and Garden was established in 1926, when the Mukai family purchased property just west of the Vashon commercial core to expand their strawberry farming operation. The family built a residence and numerous outbuildings related to their fruit production and processing.

Visit Mukai Farmstead and Garden

Hoshi Farm

Originally a 10-acre estate from the 1920s through the early 2000s, the Hoshi farm was most famous for its flowers. One of the concrete foundations for the original Hoshi greenhouse still stands at the southern part of the estate at Blue Moon Farm and is visible from 91st Ave SW. Visitors are welcome to Blue Moon Farm with advance notice.

Visit Hoshi Farm

Takatsuka Farm

August M. Takatsuka, a Vashon-born child of Japanese immigrant farmers, began growing strawberries on this property after returning from military service in World War II. Despite changing economic conditions, Takatsuka maintained the farm over the coming decades, turning primarily to Christmas trees in the 1970s. Today, the farm is operated by Karl Olsen and family, though it still bears the name of its colorful founder.

Visit Takatsuka Farm

Tahlequah

Visitors arriving by ferry on the south end of Vashon Island cross the Dalco Passage at Tahlequah, a dock site long used by Japanese American farmers and other islanders. Though it was once the location of a [Coast Salish] village, Tahlequah was named in a 1920 competition held to promote the new ferry service from Tacoma.

Visit Tahlequah

Portage Ferry Dock

Now known as the Tramp Harbor Dock, this small park on the eastern shore was the site of Vashon Island’s first automobile ferry, which traveled to Des Moines between 1916 and 1922. Previously, Japanese American farmers and other islanders had used the site to access the steamers of the “Mosquito Fleet.”

Visit Portage Ferry Dock

Fujioka Farm

Formerly owned and operated by the Fujioka family for most of the 20th century, Forest Garden Farm today is a working farm that is still rich with cultural and agricultural history. Visitors are welcome with advance notice, and there is a small roadside stand at the property.

Visit Fujioka Farm

Matsuda Farm

Once owned and operated by the Matsuda family for over five decades, this 12-acre berry farm is rich in cultural, wartime, and agricultural history. Its stories involve early Japanese American immigration to the Island, agricultural innovation, military service, and postwar “resettlement.” It has just begun a new chapter as the first farm conservation project for the Vashon-Maury Island Land Trust, and as a community space for Vashon Island.

Visit Matsuda Farm

Ober Park

In the 1920s and 30s, Japanese Americans gathered at a community center known as the Island Club for picnics, dances, and funerals. Tragically, in 1942 it became also the registration point for the Japanese American community and their point of eventual departure from Vashon Island. Though the Club has been replaced by a King County Library branch, today the site is known as Ober Park, a 5.5 acre park owned by the Vashon Park District with a library, a playground, and a memorial sculpture.

Visit Ober Park

Vashon Heights

Visitors traveling by ferry from Seattle or Kitsap County arrive at the Vashon Heights dock on the north end of the island, which was used by Island farmers to transport strawberries and other produce to Seattle and beyond. In May 1942, the entire Japanese American community was removed from the island via ferry from Vashon Heights, beginning a journey that would take them to American concentration camps.

Visit Vashon Heights

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