

Preserving Our Japantowns

Preserving the hidden history of Alameda's Japantown

By TOMO HIRAI
Nichi Bei News

While the Japanese American businesses that lined Park Street have long since disappeared since the wartime incarceration, Alameda, Calif.'s Japanese American community has developed a project to bring to light their century-long history on the island.

Under the banner of the Tonarigumi Historic Marker Project, a group of Japanese American residents on the island, along with city leaders, including the City of Alameda Free Library, have installed the first two of four historic markers commemorating the Japanese American community's history on the island.

Alameda Mayor Marilyn Ezzy Ashcraft said during an unveiling ceremony held Nov. 17, 2022 that the markers will share the history of Japanese immigrants and serve as a lesson in the continued fight for civil liberties of all people.

"I have to just pause and say I grew up in Alameda. I went all through public school, at Lincoln Alameda High. I didn't know we had a Japantown," Ezzy Ashcraft said. "So I hope our students now are learning that history, their local history."

Key stakeholders from the

four sites got together in 2019 planning to install the markers within a year or so, but the process has taken more than two and-a-half years to complete due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jane Chisaki, director at the Alameda Free Library, said organizers intend for the markers to build awareness of Alameda's "hidden" Japantown by sharing its history from its prewar beginnings when Japanese immigrants first established businesses on the island in the early 20th century, through the forced removal during World War II and the community's return after the war.

"We are losing much of our first and second generation Japanese Americans," Chisaki said in an e-mail to the *Nichi Bei News*. "And along with their passing we lose their stories. As a librarian, capturing the histories and stories of our elders is important and priceless. We have found that younger generations are interested in restoring the legacies, especially during these current times of racial upheaval. So this project is an opportunity to honor the history of the Japanese American community in Alameda and add to the rich diversity of our ever changing

community."

The project first began with the Rev. Michael Yoshii, then pastor at the Buena Vista United Methodist Church, meeting with congregation member Judy Furuichi and Janet Koike of Rhythmix Cultural Works. The three met for coffee down the street from the Marketplace marker's location.

"We were talking about trying to collaborate with Rhythmix and Buena Vista Church around some of the history of the Japanese American community, and Judy's sister Jo (Takata) had done a lot of research on history, and communities like ours have a lot of history that's hidden, because it's not made public for different reasons," Yoshii said during the unveiling ceremony. "Both the Buena Vista Methodist Church and the Buddhist temple had been repositories of this history for many years, and people within the congregations kind of knew their stories already, but there had not been an opportunity to really tell this to the larger community."

Yoshii said members from the two churches, which he said became the focal point of the Japanese American community after the war, joined together



UNVEILING HISTORY — Alameda, Calif. Mayor Marilyn Ezzy Ashcraft (L) unveils the Japantown History Marker with John Knox White, an Alameda city council member, and Jane Chisaki, director of the Alameda Free Library. photo by Tomo Hirai/*Nichi Bei News*

to create markers. From there, Yoshii said they involved the city and partnered with graphic designer Kaz Naganuma to work on the project. So far the project has installed markers at the Buddhist Temple of Alameda and the Alameda Marketplace. The remaining two markers are slated to be installed sometime early this year.

Jane Naito, who represented the Buddhist temple, said each marker tells a different aspect

of the community's history on the island. The Marketplace marker tells the story of the Japanese American businesses that thrived prior to the war. The library's marker will depict the families who settled on the island. Naito, meanwhile, said the Buddhist temple and United Methodist church both wanted to add more contemporary history to their displays.

"I didn't want people to walk by and look at (it and say), 'Oh, that's what it used to be like,'" Naito told the *Nichi Bei News*.

Naito made it a point to include photos from the congregation depicting outdoor services during the pandemic.

"And that to me is historical, right? Two years ago," Naito said. "Why can't I put new pictures up here, not just old photographs from the '40s and '50s?"

Yoshii noted that Alameda's Japantown "disappeared in 1942" due to the wartime incarceration. Almost no Japanese



American-owned businesses returned to the area after the war, save for the Towata Florists. Jill Shiraki, who helped map out the Japanese American community through Preserving California's Japantowns, told the *Nichi Bei News* a few of Alameda's nurseries returned after the war, but most Japanese Americans who returned found work as gardeners and landscapers or as domestic laborers.

While the markers physically recognize the Japanese American community's history in Alameda in an accessible way, several members of Tonarigumi,

which means "neighborhood association," said a parallel project is also in the works. According to Chisaki, the library is working on a project funded by the National Park Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program to "catalogue and digitize a community-wide archive of oral histories, photographs, and other documents" on the Japanese American experience in Alameda. The collection is slated to be preserved through Seattle-based Densho's Website and San Francisco-based Internet Archive's Website.

Virginia Yamada, manager of Densho's Oral History Program, along with Caitlin Oiyee Coon, the organization's archive director, said they have been working with Tonarigumi for two years. The research will result in seven new collections in Densho's digital archives including photos, documents and oral histories.

While organizers conducted their research in order to educate the general public about Alameda's Japanese American community, some committee members have also learned about their own family histories. Judy Furuichi, whose family has

resided in Alameda since 1902, said the project was an opportunity to learn about her grandfather.

"We lived with our grandparents, or they always did. We went to camp together. I was born (in Topaz, Utah), but we were there," Furuichi told the *Nichi Bei News*. "I had impressions of my grandfather being kind of a loner, not very social, but we're uncovering photos of him, and it showed us a different side of him. And he's pictured on the marker today. He's the man on the bicycle getting ready to go to work."

The final two markers are still

being laid out and fabricated, according to project leaders. Naito said the installation of the library and Buena Vista's markers will happen sometime in the spring, though no official date has been set.

To see the Alameda Japantown Markers, visit the Alameda Marketplace at 1650 Park St. and the Buddhist Temple of Alameda at 2325 Pacific Ave. Additional panels will be installed at the Buena Vista United Methodist Church at 2311 Buena Vista Ave. and the Alameda Free Library at 1550 Oak St.



PAST AND PRESENT — The Buddhist Temple of Alameda's marker (above) commemorates both the founders of the temple and its community, as well as its congregation today. photo by Tomo Hirai/*Nichi Bei News*

OLD JAPANTOWN — Alameda's Japantown (L) featured a variety of Japanese American-owned community businesses such as tailors and restaurants circa 1912. Most of them did not return after the war. Map by Ben Pease, <https://www.peasepress.com>

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