

Gail Lee Dubrow

## Japanese-American Cultural Resources in Western Washington

Recent preservation planning efforts throughout the western states have brought increased attention to cultural resources significant in the history of Asian Americans. California and Nevada have been at the forefront of such activities. Beginning in 1979, the California Office of Historic Preservation assumed leadership in improving the representation of ethnic minority properties in cultural resources surveys with a study of 100 sites associated with the five largest ethnic minorities in the state's history, the results of which are reported in *Five Views: An Ethnic Sites Survey for California*. Cultural resources associated with Chinese and Japanese Americans are well-represented in that study. The *Nevada Preservation Plan* provides another important overview of major patterns in the settlement of Asian Americans in the west, although it is more useful for those interested in Chinese-American heritage, since Nevada lacked the distinctive Japanese neighborhoods or Japan towns present in other places, such as California and Washington.

The limited base of knowledge about Japanese-American cultural resources in the western region was significantly expanded with the commissioning of two preservation planning initiatives in Washington State: a statewide study that provides a *Historic Context for the Protection of Asian Pacific American Resources* and a *Plan for the Protection of Asian Pacific American Heritage in King County*. These studies have revealed a wide array of previously undocumented cultural resources significant in Japanese-American heritage.

Among the most surprising findings are overlooked resources in the urban centers of community life historically known as Nihonmachi or Japantowns. Rural areas that were home to Japanese-American agricultural communities prior to World War II also contain a significant concentration of overlooked cultural resources, which need to be integrated into current farmland and

preservation planning programs. The forests and wilderness areas where lumber mills and other extractive industries operated include sites once occupied by segregated encampments of Japanese workers, some of which have promising potential for archeological investigation. Together, these new preservation planning initiatives point to the need for protecting a wider range of cultural resources than have been recognized in the past, in order to develop an accurate and complete picture of Japanese-American contributions to the development of the western region.

Some significant cultural resources associated with Seattle's Nihonmachi or Japantown are included in the city's well-protected Chinatown/International District. Perhaps the most prominent building is the Astor Hotel/Nippon Kan Theater, which has served both as a single-room occupancy hotel and as a theater and meeting hall for the Japanese-American community. While properties such as this, significant in Japanese-American heritage, were included in the nomination of the International District to the National Register, the not-unusual focus on documenting the exteriors of buildings led surveyors to overlook some interior features of great significance in Japanese-American heritage.

The single-room occupancy Panama Hotel was included in the National Register nomination

Seattle, WA. 1995.  
Panama Hotel.  
Furo or bathhouse  
located in the base-  
ment. Photo by John  
Stamets.



as a contributing element to the International District. Until recently, however, few people were aware of the undocumented cultural resources located in the hotel's basement. One half of the basement contains the only known intact example of an urban *furo* or Japanese-American community bathhouse. The other half of the basement contains fully packed trunks, stored there by Japanese Americans on the eve of World War II internment. These findings suggest the need to re-examine places of previously-recognized historical significance in search of cultural resources that may have been overlooked at a time when there was relatively little awareness or appreciation of Japanese-American heritage.

Some smaller Nihonmachi that failed to regain the vitality they enjoyed in the pre-World War II period have been overlooked as potential historic districts, with devastating consequences. One such place is the city of Tacoma's Nihonmachi, which was a thriving Japanese-American community from the 1890s through the 1930s. Absent the protection that historic district designation might have conferred, Tacoma's Japantown gradually has suffered an erosion of physical integrity. It isn't easy to visualize the 40-block large community that once existed from the few historic buildings that remain: the Buddhist and Methodist Churches and the Japanese Language School. It is also difficult to sustain claims for preserving the remaining buildings in the absence of the larger community that constituted their context and amplified their meaning. Japanese-American cultural resources located in larger communities, such as Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, are well-recognized and protected. However, a systematic study of smaller Nihonmachi is needed to enhance the protection of places that served as centers of Japanese-American community life on the West Coast in the pre-World War II period.

King County, where Seattle is located, has been home to a significant concentration of Japanese Americans over the course of the 20th century, not only in the city but also in agricultural centers in the southern part of the county. Some of the most significant properties located in these outlying areas have been inventoried, such as Natsuhara's General Store, which supplied merchandise to the farming community of Auburn; yet they remain to be designated as landmarks. But in other cases, until recently, even the most well-

intentioned efforts to preserve historic properties missed opportunities for recognizing the critical contributions of Japanese Americans, particularly as tenant farmers. Likewise, county efforts to preserve farmlands have not operated with an adequate knowledge of the physical features that subtly, but distinctively, mark historic properties as ethnic cultural resources.

The Neely Mansion, located in Auburn, offers a reminder that interpretive programs need to address not only the owners of historic houses, but also the tenants who occupied them. This is particularly important for illuminating Japanese-American heritage since Anti-Alien Land Laws resulted in patterns of long-term tenancy (or placing property in the hands of American-born children.) The Neely Mansion was designated a King County Landmark as an elaborate example of Craftsman style architecture and as the home of a white pioneer settler to the area. Yet in actuality, the development of the property is largely attributable to the labor of Japanese and Filipino families who leased it for the greater part of the 20th century. Recently conducted interviews with past ten-



ants documented Asian-American contributions to the agricultural history of the property.

These efforts to reinterpret the Neely Mansion also brought to light a previously neglected cultural resource. An outbuilding that initially appeared to have little significance turned out to be the shed for a family *furo* or bathhouse used during the period of Japanese-American occupancy, opening new possibilities for helping present-day visitors to understand the daily lives of Japanese-American farmers in Western Washington prior to the 1940s. While the process of amending landmark nominations may appear to be a luxury at a time when preservationists often find it difficult to secure funding for the most rudimentary inventories of historic properties, selective efforts to revise the inventory/nomination forms for designated landmarks can enhance the

Auburn, WA. 1939. Neely Mansion (left) and *furo* (right), as documented in the 1939 Real Property Inventory. Puget Sound Regional Archives photo.

visibility of Asian Americans at many historic places that already attract visitors, and extend needed protection to long-neglected cultural resources.

Similarly, while some agricultural properties are protected from the steady onslaught of light industrial and suburban development under King County's Farmlands Preservation Act, their significance as ethnic cultural resources has not always been well documented. Thirty-three of the 80 acres that once comprised the Hamakami Farm, located in Western Washington's Green River Valley, enjoy this form of protection, which uses restrictive covenants to prevent incompatible development. While the barn and fields commonly are recog-

railroad lines. Established by the Pacific States Lumber Company, the town of Selleck contained a cohesive settlement of Japanese workers on a site cleared for them by the company. While the company town occupied by white workers is remarkably well-preserved, the Japanese section was demolished after the company shut down. A similar pattern existed at the nearby mill town of Barneston, established by the Kent Lumber Company in 1898. While the structures associated with Barneston's Japantown were demolished long ago, cultural debris located on the surface of the site suggests the potential value of archeological investigation. Fortunately, current plans call for weaving the history of Japanese immigrant laborers at Barneston and Selleck into interpretive programs at a new visitors center in the Cedar River Watershed, where both towns generally were located. Yet, the fact that a 1909 survey found approximately 2,200 Japanese workers employed in 67 mills and logging camps in Washington suggests the importance of determining if significant archeological resources are located at any one of them.

The need remains to develop training programs that will allow cultural resource managers, particularly those located in the western region, to become more knowledgeable about the range of property types significant in Asian-American heritage, and to institute multicultural approaches to preservation education which will ensure that the next generation of preservation professionals will be better equipped to manage these tangible resources. Toward that end, graduate students in the Preservation Planning and Design Program in the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Washington have been engaged

Auburn, WA. 1994. Hamakami Farm. Sheds for cultivating hothouse rhubarb. Photo by Carole Davidson-Mulligan.



nized to be important elements of the farmscape, inadequate attention has been paid to the remaining row of sheds, which were used to grow hothouse rhubarb, a crop that was grown almost exclusively by Japanese-American farmers in this part of the country. With the exception of Japanese gardens and Buddhist temples, which often served as showcases for traditional design and building practices, Japanese Americans tended to occupy and use standard American building types. For that reason, cultural resource managers need special training to identify the less obvious ethnic imprints in the built environment and cultural landscape.

The most poorly documented set of cultural resources associated with Japanese Americans in Western Washington may be those located in fairly remote settings, such as the forests that contained many small segregated settlements of Japanese immigrants who worked for logging companies, mills, and



Barneston, WA. 1911. Japantown. Seattle Water Department photo.

in a series of projects designed to enhance the protection of Asian-American cultural resources, which are intended to serve as bridges between the university, preservation agencies, and underserved communities.

Funded by a Cultural Enhancement Grant from King County's Hotel/Motel Tax Program, graduate students in the Preservation Planning and Design Program drafted King County's *Plan for the Protection of Asian Pacific American Heritage*. In a related project, they also amended the landmark nomination for the Neely Mansion to recognize the contributions of Japanese- and Filipino-American farmers, and to extend protection to the furo discovered there. A grant from the National Park Service's Cultural Resources Training Initiative supported the development of a more broadly based program intended to fill gaps in the existing base of knowledge about Asian Pacific-American cultural resources in Western Washington. In conjunction with basic coursework in Preservation Planning, students completed paid internships with agencies that own or manage historic properties of potential significance to Asian Pacific-American heritage, but which have lacked the resources necessary to fully document or interpret them.

Just two examples of the special projects that students completed for their sponsors suggest the potential for bringing neglected aspects of our nation's cultural heritage to larger audiences. In one project, the presence of Japanese-American workers in Barneston was documented for a future exhibit at the Water Department's Visitors Center. Another project researched cultural resources associated with the labors of Japanese Americans on railroad lines located in the Snoqualmie National Forest, to provide guidance for impending archeological investigations, and documentation for future interpretive programs. Other student projects have addressed places significant in the heritage of Chinese Americans and Filipinos in Washington. Together they suggest the value of these sorts of partnerships for developing a more accurate and complete picture of Asian-American history through the identification, interpretation, and protection of remaining cultural resources.

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