



Salt Lake City's

JAPANTOWN

John D. Moore
Professor Mary Jayne Davis
English 2010
5 October 2010

John D. Moore

Professor Mary Jayne Davis

English 2010

5 October 2010

Salt Lake City's Japantown

On most days of the week, the block of 100 South between 200 and 300 West in downtown Salt Lake City is still and quiet. As it stands today, the block is comprised of parking lots, a docking area for the Salt Palace that towers over the block, an empty commercial building, and the two last remaining structures from a lively, bygone era: the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple and the Japanese Church of Christ. Before the Salt Palace was constructed, this and its neighboring blocks were alive with a bustling community that had for the better part of a century made its home here: Japantown.

Fifty, seventy-five, even one hundred years ago, one could have walked along 100 South, where now stands the Salt Palace, and entered a bustling world of homes, businesses, and homes on top of businesses. Baseball, basketball, and kendo teams might be practicing in the churches or the alleys. At night, one

might see a *kabuki* drama at the Salt Lake Buddhist Church (later known as the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple), or perhaps a Japanese film. In Japantown were the presses for two Japanese-language newspapers with long and significant histories. The Sage Market offered fruits and Japanese foods. A fish market was within view of Colonial Tailoring, itself situated inside the Colonial Hotel, home to many of Salt Lake's Japanese residents. Outside the Colonial, second-generation Japanese children—called *Nisei*—roller-skated down the streets, while their parents and uncles and friends gathered in the numerous cafes, restaurants, markets, and pool halls that dotted the street.

It is a story that few of today's Utahans seem to know. The signs that mark the historic neighborhood often catch passersby by surprise, unaware that there was ever a large or notable Japanese population in the region. In contrast to the oft-memorialized history of Mormon settlers, seldom is told the story of the Japanese community that sustained generations, situated right in the heart of Utah's capitol. Salt Lake City's Japantown was home to people who helped to shape the history of the American West, individuals who were instrumental in developing Utah's economy, and a refuge for the leadership of the nation's Japanese population in its darkest hours.

Establishment

At the end of the 1880s, Utah was seeing the beginnings of its Japanese immigrant population. Yozo Hashimoto was one such immigrant, and from his new home he became the Intermountain West's first labor agent, specializing in furnishing personnel to mines and railroads, among them his nephew, Edward Daigoro. By 1902, Daigoro had established the E.D. Hashimoto Company one block North of what would become Japantown. His company not only furnished industries with Japanese workers, but furnished those Japanese workers with supplies, Japanese food, payroll, and aided them with government forms, earning him the honorific name "Daigoro-sama" from "his boys" (Kasai & Papanikolas 336-337). As Daigoro's influence grew, so did Salt Lake's Japanese population and "in the 1900s, a Japanese Town was growing in Salt Lake City" (Kasai & Papanikolas 340). By 1910, the Utah Japanese population was over 2,000 strong, mostly men working away from cities railroads and mines, many of whom intended to earn one thousand dollars and return to Japan. But as many brought or fetched brides from Japan and started families in America, an increasing number making their way to Daigoro's Salt Lake City neighborhood.

In 1912, Salt Lake's first Buddhist temple was constructed at approximately 250 West South Temple (half a block from where the current temple stands), and in 1918, the Japanese Church of Christ was built across the street. By 1914, the Japanese community was served by two papers, the Christian-leaning and Hashimoto-backed *Rocky Mountain Times* and *The Utah Nippo*, which was founded by farmer Uneo Terasawa to offer a Buddhist perspective to balance the perceived bias of the *Times's* reporting (Terasawa & Adachi). Eventually, *The Utah Nippo* bought the *Rocky Mountain Times*, and in 1931, began publishing an English-language first page to accommodate the *Nisei* who knew less and less Japanese (Hagishimoto 83-84).

Unlike California, where local laws were increasingly oppressive of Japanese immigrants, Utah before World War II was more welcoming. The community continued to grow and flourish. Despite internal disagreements, the residents of Japantown made up a strong, compassionate community. When the Great Kanto Earthquake struck Japan in 1923, the community pooled resources to send dozens of parcels of aid to their homeland (Crouse).

The Salt Lake Buddhist Church held a Japanese language school for the *Nisei*

and subsequent generations. In 1936, the community held its first Obon dance, establishing a tradition that united the local Japanese population, attracted outside interest, and raised funds. Obon is celebrated in



Figure 1. First Obon dance in Japantown, 1936.
 Taniguchi, Nancy J. "Japanese Immigrants in Utah." *Utah History Encyclopedia*. University of Utah.
 <<http://www.media.utah.edu/UHE/j/JAPANESE.html>>

much the same way on the street outside the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple to this day.

Wartime and Internment

On December 7, 1941, successful businessman, activist, and community leader Henry Y. Kasai was attending a wedding feast in Teton, Idaho, when he was apprehended by the local sheriff under orders from the FBI. He would spend the next few years in U.S. government custody, eventually moving between internment camps, while his wife and children remained in Japantown, living "by taking in boarders and withdrawing \$150 a month from their savings account, the maximum allowed families of internees" (Kasai & Papanikolas 355). Though many community leaders were interred, most of Utah's Japanese were able to stay in

their homes, though under intense the F.B.I.'s intense scrutiny (Kasai & Papanikolas 357).

Headquartered in California before the war, both the young advocacy organization Japanese American Citizens League—the J.A.C.L.—and the headquarters of the Buddhist Missions of North America temporarily relocated to Salt Lake City under Japanese federal evacuation orders (Kasai & Papanikolas 358).

One young man from Japantown, University of Utah graduate Mike Masaru Masaoka, was a J.A.C.L. leader, yet narrowly avoided internment on several occasions, aided by his friend Senator Elbert D. Thomas. Outside the camps, Masaoka would act as a primary spokesperson to the American government for all the Japanese Americans in the camps throughout the West (Kasai & Papanikolas 352).

In Central Utah, the Topaz internment camp, (officially “War Relocation Center”), was home to approximately 8,000 Japanese persons. The community in Salt Lake’s Japantown sympathized deeply, and banded together to raise funds and donate thousands of dollars worth of books and equipment for the education of the children at Topaz.

Japantown's *The Utah Nippo* was, briefly, effectively promoted to a national publication. Kuniko Terasawa had inherited the newspaper from her late husband Uneo in 1939 and she and her paper were not seen by the FBI as enough of a concern to detain or silence. Most of the Japanese-language newspapers in the United States had been based on the west coast, but under executive orders were forbidden from publishing during the war. *The Utah Nippo* became a crucial voice for Japanese Americans from all over the country, as it was widely distributed in internment camps like Topaz and had over 7,000 out-of-county subscribers in peak war years (Hagishimoto 84-85).

Postwar

Upon release from Topaz, many Japanese who had previously been living in California did not return, joining the population in Salt Lake's Japantown (Nagata). In addition, a number of the soldiers from the U.S. Army's majority Japanese 442nd Infantry Regiment who had been treated in Utah hospitals made new homes in Japantown after experiencing the spending time there and experiencing the hospitality of its community (Crouse).

In the Special Collections of the University of Utah, there is a photograph of a party of elderly Japanese *Issei* (first-generation) gathered around the tables in one

of Japantown's restaurants in 1950. These are the first Utah Japanese to receive American citizenship, though many had been in the United States for most of their lives.

As the decades passed, successive generations of Japanese Americans intermarried more and spread out through Salt Lake City more and more, leaving Japantown behind. Though still populated with shops and home to the cultural tentpoles that were the two churches, the primary residents of the neighborhood in the sixties were the *Issei*. Then in 1964, the residents of Salt Lake City overwhelmingly approved a seventeen million dollar bond to build an arena complex that would be built on the grounds of the last significant ethnic neighborhood in Salt Lake City, displacing many residents and businesses. This complex was the Salt Palace. Those in the Japanese community who wished to protect the area ultimately could not muster enough support for their cause, and some of even the oldest generation were indifferent to the fate of the neighborhood (Matsumiya). Though promises from the city were made that displaced business would find a home in a newly designated Little Tokyo, such an area was never established (Jarvik), and many of the businesses moved to disparate corners of the city or closed their doors forever.



Figure 2. Closed Japantown shops in 1965
Nagata, Ted. *Salt Lake City's Japantown*. 1965. Photograph. Densho Digital
Archive, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Other plans were made to preserve some of the culture, even if not in the same location. In 1965, the children of the *Issei* founded the Far Eastern Cultural Center with the aim of establishing a Japanese community center for their soon-to-be-displaced parents (Far Eastern) like those set up by Buddhist communities in California and Washington (Matsumiya), but this too never materialized. Like the shop owners who vacated their storefronts, the *Issei* left the homes many of them had known for half a century.

One day in the summer of 1966, in the offices of *The Utah Nippo*, Kuniko Terasawa and her daughters were setting an edition when a wrecking ball tore into their building; they had never seen their eviction notice (Crouse). The newspaper abandoned its longtime home and relocated to a location about two miles from Japantown, where its circulation continued to decline until the paper, then a monthly, finally shut down after her passing in 1991 at the age of 95 (State of Utah). The final home of the paper still sits quietly nestled in a cover of overgrown foliage on 1000 West.

Today and Tomorrow

More than forty years after Japantown was displaced and demolished, it at last received official recognition. In March of 2007, that block of 100 South between 200 and 300 West was honorarily named “Japantown Street” (Deseret News), a visible testament to the legacy of the historic neighborhood. For many Salt Lakers, the street signs bearing this name are the first and only encounter with the significant legacy of the Japanese in Utah’s history.

When the Salt Palace made its most recent expansion, a few months before the street’s renaming, it incorporated a small, Japanese-style garden (Mountain States Construction) that sits between the Japanese Church of Christ and a

parking garage. The garden bears a plaque dedicated by Mayor Rocky Anderson and Japanese community leaders, honoring the generations who lived and worked where the garden now stands.



Figure 3. Street sign bearing name of “Japantown Street” at the intersection of 100 South and 300 West. Original photograph.

Though it could never be restored to what it once was all these decades after its unceremonious end, some community leaders hope to revitalize or reinvent Japantown. Retired judge Raymond S. Uno, head of the Japanese Community Restoration Committee has been attempting for years to secure interest and funding for a combination residential-commercial venture that would transform and commemorate Japantown. Such leaders envision an attractive neighborhood with a distinctive Japanese flavor (Jarvik). Unfortunately, efforts to find a place in Salt Lake City’s Downtown Rising project have fallen short and no such plans are being publicly advocated at present.

Still, with the recent recognition of Japantown Street, there may be cause for optimism among those who wish to see Japantown honored. Annual festivities at the Japantown churches such as Obon, Japan Festival, Aki Matsuri, and the Japanese Food Bazaar seem to have attained a higher degree of visibility and awareness in recent years, and the street signs have led some citizens to inquire about the past of this special, historical place. Perhaps, some day, this quiet street will again be alive with a distinctly Japanese character.

Works Consulted

Issei Group. Interview by Joseph Grant Masaoka and Robert A. Wilson. *Japanese Oral Histories*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 11 Nov. 1967. Transcript.

Japantown. University of Utah, Marriott Library Special Collections, Salt Lake City, Utah. c. 1910-c.1966. Photographic collection.

Nagata, Ted. Interview by Megan Asaka. "Ted Nagata Interview." *Densho Digital Archive*. Densho. Web. 04 Oct. 2010. Video.

<<http://archive.densho.org/Core/ArchiveItem.aspx?i=denshovh-nted-01-0018>>.

National Japanese American Memorial Foundation. *Patriotism Perseverance Posterity: The Story of the Japanese American Memorial*. Washington, D.C.: National Japanese American Memorial Foundation. 2001. Print.

Sanborn Company. "Salt Lake City." *Sanborn Maps*. Pelham, New York: Sanborn, 1950. Map.

Works Cited

Crouse, Lorraine. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2010.

Deseret News Publishing Co. "100 South Block Now Called Japantown." *Deseret News* [Salt Lake City, Utah] 7 Mar. 2007. *Deseret News*. Deseret News Publishing Co., 7 Mar. 2007. Web. 20 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/660201252/100-South-block-now-called-Japantown.html>>.

Far Eastern Cultural Center. "Far Eastern Cultural Center Articles of Incorporation." *The Utah Nippo* [Salt Lake City, Utah] 1 Mar. 1965, no. 10,271: 1. Print.

Hagishimoto, Haruo. "The Utah Nippo and World War II: A Sociological Review." *Contemporary Social Research* 6 (2004): 79-92. *Kyoto Women's University*. Kyoto Women's University. Web. 3 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.cs.kyoto-wu.ac.jp/bulletin/6/higasimoto.pdf>>.

Jarvik, Elaine. "Salt Lake Street May Honor Japantown." *Deseret News* [Salt Lake City, Utah] 22 Jan. 2007. *Deseret News*. Deseret News Publishing Co., 22 Jan.

2007. Web. 20 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/650224881/Salt-Lake-street-may-honor-Japantown.html?pg=1>>.

Kasai, Alice, and Helen Z. Papanikolas "Japanese Life in Utah." *The Peoples of Utah*. Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1976. 333-62. Print.

Matsumiya, Chiyo. Interview by Bunny Matsumiya. *Japanese Oral Histories*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 23 March 1973. Transcript.

Mountain States Construction. "Salt Palace Phase III." *McGraw-Hill Construction*. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Sept. 2010. <http://intermountain.construction.com/features/archive/0609_feature2.asp>.

State of Utah. "Kuniko Muramatsu Terasawa." *Utah History to Go*. State of Utah. Web. 4 Oct. 2010. <http://historytogo.utah.gov/people/utahns_of_achievement/kunikomuramatsuterasawa.html>.

Terasawa, Kuniko, and Terumasa Adachi. Interview by Joseph Grant Masaoka and Robert A. Wilson. *Japanese Oral Histories*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 30 Oct. 1966. Transcript.