



October 8, 2021

Wakasa monument, buried for 78 years, dragged out by forklift in photos released by Utah state officials

The first public photographs of the excavation of the Wakasa monument at the site of the Topaz concentration camp were recently released by the Utah Division of State History to the Wakasa Memorial Committee. The photos were taken by a Utah state official on July 27, 2021, and show that a forklift and chain were used to drag the WWII monument from where it had laid buried for 78 years. No archaeologists were present. Topaz survivors and descendants were not told about the extraction until after it had occurred, although the Topaz Museum Board had scheduled the excavation in advance and on July 21 invited a state official to attend, according to a representative of the Utah Division of State History.



Forklift drags the James Wakasa memorial monument from newly-dug hole (at right) on July 27, 2021, Topaz, Utah. Dragging may cause damage to the artifact, especially if writing or carving had existed on surface. Photo courtesy Utah Division of State History.



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The monument was built by immigrant Issei landscapers near the spot where fellow inmate James Hatsuaki Wakasa was shot and killed by a military guard on April 11, 1943. The builders erected the monument in defiance of orders not to do so and were forced by the government to remove it. They buried it, leaving only one or two inches showing. This portion of the monument was rediscovered in Sept. 2020 by archaeologists using a map found at the National Archives by a Topaz descendant.

In the wake of this unnecessary violation of sacred ground at Topaz, the newly-formed Wakasa Memorial Committee sent a letter to the Topaz Museum Board on Sept. 7, 2021, outlining a six-step proposal for the Committee and the Museum Board to collaborate on the future preservation, curation and interpretation of the monument, the memorial site and other artifacts. One month has elapsed and the committee is concerned that no reply has yet been received from the Topaz Museum Board. The Committee's proposal was endorsed on Sept. 15, 2021 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Additional Utah state photos can be seen at the Wakasa Memorial Committee's website: Wakasamemorial.org. For information, email: wakasamemorial@gmail.com

Wakasa Memorial Committee

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Arrow shows top of Wakasa Monument at west side of Topaz, Utah, in Sept. 2020, before the memorial site was desecrated on July 27, 2021.
Photo courtesy Jeff Burton.

**Wakasa Memorial
Committee**

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Newly-dug hole in foreground with video camera placed on rim. The contractor took approximately two hours to dig the hole and drag the stone from the ground, according to the museum. Archaeological protocols that would have preserved information, such as gridding the work site and screening the soil for small artifacts, mementoes or cremains did not take place. Mounds of dirt are visible around the edge of the hole and chunks of concrete which were likely part of the original monument are scattered randomly about.

Photo courtesy Utah Division of State History.



According to a professor and archaeologist who viewed the photos, “Archaeologists also study soils and with the Wakasa Monument, there are questions of how the monument was set up and taken down (in 1943). Controlled excavation would have given exposure that could have possibly answered such questions. The monument itself should have been pedestalled (left standing on a soil platform) while the area around it was investigated.” Photo courtesy of Utah Division of State History.