



February 8, 2022

Wakasa Memorial Committee announces action plan after NPS report is released



The desecrated site of 1943 Wakasa murder and where monument was dragged from hallowed ground is taped off by the National Park Service prior to assessment. Topaz concentration camp, Utah, Nov. 30, 2021.

The Wakasa Memorial Committee received the National Park Service damage report on the Wakasa Monument and Memorial Site at the Topaz concentration camp in Utah. We offer below an action plan to continue the conversations that we initiated last year to promote transparency and be full partners in the preservation, curation, interpretation and collaborative management of the Topaz historic site, an issue highlighted by the NPS report.

In response to the advocacy of the Wakasa Memorial Committee, the Topaz Museum Board last year invited the National Park Service to assess the condition of the sacred Wakasa memorial stone, which was prematurely removed from its resting place in July 2021 by a forklift operator hired by the Topaz Museum Board. The NPS study of the desecrated site and stone took place Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 2021.

Background

The 1,000-pound memorial was erected in 1943 by grieving Issei friends of James Wakasa, who was shot and killed by a guard while walking his dog on April 11, 1943.



The builders were ordered by authorities to destroy the stone but buried it instead. The top of the stone was rediscovered in 2020, 77 years after its burial, by two archeologists. The exact spot where Wakasa was killed had been unknown until the rediscovery.

NPS findings: Stone and site “vulnerable”

- **The sacred stone, which sits outdoors “placed on a piece of carpeting atop a wooden pallet” at the Topaz Museum shows evidence of fractures and cracking. NPS recommends improvements to the shed that currently covers the stone which is causing thermal stress. NPS recommends the construction of a low frame to cradle the stone which is leaning off the pallet.**
- **The excavated site at the Topaz camp is vulnerable to erosion and exposure. Backfill used to fill the large hole is settling. NPS recommends “immediate stabilization of the site to prevent further damage.”**



Wakasa Monument is “vulnerable” and requires immediate attention. Shed shown in back.

NPS calls for consensus and stakeholder engagement

- **The NPS calls for a collaborative decision-making process and for consensus among stakeholders in “future collaborative management decisions.” “Given the significance this site holds, it was important that**

there be consensus among stakeholders regarding how this location and artifacts there should be treated and if further archeological investigation would be appropriate.”

The NPS recommends engagement of “survivors, descendants and stakeholders “who possess unique insights and perspectives that enrich our historical understandings of Topaz and its legacy.” However, the goal of community engagement remains elusive since the report has not yet been released to members of the public, only to the Wakasa committee, the Topaz Museum Board and the Utah State Historic Preservation Office.

We agree with the National Park Service experts that public and stakeholder engagement is crucial for project integrity as well as supporting unity between the Museum and the community. We propose public hearings to update the community of survivors, descendants as to the progress of this project.

WMC PLAN OF ACTION

- 1. Recommend continuation of National Park Service support**
- 2. Organize Wakasa Pilgrimages**
- 3. Partner with professional historic preservation and cultural resource management organizations**
- 4. Promote robust Japanese American community engagement through town halls, public updates and info sessions**
- 5. Create the Wakasa Legacy Project**

Follow us for more details about the Wakasa committee’s plan to activate these programs over the next months. We welcome partnership with the Topaz Museum Board and all survivors, descendants and stakeholders in carrying out our vision which committee members will discuss in our first formal meeting with the Topaz Museum Board next Tuesday, Feb. 15. The Topaz Museum asks for this to be a closed meeting with restricted attendance but we hope to collaborate on public town halls in the future.

Wakasa Memorial Committee

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