



JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE

Northern California · Western Nevada · Pacific District

August 8, 2021

Topaz Museum Board
55 West Main Street
P.O. Box 241
Delta, Utah 84624

Dear Topaz Museum Board President Jane Beckwith and Board members Scott Bassett, Hisashi Bill Sugaya, Rick Okabe, Lorelei Draper, Lance Atkinson, and Teresa Thompson,

On behalf of the JACL NCWNP District, I am expressing our community's displeasure, hurt and anger over what transpired on the morning of Tuesday, July 27, 2021. The Topaz Museum, without notifying the Japanese American community and Topaz survivors and descendants, removed a historic Topaz monument from the landscape -- the Wakasa Monument. The preemptive removal of this memorial stone denied our community a ceremony of blessing, remembrance and reflection, a ritual that is very much a part of Japanese American culture. Robbed of this ritual, we are left feeling that this sacred memorial site has been irreparably desecrated.

This monument was erected by Issei inmates in memory of James Hatsuaki Wakasa, 63, who was killed with one bullet to the heart by Pvt. Gerald B. Philpott, a guard tower sentry, on April 11, 1943. The sentry was found innocent. The memorial, built in violation of a camp "agreement," was ordered taken down by authorities. It was re-discovered by two archaeologists in Sept. 2020.

We find it troubling that the Wakasa Monument was unearthed and removed using the services of a contractor hired to clear trash from Block 42. An archaeologist was not present at the unearthing to both observe and record information related to the stone, as well as the treatment of the artifact and the memorial landscape. After the lifting, we learned that the memorial weighs approximately 1,000 pounds.

An Ad Hoc Committee had been meeting since October 2020 to discuss the handling of the monument and memorial site. The committee members are: two representatives of the Heritage Partnerships Program, National Park Service Intermountain Region (cc'd below); two representatives of the National Park Service; three archaeologists who have done fieldwork at the Topaz UT, Amache CO and Gila River AZ WRA sites; three Topaz community members; a professor of Asian American history; and three Topaz Museum board members. It is our understanding that despite the involvement and work of this Ad Hoc Committee, the Museum Board removed the monument without informing anyone on the committee (except for its own board members).



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One Topaz survivor not on the committee but who learned of the stone's existence and offered to be of financial assistance to an excavation project, privately stated in an email to Museum Director Jane Beckwith on Friday, July 23, of their desire to be present with other Topaz community members when the stone's lifting was scheduled. However, the night before the excavation, that person received a reply from Ms. Beckwith that stated, in part, "I'm sure you will be disappointed when I tell you this, but because the man who will be moving the rock has other huge jobs, he said he would work in our *small task* (italics added) when it was convenient for him....The rock will be moved tomorrow."

The JACL is the largest and oldest Asian American civil rights organization in the nation. The JACL NCWNP District encompasses and has chapters in the six counties from which 8,000 citizens and permanent residents were rounded up and eventually taken to Topaz when the concentration camp officially opened in central Utah in October 1942.

Our District is now part of an ongoing conversation about the creation of a community-based Wakasa Memorial Committee of Topaz (provisional name). This committee would propose steps to discuss future treatment of the artifact and the landscape in partnership with Topaz survivors, descendants, heritage experts, archaeologists and the Museum. One objective of the committee would be to organize a proper memorial ceremony on April 11, 2022, the 79th anniversary of Wakasa's homicide.

Most importantly, the committee would serve to re-establish a trust that has now been severely tested.

The JACL NCWNP District Council, with its 31 chapters, will be meeting on November 7, 2021. We look forward to hearing from the Museum Board regarding our concerns.

Sincerely,

Carol Kawase
Governor
JACL NCWNP District

cc: David Inoue, JACL Executive Director

Robert Nieweg, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C.

Amy Webb, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Denver, CO

Justin Henderson, Heritage Partnerships Program, National Park Service, Intermountain Region

Astrid Liverman, Heritage Partnerships Program, National Park Service, Intermountain Region