

August 19, 2021

Ms. Carol Kawase
Governor, Northern California, Western Nevada, Pacific District
JACL Headquarters
1765 Sutter Street
San Francisco, CA 94115

Dear Ms. Kawase,

As a long-time member of the Japanese American Citizen League and on behalf of the Topaz Museum Board, I would like to acknowledge your letter dated August 8, 2021, regarding the Wakasa Monument.

Let me first begin by apologizing for failing to notify the JACL and other stakeholders in advance of the removal of the stone. We acknowledge that our omission triggered displeasure, hurt, and anger for which we express our profound regret.

Attached is a letter dated August 14, 2021, that we sent to stakeholders Ms. Nancy Ukai, Ms. Masako Takahashi, and Ms. Satsuki Ina expressing our apology, but also providing the reasons why the stone had to be removed as soon as possible in order to protect it. As recited in the attached letter, on July 19, 2021, we were shocked to discover that archaeologist Jeff Burton had published an article in Discover Nikkei detailing (Part 4 of the article) the precise location of the stone, including measurements specified in feet showing how to find it.

In the last three years, there has been a lot of vandalism at and around the incarceration site. Attached are photographs of the destruction, including signage thoroughly shot through by bullets, and the spray-painted desecration of a Topaz marker stating "Democrats did this" (written during the Trump era). To quote our letter to Nancy, Masako, and Satsuki:

"We immediately realized that with such detailed information, a relic hunter, looter, vandal or curious explorer could easily locate the stone. This public disclosure was alarming because the Museum's signage and county traffic signs adjacent to the site have been recently ruined with shot-gun shells and rifle bullets. In the past, vandals had so thoroughly damaged the original JACL marker that the entire monument had to be replaced. A few times we have found tracks where vehicles have been driven off the roads and onto sensitive historic areas of the site. Desecration by vandals and removal of artifacts by looters or explorers remains an on-going concern. Even if persons inspired by the article to try to find the stone were driven by curiosity and not bent on destruction, their wandering around this highly sensitive area could result in damage. In short, due to the potential for desecration, damage, or theft, we concluded that time was of the essence to protect the stone by moving it to the Museum."

I especially want to address a statement in the second paragraph of your letter:

"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 the Japanese American culture. Robbed of this ritual, we are left feeling that this sacred memorial site has been irreparably desecrated."

We join you in mourning the fact that there was no community ceremony and no ritual of remembrance during the unearthing to mark for posterity the terrible and unjust killing of Mr. Wakasa by a Topaz sentry.

But the publication of exactly how to find the stone made delaying the removal in order to organize a public community ceremony fraught with risk. While all Topaz artifacts are significant, the monument has extraordinary meaning which makes it an especially attractive target for wrongdoers. With the public disclosure of its location, in view of the wanton destruction we have already experienced, the Board felt the potential for damage by bullets or spray paint was not an idle threat. In addition, someone searching for it on an off-road vehicle would have harmed the site itself.

To be clear, the fact that time was of the essence does not excuse our failure to notify JACL and other stakeholders in advance of our actions to remove the stone. It does however explain our preoccupation to remove it as soon as possible. Therefore, within 8 days of our discovery of Mr. Burton's article, we brought the stone to the Museum.

Professional archaeologists working on a separate project informally examined the stone while they were on site and verbally shared best practices for the archaeological excavation of such an object. The archaeologists were not able to be present at the removal, so we applied the best practices they shared with us. To record the process, we hired two videographers. We also arranged for the removal to be witnessed by a senior officer of the Utah State Historic Preservation Office and three board members.

I also want to address your concern that the stone was removed by a "...contractor hired to clear trash from Block 42." I think you may have gotten the impression that the clean-up of Block 42 was merely an exercise in trash removal. Because Block 42 is a highly sensitive site, prior to the removal, archaeologists Shew and Kamp-Whittaker, were hired to create maps with specific instructions on areas that must be avoided so as not to disturb the history of that block. This is extremely difficult to do when maneuvering mobilized, heavy equipment. Mr. Scott Johnson, a skilled operator, was hired to do the work. He strictly followed the mapped instructions that Shew and Kamp-Whittaker had provided. In some cases, he carefully navigated an excavator into very limited areas, and used its extending arm to reach over sensitive grounds to lift out heavy objects so as not to disturb the foundations of the Block 42 mess hall.

Because we were impressed with Mr. Johnson's experience, skill, and understanding of the sensitive nature of the work on Block 42, we asked him to excavate the monument. However, he had already committed to work on other major jobs, but he was able to squeeze our project in his tight schedule. In your letter, you quoted an email that I had sent to Masako. In retrospect, I realize that I was in a hurry and it was poorly worded, making it seem like we had decided to move the monument in accordance with the convenience of Mr. Johnson's schedule. Actually, it was the opposite—Mr. Johnson arranged his schedule in order to comply with our need to remove the stone as soon as possible.

Finally, there's been a lot of rancor—some caused by our failure to notify stakeholders in advance of the immediate need to protect the stone, an omission we take full responsibility for, but some caused by not understanding the predicament that was created by Mr. Burton's disclosure, which in turn, triggered a mistaken conclusion that the Board acted with indifference and bad intentions. I hope this letter helps to clear the air. We look forward to working with the JACL and other stakeholders to properly memorialize Mr. Wakasa and the meaning of the monument, now, and for posterity.

By the way, members of the Topaz Museum Board have been working with Japanese Americans who were in Topaz since 1984. In 1993, the TMB hosted its first pilgrimage for 400 people who were mostly from the Bay Area. Until 2013 we held smaller pilgrimages. Of course, the Topaz Museum itself is an incredible asset that has been praised and well attended. Its mission is to educate the public and students

about the history of Topaz. We have a robust collection of 150 pieces of art done by artists who were in Topaz. Our commitment to preserve the site as it was in 1947 when the barracks were removed shows visitors the harsh reality of what Topaz was like. Recently a local man facilitated a trade of a parcel of his land for 6.2 acres that comprised Block 42 and then he donated that land to us. We now own 639 acres of the 640 total. The JACL chapters in Salt Lake City own one acre.

Should you have other questions or wish clarification, please don't hesitate to contact me. My email address is topazmuseum@frontiernet.net. Should you want to use the U.S. mail, our address is P.O. Box 241, Delta, Utah 84624.

Sincerely,

Jane Beckwith
President, on behalf of the
Topaz Museum Board

cc: David Inoue, JACL Executive Director
Robert Nieweg, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington D.C.
Amy Webb, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Denver Colorado
Justin Henderson, Heritage Partnerships Program, National Park Service, Intermountain Region
Astrid Liverman, Heritage Partnerships Program, National Park Service, Intermountain Region

Attachments:

Letter from Carol Kawase to the Topaz Museum Board dated August 8, 2021

Letter dated August 14, 2021 from the Topaz Museum Board to Nancy Ukai, Masako Takahashi, and Satsuki Ina

Photographs of recent vandalism