

Japanese Americans in Utah

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From earliest human habitation, the area now called Utah has exhibited ethnic diversity. The prehistoric-era Fremont and Anasazi people built villages and cultivated crops. Goshuite, Paiute, Navajo (Dine'), Shoshone, and Ute cultures replaced them—the last of whom gave its name to the state. The arrival of subsequent groups of people squeezed Native Americans to marginal lands where they remain today.

In the 1700s the Spanish (and then Mexicans) forged the Old Spanish Trail, which bisects Utah. While they brought the gift of horses, they also enslaved native people and encouraged an inter-Indian slave trade. In the nineteenth century, other people of European (and a few African) descent from the eastern United States sought religious sanctuary in Utah. In 1847 the vanguard of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, also called Mormons) arrived and established a theocracy that would be transformed into the state's dominant force in all aspects of life. To be non-Mormon in Utah is to be a minority. Hence, the Japanese in Utah—definite latecomers—were originally both a racial and a religious exception to the rule.

Prior to Japanese arrival, other racial and ethnic groups, usually recruited as contract labor, came to Utah in the late nineteenth century. They also belonged to minority religions—Taoist or Confucian, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish, primarily—and included Chinese, Finns, Italians, Irish, Yugoslavs, and later, Greeks and Syro-Lebanese, among others.

Initially, Utahns saw Japanese either as exotic or expendable. Although representatives of the newly westernized Meiji government received a gracious reception when they visited in 1872, they made no lasting impact. In the 1880s Japanese contract labor arrived, as well as female prostitutes and men to work on railroad gangs. They evidently didn't stay because an 1890 census of pre-statehood Utah reported only

five Japanese in Utah (Utah became a state in 1896). Numbers rose to 417 in 1900, 2,110 in 1910, and a pre-World War II high of 2,936 in 1920. (For comparison, the 2005 total of all Asians in the state was approximately 48,000, including more than 10,000 people of Japanese descent.)

Labor agents, themselves Japanese immigrants, recruited many of the workers who came to Utah in the early twentieth century. For example, in 1902 Edward Daigoro Hashimoto established a labor agency in Salt Lake City; his agency provided strikebreaking miners during the great Carbon County coal strike of 1903–04. Competing contractor Kyutaro Abiko opened an Ogden office in 1905 to provide Utah's sugar beet harvesters with workers. U.S.–Japanese agreements of 1907–08, which prevented laborers from leaving Japan for the U.S. mainland, forced Abiko to recruit workers from Hawai'i, including some for the Western Pacific Railroad in 1906. Another labor agent, Hayao Oda, procured workers for Utah's Bingham Canyon copper mine after 1909. Some Japanese immigrants also secured jobs as “houseboys” for Salt Lake City's society matrons, replacing servant girls. Ultimately Hashimoto became Utah's leading Japanese labor contractor: his agency supplied sugar beet harvesters, established the Clearfield Canning Company, opened a sugar beet center in Delta, imported Japanese food and supplies, provided banking services, and helped his fellow Japanese immigrants with government forms and legal problems.

A growing number of economically independent Japanese developed new businesses and cultural institutions. For example, several Japanese-run newspapers served to knit the community together, beginning in 1907 when the Japanese-language *Rocky Mountain Times* began publishing. Seven years later the Terazawa family began publishing the rival *Utah Nippo*, a newspaper still in existence today. Entrepreneurs opened fish markets, restaurants, and variety stores that provided specialized goods in the Japanese



enclaves of Ogden, Salt Lake City, and Helper. Reflecting a traditional Japanese respect for farmers, Utah's Japanese agricultural enterprises raised specialty crops, including nationally acclaimed celeries and strawberries. The preservation of Japanese cultural traditions was also very important: touring Kabuki troupes would perform traditional Japanese drama in the communities, while the first school in Salt Lake City to teach children Japanese language and culture opened in 1919; other communities soon opened their own schools.

The Japanese also built churches. In 1912 a memorial service conducted by a Buddhist priest from San Francisco prompted the formation of the Intermountain Buddhist Church. The church's first minister, the Reverend Kenryo Kuwabara, served first in Ogden and later at the Salt Lake Buddhist Church. In 1918 both churches established a Fujinkai, a women's organization originally created to help young Japanese brides adapt to American life. That same year, Japanese Christians founded the Japanese Church of Christ in Salt Lake City.

During the 1920s increased racism against them—including prohibitive legislation—helped to foster Japanese community cohesion and self-help. In 1922 the United States Congress passed the Cable Act, which deprived Nisei (American-born Japanese) women of citizenship if they married Issei (immigrant men), a law abolished in 1931, while the Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited the immigration of all Japanese. When local schools started excluding Nisei children from extracurricular activities, concerned parents formed a Young Buddhist Association (YBA) at the Salt Lake Buddhist Church in 1923. Adult Japanese also organized a variety of fraternal and benevolent societies. For example, the Carbon County Kyo Ai Kai, still in existence today, established its own segregated cemetery and provided pensions in the event of a disabling coal-mining accident. Salt Lake's Hiroshima Kenjinkai, a group whose members all came from a

particular area (Hiroshima) in Japan, provided similar services, as did organizations in Segoe, Eureka, Bingham, Elberta, and Payson.

Conditions continued to worsen for Utah's Japanese American as the twentieth century progressed. During the Great Depression as jobs for nonwhites disappeared, more than a thousand Japanese left Utah, among them LDS convert Mike Masaoka, who moved to San Francisco to accept the position of national secretary and field director of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). As the organization's main spokesperson, he brought national awareness to the Japanese American community beyond the West Coast; his chief responsibility became trying to head off a growing national hysteria as Japan attacked China in 1937. After Japanese warplanes bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the U.S. joined World War II, and Utah's Japanese Americans began immediately to face increased prejudice, including vandalism of their cemeteries, an unsuccessful confinement attempt by Utah's legislature, and an alien land law that restricted Issei to only one-year leases on land.

Three months later the federal government ignored the constitutional rights of its citizens of Japanese descent in an act later blamed on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership": on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced the exclusion of all Japanese Americans from the entire state of California, western Oregon and Washington, and southern Arizona and mandated their imprisonment in concentration camps in the interior. Voluntary exclusion from the West Coast remained open until March 30, 1942, which allowed Oakland resident Fred Isamu Wada (whose wife Masako was from Ogden) enough time to negotiate a lease of almost 4,000 acres near Keetley in Wasatch County; soon 90 relocated Japanese Americans were growing food there for the war effort. Despite anti-Japanese protests by Emery County residents,

another group of 40 families leased 1,500 acres to raise sugar beets near Green River.

While some businesses supported their Japanese American employees; others were quickly fired. Radios, cameras, and hunting rifles were confiscated from some citizens by municipal authorities. Prejudice existed despite the efforts of Senator Elbert D. Thomas, formerly a Mormon missionary in Japan and a mentor to Mike Masaoka, who worked to mitigate the effects of wartime hysteria.

Japanese Americans began to be forcibly moved to Utah from other states. When voluntary exclusion ended, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) detained approximately 8,000 evacuees from the San Francisco Bay area at Topaz, just outside Delta. Three other WRA locations utilized old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) centers: Antelope Springs, used as a Topaz recreation center; Dalton Wells near Moab, utilized as a temporary isolation center for “troublemakers”; and Dog Valley, south of Emery, where inmates mined coal for Topaz from the nearby mine. Due to the increased numbers of Japanese in the state, the circulation of the long-lived *Utah Nippo* rose from 600 per issue to about 10,000 during the war years.

The influx of Japanese Americans also brought new institutions to Utah. The incarcerated Topaz population included the Reverend Kenryo Kumata, head of the Buddhist Churches of America, who directed his church from Utah despite government restrictions; released from Topaz in 1943, he worked with the Ogden Buddhist Church and founded branches at Honeyville, Deweyville, Garland, and Corinne before the church’s offices were returned to San Francisco in 1945. The JACL’s headquarters were also relocated from San Francisco to Utah during the war, as was its newspaper, the *Pacific Citizen*. In 1943 the organization’s leaders, which included Shigeki “Shake” Ushio, set up the National JACL Credit Union (which is still headquartered in Salt Lake City today). Ushio, who initially worked to assist Japanese Americans whose

assets were frozen or restricted when the war began, continued to serve as chairman of the credit union’s board for more than thirty years; the credit union also provided financial assistance to those leaving detention camps, including members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

The war’s end brought many changes to the state as Utah continued to adapt to its Japanese Americans and vice versa, including an increased Japanese American population: the 1950 census counted 1,183 ethnic Japanese in Utah. In 1947 the Utah legislature repealed the state’s Alien Land Law, which allowed Issei to buy land. That same year, Utah’s Wataru “Wat” Misaka was picked first in the first round of the initial National Basketball Association (NBA) draft by the New York Knicks, breaking the professional color barrier in basketball as Jackie Robinson had in baseball. As wider societal changes continued to occur, Mike Masaoka was spearheading an intensive lobbying effort for redress. These efforts resulted in the 1948 Evacuation Indemnity Claims Act (unfortunately, only \$38 million of an estimated \$400 million loss were paid out). During the war, Alice Kasai—the wife of detained leader Henry Y. Kasai—carried on her husband’s work in establishing a Utah JACL. When the war ended and Henry returned, the two of them helped form the Salt Lake Chapter of the JACL (Utah now has three chapters). The Kasais also became active in the World Peace Study Mission, and Alice helped to create the Japanese Peace Garden in Jordan Park in 1949. Mary and Charlie Kawakami, driven out of Spring Canyon (a Carbon County mining camp) during the war, relocated to Provo, where Mary cut hair during the week to support her disabled husband and family; on weekends she took the bus to Los Angeles to study beauty care from industry professionals, leading to her recognition in 1954 as “One of the World’s Ten Best” in Hollywood. In addition, she founded a beauty college in Provo which operated until 1999.

The national JACL has brought many Utahns recognition. In 1950 Mike Masaoka became the very first “J.A. of the Biennium,” the organization’s highest honor for Japanese Americans who have succeeded in their chosen field. The most recent Utahn so honored, National JACL Credit Union Chairman “Shake” Ushio, won the award in 1998; Henry Y. Kasai had received the award in 1964, and in 1974 Judge Raymond Uno, who had broken the color barrier in the Utah court system, was given the honor. Judge Uno became Utah’s first minority to hold a number of increasingly important legal positions, and in 1985 he was elected to Utah’s Third Judicial District court, becoming the court’s first minority judge. Judge Uno worked tirelessly to encourage all minorities to study the law, and in 2005 he was among the first 50 people honored by the Utah Minority Bar Association, a group that includes African Americans, Asians,

Hispanics, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. A year later, Utah native and LDS Church member S. Floyd Mori became the interim director of the national JACL after long service in the Mount Olympus chapter and as national president (2000–04) and director of public policy in Washington D.C. since 2005.

Utah’s appreciation of Japanese culture in recent years has been somewhat spotty. Salt Lake City and Japan’s Matsumoto City have been sister cities since 1958, but in 1967 city officials destroyed all of Salt Lake City’s so-called Japan Town (except for the Japanese Church of Christ and the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple) to make way for the Salt Palace Convention Center. But advances and adaptations will undoubtedly continue: Utah’s minority population now exceeds 15 percent, and the state’s citizens of Japanese descent exemplify the positive potential of a challenging history.



Timeline for Japanese Americans in Utah

(Compiled by Nancy J. Taniguchi)

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- 1776 • Old Spanish Trail is established, linking Santa Fe, New Mexico and Los Angeles, California via Colorado, Utah, Arizona and Nevada
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- 1847 • First members of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)(also known as Mormons) arrive
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- 1872 • Japanese Meiji government officials visit Utah territory
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- 1880s • First Japanese contract laborers arrive
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- 1890 • Utah census counts five Japanese
 - 1896 • Utah gains statehood
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- 1900 • Utah census counts 417 Japanese
 - 1902–06 • Several Japanese labor agents open firms in Salt Lake City
 - 1907 • *Rocky Mountain Times*, a Japanese-language newspaper, begins publishing
 - 1907 • So-called Gentlemen’s Agreement forbids emigration of Japanese laborers from Japan
 - 1908 • Root-Takahira Agreement formalizes restrictions of Gentlemen’s Agreement, allowing only diplomats, merchants, and students to leave Japan for the United States (not including Hawaii)
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- 1910 • Utah census counts 2,110 Japanese
 - 1912 • Intermountain Buddhist Church is formed
 - 1914 • Terazawa family establishes *Utah Nippo* newspaper
 - 1919 • First Japanese school in Salt Lake City is established
 - 1918 • Fujinkai (women’s organization) formed by combined Salt Lake and Ogden Buddhist churches
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- 1920 • Utah census counts 2,936 Japanese
 - 1922 • Cable Act states that Nisei women who marry Issei men will lose their U.S. citizenship; this law was repealed in 1931
 - 1923 • Young Buddhist Association (YBA) is established for Japanese American children at Salt Lake City Buddhist Church
 - 1924 • Congress passes the Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924)
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- 1941 • Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor
 - Utah legislature passes an alien land law, which prohibited land purchases, instead restricting Issei to yearly leases; the legislation was repealed in 1947
 - 1942 • U.S. War Relocation Authority (WRA) imprisons Japanese Americans in Utah at camps in Topaz, Dalton Wells, and Dog Valley
 - Buddhist Church of America directed from Topaz
 - Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) headquarters are moved to Utah, including their newspaper, *Pacific Citizen*
 - 1943 • JACL opens National JACL Credit Union in Salt Lake City
 - 1947 • Wataru “Wat” Misaka breaks National Basketball Association (NBA) color barrier
 - 1948 • Congress passes Evacuation Indemnity Claims Act
 - 1949 • Establishment of Japanese Peace Garden in Jordan
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- 1950 • Utah census counts 1,183 ethnic Japanese
 - 1954 • Provo beauty salon owner Mary Kawakami is selected as “One of World’s Ten Best” in Hollywood
 - 1958 • Salt Lake City and Japan’s Matsumoto City become Sister Cities

Timeline for Japanese Americans in Utah

- 1967 • Salt Lake City officials raze the area informally known as Japan Town in order to build Salt Palace Convention Center
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- 1985 • Judge Raymond Uno becomes first minority to sit on Utah's Third Judicial District court
- 1988 • President Ronald Reagan signs Civil Liberties Act, in which the U.S. formally apologizes for its treatment of Japanese Americans and grants each surviving World War II inmate \$20,000
- 1989 • Congress appropriates funds for 1988 Civil Liberties Act and payments begin
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- 2005 • Utah census counts approximately 48,000 Asians, including more than 10,000 of Japanese descent