

California activists seek to preserve church land acquired by early Japanese immigrants

by [Alejandra Molina](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



The unused and dilapidated Wintersburg Japanese Presbyterian Church in Huntington Beach, California, on March 31. (RNS photo by Alejandra Molina)

The words “Jesus Lives” are emblazoned across a dilapidated, unoccupied structure in Orange County. The building’s windows are boarded up. Varying shades of white and unmatched paint cover graffiti and highlight cracks in the property’s exterior.

This is the historic Wintersburg Japanese Presbyterian Church which sits on a 4.5-acre landscape that, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is among the only surviving Japanese American properties acquired before California

enacted the Alien Land Law in 1913, which barred Asian immigrants from owning land.

The first known Japanese immigrants arrived in Orange County in 1900, and just four years later, religious leaders—Episcopalians, Buddhists, Presbyterians, and Methodists among them—founded the Wintersburg Japanese Mission, the National Trust said. Charles Furuta and Barnabus Hisayoshi Terasawa bought the land in 1908, and the original buildings went up in 1910. The mission was officially recognized by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1930. A larger church for the growing congregation was built in 1934.

Local advocates and historians have for years sought to preserve the historic property—now owned by Republic Services, a waste management company—that many refer to as a sacred place.

Most recently, the public has reignited their efforts to protect this piece of land after a February 25 fire destroyed two of the six buildings on the property, including a 112-year-old manse.

On March 19, Asian American organizations held a rally outside Historic Wintersburg to demand an independent investigation into the fire, chanting, “Don’t trash our history, we deserve the truth!” Some held signs declaring, “Save the church! Save our history!”

“It set everyone into panic mode, because there actually was a loss,” said Jamie Hiber, executive director of the Heritage Museum of Orange County. “It allowed a platform for this to once again come to the forefront.”

Local historian Mary Adams Urashima, who has written extensively about the history of Wintersburg, said she long feared the property would catch fire and that the buildings’ loss was “demolition by neglect.” Weeds and brush posed a fire risk, and vandalism had degraded the condition of the buildings. Urashima and others hope the Heritage Museum of Orange County could eventually acquire the land for a park and museum the public can enjoy.

Neither Republic Services nor the city of Huntington Beach returned a request for comment, but interim city manager Sean Joyce recently told the Los Angeles Times that he had “held exploratory discussions with Republic concerning the status of the property, including a possible purchase by the city.”

The property encapsulates three generations of Japanese Americans' faith and public life. Urashima said Japanese immigrants took English language classes and discussed financial planning, even as they continued Japanese traditions such as celebrating the emperor's birthday. It's also where Furuta became the first Japanese person baptized as Christian in Orange County, she said.

To Urashima, this place is "consecrated ground and a spiritual place for so many."

"I think that makes the ground sacred," she added.

Urashima said the property could offer Americans the opportunity to learn about Japanese American life beyond the World War II-era internment camps and see that Japanese American history is not "one dimensional."

"When you remove these things from the landscape that tell other views, other chapters of American history, people lose that connection, and they don't often consider them part of American history," Urashima said. "It fades away."

The Wintersburg community was incarcerated during World War II, and Furuta was taken to the Tuna Canyon Detention Center in Los Angeles. Families returned after the war. The church, which had been shuttered, reopened and continued to grow until it moved to nearby Santa Ana, where it remains a predominantly Japanese American congregation.

The Historic Wintersburg property is considered one of America's most endangered historic places and in 2015 was designated a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Hiber said the Heritage Museum of Orange County has a vision for the space as a museum and a destination for local students for lectures.

"Even after the fire, it's a spiritual place. It's already a destination of pilgrimage for not just Japanese Americans, but the Japanese people in general," Hiber said.

"The family came back after [internment] to occupy that space and created it into something new and applicable to their experience after the war and coming back from the internment camp," she said. "Just walking the perimeter . . . you feel it; you feel the history." —Religion News Service