

Japanese American Incarceration: The End of Incarceration and Beyond

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During WWII, the US government imprisoned over 125,000 people of Japanese descent without due process. The ten concentration camps, scattered in desolate regions of the western US and Arkansas, housed these prisoners in humiliating and dehumanizing conditions. The camp at Tule Lake, in the northeastern corner of our diocese, initially opened as an ordinary War Relocation Authority “relocation center” but was converted to a maximum security “segregation center” for the last three years of its existence.

Many Americans know little or nothing about the incarceration and its lasting effects, even those who live near the site of former camps.

“I grew up from kindergarten through eighth grade in Tulelake, California... All my growing up years I was never told the full truth about what happened.... There have been attempts to not make it seem as bad as it was. There are photos of children looking happy playing, pictures of adults doing crafts and looking very satisfied. There was a silent passing by of what happened until FINALLY Japanese American people rose up in protest and stories came out about what actually happened... the ONLY reference I ever heard to the Internment Camp was in the form of a geographic place when giving directions, i.e., ‘It’s five miles past the Jap Camp.’” – Deborah Kimokeo, parishioner, Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis, CA.



Original caption: Tule Lake Segregation Center, Newell, California. These elementary school children at the Tule Lake Center are thrilled at the sight of their first calf. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration, October 1944.

The end of incarceration

President Franklin D. Roosevelt rescinded mass exclusion orders on December 17, 1944, with Japanese Americans who were deemed "loyal" purged from camps and given \$25 to begin a new life in a nation that didn't want them. All camps but Tule Lake closed by the end of November 1945.

Many cities and towns on the west coast were openly hostile to the return of the Japanese Americans community. Various jurisdictions on the West Coast passed resolutions opposing the presence of Japanese Americans and acts of terrorism – vandalism of property, arson, verbal harassment, shootings – against returnees occurred throughout 1945.

“Whereas ... Sacramento people being thoroughly conversant with the conduct of these undesirable people...we are opposed to the return of any Japanese from concentration camps to their former locations, and we endorse the orders...that all Japanese be confined in concentration camps, and that they not be returned to any Pacific Coast State.” – Sacramento City Council, Resolution Number 207, May 28th, 1943. Repealed May 27, 2014. The City Council of Davis, CA, rescinded a similar resolution in 2006, and the Yolo County resolution was rescinded by the Board of Supervisors in 2024.

However, other white Americans welcomed the return of their neighbors. Some had supported the Japanese through incarceration by storing their possessions or operating farms in their absence and sending the proceeds back to supplement meager camp salaries.

“When we drove the Hoshiko family to the Fresno fairgrounds [to report for assembly before transport to camp], I remember my mother going around the back of the car, and Mrs. Hoshiko putting down the suitcase, and then embracing for a while. And then my mother turned around and she was crying. That was the first time I'd ever seen my mother cry. It was one of the few times in her lifetime that I ever saw her cry...”



August 1943: A new sign on the outskirts of Winters, CA. A fire of unknown origin destroyed Winters' Japantown in 1943. Only 15% of the pre-war Japanese community eventually returned to Winters. Photo: Dorothea Lange, Oakland Museum.



Gift of the Hoshiko family to the Lewis family. Photo courtesy of Ernie Lewis.

“When they came back, the girls came first. The Hoshiko parents sent the girls back to live with us and to get a feel for what it was going to be like. The girls were told, “Now, the Lewises are church people. And you are to go to church with them because church people will be kind to you.” – The Rev. Ernie Lewis, Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis, CA.

Tule Lake remained open through March 20, 1946, to imprison inmates considered “disloyal” based on “no-no” answers to two questions on a poorly worded loyalty questionnaire. The continued pressures of incarceration, including the imposition of martial law at Tule Lake in late 1943, disinformation, bitterness, and anger about their unjust treatment caused 5,461 prisoners at Tule Lake and 128 from other camps to renounce their US citizenship and request repatriation to Japan. Of those at Tule Lake, 1,327 were expatriated. Most renunciants who remained in the U.S. were stripped of birthright citizenship, rendering them stateless.



Renunciants leaving Tule Lake for Japan. Photo: Jack Iwata, 1945. Japanese American National Museum.

Subsequently, nearly all the renunciants regretted their decision, made under duress in the cauldron of uncertainty, fear, and anger that characterized the atmosphere of Tule Lake, and sought restoration of US citizenship. Civil rights attorney Wayne M. Collins filed a class action *habeas corpus* lawsuit on their behalf and argued appeals, with victory over 20 years later. His work was instrumental in halting deportation and restoring citizenship to these individuals.

Incarceration and segregation have had long-term implications that continue today, almost 80 years after the closure of Tule Lake.

The Japanese American Citizens League, the loyalty questionnaire, and division

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, leaders of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) failed to defend the civil rights of Japanese Americans and collaborated with the US government and FBI. At Tule Lake, those who collaborated with administrators were mistrusted and scorned by the organizers and activists segregated there. The prison-like dynamics of the camp amplified these conflicts. Postwar, the JACL harshly criticized “no-no” respondents and other dissidents, perpetuating the loyal/disloyal division within the community. While the JACL issued an apology to nearly 300 “wartime resisters of conscience” in 2000, debate continues about the responsibility of the JACL to mend rifts within the Japanese community.

Intergenerational trauma

Regardless of their incarceration site, many incarceration survivors displayed symptoms of avoidance associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. Psychologists suggest that survivors chose silence over talking about their incarceration experience both to suppress their trauma and to protect their children born long after the end of WWII from the burden of knowing about it. This psychological and cultural stress also can affect the physiological health of all involved.



"Thinking About Christ," 1943, by noted Japanese artist, Henry Sugimoto, incarcerated at Jerome and Rohwer, AR. Japanese American National Museum.

“As my siblings and I have grown up, we have had constant questions and curiosity about our Japanese heritage and my grandmother's experience of the internment camps, but we rarely got answers from her. She chose not to share about the internment camp until well into her 60s (she's nearing 96). We largely had to push our way (as respectfully as we could with a conflict-avoidant culture) to the kitchen to learn recipes, to her church functions when we were invited, and to find our own information wherever we could. This has felt like a very deep loss that I am finally beginning to piece together with newer family stories being shared and my own resources for cultural understanding.” – Lindsay Demary, parishioner, Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis, CA.

At Tule Lake, 331 individuals died and many were interred in a cemetery within the camp. In the 1950s, homesteaders bulldozed the cemetery and used the dirt and remains to fill ditches that surrounded the barracks area to build an airstrip. Modoc County plans to surround the airstrip with a fence, which would preclude access to survivors and others who seek to visit the site of the concentration camp. Survivors and their descendants have worked for over ten years to stop further desecration of the site.

“With the fence, we will be shut out from where our families lived and permanently reminded of the racism and hostility that put us there in the first place.” – Barbara Takei, descendant of prisoners at Tule Lake, in the *Sacramento Bee*, October 2, 2017

Stop repeating history

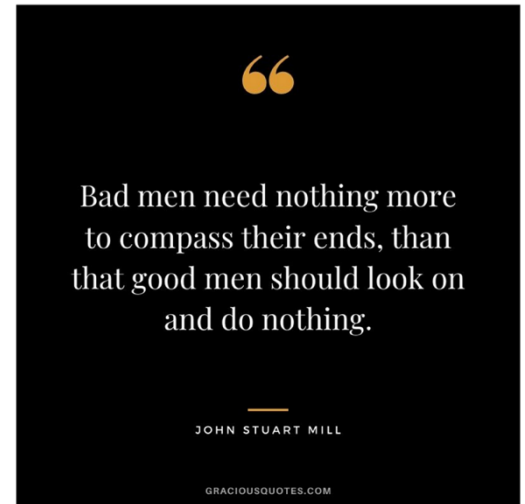
The incarceration of Japanese Americans in WWII marked a dark chapter in US history. However, it also serves as a warning in our nation's current situation.

The Alien Enemies Act of 1798 allowed the federal government to apprehend, secure, and remove “enemy aliens” in times of war. President Roosevelt used it in December 1941 as the basis for three proclamations that led to the arrest and imprisonment, without trial, of over 3,600 Japanese, German, and Italian nationals. Subsequent analyses by the FBI and military intelligence asserted that the Japanese did not pose a threat to the security of the US, but this did not stop the issuance of Executive Order 9066.

“The necessity for mass evacuation is based primarily upon public and political pressure rather than on factual data.” – J. Edgar Hoover, February 3, 1942

With few exceptions, neither legal scholars, churches, nor individual citizens spoke out against incarcerating Japanese and Japanese Americans. Two thirds of those incarcerated were US citizens by birth, and one third were children.

The current administration once again has invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to justify deporting over 200 migrants from Venezuela to a prison in El Salvador. The migrants have not received appropriate due process, and we are not at war with Venezuela.



The US erred in 1941 and 1942. We should not repeat this mistake in 2025.

“A grave injustice was done to both citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry by the evacuation, relocation, and internment of civilians during World War II...motivated largely by racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership... For these fundamental violations of the basic civil liberties and constitutional rights of these individuals of Japanese ancestry, the Congress apologizes on behalf of the Nation.” – The Civil Liberties Act, signed by President Ronald Reagan on 10 August 1988

We plan a deeper look at the Japanese American incarceration and its implications for today in a half-day webinar planned for 7 June 2025. Please watch for information. You can find the first four articles in this series in the December 2024, and January, February, and March 2025 newsletters.

Diocesan Tule Lake Committee

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See these resources for a deeper dive:

- [Information about the Japanese Incarceration, from the general to the encyclopedic](https://densho.org/learn/) -- <https://densho.org/learn/>
- [White House Proclamation on the Day of Remembrance, 19 February 2022](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-10341-day-remembrance-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii) –original post removed; proclamation archived at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-10341-day-remembrance-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii>
- [National Archives Summary of Executive Order 9066](https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066) -- <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066>
- [Sacramento City Council Resolution 207](https://cdm16855.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/389) -- <https://cdm16855.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/389>
- [The Lost Japanese American Community of Winters](https://www.nichibei.org/2024/05/monument-dedicated-to-lost-japanese-american-community-of-winters/) -- <https://www.nichibei.org/2024/05/monument-dedicated-to-lost-japanese-american-community-of-winters/>
- [What happened to the Property of Sacramento’s Japanese...](https://www.capradio.org/articles/2019/06/04/what-happened-to-the-property-of-sacramentos-japanese-american-community-interned-during-world-war-ii/) -- <https://www.capradio.org/articles/2019/06/04/what-happened-to-the-property-of-sacramentos-japanese-american-community-interned-during-world-war-ii/>
- [Wayne Collins](https://waynecollinsfilm.com/) -- <https://waynecollinsfilm.com/>
- [The Japanese American Wartime Incarceration: Examining the Scope of Racial Trauma](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6354763/) -- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6354763/>
- [Henry Sugimoto](https://www.janm.org/collections/henry-sugimoto-collection) -- <https://www.janm.org/collections/henry-sugimoto-collection>
- [Sacramento Bee, Japanese Americans protest wall planned at WWII internment camp near California border](https://web.archive.org/web/20171002145213/http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article176447971.html) -- <https://web.archive.org/web/20171002145213/http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article176447971.html>
- [The Alien Enemies Act and Incarceration of Japanese](https://densho.org/catalyst/the-alien-enemies-act-paved-the-way-for-japanese-american-incarceration-lets-keep-it-in-the-past/) -- <https://densho.org/catalyst/the-alien-enemies-act-paved-the-way-for-japanese-american-incarceration-lets-keep-it-in-the-past/>

See also [The Literature of Japanese-American Incarceration: an anthology](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/570029/the-literature-of-japanese-american-incarceration-by-edited-with-an-introduction-by-frank-abe-and-floyd-cheung/) --

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/570029/the-literature-of-japanese-american-incarceration-by-edited-with-an-introduction-by-frank-abe-and-floyd-cheung/>

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<https://www.norcalepiscopal.org/site/Commission-on-Intercultural-Ministries/#tab-id-3>