



Reflections on the Japanese American Sesquicentennial at Wakamatsu Farm

PLACERVILLE, CA. (July 31, 2019) WakamatsuFest150 was a sesquicentennial festival celebrating 150 years of Japanese American heritage, arts, and cuisine at Wakamatsu Farm in Placerville, California. Held June 6th through 9th, American River Conservancy (ARC) hosted the event to recognize the 150th anniversary of the first Japanese pioneers' arrival at Wakamatsu Farm where they established the first Japanese Colony in America in June 1869. The occasion honored 150 years of Japanese American immigration by drawing a large and diverse international crowd to the one-time-only historic occasion.

Over 4000 visitors, performers, artists, demonstrators, vendors, and volunteers joined WakamatsuFest150, including the after-hours VIP event. Many were new visitors who had no prior knowledge of the Farm nor its history. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance. The Farm was declared California Registered Historic Landmark #815 during the June 1965 centennial celebrations hosted 50 years ago at Wakamatsu Farm.

Festival-goers this year included over 60 people from Japan and many more from across America. Japanese and Japanese Americans showcased their culture and history during 41 live performances spanning 72 hours on three simultaneous stages. The festival offered 2.5 hours of Japanese language programming. On the first festival day, about 300 local school children participated in activities to learn about Japanese art, culture, and history. Every festival day, kids enjoyed playing in the outdoor nature play space. Over 50 vendors and booths offered Japanese-inspired merchandise, Japanese American history, information, and business services along with Japanese food and other festival fare.

Artists shared ongoing hands-on demonstrations of Japanese art forms like haiku, temari balls, calligraphy, sumi-e painting, wood block printing, and silk spinning, spooling, and weaving. Lecturers, farmers, and historians discussed tea, history, their books, and Japanese culture. Musicians played traditional Japanese instruments such as taiko, koto, and shakuhachi. Masters and students demonstrated Japanese archery, swordsmanship, and martial arts. Japanese women clad in colorful kimonos prepared and served ceremonial tea. Ministers held at least one Buddhist service each day at the gravesite of Okei-san, the first Japanese woman and immigrant buried on American soil. Her gravesite is the main reason why the Wakamatsu story has survived over the past 150 years.

To bring the Wakamatsu story alive during the festival, audiences enjoyed daily performances of the live action play, *Gold Hill Samurai*. Docents were posted at history stations throughout the Farm to support self-guided tours. Artifacts on display in the historic Graner House included the magnificent gold-threaded banner and 14th century samurai dagger left by the Wakamatsu Colonists, three volumes of Commodore Perry's ship logs, and much more. Visitors parked offsite and rode free luxury shuttles between Wakamatsu Farm and nearby Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park so they could extend their exploration of local history in nearby Coloma.

Dignitaries from Japan joined WakamatsuFest150, including Japanese Parliament member, Shinji Oguma, and the Consul General of Japan in San Francisco, Tomochika Uyama. As a lecturer and special guest, ARC was honored to host Iehiro Tokugawa, heir of the Tokugawa Shogunate whose ancestors ruled Japan for over 260 years. Also remarkable, the 15th heir of the Matsudaira clan family who is referred to as a "prince," Chikamori Matsudaira participated during the weekend wearing the traditional costume of his samurai lord ancestors.



On the exact 150th anniversary date of June 8, 2019, all distinguished visitors from Japan met several descendants of Wakamatsu colonists from both America and Japan. The momentous occasion represented a full circle reunion in the Japanese immigration story when the descendants of nobles and commoners of Wakamatsu history finally met at their “Plymouth Rock” landing site in America. In that historic moment, young Prince Matsudaira presented the Wakamatsu Colony descendants with sake and samurai swords made in Japan.

American elected officials who joined WakamatsuFest150 included Placerville Mayor Mark Acuna, Assemblyman Ken Cooley, and County Supervisors Lori Parlin and Brian Veerkamp. The San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival Queen and Court participated in the festivities. Visitors were quite surprised to find former Governor Jerry Brown at WakamatsuFest150, including the VIP after-hours event.

To understand the historical significance of the event, ARC circulated over 6000 copies of the festival program before and during WakamatsuFest150. The public is welcome to contact ARC to obtain free copies of the collectible 16-page *WakamatsuFest150 Commemorative Festival Program* containing articles and the event schedule while quantities last.

In partnership with the El Dorado County Visitor’s Authority, the influx of visitors boosted local businesses and organizations. The event brought accolades to ARC through overwhelmingly positive feedback, thank you cards, Japanese gifts, and governmental declarations from California and Japan. Happy visitors have shared countless event photographs. To view and download festival photos, ARC created a public photo share site at <https://photos.app.goo.gl/rLUngBMP63S18Xrc9>. Print and social media attention about WakamatsuFest150 continues, particularly on Facebook where Wakamatsu Farm continues sharing its ongoing story.

The most common request after WakamatsuFest150 is a similar event every year. Although any 150th anniversary celebration can never be repeated, WakamatsuFest150 created a timely reason for ARC to invest in infrastructural improvements to support future events at Wakamatsu Farm. Onsite improvements include two new performance stages, a small tea house, the nature play space, drinking fountains, and much more. Building on the momentum of WakamatsuFest150, it is easy to predict more memorable events at Wakamatsu Farm in the years ahead.

Find out more about WakamatsuFest150 at www.ARConservancy.org/wakafest150, email wakamatsu@ARConservancy.org, or call 530-621-1224.

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