



## Past and Present of Wakamatsu Farm

On June 8, 1869, the first Japanese settlers in North America arrived in a region named “Gold Hill” near Coloma where the California gold rush began. American River Conservancy (ARC) now owns the 272-acre historic location of the *Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony*. For the first time in the site’s long history, ARC also invites the world to experience the marvelous cultural, natural, and agricultural resources of landmark Wakamatsu Farm during public events, tours, classes, field trips, and private bookings.

Located 45 miles from Sacramento, Wakamatsu Farm is California Registered Historical Landmark #815 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Recognized by many as the “Japanese American Plymouth Rock,” Wakamatsu Farm holds three distinctive first honors:

- Site of the first Japanese Colony in America
- Birthplace of the first birthright Japanese American citizen
- Resting place of Okei, the first Japanese immigrant and woman buried on American soil

Young Okei accompanied at least 22 farmers, carpenters, samurai, and others to establish their tea and silk farm on the Placerville property. When she died at the age of 19 in 1871, Okei became a symbol of dignity and sacrifice for future Japanese immigrants pursuing the American dream. Okei’s story is so highly revered by people of Japanese heritage that they have been paying their respects at her gravesite for over a century. In prior years, visitors risked trespassing on the family-owned farm. Now ARC manages the property as a pilgrimage site, outdoor learning campus, event venue, and working farm.

As the “culture keepers” of this heritage site, ARC also honored its history by hosting *WakamatsuFest150* during June of 2019. The sesquicentennial festival celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Colonists’ arrival. Over 4,000 international visitors and dignitaries joined, including some Colony descendants. The occasion commemorated 150 years of Japanese American immigration. Fifty years earlier, a prior historic event at Wakamatsu Farm memorialized the Japanese American centennial during June 1969.

While the Japanese farmers succeeded for merely a few years, their immigration story holds the greatest fascination for visitors, historians, artists, educators, writers, performers, filmmakers, and many others. Yet long before the Colony, the bountiful Gold Hill region was home for countless generations of native people (Nisenan, Miwok), whose peaceful way of life was tragically upended following the 1849 gold rush. During the 1850’s, the Farm’s fertile soils sustained the Graner and Veerkamp pioneer families. After successfully farming the land for about 140 years, the Veerkamp family sold the property to ARC in 2010. Since then, the Conservancy has been developing a thriving destination farm where private and public opportunities entice visitors to explore the history and community of rural El Dorado County.

The biodiversity of Wakamatsu Farm also merits enduring protection. Located in the American River watershed, its scenic rolling fields connect a mosaic of springs, streams, wetlands, and oak woodlands. Picturesque farm ponds attract migratory species and sustain abundant year-round wildlife. As a land trust and non-profit environmental organization, ARC is equally dedicated to preserving the natural, agricultural, and extraordinary cultural resources of Wakamatsu Farm – in perpetuity. This captivating place is where the Conservancy’s three pillars of conservation, stewardship, and education thrive for the benefit of many communities, Japanese American heritage, and international fellowship with Japan.

ARC’s goal for the property is to help the Farm achieve its highest potential with respect to its past, present, and future for generations to come. Each year, more visitors of all ages can appreciate the tours, events, field trips, and volunteer programs while enjoying the gardens, wheelchair-accessible trail, historic buildings, nature play space, native plant nursery, teahouse, and much more. ARC also leases 110 acres of cropland and livestock pasture to two independent farming operations. Onsite *Free Hand Farm* and *FogDog Farm* grow wholesome, organic food following regenerative farming techniques. Portions of the charming landscape and historic Graner House are also available for private rentals.

As working farmland with resident farmers, this heritage site is not a public park. Visitors are welcome to year-round scheduled events announced at [ARConservancy.org/events](https://www.arconservancy.org/events). To rent the Farm or arrange a private tour, contact [wakamatsu@ARConservancy.org](mailto:wakamatsu@arconservancy.org) or 530-621-1224. Discover more about the actual living history of Wakamatsu Farm at [ARConservancy.org/wakamatsu](https://www.arconservancy.org/wakamatsu).