

ForumJournal

VOL. 33, NO. 1

Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020



PAST **ONLINE**
FORWARD **OCTOBER 27-30TH**

A CONFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL
TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Honoring the Difficult Histories and Diverse Stories of Little Tokyo

GEORGE TAKEI AND TIM WHALEN

Tim Whalen: I'm pleased to be here with a great American citizen, [George Takei](#), to discuss with him why we choose to preserve historic places, how telling difficult stories can lead us into reconciliation, and how preservation can contribute to the social justice goals of equality and inclusion. As a highly visible community activist, George provides inspiration about how we can all more effectively communicate with a wide variety of audiences about the need for preserving our shared history.

George Takei: I'm a native Angeleno, born and raised here, and I love my city and I love the diversity of my city, the various different districts. Being an aspiring actor, certainly the glamor of the Hollywood studios absolutely fascinated me. And it's constantly changing. So I know Los Angeles well and the many districts, but [Little Tokyo is where my heart and soul resides](#). It's the Japanese American district of downtown Los Angeles, literally in the shadows of City Hall. And I have many, many areas of Los Angeles that I love, but Little Tokyo is a very special place for me.

May I share the history of Little Tokyo and all the vicissitudes of life that it went through? Little Tokyo is a district that we call 118 years old because a legend has it that a Japanese sailor jumped ship at San Pedro Harbor and came to downtown Los Angeles and started an American cafe. He sold hamburgers and French fries, hot dogs, and sauerkraut—a very American restaurant. But the Japanese immigrants that came to Los Angeles congregated there, in was the area that was not restricted. Immigrants from



George Takei

PHOTO CREDIT: GREATER TALENT NETWORK

Asia were restricted to move into certain parts of Los Angeles, but that was where that restriction didn't exist, and a community grew. Restaurants opened up, grocery stores, barbershops, and churches began to be built. A Christian church and many Buddhist temples were built. The very first Buddhist temple was built in what we call the heart of Little Tokyo, on the corner of First Street and Central Avenue. And you can't get more smack dab in the center than First and Central Avenue.

On the opposite side of that very same block to the west, the first Japanese Christian Church was built. That was a Neoclassical building with four elegant ionic pillars. So that was where the Japanese immigrant Christians went.

In 1921 the leaders of a Japanese Buddhist congregation—which was founded in 1905, but their gathering place were initially in people's living rooms and then in social halls—decided they were affluent enough and large enough to build a real temple. On the corner of First Street and Central Avenue, they bought that real estate, hired an architect to build their magnificent temple. The congregation was headed by a savvy businessman. First Street was the retail street, the commercial street. All the businesses were there. And so they decided that the First Street frontage would be commercial on the ground level, with shops—a barbershop, a jewelry shop, and a sushi bar—and the second floor and the third floor would be offices—lawyers' offices, insurance offices—and the Central Avenue side would be the entrance to the temple. They wanted for this temple a classic ceremonial entrance with the undulating traditional canopy over it. And the hot architect that they hired knew about the Japanese Buddhist temple entrances, so he designed that for them. But he was a passionate lover of Art Deco. On the rest of the facade, he built Art Deco Egyptian pillars. It's a very singular, unique building; nowhere in all of Japan or all of Asia will you see a Buddhist temple with Art Deco Egyptian colors next to a classic ceremonial entrance.

And Little Tokyo thrived. In the 1920s, it became the place to go. And even in the Depression, it had a substantial support base because there were Japanese immigrant farmers in the San Fernando Valley, Japanese flower growers in the Santa Monica

area and the Malibu area, Japanese fishermen in San Pedro. They all made their weekly trips to Little Tokyo to buy groceries, Japanese groceries—pickled plums, the bags of rice and fish, and all the other things that they needed. They went to the shoe stores, because Japanese feet are smaller than Caucasian feet, and they had stores that offered shoes that fit their size. They went to dry goods stores where they bought clothes, and they had a dinner or lunch in the restaurants. But most importantly, every Sunday, they came down to Little Tokyo to worship in the Christian churches or the Buddhist temple. And certainly, the [Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple](#) at First and Central was the most vibrant of all the temples.

INTERMENT, AND AFTER

But when Pearl Harbor was bombed, everything changed cataclysmically. Terror swept the country from the Pacific all the way to the Atlantic. We were categorized as enemy aliens, which was not true at all. A second generation was born. Some were adults. I was four years old at the time. We were American citizens and we were not the enemy. I mean, I was just a four-year-old kid. It was the most irrational thing that they could say, but that hysteria was combined with racism, and every legislative body from the local city councils to state legislatures to the United States Congress in Washington thundered with irrational words of hate. The mayor of Los Angeles, Fletcher Bowron, talked about Japanese by saying, no matter what generation they are, they are Japanese; they cannot be assimilated.

We had an attorney general in California at that time, the top lawyer, who made an astonishing statement. He said, “We have no reports of sabotage or spying or fifth column activities by Japanese Americans,” and that is ominous—ominous because the Japanese are inscrutable. You can’t tell what we’re thinking from our face. It would be prudent to lock us up before we do anything. For this attorney general, the absence of evidence was the evidence. In the halls of Congress, the senator from Tennessee, Tom Stewart, made another shocking statement on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He said that any Japanese in the United States will stab you in the back. Stab you in the back! How many Japanese, first of all, would a

senator from Tennessee know? I would suspect zero. And yet those statements were made wantonly, and even then the president of the United States—who during the Depression made the statement “There’s nothing to fear, but fear itself” and pulled the nation up from that crushing Depression—was stampeded by the fear of people of Japanese ancestry.

On February 19th, he signed [Executive Order 9066](#), which ordered all Japanese Americans to be summarily rounded up with no charges, no trial, no due process. The central pillar of our justice system disappeared. And we were to be forcibly incarcerated in internment camps.

But going back a few steps, immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, on December 8th, the FBI swooped down on the Japanese American community and picked out the homes of the so-called leaders of the community, presidents of business associations, presidents of kabuki clubs, teachers of the Japanese language, and Buddhist ministers. Anyone who had anything to do with things Japanese, they rounded them up with—again, no charges, no trial—and put them in what they called detention camps. Department of Justice detention camps—irony there.

But at the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple, there was something unusual. There was one minister who was not Japanese. He was Caucasian. His name was [Julius Goldwater](#), who had a cousin in Arizona by the name of Barry, who was to be elected United States senator from Arizona and later become a candidate for the presidency of the United States. The minute the Buddhist temple was left in the care and management of Rev. Julius Goldwater, all the Japanese ministers were taken away.

When the rest of the community was rounded up (I was five years old by then, my brother was a year younger), it was a terrorizing morning. My father got my brother and me up very early, dressed us hurriedly, and told us to wait in the living room while our parents did some last-minute packing in the bedroom. Our baby sister was in a cradle in the bedroom with them.

My brother and I were just gazing out the front window at the neighborhood. And suddenly we saw two soldiers marching up our

driveway. They carried rifles with shiny bayonets on them. They stomped up the porch and with their fists began pounding on the door. I still remember it; it felt like the whole house was trembling. My father came rushing out of the bedroom, answered the door, and, literally at gunpoint, we were ordered out of our home. We were loaded onto trucks with other Japanese American families and taken down to Little Tokyo, right in front of the ceremonial entrance of the Buddhist temple. And there, already hoards of other Japanese American families were gathered. There was a row of buses waiting for us, and we were packed into those buses and taken to Santa Anita Race Track, unloaded, herded over to the stable area, and each family was assigned a horse stable to sleep in.

From a two-bedroom home on Garnett Street in Los Angeles, my parents had to take us into that stable, still pungent with a stench of fresh manure. For my parents, it was a degrading, humiliating, painful experience. But the 5-year-old me thought it was fun to sleep where the horses sleep. I had a whole different perspective. The same experience, but parallel experiences. We were there for a few months while the camps were being built.

And we were taken to the swamps of Arkansas. And for me, that was an amazing adventure. I'm a Southern California kid. I'm used to palm trees and trees growing in our yard or alongside the street. But there in Arkansas, beyond the barbed wire fence and a part of the camp itself was a bayou, pools of water that trees grew up out of and their roots snaked in and out of the water. I'd never seen anything like that. And along the edges of the bayou, there were black wiggly fish swimming that I could catch by scooping them up with my hands and putting them in jar. But the magical thing about these black wiggly fishes, they grew bumps and then legs. Fish that grow legs! And then one morning they had escaped from my jar by climbing their way out. Amazing! So those are my memories.

For my parents, it was an anguishing, horrible experience to take their children behind those barbed wire fences. And I do remember those barbed wire fences still today. There were tall sentry towers with machine guns pointed at us. I remember at

night when I made the night runs to the latrine, searchlights followed me. My parents hated it, especially my mother. But for me, I thought it was nice that they lit the way for me to pee. Two different perspectives on that.

I went to school in a black tarpaper barrack, and every morning the school day began with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I could see the barbed wire fence and the sentry tower right outside my schoolhouse window as I recited the words “with liberty and justice for all.”

[The loyalty questionnaire](#) came a year later, because the government realized that there’s a wartime manpower shortage. And here are these young people that they could have had serve—in fact, many had rushed to the recruitment centers after the bombing of Pearl Harbor to volunteer to serve in the military. But they were in prison as enemy aliens. How to justify drafting people out of a barbed wire concentration camp for service in the U.S. military? Again, another irrational thing.

The questionnaire was very sloppily put together. There were two questions that made no sense at all. Question 27 asked, “Will you bear arms to defend the United States of America?” This being asked of my parents who were Americans. My mother was born in Sacramento. My father was a San Franciscan. They were being asked to abandon their children and bear arms to defend the nation that’s imprisoning their children. Outrageous!

The next question, 28, asked another key question to which they expected a “yes” answer. Two ideas in one sentence. It asked, “Will you swear your loyalty to the United States of America and forswear your loyalty to the Emperor of Japan?” The emperor of Japan? We had no such allegiance. The government assumed that we had an inborn pre-existing racial loyalty to the emperor, which was insulting. So if you should answer “no”—meaning, I don’t have a loyalty to the emperor to forswear—that “no” applied to the first part of the very same sentence. If you answered “yes”—meaning I do swear my loyalty to the United States—then that “yes” applied to the second part, meaning you were confessing that you did have a loyalty to the emperor and now you’re prepared to forswear that.

It's that kind of outrage that my parents had to endure.

The war ended. We came back to Los Angeles, but it was the immediate post-war years. Finding housing was absolutely impossible. We lived on Skid Row for about a month or two, and then we moved into an all-Mexican American neighborhood. We were the only Asian family, much less Japanese American family, there. I had friends with nicknames like Pelon, Latta, Chichi, and they became very good friends, and I came to love the Mexican American culture and Mexican food, especially. And I learned to speak Spanish. I speak Spanish because of that time in our lives when we lived in East L.A. But our heart was still in Little Tokyo. My mother took me shopping down to Little Tokyo.

I should explain to you what happened to the Buddhist temple during the war. Rev. Goldwater was in charge of the temple, but everyone had been forcibly removed. Little Tokyo became a ghost town. But it wasn't a ghost town for very long because the war plants needed labor. Wave after wave of African Americans from the South came in and they filled the vacancy in Little Tokyo. And during that time, Little Tokyo was referred to as Bronzeville and the shops became African American shops. Restaurants served Creole food and there were nightclubs there on First Street. One was legendary, became the Finale Club where good musicians, artists like Miles Davis and Charlie Yardbird Parker played. It became an African American neighborhood.

Southern African Americans are religious people. They're Baptist and they needed a place to worship every Sunday. They approached Rev. Goldwater and asked if they might use the sanctuary of this Buddhist temple. Rev. Goldwater was a very generous and hospitable man, and he opened up the ceremonial doors of this Buddhist temple to the African American Baptists. So during the war, this Buddhist temple rocked with the hand-clapping, foot-stomping hallelujahs of Southern Baptist religious services. So this building has both a multiracial and multireligious history.

When the Japanese American community returned, then it became Little Tokyo again, But the customer base was a little different. It was Japanese American, but with a sprinkling of African Americans who had developed a taste for Japanese food. The

annual festivals that were held in Little Tokyo were reinstated, where the Boy Scout drum and bugle corps marched, and the queen of the festival rode on a float wearing a Japanese kimono. And the most spectacular part of it was, hundreds of dancers in kimonos did the classic folk dances of Japan. But after the war, we had a sprinkling of African Americans in Japanese kimonos joining in on the folk dances. I remember one very tall and very portly African American man who danced with such grace and such elegance, made the turns so gracefully, we became fans of his at every festival. Little Tokyo was back, but with a different color, a sprinkling of colors. And the Buddhist temple was, again, a Buddhist temple.

SAFEGUARDING LITTLE TOKYO

But in the 1960s, another threat emerged. Los Angeles was a growing city. The population was growing, businesses were growing. The civic center needed to expand and Little Tokyo was right next to it; we shared a border. The city needed to grow and wanted to redevelop Little Tokyo. This time, there was a sense of community within the Japanese American community. We organized, but nevertheless, the city was determined to take over land and they bought from the two congregations the Christian Union Church on the west side of our block and the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple on the east side. The Union Church built a new, very contemporary building two blocks to the south, and the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple congregation built their new temple—an even grander and more completely authentic Japanese Buddhist temple—one block to the east.

These two religious centers, the church and the temple, were vacant. There were all these businesses, but the Caucasian business owners resisted. They didn't want to sell and they joined with the Japanese American community, together with the Los Angeles Conservancy. They recognized the value of this community, not just the two religious buildings, but the texture of the street and the history of the street. And they joined with us.

We had to sacrifice one block to the west of San Pedro, across from Union Church. And that's where the [new police headquarters](#)

was built. The rest of Little Tokyo was going to be rebuilt, but we needed low-income housing for the senior citizens. We insisted that that be the first building to go up. My father served on the board of that building. And so we lost one block, but with the help of the Los Angeles Conservancy, that central block—First Street between Central and San Pedro—became a historic district.

But the Buddhist temple was empty, as was Union Church, and it was getting shabbier. Pigeon droppings started to cover the ceremonial canopy. Homeless people started to sleep in front of the ceremonial entrance. Little Tokyo was getting shabby. What was going to happen? But because the community was united, we were able to compromise with the city and save that block; the north side of the First Street still exists as it originally was when Little Tokyo was founded. There are contemporary buildings in Little Tokyo now that are hotels and office buildings, but the history is still there.

Far East Building, Little Tokyo.

PHOTO CREDIT: MELITA JURESA-MCDONALD



JAPANESE AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

By this time, I was an activist in the community, and also a lover of classic architecture, and I recognized the importance of the Buddhist temple. The leader of the group that came up with the idea of building a [museum](#) was the president of the savings and loan association, Bruce Kaji. Their office was on the south side of First Street. He asked me to serve on the board with him. We initially got a warehouse on Third Street where the artifacts that we had collected were stored. And we engaged with the city, which owned the Buddhist temple, and we agreed on a 99-year lease for a dollar. We would restore and adaptively reuse this Buddhist temple, so that the building would be honored, but the use of the building would be a museum.

The sanctuary interior was all classic; there was no Art Deco there. There were other Art Deco elements in the social hall and the stairway, but the sanctuary was a real treasure and it is as it originally was. The only change was the floor was raked theater style, so we leveled the floor off. We did not touch the altar area at all. And that became our first building.

The grand opening of our museum was to be held outdoors. The stage was to be under the ceremonial canopy. And we had the city close off Central Avenue, and folding chairs were spread out on Central Avenue and on a wide parking lot across the street. The opening was on April 29, 1992. It was a day that we all eagerly looked forward to.

But on that date, when we looked to the southern horizon, black clouds were churning up from the south, about a half a dozen columns of clouds. That was the day when the judgment came down on the Rodney King beating. The judgment on the four policemen was acquittal. When Rodney King was arrested for speeding, he was tasered and viciously beaten and stomped on. And that was captured by a man who had a camera across the street from where the beating was going on. It was a very controversial trial. And on that morning of April 29, 1992, when that verdict came down, there was a riot, and it continued for five days after that.

It underscored for us why it is so important that we build this museum. The mission of the Japanese American National Museum—it's a shameful history that we have and that's why we need to know our history fully. Like the slave history, where human beings became chattel, and then the war that was fought to emancipate them, and yet they were not fully emancipated, and then the Jim Crow period when lynchings were rampant.

Tim Whalen: This conversation makes it so clear that place and story go together, that they're completely linked and we need everyone's voice to tell it.

George Takei: That's what makes the story important and the preservation of the Buddhist temple important: as a tool for education, to promote the understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience. The injustice that we suffered came from that same source: the injustice, the prejudice against people who are different. And certainly the African Americans have a long, long history of that. We were galvanized by that symbolic date that our museum first opened its doors.

But we were determined to make this museum even bigger, because we had a big story to tell. And we continued the fundraising and we bought the parking lot across the street and got the city to close off Central Avenue so that we could have a plaza to tie the two buildings together. And we built a third building because we organize symposia, lectures, debates, and other events like that. And we were addressing the ideals of our democracy. We called the forum-shaped theater "The Democracy Forum."

In fact, Brad and I were the first to get a marriage license from the state of California when the California Supreme Court ruled for marriage equality in 2008. And we decided to get married in the Democracy Forum, because it was democracy that made our marriage possible. And we love the idea of diversity. I'd worked on *Star Trek*, and some of my *Star Trek* colleagues become good, dear friends. And so our best man was Walter Koenig, who played Chekhov, who is Jewish. So we had a Jewish Caucasian as our best man. And for our matron of honor, we asked Nichelle Nichols,

an African American. But Nichelle was rather picky. She said, “I am not a matron. If Walter can be the best man, why can’t I be the best lady?” We said, “Of course you are.” And so she became our best lady. As our guests arrived, we had a koto player—koto is a classic, horizontal Japanese harp—and we had this beautiful lady in a silk kimono playing the koto, a calming, lovely tune. For our officiant, the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist temple had on its ministerial staff a Mexican American who had become a Buddhist minister. We had a white male best man and an African American best lady, a Mexican American Buddhist minister to officiate. And when the ceremony ended, Brad is of German and English-Scottish ancestry, so we had a Scottish bagpiper at the entrance who led the wedding party across the plaza to the great hall of the museum. And we had our wedding banquet there.

This Buddhist temple has gone through many, many changes, but the history behind it and the architecture which makes it singular—the combination of Art Deco, Egyptian, and classic Japanese Buddhist temple—is something that we are very proud of. I call it an American Buddhist temple building. We say the temple is the largest artifact in our historic collection, and we refer to it as the historic building.

SHARING STORIES, BUILDING COMMUNITY

Tim Whalen: What you’re exposing is that these buildings don’t mean anything without the stories behind them. And it’s something the preservation community has not always been in the forefront of. It’s “stop the bulldozer, save the building” and then on to “stop the next bulldozer.” And we’re learning to be better storytellers. And most importantly, we’re working hard, I think, to tell a much fuller American story. I wonder if you have thoughts for the preservation community nationally about how to do that better, who to engage. We can’t always have people of national stature helping us do it. So how do we do that?

George Takei: Well I do think that you need a team or a community, as we have in Little Tokyo. The community is built on a common, shared history. And we educate. We tell the story to the

community about what these buildings mean and what we've experienced in the buildings. When it was a Buddhist temple, I've gone to weddings and funerals, and the social halls had talent shows. We share these experiences, and we tell them, "This is what makes this building unique. It's our building and we have a story to tell." We go on educational campaigns to build a base of support.

Then when there are challenges, as when redevelopment came down on Little Tokyo and we lost to the city the two most significant buildings—the Neoclassical church building and the Buddhist temple—we explain that they're not just temples, they are symbolic buildings. And particularly, the Buddhist temple has a multiracial story. We had a Caucasian Buddhist minister when our community was most challenged, when we had to be evacuated, who maintained and managed that building. It also became an African American place of worship. That gives it another dimension of uniqueness—people oppressed who came to Los Angeles seeking opportunities, and they found their opportunity, interestingly enough, in a Japanese Buddhist temple. And that added that much deeper American significance to this building.

When marriage equality came down, Brad and I could add another dimension to the museum complex. We got married in the Democracy Forum. It's a place that is a symbol of democracy, our form of government, a government that cherishes the ideal of rule of law, of due process, of equal justice, which we were deprived of by our own country.

Our resilience and our determination to continue to build a community give us that relevance. Resilience and relevance. It's an American building. We are struggling with America's struggle to realize its ideals, to make this country "a more perfect union." We're not perfect, but the ideals are shining ideas, and to give it meaning and relevance, we have to live it, and we live it by preserving these buildings that have those lessons and reminders for us.

Tim Whalen: That's so inspiring. Thank you. Just going back to the stories, I should congratulate you on receiving the American Book Award for your graphic novel entitled *[They Called Us Enemy](#)*. Your whole family story and the course of your life is there, and it was really powerful for me to see it.

George Takei: Thank you. It just got translated into Japanese. It has also been translated into German. For me, that was important because of their history, to let them know that it's not just Germans who did that, that we're all fallible human beings and America is not without fallibility. And it's also in Spanish and Portuguese. There's a huge Spanish-speaking community in the United States, but also there's a huge Japanese Brazilian community, even larger than in the United States. The largest Japanese diaspora community is in Brazil. We've sold a lot of books to the Portuguese-speaking Japanese Brazilians.

Tim Whalen: You talked about creative problem-solving, and that leads us to look to the future a bit. I realized that *Star Trek* aired its first episode in 1966, so that's now more than 50 years ago (and in historic preservation terms, at the age of 50, it would now be eligible to become a national historic landmark). But its futuristic story remains iconic and uplifting and inspiring. Do you have any parting words for us about the future of saving places, and what you think this movement and this community of people should be focusing on as we go forward and try to tell a more complete American story?

George Takei: Well, we're talking about preservation, but I have a heritage of the future, having worked on *Star Trek*. And one of my heroes is the creator of *Star Trek*, Gene Roddenberry. He was an extraordinary man on so many levels. And he said the motto of the Starship Enterprise is "infinite diversity and infinite combinations." That combination of people with different backgrounds, different histories, different experiences coming together and working in concert. And so I'm going to steal from Gene Roddenberry and take that "infinite diversity in infinite combinations" to add "working in concert as a team moves society forward."

Tim Whalen: Thank you. I can't improve on that. I don't think anyone can. I'm so grateful for your time today and thank you for bringing the preservation community along and inspiring us. I look forward to reading more about you and the stories you bring to all of us here in this country. Thank you, George, for being with us.

George Takei: Well, thank you very much, and do come and visit the Japanese American National Museum and the Buddhist temple, which we call the largest and most interesting artifact in our collection. **FJ**

With a career spanning five decades, GEORGE TAKEI is an actor and one of the country's leading figures in the fight for social justice, LGBTQ rights, and marriage equality. He has been involved with the Japanese American National Museum since its founding over thirty years ago. TIM WHALEN serves on the board of directors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the John E. and Louise Bryson Director of the Getty Conservation Institute.



FORUM JOURNAL

Tule Lake: Learning from Places of Exception in a Climate of Fear by Cathlin Goulding



RESOURCE

Preserving the Sites and Telling the Story of Japanese American Internment



TAKEAWAY

Excavating History: A Conversation with Bill Watanabe and Marjorie Akin



RESOURCE

Tadaima! Lessons From a Community Virtual Pilgrimage