BEGINNINGS OF JAPANTOWN IN THE WESTERN ADDITION

Why the Western Addition?

In the late 1890s, tracts of Victorian homes sprung up in the Western Addition—the City’s newest neighborhood. A new streetcar line served the burgeoning Fillmore Street business district. Most residents were white and Christian, but they were joined by African Americans, Jews, and Asians, barred from other parts of the City by racially restrictive covenants.

After the Great Quake and Fire of 1906 destroyed San Francisco’s downtown and civic center, businesses and government offices temporarily relocated to the Fillmore. The Western Addition served as the City’s mercantile and governmental center for a few fleeting years before reverting to its original character as a lively and diverse neighborhood.

The Japanese, however, stayed. Their settlement in the Western Addition benefited from a change in attitude among the host. Advocated most prominently by businessman and newspaper publisher Kiyosato Akioka, the goal of permanent settlement in America had supplanted the earlier disinterested ideal of working abroad in order to return to Japan with earned wealth. By 1910, the Census reported 50 Japanese-owned businesses and approximately 4,700 Japanese residents in the Western Addition.

The 1906 Earthquake and Fire

On April 18, 1906, San Francisco was wracked by a 7.9 magnitude earthquake, followed by a great fire that devastated the eastern portion of the City. The conflagration was halted at the edge of the Western Addition by dynamiting a firebreak along Van Ness Avenue. With their homes and shops in Chinatown and South of Market in ruins, Japanese immigrants joined the masses of refugees that moved westward into Golden Gate Park and the Western Addition.

Other Japanese Centers

The earthquake and fire completely destroyed Chinatown and the area South of Market Street between 5th & 7th Streets, the two primary areas of Japanese settlement prior to the Earthquake. Longstanding anti-Chinese agitation manifested itself in the formation of the Committee on the Location of Chinatown.

Abraham Beal, James Phelan and others created an official proposal to remove the Chinese from the valuable property bordering downtown and to relocate them in Hunters Point, then part of San Mateo. The effort was abandoned as the specter of losing lucrative trade with China to rival Oakland began to take form. As Chinatown was rebuilt, some Japanese businesses returned and operated until the 1940s.

The Japanese community also began to rebuild businesses in South Park, rather than in the original South of Market location. South Park was near the Southern Pacific Railroad station and the shipping docks serving Japanese companies. The area grew, serving travelers between Japan and the United States. South Park was seriously impacted by the 1928 Immigration Act which cut off new immigration from Japan. The area was dealt a further blow when Japanese shipping was moved to piers north of Market Street in 1933.

To view the entire San Francisco Japantown History Walk project log on to www.nddcreative.com/sfjhw.htm