

## **Japanese American Historical Plaza**

Dedicated on August 3, 1990, the Japanese American Historical Plaza was created to raise greater public awareness about the diversity of cultural experiences in America. The Japanese American experience is a unique story that evokes a deep appreciation of the freedoms granted to all Americans by their Bill of Rights.

The Plaza tells much of its story in bronze relief and engraved poetry. But in keeping with the Japanese tradition, the landscape itself tells a story. Walk along the south end of the stone wall toward the north, following the flow of the Willamette River, and consider the history of Japanese Americans from the early *Issei* immigrants to the new generation today. Then, walk from the bronze columns toward the river and remember the Bill of rights and the wartime incarceration that never should have happened. The Japanese American Historical Plaza was designed to speak to its visitors, affirming ideals that are among the highest of the nation.

Designed by award-winning landscape architect Robert Murase, the Plaza extends northward from the Burnside Bridge along NW Naito Parkway. Sculptures by Jim Gion mark the Western gateway to the Plaza, and twelve granite stones feature poetry by Hisako Saito, Lawson Inada, Masaki Kinoshita, and Shizue Iwatsuki.

The Oregon Nikkei Endowment conceived and guided the Japanese American Historical Plaza with help from Portland Parks & Recreation, Metropolitan Arts Commission, Portland Development Commission, and Shokookai of Portland. Generous assistance was provided by Meyer Memorial Trust, The Collins Foundation, Weyerhauser Foundation, Rose E. Tucker Charitable Trust, Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation, PacifiCorp Foundation, and Nike, Inc.

### **Where the Isai Pioneers' Voices Speak Forever**

The stones at the south end of the Plaza honor the *Issei*, the first generation of Japanese people who came to America. The *Issei* were part of a large wave of immigrants who came to America at the end of the nineteenth century. Across the Pacific they came, and settled mostly in Hawaii and the western states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

By 1904, over 2,500 Japanese people lived in Oregon. Nine out of ten were men. Railroad builders, lumberers, farmers, entrepreneurs — Japanese settlers shared in the early boom years of the state. They were pioneers.

After 1910, more women began to arrive and families settled. A first generation of Japanese children were born in American — these were the *Nisei*.

Sweeping revisions of U.S. immigration quotas in 1924 brought an abrupt end to many of the immigration patterns that had developed since the 1890s, especially among the people of Eastern

Europe and the Far East. The door to Japanese people who wanted to immigrate to America was all but closed.

### **In Spite of the Time When All Seemed Lost**

During the spring and summer of 1942, over 110,000 people of Japanese descent from nearly all parts of California, Oregon, and Washington, were ordered to leave their homes, uproot their lives, and submit to imprisonment — without a specific charge, and without a trial.

At the Japanese American Historical Plaza, this time of tragedy and loss is remembered at the break in the stone wall, behind the boulders at the center of the plaza.

### **All Was Not Lost But It Was a Long Time**

Never before during a state of war had a people ethnically related to a military opponent of the United States been singled out from all other people in the nation and deprived of their rightful protections under the Constitution.

Large boulders at the center of the Japanese American Historical Plaza recall the ten camps where most Japanese Americans were held from three to four years.

Many Japanese Americans spent the war years serving in the military. While their families were regarded as "enemy aliens," over 33,000 Nisei served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Six thousand Japanese Americans served in the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. In North Africa, Italy, and France, the all-Nisei 100th Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team faced some of the most bitter combat of the European campaigns. The most decorated unit for its size and length of service in U.S. history, they received over 18,000 individual decorations for bravery and sacrifice in service to their country.

### **Until We Rebuilt Another Home**

The years since World War II have been a time of recovery and rebuilding, during which the joint efforts of many people have removed the discriminatory laws and many of the social barriers that were imposed against Japanese immigrants. During that time, Japanese Americans have made important contributions to every field of human endeavor, including the arts, science, political leadership, education, business, and military service.

Still, the struggles of past years cannot be swept aside. Although the period of forced removal and incarceration is painful to remember, a growing number of Americans have come forward to ensure that important lessons learned from the past are not forgotten, and that the mistakes that weakened the Constitution and the entire nation are not repeated.