

American River Conservancy Acquires First Japanese Colony Site

Coloma, California - On November 1, 2010, the American River Conservancy (ARC) purchased the 272 acre Gold Hill Ranch, site of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony, a mile south of Coloma and the Marshall Gold State Historic Park. This ranch is an interesting mosaic of springs, streams, wetlands, blue and live oak forest, sweeping vistas and prime agricultural soil. Ranch ponds and the small lake is a draw for wildlife, particularly migratory waterfowl during the winter and early spring.

Many international organizations have joined this effort to acquire this historic colony site first settled by Japanese colonists from Aizu Wakamatsu (Fukushima Prefecture) in July 1869. To the best of our knowledge the Wakamatsu Colony site: is the first Japanese colony in North America; contains the gravesite of Okei Ito, the first Japanese woman buried on American soil; is the birthplace of the first naturalized Japanese-American; and is the only settlement established by samurai outside of Japan. "America derives its strength and its character from the diversity of its people", states ARC Director Alan Ehrgott. "The Wakamatsu Colonists were the last of the Tokugawa samurai defeated in the Boshin civil war of 1868-69. They also became the first, the vanguard of Japanese emigrants to arrive in California as skilled workers that advanced American agriculture, medicine, engineering, and other fields. The Wakamatsu Colony story is every bit as compelling as the story of Jamestown or the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock."

In establishing this colony in western El Dorado County (40 miles east of Sacramento) the Wakamatsu Colonists were the first to introduce traditional Japanese horticulture to California including: silk worm farming, the cultivation of tea, rice, citrus, peaches and other stone fruit varieties, paper and oil plants and bamboo products.

The ranch was appraised on June 1, 2010 at \$3,288,000, a value that was approved by both the State Department of General Services and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In order to close escrow, ARC secured \$1.5 million in competitive grant funding from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, \$504,000 in private donations and bridge loans in the amount of \$1,284,000 from New Resource Bank and the Veerkamp family. ARC must pay off these two bridge loans within two years (Oct. 2012).

The National Park Service recently placed the Wakamatsu Colony site on the National Register of Historic Places at a level of "National Significance." Bills authored by 4th Congressional District Representative Tom McClintock and U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer have been introduced in the House and Senate respectively that would aid in the management of the ranch as a public park. "Seeing the two parties working together in this manner makes me proud to be an American," remarked Fred Kochi, President of the Gold Hill Wakamatsu Colony Foundation Board.

The vision of ARC and its project partners is to create a public park at the Wakamatsu Colony site that protects Okei's gravesite, establishes a memorial garden, creates trails and a house museum within the historic farmhouse, and develops a demonstration and production farm that displays the valuable contributions that Japanese Americans have made to California agriculture and to the United States as a nation of diverse peoples.

In June of 1869, the Wakamatsu Colonists purchased approximately 200 acres, a farmhouse and farm outbuildings from Charles Graner who settled the Gold Hill Ranch in 1856. Once on the Colony site, the colonists quickly went to work, planting mulberry trees, tea plants and other crops. The Wakamatsu colonists successfully displayed silk cocoons, tea and oil plants at the 1869 California State Agricultural Fair in Sacramento and at the 1870 Horticultural Fair in San Francisco.

Over the past 137 years, the Veerkamp family has been principally responsible for maintaining the rural agricultural nature of the property and preserving the heritage and landscape of the Wakamatsu Colony. In late 2007, the Veerkamp family heirs came to the American River Conservancy and asked help in accomplishing three main tasks: (1) restore the Graner-Wakamatsu-Veerkamp farmhouse; (2) provide public access and interpret the cultural history of the Gold Hill Ranch; and, (3) purchase the Gold Hill Ranch at an appraised, fair market value. With the recent purchase of the 272 acre ranch and the near-completion of the Phase #1 restoration of the historic farmhouse, the American River Conservancy is well on its way to fulfilling all three tasks.

Recently, Mary Jean Eisenhower, the President of People to People International, summarized the benefits of the project, "The tale of a small group of Japanese immigrants who traveled to California and the Veerkamp family who befriended them is a wonderful example of People to People International in action. When my grandfather [Dwight D. Eisenhower] founded People to People, he said, ' I have long believed, as have many before me, that peaceful relations between nations requires understanding and mutual respect between individuals.' What better example of this than people from such diverse backgrounds working together through the shared bond of agriculture? The historical value of their partnership is immeasurable and is certainly a testament to the regional connection between the people of California and Japan."

Prominent partners include: the City of Aizu Wakamatsu, Japan; the Japanese American Citizens League; the Japanese American Historical Society; the California Rice Commission, the Placer Land Trust, the Consul General of Japan, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA); the California Cultural and Historical Endowment; the California Office of Historic Preservation; The El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce; People to People International and the Gold Hill Wakamatsu Colony Foundation.

The American River Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the work of Senator Barbara Boxer and Congressman Tom McClintock in their introduction of the Gold Hill Wakamatsu Colony Preservation Act into the Senate and House of the U.S. Congress. Letters of support for these two bills, which allow the Department of Interior to accept title and assist in the management of this historic site should be addressed to :

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman and the Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Senate Dirksen Office Building, Room 304, Washington, D.C. 20510.

The Honorable Nick Rahall, the Honorable Doc Hastings, House Natural Resources Committee, 1324 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.

ARC is gratefully accepting donations to help pay off the bridge loan required to protect this site indefinitely. If you would like to help, please go to www.arconservancy.org to make a tax-deductible donation.

Photos, site tours, and interview opportunities are available upon request

American River Conservancy

348 Highway 49

P.O. Box 562

Coloma, CA 95613

530-621-1224 or 530-651-3027

Website: www.arconservancy.org

Contact Person: Noël Robinson, *Director of Marketing and Development*

Email: noel@arconservancy.org