

2019 GOVERNOR'S HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARDS

Manzanar Community Archeology Program



Manzanar was one of ten "Relocation Centers" established in remote areas of the United States during World War II. Under the authority of a simple presidential executive order, almost 120,000 Japanese Americans were "evacuated" from the West Coast and incarcerated. Over 10,000 Japanese Americans, most from southern California, were incarcerated at Manzanar, in Owens Valley.

At the end of the war when the camps closed, guard towers were dismantled and the buildings were sold at auction and removed, leaving what appeared to be empty desert. Even people who lived near the former camps were not aware of them. But inspired by the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, some of the former incarcerated began a grass-roots effort to have the injustice acknowledged and recognized. Congress declared the former Manzanar Relocation Center a National Historic Site (NHS) in 1992, to help educate the American public about how, under the guise of a national crisis, civil rights can be wrongfully abrogated.

Begun in 2003, Manzanar's Community Archeology Program provides a unique platform for volunteers to learn about the personal and political consequences of racism, within a historical context. Through archeology and historic preservation projects, volunteers are discovering, documenting, and restoring landscape features that tell the stories of Manzanar to the site's visitors, who number over 100,000 per year. That story is not just about mass incarceration: it is also about human resilience. The program has uncovered not just building foundations and communal latrine slabs, but also gardens and basketball courts. It has uncovered as well, traces of the Paiute, ranchers, and farmers who lived at the site long before the Manzanar camp.

The Park Service worked with former incarcerated, activists, scholars, and local communities on how the history of Manzanar should be presented to visitors, and what themes to stress. Through public meetings, dozens of former incarcerated

recommended the site include reconstructed barracks, the security fence, and a guard tower to show the hardships of the camp. Local residents and tribal groups wanted their stories told as well, so some of the volunteer projects focus on the administration area and on the pre-World-War-II sites within the NHS. The Program also uncovers evidence of human resilience. Former incarcerated requested that the National Park Service find and restore the Japanese gardens they, or their parents and grandparents, built while imprisoned. Volunteers have removed brush and carefully excavated decades of accumulated silts and sands to uncover dozens of gardens, complete with ponds, stream courses, waterfalls, and stepping-stones.

Volunteers for the Manzanar Community Archeology Program come from as close as the nearby towns to as far away as Japan; volunteers have ranged in age from 9 to over 90, and represent diverse socio-economic classes and ethnicities. At town-era and WWII-era sites, three generations of Japanese Americans have worked alongside tribal members, inner-city youth, and local residents, sharing stories and perspectives. The program has resulted in several Park Service reports, and two program participants, who had lived at the Relocation Center as teenagers, later published their memoirs. The Manzanar Community Archeology Program benefits the public and the greater heritage of California by broadening awareness of an important, and perhaps pivotal, episode in the state's past.