

July 10, 2021

Dear Mayor Ted Wheeler,  
Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty,  
Commissioner Carmen Rubio,  
Commissioner Mingus Mapps,  
and Commissioner Dan Ryan:

As a coalition of Japanese American-led organizations, we urge you to deny the request for a demolition permit for the building currently known as the Blanchet House.

The Blanchet House building holds significant historical importance for our community. It is one of the few structures left of Portland's Nihonmachi or Japantown, a 10-12 block area that now makes up the majority of Old Town. Nihonmachi was once a large and vibrant community that existed until its residents were forcibly removed and unjustly incarcerated for no other reason than fear and racial prejudice.

Portland's New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District is the only cultural heritage district in the state dedicated to AAPI cultural history. Very few buildings remain that truly hold the history of Nihonmachi in their bones. If the proposed demolition were to take place, it would contribute to the further erasure of our community's history, while setting a dangerous precedent for the future demolition of other buildings of historical and cultural significance.

Before the building became the Blanchet House, it was known as the Yamaguchi Hotel and was home to a Japanese midwife. In reality, it is one of the few, if not the only known building in Oregon that is specifically identified to hold the history of Japanese women. Hidden history within hidden history. This building is a unique asset and is the only building in the state that can tell its singular story.

In Japan, midwives or sanba, were certified and licensed by the government to demonstrate that Japan had educated women and adopted western scientific medicine. They were highly respected in Japan and held in high regard within the Japanese American community here. They served as cultural brokers, providing an important link for Japanese immigrant women between their old and new cultures. There are stories of the midwife traveling as far as Hood River to serve the community. And although they were prohibited from assisting with the delivery of babies in the American concentration camps, they provided emotional support and both pre-and postnatal care for women.

While many history books and lessons would like us to believe that the Japanese American experience in Oregon began with incarceration or “internment”, we believe that the Yamaguchi hotel is of significant importance because it helps tell a different story. It is a story that centers the lives and contributions of Japanese women, and is a story that begins from a place of strength, resilience, and care.

For these reasons, we urge you to vote against the demolition of the Blanchet House and to determine a way forward that protects and preserves this important cultural site for generations to come.



JAPANESE ANCESTRAL SOCIETY  
OF PORTLAND

GRESHAM-TROUTDALE  
JAPANESE AMERICAN  
CITIZENS LEAGUE



HENJYOJI SHINGON  
BUDDHIST TEMPLE



Epworth United  
Methodist Church

VELEDA  
CLUB

HIROSHIMA  
CLUB

