



**MARCH 4, 2022 / FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

## **TWO 1910 STRUCTURES LOST TO FIRE, DEMOLITION AT ENDANGERED HISTORIC WINTERSBURG IN HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIFORNIA**

[Huntington Beach, California]—Shortly before 9 am, Friday, February 25, there was notification of a fire at endangered National Treasure Historic Wintersburg, located at Warner Avenue and Nichols Lane in Huntington Beach, California. Community preservationists have worked since 2012 to save and preserve this property, which holds over a century of nationally significant Japanese American history.

A fire of unknown origin destroyed the 112-year-old manse (parsonage) of the 1910 Wintersburg Japanese Mission. The nearby 1910 Wintersburg Japanese Mission was lost to demolition a few hours after the fire. Both historic structures were demolished within a few hours of the fire before an arson investigation was completed. The investigation is ongoing per the City of Huntington Beach.

The Historic Wintersburg property was named one of America's Most Endangered Historic Places in 2014 and designated a National Treasure in 2015 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Preserve Orange County named Historic Wintersburg one of Orange County's Most Endangered Historic Places in 2017. In recent years beginning in early 2016, Historic Wintersburg was targeted with anti-Asian hate, social media harassment and threats, prompting police reports. (Reference: <https://rafu.com/2021/04/og-san-just-below-the-surface/>)

All six historic structures at Historic Wintersburg are listed in the City of Huntington Beach General Plan historic and cultural element as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, which automatically places Historic Wintersburg on the State of California list of historic and cultural resources.

With local and national partners, the Historic Wintersburg community preservation group has engaged since 2012 Rainbow Disposal and in 2014 new owner Republic Services in discussions to purchase the property for historic preservation purposes. Republic Services has publicly stated to the media they would work with the community effort on the sale for historic preservation purposes but have disengaged the past two years.

Preservationists raised \$30,000 in funding to conduct an outside review in 2015 by a multi-party panel of historic preservationists, city planners and economic/business professionals—including participation by Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services—to demonstrate adaptive re-use options to save the property and prevent its demolition and development. Months after that analysis, Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services reached legal settlement with the Ocean View School District which legally encumbered the property in perpetuity, changing the circumstances and restricting development.

As a result of a 2016 legal settlement agreement between the Ocean View School District—which has a preschool and elementary school adjacent to Historic Wintersburg—and Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services, there are land use encumbrances on the Historic Wintersburg property that prevent its development and safeguard the property for historic preservation. City of Huntington Beach planning requirements also impose restrictions that hinder development. The Ocean View School District owns land adjacent to the Historic Wintersburg property, including the entirety of Belsito Street to the south and land and/or right-of-way on adjoining and nearby streets. The school district has expressed support for the full preservation of Historic Wintersburg.

Additionally, experts in appraisal of and planning for historic properties do not consider the Historic Wintersburg property developable other than as a heritage park.

Over the past decade, the community preservationists have contacted Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services repeatedly to provide more security and regular maintenance of the property, which has experienced vandalism, tagging, trespassing to steal items, and trespassing to enter the buildings for shelter. During inspections of the property, items such as cans of kerosene and Bunsen burners have been found inside buildings and brought to the attention of Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services for removal.

The community previously provided thousands of dollars' worth of tree trimming and brush removal—at no cost to Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services—to remove vegetation that put not just the six historic structures at risk, but also the adjacent homes, and the Oak View preschool and elementary school.

As recently as two weeks before the fire on February 25, Republic Services and City of Huntington Beach leaders were contacted in writing with photo documentation about vandalism and lack of security and maintenance at Historic Wintersburg. They did not respond.

The Historic Wintersburg Preservation group, and partners Preserve Orange County and Heritage Museum of Orange County, call upon Republic Services and community leaders in Huntington Beach and Orange County to take action to save and preserve this rare and significant National Treasure historic place. We are calling for a thorough arson investigation.

Individuals and organizations with the Japanese American community are calling for 1) an arson investigation, 2) the right of Japanese Americans to collect ash and remains or artifacts from the two buildings to honor the heritage and history of a sacred site, and 3) action by the City of Huntington Beach to bring Rainbow Environmental Services/Republic Services back to the table in genuine negotiations to allow the purchase of the property by preservationists and museum professionals partnered with Historic Wintersburg for the purpose of historic preservation as a heritage park.

A partial list of those calling for the actions above include:

- Japanese American National Museum (Los Angeles)
- Japanese American Citizens League (Washington, DC)
- Japanese American Confinement Sites Consortium (national)
- Japanese American Memorial Pilgrimages (national)
- 50 Objects/50 Stories of the American Japanese Incarceration (national)
- Poston Community Alliance (Poston, Arizona, confinement site)
- Little Tokyo Historical Society (Los Angeles)
- Heart Mountain Foundation (Wyoming confinement site)
- Friends of Minidoka (Idaho confinement site)
- Minidoka Pilgrimage (Idaho confinement site)
- Historical Museum at Fort Missoula (Montana)
- South East Los Angeles North Orange County (SELANOCO) chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (California)

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## RESOURCES

Ongoing Updates\* / More information about the history of Historic Wintersburg:

**National Treasure**, National Trust for Historic Preservation: <https://savingplaces.org/places/historic-wintersburg#.YhIY-ZalaM9>

**America's Most Endangered Historic Places**, National Trust for Historic Preservation:

<https://savingplaces.org/collections/11-most-endangered-2014#.YhZPZalaM9>

**Preserve Orange County:** <https://www.preserveorangecounty.org/most-endangered>

**Heritage Museum of Orange County:** <https://www.heritagemuseumoc.org/historic-wintersburg>

**Wikipedia:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historic\\_Wintersburg\\_in\\_Huntington\\_Beach,\\_California#Preservation\\_of\\_Historic\\_Wintersburg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historic_Wintersburg_in_Huntington_Beach,_California#Preservation_of_Historic_Wintersburg) (includes chronology of events and historical overview, authored by historians)

\***Historic Wintersburg blog:** <https://historicwintersburg.blogspot.com/> (ongoing updates)

\***Historic Wintersburg Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/HistoricWintersburginHuntingtonBeach/>  
(ongoing updates)

\***Historic Wintersburg Twitter:** @WintersburgHB (ongoing updates)