

Sacramento is home to one of nation's oldest Buddhist temples

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One of the more notable places of worship and spiritual enhancement in the Land Park area is undoubtedly the Buddhist Church of Sacramento at 2401 Riverside Blvd.

Despite this Jodo Shinshu temple's notoriety in the community, many locals are unaware of its place in history.

The Buddhist Church of Sacramento, which was founded in 1899 as Sacramento Bukkyo Seinenkai, or the Sacramento Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), is the oldest Jodo Shinshu Buddhist temple in Sacramento and the second oldest such temple in the continental United States. Hawaii holds the distinction of having established earlier Jodo Shinshu temples.

The oldest of these mainland temples is the Buddhist Church of San Francisco, which was officially established as the San Francisco YMBA on July 30, 1898.

Additionally, the Buddhist Church of Sacramento is the largest temple among the 55 temples of the Buddhist Churches of America, which is the oldest Buddhist organization in the United States.

The Buddhist Churches of America has its headquarters at 1710 Octavia St. in San Francisco, a short distance from that city's Japantown.

Despite this organization's longtime use of the word, "church," the Rev. Bob Oshita, minister of the Buddhist Church of Sacramento since 1984, said that many people are confused by the name of the organization and the names of its temples.

"It is better to refer to us as a temple," Oshita said. "The word, 'church,' is generally understood as a house of God. A number of people, including myself, have suggested that the word 'church' be changed to 'temple.' We could be called the Buddhist Temples of America or Jodo Shinshu Temples of America, or some name that represents us better."

The establishment of the Buddhist Church of Sacramento, which is also known as the Sacramento Betsuin (a designation given to larger temples), occurred with services held on Dec. 17, 1899 at 1221 3rd Street under the direction of the Reverends Shuye Sonada and Kakaruyo Nishijima.



The present temple's hondo (chapel) is shown from its balcony.

Photo by Lance Armstrong

In describing Jodo Shinshu, which is also popularly known as Shin Buddhism, Oshita said, "Shin Buddhism is a teaching to help us to understand the true nature of our humanity. It is Buddhism for those who find that they are truly incapable of enlightenment. Shin Buddhism is the largest sect of Buddhism in Japan. This school of Buddhism was founded more than 850 years ago by Shinran Shonin (1173-1263)."

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Sacramento Bukkyo Seinenkai members were extremely active in the founding

and very early administration of what soon became known as the Buddhist Church of Sacramento. This name was officially adopted on June 15, 1901.

An increase in membership led to a relocation, which officially occurred with the Aug. 15, 1900 dedication of a temple at 418 O St.

A local, 20-member cabinet at that time included executive secretary Jujiro Aihara, treasurers Hirokichi Hono and Tokuji Yoshida, and board members Kenichiro Shirayama, Mitsunosuke Ishimura and Asakusu Koutoua.

On Dec. 10, 1900, the Rev. Ryotetsu Harada, the first resident minister of the Sacramento temple, arrived in the capital city.

Three years later, a Japanese language school - predecessor to the current, nonprofit Sakura Gakuen

Japanese Language School at the Buddhist Church of Sacramento - opened at the Riverside Boulevard site.

Additionally, the Buddhist Church English School, where Japanese students studied English under the direction of Mrs. Ohara, was established a few years later.

Sacramento Betsuin has been continuously active in the celebration of its anniversaries.

In honor of the 10th anniversary, for instance, the O Street temple was renovated and classrooms were added to the structure at a total cost of \$4,000.

Providing leadership for this project were Inokichi Tsuda, board president, and the Reverends Edatsu Kudo and Yoko Ushio.

In February 1911, an East Indian Buddhist missionary, Dr. Madhinanda, arrived in Sacramento, where he resided for one year and gave lectures about Buddhism to the English-speaking public.

About the time of Madhinanda's departure, a Sunday school was formed and the missionary territory of the Buddhist Church of Sacramento was extended to other areas, including Chico, Oroville and Colusa.

On April 15, 1923, the hondo (chapel) and Japanese language school dormi-

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Temple: Progress came to a halt during WWII

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tory were destroyed in an arson fire.

Perishing in the fire were 10 of the 28 students who were residing in the dormitory.

Working through this tragedy, the Buddhist Church of Sacramento dedicated a new, two-story, brick building at the same site in May 1925. Board President Tsuda also provided leadership for this project, which had a total cost of \$30,000.

Behind this building was a separate structure that was purchased for \$5,000 in 1927 and used as a classroom building.

In celebration of the 30th anniversary of the temple's founding, a project to construct a large hall for spiritual and recreational activities of young members was initiated. The hall, which included a full-sized basketball court and a stage, was completed in 1937.

The progress of the temple and its members came to a halt during World War II, as Japanese nationals and American citizens of Japanese ancestry were relocated to internment camps following the issuance of United States Executive Order 9066.

The Sacramento Betsuin structures were then transformed into a military induction center.

Following the war, in September 1946, the buildings were returned to the Buddhist Church of Sacramento and the hall and classrooms were temporarily used as hostels for Japanese returning from their internment.

The hostel project proved to be very successful, as about 2,000 people obtained shelter at the site.

Additionally, Sacramento Betsuin briefly served as a postwar employment agency for returning Japanese.

Oshita explained that after more than a half-century at the same site, the Buddhist Church of Sacramento relocated to a new site.

"Back in the 1950s, Sacramento - because it's the state capital - underwent what they called at that time urban

renewal," Oshita said. "So, Sacramento's Japantown and Chinatown were physically redeveloped out of existence."

In July 1958, the city's redevelopment agency allocated \$200,000 for the church property and on Oct. 18 of that year, a groundbreaking ceremony was held at the present Riverside Boulevard site.

Once the structure was completed, a formal dedication, which was officiated by Bishop Shinsho Hanayama, was held on June 27-28, 1959.

Since its dedication, the Buddhist Church of Sacramento has experienced much growth.

This growth includes additional classrooms, a gymnasium and a continuous growth in membership. The present membership consists of about 1,000 families.

Furthermore, in 1999, as part of Sacramento Betsuin's 100th anniversary, the temple underwent a renovation and a columbarium was added to the grounds.

Also affiliated with the temple is Boy Scout Troop 50, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and Girl Scout Troop 569, which is presently celebrating its 20th anniversary.

Troop 50 is technically 12 years older than it acknowledges, since it was established in 1930 and was disbanded during World War II. The troop reorganized in 1962.

An even earlier formed Sacramento Betsuin-affiliated



Buddhist Church of Sacramento members and others gather in front of the old, brick temple at 418 O Street in this 1950 photograph.

Boy Scout Troop, Troop 4, was founded in 1924 and was disbanded along with the original Troop 50.

Today, many locals are familiar with the Buddhist Church of Sacramento for different reasons.

Although the church holds services every Sunday at 9:30 a.m. with Oshita and the Rev. Peter Inokoji-Kim, assistant minister, many events and activities draw people to this site.

Among these attractions are programs such as bonsai, tai chi, ballroom dance, aerobics, choir and youth basketball.

Certainly no Sacramento Betsuin attraction is better attended than the Japanese Food and Cultural Bazaar, which draws thousands of people every August. This year's bazaar will be held Aug. 11-12.

Another popular attraction at Sacramento Betsuin is the annual Obon Festival, which is a Buddhist memorial day

that is set aside for remembering and appreciating loved ones who have passed away. This year's edition of this public event, which includes food, music and dance, will be held at the temple this Saturday, July 14 at 7 p.m.

For those interested in learning more about the Buddhist Church of Sacramento and Shin Buddhism, the festival will offer an introduction to Buddhism this Saturday and Sunday at 5 p.m.

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