

HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

ETO PARK AND BROOK STREET IN SAN LUIS OBISPO



A Self-Guided Walking Tour Through a Historic Neighborhood

INTRODUCTION

The History Center of San Luis Obispo County is excited to share our very first Walking Tour Guide in hopes of encouraging community members to explore a little-known area that reveals an important part of the diverse cultural history of the City of San Luis Obispo: The Eto Park/Brook Street neighborhood.

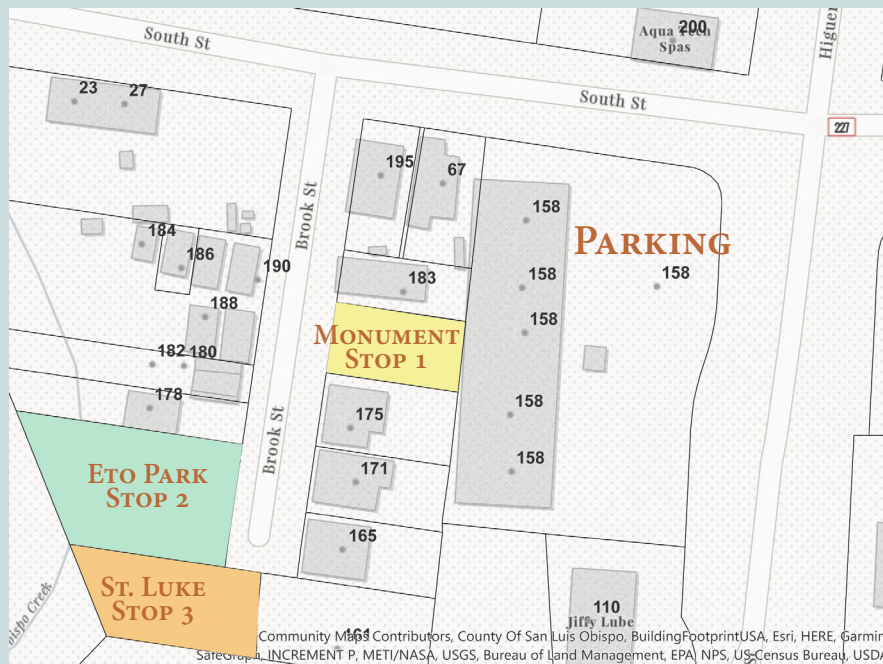
This walking tour may echo some of the conflicting emotions that were encountered by those who lived and built businesses in this confined, two-acre tract. At times, these residents surely felt tranquility, but later turmoil. Hard work and diligence were followed by confusion and despair. We are honored to share this compelling story, because

this unassuming corner of SLO Town may assist us at this critical moment when our community, and our nation, is experiencing a national reckoning in regards to racial tension and social justice.

To begin the tour, consider parking at the small strip of shops near 158 South Higuera where it's easier to find an accessible parking space, rather than on Brook Street. We encourage you to patronize the small businesses there, which include a bagel shop, a convenience store, a Mexican restaurant and more.

As you stand in this busy parking lot, try to imagine it when it was the heart of "Japantown" (see map at the end of this guide). From 1923 to 1928, a Japanese immigrant named Yoroku Watanabe leased the site

of 158 Higuera, a one-acre parcel across the street from the San Luis Obispo terminus of the narrow-gauge Pacific Coast Railway. Watanabe couldn't purchase the property due to the 1913 California Alien Land Law, but his lease from the estate of a Prussian immigrant enabled him to build a one-story wood hotel, rooming house, pool room, restaurants, commercial garage, fish market, and wholesale and retail grocery. This complex was then purchased in 1929 by a young Japanese-American citizen, Robert Fukunaga, who upgraded Watanabe's buildings and expanded the hotel to a 2-story brick structure. Japantown became the southern gateway to the city along newly-designated Highway 101 (Higuera Street).



This diminutive borough is located southwest of San Luis Obispo's Higuera Street and South Street. It highlights the fascinating legacy of two distinct cultural communities who contributed so much to our history: Japanese Americans and African Americans. Eto Park is a tranquil and picturesque garden dedicated to the memory of those Japanese Americans who developed and resided in this neighborhood, prior to their forced removal from their homes and businesses in 1941-42 after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Standing adjacent to Eto Park is Saint Luke Missionary Baptist Church, representing the heart of the African American neighborhood that evolved here in the 1940s.

Walk west on South Street and turn left into the one-block neighborhood of Brook Street. This area was developed in 1931 by Tameji Eto, a highly successful truck farmer whose descendants still reside on their 200-acre farm on the east side of Los Osos. Designated by the City as the “Nippon Tract,” to the Japanese community it was a “Nihonmachi”

That congregation would later move to a more prominent location on Broad Street, though some of their worshippers soon separated from Springfield Baptist to form St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, and ultimately returned in the 1960s to occupy that original church building.



Brook Street from the air, 1951. History Center of San Luis Obispo County.

(Japantown), a safe place for occupancy primarily (but not exclusively) by families of Japanese descent. The name “Eto Street” honored its founder, not only as a leader among his ethnic community but as the father of the local vegetable industry.

The isolation of Eto Street served as a sanctuary and an opportunity to build a modest prosperity – but only until the forced removal of all Japanese American residents and businesses in 1942 in the throes of wartime anti-Japanese hysteria. The “Nihonmachi” essentially disappeared. Even the name “Eto Street” was erased from the map, as the City Council bowed to public pressure and applied the current name of “Brook Street.”

After the war, the ownership of the businesses along Higuera Street was turned over to a variety of Black proprietors, and the now-vacant homes along Brook Street were occupied by a largely African American population. Some of these Black residents would help to build the Springfield Baptist Church at 160 Brook Street, one of the first African American churches in San Luis Obispo.



Yoruku Watanabe's store circa 1930

Let's begin our tour at the corner of South Street and Brook Street, and proceed down the east (left) side of Brook Street.

JAPANESE AMERICAN PERIOD 1920-1942

STOP #1 - 117 BROOK STREET MONUMENT

Standing in the sidewalk at 177 Brook Street is a stone pedestal about 3 feet high with a Japanese character engraved on the front. The bronze plaque there summarizes the story of the Japanese American origin of Brook Street (formerly Eto Street).

In the 1920s and 30s, this one-block neighborhood was developed by Tameji Eto and his family as a "Nihonmachi" (Japantown), who moved several buildings onto the lots he created from elsewhere in the city and also built new ones. By 1941, there were seven homes and 32 lots in the Nippon Tract. The only homes that survive today are 195 Brook Street at the corner of South Street, as well as 183 and 175. 195 Brook is a late Victorian vernacular home, and was occupied until 1942 by Misao Watanabe, Yoroku's son and business partner in the fruit and vegetable business. Misao and his wife Akiko raised four children there, Bobby Soroku, Maud Yoshi, and twins Florence Toshiko and Kathleen Satsuko.



In 1992, a half-century after the removal of the Japanese-American residents and business owners from "Japantown," the City of San Luis Obispo considered a proposal to restore the original name of "Eto Street," but this proposal was not successful.

STOP #2 - ETO PARK 170 BROOK STREET



Soon thereafter, several San Luis Obispo residents of Japanese American descent and their allies in the community persuaded the City to acquire and develop what is today "Eto Park." This lovely park, landscaped in accordance with Japanese tradition, was dedicated in 2002.



Tameji Eto

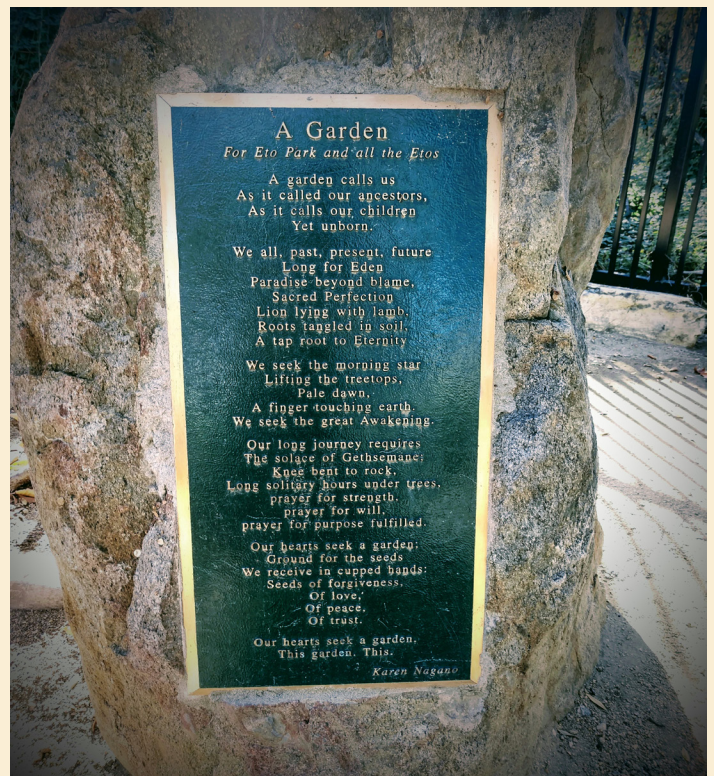


Eto Park

Kiyoshi Tanaka volunteered with Kodo Matsubara, a leading architect of Japanese gardens, and Jim Brabeck and the San Luis Obispo Rotary Club in creating Eto Park. All labor and materials were contributed and several neighbors, including the Troutner family at the southwest corner of Brook Street at South, volunteered in its development.

Stone benches and plaques mark the contributions of several Japanese-American families to this community, particularly Mr. and Mrs. Tameji Eto. A bronze plaque near San Luis Obispo Creek is emblazoned with a poem by Karen Nagano dedicated to their memory, and to the concept of the garden held in such reverence in Japanese culture.

Eto Park stands today as part of the City's proud heritage of parks, though it receives relatively few visitors. Take some time to enjoy it!



AFRICAN AMERICAN PERIOD 1945 - PRESENT

STOP #3 - 160 BROOK STREET ST. LUKE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

After the war, the ownership of the businesses along Higuera Street turned over to primarily white proprietors, and the now-vacant homes along Brook Street were occupied by a largely African-American population. In 1947, some of these Black residents acquired the present church building at 160 Brook Street from a local Methodist group, and organized Springfield Baptist Church. That church was



*Members of Springfield Baptist Church
on Brook Street, San Luis Obispo, 1947*

one of the first African American churches in San Luis Obispo. Members included several servicemen who had been trained at Camp Merriam (now Camp San Luis Obispo, home of the California National Guard) before being deployed to the Pacific Theater. They returned to San Luis Obispo after being discharged from their service in World War II. The Springfield congregation would later move to a more prominent location on Broad Street.

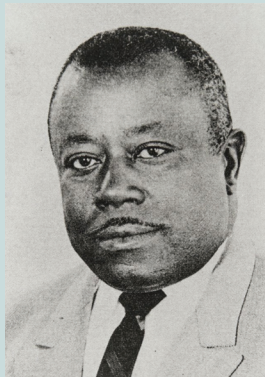


St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church

In 1958, some of their worshippers separated from Springfield to form St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, and ultimately returned in the early 1960s to occupy this original church building. Today, this church stands as the oldest predominately Black church in San Luis Obispo County, one of only two such churches in this city.

Over the decades of operation, St. Luke has called seven ministers; the founding pastor was Reverend J. C. Hawkins. Today it is under the leadership of Rev. Anthony Lynch, and continues to serve a diverse congregation. Their Clerk, Sister Linda Lynch, writes this about their future: "As time moves forward our churches are becoming integrated, which we believe pleases God, for we know He is not a God whom sees color or race – He is Love!"

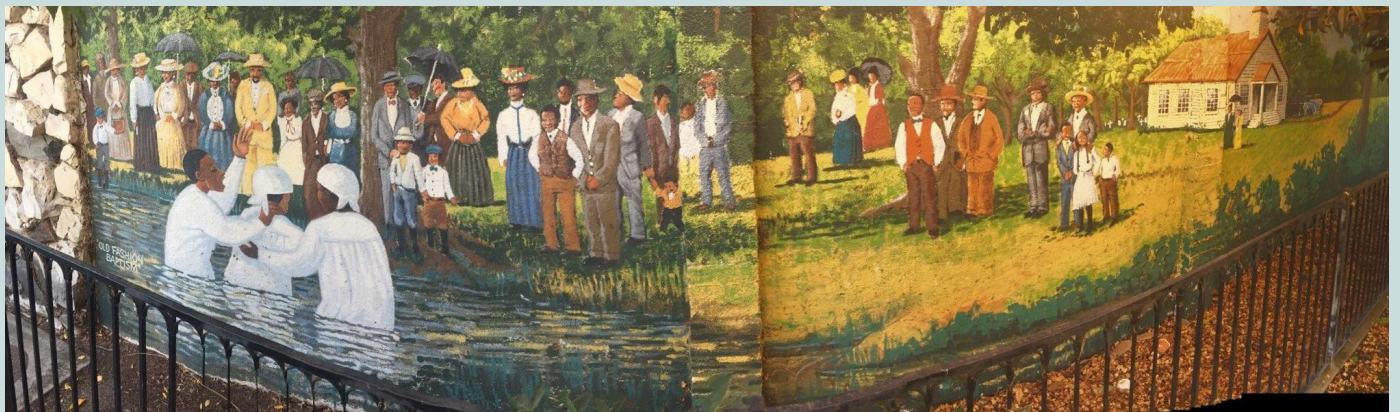
Take note, too, of the colorful mural entitled "Old-fashion Baptism." This work spans the entire north wall of the church, facing Eto Park. The artist is Rudy Raidl and dates from 2002.



Rev. J.C. Hawkins



*Cornerstone
St. Luke Missionary Baptist
Church*

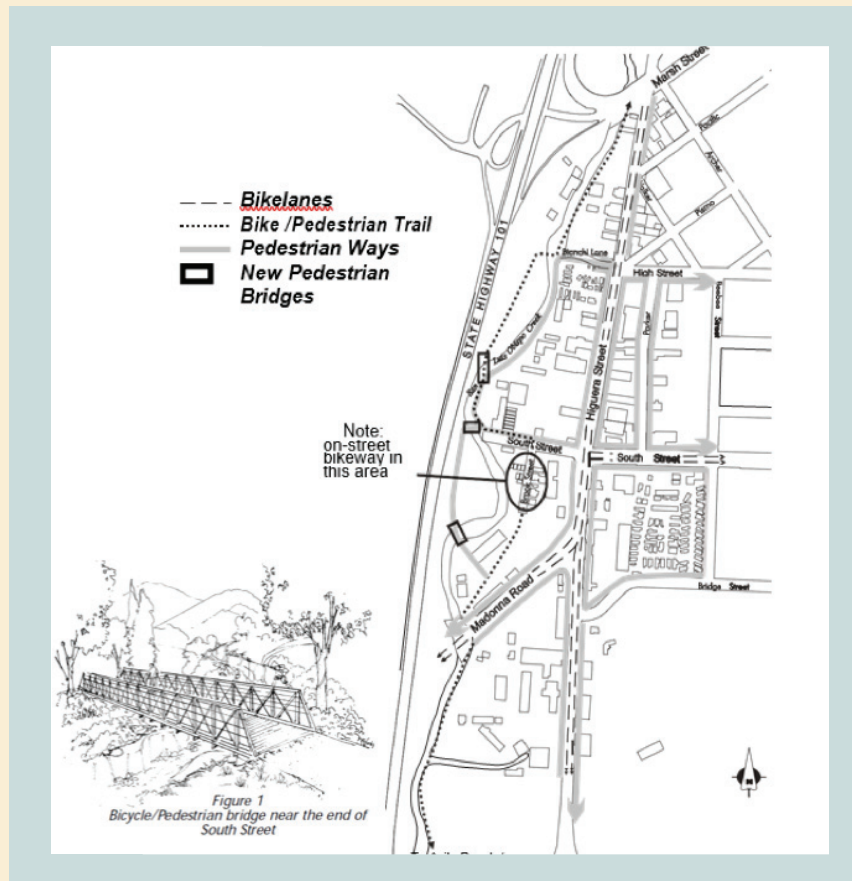


THE FUTURE OF ETO PARK/BROOK STREET

What lies ahead for this unique neighborhood that has played such an important role in providing a safe space for successive waves of Japanese American families and businesses, and later for African American veterans and their families and fellow worshippers?

The bike path would then proceed on South Street and Brook Street, and cross the St. Luke Church site to connect to a future park on the CalTrans maintenance yard to the south of the church. This plan thus calls for relocating the church building.

CalTrans has plans to move its maintenance yard from this site adjacent to the church to another property at the



In 2001, the City of San Luis Obispo adopted a plan for the larger “Mid-Higuera” district that embraces Eto Park and Brook Street, from Marsh Street on the north to Madonna Road on the South. The Mid-Higuera Enhancement Plan calls for substantial infrastructure improvements to this corridor with some important implications for Brook Street.

The Plan includes a route for the Bob Job Jones Bicycle path along San Luis Obispo Creek from the intersection of Marsh and Higuera Streets all the way south to below the CalTrans property at Madonna Road and Marsh Street. Three new pedestrian bridges would be constructed to enable cyclists to cross the creek to reach the dead-end at South Street.

south end of the City. In turn, the City has plans to convert that maintenance yard to “Gateway Park” – a facility that would serve as a staging area for the Bob Jones Bike Path.

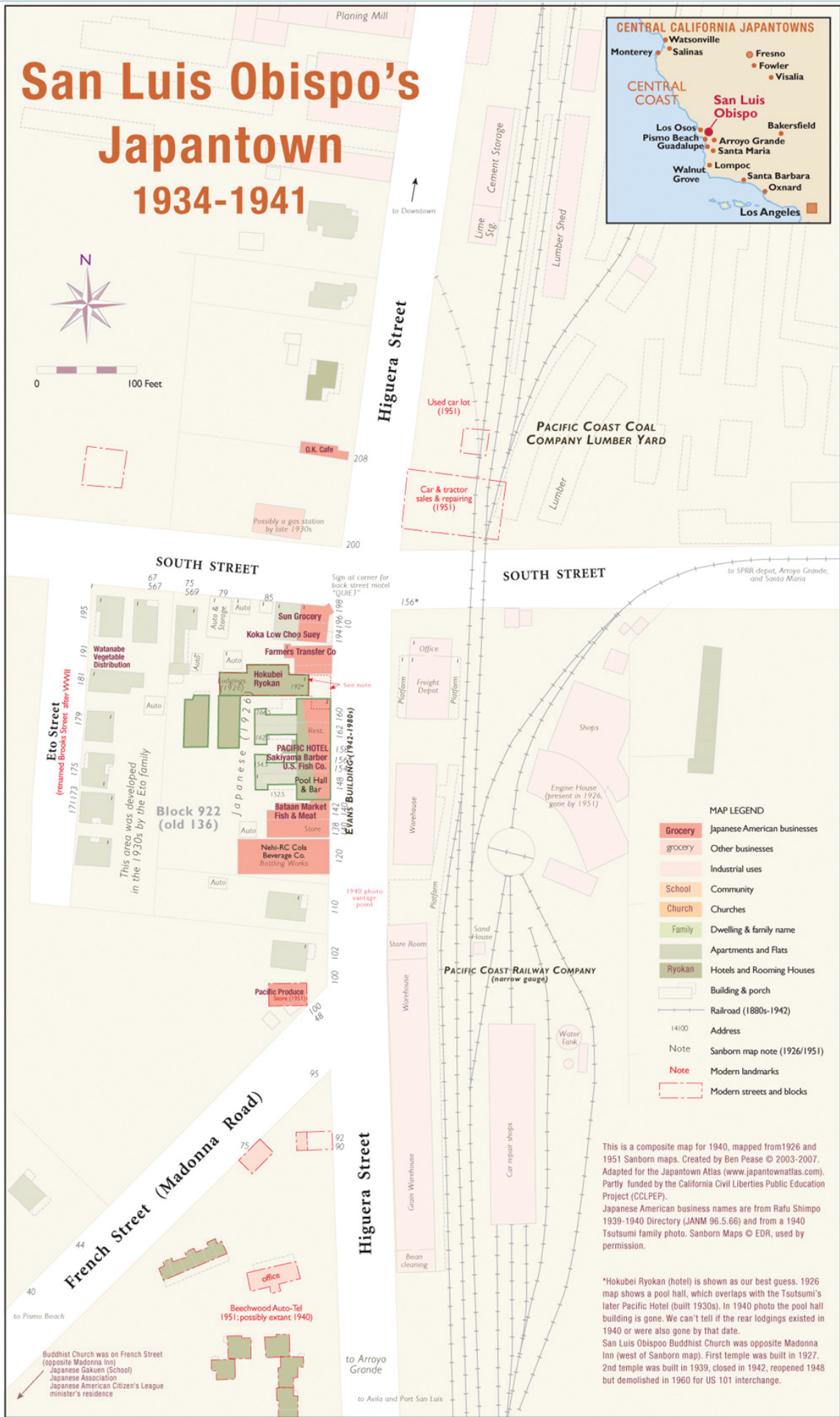
Will the City ever be able to implement the Mid-Higuera Enhancement Plan? It seems doubtful, since almost nothing has been achieved over the last twenty years. To do so would require the collaboration of CalTrans, property owners, bicycle advocates, and historic preservation advocates.

The History Center hopes to be a part of the process of improving and preserving the Brook Street neighborhood in the future. We invite you join us!

San Luis Obispo's Japantown 1934-1941



0 100 Feet



MAP LEGEND

Grocery	Japanese American businesses
grocery	Other businesses
Industrial uses	Industrial uses
School	Community
Church	Churches
Family	Dwelling & family name
Apartment and Flats	Apartment and Flats
Ryokan	Hotels and Rooming Houses
Building & porch	Building & porch
Railroad (1880s-1942)	Railroad (1880s-1942)
14100	Address
Note	Sanborn map note (1926/1951)
Note	Modern landmarks
Red dashed box	Modern streets and blocks

This is a composite map for 1940, mapped from 1926 and 1951 Sanborn maps. Created by Ben Pease © 2003-2007. Adapted for the Japantown Atlas (www.japantownatlas.com). Partly funded by the California Civil Liberties Public Education Project (CCLPEP). Japanese American business names are from Rafu Shimpo 1939-1940 Directory (JANM 96.5.66) and from a 1940 Tsutsumi family photo. Sanborn Maps © EDR, used by permission.

*Hokubei Ryokan (hotel) is shown as our best guess. 1926 map shows a pool hall, which overlaps with the Tsutsumi's later Pacific Hotel (built 1930s). In 1940 photo the pool hall building is gone. We can't tell if the rear lodgings existed in 1940 or were also gone by that date. San Luis Obispo Buddhist Church was opposite Madonna Inn (west of Sanborn map). First temple was built in 1927. 2nd temple was built in 1939, closed in 1942, reopened 1948 but demolished in 1960 for US 101 interchange.

Buddhist Church was on French Street (opposite Madonna Inn)
 Japanese Gakuen (School)
 Japanese Association
 Japanese American Citizen's League minister's residence