

Making the Invisible Visible: A Geospatial History of the
Japanese-American Community in Tacoma, Washington 1888 to 1942

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Introduction:

Prior to World War II, the urban core area of Tacoma, Washington served as the hub of a culturally rich Japanese-American community. Beginning in the late 1880's, the booming railroad, timber, and agriculture industries attracted workers to this region, including many Japanese immigrants. Tacoma's "Japantown" or Nihon Machi encompassed the area between 11th and 19th Streets and Pacific and Tacoma Avenues, and it served as the residential, business, and social center for the Issei (first generation) and Nisei (second generation) Japanese community (Magden 1, 69; Morrison 41, 42). Japantown experienced its zenith between 1900 and 1920. After 1920, it "began a slow decline, culminating with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II" (Morrison 2).

This once culturally dynamic area is now in need of recognition and preservation. The goal of this project, therefore, has been to collect and analyze primary data from various historical archive sources, as well as video and first-person interviews, in order to identify any geospatial patterns that exist between the visual representation of Tacoma's Pre-World War II Japanese community and contemporary Tacoma. These analyses can then offer insights into recognizing and preserving important historical elements.

Methods:

This project began under the auspices of current historical preservation research being conducted by Dr. Lisa Hoffman and Dr. Mary Hanneman at the University of Washington Tacoma. Project colleague Meghan Howey and I initially met with Dr. Hoffman in order to gain

an overview of her research and to obtain research source information for our GIS project. Dr. Hoffman also maintains a library of transcripts and videotape interviews conducted with members of the Japanese-American community in Tacoma. Ms. Howey and I then drafted a project flow chart to organize the types of data, as well the GIS techniques and ArcGIS tools that would be required to implement our analyses. We ascertained that the bulk of our research would be qualitative in nature with a focus on collecting primary data (Table 1). Qualitative research implies “an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (qtd. in Suchan and Brewer 151).

Table 1:

Primary Data Sources:	Secondary Data Sources:
Surveys/Drawn “mental maps” from Japanese community members	City of Tacoma Streets
Historic Maps	City of Tacoma Base map
Old Newspaper Clipping Data	City of Tacoma Zoning
Old Photos	UWT Polygon layer
Written Research	UWT Master Plan map
Audio-Interview Archives (Hoffman library)	
Personal Interviews	

For this project, we felt it was imperative to obtain, process, and analyze data collected through first-person interviews with remaining members of the Pre-World War II Tacoma Japanese community. According to Pearce and Louis, this ethnographic perspective provides “depth of place” knowledge, which provides “understanding of the cultural logic that lies behind the relations of space” (111). This ethnographic knowledge also provides insights into the “inner

life and texture of a particular social group or neighborhood” (Suchan and Brewer 150). Matthews et al. point out how combining ethnographic data and GIS methods “reveals the activity spaces and boundaries of a family’s lived experiences,” and it enables researchers “to see spatial context as well as content, helping them to identify important spatial dimensions of a problem” (88). To collect this ethnographic data, we planned to administer surveys to Pre-World War II Japanese residents, asking them think through and indicate remembered places, locations, and life-pattern pathways on a base map of Tacoma that would be provided. These hand-drawn “mental maps” provide important qualitative data that indicate participants’ spatial interactions with place and location (Gould 1). This type of participatory community mapping is vital in providing historical, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual information that may otherwise be unavailable (Mayan 46, 47).

As this project commenced, however, we discovered difficulty in locating available survey participants. After World War II, many prior Tacoma Japanese residents did not return to this area. Access to Dr. Hoffman’s audio interviews was unavailable due to the fact that she was away from campus on a research sabbatical. These factors and the time constraints associated with this project made it implausible to pursue this particular avenue of primary data collection further at this time. Ms. Howey and I then revamped our project action plan and divided data collection research tasks. Ms. Howey focused on researching old newspaper clippings, interviews with the Tacoma Historical Society, and a videotape tour with local author/historian Ron Magden. I researched books, historic maps, old photographs, and phone directories. The Northwest Room of the Tacoma Public Library and the University of Washington Library yielded most of these sources.

The first main step in organizing all of the data collected was to build a database. Gregory stresses the importance of building databases in historical GIS research in order to

“provide infrastructure for further research” (185). The benefits of a solid GIS database “allow the sources that they represent to be explored in entirely new ways” enabling GIS to “add spatial functionality to a database management system” (Gregory 199, 200). GIS Professor Matthew Kelley and the work of Anne K. Knowles were consulted to determine a viable data model. Knowles points out the benefits of utilizing an “object-oriented” model for historical research. This type of model organizes objects into classes, which can then be given attributes (i.e. names, addresses, vector type) (Knowles 184, 185). Initially, Ms. Howey and I created a database model with nine attribute fields. As our research continued, however, we determined the need to expand our model to 19 attribute fields (Table 2).

For this project, I utilized two specific historical maps. The first was a hand-drawn “mental map” created by Kazuo Ito, circa 1920 (Figure 1). This map was aligned with Tacoma Streets spatial data utilizing ArcGIS georeferencing tools. This process, sometimes called “rubber sheeting” stretches or shrinks a map image like a thin sheet of rubber being pulled to fit a particular form (Knowles 5). Next the locations of Japanese sites were converted to point or polygon features on a map through a digitizing process (Figure 2). Creating vector features enables the ability to join attribute data such as address, class, use or purpose. An historic map created by Susan Morrison circa 1994 was also georeferenced and digitized in this same fashion.

Additional books, historic photographs, church directories, and newspaper clippings were researched to locate other period relative Japanese sites in Tacoma. Attribute information for each site was recorded in the Excel database spreadsheet. The database table spreadsheet was then imported into ArcGIS. The sites recorded on the spreadsheet were geocoded using the address field in the database as a primary key.

Table 2: Database Attribute Fields

Field Name	Description
Name	Name of business or property
BusinessOwner	Name of business owner
ArchiveAddress	Historical archive address
St_No	Street number
St_Prefix	Street prefix (North, South, etc.)
St_Name	Street Name
St_Type	Street Type (Avenue, Street, etc.)
St_Suffix	Street suffix (North, South, etc.)
City	City
ZipCode	Zipcode
VectorType	Vector type (point, polygon, etc.)
Class	Service, retail, education, housing, spiritual
Use_Purpose	i.e. hotel, laundry, housing, restaurant
DateInUse	Recorded dates in use
TypeOfSpace	Public or private
RoleInCommunity	List specific role in community if applicable
DataSource	Data Source
FieldNotes	Notes from video tour and ground-truthing drive
GeoCode_StrComplete	Concatenated address fields into one complete address ready for geocoding

Figure 1: Kazuo Ito map circa 1920

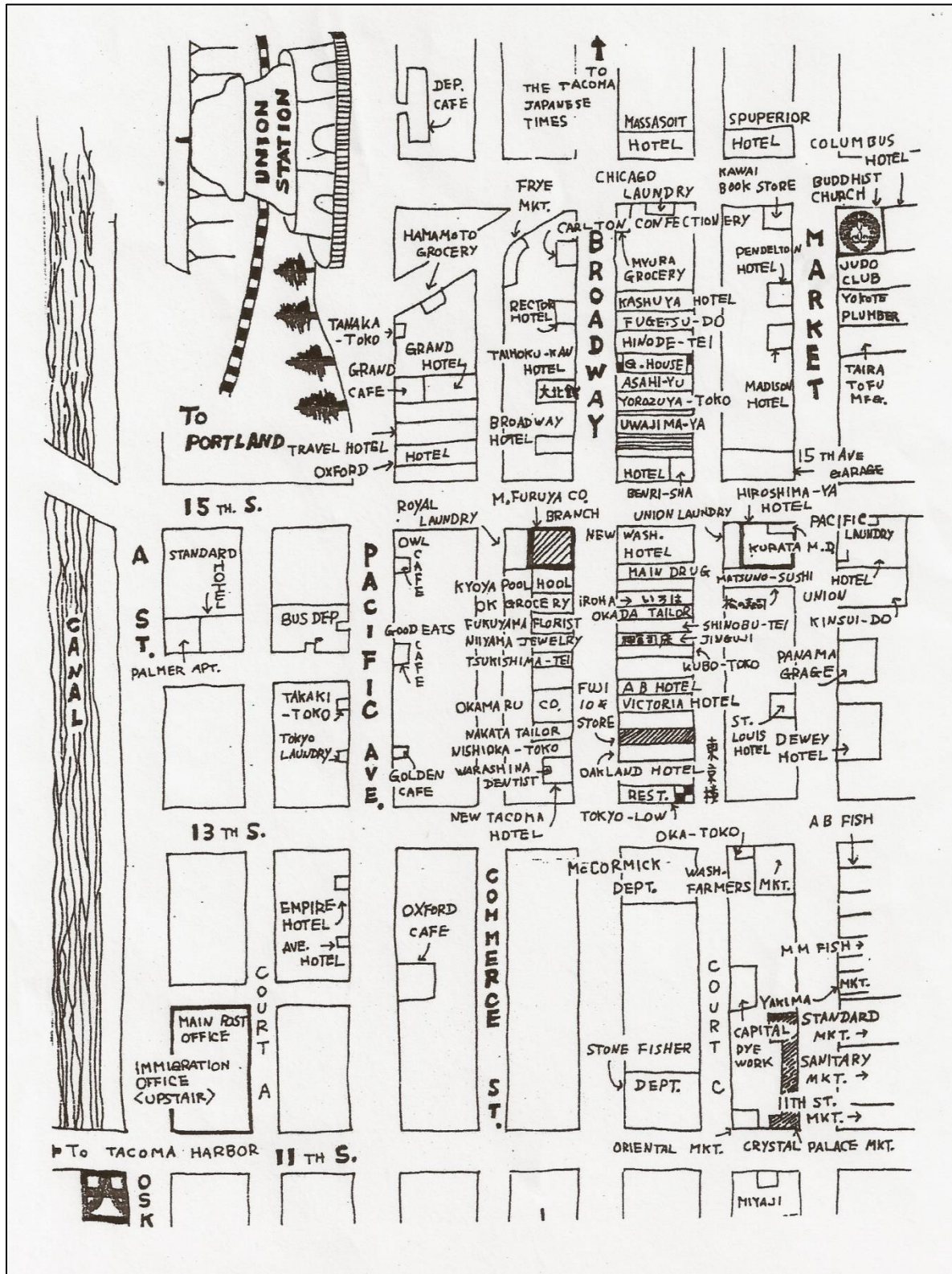
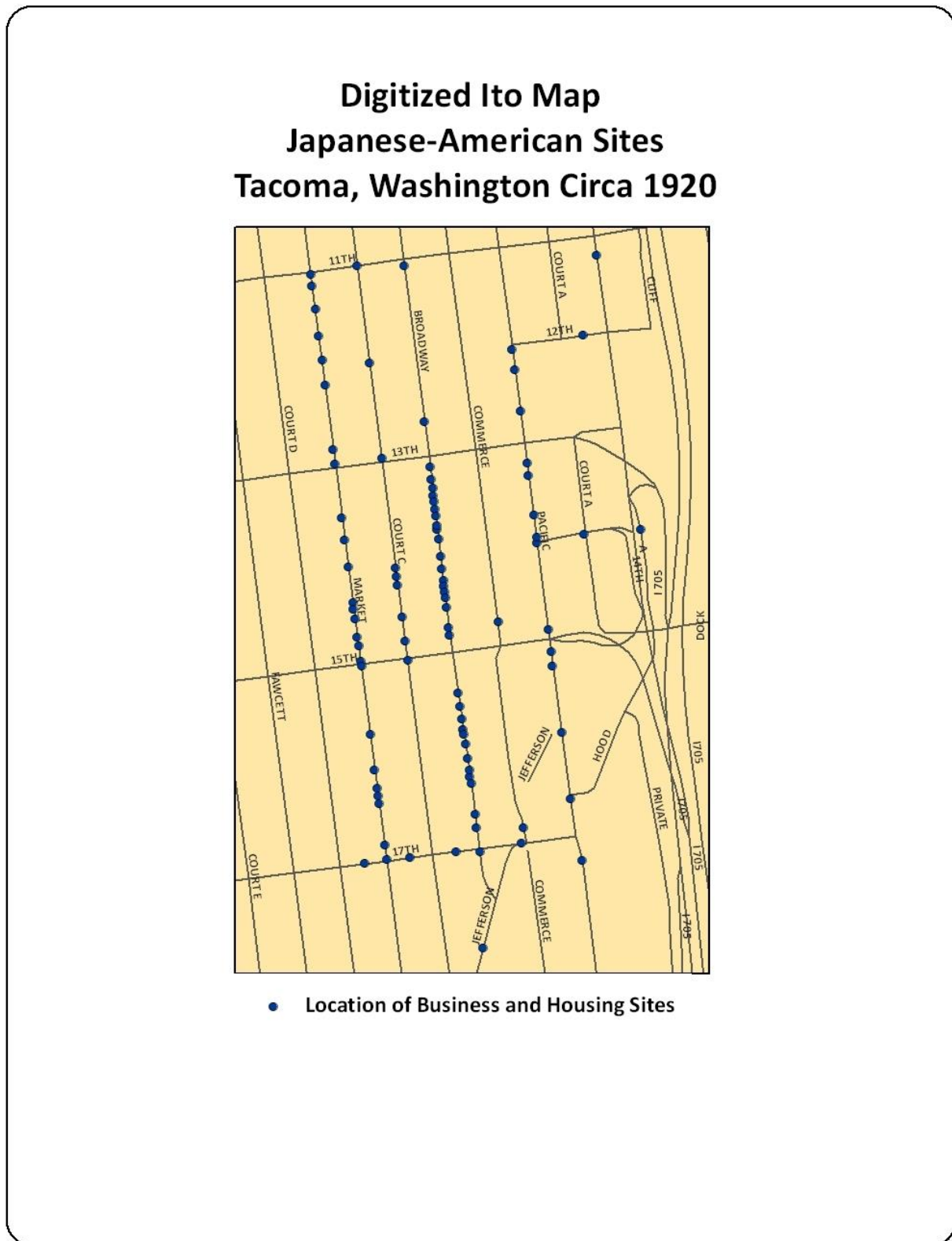


Figure 2: Georeferenced and Digitized Ito map



Ms. Howey digitized pivotal Japanese life-pattern routes, cultural centers, and significant gatherings established through her videotape tour interview with Ron Magden and layered these with current Tacoma orthophotos for comparison analysis. She also georeferenced and digitized the current University of Washington Tacoma campus master plan in order to determine areas of conflict.

Susan Morrison's thesis, *Tacoma's Nihongo Gakko*, lists remaining Japanese buildings/structures in the Tacoma area as of 1994. As a final step in our method process, Ms. Howey and I ground-truthed Morrison's list of extant Japanese buildings and took photographs at each location on May 23, 2010.

Outcomes/Results:

Kevin Lynch points out that a city is "an overlap of many individual images," and he classifies these into five element types: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Districts are described as "medium-to-large sections of the city [...] recognizable as having some common, identifying character." He describes paths as "channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves" (46). As we processed our data, we were able to create several maps that provide a visual analysis of districts, paths, and landmarks that reflect the history of the Pre-World War II Japanese in Tacoma.

Ms. Howey created maps that visualize cultural, work, and school paths, as well as landmark cultural centers such as the Japanese Language School, Whitney Memorial United Methodist Church, and the Tacoma Buddhist Church/Temple. Our ground-truthing tour confirmed the existence of 17 remaining Japanese building sites. Other extant buildings may exist; however, further research into plat and property records will be required to confirm their authenticity due to street name, building number and building façade changes over time. Ms.

Howey intersected these existing Japanese structures with the current University of Washington Tacoma campus map and determined specific areas of conflict.

I created four additional maps. Susan Morrison's digitized map visualizes three specific districts: former Japantown, a proposed historic Japantown district, and the University of Washington campus boundaries as they existed in 1994 (Fig. 3). A final comprehensive map visualizes and classifies the 282 Japanese sites listed in the database we created (Fig. 4). Of these 282 sites, 217 were classified as business sites (Fig. 5). The business corridors were located mainly along Market Street, Broadway, and Pacific Avenue. A variety of retail businesses existed; however, laundries, barbers, restaurants, and produce markets top the list. Hotels constitute the majority of the business/service category. Forty personal life-pattern sites were located with the majority of those being housing (Fig. 6). Apartment buildings and private residences were located primarily on Fawcett Avenue. Twenty-five sites could not be classified due to lack of available information.

One of the most significant outcomes of this project has been the creation of a comprehensive database that is being utilized to organize and preserve vital historical records, as well as to facilitate future research.

Discussion/Future Research Directions:

One particular potential area of conflict involves the site location for the Japanese Language School Memorial on the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) campus property, as well as the continued welfare of historical tree plantings located at the original site of the language school. The UWT master plan calls for the creation of a Japanese Language School Memorial garden to be built on the corner of Jefferson and 19th Street. The original location of the language school, however, was on South 17th Street and Tacoma Avenue. The building was

in disrepair and was removed by UWT in the mid-1990's. That lot now stands vacant with the exception of several trees, which according to language school alumni "were brought as seedlings from Japan where they were considered sacred plants associated with Emperor Hiroshito" (Boyle 17). Two of these trees are very large and well-established, being nearly 90 years old. The UWT master plan does not indicate what the fate of these important trees will be. They are the remaining remnants, however, of a very important cultural landmark for the Japanese community and must be protected.

After reviewing our method processes and our analysis work, there are several recommendations for future research in this area. One voice and one particular perspective is missing from our analysis: that of Japanese women. Pavlovskaya and St. Martin point out how maps are "instruments of power" and can be deconstructed as "objective mirrors" (590). Nearly all of data I found in my research was written by men, about men, and from a male perspective. While this is an important perspective, it does not factor in how Japanese women perceived or utilized the same given spatial area. One source, Kazuo Ito's book, *Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants in North America*, contains a single chapter entitled "Japanese Women." In this chapter, an anonymous Japanese woman writes: "In the spring of 1924 I came to the United States accompanied by my husband, in my heart an innocent dream that if we worked hard in the States we could make a lot of money and then return to Japan. We settled down in a Japanese hotel room where his parents were also living. I have a dreary memory of me finally folding my Japanese kimono on the bed and putting it away" (258). Women have important perspectives of space that need to be told.

Ms. Howey and I also feel it is important to pursue obtaining interviews with and administering surveys to the Pre-World War II Japanese residents. This population is dwindling over time as they become more elderly, and it is vital to obtain and preserve their histories and

perspectives of this area. This is a process that may take some time to plan and execute, but this important ethnographic knowledge is critical in presenting an accurate visual analysis of Nihon Machi Tacoma.

Al-Kodmany speaks to the importance of multimedia GIS (30). In the future, we would also like to see a publically accessible website established to tell the story of the Tacoma's Pre-World War II Japanese community. Historical photographs and slices of videotape interviews could be attached to specific points on a map. The database would also be attached to the map so that this information becomes available to other researchers and the public.

Lastly, the data processed for this project represent a small portion of what is yet to be researched and analyzed. I found other books, other maps, more photographs, and other resources that have yet to yield their information. One thing I discovered in the process of doing historical GIS work: It takes a significant amount of time to record and process the data that is found.

Combining quantitative and qualitative scholarship with GIS technology promises to offer exciting new vistas in the field of historical research. I hope to be able to continue studies in this field in the future.

Figure 3: Digitized Susan Morrison map circa 1994

Morrison Thesis Map "Japantown" Circa 1994



- Japanese Properties 1890 to 1931
- Extant Buildings 1994
- Extant Buildings 2010
- ▭ Former Japantown
- ▭ Proposed Historic Japantown 1994
- ▭ University of WA Tacoma Campus 1994

Figure 4: Map classifying and visualizing 282 Japanese sites:

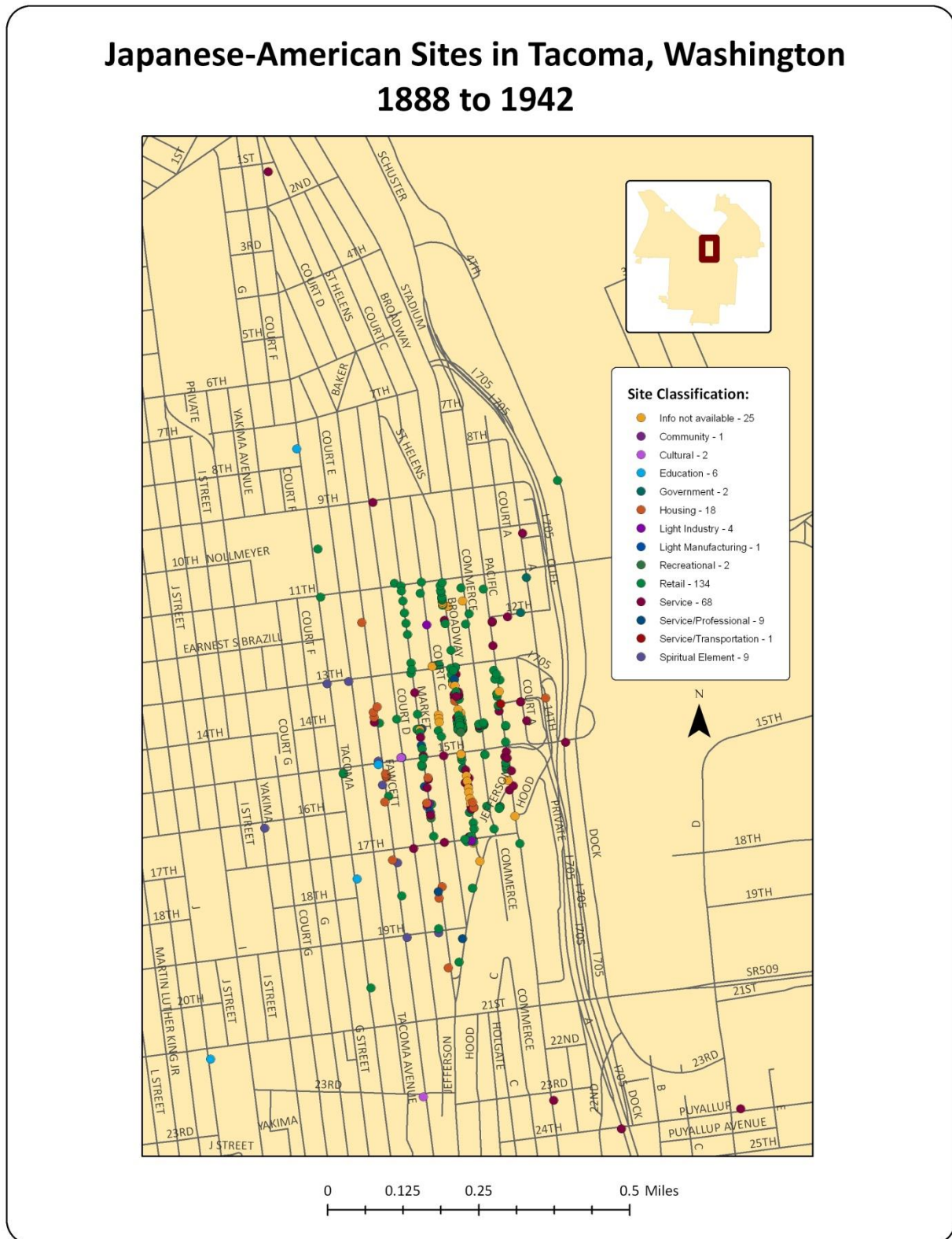


Figure 5: Japanese Business sites

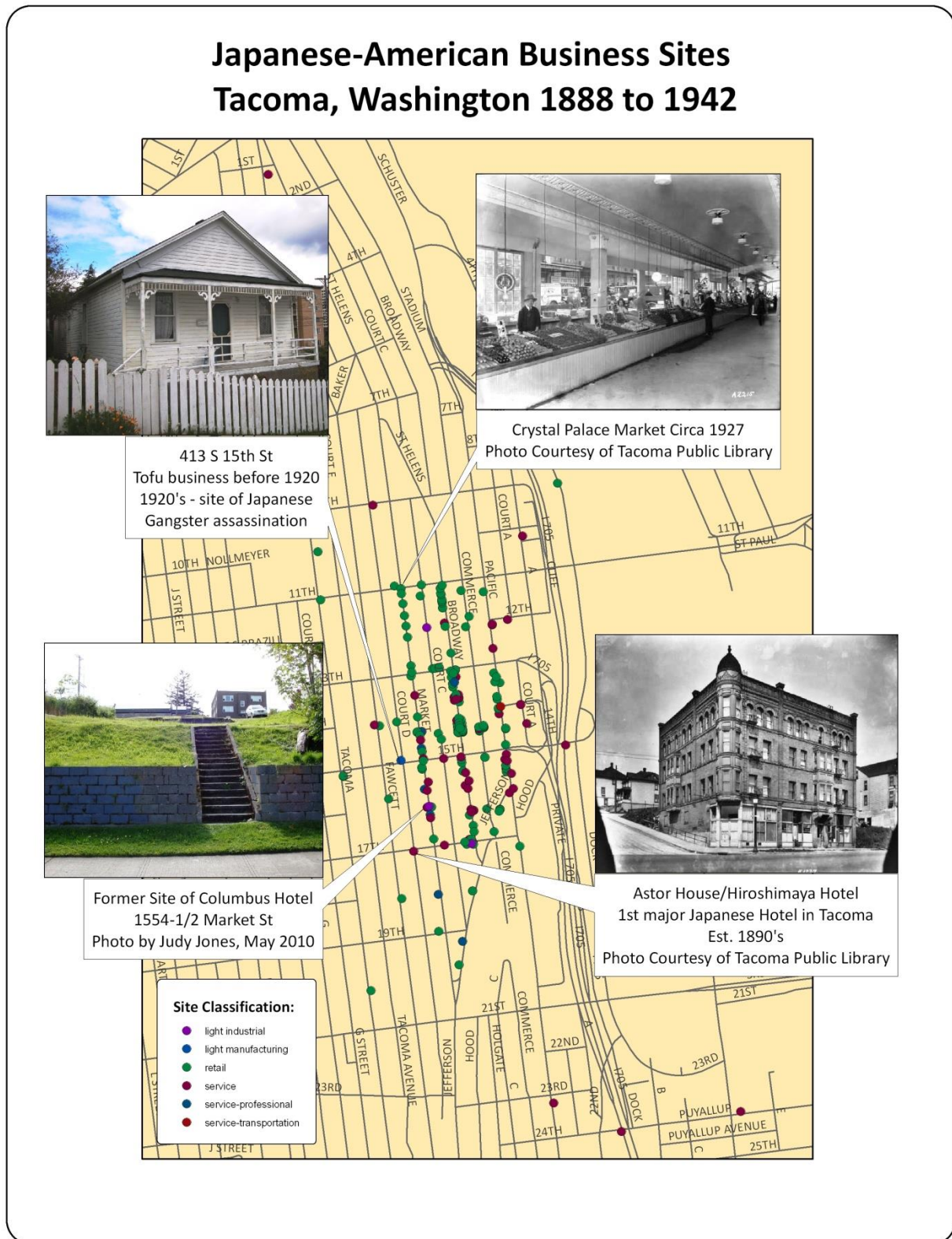
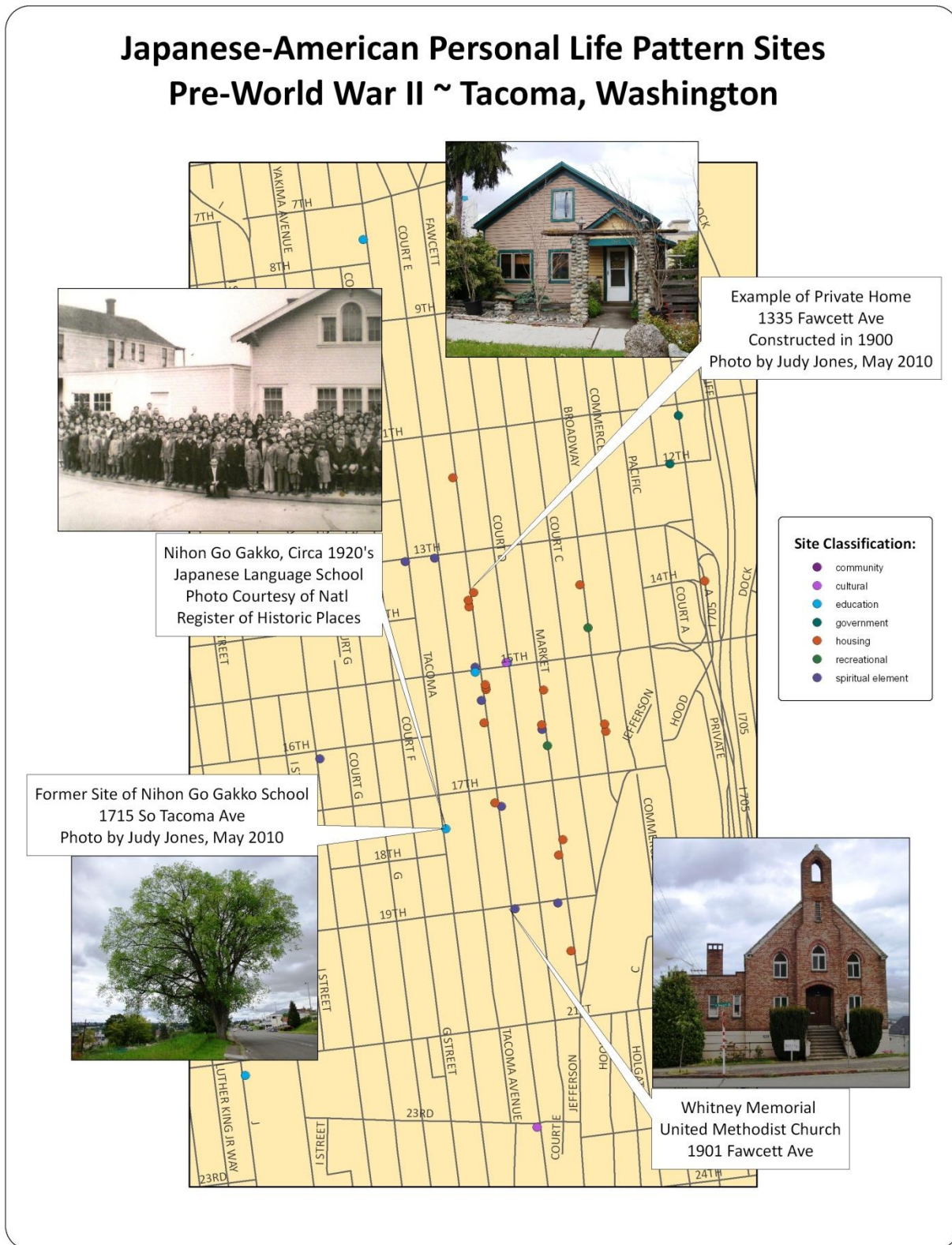


Figure 6: Japanese Personal Life-Pattern Sites



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