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House of Representatives

HONORING THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
ARRIVAL OF THE *GANNENMONO*

HON. COLLEEN HANABUSA

OF HAWAII

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, June 7, 2018

Ms. HANABUSA. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the *gannenmono*, the first Japanese immigrants to Hawaii.

On June 20, 1868, the first Japanese immigrants to Hawaii landed in Honolulu harbor. The Hawaiian government had asked its consul in Japan, Eugene Van Reed, to recruit contract laborers for work in the sugar cane fields. Though the original intent was to gather 350 immigrants, Van Reed succeeded in recruiting only 148 immigrants, of which 6 were women. These became the original *gannenmono*, or “first year people,” so named because they emigrated on the first year of the Meiji Emperor’s reign. Van Reed had secured permission from the Shogunate government for the *gannenmono* to depart, but the new Meiji government declined to reconfirm these passports, forcing the migrants to depart illegally.

Work and life on the plantations proved to be difficult for the *gannenmono*. Many of them were craftsmen and displaced samurai unfamiliar with agricultural labor. Conditions on the plantations were also harsh. Work was both tedious and monotonous, living conditions were poor, the pay was hardly sufficient and disproportionately lower for Japanese workers than for laborers of other ethnic groups, and the plantation overseers were often physically abusive. When the Japanese government heard that its citizens were being mistreated, it recalled the *gannenmono*. However, about 100 of the original group chose to remain in Hawaii, where they settled and intermarried with the locals. For the next seventeen years, the Japanese government refused to endorse any policy of organized immigration to Hawaii.

However, the need for cheap labor on the sugar cane plantations and the declining Native Hawaiian population made the need for Japanese immigrants ever more urgent. In 1881, King David Kalakaua visited Japan during his world tour and made an appeal to the Meiji Emperor for Japanese immigration to Hawaii and closer ties between the two countries. Negotiations over immigration led the Hawaiian government to promise increased wages and improved working conditions for Japanese workers in future contracts. The first contract labor immigrants from Japan arrived in Hawaii in 1885, beginning a new wave of Japanese immigration. In 1884, the Kingdom of Hawaii reported 116 residents of Japanese descent in its

census. By 1900, the Territory of Hawaii recorded over 60,000 people of Japanese descent, most of whom were unskilled male laborers.

Unfortunately, the arrival of Japanese immigrants triggered xenophobic sentiments among those concerned with labor competition and racial purity, leading the United States federal government to restrict Japanese immigration. These nativist movements were strongest in California, where many Japanese and Asian immigrants settled. Under the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, the United States promised not to impose any immigration restrictions if Japan ended its emigration programs. However, the Immigration Acts of 1924 codified the suspension of Japanese immigration by ending immigration of all aliens ineligible for citizenship – a *de facto* ban on Asian immigration not lifted until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952.

Immigration was just the first of many challenges Japanese Americans faced. The Japanese immigrants had difficulty integrating into local communities due to persistent prejudice and systemic hostility by neighbors and local, state, and federal governments. During the Second World War, over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans, the majority of whom were United States citizens, were forcibly relocated and incarcerated due largely to the mistaken notion that they would be more loyal to Japan than to the United States. Even today, stereotypes of Japanese Americans as perpetual aliens persist, even if the United States is the only country most Japanese Americans have ever known and called home.

This anniversary of the arrival of the *gannenmono* reminds us of the difficult histories of Japanese American immigration and, in a broader sense, the immigration of other racial, ethnic, and religious groups to the United States. In examining our public discourse on immigration today, we see that we do not live in a unique moment in our country’s history. Too often in our past have we closed our doors to those seeking a better future in the United States. Even after settling here, these immigrants often face prejudice and other challenges in integration. Yet, through their many sacrifices, perseverance, and resilience, through their hard work to earn their stead in America, they became Americans. Ours is a country not of a single race, ethnicity, language, or culture, but of shared values and beliefs. We are united by our common faith in democracy, confidence in equal justice, and aspirations for a better future. No one today can dispute the positive impact the Japanese American community has made on American life and society.

A hundred and fifty years ago, a small ship of immigrants seeking new lives set sail from their homes for a far-away land. For the vast majority of us in the United States today, this is how our stories and those of our ancestors begin. By learning and remembering the histories of Japanese Americans and other communities that immigrated to this country, we become wiser in crafting our national

attitudes and policies towards those seeking better futures for themselves and their families in America today. We must be an example for future generations to act wisely and honorably, informed by our own history as a country. Mr. Speaker, I ask my distinguished

colleagues to join me in honoring the *gannenmono* and remembering their story today.