



Nagasawa Kanae, c. 1865

Nagasawa Kanae

A Sonoma Valley Life Shaped by a Global Turning Point

BY BO LAURENT

Many residents of Oakmont and the surrounding Sonoma Valley recognize the name Nagasawa from local landmarks and vineyards. Fewer know the remarkable international story behind it—or why that story still resonates here today.

Nagasawa Kanae (1852–1934) was born in Japan at the end of the samurai era, during a time of intense political and cultural transformation. From 1600 to 1868, Japanese law banned almost all foreign nationals from entering, and Japanese were not permitted to leave. At age twelve or thirteen, Nagasawa was selected by the Satsuma Domain to join a group of fifteen young men sent abroad to learn from the West.

These students were dispatched to London in 1865, when such a voyage was still prohibited by the Edo (Tokyo) government and subject to severe punishment. The students boarded a British ship in secret; they changed their names and cut their samurai topknots so that, if they were discovered, the punishment would not also be meted out to their families. Their mission was bold: to acquire knowledge that might help Japan survive—and modernize—in a rapidly changing world. In particular, they wanted to avoid the fate of Asian lands colonized by European powers.

Their voyage brought them to Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, Goa, Mumbai, Aden, Suez, Alexandria, Malta, and Gibraltar. They came from a feudal society, with no mechanized agriculture, no electricity, no telegraph, and transportation only by foot or horse. They arrived after two months at sea to one of the most technologically advanced cities on Earth—already deep into the Industrial Revolution.

When Nagasawa arrived in London, he was deemed too young to study at University College of London and was sent instead to live with the family of the Scottish trader Thomas Blake Glover and to attend school.

Nagasawa eventually joined the New York State commune led by Thomas Lake Harris. In 1875, Harris moved his utopian commune to the hills above Santa Rosa, where it was named Fountaingrove.

Over time, Nagasawa emerged as a respected leader there. He succeeded Harris as leader and became a pioneering figure in California winegrowing. At a moment when the region's wine industry was still taking shape, he helped establish vineyards and winemaking practices that would later become central to Sonoma Valley's identity.

What makes Nagasawa's story especially meaningful is the cultural bridge he

represented. He lived through an era of widespread anti-Asian prejudice and exclusionary laws, yet he earned the respect of neighbors and business partners across cultural lines. Fluent in English, deeply knowledgeable about Western science and agriculture, and rooted in Japanese traditions, he navigated two worlds with unusual grace.

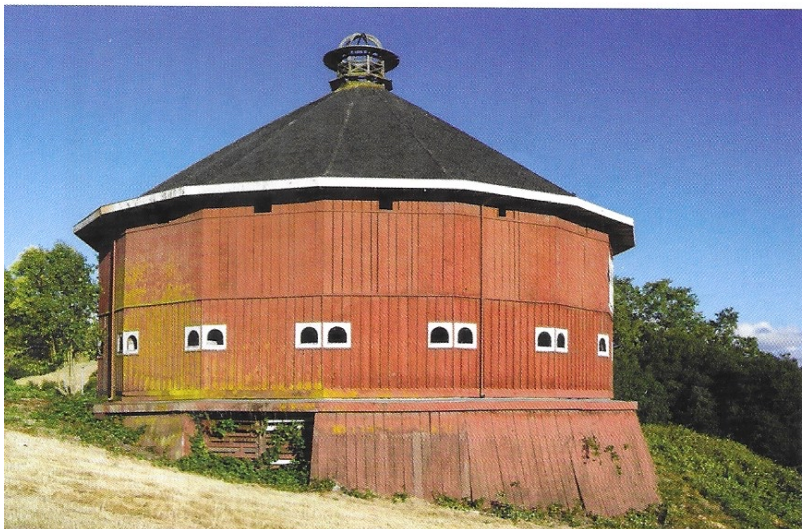
The Fountaingrove Round Barn, built while Kanaye Nagasawa ran the Fountaingrove estate, was destroyed by wildfire in 2017.

For residents of Sonoma Valley today, Nagasawa's life offers a reminder that this region has long been shaped by global connections as well as local effort. Our vineyards and communities did not grow in isolation; they were influenced by people who brought ideas, skills, and perspectives from far beyond California.

Remembering Nagasawa Kanae is not simply an exercise in historical curiosity. It invites us to see Sonoma Valley as part of a much larger story—one in which adaptation, learning, and cross-cultural exchange helped lay the foundations of the place we call home.

Visitors to Paradise Ridge winery can learn more about Nagasawa in the spot where he lived and worked: prwinery.com/history.

"Fountaingrove Round Barn," photo by Frank Schulenburg



Nagasawa Kanae (seated, right) and friends at the Fountaingrove Winery, 1910

