

# **NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT**

An Overview of the Southeast Seattle Community History Project

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## **An Overview of the Southeast Seattle Community History Project**

By Holly Taylor, Project Director

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Between 2009 and 2011, the City of Seattle Historic Preservation Program worked with community partners to develop a wide range of materials documenting the southeast region of the city, defined as the area west of I-5 and south of I-90, including Beacon Hill, Mount Baker, Rainier Valley, Seward Park, Rainier Beach, and the many residential and business districts within those neighborhoods. Rather than attempting to write one comprehensive history, the project team instead chose to develop a variety of essays, reports and poster graphics that reflect the multi-faceted history of the district. The project focuses on the era since World War II, and looks at the historical roots of the ethnic diversity for which Southeast Seattle is known today.

### **Ethnic Heritage – Reports by Community Organizations**

The first phase of the project involved community historians from four organizations – [El Centro de la Raza](#), [the Northwest African American Museum](#), [the Wing Luke Asian Museum](#) and [the Washington State Jewish Historical Society](#) – who developed a series of in-depth reports about Latino, African American, Asian American and Jewish heritage in Southeast Seattle.

These studies consider the neighborhoods with which various ethnic groups were historically associated, such as the Central Area and the International District, as well as factors like World War II defense-related employment opportunities that brought workers to Southeast Seattle from throughout the U.S. Historians examined federal immigration rules that influenced who came to Seattle, events in countries of origin that impacted the lives of immigrants and refugees, and the local effects of national policies such as the GI Bill and the Interstate Highway system. Also considered were milestones in community organizing, and the social institutions and cultural events that are associated with Southeast Seattle's ethnic groups in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Reference Documents**

Historian Mikala Woodward created a treasure trove of materials for use by researchers and students looking for information about Southeast Seattle history. A [Decade-by-Decade Summary](#) identifies major trends that influenced neighborhood development, and a [Timeline](#) details milestones, policy decisions and events that shaped Southeast Seattle, from the planting of Japanese cherry trees in Seward Park (1929) to the renaming of Empire Way in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. (1981). A glossary of [Place Names](#) explains the origins of names for many neighborhoods, schools, and parks. An annotated [Bibliography](#) provides more sources of neighborhood history information, in addition to the bibliographies included in each ethnic heritage report.

### **Essays on Geographic and Social Themes**

Several topics are explored in-depth through essays prepared by Mikala Woodward and John Hoole. An essay on [Public Housing](#) examines how defense worker housing transitioned to low-income housing, and was subsequently redeveloped under the federal HOPE VI program. An essay on [South Beacon Hill](#) looks at residential and commercial development south of Columbian Way. An essay on [Schools](#) chronicles struggles to accommodate a growing and changing population, including efforts toward desegregation. An essay titled [The Diversity Myth](#) considers what ethnic diversity means in Southeast

Seattle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And an essay titled [Whatever Happened to Garlic Gulch?](#) examines the once-thriving Italian community at the north end of Rainier Valley.

**See the World is Southeast Seattle – Poster Series**

The most visible element of the Southeast Seattle Community History Project is a series of six posters distributed for display in schools, libraries, community centers and local businesses. [The Most Diverse Neighborhood in the Universe?](#) features some of the people, places and stories that give Southeast Seattle a unique sense of place. [Getting Around](#) looks at aspects of transportation, from trolleys to light rail. [Home Sweet Home](#) considers the history of residential architecture as well as policies like Seattle's Open Housing Ordinance. [We All Belong](#) looks at community organizations and social clubs, from the Atlantic Street Center to El Centro de la Raza. [What's For Dinner?](#) considers diversity through the lens of cuisine, from community gardens to local markets and wholesale producers. Finally, [When I Was Your Age](#) looks at Southeast Seattle through the eyes of young people. All six posters include layers of historic and contemporary photographs, and text in English as well as another language, Chinese, Somali, Spanish or Vietnamese.

### **HistoryLink – More Content & New App**

In addition to the materials posted on the City of Seattle Historic Preservation Program web site, HistoryLink ([www.historylink.org](http://www.historylink.org)), the free online encyclopedia of Washington State History, has created or updated dozens of essays and other content about Southeast Seattle history which can be found through its [Southeast Seattle Suite](#). HistoryLink essays feature profiles of the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities, places like Jefferson Park and Seward Park, and organizations such as the Lao Highland Community Center and the Royal Esquire Club. In addition, HistoryLink has debuted its new [Seattle-Map app](#), a pilot project to bring location-specific historical information to mobile technology by locating the user on a map and showing relevant city history near the user's location. Selected new HistoryLink content has been translated into multiple languages.

### **Existing Information – Seattle Historic Preservation Program**

In addition to the newly created content identified above, the Southeast Seattle Community History Project web page also highlights information previously documented by the Seattle Historic Preservation Program. Resources including [Historic Context Statements](#) for Columbia City, Mount Baker, North Rainier Valley and North Beacon Hill; a [Database of Historic Properties](#) searchable by neighborhood name; and numerous [City of Seattle Landmarks](#) documented on detailed landmark nomination forms.

### **Looking Back and Looking Ahead**

The selection of topics and formats explored through the Southeast Seattle Community History Project represents the interests and expertise of one group of researchers. Many more essays, posters and reports could be developed on topics ranging from census data to open space, and from entrepreneurs to infrastructure. Likewise, the materials developed through this project could be translated into a dozen more languages to provide accessibility to the many language communities residing in Southeast Seattle. Even within the project's scheduling and budgetary constraints, the strategies and outcomes of the Southeast Seattle Community History Project represent an innovative approach to community-based historic preservation research in a dynamic region of the city. Ideally, project documentation may provide a framework for future landmark nominations reflecting the community's diverse ethnic heritage, or may encourage more community members to document their own history, and tell their own stories.