

NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

Reference Document:

Decade by Decade Summary of Southeast Seattle History,
1940s to Present

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2011

Prepared for:

City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

Historic Preservation Program

www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/preservation/southeastseattle

Southeast Seattle History Project

Decade by Decade Summary

Mikala Woodward, 2011

1940s

The onset of the Second World War found Southeast Seattle, like the rest of the country, sunk deep in the Great Depression. Many families struggled to survive, relying on government relief, community charities, and barter to make ends meet. So many people were gathering firewood in Seward Park that neighbors complained about the constant noise of chopping wood. Local businesses suffered along with their customers. Taylor's Mill south of Rainier Beach ceased operation; 100 jobs vanished as a result. The streetcar that had spurred and anchored development all along the Rainier Valley in the early 20th century did not survive the 1930s.

But there had been some promising developments: Sicks Stadium opened in 1938; local boy Fred Hutchinson and his fellow Rainiers provided much-needed entertainment and pride to the whole city. WPA crews had built playgrounds and "comfort stations" (a.k.a bathrooms) in local parks, capped the dump behind the Columbia Library to create a grassy (if lumpy) park; and dredged Wetmore Slough to create Genessee Playfield. They also built a fish hatchery at Seward Park, along with picnic shelters and a bathhouse that was put to use by the annual "Rainier Pow Wow," starting in 1934.

During the 1940s mobilization for the war effort brought thousands of people to Seattle from all over the country. As a relatively undeveloped area, conveniently located close to Boeing, Southeast Seattle absorbed a large share of them. Private homes became boarding houses for Boeing workers. Wartime housing at Rainier Vista and Holly Park opened in 1942, adding more than 1300 units of rental housing to the district. Many defense workers brought their families with them; the school district added portable classrooms and annex buildings, and shifted grade-bands around to accommodate the newcomers. The war effort boosted local businesses as well, from neighborhood groceries to Hitt Fireworks, which became Victory Hitt during the war, manufacturing flares, shipyard smokescreens, and other military products.

The turmoil of World War Two affected some inhabitants of Southeast Seattle far more deeply than others. Japanese families were rounded up in 1942 and interned for the duration of the war; many would never return to Seattle, and those that did had to rebuild their lives and businesses in the face of continued anti-Japanese sentiment. Italian immigrants were also "enemy aliens," but their

experience was quite different. An Italian pharmacist and newspaperman was accused of spying, and his "Italian Radio Hour" was taken off the air. Italian immigrants and their children had to abide by a curfew until 1943, and the Italian language school at Mt. Virgin Church closed, never to re-open. But Italian immigrants remained free, Italian businesses thrived, and the young women of "Garlic Gulch" were even able to socialize with Italian POW's incarcerated near Boeing field.

1950s

The 1950s saw the region's wartime economic expansion converted to a peacetime boom. In Southeast Seattle the old streetcar barn in Columbia City became a machine shop that made gaskets and other parts for Boeing. Wartime housing construction had been primarily rental housing for temporary workers; now developers built houses for people to buy and settle down in. Much of this new housing appeared on South Beacon Hill, in Rainier Beach, and in the southwest parts of the district, which had remained somewhat undeveloped up until now. Rainier Vista and Holly Park were converted to low-income housing in 1954; these were the first large-scale subsidized housing projects in the district. Rainier Vista's population remained largely white during the 1950s, but Holly Park housed a number of African American families in an otherwise racially homogenous neighborhood.

After five years of war-time shortages and rationing, pent-up consumer demand was finally unleashed. People bought televisions, household appliances, and cars. Auto-oriented commercial development took off in undeveloped areas between the old streetcar-station business districts. The baby boom took off as well: the population of Southeast Seattle grew 23% (from 57,098 to 70,406) between 1950 and 1960, but the population of children aged 5 to 14 increased by more than 40% in the same period. Soon the area's schools were bursting at the seams. The school district built several new elementary buildings, and opened the south end's first junior highs (7th-9th grades) to accommodate the increased enrollment and ease pressure on overcrowded grade schools and high schools.

The demographics of Southeast Seattle began to shift slightly during the 1950s. More Asian families moved to Beacon Hill; in the US Census Bureau's simplistic racial reckoning ("White, Negro, Other") North Beacon hill was nearly a quarter "Other" by 1960. The African American population remained small, with a slight increase in South Beacon Hill that, again, appears to be concentrated at Holly Park. Young Jewish families began to move into the Mount Baker and Seward Park neighborhoods, and the first of three major synagogues relocated from the Central Area to Seward Park.

1960s

Many trends that began in the 1950s continued into the '60s. Housing development proceeded, albeit at a slower pace, with the biggest gains at the southern end of the district. (Plats filed in this period indicate that many of these new homes were built by small developers who would replat an undeveloped block with a cul-de-sac in the middle of it, and build 5-10 houses around the cul-de-sac.) The school district built several more new buildings to accommodate the increasing student population.

African American and Asian families moved into Mount Baker, Beacon Hill, and Skyway in small but significant numbers. The Filipino community, which had been centered in the International District/Chinatown in the early 20th century, represented 3% of SE Seattle's population by 1970; the Filipino Community Center opened in an old bowling alley on Empire Way (now MLK) in 1965. The neighborhoods along Lake Washington - Lakewood, Seward Park, Rainier Beach - remained largely white. Orthodox Jews continued to relocate from the Central Area; by 1972 all the major synagogues had moved to Seward Park.

With the changing population came new challenges. Civil rights activists, frustrated by restrictive covenants and redlining by mortgage lenders, pushed for an end to such discrimination; the City Council passed the Open Housing ordinance in 1968. African American activists demonstrated at Franklin and Rainier Beach High Schools for the right to sport Afro hairstyles, protection from racially motivated bullying, and more inclusive curriculum. Some white residents feared that racial unrest would erupt into violence, as it had in the Central Area.

Seattle Public Schools initiated the first in a series of voluntary desegregation programs, in response to pressure from the NAACP. These programs had a limited effect on the racial composition of the schools - particularly in Southeast Seattle, where the neighborhoods, and thus the schools, were more integrated than in the Central Area or North Seattle. But they proved to be an important step in Seattle's desegregation process, if only because they demonstrated that voluntary measures were insufficient to achieve true integration. At the same time, the district's student population began a long, steady decline - by 1984 enrollment was down to 43,500 from 93,000 in 1965.

Interstate 5 was completed in 1965. The freeway divided Beacon Hill from Georgetown and the industrial neighborhoods to the west, and drew travelers away from Route 167 (Rainier Avenue). The full effect of I-5's construction on the economy and development of Southeast Seattle merits further exploration.

As the decade drew to a close, the Boeing Company - a major employer in Southeast Seattle as elsewhere in the city - took a nosedive: the company shed 20,000 of its 100,000 jobs in 1969, and another 40-50,000 Boeing employees would be laid off by the end of 1971. The "Boeing Bust" took a huge toll on the local economy for years to come. Southeast Seattle, home to many Boeing workers and at least one Boeing sub-contractor, suffered proportionately.

1970s

Seattle languished for years in the wake of Boeing's spectacular 1969-71 crash. The city's unemployment rate outstripped the national average as late as 1977, and Seattle lost nearly 7% of its population between 1970 and 1980. Southeast Seattle's population only dipped by 4% in the same period, but in some ways the aftermath of the economic bust affected Southeast Seattle much more than other parts of the city.

Housing development slowed to a crawl throughout SE Seattle. Hitt Fireworks (which had moved its production to China in the 1930s) closed up shop, citing new burdensome safety regulations as the cause of its demise. ("They've taken the Independence out of Independence Day," was Ray Hitt's comment.) Sicks Seattle Stadium shut down, and was demolished in 1979. In an effort to strengthen the faltering Columbia City business district, the city declared it a landmark district and initiated a series of physical improvements that included brick sidewalks, three-globe streetlights, and an antique street clock. Despite these investments, the business district continued its decline well into the 1980s.

The demographic shifts of the 1970s were unprecedented in Southeast Seattle. The effect of the Boeing exodus and accompanying real estate crash, combined with the City's new open housing ordinance, meant that African American families who had long been confined to the Central Area suddenly had the opportunity to buy and rent homes elsewhere - and they did. Mount Baker's African American population rose from 19% to 35% from 1970 to 1980; in other areas, the change was even more dramatic: Columbia City went from 9% to 37% black, Lakewood/Seward Park's African American population jumped from 4% to 23%, and Brighton and Rainier Beach experienced similar changes. The change on Beacon Hill wasn't as dramatic - the African American population there had been slowly rising since 1950 - but by 1980 North Beacon Hill was 20% black.

North Beacon Hill, home to many Asian families since the 1940s, was 50% Asian by 1980. And the term "Asian," which had historically meant people of Chinese,

Japanese, and Filipino descent, now expanded to include Southeast Asian immigrants arriving in the aftermath of the Vietnam War - the 1980 Census counted 828 Vietnamese in SE Seattle - and Pacific Islanders, mostly from Samoa.

All this new diversity in the district was accompanied by new waves of activism among the citizenry. Latino activists joined with others to occupy the old Beacon Hill School building and transform it into El Centro de la Raza. Community organizations emerged to promote the interests of SE Seattle residents - some, like SEED (SouthEast Effective Development), worked closely with government institutions in order to do this; others like SESCO (SouthEast Seattle Community Organization) focused on organizing residents around issues like public safety and crime.

The school district adopted many progressive measures during the 1970s, including the creation of an assortment of alternative schools (one of which was housed in the old Martha Washington School at its inception), and constructing a series of "open concept" school buildings that housed multiple classes in large spaces, in order to encourage collaboration among teachers. South Shore Middle School, which opened in 1970, took this concept to an extreme - the school basically consisted of one 1.5 acre room (carpeted in two-foot-wide neon stripes). But by far the biggest issue the district tackled in the 1970s was racial integration. The "Seattle Plan," adopted in 1978, paired minority and white schools from different parts of the district, then divided the grade bands between the two schools, so that each building housed either the 1st -3rd graders or the 4th-6th graders from both neighborhoods. White enrollment dropped by 28% in the three years following adoption of the plan (continuing a trend that had begun in the 1960s), but the district succeeded in desegregating schools - that is, ensuring that no school would have "minority" enrollment more than 20% above the district-wide average. The effect on Southeast Seattle schools was somewhat ironic: because the "minority" population included both African Americans and Asian students, many schools that looked "minority"-dominated on paper actually contained a more balanced mix of African American, Asian, and white students. Nonetheless, twenty-two SE Seattle schools were involved in the plan; all had their "minority" populations reduced below 60% by 1980.

1980s

As the 1980s began, Southeast Seattle's reputation as a "bad" part of town was gaining traction: crime was up, businesses were closing, bars were going up on windows. Even Columbia City, the area's most established business district,

struggled as it lost several long-time anchor businesses. And yet during this grim period, the seeds of Southeast Seattle's potential revitalization were planted.

With its already impressive mix of racial and cultural groups further expanded by new arrivals from Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, the neighborhood began to boast that it was "the most diverse zip code in the country," a claim that was easy to believe, if difficult to substantiate. The neighborhood's many cultural groups established ethnic groceries, restaurants, and other businesses catering to their cultural needs, social service groups such as the Refugee Women's Alliance, and other institutions like the Hmong community gardens and the Samoan Cricket League. The Jewish community built an eruv around the Seward Park neighborhood, outlining a symbolic "home" boundary within which orthodox Jews could carry burdens on the Sabbath.

The combination of affordable real estate and a diverse community attracted other institutions to Southeast Seattle as well: Columbia City saw the arrival of the Royal Esquire Club, the state's oldest African American social club; New Freeway Hall, home of the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women; and Seattle Home Midwifery Service, the state's oldest licensed birth center. The PCC opened a Seward Park store in 1985, offering a selection of natural foods. In 1989 the Orca Alternative School relocated to the Columbia building from Fremont; the school's focus on arts, social justice, and environmental education contributed to the neighborhood's identity as well. The Rainier Chamber, SEED, and other organizations worked together to revive Columbia City's heritage festival; the central event was an annual parade that reflected the neighborhood's eclectic mix of oldtimers and newcomers: pioneer descendents, hydro-planes, progressive hippies, snappy drill teams, classic cars, and immigrants from all over the world.

Community activists organized around a variety of issues: public safety, garbage dumps, low-income housing. The Rainier Chamber of Commerce held fiery public meetings to address the crime issue, and even launched a campaign to publicly identify judges who repeatedly put juvenile offenders back on the streets. Some residents worried about the high concentration of low-income housing in the neighborhood and sought to limit its expansion.

1990s and Beyond

The 1990s saw a wave of new economic and community development in Southeast Seattle, as in the rest of the city. Columbia City led the way, with the Columbia City Neighborhood Alliance, the Columbia City Merchant's Association, and later the Columbia City Revitalization Committee working to improve the neighborhood.

The CCRC held its first Town Hall Meeting in 1996: residents, business owners, and nonprofit representatives came together to share ideas and commit to making them happen. Out of that and subsequent Town Hall Meetings grew many beloved institutions: BeatWalk, the Columbia City Farmers Market, and the Columbia City Gallery, among others. Pioneer restaurants opened in Columbia City's languishing business district, including the Wellington (an African American Victorian tea room), Lottie Motts Coffee Shop (quality espresso drinks), and Salumeria (an Italian restaurant and market). Other neighborhoods initiated similar efforts, with varying degrees of success. Rainier Beach residents used a DON Matching Grant to install an art-lined pedestrian path commemorating the historic Mapes Creek. In Hillman City a business association and neighborhood alliance emerged; the groups worked with SEED and the City on public art installations and events to build community. Other community initiatives of this period include the transformation of an old Christian Science Church into the Rainier Valley Cultural Center, the building of Bradner Gardens in Mount Baker, and the founding of Powerful Schools, a non-profit that provides academic support and arts enrichment programs to South End elementary schools.

If some changes in Southeast Seattle during the 1990s could be attributed to community activists, others were wrought by government bureaucracies: I-90 was finally completed and capped - the freeway cut through the old Italian neighborhood at Atlantic Street. Seattle Housing Authority began tearing down the public housing projects at Rainier Vista and Holly Park in order to redevelop them as mixed-income communities. Public library branches in Columbia City, Beacon Hill, and Rainier Beach were all replaced or expanded. In 1996 funding was approved for Sound Transit to build a light rail line through the Rainier Valley, nearly 70 years after the old streetcar tracks were torn up. Rainier Valley residents fought unsuccessfully for a tunnel alignment, rather than street-level rails, but they were able to secure a mitigation fund to help businesses along the construction route to survive the construction or relocate. Construction began in 2004, and the first trains began operating in July of 2009.

South Seattle's history of welcoming new immigrant communities continued in the 1990s, when refugees fleeing Somalia's civil war began to arrive in the area. Somali immigrants followed in the footsteps of Ethiopians, Eritreans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Jews, Italians, Germans, and others before them, establishing homes, businesses, schools, and mutual assistance organizations to serve their communities. The word "gentrification" began to pop up for the first time as rising real estate values and physical improvements brought more well-off people

to some Southeast neighborhoods, and low-income families, including many people of color, began to move further south, sometimes out of Seattle altogether.

Seattle Public Schools made several adjustments to the desegregation plan, allowing families to send their children to any school in the district, with race as one of several "tiebreakers" to get into the most popular schools. Greater school choice may have kept more white families in the district, but parental confusion and transportation costs were high, and under the new system schools in the South End lost students - especially white children - to North End schools. By 2000 nearly every South Seattle school had a higher concentration of "minority" children than before the 1978 desegregation plan; at more than half of them, fewer than 10% of the students were white. This trend would continue into the 21st century, especially after the Supreme Court ruled that the racial tiebreaker was unconstitutional - in 2008, only three south end schools were less than 90% "minority."

Conclusion

Southeast Seattle is a multi-layered place, full of contrasts and incongruities - but also unexpected connections and hidden continuities. Lakeside luxury homes sit blocks from dilapidated apartment buildings with abandoned cars in their parking lots. Orthodox Jews walk to shul past tattooed PCC employees on break; a few streets over, Somali children study the Koran. An African American body-builder runs a gym in a storefront that once housed a hardware store; upstairs is a yoga studio. Hmong refugees tend terraced gardens on the slope where baseball fans once gathered to watch games over the stadium wall. A second-generation Italian restaurateur rents an old mill's company store from a group of Filipino developers and turns it into a pizzeria. Chinese and Japanese families that have lived on Beacon Hill for generations shop at Viet Wah Super Foods, alongside Samoan matriarchs and the children of Vietnamese refugees. At the Columbia City Farmers Market, East African women in headscarves and white hipster dads with babies in slings buy vegetables from smiling Hmong ladies, with a mural honoring four African American victims of gang violence in the background.

As the coming decades unfold, Southeast Seattle will no doubt experience further economic, demographic, and physical changes - some planned (or at least anticipated), others totally unexpected. Government institutions, community organizations, and ordinary residents will shape and respond to these changes, adding their own layers of experience to the ongoing story of Southeast Seattle.