

NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

African and African American Community in Southeast Seattle

Narrative Report & Annotated Bibliography

By Olivia Littles Erickson

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Southeast Seattle's African and African American Community (1940s to the Present)

For many years Seattle's Central District has been considered the heart of the city's African American community. Restrictive housing covenants and de facto segregation largely limited Black residents to this one neighborhood during the 1940s and 1950s. However, it has been thirty years since the Central District has been home to the majority of Seattle's Black residents as the successful passage of the Open Housing Ordinance in 1968, shifting residential patterns, and increasing land values all contributed to the steady outflow of the Central District's African American population. In 1980 the census revealed that, for the first time in the city's history, the majority of Black residents were no longer living in the Central District. Today, African Americans live in every Seattle neighborhood, but the majority make their homes in the southeast corner of the city.

In the last few decades Southeast Seattle has also become home to a large and growing community of immigrants and refugees from across Africa. The largest groups of newcomers have come primarily from the East African countries of Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. These new communities have added another layer to the multicultural history of the area.

From the Central District to the Rainier Valley

African Americans have been a part of Seattle's community since its earliest days. In 1858, only seven years after the Denny party settled at Alki Point, Manuel Lopes became Seattle's first Black resident. Born in the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa, Lopes worked as a sailor, a profession that took him from Cape Verde to Massachusetts, and eventually to Seattle where he opened a restaurant and became one of the city's first barbers.

During the city's early days the small African American community was centered around the Yesler and Jackson Street area near the heart of downtown, and in the East Madison neighborhood where William Grose's farm acted as a magnet to new arrivals looking for a place to call home. William Grose had arrived in Seattle in 1861 and soon became the city's wealthiest African Americans. These two

neighborhoods began to merge in the 1940s forming what is now known as the Central District (Zane 2001:66).

For the first several decades of the twentieth century Seattle's Central District was a multiethnic neighborhood made up of White, Italian, Asian, Jewish, and African American migrants (Zane 2001; Gilbert 2003). However, as Seattle grew in population it also grew more segregated as new white arrivals from the South brought with them the racial prejudices and segregationist beliefs they had grown up with (Griffey 2001:104). Discriminatory hiring and housing practices became more entrenched, and by the 1940s de facto housing discrimination meant that African American Seattleites were increasingly restricted to living in the ever more crowded Central District (Taylor 1994; Zane 2001).

The jobs created by WWII brought thousands of migrants to the city to work in the defense industries, swelling the African American population from 3,789 in 1940 to 15,666 in 1950 (Taylor 1994:159; Zane 2001:68). While some of these new residents moved into the Rainier Valley area to be closer to their jobs at Boeing, most of these new residents settled in the Central District, turning the formerly multiethnic neighborhood into a predominantly African American one.

Civil Rights and Population Shifts

The Civil Rights Movement arrived later in Seattle than it did in other parts of the country, but once it did, efforts to overturn discriminatory practices gained support from numerous multicultural coalitions in the city. In addition to efforts to force companies to hire African American workers and to desegregate city schools, one of the most lasting and successful civil rights efforts was the fight to end discriminatory housing practices. In a 1948 ruling the U.S. Supreme Court had determined that restrictive housing covenants were unenforceable and in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In practice however, this ruling was rarely enforced. Organizations such as the Seattle chapter of the NAACP, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Central Area Civil Rights Council (CARC), the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, and the Greater Seattle Church Council worked to help Black homebuyers purchase houses outside the Central District by putting them in touch with white homeowners willing to sell to them. These efforts eventually

led to more direct action in the form of sit-ins, protests and rallies supported by city council members Wing Luke and A. Ludlow Kramer. After an initial defeat the Open Housing Ordinance was finally passed in 1968, and with its passage began a steady increase in the number of African American residents moving out of the Central District and into other parts of the city. This population shift was exacerbated by “urban renewal” efforts in the Central District. Developers flocked to the formerly neglected neighborhood to build new condos and commercial buildings, and the subsequent rise in property values forced many long-time African American residents to find more affordable housing elsewhere. Taylor notes that by 1980, for the first time in the city’s history, the majority of Blacks were no longer living in the Central District (1994:209). Seattle’s Black Residents moved from the Central District to neighborhoods throughout the city, but the largest number moved into the Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill neighborhoods.

The Rainier Valley is now home to the majority of Seattle’s African American residents. At the time of the 2000 U.S. Census the Southeast neighborhood district, which covers the eastern half of the Rainier Valley, was home to 13,134 individuals who indicated their race as being “Black or African American Alone”—a figure which does not include individuals with African ancestry who self-identified as multi-racial (City of Seattle, Dept of Neighborhoods, 2004). This is the largest number of African Americans in any neighborhood district in the city. Combined with the numbers from the Greater Duwamish neighborhood district, which overlaps the area under study for this project, 40% of Seattle’s African American population lives south of I-90.

African-American Presence in the Rainier Valley

Despite restrictive housing covenants at least one African American family managed to move into the Mt. Baker neighborhood around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1909 Susie and Samuel Stone, owners of Stone Catering Service, bought property in the new Mt. Baker development through a white intermediary. After the developers refused to give them the deed Susie Stone successfully sued the developers, and the Stones were able to build their house at 3123 34th Avenue South in 1911 (Tobin

2004:27). Since this time African Americans have left their mark on the Rainier Valley in numerous ways.

In 1947 the Fir State Golf Club was founded as the area's first African American golf club. Widespread discrimination at the time meant that African Americans were barred from joining area clubs, and without a golf club membership these men could not compete in tournaments. Fir State was founded to give African American golfers the opportunity to compete with their white counterparts. In 1977 the club purchased a clubhouse at 3418 Martin Luther King Jr Way (Fir State Golf Club). The Jefferson Park Golf Course on Beacon Hill continues to serve as the club's 'home course' and the Fir State Junior Golf Foundation offers opportunities for children of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to enjoy equal access to the game of golf.

In 1985 the Royal Esquire Club moved from the Central District to its current location at 5016 Rainier Ave South. Founded in 1948 the Royal Esquire Club is the oldest Black social club in the Pacific Northwest, and it continues to play a role in the community by awarding scholarships to neighborhood high school students, and hosting regular dance club nights (Eskenazi 2000).

In addition to Black-owned organizations and businesses, several sites in Southeast Seattle have been named in honor of prominent African Americans. In 1982, after a long effort led by Eddie Rye, Empire Way was renamed Martin Luther King, Jr. Way, and in 1991 the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park at South Walker Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Way was dedicated. In 1998 the parkland covering the central portion of the I-90 lid was named in honor of Sam Smith, the first African American member of the Seattle City Council, and in 2006 the adjacent park space was named after Jimi Hendrix. There are currently plans underway to develop Jimi Hendrix park so that it will be a fitting memorial to the life and accomplishments of this famous Seattlite.

New Arrivals

Since its earliest days Seattle has served as an international crossroads where people from around the world have found a place to create new lives for themselves. In the last twenty years the city has seen a huge influx of new residents from Africa—primarily from the east African countries of Somalia and

Ethiopia, as well as from Eritrea, and Sudan. Unlike some other immigrants to Seattle, many of these new residents have arrived as political refugees fleeing war and violence in their home countries. According to the 2000 census, King County is home to 5,371 Ethiopians, and 2,459 Somalis (U.S. Census, 2000). The arrival of these new residents has radically changed the cultural composition of southeast Seattle and brought to the city new institutions, practices, and traditions.

Ethiopia and Eritrea

A series of traumatic political and ecological events in the 1970s and 1980s led tens of thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans to flee Ethiopia and seek residency in the United States and abroad. In 1974 Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in a popular uprising, and the resulting power vacuum was soon filled by the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee (also known as the Dergue). Once in power the Dergue proceeded to stamp out all opposition and imposed a one party, Soviet-backed communist regime. The earliest group of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees who fled from the rising violence tended to be from the middle and upper classes, but as the “Red Terror” progressed under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, tens of thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans were forced to escape (Haines 1997:266). Amnesty International estimates that 500,000 people were killed under Mengistu’s rule (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005:457). In the midst of this political violence and civil war, widespread famine in the 1980s further contributed to the chaos in the country.

While a few arrived earlier, many Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees began to arrive in Seattle in 1980 following the passage of the 1980 United States Refugee Act. The passage of this act changed the definition of ‘refugee’ so that it no longer solely applied to individuals escaping communist or Middle Eastern Countries, thus opening the doors for Ethiopian and other African refugees to enter the country. Arrivals from Ethiopia slowed through the 1990s following the defeat of the Dergue junta by a coalition made up of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionare Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). The provisional government that was established allowed the Eritreans to decide their political fate through a popular referendum, and the vast majority voted in favor of an independent Eritrea, and Eritrea subsequently declared independence in 1993 (Haines 1997:267).

Ethiopia and Eritrean Resettlement in Seattle

The majority of Ethiopia and Eritrean Seattle residents live in the Central District and Rainier Valley areas where numerous business, and community organizations have sprung up to meet the needs of these new communities.

The Ethiopian Community Mutual Association (ECMA), located in the Central District, was founded by a group of Ethiopian immigrants in 1983 to provide access to government services, housing, education, and job training. Similar organizations have since sprung up in both the Central District and the Rainier Valley, including the Horn of Africa Services (4714 Rainier Avenue South) that serves all East African immigrants and refugees and the Eritrean Association in Greater Seattle which was established in 1994 to help support Eritrean-Americans and Eritrean refugees and immigrants (1528 Valentine Place South).

The churches serving the Ethiopian and Eritrean community in Seattle include the Medhane-Alem Evangelical Church (8445 Rainier Avenue South) that was founded in 1985, and the Emmanuel Ethiopian Orthodox Church (317 S Hill Street) on Beacon Hill (Iwasaki 2003).

While many Seattle Ethiopians and Eritreans have found work in the service sector, many entrepreneurs have successfully opened markets, beauty shops, real estate services, and restaurants serving Abyssinian and Eritrean cuisine.

It is important to note that Ethiopia is home to over seventy different ethnic groups. The Amhara and Tigrean groups have historically been politically dominant, but the Oromo comprise the single largest ethnic group in the country. Some members of the Oromo community advocate for recognition as a separate cultural and political group. In Seattle the Oromo Community Center was founded in 1991 and is located in the Central District at 2718 South Jackson Street.

Somalia

Somali migration to the United States began in earnest in 1991 after President Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown, throwing the country into the chaos of civil war. However, this event can only be understood within the larger context of Somalia's modern history.

During the ‘Scramble for Africa’ during the late 1800s European powers carved the African continent into pieces so that they could exert colonial control. During this period the Somali people were divided into five regions: British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, Ethiopian Somaliland (the Ogaden which was the site of repeated military incursions by Ethiopia), and the Northern Frontier District of Kenya (Federal Research Division 2004:49). From 1899 to 1920 a long and bloody war of resistance against Ethiopia and Britain was fought in the effort to unify all ethnic Somalis into one independent nation. British attacks eventually quashed the resistance, but only after approximately one-third of northern Somalia’s population was killed (2004:59).

By training and equipping militias and manipulating clan rivalries Italy and Britain used their Somali territories to open up another battlefield during WWII. Militias from British-backed Ethiopia and Kenya were also part of the fight. After the war Somalia entered into protectorate status before gaining its independence in 1960 with the merger of British and Italian Somalilands, forming the United Republic of Somalia. The new country struggled to integrate the northern and southern parts of the country which had developed radically different institutional, educational, legal, and language systems as a result of being under two different colonial systems (73). Combined with competing political coalitions and ongoing battles to bring Somali inhabited areas in Kenya and Ethiopia under Somali control, a weak central government provided General Mohamed Siad Barre the opportunity to stage a successful coup in 1969. Barre declared Somalia a socialist state, and his grip on power lasted until 1991 when he was ousted by some of the very clan factions that he had tried so hard to suppress.

While some Somalis arrived in the United States as refugees and immigrants in the 1980s, the civil war that broke out in Somalia after the 1991 overthrow of Barre turned this small trickle into a flood as hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled the violence in their country in the hope of starting new lives abroad. Van Hear notes that “Somalis are one of the most widely dispersed refugee populations in the world,” having applied for asylum in more than 60 countries (2004:583).

Somalis in Seattle

The majority of Somali's are observant Muslims, and Somali businessmen in Southeast Seattle have responded to the needs of the community by opening up numerous halal grocery stores and restaurants. These include the Madina Mini Market on Martin Luther King Way, and the Hamarwayne Mini Mart on Rainier Avenue. The menu at Karama East African Cuisine, on 6727 Martin Luther King Jr. Way S., reflects Somalia's political and social history with its combination of Somali, Middle Eastern, and Italian foods. In a 2000 Seattle PI article journalist Phuong Le notes that in recent years numerous halal restaurants have opened, "offering everything from lamb curry and Vietnamese pho noodles to gyros and fried chicken" (Le 2000).

Somali Bantu

The Somali Bantu are a minority ethnic group in Somalia whose ancestors were brought to the region to work as slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. When war broke out in 1991 the already marginalized Bantu, who lacked alliances with Somali clans, were harshly persecuted by warring factions. In 2004 the U.S. State Department allowed 13,000 to 15,000 Bantu refugees into the country (Vinh 2004). According to EthnoMed there were 500 to 600 Somali Bantu living in Seattle as of May 2008 (Owens 2008). Like most African arrivals to Seattle, most of the Somali Bantu were settled in the Rainier Valley area with the help of local aid agencies. Due to centuries of persecution and disenfranchisement in Somalia and years spent struggling to survive in refugee camps, many Somali Bantu arrived in the United States with little or no educational background and limited job skills which has made their integration into their new communities challenging.

Post 9-11 Experiences

After 9-11 Somali immigrants in Seattle became the target for anti-Islamic fears and hatred. On November 7, 2001 several Somali-owned businesses in Seattle were raided by government agents due to suspicions that money from these businesses was being used to fund terrorist activities (ACLU 2004). The men were eventually compensated for the destruction of items seized during the raid. The local Somali community has also worked to counter negative perceptions of their community in the wake of the

upsurge in Somali piracy off the coast of Somalia (Valdes, 2009). Unfortunately, Seattle's Somali community has been touched by the actions of Islamist terrorist groups. In July, 2009 a young Seattle man pled guilty to terrorism-related charges after traveling with a group of Somali youths from Minnesota to Somalia to train with the radical group, Al-Shabaab (Carter and Ith 2009).

Other African Immigrants

While Ethiopians and Somalis make up the majority of Southeast Seattle's African immigrant population, migrants from other African countries have also made their home in the area. Peter Gishuru, President of the African Chamber of Commerce of the Pacific Northwest, came to Seattle in 1963 as part of a program to bring Kenyan students to the United States for higher education opportunities, making him one of the city's earliest African immigrant arrivals (Turnbull 2009). A few years later this same program would bring Barack Obama Sr. to the country to study at the University of Hawaii. In 2000 the Kenyan Community International Church (9656 Waters Avenue South) was founded to provide a place of worship for the small but growing Kenyan community. Southeast Seattle is also home to small communities of immigrants from Sudan, Djibouti, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.

For over one hundred and fifty years the African Diaspora, both historic and modern, has brought numerous communities to Seattle as a result of a wide range of personal, social, and political circumstances. Whether individuals identify as Black, African American, African, Somali, Nigerian, Ethiopian, or Eritrean, the presence of all these communities contribute to Southeast Seattle's amazingly vibrant cultural landscape.

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Vinh, Tan. "Fleeing Persecution, Refugees Grapple With New Home." The Seattle Times, May 5, 2004. <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20040505&slug=bantus05m> (accessed 12/14/2009).

Annotated Bibliography For Seattle's African and African American Communities

Books

Gendelman, Irina. Making Space: Memory, Identity and the Discursive Production of Place in the "Urban Development" of Seattle's Central District. Dissertation, Department of Communication, University of Washington, 2008.

In her dissertation Irina examines the ways that people construct their neighborhood identities through discursive practices. She is especially concerned about how people talk about the processes of gentrification in the Central District and how the processes of gentrification can be seen in the landscape. Even though she focuses on the CD, the borders spill over into the Colman neighborhood and Beacon Hill. Her dissertation is primarily theoretical but she does talk about her involvement with the Colman Neighborhood Association and a community art project she spearheaded.

Gilbert, Richard James. Garlic Gulch: Interpreting the History of Seattle's Rainier/Atlantic Neighborhood, 1903-2003. Thesis, Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington, 2003.

This thesis focuses on the history of the I-90 free way construction and its impact on the Italian-American community in the Garlic Gulch. Gilbert interviewed a number of older Italian-American members of the community to paint a fuller picture of the neighborhood as it was prior to I-90 construction. This thesis is most interesting as a history of the construction project itself.

Griffey, Brian H. Race, Class, and Context: Residential and Economic Changes in World War II-era Black Seattle, 1935-1950. BA thesis, Reed College, 2001.

Similar to the information presented by Taylor and Zane. Lots of focus on the role of the labor unions. There was also a bit of information about SE Seattle that was useful for that project. Like most of the writings about Seattle's African American community, mention about the Rainier Valley is delegated to the conclusion of the thesis where he talks about the population shift from the Central District, the effects of gentrification, and systemic discrimination that continues to exist and define the boundaries of the African American population.

Lawson, Jacqueline E.A. Let's Take a Walk: A Tour of Seattle's Central Area as It Was Then (1920s, 1930s, and 1940s). J. Lawson, 2007.

*This 46-page booklet provides information for a self-guided walking tour of Seattle's Central Area. Using old advertisements, census records, and city directories the author provides detailed information about some of people, businesses, and households who made up Seattle's African American community in this particular neighborhood. Many (if not most) of the places she discusses no longer exist, and their absence in the landscape is a jarring reminder of the radical transformation the Central Area has undergone. Lawson's modest book serves as a testament to a community that has been largely displaced. **The places she discusses are outside the geographic scope of our project, but I think her book provides a nice example of what a neighborhood mapping project might look like.***

Mumford, Esther. Calabash: a Guide to the History, Culture and Art of African Americans in Seattle and King County. Ananse Press, 1993.

*From Greenlake, to Renton and everywhere in between, Calabash maps sites throughout the county that are landmarks of African American history. These include works of art, buildings, Black-owned businesses, people, and sites of local historical importance. Like Let's Take A Walk, Mumford provides detailed historical information about various places and the people connected to them, and organizes the book in such a way as to make it usable as a walking guide. **Chapter 9, "Rainier Valley", lists sites within the geographic scope of the SE Seattle Mapping Project.***

Taylor, Quintard. The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District, from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era. University of Washington Press, 1994.

*Professor Taylor's book is rightly regarded as the book on the history of Seattle's African American community. As far as I can tell his is the only professionally published history on the topic (other readings are dissertations, theses, and self-published works). Taylor's book provides a sweeping look at the local history of African American migration, labor issues, residential patterns, and civil rights struggles in Seattle. **While much of the focus is on the Central District, throughout the book Taylor makes note of events that took place within the Rainier Valley area notes the demographic shift from the CD to the valley.***

Williams, DeCharlene. History of Seattle's Central District. Seattle's Central Area Chamber of Commerce, 1990.

A tiny little booklet funded by Neighborhood Matching Funds under Mayor Charles Royer. Ms. Williams was president of the Central Area Chamber of Commerce. This booklet gives a brief history of the neighborhood, the various waves of immigrant groups who moved in and out of the area (German Jews followed by Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia, followed by Sephardic Jews). Her overview of the rise and decline of the Central Area's Black population mirrors that of Zane and Taylor's books. This booklet, however, was very much directed towards improving the local business community.

Zane, Jeffrey Gregory. America, Only Less So?: Seattle's Central Area, 1968-1996. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2001.

A student of Quintard Taylor's, Zane attempts to address the commonly held notion that Seattle was (is?) a largely tolerant city that has avoided the racial intolerance and associated urban problems of other major U.S. cities. Using census records, news articles, and oral histories he concludes that while several factors (such as the fact that Seattle has never had a decaying manufacturing core that might have led to urban blight, and the historically small number of African Americans in the city) might have sheltered Seattle from the worst of racial violence and intolerance, these problems exist, nevertheless. Zane dissertation is a wonderful synthesis of the politics, history, and migrations that worked to form the Central Area. Chapters 3 and 7 both talk about how Civil Rights victories against redlining and housing discrimination led more African Americans to move from the Central District to other parts of the city and opened the doors to the forces of gentrification. Zane notes that most people ended up relocating to the Rainier Corridor.

Other

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