# History of Seattle

Seattle lies on a narrow strip of land between the salt waters of Puget Sound and the fresh waters of Lake Washington. Beyond the waters lie two rugged mountain ranges, the Olympics to the west and the Cascades to the east. It is a city built on hills and around water, in a mild marine climate that encourages prolific vegetation and abundant natural resources.

White settlers came to the Seattle area in 1851, establishing a townsite they first called New York, and then, adding a word from the Chinook jargon meaning "by-and-by," New York-Alki. They soon moved a short distance across Elliott Bay to what is now the historic Pioneer Square district, where a protected deep-water harbor was available. This village was soon named Seattle, honoring a Duwamish Indian leader named Sealth who had befriended the settlers.

The new town's principal economic support was Henry Yesler's lumber mill at the foot of Mill Street (now Yesler Way), built in 1853. Much of the mill's production went to the booming city of San Francisco, but the mill also supplied the fledgling towns throughout the Puget Sound region. A brief Indian "war" in the winter of 1856 interrupted the town's development, but when the Territorial legislature incorporated Seattle in 1869, there were more than 2,000 residents.

The 1870s were fairly quiet, despite the discovery of coal near Lake Washington, and the consequent growth of another extractive industry whose product also found its way to San Francisco. In the early 1870s the Northern Pacific Railway Company announced that its transcontinental railroad western terminus would be at Tacoma, some forty miles south of Seattle. Despite local leaders' disappointment, Seattle managed to force a connection with Northern Pacific shortly after its completion in 1883, and the town's population soared in the late 1880s. Lumber and coal were the primary industries, but the growth of fishing, wholesale trade, shipbuilding, and shipping also contributed to the town's economic expansion and population growth. One estimate is that in the first half of 1889, Seattle was gaining 1,000 new residents per month; in March alone, there were 500 buildings under construction, most of them built of wood. The explosive growth was slowed but not stopped by a devastating fire on June 6, 1889, which leveled the buildings on 116 acres in the heart of the city's business district. No one died in the fire, but the property damage ran into millions of dollars.

Enthusiasm for Seattle was little dampened by the fire. In fact, it provided the opportunity for extensive municipal improvements, including widened and regraded streets, a professional fire department, reconstructed wharves, and municipal water works. New construction in the burned district was required to be of brick or steel, and it was by choice on a grander and more imposing scale.

The 1890s were not so prosperous, despite the arrival of another transcontinental railroad, the Great Northern, in 1893. A nationwide business depression did not spare Seattle, but the 1897 discovery of gold along and near the Klondike River in Canada's Yukon Territory and in Alaska once again made Seattle an instant boom town. The city exploited its nearness to the Klondike and its already established shipping lines to become the premier outfitting point for prospectors. The link became so strong that Alaska was long considered to be the personal property of Seattle and Seattleites.

During the early 1900s, Seattle, now having discovered the rewards of advertising, continued to experience strong growth. Two more transcontinental railroads, the Union Pacific and Milwaukee Road systems, reached Seattle and reinforced the city's position as a trade and shipping center, particularly with Asia and the North Pacific.

The city's population became increasingly diversified. Scandinavians came to work in fishing and lumbering, African Americans to work as railroad porters and waiters, and Japanese to operate truck gardens and hotels. There were significant communities of Italians, Chinese, Jews, and Filipinos. The International District, home to several Asian ethnic groups, was largely developed during this period.

With its population now approaching 240,000, Seattle announced its achievements by sponsoring an international fair in 1909. The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition celebrated the economic and cultural links Seattle had forged along what is now known as the North Pacific Rim. The forty-two story L.C. Smith building was completed in 1914. For more than four decades it was the tallest building in the American west and a symbol of Seattle's booster spirit and metropolitan aspirations.

World War I transformed the city's shipbuilding industry, which turned out 20 percent of the nation's wartime ship tonnage. The war also brought Seattle national attention when, early in 1919, workers struck the shipyards to maintain their high wartime wages. This event soon led to the Seattle general strike of February 6-10, the longest such strike in American history. The strike lacked a cogent objective, but its success fueled postwar American fears about radicals and socialists. Along with the city's early ventures into municipal transit service and public electrical power, the general strike helped establish Seattle's reputation as a hotbed of political radicalism.

Seattle also had a reputation for a boom-and-bust economy, and the twenties brought depressed conditions in shipbuilding and the lumber trade. The Depression of the 1930s hit Seattle particularly hard, and a "Hooverville" of shacks and lean-tos housing nearly 1,000 unemployed men grew up at an abandoned shipbuilding yard south of Pioneer Square. World War II sparked an economic rebound as shipyards flourished again. The Boeing Company, a modestly successful airplane manufacturer founded in 1916, increased its workforce more than 1,200 percent and its sales from $10 million to $600 million annually during the war years. The war's end, however, brought an economic slump to the area that persisted until the middle 1950s.

When Boeing successfully introduced the 707 commercial jet airliner in the late 1950s, it heralded another burst of municipal optimism. In 1962 Seattle sponsored a full-fledged world's fair, the futuristic Century 21 Exposition. The fair left the city a permanent legacy in the Seattle Center and its complex of performance, sports, and entertainment halls, as well as the Pacific Science Center, the Monorail, and the Space Needle.

Since Century 21, the city population has remained fairly stable around the half-million mark, while suburban areas have grown explosively. The Boeing Company suffered a slump in the early 1970s that severely depressed the local economy. The region's economy has subsequently been steadied and diversified. Weyerhaeuser and Boeing have been a part of that development, along with such high-technology firms as Microsoft. The political strength of Washington Senators Warren G. Magnuson and Henry Jackson in the postwar decades greatly contributed to growth at such research institutions as the University of Washington, and in defense related activities. Seattle has also enjoyed an expanded air and sea trade with Asia, Alaska, and the North Pacific.

Seattle has always exhibited a spirit of optimism, enterprise, and self-promotion. At one time this was institutionalized as "the Seattle Spirit," a movement that enabled the city literally to move mountains by washing down high hills to improve building sites, to connect Lake Washington and Puget Sound with locks and a canal, and to build the world's largest man-made island at the mouth of the Duwamish River. More recently, this spirit can be credited with accomplishments like the Forward Thrust program of the 1970s, which built the Kingdome arena and numerous parks throughout the city, including Freeway Park that spans the I-5 freeway with waterfalls and hanging gardens.

Seattle is proud of its arts and cultural institutions, the many live theaters, and the downtown art museum. It is proud of its parks, of its professional and collegiate sports, of Pioneer Square and the Pike Place Market, and, above all, of the beauty of its surroundings. Seattle is also a city of parades, not always respectful of its own brief heritage, not as radical as its legend would have it; a city of homes that has many who are homeless, a city that wants great growth but demands that somehow the setting remain untouched.