

The Whitewashed City's Transformation: a photo essay of Bellevue, WA

By Justine Kim



The Bellevue skyline, with glass offices and condominium /apartment high rises. The low structure on the bottom-right is a Mercedes-Benz dealership.



The inside of Bellevue Square Mall, a new shopping mall that replaced the first mall in eastern Lake Washington (built in 1946).



The Westin Hotel, one of the newer high rises and many businessmen-oriented hotels, located across the street from Bellevue Mall.



A new construction project for a glass high rise in the heart of downtown Bellevue.



The Bravern, two high rise condominiums atop luxury boutiques and Neiman Marcus.



A different angle of Bravern, showing one Microsoft corporate office adjacent a Louis Vuitton boutique.



The high rise Microsoft corporate office in downtown Bellevue across the street from city hall.



World War II memorial in Downtown Bellevue Park with no mention of Japanese Internment.



Apartments on Lake Bellevue, where many of the region's berry farms once existed.



Parking lot in front of Lake Bellevue with a Porsche dealership in the distance.

With ten Fortune 500 companies headquartered in King County alone, economic indicators have shown an upward trend in education levels, household income, and diversity in the Puget Sound region of Washington state. In the span of a few decades, these two companies transformed the demographic characteristics of the greater Seattle area—particularly in the city of Bellevue, one of the five largest cities in the state (*State of Washington 2020 Population Trends* 6). For the purposes of this narrative, whitewashing refers to the process in which an Anglo-American culture and population imposed social, political, or economic dominance over the local, resulting in the original history's erasure. While modern American culture is understood to be an amalgamation of different cultures, races, and histories, it cannot be dismissed that “access to American citizenship and to the full exercise of civil rights” was historically determined by one’s race and resemblance to the dominant Anglo-American race and culture (Fusco 13). Therefore, due to its history of changing political and economic forces, Bellevue is a clear example of the transformation of a city whose history has been whitewashed.

The erasure of indigenous history is one of the earliest instances of whitewashing a region, and the modern-day Greater Seattle Area is no exception. Members of the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe, native to the Puget Sound region that holds King County, signed the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott, which reserved the rights of Puget Sound tribes to “hunt, fish, and live in the places they had done so for thousands of years” (“About the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe”). Much like the case of Manifest Destiny in California, the Puget Sound region experienced the “introduction of a new, Anglo-dominated class structure” (Almaguer 45). From 1855 to 1934, contact between tribe members on reservations with the United States government, and the Tribe became federally recognized in 1934 (Young 4). However, the rapid shift of the federal government’s policy from assimilation to “termination” in the 1950s led to the adoption of the House

Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, which ultimately led to the loss of federal acknowledgement of the Snoqualmie Tribe sometime between January 1953 and 1961 and federal recognition of the tribe was not restored until 1999 (Young 5-7).

In the place of indigenous history and culture, Bellevue became a city for Anglo-Americans and, eventually, Japanese American farmers. The first major logging and clearing of the land began in 1882, and the 1890s saw the growth of the region through the construction of mills and farms (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”). The 1890s also saw the increase in wealthy Seattle landowners transforming the farmlands in the western coast of the city into “sprawling estates” to be used as retreat homes along the “Gold Coast” (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”). Between 1900 to 1910, the city’s population had grown from 400 to 1,500 (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”). This growth encouraged many Japanese immigrants to work on Bellevue’s berry farms. As the prominent farming region, the first Japanese farmers settled in Bellevue in 1898, and they supplied 75% of the vegetables in King County by the 1920s (Takami). However, in 1921, Governor Hart signed the Alien Land Bill “[barring] non-white immigrants from buying, owning, or leasing land” in Washington to “deter immigration or permanent residency,” presenting societal divisions as the expression of “Western hegemony” and desire for racial homogeneity (Caldbick; Coronil 57). This form of exclusion and othering solidifies the notion of the dominant Anglo-American culture and race as the core “self” of society, despite the importance of non-white workers (Coronil 56).

The period of Japanese Internment saw another erasure of the city’s non-white history and the reaffirming of an Anglo-American history and culture. Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt in 1942, forced the “expulsion of 110,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast” into prison camps (Fiest). An example of the government’s detention of non-white

immigrants, the expulsion was a “racialized” response that presented the U.S. as “ostensibly under threat” to justify military action (Loyd 36). Despite announcing their patriotism, this government-led scapegoating led to the mass incarceration of U.S. citizens and residents.

However, the end of World War II saw a key shift in the economy of the city that gave way to modern demographic trends. As few Japanese families returned to the farms once released from incarceration, the city’s economic rural character began to diminish (Stein, “Bellevue’s First Strawberry Festival Is Held in June 1925.”). Instead, the first shopping mall in eastern Lake Washington, Bellevue Square, was opened in 1946, replacing berry farms and encouraging “unprecedented business growth” (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”). Additionally, two bridge constructions over Lake Washington connected Bellevue directly to Seattle, transforming the city into a convenient suburb, evidenced by the population jump from less than 13,000 in 1960 to 61,000 just ten years later (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”). Beginning in the 1980s as banks and high-tech firms (especially Microsoft) established their headquarters in or around Bellevue, the city became one of the riches in the state—drawing high-income earners with high educational backgrounds (Stein, “Bellevue — Thumbnail History”).

Today, 64% of workers in Bellevue are in the “management, business, science, and arts” sector, and 40% of residents earned between \$100,000 to \$199,999 a year—a stark transformation from the city’s farming roots (Nesse). Additionally, the number of foreign born residents increased from 13% in 1990 to 39% in 2017 (Nesse). The influx of tech and other high-paying industries replaced the berry farms of a city that had erased its indigenous and prewar immigrant history. These changes resulted in a skyline filled with high rise condos and office buildings—symbolizing the power of political and economic forces in changing the demographics of this high-tech suburb.

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