Pioneer Square Historical Background and Context

By Steven Treffers, 2020

The Duwamish People and the Village of Sdzidzilalitch

Present-day Pioneer Square was a centrally located and resource rich area long inhabited by members of the tribal groups of the Coastal Salish people. Sdzidzilalitch, or Little Crossing-Over Place, a winter village site with access to fishing grounds was located near what is now the intersection Yesler Way and First Avenue. The area was close to the mouth of the Duwamish River, a large estuary with over 2,000 acres of tidelands providing food, fresh water and other resources for household uses. The village's location on Elliot Bay made it easily accessible by canoe and provided access to trails leading inland to Lake Washington and beyond. Due to these factors, the village and its habitants contributed to much larger trade network extending north to Alaska, south to California, and east towards the Rocky Mountains.[1]

Sdzidzilalitch is believed to have had eight longhouses measuring 60 feet by 120 feet and a population of approximately 200 people who lived in extended families.[2] While primarily identified as a Duwamish village, it is likely the Suquamish from across Puget Sound and groups that today make up the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe also gathered at Sdzidzilalitch to trade, socialize, and share traditional knowledge.[3] These tribes maintained a rich cultural tradition based on a deep respect for the surrounding natural elements. They developed sophisticated fishing techniques using nets, weirs, and hooks, used cedar trees to create canoes, baskets, clothes and shelter.[4] Similar to other Puget Sound groups, the Duwamish maintained a seasonal schedule to follow available resources. They dispersed in the spring and summer to fish, hunt, and collect plants, and reconvened in winter villages such as Sdzidzilalitch socialize and perform important ceremonial work.[5] The longhouses functioned as gathering places and were used for important ceremonies such as marriages, healing ceremonies, dancing, and singing. Although the remnants of the long houses are no longer in evidence, Duwamish place names characterize areas along Elliott Bay and the Duwamish delta and represent the memory of these former inhabitants.

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[1] Jennifer Ott, 2014. "Sdzidzilalitch (Little Crossing-Over Place)," HistoryLink essay 10965 accessed August 26, 2020 (https://www.historylink.org/File/10965).

[2] Carin Murr Link, 2005. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Pioneer Square/Skid Road National Historic District; Ott, 2014.

[3] Ott, 2014.

[4] Link, 2014.

[5] Mimi Sheridan, Appendix I: Historic, Cultural, and Archaeological Resources, Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Project: Final Environmental Impact Statement. 2011. Washington State Department of Transportation website accessed September 19, 2020 (http://data.wsdot.wa.gov/publications/viaduct/AWVFEIS-AppendixI.pdf).

Contact and Early European Settlement

Early European explorers first arrived in the area around present-day Seattle in the late eighteenth century. During that decade, Spanish and English explorers entered Elliott Bay and Puget Sound for the first time. As was the case throughout the Americas, first contact between Europeans and the area's indigenous peoples led to consequential exchanges of goods and diseases. Early encounters in the Puget Sound region were initially friendly and introduced European-style clothing and other goods to local Native American societies. However, this interchange also introduced new diseases, such as smallpox, measles, influenza, malaria, and tuberculosis to the previously unexposed indigenous population. The resulting series of epidemics reduced the region's population from an estimated 20,000 in 1770 to about 7,000 in 1853.[6]

The arrival of American trappers in the Pacific Northwest in the nineteenth century led to a tense period of territorial disputes with the United Kingdom. These tensions were resolved with the Oregon Treaty of 1846, which delineated the boundary between British Columbia and the and the U.S.-administered Oregon Territories, including what would become the state of Washington.[7] The treaty did nothing, however, to prevent tensions between Americans and the Native population of the Oregon Territories. After years of settlement and sporadic violence, the United States Army prosecuted the Indian War of 1855-56 to secure the region for American settlement.[8] Figure 1 depicts the sites of the Battle of Seattle, a skirmish involving white settlers and members of the local indigenous population. It is among the earliest maps of Seattle.[9]

American emigrants began settling the Puget Sound area in the early 1850s. By 1851, Lee Terry, David Denny and John Low (from Illinois) settled in Alki Point (present-day West Seattle) and later that year new arrivals began to settle other parts of what is now Seattle. Soon, a town was established on at the site of Sdzidzilalitch. Originally named Duwamps, the settlement was outfitted with a general store, and townsite plats were filed in or around 1853. Relations between the Americans settlers at Duwamps and the Duwamish remained relatively peaceful; however, in 1855, Native inhabitants relinquished their rights to the Sdzidzilalitch and the surrounding area in the Treaty of Point Elliott. Indians and non-Indians were often economically and, sometimes, socially interdependent. Some intermarriage took place, and many indigenous

[6] Walter Crowley, Priscilla Long, and Greg Lange, 2001."Turning Point 16: When Worlds Collide: From Contact to Conquest on Puget Sound," HistoryLink essay 9294, accessed August 26, 2020 (https://www.historylink.org/File/9294).

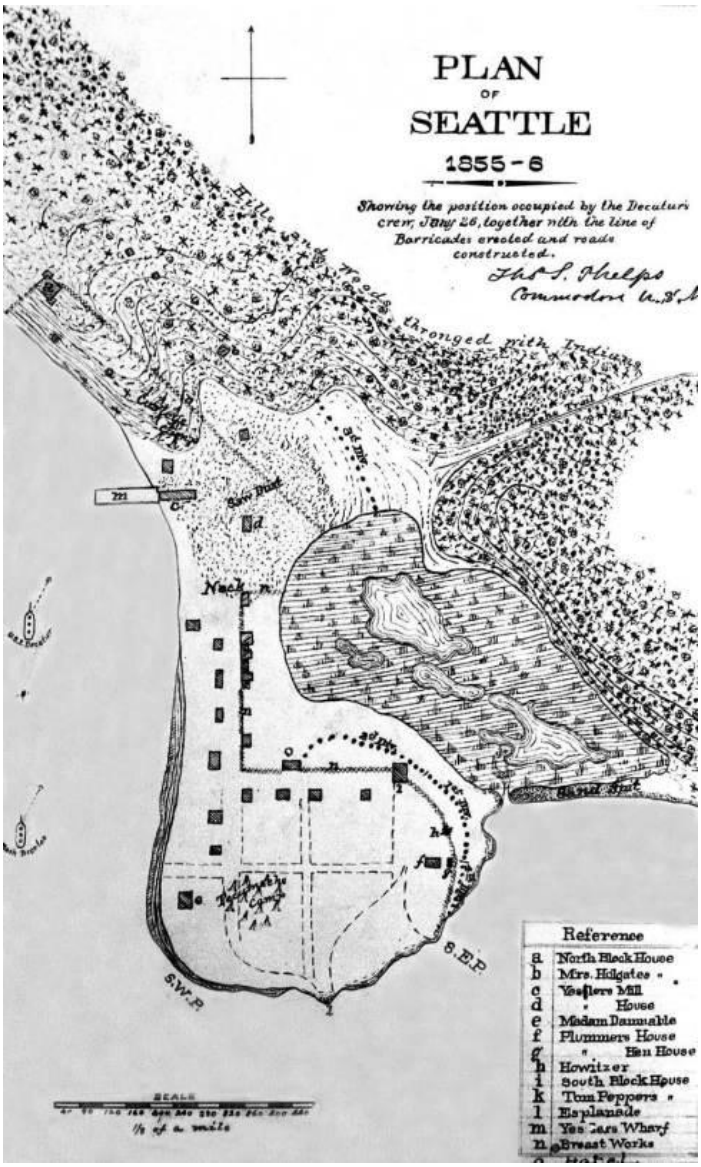
[7] Link 2005.

[8] Crowley et al., 2001.

[9] Williams, David B., 2015. "Thomas Phelps's 1856 map of Seattle is published in the Town Crier on December 15, 1917." HistoryLink essay 11045 accessed September 28, 2020 (https://www.historylink.org/File/11045).

persons were employed in local industry.[10] Symbolic of these relationships, American settlers elected to rename the outpost in honor of Chief Seattle of the Duwamish and Suquamish.[11] American residents of Seattle ultimately decided against social integration with descendants of

Figure 1 Thomas Phelps Map of Seattle, 1855-56



Source: https://pauldorpat.com

[10] Ott, 2014.

[11] Link, 2005.

the region; in 1865, the City adopted an ordinance that barred Indian residences within the city limits.[12]

Although Seattle would grow slowly over the next three decades, important events in the history of the Pioneer Square area occurred in these early years. Henry Yesler established Seattle's first sawmill, located on the waterfront, and roadway over which logs could be dragged was cleared (Skid Road, renamed Mill Street and then Yesler Way). The first parts of what is now Pioneer Square were platted in 1853. As Seattle expanded in the next several decades, the original townsite, including parts of what is now the Pioneer Square area, remained the city's main commercial district.[13]

The Great Fire of 1889 and Its Aftermath

On June 6, 1889, a fire broke out at a cabinet shop and quickly engulfed the business district. Due to "a preponderance of wooden construction," the Great Fire of 1889 destroyed about thirty city blocks between Jackson and University Streets (Figure 2).[14] At least one civic leader regarded the conflagration as a blessing in disguise, however. Banker Jacob Furth declared "[We] shall look on this fare as an actual benefit… I say we shall have a finer city than before, not within five years, but in 18 months."[15] As the city rebuilt the so-called "burnt district" in the coming years, the local press cast Seattle as a "phoenix" rising from literal ashes.[16]

Figure 2 Yesler-Leary Building from Commercial Street following the Great Fire, 1889

Source: University of Washington

[12] Ott, 2014.

[13] Link, 2005.

[14] Link, 2005.

[15] Lee Micklin,"Jacob Furth (1840-1914)," HistoryLink Database (http:// www. historylink.org), quoted in Link, 2005.

[16] SeattIe Post-Intelligencer, "The Wings of the Phoenix,", 19 June 1889, p. 4, quoted in Link, 2005.

Planning decisions made in the wake of the fire would profoundly reshape what is now Pioneer Square. For one, the City enacted Building Ordinance No. 1147, which established design standards for new construction in the area. Intended to prevent another fast-moving fire, the ordinance required that buildings in the commercial district have, among other things, masonry exterior construction, foundations set well below grade, and brick or stone arches or metal lintels above doorways. In addition, wood cornices were prohibited. Standards set out in Building Ordinance No. 1147 promoted what some observers have termed a warehouse style of construction, characterized by stone or brick exteriors and heavy timber interiors. The new measures were put to the test in 1892, when a fire broke out at the Schwabacher Building (103 First Avenue South), but did not spread to any neighboring properties (Figure 3). The fire also allowed local planners to replat the commercial district and redesign its street grid. To address longstanding drainage and sanitation problems in the area, many of the area's streets re-graded to between six and 32 feet above their original elevation. Major thoroughfares were also widened, in one case by around 90 feet. To ensure efficient passage through the area, First Street and Commercial Avenue (now First Avenue) were connected, a realignment that created the triangular parcel that is now Pioneer Place (Figure 4). In many locations, the elevation of the street beds required that original ground floors be converted to basements. Prism block lights were installed in newly laid sidewalks to illuminate open areas beneath the sidewalk.[17]

Figure 3 Schwabacher Building, Facing Southwest, ca. 1889

Source: University of Washington

[17] Link, 2005.

Figure 4 Pioneer Place, Facing South, ca. 1903

Source: University of Washington

Rebuilding of the commercial district began almost immediately. Within a month, there were 88 commercial district buildings either under construction or in the planning stage. Shaped by the mandates of Ordinance No. 1147, the district's new buildings were generally of "brick, Wilkeson sandstone, cast stone, or terra cotta" construction.[18] Buildings designed in the first few years after the fire often reflected a somewhat of a divergence with late Victorian styles in favor of Richardsonian Romanesque influences that were more suited to masonry construction. The work of architect Elmer Fisher exemplified this style and often produced "stately" Romanesque designs. Fisher's accomplishments were atypical, however. Most local architects entered the profession through the building trades and lacked formal training. Less well regarded, the buildings they designed often reflected a "naïve" combination of Victorian forms and Richardsonian details. Many commercial district buildings completed in this period were the relatively down-market hotels that would come to be associated with the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897. Also of note, is the Quon Tuck Company Building (400 Second Avenue Extension South), which was designed by early Seattle architect William E. Boone and is the most conspicuous reminder of the city's original Chinese Quarter. The first post-fire building boom began to slow at

[18] Link, 2005.

the end of 1890, a trend that was reinforced by the Panic of 1893. During the ensuing economic downturn, many architects left hard-hit Seattle.[19]

Expansion, 1890-1910

Economic recovery was around the corner, however. During the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897, Seattle emerged as a major disembarkation point for American miners headed to the goldfields. The influx of fortune seekers proved a boon to local merchants, since most travelers were advised to buy supplies adequate for a year before leaving for the Yukon. Hotels in the commercial district did brisk business too. Many catered to their rowdy clientele by offering access to sex workers, alcohol, opium, and gambling. Although the gold rush benefitted Seattle's economic health and development, a great number of miners left the goldfields impoverished and resettled in what is now Pioneer Square.[20]

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Seattle's history was characterized by rapid economic and population growth, which brought significant changes to the Pioneer Square area (Figure 5). The effects of the Gold Rush and the arrival of the railroads had already contributed to the city's rise as a regional financial and industrial center, when in 1907, the city annexed six neighboring communities. Three years later the city hosted the Alaska Yukon Exposition of 1909. The Olmsted Brothers firm, who had previously designed a system of parks in Seattle now known as the Emerald Necklace, planned the exposition grounds, including important changes to Pioneer Place. Per the Olmsteds' designs, two major features of the square were added: the Chief Seattle fountain by sculptor John When and the pergola by architect Julian Everett. The City also undertook a massive tide flats reclamation project in order to expand its territory along Elliott Bay. As part of this effort, areas in the present Pioneer Square along Railroad Avenue (now Alaskan Way) and First Avenue South were filled and new roadways eventually graded to replace original planked courses. Several wooden industrial buildings along Railroad Avenue were replaced with sturdier masonry buildings, such as the Pacific Coast Company building, constructed in 1903-04. Warehouses were also constructed along the First Avenue extension. A sign of the city's growing economic clout, Seattle was designated as the major regional railroad terminus of the Pacific Northwest. Two railroad stations were also built at the edge of the commercial district in the first decade of the century: the Italianate-influenced King Street Station (1906) and the Beaux Arts-style Union Station (1911).[21]

[19] Link, 2005.

[20] Link, 2005.

[21] Link, 2005.

Figure 5 Seattle Skyline, Facing North, 1910

Source: Seattle Public Library Special Collections

The Search for a Downtown Center, 1910-1926

In the 1910s, proposals to construct a new downtown outside the Pioneer Square area threatened the primacy of the city's original commercial district. However, two major buildings constructed in the district in the 1910s helped to cement its pace as Seattle's main business district, if only temporarily. That is, while the completion of two major buildings—the Smith Tower (506 Second Avenue) in 1914 and the City County Building (516 Third Avenue) in 1916—helped to keep the center of commercial activity at the north end of Pioneer Square, major commercial development to the north at Denny Knoll would move the center of business activity outside Pioneer Square by the 1920s. As a result, the old commercial district was soon regarded as merely the southern portion of downtown Seattle. The area's loss of stature was aided by the transformation of the Pioneer Square waterfront, which began to take on a more industrial character, as new development brought several new factories, warehouses, and

"workingmen's hotels" to the area.[22] Construction in the Pioneer Square area remained sluggish until the construction of Second Avenue Extension South in the late 1920s prompted new development. Between 1928 and 1931, construction of the new roadway led to the demolition and substantial remodeling of many buildings, but also paved the way for the construction of new ones, such as the Art Deco-style Hartford Building (600 Second Avenue), completed in 1929.[23]

The LGBTQ Community in Pioneer Square

In the late nineteenth century, Pioneer Square was home to Seattle's vice district and was known as haven for people with a variety of sexual identities. As was the case across the United States, the twin forces of urbanization and industrialization created spaces away from the surveillance of family and neighbors for individuals to engage in same-sex sexual relations. Much of this activity was practiced by transient laborers who engaged in male-on-male sex. Despite anti-sodomy laws being on the books, in Seattle, such activity was temporarily tolerated because itinerant workers fueled the Klondike Gold Rush-era commercial boom. And while Seattle's prodigious growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might have created conditions to foster the development of an LGBTQ community, the Gold Rush-era atmosphere of permissiveness faded once the economic boom ebbed. For queer Seattleites, the reemergent repression of the early twentieth century was exacerbated by the closure of drinking establishments during the era of Prohibition limited the number of public spaces in which queer Seattleites might have congregated.[24]

The end of Prohibition in late 1933 allowed for the development of a visible, self-identified LGBTQ community in Pioneer Square. With the formal reopening of Seattle's taverns, gay men and lesbians found public spaces in which they could meet, socialize, and build a community. While Pioneer Square eventually became home a large concentration of businesses catering to gays and lesbians, two of the district's establishments were central to the building of community, the Casino Pool Room (172 South Washington Street) and the Double Header (407 Second Avenue Extension South), both located near "the center of queer Pioneer Square," at the intersection of Second Avenue Extension South and Washington Street (Figure 6). Joseph Bellotti opened the Casino Pool Hall in the basement of the People's Theater prior to the repeal of Prohibition, in 1930. Its popularity was due to its atmosphere of openness. The business was for a time the only Seattle institution that allowed same-sex dancing. The Double Header, a

[22] Link, 2005.

[23] Link, 2005.

[24] Kevin McKenna and Michael Aguirre, 2020."A Brief History of LGBTQ Activism in Seattle," Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project website, accessed August 24, 2020 (https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_history.htm); Richard Freitas, n.d. "Social Landscape: LGBTQ Heritage in Seattle's Pioneer Square." Electronic document accessed August 24, 2020 (https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/23247/Freitas_SAHMDR_2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

tavern, opened in 1934 and was, at the time of its closure in 2015, possibly the longest-operating gay bar in the United States.[25]

Figure 6 The Double Header, Facing North, 1977

Source: Seattle Public Library Special Collections

In the three decades following World War II, public places catering to the LGBTQ proliferated in Pioneer Square. Most of these were, as one scholar put it, "vernacular commercial places," like the Casino and the Double.[26] In 1946, the Garden of Allah (1213 First Avenue) opened as the first gay-owned cabaret in Seattle. Known for the exhibition of drag and vaudeville performances, the cabaret catered to both gays and lesbians. Although bath houses in Pioneer Square predated the emergence of the area's LGTBQ, the South End Steam Baths (115 1/2 First Avenue) and Atlas Steam Baths (demolished) began serving a primarily gay clientele in the 1940s. In the 1950s and 1960s, the widespread and illegal arrangement of payoffs to the police limited the occurrence of police raids and allowed Pioneer Square's queer commercial establishments to operate with a degree of freedom unseen even in larger cities, such as San Francisco and New York. The number of gay bars in Seattle grew in the 1960s. Among these were two notable taverns, the gay bar and cabaret Golden Horseshoe (207 Second Avenue

[25] Freitas, n.d.

[26] Freitas, n.d.

South) and the Silver Slipper (210 South Jackson Street), a lesbian bar that operated from 1969 to 1971 (Figure 7).[27]

Figure 7 Original Site of the Silver Slipper, Facing North, ca. 2017

Source: Freitas, 2017

Amid the Stonewall uprising of 1969 and the flowering of the Gay Liberation movement, a younger LGBTQ generation became more visible and began establishing institutions of their own, such as the Gay Community Center, located in Pioneer Square at 102 Cherry Street. Increasingly, however, members of this new generation established neighborhoods of their own. Although many LGBTQ-friendly establishments remained in Pioneer Square through the 1980s, starting around the mid-1970s, the center of queer Seattle began to shift to such neighborhoods as Capitol Hill, the University District, and Wallingford.[28]

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[27] Freitas, n.d. Freitas, 2017. "'The Land at Our Feet': Preserving Pioneer Square's Queer Landscape." Master's thesis: University of Washington.

[28] Hill, Chrystie, 2003, "Queer History in Seattle, Part 2: After Stonewall." HistoryLink.org essay 4266 accessed August 24, 2020 (https://www.historylink.org/File/4266); McKenna and Aguirre, 2020; Freitas, n.d.; Freitas 2017.

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Historic Preservation in Pioneer Square

In the 1960s, the City of Seattle announced plans for a belt road around downtown Seattle that would have required the razing of many of Pioneer Square's historic buildings. This threat to the built fabric of the city's historic core alarmed several ordinary Seattleites, who, in 1970, mobilized behind a successful effort to list Pioneer Square on the National Register of Historic Places. It was also designated as the Seattle's first historic district, and the Pioneer Square Preservation Board was formed to oversee restoration projects in the district. Pioneer Square's boundaries were increased in 1978 and 1988.[29]

[29] City of Seattle, 2020. "Pioneer Square Preservation District--Neighborhoods," City of Seattle website, accessed October 16, 2020 (https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/historic-preservation/historic-districts/pioneer-square-preservation-district#history).