The City of Seattle
Landmarks Preservation Board

Mailing Address: PO Box 94649, Seattle WA 98124-4649
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LPB 141/26

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

The People's Wall
1919 E Spruce Street (formerly 173 20th Avenue)

Legal Description:

20 Spruce, a condominium recorded in Volume 66 of Condominiums, Pages 39-43, recorded in King County, Washington.

At the public meeting held on May 20, 2026 the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of The People's Wall at 1919 E Spruce Street (formerly 173 20th Avenue) as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standard for designation of SMC 25.12.350:

A. It is the location of, or is associated in a significant way with, an historic event with a significant effect upon the community, City, state, or nation.

B. It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the City, state, or nation.

C. It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation.

E. It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder.

F. Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the City and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City.

The Features of the Landmark to be Preserved Include:

The mural; the "L-shaped" retaining wall the mural is painted on; and the eastern portion of the site where the wall sits, including the land between the wall and the east and north property lines.

SIGNIFICANCE

The People's Wall (1970 – present)

The People's Wall is a mural originally completed on Oct. 6, 1970 by artist Dion Henderson, painted on a street-level concrete retaining wall facing 20th Ave at the corner of Spruce St in the Central District neighborhood of Seattle, Washington. The wall is on the eastern border of a site that once housed a duplex that was the second official headquarters of the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party from 1969 to 1971 (formerly "173 20th Ave" and currently "1919 Spruce St").

Founded in 1966, the national Black Panther Party was arguably one of the most revolutionary organizations in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s – and the Seattle Chapter was the Party's first branch outside California as well as one of the longest-functioning (running from 1968 to 1978). The Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party (SCBPP) had a major impact on the Puget Sound region, establishing community programs such as the Pacific Northwest's first free medical center which continues to operate today just a few blocks away as the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center, the only remaining health care clinic out of 13 founded by the Black Panther Party around the nation.

The mural depicted on the People's Wall has been described by SCBPP co-founder Elmer Dixon as "a testament to the struggle of the Black Panther Party". Local Seattle artist Al Doggett, a friend of Henderson's, described the mural as "reflecting the story of Black American struggles and injustices the Black Panther Party was fighting to overcome." Painted on it are images of prominent Black American civil-rights icons and scenes of the 1960s and, while none of the figures originate from Seattle, their prominence on the wall illustrates the strong ties the Seattle Chapter felt towards a national ethos. Images on the wall depict *(from left to right on the mural)*:

- **Angela Davis** (1944 – present: Party member originally from Alabama who was arrested for and later acquitted of being involved in the August 7, 1970 armed takeover of a courtroom in Marin County, California, in the midst of a deliberation on the fate of three Black inmates charged with killing a white prison guard);
- **Charlie "Bird" Parker** (1920 – 1955: legendary Black American jazz saxophonist originally from Kansas, responsible for the development of the musical style known as "bebop");
- **Bobby Seale** depicted on the mural "chained and gagged to a chair" (1936 – present: co-founder of the national Black Panther Party, originally from Texas, and one of the "Chicago 8" charged with conspiracy by the U.S. federal government for participating in anti-Vietnam War protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention);
- The **"New York 21"** (a group of New York Black Panther Party members who were arrested and charged by police on April 2, 1969 in a pre-dawn raid – and later

acquitted in 1971 after revelations that undercover police agents had played key instigator roles);

- A drawing in the style of **Emory Douglas** (1943 – present: Black graphic artist and Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, originally from Michigan) of "a sister holding a gun and enjoying good times while preparing for an attack from the police" as described by SCBPP co-founder Elmer Dixon;
- **Huey Newton** (1942 – 1989: co-founder of the Black Panther Party originally from Louisiana, convicted in 1968 of voluntary manslaughter in a shoot-out leading to the death of an Oakland police officer – which was later dismissed in 1970 before Newton's murder at age 47);
- **Malcolm X** (1925 – 1965: Black nationalist leader and Muslim minister originally from Nebraska who advocated for Black empowerment, assassinated at age 45)

Henderson's artwork reflected the Black American mood of the times, but it also contained a distinctly local element in that the first and last names of nine members of the Seattle Chapter – seven men and two women – are memorialized on it. Each was considered "fallen" in the battle for freedom and equality, whether they had died from gunshot wounds in altercations with local police officers or from preventable cancers, suicides, or even prison homicides: The Panthers viewed them all as having been lost prematurely young due to the core overarching cause of inequality, which they fought against.

The mural is "dedicated to the fallen," with names listed in the following order:

1. **Sydney Miller**, of 1732 18th Ave in the Central District, passed away on December 2, 1968 at age 26; the SCBPP's free community clinic was originally named after Miller and was located at what was once the second SCBPP headquarters at 173 20th Ave where the People's Wall is located (the clinic was later re-named in 1978);
2. **Welton "Butch" Armstead**, of 8426 37th Ave S in Rainier Valley, passed away at age 17 on October 5, 1968; the SCBPP's community center was named after Armstead and was located at what was once the second SCBPP headquarters at 173 20th Ave where the People's Wall is located;
3. **Alfred Postell***, of 3708 E Olive St in Capitol Hill, passed away on February 28, 1971. ** Note: Postell's last name on the mural appears incorrectly as "Postel"; due to the date of his death, his name may have been added to the People's Wall by artist Eddie Walker in 2008 when the mural was re-touched for the 40th Anniversary of the SCBPP;*
4. **Larry Ward**, a decorated Vietnam War veteran passed away on May 15, 1970 at age 22;
5. **Lewis T. Jackson** (a.k.a. "LewJack") a Seattle transplant from the Ninth Ward in New Orleans and the "self-appointed personal bodyguard" of SCBPP captain Aaron Dixon passed away "in 1969 or 1970";

6. **Maude Helen Allen***, captain of the female contingent of the Seattle Chapter, a graduate of Garfield High School, a well-known caterer and entrepreneur, and a member of the choir at Peoples Institutional Baptist Church (located at 159 24th Ave, just a few blocks away from the People's Wall) passed away in January 1985 at age 36 *(see photo of Allen from July 3, 1968, Fig. 28 "Documents & Clippings").* At that time, she lived at 502 30th Ave in the Central District and was survived by her parents, two older sisters (two brothers-in-law), one son and three nieces (had she lived, she would have known her three granddaughters, great-niece, great-nephew and daughter-in-law.)

   ** Note: Allen's first name on the mural appears incorrectly as "Maud"; her name was possibly added to the People's Wall by artist Eddie Walker in 2008 when the mural was re-touched for the 40th Anniversary of the SCBPP;*

7. **Carolyn Downs**, a mother who managed the SCBPP's free clinic (originally located at what was once the second SCBPP headquarters at 173 20th Ave where the People's Wall is located) passed away at age 25 in 1978*; the SCBPP changed the name of its clinic in 1979 to honor Downs after her passing and the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center continues to exist today in 2026 a few blocks away as the only remaining health care clinic out of 13 founded by the Black Panther Party around the nation.
   ** Note: Downs's name was potentially added to the People's Wall by artist Eddie Walker in 2008 when the mural was re-touched for the 40th Anniversary of the SCBPP;*

8. **Jim Groves*** passed away after leaving the country in 1968 to avoid the draft. According to SCBPP co-founder Elmer Dixon: "Groves was not originally considered a fallen comrade but was later added [to the People's Wall memorial] once we found out the circumstances of his death."
   ** Note: Groves's last name on the mural appears incorrectly as "Graves"; his name was potentially added to the People's Wall by artist Eddie Walker in 2008 when the mural was re-touched for the 40th Anniversary of the SCBPP;*

9. **Henry Boyer**, [Jr], passed away on August 23, 1968 at the age of 17; he was buried in his Panther uniform of black leather jacket and black beret.

The SCBPP left their second headquarters at 173 20th Ave in 1971 after the FBI attempted multiple raids. Key leaders were ordered to regroup at national Black Panther Party headquarters in Oakland, California, and the original duplex in Seattle where the People's Wall exists today was seized by the federal government and razed a few years later in 1973. According to Dixon, the demolition was potentially due to "the police [not wanting] our headquarters to stand as a symbol of our defiance". Not only was the former headquarters building torn down, but the address was effectively erased from King County property records: After demolition, the lot remained vacant for ten years until a series of new townhomes were built on the site in 1983, this time facing Spruce St instead of 20th Ave, thereafter becoming "1919 Spruce St". The old address no longer exists.

Despite these forces, the People's Wall has remarkably survived. For 55 years, it has never been de-faced (even amidst a surge in graffiti and tagging since the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic), an indication that the story and meaning behind the wall have been carried across generations to the present day in 2026. Despite the People's Wall having never been officially or formally declared a landmark, there is an unspoken code in the community to respect it.

Today, the wall is one of the few physical sites that mark Seattle's part in the historic 1960s national movement for civil-rights, equity and justice. Only about 2% of all designated Seattle landmarks are directly linked to Black history.

Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party (1968-1978)

The Black Panther Party was originally founded by college students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 in Oakland, California, and became arguably one of the most important revolutionary organizations in the United States in the late-1960s and early-1970s – once deemed such a priority by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that it was described as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." Chapters of the Party opened in every major city in America from New York to Chicago to L.A., but the first Black Panther chapter to be established outside of California was the one formed in Seattle in 1968, the same year Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. The Seattle Chapter was active for ten years, which also made it one of the longest-running in the country. All that remains of the duplex where the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panthers (SCBPP) was headquartered from 1969 to 1971 is a mural painted on an eastern-facing street-level retaining wall called the "People's Wall".

Inspired by Marxist philosophies, Black nationalist traditions, and prominent civil-rights revolutionary figures like Malcolm X, members of the Black Panther Party rejected the type of nonviolent civil disobedience led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, believing these tactics had not adequately addressed the racism, poverty and violence that continued to persist for Black Americans, despite the official end of the Jim Crow system of inequality in the South. In search of better lives, tens of thousands of Black Americans had migrated from the South during World War II to the West and North, altering white-dominated cities – including places like Oakland in California, and Seattle in Washington – only to be confronted with new forms of segregation. This dynamic exploded in the 1960s, birthing the civil-rights movement, one of the most significant eras in the ongoing evolution of America. Responses to racial discrimination and tactics to fight for justice ranged from Dr. King's peaceful marches to more militant philosophies like those of the Black Panther Party.

1968

In many ways, the formation of the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party (SCBPP) was a response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr on April 4, 1968. Future co-founder and captain of the Seattle Chapter, Aaron Dixon, learned about Dr. King's death while in jail for "unlawful assembly" in connection with a sit-in he had attended just a few days prior to protest the mistreatment of a Black student at Franklin High School" *(see*

“Seattle Chapter Founders: Aaron Dixon & Elmer Dixon III”). He heard about Dr. King’s assassination while watching an “old black-and-white TV in the corner [of the jail’s day cell], sitting high up on a metal shelf”. Later, alone in his one-man cell, he recalled:

> “Anger filled me that night. There would be no more tears and no more dialogue. The war began that night all across America.”

A few days later, nearly ten thousand people in Seattle marched in honor of Dr. King, down Denny Way from Capitol Hill to a memorial service at Seattle Center. A few days after that, on April 11, 1968, the U.S. Congress finally passed the national Fair Housing Act – something Dr. King had spent years advocating for and had now seemingly paid for with his life.

It was in this charged context that Aaron (out on bail) and his brother Elmer traveled with members of the BSU to the Bay Area to attend the second annual West Coast BSU Conference. None of the workshops interested them and, after seeing a flyer, they decided instead to attend the funeral of “Lil’ Bobby Hutton”, a member of the Black Panther Party who had recently been killed by Oakland Police officers in a confrontation, “despite having come out of the house unarmed and his hands up.” The Dixon brothers heard Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale speak for the first time that day. Aaron was so moved that he approached Seale afterward to propose starting a Seattle chapter of the Party. Seale liked the idea.

Almost simultaneously, sensing the cultural shift in the wake of Dr. King’s assassination, Seattle City Council finally passed a fair-housing ordinance on April 19, 1968, long overdue after a 1964 ordinance was voted down more than 2 to 1 by Seattle residents. But it was too little, too late: Seale flew to Seattle to visit the Dixon brothers at their family home in the Madrona neighborhood (905 33rd Ave.) and gave his support for the new Seattle branch of the Black Panther Party – the first chapter outside California – appointing nineteen-year-old Aaron Dixon as captain and his younger brother Elmer as second-in-command. (New chapters of the Black Panther Party would soon open in Portland and Eugene in neighboring Oregon, and they would come under the authority of the Seattle Chapter as well.)

On April 20, 1968, the day after City Council passed their fair-housing ordinance, the *Seattle Daily Times* reported that the “militant, extremist organization”, the Black Panthers, was forming in Seattle. The University of Washington’s “Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project” comments on the historic significance of the Seattle Chapter:

> “[The Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party’s] existence is an illustration of how peripheral branches of an organization would both adhere and diverge from the program established by the national headquarters [in Oakland, California]. The evidence suggests that the Seattle Panthers often respected the Party’s national leadership and worked hard to follow the national agenda. However, to say that the SCBPP was completely dependent on Oakland’s guidance and dictates would be an error. The behavior of the SCBPP was also influenced by its local leadership and local circumstances in the city of Seattle.”

The first SCBPP headquarters was a storefront in the Madrona neighborhood on 34th Ave & Union, near the Dixon family home (the storefront at 1127 1/2 34th Ave. still stands today in 2026, serving as a wine shop). They followed the Ten-Point Program, a set of guidelines written by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 for the national Black Panther Party, with the first point being "We want freedom". The national Black Panther Party's political goals included advocating for better housing, jobs, and education for Black Americans, and they famously espoused the practice of self-defense by openly carrying arms to challenge and prevent police misconduct and brutality. Members were expected to become experts in weapons usage and they were required to attend political education classes. Aaron recalls that time in 1968:

> "On any given day, scores of young men and women in black berets and leather jackets congregated inside and outside our [Madrona] storefront office; sometimes they marched at the park, often carrying rifles and shotguns up the street."

The SCBPP was training to protect and defend the Black community. On July 1, 1968, Aaron was sentenced to six months of jail time for "gross misdemeanor" due to "unlawful assembly" while attending a sit-in" protesting the mistreatment of a Black student at Franklin High School that had occurred over three months earlier *(see "Seattle Chapter Founders: Aaron Dixon & Elmer Dixon III")*. To the community, the delayed charge against Aaron felt like retribution by the city for Aaron's involvement in forming the new chapter of the Black Panther Party in Seattle. The newly-formed Seattle Chapter promptly called a meeting to protest the sentencing of their captain, which led to multiple days of demonstrations in the Central District.

Perhaps in retaliation to the Black community's demonstrations, the Madrona headquarters of the SCBPP was subsequently targeted and raided by police officers later that same month on July 29, 1968, under the guise of arresting Aaron for an allegedly stolen typewriter from the office of a local urban renewal program called Model Cities. A *Seattle Times* article from that time illustrates the effect this had on the community: the article titled "Negroes Criticize Amount of Force In Police Search" noted the community's perception that the presence of "four to six patrol cars and 11 to 14 officers" all because of a "mere typewriter" was excessive. In protest of Dixon's arrest, demonstrations broke out in the Central District again.

Seattle Chapter co-founder, Elmer Dixon recalls the evening his brother Aaron was arrested:

> "We gathered Comrades at the [SCBPP Madrona] office, and about 200 to 300 of us got in military formation – 10 abreast, 30 deep – and marched 15 blocks to Garfield Park. We were psyched to march through the Black community, straight down Cherry Street, in full uniform and in precise formation. Years later, I met a man who had been an eight-year-old boy on that day, watching us through the window in amazement. 'Come to the window!' he called to his mother. She [joined him] to watch us march in unity, shoulder to shoulder. His recollection of that day was that we were legendary heroes in our community."

Aaron Dixon was released from jail later that night and remembers driving back to his parents' house and seeing "throngs of young people rampaging through the streets, overturning cop cars and throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails." He remembers:

> "Police were attacked, cars with whites in them were stoned, windows of businesses were shattered, and police cars were overturned… the chairman [of the Black Panther Party] had never once informed me that I was to lead guerrilla attacks against police forces… I did not realize that new chapters and branches all over the country were grappling with this same dilemma. Across the country, that summer of '68 was seen by some as the beginning of the revolution."

Aaron remembers operating in those early days of the Seattle Chapter "without a blueprint or methodology to guide us, [which meant] we often had to learn how to operate on the fly, following our instincts." In the first few weeks of opening the Seattle Chapter headquarters, "phones at the [SCBPP] office were constantly ringing with people calling for help." The calls came "from people within the Central Area who would ask the Panthers to attend to landlord issues, domestic violence, and numerous other problems that arose in a typical community." Aaron was instructed by national co-founder Bobby Seale that "the Black Panthers are not the police and therefore should not be responding to those types of calls". But the Seattle Chapter failed to follow national instructions and, instead, reacted autonomously in a particularly notorious incident in September 1968

> "The [SCBPP] office started to receive calls from a particular woman whose son was being accosted by white students at Rainier Beach High School. During her first call she was told that there was nothing that the Panthers could do. But she proceeded to call day after day. Then one day she called and it was obvious she was in tears. Around the same time three other mothers called and voiced the same concerns. Over a dozen Panthers were in the office when this particular set of calls came in and they decided to take action. So they grabbed their guns, piled into several cars, and drove to Rainier Beach. When they got there, the Panthers walked into the school with their weapons and found the principal. They told him why they were there and that he needed to start protecting students. They assured the principal that if the Panthers received more calls regarding the problem, they would return."

After this controversial armed confrontation, Black students were no longer openly harassed at Rainier Beach High School. Aaron Dixon recalls, "When [BPP] headquarters in Oakland found out about this [incident], they thought we were pretty wild and crazy [in Seattle]."

Indeed, Seattle was earning a national reputation. In the wake of Dr. King's assassination, cities across the country had erupted in unison. Aaron recalls:

> "Time and Newsweek published charts of the ten cities with the highest rates of firebombing and sniping… and Seattle ranked number one in firebombing and number two in sniping… beating out New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and others. The Panthers had put Seattle on the map."

1969

The following spring of 1969, Washington State legislators proposed a rare state-level gun control law making it illegal to carry weapons in the open, a direct response to the incident with the SCBPP at Rainier Beach High School the prior year. In protest, an armed delegation of Panthers went to the capitol in Olympia and stood in formation on the capitol steps with their weapons pointed in the air. The 1969 "Unlawful Carrying" Law passed, ending the SCBPP's phase of openly carrying weapons. This law continues to exist today in 2026, one of the few gun regulations passed in state history.

Around the same time, the FBI's counterintelligence program "COINTELPRO" (created in 1956 to undermine radical groups) decided to make the Black Panthers their primary concern, and Party offices from coast to coast were targeted and infiltrated with agents instigating Party members to commit crimes in hopes of delegitimizing and vilifying the Black Panthers as an organization. National Black Panther co-founder Huey Newton sent a directive from prison stating that "any Party member involved in participating in any criminal activities was to be effectively expelled from the party." This period was known as "The Purge" and it entailed weeding out SCBPP members who were acting as FBI informants or using the organization to further their own criminal activities.

Elmer Dixon recalls:

> "I led the Goon Squad in Seattle, and we would routinely discipline wayward or reactionary brothers in the Party. We were a young organization at the time and there were a lot of crazy n - - - - s joining the Party, and they were doing stupid shit like robbing stores and beating up women. We had to weed them out of the Party, which meant, most of the time, we ended up kicking their asses."

During this time, national headquarters also declared that "front offices were too vulnerable to police attacks" and "houses or duplex buildings in residential neighborhoods were safer and better suited for working with communities." So the SCBPP closed their storefront headquarters in Madrona and moved into a two-story duplex in a residential part of the Central District that once stood at the corner of 20th Ave and Spruce St at what is today "1919 E Spruce St" but was formerly "173 20th Ave" (since demolished).

Elmer Dixon remembers, "We found a location on 20th and Spruce streets, which became our barracks and our central office – one of the most notorious Panther offices in the country." They rented the property from J. Cordell Jackson (a Black youth coordinator for Seattle's NAACP in 1964, later a marketing manager in 1971). The first floor of the duplex served as the main office (and later, the site of the SCBPP's first free medical clinic) and the upper floor served as "a hideout and bunker" for defending the building. Sandbags filled at Alki Beach were stacked against the walls upstairs and downstairs as defense. Elmer recalls that windows were fortified with sheets of plywood, corrugated steel, even "manhole covers, appropriated from wherever we could find".

From this second headquarters location, the SCBPP began organizing community outreach programs and distributing the Black Panther newspaper. By December of 1969, they had opened the Sydney Miller People's Free Medical Clinic, the first free healthcare clinic in the Pacific Northwest (later changed in 1979 to the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center, which still exists today in 2026). Regardless of the ability to pay, anyone in the community could come to the clinic at 173 20th Ave on "Monday and Thursday from 5:30pm until all patients are seen. The original name for the clinic was in honor of Sydney Miller, an SCBPP member who had been "shot [in the back] by a West Seattle [7-11] store owner" at age 26 on December 2, 1968 when the store owner claimed "he thought Sydney was going to rob the store". (Miller's name would eventually be memorialized on the future People's Wall at this location.)

The SCBPP launched the Free Breakfast for School Children Program during this period as well. When local Safeway stores refused to donate, the SCBPP quickly organized a boycott of the two Safeway stores in the Central District (one on the corner of 23rd Ave & Union St where a PCC exists today, and the other at 23rd Ave & Jackson St where an Amazon Fresh is today), effectively closing both locations. Safeway had already been the subject of boycotts going back as far as 1950 protesting hiring discrimination, but only now was the grocery chain driven out of the Black neighborhood. In Safeway's place, a group of Black grocery stores were organized with one "not far from the Panther office on 20th & Yesler", according to Elmer. (Safeway has since returned to the Central District at 23rd Ave & Madison St as part of a 2004 development that replaced the building that once housed the historic Birdland jazz club.)

But other things were afoot in this period as well: Unbeknownst to the SCBPP, the FBI had sent a memo to the offices of the Justice Department ordering the elimination of the Chicago, L.A., and Seattle Panther chapters. That December of 1969, under the auspices of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), a raid of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party resulted in the death of the Party's deputy chairman, Fred Hampton. Just a few days later, the ATF attacked the L.A. offices of the Black Panthers and over 40 police officers used tear gas, employing helicopters and armored military personnel carriers, shooting and wounding several members. It was the first significant deployment of a new tactical unit originally created to combat the Black Panthers. The police called it the "SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team", and it marked the beginning of a new chapter for law enforcement in America.

1970

SCBPP membership peaked in 1970. At this period in their evolution, the SCBPP regularly advertised free clothing "10 a.m. until 5 p.m. daily" and free food "to aid the needy" at the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party's "Welton Armstead Community Center" at "173 20th Ave", but this kind of community social work was largely overlooked by U.S. Congress when they decided to launch a full-scale investigation of the Black Panther Party that year. While much of the investigation's attention focused on national leadership and the Oakland headquarters, several chapters were also investigated, including the one in Seattle.

Chapter co-founder Elmer Dixon was subpoenaed to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington, D.C. When asked for his address, he stated “173 20th Ave” (where the People’s Wall is located). After that, his only replies were to take the Fifth Amendment, which he did 17 times, infuriating senators. In his autobiography, Elmer Dixon states:

> “I wanted to tell [Congress] that if it was Un-American to serve kids breakfast, if it was Un-American to provide free healthcare, and if it was Un-American to provide free food and clothing to the starving masses… then this America was not the America it pretended to be.”

In the incendiary summary of the investigation, the conclusion by Congress insinuated that failure to put an end to the Black Panthers could mean the end of the U.S.:

> “If a successful revolution should occur, the Panthers would replace the present form of government in the United States with a system comparable to Castro’s in Cuba… There would be no millionaires. The Panthers’ idea is to take from the Establishment and ‘to give to the Negro people.’”

It was not long after the hearing that the FBI demonstrated they were doing everything in their power to eliminate the Party. Flying back to Seattle from D.C., Elmer learned of a Seattle Chapter member having been shot. Larry Ward, a decorated Vietnam War veteran “had apparently been [tricked by a police informant to place] a bomb device at the front door of [Hardcastle Real Estate Co. on 24th & Union, across from Liberty Bank, the first Black bank on the West Coast]… and was shot to death at age 22 [by police] while trying to flee”.

The Seattle Chapter became consumed with getting justice for targeted Party members, especially in the case of Ward’s death. SCBPP members diligently showed up to the coroner’s inquest-jury. Even when a majority verdict ruled that Ward’s killing was “unjustifiable” and he had died by “criminal means”, justice was not served: Area police “as far away as Tacoma” objected to the verdict and signed a petition “urging [police] work stoppages until a new inquest”, leading to the county prosecutor refusing to prosecute the police officer who was responsible. The Black Panthers’ lawyer went as far as to file an application for a writ *directing* the prosecutor to charge the policeman responsible for Ward’s death but, in June, a superior court judge ruled that the prosecutor couldn’t “be forced to charge a policeman”. (Ward’s name is memorialized on the People’s Wall.)

Since the ATF had attacked the Chicago and L.A. chapters of the Black Panthers, they had turned their eye to Seattle, eager to use their new weapon, the SWAT team. Still unaware that the Seattle Chapter had been targeted for “elimination” by the FBI, the SCBPP was tipped off by a newspaper reporter that the ATF was planning on raiding the headquarters. The SCBPP prepared for the attack, but violence was deterred: Mayor Wes Uhlman, a Democrat, allegedly stood in their way, threatening he would dispatch local police in the SCBPP’s defense if the ATF or FBI attempted to raid the SCBPP’s office. The mayor was influenced by the fact that prominent civil-rights leader, Edwin T. Pratt, had been murdered outside his Shoreline home in 1969 just before Uhlman took office (a park named in Pratt's honor exists two blocks south of the People's Wall in 2026). At that time, Seattle had the highest per capita level of bombs in the country. The mayor believed the Black Panthers were "fairly benign" despite some "fairly outrageous statements" by members of the Party elsewhere, and he refused active cooperation.

The People's Wall mural was not yet painted, but the wall on which it is painted made a cameo appearance in one telling incident of this period: SCBPP member Valentine Hobbes was stopped by police while selling newspapers just two blocks away from the 20th & Spruce headquarters and was accused of stealing a woman's purse. Several Panthers had already lost their lives in trumped-up altercations with police (Elmer remembers that "bullet holes in [SCBPP member] Larry [Ward]'s armpits showed he was trying to surrender when he was gunned down and murdered"), so Valentine had reason to fear for his life and he began running back to headquarters for safety. Police chased him. Aaron recalls:

> "Using every bit of his sprinter's speed, [Valentine] made it to the concrete retaining wall at the edge of the office property [at 173 20th Ave]. Taking a giant leap up from the sidewalk, he landed on the grass and continued to the office door. The cops were right on his tail. One of the officers jumped out of the squad car and was running behind him. Once inside the office, Valentine went straight for the front desk, reached in the drawer, and pulled out the .357 we had named 'Martin Luther King'… As more cops showed up, throngs of supporters and people from the community began to gather, protesting the cops' presence."

Elmer remembers the same incident:

> "I dashed to the porch [facing 20th Ave]. Valentine Hobbes was running up the street with police in hot pursuit. Valentine jumped over the top of the [property retaining] wall and into the office, just as I slammed the door behind him and secured the bolt. We immediately went into Attack Mode, going down our checklist in preparation for an assault… Above our heads, the trap door to upstairs opened, and weapons began being passed down to the offices below, along with rounds of ammunition, body armor, and gas masks… Ironically, DJ Robert L. Scott from the local Black radio station, KYAC, was in the office for a feature story [and] we let him continue taping live on the radio station while we prepared for attack… Within 20 minutes, dozens of people gathered in front [of the headquarters], to stand between the police and the Panther office. Many of them came with their large dogs. Inside the office, Robert L broadcasted live."

Police demanded Valentine be surrendered for the alleged crime he committed. Elmer demanded the police produce a witness. As part of a delicate negotiation, it was agreed that Valentine would be part of a lineup for a witness to identify the perpetrator. That same evening, members of the SCBPP along with their attorney accompanied Valentine downtown to the police precinct where they anxiously entered "the silent police lobby, where there wasn't a person in sight." They waited, but nobody ever showed up. "They [the police] never had a witness in the first place," recalls Elmer. "So, we left, and never heard about that case again."

In fall of that year, legendary rockstar Jimi Hendrix asked the SCBPP to work as security guards for a hometown concert he was playing at Sick's Seattle Stadium in the Mt. Baker neighborhood (today a Lowe's hardware store). Elmer remembers meeting Hendrix backstage and that the musician "marveled at the thought of a Black Panther Party chapter in his hometown of Seattle, and [the fact] that it was started by cats from the high school that he had attended several years earlier [Garfield High]." When Elmer asked for a donation to the SCBPP's Children's Free Breakfast program, Hendrix said he'd do more than just donate money and that he'd do an entire benefit concert for the SCBPP when he returned from Europe. Sadly, that would be the last concert he played in Seattle: several weeks later in London, Hendrix died at age 27 by aspiration. (Elmer remembers: "[Jimi Hendrix's] music was too inciteful and too revolutionary. And for that, I believe he was killed… assassinated, according to a CIA agent who gave a deathbed confession.")

It was in the wake of these struggles in October of 1970 when artist Dion Henderson completed a mural at the SCBPP headquarters on the street-level retaining wall facing 20th Ave, spelling out the names of each Party member in Seattle that had been lost. The headquarters continued to be targeted by police and FBI, and the People's Wall was often the last line of defense and the location of altercations. Members routinely resisted arrest in front of the headquarters, and second-in-command Elmer Dixon himself was accused of threatening officers when several police vans blocked the street in front of the house and he came out to complain. Several years later, utility companies including Seattle City Light, Pacific Northwest Bell and Washington Natural Gas Co. admitted they supplied confidential information about 173 20th Ave to the FBI throughout 1970.

It was a tenuous time for the Party and increased vilification of the Black Panther Party by the mainstream press, coupled with infighting fomented by the FBI's COINTELPRO operation, led to an order given by national Party leadership for key members of each chapter to consolidate their efforts back at national headquarters in Oakland.

1971

The SCBPP vacated the Seattle headquarters at 20th Ave & Spruce in 1971 and the property was seized by the federal government.

Later that same year, The SCBPP reopened a block away at 169 19th Ave. where they developed the first free food program in Seattle, which became the forerunner of the city's food bank operations. The SCBPP also began a sickle cell anemia awareness campaign that year to combat a disease which disproportionately affected Black people, spurring the formation of the National Sickle Cell Disease Association of America. A Busing to Prisons Program was also launched to make it easier for the Black community to visit loved ones in prison.

Meanwhile, national Black Panther co-founder Huey Newton had a disagreement with Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver over the necessity of armed struggle, which led to a fatal split in the Party. Longtime Black Panther Party member Elaine Brown replaced Cleaver as Minister of Information.

1972-1978

In 1972, core SCBPP members including Aaron Dixon were ordered to move to national headquarters in Oakland. His brother Elmer was serving a sentence in prison at the time and would later return to Seattle on parole where he was required to stay.

The original building at “173 20th Ave” was razed by the federal government in 1973 and remained vacant and overgrown for ten years, except for what remained of the lot’s retaining wall and its mural, known as the People’s Wall. According to Elmer Dixon, the demolition and erasure of 173 20th Ave was potentially due to “the police [not wanting] our headquarters to stand as a symbol of our defiance”. Not only was the former headquarters building torn down, but the address was effectively erased from King County property records (a new building was later erected on the site in 1983 facing Spruce St instead of 20th Ave, thereafter becoming “1919 Spruce St”). The old address no longer existed. Elmer recalls returning from prison to Seattle and visiting the site where the old headquarters had been:

> “Gone was the massive fortress that we had built to protect us… Gone were the sandbags, the thousands and thousands of rounds of ammunition, the gas masks, the bulletproof vests, and the steel and plywood sandwiches on the windows… The old synagogue directly across the street from the old Panther office was completely gone. I was stunned. Only the People’s Wall remained.”

In the absence of his brother Aaron, Elmer Dixon worked to sustain the SCBPP’s programs, even introducing new aspects like blood pressure screening and prison tutoring.

In 1974, national Party chairman Huey Newton escaped to Cuba to avoid U.S. charges for murder and assault and, in his place, Elaine Brown became chairman of the Party (until 1977). In 1976, Elmer was summoned by Brown to national headquarters in Oakland where she accused him of disrespecting Ericka Huggins, a member of the Central Committee, over a disagreement about whether or not to provide red meat in the SCBPP’s free children’s breakfast program. As punishment, Brown ordered Elmer be transferred to the Oakland headquarters. He asked to return to Seattle to gather his things, but back in the Pacific Northwest, he contemplated the order, “knowing that if I did not return to Central, we [the Seattle Chapter] would most likely end up splitting away from the Black Panther Party.” Instead of complying, Elmer reached out to Brown to say, “‘Me and the ‘rads are taking over the operation of the Seattle chapter and running the survival programs on our own.”

By this time, Aaron Dixon had been assigned to act as Brown’s bodyguard in Oakland, what he later terms as “the most difficult job assignment [he] ever had”. Brown, incensed by Elmer’s insubordination, decided to travel to Seattle with Aaron to ostensibly persuade Elmer to remain in the Party. Aaron recalls of the trip, “Elaine was not used to Panthers defying the hierarchy, but Elmer refused to back down.”

An armed standoff at the new Seattle headquarters at 19th Ave & Spruce St led to the two factions walking away from each other in a stalemate. “Secretly, I was proud of the way

[Elmer] had stood up to Elaine," Aaron remembers. "We [Elmer and Aaron Dixon] had always been close as brothers could be… [and] as dedicated as I was to the movement and to the philosophy of the Black Panther Party, I was not about to stand by and watch my brother be eliminated." Elmer recalls:

> "[Now, the SCBPP's] main focus was to make sure that there would be no retaliation [from Central headquarters]… we didn't know if the Squad or some individual would strike back at the rebuff that we had handed Elaine and her team… We maintained our programs, with the only difference being that we no longer had the Black Panther newspaper to sell."

Elmer continued to run the SCBPP's programs until the chapter office officially closed its doors two years later in 1978. After ten years of serving the community, the SCBPP ceased operation. It was the longest-functioning chapter of the Party. In recalling the SCBPP era, one member remembers:

> "The Panthers were always there. They were the heart and soul of the Central District. They took care of us. They fed the community. They made sure we were medically taken care of. There was no other place to go. Going to the police was stupid. You would end up a murder victim or you'd get arrested."

Of the 13 original Black Panther Party-founded healthcare clinics across the U.S., Seattle's Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center remains the only one still in operation. Today, in 2026, the clinic is located just three blocks away from where it first started at the former SCBPP's second headquarters.

The People's Wall mural is all that physically remains linking this location in Seattle's Central District to a historic era for not just the city, but for an entire nation grappling with different aspects of the civil-rights movement. The SCBPP was a significant outgrowth of a much broader national movement that spanned the United States and evolved throughout the 1960s and 1970s. HistoryLink writer Linda Holden Givens describes the SCBPP as a unique necessity of the era: "The boldness of the Seattle Black Panther Party was matched by the boldness of the historical circumstances."

Events of that time continue to reverberate into and inform the present.

Seattle's Black American History

Black American heritage in Washington began in the territorial era with the arrival of Black settlers in both rural and urban areas even prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 which declared "that all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforward shall be free." Manuel Lopes arrived in Seattle at least ten years before Emancipation in 1852 becoming the first Black American resident of King County. Born in Cape Verde off the coast of Africa in 1812, he either traveled or was kidnapped to New England where he had become a sailor and eventually settled in Seattle only one year after the first white settlers arrived. He opened one of Seattle's first barber shops on First Avenue South, also becoming the first Black American property owner in Seattle.

The second Black American in Seattle was ex-navy man William Grose, born in Washington, D.C. to free black restaurant owners and arriving in Seattle in 1860. He opened his own popular restaurant in 1876 on Yesler Way called "Our House," expanding it into a well known three-story hotel by 1883. (The future mayor of Seattle during the Great Seattle Fire of 1889, Robert Moran, credited Grose as giving him his first meal when he originally arrived in Seattle unable to pay.)

Prior to the 1890s, Seattle's Black population was small and grew very slowly--the federal census recorded only Lopes in 1860 and, twenty years later in 1880, only 21 other Black Americans had joined him. Passage of the 1875 Federal Civil Rights Act further reinforced Black American citizenship, forbidding discrimination in such places as theaters, restaurants, hotels, and trains (the repeal of the act in 1885 had little effect). The 1883 Territorial Suffrage Act further forbade discrimination, this time on the basis of religion or sex, and the first Public Accommodation law went into effect in 1890 when the Washington State Constitution was adopted.

Black families with women and children didn't appear in significant numbers in the Pacific Northwest until after the completion of the railroads in 1883. Shortly thereafter in 1886, the earliest Black church in the territory was established (eventually called First African Methodist Episcopal or AME). By 1891, there were 24 Black American women reported in the City Directory.

In contrast to Oregon, Washington Territory never had laws restricting Black American settlement. Many Black Americans migrated to the Pacific Northwest expecting a more tolerant environment than the rest of the country. Robert O. Lee, first Black man admitted to the Washington State bar in 1889, was reported in the *Daily Post-Intelligencer* as having come to the Northwest seeking a place where "race prejudice would not interfere with prosperity." According to Quintard Taylor in *The Forging of a Black Community*, Seattle was "the end of the line both socially and geographically. There was no better place to go." To an extent, Black Americans could find opportunities in the Pacific Northwest they couldn't find elsewhere, but there were also warnings. In 1879, the *Daily Post-Intelligencer* published the following commentary:

> "[Black Americans'] coming North, we think a mistake. There is room only for a limited number of colored people here. Overstep that limit and there comes a clash in which the colored man must suffer. The few that are here do vastly better than they would do if their numbers increased a hundredfold."

The Black population saw a spike in numbers when the first black coal miners (some recruited to the area as strikebreakers) began to arrive in Roslyn and Franklin in the late 1880s. Until the Great Seattle Fire of 1889, most Black people lived in the Pioneer Square area from 1st to 3rd Avenues, between Jackson and James Streets. After William Grose lost his hotel-saloon in the fire, he moved out in 1890 to a 12-acre property in the future Central District that he had purchased from Henry Yesler in 1882.

Near the end of the 19th century, Black Americans actively participated in local politics and campaigns, aiming for recognition and advancement of their interests. John Conna, a Black Civil War veteran became the first Black political appointee in the Washington Territory when Republican Party leaders appointed him Assistant Sergeant at Arms of the 1889 Washington Territorial House of Representatives. The first local branch of the Afro-American League was organized and incorporated in Seattle in 1890 by Isaac W. Evans, who was hired later that year as the city's first Black police officer (although he would resign less than a year later).

There were only 22 Black Americans in Seattle in 1880 but ten years later that number would multiply to around 300 and, another ten years after that in 1900, another 100 Black Americans had moved to the city. As Black Americans sought to escape increasing discrimination and violence in the south, the following decade in Seattle saw the greatest increase in population: Between 1900 and 1910, the population of Black Americans increased over 450% to 2,296. As a result, racial tensions also increased, changing the relatively tolerant environment.

At the turn of the 20th century, Seattle had seven Black newspapers. In 1909, the prominent Black editor of the *Seattle Republican*, Horace Cayton, who lived in the largely white neighborhood of Capitol Hill was taken to court for allegedly "lowering real estate values". The Cayton family left their home in 1909, moving to the Central District which served as a center for the vast majority of the city's Black community beginning around 1910 until the 1980s. *The Seattle Republican* was forced to shut down in 1913 due to lost revenue caused by increasing racial discrimination and, in response, Black American leaders in Seattle decided it was time to establish a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was one of the first branches west of the Mississippi, and Cayton served as one of the original leaders.

Tensions continued to accelerate in the Puget Sound area. Black workers became strikebreakers in the 1916 longshoreman's strike and the ship stewards' strike in 1921, protesting the all-white membership of the unions, which generated bitter animosity. By the 1920s, Black businesses were much more likely to have all or mostly Black customers and clients. This was financially problematic, as the entire Black population of Seattle never comprised more than 1% of the total until about 1940.

Right around this time, in 1927, white homeowners began campaigns to enact racially restrictive covenants that would bind their property and that of future owners from renting or selling their homes to non-white families. The campaigns yielded 38 neighborhood restrictive agreements involving 964 home owners, 183 blocks, and 958 lots. It was not long after, in 1938, that Seattle became the third U.S. city (after Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Birmingham, Alabama) to document law enforcement officers reportedly killing an unarmed Black American. (Berry Lawson was beaten to death by three officers after he was removed from a hotel where he worked and was arrested for "loitering in the lobby". All three officers were convicted of manslaughter by a judge and jury, though two of the officers were released only a few months later.)

In 1948, many of the restrictive covenants on homes in Seattle expired and petitions to extend them failed, followed by the Supreme Court declaring restrictive covenants unenforceable. Black American homeownership rates in Seattle became one of the highest in the country compared to other American cities, with roughly 30% of Black Americans owning their homes in 1940 in Seattle in contrast to only 7% who owned homes in Chicago and just 4% who owned homes in New York City. Still, Black Americans were only allowed to buy homes in certain neighborhoods. Harsh residential segregation persisted and the unemployment rate among Blacks was double what it was for whites. While Washington became the ninth state in the nation to enact a Fair Employment Practices Law in 1949, the "official" end of discriminatory restrictions did not mean the end of racism.

Throughout this era, the Negro Repertory Company of the Seattle Federal Theater Project (FTP) which operated between 1936 and 1939 was third in the nation in number of productions only after New York and Boston. (This was perhaps a harbinger for what was to come later in the 1950s and 1960s with legendary Black Seattle musicians such as Ernestine Anderson, Quincy Jones, Buddy Catlett, Floyd Standifer and Jimi Hendrix.)

Post-WWII, thousands of Black Americans had migrated from the South to places like Seattle. Many worked at companies like Boeing. For the first time, Black Americans became Seattle's largest minority. In 1950, Charles Stokes was elected to the 37th legislative seat, becoming Seattle's first Black American representative in Olympia. That same year, the Citizens Committee for Fair Employment formed, organizing boycotts against discriminatory hiring practices by the city's Safeway stores, joining other organizations throughout the decade that advocated for equal employment.

By 1960, there were 48,738 Black people in Washington and the following year, Seattle established a chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights organization that first formed in Chicago in 1942, dedicated to gaining equality for Black Americans through the use of nonviolent means. Seattle CORE's first major operation in 1961 involved "selective buying campaigns" and "shop-ins" which targeted stores known to practice employment discrimination. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made a single visit to Seattle in October 1961 in coordination with CORE's "Drive for Equal Employment in Downtown Stores"—the largest protest campaign involving racial discrimination ever undertaken in the state of Washington at the time. These protests resulted in the hiring of a small number of Black Americans at local department stores and supermarkets by the end of 1963 but, again, this did not end employment discrimination.

The same day as the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, the Seattle Public School District became the first major school system in the country to initiate a voluntary desegregation plan *(see "Seattle Chapter Founders: Aaron & Elmer Dixon" for more about SCBPP co-founder Aaron Dixon's experience in Seattle Public Schools)*. Seattle CORE launched a second campaign that same year focused on housing discrimination and exposing racism in the Seattle housing market. But, while there were vocal advocates for integration, Seattle voters still soundly defeated an "open housing" ordinance in 1964 that would have let anyone live anywhere. It lost by more than 2-to-1.

In 1967, Seattle's City Council got its first Black member, Sam Smith, who served for 24 years. It was only after the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 that an open housing ordinance passed. Three days after the assassination, nearly 10,000 people in Seattle marched in memory of Dr. King's life and legacy. The city council unanimously voted for an open housing ordinance just three weeks after his death.

It was a precarious time for race relations in Seattle. Later that same month in 1968, Seattle established the first and longest-running chapter of the militant Black Panther Party outside Oakland, California, where it was founded in 1966. The Seattle Chapter operated from 1968 to 1978 (*see "Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party"*). The following year, in 1969, the prominent civil-rights leader and Executive Director of the Seattle Urban League, Edwin T. Pratt – who had led the effort to desegregate Seattle Public Schools and who also spearheaded an initiative for equal housing and employment opportunities – was shot dead in the doorway of his home at 17916 1st Avenue NE in Shoreline. Witnesses reported seeing two men fleeing the scene with a third person driving a getaway car. The day after the murder, the FBI entered the investigation at the request of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department but, despite this additional manpower, the case was closed after just three and a half months. (In a piece by the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 25 years later in 1994, new information hinted that the shooters had been hired by local construction contractors due to Pratt's efforts to integrate Black people into the workforce, threatening white workers). A Central District park was named in Pratt's honor in 1976, although the case remains unsolved.

In 1977, Seattle became the largest city in the U.S. to voluntarily undertake district-wide school desegregation through a mandatory busing program. In the first year, the number of white students dropped by nearly 12 percent compared to the previous year. This program would continue for nearly two decades, only ending in the late 1990s when the School Board threw out zoning lines, allowing any of the district's students to attend any school they wanted -- so long as they could get into it.

Eighteen years after Dr. King's assassination, a federal holiday was dedicated to him in 1986. That same year, it was discovered that the original 1852 namesake for Seattle's "King County" was Vice President William Rufus de Vane King, a slave owner and advocate for the Fugitive Slave Act. It took another 19 years for the Washington state legislature to formally vote to make Dr. King the County's official namesake in 2005.

Seattle would get its first Black mayor in 1990 with Norman Rice who served as the 49th mayor of Seattle, serving two terms from 1990 to 1997. Ron Sims would later become King County Executive in 1996 and, in 2009, he became deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the 44th president of the United States (and the first Black president), Barack Obama.

Seattle Chapter Co-Founders

Aaron Dixon & Elmer Dixon III

Brothers Aaron Dixon and Elmer Dixon III were co-founders of the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party, with Aaron serving as captain and Elmer serving as second-in-command. Both born in Chicago, the Dixon family moved to Seattle when their father took a job at Boeing (young Elmer was only 7 years old when they moved). They grew up in Seattle's Central District in the Madrona neighborhood, both graduating from Garfield High School. Their parents taught Aaron, Elmer and their other brother Michael the importance of fighting for social justice.

In Aaron's autobiography *My People Are Rising*, he recalls growing up in Madrona, a neighborhood within Seattle's predominantly Black Central District in the 1960s:

> "For the most part, Seattle was different from a lot of places in the United States at the time. Racism was not out in the open … nevertheless, it was there, hidden, mostly in faraway neighborhoods…. I remember listening to the older [Black] teenagers in the neighborhood as they shared their battle stories of venturing out of the Central District, our safe haven, going to neighborhoods like Ballard, Queen Anne, and Shoreline, and being attacked by bat-waving white boys… Up on Madrona, we kids were largely insulated from the tentacles of racism. It was only when we ventured out that it reached us."

Aaron recalls one of those pivotal experiences outside the Central District being when he and his brother Elmer's tennis team qualified for the Parks Department city championship, which was held at the Seattle Tennis Club, a prestigious club on Lake Washington which still exists today in 2026 in the Madison Park neighborhood. The Dixons competed in the only all-minority team, and they won, but Aaron describes how they were treated:

> "Besides receiving trophies, we were supposed to get lunch in the club dining room and a free swim in the Olympic-sized pool. To our astonishment, they would not allow us in the restaurant or the pool. Instead, they brought hot dogs out to us and directed us down to the beach, while we watched the white kids we had defeated being led into the club dining room."

Aaron explains that his father would often "come home from work at Boeing filled with rage from dealing with some petty racism". His mother "had her share of stories of being told lies such as 'No, we don't have any jobs open,' despite a sign stating the contrary." In November 1961 when Aaron was 13 years old, he recalls Martin Luther King Jr. making his one visit to Seattle:

> "I found myself marching down 23rd Avenue South, walking arm to arm with thousands of other people of all colors, singing 'We Shall Overcome' and other protest songs… culminating in a large rally and a speech by Martin Luther King… I made my way to the bandstand at Garfield Park, watching him and listening to his words – words that I had

> heard on TV, on the radio, and on record albums… All across the country, thousands of Black, white, Asian, Native American, and Latino kids, just like me, were slowly making an unconscious move, positioning for the big push to change America."

One year later in 1962, the Seattle chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sued the school district to end school segregation, a phenomena that was occurring as a result of decades of racial housing covenants and illegal federal government "redlining" which had created a de facto racial dividing line at the Lake Washington Ship Canal – with minority students concentrated in under-funded schools in the south and white students in well-funded schools in the north. (In a study of test scores between 2009 - 2012, Seattle's gap in academic outcomes between Black and white students was still one of the widest in the country.) In an attempt to resolve this inequity, the Seattle school district agreed to a voluntary school transfer program in 1963 and, inspired by Dr. King's message, young Aaron Dixon became one of only 250 students who signed up. (It would not be until 1977 when Seattle would become the nation's first major city to voluntarily integrate schools via mandatory bussing – one year before the future Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party would cease operation.)

Aaron transferred to what he described as "an all-white school called Denny Blaine, located in a white neighborhood of fine homes called Magnolia, which sat on a bluff overlooking Elliott Bay" and later continued on to Queen Anne High School, "an all-white high school on top of Queen Anne Hill, in a middle-class neighborhood of Victorian homes." He remembers a turning point in February 1965 – around the same time Malcolm X was assassinated – when a high school basketball championship between white Queen Anne High and his neighborhood's Black high school, Garfield High, resulted in a referee calling a "phantom foul" that unfairly declared Queen Anne the victor. Aaron heard that white kids from Queen Anne "were attacked and beaten after the game" and when he went to school the next day, he "noticed that the white kids were looking at me strangely, staring at me like I had shit on my back." By 1966, Dixon's junior year, he was "tired of the racism at Queen Anne [High School] and the whole idea of voluntary [school] integration" and he transferred to Garfield High School, joining his brother Elmer.

In the spring of 1967, Aaron and Elmer attended a lecture given at Garfield High School by Stokely Carmichael, the charismatic leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and one of the original "freedom riders". The brothers "walked out of the auditorium transformed". Aaron graduated from Garfield in June 1967 and began attending the University of Washington that same year in September as one of "only thirty Black students". He remembers writing a term paper at the UW about Malcolm X that "created a desire to know more about the plight of Black people" and promptly joined a new Black student organization called the Black Student Union (BSU). He was energized and inspired by the radical lectures given by the organization's sponsored guests, and he and Elmer eventually both also joined the SNCC.

He remembers the first time he had "an actual physical conflict with the cops" was when he and his friends were arrested at a YMCA on 23rd St in the Central District. A dispute at a

“Battle of the Bands” dance led to “cops showing up and… pushing, shoving, beating us with their batons”. He goes on to reflect, “They [the cops] did not have to come down on us the way they did. But through their actions, they brought us together, uniting us and politicizing us, all in one night.” A crowd formed to chase the cops away and “started throwing rocks and bottles at the white passersby, yelling obscenities… We erupted that night with Seattle’s first little riot.” The Dixon brothers were arrested with others and taken downtown, but released a few hours later without being charged.

On March 29, 1968, Aaron joined roughly 30 other BSU members at a “little sandwich shop across from Franklin [High School]” for a sit-in to protest the suspension of a Black Franklin High School student who had been punished while his white aggressor remained in school. The demonstration led to classes being canceled for the day and, the next day, the suspended Black student was reinstated at Franklin High and, a few days after that, the biased vice-principal who had suspended him was transferred to another school. Justice had seemingly prevailed, except there was a catch: Aaron Dixon along with other demonstrators were charged with “unlawful assembly" a few days later also. They were handcuffed, taken to the police station and booked for the first time in King County Jail on April 4, 1968, the same day Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated.

Shortly after this, with Aaron out on bail, the Dixon brothers heard Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale speak for the first time in Oakland, California. Seale later flew to Seattle to give his support for a new Seattle branch of the Black Panthers – the first chapter outside of California – appointing nineteen-year-old Aaron Dixon as captain and his younger brother Elmer as second in command*(see “Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party”, 1968).*

Aaron Dixon went on to lead the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party with the help of his brother Elmer through its first four formative years *(see “Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party”, 1968 - 1978)*, before being ordered to move to Party national headquarters in Oakland in 1972 where he worked with national leadership including Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Elaine Brown.

Meanwhile, Elmer (under parole and unable to move to Oakland), stayed in Seattle and reorganized the chapter, working to sustain the Party’s free breakfast program and health clinic. Elmer maintained the Panther organization until 1976 when he had a falling out with national Black Panther Party leadership and parted ways. He worked strategically over the next years to set up the community programs for continued independent sustainability until the Seattle Chapter officially ceased operation in 1978.

After the Black Panther Party dissolved as an organization, Aaron worked for several non-profit organizations focusing on drug and gang violence and working with homeless youth. In 2006, he ran for the U.S. Senate seat held by Maria Cantwell of Washington state since 2001. Elmer Dixon went on to found his own diversity consulting firm where he continues to work as principal owner.

Today, Aaron Dixon is the father of six and lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Elmer Dixon III is the father of five and lives in Port Townsend, Washington.

Mural Artist(s)

Dion Henderson

Dion Henderson completed the mural on the People's Wall at the Seattle chapter of the Black Panther Party on Oct. 6, 1970.

Henderson was born to Eugene and Virginia Henderson on July 8, 1941 in Detroit, Michigan, before the family relocated to Inkster, Michigan, where Henderson graduated from Inkster High School in 1959 and enlisted in the U.S. Army. Henderson served in the military for seven and a half years with tours in Vietnam. After his service, he settled in Seattle, Washington with his wife Yvonne and children, Stacy and Sydney.

It was noted that Henderson had a gift and talent for art since early childhood. He studied art at the Burley School of Professional Art and the Seattle Art Institute, and he taught fashion illustration, graphic design and Black art history at Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington. SCBPP captain Aaron Dixon recalls that Henderson was associated with the Black Student Union at the University of Washington as well as the Black Panther Party, and it was Henderson that approached Dixon about painting a mural on the street-level retaining wall facing 20th Ave at the SCBPP headquarters at 173 20th Ave.

Local artist Al Doggett remembers: "When I arrived in Seattle in 1967, Dion Henderson was a very popular and successful Black artist. He was the visual voice of what was going on in the African American community. With his artwork, his paintings and posters reflected the mood of what African Americans were experiencing, not only here in Seattle but around the country."

The mural Henderson painted on the People's Wall is described by Doggett as "reflecting the story of Black American struggles and injustices the Black Panther Party was fighting to overcome." Doggett adds that "Dion left his mark on Seattle with the many artworks he produced, and he touched a lot of people with his ability to help and give of his time and to teach art classes to young people."

In 1980, Henderson moved to Washington, DC to become an investigative consultant working for the district government, which he did for 23 years. In 1999, he married Barbara Strother Herron. His artwork has since been exhibited in Washington and California and has been published in *Black Artists on Art* and *Essence Magazine*. He passed away on October 23, 2010.

Eddie Ray Walker

Local Black artist Eddie Ray Walker re-touched paint on the mural in 2008 for the 40th Anniversary of the SCBPP.

Walker was a graduate of Seattle's Cleveland High School and the University of Washington. He was a key figure in founding the Black Student Union (BSU) at the University of Washington around the same time the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party (SCBPP) co-founders Aaron and Elmer Dixon were involved. In 1968, the year the SCBPP was formed, Walker participated in a staged sit-in with the newly-formed BSU at the UW administration building to issue their demands that UW President Charles E. Odegaard take steps to make the UW campus more accessible and welcoming for current and future Black students (Walker climbed the side of the UW administration building to gain access to the UW president's office). The actions of Walker and others that day would ultimately lead to the UW's formation of what is known today as the Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity and also the Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center.

Two of his paintings – portraits of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth – hang in Seattle's Douglass-Truth Library a few blocks east of the People's Wall in the Central District. He passed away on December 4, 2023.

Central District & Property History

The Central District neighborhood in Seattle, Washington, has a rich history of overlapping concentrations of diverse minority communities that have historically called it home, including Black and Jewish families as well as Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos.

William Grose, the second Black American settler in Seattle and a successful entrepreneur and owner of a famous three-story hotel and restaurant in present-day Pioneer Square (*see "Seattle's Black American History"*), created the anchor of the Central District's Black community when he purchased 12 acres of heavily wooded land in Madison Valley from Seattle "co-founder" and mill owner Henry Yesler in 1882. When Grose's hotel/restaurant burned down in the Great Seattle Fire of 1889, he moved to his Madison Valley property along present-day E. Madison St. & 23rd Ave where he built a home (which still stands today at 1733 24th Ave) and began selling smaller parcels of land to other prominent Black families in the city. The area became the Black community's northern anchor for what grew into the Central District.

Just two blocks south of the People's Wall, the Yesler Streetcar opened in 1888 as one of Seattle's first streetcar lines, operating on E. Yesler Way until its final run in 1940. It ran from Henry Yesler's sawmill in Pioneer Square all the way east up the original "skid row" (Yesler Way) and across a giant trestle bridge that led down to Leschi Park on Lake Washington – once a seasonal Duwamish settlement frequented by Nisqually Chief Leschi (1808-1858) that was developed in 1889 as a ferry landing, boathouse and, eventually, a six-story casino and theatre, roller-skating rink, dance pavilion, and zoo. (Chief Leschi had reportedly traveled on what would be later called "Yesler Way" to modern-day Pioneer Square to lead the "Battle of Seattle", the 1856 ambush of white settlers which resulted in Leschi's capture and hanging.) In the early 1900s, residents of 173 20th Ave would have had prime access to transportation that would take them directly into the business core of Pioneer Square. Indeed, even before a home was ever built on the site, advertisements in

1899 for lots in “Dean’s Addition" (where 173 20th Ave was located) boasted the lots were “near Yesler.”

From 1890 until about World War I, the specific part of the Central District where the People’s Wall exists was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood with Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews and Mediterranean Sephardic Jews living together. This is corroborated by data collected in the 1939 Works Progress Administration (WPA) Seattle Residential Survey, which reveals that the block where the People’s Wall exists appeared at that time during the Great Depression to be mostly inhabited by Ashkenazi Jews, while the block across 20th Ave was largely inhabited by Sephardic Jews (Seattle has the third-largest Sephardic population in the country).

The name “Nissim Chiprut” is listed as the property owner on tax documents for 173 20th Ave (where the People’s Wall is located) in 1925 and, later, the family of a grocer named “Sam Azose” is noted as living in the duplex in 1931. Azose was the president of Sephardic Bikur Holim congregation in 1929, which constructed a synagogue that same year just one block south (*see “Nearby Landmarks – Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ”*). Azose was the son of Solomon Azose, a Turkish immigrant who was the first Sephardic rabbi in Seattle, and Nissim Chiprut was Azose’s brother-in-law and worked for the Pacific Coast Coal Company. (Sephardic Bikur Holim synagogue was sold in 1963 to a predominantly Black Christian congregation, becoming Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ, while the Jewish congregation moved to a new synagogue near Seward Park.)

Planned neighborhoods where developers put racially restrictive housing covenants in their deeds were widespread by the 1920s in Seattle as was “redlining” by insurers, which confined non-white families to living in the Central District since they were excluded from other neighborhoods. In the post-war 1950s, during the “Second Great Migration”, more than 5 million Black Americans migrated from the South to northern cities like Seattle where many worked for companies like Boeing. By the 1960s and 1970s, the Central District was a majority-Black neighborhood and the epicenter of Seattle's civil-rights movement. Institutions like Mount Zion Baptist Church and Garfield High School served as organizing grounds for activists, who fought against segregation in housing, employment, and education.

In the late 1960s, the Central District neighborhood became home to the first Black Panther Party chapter outside of California, creating vital community programs like free breakfasts for children and a free family medical clinic. This history of activism and self-sufficiency has cemented the Central District's legacy not just as a place where Black people were forced to live, but as a place where they built their own institutions, fought for their rights, and nurtured a strong cultural identity that continues to influence the city today.

The Seattle Chapter of the Black Panthers (SCBPP) occupied the duplex at 20th Ave & Spruce St beginning in 1969, renting the property from J. Cordell Jackson (a Black youth coordinator for Seattle’s NAACP in 1964, later a marketing manager in 1971). The People’s Wall mural was painted on the retaining wall at 173 20th Ave and completed on October 6, 1970 *(see “The People’s Wall” for further description of the mural itself)* before the SCBPP was forced to vacate the location in 1971. The federal government seized the property and, in 1973, the duplex at 173 20th Ave was razed, leaving only the southern portion of the People's Wall. The lot remained vacant for ten years until a new series of townhomes were built in 1983.

James Berle Standifer, a local Garfield High School graduate with foresight ahead of his times, recognized the worth of the property and purchased it in 1988, five years after the new townhomes were built. Born in 1940 in Portland, Oregon, he had moved with his family to Seattle, Washington, in 1945 and graduated from Garfield in 1958, before going on to play football for Pasadena Community College and later enlisting in the Washington State National Guard in 1962, one year after Martin Luther King Jr made his one visit to Seattle. His older brother, Floyd Standifer, was a celebrated Seattle jazz musician and member of the 1960 Quincy Jones Big Band. James Standifer went on to marry Gloria Jean O'Neal and, three years before the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panthers was founded, they had their only child in 1965, Sherryl Lynn Standifer. At the time of his daughter's birth, Standifer was one of the founding members of the Kingsmen Social Club and Seattle's first African American Antique Car Club, the "Old Rides". At the age of 48, when his daughter was 23 years old, he made an investment in the neighborhood he grew up in by purchasing the property at Spruce St & 20th Ave. James Standifer passed away in 2019, leaving the property to his daughter who has continued her father's legacy of stewardship for future generations.

In recent decades, the Central District has undergone rapid gentrification and redevelopment, driving up property values and displacing many long-standing residents. Once home to a population that was over 80% Black in the 1970s, Black households make up only 10% of the Central District in 2026—a stark demographic shift that reflects the broader pressures of urban development.

Nearby Landmarks

Based on the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods Landmarks Map, the following are nearby landmarks:

- **Douglass-Truth Library (2300 E Yesler Way)**

  The Douglass-Truth Library at 2300 E Yesler Way is a cornerstone of the Central District, and its history reflects the evolution of the neighborhood itself. Built in 1914, the building, designed in the Italian Renaissance style, was originally named the Henry L. Yesler Memorial Library. It was unique for its time as the only Seattle library built with city funds rather than a grant from Andrew Carnegie. For decades, its collection mirrored the diverse community, holding books in 13 different languages, including the city's main Hebrew, Yiddish, and Japanese collections. As Black families moved to Seattle post-WWII and discriminatory housing practices concentrated the community in the Central District, the library was slow to adapt. In the 1960s, a campaign led by local Black community leaders, including the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, successfully advocated for the establishment of a dedicated

African American literature and history collection. This grassroots effort not only saved the branch from a potential closure but also cemented its role as a cultural hub. In 1975, a community vote led to the library being renamed in honor of abolitionist leaders Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, making it a powerful symbol of the neighborhood's identity and a tribute to the people who fought to ensure their history was represented and celebrated. In 2026 today, the library is home to the largest collection of African American literature on the entire west coast. (Two paintings – portraits of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth – hang in the front lobby, created by the artist Eddie Ray Walker who also re-touched the People's Wall in 2008.)

- **Fire Station #6, Africatown Community Land Trust William Grose Center for Cultural Innovation (101 23rd Ave S)**

  The Fire Station at 23rd and Yesler (now known as the Africatown Community Land Trust William Grose Center for Cultural Innovation) was constructed in 1931 and completed in 1932 by architect George Stewart. It was built on the site of an even older 1894-era firehouse. For decades, it served its original purpose, housing firefighters and their equipment to protect the surrounding community. The city decided to decommission it as an active fire station in 2013 and moved the new Fire Station 6 to a different location. At that time, the neighborhood was predominantly Black.

  The decommissioned building became a focal point in the community's struggle against gentrification and for the preservation of its cultural heritage. Led by the Africatown Community Land Trust, community leaders and activists argued that the property should not be sold for private development – a process that has historically displaced Black residents from the Central District. Instead, they demanded that the property be transferred back to the community, making it a symbol of the neighborhood's resilience and a tangible step toward land ownership and economic empowerment. It was officially designated a Seattle landmark on June 15, 2005, and is today in 2026 dedicated to William Grose, the second Black American to settle in Seattle.

- **Garfield High School (400 23rd Ave)**

  Garfield High School, located at 101 23rd Avenue, is a historic and cultural landmark in Seattle's Central District, noted for its central role in the lives of Seattle's Black community. Opened in 1923, the Jacobean-style building was designed by architect Floyd Naramore and its student body initially consisted of Jewish, Japanese, and Italian students until World War II when the Central District's demographics began to change. By the 1960s, Garfield had become a majority-Black high school due to discriminatory housing practices that concentrated the Black community in the neighborhood. The school became a prominent site for activism during the civil-rights era, hosting notable speakers like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael.

The energy from these school events and the student body's own organizing efforts led to the formation of one of the first high school Black Student Unions in the state and the birth of the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party (SCBPP). Celebrated American jazz greats like Quincy Jones and guitar legend Jimi Hendrix graduated from the high school as well as both Aaron and Elmer Dixon, co-founders of the SCBPP – along with many of the SCBPP's members. Garfield High School remains a symbol of this legacy, recognized for its contributions to Seattle's civil-rights movement and its continuing role as a central gathering place for the community.

- **Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center** (**104 17th Ave S)**

  The Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute at 104 17th Avenue S was originally a synagogue built in 1915 for the Orthodox Jewish congregation Chevra Bikur Cholim, which was a prominent fixture in the neighborhood's early history. As the demographics of the area shifted in the mid-20th century, the congregation relocated to the Seward Park neighborhood. The building was acquired by the City of Seattle in 1969 through the federal Model Cities Program, a government initiative for urban renewal. This was a direct result of advocacy by Central District citizens who saw the need for a dedicated community center.

  Renamed in 1974 to honor the renowned Black writer and poet Langston Hughes (born in Joplin, Missouri on Feb 1, 1902, and passing away on June 22, 1967, two years prior to the City's purchase), the center quickly became a vital hub for Black arts and culture in Seattle. It has served for decades as a space for performances, film screenings, and educational programs, nurturing generations of Black artists and performers.

- **Providence Hospital, 1910 Building** (**528 17th Ave S)**

  The 1910 building of Providence Hospital at 528 17th Avenue South, now part of Swedish Medical Center's Cherry Hill campus, is a landmark with a history deeply intertwined with the development of healthcare in Seattle. It was built by the Sisters of Providence, a Catholic order who had been providing care since the 1870s. Originally opened in 1878, the hospital began in a remodeled house at 5th and Madison St. It was the first hospital in Seattle. The 1910 structure was a significant expansion of the hospital's mission and remains an enduring architectural presence in the neighborhood. For decades, it was a central pillar of medical care for the growing city.

  Beyond its general medical function, the hospital has a particularly important, if complex, history with the Central District's Black community. During a period when other hospitals in the city denied admitting privileges to Black physicians, Providence was one of the few places where they could practice. For Black doctors who came to Seattle, Providence Hospital was a crucial institution, allowing them to serve their community and establish their medical practice. The hospital's presence and its more inclusive policies made it a vital healthcare provider for Black residents who faced discrimination and limited access to care elsewhere. This legacy, while part of a larger history of racial disparities in healthcare, highlights the hospital's role as a point of access and a place of professional opportunity for a community that was systematically excluded from other medical institutions.

- **Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ (1915 E Fir St)**

  The Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ at 1915 E Fir Street is an example of the Central District's layered history and demographic shifts. The building itself was originally constructed in 1929 as the Sephardic Bikur Holim Synagogue, a vital cultural and religious center for the Turkish-Sephardic Jewish community that had established a significant presence in the neighborhood at that time (Seattle has the third-largest Sephardic population in America). The president of Sephardic Bikur Holim congregation in 1929 – the year it was built – was a grocer named Sam Azose who lived in the duplex where the People’s Wall is located, just one block north of the temple. (Azose’s father, Solomon Azose, had been the first Sephardic rabbi in Seattle, having immigrated to Seattle from Turkey.) The temple was designed to be a hub for worship, education and social gatherings, and remains a visible reminder of the Jewish community's early presence in the Central District.

  In 1963, the temple building was sold to a predominantly Black Christian congregation, the Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ, while Bikur Holim synagogue moved to a new location in South Seattle near Seward Park. The temple building transformed into Tolliver Temple Church of God in Christ, a place of worship and a community hub that played a vital role in providing a support network for Black migrants arriving in Seattle starting in 1969, offering everything from spiritual guidance to a safety net of meals and temporary accommodations. The building's recent designation as a Seattle landmark recognizes this dual history, symbolizing how a single structure can embody the complex and evolving narratives of two distinct communities who have both called the Central District home.

Other notable sites nearby include:

- **Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center (2101 E Yesler Way)**

  The Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center was originally founded in 1968 by the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party and it exists in 2026 just a few blocks south and east of the People’s Wall. Originally named the “Sydney Miller Free Medical Clinic” to honor a member of the SCBPP who had been shot *(see “The People’s Wall” for information about Miller, whose name is memorialized on the People’s Wall)*, it was renamed in 1978 to honor Downs, an early Black Panther community organizer who ran the clinic and who died from cancer that year (Downs’ name is also memorialized on the People’s Wall). In 2026, the medical center is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) with a mission “to improve the health of our community by providing caring, high quality, and culturally appropriate primary healthcare which addresses the needs of people regardless of their ability to pay.” Of the 13 original Black Panther Party-founded health care clinics founded across the country, the Carolyn Downs Medical Family Center is the only one still in operation.

- **Pratt Park (201 20th Ave S)**

  Just two blocks south of where the People's Wall is located is Pratt Park, a piece of land that was first purchased by the City in 1958 as part of the grounds planned for Washington Junior High School, then later became the site for a park and low-income housing project in 1966, and finally was named in honor of Edwin T. Pratt in 1976. Pratt was a prominent local civil-rights leader and Executive Director of the Seattle Urban League, responsible for leading the effort to desegregate Seattle Public Schools as well as initiatives advocating for equal housing and employment opportunities. In 1969, he was shot in the doorway of his home in Shoreline (17916 1st Avenue NE). Witnesses reported seeing two men fleeing the scene with a third person driving a getaway car. At the request of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department, the FBI entered the investigation the day after the murder but, despite this additional manpower, the case was closed after just three and a half months. (In a piece by the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* published 25 years later in 1994, new information revealed the shooters were potentially hired by local construction contractors concerned about Pratt's efforts to integrate Black people into the white workforce). The case remains unsolved.

- **R&L Home of Good Bar-B-Q (1816 E Yesler Way), permanently closed**

  A few blocks south and west of the People's Wall is the building that formerly housed R&L Home of Good Bar-B-Q, a restaurant which was originally located a block to the east when it was founded in 1952 by Rev. Hasting Mitchell along with Rev. Robert and Mrs. Louise Collins (permanently closed in 2018, although the building still stands in 2026). During the week of November 8, 1961, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his one and only visit to Seattle at the age of 32, Dr. King requested to be taken to a barbeque restaurant by his host Rev. Dr. Samuel B. McKinney (a former classmate from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia). Mary L. Davis, daughter of the Collins' (who later purchased the restaurant in 1962), recalled: "Martin Luther King came when we were closing [for the night], but because my dad was an enthusiastic follower of Dr. King, he had to open the door for him and Rev. McKinney." They spent several hours eating, talking and reminiscing until the early morning when Dr. King had to leave on a flight back to Atlanta.

DESCRIPTION

Site/Wall

The People's Wall is a non-structural, street-level, property line retaining wall facing 20th Ave on the east border of 1919 E. Spruce St (formerly "173 20th Ave"), first evident in aerial photographs of the property taken in 1936 and in photos of the duplex taken in 1937. Although the duplex that once stood on the lot was permitted in 1904, built in 1905, and later remodeled in 1930, no earlier photos of the property exist to verify whether the retaining wall was present prior to 1936.

The wall itself is roughly 3 feet 8 inches tall (44 inches total), 38 ½ feet long (462 inches), and 7 inches thick, slightly curving around a corner on the north side where a set of six steps used to be. The wall retains approximately 3 ½ feet of level backfill and is built of concrete, scored to appear as if it were made of cinderblock. In 2025, a wooden fence sits on top of the People's Wall with no visible attachments, screening a townhouse and driveway built on the property in 1983.

A structural engineering analysis conducted in October 2025 by Francesca Renouard of Swenson Say Faget notes the wall is "visually plumb" and does not appear to be reinforced, further adding "though the wall likely does not meet current code [based on the age of construction], we do not expect the wall to pose a life safety risk at this time." The analysis concludes that the wall appears structurally sound with only signs of weathering, including "visible vertical cracks" with the most prominent crack located approximately 12"-18" from the north end of the wall", likely caused by "temperature and shrinkage cracks caused by temperature fluctuations."

(See "The People's Wall" for a detailed description of the mural painted by Dion Henderson on the wall in 1970.)

Alterations

Local artist Eddie Ray Walker re-touched paint on the mural in 2008, adding additional names to the list of "fallen" members that are memorialized on it *(see "Mural Artist(s): Eddie Ray Walker")*.

Lot Setting & Plantings

Lot Setting

Between 1870 and 1940, a popular landscaping style was to enhance a property by building a house on a flat site roughly one to four feet higher than street level, creating a grade change between a house and the public street. This is consistent with the People's Wall, which is a street-level retaining wall that sits roughly 3 feet lower than the original duplex built on the property in 1905. At the time when the original property was built, the transition between the two grades was most often accomplished with "a short section of lawn that sloped up at an angle from the sidewalk." This may have been the case with 173 20th Ave in 1905, but there is no photographic evidence until 1936 when the retaining wall structure is already present.

Street & Block

Luxury amenities such as sidewalks and utility connections were typical at the turn of the 20th-century for lots that had been platted adjacent to streetcar lines like the Yesler Streetcar which began operating just two blocks south of the site in 1888. In tax records, it is noted that 173 20th Ave sat on a street that was "graded" with a "concrete" surface, and "concrete" sidewalk.

The block where the People's Wall is located is square-shaped with different-sized lots and houses facing in four directions by 1905 (unlike the more common rectangular shape of blocks at that time with houses facing out in only two directions). While the neighborhood was effectively a "streetcar suburb" made possible by the Yesler Streetcar, the relatively random mixture of lot sizes as well as the varied placement of the houses and outbuildings on the lot is characteristic of more rural neighborhoods. (Indeed, as late as 1923, a resident at 173 20th Ave advertised a "big Guernsey cow" for sale.) The lack of uniform front and side lot setbacks on the homes built on this block also indicates there were no deed restrictions mandating visual unity, characteristic of lower-income neighborhoods that lacked "protective covenants", which conversely meant that there were also no racially-restrictive covenants in place either, allowing a wide range of Seattle's minorities to make their homes here.

Plantings

In 2025, the sidewalk planting strip in front of the People's Wall is planted with grass and a single, young ginkgo street tree (*Ginkgo biloba*). Ginkgoes are the world's oldest living tree species, known as "living fossils" because their lineage dates back over 250 million years ago, pre-dating dinosaurs. The distinctive fan shape of the ginkgo's leaves have remained virtually unchanged since they first appeared. Once spanning the world (a petrified ginkgo forest exists in Washington state), these trees were decimated by global changes 65 million years ago and thought to be extinct until they were "re-discovered" in China in the mid-1700s. Considered to be one of the most fire-resistant trees, Buddhist monks planted ginkgo trees around shrines to protect these sacred buildings from burning in potential fires. In Japanese culture, these trees are revered as powerful symbols of life's ability to endure and thrive even after immense destruction. Indeed, when the atomic bomb was dropped by the U.S. on Hiroshima, Japan, during WWII in 1945, the first sign of life was reportedly several ginkgo "survivor trees" that began growing leaves again after the blast. Since then, ginkgoes have proliferated and come to be known as some of the most resilient trees on the planet, famous for having survived multiple ice ages and major extinction events. The street tree in front of the People's Wall was snapped by vandals in 2024 but – true to the nature of a ginkgo – it is growing again.

Surrounding Streetscape

The streetscape surrounding the People's Wall is a tableau of different eras of rapid change. Neighborhoods in less desirable areas or with fluctuating populations often had their street rhythms interrupted by vacant lots created by fires or code-enforcement efforts – indeed, after 173 20th Ave was seized by the federal government and razed in 1973, it was left as a vacant lot for ten years before several new townhouses facing Spruce St were built in 1983. Further west down the block on Spruce St, several older, narrow, working-class Victorian-era homes with no front yards remain from the early-1900s. (These houses appear on Sanborn maps dating from 1904, pre-dating any structures built at 173 20th Ave.)

Across from the People's Wall on 20th Ave, the Herzl Congregation synagogue was completed in 1925 around the same time the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 drastically reduced quota limits on Jewish immigration to America from Europe. (The Herzl Congregation was founded in 1906 by progressive Orthodox Sephardic Jews two years after the death of its namesake, Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist who founded the World Zionist Organization in 1897 and acted as its first president, urging Jews to establish their own homeland in what was known then as British Mandatory Palestine.) A few years later, in 1929, the Seattle congregation voted to become part of the conservative movement, making it the oldest and largest Jewish conservative congregation in the city. By 1939 when WPA data was collected for the Central District, America was regularly turning away Jewish refugees seeking entry to the U.S. to flee the rise of Nazi Germany (in one famous case that same year in 1939, a ship carrying over 900 Jewish refugees was turned away from the U.S., resulting in many of its passengers later perishing in the Holocaust).

In 1970, around the same time the Black Panthers occupied the duplex across the street where the People's Wall is located, the Herzl Congregation sold the synagogue building to the City of Seattle, and merged with Congregation Ner Tamid in Mercer Island. The building was remodeled in 1985 and converted to the Odessa Brown Neighborhood Health Center. In 1994, the clinic moved into a new facility shared with the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center nearby which, of course, was originally founded by the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panthers in the duplex that once stood across the street at 173 20th Ave. (Today, the former Herzl Congregation synagogue is the location of First Place, Washington state's first charter school serving children 3 to 5 years old from families experiencing or at risk of homelessness.)

South of the People's Wall on 20th Ave and across from it on Spruce St., newer "decoupage"-style townhouses were developed in 2015 ("decoupage" is listed in the 2013 edition of Virginia Savage McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses* as "the most common 21st-Century Modern house", characterized as "an orthogonal box, or boxes, designed with two, three, or more wall-cladding textures and materials" with each wall-cladding "in a slightly different plane"). As demand for Seattle homes have increased (along with average prices), the streetscape in the Central District has rapidly changed every year with developers purchasing older homes to raze and redevelop for profit.

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