
NORTH RAINIER VALLEY HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT



CITY OF SEATTLE
DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS

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INTRODUCTION

The Rainier Valley was formed by glaciation, and the valley is a depression between two ridges, Beacon Hill and Mount Baker Ridge, not a river course. The valley has a narrow floor and an average width of two miles but is narrower on its northern end. Rainier Avenue and the valley take their names from Mount Rainier, and there is a stunning view of the snow-capped volcano in the distance to the south

The Rainier Valley area was opened up to development by the Rainier Valley Electric Railway, starting in 1890, and the Jackson and Dearborn Street regrades in 1907 to 1910, but it was relatively late developing compared with areas to the north. In Seattle, areas with direct access to the water were generally first to develop.

Despite its proximity to downtown Seattle, less than four miles away, one barrier to development was the ridge that originally extended from north Beacon Hill to the southern extent of First Hill. The Jackson and Dearborn Street regrades removed this obstacle and provided direct access to the Rainier Valley from the south part of downtown.

This context statement focuses on the north Rainier Valley, which extends from the north end of Rainier Avenue (at South Dearborn Street) to Columbia City on the south (South Alaska Street). The western boundary is Beacon Hill, approximately two to three blocks west of Rainier Avenue South to 23rd Avenue South, where 23rd Avenue becomes the boundary. Then the area is roughly bounded on the west by Cheasty Boulevard. The eastern boundary is Martin Luther King, Jr. Way on the north and extends two to three blocks east of Rainier Avenue south of Mount Baker Boulevard. (See map of North Rainier Valley area.)

North Rainier Valley (north end)



North Rainier Valley (south end)



PREHISTORY AND PIONEER SETTLEMENT (TO 1879)

Native Americans in Rainier Valley

Prior to the Euro-American settlement of Puget Sound, the “lake people,” a branch of the Duwamish tribe, established winter camps of cedar longhouses along the shore of Lake Washington. The Duwamish are part of the Southern Puget Sound branch of the Coast Salish Indian people.

The lake people or “Xacua’bs” (hah-chu-AHBSH) were a collection of groups whose villages were located along Lake Washington. Their main village was at Renton at the confluence of the lake outlet and the Cedar River. Other smaller village sites were scattered along the shore of Lake Washington. The lake people had associated burial sites in Renton, and one may have been in the vicinity of the Columbia City Library (Buerge n.d., 3).

An Indian trail followed the Rainier Valley from the Pioneer Square area to Renton, and it ran along the approximate route of Renton Avenue and Rainier Avenue.

At Wetmore Slough, near today’s Genesee Park and Playfield, the Indian people had a rack that may have been used to dry salmon (Buerge n.d., 3).

An 1861 survey of the Seattle area showed that the forest of the Rainier Valley included mixed maple, ash, alder, fir, cedar and hemlock. The area had likely previously been burned. The Indians sometimes burned areas to keep meadows and grasslands open and to encourage undergrowth such as vine maple, crab apple, salmonberry, and salal, which attracted wildlife and enhanced the prospects for hunting in the area (Buerge 1981, Seattle’s Indian Trails).

A few Duwamish families lived in the Rainier Valley as late as the 1930s (Buerge n.d., 10).

Early Settlers

The first EuroAmerican settlers in the Rainier Valley located in the south part of the valley, E.A. Clark in 1852 and David Graham in 1853. Walter Graham eventually acquired his brother David's land and purchased the peninsula that is today's Seward Park. Wetmore Slough, which extended south from the approximate location of today's Charlestown Street to Genesee Street and west to Rainier Avenue, was named for Seymour Wetmore who came to Seattle in 1857. Wetmore homesteaded in the Rainier Valley, and his land was near today's Rainier Avenue and Charlestown Street (Summers 1992, 2). He was the first to settle in the northern part of the Rainier Valley. In 1870 Seymour Wetmore captured a large cougar on his farm that was later exhibited downtown (The Weekly Intelligencer, February 28, 1870, 3). Seymour's son Frank purchased property on the west side of the slough.

By the 1870s, the only inhabitants of the Rainier Valley were a few farmers north and south of the future site of Columbia City. At the north end of the area, in the 1870s, Hewitt Lee built a sawmill on the small cove at the foot of Charles Street on land owned by Charles Waters. In 1883 Guy Phinney bought this land and platted Maynard's Addition (Place Names, 1940).

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF RAINIER VALLEY (1880-1899)

The thickly forested valley remained relatively undeveloped in the early 1880s. The original donation land claims of John C. Holgate and Edward Hanford extended from Beacon Hill east across the Rainier Valley. In 1869, Seattle's original south incorporation boundary was Hanford Street. In 1875, the boundary was moved north to Atlantic Street, and in 1883, the south boundary returned to Hanford Street.

King County Road No. 1 ran east down from Beacon Hill at about the location of today's Cheasty Boulevard, and then followed the approximate line of today's Renton Avenue South to Renton. It also had been an earlier Indian trail route. Renton Avenue South is the remnant of this original county road to Renton. While portions of this road still exist, some are now incorporated into Martin Luther King, Jr. Way (McKee's Map, 1894).

The Rainier Valley area was heavily timbered with a few scattered farms in 1889 when promoter J.K. Edmiston began constructing an electric railway from downtown Seattle into the Rainier Valley. Edmiston and his partners purchased 40 acres near the railway's first planned station, which became the town of Columbia.

Early Transportation – Rainier Avenue Electric Railway

Banker J.K. Edmiston began construction of the Rainier Avenue Electric Railway in 1889 and received a franchise from the city to operate the railway in 1891 (Blanchard, 1966, 68). Edmiston envisioned the streetcar line as way to open up land in the Rainier Valley and Columbia to development. A considerable part of the route followed the original Indian trail from Snoqualmie Pass (Bass 1937, 152). It ran from the Pioneer Square area up Washington Street, south on 16th Avenue (now 14th Avenue South), and west to Jackson Street, and then south on what later became Rainier Avenue. Initially the line terminated at the south city limits at Hanford Street. The area beyond Jackson Street was essentially wilderness at that time. By 1890, the railway was extended to Columbia, a total length of seven miles. The first lots in Columbia were sold in 1891, and the street railway stimulated the first wave of residential growth in the Rainier Valley from 1891 to 1910.

Columbia City incorporated in 1893 and was annexed to Seattle in 1907. At the time of its founding, a ship canal was proposed through Beacon Hill, and Columbia City was to be the location of a future inland seaport on Lake Washington at Wetmore Slough (Summers 1992, n.p.).

In 1890 the streetcar system came under the control of W. J. Grambs (Blanchard 1966, 69). In 1891, Grambs extended the line to Rainier Beach to collect freight revenue from Taylor's Mill, one of the major sawmills on Lake Washington (Blanchard 1965, 40). The fare on the Rainier line was 5 cents from Rainier Beach to Columbia City and 5 cents from Columbia City to Seattle. Cars ran every 45 minutes. The Panic of 1893 exacerbated financial problems associated with the railway line and slowed the platting and development of the Rainier Valley.

Grambs sold the streetcar line to Frank Osgood in 1895, and it became known as the Seattle and Rainier Beach Railway. Osgood extended the line to Renton in 1896, and it reached a total of 12 miles in length. In 1903, the company was reorganized into the Seattle, Renton & Southern Railway, and the two hour trip from Seattle to Renton cost 25 cents.



1908 photograph of Columbia City looking east along Edmunds Street. Source: University of Washington, Special Collections, A. Curtis M278.

Commercial and Industrial Development

By the 1890s, there were several saw and planing mills in the Rainier Valley. The sawmill and planing mill operated by Guy Phinney was located on Lake Washington at the foot of Charles Street. Following a landslide in 1898, this mill operation moved to Rainier Beach and operated as Taylor's Mill.

The sawmill at Columbia was the first commercial operation in the new town in 1890-1891, located at the northwest corner of today's Rainier Avenue South and South Brandon Street.

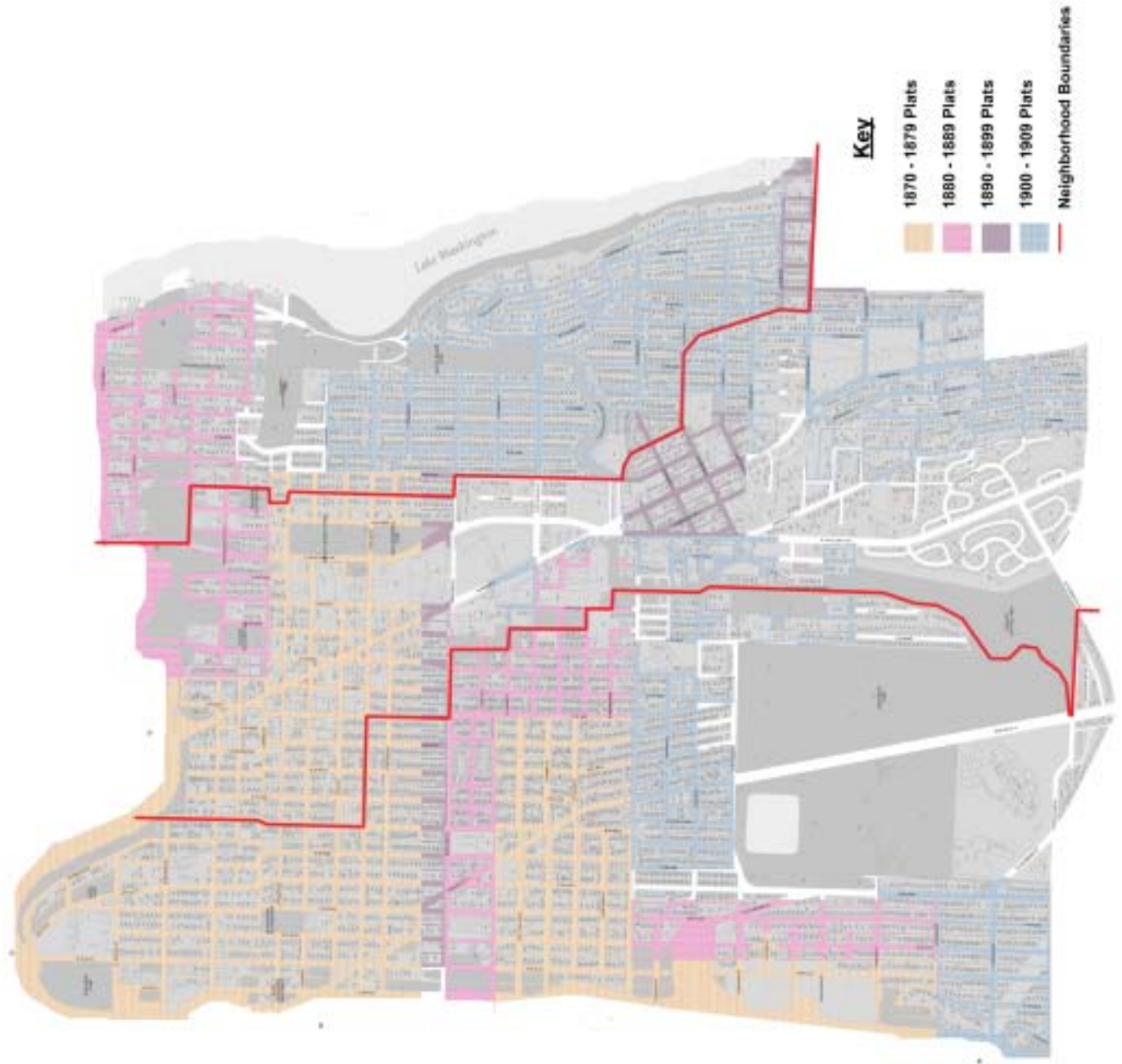
Residential Development

In 1894, only a few sparse dwellings and farms were scattered along the Rainier Valley, and most of the area was still wooded. A field club was on Rainier Avenue at the approximate location of today's Andover Street (McKee's Map, 1894).

The Quigley House at 3433 Claremont Avenue South is an extant example of an early Rainier Valley farmhouse. Eliza and John Quigley built the wood-frame house in two phases from about 1892 to 1895 (rear portion) and from 1900 to 1911. Prominent Beacon Hill residents Frank and Kate Black deeded the land to Eliza Quigley, the Black family's former governess, in 1892. Eliza and John's daughter Helen Quigley resided in this house until her death in 2000 at age 101.

Plat Map

Beacon Hill (left),
North Rainier Valley (central),
Mount Baker (right) Neighborhoods



The Lee and Bertha McKinstry House, at 4054 Letitia Avenue South, was also built in the early phase of development of the Rainier Valley associated with the Rainier electric streetcar. This well-preserved vernacular wood-frame farmhouse dates from about 1895.

Infrastructure

The South Bayview Street sewer tunnel was completed in 1894 and extended via Bayview Street from Elliott Bay to Rainier Avenue. Prior to this most houses either had outhouses or individual septic systems. The sewer line discharged into the Duwamish tideflats until 1910 when the newly constructed South Lander Street trunk sewer discharged directly into the East Waterway (Phelps 1978, 188).

RAINIER VALLEY DEVELOPMENT (1900-1919)

Prior to 1900, the growth of the Rainier Valley was relatively slow, with some settlement near Columbia City and scattered farms and a few lumber operations (Sale 1976, 60). Most of the farms were vegetable farms and many were leased or owned by Italian-American immigrants. The late 19th and early 20th century was a boom period for Seattle, and the city's population increased 5½ times between 1890 and 1910, from 42,837 to 237,174. The development of the Rainier Valley began to accelerate during the first two decades of the 20th century, although it lagged behind neighborhoods in central and north Seattle. Some of the Rainier Valley farms were subdivided during this time.

Most of the older buildings in the North Rainier Valley are concentrated in the area between South Atlantic and South Massachusetts Streets and the area immediately north of Columbia City between Renton Avenue South and Rainier Avenue South. Only a few extant buildings in these areas were constructed before 1900, including several houses discussed above. Other locations with older buildings include the York area at Rainier Avenue and Walden Street, a stop on the trolley line, and some scattered buildings along Rainier Avenue south to Holgate Street.

By 1904, development was still quite sparse in the Rainier Valley and along Rainier Avenue, as shown on the Sanborn Insurance Map. There was a waiting room for the streetcar at Atlantic and Rainier. By this time, the plats of Byron Addition (1890), Claremont Addition (1903) and York (1903) had been filed, and some houses were scattered in the area of York Station (Sanborn 1904).

During the years from 1900 to 1907, the Rainier Valley was transformed from a near wilderness with a few scattered farms into a thriving community (Blanchard 1965, 11). In 1907, Seattle annexed the remainder of the Rainier Valley south to the current city limits.

Transportation and Infrastructure

The Rainier Valley street railway line never fully recovered from the 1907 recession. In 1910, when the counterbalance over Washington Street was abandoned following the Jackson and Dearborn Street regrades, the route's north end was changed and simplified (Blanchard, 1965, 12-13). Also in 1910, heavy steel interurban cars were introduced onto the line (Blanchard 1966, 72).

The original Rainier Avenue was a two-lane dirt road alongside the streetcar tracks, "paved" with wood planks laid crosswise that extended the full length of the valley. Eventually, a two-lane road was built on each side of the tracks with paving bricks from the "Denny Renton" brickyard in Renton.

Another streetcar line served the Central Area and north end of the Rainier Valley. The Rainier Heights streetcar line, which operated under the Union Trunk Line, extended from East Jefferson Street and 21st Avenue (then Barclay and McNair) to 30th Avenue South and South Judkins Street. The cars operated along Jefferson to 24th Avenue (then Market Street), south on 24th Avenue to Dearborn Street, then east on Dearborn to 30th Avenue South, and then south on 30th to Judkins Street (Blanchard 1966, 55). This was a scenic route, with views of Mount Rainier in the distance to the south, hence the name "Rainier Heights."



1890 Byron Addition (Byron A. and Jane Young) to the City of Seattle. Source: King County Recorder's Office.

The route of Empire Way was platted in 1913, and it was named for Great Northern Railroad “Empire Builder,” James J. Hill. Empire Way was pieced together from older roads including portions of Renton Avenue South, the original road from Seattle to Renton. In 1913, both Rainier Avenue and Empire Way were designated primary state highways.

The Lake Washington Ship Canal, built on a north route at Salmon Bay and Lake Union instead of the proposed Beacon Hill route, lowered Lake Washington nine feet in 1916. The lowering of the lake caused the Wetmore Slough to dry up.

York

York Road was part of the county road, which ran from First Hill to the Rainier Valley (Summers 1992, 4). A portion of this road still retains the “York” name, at Walden Street, near the John Muir School. York Station was a stop on the Rainier Valley streetcar line, and a small commercial settlement grew up around the station at South Walden Street. York Station was originally known as Wetmore Station for the Wetmore family that farmed and grew fruit in the area. The family included Frank, Seymour and Birdsey Wetmore. In 1903, the York Addition was platted by George M. and Martha Taggart. The York name may relate to British settlers in the area or to Taggart’s English heritage (Cary 1994, p. 6).



Dearborn Street under construction in 1909. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

The York Pharmacy was located on the southwest corner of Rainier Avenue and South Walden Street. The York Grocery, located in the same building, was managed for many years by George Ferrari, who started as a butcher (Borracchini interview, 5/15/2003).

The Wetmore School, a two-room wood-frame building constructed in 1903, was the first school in the survey area. George Taggart donated the property for the school. A new, nine-room building, known as the York School was erected in 1910, designed by school district architect Edgar Blair. In 1921, it was renamed John Muir School to honor the naturalist John Muir. This building and the 1924 addition were demolished in 1989 to make way for the new building designed by Seattle architects Streeter/Dermanis and Associates.

Commercial and Industrial Development

By 1905, there were two brickyards on the west side of Rainier Avenue at the north end of the Rainier Valley. The T.S. Lippy brickyard was located in the vicinity of Charles and Dearborn streets, and the Hill Brick Company, owned by E.H. Lewis, was between Norman and Atlantic streets. No trace of these operations remains today

One of the largest industries in the area was Black Bear Manufacturing, an outdoor clothing manufacturing company owned by Charles and George Black. This imposing industrial building at 1130 Rainier Avenue South was designed by Seattle architect Andrew Willatzen and opened in 1914. When completed, the 60,000 square foot building was advertised as the most up-to-date factory building in America, with large steel sash windows, a brick and concrete structure, and a cafeteria and roof garden. This family garment business employed many Chinese and Italian workers, particularly in its early years (Chew 1994, 147; Borrachini interview, 5/15/2003). The company operated this facility until 1981 (Kreisman 1999, 62). The Black Manufacturing Building was designated a Seattle landmark in 1987 and was rehabilitated by Anderson, Koch & Duarte in 1984.

Much of the commercial development at the north end of the Rainier Valley was associated with the Italian community in the area, but few commercial buildings built prior to 1920 remain.

By 1916, some commercial and industrial development had taken place along Rainier Avenue South. The types of uses included wood storage, ornamental iron and wire works, Davidson's Planing Mill (on 21st Avenue South), and a telephone exchange building on 23rd Avenue South.

Some commercial development was located on Rainier Avenue north of Columbia City, including a drugstore on the west side of Rainier south of the intersection of Adams Street (Sanborn, 1916-17).

Alpine Dairy was located on Rainier Avenue South at South Dakota Street. This later became Foremost Dairy and more recently, Darigold.

Residential Development

Much of the residential construction in the early 1900s was concentrated in two areas: (1) the “Garlic Gulch” Italian neighborhood centered on Rainier Avenue South between Massachusetts and Atlantic streets and (2) the residential area north of Columbia City, north to include the community of York.

Most of the houses in the “Garlic Gulch” area were small wood-frame bungalows, often only a single story. The character of these houses is discussed in more detail below under the “Italian Community.”

In 1904, Frank D. Black, the Beacon Hill developer and businessman mentioned above, platted Claremont Home Tracts.

Emanuel DeLappe was a saddler and harnessmaker who came to Seattle in about 1890. He and his family lived in several houses in the York area. The original DeLappe farmhouse was located at 2618 South De Lappe Place before it burned down about 12 years ago (Korkowski, September 6, 2003). The later DeLappe house, built in 1906, was moved from Cheasty Boulevard in about 1914-1915 to its current site on the corner of Claremont Avenue South and Martin Luther King, Jr. Way at 2801 South Hanford Street (Hines and Abernathy interview, March 20, 2003). Other older houses in the Claremont Addition north of Columbia City and along Renton Avenue South included the Kimball House (on Renton Avenue), the Wetmore house (possibly on Renton Ave), and the Dupea House. The Dupea family raised vegetables and sold their produce at the Pike Place Market.

Several older houses are located on Rainier Avenue South and a few are still used as single-family dwellings. These include the Gill House at 3869 Rainier Avenue South, a one-story wood-frame cottage typical of early 20th century vernacular architecture, built in about 1906. The Foglia House at 4005 Rainier Avenue South dates from about 1913 and is a wood-frame structure with Craftsman detailing and some late Victorian characteristics. Carmino and Adelina Foglia, Italian immigrants, lived in other houses in the Rainier Valley before moving here in 1930. Their daughter-in-law, Helen Foglia, still lives in the house.



Rainier Avenue at Walden Street. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

Other houses in this north Columbia City vicinity include the Hubachek House at 4430 Letitia Avenue South, which is a small vernacular farmhouse built in about 1906 and is typical of early houses in the Rainier Valley. The Albutt House, a one-story hipped roof cottage at 3509 South Lilac Street is another representative example of early Rainier Valley architecture. It dates from about 1909. Franz E. Ohman built a wood-frame Craftsman-influenced house at 3836 Letitia Avenue South in 1912.

In about 1900, the Stevens Dairy was located on the west side today's Martin Luther King, Jr. Way near Cheasty Boulevard. This property was owned by J.M. Sears and eventually became part of the Rainier Vista housing project.

In 1905, there were still several large undeveloped tracts along Rainier Avenue between Bayview Street and Hanford Street. By 1908, several Italian-Americans owned large parcels along Rainier Avenue South between Bayview and Hanford streets. These included Nicola Marucca, George Colella, C. Vacca, and Charles Malmo. Malmo's Nursery was located on property south of Winthrop Street that later became the playfield for Franklin High School (Baists, 1908).

Starting in about 1910, Scandinavian immigrants Carl and Carrie Larson had a small farm near South Angeline Street and 26th Avenue south of Jefferson Park (Ruth Barrett interview, 2001).

During the big snowstorm of 1916, the Kimball family's greenhouses on Renton Avenue South caved in (Hines and Abernathy interview, March 20, 2003).

By 1916, most of the areas south of Holgate and between 25th Avenue South and 30th Avenue South were still undeveloped. The area along Rainier Avenue between College and Winthrop streets was mostly vegetable gardens, except for the Seattle Baseball Club's Dugdale Field located on the site that became Sick's Stadium. There was at least one greenhouse in this area. South of Winthrop Street, an inclined track and coal bunkers were associated with the street railway on Rainier Avenue (Sanborn, 1916-17).

By this time, there was quite a bit of residential development north of Columbia City within a few blocks on either side of Rainier Avenue South. East of Renton Avenue South and north of South Alaska Street, a dairy farm was located at the future site of Rainier Vista (Sanborn, 1916-17).



1915 photograph by Frank H. Nowell of streetcar tracks at Rainier Avenue and Oregon Street. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

Institutional/Public

The York School, later John Muir School, is described above under “York.” At the north end of the Rainier Valley, the Colman School, designed by school district architect James Stephen in a Jacobean style, opened in 1909. Colman was one of the last school buildings designed by James Stephen. The school was named in honor of Seattle pioneer James M. Colman (who is also the namesake of Colman Park). Because of its location in the midst of Seattle’s Garlic Gulch area, many Italian-American students attended Colman School.

By 1916, churches in the North Rainier area included the Mount Virgin Roman Catholic Church and School on South Massachusetts Street and 29th Avenue South, Bethany Sunday School on 24th Avenue South, and the Church of God on Irving Street near Bradner Place. The Lakeside Methodist Church was located on the northwest corner of Dakota Street and 38th Avenue South.

The site of today’s Rainier Playfield was already set aside as parkland: “Columbia Playfield” (Sanborn, 1916-1917).

Italian Community - “Garlic Gulch”

The north part of the Rainier Valley was originally settled by Germans and became a predominantly Italian neighborhood around the turn of the 20th century (Mumford 1993, 118).

Initially the prospect of jobs in the coal mines at Renton, Newcastle and Black Diamond attracted Italian immigrants to the Seattle area. Later, about 1900, many Italians operated truck farms, including Fred Marino and Joe Desimone, who was a key force in the Pike Place Market. During Seattle’s boom period from 1900 to 1910, Italian immigrants came to Seattle to work as laborers on building and road construction and the regrading and filling activity. Approximately 80% of Seattle’s Italian immigrants were unskilled laborers (Nicandri 1978, 47).

Because of the predominantly Italian population, the north end of the Rainier Valley became known as “Garlic Gulch” or “Little Italy.” This neighborhood centered on South Atlantic Street and Rainier Avenue South.



Rainier Avenue streetcar line near Dugdale Park, 1915. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.



Photograph of Mount Virgin Church and adjoining orchard. Source: Our Lady of Mount Virgin Church.



2003 photograph of Mount Virgin Church. Photograph by Carol Tobin.

The 1910 Census showed 3,454 Italians in Seattle, and 1,519 were located in the second ward, which included the area south of Yesler and the north Rainier Valley. About 80 percent of those of Italian descent were truck gardeners in the Rainier and Duwamish valleys, and 20 percent were professionals (Roe 1915, 36).

In 1915, the largest concentration of Italians in the city were in an area from Lane Street on the north to Mount Baker Park on the south and which extended about three blocks west of Rainier Avenue and six blocks to the east. This 90-square-block area included about 200 Italian houses comprising about 215 families (Roe 1915, 45). Most Italian immigrants lived in simple small wood-frame houses, often unpainted, typically with two to five rooms. Many had extensive gardens on small sites. Most families rented housing. The Italian residential areas were somewhat run down, with houses crowded together, and buildings were frequently overcrowded due to the taking in of boarders. The Rainier Valley was Seattle's largest Italian enclave; however, Italians also lived in Georgetown, near Jackson Street and in smaller groups at South Park, south Lake Union, Youngstown, and First Hill (Roe 1915, 45).

George Colello arrived in Seattle in 1875 and his first garden was located near First and South Jackson. Next he had a plot near Sick's Stadium, and later he farmed along the Duwamish River and in the South Park area (Nicandri 1978, 57). Domenico Vacca was one of the first Italian immigrants in Seattle and started truck farming in the Rainier Valley before 1889. His brother Pasquale immigrated around 1900 to join him in the farm operation (Vacca's, no date).

In 1900, Angelo Merlino opened a store, Merlino & Sons, that sold imported cheese, pasta and olive oil at Sixth Avenue South and Dearborn Street. In the early 1900s Charles Malmo's nursery was located on the east side of Rainier Avenue South, south of Winthrop Street. This nursery was the predecessor of Ernst/Malmo, a long-time Seattle hardware and nursery business. The DeMarco family had a truck farm behind Stewart Lumber Company in the 1920s (Pete Caso interview, 6/12/2003).

In its heyday, the commercial area at "Garlic Gulch" included a moviehouse, a gas station, a grocery store, a drugstore operated by Nick Paoella at Atlantic and Rainier, and Carmen Maletta's Barber Shop next door to Paoella. Other Italian businesses in the area were the Three Monks Macaroni Factory on Rainier Avenue next to Stewart Lumber, Guido Merlino and Joe Madonna, Casal Grocery, Drake's Market, Violi Barber Shop, and Tony LaSalle's Atlantic Street Shoe Repair (Borracchini interview, 5/15/2003).

Many truck farmers from the Rainier and Duwamish valleys sold their produce at the Pike Place Market. In the early years of the 20th century, there was considerable competition between the Italian and Japanese farmers. The Italian truck farmers grew vegetables on relatively small plots, such as those in the Rainier Valley (Nicandri 1978, 56). There were more Italian farmers in the Rainier Valley, while many of the Japanese farmers cultivated land near Auburn and Kent. The Italians and Japanese hired only their own countrymen at harvest time. The Italian and Japanese farmers competed for both farmland and markets (Nicandri 1978, 57). Land was increasingly leased to Japanese Americans because they were more easily satisfied with substandard housing, were more likely to reclaim and clear land, and would pay higher rents.

In 1915, the enrollment at Colman School was 33 percent Italian (Roe 1915, 57).

Our Lady of Mount Virgin Catholic Church was built in 1913 by Italian immigrants next to an old German church building. This missionary church at 1531 Bradner Place South was the hub of the Italian community. Father Lodovico Caramello came to Seattle in 1913 and died in 1949. The church operated a Catholic school at 29th Avenue South and South Day Street, which offered Italian lessons (Roe 1915, 61). This school later operated out of building just north of the church.



Domenico Vacca picking beans with Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill in background. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

GROWTH CONTINUES (1920-1929)

The north Rainier Valley area and Columbia City were largely developed with single family houses and some commercial uses along Rainier Avenue by 1920. Housing growth spread throughout the entire Rainier Valley during the decade of the 1920s.

Commercial and Industrial Development

The W.G. Savage Lumber Company constructed the first lumber yard at 1761 Rainier Avenue South in about 1920. Stewart Lumber and Hardware Company originated on the north end of Lake Union, and took over this yard in 1927. The complex of wood-frame buildings on Rainier Avenue was built in phases over a ten-year period. The Young family has owned Stewart Lumber since 1926. The Stewart Lumber Company is one of few remaining lumber businesses still operating in its original location and facility (Inventory form 1999).



Ca. 1925 photograph of the planned route of Empire Way (changed to Martin Luther King Junior Way in 1983). James J. Hill, the railroad baron and “Empire Builder” was the namesake of the Empire Way. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.



1925 photograph of Rainier Avenue at Atlantic Street. Source: University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, SMR244.

The Occidental Sheet Metal Works at 2310 Rainier Ave South was designed by prominent Seattle architects Schack Young & Myers and completed in 1925. This one-story industrial building retains its original multi-paned wood sash windows and is quite intact (Sound Transit 1999, 123).

The former Potlatch Market building at 1915 Rainier Avenue South was built in 1925 and originally housed three stores.

Farther south on Rainier, the two-story brick building at the southwest corner of Rainier Avenue South and South Genesee Street, which dates from 1926, is one of the few extant early mixed-use buildings on Rainier Avenue. The small brick Genesee Grocery building, constructed in about 1926, is located at 4417-4419 Rainier Avenue South.

Built in 1927, the two-story brick masonry Deaconess Settlement building at 2103 South Atlantic Street was designed by architects Stephen, Stephen & Brust. The Deaconess Settlement was established in 1910 to provide community services to the underprivileged and today the facility houses the Atlantic Street Center, which continues the human services use.

Ethnic Community

Mario Borracchini, an Italian immigrant from Tuscany, started the International French Bakery in the basement of his house at 1707 20th Avenue South in 1924. The bakery moved to its current location at 2307 Rainier Avenue South in 1939 (Borracchini interview, 5/15/2003). Borracchini family cousins include the prominent Italian families Rosellini and Gasparetti, both restaurateurs (Mayerson 1978, 11). Mario's son, Remo, took over the family business in 1965 and continues to operate Borracchini's Bakery & Mediterranean Market today.

Constantino and Antoinette Oberto arrived in Seattle in about 1919 and moved to a small house on Beacon Hill at 1761 17th Avenue South. They started the sausage manufacturing business on South King Street and moved the business to its Rainier Avenue South location in 1957. The business now employs about 900 and moved the headquarters to a 100,000 square-foot facility in Kent in 1997.

Giglio and Cecilia Gai's New Home Bakery was located in the Central Area, but in 1921 their first house, a two-story wood frame house on Massachusetts off Rainier, was in the heart of "Garlic Gulch" (Hearth & Home no date, 2).



1931 photograph of Pre's Garden Patch stand located on Rainier Avenue South. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

Giacomo and Maria Traverso also lived in the Italian community in the Rainier Valley and operated the Fiore d'Italia café on Fifth Avenue South between Jackson and King streets (Dorpat II, p. 204). Several Italian and Mediterranean restaurants and food-related businesses were located on Fifth Avenue South off Jackson Street at the western edge of the International District.

Gil's Restaurant was on Rainier Avenue at Genesee, and proprietor Gil Centrioli lived at 30th Avenue South and South Bayview Street. Gil's offered the area's first 19-cent hamburger and later converted to a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant (Anderson interview, 9/19/2003). Other Italian-owned businesses in the "Garlic Gulch" area included Gavasto's Torino sausages, Magnano's, John DiJulio's Butcher Shop, the New Italian Café, and Dominick Mastro's restaurant north of South Atlantic Street. The Atlantic Street business district included Bovee Radio, Margaret's 10 Cents Store, and Eagle Pharmacy.

Some members of the Italian business and professional class lived in the North Rainier Valley and other nearby neighborhoods. Among them were Nick Paoella, Italian newspaper publisher as well as a drug-gist, and Frank Buty, real estate agent and ombudsman, who lived in the Mount Baker area.

Many Italian-Americans continued to make wine for their families during Prohibition.

The Italian Language School associated with the Mount Virgin Church was closed during World War II and did not reopen.

The Vacca farm was located behind Sick's Stadium and Pasquale Vacca's son Pre (Prisco) ran Pre's Garden Patch produce stand across from the stadium at 2525 Rainier Avenue South (Vacca's, no date). The Vacca House was razed in 1969 (Seattle Times 6/12/1969). The Sacco Brothers had a produce stand on Rainier Avenue next to Borracchini's Bakery.

Kusak Glass, founded in 1914 by Anton Kusak, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, continues to operate today at 1911 22nd Avenue South and is a long-time business in the Garlic Gulch area.

Development

The Siena Apartments on Rainier Avenue near Atlantic Street were built during the 1920s and torn down during I-90 construction. (The neighborhood was divided by the thoroughfare approaches to the Lacey V. Murrow Bridge in the 1940s and later much of the Italian community was lost during the construction of the freeway in the 1970s and 1980s.)

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Royal Theatre was located on Rainier Avenue South, just north of Atlantic Street. It was renamed the Victory Theatre after World War II.

In 1923 most of Rainier Avenue South was zoned for commercial use in Seattle's first zoning ordinance. Businesses were typically clumped in small shopping districts oriented to pedestrians using streetcars. These included the commercial areas at Rainier and Atlantic ("Garlic Gulch"), York, and Columbia City. During the 1920s and 1930s, automobile-related strip development began to occur along Rainier Avenue South. Kristoferson Dairy was located at 1300 Rainier Avenue South during this time.

DEPRESSION AND WAR YEARS (1930-1945)

Starting in the 1930s, Japanese-Americans began to move outward from the International District into the Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill. Tadishi Katayama's grocery was located on Rainier Avenue South and Atlantic Street in the 1930s, and he lived a few blocks from the store. A number of Japanese-American businesses were located along Rainier Avenue between about Main and Dearborn streets. Some of these included West Coast Printing, State Drug Company, Tokuda Drugs, and Linc's Tackle Shop.

The attractive brick-clad two-story York Apartments at 3315 Rainier Avenue South, designed by Seattle architects Hancock & Lockman, was completed in 1932. Joe T. Hines was the builder (Hines and Abernathy interview, March 20, 2003).

Infrastructure

During the 1920s, sewer systems discharging into Wetmore Slough contaminated Lake Washington and created a health hazard. In 1930, the City of Seattle constructed the South Hanford Street tunnel to provide additional sewer capacity and to serve a larger area. The earlier South Bayview Street tunnel was abandoned. In 1931, the City completed the Charlestown Street tunnel and a pump station between Rainier Avenue and Lake Washington, which diverted low flows to the south branch of the Rainier Valley trunk and carried sewage to the South Hanford Street tunnel (Phelps 1978, 189).

Rainier Avenue South was part of the highway system that extended to Snoqualmie Falls, Snoqualmie Pass, and eastern Washington. Several major paving projects took place in the 1930s, including the extension of Empire Way to the south.

The route for a highway and bridge to Mercer Island and across Lake Washington was hotly debated in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the most controversial proposals crossed the middle of Seward Park to Mercer Island. The state finally settled on a northern route in 1938 (the approximate location of I-90 today), and the Mount Baker tunnel and the Lacey V. Murrow Floating Bridge were built in 1940.



Aerial view of Sick's Stadium. Source: Rainier Valley Historical Society.

The Rainier Valley streetcar line went through many owners and had five different names, but it never made a profit for its owners. The Rainier Valley line was the last private streetcar line in the city, and Seattle was interested in purchasing it. However, by the 1930s electric streetcar lines were declining due to an increase in automobiles and buses. In the 1930s, the City of Seattle refused to renew the franchise for the Rainier Valley electric streetcar, and the last streetcar on the Rainier Valley line operated on January 1, 1937. In 1936, the City appropriated funds to pave Rainier Avenue South. The interurban line was replaced by gasoline buses, "trackless trolleys," in 1937 that operated on the same route as the old streetcar line (Blanchard 1966, 76-77).

The Rainier Avenue landfill at Charlestown Street operated until 1939. It was capped starting that year and completed by 1941. In the 1940s, the landfill area was used by a traveling circus. In 1947, the City purchased the Wetmore Slough area as a park and site for a future playfield; however the area continued to be used as a garbage dump, and the dumping did not end until 1963.

Baseball History

Ex-big leaguer Daniel E. Dugdale built Dugdale Ball Park on the corner of Rainier Avenue South and South McClellan Street. When it opened in September 1913, this ballfield was considered one of the finest on the West Coast, with a double-deck grandstand. The Seattle team became known as the Seattle Rainiers in 1919 and was renamed the Seattle Indians in 1922. In 1932, a fire destroyed the ballpark.

Emil G. Sick (1894-1964) founded Sick's Century Brewery, which merged with the Rainier Brewery in 1935. The Rainier Brewery had been established by Andrew Hemrich in 1883. At the urging of Seattle labor leader Dave Beck, Sick bought the Seattle Indians franchise for \$100,000, renamed the team the "Rainiers," and built a new stadium at the old Dugdale Park site. Sick's Stadium opened in June 15, 1938. The Vacca vegetable farm, located just east and uphill of Sick's Stadium, was a popular place to watch the games for free.

In 1968, the Seattle Pilots played at Sick's Stadium, but they only spent one season in Seattle and moved to Milwaukee in 1969. Later, a new Rainiers Class A Team played at the stadium, but they left in 1976. The stadium was razed in 1979 (Lustig, 1978).

Public Housing

The federal government formed the National Housing Authority in 1937 during the Depression. Subsequently, in 1939 the Washington State legislature passed enabling legislation to authorize cities and counties to create housing authorities in Washington. Jesse Epstein (1911-1989) became chairman of the board of the Seattle Housing Authority in 1939 and later resigned to become its executive director. The Federal Lanham Act enacted in October 1940 authorized the federal government to provide wartime housing in areas with declared housing shortages. In cooperation with federal agencies, the Seattle Housing Authority built about 6,000 units of wartime housing units under the Lanham Act. Most was temporary housing, and only three permanent garden communities of High Point, Holly Park and Rainier Vista continued in long-term use by the Seattle Housing Authority after the war. One of these projects, Rainier Vista (1943), a large community for defense workers, was in the Rainier Valley/Beacon Hill area (see description under Beacon Hill), Holly Park was at the south end of Beacon Hill, and High Point was in West Seattle.



Ca. 1940 photograph of Pat and Nick Vacca in their family's vegetable farm near Sick's stadium. This area later earned the nickname Tightwad Hill when baseball fans realized they could watch games from the hillside farm without paying admission. Source: Museum of History & Industry. Seattle. All Rights Reserved.

The western portion of the Rainier Valley and eastern flank of Beacon Hill was one of the last areas to develop as the last of the Italian gardens were subdivided. Stadium Homes, located near Sick's Stadium where the tennis center is now, was one housing project developed during this time.

World War II

In 1942, following President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, the Japanese Americans on the Pacific Coast, including Seattle, were evacuated to internment camps. One major effect of the war on the Rainier Valley was the influx of defense workers, many of whom found housing in southeast Seattle, near Boeing and the Duwamish shipyards.

POST-WAR AND MODERN DEVELOPMENT (1946-1963)

Following World War II, most growth in the Rainier Valley was concentrated at the southern end of the valley. By 1960 earlier restrictive racial covenants no longer carried the force of law, but discrimination and other factors had limited black residence to the Central District. (Seattle voters rejected an open housing ordinance in 1964.) The only areas where blacks could move adjacent to the Central District were Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill, primarily working class districts. Many African Americans moved to these neighborhoods in the late 1960s and 1970s (Taylor 1994, 196). By 1990, the Rainier Valley black population had exceeded that of the Central District (Taylor, 1994, 237).

As part of the movement out of the International District in the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese population relocated to the Beacon Hill and Rainier Valley areas (Chin 1973, 45). Many Southeast Asian immigrants also moved to the Rainier Valley, particularly following the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. The Hispanic population of the area also increased during the 1960s and 1970s, possibly associated with El Centro de la Raza on Beacon Hill.

Similar to the Chinese Americans, many Filipinos moved from the International District to the Central Area. As the blacks moved into the Central Area, the Asian groups, including the Filipinos, moved to neighborhoods such as the Rainier Valley (Cordova interview, August 7, 2003). The Filipino community concentrated in areas near their churches, including the Iglesia Ni Cristo on Rainier Avenue South

Today, the Rainier Valley is a culturally diverse area with large percentages of African Americans, Filipinos, and Southeast Asian immigrants.



March 1943 photograph of Rainier Vista housing subdivision during construction. Source: University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.



May 1943 photograph of Rainier Vista housing subdivision nearing completion. Source: University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

Development

Much of the existing commercial development along Rainier Avenue South is post-1950, especially the larger projects. One long-time Rainier Valley business, Chubby & Tubby, opened in 1945 in a quonset hut offering surplus G.I. equipment. Chubby & Tubby, which diversified over the years to include shoes, gardening supplies, and a range of merchandise, closed in 2002.

Richard Yoshimura founded the Mutual Fish Company at 14th and Yesler Way in 1947. The market moved to its Rainier Avenue location in 1965. This retail and wholesale seafood market is still operated by the Yoshimura family today.

In the 1950s, areas along Rainier Avenue South and Empire Way were rezoned to allow extensive commercial development.

The Boy Scouts of America Building at 3120 Rainier Avenue South, designed by Seattle architect Ibsen Nelsen, opened in 1961. This Northwest Style building received an honor award for its design from the Washington State Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

The Japanese Presbyterian Church, designed by Seattle architect Paul Kirk, located at 1801 24th Avenue South, opened in 1963.

Imperial Lanes at 2101 21st Avenue South was a popular Asian-American hangout spot in the 1960s through the 1980s (Chew 2003, personal communication).

After the demolition of Sick's Stadium in 1979, the CX Corporation moved to the site. Subsequently Eagle Hardware opened in this Rainier Avenue location, and today Lowe's Hardware operates there.

Many Southeast Asian restaurants and other Asian-operated businesses have located along Rainier Avenue in the last 25 years. Examples include Pho restaurants, such as Viet Nam's Pearl and Pho Bac, and nail shops.

A considerable number of houses on the west side of the Rainier Valley and on the east slope of Beacon Hill were constructed between 1950 and 1962. In particular, quite a few newer houses were built after 1962 in the area between Martin Luther King, Jr. Way and Rainier Avenue, just north of Columbia City. These are typically suburban, ranch-style houses.

With the influx of African Americans to the area following World War II, there are a several buildings in the Rainier Valley associated with the black community. The former residence of Robert and Madeline Wright is located at 1742 Martin Luther King, Jr. Way South. The Wrights led the struggle against discrimination in Seattle's golf clubs (Mumford 1993, 120).

The Fir State Golf Club Clubhouse at 3418 Martin Luther King, Jr. Way South is the headquarters of the Puget Sound area's oldest African American Golf Club. The club was established in 1947 (Mumford 1993, 127).

Transportation and Infrastructure

In the 1960s, the Rainier Valley was affected by highway plans, including the expansion of Interstate 90 and the proposed construction of the R.H. Thomson Expressway, along the approximate route of Empire Way. The Yesler/Atlantic Urban Renewal Project began in 1961 in the Central Area and extended south to the north end of the Rainier Valley. By 1970, the City acquired 43 acres of land in the urban renewal area with the intent to encourage rehabilitation and development of quality and affordable housing to moderate-income residents who might otherwise remain renters in Seattle's Central Area. Between 1958 and 1968, the planned expansion of I-90 removed about 200 houses near the highway, including the Judkins neighborhood and much of the old Italian community. By the 1970s, there was considerable disinvestment in the North Rainier Valley area, partly due to the freeway plans. Originally approved by voters in 1960, the R.H. Thomson Expressway aroused a huge citizen protest, and was officially scrapped by city council in 1977.

In 1982, eight-mile-long Empire Way was renamed Martin Luther King, Jr. Way South to honor the late African-American leader. Seattle businessman and former Central Area Motivation Program director, Eddie Rye, led the campaign to name the roadway after Dr. King (Mumford 1993, 66-67).

SouthEast Effective Development (SEED) is a non-profit community development corporation founded in 1975 that works to strengthen and revitalize the neighborhoods and business districts of Southeast Seattle, including the Rainier Valley. The organization develops housing and commercial space, has an arts program, and over the years has brought funds for infrastructure to the community. Rainier Valley Square was developed by a public-private partnership spearheaded by SEED. Phase I of Rainier Valley Square opened in 1994 on an eight-acre site at Rainier Avenue South, south of South Andover Street. It was the first major new commercial development in the area for 20 years. SEED is now developing Phase II (Rainier Court) on a nine-acre site immediately north of Rainier Valley Square. SEED also established the Rainier Valley Cultural Center in the renovated First Church of Christ Scientist building at 3515 South Alaska Street in Columbia City.

Recent years have seen the decline of the former Italian neighborhood of "Garlic Gulch." The demise of this area was hastened by the expansion of Interstate 90 through the middle of the neighborhood (Mayerson 1978, 10-11).

One restaurant that survived the I-90 construction was the New Italian Café at 1515 Rainier Avenue South, operated by owner-manager Dominic Linareli. Linareli acquired restaurant in 1948 from his uncles, the Conjustia Brothers. (The New Italian Café operated until the 1990s.) During the I-90 construction in the 1980s, "Garlic Gulch" lost a shoemaker, dairy, a glass company, a garment manufacturing company (Black Bear), a barber shop, and a church (Beacon Hill/South District Journal, 11/28/1984).

The Jackson Place Cohousing project located at 800 Hiawatha Place South designed by Pyatok Associates was completed in 2001. It includes 27 households on a 3.25-acre site.

Seattle's 1994 Comprehensive Plan designated seven villages, including a North Rainier hub urban village. These urban villages were envisioned as the primary areas recommended for intensive development outside downtown Seattle. In 1999, the City of Seattle adopted the North Rainier Neighborhood Plan, a project of the North Rainier Neighborhood Planning Committee. Neighborhood plan recommendations related to the historical context of the area include proposals for reclaiming the Olmsted legacy on Cheasty Boulevard/greenbelt and Mount Baker Boulevard, for preserving and maintaining the quality of single-family areas, and for design guidelines as part of the station area town center at the intersection of Martin Luther King, Jr. Way and Rainier Avenue South.

The proposed above-ground Link Transit light rail line through the Rainier Valley will have a major effect on the community and has been the focus of much controversy in recent years. The route runs south through the valley along Martin Luther King, Jr. Way, starting at South McClellan Street. It includes stations at McClellan, Edmunds, Othello, and Henderson streets.

CONCLUSION

The Rainier Valley is unusual in Seattle as a long, narrow neighborhood focused on the transportation corridor of Rainier Avenue. It is a clear example of development following an early streetcar railway. The valley includes a commercial strip along Rainier Avenue and a variety of multifamily and single-family housing in adjacent areas. The area is also bisected by Martin Luther King, Jr. Way, which crosses Rainier Avenue just south of McClellan Street. Portions of the early route of Renton Avenue still retain a rural character, including the small modest houses in the area. More than most other areas of southeast Seattle, the Rainier Valley has been shaped by its role as a transportation corridor. The area has been diverse ethnically since the early years of the 20th century when it was home to many Italian-American immigrants, and it has attracted a mix of blacks, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Chicanos since World War II. According to the 2000 Census, 83 percent of the Rainier Valley residents are non-white, with Asians as the most predominant group (45 percent), followed by blacks and people of Hispanic descent.

Important themes to be addressed in a survey of the north Rainier Valley area include transportation, ethnic heritage, and commerce. Since there are few architect-designed houses in the area, the survey will address vernacular house types and structures associated with the various ethnic groups that have lived and worked in the neighborhood.

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