

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 1 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

**Context Statement**

The Columbia City Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. This updated nomination replaces the previous registration form, and includes expanded information regarding the district's history, but does not alter the district's boundaries. The Columbia City Historic District is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at a local level of significance, under Criterion A, as a district which embodies the patterns of development of a late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century independent municipality, and commercial and residential "streetcar suburb" on the outskirts of Seattle, Washington. Community development, commerce, social history, and transportation are areas of significance which demonstrate the district's eligibility under Criterion A. The district is also eligible under Criterion C (area of local significance: architecture) for its representative collection of commercial, residential, and mixed-use buildings that are good examples of vernacular and revival style architecture, several of which were designed by prominent regional architects between 1908 and 1928, and which, taken together, present a cohesive statement on the significance of the district's contribution to the history of Rainier Valley and the greater Seattle area. The period of significance begins in 1891 with the first buildings constructed in the Plat of Columbia. It ends in 1937 with the end of streetcar service, the removal of streetcar tracks from the district, and the permanent conversion of Rainier Avenue to an automobile thoroughfare. Approximately 80% of the district's buildings were constructed within the period of significance.

The streetcar line which began service to Rainier Valley in 1891 played the most significant role in determining the physical development, economic development, and architectural character of Columbia City. Founded as a speculative real estate development well outside of downtown Seattle, Columbia City retains its appearance as a small town with a variety of commercial and civic buildings fronting Rainier Avenue and a collection of vernacular residential buildings on side streets and fronting the historic open space of the Columbia Green. Now over a century old, Columbia City's commercial history includes both industrial mill developments and small-scale, independently owned shops and businesses catering to local clientele. Business owners and workers typically lived in residences on the side streets off of Rainier Avenue, and the district retains a strong pedestrian orientation.

Social history in the community is characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, and a high level of civic involvement on the part of business leaders and other local residents. The significance of the streetcar as an influence on development is ongoing, though the significance of the streetcar as a method of transportation was diminished by the increasing reliance on the automobile since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Architectural history in the district is primarily characterized by a variety of vernacular commercial and residential buildings, with several prominent civic and cultural buildings designed in revival styles popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century providing visual anchors for the district.

**Historical Development of Columbia City**

Rainier Valley and the Lake Washington shoreline were part of the traditional territory of the Duwamish people, a Southern Puget Sound Salish speaking group whose major winter villages were located to the south, in the area of the Black River in present-day Renton and Tukwila. Several locations in the vicinity of Columbia City had Indian place names, which were recorded by anthropologist T. T. Waterman in both Lushootseed (Puget Sound Salish) and English in the early 1900s. One village site, identified as an 'old village' called *Sext<sup>3</sup>i'tclb* or "place where one wades," was located approximately five miles south of Columbia City on the shoreline of Lake Washington at a place now called Bryn Mawr. Another village site in the vicinity of Columbia City was located approximately two miles to the south west, in the Duwamish River valley. This village was called *Tu<sup>3</sup>qwe'Lild* or "a large open space." It was situated on a large flat area in

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 2 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

a bend of the Duwamish River, where the Meadowlands Racetrack used to stand in Georgetown, the present location of the King County International Airport (Boeing Field).

Closer to the location of Columbia City, there was a place known as *Sqa'tsld* or “choked up mouth” for the mouth of a creek emptying into Wetmore Slough which was generally blocked by snags. The creek was noted as having formerly been frequented by silver salmon. This may refer to the creek which ran in the historic period west of the old Columbia School and the Columbia Library, through Columbia Park, and into Lake Washington via Wetmore Slough, through what is now the Rainier Playfield.<sup>1</sup>

The area around Columbia City was first surveyed in September 1861, by a surveyor from the United States General Land Office who recorded a series of hand-written notes on the landscape, and created a map that served as a base-map for subsequent land claims. In the vicinity of Columbia City (Township 24 North, Range 4 East, Section 22), the surveyor noted that the timber was a mixed forest of fir, cedar, hemlock, maple, cottonwood, willow, ash, alder, and dogwood, with an under story of gooseberry, salmonberry, fern, salal, and crabapple. The surveyor also noted the presence of an established trail between Lake Washington, then called Duwamish Lake, and Seattle, which crosses Section 22 in a northwest to southeast direction.<sup>2</sup> This was likely a trail used by Native people, and it later served as the approximate route of the streetcar line.

There were at least four land claims in the vicinity of Columbia City prior to 1861, which were noted by the surveyor, including Donation claims that had been either proved up or preempted by H. Butler, Jackson (John) Harvey, Edward Walsh, and Seymour Wetmore. An additional land claims in the area had been filed by the Woodin family, who later founded the community of Woodinville.<sup>3</sup> Access to the area was increased with construction of a military road around 1860, and a later county road, as well as steamer service on Lake Washington, and land claims in the vicinity of Columbia City increased in the 1870s. A handful of houses had been constructed in the area east of Columbia City by the late 1880s, and real estate speculation began in earnest with the platting of Maynard's Lake Washington Addition (now called Lakewood) in 1890.

In 1889, J.K. Edmiston started laying tracks in Seattle, from the west side of Railroad Avenue up Washington Street, for his Rainier Avenue Electric Railway. As pioneer historian Carey Summers explained, “The tracks ran east to what is now 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue S, and then turned southeast, along a private right of way, probably donated by settlers who hoped to profit from the railway. This right of way later became Rainier Avenue. Tracks were laid on trestles and fills because the ground was swampy.”<sup>4</sup> The railway served the dual purpose of opening the valley to development and providing access to new sources of lumber, which was in high demand after the Great Fire that had destroyed most of Seattle's business district earlier that year.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hilbert, Vi, Jay Miller, and Zalmai Zahir. *Puget Sound Geography*. Federal Way, WA: Zahir Consulting Services, 2001, p. 46, 47, 96.

<sup>2</sup> US Surveyor General, General Land Office Surveyor's Notes (1861) and Map (1862), Township 24 North, Range 4 East, Willamette Meridian. Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Olympia, 1861.

<sup>3</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 29.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

Mr. Edmiston is a pivotal figure in Columbia City's history, though little is known about the man beyond his role as a pioneer real estate mogul. He was the head of the Security Savings Bank in Seattle, and had come to Seattle from Walla Walla, probably in the 1880s. Edmiston may have been an in-law relative of the Woodin family who had homesteaded land in the Rainier Valley. In 1890, Edmiston, along with principal landowner Percy Rochester, and John I. Wiley began planning for a new town site at the end of the streetcar line, which they named Columbia.

Accounts vary on exactly how the community of Columbia got its name, though each of the various explanations ultimately derives from efforts to honor Christopher Columbus. Pioneer historians H.H.A. Hastings and Carey Summers both indicate that it was named specifically for "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," a patriotic melody composed in 1843 by Philadelphia singer David T. Shaw.<sup>5</sup> Columbia (from "Columba," the feminine form of Columbus) was an early name for the American colonies, first used during the French and Indian War to create a sense of solidarity among the 13 independent colonies. The name Columbia was commonly used by the time of the Revolutionary War, and after the founding of the United States of America, Columbia continued to be used as an alternate name for the country. Nineteenth century paintings personifying the United States as a secular "lady liberty" goddess often named her Columbia. Several early 19<sup>th</sup> century American coins also featured this image.<sup>6</sup>

Columbia was chosen by early territorial settlers as their preferred name for what became Washington Territory, harkening back to Christopher Columbus through a more direct connection to the Pacific Northwest region's earliest American explorer. Captain Robert Gray was the first non-Native to 'discover' the Columbia River, which he named in honor of his sailing ship, the *Columbia Rediviva*, meaning "Columbia reborn," which had been named in honor of Christopher Columbus. Settlers in the northern part of Oregon Territory met in 1851 near present-day Olympia to petition Congress for establishment of a separate "Columbia Territory" covering the area between the Columbia River and 49th parallel. Congress approved the new territory in 1853, but changed its name to Washington in honor of the nation's first president.<sup>7</sup>

Forty acres were logged and cleared between Alaska and Hudson, and between 37<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> in 1890 – 1891, for a new town site. Following clearing of timber from the Columbia City town site, Washington Co-operative Home Company partner Perry Rochester began promoting the new development, in large advertisements on the sides of street cars and in the newspapers of the day. Advertisements promoted the wonderful streetcar access, the rich soil, the free wood, and the elegant lots on reasonable terms.<sup>8</sup> One of the Washington Co-operative Home Company's more creative sales pitches was that it was supposed to rain less in Columbia City than Seattle, because Columbia City was farther south.

J.K. Edmiston rode the first Rainier Valley Electric Railway trolley out from Seattle to the end of the line at Hudson Street and Rainier Avenue in the Spring of 1891. The car was packed with free riding sightseers, attracted by banners offering to sell lots at Columbia City. Columbia City's favorite story to tell about itself involves the sale of the first lots in the new

---

<sup>5</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Sives, Kevin. "Columbia The Gem of the Ocean." *Antique Bottle and Glass Collector Magazine*. Online at <http://www.glswrk-auction.com/148.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> History Link Essay: *About Washington State – Frequently Asked Questions and Their Answers*. File No. 5315, by Walt Crowley.

<sup>8</sup> Banta, Robey. "Columbia City Has Much of Human Interest." *Duwamish Valley News*, 4/7/1916.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

town site on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1891. Pioneer historian Carey Summers writes, "Flat cars with benches were towed behind streetcars with banners saying "Watch Columbia Grow."<sup>9</sup> David C. Brown, his son D.W. Brown, attorney H.H.A. Hastings, and others walked from Seattle down the east side of Beacon Hill, to a county road, part of which still exists as Renton Avenue. The real estate office was set up in a tent on the east side of Rainier Avenue, in the middle of Ferdinand Street. There was also a wood and canvas sandwich shop located where the Grayson & Brown Building was later built (#41). D.W. Brown, who had worked as a laborer on the Rainier Avenue Electric Railway, bought the first lot near 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and Angeline Street, just east of the Columbia City Historic District. Lots at Columbia were \$300.00, with payments of \$10.00 down and \$1.00 per week for 300 weeks providing that buildings were erected. \$750.00 lots required a payment of \$1.50 a week. There was no interest charged. Summers later notes that the promoting company failed, but the town site of Columbia prospered. As told by the Columbia Pioneers, "By July 20, 1891, twenty persons resided at Columbia including J. A. Kelso, Van R. Peirson, C. R. Hepler, and others. Many people lived in shacks and tents while houses were being built. All were soon neighbors. They were welcomed by earlier residents including families with the well known names of Almquist, Stephen, Smith, Matthiesen and Wetmore."<sup>10</sup>

The Plat of Columbia, occupying the NE ¼ of the NW ¼ of Section 22, Township 24 North, Range 4 East Willamette Meridian was filed on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1891, by Percy W. Rochester and John I. Wiley, the President and Secretary respectively of the Washington Co-operative Home Company, at the request of J.K. Edmiston.<sup>11</sup> The plat covers the area bound by Alaska Street to the north, Hudson Street to the south, Noble Street (now 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue) to the east, and Caldwell Street (now 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue) to the west. The eastern half of the plat, east of Wisconsin Street (now 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue), contains blocks of rectangular residential lots that are 30 feet wide (east to west) and 100 feet long (north to south). Each block contains 40 lots, and is 20 lots long (east to west) and two lots wide (north to south). Alleys running east to west bisect each block. Each block is approximately three times as long, east to west, as a typical city block. This exceptional length is reflected in the current street names, in which 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue are one "block" apart. This lot configuration pattern is also found in the eastern part of each block in the western half of the plat. Copies of the historic plat maps are included in the nomination's additional documentation.

The streetcar right of way, in the southwestern quadrant of the plat, platted as Rainier Avenue, cuts diagonally across the lots in a northwest to southeast line. This right of way produced unusual and distinctive lot shapes. Unlike the majority of lots in the plat which are long, narrow rectangles oriented north – south, the lots adjacent to the streetcar right of way are long, narrow trapezoids oriented east – west. The long east – west lot lines are parallel, the short lot lines adjacent to the streetcar right of way are angled, and the short lot lines at the opposite ends of lots from the streetcar right of way are on straight north – south axes with right angled corners.

On the east side of Rainier Avenue, lots are longer on their north sides, producing acute northwest corner angles, and obtuse southwest corner angles. On the west side of Rainier Avenue, lots are longer on their south sides, producing obtuse northeast corner angles and acute south east corner angles. These unusually shaped lots in turn produced some very unusual and distinctively shaped buildings, as commercial buildings were built out over time exactly to the lot lines.

---

9 Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 30.

10 Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Plat of Columbia Map, 1891.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 5 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Trapezoidal lots exist only one layer deep on both sides of Rainier Avenue, with the dominant pattern of 30' by 100' north – south oriented rectangular lots resuming near the plat's western boundary. In the northwest corner of the plat, north of the streetcar right of way, a large square block is denoted as Columbia Park. This lot was later subdivided and developed, but park property remains in the present to the north and west of this block.

The Columbia Supplemental No. 1 plat embraces the East ½ of the NW ¼ of the NW ¼ of Section 22, and the SW ¼ of the NW ¼ of the NW ¼ of Section 22, Township 24 North, Range 4 East Willamette Meridian. Frank D. Black and his wife Kate H. Black, of Wayne County, Michigan, owners of the above described property, dedicated the plat on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1891 before a notary public in Michigan. The plat was filed for the record in King County on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1891 at the request of J.K. Edmiston.<sup>12</sup> Frank Black later became a partner in Seattle Hardware, and the Blacks built a fine home on Beacon Hill.

The Columbia Supplemental No. 1 plat covers the area bound by Caldwell Street (now 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue) on the east side, and is adjacent to the Plat of Columbia on this side. The east boundary is Arents Street (now 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue), the south boundary is Hudson Street, and the north boundary is Alaska Street on the east half, and a half-sized lot north of Columbus Street (now Edmunds Street) on the west half. Lots in Columbia Supplemental No. 1 plat are 30 feet by 110 feet; alleys are 14 feet wide; streets are 60 feet wide.

Columbia Park is a notable feature included in the northeast quadrant of the plat. It has an irregular shape formed by a square in the northwest corner of the plat, with a pan handle extending to the south which encompassed a steep ravine on both sides of a creek. On the plat map, the park is bounded by Park Drive on the west (later vacated as 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue and represented by a concrete pathway), and by Edmunds Place on the east, which forms a Y in the north where the park is crossed by Rainier Avenue and the streetcar right of way, running northwest to southeast near the northeast corner of the plat. A small portion of Columbia Park is shown in the northeast corner of the plat, on the east side of Rainier Avenue.

The street names found in the original Plat of Columbia and the Columbia Supplemental No. 1 plat are a curiosity, until one recalls the origin of the name Columbia and its connection a famous explorer. Streets running east – west include four streets named for explorers: Americus Street, for Americus Vespucci; Columbus Street, for Christopher Columbus (later renamed Edmunds Street); Ferdinand Street, for Ferdinand Magellan; and Hudson Street, for Henry Hudson.<sup>13</sup> As Seattle developed, each of these streets was extended westward through the reclaimed tide flats of the Duwamish industrial area and the residential neighborhoods of West Seattle.

One of the first community projects initiated by Columbia's early residents was the construction of a town hall on Rainier Avenue, south of Hudson Street. Building costs were covered by private subscriptions from the pioneers that bought the first lots in Columbia. Shortly after construction, the building was moved across the street to the northwest corner of Rainier and Hudson. The Hall served as a school, church, community building, and library.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Columbia Supplemental No. 1 Plat Map, 1891.

<sup>13</sup> Cardle, Doug. *About Those King County Place-Names*. 1989. Seattle: Coastal Press.

<sup>14</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 32.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

Development occurred rapidly at the new town site, and a pamphlet written by the Columbia Home Company celebrates the town's first anniversary on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1892:

The town is today just one year old. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1891, the slightly high ground upon which it is located was entirely bare of any structure and enveloped in the woods. Now, much of the timber has been cut down and the work of clearing is progressing. From forty to fifty residences of inviting appearances have been erected besides several store buildings. A handsome two story building has been erected by the local lodge of Knights of Pythias the upper part of which is in use as a hall. A \$10,000 school house has been built and has now an attendance of 85 scholars, with two teachers. There is an extensive system of water pipes supplying the town by gravitation with pure spring water. There is also a post office and two church denominations holding services each Sunday."<sup>15</sup>

The pamphlet goes on to list the price and the terms of lot purchase, which remain unchanged from the previous year, and says that, "Upon the request of any purchaser and upon being given reasonable assurance of good faith the Home Company is prepared to erect a residence according to the plans submitted by the purchaser and to take payment therefore in weekly or monthly payments."<sup>16</sup>

The 4800 and 4900 blocks of Rainier Avenue were intended for commercial use, although the Hellenthal home (#35) was constructed at 4900 Rainier Avenue in 1892 as a private residence. It was the first brick building in Columbia, built by Joseph Hellenthal, a brick layer who had emigrated from Germany in 1880. The Hellenthal family sold their home just two years after it was constructed, and the family moved farther south to a more rural area of Rainier Valley. The former Hellenthal home was quickly sold, and after remodeling, opened as a commercial enterprise, the Hotel Dakota, in 1896. It was remodeled again in 1904 and became the Columbia Hotel.<sup>17</sup>

By 1893, three hundred lots had been sold in the original two plats. Most of the houses built during Columbia's first two years were located in the blocks to the east of Rainier Avenue and lie outside of the boundaries of the National Register historic district. One, the 1891 Van R. and Agnes Peirson House (#37), is extant within the National Register historic district, and several are included within the locally designated historic district. Other early homes are described as follows:

Built and sold before the 1893 Panic were the Hastings home on Angeline, the house next door, two Eaton homes on Angeline, the Hart home south of the Library, the R.J. Rhodes home on Angeline, the two Sparks houses, Mrs. Pemberton's home, the H.A. Gardner home on Edmunds, and the J.A. Kelso house on Ferdinand were built on the plans. Van R. Peirson built his own home that year...at 3820 Ferdinand, and the Van Swigert home on Hudson, the home in which Hearst Summers later lived. He, also, built the Baldwin and the Brown homes.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>16</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>17</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 32.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 7 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

By January 1893, the population of Columbia exceeded 300 people, and the community was eligible to incorporate under Washington State law. A Petition for the Incorporation of the Town of Columbia, signed by 66 citizens, was presented to the King County Commissioners, and the community's name was formally changed from Columbia to Columbia City. By becoming the only incorporated community in Rainier Valley, Columbia City captured most of the valley's early growth in population, industry, and market for goods and services. Columbia City's first town council included the following members: C.P. Hutchinson, Mayor; J. Sullivan, Wm. Willsay, E. Volland, J. Hellenthal and Fred Bond, Councilmen; E.L. Hepler, Treasurer. The Appointive Officers were: H.H.A. Hastings, Town Attorney, B.R. Shaw, Clerk; D.C. Brown, Marshal; and C.R. Hepler, Police Judge.<sup>19</sup>

One grand scheme promoted by Columbia City's early settlers was to turn the landlocked town into a seaport, during an era in Seattle's history when tidelands were filled, hills were re-graded, and rivers were straightened. The ambitious plan, first proposed by former territorial governor Eugene Semple in 1895, was to cut through Beacon Hill to create a ship canal between Elliott Bay and Lake Washington. Landslides and cave-ins during construction in 1897 stopped the canal project, but dredging continued to cut a road through Beacon Hill at Dearborn Street. Columbia City boosters still hoped to establish a port facility by dredging Wetmore Slough, a low-lying marsh area that stretched from Columbia City northward to Lake Washington. However, the completion of the Lake Washington Ship Canal in 1917 lowered the level of the lake by nine feet, drying up Wetmore Slough and putting an end to the idea of Columbia City having a working waterfront.<sup>20</sup>

Columbia City grew with the addition of the Morningside Acres plat in 1900 and Frye's Addition in 1901. Maynard's Lake Washington Addition was replatted in 1902, and Hillman's City Addition was platted in 1903.<sup>21</sup> Residential growth on Columbia's northwest corner was somewhat slowed by environmental constraints, documented in a photo from 1896. The photo shows three people standing on a single log bridge crossing the deep ravine and creek on Edmunds Street west of Rainier Avenue. Development of residential properties on the Columbia Green accelerated after a bridge was built at Edmunds Street, with construction of the Dodge – Elliott House (#8) in 1902, the Rosby – Garrison House (#3) in 1905 and the Rodia – Elliott House (#10) in 1907.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Columbia City's early history and development is that business owners generally lived within two or three blocks of their businesses. For example, Theodore Weed who built the Weed Building (#34) lived with his wife Myrtle at 3839 Edmunds Street, and Weed later owned a business at 5000 Rainier Avenue. Reverend Summers of the Columbia Baptist Church (#11) lived at 3812 Hudson Street. Anna Dodge lived for a time at 4747 – 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue (#8), and the family also owned the Dodge Building (#39) on Rainier Avenue.

Columbia City was reincorporated as a "City of the Third Class" (an upgrade from the previous incorporation as a "Town of the Fourth Class") in 1905, when its population reached the required 1,500. A recent essay explains:

Residents rejected a move for annexation to Seattle at that time, arguing that Columbia City could enjoy lower taxes and more local control, particularly on the issue of saloons, as an independent entity. The town prided itself on never having had a saloon within its corporate limits, and many citizens feared that annexation would unleash

---

<sup>19</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>20</sup> History Link Essay: *Columbia City – Thumbnail History*. File No. 3327, by Cassandra Tate, 6/2/2001.

<sup>21</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 43.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

the forces of Demon Rum. By 1907, however, the mood had changed. The tax base proved to be too small to maintain a growing municipality. The voters approved annexation on March 5, with 109 in favor and only three opposed. Columbia City officially became part of Seattle when the election results were filed with the Secretary of State, on May 3, 1907.<sup>22</sup>

After annexation by Seattle, Columbia City was referred to for a time as Columbia Station. Other communities along the Rainier Valley line were also referred to as stations, such as Brighton and Rainier Beach, reflecting the continuing importance of the streetcar line to the area's development.

Completion of the Columbia Branch Library (#13) in 1915 marked a milestone in the development of Columbia City, as it was the first in a series of prominent civic and public buildings constructed between 1915 and 1926 which gave the district enduring visual anchors at its north and south ends, and strengthened Columbia City's role as a civic as well as commercial center for Rainier Valley. The Columbia Branch Library was first established in 1909 in the former Columbia Town Hall building at Rainier Avenue and Hudson Street. The new branch library was constructed on the east side of Columbia Park, and was noted as a source of civic pride in the community. It was one of several branch libraries built in Seattle neighborhoods in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with funds donated by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The citizens of Columbia contributed \$2,500 toward the project, and Carnegie donated \$35,000.<sup>23</sup>

An ambitious program of street improvements for Rainier Avenue began in 1912, linked to resolution of litigation between the City of Seattle and the streetcar line, and the growing demands of automobile owners for better roads. In Columbia City, Rainier Avenue was graded and re-aligned north of Edmunds Street in the vicinity of the library, so that the right of way could accommodate both the streetcar and automobiles. Local property owners paid for the paving of Rainier Avenue with bricks, after waiting two years for settlement to take place in the filled areas. The west side of the Avenue was done 1917 – 1918, and the east side was done 1919-1920. Bricks were laid on top of a five-inch concrete base.<sup>24</sup> Rather than running on the west side of the Avenue, streetcar tracks were realigned to run up the middle of the street.

The building of the Columbia Branch Library and realignment of Rainier Avenue both affected Columbia Park, which had been deeded for public use in 1891 but had never been developed as a public amenity. Prior to 1912, the park property was dominated by a steep north – south ravine, cut by a stream which flowed to the north and drained into Wetmore Slough. A small portion of the park on the east side of the streetcar tracks had been vacated by King County in 1892. As a part of Columbia City's annexation by Seattle in 1907, the Columbia Park came under the purview of the Seattle Parks Department. In 1911, property owners adjacent to the park waived their egress rights to streets originally platted on the park's east and west edges, opting instead for the construction of pathways. In 1912, a portion of the park's east side was deeded by Frank and Kate Black to the Library Board, for construction of the Columbia Branch Library. As the Rainier Avenue realignment project was completed, a project to 'improve' Columbia Park gained momentum. As early as 1916, residents wrote letters to the City of Seattle asking that the forty foot deep ravine be filled to create a more desirable public space. The City's solution was to route the stream into a series of pipes and culverts, thereby eliminating the salmon run,

---

<sup>22</sup> History Link Essay: *Columbia City – Thumbnail History*. File No. 3327, by Cassandra Tate, 6/2/2001.

<sup>23</sup> Rainier Valley Citizen, *The Citizen Christmas Annual, December 25, 1915*. p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 69.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 9 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

and fill the ravine with garbage. City engineers estimated that it would take approximately 30,000 cubic yards of material to fill the north portion of the ravine and 54,000 cubic yards of material to fill the deeper south portion of the property.<sup>25</sup>

When progress on the filling of the ravine slowed in 1919, the Young Men's Business Club of Rainier Valley sent a letter to the Seattle Park Board requesting that the City continue dumping garbage in Columbia Park to complete the fill, with the object of finishing, grading, and seeding the park. Park improvements were finally completed in the mid-1920s, after which point the property is generally referred to as the Columbia Green. It would seem curious that the Columbia Branch Library, though sited within a city park, was originally designed without any windows on its west façade facing the park, but this design decision may be explained by the fact that the park was an open garbage pit for several years after the library was constructed, prior to the completion of park improvements.

The completion of the library, park, and road realignment were the first in a series of local improvements for Columbia City, which included both redevelopment and new construction in the district spurred by the general prosperity of the post-WWI economy. The Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist (#1) was constructed in a Greek Revival style at the northwest corner of the Columbia Green in 1921, on a parcel where a single family home formerly stood. A classically styled, brick and stucco-clad building was also constructed in 1921 at 4812 Rainier Avenue for the Ark Lodge No. 126 Free & Accepted Masons (#45). A new Columbia School (#17) was constructed in 1922 in a Mission Revival style just to the west of the old wood-frame Columbia School, and the old school was demolished. At the south end of the district, the old wood-frame Columbia Town Hall building at Rainier Avenue and Hudson Street was moved one block to the west, and a new reinforced concrete Spanish Revival style building was constructed in 1926 by the City of Seattle to serve as a neighborhood police precinct (#29).

In addition to the public and civic buildings described above, a number of significant commercial buildings were constructed in the 1920s, many of which replaced earlier wood-frame buildings. Commercial buildings from this era include the Columbia Theater (#31), the Columbia Motor Company (#38), the Rainier Valley State Bank (#44), the Rainier Valley Barber Shop (#33), the Calvert Bakery (#20), Skaggs Safeway (#30), and the Columbia Confectionery (#23). All are constructed of brick with the exception of the Rainier Valley Barber Shop (#33); all are one story, with the exception of the Bank Building (#44). Some of the older commercial and civic buildings in the district were renovated during the 1920s, to update the look of the storefronts, and lend a more solid, modern appearance to what were mostly wood-frame buildings. Substantially renovated buildings during this era include the Weed Building (#34), the Columbia Baptist Church (#11), and the Dodge Building (#39). One new residence was constructed along the west side of the Columbia Green in the 1920s, the Thomas & Nina Elliott House (#9), built in 1925.

The middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought few changes to Columbia City, but the changes were significant. The end of the streetcar era came in 1937, and tracks were removed and replaced with pavement within a few months. A fire destroyed the second floor of Phalen's Hall (#22) in 1941. The building's distinctive ornate turrets and false front had been removed previously and the façade had been bricked over, but the building still maintained an important role in Columbia City's history and civic life. With the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, a new period of

---

<sup>25</sup> Seattle Municipal Archives: *City of Columbia Records, 1893-1913*, City of Seattle.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 10 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

growth and change occurred in Columbia City, as government contractors built temporary housing for defense workers in fields on the west side of town.<sup>26</sup>

There was relatively little post-WWII commercial development in Columbia City, as auto-oriented strip mall developments were more likely to be built to the north and south of the historic district along Rainier Avenue in areas with large tracts of undeveloped property for both buildings and parking. However, one section of Columbia City's commercial district was greatly altered in the mid-1950s, on the west side of Rainier Avenue between the Columbia Branch Library and Edmunds Street. Until approximately 1954, a substantial hill was located north of Edmunds Street and west of Rainier Avenue, bordering on the southeast edge of the Columbia Green. Three residences were located on the hill, belonging to the Nichols, Hart, and Covington families. These houses were demolished, the hill was graded flat, and three modern commercial buildings were constructed between 1957 and 1959 – the Hasegawa Professional Building (#14), the Tradewell / Columbia Plaza Building (#15) and the SeaFirst Bank Building (#16).

In 1966, a development company called the Rainier Avenue Corporation questioned the legal status of the northeast corner of the Columbia Green, claiming that the property had not been properly vacated following the realignment of Rainier Avenue prior to 1920, and asserting its right to develop a portion of the property at the southeast corner of Rainier Avenue and Alaska Street for commercial purposes. A series of court cases in the King County Superior Court and Washington State Supreme Court was finally resolved in 1970 when the United States Supreme Court refused to hear the case on appeal, allowing a lower court decision to stand in favor of the City of Seattle and the Columbia Pioneers, and the park property was preserved as a public amenity.<sup>27</sup>

Documentation and listing of the Columbia City Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 resulted from a simultaneous effort on the part of the City of Seattle to recognize and document its historic neighborhoods, and an effort on the part of community activists and planners to revitalize Columbia City by championing the neighborhood's pedestrian-friendly historic characteristics and its potential for economic redevelopment. Organizations such as the Columbia City Merchants Association and the Columbia City Development Association also played roles in this effort. Several planning documents were prepared by the City of Seattle and the non-profit community development organization Southeast Effective Development (SEED), in the months before and after the historical designation, which focused on community needs and regulatory oversight, including the *Southeast Seattle Community Development Plan* (1976), the *Columbia City Business District Plan* (1978), the *Columbia City Landmark District* (1979), and *Columbia City, A Guide for Investors* (c.1981).

In 1980, shortly after designation of the historic district, a major streetscape enhancement project was undertaken by the City of Seattle. The work included widening sidewalks, adding benches and trees, improving landscaping, and updating traffic signals.<sup>28</sup> Another beautification project was undertaken in 1988 in the district, which included installation of old-fashioned three-globe street lights, decorative street signs, and brick style paving blocks to demarcate crosswalks in intersections. The highlight of this project was the installation of a renovated street clock on the west side of Rainier

---

<sup>26</sup> History Link Essay: *Columbia City – Thumbnail History*. File No. 3327, by Cassandra Tate, 6/2/2001.

<sup>27</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Avenue between Edmunds Street and Ferdinand Street, in front of the Rainier Valley Investment Company (#24). The clock was made in Seattle in 1906, and was originally sited on the 1200 block of First Avenue, in front of the former Myers Music store. The historic clock was restored by retired machinist Jimmie Collier, who was allowed to purchase it from the City of Seattle on the condition that he sell it back to the City after it was repaired.<sup>29</sup> A 1915 photo of Columbia City shows a street clock on the east side of Rainier Avenue, in front of the Toby Building, but it was removed some time in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Following two decades of deferred maintenance and general deterioration of buildings in the district, the first major efforts to rehabilitate a significant historic building occurred in the mid-1980s, when one of the anchor historic commercial buildings was renovated. A 1981 fire at Slim's Tavern in the Columbia Hotel (#35) had been a blow to the commercial district, and the building sat vacant and deteriorated for several years until it was renovated first by a private developer in 1984, and later by SEED, which purchased and renovated the building in 1998 to provide eight units of low-income housing and street-level retail.<sup>30</sup> In 1992, Pioneer Human Services, a non-profit social service organization, purchased and renovated the Toby Building (Site #42) to serve as its headquarters, as well as to provide transitional housing and street-level retail.

Earl Richardson, SEED Executive Director, explained that SEED's real estate rehabilitation projects were intended to demonstrate a long-term commitment to the neighborhood's economic vitality, and to serve as a catalyst for private investment.<sup>31</sup> SEED staffers also served as organizers for annual community events including summer festivals, historic walking tours, and holiday parties sponsored by the local business community. Many family owned businesses which had operated for decades in Columbia City, including Grayson & Brown (located in site #41), Cleo's (located in site #44) and Rector's (located in site #19) weathered the lean and challenging years in the 1970s and 1980s, but closed in the late 1980s or 1990s, as owners prepared to retire, and the district's clientele changed.

Other SEED redevelopment projects in Columbia City include the transformation in 1993-4 of the Fifth Church of Christ Scientist (#1) into the Rainier Valley Cultural Center, a performing arts center, public meeting space, and home of the Rainier Valley Historical Society. This project ensured that one of the most prominent historic buildings in the district continues to serve a public, civic function in the community. SEED also operated the Columbia City Art Gallery for several years prior to 2004 in the former Columbia Theater (#31). In 2004, the gallery moved to the newly renovated Columbia Department Store (#40), a 1909 commercial building which SEED purchased the previous year. In addition, SEED's Good Neighbor Program has provided façade improvement funds to over 30 small businesses in and adjacent to the historic district.

Since the late 1990s, several commercial buildings in the historic district have been rehabilitated by private owners / developers with the approval of the Columbia City Review Committee and the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board. These include Skaggs Safeway (#30), now Tutta Bella Pizzeria; the Columbia Café (#32), now the Columbia City Ale House; the Grayson & Brown Building (#41), now Revival Lighting; the Rainier Valley State Bank Building (#44), now

---

<sup>29</sup> McGuire, Terry. "Old Street Clock." *Beacon Hill News / South District Journal*. January 20, 1988, page 4.

<sup>30</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Earl Richardson of SEED, Seattle, Washington, April 13, 2004.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 12 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Starbucks; and the Ark Lodge (#45), now the Columbia Cinema. Renovations have been proposed for several other buildings in the district. Construction of Sound Transit's Central Link Light Rail line, begun in 2004, will bring rail transportation back to Rainier Valley after an absence of more than 70 years.

**Economic Development & Commercial History**

The history of commerce in Columbia City is in many respects typical of small towns in the western United States, with early economic growth stimulated by lumber mills, and development of a commercial district around a stop on the rail line that was the primary early means of transportation. Two aspects of Columbia City's commercial history that exemplify this pattern of development are the significant role that the streetcar line had as the neighborhood's major employer, and the longevity of many of the neighborhood's core businesses.

Early homesteaders in the area logged old growth timber, and established small farms on cleared land. The Matthiesen family who homesteaded 80 acres in the central Rainier Valley in 1880 grew a variety of produce, and found buyers for it in the booming mining town of Newcastle, which they reached by rowing east across Lake Washington and up May Creek.<sup>32</sup>

Anticipating the urgent need for lumber, F.E. Scott built the Columbia Mill in July 1891, west of Rainier Avenue where the streetcar line initially ended, south of Hudson Street in the area of present-day Brandon Street and Dawson Street. The mill was Columbia's first commercial structure, and it sustained the town's growth during the Panic of 1893 when many other developments failed.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the Columbia Mill, the area also boasted Blackmer's Shingle Mill just west of Columbia City, and Taylor's Mill (officially named the Rainier Beach Lumber Company), as well as numerous lumber yards, including the Schlegel Lumber Company at Rainier Avenue and Hudson Street.<sup>34</sup>

The Columbia Grocer was the first store to open in Columbia City. It opened in 1892 at the northeast corner of Rainier Avenue and Ferdinand Street, later the location of the Dodge Building (#39). The Helper Grocery opened the following year, in 1893, on the northwest corner of same intersection.

An 1893 incorporation petition presented to the King County Board of Commissioners by residents of Columbia City provides insight into early commercial and economic activity, as it lists the occupation of each of the petition's signers. Of the 66 men ("legal voters and residents") who signed the petition, almost half were engaged in building trades such as carpenter, contractor, lumberman, painter, bricklayer, and laborer. Others are identified primarily as merchants.<sup>35</sup>

A transcontinental railroad began serving Seattle directly in 1893. In spite of an infusion of newly arrived migrants and immigrants, the Panic of 1893 sent King County into a depression, and economic growth in Columbia City slowed

---

<sup>32</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>33</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Seattle Municipal Archives: *City of Columbia Records, 1893-1913*, City of Seattle.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 13 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

dramatically. The Columbia Mill continued to operate through tough economic times, but J.K. Edmiston lost control of the streetcar line at the same time that his Security Savings Bank in Seattle went into receivership.

Attorney H.H.A. Hastings of Columbia City was appointed as the bank's receiver, and he produced a report in 1894 entitled "How To Ruin A Bank" detailing what he called "queer methods of accounting" in which Edmiston used the bank to further his personal transactions. Edmiston allegedly had the Rainier Valley Electric Railway issue worthless promissory notes to his brother, also a banker, who then assigned them to Edmiston himself. Charges were filed, but Edmiston quickly left the Seattle area. Speculation regarding Edmiston's whereabouts ranged from South America to New York, and though he was not publicly heard from again, he did apparently pay off debts through a third party for many years.<sup>36</sup>

Four years later, the start of the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897 reversed the region's economic fortunes and signaled the beginning of a period of great prosperity for Columbia City. Some of the town's inhabitants went north to Alaska to try their luck at mining, including Glen Carrington, Charles Johnson, Asa Hepler, Charles Cook, and the Groat boys.<sup>37</sup> Provisioning miners proved to be more reliably profitable than mining itself, and some local boys returned with earnings to invest in their fledgling city. Many of Columbia City's new residents in the late 1890s and early 1900s settled in the area after working in Alaska for a period of time, although it is not clear from historic records whether they chose to settle in Columbia City due to personal connections or simply due to economic opportunities. Those who spent time in Alaska during the Klondike era who later became Columbia City residents include Simeon Toby, Thomas Elliott, and members of the Weiss family.

The surrounding communities of Brighton, Atlantic City, Dunlap, Rainier Beach, and Southeast developed in the early 1900s around streetcar stops. Most had grocery stores, feed stores and a few other commercial establishments, but Columbia City served as "downtown" to these communities, the major business district in Rainier Valley. As Columbia City's population grew, the local economy expanded to include manufacturing and a wider variety of commercial enterprises. Fuel yards took advantage of the streetcar line for delivery of coal from nearby Renton and Newcastle, as well as fire wood. Valley Fuel Company received deliveries via a short spur line extending off to the east from the main line at Rainier Avenue and Alaska Street.

The timber supply in the vicinity of Columbia City was exhausted less than ten years after the construction of the Columbia Mill. The Mill furnished part of the electricity needed to run the streetcars, so it was logical to build the Hudson Street car barns to serve the streetcar lines on the site of the old mill in the early 1900s. Due to the proximity of the car barns, one of the most reliable occupations for three decades in Columbia City was that of motorman on the streetcar line.<sup>38</sup> Other notable early businesses in Columbia City included meat markets, real estate offices, the Columbia Laundry, a tinsmith, and a plumbing shop.

Two anchor buildings, the Toby Building (#42) and the Grayson & Brown Building (#41), constructed in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the business district's north end were built to house two businesses that have helped to define Columbia

---

<sup>36</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

<sup>38</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 43.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 14 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

City for a century. The Toby Building (#42) is connected to the history of banking in Columbia City, and also served as “incubator” space for a number of other local businesses. The two gentlemen whose names grace the buildings, D.W. Brown and Simeon Toby, were acquainted prior to settling in Columbia City. D.W. “Will” Brown was a motorman on the streetcar line. Simeon Toby paid a visit to Brown in Columbia City on his way to Hillman City to look at real estate. Toby mentioned where he was headed and why, and Will Brown insisted on showing Toby a choice corner lot available in Columbia. As Brown later told his grandson, Buzz Anderson, “I offered him such a good price, he decided to invest in Columbia City.”<sup>39</sup>

In 1903, Toby constructed a two story brick building at Rainier Avenue and Edmunds Street (a third story was added in 1914), and in 1909 he opened his bank. Buzz Anderson recounts the history of Columbia City’s first banking enterprise: “[Toby] did not have the \$10,000 needed to obtain a State Charter, however, so he formed a private bank, S. T. Toby Bank. A year later he obtained the needed Charter and his bank, in 1910, became the Rainier Valley State Bank. Will Brown had the honor of being the first depositor at the new bank.”<sup>40</sup> Toby built the Rainier Valley State Bank building in 1922 (#44) and formed the Southern Savings & Loan the same year. In 1924 Simeon Toby died and his son Thomas became head of the banks. Shortly afterward, Seattle First National Bank bought out Toby’s banks, and continued to operate at the same location at 4820 Rainier Avenue for four decades, until a new SeaFirst Bank was constructed directly across Rainier Avenue (#16) in 1959.

A storefront in the Toby Building also served as the first home for Grayson Brothers Hardware, founded in 1903. In addition to the hardware business, the Graysons also had a funeral business, which was a common combination in the pre-automobile age, as caskets could be made in the furniture workshop, and both businesses could share the large wagon and team required to transport both caskets and furnishings. In 1908, D.W. Brown built the Brown Building (#41) at 4860 Rainier Avenue, and in the building’s early years it housed a printer. Grayson Brothers Hardware relocated to the Brown Building in 1911, and in 1916, D.W. Brown left his job as superintendent of the streetcar line during one of its many bankruptcies and joined Ed Grayson as a partner in his hardware and furniture business. It became known as Grayson & Brown Hardware and Furniture Company. Grayson divested himself of the funeral business, after D.W. Brown’s wife Edith objected to her husband’s involvement in the business. The funeral business survived, however, and is known today as Columbia Funeral Home, located just north of the Columbia City Historic District in the historic Lassen Home on the northwest corner of Rainier Avenue and Alaska Street.<sup>41</sup> In 1923, a two story addition to the Grayson and Brown Building was constructed on the north side, and the floor and roof joists were attached directly to the Toby Building, so the two buildings share a party wall.

Through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an assortment of locally owned businesses served residents of Columbia City and the surrounding Rainier Valley, often moving from one storefront to another along Rainier Avenue as more desirable commercial spaces became available. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Columbia City’s commercial district boasted grocery stores, drug stores, hardware stores, dry goods stores, bakeries and confectionary shops, a milliner, a tailor, a shoemaker, a print shop, a furniture company, transfer and storage companies, undertakers, as well as physicians,

---

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Simeon T. Toby’s Bank Building*. 1/19/2000.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Simeon T. Toby’s Bank Building*. 1/19/2000.

<sup>41</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Frigidaire Week at Grayson & Brown*. 5/7/2002.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 15 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

dentists, and a music teacher. Later decades saw the addition of insurance companies, beauty shops, jewelers, florists, cafés, movie theaters, opticians, and other professionals in second floor offices above storefronts. A number of commercial buildings also had hotels operating on upper floors, or rented housekeeping rooms.

The Rainier Valley Citizen's 1915 Annual, a supplement to the local newspaper, provides a description of Columbia City in its hey-day:

As a center for the community business, Columbia gained an early lead over the other and less favorably-situated settlements, and today it has more brick buildings and more and better stores than any other suburb of Seattle with the possible exception of the University district. It has a bank, a public library, a police sub-station, two telephone stations, several lodge halls, the largest fireworks plant on the Pacific Coast, a newspaper and printing plant, three lumber yards and wood work mills and many fine stores of various kinds. Columbia also has the first brick pavement laid down in the Rainier Valley district.<sup>42</sup>

As Columbia City prospered, the commercial center evolved in a distinctive pattern: wood frame buildings constructed in the 1890s were often torn down or moved off of Rainier Avenue to make way for new brick buildings. The Rainier Valley Investment Company building (#24) epitomizes the prosperity and boosterism of the period. It was built at 4871-75 Rainier Avenue, on the former site of Hepler's Grocery, which was moved out of the way to the west. The Rainier Valley Investment Company building was designed by local architect Henderson Ryan, and constructed of brick in 1913 by a group of local investors. The building has provided retail space on the ground floor and professional offices and living quarters on the second floor for over 90 years. The Investment Company's office was located across the street at 4870 Rainier Avenue, prior to construction of the Dodge Building (#39) on that site. Principal owners and stockholders of Rainier Valley Investment Company also had regular 'day jobs.' For example, Mr. Gardner, the company president, was one of Columbia City's barbers, and D.W. Brown was a streetcar motorman at the time.

Columbia City remained a business hub for many years. Among the major employers were the Hitt Fireworks Company, which moved to Columbia City in 1905, just south of the commercial district. Hitt's was one of the largest manufacturers of fireworks in the United States. The Heater Glove Company, established in 1916 by Freeman Heater, manufactured leather jackets, hats, and other articles in addition to gloves. The company's first location was in a small building with room for only one sewing machine and a front door that opened onto the alley. They were directly behind Mayfield's Restaurant and Hotel at 4914 Rainier Avenue (#32), which has been known since 1929 as the Columbia Café and Elbow Room.<sup>43</sup>

Bob Heater, Freeman's son, explained:

In the thirties there was a Northwest Products trade show every year in downtown Seattle by the Pike Place Market. Freeman Heater would have a large window display showing all the products they manufactured. Among the products they made were leather aviator helmets for the pilots during the open cockpit era of flying. The most noteworthy product the company produced was the helmet worn by Charles Lindbergh on his famous flight across the Atlantic in the Spirit of St. Louis in 1927. It was made of a very soft light brown leather. It is now on display in the Smithsonian. That wasn't the only notable product they made however. It seems that

---

<sup>42</sup> Rainier Valley Citizen, *The Citizen Christmas Annual*, December 25, 1915.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Heater Glove Company*. 12/29/1999.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 16 of 28 **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Freeman was a boxing fan and a friend of the famous boxer, Jack Dempsey. The company made his boxing gloves for him. They also made them for Jack Sharkey and other local boxing champs.<sup>44</sup>

The impact of automobiles on Columbia City's business district became more pronounced after about 1915, not only in the changing streetscapes, but in the addition of gas stations at both the north and south ends of the commercial district, as well as a car dealership called the Columbia Motor Company (#38), and garages providing repair services.

The commercial phenomenon in Columbia City of the combined barber shop and pool hall deserves special mention. As an element of the district's social history, Columbia City's early effective ban on saloons contributed to the development of this unusual combination commercial enterprise, but the Rainier Valley Barber Shop (#33) is also notable for its continuity. Prior to the construction of the Rainier Valley Barber Shop at 4910 Rainier Avenue in 1926, Menzo LaPorte's barber shop had had at least five other locations in Columbia City. His first shop at 4866 Rainier Avenue (#22) was a partnership with his future father-in-law Lee Gardner, who had previously operated a barber shop at 4915 Rainier Avenue (#28). In 1917, Gardner and LaPorte moved to 4870 Rainier Avenue (#39). Mr. LaPorte opened his own shop at 4906 Rainier Avenue (#34) in the early 1920s, and moved to 4904 Rainier Avenue (#35) in 1922. His final location at 4910 Rainier Avenue (#33) was in a building which he built.<sup>45</sup> John Wynn has operated Big John's Barbershop in the building since 1970. The only establishment that moved more often than the barber shop was Columbia City's post office, which has had at least eight different storefront locations since 1891.

Nelson's Butcher Shop (#21) is also notable for its longevity, though it has served Columbia City as a meat market in the same location at 4861 Rainier Avenue since 1909. Operated first by Charles Nelson and then by his son Richard "Butch" Nelson, the meat market is one of the longest lived businesses in Columbia City. Although it closed briefly in the 1970s, it has been operated in recent decades by Robert Ackerly as Bob's Quality Meats.

Other glimpses of Columbia City's commercial history can be found in the Rainier Valley Historical Society's collection, which includes the guest register from the Columbia Hotel (#35), signed by local residents enjoying the hotel's famous 'All You Can Eat' Sunday dinners, as well as hotel guests hailing from cities and towns all over the United States and beyond, including celebrity guest Buffalo Bill Cody. The south storefront of the Columbia Hotel building was occupied in the 1930s by the Columbian, a neighborhood dry goods store. This was an early attempt by Marshall Fields to operate as J.C. Penny did originally, with neighborhood and small town units.<sup>46</sup>

A photograph in the Rainier Valley Historical Society collection captures the impact of the Great Depression in Columbia City. Taken in 1932, it shows hundreds of people lined up outside a relief office on the Edmunds Street side of the Toby Building (#42) in one of the former locations of the Columbia Station post office. Historian Mikala Woodward writes, "When the Depression first hit Washington State, the government did little to help people who were affected. It was the unions and the communists who got together and provided assistance – they cut firewood and gave it away to people in

---

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Heater Glove Company*. 12/29/1999.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Columbia City's First Pool Hall*. 7/10/2002.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: All You Can Eat For 25 Cents*. 12/31/2000.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 17 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

need, and they opened relief offices.”<sup>47</sup> The self-help movement in the United States originated in Seattle, according to historian Richard C. Berner, and the relief office in Columbia City was the first local office to open, with token support from the Seattle City Council and actual support from the Unemployed Citizens’ League.<sup>48</sup>

The end of streetcar service on January 1, 1937 represented more than just the end of 46 years of private streetcar service for Rainier Valley. The streetcar line, with its Hudson Street car barn, had been a major employer in Columbia City, and its demise in the midst of the Great Depression hurt the district badly.<sup>49</sup> The most recently constructed residential building in the Columbia City historic district, the 1933 Evans Rental House (#4), also conveys its era as a modest house built by a relative of the property owner, who lived nearby, as a means to generate additional income during the Great Depression.

During the World War II years, small businesses struggled to find employees, as many of their regular workers had been drafted into the armed forces. Grayson & Brown employed several older retired men and housewives from the surrounding area to sell nails, fencing and paint from the hardware department as well as furniture and appliances.<sup>50</sup> Businesses boomed in Columbia City in the post-WWII economy, as shop owners tried to keep up with demands for goods and services from the huge influx of new residents in Rainier Vista and Holly Park housing developments. One well known business of the time was Cleo’s, a women’s clothing store which drew customers from all over Seattle. The business started out in the Calvert Bakery Building (#20), and then moved to the Rainier Valley State Bank (#44) in the 1960s. Rector’s Men’s Shop (#19) was also an institution in Columbia City for decades.

As the post-WWII economy slowed, and the temporary wartime housing transitioned to low-income housing projects, Columbia City’s commercial district struggled to attract shoppers. A neon sign directing traffic to the Columbia Shopping District was installed on Empire Way in 1950, and the Columbia Merchant’s Inc. sponsored promotions such as a raffle for a new Buick to entice area residents to “shop at home” rather than traveling in their cars to Seattle or Renton.<sup>51</sup>

Columbia City experienced relatively little post-WWII commercial development, with the exception of one major redevelopment project on the west side of Rainier Avenue, north of Edmunds Street, which involved the construction of three new commercial buildings in the late 1950s. These three buildings, the Hasegawa Professional Building (#14), the Tradewell / Columbia Plaza Building (#15) and the SeaFirst Bank Building (#16), were constructed in a modern style, and do not currently (2004) meet the National Register’s 50 year age requirement to be considered as potentially contributing resources to the district. However, each represents evolution and continuity in terms of the history of commerce in the neighborhood. Professional offices had long occupied second floor spaces above storefronts on Rainier Avenue; numerous

---

<sup>47</sup> Woodward, Mikala, ed. *Rainier Valley Food Stories Cookbook: A Culinary History of the Rainier Valley*. Seattle: Rainier Valley Historical Society, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Berner, Richard C. *Seattle in the 20th Century, Volume 2: Seattle 1921 – 1940, from Boom to Bust*. Seattle, Washington: Charles Press, 1992. p. 305.

<sup>49</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Columbia City’s First Pool Hall*. 7/10/2002.

<sup>51</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 18 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

grocery stores and general stores had served the neighborhood over time; and the neighborhood bank migrated from the southeast corner of Rainier Avenue and Edmunds Street, to the northeast corner, to the northwest corner of the same intersection over a 50 year period.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many long-time businesses were sold or closed their doors. Newspaper articles from the 1970s lament the flight of merchants to other communities and the deterioration of the commercial district, and note that the biggest going concern for many years in Columbia City was the local Bingo parlor. A 1974 newspaper article titled "Closing in the Face of Crime" noted the closing of Columbia City's jewelry store after 26 years of business because the store had been robbed three times in less than a year.<sup>52</sup> Designation of the landmark district at the local level in 1978 and listing in the National Register in 1980 were key elements of the effort to support local businesses and reinvigorate Columbia City's commercial district. The Columbia City Development Association was organized around this time, and worked to plan community revitalization projects and bring funds into the neighborhood.

Even after several years of planning and public investment in the Rainier Valley, an increased police presence and the formation of neighborhood watch groups, businesses in Columbia City struggled during the 1980s, and many family-owned businesses closed after decades of operation, including Rector's Menswear (#19) and Grayson & Brown (#41). Rapid turnover in the neighborhood's population in the preceding two decades meant a dramatic change in clientele, and many businesses were unable to continue operating. Columbia City's commercial district included several boarded-up buildings during the 1980s. As Seattle's economy boomed in the 1990s, Columbia City seemed to be perpetually rediscovered by local trend watchers looking for the next up and coming neighborhood, and new restaurants and shops opened as historic buildings were rehabilitated to serve new uses.

The Columbia City Farmers Market, held weekly during the summer in the Tradewell / Columbia Plaza parking lot (#15), plays an important role in community building in contemporary Columbia City. Founded in 1998, the farmers market provides a neighborhood gathering place that showcases the area's ethnic diversity and provides a link to Rainier Valley's agricultural heritage.

**Social History in Columbia City: Schools, Churches, Ethnic Heritage and Social Groups**

The early settlers of Columbia City were a social and civic-minded group, establishing a community Sunday school in July 1891, less than three months after the sale of the first lots in the newly established Columbia town site.<sup>53</sup> Several early settlers were civil war veterans, including Mr. Wiard and Mr. D.C. Brown. Perhaps the earliest social organization established was the Columbia Pioneers, which held annual gatherings starting in 1891. By 1892, the original Columbia School had been constructed, with an initial enrollment of over 85 students, indicating that the majority of the population of Columbia City in the early 1890s were children. Columbia City never boasted a high school; students in all grades attended Columbia School in early years. Later, students were sent to Broadway High School in Seattle, and after 1911 to Franklin High School in Mount Baker. By 1893, a baseball team had been organized, and Columbia City's Fourth of July festivities were gaining renown. A volunteer fire department also established at this time.

---

<sup>52</sup> Suffia, David. "Closing in the Face of Crime." *Seattle Times* 1/9/1974.

<sup>53</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 31.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 19 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

Fraternal organizations were important social institutions in Columbia City's early years, and their facilities served many other community organizations as well. The earliest fraternal lodge hall in Columbia City was the Knights of Pythias Hall, an ornate, turreted false-front wood frame building constructed in 1892 at 4863-65 Rainier Avenue (#22). The most visually prominent building in Columbia City's early years, the two story building had commercial space downstairs and a meeting room upstairs for lodge meetings, community affairs, and social gatherings. Bill Phalen bought the building in 1903 and it became known as Phalen's Hall, with Phalen's general store and grocery on main floor and continued community use of the second floor by a variety of organizations for meetings, social gatherings, and dances.<sup>54</sup>

The Modern Woodmen of the World had a lodge hall upstairs in the Weed Building (#34). This space was also used by other community groups for business meetings as well as dances and other social gatherings. The Oddfellows met in nearby Hillman City. Another social center was Boyd Hall, built in the late 1890s on Ferdinand Street, just west of the old Columbia School, on the site of the present Columbia School. This facility primarily served as a dance hall, and was also used for roller skating and as a theater. Boyd Hall was where the first movies were shown in Columbia City, in 1914.<sup>55</sup>

A Masonic Lodge was chartered in Columbia City in 1903. The Ark Lodge # 126 Free & Accepted Masons first met in what was known as Fraternity Hall, a meeting hall built by H.H.A. Hastings on the south side of Ferdinand Street, one half block west of Rainier Avenue. An Eastern Star chapter was chartered in 1905. The Columbia Pioneers also met at Fraternity Hall, as did other community organizations. In 1921, the Ark Lodge built an elegant stucco-clad Temple building at 4812 Rainier Avenue (#45). The order sold its Lodge building in the early 1990s to a private developer who has renovated interior spaces to serve as an art gallery and movie house. The Ark Lodge #126 celebrated its centennial in 2003, and continues to meet at the Delta Masonic Hall in Tukwila. In describing the role of fraternal organizations like the Masons in earlier eras, long time Ark Lodge member Georg Schluter said, "When you come from another country and don't know anyone, the people in the lodge become very important, like your family."<sup>56</sup>

Demographic patterns in Columbia City are captured in early census data. The Federal Census of 1900, enumerated by Columbia City resident Ralph D. Nichols, was the first federal census conducted in Columbia City after its founding and incorporation. The Census of 1900 counted 709 men, women and children living in Columbia Precinct. Of the total population, 16% were foreign born, coming from (in order of frequency) English and French Canada, Germany, England, Sweden, Ireland, and at least seven other countries. The majority of Columbia City's residents at the time were children, and over 40% of the total population had at least one parent who was foreign born. The Census of 1900 also shows that 22% of Columbia City's population had been born in Washington state or Washington territory. The remaining 60% of the population came from elsewhere in the United States, with the majority hailing from Midwestern states such as Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Later census data, from 1920 and 1930, shows a smaller number of immigrants relative to the overall population, but a broader range of countries of origin. Prior to WWII, immigrants in the

---

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Bill Phalen's Parade*. 10/13/1999.

<sup>55</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with members of Ark Lodge #126 at Delta Lodge, Tukwila, Washington, April 7, 2004.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 20 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Columbia City neighborhood were predominantly Caucasian people coming from European countries, but they spoke many languages and brought a variety of traditional customs and cultural practices with them.<sup>57</sup>

While the Rainier Valley Improvement Association founded in 1904 sought to boost the district's economic development, several churches sought to guide the community's moral development.<sup>58</sup> The Columbia Congregational church was the first church constructed in the neighborhood, just east of the Columbia City Historic District boundary, at 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Ferdinand Street. Other churches established in Columbia City's early years include the German Evangelical Church on Angeline Street, the Columbia Baptist Church on the Columbia Green (#11), and the Christian Science group, which met on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Weed Building (#34).

One of the most pressing social issues in Columbia City's early days was temperance, and the town's ability to effectively prohibit the operation of saloons within its boundaries was a key issue in Columbia's history as an independently incorporated municipality. One of the most common misconceptions about Columbia City's history is that one of the first pieces of legislation passed by Columbia's Town Council was an ordinance banning saloons. It was a point of pride for many years in the community that Columbia was a 'dry town.' However, research has shown that this was not actually true. Ordinance #18 passed in 1893 set the price of a liquor license prohibitively high, at \$500. For comparison, a lot in the original Plat of Columbia at the time cost \$300 and could be paid off over the course of several years. The high cost of a license was intended to deter any potential business people from operating a saloon in Columbia City. As other outlying communities voted in favor of annexation into Seattle in the late 1890s and early 1900s, Columbia City voted to maintain its independence, and therefore maintain its effective prohibition against saloons.

Concern on the part of upstanding local residents about the moral character of Columbia's citizenry extended beyond saloons to include the more mysterious sounding establishment known as the pool room. Then, as today, pool tables were typically found in taverns, but since Columbia City was without taverns, a pool room was opened in 1905 in association with Mr. Gardner's barber shop at 4915 Rainier Avenue (#28).<sup>59</sup>

Not long after the pool room / barber shop went into business, a petition was submitted to the Mayor and Council of Columbia, with the following message: "We, the undersigned mothers and women residing in Columbia, hereby petition your Honorable Body to regulate the conduct and operation of the billiard and pool room operated on Rainier Avenue by the adoption and enforcement of an ordinance requiring the same to be closed all of Sunday and Sunday night and to be closed each night at 11 o'clock p.m."

The petition includes five pages of women's signatures. A second petition from the same time period is also included in Columbia City's municipal records, and this one reflects a decidedly different constituency. The wording of the second petition is as follows: "We, the undersigned residents of Columbia, respectfully petition your Honorable Body not to pass an ordinance as prayed for by a certain petition presented to your Honorable Body at your last meeting..." Signatories to this second petition are all men. Although the women's petition had many more signatures, it appears that the men

---

<sup>57</sup> Federal Census Data, Columbia Precinct: 1900, 1920, 1930.

<sup>58</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Columbia City's First Pool Hall*. 7/10/2002.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 21 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

eventually won out on this particular issue. Columbia voted for annexation into Seattle in 1907, thus opening up the town to saloons and other “legal entertainments,” at least until Prohibition came along.<sup>60</sup>

Real estate speculation and development were lucrative enterprises throughout Columbia City’s history, but one investment company is particularly notable for its role in the region’s social history. It is described in a 1915 publication under the title “Columbia Has Only Woman’s Realty Corporation.” The article says:

Through not generally known, there exists in Rainier Valley a women’s organization of a very unique character. There is not known to be another one of the kind in existence in this city or elsewhere... The organization is one of Rainier Valley housekeepers, incorporated for business and investment purposes only, and is known as the Columbia Co-operative Investment Company.<sup>61</sup>

One unusual aspect of Columbia City’s recreational history during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century involves a community approximately 70 miles to the north of Seattle, on Camano Island. At least a dozen families from Columbia City built summer cabins near Camp Lagoon resort on the northwest side of the island, and many more rented cabins for weeks or months each year. So many residents of Columbia City could be found on Camano Island at any given time during the summer that the community’s unofficial, but functional, post office address was Columbia City #2.<sup>62</sup>

The housing boom during WWII introduced tremendous changes to Columbia City and Rainier Valley’s ethnic make-up, with the rapid construction of racially integrated public housing projects. As the post-WWII prosperity began to fade, Columbia City and surrounding neighborhoods in Southeast Seattle experienced a period of rapid social change coupled with an economic downturn that had a profound impact on the community. A community development planning study conducted by Southeast Effective Development (SEED) in 1976 identified the period of time between 1960 and the mid-1970s as one characterized by racial transition, out-migration of the white middle class, and financial disinvestment.<sup>63</sup> However, the same study found that when residents were asked to identify the most positive things about living in their neighborhood, the top response was that the neighborhood was well integrated, documenting a growing awareness and pride in Southeast Seattle’s cultural diversity.

The Columbia City Development Association lobbied for the establishment of “Little City Hall,” a field office for city government established in 1978 in the Calvert Bakery Building (#20). This municipal presence, combined with listing of the Columbia City historic district in local and National Registers represented a critically needed re-investment in district by Seattle’s civic leaders.

Ethnic diversity has always been a hallmark of the district, but in recent decades it has become a key aspect of Columbia City’s identity as a neighborhood, and one of the factors that draws individuals and organizations to the area. The Royal Esquire Club, a private, not-for-profit African American social club located just south of the National Register district, but

---

<sup>60</sup> Seattle Municipal Archives: *City of Columbia Records, 1893-1913*, City of Seattle.

<sup>61</sup> Rainier Valley Citizen, *The Citizen Christmas Annual, December 25, 1915*.

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Marvin “Buzz” Anderson, President of Rainier Valley Historical Society, February 6, 13, and 20, 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Southeast Effective Development. *Southeast Seattle Community Development Plan – Framework for Action, 1976*.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 22 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

within the locally designated landmark district on the 5000 block of Rainier Avenue, exemplifies this trend. The Club's neighbors to the south, Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party both headquartered in New Freeway Hall at 5018 Rainier Avenue augment the neighborhood's diversity as well.

Recent history of Columbia School reflects demographic patterns and civic engagement consistent with other aspects of Columbia City's social history. Columbia's student enrollment jumped in 1942-43 because of an influx of wartime workers, many of whom lived in the nearby Rainier Vista Housing Project. Classroom spaces were reconfigured and adapted to accommodate new students, and portable buildings were put to use even after an annex building was opened offsite to accommodate additional students. Following mandatory busing and the opening of additional schools in surrounding neighborhoods during the 1970s, Columbia School became the home of Orca K-5, an alternative program focusing on arts and the environment, and characterized by a high level of parent involvement. A predecessor to the Orca program was founded in 1972, and was co-located at two schools in north Seattle prior to moving to their own facility, Columbia School, in 1989.<sup>64</sup> Now called Orca at Columbia, the program serves students in grades K-8.

After a twenty year period of social instability, economic decline and rising crime, Columbia City achieved a sort of equilibrium at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Current census figures show that the population of the area is approximately one third African American, one third Asian American, and one third European American, making it one of Seattle's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Beyond those broad statistics, at least 40 different ethnic groups have their highest concentrations in the communities of Rainier Valley, giving the area a unique cultural environment.<sup>65</sup>

The Columbia Pioneers continued to hold annual meetings through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The group experienced a burst of activity in their efforts to protect the Columbia Green from proposed development in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but their membership aged and dwindled. Columbia Pioneer historians Van Peirson, Ruth Hall, Carey Summers, and Madge Nichols Brauner each made significant contributions to the historic record of Columbia City through numerous books, articles, and collections of artifacts and photographs. In 1993, the Columbia Pioneers reorganized as the Rainier Valley Historical Society, a non-profit organization founded to preserve the history of Columbia City and the surrounding area. The Rainier Valley Historical Society has its offices and archives in the Rainier Valley Community Center, formerly the Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist (#1) on the Columbia Green, and continues the tradition of annual meetings along with many other heritage activities intended to appeal to broad audiences.

**Transportation & Its Impact on the Community**

Pioneer Historian Carey Summers wrote, "Columbia City began with the rickety old streetcar lines. Now without them progress would have been slower, no doubt: but with the kind of service the R.V. [Rainier Valley] Transit Lines gave, it may be that Rainier Valley grew largely in spite of its transportation."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Thompson, Nile & Carolyn J. Marr. *Building for Learning, Seattle Public School Histories 1862 – 2000*. Seattle: Seattle School District, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Cantwell, Brian. "Columbia City: Colorful 'Neighborhood of Nations' retains the feel of a village." *Seattle Times* 3/4/2004.

<sup>66</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 7.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 23 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

An Indian trail crossed Rainier Valley long before any streetcar line, on a route from Lake Washington just south of today's Seward Park, northwest through what became Columbia City, and across north Beacon Hill to Elliott Bay. A military road was constructed between Steilacoom and Seattle following the territory's Indian Wars in 1855, and it followed a route northward through South Park, across the Duwamish River and along the route of present-day Renton Avenue, crossing Beacon Hill along the route of present-day Graham Street. The York Road constructed in the 1890s followed a roughly north – south route through Rainier Valley, skirting Columbia City on its north side, and winding northward attempting to avoid what was then a vast swampy area between Columbia City and First Hill.

A far more pleasant option for early transportation to the Columbia City area were steamers which regularly left Leschi and traveled south along the Lake Washington shoreline to Lakewood a summer community just east of the Columbia town site platted in 1890 as Maynard's Lake Washington Addition by Guy Phinney.

By far the most significant factor in transportation history related to Columbia City was the construction of a streetcar line which opened up Rainier Valley to rapid commercial and residential development. Construction on the Rainier Valley Electric Railway started in 1889. Streetcar service began in 1891 and continued for 46 years, though the privately owned streetcar company operated under at least six different names and went through almost as many bankruptcies and reorganizations.<sup>67</sup>

Streetcars left every 45 minutes from Railroad Avenue & Washington Street in downtown Seattle. The fare to Columbia was four cents. Cities like Seattle encouraged development and investment in outlying areas by granting franchises to privately owned transit companies. The Seattle City Council passed Ordinance #1780 on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1891, permitting Edmiston to operate the Rainier Avenue Electric Railway, which he had been doing already for several months.

The line was extended to Rainier Beach within two years, and the fare was five cents additional to Rainier Beach. Sources disagree about exactly when service was expanded to Rainier Beach, but all sources agree that the route did not generate enough revenue to keep up with construction debt, and the line went into receivership during Panic of 1893 and came under the control of W.J. Grambs. Columbia City's incorporation in 1893 made the streetcar line King County's first true interurban. In 1895, after more than two years in receivership, the Rainier Valley Electric Railway was sold to Frank Osgood, who changed the name to the Seattle & Rainier Beach Railway. The line was extended to Renton in 1896, and the name of the line was later changed to the Seattle & Renton Railway.<sup>68</sup>

As other streetcar lines around Seattle were consolidated under Seattle Electric Company, Rainier Valley line stayed independent, though the level of service brought frequent complaints from passengers. In 1903 the line was reorganized yet again as the Seattle, Renton & Southern Railway, but remained under the management of Frank Osgood. A promotional pamphlet from this period advertises railway excursions, inviting passengers from Seattle to enjoy two hours of mountain and water scenery for 25 cents. Boating, fishing, picnicking, camp grounds, and resort hotels could be enjoyed in the vicinity of Rainier Beach and Bryn Mawr.

---

<sup>67</sup> Blanchard, Leslie. *The Street Railway Era in Seattle: A Chronicle of Six Decades*, published by Harold E. Cox, Forty Four, PA, 1968.

<sup>68</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 24 of 28 Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA

---

The line grew from two cars in 1891 to 23 passenger cars, freight cars & locomotives by 1906. It moved goods such as Renton's coal, timber and milled lumber, and produce, as well as people commuting to work or school, or visiting the country. Spur lines were constructed that served the Genessee and Lakewood neighborhoods east of Columbia City, as well as along 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Findlay Street to the west of Columbia City.

In 1907 Osgood sold the Seattle, Renton & Southern Railway to W.R. Crawford, around the same time that Columbia City residents voted for annexation into Seattle. Pioneer historian Carey Summers writes, "The 1907 depression, mismanagement, litigation and bankruptcy started the line on a slide to financial chaos from which it never recovered."<sup>69</sup> In 1911, Seattle voters approved municipal purchase of the Rainier Valley line, but the City of Seattle refused to purchase the line after its owners increased the price.<sup>70</sup> The Seattle Renton & Southern Railway went into bankruptcy again in 1912, and came out four years later after extensive litigation as the Seattle & Rainier Valley Railway.<sup>71</sup>

An advertisement by the Seattle, Renton & Southern Railway in the 1915 Rainier Valley Citizen Annual acknowledges "statements made by demagogues and certain newspapers that the Seattle, Renton & Southern is a junk pile." The advertisement goes to describe the rail lines cars as the safest, most convenient and most expensive, and promises a prosperous future of good service. An article in the same publication explains that the Railway had recently been enmeshed in,

"intricate litigation, involving various parties including the city, and passing from court to court seemingly without hope of settlement. This litigation has been a somber cloud upon the prospects of Rainier Valley, shutting out the glow of prosperity, obscuring the manifold merits of the district, and dampening the ardor of the inhabitants... When one understands that the grading of numerous side streets, the laying of sewers and water mains and the construction of business property depended alike upon and had to wait the improvement of Rainier Avenue, the widespread effects of the Seattle, Renton & Southern litigation became apparent."<sup>72</sup>

The primary point of contention may have been the railway's refusal to pave the portion of Rainier Avenue between the tracks, which created a safety hazard for vehicles and pedestrians.

Throughout Columbia City's history, an uneasy balance existed between the streetcar line and Rainier Avenue. At the north end of Rainier Valley, the streetcar tracks were built on trestles and fill in several swampy areas, leaving no room for a roadway paralleling the tracks. Later, because of the mud, the roadway was "paved" with wood planks laid crossways the entire length of Rainier Valley. As the line approached Columbia City and attained higher, drier ground, both streetcar tracks and roadway had to be filled and graded to reduce the prohibitively steep grade north of Edmunds Street. A 1905 photo of Columbia City's business district looking north from Hudson Street shows two sets of streetcar tracks on the west side of the right of way, and a wide two-lane planked roadway with a horse drawn wagon parked on the east side. Sidewalks along Rainier Avenue were planked starting in the 1890s, and the planking of the roadbed was begun somewhat later, but side streets off of Rainier Avenue remained muddy troughs for many years.

---

<sup>69</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 58.

<sup>71</sup> History Link Essay: *Seattle Renton & Southern Railway – King County's First True Interurban*. File No. 1756, by Walt Crowley, 2/24/1997.

<sup>72</sup> Rainier Valley Citizen, *The Citizen Christmas Annual, December 25, 1915*.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 25 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

As automobiles became more common in the 1910s, the demands of drivers to have passable roadways increased. After studying the problem for several years following the annexation of Columbia City, the City of Seattle initiated a major improvement project for Rainier Avenue in 1915 which involved a realignment of the tracks and roadway. Rainier Avenue was graded, and the streetcar tracks were moved to the center of the roadway, making room for two lanes of brick pavers from the Denny Renton brickyard to be laid on each side of the tracks.<sup>73</sup> Between Edmunds and Alaska Streets, the route of Rainier Avenue was reconfigured, and side streets that had been platted through the Columbia Green but not built were vacated.

Other arterials in Rainier Valley were constructed or reconstructed during this time, such as Empire Way, completed in 1913, which ran southwest of Rainier Avenue on Columbia City's west side. Cheasty Boulevard, completed in 1910, was one of the parkways in the Olmsted Brother's Seattle Parks Plan, and provided a scenic if circuitous route from Rainier Avenue to Beacon Avenue. With the completion of Columbian Way in 1927, Columbia City had a direct automobile route across Beacon Hill to the Duwamish Industrial Area south of downtown Seattle. Residential and commercial development came relatively late to Beacon Hill compared to other areas of Seattle, and though Rainier Valley businessmen met with Seattle City Council members to discuss a cross town highway between Duwamish and Rainier Valley as early as 1916, the route was not completed until several years later.<sup>74</sup>

Simeon Toby, Columbia City banker, was active in the community and probably was remembered most for his efforts in convincing the city about the need for a road over Beacon Hill. In order to get to Georgetown and West Seattle in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was necessary to either attempt to navigate a steep and muddy wagon road over the hill, or go all the way north to Dearborn Street and then back along what became Airport Way, at the base of Beacon Hill's west edge. Efforts to lobby the Seattle City Council were successful, and Columbian Way was constructed on an almost straight northwest to southeast route from Spokane Street to Rainier Avenue. For his efforts, Toby was memorialized as "The Father of Columbian Way" on a large bronze, embossed plaque that was installed for many years in a small park at the northwest corner of Rainier Avenue and Edmunds Street, and later was moved across the street and installed on the north wall of the Toby Building (#42). Buzz Anderson, Rainier Valley Historical Society president, noted that more of the credit for the establishment of Columbian Way should probably have gone to Ralph Nichols Sr., who resided in Columbia City and served on the Seattle City Council.<sup>75</sup>

The route of Rainier Avenue through Columbia City was part of the state highway system in the 1920s and 1930s. State Road No. 2, also called the Sunset Highway, began in Seattle at State Road No. 1, the Pacific Highway, and headed southeast on Rainier Avenue to Renton, and then northeast through Issaquah and east over Snoqualmie Pass. The state highway designation shifted to Empire Way (renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Way in 1982) in the late 1930s, bypassing Columbia City, but the Rainier Avenue continued to serve as Rainier Valley's major thoroughfare, connecting Seattle and

---

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, Buzz. *Days Gone By: Columbia Library Under Construction*. 9/16/1998.

<sup>74</sup> Summers, Carey. *Centennial History: Columbia City, Rainier Valley, 1853-1991*. Seattle, Washington, 1992. p. 67.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with Marvin "Buzz" Anderson, President of Rainier Valley Historical Society, February 6, 13, and 20, 2004.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 26 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Renton.<sup>76</sup> The Sunset Highway served as the region's primary automobile route for points east until 1940, when the Lake Washington Floating Bridge was completed and the primary state highway designation shifted to the more direct Seattle – Mercer Island – Issaquah route.

After three decades of uneasy coexistence between streetcars and autos on Rainier Avenue, the City of Seattle revoked the streetcar line's franchise in 1934. Two years later, the City ordered the Seattle & Rainier Valley Line to rip up its tracks so the Rainier Avenue could be widened and resurfaced for automobiles.<sup>77</sup> The last Rainier Avenue streetcar finished its run in the early morning hours on January 1, 1937. Later that year, a parade celebrated the long-awaited paving of the center of Rainier Avenue where the streetcar tracks had been removed. The parade route went all the way from Dearborn Street to Rainier Beach, with ribbon cuttings in every community.<sup>78</sup> By early 1941, Seattle's few remaining interurbans and streetcars had been replaced by city buses.

Though automobiles triumphed over streetcars as the major mode of transportation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Columbia City's historic district remains strongly pedestrian oriented, with the original route of the streetcar having a greater impact on the physical development of the district than any 'improvement' related to automobiles. Though it will not pass directly through Columbia City's historic district, the Sound Transit Central Link Light Rail line under construction in 2004 will bring rail transit back to Rainier Valley after an absence of about seventy years, and members of the local community are advocating for the station closest to Columbia City, at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Edmunds Street, to be named Columbia Station.

**Architectural Significance of Columbia City Buildings**

The Columbia City Historic District includes a few examples of buildings designed by well-known architects, and most of these are public or civic buildings associated with the economic prosperity of the early 1920s, following World War I. The majority of the district's commercial and residential buildings are vernacular in style, and their contribution to the district's overall significance is based on their ability to convey the era of their construction from the 1890s to the 1930s, through their design, setting, materials, workmanship, and association.

The most notable feature lending a sense of cohesiveness to the district is the influence of the streetcar right of way on the pattern of development of Columbia City's commercial buildings. From the earliest wood frame commercial building in the district, Nelson's Butcher Shop (#21) with its 1892 boomtown façade, to the most recent commercial building constructed within the historic period, the Columbia Confectionery Building (#23) with its 1928 brick façade, the footprint, orientation, and angled façade of each building was determined by the original Plat of Columbia with its angled lot lines abutting and paralleling the diagonal streetcar right of way. Additionally, a majority of district's commercial buildings retain a suite of characteristic historic features, including large display windows, recessed entryways, transom windows, metal frame awnings, and glazed tile bulkheads.

---

<sup>76</sup> *State Road No. 2 Sunset Highway*, web page posted at [www.angelfire.com/wa2/hwysowastate/strd002.html](http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/hwysowastate/strd002.html)

<sup>77</sup> History Link Essay: *Columbia City – Thumbnail History*. File No. 3327, by Cassandra Tate, 6/2/2001.

<sup>78</sup> Rainier Valley Historical Society Collection.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 27 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

Both commercial and residential buildings constructed in the district prior to 1914 were largely the work of local carpenters and masons such as G.S. Dudley and the Collier Brothers. One notable exception to this pattern is the 1913 Rainier Valley Investment Company building (#24), a two story brick building designed by Henderson Ryan. An architect with a background as a contractor / builder, Ryan is known for early work in Seattle such as the Ballard Public Library (1903-4) and the Roycroft Apartments (1906-7), as well as later work such as the Neptune Theater (1921-22).

Another pair of Columbia City buildings, the 1911 Rector's Building (#19) and the 1914 Columbia Café (#32) were both designed by Thompson & Thompson, a father-son partnership which also designed several buildings in Seattle's International District. The nondescript Dodge Building (#39) was designed in 1908 by partners James Schack & Daniel Huntington, who also designed the First Methodist Episcopal Church (now First United Methodist) in downtown Seattle and numerous residences together. In the post-WWI era, the Rainier Valley State Bank (#44) was designed by architect Victor W. Voorhees, who is individually credited with the design of over 110 building projects around Seattle, including residences, commercial and industrial buildings, apartment buildings and fraternal halls. He is best known for designing the Vance Hotel and Vance Building in Seattle, and for advertising books of house, cottage and bungalow plans for sale.

From 1914 to the mid-1920s, a series of prominent public and civic buildings were designed and built in Columbia City, many of them in popular revival styles of the era, which give the historic district several of its visual anchors today. The earliest of these prominent buildings was the Columbia Branch Library (#13), a Carnegie Library built in 1914-1915 at the east edge of the Columbia Green, facing Rainier Avenue. It was designed by Harlan Thomas and W. Marbury Sommervell in a Colonial Georgian Revival Style. Thomas was known for his work on St. James Cathedral on Seattle's First Hill; Sommervell was known for the Sorrento Hotel in the same neighborhood. In partnership, the architects designed several branch libraries in Seattle, including the Queen Anne, Douglass-Truth, and Columbia Libraries.

Just a few years later in 1921, the Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist (#1) was designed in a Greek Revival style, and built at the northwest corner of the Columbia Green on Alaska Street. The same year, the Ark Lodge #126 F&AM (#45) was designed by J.L. McCauley, an architect who lived in Columbia City and is probably best known for his role in designing the expansion of the King County Courthouse (County-City Building) with lead architect Henry Bittman in 1929. McCauley designed at least three other buildings within the Columbia City National Register Historic District, the 1920 Columbia Theater (#31), the 1924 Fasica Building (#43), and the 1927 Calvert Bakery (#20), as well as the 1923 addition to the Grayson & Brown Building (#41), and a 1929 renovation of the Weed Building (#34). McCauley designed two additional buildings in the larger, locally designated Columbia City Landmark District, at least three SRO apartment hotels that are included in the International District Seattle Chinatown National Register Historic District, and commercial buildings in Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood.

The 'new' Columbia School (#17) was constructed in 1922 in a Mission Revival Style designed by Floyd A. Naramore in his early years as the architect for Seattle Public Schools. Naramore designed twenty schools in Seattle, mostly in a Georgian style. The Columbia School is unusual in that it is the only Mission Revival school in the Seattle district, and the only Naramore school designed with exterior stucco.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Ochsner, Jeffrey Karl. *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects*. 1994. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number      8      Page 28 of 28      **Columbia City Historic District, King County, WA**

---

None of the residential buildings within the National Register district are associated with notable architects, though at least three are associated with builders who made significant contributions to the development of Columbia City. Van R. Peirson was one of Columbia City's founders, and served as mayor from 1903 to 1906. He built his house (#37) in 1891 and the Peirson Apartment Building (#36) in 1908. Van Peirson may also have built several of the Washington Co-operative Home Company houses in 1891 and 1892 that were said to have been built "on the plans" of the company. Approximately 32 houses were built in the original plat of Columbia in 1891 – 1892. In addition to the Van R. and Agnes Peirson House (#37), four other houses from this period are extant, and are included within the locally designated Columbia City Landmark District.

One residential building and three commercial buildings are attributed to builder W.S. Mangrum, who worked in Columbia City in the 1920s. The Thomas and Nina Elliott House (#9) on the Columbia Green was built by Mangrum in 1925, as were the 1928 Columbia Confectionary Building (#23), the 1922 Rainier Valley State Bank (#44) and the 1924 Fastica Building (#43).

In conclusion, Columbia City's history of development, its commercial and transportation history, and its social and architectural history all illuminate elements of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century community life in the Seattle area decisively shaped by timber and streetcars. A well-preserved mix of historic residential and commercial buildings, associated with each of the above themes, continue to convey the district's significance and identity. Since it was originally listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, the Columbia City Historic District has been enhanced by several sensitive rehabilitations of historic buildings, ensuring that both the vernacular and high style resources in the district will continue to contribute to the district's historic character for decades to come.