

SECTION II

HISTORIC RESOURCES OF OLYMPIA

Places of importance in a distinctly Northwest town

The early history of Olympia is, in many respects, the history of nearly every city in the Pacific Northwest. Its beaches and forests were first home to American Indian people who fished for salmon and harvested shellfish along the shores of Budd Inlet. In the 1840s and '50s, as the United States pushed westward, American immigrant settlers were attracted to the potential of a small peninsula set at the southernmost end of Puget Sound. It had timber, oysters and a saltwater highway that led directly to the Pacific Ocean. There could hardly be a more promising place to build a town.

Olympia loaded up sailing ships with shingles for San Francisco. It crossed its fingers and hoped for a railroad—and was disappointed when the trains passed it by. It built itself mills and factories, fraternal lodges, an opera house and modest frame homes in neighborhoods that stretched along streetcar lines. When the age of the automobile arrived, the city tore up its trolley tracks and sprawled further south, east and west.

In one fundamental way, of course, the city of Olympia is unlike anywhere else. In 1853, when it was little more than a muddy frontier village, Olympia was named as capital of the recently created Washington Territory. Rival towns have repeatedly tried to capture the coveted title, but Olympia has staunchly remained the capital ever since.

It is easy to appreciate the important historic buildings of the Washington State Capitol Campus. It is harder, perhaps, to recognize Olympia's first brick building or the last of the wooden boardinghouses



Olympia, looking down Main Street (Capitol Way) toward the water, sketched by James Madison Alden in 1857. The two-story Masonic Hall (1854) can be seen at the center of the sketch. *Washington State Historical Society.*

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where loggers and mill workers stayed. But each historic resource is important to this community, both for what it can teach us and for the contribution it makes to the character of our town.

A Summary of Resources

A complete list of properties listed on the Olympia Historic Resources Inventory Olympia Heritage Register, and the State and National Registers can be found in Appendix D.



Washington's first capitol stood at the top of the hill behind town on the site of the present Capitol Campus. A rear addition, just visible in this photograph, was built to accommodate the Constitutional Convention in 1889. *Asahel Curtis photo (negative #1403), Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries.*

Natural Setting and Topography

The pioneer town of Olympia sat on a small peninsula at the shallow head of Budd Inlet, squeezed between the tidal mouth of the Deschutes River and a smaller marine estuary known as the Swantown Slough. The original city shoreline, much different from the one seen today, is approximately marked throughout downtown Olympia with bronze "Historic Shoreline" markers installed by the City of Olympia Water Resources Program.

By 1856 the east side neighborhood of Olympia, known originally as Swantown, was linked to downtown by a footbridge. The west-side neighborhood, called Marshville, was accessible only by boat until a wagon bridge was built in 1869. Steep hills on both the east and west were eventually re-shaped and graded to accommodate wagons and streetcars.

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Dredging of the shallow Olympia harbor began as early as the 1890s. The most extensive dredging took place in 1910-11, when 2 million tons of mud were scooped from the floor of Budd Inlet and used to create new waterfront blocks and to fill in the Swantown Slough.

Another major change in Olympia's surroundings occurred in the 1950s when a small dam was built at the mouth of the Deschutes, turning what had once been saltwater estuary into freshwater Capitol Lake.

An important factor in understanding the history of the area's built environment is the geology of Puget Sound. Several shallow crustal faults, as well as the deeper and larger Cascadia Subduction Zone, have formed seams where rocks grind and slide past each other intermittently throughout geological time. The magnitude 7.1, 6.5, and 6.8 earthquakes of 1949, 1965, and 2001 respectively, are reminders of those powerful forces which altered the buildings of Olympia.¹

Steh-Chass/Budd Inlet People of the Water

For more than 12,000 years, this area of Budd Inlet was home to an extended family, a city of people who lived in longhouses, fished and collected shellfish on the shores and tidal flats of what is now known as Olympia. The ancient city was called Steh-Chass (stu-chus), and the descendants of those people are known today as the Squaxin Island Tribe, or People of the Water. Steh-Chass was a terminus for both land and water routes, and the canoe was the preferred choice for transportation. In the 1800s, even as Steh-Chass was being displaced by what is now Olympia, the annual canoe races on Budd Inlet were still a popular event enjoyed by both Native Americans and settlers. After the Puget Sound Indian War of 1855-56, most local American Indian people were relocated onto tribal reservations at Nisqually or Squaxin Island, although autonomous bands remained in Olympia as late as 1879.

The area around the 4th Avenue Bridge has an ongoing place in the rich history of the Squaxin Island Tribe. Each year, the tribe still exercises their fishing rights in the waters below the span. Using gill nets and beach seines, as they have done for centuries, Squaxin people harvest food for their families reaffirming the important ties to the land and water which sustain them. The Boldt Decision of 1974 reaffirmed Squaxin Island Tribe's legitimate and ancient claims.



Map compiled from federal land surveys in the 1850s to reflect important cultural features of the time period. Note the important overland portage route from the north end of Black Lake to the Steh-Chass. *Courtesy of the Squaxin Island Tribe.*

¹ From *Workingman's Hill: A History of an Olympia Neighborhood* by Rebecca Christie, Bigelow House Preservation Association and Bigelow Highlands Neighborhood Association, 2001, pg. 9

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Archaeological remnants of seasonal Salish campsites have been found at Priest Point Park, along the shores of Capitol Lake and along the coves of Budd Inlet. No trace of a permanent village is known to have survived the extensive dredging and filling that reshaped Olympia's waterfront nearly 100 years ago.

American Pioneer Period

A pair of pioneer business partners, Edmund Sylvester and Levi Lathrop Smith, arrived on the shores of Budd Inlet in 1846, less than a year after the first American immigrants to Puget Sound had settled at Tumwater Falls. When Smith died unexpectedly in 1848, Sylvester inherited the land Smith had claimed on the beach just above the high tide line. In 1850 Sylvester platted the townsite of Olympia. He set aside specific lots for several traditional elements he thought a city should have: a Masonic Temple, a church, a school and the central public square now called Sylvester Park. Later Sylvester would also donate a tract of land on the hill behind town for a Territorial Capitol.



The Bigelow House as it appeared during the 1860s. The Carpenter Gothic style borrowed elements from medieval church architecture and reinterpreted them in wooden construction: a steeply pitched roof, gothic (pointed) arches, decorative millwork that suggested the carved stone of old cathedrals. It was a style that peaked in popularity back east at about the time early pioneer settlers were moving west. *The Bigelow House Museum Collection.*

When Thurston County was established in 1852, Olympia was named as the new county seat. By the mid-1850s the town had a post office, a newspaper office, sawmills, houses, mercantile stores and steamship service along the Sound to Steilacoom and Seattle. In its earliest decades the city was centered near Olympia Avenue and Capitol Way, which marked the northern edge of the natural peninsula.

Few first-generation structures survive in Olympia today, although some sites from this period are labeled with early interpretive markers embedded in City sidewalks. Surviving pioneer homes in good condition include the Bigelow House (ca. 1860) and the Steele House (1870). The Puget Sound Wesleyan Institute (1858), which served as the first Thurston County Courthouse, is seriously deteriorating at the corner of Adams Street and Union Avenue.

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A Capital City

The first Washington Territorial legislature, called to order in 1854, met in the hastily built second story of a store near the waterfront owned by Edmund Sylvester. For the next two sessions it met in Olympia's first Masonic lodge, until a two-story Territorial Capitol building was finally completed in 1856 on the wooded hill behind town.

Serious attempts were made in 1859-61 and again in 1889 to move the capital elsewhere. (The lack of a decent hotel in town, the inadequacy of the pioneer capitol building and the long muddy climb to reach it were three of the most common legislative complaints.) In 1901 the State purchased the elegant stone Thurston County Courthouse (1893) at the edge of Sylvester Park for use as an interim capitol until a permanent statehouse could be built.

For a single session, while additions were made to the Courthouse, the legislature was forced to meet in a former feed store downtown. It was not until 1928 that the present domed Legislative Building was completed as part of a Capitol Group of buildings overlooking Olympia.

By the 1950s the headquarters of many state departments had drifted out of Olympia to the bigger city of Seattle. In 1954 a group of local business leaders successfully sued the State for return of those offices, claiming that their removal had violated the Washington State Constitution by separating state agencies from the capital city. That legal victory spurred rapid growth in Olympia as state agency offices expanded here and workers poured in to staff them. To accommodate this expansion, a new annex to the original Capitol Campus was developed in the 1960s on the east side of Capitol Way.

In 1987, the Washington State Attorney General issued an opinion that the seat of government is the city of Olympia as it existed in 1890, but that all state executive offices must be located at the seat of government, which was defined as in, within, or in close proximity to the city of Olympia as it existed in 1890.



The Old Capitol and Sylvester Park, before the loss of the clock tower and the bell-roofed park bandstand. *Jeffers Studio photo from the Wahsington State Capital Museum, Washington State Historical Society.*

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The Washington State Capitol Group and the Old Capitol/Thurston County Courthouse are both listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Two of the three other legislative meeting sites are marked, and



The first two buildings of the Capitol Group, the 1917 Temple of Justice, left, and the 1921 Insurance Building. *Jeffers Photograph, J. Johnston papers, Manuscripts and University Archives, University of Washington Libraries. NR, SR*

plans are currently underway to mark the site of the feed store as well. Other landmarks associated with Olympia's role as capital includes the Hotel Olympian (1920) and the Funk House (ca. 1892), home of attorney George Funk who helped argue the case to keep state offices here.

County and Local Government

Olympia was named as the seat of newly organized Thurston County in 1852, when the region north of the Columbia River was still part of Oregon Territory. It has seen a succession of county courthouses since then, four of which still stand: the Puget Sound Wesleyan Academy Building (1858) on

Adams Street, the Old Capitol Building (1893) overlooking Sylvester Park, the Old Thurston County Courthouse (1930) on Capitol Way and the current Thurston County Courthouse (1977) on Lakeridge Drive.



Old City Hall and Fire Station with its hose-drying tower still intact. *Washington State Capital Museum, Washington State Historical Society.*

Olympia City government was housed for more than half a century in the Old City Hall and Fire Station (1912). City administrative offices moved in 1966 to a new City Hall on Plum Street; the Olympia Fire Department remained in the building until a new central fire station was built in 1992. A fire house from the 1930s also remains in use on the West Side.

Commercial Development

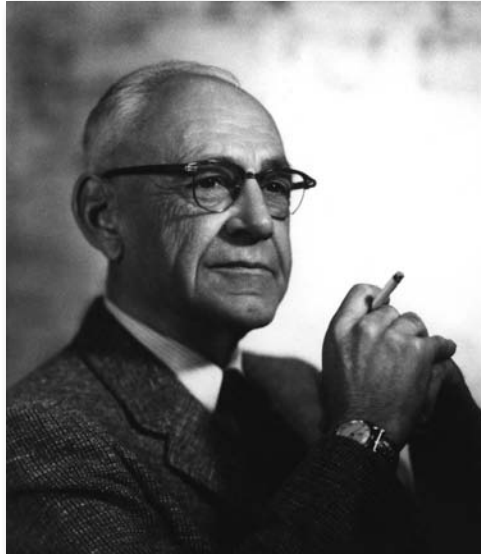
Olympia's first wooden storefronts, clustered near the waterfront, gradually gave way to more permanent brick and stone structures as the center of town pushed south across State Avenue. A few important commercial buildings

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survive from before 1900, including the Olympia Hardware Building (1884), the Chambers Block (1887), the Mottman Building (1888), and the Reed Block (1891). The Cunningham Building (1896) is the last wooden pioneer-style storefront remaining downtown.

By the close of the 1920s, most of downtown Olympia's familiar historic blocks were in place. Architect Joseph Wohleb, who arrived here from California in 1911, peppered the city's commercial core with stucco storefronts and red tile roofs in the Spanish-Colonial style. The Jeffers Studio (1913), the Donald Building (1924) and the Old Daily Olympian Newspaper Building (1930) are examples of Wohleb's southwest influence on a thoroughly Northwest town.

In the automotive age, retailers began moving away from downtown. The G.V. Valley (Wildwood) Shopping Center (1938) anticipated the rise of modern strip mall development. Enclosed shopping malls at South Sound Center and on the West Side drew anchor department stores away from downtown Olympia in the 1960s and '70s.



Architect Joseph Wohleb. *Jeffers Studio photo, courtesy of the Wohleb family.*

Olympia Industries

Industrial development centered around the city's waterfront along the west and east sides of Budd Inlet. After the dredging and filling of 1910-11, which added land north of Thurston Avenue, there was suddenly room for expansion. The first local Port District was formed in 1922. Within a few years the new port was serving 30 lumber mills, five shingle mills, two large veneer plants and the Olympia Door Company. Other harborside industries included a fruit-canning plant and oyster-opening houses that shucked Olympia oysters and shipped them to worldwide markets.

Surviving industrial and manufacturing sites in downtown Olympia include Zeigler's Welding (1910), Olympia Knitting Mills (1929) and the office and warehouses of Olympia Veneer (1953-1964). Dozens of "pre-cut" homes manufactured by the Olympia-based Tumwater Lumber Mills can also be seen around town.

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Diverse Olympia

Olympia's population has changed over time, tied to the broad patterns of the city's social and economic history. The city has been shaped through waves of immigration and settlement. Minority communities have contributed significantly throughout Olympia's history. Individuals of many diverse ethnicities and backgrounds continue to play prominent roles in the community.

The original inhabitants of the area were the Coastal Salish people. After the Puget Sound Indian War of 1855-56, most local American Indian people were relocated onto tribal reservations at Nisqually or Squaxin Island, although autonomous bands remained in Olympia as late as 1879.



Locke Family, 1905. The "Mayor of Chinatown," Sam Fun Locke came to Olympia in 1874. By 1877 he was part owner of Hong Yek Kee Company. He acted as a banker for Chinese laborers and financed Chinese businesses in Olympia and as far away as Hoquiam and South Bend. He and his wife raised nine children in their home above the Hong Yek Kee store. He died in 1934 and was feted with an elaborate funeral. *Photograph courtesy of Hugh Locke.*

Most pioneer settlers traced their ancestry to European settlement in America. In 1870, the census for Olympia listed 966 native born residents, 237 foreign born, 24 "colored" and 18 Chinese for a total of 1245 inhabitants.

Olympia's early commercial and industrial development was tied to the contributions of individuals of minority communities. Chinese people made their way here almost as soon as the town was founded—working as laborers, cooks and household servants, opening shops and laundries, or growing fresh produce in well-tended gardens and selling it door-to-door. Rebecca Howard, a Black American woman, purchased the Pacific House hotel on Main Street (Capitol Way) in 1860 and turned it into an important meeting place for locals and legislators alike. Jewish American merchants opened stores in Olympia as early as the 1850s and have continued to play a vital role in

the commercial development of the town. The Jewish community established a cemetery near Olympia in 1870.

Olympia's changing economic base drew first generation immigrants. Japanese immigrants found work in the "opening sheds" of the local oyster industry. Scandinavian workers gravitated toward the logging and lumber industries, rolling up their sleeves in Olympia's wood-products mills.

Life for the Chinese in Olympia grew much more difficult by the late 1800's. An economic downturn spurred exclusion laws and harassment

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for Chinese throughout the region. Sheriff William Billings helped prevent ouster of the Chinese from Olympia (as had happened in Tacoma and Seattle). Still, with restrictive immigration laws there were few new arrivals to join the aging population. By the 1940s Olympia's Chinatown was vacant. The buildings were razed in 1943-the same year exclusion laws were repealed. By then, many Chinese had left for larger cities in the U.S. or returned to China. Many Chinese residents continue to live in Olympia.

Japanese American residents were subject to the internment regulations during World War II. Some of the local oyster industry workers were sent to camps in California and Idaho. Some families returned after the war and continue to live in the area along with more recent Japanese-American arrivals to the city.

Over time, particularly because of the opportunities for employment with the state of Washington, Olympia has become much more diverse. In the later part of the 20th century, new groups of immigrants notably from Southeast Asia came to the area. The area's African American population has also grown.

Olympia's growing diversity has become more represented among elected officials. In 1988, Cora Pinson became the first African American Olympia City Council member. Doug Mah was elected as the first Chinese-American member of the Olympia City Council in 2001.

By the 2000 census, nearly 15% of the city's population was non-white and there were 114 different ancestry backgrounds reported. Hispanic and Vietnamese residents made up the largest minority backgrounds.

There are archeological remnants of seasonal Salish campsites, but no permanent village is known to survive today. Other ethnic heritage sites in Olympia include the Shanghai Café Building and the Olympia Hardware Building (both long-time sites of Chinese restaurants) and an interpretive marker near the Heritage Park fountain that honors Olympia's historic Chinese community. The Oyster House at Percival Landing was originally an oyster-opening warehouse that employed many Japanese workers. The influence of Scandinavian millworkers survives in scores of local "kit" houses manufactured by Tumwater Ready Cut Homes, a successful enterprise owned and run by a family of Swedish immigrants. The original Temple Beth Hatfiloh (1938) remains an important landmark of local Jewish history. The Olympia Junk Company Building (1926) was constructed by the Bean family, prominent Jewish storeowners who still own Olympia Supply Co. The recently rehabilitated Harris Drygoods Store (1896) was established by the Harris Family, longtime area Jewish merchants.

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Selected Historic Neighborhoods

East Side Neighborhood

Originally separated from downtown Olympia by the waters of a tidal slough, this district was first known as “Swantown” after Scottish immigrant John Swan who claimed land east of Cherry Street in 1850. Early east-side development consisted mainly of small household farms and orchards. More homes and business followed, especially after electric streetcars began running up Fourth Avenue in 1892. By 1911 the Swantown Slough had been filled, connecting the East Side directly to downtown.

Bigelow Highlands Neighborhood

Prior to 1900 this was an area of small farms and orchards, with most houses located within a block or two of major roads. After the turn of the 20th century it developed into a modest working-class neighborhood that was home to hundreds of workers employed in the waterfront mills.



Local contractor and carpenter Benjamin Harned built this fine home—a mixture of Gothic Revival and Italianate styles—for Captain Sam Percival and his wife Lurana Ware Percival in 1874. The Percival house stood approximately at the western edge of today’s Fifth Avenue Bridge. Later, the house saw service as the Maxwell Maternity Home. *Undated Postcard from a private collection.*

West Olympia

This neighborhood began as a separate community called “Marshville,” after pioneer settler Edmund Marsh who claimed land here in 1865. Although the first bridge to the West Side was completed in 1869, major development did not take place until after 1880 when the steep, muddy track up Harrison Hill was re-graded into a passable road. As on the east side of town, new electric streetcar service inspired the construction of houses away from downtown Olympia.

South Capitol Neighborhood

The development of this neighborhood south of downtown was closely tied to the construction of a permanent state capitol on the bluff overlooking Budd Inlet. Although the oldest home here dates from 1878, the majority of houses were built between 1900 and 1928—the year that lawmakers moved at last to the great domed Legislative Building. Nearly every popular housing style of the early 20th century is found in this neighborhood. In 1991 the entire South Capitol Neighborhood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Southeast Olympia

This area remained substantially rural well into the 20th century. Streetcars carried crowds to the original Thurston County Fairgrounds (near the present-day intersection of Capitol Way and Carlyon), which later gave way to a horse trotting track. In 1922 developer J.T. Otis platted the first residential subdivision here. Within a decade the horse track, too, had been graded and divided into residential lots.

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