

North Slope Historic District

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The North Slope Historic District encompasses 950 properties in a wedge-shaped street grid that runs uphill from I Street to and including Grant Ave. between Division and Steele Streets in Tacoma. The slope provides views of Puget Sound, filled with sailboats in the afternoons, and the snow-capped Olympic Mountains across the Sound. The streets themselves are tree-lined, and older homes lend an air of comfort as a familiar American landscape.

It is a very pleasant neighborhood, but why is this place historic?

Development of the North Slope area reaches back to the 1880s when the town began to flourish with the new railroad terminus at New Tacoma. The nearby waterfront tracks, warehouses and docks were part of an infrastructure that connected shipments of grain, lumber and manufactured goods to stations throughout the resource-rich Northwest and to ports up and down the West Coast.

Land speculation in Tacoma led to the platting of residential lots vastly in advance of the market for them. So buyers had the option of being the first on the block throughout the area, giving rise to a checkerboard or hopscotch pattern of development. You can see that today in the building styles and construction dates of the houses throughout the area where the Victorians and foursquares are juxtaposed with bungalows. The buildings manifest the influence of locally available lumber and an eclectic Northwestern mixing of styles.



Most of the homes were built between 1889 and before World War II. The neighborhood was almost entirely built up by 1949. The mixing of styles and periods from our grandparents' days is a reason why it looks so much like home to Americans. We find that construction dates in the North Slope cluster in times of prosperity, between the 1893 Panic, WW I, and the Great Depression.

Intense activity
1888 - 1893
1902 - 1912
1919 - 1929

Little building activity
Panic of 1893
WW I
Great Depression

But, back in the 1880s, builders were dragging supplies and equipment down dirt roads to clear stumps to start a place many people could call home. The area became the haven of the respectable, a step up from Old Town, where fishermen, longshoremen and mill workers frequented saloons!

The people who lived here and built the area over a period of five decades were a core and a cross section of Tacoma's working people. Physicians, RR workers, postal employees, businesspersons who ran all kinds of businesses, from machine shops to florists, independent tradespersons such as tailors, electricians, a harbormaster, a watchmaker. The famous also lived here and include architects Carl Darmer, the favored architect of the Northern Pacific RR Co., and Roland Borhek, singers such as opera star Signor Fioli and the young Bing Crosby, athletes and Ernest Lister, who was the State's governor from 1913 to 1916.



The house builders were often unrecorded and pattern books may have been the source of many plans. The district does have several structures designed by notable local architects: Bullard & Hill, Larkin & Barton, C.A. Darmer, Ambrose Russell, Proctor & Ferrell, Frederick Heath.

The styles of the buildings represent what was most popular and useful and in America at that time. Most are not particularly high style, just good solid examples of what worked within the tastes and budgets of the builders. Prevalent styles show excellent representations of Queen Anne, stick styles, classic American foursquare, Craftsman and bungalow.



This local history and character is celebrated by the community in the ongoing work of the North Slope Historic District organization in gatherings and workshops on best treatments for maintenance of historic houses, earthquake safety and community security. The designation of the district as historic has proved to be a valuable planning tool to help protect historic character. District designation carries responsibilities, which add up to keep it looking historic.

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