

# THE WEDGE HISTORIC DISTRICT

From the National Register Nomination

## Summary Paragraph

Tacoma, Washington lies on the banks of Commencement Bay, where the Puyallup River flows into Puget Sound. The city is 30 miles south of Seattle, north of Interstate 5, and 30 miles north of the capital city, Olympia. To the west, a suspension bridge, the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, connects the city to the Kitsap peninsula. Through the community, a main railroad line runs south to California and north to Canada, with another line crossing the Cascades into eastern Washington.

The Tacoma “Wedge Neighborhood,” named for its wedge shape, is located between 6th Ave and Division Ave. from South M Street to its tip at Sprague Avenue. The Wedge lies within Tacoma's Central Addition (1884), Ainsworth Addition (1889) and New Tacoma and shares a similar history to that of the North Slope Historic District, which is north of the Wedge Neighborhood across Division Avenue, and is listed on the Tacoma, Washington and National Registers of Historic Places.

## LOCATION AND SETTING

The Wedge Neighborhood is bounded by Division Avenue to the north and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the south, both arterials that serve to distinguish the Wedge from its surrounding neighborhoods. To the east is Martin Luther King Jr. Way, another arterial, just outside of the district. The district boundary is established by the thoroughly modern MultiCare Hospital campus to the East. The development of the hospital coincides with the borders of the underlying zoning, which is Hospital Medical, the borders of which run along a jagged path north and south from approximately Division to Sixth Ave, alternating between S M St and the alley between S M St and S L St. The district terminates at the western end in the apex formed as Division and Sprague Avenue meet.

The typical lot is 25' wide and either 120 or 130' feet in depth (blocks within the Ainsworth Addition contained both 120 and 130' lots), and the typical blocks were 360' wide east to west, and 380' long from north to south, all with north to south running alleys. Residential roads running through the district are 80' wide. Driveways off the main roads are infrequent and most garages are located in the alleys.

The majority of the land within the district is level, with a sharp decrease in elevation occurring to the east of Martin Luther King Way. Historically, the neighborhood that formed the Wedge extended contiguously eastward to Wright Park and around the Fannie Paddock Memorial Hospital on Martin Luther King Jr. Way (then K Street), which later developed into the MultiCare campus. Development was typically single-family detached housing of moderate scale, with larger apartment buildings constructed near

Division and near Wright Park. Monumental structures with close ties to the development of the Wedge included religious structures such as Fannie Paddock Memorial Hospital, First United Methodist Church at 423 K Street (demolished), and Trinity Presbyterian Church near the apex.

## Statement of Significance

The Wedge Historic District is a triangle-shaped district located in Tacoma Washington. The location is on the upper portion of the city known to most for the tree-lined streets and historic homes

The Wedge Historic District is listed on the Tacoma Register of Historic Places as an example of an intact residential neighborhood in Tacoma dating from prior to WWII. The primary development of the Wedge Neighborhood occurred prior to the 1930s, and exhibits both the characteristics of a neighborhood that developed during the streetcar era, as well as typical middle class architecture from the 1890s through the 1930s.

The Wedge Historic District is adjacent to the North Slope Historic District, which is listed on the Tacoma, Washington and National Registers of Historic Places, and which shares much of its history and character with the Wedge to the south.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The Wedge traces its development to some of the earliest settlement in Tacoma. Although there had been native people in the region for thousands of years, European exploration in 1792 under the command of British Captain George Vancouver gave Puget Sound area names, many in honor of his crew members. The British later founded Hudson's Bay post at the mouth of the Nisqually River in 1833. The Lewis and Clark Expedition first brought the Americans along the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean in 1805 and American explorers arrived in 1841 to chart the northern Puget Sound. In 1843 the 2,000 mile three-decade "Great Migration" began from Independence, Missouri along the Oregon Trail bringing settlers and their families, although it was not until 1846 that the United States/Canada border was officially established. As land became scarce around the Columbia River, these settlers moved outward. Eventually, Washington Territory separated from the Oregon Territory in 1853 with a population of 3,985.

It was during this territorial period that Pierce County, named after newly-elected President Franklin Pierce, and Tacoma, named after the Puyallup Indian word for Mount Rainier or mountain, began attracting settlers. Traders, trappers and explorers had passed through but the settlers came to stay. In 1853 Swedish settler Nicholas Delin started his sawmill, the first major source of employment for early settlers and in 1863 Job Carr built his log cabin in "Old Town", considered to be the birthplace of Tacoma.

General Morton Matthew McCarver bought a large tract of land nearby. The Northern Pacific Railroad was planning to establish its westernmost terminus and both Carr and McCarver expected that area to be the logical place and the town offered the railroad two miles of waterfront and 2,700 acres in a solid block as an enticement.

The Northern Pacific did establish Tacoma as its terminus in 1873 but Charles B. Wright, then president of Northern Pacific, and J. C. Ainsworth among others chose a site several miles east along the waterway which was largely uninhabited and gave the railroad control over the area and its development. "New Tacoma" was platted in 1874 and would be the main commercial district. Business and residential development began and churches, schools and a hospital followed.

Bordering on New Tacoma, the Central Addition was added in 1884 and the Ainsworth Addition in 1889, the year Washington Territory joined the Union as the 42nd state. The Wedge had been platted and mapped and lots were sold and houses built.

The Wedge was considered to be a very desirable residential area because of its proximity to downtown businesses, Puget Sound waterways and railroad and steamship lines. This geographically small area was also completely surrounded by streetcar lines connecting it to downtown, Old Town, Defiance Park and other parts of Tacoma.

## **SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE WEDGE NEIGHBORHOOD**

The original Wedge settlers were a very diverse group of people from all walks of life, from many parts of the country, and from many other parts of the world. Many of these early residents were born in Germany, Sweden, Norway, and England. They brought their languages, foods, culture, and religions. They included professionals, laborers, merchants, and the clergy. Represented were doctors, attorneys, architects, and contractors, engineers, politicians, jewelers, barbers, school teachers and officials, bankers, real estate and insurance personnel as well as seamen, railroad and shipping and electric company employees. Some owners of large homes took in boarders and extended-family members.

Notable examples of Wedge residents include:

**Andrew Titlow**, an early Tacoma banker and attorney (410 S. Sheridan).

**Frank and Ethel Mars**, who started the Mars Candy Company (504 S. Ainsworth).

**Anne Kincaid**, who survived the Titanic (1405 S. 5th).

**H. W. Manike**, who owned and operated a florist shop and greenhouses for 50 years on Division and M

St.

**J.C. Todd**, a pioneer Tacoma businessman who owned a ship's chandlery and later an auto parts store (502 S. Sheridan).

**Andrew Tweeden**, Vice-President and Treasurer for the Northwest Bridge Company (514 S. Sheridan).

**Richard Davis**, who owned the Tacoma Millwork Supply Company (517 S. Sheridan).

**George Murry**, who served two terms as County Clerk and two terms in the State Legislature (505 S. Sheridan).

**Llewellyn Thomas** who operated several barber shops during his early years in Tacoma (408 S. Sheridan).

**Silas Nelsen**, noted architect (405 and 407 S. Sheridan Ave.).

#### **BUILDERS, CONTRACTORS AND ARCHITECTS ACTIVE IN THE WEDGE**

##### **Silas E. Nelsen, Architect**

Silas E. Nelsen, a native of Wisconsin, moved to Washington State in 1900 with his parents. He started his career as a naval architect but eventually moved into residential and civic architecture. He moved to the Puget Sound as an adult and worked with the architectural firm Heath, Grove, and Bell for four years. He started his own practice and designed more than 150 homes, 15 churches, numerous buildings at the University of Puget Sound. Silas' own house at 405 South Sheridan (1926) and the Fred Corbit House at 2820 North Stevens (1928) both won several awards. In addition to his residential work, Nelsen worked on a number of civic, commercial and religious commissions. He designed the original main branch addition of the Tacoma Public Library, St. Nikolas Greek Orthodox Church (1925), Central Baptist Church (1950), Anna Lemon Wheelock Library (1927), Tacoma Mountaineers Building (1956), Johnson Candy Company (1949), Mueller-Harkins Motor Company (1948), and several fraternity houses at the University of Puget Sound.

The Nelsen family lived here until Silas retired in 1977 and moved to Gig Harbor. He died in 1987.

##### **Andrew Larson, Contractor**

Andrew Larson was born in Leksand, Sweden in 1885 and immigrated to Tacoma at the age of eighteen. He started his career as a furniture maker and by 1920 founded his own

contracting company. During the early 1920s he built a number of Craftsman-styled bungalows but soon began constructing predominately English and Dutch Colonial residences. His Dutch Colonial at 3315 North 30th (1927) was the first fully insulated house in Tacoma. The model home received a tremendous amount of publicity and was open to the public in early 1928.

### **Shaw & Shaw Brothers, Architects**

Frederic and Stanley T. Shaw moved from Michigan to Tacoma in 1895, as one of the areas pioneer families. Their father was Rev. Robert P. Shaw, in interim minister during the organization of Immanuel Presbyterian. Frederic Shaw started as a draftsman for Frederick Heath in 1904. He later worked for a number of architects, including C.A. Darmer and Seattle architect James Teague. While employed by the City of Tacoma Engineer's Office, Frederic designed Engine House No. 4 at 220 East 26th Street. After WWI the brothers started their architectural firm, which lasted until 1929.

Notable works: Wainwright School (1924), Dash Point Elementary (1924), Muscek Building (1924), Tacoma Gospel Tabernacle (1923), First United Presbyterian (1922), and Goodwill Industries (1930).

### **Edward Cook Hill, Builder**

Mr. Hill moved from Cincinnati, Ohio to Tacoma with his wife in 1889. Born in Cincinnati in 1861, Mr. Hill entered the contracting business in Florida, and returned to Ohio prior to moving to Tacoma. In addition to being a prolific house builder between 1901 and 1905, Mr. Hill also reputedly was involved in the construction of several Tacoma Schools. In 1903, Edward Hill took ownership of the South Tacoma Mill Company, and in partnership with J.R. Addison, reorganized the company as Addison-Hill Lumber Company in 1911. Edward Hill's brother, Frank Hill, was also an active developer and designer of homes in Tacoma. Edward Hill died in 1951.

### **Frank D. Hill, Architect**

Frank Hill was involved in the real estate professions in Tacoma from 1889 until his death in 1957. Mr. Hill was active in Tacoma as an architect as well, designing and building many homes with his brother, Edward C Hill.

### **Residential Architecture**

The earliest surviving house in the Wedge were built in 1892. An 1888 map shows houses and streets that no longer exist because of expansion of other structures. Most of the current larger homes date from the late 1890's to early 1900's and others from the 1920's. Most have had little or no exterior modifications and a considerable number

still have their original carriage houses. These homes are similar in style to those in the North Slope Historical District both in age and architectural classifications. The Victorian, Craftsman, Foursquare, Bungalow, and Gothic are pure style and/or represent a variety of styles, as are the Dutch Colonial and Cape Cod. Very few are considered to be noncontributing to the classic lines of the style categories.

There are several apartment and commercial buildings and buildings along 6th Avenue plus the Trinity Presbyterian Church and the Salvation Army administrative office and emergency housing. Many multi-family buildings and a medical facility are within the Wedge perimeters. Most of the structures within the Wedge consist of single-family homes. Several of the larger homes had been converted to multi-family units during earlier housing shortages. Some of these are now being restored to single-family residences.