

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

For a major US city, Seattle's civic history begins late in the chronicle of the nation. While the rest of the country was establishing firm roots, most of today's Seattle was covered in deep forest that was perennially drenched in rain. Though native groups lived here long before, colonialist settlement didn't reach Puget Sound until 1851. The history of Seattle as a city is itself only about 130 years long, but in that time it's become the cultural and economic center of the Pacific Northwest. Not that the city would ever brag about that status itself, mind you.

Despite its achievements and importance to the region, Seattle still has the mellow sense of modesty and self-deprecation that characterizes the Northwest. This dates back to its laid-back origins as 'New York Pretty Soon' (see p24). The attitude peaked in the 1950s and '60s, with the wild antiboosterism of newspaper columnist Emmett Watson (who wrote things like 'Have a nice day – somewhere else' and 'Our suicide rate is one of the highest in the nation. But we can be No 1!'). And it has colored the way the nation perceives Seattle, along with the popularization of the antiglamorous in the form of grunge, a trend whose fame still seems to mortify the city. Then there was Seattle's naive excitement at being selected to host the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) conference and many residents' shock at the resulting fallout. Seattle always seems to have an uncomfortable relationship with the success it has struggled to achieve.

SEATTLE FACTS

City area 83.9 sq miles
 Population 602,000 (estimated)
 King County area 2126.1 sq miles
 King County population 1.87 million
 Freshwater shoreline 147.52 miles
 Saltwater shoreline 53.38 miles
 Puget Sound 500 sq miles of water, 300 islands

NATIVE PEOPLES OF PUGET SOUND

When the accumulated ice of the great polar glaciers of the Pleistocene Epoch lowered sea levels throughout the world, the ancestors of Native Americans migrated from Siberia to Alaska via a land bridge across the Bering Strait. By this reckoning, the present tribes of Puget Sound arrived here 11,000 or 12,000 years ago, before the glaciers receded.

Unlike the Plains Indians living further inland, who were primarily nomadic hunter-gatherers, the first inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest were intimately tied to the rivers, lakes and sea. The tribe living on the site of today's Seattle was called the Duwamish. They and other tribal groups along Puget Sound – notably the Suquamish, Coast Salish and Chinook – depended on catching salmon, cod and shellfish. On land, they hunted deer and elk, more for their protective hides than for their flesh. Though each group had its own dialect, coastal natives communicated through a language called Lushootseed, which natives today struggle to keep from extinction.

TIMELINE

9000–11,000 BC

The ancestors of the Duwamish, Suquamish, Coast Salish and Chinook tribes arrive in Puget Sound after earlier migrating from Siberia via a land bridge across the Bering Strait.

1792

British sea captain George Vancouver sails through the Straits of Juan de Fuca and Georgia.

1804–06

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out on their famous expedition across the Louisiana Territory, covering 8000 miles in two years, with the help of Shoshone Indian translator Sacagawea.

TODAY'S DUWAMISH PEOPLE

Seattle took its name from Chief Sealth (1786–1866), anglicized to 'Seattle', the leader of the Duwamish tribe who initially welcomed members of the Denny party when they arrived in 1851.

At the time of the Denny party's arrival, the peaceful Duwamish culture was deeply linked to the salmon that made seasonal runs on the Green and Duwamish Rivers. White settlers received permission from the Duwamish to build their first structures on the site of a summer camp that the area's native inhabitants called Duwamps – the name that the settlers applied to their little town as well. Chief Seattle urged peaceful coexistence between the people of his tribe and the whites, and he encouraged the Duwamish to work side by side with the settlers building houses, cutting trees and laying out streets.

Relations with other tribes along Puget Sound were not as good. To address growing hostilities, the US government drew up a treaty in 1854 granting area tribes \$150,000 in goods and 2600 acres of reservation land in return for vacating two million acres of prime real estate in western Washington, including the present-day Seattle area. Distrust and anger soon broke out, and in 1855 warfare erupted between the natives and white settlers.

Chief Seattle persuaded the Duwamish not to become involved in the conflict, but the settlement at Duwamps was besieged by a group of hostile Indians, forcing the settlers to take shelter in the town's small stockade. A visiting navy sloop, the *Decatur*, fired its cannons into the forest above the little town to frighten the Indians away. In retaliation, the Indians burned and looted nearly all of the settlements on Puget Sound. In the end, the settlers prevailed and one of the Indian rebel leaders, Leschi, was captured, tried and hanged for murder.

So in many ways, the interactions between white settlers and the natives who lived on the land for thousands of years before they arrived have been ugly, conflicted, and rife with violence and unfairness. But if the people who settled in the Pacific Northwest have absorbed anything from the pre-existing Indian cultures, it's a sense of reverence for nature and the surrounding wilderness, even though that reverence is frequently ineffective and often comes across as hypocritical in the light of history. 'How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land?' Chief Seattle asked in his

Summer and fall were dedicated to harvesting the bounty of the sea and forest. Food was stored in massive quantities to carry the tribes through the long winter months, when the most important ancient legends and ceremonies were handed down to the younger generations. In terms of artistic, religious and cultural forms, the Northwest coastal Indians reached a pinnacle of sophistication unmatched by most Native American groups. Ornately carved cedar canoes served as transportation, and extensive trading networks evolved between the permanent settlements that stretched up and down the coast and along the river valleys.

Extended family groups lived together in cedar longhouses, which were constructed over a central pit-like living area. The social structure in these self-sustaining tribal villages was quite stratified, with an aristocratic class of chiefs holding the majority of wealth and power. Social and religious rituals were dominated by a strict clan system. Wealth was measured in goods such as blankets, salmon and fish oil. Such commodities were consumed and to some degree redistributed in ceremonial feasts in which great honor accrued to the person who gave away these valued items.

Puget Sound natives evolved complex cultural, social and economic structures, which the invasion of Euro-American settlers in the mid-1800s almost erased. Today tribes struggle for survival, respect and renewal (see the box, [above](#)).

1851

1854–55

1885

The Denny party arrives at Alki Point and settles in Puget Sound, already home to the Duwamish people. A year later, thanks to rough tides that made pier-building impossible, the settlement moves to Seattle proper.

US treaty grants 2600 acres of reservation in return for two million acres of prime real estate. Warfare erupts between tribes and white settlers. Chief Sealth delivers his masterful address.

A group of white settlers establishes the Anti-Chinese Congress, setting a deadline by which all Chinese must leave Seattle. About 500 stay, and the mob's attempt to remove them leads to riots the following year.