

# A Brief History of the Seattle Southside Region

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The area known as [Seattle Southside](#) has a rich and vibrant history. From centuries old pre-European habitation by the Duwamish and Muckleshoot tribes, to European settlement in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to the construction of Sea-Tac Airport, the history of this area is fascinating and colorful. This blog will only touch on some of the major events, but it will also include links and resources for a deeper dive into the past.



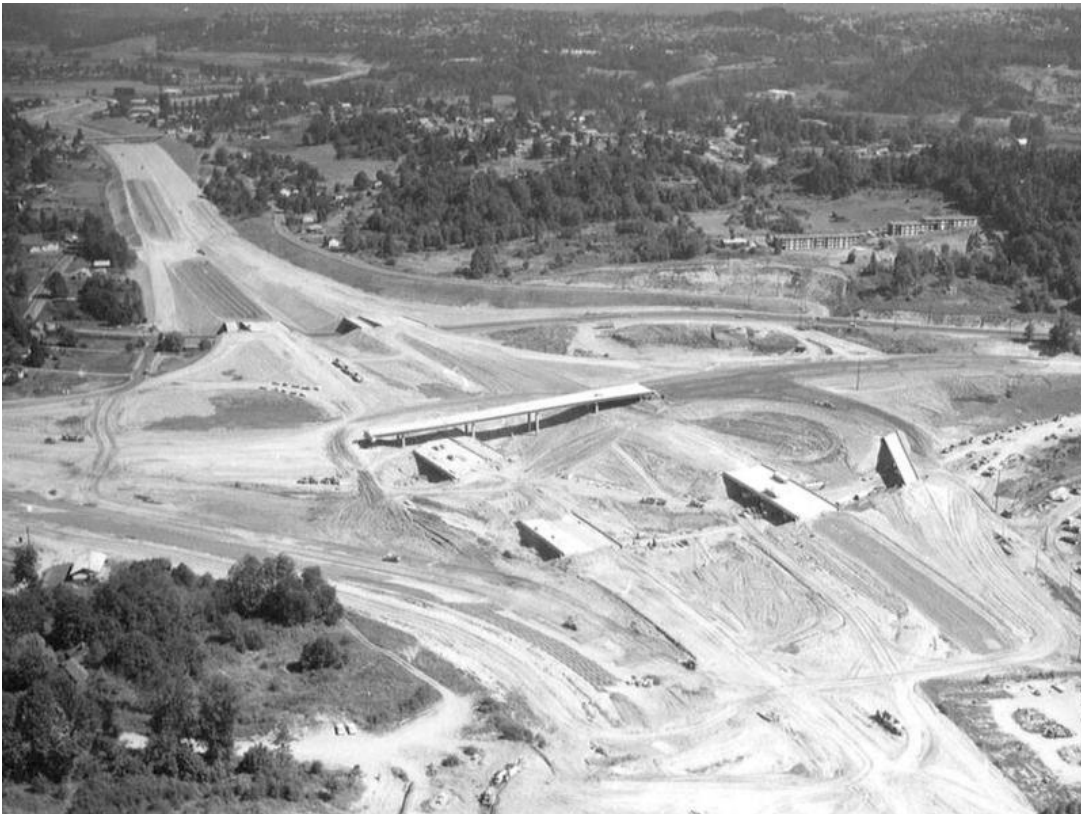
*Historic photo of the Duwamish people courtesy of The Duwamish Tribe - date unknown.*

The Duwamish people lived in the area surrounding the Duwamish River (modern-day Seattle Southside) for centuries, perhaps even thousands of years, as indicated by their oral traditions featuring stories about the last ice age (“History of the Duwamish People,” n.d.). They lived in cedar longhouses, hunted and fished in local waters and used rivers to trade with other tribes and neighboring people. In modern times, two canoes estimated to be up to 300 years old were discovered at the bottom of Angle Lake by scuba diver, William Westlake Walker (“History,” n.d.)

Although the first European known to have seen the area was British explorer, George Vancouver in 1792, the area was not settled by Europeans until the arrival of the Collins Party in 1851 (Class, H.C., 2007). Members of the Collins Party were soon joined by notable pioneers Stephen and Joseph Foster in 1852. Joseph Foster was notable in that he served in the early Washington Territorial Legislature, acted as a packer and scout in the Indian War, and he was the first superintendent of local schools (Stein, 1999). Today, the name Foster is on local schools and the [Foster Links Golf Course](#) where the Foster homestead was originally located (“Tukwila History,” n.d.).

In the early days of European settlement, pioneers found the soil near the river to be fertile, so many homesteaders spent the later half of the nineteenth century growing hops, hay, fruit, and vegetables (Stein, 1999). The industrialization of the region started with the construction of Military Road in 1853 which connected Fort Steilacoom and Fort Bellingham, and continued with the Seattle-Tacoma

Interurban Railway in 1902 (“History,” n.d.). In 1928, the Pacific Coast Highway acted as a primary route between the cities of Seattle and Tacoma, which resulted in dozens of new restaurants, hotels, and gas stations in the area (Dorpat & Crowley, 2003). Finally, in the midst World War II, construction on the future Seattle-Tacoma International Airport began in 1943 and was officially dedicated on Halloween of 1944 (Dorpat & Crowley, 2003).



*Aerial photo of construction of the I-5/405 interchange circa 1966 courtesy of The Tukwila Reporter.*

In the 1960s, Seattle Southside’s central location and crossing highways resulted in further development and construction. This construction boom culminated in the opening of Southcenter Mall in 1968, which would eventually become [Westfield Southcenter](#). At the time, Southcenter Mall was one of the largest malls in the state. Nowadays, it is the largest mall in the Pacific Northwest (Stein, 1999).

Today, Seattle Southside’s history of innovation in transportation continues as the area is a central hub of Sound Transit’s Link light rail which currently connects the cities of SeaTac and Tukwila to Seattle, and will eventually go as far north as Everett, and as far south as Tacoma. Hotels, restaurants, and attractions continue to spring up around Pacific Highway and the Duwamish River, making Seattle Southside a must-visit location for leisure and business travelers for years to come.

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## Tukwila — Thumbnail History

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Frederick Dent, for whom Fort Dent was named. Dent was also the brother-in-law of President Ulysses S. Grant. Courtesy Library of Congress



Downtown Tukwila, 1900s  
Courtesy Tukwila Historical Society



Hull's grocery store in Tukwila, 1930s  
Courtesy Washington State Archives



Aerial view of Southcenter Mall, 1970s

The City of Tukwila, located 10 miles south of Seattle, is near the original confluence of the Black and White rivers. These rivers, before development altered their courses, merged to form the Duwamish River. The Duwamish flowed north into Elliott Bay, below the hills of Seattle. The Duwamish Indians inhabited this valley for many centuries before white settlers arrived in the 1850s. In 1851, the Collins party staked a claim near the mouth of the Duwamish River. Around the same time, the Denny Party settled at Alki Point, to the west of the Collins' claim. Soon after, other settlers started claiming land further south into the valley.

Joseph and Stephen Foster, brothers who had walked west from Illinois alongside an oxcart, were the first to settle in what is now Tukwila. They both staked claims near where the Black and White rivers met, then known as Mox La Push (Chinook jargon meaning "two mouths"). Spring floods would often reverse the course of the small Black River, causing it to flow backward into Lake Washington, temporarily giving it another mouth.

Two years after the Fosters began clearing their land, hostile Indians massacred settlers in the White River valley to the south. This led to the short-lived Indian War, the result of which was the removal of all local tribes onto reservations. Although many of the Duwamish Indians remained friendly with local settlers, the tribe was never granted its own reservation and was forced to move onto land inhabited by other tribes.

### Nineteenth Century Development

Soon after the Indian War, Fort Dent (a small blockhouse) was built near Joseph Foster's cabin in case of further uprisings. Also, the first road in King County was built along the Duwamish River over an established Indian trail. The road and the river enabled valley settlers to access the growing city of Seattle. Logs harvested while clearing the land could be floated upstream to the mills, and the road allowed mill workers to get to their jobs.

Joseph Foster, who served in the Indian War as a packer and scout, became a territorial legislator in 1858. Among legislation he sponsored was a bill that established a Territorial University in Seattle, which later became the University of Washington.

Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Duwamish Valley attracted many settlers. The soil was excellent for growing hops, hay, fruit, and vegetables. The river was abundant with salmon. In 1880, the total number of people living in the valley was 199. By 1892, the population was 2062. An aphid infestation and the nationwide economic panic of 1893 temporarily slowed growth in the area, but the community's location along a transportation corridor allowed it to flourish in the twentieth century.

### Planes, Trains, Automobiles

The grassy plain a few miles down river of Mox La Push was called The Meadows. In the early 1900s, a horseracing track was built there. In 1912, the First King County Fair was held at the site. Later still, a small airport was built which grew to become Boeing Field and home to the Boeing Company's Plant II, which produced many of the larger planes that fought in World War II.

In 1902, the Seattle-Tacoma Interurban Railway was built through the valley. The electric train, which could achieve speeds of 60 to 70 miles an hour, greatly suburbanized the area by allowing commuters a chance to have a home in the country and a job in the city.

The increase in the number of automotive vehicles soon followed, and better roads and bridges were built throughout the region to accommodate them. By 1928, the Interurban was phased out as roads became the preferred routes for many people.

The rivers, which had been the first travel routes in the community, also underwent man-made changes. One of these rivers was phased out. Following a major flood in 1906, the Duwamish River was dredged and straightened over a period of years. Ten miles to the south, the White River was diverted from its original course, and the Green River now filled the channel.

And in 1916, the lowering of Lake Washington resulting from the construction of the Montlake Cut to connect Lake Washington with Lake Union caused the Black River to disappear. Mox La Push went from two mouths to none.

By this time, the community had already been named Tukwila. The etymology of the name is unclear, but it was used by Duwamish Indians to describe the region. Locals had been calling the community by this name for years. In 1908, Joel Shomaker, a Seattle newspaperman who lived in the valley, pushed for incorporation. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* held a "Name The New Town" contest, and the name Tukwila won. The town was incorporated on June 23, 1908 with Shomaker as mayor.

### Industrialization vs. Commercialization

As transportation corridors expanded throughout south King County, Tukwila cemented itself as a central hub. The rapid growth of Boeing and other industries during World War II threatened to over-industrialize the area after the war, but opposition from Tukwila citizens prevented it. Rather than rely on industry to sustain growth, they turned to commercial businesses.

In the 1960s, planning had already begun for two new highways that would cross right next to the city: I-405, which would travel around Seattle and Lake Washington, and I-5, which would run the entire length of the Pacific Coast. The city planners, realizing the

potential of such a busy crossroads, started work on a grand shopping mall for Tukwila. On July 31, 1968, Southcenter Mall opened with 116 stores built on 30 acres. At the time it was one of the largest malls in the state.

In recent years, the City of Tukwila has annexed many smaller nearby communities such as Riverton, Allentown, and Foster, including a number of industries along East Marginal Way. Seattle had sought these industries for their tax base in the 1980s, but the resistance of a small number of residents in the neighboring Southpark area prevented the annexation. The industries now enrich Tukwila's tax base.

By the end of the twentieth century, Tukwila has a population of nearly 20,000 people. With industry to the north, Sea-Tac Airport to the west, and a wide variety of businesses within and without, Tukwila continues to be a thriving city as it enters the twenty-first century.

*Sources: Kay F. Reinartz, Tukwila: Community at the Crossroads (Tukwila: City of Tukwila, 1991).*

the twenty-first century.

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**Sources:**

**Kay F. Reinartz, *Tukwila: Community at the Crossroads* (Tukwila: City of Tukwila, 1991).**

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