



Seattle tide flats just south of present day Pioneer Square, 1895. Note the wood pilings marking parcel boundaries.

If you walked over the Dearborn South Tideland Site today, you wouldn't even know it was there. You'd probably be looking across the street at CenturyLink Field, or to the west at giant container ships on the waterfront instead. But in the long, narrow block between Alaskan Way S., First Avenue S., Dearborn Street, and S. Royal Brougham Way, Seattle's past is buried under your feet.

Dig into this tiny piece of industrial real estate, and you'll find intriguing clues to the city's unwritten history.

Seeking Their Fortunes Building Seattle from the Mud Up

It wasn't a very promising beginning. Seattle in the 1850s was little more than a few wooden structures along muddy streets and a sawmill built on a pier. Even so, Puget Sound timber was pure gold, and the frontier city grew at a frantic pace.

A house here, a dock there, a warehouse across the street—development was haphazard at best, especially along the waterfront.

In 1893, the Washington State Legislature passed a bill that allowed enterprising

people and companies to dig canals through the tide flats and deposit the spoils to make new land. The new parcels could then be sold at a tidy profit.

The bill touched off a land rush that had entrepreneurs using pilings to mark off sections of tidelands to be filled.

Soon, hydraulic dredging equipment built for gold mining in the Klondike was put into service sluicing Seattle's inconveniently steep hills onto its inconveniently wet flats. Peninsulas began to emerge among intertidal lagoons.

Tide Flats Life

The Wild West in the Northwest

Search through archives of early Seattle images, and you'll find portraits of the stern-looking city fathers, black-and-white photos of new buildings and railways, and the occasional birds-eye map. But Seattle was more than just prominent families and industry.

The city ran on the labor of thousands of workers whose names are seldom listed in the historical record. They represented a range of ethnicities, ages, and personal histories—much more so than the founding fathers recorded in “official” histories. The jumble of piers, docks, and floating structures in the tide flats area was their home and workplace. They built early Seattle, then faded into obscurity.

At first a boomtown, the maze of factories, shacks, and businesses south of S. King Street eventually became a barrier to “progress.” The railroad companies wanted a clear corridor along the waterfront that was on dry land instead of hard-to-maintain wood trestles. They bought the tide flats and demolished the old structures.

By 1914, the patchwork of fill and tide flats had been replaced by level, dry land. Seattle’s populations drifted elsewhere, and this chapter of history closed.



Floating shacks on the Seattle waterfront, circa 1900. MOHAI 1988.33.22.

The Dearborn South Tidelands Site

A Snapshot of Tide Flats Life

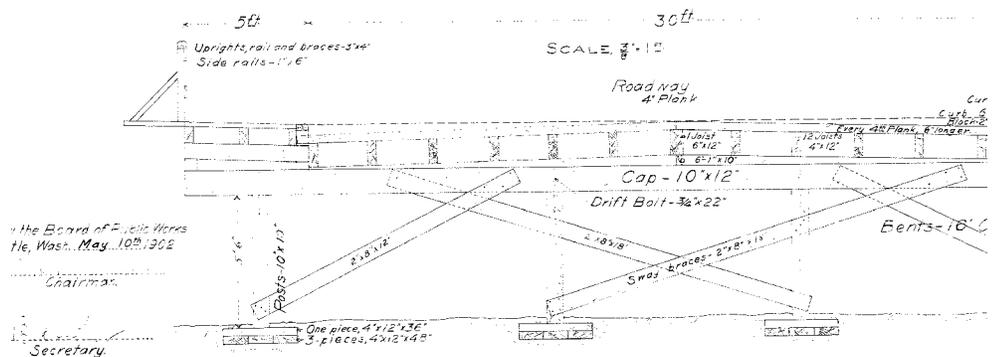
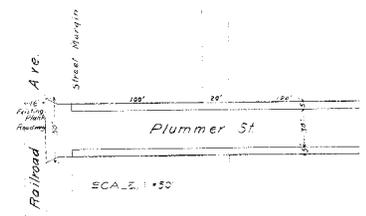
What remains of the former tide flats culture? The clues are buried under busy streets, buildings, and a tangle of electrical cables and water and sewer lines.

Archaeologists are constantly looking for a window into this vanished world. In 2010, they got a chance to peek in. That’s when the Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Program planned to install new electrical lines along a corridor from just north of S. Royal Brougham Way almost all the way to S. Dearborn Street.

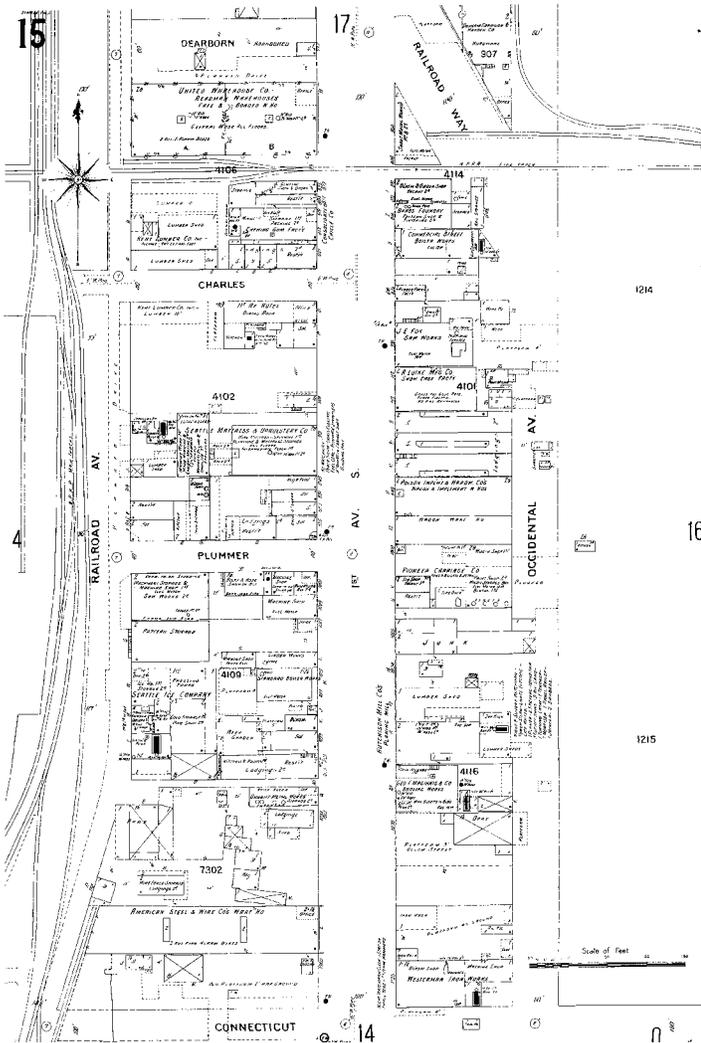
PLUMMER STREET
 FIRST AVE. SOUTH TO RAILROAD AVE.
 BY CONSTRUCTION OF A
 BRIDGE ROADWAY
 ORDINANCE NO 6944
 APPROVED JUNE 6TH 1901
 CAL IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT NO 435
 APRIL, 1902
 R. H. THOMSON
 CITY ENGINEER

Fig. No. 2.

N.



Original engineering plans for Plummer Street (1902) (Note: The new street is an elevated planked roadway built over six feet above the newly created ‘dry land’.



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (1904-1905) illustrating the once busy neighborhood at the Dearborn South Tideland Site.

During earlier construction work, archaeologists had identified an archaeological site in this area that might help write the unwritten history of the tide flats.

The site was given the number 45KI924 and the name “Dearborn South Tideland Site”. Previous archaeology work had uncovered some building foundations and had also found some historic garbage, which, to an archaeologist, can be a goldmine of information.

Archaeologists researched what some proposed utilities work might dig up through the site. According to a 1904-1905 fire insurance map, the utility lines crossed worker housing near the American Steel and Wire Company warehouse, then skirted just west of more housing, a restaurant, and a beer garden near the Seattle Ice Company. After that, the lines crossed lodgings and a restaurant near the Seattle Mattress and Upholstery Company. The lines hit the western edge of the First Avenue Hotel, just missing

the lodgings of the Consolidated Chicle Company chewing gum factory, and ended at the United Warehouse Company’s general merchandise storage.

Researchers consulted earlier maps and detailed population records to find out more about this once busy neighborhood. Based on this research, archaeologists developed a plan to explore certain parts of the site.

The archaeologists weren’t just prospecting, though. They had specific research questions to answer. How did the land making activities affect the natural environment, and how did local residents use this new land? Can intact deposits of garbage be linked to particular groups of people at particular times? Can these deposits tell us how the residents of the tide flats were integrated into regional and global trade networks?

Any bits of history left behind could help write the stories of people passed over in the history books.

A Learning Experience

The Excavation

Archaeologists created a plan to explore the deposits. They removed the modern fill put in place by the railroads who had demolished this once thriving neighborhood. In five areas, archaeologists removed this fill with heavy equipment and then dug down through the historic deposits by hand.

No detail was too small to record. Dirt was sifted through screens to find tiny objects. Soil was collected and analyzed for everything from pollen content to grain size. Animal bones were analyzed to determine what animals were being eaten.

The field crew carefully documented the findings with maps, drawings, and photographs. Later, in the lab, they cleaned the finds, inventoried them, and crunched the numbers.



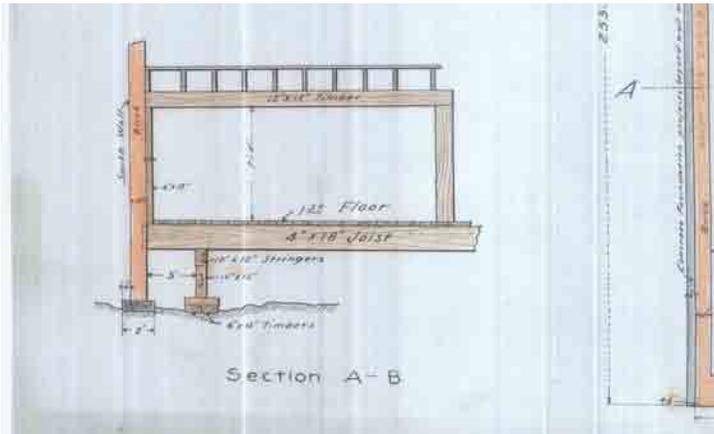
A piling platform that once supported an elevated planked surface in this location.



A sample of the artifacts recovered from the Dearborn South Tidelands Site that provided a window into everyday life in early Seattle.

The northernmost trench was excavated in an area that originally had a steam laundry in 1893, and by 1905 contained two saloons, lodgings, a restaurant, a chewing gum factory, and a lumber yard with four buildings and an office.

Archaeologists hoped to find refuse from the lodgings and restaurants. Unfortunately, they mostly found debris from building demolition and fill.



Detail from the Seattle City Engineer's drawing of the American Wire and Steel warehouse (Note: The building is constructed on pilings set on platforms placed on the newly created 'dry land').

The area surrounding the next trench south was occupied by industrial manufacturing in the 1890s. After the turn of the century, it was home to the First Avenue Hotel.

This trench intrigued archaeologists with more domestic debris, including tableware, glass lamp fragments, and a pharmaceutical bottle. But careful examination of the layering of soils revealed that the deposit had been mixed and churned during historic demolition of this area by the railroad.

The first business in the location of the next trench was a dairy, present in the 1890s. By 1905, the dairy complex was gone, replaced by the Seattle Mattress and Upholstery Company factory and numerous hotels, restaurants, and saloons. There was still more domestic debris in this trench, but, like previous trenches, it was mixed with demolition debris. This trench did contain several piling platforms below the demolition debris. Humble structures of dimensional lumber set atop dredge and regrade spoils. These platforms supported huge, heavy buildings like factories and hotels.

The southernmost trenches were near each other in an area that had stables, tenements, and an office in the 1890s. By 1905, the American Wire and Steel warehouse occupied almost all of the area. Storage for the facility also included lodgings and stables.

These trenches contained a wide variety of domestic artifacts and animal bones. However, the domestic debris didn't have a wide variety of items like an intact garbage deposit would. The debris was mostly broken tableware and other things that would be left behind in a building about to be demolished.

The animal bones were so fragmented that only 12 of 231 could be completely identified to a specific animal species. Seven cow bones, four pig bones, and a chicken bone provided little in the way of usable information about the people who ate them.

In the end, the history of the working poor on the margins of the growing city remained elusive. But some mysteries of Seattle history were solved. Archaeologists gleaned information on how the tide flats were filled, and how the earliest structures were built atop shifting sediments.

The engineering history of the tide flats area is mostly unwritten, and archaeological research is the best way to learn about the three-dimensional complex of structures on tide flats, piers, and wharves that characterized some of Seattle's earliest history.

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