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Fire and Gold Build Seattle

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Abstract

The final decade of the 19th century established Seattle as the preeminent city in the Pacific Northwest. Prodigious changes resulting from the Fire of 1889 paved the way for Seattle to take full advantage of the Klondike Gold Rush eight years later. This work details the impact that each of these events had on Seattle and concludes that the compound effects of two events of happenstance created the foundation for the Seattle we know today.

Introduction

Seattle was founded in of 1852. The area showed great promise. It sat at the edge of a deep-water sheltered bay that was ideal for shipping. The pine and cypress forest that surrounded the settlement promised a strong future in timber, and the waters of Puget Sound were a rich fishery.[1] The abundance of natural resources led Seattle to develop into a strong and successful town, but not the economic center of the Pacific Northwest that its founders and businessmen had strived for it to be. The first four decades of its existence were spent battling with Tacoma, Olympia, and Portland for new businesses and recognition.[2] Ultimately, the Seattle fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 would be the two primary catalysts for Seattle's ascension to prominence.

Most written histories of Seattle attribute its growth and prominence to a host of factors that led the city along a turbulent road of evolution. Some texts, like Murray Morgan's *Skid Road* (1951)[3] and Roger Sale's *Seattle: Past to Present* (1976)[4]; portray Seattle as the aggregate product of many social, political, and economic events. Others, including Lisa Mighetto and Marcia Montgomery's *Hard Drive to the Klondike* (2002)[5], credit the Klondike gold rush as having been pivotal to Seattle's solid position as the dominant city in the Pacific Northwest. The Klondike gold rush was essential to Seattle's claim to be the "Queen City of the Great Pacific Northwest" but the prosperity of that single event was not the crucible. Rather it was the one-two

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[1] Janathan Raban, "Boomtown USA from Boeing to Microsoft, Seattle has been Home to Many of the World's most Influential Companies. Long - Time Resident Jonathan Raban Considers its Successes - and, in its Severance from its Regional Roots , the Price it may have Paid," *Financial Times (London, England)*, sec. FT WEEKEND MAGAZINE - Feature, June 30, 2007.

[2] Carlos A. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 235-239.

[3] Murray Morgan, *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle* (New York: Viking Press, 1951).

[4] Roger Sale, *Seattle, Past to Present* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976).

[5] Lisa Mighetto and Marcia Montgomery, *Hard Drive to the Klondike: Promoting Seattle During the Gold Rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

punch of the Seattle fire, which created a new and improved city core and further developed the idea of "Seattle Spirit", and the promotion of the city during the Klondike Gold Rush that fueled an entrepreneurial spirit in Seattle that continues to this day.

This thesis will argue that it took the combination of affluence that came with the gold rush and the restructuring of the city's business core that resulted from the 1889 fire for it to continue to succeed. Prior to the fire of 1889, Seattle's business district was comprised of a disorganized collection of wooden buildings. The lack of planned design had created a city with streets too narrow to support growth, a sewer system that was hostage to the tide levels of Elliott Bay, and a resident population of one million rats. Ironically, the fire that burned 32 blocks of the city was exactly what Seattle needed to become the Queen City she aspired to be. Without the absolute devastation that the fire provided, the many different businesses would have never agreed to a complete demolition and redesign of the entire business district, which created a city capable of taking advantage of the Klondike Gold Rush.

The bricks of the burned out building's foundations had barely cooled when Seattle began to rebuild. The day after the fire, some 600 of Seattle's business leaders met and agreed on a progressive plan for the design and construction of the new city. The redesign included rebuilding primarily with brick and stone, raising the street grade, widening and straightening main streets, installing new water lines, and building a much improved sewer system.[6] The rebuilding of Seattle injected the city with a new vitality. The population increased dramatically. Capital to fuel growth came from the east coast and the city positioned itself literally and figuratively to flourish. While the post-fire Seattle showed great growth and promise, its progress

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[6] Jeffrey Karl Ochsner and Dennis Alan Andersen, "Meeting the Danger of Fire: Design and Construction in Seattle After 1889," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (Summer, 2002), 115-126.

was retarded by the economic crash of 1893. Seattle was a new city poised for success being held back by a dreadful national economy. On July 17, 1897, the arrival of the steamship "Portland", laden with Klondike gold, brought with it the means for Seattle to climb out of the economic muck. The prospect of finding a fortune in gold was entrancing to an American public recovering from the crash. The city's civic leaders moved quickly to entice miners to shop and ship out from Seattle, establishing it as the "Gateway to Alaska".[7]

These dramatic times in Seattle's past are examples of the city and its people embracing challenge and opportunity and making the most of the situation at hand. A literal symbol of the connection between the fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold rush is the Alaska Building in downtown Seattle. Built in 1903, it was the first completely fireproof high-rise to be constructed.[8]

This work will use a combination of personal letters, newspaper articles and advertisements, government documents, and period photographs to show how these two pivotal periods in Seattle's history would solidify the city's dominant position in the region. The lasting effects of the Fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold Rush would provide the basis for Seattle to become one of the leading cities in the world.

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[7] Walt Crowley, "HistoryLink File # 9301 Turning Point 7: A Bumpy Ride: Seattle's Economic Booms, Busts, and Comebacks," http://www.historylink.org (accessed Oct 28, 2013).
[8] Ochsner and Andersen, 115-126.

Historiography

Most of the literature covering Seattle's history emphasizes the importance of the Klondike Gold Rush while acknowledging the Fire of 1889 only as a lesser and unrelated event. In *Seattle, Past to Present*, Roger Sale takes a much different view. Sale advocates that the Fire of 1889 was of significant importance while the Gold Rush was merely a "nice shot in the arm" to Seattle's future.[9] In his chapter, "Premier City of the Northwest, 1890-1910", Sale begins with a description of the fire and credits it as being progressive rather than a setback: "In a stagnating city such disasters can deal a death blow, but in a healthy one they are almost always spurs to new and greater growth."[10] He describes the reconstruction as "a badge of youthful pride" because Seattle had progressed from a one-dimensional exporter of lumber and coal to a multi-tasking city with a diversified economy and the resources to rebuild itself bigger and better than before. Sale gives little credence to the impact of the Klondike Gold Rush. He contends that Seattle had already positioned itself on a solid financial base and that the Gold Rush played a relatively minor role in its ascension. "The Gold Rush was not a major contributor to [Seattle's] essential economic development."[11] He goes on to credit Seattle's role in the Gold Rush as being merely geographical good fortune and downplays the function of city leaders such as Erastus Brainerd and the city's efforts of self-promotion. Sale recognizes the city's ability to "provide essential goods and services when the miners arrived" as being the driving force behind the droves of people that chose to outfit and leave from Seattle for the Klondike.[12] He believes that the rebuilding of the city's business core played a larger role in Seattle's future.

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[9] Sale, 51.
[10] Ibid, 50.
[11] Ibid, 52.
[12] Ibid, 53.

William C. Speidel, in *Sons of the Profits or There's No Business Like Grow Business! The Seattle Story, 1851-1901*(1967), gives similar credit to the Fire of 1889. He places significance on when the fire occurred that others do not. In his chapter, "Having wonderful fire. Wish you were here!" Speidel imparts a sense of good fortune in the timing of Seattle burning to the ground.[13] He points out that had the city caught fire on "June 1, instead of June 6 … we'd have been no place" because the Johnstown flood, that killed 2,200 people, would have overshadowed it in all the papers. As it turned out though, the largest fire in the Pacific Northwest came along at just the right time and made all the newspapers. Speidel credits the three weeks following the fire as "the most important in [Seattle's] history."[14] He cites the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* as writing that "the fire not only destroyed the Seattle that was, but 'At the same time, it prepared the way for the greater and more beautiful Seattle that is to be.'"[15] Speidel gives equal flourish to the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897. He vividly expresses the point of view that Seattle felt that it owned Alaska and that it had been building on its business for thirty years. "By the time the big strike came along in 1897 we had the business of mining the miners honed to a fine edge."[16] Seattle knew what the miners needed on the way up and what they wanted on the way back and it was prepared to make as much money as possible at both ends. While Sale used a tone preferred by academia, Speidel's words seem to be written for a less discerning audience.

In the preface to *Skid Road* (1951), Murray Morgan lists four key events in Seattle's history. "The coming of the Mercer Girls, the Great Fire, the Klondike Excitement, and the

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[13] William C. Speidel, *Sons of the Profits Or, there's no Business Like Grow Business the Seattle Story, 1851-1901* (Seattle, Washington: Nettle Creek Publishing Company, 1967), 345.
[14] Ibid, 241.
[15] Ibid, 253.
[16] Ibid, 307.

General Strike".[17] In regard to the Fire and the Gold Rush, he gives each an equal amount of page weight and equal recognition of their importance. Like Speidel and Sale, he portrays the pre-fire Seattle of 1889 as a young but growing city. Morgan emphasizes that population increase resulted from the fire, "When the fire started, Seattle's population was estimated at 31,000. When census takers counted the population in 1890…they found that Seattle had 37,000 inhabitants."[18] Morgan's account of the Klondike Gold Rush centers on the importance of Erastus Brainerd and the campaign to promote Seattle. Like Speidel, Morgan references Seattle's feelings of ownership of Alaska. Morgan declares that Erastus Brainerd "probably did more than any other individual to annex the Territory of Alaska to the City of Seattle. Certainly he was the man most responsible for making Seattle the main port of the Klondike and Nome gold rushes."[19] Like other historians, Morgan acknowledges the financial gain achieved through the Gold Rush period, but he also makes a connection to Reginald H. Thomson, Seattle's city engineer, who would later propose the leveling of Seattle's hills for future expansion. "The wealth brought to Seattle by the prospectors who heeded Brainerd's carefully sounded calls helped finance the work of another local genius, Reginald H. Thomson…without Brainerd, Seattle might not have tripled its population in a decade; …without Thomson, it could not have handled the newcomers."[20] Glenn Chesney Quiett gave an earlier historical view in *They Built The West: An Epic of Rails and Cities* (1934). Quiett's work focused on people rather than events so he did not write about the Seattle Fire. Regarding the Klondike Gold Rush, he, like Morgan, centered on the connection between Seattle and Alaska as well as the work of Brainerd. Quiett also refers to the "Seattle Spirit", an attitude of perseverance attributed to Seattle and its

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[17] Morgan, vi.
[18] Ibid, 115.
[19] Ibid, 159.
[20] Ibid, 167.

inhabitants. "The Seattle Spirit has always been boldly aggressive, shrewd, and powerful in obtaining whatever it set out to get."[21] The Seattle Spirit is a recurring theme in the history of the city and is referenced in many historians' works.

In *Hard Drive to the Klondike* (2002), Lisa Mighetto and Marcia Montgomery argue the Klondike Gold Rush was the "pivotal event affecting the course of [Seattle's] history."[22] Mighetto and Montgomery contend that the lessons learned and the wealth, status, and chutzpah obtained during the gold rush, have been parlayed into the good fortune of the local companies of today. They take a much more comprehensive look at the gold rush than other authors whose works I researched. While they present convincing evidence to support their thesis, they acknowledge that not all historians agree as to the significance of the gold rush on Seattle's development. Mighetto and Montgomery claim, "Most modern historians…present the Klondike Gold Rush as a pivotal event essential to the city's development" while earlier perspectives regard it as a lesser event.[23] They give a modest reference to the Seattle Fire although they do regard the improvements to the city as being helpful in allowing Seattle to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Klondike Gold Rush.

"Advertising and the Klondike" a 1922 article written for the *Washington Historical Quarterly* by Jeannette Paddock Nichols, thoroughly outlines the efforts made by Erastus Brainerd in promoting Seattle but believes it had little effect on the city. She claims that while the advertising employed to draw miners to Seattle was capacious its effectiveness is debatable. "It cannot be gainsaid that the bureau of Information of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce gave

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[21] Glenn Chesney Quiett, *They Built The West: An Epic of Rails and Cities,* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934) 473.
[22] Mighetto and Montgomery,.xiii
[23] Ibid, 85.

momentum to the growth of both the Klondike and Seattle."[24] Her views seem to align with those of Roger Sale.

In *It Happened in Seattle: Remarkable Events That Shaped History* (2009), Steve Pomper credits both the Seattle Fire and the Klondike Gold Rush as being defining events in the city's history. His account of the fire is similar to other works but his regard for the impact of the event is markedly stronger than others.

> Remarkably, this story is not one of disaster but a true American…tale of perseverance; a northwest phoenix rises from the ashes. This was never as true as in the aftermath of the Seattle fire for all of the benefits it brought to the city. It's said that in order to have a strong structure you must first have a firm foundation. Well, if this is true, pre-1889 Seattle's "foundation" may have been quaint at best, but at worst it was pathetic. It's clear that without the great fire, Seattle would probably not have become the Queen City of the Great Pacific Northwest.[25]

To illustrate his perspective on the Klondike Gold Rush, Pomper draws correlations to post gold rush events. He points to the Golden Potlatch in 1911 and the Silver Anniversary of the Klondike Gold Rush, two celebrations that Seattle held to observe the significance of the period. He writes that "For Seattle the recession of the 1890s was over, and the recovery from the Great Seattle Fire was complete", tying the most important event of the beginning of the decade with the most important of the end.[26]

Three final sources deal exclusively with the Fire of 1889. In the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* article, "Meeting the Danger of Fire: Design and Construction in Seattle after 1889" (2002), Jeffrey Karl Ochsner and Dennis Alan Andersen detail the changes made to the city's

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[24] Jeannette Paddock Nichols, "Advertising and the Klondike," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1922), 20-26.
[25] Steve Pomper, *It Happened in Seattle: Remarkable Events That Shaped History* (Guilford: Globe Pequot, 2009).
[26] Ibid, 36.

core during its reconstruction. They attribute the fire as "one of the most important episodes in the emergence of the city as a significant American urban center."[27] They credit the fire's total destruction as an opportunity to correct deficiencies in the business core, including raising street grades, installing new water and sewer lines, straightening and widening streets, and rebuilding in brick and stone to reduce the danger of fire. It also motivated the city to replace the all-volunteer fire department with paid professional firefighters. While the new building codes did reduce the risk of fire, it was not until the 20th century that Seattle passed "regulations requiring a truly fireproof downtown."[28] They point out that the "first fully fireproof steel-framed high-rise commercial structure was the Alaska Building" which, perhaps without their knowledge, draws a connection to the Klondike Gold Rush.[29]

In the foreword to *The Day Seattle Burned* (1989), James R. Warren states, "The catastrophic fire…serves as a watershed in our history by separating the frontier town from the major seaport city we know today".[30] He continues, "after the fire, Seattle continued to outpace all rival cities on Puget Sound"[31] and writes that the fire had a positive promotional effect for the city. "The fire focused attention on Seattle as had no previous event." "The fire may eventually prove a sort of business blessing," much as was the case in Chicago.[32]

Jeffrey Karl Ochsner and Dennis Alan Andersen interpret the evolution of Seattle's architecture after the fire of 1889 in another publication, *Distant Corner: Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H.H. Richardson* (2003). They attribute the population explosion of the 1880s to

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[27] Ochsner and Andersen, 116.
[28] Ibid, 116.
[29] Ibid, 124.
[30] James R. Warren, *The Day Seattle Burned: June 6, 1889* (Seattle: J.R. Warren, 1989).
[31] Ibid, foreword.
[32] Ibid.

the introduction of the transcontinental railroad, but they credit the Seattle Fire with being the instigator of the many physical changes to the city. Their work led them to "the discovery of hidden linkages between Seattle in the late nineteenth century and in our own time, and the development of a deeper understanding of how the architecture and urban development of that period set a course for Seattle and left a legacy that continues to shape the city today."[33] They contend, "The urban core that emerged in Seattle after the fire was focused on commerce".[34] This focus on commerce would become the foundation of businesses that would allow Seattle to take full advantage of the gold rush.

Thus, while most historians acknowledge that the Seattle Fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold Rush were important events in Seattle's history none establishes a direct correlation between the two. I contend that without the improvements to Seattle's business core and infrastructure that followed the fire, the city would not have been in position to take full advantage of the Klondike Gold Rush.

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[33] Jeffrey Karl Ochsner and Dennis Alan Andersen, *Distant Corner: Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H.H. Richardson*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
[34] Ibid, 75.

Early History of Seattle

The first settlers to Seattle were members of the Arthur Denny party in the fall of 1851. They spent the winter at Alki Point, (today's West Seattle), before moving across Elliott Bay to establish a permanent settlement on the eastern shore of Puget Sound. David S. "Doc" Maynard and Henry Yesler arrived soon after Denny. Maynard suggested the name Seattle as a gesture of friendship and respect to Duwamish Indian Chief Sealth who had befriended the settlers.

Seattle's first industry was logging. Denny had chosen the sight because it provided a protected, deep-water port ideal for shipping, which, combined with abundant, and easily accessible old growth timber, provided a profitable resource for the newly formed community. Yesler began construction on the first steam-powered lumber mill in the Pacific Northwest and soon Seattle built a booming business out supplying timber for the shipbuilding and construction industries.

On July 14, 1873, Seattle lost the competition with Tacoma for the Northern Pacific Railroad terminus. The move slowed, but did not stall, the town's growth. Seattle was an aggressive community, eager to ascend to a prominent position of economics and notoriety in the region. With the tenacity known as the "Seattle Spirit", it fought to acquire a railroad connection and in 1893, the Great Northern Railway finally reached Seattle.

The decade following 1880 was a period of strong growth for Seattle as a leader in the timber industry, shipbuilding, and as a growing port for shipping manufactured goods. "A person who visited Seattle in 1880 and returned in 1893 would barely recognize the place."[35] The Pacific Northwest experienced a decade of growth rarely equaled by other areas of the United

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[35] Schwantes, 225.

States. Every city in the region was in a competition "to become the metropolis of the West" but

by 1890, the title belonged to Seattle, whose population had grown from just over 3500 residents

in 1880 to nearly 43,000 in 1890.[36]

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[36] Ibid, 234-235.

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The Seattle Fire of 1889

On the morning of Friday, June 7, 1889, Seattle residents awoke to the smoldering ruins of what was left of their city. The previous day the city had caught fire and the entire business district had burned to the ground. The circumstances attributed to the course of events leading to the fire were an ideal recipe for disaster.

Seattle was a timber town built primarily out of wood. The buildings were all wood framed; there were wooden sheds and woodpiles between many of the buildings; the street pavements were made out of wooden planks; and many of the streets and buildings were situated above ground-level on wooden pilings creating a perfect space for the fire to travel with incredible speed and ease. The city's water pipes, made from hollowed out logs, fed hydrants located on every other street corner. The water supply provided by the city's water main and hydrant system was sufficient for attacking a single

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[37] P-I Archives: Seattle Fire of 1889. June 7, 1889, Seattle Post Intelligencer, Seattle.

[38] Sources for this and all subsequent photographs are cited in the Image section of the bibliography.

structure fire, but was incapable of supporting the demands of a fire of large magnitude. The addition of each hose to the system lowered the water pressure significantly.[39]
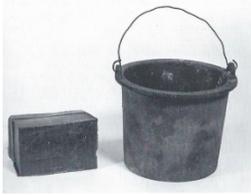
The spring of 1889 was uncommonly warm and dry and June 6 began as just another beautiful day. On the afternoon of June 6, 1889, at around 2:30 pm, a glue pot boiled over and started a fire in Victor Clairmont's cabinet shop located at the corner of First Avenue and Madison Street. Employee, John Back tried to extinguish the fire by throwing water on it, but that only caused the fire to spread across the woodchip and turpentine covered floor.

The blaze quickly spread to the paint shop above and the Great Seattle Fire had begun. Andrews writes "Had a professional arson ring planned to destroy Seattle on the afternoon of June 6, 1889, it would have chosen [the cabinet shop] as the perfect location to set the torch. Conditions were perfect–a long dry spell, the wind in the right direction, and the frame buildings lining the narrow [plank] streets were made to order for the rapid spread of a conflagration."[40]

By 2:45pm, members of Seattle's volunteer fire department had arrived, but the smoke was so heavy that they could not find the source of the blaze. They assumed that it was in the paint shop located above the woodworking shop, but by the time they located that source, the fire had grown out of control and quickly spread to the adjacent building, which housed the Dietz & Mayer Liquor Store. The combination of fire and alcohol created an explosion that next caught the Crystal Palace Saloon and the Opera House Saloon on fire. Soon the entire block was ablaze.

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[39] Ralph W. Andrews, "The Great Seattle Fire." In *Historic Fires of the West*, by Ralph W. Andrews, 105-123. Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1966.
[40] Ibid, 105-123.

An afternoon wind helped spread the fire to adjacent blocks reaching the Commercial Lumber Mill, the Colman Building, and the Opera House. "Twenty minutes after the glue pot tipped over, the entire block from Madison to Marion was aflame."[41] The fire was officially out of control.
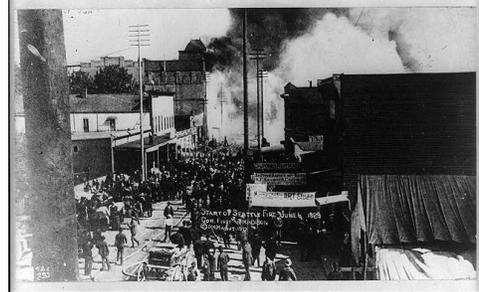
"Mayor Robert Moran took command from acting Fire Chief James Murphy who was reportedly 'distraught'. Moran ordered the Colman block to be blown up, in an attempt to end the fire, but the fire jumped past the block, and spread to the wharves as well as up the hill toward Second Avenue."[42] By 4:00 pm, less than two hours after the fire had begun, most of Seattle's citizens realized that the city was lost. The fire was moving up Third Avenue and the city's inadequate firefighting resources were spread too thin to retard its advance. Attempts to pump water from Elliott Bay proved futile because the tide was out and the hoses were not long enough to reach from water's edge to the burning structures. Making matters worse, crowds of onlookers harassed the all-volunteer fire crews for their lack of success in fighting the blaze. Tacomans could see the fire's smoke and its roar could be heard for miles.

City officials sent out urgent calls for assistance and help was promised from throughout the Pacific Northwest, from Portland to the south to Victoria, B.C. to the north. However, it came too late to join in the fight. Seattle businesses and families could only try to save what they could and watch their city burn. Businessmen loaded as many goods as they could onto ships

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[41] Morgan, Skid Road, 108.
[42] Andrews, 105-123.

before the wharves caught fire. "The Seattle Times was able to get most of their files and books aboard the schooner Teaser."[43]

By about ten o'clock that night, the fire was finally under control. Fire crews and citizens had fought furiously against the blaze, but only a lack of fuel ultimately stopped the fire's progress. In a seven-hour period, the fire had consumed Seattle's entire business district. Everything west of Second Avenue and south of University Street was reduced to ashes. From James Street southward, the fire had destroyed everything from Fourth Avenue to Elliot Bay. A total of "120 acres (25 city blocks) had been destroyed, as was every wharf and Mill from Union to Jackson Streets."[44] The once bustling timber town was no more.

Seattle suffered a great loss of property but sustained no human loss of life. The only lives lost in the blaze were those of the town's million or so rats, which can be regarded as a benefit. While no Seattleites lost their lives, thousands lost their homes and jobs. The city estimated municipal losses at over 8 million dollars, with personal losses pushing the total to nearly 20 million.

The next day, June 7th marked the beginning of a new period in Seattle's history. Mayor Robert Moran called a meeting of the city's businessmen to begin to plan the path forward for Seattle. The optimism and energy among those present that morning gave no indication they had just suffered the worst fire in Pacific Northwest history. Community leaders were eager begin to address the multitude of problems that followed the fire. Among the questions to discuss was whether to use money collected for the Johnstown Flood victims for Seattle's own needs. The

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[43] Ibid, 105-123.
[44] Ibid, 105-123.

answer was unanimous, "Send the money to Johnstown!"[45] Just a week before the fire, a dam

break on the Conemaugh River caused an enormous flood that destroyed the city of Johnstown,

Pennsylvania.[46] Relief efforts and donations came from around the world including thousands of

dollars from Seattle.[47] The collected agreement to help the people of Johnstown, even in the face

of their own adversity, is a testament to the character and mettle of the people of Seattle.

The solidarity of purpose at the meeting resulted in decisions that forged a path for a

brighter Seattle future. Agreements to improvements to the city's infrastructure, building codes,

and support services took effect immediately or in the near future. The city's business district

would begin to rebuild as soon as the area had cooled, but this time using brick or stone. Wooden

business structures would not be a part of Seattle's future. The city's businessmen agreed on a

number of improvements to the "New Seattle": A new water system including; a new fresh water

source and pipes to carry it; elevating the street level so that the city sewer system would no

longer be a two-way endeavor dependent on the tide; and streets significantly wider, both as a

safety measure and to provide for future growth. The city's new street grid, while not completely

redrawn, eliminated some of the more problematic areas. The *Seattle PI* had referred to Seattle

as a "Phoenix" rising from the ashes. Perhaps the city leaders took the reference a bit too

literally, as the new water and sewer lines required that the streets be raised as much as thirty feet

in places. Since construction began almost immediately after the fire, the new street levels would

often eliminate a building's first floor. In the beginning, the city resorted to using ladders to

provide access to the old and new street levels, which led to seventeen deaths from falling from

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[45] Andrews, 105-123.
[46] "Hundreds of Lives Lost," *New York Times*, Jun. 01, 1889.
[47] Andrews, 105-123.

the new street level or being crushed by falling wagons or freight.[48] Ironically, the only deaths in the fire were those of a million or more rats.

The fire department that had fought Seattle's biggest blaze was now a thing of the past. On October 17, 1889, a full-time, professional fire department replaced the all-volunteer unit and Gardener Kellogg became the Seattle Fire Department's Chief.[49] The most modern firefighting equipment of the time replaced the former fire department's antiquated equipment. The number of fire hydrants doubled, with one on every block. This signaled to residents and outsiders alike of Seattle's commitment to protecting the new city.

It is hard to imagine that such a destructive event could have such a positive outcome. It paved the way for Seattle to build a new city, with improved building standards and services. Boosters wrote, "The new Seattle will be a much better city than the old . . . It will have broad business thoroughfares, unexcelled dockage and wharfage facilities. The old city of pioneer days lies buried beneath 115 acres of ashes, but already out of this grave the young Phoenix is rising glorious in its beauty and endowed with strength and energy."[50]   It brought positive attention and firmly seated Seattle into people's minds. The energy and zeal with which Seattle businesses rebuilt appealed to investors around the country and infused the city with new capital for growth. "The rapidity with which the city rebuilt itself sent Seattle's fame over the country. Nothing like it had been witnessed on the American continent with the single exception of Chicago during the period immediately succeeding the great fire of 1871."[51] The construction demands of rebuilding a 25-block business district brought a wave of new citizens to the community and stimulated the

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[48] Andrew Ward, "Seattle," *American Heritage*, April 1994, 45 ed.: 70.
[49] Alan J. Stein, "Seattle Fire Department is created on October 17, 1889," *HistoryLink*, September 2, 2002, http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=2123 (accessed February 2, 2014).
[50] C.W. Austin and H. S. Scott, "There Is Nothing That Succeeds Like Success," in *The Great Seattle Fire* (Tacoma: Puget Sound Printing Company, 1889).
[51] Andrews, 105-123.

economy. As the city's population grew, so did its regional prominence. Seattle quickly passed Tacoma in population on its way to becoming the most populated city in the state. Soon it would pass Portland to become the largest city in the Pacific Northwest.

Sometime shortly after the Great Fire, British writer Rudyard Kipling came to Seattle. In *Sea to Sea and Other Sketches: Letters of Travel* he wrote, "Have I told you anything about Seattle, the town that was burned out a few weeks ago…? In the heart of the business quarters there was a horrible black smudge, as though a Hand had come down and rubbed the place smooth. I know now what being wiped out means."[52] Yet in a matter of eighteen months, Seattle no longer resembled a black smudge but rather a bright and shining beacon of commerce poised to take advantage of the future. On July 17, 1897, Seattle's "ship came in."
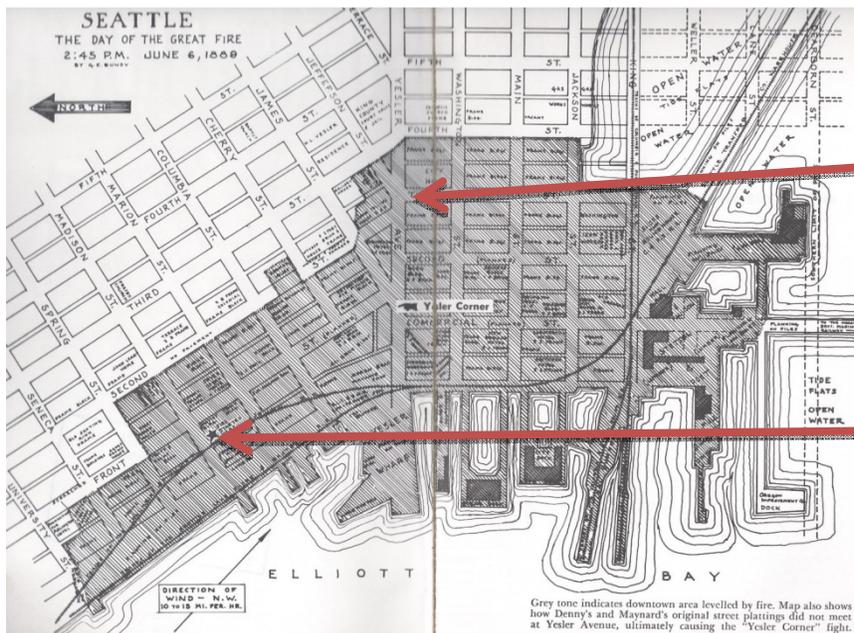
By 4:00 p.m., it has reached Third St.

The fire starts here at around 2:30 p.m.

Grey tone indicates downtown area levelled by fire. Map also shows how Denny's and Maynard's original street plattings did not meet at Yesler Avenue, ultimately causing the "Yesler Corner" fight.

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[52] Greg Lange, "Rudyard Kipling visits Seattle soon after the Great Fire of June 6, 1889," *HistoryLink*, http://www.historylink.org.

The Klondike Gold Rush

The year 1897 will be known in the history of Seattle as the year of the Klondike, for in that year the deep weight of depression which had been crushing the city down to the earth and her people into the deep slough of bankruptcy was suddenly removed by an influx of gold from the far North and of gold-seekers from all states and nations. In a single day Seattle burst the bonds of poverty and restricted trade which had held her a prisoner for four years, she leaped into vigorous liberty, straightened her bent back, flashed the fire of hope from her weary eyes and fixed the attention of the world by her proud position in the gateway of the road leading to the golden land of the North.[53]

On July 17, 1897, the steamship Portland docked at a Seattle pier and the city's future fortunes disembarked from that boat. The Portland carried prospectors with sacks of gold from the Klondike. *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ran the headline "GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!, Sixty-Eight Rich Men on the steamer Portland. STACKS OF YELLOW METAL!"[54] This marked the beginning of the Klondike Gold Rush.

The country had suffered through the grip of the Panic of 1893, the result of dwindling federal gold reserves and a stock market crash that left twenty percent of America's workforce unemployed. Four years of economic struggles left Americans eager to risk whatever they had for a chance at riches.[55] In the summer of 1897, "an ounce of gold was worth $16; average wages totaled approximately $14 for 78 hours of work."[56] For the city of Seattle, it was not a matter of

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[53] "The Klondike Year in Seattle Argus, Dec. 18, 1897." *Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest.*

[54] Mighetto and Montgomery, 13.

[55] Crowley, n.p.

[56] Katurah Mackay, "All That Glitters: The rush for gold in the Klondike helped finance the growth of Seattle as a major American city," *National Parks Magazine*, http://www.nps.gov/klse/home.htm (accessed Nov. 13, 2013).

risk but of opportunity. The new Seattle, rebuilt from the ashes of the Fire of 1889, positioned itself perfectly to take advantage of the Klondike craze. Within days of the Portland's arrival, would-be miners from across the country set out for the Klondike. Headlines in newspapers across the country created a stampede of Argonauts headed north and Seattle was the closest point of departure for Alaska.

Prospective miners rushed to board trains to any port on the Pacific coast that had steamships going to Alaska. The Southern Pacific Railroad serviced San Francisco; the Canadian Pacific ended at Vancouver and Victoria; the Oregon Washington Railway and Navigation Company went to Portland; The Great Northern, Seattle; and the Northern Pacific Seattle, Tacoma and Portland.[57] This created a heated competition between the cities to secure the majority of the stampede's business. The city that could lure the most Klondike traffic would elevate its status along the west coast and be able to put the economic doldrums behind it.

9064 - "Good-bye, Good Friends, Good-bye, We go to Do or Die,"
Steamer Rosalie leaving Seattle for the Klondyke.

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[57] Nichols, 21.

The arrival of the steamship Portland made the headlines of newspapers across the country and around the world, so people naturally looked to Seattle as a prime point of departure. Local stories of adventurers heading out for the Klondike made front-page news. Headlines like these prefaced sensational stories of Klondike Fever: "New Yorker Starts For Mines. Herman Lowe Passes Through Denver on the Way to Seattle."; "New York Is Feverish. Adventurers Getting Ready to Strike Out for the Klondike."[58] Seattle wanted to insure that the enthusiasm continued and pointed her way, and created a Bureau of Information as part of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce. A letter drafted on September 15, 1897, states, "The Chamber of Commerce has established a Bureau of Information, having for its object the advertising of Seattle as the starting and outfitting point for Alaska."[59] The key element of the bureau's creation was the appointment of Erastus Brainerd as secretary and executive officer. The Connecticut born Brainerd graduated from Harvard at 19. Upon graduation, he served as curator of engravings at the Boston Museum of Arts and worked as a tour promoter in Europe before becoming the news editor for the *Atlanta Constitution*. He later moved to Philadelphia and finally to Seattle in 1890 where he became the editor of *The Press-Times*. During the course of his employment and travels, Brainerd actively joined numerous civic, professional, and social clubs. He was regarded as being worldly, confident, and self-assertive.[60]

Brainerd saw the gold rush frenzy as an opportunity for Seattle to capitalize on the frenzy through an exhaustive and complex campaign of self-promotion with the singular goal of

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[58] "NEW YORKER STARTS FOR MINES," *New York Times*, Jul. 22, 1897.

[59] Erastus Brainerd, "Letter from E. Brainerd to Seattle businessmen," *HistoryLink*, September 15, 1897, http://www.historylink.org (accessed Oct. 24, 2013).

[60] Mighetto and Montgomery, 19-21.

establishing Seattle as "the only place to outfit for the Klondike."[61] In a meeting two weeks prior to the official creation of the Bureau of Information, Brainerd outlined a nine-point plan to promote Seattle and "counteract the efforts of other cities in the same direction."[62] The implementation of his plan began with a series of advertisements in major newspapers and magazines including the *New York Journal, Munsey, McClure's, Cosmopolitan, and Harper's Weekly.* The advertisements hailed Seattle as the "Queen City of the Pacific Northwest," "Look at your map! Seattle is a commercial city, and is to the Pacific Northwest as New York is to the Atlantic coast."[63] Other aspects of the campaign focused on the distribution of Seattle periodicals to public libraries and hotels, the preparation and supply of a map showing Seattle as the center of Alaskan trade to any newspapers that would run it, and the organization of a letter-writing campaign by Seattle's citizens to their hometown newspapers extolling the benefits of Seattle.[64] He convinced Seattle's *Post-Intelligencer* to print a special Klondike edition on October 13, 1897. The special issue promoted Seattle as a "city from 65,000 to 70,000 population, with big brick and stone business blocks and mercantile establishments that would be a credit to Chicago, New York, or Boston." It included a map of transcontinental railroad lines leading to Seattle, advice for prospectors on what they would need for the Klondike, how to buy a prospecting outfit, and the best routes to reach the gold fields, all
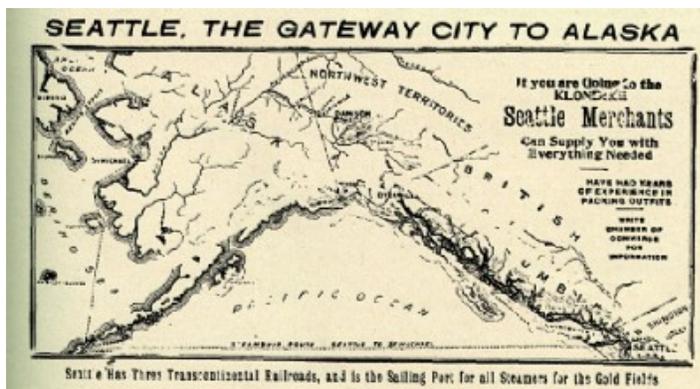
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[61] Ibid, 21.
[62] Erastus Brainerd, "Seattle Chamber of Commerce Report, September 7, 1897," *Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest*, Sept. 1897.
[63] Mighetto and Montgomery, 21.
[64] Erastus Brainerd, "Seattle Chamber of Commerce Report, September 7, 1897."

the while promoting Seattle as the "Gateway" to the Klondike.[65] The "Klondike Edition" of the

Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* went to every postmaster in the United States, every public library,

every mayor of a city, as well as thousands of copies to the Great Northern and Northern Pacific

railroads.[66]

Brainerd was tenacious in his promotion of Seattle during the gold rush, not only in the

orchestration of advertising but also through his personal connections throughout the country. He

used every resource at his disposal to secure Seattle's share of the estimated "100,000

stampeders, 70,000 of whom chose Seattle as their point of departure."[67] One of Brainerd's

innovative promotions was a gold display that traveled across the nation on the Great Northern

Railroad. The commissioned railcar displayed $6000 worth

of Klondike gold and promoted Seattle as the means to

pursue such riches.[68]

The economic impact of the Klondike Gold Rush

touched every facet of Seattle life. "Merchandise flew off the

shelves and out the doors of Seattle's shopkeepers, especially those specifically supplying the

fortune-seekers with mining equipment and provisions."[69] Local stores stocked so much

merchandise that it had to be stacked in front of the stores. Merchants sold clothing, tools, pans,

tents, sleds, food, and an almost endless variety of inventions that they professed essential to

success in the gold fields. Every seaworthy passenger boat became an "Alaskan" cruise ship and

local shipbuilders began construction on new steamboats. Lumber mills shipped building

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[65] Mighetto and Montgomery, 22.
[66] Nichols, 22-23.
[67] Mackay. n.p.
[68] Mighetto and Montgomery, 87.
[69] Pomper, 36.

materials to Alaska to construct new towns, boats, and docks. Seattle's hotels remained booked

beyond capacity with fortune seekers waiting for passage to Alaska. Local construction

businessmen worked steadily to build new housing, stores, hotels, and restaurants. The demands

placed on Seattle to meet the needs of the onslaught of travelers created thousands of new jobs

that increased the city's population base from 42,837 in 1890 to 80,871 in 1900.[70] Bank receipts

increased "from $36 million in 1897 to $68 million in 1898 to over $100 million in 1899."[71]

In order to effectively "mine the miners"[72], Seattle petitioned Washington, D.C. for an

assay office. The addition of a federal assay office meant that Seattle would retain much of the

profits of miners returning from the Klondike. Without an assay office, miners would have little

or no money to spend in Seattle upon their return from the gold fields and would have to leave

the area and take their gold with them. An official government assay office opened in Seattle by

the summer of 1898, which meant that more money stayed in the city.

Fortune begets fortune. Seattle's attraction to investors greatly increased during the gold

rush years. The Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads invested heavily in upgrading their

Seattle waterfront facilities. Trade with the Far East, the Philippines, and Hawaii grew in concert

with the expanded wharf, dock and train facilities. Major steamship companies establish offices

in Seattle to accommodate the increase in shipping demands.

The Klondike Gold Rush created a lasting connection between Seattle and Alaska. Seattle

claimed Alaska as its hinterland and a market for its commerce and production. The wealth

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[70] Schwantes, 192.

[71] Kathryn Morse, "The Klondike Gold Rush: Curriculum materials for Washington Schools," *Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest*, http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn.html (accessed Nov. 20, 2013).

[72] Ward, n. p.

created through the ongoing partnership provided Seattle with the means to continue to develop

and become a leading national city.[73]

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[73] Morse, n.p.

Conclusion

The Klondike Gold Rush mirrors Seattle's response to the Fire of 1889 in that they both demonstrate the community's ability to take advantage of the situation at hand in order to create a better present and prosper in the future. The lasting effects of these two events of happenstance have combined to create the city that Seattle is today.

The Seattle Fire of 1889, while initially devastating, created a city that could accommodate the incredible onslaught of people during the Klondike Gold Rush. Without the capital improvements made to the city that resulted from the fire, Seattle would not have been in a position to take as much advantage of the gold rush. The pre-fire city did not have the infrastructure capable of supporting the tens of thousands of miners that descended upon the city between 1897 and 1900. The new construction of the business core, new water supply and delivery system, widening of streets, and wharf improvements, all contributed to Seattle's ability to "mine the miners".

The Klondike Gold Rush infused the city with money that Seattle desperately needed to recover from the economic Panic of 1893. The promotional efforts used to attract miners during the gold rush also created interest for investors looking to capitalize on new Pacific Rim markets. Seattle became synonymous with Alaska and the Klondike, and the relationship forged during the period continues to this day. Two modern examples of Seattle's ongoing connection to Alaska are Seattle's Alaska Airlines and the University of Washington "Huskies". A third example, the Alaska Building in downtown Seattle, links the Fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold Rush in that it was the first completely fireproof building in the city.

Every city's growth is built on a collection of events that shape its future course and Seattle is no different. The Seattle of today is the product of countless events and decisions that contributed to its complexion, but the Fire of 1889 and the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 were two events that could not be anticipated where the "Seattle Spirit" squeezed every bit of good fortune possible from the circumstances at hand.

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