

# SELF-GUIDED WALKING TOURS



## Columbia City Historical Walking Tour



### Introduction:

Columbia City still has something of the look and feel of the self-contained mill town that it was in 1907, when it was annexed to Seattle. Designated a Landmark District in 1978, the pedestrian-friendly

neighborhood includes more than 40 historic commercial and residential buildings. At the center is a “village green” with a stately Andrew Carnegie library. Several of the older buildings have been renovated recently, and once boarded up storefronts have been turned into restaurants, an art gallery, offices, and other businesses. Located seven miles southeast of downtown Seattle, the Landmark District is bounded by Alaska and Dawson Streets (to the north and south) and 39th and 35th avenues S (east and west).



*Note: This tour is intended for personal use only and was prepared by HistoryLink for the City of Seattle Office of Economic Development, Tourism Division. Copyright 2001, City of Seattle. All references to contemporary businesses in this tour date from May 2001. They are cited for orientation and information purposes only and do not imply recommendation or endorsement by the City of Seattle or HistoryLink.*

To learn more about Columbia City's history, visit [www.historylink.org](http://www.historylink.org).



**2. Rainier Valley Cultural Center, 36th Avenue South and South Alaska Street:** Originally the Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist, this neo-Palladian building lends classical formality to the north end of Columbia City’s “village green.” Completed in 1921 and now used as the Rainier Valley Cultural Center, the building’s front entrance has been moved to the side (facing Alaska Street), but its exterior is otherwise virtually unchanged.

**3. Columbia Branch, Seattle Public Library, 4721 Rainier Avenue South:** Columbia City residents included a library in their first public building, a Town Hall built by private subscription in 1891. The Andrew Carnegie Foundation donated \$35,000 to build and furnish this Colonial Revival library, completed in 1915. Designed by architects W. Marbury Somervell and Harlan P. Thomas, the library is now surrounded by gently sloping lawns and clusters of huge maple trees.

**4. Columbia School, 3528 South Ferdinand Street:** The first school in Columbia City was a two-story frame structure with a bell tower, built in 1892. Classes were held on the first floor while the second story was being finished. The school was replaced in 1923 by a one-story stucco building designed by F. A. Naramore in a Spanish Revival style. The old school bell (model No. 22, apparently ordered from the Sears, Roebuck and Company, cost \$9) now sits in the Rainier Valley Historical Society’s offices in the Rainier Valley Cultural Center. The building is now an alternative elementary school named Orca by its students.

**5. Bob’s Quality Meats, 4861 Rainier:** A butcher shop has been a fixture in the 4800 block of Rainier Avenue S since Columbia City’s earliest days. The shop is now operated by Bob Ackley, his son Jim, and grandson Abe.

**1. Columbia Park:** Columbia City’s “village green” was originally part of a 40-foot ravine carved by a creek that emptied into Wetmore Slough (now the Genesee Playfield). A huge log bridged the ravine at its southern end. In 1911, the Seattle Park Department cleared away the underbrush, opened up the paths, and cleared out the brook for spawning salmon. In the 1920s, the creek was diverted into a sewer line and the ravine was filled and parts were used as a garbage dump. For many years, especially on warm Sundays, sermons at nearby Columbia Baptist Church were punctuated by the unholy smell of rotting refuse.

Today, the ravine is a broad expanse of lawn bracketed by a public library to the east and a row of frame houses, dating from 1902 to 1933, on the west.



**6. Birthplace of Columbia City:** Rainier Avenue S and S Ferdinand Street: On April 4, 1891, promoter J. K. Edminston and his partners pitched a tent at this intersection and started selling lots in the newly-platted town of Columbia. Lots measuring 30 feet by 110 feet could be had for \$300, with \$10 dollars down and \$1 per week. By 1898, the town had been renamed Columbia City, and promoters invited people to “Watch Columbia Grow.” Its amenities included a Fraternity Hall



and an ornate Knights of Pythias Hall, (only its first floor survives, although thoroughly remodeled).

**7. Columbia Police Station, 4923 Rainier Avenue S:** The multi-purpose Columbia Town Hall, built in 1891-92, included a Fire Department, Police Station, jail, library, and school. The Town Hall was replaced in 1926 by the Columbia Police Station (now the Southwest Youth and Family Services Center), a reinforced concrete structure with brick trim. Its gable roof makes it unique among buildings in the Landmark District.

**8. Salumeria on Hudson, 4918 Rainier:**

Columbia City prospered during the 1920s and became the business hub for the Rainier Valley. False-fronted wooden buildings such as the Electric Bakery and Rainier Valley Dairy were replaced in the 1930s, and Salumeria, an Italian delicatessen, now occupies the site.

**9. Columbia City Gallery, 4916 Rainier Avenue S:** The Columbia City Gallery occupies the front of the former Columbia Theater, opened in 1923. In order to meet zoning requirements that stipulated

that theaters (along with other morally suspect enterprises) be located a safe distance from schools, the theater’s auditorium was built across the backs of the adjacent buildings. Patrons passed through Carroll’s Sweet Shop to get to the movie screen in the back. The Columbia City Gallery occupies the storefront now, and the theater’s auditorium is in use as a recording studio. The Columbia City Ale House has replaced the 1930s-era Columbia Café.

**10. Columbia Hotel, 4900 Rainier Avenue S:** Built as a private home for the family of Joseph Hellenthal in 1891, this was the first brick building in Columbia City. It was enlarged and converted into the Columbia Hotel in 1904. The hotel was popular for its Sunday dinners, and the pork on the menu came from pigs kept in the back yard. Sometime around 1910, a full third floor was added and stucco was placed over the brick facing, giving the building the look it has today. The building is now shaded by trees planted in the late 1970s. Lottie Mott’s coffee shop occupies the storefront.

**11. Toby Block, 4850 Rainier Avenue S:** S. T. Toby erected a building on this site in 1903 and then replaced it in 1907 with the two-story building shown in our historic photograph. Cameron’s Drug Store moved into the storefront, which had earlier housed the Rainier Valley State Bank. A third story was added in 1913.



The straightforward brick exterior is enhanced by a prominent bay on the corner and regimented arches over the windows. The Technology Access Foundation occupies the storefront now. The upper floors have been remodeled to provide transitional housing.

**12. 4820 Rainier Avenue S:** This two-story apartment building, constructed in 1927 of brick with terra cotta details, has housed a number of different businesses in its storefront. Today, it’s home to a Starbucks coffee shop.



**13. Ark Lodge 126, 4812-16 Rainier Avenue S:** The exterior of the Ark Masonic Temple Lodge is much the same as it was when it was built in 1921. One of the most formal buildings in the Columbia City Landmark District, the two-story building is finished with white stucco. The top looks a little like a birthday cake, with monumental pilasters below an entablature and parapet. Members of the lodge met on the second floor. The Freeman Heater Glove Company (which manufactured aviator hats and assorted clothing in addition to gloves) once occupied the bottom floor, which now houses the Victorious Life Christian Center.

**14. Columbia Funeral Home, 4567 Rainier Avenue S:** Although just outside the boundaries of the Landmark District, the Columbia Funeral Home is an important part of Columbia City’s historical neighborhood. Built in 1906 for the Lassen family, it was enlarged in 1907 and converted to a funeral home in 1917. Leo Lassen, announcer for the Seattle Rainiers minor league baseball team, grew up in this house. Since the 1950s, the Columbia Funeral Home has been locally famous for the elaborate crèche display in its front yard during the Christmas season.

