

# GROWTH OF THE HERITAGE COMMUNITY

*Historical Paper No. 11*

---



Heritage 4Culture Publications Program, 101 Prefontaine Place S, Seattle, WA  
98104-2672, (206) 296-8688, 1-800-325-6165, TTY Relay: 711, [www.4culture.org](http://www.4culture.org)

## Introduction

This paper is an overview of some of the significant trends, events and other factors that have shaped the growth of the heritage community of King County. The first heritage organization formed here was the King County Pioneer Association, which was organized in 1871, just two years after the incorporation of the City of Seattle. Other early groups were: the Washington State University Historical Society, established around the turn of the century at the University of Washington; and the Seattle Historical Society which was incorporated in 1914 and opened the Museum of History and Industry in 1951. Although heritage organizations have existed here for well over a century, the greatest development within the heritage community has occurred in the past 30 years.

The post World War II growth of population, the new mobility associated with the ownership of automobiles, the increase in disposable income, the real (or perceived) growth of leisure time, the "hegira" of urban populations to suburbs and formerly rural areas, the negative effects of freeway and highway construction on the urban core of cities (either bypassing them or plowing through them) and many other economic and social factors (and the reactions to them) played a role in the regional and national "*search for community*." These trends and factors roughly parallel the enormous growth in the numbers of non-profit organizations of all types in the region and throughout the country. The rapid proliferation of heritage organizations in the last few decades around King County is substantially related to these trends.

## The Heritage Community of King County

Today there are close to 200 historical organizations, agencies and museums operating in King County. The Association of King County Historical Organizations, the county's most active constituency and networking group, represents about 70 groups with memberships of over 40,000 persons. 4Culture and its predecessor agencies have developed a regional public history program that includes the following major elements: competitive heritage granting programs, heritage technical assistance and historic preservation services. They have played a significant role in the heritage community over the years. One of the primary characteristics of the heritage community here is that many communities retain a strong, personal linkage to their history. The past is not so remote in time that the connection to it has become abstract. Ties to community pioneers, families, elders and living traditions are still very much in evidence. This makes for degree of urgency and a dynamic quality in community history activities, especially in relation to resources that are threatened by population growth and rapid developmental pressures or that are otherwise in danger of being lost forever.

Not all of the initial attempts at forming heritage organizations were successful, especially in the years before funding opportunities were available to them. In a number of areas, historical societies in neighborhoods and communities dissolved or faded away, some more than once, but

in most instances, the impulse to collect, preserve and interpret history has a tendency to re-emerge in the form of a new organization, because virtually every community has elders, heritage resources, stories and values, as well as the need to transmit culture to succeeding generations.

### Significant Trends, Events & Factors

Among the significant and specific factors affecting the growth of the heritage community are the following:

#### *NATIONAL FUNDING PROGRAMS*

The passage of the National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 has had a significant impact on cultural activities around King County. The National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and Humanities (NEH) grant programs are of primarily of significance for having assisted larger, urban institutions and statewide granting agencies to develop their regional resource bases and service capacities. In addition, the Museum Services Act of 1976, which created an independent agency, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), at the Smithsonian Institution, has provided funds for the operation, collection conservation and assessment of historical and other museums. As with other federal funding programs, the IMLS grants have been limited almost exclusively to larger urban institutions, but technical assistance, training and organizational assessment services have served a somewhat broader spectrum of heritage groups. The National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) has played a major role in the region by assisting in the development of county and municipal archival programs as well as by funding major institutional and tribal records preservation projects.

#### *HISTORIC PRESERVATION LEGISLATION*

The adoption of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 has had an enormous impact on the field of public history at the "grass roots" level, triggering broad based public involvement in preservation and heritage matters. Among the significant results were that:

- State, county and municipal governments adopted laws and policies relating to historic preservation. Many citizen boards were established by local governments, and governments became more involved in stewardship of heritage resources in their communities and under their own control
- A new community cultural conservation ethic of "*preservation in place*" made historic preservation a matter of environmental concern for communities throughout the country.
- In order to accomplish preservation goals, many new organizations had to be formed. Citizens and communities throughout the region discovered that "*preservation requires organization*"--that only an organized effort, active constituency and teamwork gets the big jobs done.

#### *AMERICAN REVOLUTION BICENTENNIAL*

The American Revolution Bicentennial of 1976 had a quantum effect on the growth of the heritage community. Although relatively little funding was available to support projects at the state or county level, citizens and communities around the state and county organized committees to accomplish local projects, many of which have had a lasting impact. The event encouraged and mobilized widespread citizen activism in heritage projects, and resulted in a

permanent increase in public involvement in heritage activities of all types. Among the significant results of this celebration were that:

- Committees were organized around the county in many municipalities, even in some unincorporated areas. Many projects were undertaken and accomplished. The window of visibility and public interest helped to launch many more community projects that were to come to fruition in subsequent years. The event resulted in a great and lasting increase in citizen activism and volunteering.
- King County government expanded its Arts Commission to accommodate persons with heritage expertise and to make heritage grants and plan for new programs. An Historical Committee was formed within the Commission, and it worked to launch a new Office of Historic Preservation, historic sites inventory, landmark ordinance and commission, granting programs, and technical assistance services.
- Among the projects with long-term impact were: the publication of many books and tour guides; the placement of interpretive markers; and the establishment of new museums and organizations.

### *SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*

Several social movements of the past few decades have had an enormous impact on the growth of interest in the heritage community:

- The "Roots" phenomenon, resulting from the publication and televised screenplay of the famous novel by Alex Haley focused national attention on ethnic heritage.
- Ethnic and Native American communities have developed their own museums, programs and organizations to preserve and interpret their traditional and material culture. Ethnic studies programs have been established across the educational spectrum.
- The Women's Movement has enriched the preservation and interpretation of community history and continues to have a major impact on public education.

### *TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS*

Among the technological innovations that have accelerated popular involvement in heritage activities are:

- The use of the personal computers and their application to word processing, data management, desktop publishing and the Internet. The Internet prides unprecedented opportunities for enhancing accessibility to documents and images.
- The development of personally accessible oral and video recording technologies has provided an affordable means of documenting and interpreting historical resources.
- Television and cable communication technologies have enabled the development of distance learning and broad dissemination of visual imagery.

### *PROFESSIONAL & NETWORKING GROUPS*

The formation of national, state and local professional and networking groups and their outreach and technical support activities have also been a major factor in the growth of the heritage community. Among the major groups supporting the development of heritage activities have been:

- National groups such as: American Association of Museums; American Association for State and Local History; Oral History Association; Society of American Archivists; American

Historical Association; and Association for Preservation Technology have provided invaluable technical and support benefits to the field.

- State and regional groups, including: Washington Trust for Historic Preservation; Washington Museum Association; Pacific Northwest Historian's Guild, the Northwest Oral History Association and others have played important roles in professional networking, technical assistance and constituency building.
- The Association of King County Historical Organizations has provided essential support for public archival, preservation and granting programs.

### *WASHINGTON STATEHOOD CENTENNIAL OF 1989*

The celebration of this event provided another major impetus for community involvement around the state and around King County. A State Centennial Commission was formed, and each of the state's 39 counties and many of its municipalities also formed commissions or committees. The Legislature appropriated over \$12 million for this event, and many county and local jurisdictions also contributed funds. Among the major impact were:

- The investment of public funds at state and local levels in many heritage projects
- The establishment of a statewide technical assistance program, newsletter and annual conference and workshop cycle
- Articulation of a common legislative agenda for the statewide heritage community
- Stimulation of nearly 800 separate projects in King County alone

### *COMMUNITY ANNIVERSARIES*

King County is about 2,200 square miles in land area with over 1.8 million in population. Seattle was established as the county seat in 1853. There are a total of 39 municipalities in King County. Aside from the City of Seattle, which incorporated in 1869, virtually all of the municipalities were incorporated in three "waves" or time periods which corresponded with major growth spurts in population: 1890s to 1910s; 1947 to 1961; and 1989 to present. The celebration of the centennials, diamond jubilees and the other anniversaries of these communities have resulted in:

- New public-partnerships for the support of heritage museums and organizations
- Municipal support for historic preservation activities, publications, events, markers, murals, and other interpretive projects
- New visibility for heritage activities and fresh opportunities for public involvement in them.

|   |
|---|
| <p>This information is available upon request in alternative formats for persons with disabilities. TTY Relay: 711.</p> |
|---|