The Central District or Central Area has historically been the heart of Seattle’s African American community. The community is a combination of historical and contemporary neighborhoods on First Hill and in Southeast Seattle, enriching Seattle’s ethnic heritage. Two distinct African American neighborhoods developed in Seattle, in the East Madison area and the Yesler–Jackson area, finally approved. Seattle City Council, and in 1968 an open housing ordinance was finally approved.

In the 1960s, the Central District Forum was established in 1894. East of downtown, the neighborhood encompasses the Madison Valley east of downtown. Several small commercial districts developed in the late 19th century along streetcar routes, and many historic landmarks from that era tell the stories of African American community history.

Black community. For more about the Central District, visit:

Seattle Black Arts Alliance

africatownseattle.com

SPECIAL EVENTS

SEATTLE'S CENTRAL DISTRICT

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

SEATTLE CULTURAL HERITAGE GUIDES are a resource for visitors who want to explore the city's rich cultural heritage. Learn about museums, historic sites, public art and neighborhoods that will give you an insider’s view of Seattle’s vibrant ethnic communities and unique history.

The guides are produced by the Cultural Tourism program of Visit Seattle, and supported by funding from 4Culture (King County Lodging Tax) and the Office of Arts and Culture.

Learn more about Seattle and access expert travel advice at visitseattle.org. Or stop by one of our Visitor Information Centers at 1st & Pike in downtown Seattle or the main floor of the Washington State Convention Center at 7th & Pike.

Our sincere thanks to all the community members who helped contribute to this project and who preserve and protect Seattle’s cultural legacies.

VISTA SEATTLE

visitseattle.org/culturalheritage

Visitors can explore the city's rich cultural heritage by visiting museums, historic sites, and public art installations. The guides provide detailed information about the city's African American heritage, including the development of African American neighborhoods, the role of the Central District Forum, and the contributions of African American artists and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

African American heritage in Washington goes back to the territorial era, with the arrival in 1845 of Black pioneers who settled in both rural and urban areas. Seattle's earliest African American resident was Manuel Lopes, who came originally from Cape Verde and worked in the Atlantic whaling trade before arriving in Seattle in 1852. Entrepreneur William Grose came to Seattle in 1861, establishing a hotel near the waterfront and later buying a large ranch property above the Madison Valley east of downtown.

"World War II brought a tremendous increase in the region's African American population, as workers seeking well-paying jobs in defense industries migrated to the region. Seattle's jazz music scene flourished in clubs located on Jackson Street. Yealer Terrace became the first racially integrated public housing in the nation in 1940, and the following decades brought many "firsts" for Black workers in industry, medicine, education and other fields. In 1967, Sam Smith became the first African American to serve on the Seattle City Council, and in 1968 an open housing ordinance was finally approved.

In recent years, immigrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and several West African nations have established vibrant neighborhoods on First Hill and in Southeast Seattle, enriching existing communities and adding new cultural traditions to Seattle's ethnic heritage.

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In the 1880s and 1890s, African Americans from the South were recruited to work in the coal mines of the Pacific Northwest. Although discrimination limited access to many industries and professions, the region offered opportunities for land ownership and economic improvement.

Two distinct African American neighborhoods developed in Seattle, in the East Madison area and the Yesler-Jackson area, and these eventually grew together to form the Central District or Central Area, as it is known today. Churches, fraternal organizations and social clubs established a century ago continue to serve the community.
INTRODUCTION

African American population, as workers seeking well-paying jobs in defense industries migrated to the region. Seattle's jazz music scene flourished in clubs located on Jackson Street. Yesler Terrace, Seattle's earliest African American resident was Manuel Lopes, settled in both rural and urban areas.

Several small commercial districts developed in the late 19th century along streetcar routes, and many historic landmarks from that era tell the stories of African American community history. The oldest Black church in Seattle, the First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, was established in 1886, and other neighborhood landmarks include cultural institutions linked to African American heritage. The Pratt Fine Arts Center at 1902 S Main Street, and the adjacent Edwin T. Pratt Park are named in honor of the slain civil rights leader. The Douglass – Truth Library at 2300 E Yesler Way, honoring abolition leaders Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, holds a significant collection of African American literature, history and public art. Several private homes of Seattle's African American pioneers and community leaders, fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons, and many of the Heritage Sites featured in this guide, are located in the Central Area.

Although the region's African American population is no longer confined to the Central Area by discriminatory housing policies, the neighborhood retains a strong connection to Black history and culture, and remnants of its heyday can be found in the stories told in restaurants, salons and other establishments catering to the Black community.

For more about the Central District, visit seattle.gov/arts/arts-and-cultural-districts and africatownseattle.com

SPECIAL EVENTS

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

3rd Monday in January, Multiple venues

Seattle has one of the largest annual celebrations in the nation, with workshops, a rally and march. Events honor Dr. King for his work toward racial equality and toward economic justice for all people, his commitment to nonviolence, and his stand against war and militarism. milwaukee.org and kingcounty.gov/mlk

BLACK HISTORY MONTH EVENTS

February, Multiple venues

Numerous events at the Northwest African American Museum, EMP, MOHAI, the University of Washington, and elsewhere celebrate Black History Month with art exhibits, dance performances, and historical displays.

LANGSTON HUGHES AFRICAN AMERICAN FILM FESTIVAL

April, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, 104 – 17th Avenue S

This annual event showcases films from independent Black filmmakers and works about the African American experience. The festival also features panel discussions, screenplay readings, and screenings for youth. The festival committee presents other programming during the year. langstoninstitute.org

JUNETEENTH FREEDOM FESTIVAL & PARADE

June, Edwin T. Pratt Park, 1001 E Main Street

This annual festival commemorates the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, marking the end of slavery in America. Enforcement of the proclamation freed Texas slaves on June 19, 1865, and the date was celebrated as Juneteenth or Freedom Day. seacc2108.org

FESTIVAL SUNDIATA PRESENTS BLACK ARTS FEST

June, Seattle Center

Named in honor of a legendary African king, Festival Sundiata presents African and African American cultural traditions including drumming and dance, music, visual art, children's activities and a marketplace for imports and crafts. festivalcondia.org

UMOJA FEST AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE FESTIVAL

August, Judkins Park, 2150 S Norman Street

Seattle's annual African American festival celebrates and empowers with a parade, live music, cultural performances, family activities, basketball tournament, car show and vendors. umojaafestlyfe.com

EARSHOT JAZZ FESTIVAL

October and November, Multiple venues

Seattle's major annual jazz event brings international jazz giants to town each fall, and presents Seattle's finest musicians in a festival setting. Schedule includes performances, workshops, films, exhibitions and educational programs. earshot.org

THE HANSBERRY PROJECT

Multiple venues

In partnership with several local theaters including Intiman Theatre and Langston Hughes, the Hansberry Project is a professional Black theatre company dedicated to the artistic exploration of African American life, history and culture. hansberryproject.org
AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE SITES

A. NORTHWEST AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM
1200 5th Avenue S
This African American Museum is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of African American heritage and culture. "Black History: A Celebration of African American Art" is displayed in the Allen Theatre. acttheatre.org

B. JIMI HENDRIX PARK
OPENING 2017
2400 5th Avenue S
Adjacent to the Northwest African American Museum is the newly-opened Jimi Hendrix Park, a community gathering place honoring this Seattle-born artist's life and musical legacy.
jimhendrixfoundation.org

C. KING COUNTY COURTHOUSE
5th Third Avenue, 206 296 0015
In 1986, the King County Council voted to change the name of King County to commemorate the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the historic King County Courthouse lobby, artist Linda Beaumont created a terrazzo and marble floor design titled Truth Crushed To The Earth Will Rise Again which celebrates the 1963 March on Washington.
4culture.org/publicart

D. SEATTLE ART MUSEUM
1300 First Avenue, 206 654 3000
The Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Gallery honors the legacy of these two renowned African American artists, and features contemporary artists of color. One of the great figurative painters of the 20th century, Lawrence completed many of his later works such as the “Builder’s Series” while living and teaching in Seattle. SAM also has an outstanding African art collection curated by Pam McClusky.
seattleartmuseum.org

E. EMP MUSEUM
521 Fifth Avenue N at Seattle Center, 206 770 2700
Exhibits and oral histories highlight African Americans and their contributions to music, pop culture and science fiction, from Jim Hendrix to Octavia Butler. empmuseum.org

F. AUGUST WILSON WAY
Seattle Center at Warren Avenue
A pedestrian walkway and an installation adjacent to the Seattle Repertory Theatre honors playwright August Wilson, whose unparalleled vision of African American life is presented in his ten-play Century Cycle. Several of these plays were written while Wilson resided in Seattle during the last decade of his life, when he worked closely with the Seattle Repertory Theatre.
seattlerep.org

G. FORT LAWTON HISTORIC DISTRICT
Discovery Park, 5643 Discovery Park Blvd, 206 386 4236
This former army base served as a point of embarkation during World War II, but its connection to African American heritage goes back to the early 20th century. The base was home to the 25th Infantry Regiment, one of four all-black regiments in the U.S. military, known as “Buffalo Soldiers,” a name conferred to the troops by Native Americans in the Great Plains.
seattle.gov/filmandmusic/music

H. MUSEUM OF HISTORY & INDUSTRY (MOHAI)
Lake Union Park, 900 Terry Avenue N, 206 324 1226
MOHAI's permanent exhibits feature African American stories and experiences from throughout the city's 150-year history, including profiles of Black pioneers, artists and defense workers. The Black Heritage Society of Washington State's collection of photographs and archival materials are housed in MOHAI's Bureau Center, and can be viewed by appointment.
mohai.org | bhswa.org

I. JIMI HENDRIX STATUE
Broadway Avenue E and E Pine Street
A life-size bronze sculpture called “The Electric Lady Studio Guitar” by artist Daryl Smith depicts Jimi Hendrix playing a Stratocaster.

J. JAMES & JANIE WASHINGTON CULTURAL CENTER
13th – 26th Avenue, 206 709 4230
Renowned sculptor and painter James W. Washington Jr. came to the Seattle area in the 1940s and became a teaching artist at the Northwest School of visual artists. The Center celebrates Washington's lifetime works, preserves his studio, home and garden, and provides artists residency programs. Tours are available by appointment. Washington’s public art can also be viewed at several locations in Seattle.
seattleartmuseum.org

K. WASHINGTON HALL
515 – 4th Avenue, 206 622 4992
This historic venue and public dance hall hosted artists such as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. Built by the Danish Brotherhood and long owned by the Sons of Haiti, Washington Hall was restored by Historic Seattle, and it again serves as an event space and a home for cultural groups including 256 Zulu, Hidmo, and Voices Rising. Across the street the Square P-Patch's terrazzo floor displays about neighborhood music history.
washingtonhall.org

L. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MEMORIAL AND PARK
2200 Martin Luther King Jr. Way
Sculptor Robert Kelly created the park’s black granite monument, which was inspired by King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech given in Memphis the day before he was assassinated in 1968.
seattle.gov/MLKmemorial

M. LANGSTON HUGHES PERFORMING ARTS INSTITUTE
104 – 7th Avenue S, 206 684 4737
Named in honor of an acclaimed poet of the Harlem Renaissance, this former synagogue serves as a cultural performing arts center, offering classes, and hosting a variety of community arts events including dance, music, theater and film productions such as the African American Film Festival.
langstoninstitute.org

N. JACKSON STREET
1st Avenue to 23rd Avenue
Seattle’s jazz scene thrived from the 1920s to the 1970s at clubs such as the Black & Tan and the Blue Note, where members of Local 493, the Negro Musicians’ Union, played to packed houses. Ray Charles, Ernestine Anderson and Quincy Jones got their start in Seattle’s music scene, along with many distinguished local musicians. A sign at 12th Avenue and S Jackson Street, today the center of the Little Saigon neighborhood, commemorates Seattle’s jazz history and, Jackson Street from 20th to 23rd is now known as Ernestine Anderson Way. The Jackson Street Jazz Walk brings live music back to a variety of venues.
seattlejazzscene.org

Venues such as Talia’s, the RoyalRoom and Diminuendo’s Jazz Alley carry on the tradition of those early clubs. More at seattlejazzscene.org

Find an insider’s guide to Seattle music history at seattle.gov/kintram/music

O. COLUMBIA CITY LANDMARK DISTRICT
Lake Washington Boulevard East between S Alaska Street and SShadle Street
Columbus City Hall was established in the 1920s on the Rainier Avenue streetcar line. World War II-era housing developments increased the neighborhood’s ethnically diverse, and African American entrepreneurs played key roles in Columbus City’s revitalization as a landmark district. A seasonal farmer’s market and the first Friday BawWak, with restaurants, galleries, and cultural organizations all contribute to the area’s vitality.
columbiacityseattle.com

P. THE MUSEUM OF FLIGHT
9400 East Marginal Street S
Long-term exhibit The Boeing Story includes experiences of African American men and women defense workers in Seattle during the World War II era, and pilots involved in the war effort.
museumofflight.org

FURTHER AFIELD

JIMI HENDRIX MEMORIAL
Greenwood Memorial Park
935 N 90th Street, Renton 425 255 3133
Musician Jimi Hendrix grew up in Seattle’s Central Area, achieving international fame in the 1960s. Following his untimely death, his family created a memorial that has been visited by millions of fans from around the world. Located approximately 40 minutes southeast of Seattle.
jimihendrixmuseum.org

PUGET SOUND NAVY MUSEUM
254 First Street, Bremerton 479 4794
An hour west of Seattle by ferry, Bremerton is home to the Puget Sound Navy Museum and the adjacent Naval Shipyard, the region’s largest ship repair facility. During World War I and II, thousands of people came from all over the country to work in the shipyards, including many African American men and women, and many Black officers and sailors were stationed at nearby naval facilities.
pugetsoundnavymuseum.org

ROSALYN HISTORIC DISTRICT
First Street & Pennsylvania Avenue
This mining town 1.5 hours east of Seattle played an pivotal role in the region’s ethnic history in 1891, when more than one hundred African American miners left the southern U.S. and traveled to Roslyn, where they had unsuccessfully been recruited to work as strike breakers for the Northern Pacific Coal Company. Some of the Black miners left quickly for other destinations, but many stayed with their families and established strong connections in the community, and Roslyn was the first town in Washington State to elect a Black mayor. Well-preserved commercial and residential districts are walkable, and the Mount Olivia African American cemetery is part of an impressive complex of historic cemeteries.
roslynwa.uscovery

DID YOU KNOW?
The Seattle Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1913, and is one of the oldest chapters west of the Mississippi.
seattlenorthcy.org

The NEGRO REPORTEY COMPANY was established in the 1930s as the African American unit of Seattle’s Federal Theatre Project, and was based at the Playhouse Theatre in the University District.

The THELMA DEWITTY THEATER at the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center in West Seattle’s Delridge neighborhood is named for the first African American teacher in the Seattle School District, who began teaching in 1947.
youngstownarts.org

In 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made his only visit to Seattle, speaking to an overflow crowd at the national headquarters of the National Order of Eagles, now home to the A CONTTEMPORARY THEATRE (ACT). A bronze bust of Dr. King by sculptor Jeff Day commemorates King’s visit and is displayed at the ACT Theatre.
acttheatre.org

Several city parks are named for prominent African Americans:

• HOME RICK HARRIS PARK at 2401 E Howell Street is named for a renowned poet, playwright and physician.

• FLO WARE PARK at 28th Avenue S and S Jackson Street is named for a Central Area activist dedicated to social change.

• POLLY BARNETT PARK at 352 Martin Luther King Jr Way honors a pioneering coal miner and community leader.

• SAM SMITH PARK at 1400 Martin Luther King Jr. Way honors the first African American elected to the Seattle City Council.

To learn more, visit: seattle.gov/parks/history/BlackHistory.htm

Photo courtesy of the James & Janie Washington Foundation

Photo: Museum of Flight