

Underneath the Surface: The Great Seattle Fire of 1889

By Julie Artz



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Recently, my daughter and I took the Underground Tour in Seattle as part of our plan to explore our new home. The tour provides a fabulous glimpse into Seattle's history and is worth a trip. Having already visited Rosario Resort's Moran Museum we knew about the devastation brought by the Great Seattle Fire of 1889. What we didn't know is what happened afterward.

Some describe the fire, which started when a glue pot caught fire in a local cabinet shop on a hot dry day, as the best thing that ever happened to Seattle. No one was killed in the fire (except, perhaps, a few thousand rats) and it allowed the fledgling city to redesign its city center in a way that would last. And they succeeded, since the area rebuilt after the fire is known over one hundred years later as Pioneer Square.

Because the original city of Seattle was built on tidal flats (muddy shoreline created by the Puget Sound's tides), the downtown area often flooded and the primitive sewer system, which relied on gravity to flush waste out into the Sound, often backed up when seawater rushed into the system at high tide. The results were sometimes explosive and residents of 19th century Seattle kept a schedule of the tides so that they could avoid visiting the toilet during peak hours.

But after the fire, mayor Robert Moran quickly called for Seattle to rebuild. To avoid the risk of fire, the city enacted new codes requiring stone or brick construction instead of wood.

City planners also devised a scheme to raise ground level in downtown Seattle by an average of fifteen feet, preventing tides from flooding the downtown area and allowing for more modern sewers that could work with a shipment of Thomas Crapper's (in)famous toilets from London, the first of which is pictured above.

The only rub? They planned to blast the steep hillsides surrounding the tidal flats with high-powered water to wash fill dirt down into the city. But the process took time and businesses couldn't afford to wait to rebuild. Their solution was to allow businesses to rebuild as long as they put a door on both the ground floor and the second floor.

The doors you walk through today in Pioneer Square were once those second-story doors. The original entrances are now buried beneath the modern-day streets and sidewalks and contain a treasure trove of artifacts from 1890s Seattle through 1949, when a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck the city and created tons of debris, much of which was relocated into this series of underground passages and buildings.



HistoryLink.org Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History, "Earthquake hits Puget Sound area on April 13, 1949" (by Greg Lange), <http://www.historylink.org/> (accessed February 12, 2016).

Today, Pioneer Square is a designated Historic District because people like Bob and Shirley Spiedel worked hard to preserve this interesting piece of Seattle's history.

Questions for Discussion

- *The Puget Sound made what is now Seattle a prime area for a thriving port town and, at the same time, challenged city planners who needed to avoid dangerous flooding during high tides. What other natural resources do you think made this such an ideal location for a city?*
- *The sluicing of the hillsides around Seattle changed the original grade from a steep 49% to today's 18%. Can you imagine what it would be like to drive into downtown if the hills were three times as steep as they are today?*
- *Did you know that more than a third of the people on Earth (2.6 billion people) don't have access to indoor plumbing (<http://www.livescience.com/16713-7-billion-people-world-poop-problem.html>)? What sorts of issues do you think lack of toilets and clean running water create for these people?*

Further reading and exploration

Pomper, Steve. *It Happened in Seattle – Remarkable Events that Shaped History*. Morris Book Publishing. Connecticut. 2010.

<http://www.thomas-crappier.com/The-History-of-Thomas-Crappier.html>

<http://www.undergroundtour.com>

http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?displaypage=output.cfm&file_id=2063

<http://www.duwamishtribe.org/elliottreaty.html>

<http://www.undergroundtour.com/about/bill.html>

<http://www.rosarioresort.com/history.htm>