

Where You At?

A DOWNTOWN GEOGRAPHICAL TOUR

Wander in and out of buildings to explore historic maps, clocks, and photographs.

DISTANCE	1.1 miles, one way
STARTING POINT	James Street and Yesler Way
ENDING POINT	Westlake Mall on 4th Avenue between Pike and Pine Streets
NOTES	Because this walk takes you into office buildings, it is best done on a weekday. On weekends, you can still access the Rainier Tower but will not be able to enter the lobby of the Seattle Tower. There is one relatively steep hill near the beginning.

If you ask Seattle residents how to get to a particular spot in the downtown area, you are likely to hear them mutter, “Jesus Christ Made Seattle Under Pressure.” No, your interlocutors are not seeking help from on high. As many in Seattle know, this pithy saying is the order of downtown city streets: Jefferson-James, Cherry-Columbia, Marion-Madison, Spring-Seneca, University-Union, and Pike-Pine. But there are other ways of knowing where you are in downtown Seattle. One of my favorites can be found at your feet, on more than a dozen manhole covers—sometimes called hatch covers—each decorated with a map of downtown. Or if you





Earl Laymen street clock, built in 1922, originally in front of Young's Jewelry, 3rd Avenue and Seneca Street, and now at 1st Avenue S and S Main Street



Question mark clock, built in 1990 by Bill Whipple, 5th Avenue and Pine Street



Ben Bridge street clock, built in 1925 by Joseph Mayer, 4th Avenue and Pike Street

want a more timely perspective, look for the half dozen early-20th-century street clocks that still loom over the city's sidewalks.

Each of the urban elements featured in this walk offers a clue to a better understanding of Seattle's story. They reveal how the city has grown, how it has recovered from catastrophe, and how its citizens see themselves in relation to the larger world. Most are helpful, some are fanciful, and others are occasionally misleading. Made of brass and stone and steel, they provide a sense of permanence, which contrasts sharply to the rapidly changing urban infrastructure. They even offer you a chance to test your knowledge of Seattle history via a series of questions.

Start on the north side of the intersection of James Street and Yesler Way at the corner of the Pioneer Building (600 1st Avenue). Carved into the building on the left side of the steps behind an iron balustrade are the words *City Datum Elev. 18.79*.

1 Seattle's history began on November 13, 1851, when the *Exact* dropped off 22 members of what became known as the Denny Party at Alki Point in West Seattle. They quickly realized the location was ill suited for building a port, so they moved across Elliott Bay to a spot about 100 yards west of where this walk begins. From this location, the town grew with businesses

centered around what is now Pioneer Square and residences on the slopes that rose from the bay.

Although one of the founding fathers, Arthur Denny, was a surveyor, more than two decades passed before the young town had a systematic, accurate, and block-by-block survey. Before this survey, property owners established their property boundaries and fence lines in a haphazard way, often based on their neighbor's previous, unguided planning. For example, at one location a fence that should have been on a property line was actually located nine feet into the street. Finally, in 1875, the city council hired an engineering firm to lay out an accurate grid of the city and note elevations above sea level.

The survey team's first task was to ascertain what is known as the city's *datum point*, or the zero point from which all vertical measurements are made. Engineers and surveyors would use the datum point primarily for establishing new grades on city streets. In addition, with an accurate map based on the datum point, property owners would be able to build structures at an elevation corresponding to the prescribed grade.

To determine the datum point, the surveyors set up a tide gauge on one of the downtown wharves, measured tides over the month of June, and used the mean of the high tides as zero elevation, or in this case, sea level. Next, they transferred the elevation information to a permanent location where later surveyors could easily find it. At the time, one of the few granite buildings in the city was the Dexter Horton Bank, located at what is now the corner of S Washington Street and 1st Avenue S. Unfortunately, Mr. Horton's bank was ruined in Seattle's Great Fire of 1889, which led the City Council to have a new datum point established. On September 16, 1891, it designated that spot as the "lower step at the entrance to the Pioneer block . . . at the southwest corner thereof," or the location where you now stand.

So what does that number carved in granite mean? It means that you are standing 18.79 feet above sea level, or the zero elevation point—or at least this was true until 2003. Because the old datum was based on "inconsistent and outdated methods," the City Council passed an ordinance to establish a new vertical reference datum. Subsequent advances in technology, using tools such as the Global Positioning System, have led to further changes, which means that surveyors no longer rely upon a single point to establish their location.

Walk north on the west side of 1st Avenue, cross Marion Street, and continue to slightly beyond the entrance of the brick and terra-cotta Federal Building (909 1st). Look for a light pole next to the street. On it are polished metal panels inscribed with newspaper articles from 1889.

2 Artists Linda Beaumont, Stuart Keeler, and Michael Machnic made this artwork titled *The Fire* in 1996 as an homage to Seattle's Great Fire of June 6, 1889. (For more information about the fire, see Walk 3.) On the map just below the title panel, look very carefully for a star at Madison Street and Front Street (now 1st Avenue). It marks where the fire started. The map also illustrates how much Seattle's shoreline has changed; all of the docks and wharfs from 1889 would now be on land made by fill.

Walk north on 1st Avenue, and cross to the northwest corner of Spring Street.

3 Look down at the manhole cover at your feet and its map of Seattle. Designer Anne Knight thought that the map would make an excellent teaching guide, as well as a route finder to downtown. Around the map's outer edge, she added a key to the symbols used for different Seattle landmarks. Look for a raised, polished bead, which indicates the location of the manhole cover on the map. All of the landmarks still exist except for the Kingdome, Seattle's former sports arena, which was imploded on March 26, 2000. Knight told me, "At the time when I designed these maps the



Hatch cover by Nathan Jackson, 1976



Hatch cover by Garth Edwards, 1984

Kingdome had just been built, and I thought naively that it looked like a structure that would be there forever.”

Nineteen covers were planned. Only 14 can still be seen; one supposedly went to Kobe, Japan, as part of a sister city project, while others simply disappeared or were never made. Each cost \$200 and weighed 230 pounds. The first one was put in place in April 1977 on the north edge of Occidental Park. It is still there.

Seattle Arts Commissioner Jacquetta Blanchett Freeman started the city’s manhole cover program. She had been inspired by decorated covers she had seen in Florence, Italy. Working with the Department of Community Development director, Paul Schell, she raised the money to hire Knight for the first design. More recent manhole covers include artwork by Garth Edwards (1984), Nathan Jackson (1976), and Nancy Blum (2001).

Also, note the duck tracks a few feet west of Knight’s cover.

Continue north on 1st Avenue to University Street, turn right, or east, and walk two blocks to 3rd Avenue. Cross over to the entrance to the Seattle Tower (1218 3rd). Enter the lobby if it is open. If not, simply admire the beauty of the building.

4 As described in *Stories in Stone* (Walk 3), the Seattle Tower is supposed to represent a mountain. To complement the mountain symbolism, “the lobby was first conceived as a tunnel carved out of the solid, the side walls polished, the floor worn smooth and the ceiling incised and decorated as a civilized caveman might do it,” wrote architect Abraham Albertson. Apparently, said caveman also had quite the knowledge of the world, for at the end of the lobby is a bronze-colored plaster bas-relief map of the world, titled “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” The title comes from Bishop George Berkeley’s poem *America or the Muse’s Refuge: A Prophecy*, written in 1726 and one of the most famous evocations of America’s destined greatness.

Perhaps the map should have been titled “Seattle, Where the Course of Empire Leads.” No means of transportation on land or sea illustrated on the map is more advanced than the great ship leaving Seattle and the fast-moving train headed our way. Nor is any building on the map larger than the one in Seattle, which of course just happens to be the one you are standing in. Like the building itself, the map is a brilliant piece of symbolic propaganda for a city on the rise.



"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," Seattle Tower lobby

It is not known who designed the map, but Joseph Wilson's daughter, Mary Basetti, told me, "I always felt that [the map] was Dad's doing because the design well captures his unique drawing style. Dad loved everything about the Northwest, and I would think he was expressing our special location as an important port city."

Exit the lobby. Walk east on University to 4th Avenue, cross to the north side of the street, and continue on University one half block to the entrance of the Rainier Tower. Enter the building, walk down the stairs and through the lobby to a corridor, or pedestrian concourse. Turn right, and walk down the lengthy corridor to see an excellent display of photographs of Seattle. The corridor ends at an escalator.

5 These photographs focus on the Klondike Gold Rush, Maritime Seattle, Boeing, and Seattle's growth. There is also a large terra-cotta head of a Native American, which came from the White-Henry-Stuart Block, the building leveled in 1978 for the Rainier Tower. Other heads from that building ended up at the Washington State Convention Center and Discovery Park. The Cobb Building across the street still retains its original heads, including one in the vestibule adjacent to the entrance.

Where the Rainier Tower now stands is part of the Metropolitan Tract, the location of the original University of Washington campus. In 1861,

early Seattle settlers Arthur and Mary Denny, Charles and Mary Terry, and Edward Lander donated 10 acres for a university site. Classes began on November 4, 1861, in a building later replaced by today's Fairmont Olympic Hotel. The campus moved to its present location in 1895 to be "removed from the excitements and temptations incident to city life and its environment," or so noted an annual report from the university. UW still owns the tract, which has about 1.7 million square feet of office space and annually generates more than \$20 million in net income.

Return to the beginning of the corridor, turn right, descend the stairs to the building's main lobby. Turn left and exit to 4th Avenue. Turn right, and walk north to the southeast corner of 4th and Pike Street and the street clock in front of Ben Bridge Jewelers.

6 In this era when everyone carries a phone that displays the time, it may seem strange that people used to rely on sidewalk street clocks for their chronometric updates. So many horological devices once graced downtown that Seattle was known as the "city of clocks." It was also home to one of the great clock makers, Joseph Mayer, who began working with his brother in 1897 and continued making cast-iron street clocks until 1937. Clock aficionados have located surviving Mayer clocks as far away as Puerto Rico and New York.

At 4th and Pike in 1930, one could see 16 clocks from the corner. Most had been erected by jewelers, which led to a clock war as each jeweler tried to outdo the other, first with two dials, then four, then eight. Never had telling time been so easy in Seattle, though there was still some confusion, as "it is seldom that any two of the clocks show the same time," noted a writer in the *Seattle Times* in 1930.

Seattle's golden age of clocks, when 50 graced the streets, did not last long. In 1953, the Board of Public Works proposed to eliminate street clocks, noting their "obsolescence and homeliness" and complaining that they often displayed the wrong time and sometimes several incorrect times on clocks with multiple dials. The Board ultimately decided to allow the clocks to remain but only if clock owners ensured their accuracy. Otherwise the clocks could be removed or have a cloak placed over them.

In 1980, the city of Seattle designated as landmarks 10 of the old street clocks. Nine of the landmarked ones still exist, including three in downtown. Built by Joseph Mayer in 1925, the Ben Bridge clock is the only one in



Seattle's forest of clocks, as seen looking east on 4th Avenue, June 1930

Seattle that has remained in the family of its original owners. Still with its original timing mechanism, it has to be wound once a week.

[Cross Pike Street, and walk north into Westlake Plaza.](#)

7 Artist Robert Maki and landscape architect Robert Hanna patterned the gray, white, and red granite paving blocks after a Salish basket motif. Maki also incorporated large reddish granite pieces to evoke the original seven hills that Seattle was built on. Less obvious, and a little challenging to find, are numerous bronze panels placed among the paving blocks. (The twenty-plus panels are located about halfway between Maki's northern-

OPTIONAL SIDE TRIP: AN OLD WEATHER GAUGE

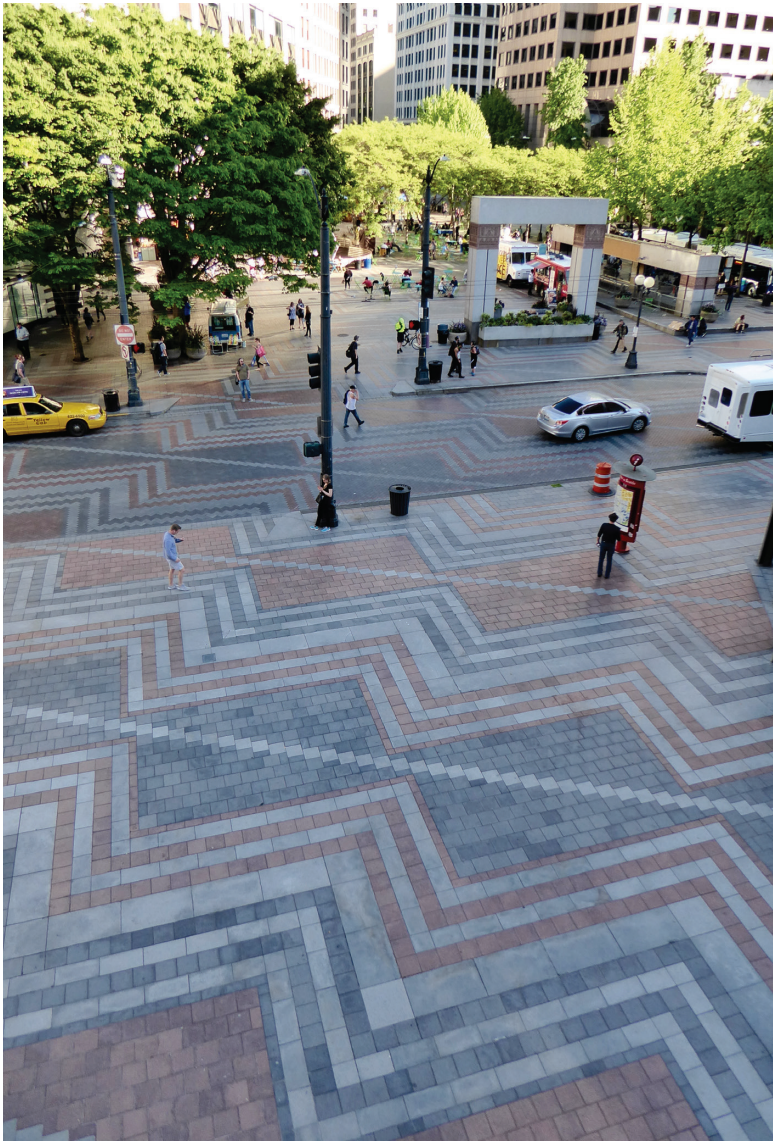
Completed in 1913, the Securities Building, which takes up the northeast corner of 3rd Avenue and Stewart Street, has a beautiful and unusual lobby. It features white banded onyx quarried in Baja California. The stone formed in cold water springs as calcite settled out of the water and built up layer upon layer. Building-stone onyx is sometimes called onyx marble or Mexican onyx, though it is not marble and not all of it comes from Mexico [the same rock is used in the lobby of the Smith Tower (Walk 3)]. The green rock is serpentine, a metamorphic rock (meaning it was altered by pressure and temperature) quarried in Vermont and known as Verde Antique.

Equally as intriguing and far more unusual is the Weather Center and its six gauges. Building tenant Time Outdoor, Inc., which was a subsidiary of the weather station builder American Sign and Indicators Corporation, installed the display in 1964. It had hoped to promote the product, but apparently it met with little success as no other building in Seattle added its own Weather Center. The Securities Building's time, wind direction, and barometric gauges work; the others have been broken for years, and the property owner has not been able to find anyone who can fix them.

most pink granite feature and the waterfall feature, roughly across from the entrance of 1525, 4th on the west side of the street. They may be hidden by tables and chairs, so finding them can be challenging.)

Based on geographic and historic questions and answers created by local children, the panels are oriented in three rows each consisting of four question tiles and one answer tile. In addition, look for a bronze compass a few feet south of the Q&A tiles. Nearby are artistic depictions of several Seattle landmarks, including the Space Needle, Ferry Terminal, Husky Stadium, and the Kingdome. Note how each one is in the correct geographic orientation, creating a rough map of the Seattle landscape.

With smart phones and GPS, knowing your time, temperature, and place in the world has never been easier, but sometimes it's nice not to rely on technology. Fortunately, you can still find yourself in Seattle.



Star Axis/Seven Hills by Robert Maki and Robert Hanna