SEATTLE · FIELD BOOK 02

Seattle

The Hills We Changed

Seattle, beneath the streets

Look at a familiar street and imagine that the ground itself has a history. Before asking what was built there, ask what was removed.

This field book begins at Denny Park. A municipal history describes regrading threatening the park by 1910 and the park itself lowered by 1930. It is a compact starting point for a larger question: how do we recognize a landscape that people have reshaped?

Read the records, follow the material, then look at the city again. Your own observations begin where the printed account leaves off.

First-edition reading proof / 48 interior pages

Sources 1 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

Pay attention to the ground

Use the locator to place the story, then choose a short stretch of familiar street to observe. Notice how the ground meets doorways, sidewalks, walls and neighboring blocks.

Make a sketch that records relationships rather than exact measurements. Mark a rise, a level stretch or a sudden step. Add your viewing direction and the date.

A change of level is a reason to investigate, not proof of a particular regrade. Compare your observation with a documented account before assigning it a cause. Keep a separate line for questions you cannot answer from the street.

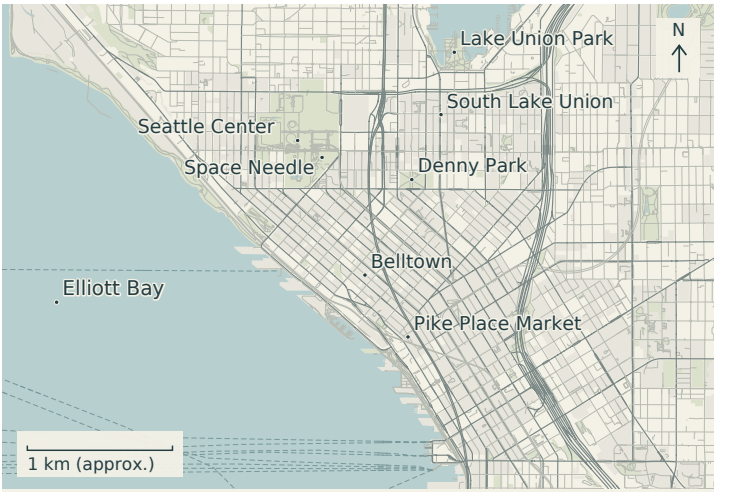
01 What rises or falls?

02 What is connected or separated?

03 Which explanation needs a source?

A CLOSER LOOK

Locate the story



Present-day Denny Park and surrounding streets. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors. Former elevations are not shown.

Find Denny Park on this present-day map. Follow the surrounding street pattern toward the waterfront and choose a reference point for your notes.

The map helps place the historical account. Its current streets and water outline do not show the former height of Denny Hill or the extent of any particular regrade contract.

Sources 9 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

The park and the streets around it

Denny Park's municipal inventory records its formal dedication as a public park in July 1884. The same account describes later redesigns and changing surroundings.

During the regrades, the park was temporarily left above neighboring ground. The city's historical accounts place its lowering in 1930, followed by a new landscape design by L. Glenn Hall.

A park can retain a name and public purpose while its physical relationship to the city changes. Keep those different kinds of continuity in mind when you look at a place: the name, the use and the shape of the ground need not tell the same story.

Sources 2 · full references at the back of the essay

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A CLOSER LOOK

Moving a hill takes a system

The city's Engineering Department photographed the regrade from several viewpoints. Its surviving album records sluicing, earthmoving equipment and barges carrying away excavated material.

A contemporary construction account from July 1930 describes a chain of electric shovels, movable conveyors, a fixed conveyor along Battery Street and barges at Elliott Bay. The operation joined excavation to transportation and disposal.

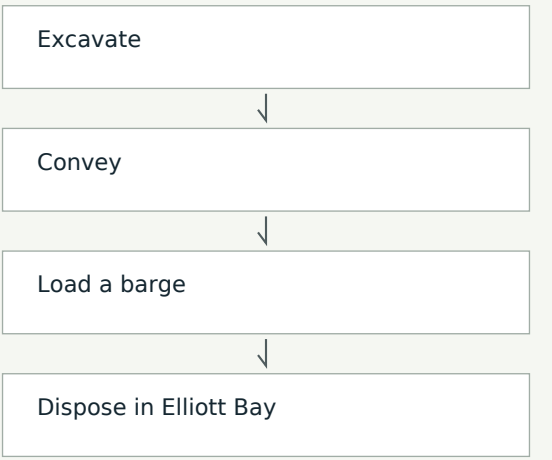
Imagine following one load through that chain. Each transfer needs space, equipment and a place for the next step. Looking at those connections helps turn the phrase 'a hill was removed' into a series of physical actions.

Sources 3, 4 · full references at the back of the essay

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A CLOSER LOOK

Follow the material



Original process diagram based on documented material handling. Schematic; not a geographic route or measured section.

The park history records conveyors loading excavated material into barges for disposal in Elliott Bay. The contemporary construction account describes the equipment connecting excavation and waterfront.

The arrows separate the actions; they do not draw a route through Seattle.

Add one question under each stage. Which record might establish the machinery, location or destination?

Sources 1, 4 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

A park through several changes

July 1884

Formal public-park dedication recorded by the city.

1904–1929

Dates covered by the Engineering Department's regrade photograph album.

By 1910

Regrading threatens Denny Park in the park history's account.

1930

The park is lowered; a new landscape design follows.

This timeline follows the park, rather than assigning one start and finish date to every part of the Denny Regrade.

Read each date as a prompt for a different source: a municipal dedication, a historical account, an engineering image or a later landscape record.

Sources 2, 1, 3 · full references at the back of the essay

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A CLOSER LOOK

Read a contour before believing a height

Topographic maps use contour lines to describe the shape and elevation of land. The interval tells you the vertical difference between successive contours. Read the legend before reading a slope.

The USGS Seattle sheet issued in October 1897 records surveys from 1893–1895. Its printed scale is 1:125,000 and its contour interval is 50 feet. The available sheet also carries a 1901 reprint date. Survey, edition and reprint are different dates.

That map can inform a regional historical view. It does not supply every change of height along a city block. Ask whether the source's detail is sufficient for the question you want to answer.

Sources 5, 6, 7 · full references at the back of the essay

FIELD NOTES

Draw a street in profile

Choose a short stretch you can observe from a public place. Draw a horizontal line across a notes page as a reference. Above it, sketch the rises and falls you notice along the street.

Add the points where your view is interrupted. Mark a doorway, wall or crossing only if you can identify it. Label the drawing 'observed profile, not measured' and write where you stood.

Now add a second line in words: what might explain the shape? Keep more than one possibility where appropriate. A useful field sketch preserves the difference between the ground you saw and the history you have yet to establish.

01 Location and viewing direction

02 Observed profile, not measured

03 Possible explanations

04 A source that could test them

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FIELD NOTES

Read an engineering photograph

Find a dated regrade photograph in the Seattle Municipal Archives. Before studying the image, record its identifier, date and the location stated in the catalog. Note whether the photographer or creating department is named.

List three things the photograph visibly contains. Then list two things you would need another source to establish: perhaps the depth of an excavation, the destination of a conveyor or what stood just beyond the frame.

Finally, compare the photograph with its caption. Which parts of your interpretation came from the image, and which came from the words? Both can be useful when their roles remain clear.

01 Catalog identifier and date

02 Three visible details

03 Two questions outside the frame

Sources 3 · full references at the back of the essay

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A CLOSER LOOK

What survives a change of level?

A place can survive in several forms: a name on a sign, a use remembered by someone, a line on a map, an object in a photograph. These are different records, and they may not fit together neatly.

Choose one feature from your notes and write a short account using only what you can support. Put the source beside each historical statement. Leave your own interpretation in your own voice.

Then write one question that remains. The aim is not to turn every wall or slope into evidence of the same project. It is to make the city's ground interesting enough to look at carefully.

01 What I can support

02 What I think it means

03 What remains uncertain

Sources & ground notes

1. Denny Park history, Don Sherwood files
Seattle Parks / Seattle Municipal Archives

2. Denny Park historic-site inventory
Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

3. Denny Hill Regrade Photograph Albums, 1904–1929
Seattle Municipal Archives

4. Denny Hill Regrade No. 2, Seattle, Washington
Western Construction News, July 25, 1930, page 351 onward

5. Topographic mapping
US Geological Survey

6. Topographic map symbols
US Geological Survey

7. Seattle quadrangle, edition October 1897, reprint August 1901
US Geological Survey

8. Are USGS topographic maps copyrighted?
US Geological Survey

9. Copyright and license
OpenStreetMap

https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright

Full references, source records and image credits:

originbooks.com/places/seattle/hills

YOUR OBSERVATIONS