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# SEATTLE'S WATERFRONT HISTORY CURRICULUM





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PORT OF SEATTLE



## Inquiry Description

In this focused Inquiry students will explore the impact of the Great Seattle Fire. Students will read primary and secondary sources about the impact of the Seattle fire of 1889. Within this lesson students will practice the skills of reading primary and secondary sources for information, analyzing photos and political cartoons, and supporting an original claim with evidence and reasoning.

This lesson would fit into the chronology of Statehood or could be a lesson on the role of industrialization in urban areas. Teachers should also keep in mind that these sources could have a reading level that might call for further scaffolding to meet students needs.

## Standards

Washington State Social Studies Standards

- SSS1.6-8.1 Analyze positions and evidence supporting an issue or an event
- H2.6-8.4 Explain and analyze how technology and ideas have impacted Washington state history since statehood.
- H4.6-8.2 Analyze how a historical event in Washington state history helps us to understand contemporary issues and events.
- C2.6-8. 4 Use knowledge of the function of government to analyze and address a political issue.

## Learning goals/ Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

1. Describe the events surrounding the Great Seattle Fire.
2. Analyze connections between how the Great Seattle Fire led to political reform around safety and resiliency.
3. Use evidence to create a claim that is supported with evidence and reasoning.
4. Apply new knowledge to produce a Public Service Announcement about how communities are addressing public safety and natural disasters.

## Focused Inquiry

**Compelling Question:** Was the Great Seattle Fire great for Seattle?

**Staging the question:**

At the beginning of this lesson have students review the poster from 1889 that shows Seattle before and after the fire.

Students will analyze the image using the WAVES (words, actions, visuals/ symbols, emotions, significance) graphic organizer on Student Handout #1.

When they are done, have them share out questions that they have about the image and/or the event. Teachers should capture these ideas on the board or chart paper that can stay up throughout the lesson.

Students will make predictions about the ways that fire could be bad for a city and ways that it could lead to positive change (noting that nobody died in the fire).

**Teacher note:** *It might be important/ helpful for students to put this event into the timeline of events for statehood, the increased use of railroad, the importance of extractive industries, etc. This could help if students are struggling for things to think of.*

**Supporting question(s):** How do communities change because of natural disasters?

**Formative Performance Task:**

To introduce the events of the Seattle Fire consider using the Q13 video, “Remembering the Great Seattle Fire.” It uses primary source images to show the destruction of the fire. It also goes over key points of the fire. This will help students have an idea of what they should be reading for in the excerpts. After watching the video the class can make a list of what they learned and possible questions that they have.

This lesson could be done as a Jig-Saw activity in groups, as a whole group reading, or as individual assignment. Teachers should use the learning strategy that works best for students in their class. If teachers are going to do a Jig-Saw activity it is recommended that students read the first section together as a class. This will help students to have some context before they read their sections. It could also be used to model how they should read sources and what are some of the key ideas that they should look for. As students work through the questions for each section the reflection questions are set up to support the “Take Informed Action” section of the lesson.

Students will read through the excerpts of The Great Seattle Fire, Part 1 and Part 2. Students should answer the questions for each section.

**Featured Source(s):**

[Remembering The Great Seattle Fire](#) 130 years later Q13 Fox from Seattle

[The Great Seattle Fire, Part 1](#) By John Caldbick posted to historylink.org 9/19/2020 (including primary source images)

[The Great Seattle Fire, Part 2](#) By John Caldbick posted historylink.org 9/19/2020 (including primary source images)

[Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Seattle, King Co. Washington 1888](#)

[Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Seattle, King Co. Washington 1904-1905](#)

[Photo: North from 1st Ave. and James St.](#)

[Photo: Yesler Way and 1st Ave S](#)

**Argument:**

At the end of the lesson students will use their notes from the readings and discussions to answer the compelling questions “Was the Great Seattle Fire great for Seattle?” Students should use appropriate evidence from this lesson and well thought out reasoning to support their answers.

This could be written from, in a presentation, or in a creative one-pager.

**Take informed Action:**

Students should research how cities recover after natural disasters. To make this research more place-based, students should choose a location that is near to them.

In their research they should look at how the city has improved because of what was learned from the natural disaster. Students should then create a public service announcement campaign that shares this information about what their community is doing to prevent natural disasters and/or what people could do in case of a natural disaster. Examples could include tsunami warning systems in the community, what to do if there is a tsunami, and how much supplies people should have in case of a tsunami.

Some ideas are wildfires, floods, landslides, earthquakes, impact of climate change, etc. Part of this assignment could be to have students conduct interviews with government officials that are in charge of these changes.

**Teacher note:** *This could be a launching point for a larger project-based learning project. Students could invite a panel of people into the class (fire chief, city inspector) to share what different governmental agencies are doing to address the same natural disaster. This would be a way to have students learn about the workings of local government.*

Student handout #1

Name:

**Directions:** Look at the poster below that was created after the Seattle Fire of 1889. Answer the questions below. When you are done, be ready to share out what are ways that the fire was good and bad for Seattle.



<b>Words:</b> What words do you see? What words do you think are the most important?	
<b>Actions:</b> What actions do you notice in the image? Why do you think that those are important?	
<b>Visuals:</b> What images do you see? Why do you think they were included? What symbols do you see? What do they mean?	
<b>Emotions:</b> What emotions do you think the artist wanted the audience to feel because of this poster?	
<b>Significance:</b> Why do you think that this poster was published? Whose point of view is it from? <i>(remember- this is the final draft of the work, everything about this is intentional from the colors to the images)</i>	

## Student Handout #2

Name:

**Directions:** As you read about the events surrounding the Great Seattle Fire and analyze images, answer the questions that are connected to each section.

Excerpt from *The Great Seattle Fire, Part 1* By John Caldbick posted to [historylink.org](http://historylink.org) 9/19/2020

On June 6, 1889, at about 2:45 p.m., what became known as the Great Seattle Fire started... on Front Street (today's 1st Avenue). The blaze quickly spread in all directions, racing unseen through basements and under planked streets and sidewalks before breaking into the open. Within a few hours, much of Seattle's commercial core and waterfront was destroyed, from University Street to Dearborn Street and from Elliott Bay to as far east as today's 4th Avenue S. Volunteer firemen and hundreds of citizens who fought the flames for hours won few victories. Wood buildings, some dating back to pioneer days, went up like torches, and the extreme heat left newer buildings of brick and stone roofless and gutted, or collapsed. No lives were lost, however, and the inferno proved to be a blessing, if at first well-disguised. The flames wiped out the city's largely wooden downtown, a remnant of its hardscrabble past. When the debris was cleared, Seattle had a clean palette on which it would rebuild at a speed and with a style that secured its emerging status as the key city of the Pacific Northwest.

1. When did the fire start?
2. Why do you think the author says that the "inferno proved to be a blessing?"

*Reflection: What is a question that you have about the Seattle Fire?*

### The Battle Begins

In 1889 a log [barrier] separated Front Street from the tidelands of Elliott Bay... Both the street and its sidewalks rested on a framework of pilings and crossbeams and were surfaced with wooden planks. The Pontius Building was also made of wood, built over the tidelands. It had two stories above street level and two below, the latter accessed by a stairway on the building's north side. The first basement level held McGough's paint business; the one below was occupied by Victor Clairmont's cabinet shop.

John E. Back, a Swedish immigrant in his mid-20s, worked for Clairmont... Back was melting a pot of hardened glue on a stove heated with turpentine-soaked wood shavings. He added some shavings to the stove, then went to work about 25 feet away. A few minutes later, the overheated glue itself caught fire.

... Back threw a bucket of cold water at the glue pot. This was not a good idea. The water hitting the blazing gluepot caused an explosion. In Back's words, "When I throw the water on, the glue flew all over the shop into the shavings and everything take fire" ("That Immortal Glue-Pot"). The Great Seattle Fire was off and running.

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3. How did the fire start?

4. Why was throwing water on the fire “not a good idea?”

5. What information from the reading would suggest that the fire would spread quickly?

*Reflection: What is a question that you have about how the fire started and/or how it might have spread quickly?*

### **Futility**

The privately owned Spring Hill Water Company had since 1881 been diverting spring water into wooden reservoirs on First Hill and Beacon Hill to provide Seattle's growing downtown with water for consumption and fire-fighting. In 1886 the company supplemented its supply by pumping from Lake Washington. The water was gravity-fed from the hilltop reservoirs to the city's commercial district through relatively small-diameter mains made of hollowed-out logs. These ran below the streets, supported by wooden bracing.

Seattle had a [mostly] volunteer fire department, limited equipment, and relatively few fire hydrants, spaced two blocks apart in the downtown area...

One of the pumping rigs was vainly attempting to pull water from Elliott Bay, but the tide was partway out and it appears there was difficulty laying sufficient hose from Front Street.

6. Why is this section called “Futility?”

*Reflection: What is a question that you have about the fire fighting technology of the time?*

Seattle waterfront looking north from S Washington Street, 1887 Courtesy The Seattle Public Library



Members, Volunteer Fire Company No. 1, horse-drawn steam-powered pump, Seattle, 1883 Courtesy MOHAI



7. What connections can you make between what the reading (Excerpt from *The Great Seattle Fire, Part 1 all sections*) says and the two images?
8. Using evidence from the readings so far and the two images, make a prediction about the outcome of the fire.

*Reflections: Do you think that Seattle did everything they could at the time to fight the fire? Why or why not.*

## **On the Waterfront**

As one front of the blaze moved south along Front Street and east to 2nd Street, another moved west to the city's waterfront, almost all of which -- including mills, warehouses, wharves, and piers -- was perched on a framework of pilings pounded into the muddy floor of Elliott Bay...

Almost every foot of the waterfront, north and south, was occupied by either a wooden building or storage lots filled with lumber and other flammables. Racing underneath all this, the flames moved north to as far as University Street, where they were halted by excavations for two planned buildings and the heroic efforts of a bucket brigade. This was as far north as the fire would get.

The waterfront to the south would not be so fortunate. Virtually every man-made feature -- wharves, piers, buildings -- was burned down to the pilings, many of which were left standing like a stunted, dead forest. Only one wharf, located at the foot of Union Street, survived.

## **Coda**

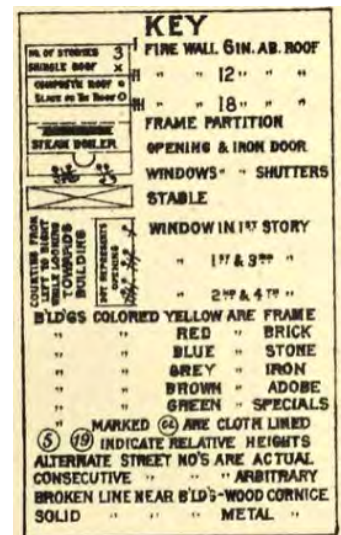
Those who had battled the blaze (including firefighters who had raced up by train from Tacoma) and the many men, women, and children uprooted and left homeless had little time to contemplate the broader significance of what had just befallen their city. Accounts vary widely, but one contemporary source states that 116 acres -- approximately 58 city blocks -- was smoking ash (Austin & Scott, 20). Most of the very things that signified Seattle's status as an up-and-coming metropolis were gone. Banks, stores, finance companies, land companies, doctors' and lawyers' offices, wharves, piers, mills, warehouses, and hundreds of businesses of all kinds had been consumed by the flames. Fortunes in goods were incinerated or damaged beyond repair. Financial records, business records, medical records, legal records, and entire law libraries went up in smoke...

The cataclysm also exposed the city's fundamental flaws, ways in which, despite its aspirations, it was still operating as a pioneer town -- an amateur, unpaid, and often unmotivated fire department; an inadequate water supply; an almost complete lack of building codes, regulations, or enforcement; and a waterfront that, while serviceable, was a highly flammable expanse of wood cobbled together on a framework of pilings.

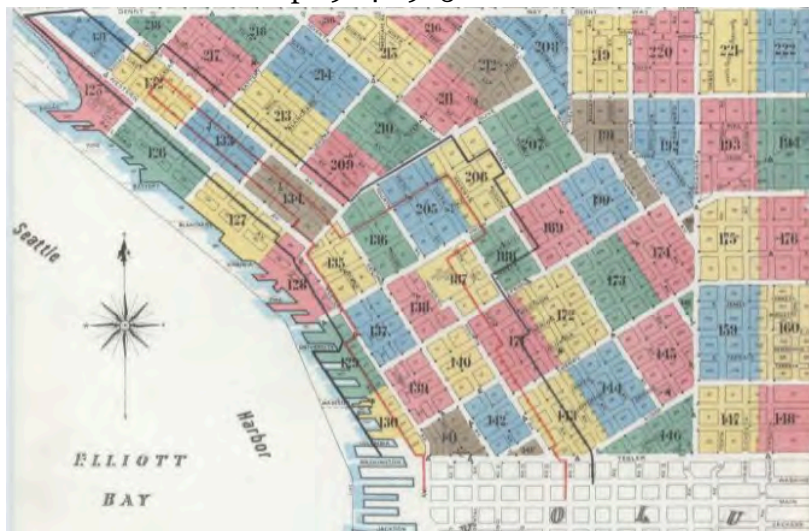
9. What can you infer about how the fire will impact the economy of Seattle? What evidence do you have to support this?

*Reflection: If you were a part of the city government of Seattle, what changes would you suggest after the fire? Why?*

# Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1888



## Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1904-1905



10. What differences and similarities do you notice between the two maps?
11. How do these maps show the changes in Seattle after the fire?

Photo: North from 1st Ave. and James St. 1886  
**Before the Fire**



Photo: Yesler Way and 1st Ave S 1895-1900  
**After the Fire**



12. What differences and similarities do you notice between the two photos?

13. How do these photos show the changes in Seattle after the fire?

*Reflection: Refer back to the first reading section. The author argues that the “inferno proved to be a blessing.” How might they use this image as evidence for that statement? Explain your answer.*